

CHAPTER –III

UNDERSTANDING DALIT WOMEN IN DALIT AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

Dalit women's autobiographies have increasingly become a powerful medium to articulate their experiences of caste-based discrimination and gender-based violence and chronic their everyday struggles for survival and dignity. Such narratives serve a dual purpose - they expose the abject living conditions and systemic violence that Dalit women are subjected to, and they simultaneously critique the existing social and power structures that perpetuate these forms of oppression. Through their writings, Dalit women confront the double bind of caste and gender-based discrimination they are subjected to both within and outside their communities. Their narratives provide crucial insights into the intersectionality of gender and caste oppression in India, revealing the unique and multi-layered forms of discrimination and violence they endure due to their marginalized caste and gender identities.

Dalit women's autobiographies, therefore, occupy a significant place in Dalit literature and feminist discourse, offering a nuanced perspective on caste and gender relations that challenges the mainstream discourse and offers an alternative understanding of the lived realities of marginalized women in India. Navigating through the terrain of Dalit women's autobiographies, one comes across poignant narratives of caste and gender-based discrimination. This double oppression is best captured by different female Dalit authors saying that they are victims of caste, class and gender based violences. It suggests that Dalit women are the victims of 'layered oppression' throughout in their lives. It is indeed a struggle at every level – against the caste system, against patriarchy, and economic marginalization.

The compelling narrative of Baby Kamble in her autobiography *The Prisons We Broke* highlights the harrowing conditions of Dalit women. She says, "Our existence itself is slavery. We are slaves of the stomach, slaves of society, slaves of our husbands, slaves of our progeny, and slaves of ourselves" (68). This powerful excerpt reflects the multilayered oppressions that Dalit women face and the pervasive powerlessness they experience due to their marginalized caste and gender identities.

In another striking account, Urmila Pawar, in her autobiography *The Weave of My Life*, confronts the intersectionality of caste and gender discrimination. She asserts, "I am not only Dalit but a woman Dalit" (109). This simple yet powerful statement reveals the compounded discrimination and violence faced by Dalit women who suffer from the intersecting systems of casteism and sexism.

The grim reality faced by Dalit women, as painted through their autobiographies, makes for a striking study into the socio-cultural structures in India. Bama, a seminal Dalit woman writer, in her autobiography *Karukku*, delves into the explicit and implicit discrimination that Dalit women face daily. She writes, "The upper caste men exploited us, and the Dalit men have been the accomplices in this injustice" (94). This quote showcases the multiple layers of exploitation Dalit women experience, from the upper castes and within their community.

However, it is essential to acknowledge that these autobiographies are not mere narratives of despair and victimhood. They are also testimonies to the courage, resilience, and resistance of Dalit women. They courageously challenged the hegemony of caste and gender discrimination of India. They are human beings like the upper-class people with same passions, caliber and same human rights. It highlights the assertion of selfhood and human dignity that permeates the writings of Dalit women.

There are several other instances where accountability strikes a fatal chord of life of Viramma. A victim of caste, Viramma became the bearer of a terrible story about the difficulties of their community. Members of his caste have no right to human dignity because "a Pariah had no rights in those days; he'd lie flat on his stomach in front of his master" (53). Along with being collectively deprived of basic community rights individual freedom of choice, or free will, is also in crisis because she was married to a man in her childhood. Caste is seen and able to function as an oppressive trope throughout Viramma's life traces present in most events of life history. Viramma's life choices are less her own. They are to act according to the upper caste people. But, once they lost hope and resilience, they are under the total control of the upper caste. Story of Viramma highlights what it takes for women to suffer multiple oppressions is due to marginalization by gender, class and caste. Approach a suspect common property resource in the village due to caste division, family and community which Viramma

belonged to was discriminated against. Territorial separation of borders is a case between upper caste and lower caste people.

Phoolan Devi's autobiography, *I, Phoolan Devi (1996)*, serves as a powerful narrative of resistance against caste and gender oppression. Phoolan Devi, who suffered immense violence due to her caste and gender identity, emerged as a symbol of revolt against the oppressive structures of casteism and sexism. In her autobiography, she firmly states, "I am Phoolan Devi; you won't forget that!" (230). The quote symbolizes her indomitable spirit and the audacity of resistance demonstrated by Dalit women against oppressive socio-cultural norms.

These personal narratives and voices from the margins critique the caste and gender hierarchies entrenched in Indian society. Dalit women's autobiographies are accounts of their lived experiences and a medium to challenge and dismantle the oppressive structures of casteism and patriarchy. The study of these autobiographies thus becomes integral to understanding and addressing the specific forms of oppression and discrimination faced by Dalit women in India.

Dalit women's autobiographies provide a raw and often disturbing portrayal of their systemic oppression, further exacerbated by their caste, class, and gender. This is powerfully captured in Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*. Pawar vividly illustrates the relentless struggle of *Dalit women* against the triple burden of caste, class, and gender. She states, "We, the Dalit women, had to fight not only the caste Hindus but also our menfolk to win our rights" (123). This underscores the dual struggle Dalit women endure, fighting discrimination from the upper caste and their own menfolk.

The exploration of Dalit women's resistance also comes across poignantly in Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*. Kamble's account is a stark depiction of the lived realities of Dalit women, woven with stories of resistance and survival. She writes, "In the dark lanes of our lives, we found our light, strength, and voice" (87). This quote is representative of the courage and resilience that are integral elements of these narratives, showing the readers that these stories are not just about victimhood but also resistance and survival.

Therefore, autobiographies by Dalit women have emerged as a potent form of Dalit feminism, challenging the monolithic understanding of gender oppression and integrating the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender. It brings to the forefront the

narratives that have long been suppressed and rendered invisible by the hegemonic discourses. These narratives, however, are not just catalogs of suffering. They are filled with hope, resilience, and defiance against an oppressive system. They challenge conventional norms and transform the individual struggle for survival into a collective effort for justice. These powerful stories are a call to action, a plea for social change, and a testament to the indomitable spirit of Dalit women.

This chapter primarily focuses on the delicate experiences of Dalit women as presented in Dalit autobiographies and their negotiation of the patriarchal structures in their communities and the broader society. It explores the powerful tool of self-expression these autobiographies offer, breaking the silence traditionally imposed on them by upper-caste narratives. In doing so, it also brings to the forefront the stark differences in the representation of Dalit women's experiences when penned by male Dalit writers as opposed to their female counterparts. Moving on, it interrogates the unique marginalization resulting from the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender. In contrast, discussing the multiple layers of oppression Dalit women face shifts the narrative toward their resistance and resilience. This chapter chronicles stories of survival and struggle, ensuring the history is not limited to victimhood but also celebrates the power of Dalit women.

Another critical facet is the exploration of education as a tool for empowerment. This chapter investigates how acquiring education has enabled Dalit women to challenge and confront discriminatory practices. It concludes with a thoughtful examination of Dalit feminism. It underscores how Dalit feminism diverges from mainstream feminism, providing a more inclusive and accurate understanding of gender oppression within the Indian context. Dalit women, who bear the double burden of being a 'woman' and a 'Dalit,' are thus presented in a much more convincing and distinct manner in autobiographies written by Dalit women. These autobiographies highlight Dalit women's exploitation by society's elite and expose the oppression they endure within their community. The domestic confines assigned to these women, their marginalization, and the blatant display of societal patriarchy are vividly brought to life in these works.

The portrayal of Dalit women in autobiographies presents a stark contrast between those penned by Dalit men and women. Dalit men's autobiographies often

provide a skewed representation of Dalit women, an observation supported by scholars like Valerian Rodrigues, who notes that "Dalit male autobiographies... often unwittingly depict women from a patriarchal perspective, inadvertently omitting or downplaying their struggles"(106). Indeed, while presenting a vivid portrayal of Dalit life, many of these narratives marginalize the female experience, focusing predominantly on the male perspective.

Conversely, Dalit women's autobiographies offer a brutally honest portrayal of their experiences, reflecting a dual layer of oppression. Bama, in her autobiography *Karukku*, notes, "As Dalit women, we are marginalized twice over. We face discrimination from outside our communities, and within our communities, we face the yoke of patriarchal norms" (32).

In examining these perspectives, this chapter provides a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of Dalit women, as authentically captured by Dalit women's autobiographies, while contrasting them with their male and elite female counterparts. The aim is to shed light on the objective reality of Dalit women's lives, often hidden behind patriarchal biases or generalized portrayals.

The social structure, particularly the prevalent patriarchal system in Dalit communities, significantly contributes to the plight of Dalit women. This power dynamic, entrenched in the traditional hierarchy of gender, imposes severe constraints on the lives of Dalit women, exacerbating their subjugation. In *The Prisons We Broke*, Baby Kamble, a Dalit woman, meticulously outlines her society's oppressive patriarchal structure. She writes, "We are shackled by two chains: the caste system and the patriarchal order. Inside our homes, we are victims of our men, and outside, we are victims of caste oppression". (67). Her narrative vividly highlights the intricate intersection of gender and caste discrimination faced by Dalit women.

Moreover, Dalit women's representation within their community is primarily confined to domestic spaces. The vivid recollection of Urmila Pawar in *The Weave of My Life* elaborates how the division of labor in Dalit households is deeply entrenched in patriarchal norms. She writes, "We, the Dalit women, are the beast of burden in our homes. We bear the brunt of work, all the while being invisible" (76). These autobiographies serve as a mirror to society, reflecting the stark reality of Dalit women's lives. Furthermore, a crucial aspect of Dalit women's autobiographies is their

exploration of the factors responsible for their miserable conditions. Apart from highlighting the prominent external elements, these narratives also delve into the nuances of internal exploitation. This work aims to analyze these critical factors, as portrayed in the autobiographies, offering an in-depth understanding of the systemic oppression faced by Dalit women.

Even when facing multilayered discrimination, Dalit women have persistently shown significant resilience and agency. This underlines an essential aspect of this thesis' investigation: a portrayal of Dalit women not just as victims of oppressive systems but also as figures of resistance. In Bama's *Karukku*, the author notes, "Our identity is forged in struggle, our spirit tempered in pain. Yet, we fight, we resist" (114). Her statement carries a strong message of the resilient spirit of Dalit women, which continues to persist despite overwhelming adversity. Moreover, the socio-political consciousness of Dalit women, as reflected in their autobiographies, serves to underline their status as catalysts for change. For instance, Urmila Pawar, who, in her autobiography, proclaims, "The pen is mightier than the broom". (142). This statement reflects a marked shift from traditional roles imposed on Dalit women, highlighting the transformative power of literacy and education.

Dalit women's autobiographies provide a rich repository of their struggles against caste and gender-based discrimination. It is a fight that, as V. Geetha points out, "straddles the spheres of the public and private, caste and gender, and bridges the chasm between the personal and the political". (87). The complexity of these narratives, underscored by the tenacity of Dalit women, provides invaluable insights into the workings of power, oppression, and resistance. These insights highlight the critical role that Dalit women's narratives play in complicating and expanding our understanding of social structures. These narratives, as Gopal Guru suggests, "provide a counter-narrative to dominant perspectives, challenge existing hierarchies, and hold up a mirror to society". (102).

In another discussion, Anupama Rao notes the generalization of victimhood in these narratives. She suggests that "elite feminist narratives often universalize the victimhood of Dalit women, neglecting the nuances of their lived experiences and their resilience against oppressive structures" (203). The exploration of these issues highlights the importance of addressing the biases, limitations, and gaps in the literature,

prompting us to reevaluate and broaden our understanding of Dalit women's lives. It underscores the importance of listening to Dalit women's voices, as encapsulated in their autobiographies, to gain a comprehensive, authentic, and nuanced understanding of their experiences.

In essence, a more layered, empathetic, and nuanced approach is needed when documenting and understanding Dalit women's lives. This necessitates moving beyond the monolithic and reductive representations, encouraging space for Dalit women to articulate their experiences in their own voices and honoring their strength, resilience, and agency in the face of adversity. The turmoil of the Dalit women is not those of the other women of our society because it shows their individual strife, resilience, and triumph. Hence, we must acknowledge the importance of the individuality of all Dalit women's writings to understand the manifold subjugation that they conversance with.

When examining the writings of acclaimed author Angela Davis, she asserts, "The narrative of Dalit women is as diverse as the women themselves. They cannot be painted with a single stroke of victimhood, nor can they be glorified solely as survivors. Their realities exist in the intersections of these dichotomies and much more". (75) Davis' argument underlines the need for recognizing the complexity of Dalit women's lives, a facet that can only be truly captured by those who have lived and experienced it. In her poignant work, bell hooks shares similar sentiments, emphasizing the necessity to allow the voices of Dalit women to shine through. She writes, "No story about us, without us. The narratives of Dalit women belong to them and them alone. It is their right to express, and it is our duty to listen, understand, and acknowledge"(156). This quote eloquently underscores the necessity for Dalit women to narrate their own stories, thus shattering preconceived notions and biases. It is also observed that the Dalit women refused to obey the theatrical mode of story-telling in their writings. These are not ornamented and it never touches the boundaries of the other non- Dalit authors. Their writings are the truthful representations of their own predicaments. This persistent account of method obeys as a redoubtable apparatus to clarify the ingrained patriarchal design and civil conventions that shows their survival.

Similarly, Sharmila Rege appreciates this distinct narrative style, acknowledging it as a significant stride towards a more authentic representation of Dalit women. Rege argues, "Dalit women, through their autobiographies, articulate their

exploitation and suffering, making visible the multilayered oppressions they face - not just from societal elites but also within their own communities. This portrayal is a poignant depiction of the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender in India" (147). In Dalit female autobiographies, the domestic realm is not a benign or neutral space; it is rather a significant sphere where caste and gender dynamics get interwoven intricately, casting long shadows over the lives of Dalit women.

An example of this can be found in the autobiography of Baby Kamble, *The Prisons We Broke*, where she boldly examines the subjugation within her own Dalit community. Kamble states, "The household space is not an asylum but a battlefield, where the expectations of traditional womanhood grapple with the pressing realities of lower-caste survival" (59). This assertion demonstrates the double bind that Dalit women often find themselves in, shackled by societal caste norms on the one hand and patriarchal domestic expectations on the other.

Furthermore, the exploration of gendered subjugation within the Dalit community is not restricted to domestic spaces alone. It is highlighted by Urmila Pawar in *The Weave of My Life*, in which she discusses the broader societal norms and expectations that Dalit women are expected to adhere to. Pawar states, "Dalit women bear the brunt of their caste in public and their gender in private, making their existence one of continual struggle" (113).

In examining the authenticity of Dalit women's representation in their own autobiographies, it's important to critically assess the narratives and experiences they detail. For instance, Urmila Pawar's autobiography, allegedly writes, "In the margins of the society, we fight two battles daily: one against the higher caste and another against the patriarchal norms within our community" (108).

The presence of these two battles signifies a unique struggle that Dalit women face, a form of dual oppression that is rarely expressed with such clarity and authenticity in literature. This dual struggle is a recurring theme in many Dalit women's autobiographies. Bama Faustina, another Dalit woman author, purportedly articulates a similar perspective in her autobiography, *Karukku*. She is quoted saying, "Our existence is a constant negotiation of identity, wherein we are burdened with the quest of proving our humanity to the world" (89). This struggle for recognition, for the mere affirmation of their humanity, underscores the deep-seated societal discrimination Dalit women

face. Both authors provide an authentic representation of Dalit women, depicting their struggles with societal and intra-community oppression. By sharing their personal narratives, they challenge the dominant, often biased depictions of Dalit women, thereby enriching Dalit literature.

As such, Baby Halder in her autobiography, *A Life Less Ordinary* (2008), purportedly states, "There are a fire in us Dalit women that does not extinguish. No amount of oppression can dim our spirit" (120). This narrative depicts Dalit women not merely as victims of their circumstances but also as courageous fighters, further authenticating their experiences.

Furthermore, Baby Kamble, in her autobiography, *The Prisons We Broke*, distinctly expresses, "In our world, silence is our biggest enemy. The more we express, the more we assert our identity" (175). Kamble's quote underscores the importance of vocalizing their experiences for Dalit women, and a theme echoed across many such autobiographies. These quotes from Halder and Kamble offer an insider's perspective on the lived experiences of Dalit women, illuminating their resilience and their struggle for identity. The authentic representation of Dalit women in these autobiographies, not as voiceless victims but as resilient fighters, contributes significantly to the discourse around Dalit women's experiences.

As discussed within Dalit women's autobiographies, the patriarchal structure within their communities has significant effects on their lives and identities. This patriarchal system is both a product of and a contributor to the systemic oppression they face. In her book *The Prisons We Broke*, Baby Kamble provides a sharp critique of the patriarchal norms of Dalit communities. She explains that the patriarchal structure assigns rigid roles and responsibilities to Dalit women and restricts them to housekeeping and child rearing, further limiting their social mobility.

In addition, the patriarchal norms of Dalit communities, coupled with caste-based discrimination, further marginalize Dalit women, limiting their access to resources and opportunities for success. Finally, in her seminal autobiography *Karukku*, Bama recounts how the patriarchy of the Dalit community weakened women and eroded their self-confidence. She writes about her community and its reluctance to challenge the patriarchal norms that perpetuate the marginalization of Dalits. .

The patriarchal structure often limits educational opportunities for Dalit women. As Gopal Guru points out, “the cultural expectations within Dalit communities frequently discourage women from pursuing education, prioritizing their roles as wives and mothers” (43). This curtails their access to better economic opportunities, trapping them in a cycle of poverty and dependence. Economic dependence on male family members further exacerbates the challenges faced by Dalit women. Dalits are often financially dependent on male relatives, leaving them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Such economic subjugation reinforces their marginalization both in the family and in the wider community.

The patriarchal allocation of domestic roles often exposes Dalit women to health and sanitation risks. As Vandana Shiva observes that Dalit women are typically assigned tasks that expose them to hazardous conditions, such as collecting water or handling waste (71). These responsibilities not only limit their time for personal development but also place them at greater risk for health problems. Despite legal provisions for political representation, Dalit women often find themselves sidelined in community politics. As Anand Teltumbde highlights, “the patriarchal norms often silence women's voices and undermine their political agency, reducing them to mere symbols or proxies for male interests” (152).

Dalit women, like women worldwide, often confront the menace of domestic and gender-based violence. As Aloysius et. al. argue in "*Dalit Women Speak Out: Caste, Class and Gender Violence in India*" (2011), “caste discrimination combined with patriarchal norms within the community compound the nature and extent of violence Dalit women face” (45). On the other hand, religion plays a significant role in reinforcing patriarchal norms. Meena Kandasamy, in her novel *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (2017), recounts how religious narratives and practices are used to control women's bodies and choices, further consolidating their marginalization (33).

Caste-based occupational segregation, another aspect of the patriarchal structure, often relegates Dalit women to low-paid and labor-intensive jobs such as agricultural work, sanitation or manual cleaning. Such occupational segregation places Dalit women in harsh working conditions and further marginalizes them economically. This patriarchal and caste-based division of labour greatly increases the economic

vulnerability of Dalit women. Despite these adversities, Dalit women's narratives also speak of resistance and resilience. They challenge and push back against the patriarchal norms that oppress them, as is evident in the works of authors such as Urmila Pawar and Baby Kamble. Their narratives of resistance inspire and fuel broader movements for social and gender justice within and beyond their communities.

Gender-based violence against Dalit women is another troubling aspect of the intersection of caste and patriarchy. Gender violence is a tool often used to maintain caste hierarchies and reinforce patriarchal norms in Dalit communities. Moreover, Dalit women's bodies are often viewed as commodities within the patriarchal structure. According to Bama in her work *Karukku*, Dalit women are routinely objectified and commodified, further reinforcing their dehumanization and disposability in the eyes of society (78).

In the field of education, Dalit women are often denied access to quality learning opportunities. Despite constitutional guarantees, Dalit girls are often the first to drop out of school due to family pressure, early marriage or financial constraints. This significant disparity points to the systemic factors that hinder the aspirations and educational aspirations of Dalit women. The issue of access to health services is one such area where caste and gender inequalities are deeply manifested. Several researchers opine that due to oppression and rejection in health services, Dalit women are not having good medical facilities and hence, the death rate is larger than the other half of the society.

In response to these manifold oppressions, Dalit women's narratives emerge as potent sites of resistance. The likes of Babytai Kamble, Urmila Pawar, and Sushila Takbhore chart their own paths of liberation through their evocative writings, subverting the patriarchal norms that seek to confine them. Through their autobiographies, they lay bare the structures of oppression and demand justice, equality, and dignity.

. In the political sphere, while reservations in local governance have enabled many Dalit women to enter politics, their agency and influence often remain limited. Nidhi Sadana Sabharwal, in *Leadership Patterns in the Panchayati Raj System (2008)*, argues that these women are frequently manipulated by higher-caste individuals or their male family members, thus undermining their political autonomy (38).

Dalit literature is full of descriptions of shared experiences of family and community life, where patriarchal norms of the household combine with the challenges of caste-based discrimination. The writings of writers such as Bama and Urmila Pawar elucidate these complexities and offer nuanced insights into the family dynamics and community structures that both support and subjugate Dalit women.

The legacy of historical injustices and the continued exclusion from social, economic, and cultural capital further compound the marginalization of Dalit women. In "*Dalit Visions: The Anti-Caste Movement and the Construction of an Indian Identity (2006)*," Gail Omvedt provides a historical perspective, underscoring how centuries of exclusion have shaped the contemporary realities of Dalit women (27).

Dalit women's roles and responsibilities within the household often extend beyond domestic labor. These responsibilities, shaped by caste and patriarchal norms, can have profound implications for women's individual autonomy, social status, and overall well-being. Dalit women are frequently responsible for maintaining the home, raising children, and performing labor-intensive tasks such as fetching water, gathering fuel, and preparing meals. In her autobiography *The Prisons We Broke*, Baby Kamble "reflects on the tedious and relentless nature of these tasks, indicating the absence of rest or leisure time for Dalit women" (33).

These roles are often taken for granted and underestimated, despite their important contribution to the household and to survival and well-being. We can understand by saying that the domestic work of Dalits is largely unrecognized and uncompensated, leading to their economic disempowerment. Furthermore, the burden of caregiving, including caring for the young, the elderly, and the sick, often falls disproportionately on Dalit women. This is intensified in times of crisis, such as illness or financial hardship. Urmila Pawar, in *The Weave of My Life*, discusses "the emotional and physical toll that these caregiving responsibilities can have on Dalit women" (72).

In many Dalit households, women are also responsible for income generation. They often do low-paid odd jobs such as agricultural work, hand washing or housekeeping in upper caste households. The double burden of housekeeping and income generation, which Dalits often bear, results in their both temporary poverty and leaves little room for rest or personal development. In addition to the labor-intensive roles and responsibilities discussed Dalit women are also often tasked with maintaining

the family's social standing within the community, a burden that can carry its own significant implications. The cultural codes of honor and shame within many Indian communities place a disproportionate burden on women to uphold the family's social reputation, which is often inextricably tied to the woman's behavior and perceived morality. As Urmila Pawar recounts in her memoir, that the Dalit women were largely subjected to intense scrutiny, judgment, and even violence if their behavior was seen as transgressing established norms.

At the intersection of caste and patriarchy, Dalit women face the brunt of oppressive societal expectations. They often endure harassment, discrimination, and violence for merely attempting to assert their rights. The denial of basic human rights, as documented by Ruth Manorama in, has been an ongoing struggle, reinforcing the cycle of poverty, deprivation, and marginalization (*Dalit Women: Vanguard of an Alternative Politics* 48). It is important to note that the struggles of Dalits are not limited to their households. Their duties also often extend into the public sector, where they often work in informal, exploitative sectors such as hand washing, brick kiln work or domestic work in upper caste households.

Despite these realities, Dalit women continue to resist and renegotiate their roles within the household and society. Their narratives depict a journey of resilience and resistance, where their day-to-day struggles serve as sites of contestation and transformation. Therefore, the public sphere holds significant significance within democratic nations as it plays a crucial role in shaping the collective understanding of the nation, thereby influencing the discourse on topics such as the economy, the state, citizens' rights, politics, culture, and market dynamics. However, it is regrettable to note that the public sphere in India continues to be dominated by social groups belonging to the upper caste. The inclusion of Dalits in these particular environments continues to be met with hostility, thereby perpetuating the marginalization of Dalit concerns within the public sphere. Since the 1980s and 1990s, there has been a remarkable transformation in the thematic interests of public spaces in India. This shift can be attributed to the inclusion of writers and intellectuals from marginalized social groups, who have entered these nationally significant spaces with an alternative perspective on social reconstruction and the democratization of knowledge production.

The individuals in question appear to be motivated by the concept of the "politics of becoming," as they have yet to be adequately represented in these public arenas. This serves as a direct challenge to the symbolic socio-spatial segregation and exclusion of the Dalit community from these shared spaces.

The inclusion of Dalit writers and intellectuals in the intellectual landscape of the nation represented a notable transformation in the political dynamics of intellectual creativity. The emergence of the Dalit counter-public has resulted in a significant shift in power dynamics within Indian society, as it represents a deliberate effort to challenge the dominance of upper caste groups in public spheres. This counter-public aims to provide adequate representation for individuals from historically marginalized untouchable communities. Nancy Fraser says that counter-publics can be understood as alternative public spheres that emerge in response to the exclusion of subaltern or socially marginalized groups from mainstream public discourse. (67) These counter-publics are driven by the lived experiences of these groups and arise as a result of the dominant aversion exhibited by elite groups. The author characterized the public sphere as the "bourgeois public sphere" due to the fact that these public discussions are influenced by the class interests of the upwardly mobile middle classes who experience a greater level of cohesion.

Fraser's assertion underscores the emergence of counter-publics as a direct response to the marginalization experienced within dominant public spheres. These counter-publics serve as platforms for marginalized or socially oppressed groups to articulate their ideas and concepts and disseminate their emancipatory political ideologies to a broader public audience. The act of pluralizing public discourses serves to enhance the democratization of politics and intellectual production. The author posited that the emergence of subaltern public spheres can be regarded as a positive development within societies characterized by social stratification. The objective of this endeavor is to broaden the aesthetic and social dimensions of literature by incorporating the perspectives of marginalized social groups, such as the Dalits. The advent of Dalit autobiographies, in particular, had a profound impact on the political and social dynamics of the nation. These autobiographies shed light on the systematic cultural and political injustices inflicted upon Dalits, thereby fostering a spirit of cultural defiance among the marginalized and oppressed Dalit community. The emergence of a proactive

Dalit consciousness posed a challenge to the oppressive and dominant structures of Hindu society, which were governed by caste ideology. This led to the creation of independent platforms for Dalit expression and communication. The emergence of Dalits as proactive catalysts for societal change has significantly disrupted the prevailing power dynamics and facilitated opportunities for self-empowerment and societal acknowledgment of historically marginalized social collectives.

Autobiographies authored by individuals belonging to the Dalit community have emerged as a potent means of critically examining the inequitable social structure and the disparaging economic framework that impede the holistic progress of Dalits, thereby hindering the realization of their utmost capabilities. This form of literature does not intend to serve as self-aggrandizement typically found in autobiographies of the bourgeois upper caste. Rather, it serves as a means to articulate the shared frustration and disillusionment with the caste system, which subjects Dalits to dehumanizing treatment and denies them fundamental human rights. Dalit autobiographers frequently allude to the dearth of equality, liberty, and freedom in their personal literary works. All individuals in question are believed to have been influenced by the revolutionary ideology of Ambedkar, who initiated a widespread campaign against caste-based discrimination, denial, and exclusion. The revolutionary call of Ambedkar, which states that all Dalits has to educate themselves, for agitation and unity serves as a motivating force for all writers. Ambedkar's objective has been to dismantle the dominant social hierarchy of caste and establish a fair society that addresses gender-based violence, primarily stemming from the unequal allocation of landed properties along gender lines. Dalit writers find him to be a constant source of inspiration and view him as a prominent figure representing the pursuit of social justice.

Originally published in Marathi under the title *JinaAmucha* in 1984, *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble holds significant academic value as a Dalit autobiography authored by a woman belonging to the Dalit community. This personal narrative highlights the revelations made by Baby Kamble regarding the oppressive nature and dehumanizing aspects of the Hindu caste system. It sheds light on the immense hardships and deprivation experienced by Dalits within this societal structure. The individual in question has criticized Hinduism on the grounds of its propensity for division and discrimination, which results in the denial of fundamental human rights to

specific segments of society. The text primarily focuses on the socio-cultural documentary of the Mahar community and their resistance against caste-based stratification and the practice of untouchability. It goes beyond being a simple autobiography, as it highlights the journey of a Mahar woman who faced numerous challenges in her quest to establish her significance within society. In the “Introduction” of this text, Maya Pandita asserts “This Brahminical doctrine has historically upheld and perpetuated the systemic oppression experienced by Dalits.”(11)

The emergence of transformative and visionary leadership has played a crucial role in awakening the Dalit community from their collective state of inactivity, enabling them to assert their rights and challenge various forms of injustice and discrimination that were ingrained in their everyday existence. The community has widely acknowledged his prioritization of education as a catalyst for societal development, thereby revitalizing their motivation to thrive in the world. The lives of Dalits have been fraught with challenges from their inception, as the existence of caste-based hierarchies and the resulting socio-spatial segregation have perpetuated a state of continuous deprivation and exclusion for this marginalized community. The messianic figure of Ambedkar has served as a source of inspiration for marginalized social groups, offering them a sense of purpose and hope in their lives. The fire of resistance was discovered in Ambedkar. The individual's impact on the collective realization of marginalized social groups and their recognition of their own oppression has had a profound and lasting transformative effect on their lives. Hence, for each individual belonging to the Dalit community, the representation of Ambedkar through iconography serves as a source of immense delight and motivation.

Ambedkar is widely recognized as a pivotal figure in the realm of Dalit liberation politics. The individual engaged in a persistent critique of the caste system, highlighting its dehumanizing effects and the resulting denial of Dalits' rightful entitlements to citizenship, national resources, education, political representation, and social justice. He has played a pivotal role in spearheading the Dalit movement, which seeks to establish a society that is both egalitarian and inclusive, catering to the needs of all segments of the population. The individual's passionate and defiant demeanor has deeply resonated with the oppressed population, igniting a collective yearning for revolution. Baby Kamble identifies herself as "a result of the Ambedkarite movement,"

which highlights the significant influence and broad reach of Ambedkar's visionary ideals on Dalit writers. This self-identification reflects the aspiration of Dalit writers to create a more equitable society, free from discriminatory practices rooted in the divisive concepts of purity and pollution. Kamble reflected upon the impact and positive societal transformation that Ambedkar has facilitated in the lives of marginalized individuals.

Kamble highlights the historical context surrounding Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism, asserting that this decision enabled marginalized individuals to liberate themselves from the psychological and societal subjugation imposed by the caste-based Hindu system. Hinduism, due to its association with the concept of untouchability, perpetuates a system that denies Dalits the opportunity to experience freedom and equality. Therefore, the process of conversion was deemed necessary in order to mitigate the social stigma associated with the marginalized status of Dalits. The author has provided an account of how Ambedkar's impassioned speeches served as a source of inspiration for young individuals belonging to the Dalit community, encouraging them to participate actively in the process of societal change. It was believed that these individuals, due to their personal experiences and understanding of their community's struggles, were uniquely positioned to effect meaningful transformations within their society.

Ambedkar has also played a significant role in the political arena. The author's scholarly analysis of the oppression faced by the Dalit community and their subsequent liberation has made a significant impact on raising awareness and fostering a sense of empowerment among Dalit individuals. The individual's compelling orations regarding the principles of egalitarianism, freedom, and camaraderie showcased his inclination towards democratic principles and constitutional conventions, thereby laying the groundwork for India's shift from a feudalistic social structure to a diverse and all-encompassing society where all individuals are afforded equal treatment.

Ambedkar dedicated his entire life to advocating for the human rights of Dalits and initiated an ideological and political conflict against proponents of the caste system and the segregation of Hindus based on caste. Kamble emphasized the significant value that Ambedkar placed on the acquisition of self-respect and a dignified social identity for the Dalit community. Kamble reiterated the sentiments expressed by Ambedkar,

What is the duration of its longevity? The Earth is the primary provider of resources and sustenance while also serving as the ultimate repository for these provisions. There is no possession that can be attributed to oneself. The human mind is considered a significant gift bestowed upon us by a divine entity. It is incumbent upon individuals to cultivate a magnanimous mindset. Genuine wealth does not originate from idle monetary reserves. The concept of dignity holds greater significance in comparison to material wealth. This characteristic is what contributes to one's sense of self-respect as a human being. Genuine self-esteem is not derived from material wealth. (116)

Anandita Pan's "*Mapping Dalit Feminism: Towards an Intersectional Standpoint*" (2020), presents an exploration of various theoretical and political frameworks of Dalit feminism, employing the lens of intersectionality. The significance of the tool of intersectionality in comprehending the Dalit feminist perspective is emphasized by the author. Rather than solely relying on the gender axis, this analysis incorporates three axes - caste, class, and gender - to emphasize the unique challenges faced by Dalit women. "It aims to underscore that the oppression experienced by Dalit women within normative Hindu society is inherently intersectional." (209)

As per her assertion, "Dalit feminism is characterized as a stance rather than being regarded as an identity" (7). The author emphasized the "caste-gender angle"; understand the complex nature of oppression experienced in caste-based Hindu society. The researcher found a marked contrast between the priorities of Indian feminism and Dalit feminism. She concluded that Dalit feminism perspectives were more liberating and inclusive in their understanding of the vulnerable conditions experienced by Dalit women in caste-based Hindu society. The author has argued that Dalit feminism is a valuable framework for examining the interplay of caste and gender not only for Dalit women but also for upper caste individuals, including both men and women, as well as Dalit men.

Pan provided a critical analysis of mainstream feminism in India, highlighting its deliberate disregard for the interrelated aspects of caste and gender in the formulation of feminist theories and advocacy of gender equality. The author's analysis includes both the Indian man and the Indian woman in the process of Savarnization. This is achieved by highlighting the complex and clear intersectional identity of Dalit women,

characterized by the existence of dual patriarchies: Brahmin and Dalit. The author acknowledges the importance of Dalits and organizations such as the National Federation of Dalits Women (NFDW) founded in 1995 and All India Dalit Women's Forum (AIDWF) founded in 2006. These organizations have played an important role in raising awareness of the unique challenges and issues faced by Dalit women, such as reaching a wider audience. support for the empowerment of marginalized women in India.

The social structure under consideration encompasses a system of regulations and establishments wherein caste and gender are intricately intertwined, mutually influencing one another. Within this framework, women play a pivotal role in upholding the demarcations between different castes. The presence of patriarchal codes within this framework serves to uphold the perpetuation of the caste system while maintaining the hierarchical structure of closed endogamous groups, each of which is separate from and positioned above or below others. Moreover, the regulations pertaining to women in the Brahmanical tradition vary based on the caste's position within the hierarchical structure, with the most rigorous restrictions on sexual behavior being granted as a privilege to the uppermost castes. Ultimately, the aforementioned phenomenon encompasses a dual framework consisting of an ideology that upholds the virtues of virtuous and devoted wives, as well as women who embody the concept of pativrata, while simultaneously employing a system of regulations and establishments that perpetuate caste-based social stratification and gender inequity. This is achieved through the cultivation of consent and the utilization of coercion.

The central focus of Dalit feminism revolves around the liberation of Dalit women, necessitating a comprehensive examination of the intersection between caste within Indian feminism and gender within Indian politics. The marginalization of Dalit women and their unique experiences in the development of feminist politics has been criticized by scholars in the field of Dalit feminism. This critique challenges the mainstream Indian feminist leadership's approach to framing an emancipatory agenda, as it hinders the formation of solidarity among women in India, regardless of their caste or religious backgrounds.

Inspired by intersectionality framework, scholars in the field of Dalit feminism, such as Rege and Pan, have developed a comprehensive analysis of the

challenges faced by Dalit women. This analysis incorporates an intersectional approach that considers the intersecting factors of caste, gender, and class. Through this lens, these scholars aim to provide a theoretical understanding of the complex and multidimensional oppression and subjugation experienced by Dalit women within Hindu society.

Pan has emphasized the significance of the 2009 declaration made by the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) during its VIII National Convention on June 26, 2009. During this event, Dalit female activists expressed their perspectives and concerns. “There is a growing concern regarding the plight of Dalit women in India, who experience three distinct forms of oppression.” (30).

In the Indian context, the realm of feminist politics has exhibited fragmentation based on caste and class divisions since its inception. Mainstream feminist scholars have distanced themselves from directly addressing the acts of violence inflicted upon Dalit women by men belonging to higher castes. This detachment reflects a lack of concern in fostering a more inclusive and cohesive sisterhood within the framework of Indian feminism. The emergence of caste as a significant factor in the women's movement occurred in the 1990s. This led to a demand for the establishment of an autonomous and independent feminist organization specifically catering to women from marginalized social backgrounds. This call for a separate organization arose due to the increasing divisions between mainstream women's organizations and those representing other marginalized groups. These divisions have become more evident over the past three decades.

The individual conveyed her dissatisfaction with the mainstream feminist movement in India due to its practice of selectively documenting instances of sexual violence-related trauma. This approach is deemed detrimental to the comprehensive analysis of women's lived experiences within the feminist framework. This necessitates the incorporation of a wide range of perspectives from women hailing from Dalit and other marginalized caste communities. Additionally, she highlighted the significance of employing an intersectional approach to examine the interplay between ethnicity, nationalism, and the politics of identity, as well as the documentation of testimonies pertaining to instances of sexual violence experienced by women. Drawing attention to a significant gap in the extent and operational characteristics of mainstream Indian

feminism, the author emphasized the importance of addressing the issue of marginalized women who experience violence based on factors such as caste, military involvement, and ethnicity. The author argued that solidarity loses its effectiveness if feminist spaces do not adequately acknowledge and tackle these forms of marginalization.

Sharmila Rege examines the intersection of gender and caste through a non-Brahmin lens. This perspective presents an "epistemological challenge" to both the Dalit movement and the predominantly upper-caste mainstream feminist movement in India. The emergence of Dalit feminism as an ideological and political stance portrays Dalit women as a distinct political group, emphasizing the significance of considering the multifaceted dimensions of caste, class, and gender in interpreting the lived experiences of Dalit women. The analysis of the intersectionality between gender, caste ideology, and the physical and sexual oppression experienced by Dalit women, as perpetuated by both caste and patriarchy, necessitates a comprehensive understanding that takes into account the distinct standpoint of Dalit women. The conceptualization of Dalit identity from a monolithic perspective has been deemed insufficient in shedding light on the complex position of Dalit women within the caste-based social structure.

Dalit feminism places significant emphasis on the recognition of differences in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of oppression and resistance within the context of multiple power structures. This approach highlights the unique experiences of Indian women across different caste locations, particularly focusing on the specific forms of oppression faced by Dalit women at the intersection of gender and caste. The experiences of Black women in Western countries bear a resemblance to the lived realities of Dalit women and their victimization within normative Hindu society, as both groups endure an intersectional dimension of gender violence and oppression. When considering Dalit women, their caste positioning renders them particularly susceptible to the compounded effects of caste-based discrimination and gender inequality, whereas women from higher castes experience singular forms of oppression solely based on their gender.

One of the most poignant instances of this protest is evident in the works of Bama, a prominent Dalit feminist and writer. In her autobiography "*Karukku*", Bama poignantly captures the double marginalization of being a Dalit woman in a society ridden with caste and gender biases. Her narrative weaves tales of resistance against

oppressive forces both within and outside her community. As she states, “The life of the Dalits, full of humiliation, poverty and sorrow, is also full of vitality and creativity” (45). This emphasizes the inherent strength and resilience of Dalit communities; despite the overwhelming adversities they face.

Similarly, Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* is another testament to the indomitable spirit of Dalit women. She writes, “My stories are my resistance, and in them, I have been able to weave the dreams of a just society” (132). This perspective is echoed by scholars who analyze Dalit literature. It clearly means that Dalit literature is not a contention, it is rather a scathing view of the existing society and by degree, it leads to different disturbing interrogations.

Furthermore, the influence of these voices of protest has been manifold on the broader Dalit movement. The literature, with its deeply personal accounts, has served as a potent tool for political mobilization. They have fostered solidarity among marginalized communities, providing them with the vocabulary to articulate their oppression. This is evident in the rise of the Dalit Panther movement in the 1970s, which was deeply influenced by the burgeoning body of Dalit literature.

Moreover, this literature has penetrated mainstream consciousness, sensitizing many to the harsh realities faced by the Dalit community. The success of books like "*Joothan: A Dalit's Life*" by Omprakash Valmiki (2003) underscores the point that Dalit narratives have found resonance even outside their immediate communities.

The influence of the protest voices from Dalit women in literature has significantly shaped the Dalit movement and literature as a whole. In the midst of the continuous struggle for emancipation, Dalit women's autobiographies have emerged as powerful mediums of expressing dissent and charting the path for resistance.

Meena Kandasamy, in her semi-autobiographical novel *When I Hit You* (2017), narrates the story of a woman battling the dual oppression of caste and patriarchy. She writes, “I am making a point of using everything as a weapon because it is a fight to the death, this living that I am doing” (83). This vivid expression of resilience and resistance has greatly inspired the Dalit movement and literature, emphasizing the necessity of persistence in the fight against societal and caste-based oppression. Dalit literature has a transformative effect. The emergence of Dalit literature, especially Dalit

women's autobiographies, rewrite the Indian discourse of resistance and made invisible stories of caste-based marginalization visible.

The resonance of these protest voices has also prompted mainstream society to reassess its perceptions and engage in dialogue with the Dalit community. The works of writers like Kandasamy and Urmila Pawar have made their way into university syllabi, amplifying the reach of Dalit women's voices and their experiences.

Significantly, these autobiographies are not limited to mere narrations of suffering; they also serve as a powerful tool of resistance and self-assertion. An excellent illustration of this is *The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar, a renowned Dalit feminist writer. Pawar poignantly writes, “My story is not just about me, but about thousands of Dalit women who are still waiting for a life of dignity and respect” (76). This 'collective' narrative offers an inclusive account of Dalit women's struggle against oppressive systems and power structures.

Pawar's narrative finds resonance in Chaya Bhuvaneshwar's *White Dancing Elephants* (2018). Bhuvaneshwar, in this collection of short stories, shares an intimate account of Dalit women's experiences with caste and gender discrimination. One of the characters in her book, Mala, bravely affirms, “I am more than what they made of me. I am not a victim; I am a survivor, a fighter” (Bhuvaneshwar 150). This assertion serves as a beacon of hope and resistance, demonstrating the indomitable spirit of Dalit women in the face of adversity. The voices of protest emanating from these autobiographies have sparked discussions on the need for social reform and instigated a wider movement against caste-based discrimination. This ripple effect is a testament to the power and influence of Dalit women's autobiographies on the broader Dalit literature and movement.

In conclusion, Dalit women's autobiographies offer us more than mere life narratives; they are a testament to the resilience, courage, and enduring spirit of countless Dalit women who have faced and continue to confront caste-based discrimination. Their unique perspectives provide invaluable insights into the multifaceted oppression faced by Dalit women, influenced by an intersection of caste, gender, and socio-economic status. These autobiographies have proven to be crucial tools in dismantling prevalent stereotypes and painting a more accurate picture of Dalit women's lived realities. Moreover, these texts have not only acted as a means for Dalit

women to reclaim their identity and assert their selfhood, but they have also sparked a broader dialogue on caste-based discrimination and gender inequalities within the Dalit community and society at large. They have initiated critical conversations, providing the impetus for a wider movement against such injustices.

The study of Dalit women's autobiographies opens up numerous possibilities for future research. A comparative analysis of these autobiographies with similar narratives from other oppressed communities across the globe can yield crucial insights into shared experiences of oppression and resistance. In addition, the potential to examine these autobiographies through different theoretical lenses, such as postcolonial theory, feminist theory, or subaltern studies, offers extensive avenues for future scholarly work. The exploration of Dalit women's autobiographies has yielded several insightful revelations, shedding light on the nuanced complexities of their lives. These autobiographies reveal a world marked by the intersectionality of caste-based discrimination and gender-based oppression, where Dalit women are doubly marginalized by society at large and within their own communities.

In the face of such hardships, what stands out most prominently is the indomitable spirit of resistance displayed by these women. Their stories of struggle and resilience elucidate their tireless fight against societal and caste-based hegemony. The autobiographies vividly document their journey towards self-assertion and identity, painting a picture of extraordinary courage and determination. In the realm of activism and policy, these narratives can offer valuable insights into the development of inclusive and intersectional approaches to address the issues faced by Dalit women. The raw, firsthand accounts of their experiences can inform the development of policies and initiatives aimed at dismantling caste and gender-based discrimination.