

# PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN THE SELECTED MEMOIRS OF DALIT WRITERS

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## ABSTRACT

*The present research is aimed at studying critically the portrayal of women characters in the selected memoirs of the Dalit writers. The memoirs, Athvaninche Pakshi (The Birds of Memory) (1973) by P. I. Sonkamble, The Prisons We Broke (2008) by Baby Kamble and The Weave of My Life by Urmila Pawar are worth studying with reference to the women characters and their plight in the face of adversity and patriarchy in the caste and class-ridden Indian society. There are some similarities and differences in these autobiographical works and therefore worth comparing the women characters against the backdrop of class and caste hierarchy. The discovery of new meaning and interpretation in relation to the representation of women characters is the focal point of the present research.*

## Aims and Objectives

The following are the aims and objectives of the present study:

- 1) To study the women characters as depicted in the memoirs of the selected Dalit writers.
- 2) To understand the roles of the women characters in the memoirs and study their identity crisis.
- 3) To throw light on the status of Dalit women and lower caste women and their socio-economic problems in the caste dominated society.
- 4) To demonstrate how the lower caste women were victims of male domination and social code of conducts.
- 5) To discover the various roles women such as mother, sister, wife, daughter, daughter-in-law, mother-in-law and grandmother.
- 6) To discuss illiteracy, malnutrition, superstitions, starvation, unhygienic surroundings etc. in which the women characters in the selected memoirs are trapped
- 7) To stress the importance of hard work and the Dalit women's devotion for their family.
- 8) To illustrate the relations of Dalit women with their relatives and male counter parts.
- 9) To, emphasize injustice, sufferings, poverty, and humiliation inflicted on the women characters
- 10) To compare and contrast the image of women in these books

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Preliminaries

Exploitation and subordination of Dalit women in India has been the central issue in all Dalit literature whether it is Dalit poetry, drama, novel or autobiography. Autobiography as a form of Dalit literature emerged during the 70s, the reason being the appearance of the educated class of the first generation of the Dalits. The writers of the first generation wanted to depict their own experiences revealing their own world which was replete with marginalization and exploitation of all kinds. Most of the Dalit writers selected 'memoir' as a form of writing through which they spontaneously expressed their feelings and experiences. Through this form of literature, they also narrated the experiences of the Dalit women's lives. This literature of 'the oppressed' deals with poverty, hunger, disease, oppression, psychological turmoil, and ostracism etc. Gender discrimination and women's segregation is a vital issue in the memoirs of not only the male Dalit writers but it has also been the domain of the Dalit women writers. The lives of the Dalit women reveal the fact that they have been isolated from the main stream of the society from the time immemorial. The Dalit women stand as marginalized within their own communities as being outcaste and weaker gender at the same time. The uniqueness of the Dalit women's autobiographies is its heartrending and authoritative portrayal of women characters that undergo adverse economic, social, educational and cultural conditions prevailing in those days. Dalit women writers wanted to throw a flood of light on the miserable social and economic conditions of the Dalit women in their respective memoirs. They were interested in portraying the Dalit women as they had seen them moving around facing the odds of life. The women's issues were treated by these Dalit writers sympathetically in their respective autobiographies.

The present research is aimed at the portrayal of women characters in the selected memoirs of the Dalit writers. The memoirs, *Athvaninche Pakshi (The Birds of Memory)* (1973) by P. I. Sonkamble, *The Outcaste* (2003) by Sharankumar Limbale, *Outcaste* (2005) by Narendra Jadhav, *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) by Baby Kamble and *The Weave of My Life* (2009) by Urmila Pawar are worth studying with reference to the women characters and their plight in the face of adversity and patriarchy in the caste and class-ridden Indian society. There are some similarities and differences in these autobiographical works and therefore worth comparing the women characters against the backdrop of class and caste hierarchy. The discovery of new meaning and interpretation in relation to the representation of women characters is the focal point of the present research. The women characters are worth studying from sociological point of view.

These writers belong to lower castes of Indian society where discrimination, ostracism, humiliation, dehumanization, ill-treatment are the order of the day. These writers portray the women characters against the backdrop of Hindu society based on hierarchy. The above-mentioned memoirs depict the condition of women, their pitiable existence, and suffering of their respective backward communities at the hands of higher caste people. The struggle of women is worth studying from the point of view of humanism, tolerance, human dignity and human values.

The memoir *Athvaninche Pakshi* by P. I. Sonkamble is written in Marathi. The memoir *Outcaste* by Narendra Jadhav is a translation of the original Marathi memoir entitled *Aamcha Bap ani Amhi*. *The Prisons We Broke* is translated by Maya Pandit and the original book is entitled *Jin Aamuch* by Baby Kamble. *The Outcaste* by Sharankumar Limbale is translated by Santosh Bhoomkar and *The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar is translated by Maya Pandit. These writers handle the themes of untouchability, exploitation, subjugation of women in their inimitable style. All the Dalit writers mainly deal with suffering and humiliation caused by utter poverty and the low status accorded to them in the Hindu society.

The women in above memoirs live in deplorable condition. Their life is surrounded by hunger, poverty relentless humiliation, continuous deprivation, unhygienic surroundings, filthiness, superstitions etc. The tragic stories of Dalit women show that they have no self-identity and social standing. Their lives are reduced to mere vegetable existence. Maltreatment, illiteracy, starvation, and untouchability are the forms of exploitation practiced by the patriarchal society. The plight of Dalit women or the lower caste women is far from security and justice. They are denied the fundamental right live with dignity and suffer at the hands of their male counterparts. These autobiographies depict the wretched condition of women. They are not only by the high caste people but they are also the victims of their own people. In India, the birth of a girl child was abhorred in the past. If at all it was welcome, it was for her utility in gaining livelihood for others in family. Newly wedded girls below fifteen years of age, unable to bear the thrashing used to run away from their husbands to their parents. This aggravated the conditions as the girl's parents instead of listening to their miseries drove the girls back to their in laws. These situations forced them to go out of the frying pan into the fire.

These books are not only an account of Dalit women's personal sufferings but they also depict the social realities. Therefore, these memoirs are worth comparing as far as the portrayal of women is concerned.

**Chapter One** is an Introduction. It deals with the historical perspective of the position of women in Indian society and how their images were portrayed in the Indian Writing in English. It takes a survey of the related literature. The historical and social factors that led the Dalit women to live a confined life are also examined and discussed thoroughly. The chapter highlights the aims, objectives, scope and limitations of the study. It also spells out the methodology to be used for analysis of the women characters.

**Chapter Two** is entitled **Portrayal of Women in Athawaninche Pakshi**, a memoir in Marathi by P. I. Sonkamble. The plight of the women characters are discussed thoroughly against the backdrop of Indian socio-cultural reality.

**Chapter Three** is entitled **Portrayal of Women in The Prisons We Broke**. The plight of the women characters is discussed thoroughly against the backdrop of Indian socio-cultural reality.

**Chapter Four** is entitled **Portrayal of Women in The Weave of My life**. It discusses how the women are depicted in this autobiography in a lively manner.

**Chapter Five** is the concluding chapter. It revisits the earlier chapters and states the main findings of the research followed by the pedagogical implications. It offers scope for further research in this or related area towards the end of the chapter.

## CONCLUSION

Women in India especially Dalit women have been relegated to marginality from the ancient period till today, the reason being the rigid patriarchal structure of the Indian society. Manu, the supreme philosopher and preacher of the Hindu religion is held responsible for creating the heinous social structure of caste system in India. He wrote a scripture entitled 'Manusmriti' in which he advocated the caste system. The untouchables or what we call 'Harijan' were considered the lowest in the social order. The Dalit women received ill treatment at the hands of the caste Hindus as well as their own people especially the males. Even after seventy years of Independence, Indian society has not been able to give justice and self-esteem to the low-caste women. Atrocities against them are on the rise. Every two hours, one Dalit is beaten, everyday 3 Dalit women become the victims of the rape, two Dalit are murdered and two Dalit houses are burnt (India: 1995). They are mostly exploited by usurping their lands, giving them low wages and using them as bonded labour. In the present study, the women are projected as the mute sufferers. Their plight is so terrible that even they do not get enough bhakri to eat forget about the nutritious food. The autobiographies under consideration depict women in their miserable condition. They are torn between the struggle to survive and worry to support their husband and children. An attempt has been made in the present research to study the portrayal of women in five autobiographies of the Dalit writers such as P. I. Sonkamble, Sharankumar Nimbale, Baby Kamble, Narendra Jadhav and Urmila Pawar.

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