



**ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER**

**English**

**CONFLICT OF THE SELF AND THE SOCIETY: A CRITICAL STUDY OF DALIT AUTOBIOGRAPHIES**

**KEY WORDS:** Conflict, Dalit Autobiographies, Dalit Self, Hindu Caste Society, Discrimination

**KiranKumar B**

Research Scholar, Department of English (SSL), VIT University, India

**Dr. N S Prasantha Kumar**

Assistant Professor, Department of English (SSL), VIT University, India

**ABSTRACT**

Dalit self and the Hindu caste society are always at bay. They are always at conflict. The source and cause of conflict between the dalit self and the society is the phenomenon called caste. Dalit self undergoes a traumatic experience of discrimination, humiliation and exploitation based on caste which are explicitly sponsored and advocated by the Hindu caste society itself. The dalit self and the society diverge in their nature. The dalit self wants to voice out for justice, equality and fraternity whereas society tries to suppress the voice and presence of dalit self in achieving these goals. The entry of the dalit self is forbidden and prohibited in certain significant places and dalit self has to undergo a conflict of caste identity in educational institutions, conflict of purity and impurity in religious temples, conflict of sexual identity in public places, conflict of poverty which comes from the society itself. The Hindu society does not uphold and acknowledge the abilities of dalit self as a moral, spiritual, rational and social, political and cultural being yet all. However, in this paper how the conflict arises between the dalit self and the Hindu caste society is critically analyzed by taking instances from Dalit autobiographies.

**INTRODUCTION**

Individual and society vise versa seem to be restless and at conflict from the beginning of the world. The world history tells us that society invariably had an upper hand over the individuals. The conflict and unrest between the self and society is that the society craves and thrives for power and authority over the individuals. Individuals are sole responsible to the society for the actions that they do. When we talk about the conflict, uncertainty, unrest and turmoil and chaos in the society, it represents the denial of human subjectivity called Freedom, Existence and Essence. These are the most important aspects of life of an individual. If such things are denied, the life brings no meaning and the whole existence of life is questionable.

The political philosopher Rousseau in his polemical text *The Social Contract or Principles of Political Right* (trans. 1913) has argued that, "Man is born free, but he is everywhere in chain."(49) Another French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, the most celebrated writer has claimed that "Man is condemned to be Free." In the similar way, Homer, the most acclaimed Greek poet and critic rightly argued that, "The day that reduces a man to slavery takes from him the half of his virtue" If we contextualize and situate the above statements, that shows no man/woman wants to be a slave under any kind of situation. Everyone wants to be free from all kinds of evil practices. But the given freedom of dalits in India have been taken away by the Hindu high caste communities and exercised their authority and power over dalits and made them to be slaves for ages and ages. As a result, dalit is everywhere denied of his given self especially the fundamental virtues such as equality, fraternity and liberty.

Coming to Dalit autobiographies, these are chronicle in nature written with the resolution of accentuating the predicament and the plight that the dalit self bound to encounter discrimination on behalf of the community in any given situation and circumstance. The Dalit autobiographies penned by dalit men and women share a common experience of pain which is an outward symbol of social oppression. Dalit men and women share their individual self experiences in connection with the society. There has been always denial of individual self by these men and women, wherever they encounter and seen in the particular situations. The narrations by these men and women show in their autobiographies a sort of inward and outward conflict of the self and the society. Wherever and whenever the men and women of dalit community enter into the public sphere unjustly and explicitly their existence of individual self is denied perhaps at schools, markets, and administration, agriculture, industry and job places. There is always a conflict among the individual self and the society. However, beginning from the childhood the dalits face and encounter problems from the Hindu caste society. He/she is much perplexed and shocked at

the treatment of society and tries to bring a harmony and justice to his/her self by demonstrating the social evils which are imposed on the self of the writer.

**Conflict of dalit caste identity in educational society**

Educational institution is the place where learning takes place, by giving equal opportunities to all section of the society. But for the Dalit learning is always a hard reality where Dalit self is denied to access the knowledge of the society by keeping him in the state of conflict by bringing out his caste details, identity details, religious details and cultural details into class room atmosphere that which makes him feel inferior, voiceless and threatened. Sharan Kumar Limbale, a Tamil dalit writer and critic is being questioned during his childhood in the class room by his teacher in *The Outcaste* (2007) that, "You, son of a bitch, come on, start writing! You like eating an ox, don't you?"(7) This incident shows that educational institution is the first site of conflict that arises between dalit self and Hindu caste society. It is the Dalit self always has to confront the conflict and grapple with the society until it stops giving up. Society tries to impose so many restriction on Dalit self. Limbale gives a vivid picture of himself and the community how they are denied of their presence in the educational tours, picnic and classroom. The Dalit self and the society are always at bay. Limbale writes:

The Wani and Brahmin boys played kabbadi. Being marked as Mahars we couldn't join them. So Mallya, Umbrya, Parshya, all from my caste, began to play touch-and-go. We played one kind of game while the high-caste village boys played another. The two games were played separately like two separate whirlwinds. Play over, we settled down to eat. Boys and girls from the high castes like Wani, Brahmin, Marwari, Muslim, Maratha, Teli, fishermen, goldsmiths and all the teachers, about hundred or so sat in a circle under a banyan tree. We, the Mahar 39 boys and girls, were asked to sit under another tree. The high-caste ones said a prayer before eating, which didn't make any sense to us. (2)

Limbale also gives another incident from his autobiography *The Outcaste* (2007) where he had to conflict with the educational society on caste and religious lines. Limbale remarks:

I was afraid of my caste because I couldn't claim my father's caste and religion. In a sense I was not a Mahar, because high-caste blood ran in my body. Could I drain this blood out of my body? My own body nauseated me. The agony I lived through is my own as much as that of my village. The life of my village was mine. I was wounded by this landlord's mansion. (82)

Dalit self is always at conflict in sharing caste identity and religious identity in public places like educational institutions. Limbale,

whose identity is unknown, has to grapple with society when such questions are asked on caste and religion lines. It is always a hard reality for dalit self to share his/her identity at public places which will bear brunt on the lives of Dalits. In this connection, that is conflict of Dalit self in educational institution we have similar kind of experience confronted by Gunasekaran, a Tamil dalit writer in his autobiography *Vadu* (1995). Gunasekaran had first felt caste-stratification while studying six, seven, and eight standard. Tracing the caste is a crucial discrimination. He was being questioned by the school clerk in the class room on caste lines. The writer had to face the conflict of caste identity in class room. He writes:

"How many Parayans are there in this class? Lift your hands. How many are Pallans? Stand up. I will count. As soon as the class gets over, come over to the office and pick up the scholarship forms. You should fill up the forms and return them to the office within a week", the class teacher would announce. It is hard even today to imagine how small I felt in front of everybody in the class. (29)

In the similar way, Bama a Tamil dalit writer cum feminist in her autobiography *Karukku* (2000) recalls her school days where she had confronted the conflict of caste identity in class room she notes:

Time and again, my physical training teacher and class teacher would come to the classroom or the school assembly and ask the dalit children to stand up for some reason or other. . . They would record our names... It is humiliating to stand in front of about 2,000 children with bowed heads - as if we have committed some crime. (17)

#### **Conflict of Dalit with absolute poverty**

Society imposes a certain restrictions on dalit self with regards to food consumption. However, dalit self is always at war with the society sponsored poverty and caste discrimination. Dalit self has his own food habits. But, it is the society which made dalit self to be impoverished by confiscating the social and economical resources and enjoying at optimum level by dethroning dalit self penniless. Limbale describes the hard reality of poverty he faced during his childhood in his autobiography *The Outcaste* (2007) says:

Mallya carried a bundle of bhakari on his head and we, the Mahar boys, followed him excitedly like hungry vultures. At last we gathered in Girmallya's farm and opened the bundle. It contained crumbs of different kinds of food and their spicy smell filled the air. We squatted in a circle and stuffed ourselves greedily. We had never tasted food like that before. We were all really gluttonous. Our stomachs were as greedy as a beggar's sack. (3)

Limbale narrates the entire incident about how he had the day with his friends in sharing the food which is brought by upper caste boys. Limbale says "When I got home, I told my mother all this. Like the victim of a famine she said, Why didn't you get at least a small portion of it for me?" (3) Dalit self struggles even for a single morsel which is treated as so special to satisfy the hunger. Dalit self only can dream and imagine the spicy food which is eaten by upper castes can never come to true to dalit self unless there is equality, justice and fraternity among upper caste communities.

Laxman Mane's autobiography *Upara* (1980) also gives a similar account of denial of dalit self and his experience of poverty:

I took a bowl in my hand and went from house to house begging for food. Standing in front of each house, I would call out loudly: "Aunt, throw some crumbs of bhakri into my bowl...I beg of you ... Grandma dear, throw the stale leftovers into my bowl, please ... for pity's sake". Some women put rotten bread, stale curry and things like that into my begging bowl. In an hour or two, the bowl was full. I returned home followed by street dogs. Pelting stones at them and brandishing the cane, I reached the hut. Hunger had made us feeble. We ate enough from the begging bowl and we preserved the rest to eat later. (p.35)

In another childhood incident Laxman Mane gives same sort of experience where he had conflict with poverty:

Then we would be on the look-out to find out when the guests were going to get up. They would get up together at the same time. There would be a pile of plates made of jackfruit tree leaves with the left-overs. We would rush and pounce upon them. Whatever eatable came to our hand, we would grab it and put it in a piece of cloth. We had to finish our job before these plates were licked clean by the street dogs. Then, tying out 'loot' in a piece of cloth and abusing each other, we would return home. (p.94)

#### **Conflict of Dalit with Religious Temple**

Dalit self even faces worst form of discrimination in religious temples where the dalit presence is denied on the basis of purity and impurity which is of human construction. Dalit self is not exceptional even in religious temples where the Dalit self has to confront the conflict of purity and impurity which are society sponsored. Limbale shares the denial of his self from the rest of higher caste communities:

Limbale reminds us, Our School where the pupils came from high castes like Wani and Brahmin was run in the temple of Ithoba. The girls sat in a separate section. Further down the temple hall sat boys and girls from the cobbler community and then at the entrance sat we, the Mahar boys and girls. Arjya, a Mang, never sat with us. On Saturdays the teacher asked us to clear the floor and walls with cow dung paste. (4)

Narendra Jadhav in his autobiography of *Outcaste: A memoir* (2003), shares the similar kind of experience, where he had to confront the conflict of purity and impurity notions in temples. He writes:

During the Ganpathi festival, when we went to their house, we would be given Prasadam on our outstretched palms outside the door. They were careful not to touch us. Of course, some families made an exception to this practice and welcomed us to stay for the puja. (230-31)

#### **Conflict of Dalit with Sexual Identity**

Dalit self especially Dalit woman had to face the worst form of discrimination. She has to confront the conflict of sexual harassment which is sponsored by the Hindu caste society itself. Upper caste men treat dalit woman as the self made for sex. Even more, they treat dalit woman as sexual object to quench their sexual needs. For an incident, Limbale writes in his autobiography *The Outcaste* (2007):

Santamai and I went to a moneylender. He was drunk. Santamai and I stood at some distance from him. Santamai's blouse was torn exposing her breast. The moneylender kept staring at the peeping breast, but he refused to lend us the money. His look spread like poison 48 in my heart. I wished that the blouse of this moneylender's mother or sister was torn so that i could stare at their breasts. I burned within. Our poverty was detestable. I wanted to rebel against such humiliation. (82)

Limbale writes about his mother in acknowledgements that how dalit self is made to confront the conflict with society. He realizes that it is society sponsored discrimination had made dalit self always at bay. Limbale presents two version of world of society where always confront each other. Limbale writes:

My history is my mother's life, at the most my grandmother's. My ancestry doesn't go any further. My mother is an untouchable, while my father is a high caste from one of the privileged classes of India. Mother lives in a hut, father in a mansion. Father is a landlord; mother landless. I am an akkarmashi (half-caste). I am condemned, branded illegitimate. I regard the immorality of my father and mother as a metaphor for rape. My father had privileges by virtue of his birth granted to him by the caste system. His relationship with my mother was respected by society, whereas my mother is untouchable and poor. Had she been born into the high caste or were she rich, would she have submitted to his appropriation of her? It is through the Dalit movement and Dalit literature that I understood that my mother was not an adulterous but the victim of a social system. I grow restless whenever I read

about a rape in the newspaper. A violation anywhere in the country, I feel, is a violation of my mother. (ix)

### Conflict of Dalit with Identity

The question of identity still remains a complex, a challenge and a debatable for dalit self. The identity of dalit self is yet to discover, yet to find, yet to define at socio-literary circle. The western thinkers have given the different views about the identity of one self. The profound philosophers like Rene Descartes says "I think therefore I am" and another writer like Socrates say "I know that I know nothing". But what about the Dalits in India? On what philosophical base do upper caste society give identity to Dalits and On what criteria do they give identity to dalit self and on what parameter do upper caste society give identity to Dalits? Is Dalit self not a rational being? Is Dalit self not a thinking being? Is Dalit self not a social being? Is Dalit self not a political being? Is Dalit self not a religious being? Is Dalit self not a cultural being? To which of these dalit self can be identified? And Dalit self is still struggling and conflicting with these domains.

Limbale much perplexed at his split identity, where he has to confront the conflict which arises from the society. The Society does not accept the nameless and identity less persons like Limbale. He envisions the sufferings and difficulties which results out because of his split identities had to face conflict from Hindu caste the society. Limbale writes in his autobiography *The Outcaste* (2007):

Why did my mother say yes to the rape which brought me into the world? Why did she put up with the fruit of this illegitimate intercourse for nine months and nine days and allow me to grow in the foetus? Why did she allow this bitter embryo to grow? How many eyes must have humiliated her because they consider her a whore? Did anyone distribute sweets to celebrate my birth? Did anyone admire me affectionately? Did anyone celebrate my birth? Which family would claim me as its descendant? Whose son am I, really? (37)

### CONCLUSION

The instances are drawn from Dalit autobiographies show that there has been continual conflict of denial and rejection of Dalit self from the side of so called higher caste societies. Even the entry and the presence of dalit self is being denied in all public places. The educational institutions, religious temples and the work place, etc. wherein dalit self struggles with these institutions constantly. Invariably, there is a continuous and constant struggle of conflict between the dalit self and the so called higher caste community societies. The presence of dalit self is denied wherever is represented. Conflict of the self and the society is seen when the self of the dalit is denied in the particular context and situation. Above all, the conflict arises out because of the age old traditions and customs which are rigorously imposed on dalit self and upheld by the Hindu caste society as a means of discrimination and exploitation of the dalit self.

### REFERENCES

- [1]. Bama. (2000). Karukku. Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom. Oxford Publication, New Delhi. Print.
- [2]. Gunashekar, K A Vadu, Nagercoil: Kalachuvadu Pathippagam, 1995. Print
- [3]. Jadhav, Narendra. Outcaste: A memoir. New Delhi: Viking Publishers, 2003. Print
- [4]. Limbale, SharanKumar. The Outcaste. Trans. Santosh Bhoomkar. New Delhi: Oxford University, 2007. Print
- [5]. Mane, Laxman. Upara: An Outsider, translated from Marathi by A. K. Kamat, New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1997.
- [6]. Rousseau, Jean Jacques. Social Contract & Discourses. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1913. 2010. Print
- [7]. <https://www.ukessays.com/essays/philosophy/man-is-condemned-to-be-free-philosophy-essay.php>.
- [8]. [https://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=6467:slavery-by-Mahatma-Phule-preface](https://roundtableindia.co.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6467:slavery-by-Mahatma-Phule-preface).
- [9]. <http://newlearningonline.com/new-learning/chapter-7/descartes-i-think-therefore-i-am>.
- [10]. <http://www.askphilosophers.org/question/506>.