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**‘Outcaste: A Memoir’, a Dalit Autobiography Set Against the Backdrop of Suppression**

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**Article Received:** 28/05/2024

**Article Accepted:** 28/06/2024

**Published Online:** 29/06/2024

**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2024.6.6.116

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**Abstract:** The paper is an attempt to study Narendra Jadhav’s narrative ‘Outcaste: A Memoir’ as a Dalit autobiography. Critics like Mukherjee (2003), Satyanarayana and Tharu(2013), and Beth (2007) have discussed Dalit autobiography at length in their works and laid down certain features that characterise Dalit autobiographies distinct from traditional autobiographies. In the essay, these characteristic features are briefly discussed and examined with reference to ‘Outcaste: A Memoir’. The findings of the paper reveal that the text satisfies the points essential to be termed as a Dalit autobiography. The discussion is preceded by a short account of Dalit movements and literature.

**Key words:** Outcaste, Dalit autobiography, Dalit literature, Jadhav, upper-caste.

**Introduction:**

Caste always has been playing an important role in the literary imagination in the Indian context. Sometimes it is overt and at others covert. The representation of Dalits in non-Dalit writings before Ambedkar tended to be far removed from what Dalits are; Dalit characters were often portrayed as "helpless and childlike". In spite of this, the emergence of Babasaheb Ambedkar as a national figure motivated Dalit writers to use literature as an instrument to authentically expose the age-old persecution suffered by Dalits under the sway of the upper class.

“The term ‘Dalit’ means ‘the oppressed’ and is the self-referential term of choice for activists and intellectuals from this social group.” (Kapadia 2). One of the most prominent Dalit critics Baburao Bagul, who considered ‘Dalit literature’ as ‘Human literature’ was of the view that caste has always been there in Indian literature. He even goes to the extent to say that the “established Literature of India is Hindu literature” (Dangle 289). Bagul then undertakes to classify Indian literature into two sections – one is the literature for the Brahmins and the other is that for the

Kshatriyas. Dalit writers like Bagul, as put for the by K Satyanarayana and Tharu, through their critical engagement show that “Indian literature is elite, Hindu and upper caste” (Dalit Writing: An Introduction 8).

Before Independence, literature by Dalits, or lower caste people was also there, but that literature was rejected by the upper caste literatures simply because they could not accept Dalit heroes or characters playing decisive roles in literature. Instead, the upper Caste writers attempted to represent the Dalits or lower caste people as they perceived them to be. According to Bagul, “the (Hindu) writers who have internalized the Hindu value-structure find it impossible to accept heroes, themes and thoughts derived from the philosophies of Phule and Ambedkar” (Dangle 282).

The upper caste writers gave a picture of the Dalits which the latter think to be a deteriorated representation. Their representation of the Dalits in their works was that of “helpless and child-like people who cannot make their own decisions or take action” (A. Mukherjee 8).

Thus, it is quite obvious that only the upper-class people had the ability to think and act in Indian literature as this literature was produced by the upper caste authors. Dalits or lower caste people contradicted this trend even before independence, but this contradiction was suppressed by the upper caste writers. It was because the Empire refused to address the internal contradictions in the life of the Indians. Even in the post-colonial period, this pattern was followed and not a very broad scope was provided to the Dalits or lower caste people.

It is only in 1975 that Dalit literary movement began in Maharashtra and which along with it, brought a new perspective of looking at Indian literature. It is a perspective which is even by the Dalits or lower caste and downtrodden people. According to Dalits, it is only they who can represent themselves truly and no one else can. Kapadia (2017) explains that the term “Dalit” “is the self-referential term of choice for activists and intellectuals from this social group” (Smith 159). Dalit literature produced by Dalit writers “represents a new thinking and a new point of view. It poses the question of the representation of dalit and lower caste life (‘heroes, themes and thoughts’ from dalit society’) as a critical public issue” (Satyanarayana and Tharu 8).

### **Dalit Autobiographies**

The paper will focus on Dalit autobiographies and their salient features that mark them different from traditional autobiographies with special reference to Narendra Jadhav’s ‘Outcaste: A Memoir’. “Sharing experiences of trauma, humiliation, inequality, submission, rebellion and hope, and being able to voice these emotions as social experience, are carried through by...autobiographical dalit writings” (Dutta

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48). Translating Omprakash Valmiki, Mukherjee, writes, ““Dalit writers should write autobiographies so that not only our history will stay alive but also our true portrayals of wrongdoers. Dalit autobiographies will provide inspiration to our future generations”” (Introduction to Joothan xxxvi). Following are a few characteristic features of Dalit autobiographies (accumulated from the writings of Mukherjee (2003), Satyanarayana and Tharu(2013), and Beth (2007)), in terms of which Dalit autobiographies will be differentiated from the traditional autobiographies. Subsequently, all the points will be discussed with specific reference to ‘Outcaste: A Memoir’.

- Generally, autobiographies are written by someone who considers one’s ‘life as one of importance or of significant personal achievement’. In Dalit autobiographies, however, an individual’s life becomes significant because it ‘speaks of and for a community’. As such, the central character’s life is representative of a ‘group experience’ and functions like a ‘testimony to that experience’.
- Like other autobiographies, Dalit autobiographies are personal tells. However, these tells, at root, are not about the individual, rather they serve as ‘important social and historical documents’.
- “Dalits’ autobiographies have underlined spatial exclusion as a prominent method through which discrimination is practiced in rural India” (Rawat and Satyanarayana 19).
- In Dalit autobiographies, a particular attention is paid to the role of *jati* experience in localities’

#### **‘Outcaste: A Memoir’ as a Dalit Autobiography**

“Dalit literature, has had a profound influence over both the Dalit community's own self-perceptions as well as wider public perception of Dalit identity in its construction of Dalits as a separate cultural community” (Beth 574). ‘Outcaste: A Memoir’ by Narendra Jadhav is a veritable piece of Dalit writing about Dalits themselves. It is an autobiography which deals with the struggle of Damu and Sonu, author’s parents and how subsequently they become successful in bringing up their children with success in life. ‘Outcaste’ delineates the metamorphosis of a Dalit family which bears a testimony to the influence of the social movement led by Ambedkar.

‘Outcasts’ is definitely a Dalit text as it is penned by a Dalit, Narendra Jadhav and it deals with various struggles and problems generally the Dalits have to confront. What is significant about ‘Outcaste’ is that the text narrates the story about Dalits as they are and as they feel about themselves – not “as helpless, childlike people who cannot make their own decision or take action”. They are representative of the people

who refuse to define themselves by circumstances and attempt to shape their own destiny.

In ‘Outcaste: A Memoir’, Damu, the protagonist has been presented as an assertive and independent Dalit, if not, a leader. In the beginning of the narrative, we find Damu doing his duty as a Mahar. Twaha (83) observes that “In a period spreading about two thousand years, Mahars have the history of serving as ‘all-purpose servants, watchmen, messengers, and removers of dead cattle in village and towns’ (Dharwadker 319). In spite of the past of a marginalized existence in the society as a Mahar, Damu never loses his self-dignity, rather he goes to the extent of resigning from his duty as a Mahar and migrates to Mumbai. His self-dignity is reflective in his speech he retorts against performing the duties of a Mahar:

“I spit on these inhuman traditions. I am a man of dignity and I will not go from house to house begging for Baluta” ( Jadhav 10).

Damu, on the one hand struggled very hard to earn his livelihood in Mumbai during 1930s and on the other hand, he also engaged himself with the Dalit movement led by Ambedkar. His subsequent conversion to Buddhism also reflects the dynamic aspect of his character. We perceive similar kind of attributes in the character of Jadhav as well who inherits all the traits of his father. Once he utters, " If others look down on me in their belief that my caste is low, it is their problem, not mine” (Jadhav 214). ‘Outcaste’ is undoubtedly a Dalit text at least in the sense that here in it, Ambedkar, the Saviour of Dalits, appears as a character and a powerful symbol of Dalit assertion. It is indeed futile to make any attempt to analyse the characters like Damu and Jadhav in isolation without linking them to Ambedkar and the Dalit movement.

‘Outcaste’ apart from being a narrative based on the story of a Dalit family, also provides us with the information regarding Dalit history. As rightly put by Satyanarayana (309), “Outcaste describes two historical processes: the migration of Damu from his village to the urban space of Mumbai and the Dalit movement, both of which are central to the making of modern Dalits.” The struggles confronted by Babasaheb Ambedkar find a clear expression throughout the narrative whether it is the *Mahad Satyagraha* of 1927, or the Nashik Kalaram Temple Entry Movement of 1930, or it is Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism in 1956 all find their mention in the memoir. All these historically significant events exercise their impact in giving a new meaning and dimension to the life of the Dalits like Damu and Jadhav. The reader can trace the extent of influence various Dalit movements had on the Dalits from Damu’s expressions that contain echoes of Ambedkar’s speeches. One such expression is when Damu says,

“There will be no difference between parents and animals if they do not desire to see their children in a better position than their own.” (Jadhav 22)

The narrative 'Outcaste' narrates the journey of a Dalit family towards freedom, confidence, pride and dignity from servitude, depression, and humiliation. This journey becomes possible because of Damu's migration to the urban space Mumbai and at the same time the Dalit movement provides the guidance and the identity. The result is the formation of Dalit identity against a global background but without the sense of race religion, or caste discrimination. This fact we trace when Apoorva admits:

"I am just Apoorva, not tied down by race, religion or caste" (Jadhav 263)

None of the characters in the narrative is ashamed of his/her caste status, rather s/he boasts for what s/he is. S/he aspires for becoming a human being which makes caste identity irrelevant.

What is noteworthy about 'Outcaste: A Memoir' is that the narrative is set against the backdrop of universal citizenship but it has ignored one essential aspect i.e., Dalit struggle and identity of the Dalits in the rural areas in India. It is evident in the novel that Jadhav is distressed to be identified as belonging to a particular caste. In spite of claiming to belong to his community, Jadhav refuses to identify with the village of his birth. In the autobiography, "Jadhav fashions a cosmopolitan Dalit identity" (Satyanarayana 302) Therefore, instead of generalising *Outcaste: A Memoir* simply as a Dalit autobiography, we should call it a *cosmopolitan Dalit autobiography*.

### **Conclusion:**

Through brief historical discussion on Dalit literature and the subsequent analysis of Dalit autobiography with special reference to Narendra Jadhav's 'Outcaste: A Memoir', the paper attempted to establish how even after a long tradition of suppression and persecution at the hands of the upper caste communities, the Dalits did not lose the spirit of asserting their existence in the Indian society. The analysis 'Outcaste' as a Dalit autobiography in terms of salient features laid down by Mukherjee (2003), Satyanarayana and Tharu(2013), and Beth (2007) reveal that the text satisfies all the essential points to put it as one in the tradition of Dalit autobiographies. Apart from being a tell of Damu, the protagonist, 'Outcaste' is a saga of the entire dalit community and its indomitable sense of dignity. The development of the story coincides with various historically noteworthy Dalit movements.

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Impact Factor:7.539(SJIF) SP Publications ;Vol-6, Issue-6(June), 2024

**International Journal Of English and Studies(IJOES)**

ISSN:2581-8333 An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal

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