

Reflection of Dalit Consciousness in *Growing up Untouchable in India*

- Vandana Pathak

Abstract: Dalit consciousness plays a prominent role in Dalit literature. The experiences articulated in Dalit literature are individual and those of the community. The Dalit consciousness in Dalit literature is the revolutionary mentality connected with the struggle. There are two definite aspects of Dalit consciousness namely the acceptance of humans and humane values in life. This paper is a humble attempt to study Dalit consciousness reflected in a Marathi Dalit autobiography.

Keywords: Dalit, Dalit Consciousness, Commitment, Rejection, Negation, Acceptance, Egalitarian Society, Human and Humane Values.

Writing is not simply writing, it is an act, and in man's continual fight against evil, writing must be deliberately used as a weapon.

- Jean-Paul Sartre

All individual experiences are crystallized in society. An individual has to relate all his personal feelings, emotions, and experiences to society or to the societal background. This kaleidoscope of experiences is also associated with social commitment. This social consciousness is versatile and multifaceted. It is the sum total of the thoughts of people, their thought processes, social awareness, habits and morality. This social consciousness is very closely related to life and realism (Kusare-Kulkarni, 144). Yashwant Manohar feels,

A work of literature is shaped by the surrounding cultural, economic, literary, moral and social contexts. The direct/indirect impact of all these is manifested in that work of art. Literature is an important organ of social life and it has an essential relationship with all other organs. The universe of literature is thus cultural universe... a work of literature can never be cut off from life (Manohar, 1983, 17).

A Dalit writer is always on the battlefield. His destiny is that of social oppression. It is difficult to survive the heat of all these experiences. Thus, all Dalit writers lead a life of agony. R.G. Jadhav says that the inherent universe of this social consciousness is of different forms and shapes. It accommodates the world of history and 'Puranas'. At the same time, it accommodates in its fold contemporary reality. It has in it the strange, colourful world of Dalit as an individual and the relations and resultant tensions of Dalits and non Dalits (Jadhav, 115). The experiences articulated in Dalit literature are individual and those of the community. Dalit autobiographies deal with 'we' along with 'I'. This subjective 'I' is at the centre stage of the autobiography, giving vent to all emotions and feelings of that particular community. That is why it has

been said that Dalit literature is not created by an individual but it is an expression of collective consciousness (Mande, 79). Liberty, equality and fraternity occupy a place of prominence as being instrumental in uplifting this marginalized section of the society. Sharankumar Limbale has talked about these experiences at length. He says, "They express the pain of human beings who are not treated as human. They demonstrate respect for the Buddhist-value of treating humans as human. And they nurture the feeling of unending gratitude towards Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and Mahatma Phule" (Limbale, 32). Dalit literature is thus, a product of Dalit experience – individual as well as collective. Their experience is a product of pain and revolt. Dalit consciousness plays a prominent role in Dalit literature. Sharankumar Limbale has said, The Dalit consciousness in Dalit literature is the revolutionary mentality connected with the struggle. It is a belief in rebellion against the caste system, recognizing the human being as its focus. Ambedakrite thought is the inspiration for this consciousness. Dalit consciousness makes slaves conscious of their slavery. Dalit consciousness is an important seed for Dalit literature, it is separate and distinct from the consciousness of other writers. Dalit literature is demarcated as unique because of this consciousness (Limbale, 32).

Shedding more light on the concept Waghmare says, "I honestly feel that the main aim of writing of literature is creation of consciousness and conscientization. It is my opinion that it could be a very important and precious achievement of literature" (Waghmare, 80). There are two definite aspects of Dalit consciousness. One is that of acceptance and the second is that of rejection. It is the acceptance of humans and human/e values in life, the acceptance of values advocated by Dr. Ambedkar. It is the acceptance of liberty, equality, and fraternity for the establishment of a just, caste free, *Varna* free and class free society. Hence the Dalits reject casteism and untouchability. They are against the established unjust, caste ridden society. It is a forward journey of self and community development. That rejection of anything too could be positive has been substantiated by Dalit autobiographies. Thus, Dalit consciousness is human centered. It gives utmost importance to humanism. It is social, revolutionary, and hence transformative in nature. The Dalit consciousness in Dalit literature is transformed into social consciousness. While defining Dalit consciousness, Narhar Kurundkar says, "A new vision is being created in literature with a point of view that every individual should get protection for freedom, dignity and moral values. This is what I consider Dalit consciousness to be" (Kurundkar, 53). The seeds of Dalit literature in general and Dalit autobiographies in particular are in this Dalit consciousness. This Dalit consciousness makes life a daily battle for sensitive Dalit writers. This paper is a humble attempt to study Dalit consciousness reflected in Vasant Moon's *Growing up Untouchable in India*. Vasant Moon's *Growing up Untouchable in India* deals with the life of the *Mahars* in the *Vasti*. As the title itself suggests, it is a journey towards progress of the people in *Vasti*. The people in the *Vasti* were greatly influenced by Dr. Ambedkar. Dr. Ambedkar had become a familiar name to all of them. They wanted a social order based

on Dr. Ambedkar's philosophy. *Vasti* is an authentic socio-cultural, historical document of Ambedkarite Movement in and around Nagpur. Vasant Moon's *Growing Up Untouchable in India* (original text in Marathi is called *Vasti*) is the first Dalit autobiography to be published in English. Moon's story is about his *Vasti* or neighbourhood and a community of people considered to be at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. It reveals a complex yet rich slum culture where Dalits are seen as a struggling, striving community with rich bonds. Christopher Queen says, "Moving beneath Moon's sharply etched tale of material deprivation, caste conflict and neighbourhood politics is the inexorable rise of Dalit (Untouchable) militancy and spirituality – illuminated by the towering figure of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Champion of the poor and the leader of the Buddhist revival in India" (Moon, Blurb). The dedication page of the autobiography proves the maturity of the Dalit consciousness of Vasant Moon. He says,

At a time when all the children in the neighbourhood around her called their mothers, "Ma", she taught us to call her "Mother", like children of the elite. She took care of us, raised us and taught us the new alphabet: the A of "aspiration", the B of "Babasaheb" and the C of "confidence" (G.U.I., p.no. not given).

The development of Dalit consciousness in the writer can be attributed to a large extent to the role played by his grandfather Sadashiv Lohkare in his life. The life in the *Vasti* was very secure and even widowed women used to leave their little girls at home (as was done by Moon's mother) and fearlessly go out to work. They would say to the older people lounging next door, "'Oh Ganba Grandfather, just keep an eye on my kid," and he would do this. "Go child go; don't worry." There were no secrets in the neighbourhood" (G.U.I., p.5). The elders in the community accepted responsibility voluntarily. In the deserted community in the afternoon, four or five little children sat playing cards. Hearing their voices, grandfather Sadashiv Lohkare roared as he sat, "'Who is that playing cards?" And with his voice the kids ran away. The people of the settlement were like that. They would give tongue lashings, and people stood in awe of them" (G.U.P., p.5).

This grandfather was instrumental in developing Moon's Dalit consciousness. He taught him to dress up properly and urged him to be a saheb. His idea of a Saheb was taken from his observation of Europeans. Grandfather Lohkare had grown up in the company of Europeans. He imbibed discipline from them. Vasant Moon was exposed to many diverse experiences in the *Vasti*. These experiences played a crucial role in developing his personality and the development of his Dalit consciousness. Some such moulding experiences were the visit of Mahar leaders and activists like Laxmanrao Ogale of Amravati, Ghadale of Shegaon in Chandrapur and Dashrath Patil of Bele, fight between Maniram and Shivram and Maniram's inviting Shivram for dinner, Vasant's not reading other people's personal letters, his being offered liquor and his mother's strong reaction to it, Laxman's taking control of the household, mother's going out daily to look for work, Atmaram and Baba together beating Gajanan ferociously, his stealing of a paint brush in school, Uncle Hari taking him to school for admission, his watching

various plays and listening to the songs of various poets, his interaction with Kolte, and his writing of plays, etc. The title of the Marathi autobiography *Vasti* is symbolic of a close-knit community. It stands for living together, working together, mutual understanding and cooperation. Naturally, the consciousness that is developed in the *Vasti* is more community oriented rather than individual. Community consciousness is desired utmost for its development. A famous Marathi saying proclaims, 'let us help each other and all together embark on the right path.' Once all the youth in the *Vasti* read Ambedkar's call in a weekly called *Janata*. He had written that they should not perform the puja of Hindu gods and not observe their festivals. It was not possible for the older generation to give up Hindu culture. The Samata Sainik Dal organized a house-to-house publicity campaign. Wamanrao Godbole, in a meeting, explained Babasaheb's thinking. Wamanrao explained that to begin with they should stop celebrating these festivals in their own homes. Instead of celebrating *Janmashtami* – Krishna's birthday or Ram's birthday, they should celebrate Ambedkar and *Chokhamela Jayanti*. As a result, they gradually stopped celebrating Hindu festivals in their community. Moon triumphantly writes, "It did not take very long for the religious revolt of Maharpura to spread through out Nagpur. The culture that had been stamped on people's minds for years and years began to be wiped out. And a new generation emerged" (G.U.I., p.45). Due to the pleadings of Dr. Ambedkar, the people in the community stopped removing/ pulling dead animals and doing other dirty work. The Mahars were boycotted as a result. They could not get grocery or other things in the market and were beaten. Dashrath Patil came out with the excellent idea of setting up their independent market. The entire community was enthused and got ready to live independently. Self respect was of greatest value to the people in the community and for that, there was never any compromise.

Vasant Moon describes the active participation of people of his community in various activities like the Satyagraha proclaimed by Dr. Ambedkar to condemn the Puna Pact, the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948, ban imposed on the Rashtriya Swayansewak Sangh, and a ban on all semi-militant organizations including the Samata Sainik Dal, the "Factories" set up in every community to make weapons, the Hindu-Mahar riots, a rally organized by Samata Sainik Dal and many other events and incidents in detail to show the development of Dalit consciousness in the community. The development of Vasant Moon's Dalit consciousness reached fruition when he started publishing articles. Raosaheb Thaware's booklet on *Dr. Ambedkar's Politics* flared his temper. His pen became his sword and he wrote a responsive article reviewing every point made in that booklet. In 1953, it was decided to take out a handwritten magazine in the community. The name of the magazine was *Shuklendu* (Rising Moon). Moon wrote the editorial, one poem, three small verses, two light articles, a play, a monologue, and one theoretical article in it. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar appreciated the issue and complimented Moon on his article entitled 'When will the demon of subcasteism come to an end?' Moon was actively involved in the

organization of mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism. As an eye witness, he has given a vivid description of how it was organized at Nagpur and its impact on people. The entire community's response to Dr. Ambedkar was spontaneous and overwhelming. These people interacted with Dr. Ambedkar whenever he visited Nagpur. They objected to the use of the word 'Harijan'. The slogans like "Ambedkar Jindabad Thode Dinme Bhimraj" and "Long live Ambedkar" rent the air. Women of the community too did not lag behind and played a positive role in this Ambedkarite movement. Thus, Dr. Ambedkar and his philosophy was the nucleus of Moon's life and the entire universe of Vasant Moon was centered round the Ambedkarite Movement of reformation and transformation. An analysis of the above *oeuvre* shows that the seeds of Dalit consciousness of Moon were in human and humane values preached by Dr. Ambedkar. Liberty, equality, and fraternity were three values that the people in the *Vasti* cherished and longed for. They longed for self-respect, dignity, and confidence. The established social order imposed animal existence upon them and exploited them fiercely. *Upara (An Outsider)*, *Uchalya (The Branded)* and *Vasti (Growing up Untouchable in India)*, *Aamacna Baap aan Amhi (Outcaste: A Memoir)*, Limbale's *Akkarmashi (The Outcaste)* and many other Dalit self-narratives are outpourings of the pain, grief, struggle, and protest of Dalit writers. All these autobiographies are socio-cultural and historical documents of their struggle, their own and community's uplift. 'Why should we lead an animal existence? We too are human beings' is the loud message that this/ these writer/s wanted to convey.

A study of this autobiography shows that the influence of Dr. Ambedkar is instrumental in developing the Dalit consciousness of Moon. 'Dalit consciousness' is the thought of transforming the lives of the Dalits. It is an optimistic attitude. It is the ability to note subtly the pain and agony in Dalit life. It is at the same time a social commitment. "Dalit consciousness is full of revolt, optimistic, revolutionary, self-motivated, new, human-centered..." (Manohar, 1978, 8-9). At the heart of Dalit consciousness is an individual, a human being. It believes in dignity, self respect of an individual. It has a natural, spontaneous affection, fellow feeling for people at the grass roots of the society. Dalit consciousness reflects an ability to note subtly Dalit pain and agony. It is an expression of protest and rejection. It is an expression of negation. It is against all kinds of exploitation. It takes into its gamut, along with Dalits, all afflicted, harassed, marginalized people. It has a close affinity with Dalit struggle. From Dr. Ambedkar's point of view Dalit consciousness is an expression of freedom from slavery. This consciousness is not restricted to an individual but has the ability to take the entire community in its fold. It is a self motivated consciousness. Dalit consciousness has an inherent association with Dalit experience and thus possesses economic and social basis. It is based on Dalit sensitivity. It ignites in Dalits a spirit to fight against injustice. Thus, Dalit consciousness, even though it related to the caste, goes beyond the parochial attitude of caste and discrimination, to fight against an unjust system and all evil tendencies that are hidden in the system. It insists that in this universe of humanity,

human beings should be given topmost priority. After studying all these definitions and opinions of various critics, it can be said that Dalit consciousness has its roots in the grim reality of Dalit life and it is deeply ingrained in the Dalit psyche. It is based on human and humane values. Dalit consciousness is both social and cultural in nature. Dalit consciousness is a thought that believes in transformation. In its fervent expression of creation of a new society, it is transformed into universal consciousness. The local very subtly and effectively turns into global. It brings together all exploited, marginalized, discriminated people on one platform in its wider sense and makes a passionate appeal on their behalf to create an egalitarian society based on liberty, equality, fraternity and justice.

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