

**An Exploration on the Tormenting Expressions of Caste System,  
through the Narratives of Some Dalit women Writers**

**Dr. Ancy Joseph, M.A., Ph.D.  
Sruthy, P.U., M.A., NET**

**Abstract**

Dalits are considered as those who hail from low castes and have been marginalised and oppressed in all possible manners. As any other oppressed group, the Dalits too attempt to track their feelings and emotions through the power of words. They utilise the written words as a weapon against the inhuman oppression of Dalits by the Brahminical social order that hinders the basic human rights and dignity. Apart from other stream of literature with the intent for entertainment, Dalit writing attempts to record social injustice by revealing the harsh realities of Dalit life. Dalit women writers choose the medium of autobiography to give life to their emotions and feelings. The writings of Dalit women writers are based on the life experiences and consciousness. Dalit women writers portray their outburst for justice. Through their autobiographies, they express their attitudes towards work which helped them to conquer their enemy and achieve their own identity.

**Keywords:** Casteism, Dalit literature, quest for equality, marginalisation.

**Dalits**

Dalits are considered as those who hail from low castes and have been marginalised and oppressed in all possible manners. They belong to the lowest order of Indian society, facing discrimination from all walks of life like education, social and political aspects. They were excluded from social, economic, cultural, civil and political strands. Initially referred as “Shudras”, they have been untouchables based on the traditional Indian Brahminical caste

system. In a way, the term ‘Dalit’ acts as an umbrella term that encompasses many lower caste people and many other below-poverty-line people.

### **Dalit Literature**

As any other oppressed group, the Dalits too attempt to track their feelings and emotions through the power of words. They utilise the written words as a weapon against the inhuman oppression of Dalits by the Brahminical social order that hinders the basic human rights and dignity. Dalit literature “expresses the pains and pangs of the Dalit existence; it is the lived reality of crores of people living on the margins of life in India; it verbalises the suppressed anger and wounded pride of those existing outside the caste identities” says the author of a Marathi autobiography, *Akkarmaashi*. “The so-called mainstream literature is the product of the imagination of upper caste writers about middle-class issues, but Dalit literature is based on the lived experience of the writer.” Apart from other stream of literature that is intended for entertainment, Dalit writing attempts to record social injustice by revealing the harsh realities of Dalit life.

### **Emergence of the Use of the Term *Dalit***

Dalits have a history that can be rooted back to centuries. It can be pinned authentically from the middle of the twentieth century. The term ‘Dalit Literature’- Dalit meaning oppressed, broken and downtrodden- was formally used in 1958 at the first conference on Dalit literature in Mumbai. The emergence of Dalit Panthers in 1972 in Maharashtra is a noteworthy movement in the history of Dalit literature. From then on, it was acknowledged by various literary movements throughout India.

For a long period, the genre of Dalit Literature was being completely neglected by the literary circle. The publication of the Marathi work *Poisoned Bread* edited by Arjun Dangle (1992) and Arun Prabha Mukherjee’s translated work of Om Prakash Valmiki’s *Joothan* (1997) into English in 2003 resulted in the acceleration of acceptance of Dalit genre into the mainstream of literature in India and abroad.

In 1969, the element of modern Dalit Literature is described in an article, “A Discussion: Literature of Dalit Consciousness, Direction and Inspiration.” by M. N. Wanknade. The emergence of “Dalit Literature” or “Dalit Sahitya” is seen in “The Times Weekly Supplement” of November 25, 1973 with the term Dalit Panthers founded by Namdeo Dhasal and Raja Dhala, reports *Literarism* journal.

### **Not a Literature of Vengeance**

Bagul reports, “Dalit Sahitya is not a literature of vengeance. Dalit Sahitya is not a literature which spreads hatred. Dalit Sahitya first promotes man’s greatness and man’s freedom and for that reason it is a historic necessity... Anguish, waiting, pronouncements of sorrow alone do not define Dalit Literature. We want literature heroically full of life for the creation of a (new) society.” (3)

Dalit literature symbolises a quest for equality tries to establish a rational attitude towards the problems of society. At the beginning of Dalit Literature, the presence of noteworthy writers was few. Dr. Ambedkar’s writings and views resulted in an effective movement in the field of Dalit Literature. Through the works of Dalit writers, they provide various useful insights into the question of Dalit identity. They portray the element of realism in day to day life of a Dalit, resulting in the authenticity and liveliness of Dalit Literature. Autobiographies of Daya Pawar’s *Baluta*, Madhaw Konduilkar’s *At Post Devache Gothne*, Shankarrao Kharat’s *The Sky and Heights of the Soul*, Gawakiby Rustam *Achalkhamb*, Shantabai Kamble’s *The Illustrated Story of My Life* are a few representations of the realistically portrayed life experiences of a Dalit writer. Through their narrations and discourses, they fight against the casteist tradition in the society.

### **Dalit Women Writers**

The presence of Dalit women that write are noteworthy in their works that contribute in breaking the shackles and resisting the oppression faced by them, in a way the double discrimination. Being a Dalit and being women, their need is to make their plight known to whole world through their words. Because of most of female Dalit writers lacked proper education, they traced the outbreak of their emotions through their own vernacular language. But

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Dr. Ancy Joseph, M.A., Ph.D. and Sruthy, P.U., M.A., NET

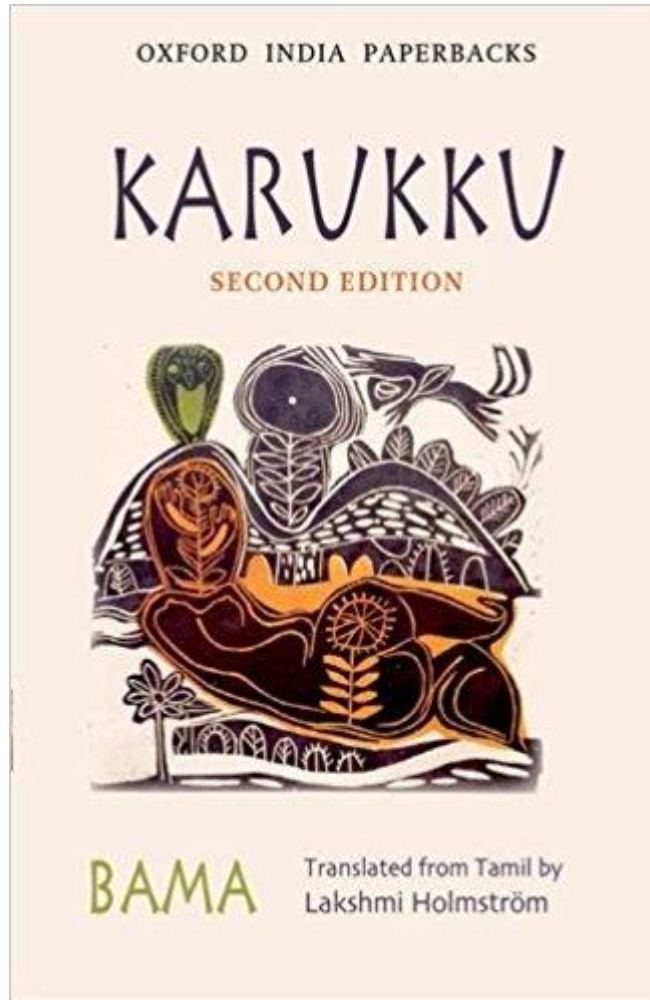
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by late 20th Century, most of their works had been translated into other languages and that helped them to propagate their ideologies. Now most of their works are all translated into English language and the translations attract a worldwide readership and offer recognition and fame to these writers. Dalit women writers too chose the medium of autobiography to give life to their emotions and feelings.

### **Bama**

A Tamil Dalit woman pen-named Bama is noteworthy for her autobiographical as well as other works. She is well-known known for ***Karukku***, the autobiography that has been translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom. Originally written in Tamil language, it tells the story of marginalised Dalit Christian women. Even as an educated person, she faced many suppressions, marginalisations and crushings being a lady from the Parayar community. Through her work, ***Karukku***, she tries to empower other fellow Christian Dalit women to break their traditionally set roles by their society, to promote their education and protest and proclaim their selfhood in the society.

### ***Karukku* – Portrayal of Dalit Women and Patriarchy**



*Karukku* is an experience of a Dalit woman, a long torment, through which she could identify herself. Bama did not only create a space for her caste but also for women who were the victims of two-fold hierarchy. Dalit women were victims not only of caste but also of patriarchy. In the novel she has shown the plight of Dalit women, their sufferings and discrimination at the hands of their patriarchy, but through her own story she has evolved herself as a role model for the rest of Dalit women. She was born in Paraiyar community, and through her hard work and ardent interest she could establish a place for her in her community and in this world. In a society where women were paid lesser wages than men for the same amount of work, had to do the household tasks, were beaten up by their husbands and not allowed to go to school, Bama was able to fight the odds. She carried on with her higher education, and also at times thought about the ways in which the Dalit children could be educated and treated better.

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### **Distinct Autobiographical Mode**

Unlike most autobiographies, Bama's narrative is not direct. She does not describe events only in terms of the impact they had on her later life, but she writes about the experiences she had -- moments of subjugation that composed her daily life reality. In the book, one sees Bama's search to understand and present how her multiple identities as Dalit, Christian and women have impacted her oppression.

### **Life in the Community**

*Karukku* is a requiem to the community Bama grew up in. She writes of life there in all its vibrancy and colour, never making it seem like a place defined by a singular caste identity, yet a place that never forgets, and is never allowed to forget its caste identity. She writes concurrently of humorous incidents she remembers from her childhood, the games she used to play with her friends, good meals with her family and the oppression of her community by the police, upper-castes, and the nunnery. In this manner, she presents the rife of caste oppression - how it not only punctuates everyday life, but is also an integral part of it, even in the memory of a community.

### **Shantabai Kamble**



**Shantabai Kamble**

Courtesy: <https://litbirthdays.wordpress.com/2010/02/28/literary-birthdays-february-28-march-6/>

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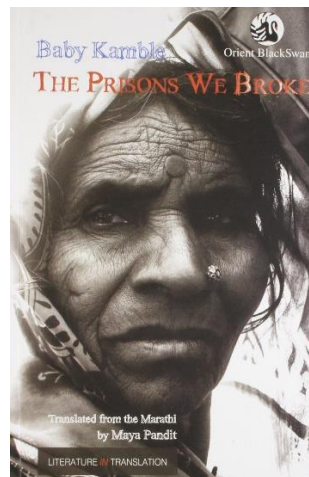
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Shantabai Kamble, a Marathi writer who ardently believes that education is the only way through which one can protect the rights of Dalit, wrote the first Dalit women autobiography titled *Majhya Jalmachi Chitarkatha*, translated as *The Kaleidoscopic Story of My Life* (1988). As a follower of Ambedkar's views and opinions, she is the first Dalit woman teacher in Sholapur district. Her work highlights the burden of class, caste and gender upon a poor Dalit woman. The protagonist of the work descends from the Mahar caste, the Dalit community of Maharashtra, who represents the plight of Indian Dalit woman in her own society.

She wrote *Mazhya Jalmachi Chittarkatha* after she retired from teaching in 1981. It was first serialised in *Purva Magazine* in 1983 and was tele-serialised as *Najuka* on Mumbai Doordarshan in 1990. It has also been translated into French. The word *Chittarkatha* literally means a picture story but also specifies a sense of pieces of pictures being put together like a jigsaw puzzle.

This is the first work in Dalit literature which is written by a woman. This book deals with the two major problems of the society. First, the oppression and mistreatment of the Dalit by the upper class, secondly the discrimination towards women in a patriarchal society. In this work the narrator writes about the struggle that does not take the form of direct physical violence. The resistance in Dalit autobiography appears in the form of incongruity.

## Baby Kamble



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*Jeena Amucha* translated as *The Prisons We Broke* (1986) is yet another autobiography that represents the darker sides of Hindu caste system in our country. Baby Kamble, the author of the work portrays the position of Indian Dalit women who are being ostracized twice by both the upper caste community as well as within the community because of being a woman. She puts light on to her village called Veergaon and to her community Maharwada. The people of Maharwada community suffered from illiteracy and starvation. They were considered as dirty by the upper caste. Through her work, she puts voices to all the miseries of the downtrodden and attempts to react towards the age-old tradition of the society.

Baby Kamble's autobiography throws light on self-affirmation. It is a sociocultural analysis of the society. She voices against the Hindu caste system which degraded Dalits for centuries and praises Dr. Ambedkar who fought for his people and brought a drastic revolution. Baby Kamble was brought up in this tradition movement and has witnessed the torment of Dalit women in the pre and post Ambedkar period. It is not only the story of Dalit women prisoners but about the fighter in her who broke her chains to assert herself.

*The Prisons We Broke* is considered as the Dalit feminist analysis of patriarchy. She graphically describes the physical and psychological violence women have to undergo in both the public and private circles. Baby Kamble shows the remarkable dignity and flexibility of the Mahar women in their struggle through which they have emerged as the agents of transformation in their community.

If the Mahar community is the 'other' for the Brahmins, Mahar women become the 'other' for the Mahar men. Baby Kamble demonstrates how caste and patriarchy converge to prolong exploitative practices among women. In her self-narration, Baby Kamble portrays how Dalit women were the worst victims of superstition, hunger, poverty and the exploitative patriarchal order of Dalit men as well as the men of higher castes.

In her autobiography Baby Kamble presented the live picture of Mahars life in past 50 years living in western Maharashtra. She frankly showed her anger towards the *Chaturvarna*

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system of Hinduism as well as against the patriarchal order prevalent among Mahars which gave a lower status to their women. The autobiography is a social critique of the Hindu social system as well as the patriarchal order of Mahars. Baby Kamble's self and honest analysis made her autobiography totally different from the autobiographies of higher caste women as well as Dalit male autobiographies where the presence of Dalit women as an independent human being rarely felt.

Baby Kamble's autobiography *The Prison We Broke* is deeply rooted in historical and social processes of community. She, by using the free flow of prejudice, questions both the interior and exterior nature of oppression that her community had to undergo. The book is a peek into the inhuman sufferings of Dalit with no sense of self-respect and identity. Her poverty-stricken, undernourished people were forced to live on the fringes of the village with threads as the marker of their caste.

Throughout her autobiography she tries to bring home the point that ignorance was the biggest factor which led to the despairs of her community. She stresses the fact that social bonding and self-awareness make the only key to the prison. Social attachment of her community is reflected in various customs and practices that people of her society adhered. *The Prisons We Break* sarcastically attacks the immoral practices existing within the community. Kamble breaks the myth of Mahar community being an ideal society. This she does by highlighting the triple oppressions - caste, class and gender, which women of her society had to face.

### **Urmila Pawar**

Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* is originally translated from her Marathi autobiography, *Aadyan*. Urmila throws light on the 'private' and 'public' aspects of her life. She talks openly about the household and marital conflicts. She frankly offers a strong critique of feminist and Dalit politics. The author links her mother's act of wearing baskets, *aadyans*, to her own 'act of writing'. Urmila Pawar's memoirs describe the long journey from the Konkan to Mumbai, bringing realisation of the struggle of three generations for Dalit modernity.

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Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* belongs to the genre of autobiography which presents the major issues of class, caste, and gender in the Indian context. Apart from recording a woman's discovery of selfhood and assertion of identity it also offers a background picture of the Indians especially Maharashtrian culture including inter personal and strong relations, clashes, and tolerances. Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* speaks not of a single person but the struggles of the entire society.

The problem of poverty is closely linked with her Dalit-hood, i.e., her caste of Mahars, which is one of the lowest in the Hindu *varna* order and with the problems of gender, i.e., of being born as a woman in the patriarchal Indian society. Throughout her life, she has to struggle against these antagonist forces to emphasize her selfhood and achieve a sense of fulfillment. The narrator, like most of her community, suffers from economic disability. Because of their poverty they do not have adequate food, clothing, proper shelter and other creature-comforts.

The Dalit community of Konkan region of Maharashtra, whose caste-based occupation was weaving bamboo baskets were put into limelight by Urmila Pawar in her autobiography, *Aaidan* translated as *A Weave of My Life* (2009). She locates the discrimination, untouchability, labour, gender and sex inside and outside Dalit community. They were considered as racially inferior and polluted by nature itself and were forced to live in secluded part of the locality. She too, as other woman writers of Dalit autobiography, attempts to break the traditions of her community with the help of power of words through revealing the cruel actualities.

### **Rural Tyranny**

One of the major areas of focus of Dalit writings is rural tyranny. Dalit writers sparkled their ink in emphasizing the caste, class and gender bias faced by Dalits in the society where they themselves form a part of it. Through their writings they attempt to make a small change in the viewpoint of the society even though many of the practices are still continued in the society even today.

Dalit women are exposed to tremendous forms of social, economic, physical and mental torture and exploitations. Dalit women are victims of caste-based killings. They are raped when working in the fields. They are casually exposed and molested and they even invite death if they dare to quench their thirst from a common well. The writings of Dalit women writers are based on the life experiences and awareness. Dalit women writers portray their upsurge for justice. Their life is quite similar to their upper caste equivalent, but the fact is that Dalit woman have been victims of patriarchal society for ages and still have very little right to seek human rights. Their attempt to declare their rights are often met with strong resistance from the higher castes resulting in merciless torture rapes, massacres and other atrocities. The images of reality reveal the level of violence through Dalit autobiographies. The Dalit autobiography stands as honoured end where processes of self-investigation, examining awareness, assertion and identification display a quest of self.

### **Dalit Autobiographies**

In Dalit autobiographies the writers have articulated their positive attitudes towards work which helped them to conquer their enemy and achieve their own identity. Dalit literature rightfully claims its place within the mainstream literary theories, upper caste ideologies and explores the neglected aspects of life, keeping away fantasy and illusionary aspects of life, paving the way to authenticity and liveliness of art.

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HOD, Associate Professor  
Department of English  
St. Dominic's College  
Kanjirapally 686512  
Kerala  
India  
[ancyvg@gmail.com](mailto:ancyvg@gmail.com)

Sruthy, P.U., M.A., NET  
Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
Christ College  
Irinjalakuda 680 125  
Kerala  
India  
[sruthyanish21@gmail.com](mailto:sruthyanish21@gmail.com)

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