

The Role of Ambedkarite Ideology in Shaping Dalit Identity in the Writings of Narendra Jadhav and Vasant Moon

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Abstract

The theme of this article is to investigate how Dalit identity is being manifested in Ambedkarite literature in Outcaste: A Memoir written by the writer Narendra Jadhav and Growing Up Untouchable in India written by the writer Vasant Moon. They are both 'life stories' about the Mahar world from the twentieth century in Maharashtra. The principal concern of the paper is the achievement of two goals. The first is to follow these notions of dignity, education, self-respect, and resistance in each text and how they are related to the Dalit self. The second is to contrast the two writers in their narration of the oppression of caste and the consciousness and emancipation of the people. The paper uses Ambedkar's critique of caste and scholarship that interprets the Dalit as a witness to read the Dalit autobiography as an Ambedkarite narrative grammar that turns humiliation into claim, a grammar, not a borrowed slogan. The grammar is organised by Jadhav each around a family's generational rise; Moon spreads it out over a neighbourhood. The comparison indicates that Ambedkarite Dalit identity in life-writing is multiple, conflicting and formally creative.

Keywords: Ambedkarite ideology; Dalit identity; Dalit autobiography; Narendra Jadhav; Vasant Moon; caste resistance

1. Introduction

Ambedkar's thought has been the most direct inspiration for the Marathi Dalit literature among all the intellectual traditions in modern India. He organized the water-tank and temple satyagrahas of the Mahars of Maharashtra, started schools, newspapers, political parties and eventually initiated mass conversion to Buddhism at Nagpur in 1956. This generation, for whom writing the self was already a political process (Zelliot, *From Untouchable*), resulted from that movement. That was the basis for Dalit autobiography. It's definitely a record of humiliation. It is also an un-naming of another quality: the slow construction of a self that won't submit to the name of the identity cast. Narendra Jadhav and Vasant Moon are names following in their footsteps, albeit from different points of view. Moon was a civil servant and activist, who put together the Government of Maharashtra edition of Ambedkar's writings and speeches.

His memoir, *Vasti*, was released in Marathi in 1995, and in English as *Growing Up Untouchable in India*, translated by Gail Omvedt with an introduction by Eleanor Zelliot (Moon, *Vasti*; Moon, *Growing Up*). Jadhav is of the Reserve Bank of India cadre and an economist. In 1993, he published his book *Aamcha Baap Aan Amhi* and ten years later *Aamcha Baap Aan Amhi*—a larger English-language edition became *Outcaste: A Memoir* (Jadhav, *Aamcha Baap*; Jadhav, *Outcaste*). Both of these are products of the Mahar community and Ambedkar movement. But they don't tell the same story.

The research problem is the difference. Ambedkar's impact on Dalit writing is often included in the background, taken for granted, and studied superficially, word by word. It is harder to understand how the Ambedkarite ideas come into the narration: whose voice is listened to, which scenes are used to represent them, and what is left out of them. This first step is to look into the representation of Dalit identity, dignity, education, self-respect and resistance through the Ambedkarite ideology, in both works. The second is to compare the representation of such oppression and transformation of the caste system which Jadhav and Moon stand for, collective consciousness and a different prospect of emancipation.

The paper makes the case that both writers employ the ideas of Ambedkar as a grammar to "rework" humiliation into self-respect, and that that grammar is different. Jadhav's autobiographical narrative is a marriage of Dalit identity to the family's ascent and empowerment through education, which could otherwise lead to the assumption that emancipation means personal mobility. Moon's memoir expands identity in a neighbourhood, making the Dalit self appear inextricable from the vasti that make up that space. Both of the texts together indicate that the Dalit identity of Ambedkarites is not a stable substance, but a practice of self-narration that is pitched against.

2. Review of Literature and Theoretical Framework

Three bodies of scholarship bear on this inquiry.

The Ambedkar movement as history. In the essays the Mahar community's journey from imposed "untouchability" to self-chosen Dalit names is tracked by Eleanor Zelliot. Through them they demonstrate how Ambedkar's struggles helped to give that passage concrete form (Zelliot, *From Untouchable*). Gail Omvedt situates this movement in a larger democratic revolt against caste. She reads Ambedkar's politics as a matrix for self-organized Dalit public not a call for reform from above (Omvedt). Christophe Jaffrelot highlights the conflicts to be found in Ambedkar's career between political representation and social reform/religious conversion. Those tensions are important here because the memoirs not only have inherited one Ambedkar (Jaffrelot) but another as well.

Dalit literature as aesthetic: Sharankumar Limbale asserts that Dalit literature must be evaluated on its own terms, which typically have to do with the struggle for liberty, equality and fraternity, rather than on upper-caste notions of beauty (Limbale). Toral Gajarawala takes it to form, demonstrating that literary realism's assumptions are also shaken by caste (Gajarawala). Both warn against reading a memoir as a "document."

Autobiography and identity.

- In this essay, Pramod K. Nayar reads Dalit life-writing as testimonio. In this genre, the narrator is a witness to the community, and invites the readers to listen as secondary witnesses (Nayar).
- Working with Hindi texts, Sarah Beth suggests that Dalit autobiography is a creation of a cultural identity that deliberately challenges the ascribed "untouchable" identity (Beth).
- Raj Kumar sees Dalit personal narratives as negotiations with the caste, with the nation, and with the self, for which the priorities of the narrator are not always explicit (Kumar).
- Sharmila Rege's contribution on Dalit women's testimonios provides a corrective. Emancipation is a fluid concept which has been explored in Ambedkarite life-writing through the male voice and gender differences (Rege).
- 'Humiliation' is a theory put forward by Gopal Guru as an assertion that is revealing structures of power. In his narration, self-respect is manifested as an assertion of rejection practised upon a humiliated one (Guru).

Framework. The framework that has been used is that of Ambedkar's collected writings along with that of Guru and Nayar. As Ambedkar suggests in his essay "Annihilation", "caste is an order maintained by a marriage system of the same name and supported by scriptural backing" (Ambedkar, "Castes"). Guru's dialectic of humiliation and self-respect, along with Nayar's testimonio, provide the context for a reading of the memoirs that produce the terms for the conversion of experience into claim.

Research gap. Ambedkar's portrayal is a theme of overcoming hardships in recent journal criticism (Anowar) which read Jadhav's *Outcaste* through Ambedkar. Since Moon's text, the interest has been sparked, primarily as historical witness. Of the scholarship included in this survey, none has dealt with the memoirs side by side. Neither does anybody question how their formal selection, family narratives against

neighbourhood chronicle generate different Ambedkarites. This paper fills the comparative and formal void.

3. Ambedkarite Ideology and the Formation of Dalit Identity

In his views in early paper "Castes in India", Ambedkar contended that caste system had emerged as an overlay on exogamous practice. On this interpretation, the essence of enclosure is not occupation but a reaction to it (Ambedkar "Castes"). The suggestion of identity is strong. Whereas, if caste is reproduced through closed marriage and through being born, that being "untouchable" is not a natural fact but a social imposition. An imposition is something that can be turned down.

"Annihilation of Caste" took this thought to its extreme. Ambedkar sees caste as a thought, a mindset, and the authority behind it in the holiness of the shastras, not a physical barrier (Ambedkar, "Annihilation," sec. 20). He places an ideal society, based on liberty, equality and fraternity, against it. He knows fraternity as democracy in its social dimension, as associated living (sec. 14).

Two consequences follow for literary identity:

- Because caste is a structure of belief, it must be fought on the terrain of consciousness, which is exactly where autobiography operates.
- Because fraternity demands a re-imagined community, the alternative self cannot be purely individual.

This framework places an important emphasis on education. Ambedkar saw education as an instrument for the excluded to analyze their plight and make a difference. This call to accept the combination of education and organisation with agitation culminated in putting into practice a programme of Mahar neighbourhoods (Zelliot, *From Untouchable*; Jaffrelot). An additional twist was coming from the conversion of 1956 a rejection of the religious caste system that had allowed for the institutionalization of untouchability, and a proposal for a new collective designation.

How is all this made narrative? Guru's account helps. Humiliation becomes political when the humiliated makes it a demand, and self-respect comes when the person refuses to accept the terms of humiliation (Guru). This movement is repeated in the autobiography of Ambedkar and is the most prominent one. It reminds the scene of degradation, denies its underlying assumptions, and tells a self-constructed in opposition. In his testimonio model, Nayar also notes that the "I" in testifying has a "we" (Nayar).

The framework therefore yields three questions for the texts:

1. How does each memoir represent the humiliating order?

2. Which Ambedkarite resources does it mobilise against that order: education, organisation, conversion or fraternity?
3. Is the resulting identity figured mainly as individual or as collective?

4. Dalit Identity in the Writings of Narendra Jadhav

Outcaste is a strange autobiography, as its thesis doesn't revolve around the autobiographer himself or herself. Jadhav's main characters are his father Damodar's diaries and his family's memories. In some chapters (*Outcaste*), He lets Damu and his mom, Sonu, speak in first person, before his narration kicks in later. The polyphony matters. Here the Ambedkarite identity is hereditary, it is born into an individual and given to him.

There is a first episode set in the village of Ozar. Young Mahar Damu is assigned to guard a corpse that has been washed up on a beach, one of the duties bestowed by his caste (Jadhav, *Outcaste*). The stage is used for a first refusal. He challenges the authority of the village, which Guru describes as the rejection of the rejection a challenge to something that has been seen as a duty and is only regarded as such after being challenged. That refusal to become a trajectory becomes the experience of Damu when he moves to Bombay.

Ambedkar comes in as presence and programme. As Damu travels with it, it enters his body and leaves its non-neglect of education behind in 1956, the family sees their way into Buddhism. Most importantly, he is very insistent on his children's education. His success in the doctoral study and then in the Reserve Bank and a government career is a fulfillment of the father's wish, and the narrative features itself as a tribute.

It's here that the challenge really starts. In a narrative that is more about triumph than anything else, the recent criticism has embraced that angle (Anowar). However Ambedkar's idea of fraternity requires more than the prosperity of a single house. It's partially addressed that question with Sonu in *Outcaste*. She conveys them in her own words and, once again, brings the story back to the household, to which much of the price of Damu's rebellion falls. Here, Sonu's voice disrupts the rise and reminds the reader that "dignity" has a domestic price (Rege). Jadhav becomes thus a double agent, his Ambedkarite side being as real as the other one. It is formed by a refusal and ultimately informed by education, but it is forced into an individual arrival story that doesn't quite go along with Ambedkar's collective horizon.

5. Dalit Identity in the Writings of Vasant Moon

The neighbourhood is not the protagonist of *Growing Up Untouchable in India*, it is the narrator. The first part of its first chapter is dedicated to the vastis. In later

chapters, devotion, play, schooling and political organisation are woven together in a single texture in the chapters on Hymns, childhood heat and rain, sports and study, and pigeons and politics (Moon, *Growing Up*). The titles of the chapters indicate a method. In Moon's "I," growing up happens within a collective, and it's hardly ever forgotten in this book.

This organization provides Ambedkarite fraternity with literary body. Jadhav focuses the movement on a father, whereas, Moon distributes the movement throughout a community. Ambedkar is not a character; he seems to be a stream flowing through the avenues of a settlement in Nagpur changing its rituals and aspirations. Thus, Nayar's testimonio model is more compatible to Moon than Jadhav's model. The narrator has borne witness for neighbors – most of whom were unrecorded writers (Nayar).

It is their oppression of caste is there, but Moon sees it from the inside looking out in the vasti. The community's self-making is at the centre and humiliation at the edges. It is a political decision which is in turn a philosophical or ideological one. To tell Dalit life as full, sensory, comic and argumentative is to refuse to be reduced to a Dalit victim, a point Limbale is making insistently: that is the core of Dalit aesthetics (Limbale). The attention that Moon gives to seasons is of Nagpur belongs to the refusal. It is not just a complaint but also a landscape at the vasti.

The formation of the narrator itself is a topic of education and politics in the chapter "Rising Moon." The punchlines are individualistic and yet stick with the community that created them (Moon, *Growing Up*). The sense of a life lived in the context of a larger mobilisation is bolstered by the introduction which Zelliott provides, turning the memoir into part of the history of the Ambedkar movement. The Ambedkarite self in Moon is a part and not a principal.

A caution remains. The inclusion of a warm recollection of the vasti by a retired official, written decades later, may help to soften the gender/ class tensions the community experienced. All collective voice chooses.

6. Comparative Discussion

The two memoirs, side by side, have an Ambedkarite grammar. Humiliation is named, refused and converted to self-respect, using education and organisation as the instruments of conversion. Both make a present of Ambedkar as an actual human being in Mahar life, as opposed to a theoretical entity. In Guru's words, both make the humiliation a claim.

The distinctions are in form; form has ideology. Emancipation comes at the level of the family of Jadhav's life, whose voices resonate in polyphony. It charts vertical

progression, upward mobility from a village to a national office, much like Ambedkar's belief in education but takes national freedom through mobility. The community is the unit in Moon's neighbourhood chronicle. Its episodic, horizontal organization is more like that of fraternity, Ambedkar's term for associated living (sec. 14 of "Annihilation"). The two texts also position their authors differently:

- **Jadhav** writes as a successful son honouring his parents. Authority flows toward Damu, even though the book exists only because of the son's achieved standing.
- **Moon** writes as a former insider recording a world. As compiler of Ambedkar's collected writings, he is both chronicler of the movement's base and custodian of its archive. That double role helps explain why his memoir subordinates the self to the vasti.

Translation is another level of mediation. Jadhav converted his own Marathi book into a larger English version. Omvedt translates Moon to English and Zelliott's frames the history of the book. So, the two Ambedkarite selves come to English via different hands.

The dichotomy is accentuated when you add gender. Even though the story is based on the father, Jadhav voices his mother to narrate each section. Moon's oeuvre focuses on the experience of a boy which introduces a second thought: who is "we" in the vasti whose lives are absorbed? Both Rege's and his critique are applicable to both texts in varying degrees.

What does the comparison show? However, because of the nature of the texts, the identities that are constructed against ascribed identities varies between the two, and Beth's assertion that Dalit autobiography constitutes identity construction in opposition to ascribed identity is true for both texts. In Jadhav, the Ambedkarian self is achieved through inheritance. In Moon, it is a belonging that is held in the community. Both of these are not exhaustive of Ambedkar's project. Jadhav represents its emphasis on education and individual dignity; Moon represents its emphasis on fraternity and collective consciousness. In short, each memoir is a foregrounding of the Ambedkar that its writer required (Kumar).

7. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to analyze the role played by Ambedkarite ideology in the formulation of Dalit identity in the memoirs of two Ambedkarites, Narendra Jadhav and Vasant Moon, as well as compare the depictions of oppression, consciousness and emancipation. Humiliation is transformed into self-respect by an Ambedkarite grammar of refusal in both texts' education and organisation. Their shape, however, creates another form.

In Jadhav's Family Saga, emancipation is found in an ascent of generations. It is potent as evidence, but ridden with the danger of constriction of Ambedkar's perspective to individual success. As narrative form, Moon's neighbourhood chronicle comes into being, a warmth that may quell internal divisions. The Ambedkarite ideology in these life-narratives in Marathi does not function as doctrine but rather as a generative framework which is influenced by social position and formal expression of each writer. Note that here, the Dalit identity is not provided. It is written and twice written.

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