



Remembering Caste, Reclaiming Identity: Childhood, Humiliation and Resistance in Select Marathi Dalit Autobiographies

Dr Suresh G D

Associate Professor & Head, Department of English, Government First Grade College, Holalkere (Tq)- 577526, Chitradurga (D), Karnataka, India
sureshgd959@gmail.com

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Abstract— *Dalit autobiography has emerged as one of the most powerful forms of Indian life writing because it transforms personal experience into a narrative of collective history, social injustice and resistance. Unlike conventional autobiographies that frequently concentrate on individual achievement, Dalit autobiographies locate the individual within the structures of caste, poverty, labour, social exclusion and community life. Childhood occupies a particularly important place in this tradition because caste consciousness is often formed through experiences encountered during the earliest stages of life. Sharankumar Limbale's The Outcaste: Akkarmashi, Baby Kamble's The Prisons We Broke, and Laxman Gaikwad's The Branded: Uchalya are significant Marathi Dalit autobiographies that remember childhood and community life through the experience of caste oppression. Although the three narratives differ in gender, social background, narrative structure and individual experience, they collectively reveal how caste penetrates everyday life through poverty, untouchability, education, occupation, hunger, social exclusion and humiliation. Limbale's The Outcaste explores the painful identity of a child born to a Dalit mother and a dominant-caste father, making questions of legitimacy, belonging and caste central to the narrative. Kamble's The Prisons We Broke extends the autobiographical perspective from the individual to the collective life of Dalit women and the Mahar community, exposing poverty, gender oppression, caste discrimination and the struggle for dignity. Gaikwad's The Branded: Uchalya represents the experience of a nomadic community historically stigmatised and treated as criminal, demonstrating how social prejudice can become attached to an entire community and continue across generations. Through memory, these writers recover experiences excluded from dominant histories. Their narratives transform humiliation into testimony and memory into resistance. This article argues that the three autobiographies reclaim Dalit identity by challenging caste-based representations and asserting the right of marginalised communities to narrate their own histories.*



Keywords— *Dalit autobiography, Marathi Dalit literature, childhood, caste, humiliation, identity, memory, resistance, Sharankumar Limbale, Baby Kamble, Laxman Gaikwad.*

Introduction

Dalit literature represents a major intervention in Indian literary and social discourse because it challenges systems of caste hierarchy and the literary traditions that have historically marginalised the experiences of

oppressed communities. Dalit writing places lived experience at the centre of literary expression. It records suffering, humiliation, poverty, exclusion and exploitation, but it also expresses dignity, consciousness, resistance and the desire for social transformation. Among the different

forms of Dalit literature, autobiography occupies a particularly important position because the writer's personal experience becomes connected with the experience of a larger community. The individual life becomes a means through which an entire social history can be narrated.

Marathi Dalit literature has played a pioneering role in the development of Indian Dalit writing. The emergence of autobiographical narratives in Marathi created a powerful literary space for writers to challenge caste-based silence and represent experiences from within marginalised communities. Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, and Laxman Gaikwad's *The Branded: Uchalya* are among the important autobiographical works through which caste, identity, poverty and resistance are articulated. University reading lists on Dalit literature identify all three works as significant texts within the tradition of Dalit autobiography.

The autobiographical mode in these works differs significantly from the conventional understanding of autobiography. The narrators do not present themselves simply as exceptional individuals who overcome difficulties and achieve success. Instead, their lives remain inseparable from the social conditions of their communities. Their memories contain the voices of mothers, fathers, children, labourers, neighbours, workers and other members of marginalised communities. As a result, the autobiographical "I" frequently becomes a collective "we." Scholarship on Dalit life narratives has similarly emphasised the movement from individual experience towards collective memory and community testimony.

The present article examines the three autobiographies through the interconnected themes of childhood, caste, humiliation, poverty, identity, memory and resistance. It argues that remembering the past in these narratives is not merely an act of personal recollection. It is an act of reclaiming identity and rewriting history from the perspective of those who have traditionally been excluded from dominant representations.

Childhood under the Shadow of Caste

Childhood is conventionally associated with innocence, play, education and emotional development. Dalit autobiographies challenge this idealised image by demonstrating that caste becomes visible to children at a very early age. The Dalit child learns about social hierarchy through everyday experiences involving food, water, school, work, residence, occupation and interpersonal relations. Childhood therefore becomes one of the first spaces in which caste consciousness develops.

In *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*, Sharankumar Limbale's childhood is deeply affected by his ambiguous position within the caste structure. He is born to a Dalit mother and a high-caste father and is consequently denied a stable sense of social belonging. His identity as an *akkarmashi*, or one born outside socially recognised legitimacy, becomes both a personal and social wound. His father's privileged position contrasts sharply with his mother's poverty and marginality. Scholarly discussions of the text emphasise this contradiction between the father's privileged caste position and the mother's landless Dalit existence.

Limbale's childhood is therefore shaped by a fundamental question: where does he belong? He cannot fully claim the identity associated with his father, while his relationship with his mother places him within the social reality of untouchability. The child experiences caste not simply as an external social system but as a problem of identity. His very existence becomes a reminder of the unequal relations between dominant-caste men and Dalit women.

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* approaches childhood from a different perspective. Rather than focusing exclusively on the formation of one individual identity, Kamble presents the collective experience of Mahar life. Her memories of childhood and community life reveal hunger, poverty, social exclusion and the difficult conditions under which Dalit families survived. The autobiographical voice frequently moves beyond the individual self and records the experiences of women, children and families within the community. Kamble's work consequently becomes both autobiography and social history.

Laxman Gaikwad's *The Branded: Uchalya* similarly presents childhood within a community burdened by social stigma. The *Uchalya* community is associated with a hereditary label of criminality, and this stigma affects the lives of its members even when individuals have committed no crime. The child therefore grows up in a social environment in which identity has already been imposed from outside. The community is treated with suspicion because of its inherited social label. The autobiographical narrative exposes how such stigma can become a form of social imprisonment.

The three texts therefore reveal different dimensions of caste-marked childhood. Limbale's childhood is shaped by questions of legitimacy and mixed-caste parentage; Kamble's by collective poverty, caste oppression and the condition of Dalit women; and Gaikwad's by the inherited stigma attached to a nomadic community. Yet all three demonstrate that caste deprives

childhood of the innocence that dominant social narratives often assume.

Humiliation and the Caste-Marked Body

Humiliation is central to Dalit autobiographical experience because caste operates through the body. The Dalit body is marked as polluted, inferior, criminal, poor or socially undesirable. Experiences involving touch, food, clothing, labour, residence and physical space communicate caste hierarchy in everyday life.

In Limbale's *The Outcaste*, humiliation is inseparable from the narrator's uncertain identity. His body carries the social consequences of his parents' unequal relationship. The father's high caste provides social privilege, while the mother's Dalit identity determines the child's marginal status. The contrast between the father's mansion and the mother's hut becomes a powerful representation of caste inequality. Limbale's identity as *akkarmashi* is not merely a private description; it reflects a society that attaches social value to birth and legitimacy.

Kamble's narrative expands humiliation into the collective sphere. The Dalit community is subjected to forms of social and economic deprivation that affect everyday life. Women suffer particularly because caste oppression is combined with patriarchal control and poverty. The autobiographical narrative exposes the ways in which Dalit women are expected to bear the burdens of household labour, economic hardship and social discrimination.

The title *The Prisons We Broke* is itself significant because it suggests that oppression exists through multiple forms of confinement. The prison is not simply a physical structure. It can be caste, poverty, gender inequality, ignorance and social conditioning. Kamble's narrative demonstrates how these structures affect the lives of women and children and how consciousness can become the beginning of liberation.

In *The Branded: Uchalya*, the very word "branded" suggests a permanent social mark. The Uchalya community carries a stigma that precedes the individual. Members are treated as suspicious because of their community identity. Gaikwad's autobiography exposes the injustice of judging individuals according to inherited labels. The narrative thus demonstrates that caste and social stigma can function even without direct physical violence. Suspicion itself becomes a form of oppression.

Poverty, Hunger and Social Exclusion

Poverty is a recurring reality in all three autobiographies. However, poverty is not presented simply as an economic condition. It is closely connected to caste and social exclusion. The writers demonstrate that

marginalised communities are poor partly because caste determines access to land, occupations, education and resources.

In *The Outcaste*, the contrast between the privileged father and the impoverished mother illustrates the economic dimension of caste. Land and wealth are concentrated on one side of the social hierarchy, while Dalit families remain vulnerable to poverty and dependence. The narrator's childhood experiences reveal how economic deprivation affects food, education, family life and self-respect.

Kamble's narrative gives particular attention to the material conditions of Dalit women and families. Hunger, inadequate clothing, exhausting labour and economic insecurity form part of everyday existence. Poverty is experienced collectively, and the survival of one family cannot be separated from the conditions of the wider community. Kamble therefore transforms private memories into a social record of poverty.

Gaikwad's narrative presents a related but distinctive experience. The Uchalya community's marginalisation restricts opportunities for stable employment and social mobility. The inherited stigma attached to the community contributes to a cycle in which poverty and social suspicion reinforce one another. The autobiography exposes how a community can become trapped within a social identity imposed by dominant society.

The three writers consequently challenge explanations of poverty that blame individuals for their economic condition. Their narratives demonstrate that poverty is structurally produced and maintained. Caste determines who owns land, who performs particular forms of labour, who receives education and who has access to social dignity.

Education and the Awakening of Consciousness

Education occupies an important position in Dalit autobiographical writing because it represents both a possibility of social transformation and a site where caste discrimination becomes visible. The school promises equality but does not always provide it. Dalit children may enter educational institutions while continuing to experience caste-based exclusion and humiliation.

For Limbale, education contributes to the development of critical awareness. The child gradually learns to interpret experiences that initially appear personal or accidental as manifestations of a larger caste system. Education therefore transforms experience into consciousness.

Kamble's perspective is particularly important because her narrative connects education with the condition of Dalit women. Traditional social structures restrict women's opportunities, and ignorance becomes one of the mechanisms through which oppression continues. The narrative therefore values consciousness and knowledge as essential elements of liberation. The breaking of the "prisons" requires not merely economic change but a transformation in how oppressed people understand themselves and their social circumstances.

Gaikwad's experience similarly demonstrates the importance of education in challenging inherited social identity. Education offers the possibility of moving beyond the restrictions imposed by community stigma. Yet the autobiography also reveals that education alone cannot immediately erase caste prejudice. The educated individual may continue to carry the social identity imposed by the community.

Education thus has a double function in the three texts. It provides an opportunity for individual transformation, but it also exposes the persistence of caste within modern institutions. The school can become both a place of exclusion and a place from which resistance begins.

Gender and the Experience of Dalit Women

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* is particularly significant because it foregrounds Dalit women's experiences. While caste affects both men and women, Dalit women experience caste oppression through gendered forms of labour, poverty, family expectations and social control. Kamble's narrative challenges representations of Dalit life that focus only on male experience.

Women in the narrative are workers, mothers, wives and members of the community, but they are also observers and interpreters of social reality. Their experiences reveal the relationship between caste and patriarchy. They suffer oppression from dominant social groups while also experiencing gender-based restrictions within their own communities.

Kamble does not romanticise the community. She is critical of practices that reproduce women's suffering. This makes her autobiography especially significant for Dalit feminist thought. She demonstrates that liberation from caste cannot be complete if gender inequality remains unchallenged.

The contrast with Limbale and Gaikwad is productive. Their autobiographies provide important accounts of caste and poverty, but Kamble places women's experiences at the centre of the narrative. Her work

therefore expands the meaning of Dalit autobiography by demonstrating that the history of caste must also be narrated through the lives of Dalit women.

Memory as Counter-History

Memory is the foundation upon which these three autobiographies are constructed. The writers return to childhood and community experiences not simply because these events are personally important but because they represent histories that have been excluded from dominant narratives.

Limbale remembers his childhood to expose the contradictions of caste, legitimacy and identity. His personal history becomes connected with the history of Dalit families and communities. His narrative demonstrates how the question of parentage is also a question of caste power.

Kamble remembers the lives of Mahar women and families to preserve experiences that might otherwise remain undocumented. Her autobiographical voice becomes a collective memory of a community. The narrative therefore moves beyond the conventional boundaries of autobiography and approaches social history.

Gaikwad remembers the life of the Uchalya community to challenge the criminal identity imposed upon it. His narrative asks readers to understand the historical and social conditions that produced marginalisation rather than simply accepting the labels attached to the community.

Dalit autobiography thus becomes a form of counter-history. It challenges official histories that frequently privilege dominant communities and institutions. The memories of hunger, humiliation, labour and exclusion become historical evidence. Through writing, the authors preserve experiences that dominant society has attempted to forget.

Identity and the Reclamation of the Self

The central concern of all three autobiographies is the struggle to reclaim identity from definitions imposed by caste society. Limbale's identity is complicated by the term *akkarmashi*. He is forced to confront a society that defines him through his birth and denies him the secure identity available to those born within accepted caste and family structures. His act of writing challenges that definition by transforming the stigma into a source of critical literary expression.

Kamble's reclamation of identity occurs through the representation of Dalit women and community life. She refuses to allow her community to be represented only through the prejudices of outsiders. By recording the lives

of ordinary women, she gives them historical and literary visibility.

Gaikwad similarly challenges the inherited identity of the “criminal” or “branded” community. His autobiography separates human beings from the social labels imposed upon them. The act of narration becomes an argument for recognising individual dignity beyond inherited stigma.

In all three texts, therefore, identity is not something simply possessed by the narrator. It is something contested and reconstructed. The writers reclaim identity by telling their own stories.

Resistance and Agency

Resistance in these autobiographies is not restricted to political movements or dramatic acts of rebellion. It begins with the refusal to accept humiliation as natural. The ability to remember, question, learn and write becomes an act of resistance.

Limbale's writing transforms personal stigma into literary testimony. His autobiography exposes the structures that produced his marginal identity. The personal “I” becomes connected with the collective suffering of Dalit communities. Dalit autobiographical writing has often been understood in this way: the individual story becomes a narrative of the community.

Kamble's resistance is particularly significant because she speaks against both caste oppression and gender inequality. Her narrative gives voice to women whose experiences might otherwise remain invisible. By criticising social practices within and outside the community, she demonstrates that resistance requires an honest examination of all forms of oppression.

Gaikwad's resistance lies in challenging the social construction of criminality. His autobiography demonstrates that communities can be “branded” by society and then denied opportunities because of that brand. Writing becomes a means of questioning this inherited stigma.

The three writers therefore redefine resistance as the struggle for dignity. Education, memory, self-expression, community consciousness and literary representation all become forms of resistance.

Language and Dalit Literary Expression

The language of Dalit autobiography is itself significant because Dalit writers challenge literary conventions associated with elite culture. Their narratives often preserve the rhythms of oral storytelling, community speech and everyday experience. Such language allows the

writers to represent social reality from within the community rather than through an external literary gaze.

The three texts are originally Marathi works that have reached wider audiences through translation. The *Outcaste: Akkarmashi* was translated into English by Santosh Bhoomkar, *The Prisons We Broke* by Maya Pandit, and *The Branded: Uchalya* has been published in English by Sahitya Akademi. These works are widely recognised within English-language study of Dalit literature.

The use of community-centred language is important because language can challenge social hierarchy. When the speech, memories and experiences of marginalised communities enter literature, their cultural world gains literary legitimacy.

A recent sociolinguistic study of these same three autobiographies argues that regional dialect, caste-marked vocabulary, oral narrative strategies and gendered voices can undermine the symbolic authority of dominant literary language. This reinforces the argument that Dalit language is not simply a stylistic choice; it can also be part of the political project of self-representation.

From Victimhood to Agency

One of the most important achievements of these autobiographies is that they refuse to reduce Dalit identity to victimhood. The narratives contain hunger, humiliation and suffering, but they also contain consciousness, courage, creativity and resistance.

Limbale's painful experience of illegitimacy becomes the foundation of a powerful literary voice. Kamble transforms memories of women's suffering into a collective critique of caste and patriarchy. Gaikwad transforms the stigma attached to the Uchalya community into a narrative that questions the very foundations of social labelling.

This transformation is central to the meaning of the title *Remembering Caste, Reclaiming Identity*. Remembering is necessary because forgetting would allow oppressive histories to disappear. But remembering alone is not enough. The memory must be transformed into knowledge and resistance. These writers remember humiliation in order to challenge the structures that produced it.

Their autobiographies therefore move through a significant sequence: experience, memory, consciousness, narration and resistance. The individual who was once defined by caste becomes the author who defines himself or herself through writing.

Comparative Perspective

A comparative reading of the three autobiographies reveals both common experiences and significant differences. All three texts represent communities affected by caste-based marginalisation, poverty and social exclusion. All three demonstrate that childhood is shaped by social structures and that humiliation can become a source of consciousness. All three also transform individual memory into collective testimony.

However, each text offers a distinctive perspective. The *Outcaste: Akkarmashi* is deeply concerned with questions of birth, legitimacy, caste identity and belonging. Limbale's personal position as the son of a Dalit mother and a high-caste father makes identity a particularly painful issue. His autobiography explores the psychological and social consequences of being denied a secure place within caste society.

The *Prisons We Broke* is distinguished by its emphasis on Dalit women and collective community experience. Kamble's narrative demonstrates that caste oppression is inseparable from gender and economic conditions. Her work expands Dalit autobiography beyond individual male experience and foregrounds the lives of women.

The *Branded: Uchalya* offers a different perspective by focusing on a community historically marked by the stigma of criminality. Gaikwad demonstrates how social identity can be imposed upon an entire community and transmitted across generations. His narrative therefore raises important questions about prejudice, inherited stigma and social exclusion.

Together, these works demonstrate the diversity of Marathi Dalit autobiography. They do not present a single uniform Dalit experience. Instead, they reveal differences based on gender, community, family background, occupation and social location. Their common ground lies in the rejection of imposed inferiority and the insistence on dignity.

CONCLUSION

Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, and Laxman Gaikwad's *The Branded: Uchalya* are powerful examples of Marathi Dalit autobiographical writing. Through memories of childhood, family, poverty, education, labour and social exclusion, the three writers expose the everyday operation of caste and the deep psychological consequences of humiliation.

Their representations of childhood are particularly significant because they demonstrate how

caste consciousness begins at an early age. Children learn the boundaries of caste through social interaction, poverty, occupation, education and exclusion. Childhood therefore becomes an important site for understanding how caste reproduces itself across generations.

Yet these autobiographies do not remain narratives of suffering. They transform memory into resistance. Limbale challenges the stigma of illegitimacy and caste identity by narrating his own life. Kamble gives literary and historical visibility to Dalit women and challenges both caste and patriarchal oppression. Gaikwad questions the inherited criminal stigma attached to the Uchalya community and asserts the humanity of people who have been socially branded.

The three narratives also demonstrate that Dalit identity is not simply something imposed by caste society. It can be reclaimed through consciousness, education, memory and literary expression. The autobiographical act enables the writers to move from being objects of social representation to becoming subjects who represent themselves.

Remembering caste in these works is therefore not an exercise in preserving pain alone. It is a political and literary act. The memory of humiliation becomes evidence against oppression, while the act of narrating that memory becomes a declaration of dignity. The writers reclaim the right to speak about their own lives, communities and histories.

Ultimately, these autobiographies transform the personal into the collective. Their individual childhood memories become records of communities whose experiences have frequently remained outside official histories. They demonstrate that Dalit autobiography is not merely a story about the past; it is a continuing assertion of identity and resistance in the present. Through *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*, *The Prisons We Broke*, and *The Branded: Uchalya*, memory becomes a means of reclaiming identity, literature becomes a form of resistance, and the previously silenced Dalit subject becomes the authoritative narrator of his or her own history.

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