

Dalit Women's Autobiographical Writings: A Gaze Back

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Introduction

1. Caste system, a descent-based institutionalised inequality, has been practiced for thousands of years in parts of South Asia, such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal. Caste remains a cage for Dalit communities, spreading its tentacles wide and deep. Over the centuries caste has made its presence felt in the lives of people through religious privileges and prohibitions, descent-based differential socio-economic status and opportunities, power to make both social and personal decisions and violence against those who challenge the caste system. It exists in every sphere of life from pattern of housing, food and dining, rights over water, land and cattle, marriage, choice of occupation to modern-day institutions. In India, despite Constitutional provisions and legislations to safeguard the rights and lives of Dalits, caste has persisted and transformed itself into a myriad of new forms. It remains a challenge to the ideals of democracy-equality, justice and fraternity. Post-independence, under the leadership of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, the Constitutional Committee of India has been able to give itself the promise of affirmative action, abolition of untouchability and laws to safeguard the life and rights of Dalits. As a result of affirmative government policies and Dalit consciousness, some Dalit individuals and communities have been able to overcome many hurdles. However, often upward mobilising Dalit individuals and communities have faced reprisals in the forms of mob violence, the burning down of houses, murders, assaults, rapes and institutional discrimination, as in the case of Rohit Vemula,^[1] as a reprisal for their upward social mobility.
2. Amongst Dalit, it is Dalit women who face the worst kind of violence. They are gendered and sexualised, and treated as both polluted and sexually available for the men of the dominant caste under the disguise of religious sanctions—such as the devadasi system.^[2] In the words of Dalit poet Challapalli Swaroopa Rani:

If there is any soul in this country who is subjected to all kinds of oppression and exploitation, it is the Dalit woman. On one side she is oppressed by the caste system, on the other side she is subjected to gender oppression and class exploitation. She is a Dalit among Dalits.^[3]

Dalit women face patriarchy at home and the burden of patriarchy and caste outside. Neither the Dalit movement nor the Women's movement in India opened up and accepted the issues of Dalit women which came from their experience of the intersection of caste and gender (and often class). For the educated middle-class leaders of the Women's movement, the category of women was homogenous, the issue of caste was not their issue but that of the Dalit movement. Neither did they express solidarity with Dalit women humiliated and tortured by upper caste men^[4] nor did they critique caste.^[5] Further, for the male leaders of the Dalit movement the concerns of Dalit women, such as domestic violence, were divisive and were not taken up by the Dalit movement. This marginalisation of Dalit women and the need for them to speak about their complex reality at the intersection of caste and gender exhorted Dalit women to speak 'differently'.^[6]

3. In the 1980s and 1990s Dalit women claimed their own issues and their own movement, the Dalit women's movement, to fight patriarchy outside and within Dalit households. The movement marked their separate identity outside the unitary category of women and Dalit and their presence in the political sphere. Similarly, autobiographies written by Dalit men do not give space to Dalit women, who only have a guest appearance and are represented as 'self sacrificing mothers or mothers patiently enduring pain and suffering, but very rarely as the agents for change'[7] . It is this subordination that provoked Dalit women to write their own autobiographies, 'the politics of presence' that has led Dalit women to announce their arrival in the 'Dalit counter public'. Their presence has also added value to the subversion value of the counter public.[8]
4. In the next section, I will discuss the use of Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze to read the autobiographical accounts of Baby Kamble and Bama. This is followed by a reading of the autobiographies and a discussion of the autobiographies by using the gaze theory.

Reading Dalit women's autobiographies

5. In the Indian context, Dalit women's autobiography is a fairly recent phenomenon, not more than two decades old which originated from Maharashtra. Dalit women's autobiographies have also been published in regional languages in Tamil Nadu and Gujarat, two other states with vibrant Dalit movements and Dalit Women's movements. Over the years, Dalit women's writing came pouring, opening up and laying bare the issues that remained close to their hearts. These writings are an invitation to the Dalit and non-dalits, alike, to engage with the issues facing Dalit women. Sharmila Rege calls autobiographies of Dalit women testimonies or pleas to a judge.[9] It is an apt term, as the autobiographies narrate the injustices meted out to Dalits and Dalit women, specifically. It also emphasises their faith in justice and transformation in society, in the conditions of Dalits and the caste system.
6. I am using interactional analysis. This is a form of narrative analysis that emphasises the dialogic process between the narrator and listener, where the focus is on storytelling as a process of co-construction, and where the storyteller and listener create meaning collaboratively.[10] This interactional approach helps in unfolding the relationships amongst different actors where readers interpret the narrative often in a way much different from the story tellers' perspectives. Interactional analysis also looks at interactions as performances where the narrator is trying to recreate their identities from memory. This creation of the self is not devoid of social interactions, rather, it develops through a process of interaction with others.[11]
7. I bring in the theory of gaze to understand the process of self-differentiation. According to Jacques Lacan, a psychoanalyst, it is through her gaze on the image of herself in a mirror that a child identifies herself with the image. However, it is through the gaze of others that the individual becomes aware of herself as an object and the lack of control over others and hence over her own objectification and loss of subjecthood.[12] The self, then, is a product of continuous contestation between the objectifying gaze of others and one's own gaze. How does the gaze of others and one's own gaze effect dominated groups like Dalit women?
8. In her theory of the male gaze in cinema, Laura Mulvey explained the way women are represented for the visual pleasure of the 'heterosexual male' and objectified as sexualised bodies.[13] This objectification is a loss of subjecthood and agency. A critique of the theory by bell hooks argues that black women resist this objectification by choosing to use their agency and not identifying with the sexualised representations of women or those of black women.[14]
9. I argue that much like the 'male gaze' the dominant Brahminical patriarchal perspective has continued to

objectify Dalit women as labouring and having sexualised bodies, stigmatising and dominating them. How does this gaze affect the lives of Dalit women and how do they react to this gaze? How do they oppose this gaze? I look into autobiographical accounts of two Dalit women activists to engage with their life narratives and hope to find some answers to the above queries.

Bama

10. Bama is the pen-name of a Roman Catholic Parayar woman from rural Tamil Nadu.^[15] Despite Parayar women embracing Christianity, they are treated as the 'lowest of the low' by the other villagers. According to M.S.S. Pandian, Bama writes in colloquial Tamil, thus emphasising a break from and contesting the standardised Tamil, which is exclusively used by the educated.^[16] Bama's narrative also defies chronology unlike other autobiographies and she chooses to build around different themes such as work, belief, games and recreation. She creates anew by breaking the old rules. She writes:

There are other Dalit hearts like mine, with a passionate desire to create a new society made up of justice, equality and love. They, who have been oppressed, are now themselves like the double-edged karukku,^[17] challenging their oppressors.^[18]

The Dalit community displaces Bama's autobiographical 'I' in tune with autobiographical writings by women and Latin Americans.^[19] Pandian also highlights Bama's strategy of 'erasing specificities by masking them with a veil of anonymity' which turns the narrative into a universal statement about oppression and invoking larger solidarities.^[20] It is her refusal to name her village, the order she joined, the biased village school headmaster, that she enables a 'politics of collectivity' to emerge.

On the autobiography

11. Bama's narrative starts with a description of her village. Its natural beauty, the importance of the hills, lakes and stream in the lives of the villagers finds significance in her narrative. She describes the village divided into hamlets of different caste—Nadars, Koravar, Chakkiliyar, Thevar, Chettiyaar, Aasaari, Naicker, Udaiyaar and Parayar. The spatial segregation is conveniently done so that all necessary institutions such as the post office, markets and the church are located within the upper caste habitations so that they do not have to enter the streets of Dalit hamlets.
12. Bama got her initial education in the church-based school in the upper-caste Nadir hamlet like other Paraya and Pallar children of her village. Her days in the village school had left a mark of discrimination against the Dalits. The headmaster, being from the upper caste, would stigmatise the Dalits. In another church-based school in the neighbouring town the teachers and sisters would encourage the Dalit children; however, there were always people who would point out the caste of the Dalit children to find faults with them and humiliate them.
13. Bama had assumed that in college she would not be discriminated against on caste. However, this proved to be a wrong assumption and Dalit students were asked to stand up in the class. There were only two of them and they were made to stand out. Bama felt a titter of contempt from the other students and it enraged her. 'I was filled with a sudden rage ... It struck me that I would not be rid of this caste business easily, whatever I studied, wherever I went.'^[21] However, she had learnt from her elder brother who had a master's degree that Dalits can throw away the indignities through education.
14. Bama went on to attain a B.Ed. degree and work in a school for the next five years. The church-based school catered to underprivileged children and nearly a third quarter of them were Dalit. As a teacher Bama was happy, teaching children with whom she could identify but the attitude of the majority of the nuns towards the children disturbed her. Though the boarding attached to the school was for the welfare

of the destitute children, these children were made to do menial tasks for the nuns. Although Bama does not specify the tasks her critique of the nuns is their behaviour, which showed no endeavour to develop the minds of these children against caste oppression but rather to reinstate fatalistic notions about caste.

15. Troubled with what she saw and what she felt could be done by the nuns for the children, time and again she would be seized by the wish to enter the order. The dominant yearning was to 'teach those who suffer that there was a Jesus who cares; to put heart into them and to urge them onwards'.^[22] While Bama expresses that this yearning was in spite of her criticism of nuns and experience of years of castigation and reproaching nuns, it seems that it is exactly because of these reasons, as a challenge to the prevalent system, she joined an order, to prove otherwise.
16. The first three years were years of hope of the achievements once she became a nun. She had an urgency to be a nun and these times were spent reading and debating the sufferings of people, the life of Jesus and the woman who founded the order. It was this woman's story of love and concern for the poor that inspired Bama to become a nun like her. However, after taking her vows she was sent to a prestigious school to teach. The students came from wealthy families and the school was well endowed. Bama felt a deep alienation from her teaching, something that she liked, and her faith, something that she had learnt to 'love—paasam' over her initial 'fear—bhayam'. 'And the Jesus they worshipped there was a wealthy Jesus. There seemed to be no connection between God and the suffering poor ... I found I had to search hard to find God.'^[23]
17. The life in the convent was luxurious and far from the life of service and struggle that she thought a nun's life would be. The struggle that she had seen her family and people undergo for survival shamed her for the life of comfort and abundance she was leading. She was teaching children who were privileged while the pitiable condition of the poor and Dalit children tormented her.
18. Bama saw people were treated differentially in the convent—based on their material conditions—the rich were welcomed while the underprivileged were discriminated against. The logic of running the school was to generate funds for their work amongst the Dalits and underprivileged. Her disenchantment with the order was heightened when her request to be sent to a school for the Dalits and underprivileged was turned down and she was exhorted to 'see with the eyes of faith'.
19. The people in the convent were far removed from the Dalits and many had poor opinions about Dalits. As a nun within the convent Bama dared not to reveal her own caste to them, she would rather 'shrink into' herself. It is a fear of being discovered, of being shamed that numbs her in her early days. It is only when she realises that there is nothing wrong with her or her community, that she finds strength in her faith through her own reading and that she lashes out: 'Dalits have begun to realise the truth. They have realised that they have been maintained as the stone steps that others have trodden on as they raised themselves.'^[24]
20. Her experience as a Dalit within the order, which mostly had people from the upper caste, made her realise 'the lack of humanity in their piety'. In her criticism of the caste-based rule of kith and kinship in her order, Bama realises and reveals the use of religion to perpetuate Dalit stigmatisation.

They teach them to shut their eyes when they pray with their deliberate intention that they should not open their eyes to see. They teach them to shackle their arm together and prostrate themselves in prayer at full length on the ground so that they should never stand tall.^[25]

21. Bama left the convent and returned to the outside life amidst uncertainties—that of having to struggle, to find employment and earn a living. She was faced with the challenge of being a Dalit woman looking for a teaching job when schools are run by higher castes, of being a single woman, when lecherous men will not even let an unaccompanied woman stand somewhere peacefully, of being out of the protective fold of the order after eight to nine years.

22. What stands out is her ability to feel other's pain, which one cannot within the comfort of the convent. She is no more alienated, confused or confound.

Today I know what it is to be hungry, to suffer illness in solitude, to stand and stare without a paisa in one's hand, to walk along the street without protection, to be embarrassed by a lack of appropriate clothes, to be orphaned and entirely alone, to swim against the tide in this life without the position or status or money or authority. [26]

The autobiographical urge

23. Bama wrote Karukku 'to make sense of her life' says Lakshmi Holmstrom, who translated it from the original Tamil version. It is shaped by her quest for integrity as a Dalit and Christian. Although it is a narrative of the self-driven by the quest of the self, it fits into the larger contemporary debates within the Dalit movement—that of faith and identity. It challenges the notion of the Dalit woman within Dalits as well as non-Dalits. Bama, being a woman, does not fall within many of the ordinary categories and stereotypes for women—wife, mother, the sexualised women. She also skips from engaging in these in her autobiography. She hardly touches on the issues of Dalit women within and outside the household something that is marked in the Marathi Dalit autobiographies. The reasons for this could be many; maybe the relationships are egalitarian. The male members of her own family—brother and father—are based outside, studying and working in the army; her mother is the one who worked tirelessly and provided for them as the father's income would go in their education. However, she does touch upon the lives of other women around her—grandmothers are shown to work from dawn to dusk in the house of the upper-caste landlords; wife beating by a neighbour is shown to be regular and something nobody meddles into. Bama's own childhood experience with boys is mixed with fun, competition and desires to be able to enjoy the same freedom that they do. The major emphasis in her narration is the crisis in her life around her faith and it is in this sense that her narration has a polemic 'unusual' and 'inadequate' Dalit woman only when we essentialise Dalit womanhood. That there is heterogeneity within Dalit women and it has to be acknowledged and engaged with by Dalit feminist is a crucial exposé.
24. In my reading, Bama, in her own rebellious way challenges and exposes the brittleness of structures—she is an insider and an outsider in the order at the same time, a woman and not-so-womanly, a Dalit but contesting it simultaneously. What strikes out in her narrative is her indomitable spirit that defies definitions and boundaries.
25. In Bama's writing there is a quest for the meaning of religion—is it all rituals fulfilling what it claims to be, transformatory— a path to God (something that we had earlier seen in our discussion on the autobiographical genre) as it is professed by the church and its various authorities. She turns to the scriptures to discover for herself the faith that she is born into, that is embraced by her family, to move out of the clutches of a social system that discredited them by religious sanctification and prohibition. At the crux of her narrative is the recognition of the divisive forces elemental in social life and in her own experience—religion (as she differentiates it from faith), caste, language, region and gender. What it questions is the intolerance to difference and more brutally the intolerance of a faith that professes equality and tolerance. It is a crisis in her faith, a dilemma in her life. It is a tension of the professed and the reality.

Baby Kamble

26. Baby Kamble lives in Phaltan, a small town in Satara district of Maharashtra. She had been part of the Dalit Movement(s) in Maharashtra from a very young age, since her school days, in fact, and derives her inspiration from Babasaheb Ambedkar and his selfless work for the Dalit community. Baby Kamble like Dr B.R. Ambedkar, belong to the Mahar community. Mahars are a Dalit community from Maharashtra, who have been at the forefront of the Dalit Movement in the state, as well as the rest of the country.

Unlike many other Dalit communities, Mahars have been able to educate themselves and unite and avail themselves of the educational and employment schemes provided by colonial and post-colonial governments.

27. Baby's original autobiography, *Jina Amucha*, published in Marathi in the year 1986, was translated into English and published in 2008 by Orient Black Swan.

The autobiographical urge

28. Everyday Baby Kamble used to sit at the counter of their small shop and attend to the customers from nine in the morning to four in the evening. This was the period her husband was away buying things they required. Whenever she found some time she wrote her autobiography in Marathi in notebooks. She had to be careful that nobody saw her writing. She also had to hide her notebooks as she feared her husband, though he was 'a good man', would have not 'tolerated' the idea that she was writing. He was as she says 'like all the men of his time and generation' who considered woman to be an inferior being. She started writing around the age of thirty and, after twenty years, got it first published in 1982 as a series in a women's magazine *Stree* with help from Maxine Berntson, a sociologist, who was working on her doctoral thesis on Scheduled castes. Since she was working in Phaltan where Baby Kamble lived, Maxine had approached Baby, who was known as a political leader and women activist. It is during one such meeting that Maxine asked her to write about her work and Baby showed Maxine her notebooks. Baby's family came to know about her writing only after the autobiography was published.

On the autobiography

29. Like an auto-ethnographer, Baby gives detailed description of the houses, locality of the houses in the village: the Maharwada, the restrictions faced by Mahars in the other parts of the village or even in their area in the presence of a higher caste man. She narrated all this not just from the experience of being a Mahar, but a Mahar woman.
30. Early on, she exemplifies the differences of class within the Mahars in her community—that of the leaders of the community—who got a greater share for their services and had houses which were in somewhat good condition when compared to the rest, whose 'houses were the poorest of the poor, eternally stricken by poverty'.[\[27\]](#)
31. The self in her narrative appears through the shared intense poverty, hunger and oppression of the community.

That great maker of the universe had indeed made some provisions for the meek slaves of the earth. If he had given a mouth, he also had to give a few morsels to feed it, to compensate for the fasting of the remaining eleven months. Perhaps Ashadh was the provision that had been made to allow them a little food.[\[28\]](#)

32. She identifies the notions of double consciousness within the Mahar women. Although 'Hindu philosophy had discarded us as dirt and thrown us into their garbage pits, on the outskirts of the village' yet Mahar women desperately tried to preserve whatever bits of Hindu culture they could imitate so that they would be able to live like the upper caste, enjoy wealth like their wives and practice their rituals. She is aware that these rituals marked their difference from the upper caste and they were denied to them to keep them suppressed. At the same time, the Mahar women imitated the Hindu rituals as 'an outlet for their oppressed souls'.[\[29\]](#)
33. Her narration is from the various angles of the self's experience, shared experience from women of her community and her own observations. This covers in it the temporal span of her childhood and adult life which also brilliantly captures the experience of her community and the women of her community in the

height of Ambedkar's revolutionary leadership and beyond. There is in her story a history of a great people and their movement under able and revered leadership, a lament for the way the movement had lost its aim in the political mayhem and personal agendas of the people of the community itself and a hope for re-emergence of the movement of pride and dignity.

34. Baby is outspoken and does not dilute her narration in self-glorification of the community. Rather there it is self-critical and self-analytical of the community, its behaviour towards its women, towards its way of life. While she tells the story of her father who was educated and ready to sweat it out in his work as a contractor for buildings, she also brings out the helping nature of his which at times would leave the family with nothing to eat. She portrays the anguish of the women against the hardships and poverty in the sharp remarks of her mother for her father who would never save (he would always say that one does not need more than a bellyful). The helpless requests of the mothers of the poorer families (who would ask their husbands to get some cactus flowers to cook) at the same time shows the terrible side of the same women as mothers-in-law.
35. Baby narrates the sorry state of the young brides (eight or nine year old) few decades ago, who had to work hard under the eyes of their mother-in-law, be the last to eat if anything was left for her and also get abused and beaten even without any fault. The provocation for punishment as big as having ones nose chopped off could be the mother-in-law's jealousy of the young girl; a chat with a male outside the family and she could be beaten by her father-in-law. The present day condition of women within the household is pitiable, as women continue to face the strong patriarchal and malevolent ideologies of society towards a girl brought home after marriage. Baby gives us a dark picture of the situation of a Mahar girl—married at a young age; devoid of education to stand for self; beaten and bruised by in-laws and husband; working long hours; getting whatever is left over after families consumption, and undergoing regular pregnancies where she has no choice. All this leaves her at the bottom of the ladder of development. Her movement curtailed and under surveillance very much the same as that of women from the upper caste, her sexuality controlled by her family and relatives through taunts and thrashings, her position as the last in the family from basic consumption to decision making, the Mahar women is under the dual burden of her caste and her sexuality.
36. Baby breaks the myth of a democratic Dalit family. She brings out the inhumane acts of the chopping off of the nose of women by the husband and his family; the regular burden of torture and taunts. She remarks that in the days prior to the 1940s that at least one woman in a hundred would have her nose chopped off by the husband under the provocation of his mother or father. The overall condition of women is pitiable not just because of the troubles they have with the other castes but also because of an existing disrespect for women at large. Women have to bear the burden of purity; they could be questioned if they do not veil themselves properly, called a 'slut' by the men and women for any shortcoming (the connotation of the word 'slut' itself is derogatory to women only; there is no mention of an equivalent term for the male). It has been an enigma how a community which is obsessed with the worship of the Goddess and celebrates the possession of the bodies of their women by Goddesses can butcher the same body as filthy and polluted.
37. According to Gopal Guru most Dalit women's autobiographies talk about exploitation, humiliation and starvation under the class, caste and gender systems. Ambedkar also forms a common reference point in these autobiographies along with resistance against Dalit patriarchy and social patriarchy. Modernity is also a common theme. In Baby's autobiography there is a tension between tradition and modernity to which the Mahars respond with the determination to achieve modernity. This modernity is embodied by Ambedkar and is epitomised by him. Again there are traditional structures within the community such as the *chawdi*[30] which is very much a modern concept of a public space available for debates and deliberation. The *chawdi* is the space of action, dialogue and doing: here the school boys plan their temple entry; here the Mahar *wada*[31] celebrate their first Ambedkar's birth anniversary; here, Baby and her husband start the first shop of their *wada* as a protest against the shopkeepers of the village who

practiced untouchability. It is also the place of traditional get-togethers and celebrations. There is a tension of the modern and the traditional in this space.

38. The work mostly revolves around the day-to-day lives of the Mahar community; the perpetual shortage of food, battered, stitched together pieces of rags as dresses, the snot-nosed and dirty children, the trials and methods of bringing home food from collections of leftovers; in exchange of labour, collection of dead animals during epidemics, to poisoning someone's cattle in the most difficult situation. The autobiography speaks of the lives of the Mahar people, their traditions, celebrations, their Gods and Goddesses. A large part of the work consists of retelling myths and stories around evil forces, superstitions and the belief of the people in forces which write their destiny, difficult processes of treatment in case of ill health. According to Baby Kamble, Mahars opt for these beliefs, superstitions and treatments in the face of want and needs. They have no money or means for alternatives.
39. Baby never mentions her own life events—marriage, birth of children—except for her own birth. However she mentions her enrolment in school; her experience in a new school with caste-Hindu girls; the opening of their shop in the Maharwada—the first one. She writes of her decision to be equally involved in the shop; her decision to write about her experiences; the decision to send her children to school; their success in the academic and professional world; her involvement and service for the community in terms of running a government-supported orphanage for the backward caste. These are significant events in her life.
40. Baby Kamble breaks the boundary of given notions of womanhood and creates a self which dares to challenge the given. In her choice of significant life events she mentions those events which she has imbibed as important from her close engagement with Ambedkar's thoughts. As she affirms, 'I made a firm resolve, at a young age to lead my life according the path sketched by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, the light of my life. His principles have exercised a strong influence on me.'^[32] It his principles of education, economic independence and political participation of Dalits and especially Dalit women, that worked as her framework for her life and hence life events.
41. There is however, a tension within her beliefs—she herself claims that she was also influenced by the strength of Savitri from the movie *Sati Savitri*, the moral strength to bear adversities. She expresses her awareness that the ideal of Sati, a construct of the caste-Hindu to dominate women, is antithetical to Ambedkar's principles of equality. It is however, her ability to be truthful that she cherishes more than what others may say. This tension between following the caste-Hindu beliefs and Buddhism, the religion embraced by Mahars under Ambedkar's leadership, is openly expressed by Baby Kamble. This finds mention many times and in many forms—the worship of Hindu gods, celebration of Hindu festivals, young girls draping clothes like the Brahmin or Gujrati women, use of *haldi* and *kukum*^[33]—which Baby identifies as the desire of the Mahar woman to be like them. She also identifies that this desire for better lives and living conditions underlies the desire of symbolic fulfilment.
42. Baby Kamble narrates her and her community's shared experience of breaking prohibitions, internalised and imposed—'the prisons'—that excluded them. It is the prisons of hunger, illiteracy, untouchability, patriarchy, economic dependency, superstition, disease and social disability related to caste and gender that they broke. It is through the breaking of these prisons that the Dalit, including the Dalit women, assert their selfhood.

Gazing back

43. For centuries, caste and Dalits have been written about in religious texts by Brahmins. During colonialism the information about caste has come from information gathered from educated upper castes. Both these sources of information had created an image of the Dalit women from a sexualised

upper caste male perspective which had also gone to be the dominant notion of caste, Dalithood and Dalit womanhood. However, by writing their own autobiographies Dalit women have wielded the power to recreate their identities amongst complete strangers and sometimes amongst known people (Bama is a pen name and Baby had problems when her autobiography was run as a column in a magazine). Dalit women have also been able to challenge the dominant perspective and power over their lives. In true sense, the autobiographical writings of Dalit women are a gaze back at society at large, especially at Dalit men and upper caste men.

44. At the ideational level, the return of the gaze would require a role reversal. This requires the gazed, objectified subject to attain subjectivity, to be the holder of the gaze. Thus, it implies that the Dalit women gaze at society. While returning the gaze the standards, views and perspective do not remain the same, they change. The subject returning the gaze has experienced being 'objectified' and it is this experience that moulds the gaze. Consequently, the standards and perspective of the returned gaze would be 'different'. This difference is not simply the result of being branded different by the hegemonic powers for the creation of the self, but in excess of this. Thus, it is not a binary of the dominant, but an assertion of the self which exists apart from the dominant. That is, this difference is not just the Dalitness of the self as opposed to the dominant Brahminic self but a self which is more than Dalitness. The perspective of this self is thus not the same as the hegemonic 'self', but it is more evolved. It is a much more human gaze as it does not in return objectify the hegemonic. This gaze, as our experience shows, draws heavily from an inward gaze. It is self-critical as we saw with both the autobiographies. Writing in 1993, observing precedent autobiographical works, S.P. Punelekar observes that Dalit autobiographies are introspective and self-critical, 'the critical focus is turned inwards to scrutinise the biases, predilections, stereotypes and other angularities of their own parents, relatives, caste fellows and even leaders.'^[34]
45. This criticality and reflexivity is at the base of subjectivity and selfhood, an assertion of the self—a self cannot be without its own mechanism and criteria of analysis. The returning of the gaze, thus, is an act of subjecthood, which implies power of the holder of the gaze over the gazed. It is empowering but does not annex power from the other. It changes the power equation as it asserts its share in the power. It tries to break the monotony of the monologue and the hegemony. It disturbs the stereotypes by revealing other perspectives, deconstructs the given by revealing alternatives. It opens up room for dialogue and exchange.
46. In a similar vein, Pramod K. Nayar writes, about Bama's *Karukku*:

Reading *testimonio* like Bama's enables us—readers, critics and students—to interpellate ourselves in a relation of solidarity with social reform and liberation movements. It provides a discursive space where an alliance between the intelligentsia and the subaltern can take place. Dalit life-writing such as Bama's fashions a discourse of testimony and self-revelation, to establish a sense of agency, to articulate a personal history in and onto the texts of a traditional patriarchal, casteist culture.'^[35]

47. Punelekar also observes in Dalit autobiographies an urge to communicate with themselves and others and their own search and interpretation of their actions. This knowledge produced by Dalits, here by Dalit women, as insiders, is immensely 'significant for the construction of social theory and praxis for transformation',^[36] which is less partial and from the perspective of the oppressed group.

Notes

^[1] Rohith Vemula was a Dalit PhD scholar at the University of Hyderabad and an activist with a Dalit students organisation, the Ambedkar Students Association. He was suspended, barred from the hostel and his fellowship was stopped after a false complaint was made against him by the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the students' wing of the right wing government. Unable to take on the injustice met out to him Rohith committed suicide in a hostel room in the University. Rohith's death triggered a nationwide students' movement against institutional casteism and discrimination faced by Dalit students in institutes of higher studies.

[2] Literally, the term means a female servant of god. It is an oppressive religious practice in parts of southern and eastern India whereby Dalit parents have to marry off their young daughter to a local deity and she is dedicated to the service of the deity to the temple. The Devdasis were bereft of the right to marry and were bonded for lives to their duties towards the temple including dancing and physical and sexual exploitation by the upper caste. The Devdasi system was proclaimed illegal by an act in 1947 yet it has not been completely abolished.

[3] Challapalli Swaroopa Rani, 'Dalit women's writing in Telugu', in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 33(17) (1998): WS21–WS24, p. WS21

[4] Rani, 'Dalit women's writing in Telugu'.

[5] Gopal Guru, 'Dalit women talk differently', in *Economic and Political Weekly* 30(41/42) (1995): 2548–550.

[6] Guru, 'Dalit women talk differently'.

[7] Gopal Guru, 'Afterword', in Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2008, pp. 158–70.

[8] Guru, 'Afterword'.

[9] Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Dalit Women's Testimonies*, New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006.

[10] Catherine Kohler Riessman, 'Narrative analysis', in *Narrative, Memory & Everyday Life*, edited by Nancy Kelly, Christine Horrocks, Kate Milnes, Brian Roberts and David Robinson, Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield, 2005, pp. 1–7.

[11] George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1967.

[12] Jean-Paul Sartre, 'The look', in *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, New York: Washington Square Press, 1992, pp. 340–400.

[13] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, edited by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 833–44.

[14] bell hooks, 'The oppositional gaze: Black female spectators', in *Movies and Mass Culture*, edited by John Belton, New Brunswick and New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1996, pp. 247–64.

[15] The same as Pariah, Paraiyan that has been used earlier, the term used here is Bama's.

[16] M.S.S. Pandian, 'On a Dalit woman's testimonio', *Seminar*, no. 471 (1998): 53–56.

[17] 'Karukku means palmyra leaves, which with their serrated edges on both sides, are like double-edged swords.' See Lakshmi Holmstrom, 'Introduction', in Bama, *Karukku*, translated from the Tamil original by Lakshmi Holmstrom, Chennai: Macmillan India Limited, 2000, pp. vi–xii, p. vii.

[18] Bama, *Karukku*, translated from Tamil by Lakshmi Holmstrom, Chennai: Macmillan India Limited, 2000, p. vi

[19] Pandian, 'On a Dalit woman's testimonio'.

[20] Pandian, 'On a Dalit woman's testimonio'.

[21] Bama, *Karukku*.

[22] Bama, *Karukku*, p. 20.

[23] Bama, *Karukku*, p. 92.

[24] Bama, *Karukku*, p. 94.

[25] Bama, *Karukku*, p. 94.

[26] Bama, *Karukku*, pp. 102–103.

[27] Kamble, *The Prisons We Broke*, p.7.

[28] Kamble, *The Prisons We Broke*, p. 7.

[29] Kamble, *The Prisons We Broke*, p. 18.

[30] A common area for public assembly in a village or hamlet.

[31] *Wada* are residential complexes or houses.

[32] Kamble, *The Prisons We Broke*, p. 115.

[33] Symbols of married life which upper caste women wear on occasions to signify their married state.

[34] S Punalekar, 'The sociology of Dalit autobiography', in *Social Transformation in India: Essays in Honour of Professor I.P. Desai*, edited by G. Shah, Jaipur: Rawat Publishers, 1993, pp. 371–96.

[35] Pramod Kumar Nayar, 'Bama's Karukku: Dalit autobiography as testimonio', in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 41(2) (2006): 83–100, p. 98.

[36] Punelekar, 'The sociology of Dalit autobiography', p. 395.

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