

## Socio-Cultural Comparative Study of Women's Autobiographies: A Case Study of Harriet Jacobs and Baby Kamble

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### ABSTRACT

The present research paper tries to compare the case study of African- American and Indian Dalit women's narratives or autobiographies to find out women's voice, similarity in their stories and common grounds for comparison at various levels. Two distinct and popular memoirs written by Baby Kamble (India) and Harriet Jacobs (USA) have been opted for the comparison firstly because both were written by marginalized women who were victimized due to their skin color in Harriet's case and caste atrocities in Baby's case. The autobiographies of both were inspired by White women who helped the writers with motivation, necessary help and publication. The motto was to present the agonies, exploitations, and atrocities faced by both, eventually overcoming all odds to achieve the sense of moral victory not only for them but an example for all the community. Representing as a woman of marginalized background both opted an extraordinary adventure to put channel for their sufferings, signifies their miserable journey, inhuman systems we live in, discriminatory class exploitations, gender hierarchies, biases of color, caste, gender, race and economic deprivation. The autobiographies share a fact that women in developed modern American are not different from the woman of India, as women are subject to highest traumatic sufferings though the discriminating factor varies. The socio-cultural comparisons of these two texts give us space to investigate differences, similarities of cultural, social- religious and political grounds in distinct geographies. USA and India are very distinct in their time and space zones, the conditions of women, is the shared thread that connects them, and the comparison seems very natural and necessary.

**Keywords:** Women's autobiographies, Dalit and slave autobiographies, gender discrimination, Segregation, Caste hierarchies, marginalized, Sexual harassments

### INTRODUCTION

#### The Two Autobiographies – One Tone

Autobiography as a genre has provided a vital platform for the marginalized subalterns to express their struggle, survival, and victory. Harriet A Jacobs's autobiography *Incident in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) depicts the horrible stories in the life of an ordinary slave girl in Northern American slavery of 19<sup>th</sup> century while Baby Kamble's autobiography *Jine Amuche* originally written in Marathi and translated in English titled *The Prison We Broke* (1987) by Maya Pandit, talks about the similar horrible stories in India. According to William Andrews, the purpose of the slave narratives was to affirm the humanity of the former slaves and assert that they too could be reliable transcribers of Southern life and black folk character (First Century, 1983).

Comparing these two autobiographies helps to understand the historical, cultural and political contexts in which women are the subjects of oppression. The women narrators in both the cases represent an ideal example of women's slavery contextualized because both the autobiographies have been very popular and became milestones in the discourses. These two stories display a bitter, torturous journey that ended in freedom completing their search for racial identity.

Women's autobiographies particularly by Afro American slaves and Dalits (marginalized by caste system in India) are the broad area to understand the oppression, brutality and their eternal struggle against the system. Comparing these two autobiographies helps to understand the historical, cultural and political contexts in which women are the subjects to oppression. Baby Kamble was born at Phaltan, a rural area of Maharashtra state in India in Mahar Caste, the biggest untouchable caste in Maharashtra. (Scheduled caste in Indian Constitution) "Harriet Ann Jacobs was born a slave in Edenton, North Carolina in 1813. After both her mother, Delilah, and father, Elijah, died during Jacobs's youth, she and her younger brother, John, were raised by their maternal grandmother, Molly Horniblow." The online portal *Documenting the South* informs us about Harriot and her belongings. In the introduction the readers are informed about the nature of narrative perspective, "The slave narrative is the first African American literary genre, it is so much of African American culture, a powerful Creative response to America's tragedy." (XVI Introduction) Harriet wrote with pseudo 'Linda Brent' and the aid of publishing the book was provided to her by white abolitionist editor Lydia Maria Child. Harriot's narrative challenged the 'Cult of Women hood' a term coined by sociologist to define the prevailing value system and women's role as ideal mother, faithful wife and honest social member amongst higher and middle class in 19<sup>th</sup> century in the USA. (Keister 228). The virtue of black females particularly burdened with motherhood signifies society's idea of womanhood that is too narrow. The *Prison We Broke*, narrates the ethos of Dalit class and the vast vicissitudes that reflects the sufferings of woman in that period that happened in democratic and liberal society. The tone of Baby's autobiography centers around her womanhood and issues related to it. "Greatly influenced by Dr. Ambedkar's opinion that only women could bring the community out of the darkness of superstitions. Women who were the worst victims of the caste hierarchy became a driving force towards education and change." (Sonika 3)

These two autobiographies are written in different periods and geographical locations and time zones; they share some common grounds. Themes of victimization, master slave relationships, social and political systems that not only supported but encouraged slavery, womanhood, family bonding, and socio-cultural practices, make these two books similar and echoing each other. This research will open new doors for Indian researchers to compare the slavery systems in both countries as both proclaims proudly about their glorious democratic structures. The constitutions of USA and India loudly sing the tunes of equality, opportunity and freedom from exploitations, yet both the nations have failed in their promises. Exploitation of women in Indian context is not so different from the slavery practices in the American world. Caste hierarchy and religious hegemonies are the core primaries of the system which has not been attended as slavery in the Western part.

### **Autobiography as Genre**

Autobiography has been a very fascinating form of literature, and its popularity is at its peak nowadays as the readers demand to read the memoirs of real heroes and characters rather than fictional people. Literature has forms like short stories, novels and drama but autobiographies claim something more realistic than fiction. The reader is made aware on the onset that he or she is reading something which is factual and has happened in the life of the writer. Though some critics disagree that it's a genre of literature like novels, short stories and drama. George May reports, "Autobiography is neither a genre nor a form, nor a style, nor even a style not even a language but a literary attitude." (May 20) If it is an attitude, it best suits the narrator to convey the situation from his or her point of view. The definition of autobiography leads us to new arena, Jerome Buckley speaks about autobiography as "The ideal autobiography describes a voyage of self-discovery, a life journey confused by frequent misdirection and even crises of identity but reaching at last a sense of perspective and integration. It traces through the alert awakened memory and continuity from early childhood to maturity or even to old age....and as a work of literature it achieves a satisfying wholeness." (Buckley 21)

### **Dalit- The Identity**

Dalit literature has emerged as a new trend like Afro-American literature that especially designates sorrows, maltreatment, poverty, degradation, sexual, social oppressions and sadness. It basically depicts the real picture of gloomy and dark side of grief, dishonor and dejection faced by these communities. The literature and its functions which are laid down by popular culture are subverted and a complete paradigm shift taken towards broken relationships, violent interactions, abusive social patterns, shocking truths of life shattering experiences, immoral sexual intercourses. Dalit is a term that describes the lowest status of an individual in the social order. Untouchables, lower castes, Adivasi (people who live in forests), land laborers, nomadic tribes, landless farmers,

eunuchs etc. are labeled as Dalits. It is not a homogenous group of people discriminated against based on color like in America and Europe.

“Dalit is not a caste, it is a class, which is formed on the basis of social and economic conditions including farm workers and strugglers in livelihood.” says Dr. Sada Karhade, a Dalit scholar. Dr. Karhade’s view is basically based on economic grounds which contradict with the definition of Dr. Bhalchandra Phadke who believes that it is not proper to define Dalit based on class because Dalit word possesses its own identity that was ostriched by the Hindu caste system. Dalit is the invisible class who has experienced sufferings and sorrows and exploitation mutely. But there is a debate on what is Dalit literature. Is it a literature produced by a Dalit or is it the literary work centralizes Dalit issues? According to Yogendra Meshram, “Dalit are those who are suffering from thousands of years and the literature produced by these classes of people is called as Dalit Literature.” So, the Dalit class existed in India since ancient times when they were labelled as Shudra (untouchable) and were outcasted from all types of social, economic, cultural, or human privileges. Dr C B Bharathi says, “The aim Of Dalit Literature is to protest the established system which is based on injustice and to expose the evil and hypocrisy of higher casts. There is an urgent need to create a separate aesthetics for Dalit literature, an aesthetics based on real experiences of life.” (Bharati 34)

Autobiographical narratives written in prose by contemporary Dalit writers are examples of analytical in Marathi (language of Maharashtra state of India). N.S. Suryavanshi, *Things I Never Imagined* (1975) is milestone autobiography but the book that steered the consciousness of Dalits is *Balute* (1978) by Daya Pawar marked the emergence of Dalit autobiographies in Marathi and Indian literature. Shantabai Kamble wrote *The kaleidoscope story of my life* (1983) originally in Marathi (*Mazya janmachi Chittarkatha*) is the first Dalit women’s autobiography in Marathi followed by Urmila Pawar *Weave of my Life* (1988) firstly written in Marathi (Aaidan). Considering women as a narrative, Carolyn G Heilbrun says, “the women herself may tell it, in what she chooses to call an autobiography, she may tell in what she chooses to call fiction, a biographer, woman or man, may write a biography, or the woman may write her own life in advance of living it, unconsciously and without realizing or naming the process.” (Heilbrun 112)

Maharashtra is one the biggest and progressive states of Western India, speaks Marathi language by about 120 million population. The state is known for rich literary cultural heritage in India. Dalit Literature is one of the recent trends since 1960s (Poitevin) that identifies itself differently from the mainstream as it varies with contextual specificity, ideological positioning against the establishment with specific political strategies and cultural idiom voicing out in one temper. In current discourse Dalit literature, culture or social movement stands to be acknowledged as comprehensive rebellious section designating socially marginalized who have been culturally, socially, economically repressed by higher dominators and maintained by virtue of a conventional, unequal, ordered socio-political-economical dispensation in a non-human as Untouchables. The radical political ideologue of Dalit could be figured out in the formation of *Dalit Panther*, a political movement launched by radical Dalit leader, writer and political activist Namdev Dhasal, Raja Dhale and J V Pawar around in 1972. In its *Manifesto of Dalit Panther* (1972) that widens the category of Dalit who has “the ability to define itself of all lower classes, castes, tribal people, toiling classes and all women.” Within the reference of the present context, the term Dalit literature is commonly showing the same social sections as do other Marathi words, which were previously referred by other Dalit writers as their source of inspiration. The term *ati-shudra*, coined by Jyotiba Phule to foster his *Satyashodhak Samaj* since 19<sup>th</sup> Century. It is applied to those driven out of the four sections of *Varna* system. (*brahman, kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra*) which is religious constitution of the four varna system according to Hindu social dispensation, based on *Purushasukta* (Rig-Veda X,90) The eminent scholar Dr.B.R.Amedkar defined Dalithood is a kind of life condition that characterises the exploitation, suppression and marginalisation of Dalit community by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper caste’s Brahmanical ideology (Ambedkar 204). It is mainly since the nineteen sixties that, in practical parlance, the word *dalit* becomes an explosive catchword for social, cultural and political revolutionary movements launched by untouchable castes, essentially the Mahars, in such expressions as "*dalit* literature" (Anand 1992; Dangle 1992; Lanjewar 1995; Gros 1996; Bhoite 1977) and "*dalit* movement" (Jogdand 1991; Gopinath 1994; Kshirsagar 1994; Omwedt 1994, 1995; Pendse 1994). The use of the word tends to be appropriated by and/or for the castes traditionally discriminated against as untouchable and refer to their specific conditions of cultural indignity and social subalternity. This limitation is often and, on several accounts, denounced as an illegitimate political discursive event. But the word, overtly or openly, is commonly used or suspected to be used with this restrictive meaning by the supporters, as well as the critics and opponents of the *dalit* liberation movements in India.

Women, double marginalised and oppressed, attempted their autobiographies in Marathi was also a very revolutionary step. Baby Kamble was a flag bearer of dalit Movement in Maharashtra. Her Autobiography naturally made her a leader; from words she changed the worlds for many women.

## Afro American Women's Autobiographies

Afro American autobiographies in USA is a product of the conditions, a unique literary inheritance, the encounters they witness in day-to-day life and the past they carried from their unknown ancestors which had been imbibed in their genes for ages. That culminated into a glorious written literary example, oral traditions, spiritual narratives and unlinking a strong current of protest, a mixture of Anglo European aesthetic and linguistic models and refined distinctions of various and creolized origin. The women narrative style combines a tradition within tradition functioning within the muscular, strongly exuberant and very aggressive autobiographies. However, walking along the male counterparts, they formulate a distinct portrayal of womanhood. Like male stereotypical images, they also fought against the clichés laid by the traditional belief systems. The genre liberated them from their psychological slavery into new horizon of freedom and dignity. "In the parlance of Audre Lorde, black women writers attempt to dismantle the master's cardboard house of false superiority, threatening not only the notion of "whiteness" but also patriarchy and with it the very idea that man is closer to God than woman." (Braxton 57)

Joanne Braxton proposes to redefine the genre of Black Women's autobiographical writings, "As black American women, we are born into a mystic sisterhood, and we live our lives within a magic circle, a realm of shared language, reference and allusion within the veil of our blackness and our femaleness. We have been as invisible to the dominant culture as rain, we have knowers, but we have not been known." (Braxton 34) She cites an example of the feature to define the slave narrative genre as inadequate for judging Harriot "Linda Brent" Jacobs pseudonymously published *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* (1861). Harriot demonstrated outraged mother as like masculine aggression. Post Emancipation failed to authorize black women dealing with their expressions through their narratives. In 1789 Olaudah Equiano published *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African written by himself*, the first autobiographical account written in English by an enslaved African. This was followed by thousands of smaller or longer memoirs in the next century -some very tiny a few hundred words other hundreds of pages long published in Britain, the Caribbean nations and the USA. Hundreds of similar were published in Arabic, and other national languages. Jarena Lee, Rebecca Jackson, Elizabeth Keckley, S K Taylor, Harriot Tubman and Sojourner narrated their extraordinary stories.

These slave narratives written or motivated by their white supporters faced and survived through the agonies and horrors of New World Slavery. The motif of writing these memoirs filled with tragical sufferings and miraculous yet hard fought battles against slavery was a part of long campaign for the abolition of the slave trade and of slavery. Many of these narratives were supported with the preface or introduction by white authors, publishers, or thinkers because these narratives function as a part of polemic against slavery. The political view which supports slave system asserted that the autobiographies overstated the sufferings of the slaves. These stories blame the whites and dugout the old graves to counterattack the authorities. But to counter argue, it is vital to ascertain that these extraordinary writings have been produced by those people who never had an opportunity to learn 'writing, reading or expressing' through pen and paper which was the core skill area possessed by whites. The slaves stereotype never imagined that slaves could write at all, writing creative literature was least expected from them. Writing, expressing, storytelling, language articulation were the qualities naturally possessed by whites and intellectual abilities were beyond the capabilities of ill cultured and illiterate blacks. In many parts of the American South uprising led by Gabriel Prosser in 19<sup>th</sup> century, teaching slaves to write was prohibited by law.

Women Slave writings is very essential and significant because these are the stories from the most enslaved subjects. Eighteenth century glorified humanity, individuality and spirit of manhood, even on the peak of the period, it was a common belief amongst supporters and opponents of slavery that generally African Negro and particularly Black women are incapable of writing. They not only lack intellectual capabilities but also do not possess common sense of literary taste. This suspected inferiority in cognitive process was one of the tools in the hands of those who supported slavery that how could Whites bring out equality with Blacks when these barbaric people didn't possess the natural offering of the human spirit? Slave narrative was the answer to this question because it produced a testimony to the horrors of slavery, on the other hand it showed the evidence of humanity of people. That may be the reason that so many autobiographies carried the title "written by herself". It not only proclaimed the truth of their horrible tortures through which they passed but also depicted that black women can write literature. Harriot Jacob not only accomplished this but inspired a generation that followed.

Though Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is not the first slave narrative showcasing the horrors of the blacks, published in the first narrative of its kind is *The History of Mary Prince* published in 1831, but Harriot's autobiography became the central part of the woman's narrative tradition. Baby Kamble too was not the first women autobiography writer in Marathi or in India, but her narrative also stood extraordinary in the discourse of woman's narratives. Kamble's *Prison We Broke* doesn't remain her personal story, but she intervenes personal suppression as a part of her belonging to Mahar community hence it reflects the agonies of entire community in the contemporary space and time. She voices out for all women who never imagined or dared to express.

## Master Slave Relations in India and USA

Slavery system has 300 years history, but caste system is the most ancient. The master slave relationship in both the autobiographies emphasizes that women once a slave has many masters, the entire system attempts to dehumanise them. Kambale narrates an incident when she arrives at her husband's home, a new family and village after her marriage, she was too small to understand the customs of the society. A man from Brahmin community was ignored and Kambale didn't bow down in front of him. The man comes to her house and shouts, "who, just tell me, who the hell is that new girl? Doesn't she know that she must bow down to the master? Shameless bitch. How dare she pass me without showing due respect? (Pandit 53) To react to the situation, elderly in laws from the family come out of the home and fall into the feet of the man and begs for apologies. They beg to forgive her as she is new and stupid. The mother-in-law drops down on her knees and requests, "No, no kind master. That girl is a new animal in the herd! Quite foolish and ignorant. If she erred, I her mother, fall your feet, but please forgive us for this crime." (Pandit 53) Feminist social activist Maxine Bernstein who was conducting her research at Phaltan, Maharashtra came across Bay Kambale and her zeal for writing and social change, encouraged her to pin down her stories and persuaded her to publish her articles in local magazines. Baby Kamble was running a small grocery shop in a village in Maharashtra, and she secretly wrote down her stories. Maxine and Maria Child both Christian and modern moral ladies wanted to help the downtrodden women around them to reach social salvation. They both not only encouraged their counterparts to write but took efforts to bring them into a narrative to the common masses. The intentions of both this Christian humanitarian act is explained in the preface written by Maria Child, "I do this for the sake of sister in bondage, who are suffering wrongs, so foul that our ears are too delicate to listen to them. I do it with the hope of arousing conscientious and reflecting woman at the North to a sense of their duty in the exertion of moral influence on the question of slavery on all possible occasions." (Jacob preface) Feminist writer and activist Maxine Bernstein were the force behind Baby Kamble's autobiography. Kamble had kept her writing secretly away from her family because writing was against the norm of the times. Bernstein came across Baby Kamble and her enthusiasm about writing when they both interacted in a village called Phaltan where Bernstein was researching for her project. She not only supported her but also published her writing and convinced her family members about the importance of her writings. The narrative states on caste system, poverty, aggression, and suppression and multi layered discrimination faced by Dalit and particularly woman. The span the narrative covers from precolonial to post-colonial in India. It is deeply rooted with two significant movements happening simultaneously in the socio-political sphere of the nation- one a political movement for independence fought by Congress under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and the other was a fight against the caste system which was a part of Brahminical religious hegemony led by Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar. Kamble's autobiography was just not a personal story telling but it went beyond these personal realms and became the story of all women from Dalit community. It mirrored the political and critical record of the making of the nation from the standpoint of a very precarious social location. *The Prison We Broke* the title signifies that it was not a story of a single woman but it's *We* the entire Dalit Women's commitment and she owned the struggle as *We* and not *I*. This narrative is the biography chronicled from the untouchable women's point of view. Though it's a woman's narration, it has imbibed the ethos, tone and the tragedy of entire Dalit community and race.

Domna C. Stanton writes in *The Female Autography*: - "Female autobiographies, examples memoirs, letters and diaries – represent one of these cases of maddening neglect that have motivated feminist scholarship since 1978. This body of writing about the self has remained invisible, systematically ignorable." (Stanton 56)

### Theme of Sexuality

It's a very sensitive and controversial thing when a woman opens her secrets about her sexual oppressions and sexual matters. Woman's autobiographies have these features as they have been a victim of male dominated societies in which they found themselves. Its not an easy affair to write about such very personal and embarrassing moments in their lives. That may be the reason that Harriot Jacobs pseudonymously published her narrative with the "Linda Brent". The reason she offers for narrating pseudonymously because Linda mentions her intention in the preface itself, "I have concealed the names of places and given persons fictious names. I had no motive for secrecy on my own account but deemed it kind and considerate towards others to pursue this course." (Introduction, Jacob) Harriot Jacob's narrative has many of such sensitive and shameless sexual encounters in her narrative because woman as a slave face sexual oppression as a first step of their living. Kamble being born in lowest caste hierarchy faced similar oppressions, but she didn't take any pseudo name. Dalit women has been stereotyped as "victims of the lust of the higher caste men." (Kumar 2010: 219) has similar portrayal of black women. Dalit women were like an object always must be ready for sexual pleasures of the upper caste. Dalit men who also exploited their wives, never protested the norm of providing their wives to upper caste males. Kamble very boldly states that her mother was kept by many upper caste powerful men. None of her siblings born in her family had same father. She said that it was a common practise approved by the society and though the country was ruled under law, it was beyond the reach of Dalits. "My mother was not an adulteress but the victim of a social

system. I grow restless whenever I read about a rape in the newspaper. A violation anywhere in the country, I feel, is a violation of my mother,” (Pandit 23) Kamble speaks more relentlessly than Jacob, the reason may be the boldness she achieved during the process of her writing. Her writing is not passive commentary but an appeal to the masses and articulation of her fiery feelings.

“When Mahar (the caste) women labor in the fields, the corn gets wet with their sweat. The same corn goes to make your pure, rich dishes. And you feast on them with such evident relish! Your palaces are built with the soil soaked with the sweat and blood of Mahars. But does it rot your skin? You drink their blood and sleep comfortably on the bed of their misery. Doesn’t it pollute you then?” (Pandit 56)

Jacob’s narration has many sensitive and indecent episodes of sexuality with intentionally arranged to show women suppression as a slave. She consciously narrates,

“I am well aware that many will accuse me of indecorum for presenting these pages to the public for the experience of this intelligent and much injured woman belonging to a class which some call delicate subjects and others indelicate. This phase of slavery has generally been kept veiled but the public ought to be made acquainted with its monstrous features.” (Jacobs Preface 1861)

## CONCLUSION

Autobiography, since its emergence in the 18th Century as a prose form of articulation has become a powerful narrative to play a significant part as an agency. It has been the domain of literate, cultured, and academically, socially and culturally dominating community. Literature in general has been the voice and choice of privileged, aesthetically, and intellectually superior class. The tone of romantic narration hugely emphasized the nature of individuals in the example of Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions*. The sudden outburst of cheap newspapers and printing materials, mass education, modern stereotypes of fame, celebrities and the other stakeholders were fast to encash the market of Autobiographies. Those in the public eye should write about their life experiences.

America and India culturally possessed unique literary inheritance of the long past that shaped their attitude towards life and writings. The legacy is deeply grounded in their oral, spiritual, written literary models. The slavery in both the states was compounded on controlling the weakest classes of the society. In India it was the Brahminical religious hegemony founding the closed caste system where once you are born in lower caste, you destined to suffer at all levels. Women in any caste is powerless and vulnerable. In USA, the discriminating ground was the color. Slaves brought from African origin were segregated as Negro in American Societies. They brought African cultural heritage along with them, mostly the traditions of protest, fights and eternal struggle as a part of their destiny. Britisher’s brought new educational systems, western thoughts and literary traditions to India as colonizers. The Dalits benefited from it and Dr.B.R. Ambedkar, who received his Doctorate and other degrees from Western Universities, inspired many Dalits to come forward and protest. Maya Kamble is the product of the Western education system, and she also dedicated her struggle to Dr.B.R. Ambedkar. Black women’s autobiographical narrations comprehend a tradition within a tradition following the strong, aggressive and primarily masculine autobiographies. Like in India, women walked in the men’s shoes till they found their own voice. The Dalit and black women reshaped and redefined their inherited intelligence which they molded in their own way. These women living in distinct countries and in different time zones surprisingly faced similar destiny and witnessed common horrors of life. Overthrowing each attempt that tried to enslave them or ridiculed their existence, these Dalit and Black women autobiographers broke the shackles of their bondage and challenged their stereotype image and defined their new identity. These women not only dismantled their master’s kingdom but also subverted the notion of male superiority, religious dogmatism, social limitations and in larger perspective created a house of hope for future generations. Their new constructed identical self-image ‘female autobiographical self’ formulated new paradigms in literary discourse which ultimately launched a platform for providing support, guidance, inspiration, direction both for society and those who are subject to oppressions. These two women and their autobiographies do not cover all the themes, issues and cultural significance of two distinct time zones and space yet they bring out the essence of their voices, expressions and destinies which are representative and symbolic in its way.

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