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Writing life; writing resistance: Depiction of resistance in subaltern women writings.

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Life writing has emerged as one of prominent genres of critical attention. Philippe Lejeune defines autobiography as “A retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality.” Writing about own life experiences can be seen as a manifestation of man’s quest to live beyond time and as a way to inform and educate the posterity about the life experiences of their ancestors. The genre of Life writing incorporates various subgenres which include Biography, Autobiography, Memoirs, Testimonio narratives etc...

It may be said that the early life writing was mostly elite in nature. It usually dealt with people who had some kind of fame and authority in the society. There are immense collections of memoirs, biographies and autobiographies by the kings, the rulers, leaders etc.. The genre of life writing demanded certain amount of social visibility in order to be acceptable among the readers. However, with the passage of time, the genre has percolated into the common masses. With the emergence of subaltern autobiographies, writing life has become a powerful tool of resistance and resentment against authority. It became the most authentic way of speaking out about humiliation and exploitation in public. Thus many of the atrocities by the mainstream came to the notice of the civil society. The downtrodden got an authentic way of expressing their grievances.

The proliferation of subaltern autobiographies in the recent year shows the emergence of life writing as a prominent way of expressing resentment. Recounting life experiences by the downtrodden has become popular across cultures today. It needs to be noted that many of the social reform movements were backed by significant volume of resistance writing in support of those movements. Autobiographical and biographical writings have played a major role in opening our eyes towards the realities around us.

The present study aims a comparative analysis of subaltern women life writings with reference to “Karukku”, a dalit woman autobiography by Bama and ‘I am Rigoberta Menchu’ an autobiography by an Indian woman from Guatemala. It may be seen that these works hail from two divergent backgrounds in terms of geographical and social parameters. Yet, both serve the purpose of mapping the marginalized experiences through self-reflexive narratives. These works bring out the plight of women under oppressive regimes from two diverse backgrounds.

Dalit literary movement is a significant revolt against the authority of caste and social inequality in India. It was not merely a literary movement but an offspring of the mighty dalit social movement which aimed to give voice to the voiceless and to bring about social equality among all sections of the society. Dalit women writings are significant since they address the issues of Dalit women who are victims of double marginalization by caste and patriarchy.

Writings by indigenous people documents the struggles of indigenous people to reclaim a life of dignity. Indigenous writings are significant tools for dissemination of literature for fights against human rights violations. The Guatemalan indigenous writings are significant in their depiction of Guatemalan realities from the indigenous perspective. It documents the huge violation of human rights in Guatemala and the struggles of the indigenous people to create a life based on equality.

It may be said that these literary works may be termed as writings of resistance which aims to resist the violations of human rights and to create an awareness about the urgent need to fight for a world of equality. People across the world who had undergone experiences of subordination and oppression has significantly contributed to the resistance writings.

'Karukku' and 'I, Rigoberta Menchu, an Indian woman in Guatemala' as a testimonies of trauma and resistance.

Karukku is one of the pioneers of Dalit women writing in South India. It paved way for the proliferation of Dalit life writings which voiced the long-suppressed voices of dalit women who were crushed under the double marginalization of caste and patriarchy. Despite giving voice to the long-suppressed sufferings and resistance, they also plays a vital role in empowering the subdued and give them the courage to speak out for their rights.

Bama, in her novel 'Karukku' speaks about her own experiences as a writer. Her work influenced many people. It made her to realize how potent a book can be. The work was able to create 'empathetic unsettlement' among the readers by representing the plight of Dalit women in India. She was able to express her untold miseries which were unknown to the world till then. Writing an autobiography provided her a platform to utter her bitter experiences as a human being in a world controlled by numerous power structures. Bama reveals that 'karukku' written by a wounded self has not been dissolved in the stream of time. The strength and confidence that the book provided to the people who undergo similar experiences was immense. Bama's work open before us a window to the world of harsh realities faced by the downtrodden. Reading through the pages of Karukku makes one to realize how inhuman the world around us is despite its claims of humanity and civilization.

Bama gives a description of the locality in which the lower class people resided. The caste hierarchy and the pathetic living conditions of the poor are well depicted in her autobiography. It is quite disgusting that the higher caste could make the lower caste to do all the menial jobs to serve them, however they are not supposed to touch the higher caste. Bama's work is significant for her expression of resentment against authorities. Her strong criticism of the church authorities where she happened to be a nun shows the spirit of resentment in her writings. She regrets her decision to join the convent despite the opposition by her family members. She decided to become a nun because of her strong desire to work for the poor and downtrodden. Being a woman who was able to come out of her troubles because of her education, she wanted to contribute something meaningful for the society and especially for the downtrodden. Yet it was a startling realization that the charity organizations which pretend to work for the poor are actually exploiting the poor. The ultimate aims of all these organizations were to make money and in order to do that they had to serve the wealthy people. Bama openly criticizes the elitist attitude of the Christian missionary organizations. The organizations which endlessly talk about divine responsibility of social commitment end up as money making organizations. Bama also criticizes the casteist attitudes of the organization that refuses to promote nuns from dalit communities. The higher positions in the church are reserved for the higher caste Christians and the dalit Christians are always considered as inferior. She boldly criticizes the attitude of the missionary societies towards the nuns from dalit community. She was often used as a puppet who was supposed to change from places to places according to the whims and fancies of the superiors. Unable to cope up with these situations she finally came out of the system and tried to establish a life of her own.

Bama's testimonio is a narrative of a strong woman who was able to stand up for herself despite all struggles and hurdles. It depicts a lone lady's struggle and resistance against the power structures. Bama performs a very political act when she criticizes the centers of power and authority. She uses writing as a tool for expressing her resentment against the oppressors. Being a woman who lacks the social agency to express herself, she finds writing as the most convenient tool for expressing resentment and resistance. Throughout the book, she questions the value systems of the civilized society. She traces her own evolution from the position of a victim to that of a warrior who valiantly fights against the challenges in her life. As many of the critics like James Scott and Michel de Certeau observe, resistance from the powerless sections of the society may not end in revolutionary resistance movement. Expressing disagreement against the authorities itself need to be seen as a revolutionary act. *Karukku* is a work that holds up the spirit of resistance and resentment against the power structures.

Taken from a different socio-political scenario, 'Me, Rigoberta Menchu' is a biographical narrative by Rigoberta Menchu, an activist who works strongly for the cause of the Guatemalan. Her work is a strong response to the ill treatment and sufferings the Guatemalan slaves had to undergo under military dictatorship in Guatemala. It needs to be noted that unlike Bama, Menchu's protests ended up in active social activism at a larger scale. Her efforts were recognized by the world and she was awarded Nobel Prize for peace in 1992.

Menchu was brought up in a traditional Mayan family and she had great respect for her traditions and values. She grew up amidst the chaos of civil war. Hence she grew up as an activist. 'I, Rigoberta Menchu, an Indian Woman from Guatemala' is an account of the life long struggle that Menchu had to face as a poor woman who belonged to a peasant family in the war torn Guatemala. In the work, *I, Rigoberta Menchu*, Menchu recounts her childhood experiences as the daughter of a peasant family. The biography starts with these lines.

"My name is Rigoberta Menchu. I am twenty-three years old. This is my testimony. I didn't learn it from a book and I didn't learn it alone. I'd like to stress that it's not only my life, it's also the testimony of my people. It's hard for me to remember everything that's happened to me in my life since there have been many very bad times, but, yes, moments of joy as well. The important thing is that what has happened to me has happened to many other people too: My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people" (Menchu, 21)

Rigoberta Menchu gives a clear account of the struggles and sufferings that she and her people had to put up in life. Children died out of malnutrition. Growing up amidst such struggles, Rigoberta wanted herself to get educated and wished to learn Spanish. When she got an offer to be a maid at the home of a wealthy landowner, she eagerly took up the job, hoping that she could learn Spanish which can serve as a window to the world outside. However she was shocked by the sad realization that even the dogs at the house of the landowner were treated better than her. Cadelaria, who was her fellow maid at the house, is a significant character in her autobiography. They underwent similar kinds of ill treatment by the mistress of the house. With the influence of Candilera, Menchu started to express her resentment against the injustices done to her. Rigoberta shares the humiliating experience when her father was ill-treated by the mistress when he came to ask for money as the family had to meet urgent expenses.

The original title of the book read so, 'My name is Rigoberta Menchu and this is how my consciousness was born'. The work mainly concentrates on her evolution as a social activist. She traces how the humiliating experiences of her life prompted her to work for the rights of her people. The resistance and resentment takes a dynamic form in her work. She strongly criticizes the authorities throughout her work. Being a member of a family with strong revolutionary tradition, she also slipped into the shoes of her father and devoted her life completely for her people.

These works by women from two different cultures speak volumes about their harsh realities. They question the value system of the civilized society which claims to be egalitarian and humane. These works manifest the power of writing as a form of resistance. Writing often acts as a fuel for activism and hence acts as a forerunner of social change. It needs to be noted that all resistance movements were backed by immense quantity of resistance writings which prompted people to think about the unsatisfying realities around them.

Micheal de Certeau observes that the everyday activities of the ordinary people like reading, writing, travelling helps to empower them to challenge the exiting social hierarchy. He trusts in the power of writing as a means of subverting the existing social orders. Memoirs, biographies and auto biographies of the downtrodden are often accounts of the subordination and exploitation that they had to face as the less privileged. Writing itself is resistance in oppressive social situations.

It may be concluded that resistance writings across the globe has contributed significantly in the fights for human rights. Being testimonial narratives that narrates traumatic experiences , they create 'empathetic unsettlement' among the readers who encounters these kinds of writings. Thus self-reflexive narratives are significant in disseminating socially significant personal experiences among the global community. Thus individual experiences gains a wider significance and becomes capable to create an influence in the global fight for an egalitarian world.

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