Exploring Convergences: Dalit Writings and Australian Aboriginal Writings

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ABSTRACT

Given the kind of literary works Dalit writing in India and Aboriginal writing in Australia have witnessed in the recent years, it would not be inappropriate to assert that both domains of writings have begun to emerge discursively as powerful visible forms of protest against a chequered history of exploitation both in socio-politically materialist and discursive realities. These subaltern discourses have thus become sites for the contestation and negotiation of identities at several levels and in several ways. However, there is no denying the fact that there are many divergences and convergences between these two writings. In this article, I seek to touch upon some of the areas/platforms whereby convergences are happening and examine some of the problematics involved therein. Some of the prominent questions that could be addressed are: What are the commonalities between Australian Aboriginal and Dalit writings? How far and in what measure these subaltern writings have transformed the full dimension of the cruelties and humiliation they had suffered, into literary expression and experience? How does the narrative agenda, within the autobiography, form an anti-caste or anti-racial discrimination narrative? How are they engaged with identity politics in an attempt to understand the kind of identity asserted in these autobiographies as well as the boundaries of these identities? How do these autobiographies represent an attempt to assert a new form of socio-historical narrative and lastly, Where do the present trends in both writings lead to?

Dalit writing in India and Aboriginal writing in Australia are born out of the anguish of their unjust social system based on caste, class iniquities and racial discrimination, and have become expression of the agony suffered by these deprived
groups for ages. Dalit literature and Aboriginal literature have begun to emerge discursively as powerful visible forms of protest against a chequered history of exploitation both in socio-politically materialist and discursive realities as well as against the existing intellectual and social system. There are many common elements of anguish, anger and protest discernible in both literatures of Dalits’ and Aboriginals’. These subaltern discusses have thus become sites for the contestation and negotiation of identities at several levels and in several ways. At this juncture, I am reminded of Althusser (1971) who asserts: “All ideology has the function (which defines it) of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects”. What Althusser says here is the fact that it is the marginalized individuals—be it Dalits or be it Aboriginals— who on becoming conscious of their plight, at times attempt to challenge and subvert the practices and institutions that constitute their subordinate and subsidiary identities. Furthermore, their significant literary works more than ‘reflecting’ and ‘representing’ the dominant ideological practices, behaviour patterns and value systems validated through them, expose the silences and gaps in them for analysis, critique, understanding, subversion and transformation.

The writers of Dalit writing in India and Aboriginal writing in Australia, throughout their writings evoke a vital and recurring thematic concern: a conscious protest against and rejection of the political and cultural hegemony of whites (in the case of Aboriginals) and the caste Hindus (in the case of Dalits). These literatures, explicitly probe ideologies and cultures from a marginalized position, and do make their silences “speak” on issues of class, race and caste. They are forced to an aura of powerlessness, helplessness after being excluded from the mainstream literature. Fetterley Judith(1977:492) writes:

*Power is the issue in the politics of literature, as it is in the politics of anything else. To be excluded from a literature that claims to define one’s identity is to experience a peculiar form of powerlessness*.
It is the authority and unequal power relationships operative in what is known as normal behaviour which are responsible for humiliation, subordination and marginalization of Aboriginals and Dalits that these writings focus on and question. M. Foucault (1972:81) in his book Archeology of Knowledge talks of subjugated knowledge’s in power knowledge as being “the historical contents that have been buried and disguised in functionalist coherence or formal systematization.” The insurrection of subjugated knowledges “allow us to rediscover the ruptured effects of conflict and struggle” that the new order or functionalist coherence is designed to mask. In the words of Foucault (1972:81) Subjugated knowledge also includes:

...a whole set of knowledges that have been dis-qualified...
a particular, local, regional knowledge...which owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it”.

The reading and writing of Dalit and Aboriginal literature is mostly passionately autobiographical involving the search for the self or identity. Each individual writer makes it her/his privilege to write the stories of their community in the stories of their own. By means of writing these writers break the silence of both Dalit as well as Aboriginal community. They as an individual writer articulated or gave voice to Dalit or Aboriginal experience which until now was hidden, repressed and secreted. These writings are not just about finding voice but also about finding voice but also about revelation of the most inner life of a community in a public or a kind of confession or a scandal. Their task as a writer is to transform voice and silence into literary tropes. The search is not merely sociological one as a search for Dalit or Aboriginal community, culture and so on, but it is a philosophical aesthetic search for Dalitness and Aboriginality.

Dalit literature and Aboriginal literature focus on synthesizing aesthetics and politics in its rejection of Varna-system based cultural paradigms and Euro-centric cultural paradigms and in its search for aboriginal-centric paradigms and Dalit-centric
paradigms of beauty and culture. Aboriginality and Dalitness is their bitmotif. Their focus of an exclusive Dalit aesthetic or Aboriginal aesthetic is on decolonizing the mind about languages, colour, caste, race, physical beauty and to tackle the deep rooted racism and casteism that structure their very view of the world and their intellect. Aboriginal women’s aesthetics is about how the putative experiences of colour and sex are transformed and can be transformed into literary tropes and representations in language and culture. The search for the self lies at the juncture where the experience of Aboriginality is transformed into trope. Black-white politics is especially linked to aesthetic ideas because racism is centrally expressed in terms of the physical and the beautiful. The basis of racism is the philosophical aesthetic expression of the Black and attitude to beauty and colour is the juncture where racism and sexism overlaps and cuts across.

In the case of Dalits in India, it can be understood in the perspective of the purity-pollution conceptual idea. The caste Hindus consider themselves “purified”, “pure” where as untouchables (Dalits) “impure”. Even the shadows of Dalits could pollute the caste Hindus, let alone their physical touch.

The agenda of both writings is to bring the “absence” (of dalit and aboriginal voice) to presence and then aesthetic is to transform experience and self into trope and make trope to bring upon experience and self in order to liberate. The aboriginal creative efforts become emblematic of aboriginal creative struggle and Dalit creative efforts become emblematic of Dalit creative struggle.

Aboriginal literature and Dalit literature aim at writing to protest or at first protesting against and later resisting what they saw as unjust. They mince no words in exposing the injustice and in general their writings go straight to the heart of the matter. To classify them as a category of protest literature may be a right premise. These subaltern writers have made it their mission to protest the wrongdoings of governments in their literary and non-literary works. They have emphasized the responsibilities of
intellectuals to oppose the tyranny of governments and help in checking the reign of terror and injustice. Their writings are the quintessential of what Nadine Gordimer (1984:285-300), the white South African writer, said ‘responsible’ writing because the subaltern writers do not have liberty; these writers are answerable for what they write. On the one hand, they are accountable to the oppressed whose spokespersons they claim to be. On the other hand, they are answerable to the state which can punish them for the act.

**Major issues in Aboriginal Writings**

Out of the perpetual slavery, oppression, contempt, and colour discrimination emerged a few sensitive Australian Aboriginal writers who later realized the two tragic facts of racial history: slavery and colonialism; and could not avoid naming the West, especially the White Man, as the Villain in perpetuating both the wrongs. Because of its unique history of slavery, colonization and post-independence oppression, protest has been an integral part of writing in almost throughout Australia. Sometimes, protest writing in the cruel, unjust, apartheid society takes a taunting, biting, often scatological form. Indeed, protest literature in Australia has played such a significant role in projecting the people’s resistance and submersion of expressionist regimes – white or black – so as to deserve consideration as an independent literary species. Their protest is against the falsification of history, a protest against the muzzling of dissenters, a protest against the illegal detention of political suspects, a protest against sub-human prison conditions, a protest against the “power of evil men to destroy”(Gordimer,Nadine,1984:285-300)

The colonial hangover, the insidious crawl of neo-colonialism, the subjection to torture and inhumane torment experiences, the sullen soullessness of the white people, are the major factors that have given birth to the literature of protest, of disillusion, the literature of tension and agony and defied hope, the literature of self-introspection and self-assertion, of clinical analysis, sardonic humour and unquestionable integrity. The last few decades have witnessed a phenomenal flowering of Aboriginal creative writing in English. These writings grapple with such themes as the racial discrimination, the colour
consciousness, an aggressive sense of guilt on the one side and burning resentment, the communication breakdown, the atrophy of sensibility, the drying up of compassion, the feeling of negation, alienation, fear, terror, and sub-human existence on the other side.

Some writings illustrate the plight of the visionary, the exile, and the struggle against the inhumane oppressors and have succeeded in portraying the horrifying innermost experiences of dehumanized existence in solitary confinement, the despicable oppression by the white colonialists and the gruesome acts of racial hatred. The fabric of racial discrimination has dominated the thematic structure of the writing. Even though the writers confront in one way or another this fabric of discrimination, they go beyond generalized attempts at portraying the evils of the racism because the writers have been brought up in particular segments or pockets of racism, and they are inclined to search out their line of differences within the special expression of their group. Resistance at the political and the socio-cultural level by aboriginal women has engaged the literary genius of a host of Aboriginal writers. Prominent among them are Sally Morgan, Glenyse Ward & Ruby Langford. In their works of fiction, women shake off their emotional dependence on men to become self-ware, confident, and politically conscientious – be it because of hunger, war, destitude, physical exploitation, or mental and economic oppression. It is in this continent that one is compelled to reject the usual role categories by which women are assessed and defined – mistress, prostitutes, wives, girl-friends, and grant recognition to them as prophets, decision-makers, heroines, martyrs and challengers of their status quo. Most of the autobiographies deal with the position and reaction of women in situations of extreme social and political oppression during and after colonial rule. These record the positive reaction and the struggle of all classes, especially women, against political suppression by the white colonialists.

The image of women presented in all the auto-biographies reflects a broad spectrum of ages, classes, ethnic groups, occupations and degrees of political awareness. But the solidarity of womanhood which stems out of a common concern for the welfare of their menfolk, their children and the aged in their large families, cuts across cultural
and social barriers. As hunger stalks their families, a subtle reversal of roles takes place. The women in search of sustenance for their families become the bread-winners, giving up their passive roles to become active as deers and actors. This reversal of roles, is for the women, a return to their pre-colonial status in Aboriginal society which was subverted by the imposition of colonialism. None of the Aboriginal men resent this takeover by women because traditionally they always accepted the role of women in agriculture and in the production of food. We can see one by one the Aboriginal women leaving other household activities to go in search of food. A change overcomes as their desperation mounts and they become aggressive and angry. A sense of injustice takes place hold of them and they resort to all kinds of strategies, having been subjected to various gruesome injustices to procure food and water. Aboriginal women’s feminism is born out of the knowledge of the injustice done to their people by white colonizers. Their anger and violence directed at the white man is justifiable and the crudeness of action is directing the women to strongly protest them effectively matches the lewd remarks and crude sexual exploitation of the Aboriginal women at the hands of the white men.

The production of life stories or autobiographical narratives has been central to Aboriginal women’s writings and their struggle for recognition. It is a genre which, as Ann Brewster has noted in her study Reading Aboriginal Women’s Autobiography women have come to dominate. In her recent book on indigenous women and feminism in Australia, Talkin’Up to the White Woman, Arleen Moreton Robinson, a Koenpul women from Quandamooka, has pointed to the crucial importance of these ‘self-presentations’, noting, however, that in their writings, ‘self’ is constituted in fundamentally different ways than in white women’s writing. Wole Soyinka (1992:228) asserts:

\[\text{In these life writings experience is fundamentally social and relational, not something ascribed separately within the individual. Indigenous women’s life writings are based on the collective memories of inter-generational}\]

\[\text{www.ajhss.org}\]
relationships between predominantly indigenous women, extended families and communities”.

The fact that most of this has been autobiography or life-writing links it with some of the concerns in other writings, but the issues of gender are subsumed by those of race there, for these women’s writings require to be read as political interventions in a shameful history of racial oppression. Some women writers draw our attention to the counter-narrativity of these writings, contesting earlier, but most significantly official, records and versions of past events. None of these has been of more importance to women that the “stolen children”, taken from generations of Indigenous mothers in the name of policies such as that of “assimilation’. Their writing therefore stresses the family as a site of resistance to state intervention, an issue raised in several autobiographies. Some of the Aboriginal women examine the intersection of “history” and autobiography and the only partly successful renegotiation of nationalist conventions. Some texts address the complex positioning of the female subject in terms of Australian history, through maternal testimony, which has been contested in two ways. The first is the assertion of an older and earlier Aboriginal history, not less real for being silenced in so many white texts. The second is the maternal and grand-maternal voices that resist not only the institutions that attempted to silence them – the officially sanctioned theft of children in Sally’s mother and grandmother’s case – but also the daughter’s attempts to “place” them in public history in their quest for an understanding of the self. Furthermore, as collective life stories these narratives told of their people’s history of dispossession and colonization. As Ruby Langford (quoted in Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2000:1-2), wrote:

We are invaded people, and have been since 1788... Our
tribal laws mean nothing to the white man; our traditional
people were classified as heathens and vermin to be
cleared off the face of the earth. Assimilate us or wipe out
was the order of the day”.

Many of the life stories tell of the removal of children and whole families from traditional country, their incarceration into white homes and institutions, under
government laws allegedly passed in the interests of Aboriginal ‘protection’. While white women were urged to bear large families in the interests of the nation and the race, Aboriginal women were deemed ineligible for motherhood and constantly faced the possibility of having their children taken away from them. Doris Pilkington tells of the effect of the removal of her mother and aunty from their families and community, in Western Australia as Anne Brewster (1996:2) writes:

Molly and Gracie sat silently on the horse, tears streaming down their cheeks as constable Riggs turned the big bay stallion and led the way back to the depot. A high pitched wail broke out. The cries of agonized mother and the women, and the deep sobs of grandfathers, uncles and cousins filled the air”.

Aboriginal women’s narratives also tell of their coercion into various forms of unpaid or lowly paid labour and the experience of working in domestic service for white women, and as Moreton-Robinson(2000:9) notes, ‘acts of humiliation and cruelty by white women pervade indigenous women’s life writings”. Together these self-presentations offered a new and dramatically different account of national history. As Langford (quoted in Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2000:9) has observed:

My story is about twentieth century Aboriginal life... it’s probably the only information that a lot of students get that puts the Aboriginal point of view. Because Koori history and culture is almost never taught in schools, and if it is, seen by whites, and rat from an Aboriginal perspective”.

In this new history Indigenous people become the agents of their lives subjects of their stories and white women are positioned on the side of the colonizers.

Given the dynamic inter-relationship of the white women’s movement in Australia and Aboriginal women’s struggle for recognition and self representation, what comes to the fore is the fact that the dialogue between them shaped a new sense of
radicalised identity on both sides, but in a further development, Aboriginal women came to assert the distinctiveness of their claims as Indigenous Australians, as the colonized and disposed. And they claimed their right to political voice through self-representation. This reminds me of Toni Morrison (quoted in Anne Brewster, 1996:2) who asserts: ‘Black women look at white women and see the enemy for they know that racism is not confined to white men and there are more white women than men in this country’. Even Tony Morrison (quoted in Larissa Behrendt, 1993) is when he says, ‘Within the feminist movement, non-indigenous women have marginalized minority women, through lack of recognition and the presumption that they can speak on behalf of all women’.

Aboriginal women reacted with rising anger to the political and historical representations made on behalf of and about ‘women’. What were in dispute were the assumptions of common experience and common interests. In her 1975 essay, ‘Black Women in Australia-A History’, black activist Bobby (Roberta) Sykes sketched a history of Aboriginal Australia following the ‘invasion’ by the British, in which Blacks lost their land, were poisoned and shot, deprived of food and infected with introduced disease. Lynette Morris (1996) avers that the British also ‘took [the Black man’s] women’. Sykes stressed the prevalence and invisibility of the rape of Black women and girls, in the past and present, an emphasis that her autobiography would later make clear was informed by personal trauma. Black women, Sykes insisted, were subjected to a particular form of contempt in Australia. On the other hand, Aboriginal people had survived largely through the work of women in raising up families and sustaining communities. But the Black woman remained oppressed Bobbi Sykes (1975:313-21) writes:

_Burdened down with the complexities of bringing up children in this sophisticated and complicated society, she remains an object of sexual fulfillment for the white man, and an ‘invisible’ woman to her white female contemporaries, especially, the ‘establishment’ of women’s liberationists who chatter on about sexual oppression and_
the competitive orgasm, and who spare not a thought for
the true object of sexual oppression in this country today”.

The most important obstacle faced by Black women, Sykes concluded, was ‘the barrier of racist attitudes.


*Aboriginal women have been oppressed by white women.*

*White women were missionaries that attempted to destroy Aboriginal culture. They used the slave labour of Aboriginal women in their homes. White women were the wives, mothers and sisters of those who violently raped Aboriginal women and children and brutally murdered Aboriginal people. White women can be as racist as white men.*”

White women, including feminists, had to recognise that Aboriginal women had a different history and thus, a different political agenda. Aboriginal women were also necessarily pro-family: there was a need to rebuild families which had been systematically smashed by the state through the removal of children. They emphasized the preservation of language and culture and improved access to health, education and legal services. Aboriginal people’s (especially men’s) high rates of imprisonment were also a major issue. Australian Aboriginal women’s autobiographies explicitly show the use of history as a dominant structuring, metaphor or interpretative frame, which can be related to women’s stories having been hidden from history. It also needs to be understood in the context of the search for a redefinition of Australian national identity, involving intense engagement with history itself. In these autobiographies, personal histories are conceived of in terms of Australia’s Aboriginal history. Yet within this
crucial shift, certain notions of “history” come to be valorized. Departing from nationalist conventions in autobiography, these texts also repeat some of the terms they seek to deconstruct or oppose. For the Aboriginal women “History” or at least particular version of it, becomes an interpretative frame through which the sense of self is constructed and validated in the autobiographies. What is explicitly seen is the fact that these texts are deeply concerned with the process of constructing the self as historical subject, as subject in history?

Sarah Nuttal in the essay ‘History and Identity in Contemporary Australian Women’s Autobiography’ discusses this concern in detail and asserting that this concern can be related in three ways: firstly, to the women autobiographer’s sense that women’s stories have not been told, have been hidden from history. The desire to draw women’s stories into historical narrative opens into other questions: Do women tell stories differently? If so, how might one construct the history of one woman’s life; but also open the way to telling the stories of many women – and how does this transform all of our notions of what history is and of who tells it? In the autobiographies under consideration a women’s intergenerational chain is foregrounded, in few of which the daughter/historian attempts to tell the story of the mother, the grandmother in order to try to understand their own lives and histories. The second context in which we can view these texts is a widespread contemporary engagement with history itself in Australian politics and culture, and a search for a redefinition of Australian national identity. There is a third context in which their concerns with history, both personal and public, should be understood. Contemporary debates around the relationship between literature and history, on the one hand, and history and memory, on the other, provide important reference points for analysis. Most historical discourse lays claim to a sense of “pastness”, to a past time which has existed. Autobiographies poised on the cusp of “history” and “fiction”, are invaluable sources for exploring several questions, and opening them up to more careful scrutiny. Such texts are also concerned with questions of memory; and “memory’ and “history” have at different moments been both antagonists and allies. Both are concerned with how people construct a past, although “memory” has
sometimes invited a more malleable understanding of the past, less bounded by a potentially limiting set of disciplinary conventions.

In the autobiographies question from the beginning is how to find frames through which to understand and interpret someone’s life, and by extension her/own. Reflecting this, writers divide the books into different sections as ways of tracking a life and looking at it through different lenses. The past and ongoing exclusion of Aboriginals from Australian history is one of the key interpretative frames from which aboriginals write, in relation to which they continue to uncover their own identity. History becomes a lens, a frame through which articulation of the self becomes possible. A lot of the narrative “impetus” is in fact dissolution. Writers seek to rewrite nationalist convention by looking for the dissolution of the unjust social, political, economic and psychological structure and in doing so certain kinds of subjectivities come to be valued; others silenced. ‘Testimony’ has been one of the only narratives of affect in history writing until recently. Current works, particularly in the realm of public history, however, is displaying a new interest in traumatic memory: in how to engage the body of the viewer, or the reader. That is, the way people become visible to us, or cease to become visible, is increasingly at stake in these works; the question of how we move beyond the boundaries of our own bodies in the external, sharable world is beginning to the more closely looked at.

**Major Issues in Dalit Voices**

The main issue of Dalit autobiographies has been their act of exposing the continuation of caste-based discrimination and the power structures and belief systems that support the practice of untouchability. No Dalit in India is immune from the virus of casteism whose roots lie in the hearts and minds of people. For Dalit writers autobiography often constitutes their primary political act of assertion. Thus, for the Dalit community, like many other marginalized groups, autobiography is not simply a kind of literature but is a form of assertion and resistance in its own right. Dalit autobiographers narrative agenda is to expose the continuation of caste discrimination, even in modern times, and even in the urban centers of India. It attacks the basis of this caste
discrimination in a variety of ways, but especially through a stable focus on the ‘factual’ recounting of experiences of discrimination. In the autobiographical form, these ‘facts’ become uncontestable truth, since no one knows more about an individual’s life experiences than the individual himself. Furthermore, the autobiography serves the additional function of re-affirming and strengthening the link between the individual Dalit writer and the larger Dalit community. Through this union comes the ‘strength in numbers’ needed to contest the institutionalized social order of caste in India. Besides giving Dalit entrance into a public space through identity-based narrative authority, autobiography provides a space for Dalit writers to regain control over the constitution and meaning of Dalit selfhood and join in a show of strength with the larger ‘Dalit community’.

Therefore, one of the most important narrative agenda of Dalit autobiography is its use of the author’s life experiences of pain as a means of political assertion. By writing about their own experiences as a Dalit, these writers reveal two objectives in their autobiographies. One is to contest the basis of caste discrimination. The other clear narrative agenda of these Dalit autobiographies is to expose the reality behind the institutional narrative that caste no longer functions as a significant force in the public sphere of modern India. In other words, that untouchability was abolished by the constitution of India in 1950, and consequently, there is no longer caste-based discrimination in government jobs, public schools, transportation, etc. Thus, Dalit autobiographies constitute a challenge to this institutional narrative by presenting what they claim are ‘factual’ experiences of untouchability from the writer’s own life. Thus, pain, whether experienced as humiliation, as exclusion, or as actual physical violence, all serve as similar purpose in the narrative, that is to expose the contemporary occurrence of untouchability, which is otherwise ignored in the public discourse. Exposing the continuation of untouchability through this pain does several things for the audience of Dalit autobiographies. For its Dalit readers, pain is a uniting phenomenon. As Valmiki writes, ‘Dalit readers had seen their own pain in those pages of mine’. For the non-Dalit reader, this pain and the social reality it exposes means something different all together –
shame, accusation, and hopefully an invitation for change. Dalit autobiographies serve a very different purpose than those of famous celebrities or historical personalities. Their agenda is not localized in individualism but links the individual to his entire caste community as a way of gaining power and support in a group struggle against similarly experienced oppression.

Dalit autobiographies are meant to be understood as a representative life story, where the ‘ordinary’ or ‘representative’ Dalit individual uses his narrative to raise his voice for those who are silenced by caste oppression. Yet, although Dalit autobiographies certainly invoke multiple subjectivities where the individual ‘I’ is linked to the communal ‘We’, the relationship between the two is neither direct nor unproblematic. Since all individuals hold multiple identities (class, caste, gender, occupation, location, religion etc.), no one individual can represent the wide variety of identities held by every member of the community he claims to represent. In fact, while discussing the ‘representative’ nature of the subject in Dalit autobiographies, it becomes important to look closely at instances in which the subject ‘I’ has differently representing the ‘we’, either of another Dalit individual or the Dalit community. Both critics as well as Dalit writers themselves describe Dalit autobiographies as “narratives of pain”. It is pain which strings one narrative event to the next, and it is pain that binds individual Dalits together into an ‘imagined community’ of fellow sufferers. Finally, it has given Dalit writers a way of uniting with a larger ‘Dalit community’ to create a powerful group which can be used to fight against caste discrimination.

Convergences between Dalit writings and Aboriginal writings

Dalit writing in India and Aboriginal writing in Australia have much in common: they are powerful visible forms of protest literatures against a chequered history of exploitation where Dalits are fighting against the unjust social system based on caste where as Aboriginals are fighting against racial discrimination. There are many common
factors or common platforms whereupon one can draw parallels and find convergences between the two literatures under consideration. Some of the common issues are like a shared colonial past (if it is British colonialism or European colonialism in Australia then I would say it is internal colonization in India because the cast Hindus in the Hindu community in India have, for more than thousand years, sought to perpetuate institutionalized hegemonic dominance along the axis of caste system in India which is no doubt a form of internal colonization that allowed for material exploitation within a social framework that negated the very humanity of the Sudras so-called Dalits today); they struggle to survive because of the human rights denied to them; both writings exemplify a form of ‘testimony’ to the kinds of injustices, exploitations, human tortures the people have experienced; both are “narratives of pain”; dealing with issues of identity; Dalit and Aboriginal writers have launched their literary careers by first narrating their life-story, making autobiography an institutional space through which they can enter the literary public sphere; the entire life-narrative is based on the idea of the communal identity; in both their autobiographies as Stephen Butterfield (quoted in Larissa Behrendt, 1993:31) writes of African American autobiographies, “the self belongs to the people, and the people find a voice in the self”

Moreover, autobiographies have been used in both literatures as a means of political assertion; many of their insights reveal important similarities the way Dalits and Aboriginal people use their own autobiographies as a political act. For Perkins and Harlon, the autobiographical narrative is perceived as the actual site of the power struggle, where the voice of the marginalized individual contests the institutionalized narrative of the dominant group. Harlow (1987:85) writes

*If resistance poetry challenged the dominant and hegemonic discourse of an occupying or colonizing power by attacking the symbolic foundations of that power and erecting symbolic structures of its own – resistance narratives go further still in analyzing the relations of*
Furthermore, their agenda is not localized in individualism but links the individual to the “entire community” as a way of gaining power and support in a group struggle against similarly experienced oppression. The autobiographies of both literatures give a more complex picture of subjectivity where the protagonist (‘I’) and the Dalit community or Aboriginal community (‘We’) are inextricably linked in a complex web of meaning. An important similarity between Dalit autobiographies and Aboriginal autobiographies is the difficult struggle these writers face to gain the right to speak. In addition to this, both literatures also deal with issue of fighting against social and physical exploitation, fighting for social justice and human rights or lack of rights, citizenship. Having citizenship means individuals have access to a number of social goods: for instance, voting rights, medical attention, social security, legal rights, police protection etc. what many of the testimonies reveal is that without citizenship many Aboriginal people were denied the basic legal and health rights. Moreover, we can notice that both literatures reveal how girls, women and men are being used as slaves, servants and maidservants.

Another common factor is ‘socio-economic status’ which refers to the level (status) of social and economic position of people within society as reflected by various ‘indicators’ that enable us to measure and compare the financial and social position of groups within community. They indicate people’s standard of living. The main indicators of socio-economic status are: social indicators i.e. education, health, contact with the criminal justice system, employment/unemployment level, type of occupation/job, housing, access to services etc.; economic indicators i.e. income, salary, wages etc., level of dependency on welfare payments, home ownership etc. I will not go into the socio-economic status of people as it has already been dealt with in detail in chapter 2.

To substantiate and illustrate these common factors, similarities or diverging issues let us now have a look at the texts under consideration.
Dalit Autobiographies

Omprakash Valmiki (2003) begins his autobiography by asserting, “Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creation. We have grown up in a social order that is extremely cruel and inhuman. And compassionless towards Dalits” (p.i). These lines of Omprakash Valmiki apparently prove the fact that Dalit autobiographies are “narratives of pain”. It is this pain which binds individual Dalits together. Joothan, corresponding to the narrative agenda of contesting untouchability, focuses on events that highlight the pain of experiencing caste discrimination. For example, in Joothan, Valmiki contests the basis of caste discrimination by asserting, “Being born is not in the control of a person. If it were in one’s control, then why could I have been born in a Bhangi household? Those who call themselves the standard-bearers of this country’s great cultural heritage, did they decide which homes they would be born into? Albeit they turn to scriptures to justify their position, the scriptures that establish feudal values instead of promoting equality and freedom” (Valmiki, 2003:133-34).

Dalit autobiographies constitute a challenge to the institutional narrative that caste no longer functions as a significant force in the public sphere of modern India by presenting what they claim are ‘factual’ experiences of untouchability from the writer’s own life. Valmiki, for instance, does this by repeatedly narrating his experiences of pain as exclusion due to the continued practice of untouchability. Valmiki(2003:16) writes, “I was kept out of extracurricular activities. On such occasions I stood on the margins like a spectator. During the annual functions of the school, when rehearsals were on for the play, I too wished for a role. But I always had to stand outside the door. The so-called descendants of the gods cannot understand the anguish of standing outside the door”.

In another instance, Valmiki relates how he was continually kept out of the chemistry lab ‘on some pretext or the other’, and despite protesting to the head master of the school, nothing was done to enforce the equality of every student regardless of caste to use the lab. Valmiki(2003:65) writes, “Not only did I do poorly in the lab tests in the
board exam, I also got low marks in the oral, even though I had answered the examiner’s questions quite correctly”.

The modern concepts of Michael Foucault, Julia Kristeva and Jacques Derrida on the issues of knowledge and power, and centre and margin relations may be of recent origin, but if we think in the context of Indian society, we find attempts to control political power and society through knowledge from ancient times. In other words, looking at the ancient social organization it can be noted how through the medium of knowledge, social structuralist monopolized political power and society through knowledge from ancient times. In other words, looking at the ancient social organization it can be noted how through the medium of knowledge, social structuralist monopolized political power by various orders. *Manusmriti* in the first chapter speaks that learning, teaching, giving and taking alms are duties of Brahmins. That is, the Brahmin will be solely responsible for the actions concerned with knowledge, and nobody else! It is evident that this includes only those who are born Brahmins, not those by deeds; because deeds have been established by the system on the basis of birth. *Manusmriti* speaks that for the progress of the world, Brahma created Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra from mouth, arms, forehead and feet respectively.

What is the place and status of the Dalit community in the social system? Dalits are to serve and perform tasks that are considered impure for the communities above them, whether it be work related to leather, or task like digging graves. The work of a butcher is also to be done by them. They are also suppose to carry corpses and dead bodies of animals. The Dalits are treated worse than animals. Their presence is usually banned from upper-class localities. Even then they are bound to hang clay pots from their necks so that they may not pollute the streets of the priviledged by their spittle. They carry brooms tied to their bodies so that while passing through such ‘upper lanes’ they can wipe away their footprints. In their world women, young girls are casually stripped, molested and raped, men brutally murdered and this has been going on for centuries, generation after generation. These are untouchables who invite death if they dare to quench their thirst from a common pond. Even the Brahmin’s god is not their god. He
does not accept their supplication. He is not even capable of feeling their misery. This must be hard to swallow when they see that ‘they strip naked my mother, my sisters’ and ‘my own daughter’s virtue is looted in public/my eyes look in, my blood shakes’.

They have to “stay with folded knees, hands and heads bent down on the mud floor”, “they can’t enter the rooms inside a house” (Shimazaki Toson quoted in Devendra Chaubey, 2005:64), because they “are forbidden to enter inside the house” (Shimazaki Toson quoted in Devendra Chaubey, 2005:64). And even if sometimes a Dalit enters the house of someone belonging to a high caste without anyone’s knowing it, people behave rudely with him/her. Why, because they are untouchables and the rest of the traditional society cannot practice the conduct of touch with the untouchables. This is the reality of Indian society that the Dalit community has to face every day. Given these social conditions, what can a Dalit community do but to oppose conventions, to rebel against the order?

Sharan Kumar Limbale (2003:163), in his autobiography quotes upper caste people saying, “We do not want to rent the house to Muslims and Mahars”. (a Dalit Caste) Why? because they are dirty, they do not care about cleanliness. Saran Kumar Limbale(2003:161-62) writes that, “I bathe with soap everyday. Clean my teeth with toothpaste. There is no uncleanness in me anywhere. Then why am I untouchable? Here a dirty high-caste man is touchable and of pure charater, an outcaste with a clean lifestyle is untouchable”. What a big affliction it is of a Dalit’s life, who being a human being wants to live it with the rest of the society. But in the Indian social system this is not possible for Dalits. Reason being Limbale(2003:163) says, “every city is casteist. Every village casteist. Every house casteist. Caste has here broken the people so much from the inside that there is no human being left anywhere”

Narendra Jadhav(2003:3) in his autobiography, Outcaste: a memoir brings to the fore what is the place of a Dalit in the eyes of policemen and upper caste people. Narendra Jadhav writes, “Walking home slowly, he (Damu) was looking forward to some that tea and bhakris, home-made millet bread, when a policeman came looking for
“Eh Damu Mahar, I have been looking all around for you. Where have you been wandering around, you son of bitch? The constable seemed flustered and Damu sensed that something terrible had happened. He told Damu that a dead body had been found floating in the broken well by the Mangroves. You will sit guarding the body till the Fauzdar and the police party come to inspect the scene and write a report’, the constable ordered. Nobody should be allowed near the well. Remember, if anything happens to the corpse, your body too will end up in the well”

This clearly indicates that Dalit’s duty was to carry the corpse and listened to the orders of policemen. The policeman did not care in the least whether Damu was hungry or not. When Damu told the policeman that he had not eaten since morning. He lifted his baton as if to strike him. ‘Do you see my baton?’ he asked, brandishing it, ‘I’ll stick it up your ass and you will see it come out of your throat. I’ll beat you up so badly that you’ll forget the name of your father’(Narender Jadhav, 2003:3).

This clearly shows a picture of exploitation, fear, terror, repression and oppression of a Dalit by a policeman.

Sharan Kumar Limbale in his auto-biography The Outcaste: Akkarmashi rightly gives an answer to the question: what is it like to grow up as an impoverished outcaste in modern India? Perhaps the best way to find answer to this question is hear it through the words and emotions of those who have lived thorough the experience which Limbale has unquestionably done in his book. Limbale tells us that the caste of a Hindu Indian determines everything about his life, including the clother he will wear, the person he will marry, and the food he will eat. Limbale describes the life of a man who suffered not only through this caste system but also through the pain of not even being allowed into the caste system: he was an outcaste, below everyone else. He is able to obtain a house on rent in a clean and tidy colony by hiding his caste. Limbale (2003:163) writes that Untouchables were not allowed to live in the mainstream of social life: “We do not want to rent the house to Muslims and Mahars” (p.163) The one that controlled his life from the time he was a child was hunger; he knew that a man was no bigger than his own
hunger and that there was no escape from it. Not only did he physically suffer from his deep, insatiable hunger, his entire life he lived under the course of not having “pure blood”. Because his mother had him out of wedlock with the chief of the village, he belonged nowhere and no one would accept him.

*The Outcaste* clearly shows how the lives of India’s lowest citizens are completely controlled by the society around him. The dominating theme throughout the book is the Dalit’s constant battle with hunger. Although Limbale is allowed the privilege of going to school, he had to watch the higher caste children eat lavish meals and could only hope that they would be generous with their scraps. His grandmother would eat bhakari made from the corn she had dug out a pile of manure so that her grandchildren would have what little good flour she had left. She made incredible sacrifices, but her house still want hungry until they were able to beg on a market day or until a good friend received the contract to remove a dead animal.

Another nearly impossible hurdle that he suffered his entire life was the fact that he had no identity, no home or place of belonging. Limbale was born with a Dalit mother and a father who was the chief of a village. He could not get certain papers signed for school because he could not properly identify his caste by his mother or father, and they would not accept his grandmother as his guardian because she lived with a Muslim. When it came time for marriage, he could not even get married to an outcaste girl because his blood was not pure; he was not wanted anywhere. Eventually, a drunkard who had offered Limbale his daughter would not allow her to leave after the wedding because of Limbabe’s background. The clouds of doubt and identity hung over this poor outcaste boy his entire life.

Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan*, an autobiographical account of his birth and upbringing as an untouchable, or Dalit, in the newly independent India of the 1950s, is one of the first portrayals of Dalit life in north India from an insider’s perspective. “Joothan” literally means seraps of food left on a plate, distined for the garbage for the family pet in a miiddle-class urban home. It is related to the word ”Jootha” , which
means polluted, and such scraps are characterized as “Joothan” only if someone also eats them. India’s untouchables have been forced to accept and eat joothan for their subsistence for centuries. The word uncapsulates the pain, humiliation, and poverty of this community, which has lived at the bottom of India’s social pyramid for millennia. Although untouchability was legally abolished in the constitution of the newly independent India in 1949, Dalits continue to face discrimination, economic deprivation, violence and ridicule. In the book Valimiki Writes” One can somehow get past poverty and deprivation but it is impossible to get past cast.” With this statement Valmiki highlights the rigidity of the caste system in India that has resulted in the socio-economic operation of thousands across India over centuries merely because of the “lower cast” to which they belong. The title of this autobiographical account, Joothan encapsulate the pain, the humiliation and the poverty of the “untouchable” chuhra community of Uttar Pradesh, to which the author belongs. The untouchable or Dalits who were social outcasts not only had to relish it. The treatment meted out to them was worse than that to animals. He writes about the ill treatment meted out to him when he was at school because he was an untouchable. He describes the trauma he went through when he was asked to spend three days sweeping the school courtyard instead of accompanying his classmates belonging to the higher castes, in the study class. One of the most powerful moments in the text is when his mother overturned a basketful of joothan at a wedding after a high-caste, Tyagi humiliated her. The author’s objectives don’t stop at evoking compassion towards the oppressed Dalits in the mind of the reader but questions,”Why is my caste my only identity?” This one query loads the reader into introspection. In India caste has always defined the socio-political scenario of the country. Whether it is the debate on the reservation policy for government jobs and education to aid the socially and economically backward classes or political gimmickry, everything has an undertone of caste. Valmiki writes that despite government taking for the development of oppressed classes, through reservations, their achievements are hardly noticed and are ridiculed often. Many of us. At some stage of our lives have been discriminated against because we belong to a lower caste and community. The mention of caste community on admission forms to school and colleges is one example. Just being
an Indian is rather insufficient to get out basic rights. Isn’t it ironical that with every step out country takes towards 'developments 'the same issues crop up again and again?

Thus we can observe that Dalit writers like Om Prakash Valmiki and sharan-kumar Limbale and other also have attempted to negotiate the challenge of securing narrative authority by emphasizing the ‘experience of discrimination ‘ and Dalit identity’ as two necessary criteria for writing. Dalit autobiographers also negotiate the issued of authority to represent the Dalit community by presenting their autobiography not as a result of this desire for personal recognition, but as a response to the requests from the Dalit community for representation. For instance in the preface of both Joothan and Tiraskrit, the author bases his decision to write his autobiography on the requests of the Dalit community. Valmiki(2003:163) attests that “responses came even from for-flung rural areas. The Dalit readers had seen their own pain in those pages of mine. They all desire that I write about my experiences in more detail”. Similarly Chauhan writes, “The readers of these magazines (where several short autobiographied articles were published) sent me letters for two continuous years, among them senior literary writers but also villagers. And through their reflections, I realized that only those who have also felt the pain of Dalits can understand”.

Dalit autobiographies are not simply the narration of life-stories. They are also used by Dalit writers as a means of political assertion. For example, Narendra Jadhav in his book Outcaste speaks about Dr. Bhimrao (Babasaheb) Ambedkar leading thousands of Dalits to the Chavdar Pond in Mahed in a peaceful agitation for water-rights; and soon he will launch a satyagrah demanding entry for Dalits into the Kala Ram Temple in Nasik. There is an incident described in the text where…Damu, the chief protagonist of the story, is seen as rebelling against the whole traditional society when the fauzdar turns his foul tongue on Babasaheb Ambedkar. For Damu, that is blasphemy. Babasaheb is his god. That very might Damu decides he has had enough. He will throw away the miserable crutches of traditional village duties that has been saddled with and return to Mumbai. The bitter opposition of Ambedkarites to Mahatma Gandhi’s description of
untouchables as Harijans finds no place in Damu’s story. Where as in Moon’s (2001) even the anti-Gandhi demonstration during his visit to Nagpur, forcing him to turn back, is debated and described. In comparison Vasant Moon’s *Growing up Untouchable in India* is more political. Though Damu works for the Dalit cause, sporadically in the early years and more consistently later, he does not discuss issues of political debate as Moon does. Damu’s guts and sinews are too strong, his response to Ambedkar’s call to Dalits to “Educate, Unite, Agitate” too complete and all-consuming to allow him to live in the past. His story lives in the present.

The recent spurt in Dalit literature in India is an attempt to bring to the forefront the experiences of discrimination, violence and poverty of the Dalit. Often, with religious and social sanction, these experiences have for long been silenced and marginalized as uniliterary. More recent is the trend to deny their existence altogether. The growing corpus of Dalit texts-poems, novels and autobiographies—however, seeks to ratify this while describing the nuances of Dalit cultures. Although Dalit literature comes in all genres, the auto-biographies are the most popular. This phenomenal growth in Dalit writing is part of growing need of the dalits themselves to articulate their experiences. We can see that these texts which have for centuries been relegated to the margins, offer a challenge to literary aesthetics which, with its caste and gender bias, have for long been masquerading descriptions of the traumas of being an “untouchable” and the target of upper-caste ideology and machinations, these voices question the institutions and ideologies that have placed them at the margins.

Even more distressing are the stories of Dalit women; for if men have it bad, the women have it worse. Bama’s autobiographical-novel, *Karukku* – the first Tamil Dalit text-deals with the experiences of a Dalit woman in a variety of social institutions like the village, the family, the education system, the church and the clergy. The caste system has been so deeply ingrained in the Indian psyche that institutions that ought to promote egalitarianism or awareness and up propagating the same distinctions. The stories of
individuals such as these function as voices of entire communities of people who have undergone similar experiences of discrimination.

*Karukku* is a poignant subaltern novel that speaks of the childhood experiences of the author, Bama. The significance of it comes from its social message. The author’s childhood is interspersed with events that repeatedly bring to the fore the harrowing experiences of a Dalit child. It comes across as a sincere attempt to tell a story that is matter-of-factly indignant about ill-treatment in the name of class, caste and religion. The story is that of poverty, pain and neglect more than that of anger or aggression, which creates awareness more than anger. Constantly reproved for being a member of a lower caste, the Dalit children go through severe abuse and torment. It is not just the story of the author alone; it seeks to expose the plight of thousands of Dalit children. She finds that several of her own people have internalized the inferiority that is imposed on them by the upper classes. She wants her novel to be a “two-edged sword”. While on the one hand it challenges the oppressors who have enslaved and disempowered the Dalits, on the other hand it reiterates the need for a new society with ideals such as justice, equality and love. It seeks to establish a better society for the Dalits part from questioning the oppressors. It does not retaliate violently to injustice. On the contrary, it seeks to emphasize on the importance of education, moral values and unity. During severe oppression, her people hardly questioned authority or fought against it. They rather sought to dodge the low temporarily and escape punishment than work towards long-term solutions. She believes that a lack of unity among the Dalits will make it easier for the upper castes to subjugate them. Bama (2000:41) says:

*A hundred times a second there are scuffles among them. Shameless fellows. Of course the upper-caste men will laugh at them. In stead of unity together in a village of many castes, if they keep challenging each other to fights, what will happen to all these men in the end?*
We can see here that this novel has undoubtedly been used as a means of political assertion. This is not localized in individualism but links the individual to his entire caste community as a way of gaining power and support in a group struggle against similarly experienced oppression. Manager Pandey has rightly claimed about Dalit autobiography which is perfectly suitable here that

if it is an autobiography, then it is not of an individual but of a community. Putting community in place of the individual...the past and present of the community itself becomes the plot of the story.

In this novel, it is evident that the protagonist’s own subjective autonomy is bound up in a close relationship with her caste community. She faces personal discrimination and is also deeply sensitive to the pain of other oppressed Dalits, with whom she identifies to such a great extent that she seems to experience their pain herself. She repeatedly talks about the importance of education for the Dalit child. Bama (2000:15) quotes her Annan’s words:

Because we are born into the Paraya jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities

She also stresses on the need for the Dalits to demand better wages for heavy physical labour. There are places where she is proud and happy the way she is but is angered by the treatment given to her. Bama (2000:24) writes:

Are we not human beings? Do they not have common sense? Do they not have such attributes as a sense of honour and self-respect? Are they without any wisdom, beality, dignity? What do we lack

It can be explicitly noticed that Karukku is not merely a militant voice seeking to liberate the Dalits from oppression; it gives an identity to the Dalits by proudly recollecting the cultural significance of being a Dalit, in the remnants of memories. It
seeks to decentralize the established structures and most importantly it becomes the harbinger of an awakening and a reiteration of the Dalit’s freedom to question, rebel and reinterpret.

Thus, we can see the Dalit autobiographies can be described as “narratives of pain”, a pain which stings one narrative event to the next, and it is the pain that binds individual Dalits together into ‘imagined community’ of fellow-sufferers. Yet the experience of oppression does not imprison Dalits in eternal victimhood, but rather is then used by the Dalit community as a tool mobilized against this ‘cruel and inhuman social order’ which supports caste-based discrimination. Dalit autobiography transforms an experience of pain into a narrative of resistance. For Dalit autobiography, the entire life-narrative is based on the idea of the communal identity and in it “the self belongs to the people, and the people find a voice in the self”. Subjectivity in these autobiographies in thus complicated by the deep connection between the individual self and the communal self. Thus, for the Dalit community, like many other marginalized communities such as Aboriginal community, autobiography is not singly a kind of literature but is a form of assertion and resistance in its own right.

**Australian Aboriginal Autobiographies**

If Dalits in India one the one hand, are bearing the brunt of caste discrimination, Aborigines in Australia, on the other hand, are drinking the bitter water of humiliation and indignity of racial discrimination. Pain, torture and sufferings, however, are of the same kind. That’s why both Dalit writings as well as Aboriginal writings are undoubtedly ‘narratives of pain’. There are scores of similarities between there two writings as mentioned earlier in this chapter. Aboriginal autobiographies too are not simply the narration of an individual’s life story, but are used as a means of political assertion. Their agenda also is not localized in individualism but links the individual to her entire

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1. Ibid. p. 24.
Aboriginal community as a way of gaining power and support in a group struggle against similarly experienced oppression and exploitation. For example Ruby Langford (1988) points out: Many Aboriginal women claim that while the narrative they unfold is their personal story, their experiences are similar to those of many other Aboriginal women. For this reason these personal stories can be viewed as ‘testimonies’ to the way Aboriginal people were treated by non-Aboriginal people: in particular, the government in the form of the Aborigines protection Board, the Native Welfare Department, the Education Department, the Police, the Church, missionaries, and other institutions within the state apparatus. Louis Althusser(1971) points out that it is these institutions through which ruling class idea are legitimated. Furthermore, these writings are ‘testimony’ not only to the dominant attitudes and beliefs of the society but also to the struggle to survive because of the human rights denied to Aboriginal peoples. Ruby Langford-Ginibi (1988:269), the Koori writer, explains why she wrote her life story at the end of Don’t Take…Town:

_I knew when I finished this book a weight would be lifted from my mind, not only because I could examine my own life from it and know who I was, but because it may help better the relationship between the Aboriginal and white people. That it might give some idea of the difficulty we had surviving between two cultures, that we are here and will always be here_

We have seen that the condition of Dalits in India was very bad and they were considered as outcaste and untouchables in the India society; more so, they were placed at the lowest rung of the society. The conditions of Aborigives in Australia was even worse they were placed at the “bottom of the scale of humanity” and they were not even considered human beings in the beginning. There was popular theorizing by the white perceptions that Aborigines were less than human, that they had no ‘souls’ which permitted the massacre of Aboriginal people on a scale wide enough to see their

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2 Mostern, p.51.
extermination as being, at the very least, countenanced the part of the policy makers, who remained passive in the face of wide-scale killings. Oen would be shocked to learn that the Register of 17th June, 1914, made the following startling announcement:

*The native* tribes of Australia are generally considered to be at the bottom of the scale of humanity...and probably to be inferior in mental development to many of the stone-age inhabitants of Europe in prehistoric ages. Yet they have every right to be considered man.

**HUMAN AFTER ALL**

Though infantile in intellectual development, the Australian natives are thoroughly human as can readily be seen by the cubic measurement of their brains, 99.35 inches compared with that of a gorilla 30.51 inches.

The statement itself is absurd. Even more absurd is the arrogance of the dominant group recognizing Aboriginal people as “human after all”, or “thoroughly human”.

The world of Aboriginal society was totally controlled by the white world. Social legislation of the white world was instrumental in destroying the social structures of the Aboriginal people and therefore the locus of identity. Through policies of segregation, Aboriginal people were not only excluded from White society, they were located in a negative world by mainstream society. The white world in the form of Australian Government articulated a conceptualization of Aboriginal identity as “working definition” of Aboriginal identity:

*An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he lives.* (Quoted in Jenkin,1979:248)
This meant that if Aboriginal people wanted to locate themselves in a Aboriginal world then, in terms of the definition proposed above, they must locate themselves in a world of meaning that had characteristics that were specifically Aboriginal, a world which was legitimated, made credible to the self, at all levels of “theorizing”…

As Dalits in India were excluded from the society and declared untouchables. So were Aborigines in Australia though they were not declared untouchable. Aboriginal people who tried to locate themselves in the white world met with hostility and rejection:

*On the street there are the eyes, staring at black skin* (Australian Department:1981)

*I’d walk into a town. You walk down the street and you’re black and the white man doesn’t have to say a word to you. He steps around you, you’re shit, you’re nothing. And they cut you down with this sort of concept and you get that way, you feel it, you feel inferior* (Gilbert.k 1973:41)

In South Australia before the 1959’s and even into the 1960’s, many, if not most urban people had never seen an Aboriginal person. Perkin relates his own experience in Alice Springs:

*We had to stay there. We were not allowed in Alice springs after dark, only for the pictures on Saturday night. That rule has relaxed a little over the years….But before the idea was simple: ‘Keep the street clean of Aborigines’. That was the way we had to live-as scum, the unwanted* (Dixon,c 1975:49)

Aborigines were separated spatially by the location of their housing as is the case of Dalits in India; they were separated socially from those with whom they worked or placed sport, the same case was with Dalits in India as well. Perking further relates:
I would go into a pub with the cricket team and the barman would say, “Listen darkie, you know you don’t belong in here. If you don’t get out, I’ll get the copper on to you!

Thus, we can see that when the British claimed sovereignty over this country in 1799 and colonized the land as “terra nullius”, the Aboriginal people have suffered the consequences of the “terra nullius” theory and been subject to grave injustices since then. They not only suffered the loss of their land, but also suffered the degradation and dehumanisation that British colonization left in its wake. To the indigenous people of Australia and the indigenous peoples throughout other lands, European colonization was to disrupt their lifestyles, their cultural practices, ideologies and heritage to the point that they were totally wiped out.

The white world implemented two “conceptual machinery” those of therapy and nihilation, which included other policies of segregation, isolation, dispersal and assimilation also, to wipe out Aboriginal people. Therapy was employed to return the deviant individual to the norms of the mainstream group. Nihilation, on the other hand, acted in the opposite way and was brought into play to protect a universe of meaning by liquidating conceptually all alternative systematizations of meaning. This was the conceptual machinery adopted by the white world to control the Aboriginal world of society.

When it became clear that the Aboriginal people would not die off, the protection board for the Aborigines decided to break up all Aboriginal communities. They would then sell the land to the newly arrived European for farming. The board started by taking away all the rights from Aborigines to own or use reserve lands; the Aborigines could own nothing. The reserves were made a training ground for Aboriginal children to become servants. The protection board had plans to remove Aboriginal children from their reserves and place them under the control of white employers. After these children were removed, they were never allowed to return home. The white society thought it
would be in the best interest of the child to remove her from the corrupting influence of her Aboriginal family, they would send the girls to an institution or foster home, and train her to become a servant. Aborigines worked for flour, sugar, and tea rations on the cattle stations. Aboriginal women on cattle stations often worked harder than the men, who were mostly stockman. The women not only had hard domestic chores – such as cooking, cleaning, washing, and caring for children – but, they also worked as cattle drivers; with camel teams; as shepherds; road repairers; water carriers; house builders; and gardeners. If they tried to escape, they were captured and beaten.

If we compare this conditions with that of Dalits in India, we find this similarity to great extent. For example, Dalits also have the same kind of professions such as: working as servants, cleaning, washing, water carriers; gardeners house builders; road repairers etc. that the Aborigines have in Australia. Most girls who were removed from their white employers ended up working for middle-class white people. These girls usually were awakened before 5:30 A.M. to do all of the household jobs. These girls often suffered sexual and physical abuse. Often the white people would send Aboriginal women out into the white community, and if they came back pregnant, the rule was to keep each woman for two years and then take the child away; sometimes mother and child would never see each other again. The children then grew up in a white community knowing nothing of the Aboriginal culture and environment.

Turning to texts now, Wandering girl the autobiography under consideration is a first-person account of an Aboriginal teenage girl living in Australia in the 1960s. As was the case with many Aboriginal children at that time, Glenyse also became a victim of ‘stolen generation’ and was taken away from her natural parents at the age of one and placed in a German Catholic mission to be raised in the European manner. At 16, she was sent out to work as a maid for a wealthy white family. After suffering many humiliations from her mistress, Ward summons the courage to strike out on her own.

Glenyse(1987:51) writes:
You see in the early days of survival and struggle, there was a lot of hardship and agony amongst the Aboriginal people. Through the misguided minds of earnest white people we were taken away from our natural parents. This affected all of us. We lost out identity through being put into missions, forced to abide by the European way

Glenyse Ward (1987:1) gives her testimony as to the manner in which she was taken away from her mother to Wandering mission:

*I was taken away from my natural parents at the age of one, because mum took me to see doctor when I was sick. The Native Welfare was called in and mum was told she was an unfit mother and I would be better off put into a home and reared up the European way*

We can notice that Glenyse had no other choice: she’s delivered to Mayor Bigelow and his vicious wife as their one domestic. Housed in a dirty garage, instructed to eat meager, inferior food after cooking sumptuous meals for the family to share in their luxurious dining room, given unfamiliar tasks with no instruction, brow-beaten and humiliated at every turn, she quietly retaliates by garaging hungrily and luxuriating in the Bigelow’s bath when they are out. She was supposed to wake up before dawn everyday and slave for fifteen hours. She was given tin plate to eat of and tin mug to drink from and slept on a shabby cat above a garage. It must have been very humiliating for her to drink off a tin mug, which was given to pet dogs and cats. Glenyse (1987:1 writes:

*As she poured herself and Mr. Bigelow tea in beautiful cups and lowers. I wondered if I was going to get a cup. I could only see two cups and saucers on the table, when she went to a cupboard in the far left of the kitchen, I thought, “oh, that’s good, she’s going to get me a cup and saucer”. To my amazement she came back to the table with an old tin mug, poured tea in it, and placed it down infront of me.*
Glenyse (1987:11-12) couldn’t even retaliate properly she was taught ‘never to speak out to people unless we were spoken to first, no matter what the circumstances’. She was given very clear instruction by Mrs. Begelow that she was there as her dark servant, that she was to obey her orders and do what she was told to do. Glenyse(1987:12) writes: “In those days, not so long ago either, we were not allowed to say anything against our white bosses”. What is foregrounded here is the ‘terror’, ‘fear’ the child must have experienced. This ‘terror’ or ‘fear’ emerges because of an ‘unspeakable’ act; an act that silences people because they are a ‘already’ judged as ‘inferior’. The voices of Aboriginal people have been judged as not legitimate in the phrase universe of the dominant Anglo-Australian policy making.

It can be argued here that Dalits in India are also rendered same kind of treatment. There come many situations in Dalit’s life where they have to face their upper caste masters with folded hands, sometimes even on knees. They don’t dare to speak against their masters even if master has committed mistakes. This is because their voices are just like that of Aboriginal people’s, judged as inferior. It can be discerned here that while the narrative unfolded is author’s personal story, her experiences are similar to those of many other Aboriginal women. Thus it becomes a text of political assertion and resistance.

Sally Morgan(1987) in My Place writes of her quest to uncover her heritage/her identity as an Aborigine, a heritage that had been denied her for many years by her family’s insistence that they were not Aboriginal at all. When she says now that she would never feel bitter about the fact that her grandmother and mother had hidden their background from her and her brothers and sisters, Sally (1987:126) acknowledges, “it was a survival technique. I can’t be bitter about that”. The basic question one would ask here is – why is it that her grandmother, Daisy Corunna, and her mother, Gladys Milroy had hidden their background? The appropriate answer to this question is given by Sally’s mother when sally questions her about their family and heritage. The truth was this (Sally 1987:126) writes):
My granny was taken away and she was a servant or virtually a slave for a lot of her life, so they had very hard, difficult lives...Aboriginal people had such a terrible time...like my grandma and my mum were very frightened that when dad died that us five kids would be taken away and that was based in reality because my grandma had been taken away and then my mum had been taken away and they just couldn’t handle the idea that a third generation of our family would be torn apart.

If we go back to the Australian history for a second, we can remember that the period from 1788 to 1967 (i.e. the year of the Referendum granting Aboriginal people citizenship) is the period of outright oppression which in turn gave way to assimilation. The time frame covered in the book expands from 1893 to 1983 which means the surveys approximately 160 years of Australian race relations, specifically race relations in Western Australia where the stories are set. The incidents that happened with these aboriginal women were the outcome of the Assimilation policy which was founded on the concept of “the Australian way of life” which preached virtues of a common culture and demanded that all racial minorities conform by adopting this as individuals and by abandoning their difference, which was closely linked to their identity as part of a community. These circumstances help us understand why Morgan and her family suppressed their Aboriginal background. The forgetfulness and denial of identity that is thematically central to My Place was the objective of assimilationist and separatist policies; the aim of the policies, whether benevolently intended or not, was to absorb indigenous children into white society, to force them to forget and deny their Aboriginal heritage. It is the direct and indirect effects of these policies that led Gladys and Nan to deny their children knowledge of their Aboriginal background; if the children knew and world got out, the family might be torn apart. As mothers they feared that their children might suffer the same fate as Arthur, Daisy and Gladys, all of whom had been uprooted and exploited by whites for no other reason than they were Aboriginal.
If it is the direct or indirect effects of severe policies that led Gladys and Nan to deny their children knowledge of their Aboriginal background, Sharankumar Limbale, a Dalit writer under consideration, was able to obtain a house on rent in a clean and tidy colony by hiding his caste. This is because the caste Hindus behave inhumanely with Dalit community in Indian society. If the mainstream group came to know and any word got out they would kick the dalit out of the colony. Another example can be cited here, the protagonist of the auto-biogrpahy Tiraskrit is able to study well in a college only by concealing his caste: “In Delhi while pursuing B.A. in Bhagat Singh College (evening). I had to undergo similar conditions, when I felt that I can not control these conditions then I had the compromise. I started using my gotra ‘Chauhan’ with my name. Now my collegemates thought I was a Rajput or Thakur”.

So here also it was a survival technique and direct effects of caste discrimination in India. In My Place for Gladys and Nan the secrets Sally wants to uncover are the source of profound shame and the most difficult secret they are forced to confront is the possibility that Howden. Drake-Brockman may be the father of both Nan and Sally’s mother Gladys. Nan’s silence can be understood as a response to shame and fear. These women were sexually exploited by the station-owners or stationmasters. Even Sally is in search of her identity, her place of belonging.

This situation can be compared with that of Sharankumar Limbale. In his autobiography The Outcaste, we can see the author had no identity, no home or place of belonging. We find this similarity between these two autobiographies. His mother, after her husband left, was sexually exploited by the high caste men of the village. Limbale was born with a Dalit mother and a father who was the chief of a village. He could not get certain papers signed for school because he could not properly identify his caste by his mother or father.

Sally Moran’s novel maps her family’s attempt to recover and celebrate their Aboriginal identity against the official white version of Australian history, and as such, is
usefully thought about as a form of counter history. Thus the contrast between speaking out and remaining silent becomes an underlying structure of the book. In writing her personal history Morgan is also writing the history of untold numbers of Aboriginal families in the years covered by the book. She is writing within the conventions of the traditional European genre of auto-biography, but what is important to note is the ways in which her individual story becomes collective story-telling or communal history. It is more or less like Dalit auto-biographies. For instance Jothan links the individual story with the entire Dalit community where the protagonist (‘I’) and the Dalit community (‘we’) are inextricably linked in a complex web of meaning. The protagonist’s own subjective autonomy is also bound up in a close relationship with his caste community. He faces personal discrimination and is also deeply sensitive to the pain of other oppressed Dalits, with whom he identifies to such a great extent that he seems to experience their pain himself.

In My Place it can be discerned that like Arthur, Nan and Gladys cooperate with whites in order to survive, but one striking difference between their narratives and Arthur’s is that Arthur speaks relatively easily where as Nan and Gladys want to remain silent about the crimes committed against them. This is because they were frightened of severe punishment if they went against the policies. Similar case is with Dalits in India. To escape severe punishments, beatings, just like Nan and Gladys, prefer to remain silent about the crimes committed to them by the upper caste people. They do not dare to go against their orders and commands.

Even though the history related in My Place is identifiably personal, it does have a strong political dimension as other marginalized writings such as Dalit writings have. Arthur, for example, touches on the issue of Aboriginal land rights when he says that “we should get our land rights” because we were here “longer than them”, before “this country was invaded; but Morgan does not include long polemical passages calling for Aboriginal land rights as she might have done. Rather Morgan’s strategy is to present white injustice and inhumanity in such a way as to force readers to recognise the extent of
this injustice – and she does this most forcefully by asking us to confront the suffering of the Aboriginal characters – Arthur, Nan and Gladys – from their own point of view.

From Dalit writings Bama’s karukku, Narendra Jadhav’s Outcaste, Vasant Moon’s Growing up Untouchable in India have political dimension. Bama, for example, in her novel karukku repeatedly talks about the importance of education for the Dalit child. She believes that a lack of unity among the Dalits will make it easier for the upper castes to subjugate them:

A hundred times a second there are scuffles among them.
Shameless fellows of course the upper-caste men will laugh at them. Instead of uniting together in a village of many castes, if they keep challenging each other to fights, what will happen to all these men in the end?

Thus, it is noticeable that in My Place community is felt and lived. It has this sense of community, of family as its theme. While approximating the genre, she Aboriginalises it by stepping away from her icon individual life and into the lives of members of her black family.

An Aboriginal Mother Tells of the Old and the New (Roughsey, Elsie: 1994) is undoubtedly a political text in the sense that it questions the very fact of white dominance in Australia. In her text, we do not find a separation between ‘I’ and ‘they’ and moreover she often slides from objectively describing an incident to participating in it. It is a veritable encyclopaedia of Aboriginal beliefs and practices. Elsie’s suffering at the hands of the missionaries and their dormitory system which segregated Aboriginal children from their parents for the years of their childhood is a theme running through the pages. She sees her life as but one among the many likes of her Lardil people, and her aim in writing her book is not to tell her story, but their story. Thus Roughsey, Elsie (1994:236) closes her book with:
As I close the writing of my wonderful people, I feel sad to know they are gone now. Only memories last forever. Roughsey, Elsie (1994:236) writes that this story is not her story but life of my people:

This is the life of my people, and with the Europeans. I feel that people may understand what I have written about.

About the changes in their lives Roughsey, Elsie (1994:227) writes:

Within the days of my life I’ve spent, I’ve found myself learning and understanding, being so interested...what everyday life meant to me. Closely and carefully I watched nature of my people...how we treated our laws, customs and culture and they were almost wiped out.

There comes a situation where she seems to be quite apprehensive of the fact that though people are going to be independent now her people will never understand the meaning of this word ‘independent’ because they have never heard this word before. In Roughsey, Elsie’s (1994:228) words:

So now the Government expects us to take over to be independent, but my people never heard of being independent before, because they never heard or knew the word or what it all means. It’s just lucky few of us understand, and had to explain the word ‘independent’. ...‘Depend’ is the word we know of; ...that ‘independent’ was a European’s act and life...Aboriginals could never in the past years be equal as European.

We have seen earlier that the theme of political assertion has been one of the common considerations of Dalit writings as well in this sense this becomes a commonality between Dalit writings and Aboriginal writings. Ruby Langford (1988:50)

You pointed up your lips and rolled and combed your tainted hair ruby are you contemplating going out somewhere the shadow on the wall tells me the sun is going down Ru-uby, don’t take your love to town Kenny Rogers.
The above mentioned lines apparently illustrate the fact that Langford Ginibi’s life as a woman was affected by racism, and her life as an Aboriginal person affected by sexism. Often what is hard is talk about is sexual and other violence from white men in a historical situation where the sexism and sexual oppression encountered by women is compounded for black women by racism. Langford Ginibi (1988:105) is comparatively explicit bout this:

My grandmother was a full-blood. She was raped by an Italian, the banana plantation owner up home, Billy Nudgell, that’s how my mother came to be. You see

The question to be asked is whether her family members were alone to be sexually victimized. The answer is NO. There were a number of Aboriginal women who were raped and sexually exploited but never spoke against it. Ruby knowns this that’s why in the narrative she unfolds she concedes that her experiences are similar to those of many other Aboriginal women. In her another book, Langford’s friend Panamy, an Aboriginal artist, with whom she travels back to her Bundjalung country says as part of a speech that Ruby (1988:50) makes there:

Can you imagine what it’s like for a Koori woman, raped and beaten, to have to go for help to the same organisations that stole her kids initially and the same lot who are killing her brothers? Can you imagine how she feels about her so-called rights and protection? She knows she hasn’t got any. Whether she’s drunk or not, they believe she is drunk. It’s always the stereotypes a woman has to deal with before anything else, even before she can get help

Ruby Landford’s story is not simply an individual’s story it’s transformed into community. Ruby (1988:114) has commented:

This is not only my book, my story, it’s the story of every Aboriginal woman in this country today that’s got kids to raise. I’m only one
In fact right in the beginning of the book Ruby(1988:1) writes that it
‘is a true life story about an Aboriginal women’s struggle
to raise a family of nine children in a society divided
between black and white culture in Australia...And, it is
dedicated to every black woman who’s battled to raise a
family

So we can find that there are many commonalities between Ginibi and her
family’s experiences and these of other Aboriginal women’s mothers working to support
their children; looking after them when they are ill; dealing with weddings and death are
all such instances. Sharan Kumar Limbale’s mother, a Dalit woman, after her husband
left her, had her experiences of looking after her child similar to those of Ruby Langford.
As Ruby Langford was married not to one but three husbands, likewise Sharan Kumar’s
mother, who did not marry other men, but was forced to sleep with other men in the
village belonging to upper caste. So she had very much similar family experiences as
Ruby Langford had. Ruby describes a number of painful and sometimes embarrassing
experiences.

Ruby Langford also becomes a victim of domestic violence. Langford Ginibi is
beaten up by Sam earlier, and later by Lance. This experience is quite common among
Dalits in India. Dalit women are severely beaten by their husbands who come drunk at
night because of their extreme poverty and caste oppressions. Langford Ginibi
(1988:83) had no ‘room of her own’ then: her early formation as a writer came in ‘the
times I had to myself-the men gone to work and the kids still asleep – and I sat on the
bank fishing and thinking about life’

This can be found with Dalits in India as well. Narendra Jadhav narrates in his
book Outcaste that her parents had to move around here and there in the city looking for a
proper place when they ran away from village to escape the brutal caste oppression by the
upper caste villagers.
The Nyoongah writer and critic, Mudrooroo (1993:145) suggests that Langford Ginibi became explicitly political and entered activism through the initial act of writing *Don’t Take:*

> in the process of publication they become more aware of the politics and problems involved in the production of texts...They have to go through that process of finding a voice in the struggle as writers, of existing in textuality, and this is particularly so for Aboriginal women writers. Perhaps I should say that to be black and a woman in Australia is an awful place from which to write. For black women to write is to challenge the whole patriarchal mess.

Langford Ginibi’s earlier political involvement with groups like the Aboriginal Progressive Association had been curtailed by Lance who demanded to know why she didn’t stay at home to look after the kids ‘instead of running around to meetings’. For Langford Ginibi (1988:118) writing is also a way of articulating the pain of all these experiences, she recalls how ‘back in the room I’d run to hide my hurt’. ‘I can assure you that everything that’s written in there is true, because I’ve got the scars to prove it’. she also comments. These are both scars on the body and scars on the mind.

If for Langford Ginibi (1988:115) writing is ‘a way of articulating the pain of all these experiences’, then so is writing for Dalit writers as well. Their writings are also ‘narratives of pain’. It is this pain that binds individual Dalits together into a ‘Dalit community’. More than anything else, the ‘right’ or ‘ability’ of the marginalized Dalit group to write literature, as in the case of Aboriginal writers, comes under immediate contestation, and Dalit writers have been forced to fight for the right to speak as well as to redefine the boundaries of what can be said. All the Aboriginal autobiographies have been written with a sense of encompassing the stories of others, or as composites of the experiences of Aboriginal people (women especially). This can be viewed as a dialogue between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people about the history of injustices that Aboriginal people (women) have experienced. Anne Brewster thus rightly points out that
in their writings, Aboriginal women’s “life (his) stories construct alternative versions of self and community that resist and oppose the hegemonic narratives of individualism and nationalism”, thus constituting an alternative ‘self’ which is a self constituted by race and gender within a collectivity.

To sum up, it can be submitted that Aboriginal writings and Dalit writings are converging towards the fact that they are a form of “resistance” literature and “narratives of pain” and this binds them together into an ‘imagined community’ which mainstream group calls it a ‘marginalized community’. Both writings have launched their literary careers by first narrating their life-story, i.e., making autobiography an institutional space through which they can first enter the literary public sphere. It has given these writers a way of uniting with a larger ‘particular’ community to create a powerful group which can be used to fight against oppression and discrimination. Their narratives are based on the idea of the communal identity. As Stephen Butterfield writes, ‘the self belongs to the people, and the people find a voice in the self. Subjectivity in these autobiographies is thus complicated by the deep connection between the individual self and the communal self. These autobiographies have been used as a means of political assertion. Both literatures use the writers life experiences of pain as a. In both literatures ‘individual’ is linked to the entire community as a way of gaining power and support in a group struggle against similarly experienced oppression.

References


