

From Silence to Voice: The Role of Education in Indian Women's Autobiographies

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Abstract- Education is a significant tool through which individuals share their experience, know about their identity and voice it through their words. Education has proved to transform lives especially in the context of women in Indian society. Education serves as a central theme in women's autobiographical work where it helps to empower, express and resist societal and patriarchal norms. Women autobiographies reveal how education emerged as a powerful medium which made women travel from silence to voice, from resistance to acceptance. Women narratives provide the light on education which not only focuses on personal experience but also show the broader socio-cultural realities from women's lens. This paper incorporates close reading of autobiographies of Baby Halder and Bama Faustina and highlights the role of education in shaping their identities. This paper is going to be a study on how education and learning functions as a powerful tool for self-definition, resistance, and empowerment.

Index Terms- Autobiography, Education, Empowerment, Identity, Resistance

I. INTRODUCTION

Education has long been viewed as a powerful tool for personal growth and societal progress. In patriarchal societies, women are often socialized into roles of submission and silence. Their knowledge is seen as limited to domestic spaces, and their access to formal education is frequently hindered by social or economical barriers. Yet, history and literature are filled with examples of women who, through education, have challenged these boundaries.

Autobiography as a literary form becomes especially significant in this context. Autobiography as a genre provides an intimate glimpse into the lived realities of women who have historically been silenced. It allows women to narrate their own lives and reclaim histories that have been silenced or distorted. This paper focuses on two such autobiographies- Karukku by Bama Faustina and A Life Less Ordinary by Baby Halder. While the authors come from vastly different geographical and socio-cultural backgrounds, both

their narratives reveal how education, both formal and informal, transformed their lives, enabled them to challenge structural inequalities and reshape their identities.

The link between women's education and social progress is well established. Educated women are more likely to resist patriarchal control, advocate for their rights, and become a distinct self to participate actively in societal development. Education also offers an entry into a free space wherein they can present themselves according to them. However, for many women especially those from disadvantaged groups education remains a tough terrain.

According to Feminist theorist Bell Hooks, education should become "the practice of freedom". For women situated at the margins, education is not merely about literacy, it is a path toward self-awareness, resistance, and authorship. Sharmila Rege's concept of "Dalit feminist standpoint" further reinforces how the personal experiences of marginalized women challenge dominant narrative to reclaim their liberal space. This view is particularly pertinent when we examine the lives of working class women and women from rural backgrounds, as education is doubly significant for them as it becomes both a platform of struggle as well as a space for liberation. When these women gain access to education whether in structured institutions or through informal means, they often use it to question not only societal norms but also literary traditions that have excluded their voices. The autobiographies of Bama and Baby Halder confronts the dominated socio-cultural norms and redefines freedom through education.

II. BAMA FAUSTINA'S KARUKKU

Karukku is a groundbreaking autobiographical work written by Bama Faustina in 1992. It marks a turning point in Dalit literature and feminist writing in India. The text articulates the lived reality of a Christian Dalit woman in Tamil Nadu. Through her narrative,

Bama focuses on her experiences of caste-based discrimination, both in society and within the Catholic Church. At the heart of the narrative, she highlights the role of education and how she used it as a tool to resist from her early years.

Talking about her early days in schooling, she says that it was filled with contradictions. On the one hand, where she was academically excellent, she was constantly reminded of her Dalit identity through discriminatory practices, on the other. Teachers' attitudes, classmates' prejudices, and societal norms always tried to remind her of her position as inferior in and outside school. School was one of the first spaces where Bama recognized the injustices she faced and began questioning them. She notes, "Because I was a Dalit, I had to be ten times better to be considered equal". However, instead of turning away from education, Bama embraces it as a tool of resistance. Through literacy and learning, she gains the vocabulary to articulate her pain and the awareness to question the structures that marginalize her.

Her journey through convent school and her time as a nun become another encounter with discrimination and caste based exclusion. Her eventual decision to leave the religious order reflects her internal conflict with the institutions that perpetuate discrimination under the guise of morality. Education became a medium for her to liberate her from the boundaries and by using the same tool of literacy and literature, she uplifted herself along with her community.

Education gave Bama the power to write about herself, but most importantly write truthfully her story in her own language, on her own terms. Karukku defies traditional literary and academic norms by using the fragmented, non-linear, regional language. Education thus enabled Bama not only to reclaim her voice but to challenge and reshape the literary canon itself.

III. BABY HALDER'S *A LIFE LESS ORDINARY*

While Bama's story is deeply focused on caste discrimination and religious practices, Baby's story comes from a different setting, with different constraints. *A Life Less Ordinary*, written by a domestic worker, Baby Halder in 2006, presents a narrative of poverty, abuse, and invisibility. Born into a poor family, she was forced into an abusive

marriage at the age of twelve and burdened with the responsibility of motherhood at the age of thirteen. She was abandoned by her mother at an early age which she saw as a reason her father denied her education. Her childhood love for learning was evident, as she writes, "I loved school as much as I hated home". By expressing the deep loss she felt after losing her two significant life moving factors, she writes, "Now, I thought of only two things: whether I was asleep or awake, my thoughts would constantly turn to my studies and my mother."

The early exposure to education remained a source of inner strength despite the abrupt end to her schooling. Her reencounter with studies happened years later in her life when she met her employer Prabodh Kumar, a retired anthropology professor and writer. It was a turning point in her life when Prabodh saw her interest in his books and studies. He gave her Amar Meyebela (*My Girlhood*), the autobiography of Taslima Nasrin, to read. This book had a profound impact on her. Nasrin was one such woman who wrote about sexual abuse, discrimination, inequality, and like Baby, she had struggled for literacy in a deeply patriarchal society. With the encouragement of Prabodh Kumar and a parallel between the lives of Nasrin and herself, Baby got inspired to begin writing her own life story. Reading gave her language for the pain she had endured, and the act of writing enabled her to step out of invisibility and claim dignity and identity.

Halder's story becomes particularly significant as it expresses that even in its most informal forms, education can still bring transformation. She travels a journey from a common domestic worker, voiceless and invisible being to an author, praised and celebrated across the world through reading and writing. Her story redefines what it means to be educated and have a distinct voice to tell stories.

IV. AUTOBIOGRAPHIES AS AN ACT OF RECLAMATION

Both Bama Faustina and Baby Halder use autobiography not only to narrate their personal journeys but also to reclaim their voice and identity. Autobiographies became a medium for them to represent themselves with a new perspective, a genre long used by feminists to reclaim fair space in society and literary canon. Education, in both cases, formal or informal, is the key factor to bring transformation

and agency. Without access to reading and writing, their stories might have been lost somewhere in the voiced society which never gave importance to women's voices.

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These narratives also question the traditional norms of literary canon. By voicing against the dominant discrimination and patriarchal practices through autobiographies, the narratives of Bama and Baby defied the set boundaries and extended the mainstream literary culture. Their stories highlight how education can give women the power to narrate and reclaim their own lives.

V.CONCLUSION

The autobiographies of Bama Faustina and Baby Halder clearly demonstrate the critical role that education plays in the lives of women. Education received in any form, formal or otherwise, gives women the power to question, resist, and redefine their place in the world. It allows them to move from the margins to the center not just in society but also in literature. The stories of Bama and Baby signifies the power of education reminding us that education is not just about schooling; it is about awakening, expressing, and transforming lives in a positive way. It is the key to breaking chains both visible and invisible. In a society where inequalities and discriminations dominate, these narratives serve as a powerful reminder that education can pave the way for inclusion and equality.

As a society, we must recognise that education empowers women. Education is not just a right for all but is a transformative force which can help us to make a society where women are not just heard but celebrated as an individual. With good access to education, women can secure their fair space in society as well as the literary world.

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