

# A STUDY OF PAIN AND RESISTANCE IN VASANT MOON'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY GROWING UP UNTOUCHABLE IN INDIA

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## Abstract

One of the most important literary genres among readers, academics, authors, critics, and activists worldwide is autobiography. This essay considers the significance of Dalit autobiographies, which not only help us comprehend firsthand recollections of the autobiographers' lives and connect to their lived reality through their human emotions and situations, but also document the Dalits' protests and movements and the inhumane treatment they endured at the hands of Hindu society. This paper also discusses how Vasant Moon's autobiography, *Growing Up Untouchable in India*, differs from other Dalit biographies and autobiographies because, at a certain point in the narrative, it stops being a personal autobiography and transitions into a community biography and movement.

**Keywords:** Autobiography, Protest, survival, Pain, Resistance

## INTRODUCTION

The "autobiography" genre solely relies on the writer's recollection since the biographer analyzes and records a vast array of former experiences, events, and occurring in his or her own life. Prior to the subject of literary expressions, this genre was presumably not seen as a grand tradition or mainstream in literature studies. Nevertheless, it acquired popularity and was eventually recognized. This multifaceted form of self-expression was not exclusive to any one nation; rather, it extended its roots and branches to people of all ages in several nations. Reading autobiographies helped students link to the autobiographers' lived reality with their human feelings and situations and comprehend firsthand stories of their life.

Activists, socialists, and historians assert that throughout history, numerous voices have consistently been marginalized and suppressed. The voice of the Dalit people in India was one such voice that was long ignored. The word "Dalit," which means impoverished, repressed, and rooted in the ground, has taken on several meanings and connotations. During the colonial era, the scheduled class also referred to as the oppressed, dejected, or downtrodden class, was referred to as Dalit. With the rise of the Dalit Panther in the 1970s, this term gained a sense of militancy and was proudly used to express disapproval of the class system. A topic and major theme of Dalit works in English-language Indian literature are the hardships, demonstrations, tribulations, and distress brought forth by Dalit activists, victims, and authors.

In addition to other well-known genres including novels, poetry, and non-fiction, authors have made numerous deliberate and concerted attempts to offer their voices in the form of narrative biographies or autobiographies. In addition to detailing the inhumane and disregarded treatment of the Dalits by Hindu society, these Dalit memoirs also document their demonstrations and actions. These authors then used this genre as a vehicle to express their oppression and misery.

M.F. Jilthe makes a valid remark on this literary form:

*The voiceless found a voice here; the wordless found word here. (Deivasigamani 18)*

This paper aims to share a Dalit's recollections of childhood trauma, suffering, and observations as well as his journey of protest against a certain historical fact that is portrayed in his well-known autobiography, *Growing Up Untouchable in India*. Vasant Moon provided insight into Dr. Ambedkar's views, philosophy, and beliefs by editing seventeen volumes of his works and speeches in the English language. One of his masterpieces, *Life of Women in Buddha's Period* (1989), depicts the Buddhist era as a golden age for Indian women, when their various duties and responsibilities were understood and accepted. Through Dalit activism, education, and community service, Vasant Moon devoted his life to improving the Dalit people and attempting to elevate them from their marginalized status. In his autobiography, he himself described how he turned

the Dalit community's marginalization into a new creative form.

Moon, who was raised in Vasti as Mahar, traces his travels in this autobiography. In many respects, this life story differs from other Dalit works in that Moon is not shown as a miserable victim or as a member of the underprivileged group who lacks ambition and optimism. He had a strong enough spirit as a child to resist the effects of untouchability. The Vasti were a close-knit group of people. Moon consequently lacked a fundamental comprehension of caste prejudice and stigmatization during his academic career. All facets of society were represented among Moon's academic colleagues and instructors. They did not feel uncomfortable or discriminated against, and their relationship was open and cordial. As a worker and activist, he had the chance to collaborate with and interact with numerous significant Savarna people.

Since he firmly believed that education and movements will improve the lot of the Dalit community, his recollections of those times are joyful and deserving of being treasured. Through Moon's observations, experiences, and story, readers are able to observe the caste system in India as well as the hunger, oppression, and suffering of the Mahar people. According to him, there were numerous subcastes in Vasti that avoided one another and didn't communicate. They sat in different rows at public gatherings and avoided dining together. In the event of an error, the Panchayat would conduct a purifying ceremony. He states that:

*Many subcastes existed in the community, eight to ten houses of Ladvans, eight to ten of the Barkes. All these were on the southern side of the neighborhood, while the Zhade-Ghavanés and Somvashis were in the middle, and the entire rest of the neighborhood belonged to the Bavanes. Before I was born, the subcastes didn't eat in each other's houses. At public gatherings they sat in separate rows. The Ladvans, Zhades-Ghavanés, and Barkes would not sit on the mats of the Bavanes. If by mistake anyone sat down in the wrong place, the sub caste panchayat would do a purification ceremony. The entire neighborhood would have to be washed with the water from the well near the temple. Later, when taps came, the Barke women would not put their hands on the taps of the Bavane women. (Moon 28)*

Despite the terrible persecution by the upper class, the Dalit community's ethos was so strong that everyone took great pleasure in being a member of that caste. This book also highlights Ambedkar's impact on Moon's life, as his love of reading led to his deep interest in Babasaheb's philosophy. This, in turn, affected his personal life in a way that allowed him to break the long-standing caste system and marry a girl from a different subcaste with the intention of educating her. As he states:

*I was determined that at least I would marry outside the subcaste. (Moon 207)*

The structured social and political groups that the Mahar community established to advance equality and dignity are also documented in this work. The task of fighting against Dalit atrocities and uniting them into a party of disciplined and resilient fighters who could seize power from the ruling class and give it to the downtrodden was taken up by the revolutionary Samta Sainik Dal. Dashrath Patil was one such leader. In 1930, he persuaded the Mahar people to cease transporting dead animals. As a result of these demonstrations:

*In every village boycotts were imposed on these rebels by caste Hindus. Mahars who went to the market could not make purchases. Mills in the village were closed to them; beatings began. (Moon 12)*

To support the education of Dalit children, numerous other community members have established schools. Moon gives the example of his paternal grandfather, Vithoba Raoji Moon, a prominent Nagpur social leader who emphasized the importance of educating the Dalits. Vasant Moon provides readers with a comprehensive and lively overview of his Mahar community culture through his family, relatives, and activists. This is where the autobiography stops being a personal autobiography and becomes a community biography, which Moon supports by stating that Gangya, Balya, Pandya, and Janya are all present in this work of mine. (Moon 177)

The Mahar community underwent a significant mental and psychological transformation as a result of Ambedkar's teachings. Moon and his companions were persuaded to protest, referring to them as Harijans, because his teachings helped them become conscious of their own existence and individuality. Moon's philosophy was also transformed by Ambedkar's teachings, which helped him recognize the rights of Dalit people. He disseminated the idea that Dalits' status and social hierarchy could be altered by education. He was greatly influenced by Ambedkar's motto, "Educate, Organize, and Agitate," and he believed that the key to Dalit empowerment and independence was education, collective action, organization, and agitation. He states at one time that:

*As education spread within the community, its cultural consciousness began to be transformed.*

*People demanded that the qawwali singers do social songs. (Moon 155)*

Throughout this book, Moon has made numerous statements about the ability of education to alter people's perspectives. He remembers learning Hardy's Return of the Native in one of his English classes,

and he came to the following realization:

*The roles in this novel revolve around a specific region of England. The atmosphere of this region determines the life and nature of those characters. The form of composition of that novel impressed itself on my mind. I became conscious that my life also was shaped by the community and people around me. In those days, I kept on thinking that I should write a novel and create a picture of the Ambedkarite movement in it. (Moon 161)*

He obviously draws attention to how schooling has shaped his beliefs and influenced his thinking. He reaffirmed the belief that those who lack education are easily taken advantage of by those in positions of authority. He started a magazine to try his hand at writing:

*The name of the magazine was Shuklendu (Rising Moon). Just as the moon grows steadily, I expressed the hope as editor that the magazine would grow. (Moon 182)*

In addition to discussing schooling, he goes into great length regarding Babasaheb's influence and effects on the Dalit community's cultural life. Babasaheb's teachings were enacted and retold in his community through the use of plays, poems, and songs.

*In Uddhav's plays, Natthu Shende and Atmaram Dhok would play the humorous parts. Govardhan Gaurkhede of our community played the main role. Manik Patil and Shankar Ramteke took other parts. In that play troupe, two plays, Shaving, or the Widow's Humiliation and Conversion, were very popular. (Moon 143)*

In addition, the characters in the Puranic and epic ballads were named after the Mahabharata's BHIM, which was connected to Bhim, the abbreviation for Bhimrao Ambedkar.

*Oh toilers, oh Dalits, who is your protector? The wealth of Indra was in the ocean, He got it back through churning, It became ours by right. They are saying let us loot it all! Just as the Kauravas, hearing the roar of Bhim, Hidcrying like Jambuk— Das thinks. (Moon 145)*

In addition to inspiring the Dalit community and reawakening their dormant fortunes, these plays, songs, and qawwalis also influenced the community's mindset (Moon 154). He felt that a life devoted to Babasaheb would have significance, and BHIM became a source of pride for his community. He lists numerous poets and qawwals who used to travel to Nagpur from other Indian states to perform songs on BHIM, the suffering of the Dalits, and their experiences.

*These singers were young men who would experience an upsurge of rage about atrocities and the battle for our rights. They were not striving to publish books of poetry. They went from neighborhood to neighborhood, village to village to raise consciousness through their songs. (Moon 151)*

As a result, this autobiography concentrates on the themes of justice, equality, and fraternity that other autobiographies might not do. Instead, by focusing on the Vasti community's human position and dignity, it transcends these boundaries and changes Mahar culture and society. This book challenges the antiquated ideas of caste and class hierarchy in any culture by taking the Dalits outside of the village and social standards.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the aforementioned discussion, it can be concluded that Vasant Moon's autobiography, Growing Up Untouchable in India, differs from other Dalit autobiographies in that, at a certain point in the narrative, it stops being a personal biography and transitions into a community biography. He consistently emphasized the value of organization, agitation, and group action as the means to Dalit empowerment and liberation throughout his life. He lived out the Ambedkar teachings in his own life in addition to preaching about them.

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