

Recasting Caste: History, Memory and Identity in Dalit Women's Testimonios

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Abstract

This paper examines how Dalit women's testimonios mark moments of disruption in the dominant narrative of mainstream women's movement and historiography. The practices of the women's movement have not given adequate representation to the participation of Dalit women in the making of Indian modernity. Focusing on Meenakshi Moon and Urmila Pawar's *We also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement* (2008) and Sharmila Rege's *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonio* (2006) the paper examines the relevance of testimonio genre as a deeply feminist practice that is committed to retrieving women's voices and its increasing use by feminist oral history practitioners. Drawing attention to the relationship between gender and testimonio genre, the paper traces the trajectory of testimonio from its Latin American roots to its deployment in the Indian context and how it helps in reinscribing marginalized and oral identities in historical and political discourse. Using memory as an affective source, the collective witnessing in Dalit women's testimonios mark a lateral spread in Indian historiography and women's movement by taking cognizance of their political activism unlike the earlier focus on the contribution of elite savarna women. The paper examines testimonio both as a methodology and as narrative development and argues that dalit women's writing has evolved into a more complex and nuanced narrative and make a unique intervention through their inter-generational memory work that creates a historical consciousness for the present and future generations of women. Moving beyond an uncritical deployment of testimonio genre for dalit women's life writing, the paper examines not only strategic similarities but differences in terms its form, political and ethical engagement, and the specific demands it makes on the reader.

Introduction

A hybrid genre, located between autobiography, ethnography, narrative fiction, testimonio rose to prominence in the context of revolutionary struggles in Latin America in the 70's and the 80's and has been used as a genre to document the experiences of oppressed groups and denounce injustices. The Spanish term testimonio has been defined as a first-person narrative that bears witness to individual response to systems of oppression. The meaning of the term testimonio "suggests the act of testifying or bearing witness in a legal or religious sense." (Beverly 14) The term *dar testimonio* means to give testimony and testimonial narrative is the closest English equivalent to the term testimonio. George Yúdice defines testimonial literature as "an authentic narrative, told

by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (war, oppression, revolution, etc.)." (44) Yuidice also explains that the testimonial narrator gives his or her personal testimony directly, addressing a specific interlocutor. (17) The early definitions of testimonio that emerged emphasized urgency, authenticity, and call for support and solidarity. John Beverly explains testimonio as " a novel, novella length narrative, told in the first- person by a narrator who is also the protagonist or witness of the events she or he recounts and whose unit of narration is usually a 'life' or significant experience." (92-93) Also, according to Beverley, the intention is not one of literariness but of communicating the situation of groups oppression, imprisonment and struggle. (94-97) Testimonio scholars highlight the emancipatory potential of the form and emphasize the collaborative nature of production. Since the narrator in many cases is not literate, she gives her testimony orally to an interlocutor who could be a journalist, writer or social activist. The oral narrative then is transcribed, edited and translated. "Emphasizing popular, oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her own experience as an agent (rather than representative) of a collective memory and identity." (Gugelberger 44) Though endowed with a distinct Latin American identity, testimonio has entered the lexicon of English language and has become more of genre term referring to narratives that denounce human rights violations and oppression. Written in response to the military repression that sparked widespread resistance and a growing political consciousness testimonios were instrumental in drawing attention of international community towards gross human rights violations carried out by repressive regimes. Most of the early testimonios that received international recognition were transnational productions and collaboratively produced by female authors, editors and translators across the boundaries of race, class and region. Notable among them are *'I Rigoberta Menchu, an Indian woman from Guatemala* (1984) that won the Nobel prize for Peace and *'Let me Speak! Testimony of Domitila, A Woman from Bolivian Mines* (1978). These testimonios were premised on building solidarity networks and soliciting support in denouncing human rights violations. Since the narrative attracted attention more for its political commitment and representation of subaltern experience the question of literariness was not an area of concern.

Testimonio combines the basic tenets of feminist methodology by laying emphasis on the subjective experience of women as the basis of knowledge and including the traditionally silenced voice. By positing women as 'speaking subjects', testimonio challenges the misrepresentation of their agency and subjectivity resulting from a male perspective. In redefining reality from a marginalized perspective, testimonio also incorporates feminist methodology's political commitment to expose injustice and oppression. Most important, testimonio also foregrounds feminism's commitment to collaborative work and solidarity between peoples. (Brabeck and Ting 2000). Critics like have even claimed that this genre belongs exclusively to women, making a strong case for the mutually constitutive relationship of gender and genre. (Sternbach 1991) Referring to Reneì Jara's etymological study of the word testimonio, Sternbach notes that the terms testigo (witness) and testimonio (testimony) derive etymologically from testes; which manifest the exclusion of women both legally and anatomically from the language discourse. As there is no feminine form for testigo in the Spanish language, so when women are witnesses they are referred to as la testigo. (92) Women, Sternbach implies, are not qualified to testify or to give evidence. The appropriation of this narrative form by women is therefore an interesting phenomenon. To draw the idea that testimonial literature is more female gendered, she highlights three important traits shared by

women's discourse and testimonial literature; the "vindication and use of oral history as a means by which to obtain a narrative, the use of the example of female slavery as the cause of the testimonio, and finally the understanding of the personal as the political." (9) The appropriation of this narrative form by women has a larger political purpose and while it has evolved into many other forms it retains its commitment to denounce oppression and violence.

Dalit Life Writing as Testimonio

Sharmila Rege appropriates the genre of testimonio in her attempt to set up a theoretical framework for the emerging body of autobiographical writing by dalit women which might be read as a narrative of suffering and pain devoid of its social and political content. Making her observation in the context of widespread publication and consumption of Dalit autobiographies, her concerns are pedagogical so that one doesn't end up making a spectacle of dalit suffering and pain. The larger issue is how these autobiographies are to be read and testimonio provides a framework as it is a genre suitable for subaltern representation. Drawing her definition of testimonio from scholars like John Beverly and George Yudice, Rege notes that 'dalit life narratives are in fact testimonios, which forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and contests explicitly or implicitly the 'official forgetting' of histories of caste oppression, struggles and resistance.' (13) Interestingly, much before Rege brought the comparison of testimonio to dalit life writing, an important book dealing with the history of women's participation in the Telegana movement, 'We were making History: Life stories of Women in Telengana People's Struggle' (1987) drew inspiration from the testimonio genre. The editors of the book acknowledge their debt to Margaret Randall's 'Sandino's Daughters' (1981) a collection of women testimonios against the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua. Over the last couple of years, as dalit women's life writing has spawned and gained prominence, testimonio has been deployed as a genre term for dalit women's autobiographies, memoirs, and life sketches by Dalit studies scholars. (Rege 2006, Guru 1998, Pandian 1998, Nayar 2006, Panjabi 2009). Testimonios counter hegemonic potential, giving voice to the disenfranchised and establishing their agency are well known and these features serve as major points of correspondence between testimonio and Dalit life writing.

Dominant theorizations of caste in colonial sociology, anthropology, and other political and social formulations have their limitations as they have not addressed the experiential dimension of caste, which is gendered, and which makes dalit women doubly oppressed. Also, dalit women's political and social participation in anti-caste struggle has not been documented despite their active participation. Rege calls for a radical revisioning of feminist politics from a Dalit feminist standpoint as until now the mainstream feminist movement with its Brahmanical focus has limited itself to a framework of "difference" that effectively serves to marginalise Dalit women's issues. According to her, there is an urgent need to shift the focus from 'difference' and to historically locate Dalit women in their real struggles. (40) Rege argues that while "Indian feminist scholarship may have developed sophisticated theoretical approaches in its critique of empire and nation, there are significant gaps in the self-critique of the mainstream Indian women's movement." (20) The nationalist relegation of the caste to the realm of cultural and private at the same time appropriating domestic and familial ideologies to its cause (Chatterjee 1993) also rendered dalit women's participation invisible. One of the major assertions of the new dalit feminism is claiming the right to self-representation since they are no longer

content to have upper caste feminist acting and speaking on their behalf. To point out the central role of caste and not just gender, both as a site of oppression and of resistance is the basis of Dalit testimonio. Quoting various scholars on the significance of Dalit autobiography Rege argues that the framework of testimonio can disrupt the sociological understanding of caste by bringing in the experiential dimension. Testimonio offers an opportunity to the silenced women to record their voices and foregrounds ways of being political in the realm of every day. In what follows, I will first analyze the correspondences between testimonio and dalit life writing along three axes: first, the dialectic between self and community as both narratives move away from bourgeois notion of autobiography in foregrounding a communitarian self. Second, reinscripting oral and marginalized dalit subjectivities into political and historical discourse not as victims but as agents. Third, how testimonio enables ways of building women's history of dalit movement and offers possibilities of a more emancipatory understanding of modernity by including the dimension of caste, which had been relegated to the margins.

Individual / Plural Selves

Much like the testimonio, retrieving the right to representation is a central issue in dalit autobiography and this is mentioned in the preface to many texts where the dalit writer claims that he s/he has chosen to write about his life not for personal recognition but to represent the lives of their community. (Kamble 2006, Pawar 2008) The autobiographical mode has political, ethical and epistemological valence as Dalit testimonio can be written only by a Dalit writer unlike fictional forms that highlight Dalit experience of oppression and stigmatization but are written by non-dalit writers. (Anand and Zelliott 1992). This epistemological vantage point of Dalit woman writer marks the most distinguishing feature of Dalit testimonio. One major point of the intersection of Dalit autobiography with testimonio is how both the genres move away from the parameters set by bourgeois autobiography. Scholars have hailed Dalit testimonio for foregrounding a communitarian self. (Nayar 2006, Pandian 1998, Guru 2003, Rege 2006) Dalit life narrative as testimonio moves away from the parameters set by bourgeois autobiography and creates testimonios of caste-based oppression, anti-caste struggles and resistance. In reading Dalit women's autobiography as testimonio, Rege, constructs Dalit women's life writing in opposition to the autobiographies written by the upper caste women because "a large part of the feminist discourse on experience has been an autobiography of the upper caste woman, her conflict with tradition and her desire to be modern'. (13) Dalit women's account of their life-world and experience poses a sociological and epistemological challenge to the genre of bourgeois autobiography. The story is not her own but that of others too. The 'I' of the testimonio voices the struggle of the larger community and posits a communitarian self. Thus, while the speaker in the Dalit autobiography represents the suffering of her people the individual self is validated by being part of a community. The self becomes a metonym, and represents the collective. Interestingly, while John Beverly points out the communal dimension of the testimonial self, he differentiates the narrator from the people she represents and calls the testimonial narrator an "organic intellectual" of the subaltern in the Gramscian sense. (1991) Despite representing the collective, the speaker negotiates her narrative authority as different from her own people. This play between individual and collective mark much of testimonial criticism and separates testimonio from autobiography. Doris Sommer was

the first testimonio critic to foreground that the self of the testimonio narrator is plural and emphasizes the difference between the testimonial and autobiographical strategies of identification.

'the testimonial 'I' does not invite us to identify with it. We are too different, and there is no pretence here of universal or essential human experience...the singular represents the plural not because it replaces or subsumes the group but because the speaker is a distinguishable part of the whole.' (247)

Sommer's point that the self metonymically represents the collective yet remains different, is a significant point in understanding the dialectics between self and community in women's testimonios. While the sense of self as communal and relational stands out clearly in most narratives, it would be erroneous to assume that the individual self is subsumed in the larger group. The testimonial narrator stands tall not because she is different rather she has acquired the political consciousness to speak from multiple subject positions as she negotiates through oppressive social structures of caste, class and patriarchal domination and highlights the condition of her people. Also, the dialectic between self and community emerges more clearly in full length autobiographies as compared to short life sketches. By speaking out publicly about their personal experiences and their community, they register their protest and challenge the experience of subordination. Moving beyond a reified notion of subaltern agency and the binary between the individual and community, women's autobiographical narrative allows the reader to understand multiple subject positions that the narrator occupies and the contradictions between these positions. Locating the subject historically, the narratives foreground dalit female subjectivity as a complex construction than simply denouncing caste based oppression.

While an overarching testimonial framework enables the emergence of silenced voices what has not been examined are the differences in their historical location, production and circulation of these narratives. Also, a wholesale adoption of testimonio and its uncritical deployment blurs the difference and erases specificities of dalit life writing. Since Rege's concern about dalit autobiographical narrative has to do with its transnational consumption and issues of pedagogy as it has now become the part of the curriculum in many universities, it is even more important to trace not only the similarities but also remain alert to the differences between two narrative forms. Though dalit history enables comparisons with global history of racism and exclusion there are notable differences in modes of witnessing in testimonial and dalit life writing. While the narrator in testimonio is soliciting support and solidarity for an imminent political strife and to denounce human right violations in dalit life writing, the injustice is historical in nature and is part of deep-rooted prejudices and beliefs. My contention is that dalit women's autobiographies make an intervention through their inter-generational memory work that creates a historical consciousness for the present and future generations of women. By archiving the autobiographical memories of women from the early twentieth century to the present, the attempt is to reconstruct the history of the movement from dalit women's perspective and examine how their lives are transformed by being part of the movement. An analysis of the narratives of women in the Ambdekarite movement and excerpts from well-known autobiographies included in Rege's book attests to the evolution of autobiographical form as the part of a larger political and literary movement. Not only, they relocate caste within the dominant discourse of the women's movement but mark the emergence of dalit feminist consciousness.

Narrative as History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement

One of the significant aspects of autobiographical memories of dalit women is that while they are personal recollections, they are socially constructed and communally oriented. Also, these memories offer possibilities to imagine, invent and reconstruct alternate identities, which have not been possible as a result of historical injustice. In rewriting the history of Ambedkarite movement from the perspective dalit women and documenting their robust participation, these oral testimonios contribute towards building a historical consciousness through narrativization of dalit women's memories and restores dignity and pride, which is denied to them. The Ambedkarite movement began in the 1920's where Dalit women participated in large numbers under the leadership of B.R Ambedkar. Pawar and Moon build a collective history of the movement, which does not figure in the dominant narrative of either Indian women's movement or freedom movement. The text presents forty life sketches of women, out of which twenty-seven are living and thirteen deceased. The testimonios reconstruct the lives through interviews, and those who are deceased, their lives are reconstructed through various periodicals or through their association with other activist women. One of the significant aspect of the text is the collaborative methodology, which aims to recuperate lost voices of the women who participated. By documenting women's participation in the struggle, it seeks to construct a counternarrative on caste by bringing the private lived experience of caste and at the same time public practices of anti-caste struggle. Ambedkar like Phule before him was clear that the subjugation of women is central to the reproduction and sustenance of the caste system, and thus the emancipation of women at the bottom of the caste hierarchy is crucial to any struggle against caste and untouchability. The significance of such a collective history of the movement is that it challenges many orthodoxies, both historical and pedagogical by locating anti caste struggle alongside the major sign posts of national movement for freedom from colonial rule and also reconstructs an emancipatory history of Indian modernity.

Ambedkar's two significant speeches when he addresses women are Mahad satyagraha in 1927 and the 1942 speech at the All India Dalit Mahila Parishad in Nagpur. (Pawar and Moon 27) Women recall these historic occasions with great joy and how it had a profound impact on them by making them more articulate and aware of the social and political reality. As they worked for the movement, they organized Mahila Mandals meetings, took part in the satyagraha, made speeches in front of a large audience, and also worked for the distribution of periodicals like Bahishkrut Bharat, Mooknayak, Prabudha Bharat etc. Women's participation also transformed their domestic spaces and some of them who had support of their families could become full time activists. One of the common themes in most of the life sketches is the struggle of women to get educated and this sensitization is the result of the mass action programmes, which the women attended. Interestingly, as the life sketches of the women show, their roles were very diverse. For instance, Radhabai Kamble was active in the workers' movement and led a successful strike in organizing the mill workers in Nagpur and her testimony was recorded in when the British government sent a labor commission to India in 1929 to carry out a survey of the situation of industrial workers.(205) Shantabai Bhalerao, participated as a young girl in Chavdar lake Satyagrah in Mahad remembers the burning of Manusmriti. She also participated in the Quit India movement along with Aruna Asaf Ali, Maniben and went to jail for two months when she as pregnant.(241) She travelled with Ambedkar to hold programmes of initiation into the dhamma.(242) Laxmibai Naik, Nandsheela,

Chandrasheela, became a Bhikshuni and spread the message of Buddha. Several others like Shatabai Dani participated in 1946 which Ambedkar had launched because representatives from dalit community were not being selected for the Pune assembly. (244). We hear several stories of rebellion, rather than narratives of victimhood and violence. Shantabai Dani, recollecting Ambedkar says, 'his words gave us identity, self-respect independence and the strength to fight against injustice. (246) Establishing women's association, drawing up welfare schemes for Dalits, participating in Satyagraha campaigns, working for the distribution of newspapers, led to a great awakening in the women. As Parbatabai Meshram recollects 'we became aware of injustice, oppression, insult and a sense of identity was awakened in us.' (275) She recollects the 'five mile long' procession for Babasaheb and slogans that were raised in Ambedkar's honour.

"The blue flag of the Dalits, it is dearer to us than life,
We must become the ruling community" (272)

Babytai Kamble who took part in the historic Marathwada university renaming struggle recollects the songs at the time of historic Poona Pact in 1932 and the tension between Ambedkarite and Gandhian politics.

Gandhi's four anna piece is broken
Say victory to Babasaheb Ambedkar!
Rep Right, Rep Right, we are marching
Ambedkar army came and Gandhi ran away (Pawar and Moon 272)

Many such songs and slogans find expression in these narratives and are full of adulation and hope, which Ambedkar ignited in these women. The emancipatory Ambedkarite movement galvanized the women and their collective memories foreground moments of joy along with memories of overcoming humiliation, violence and exploitation. In registering their names and voices, the text restores the women as historical beings who are not passive victims but active agents in the making of dalit women's history. While narrating their experiences women also come to understand the dynamics and contradictions of the movement as a great deal of women's participation has been neglected even in the literature of the Ambedkar movement. Unfortunately, dominant narrative of the movement with its focus on icons, songs, slogans, stories of courage and sacrifice have not taken note of the women's participation even as women took part in the struggle under the leadership of Ambedkar. By examining the participation of these women, the text traces the historical roots of dalit women's struggle, which found fruition in women finding their own voice, initiating a dialogue with other feminists and giving their ideas shape and translating them into an emancipatory programme which is a process now under way.

Memory and Narrative

Sharmila Rege's *Writing Caste/ Writing Gender* includes selection from eight well known dalit women's autobiographies from Maharashtra, who were part of the dalit movement from the early decades of twentieth century. These autobiographies have been in circulation for decades now. Originally written in Marathi, some have been translated into English and are part of the curriculum. The autobiographies examine the memories of women along the axes of social custom, food and deprivation, violence, resistance, political activism, household, and caste. Women recount memories of different phases

of transition from pre Ambedkarite days to the memories of Ambedkarite struggle, and the transformation it brought about in the lives of women. Babytai Kamble, whose autobiography was serialized in Marathi before being published in book form by her son, documents various practices as balutedari, yeskari, mahar watan, significance of the month of Aakhaadh, that are particular to Mahar community and which confined them to caste-based labor. The impact of Ambedkar was immense on the lives of the community, and his consciousness raising transformed the ways of living, dress, food habits in the women and community at large. One significant impact of Ambedkar's teaching was giving up the practice of eating meat of dead animals and Babytai's grandmother, Sitavahini led the agitation to ban the eating of dead cattle. (296) These intergenerational memories find expression in almost all writings and not only give courage to women but also builds a history of resistance within the family. Babytai also feels that women bear the responsibility of carrying forward the legacy of Ambedkar even if the husbands forget Babashaeb's contribution in their false pride as they prosper in life. (123) Shantabai Dani also recollects the sacrifices of her mother and grandmother and who had 'tremendous fighting spirit' (137) and their resolve that the challenge posed by caste must be faced and overcome (131). Baby Tai recollects with fondness the Ambedkarite jalsas, which helped to raise the consciousness of people and transformed them. The disillusionment with the hard won Independence of the country in 1947, emerges poignantly in the narrative of Mukta Sarvagod, who recollects that when she saw the national flag go up in Islampur where she lived at that time, she wondered what it meant for people like her and whether independence had meaning in their lives. As Shantabai recollects 'caste had eaten away the nation' and thus independence did not hold any promise for them. (61) While highlighting the struggles of their community, these narratives provide a critique of social and cultural practices of Indian society, which despite democratic polity and constitutional guarantees is still faced with the problem of discrimination and inequality. Women like Kumud Pawde who despite all difficulties go on to become a professor of Sanskrit also face humiliation because of her inter caste marriage and her inability to get a job despite her academic credentials. Kumudtai raises fundamental questions about the autobiographical form and its salience for women. According to her, the narrative is not an autobiography but a 'critical' narrative of her experience. Women's autobiographies are not emotional outbursts, as claimed by male writers. She raises fundamental questions about praxis, the need to follow the work of Phule and Ambedkar, and work towards the unity of untouchable castes rather than abusing Brahmins alone. (239) With her education Kumudtai sees through the double standards and hypocrisy that permeates the discourse of caste differently in private and public realms even in a state like Maharashtra, which has been the epicentre of anti-caste movements. Despite all her education and status, even Shantabai Kamble has to suffer humiliation because of her caste identity. Though she is the headmistress of a school and in a position of authority, her daughter has to suffer discrimination as her touch is polluting to other students. This humiliation by upper castes and isolation in one's own community as they become educated and well informed is experienced by many women. Urmila Pawar, whose well-known autobiography *The Weave of My Life* was chosen by Maharashtra Sahitya Parishad in May 2004, for Laxmi bai Tilak award, as the best published autobiography, declines to accept the award as she questions Marathi literature's commitment to the literary aesthetics and values of upper castes. In a letter she wrote to the parishad she explains her political stand and says that images, metaphors and symbols continue to emerge

from fantasy and hardly ever generate in human being a faith in their own agency. For women like Pawar the question of agency is central to any literature as it ought to reflect the reality of human experience and reaffirms faith in one's own self and agency. As we have seen through these examples, dalit women's life writing is an assertion of their agency and marks the emergence of a dalit feminist standpoint which has led to building solidarities and collaboration.

Conclusion

The political and ethical commitment to register silenced voices is a part of emancipatory project that seeks to map the contribution of women as active agents in making their history. Dalit women's autobiographies emerged at a particular historical moment and have acquired recognition and acclaim more so in their afterlife in translations. An important social and historical document, it marks a lateral spread to Indian historiography by retrieving their struggles and contribution to the women's movement. Moving beyond an uncritical deployment of the term 'testimonio' for dalit life writing, I have tried to examine not only the affinities between the two modes of witnessing, but the departures in terms its form, political and ethical engagement, and the specific demands it makes on the reader. Dalit testimonio is not simply responding to an immediate historical moment, rather its emergence, marks a growth of political consciousness or more aptly dalit chetna, which has taken years of struggle, education and recognition of social and political exclusion. While Dalit feminist standpoint is crucial to understanding dalit life writing it is possible if we read it as part of an ongoing literary and political movement, tracing a historical trajectory of the form, as it has evolved over the years, which foregrounds self-reflexivity and a complex construction subjectivity in dalit women. Recent dalit life writing is a far more layered and nuanced narrative documenting intimate and everyday experience of caste based exclusion, hierarchy and inequities than just denouncing caste based oppression. The publication of these collective voices and individual autobiographical accounts by Dalit women is not only a significant step in establishing the role they played in organizing protests and be an active part of the movement but also foregrounds the challenges faced by the women both the level of family and alienation in the aftermath of the movement. Despite the egalitarian thrust of political activism women encounter limitations imposed by patriarchy in the movement. Reinscripting these voices into the historical discourse resonates with the present because there has been an erasure of dalit women's political participation even within the dalit movement.

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