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"The Double Curse"—a Dalit Woman Autobiography in Hindi by Kausalya Baisantri

SUMMARY: Kausalya Baisantri authored a Dalit woman autobiography in Hindi—the first to my knowledge—in 1999. The article draws on the 'narrative self' concept as the theoretical apparatus for the analysis of the text's content and context. The history of the autobiography genre in Hindi overlaps with the beginnings and advancement of prose in pre-modern and modern literature in these languages, which developed at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. Autobiographical motifs predominate Dalit writings, due mostly to the fact that Dalit literature *per se* is viewed both by the authors as well as by the readers as a strong manifesto of an exploited people's struggle, voiced by the oppressed themselves with the purpose of enforcing social change, it is perceived as a weapon to fight oppression of the upper castes.

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Adam Zagajewski—one of the most recognized contemporary Polish poets—is also the author of autobiographical essays (Zagajewski 2007, 2011), in which he eloquently describes his intellectual and aesthetic encounters; reveals the details of his daily routine with a particular focus on his writing rituals; describes his family members as a background of his personality's evolution; shares his remarks on poetry, literature, culture and history. His reflexive and meditative essays fit impeccably into an established tradition of the life writings' genre, where an accomplished person shares his accomplished views

of the not-yet-accomplished world. In 2011 I accompanied Zagajewski throughout his stay in India, including his visit to the Jaipur Literature Festival, where I was enthusiastic to facilitate his meeting with a somewhat more exceptional autobiographer, A. Revathi, who authored a life story translated into English from Tamil, *The Truth About Me. A Hijra Life Story*.

I read A. Revathi's book and I was delighted to be able to congratulate her personally on her English debut. She was pleased to communicate in the Hindi medium to someone from outside of India (she did not know English). It seemed to me that she was content to hear praises of her work with an eagerness of an author, but there was more to it, which shall be explicated by the quotation from Revathi's preface to her book:

> *The Truth about Me* is about my everyday experience of discrimination, ridicule and pain, it is also about endurance and my joys. […] As a hijra I get pushed into the fringes of society. […] Yet I have dared to share my innermost life with you—about being a hijra and doing sex work. […] I hope that by publishing my life story, larger changes can be achieved. I hope this book will make people see that hijras are capable of more than just begging and sex work. I do not seek sympathy from society or government. I seek to show that we hijras do have the right to live in this society (Revathi 2010:v-vi).

Her presence at the literature festival in Jaipur and her interaction with the audience gave her the recognition not of an undistinguished and ordinary person from the fringes of society, but of a subject with a story to tell.

Eagerly, I introduced Revathi to Zagajewski. An introvert intellectual, an admirer of philosophy, poetry, literature, art and classical music of Europe, already thoroughly overwhelmed—to describe it euphemistically—by experiences of his Indian journey on the one side; and on the other, by a towering figure of Revathi clad in sari, a former sex-worker, a present sexual minority rights activists and an extravert; this exceptional encounter of the two authors was brief.

I shared this autobiographical anecdote, vivid in my memory, as a parable of the development of life writings. Autobiography as a genre established its distinctive features in the 18th century through narratives of great white Christian men's lives, but in the 20th century the genre was redefined through stories of the 'others' whose voices had earlier been excluded from both, the life writings and the critical discourse on them. It was Revathi's narrative, too, which triggered my specific interest in women's autobiographies in Hindi.

An enquiry into contemporary life writings by women in Hindi opens a broad spectrum of research within a multilayered, interdisciplinary discourse. Smith and Watson emphasize:

> The status of [women's] autobiography has changed dramatically […], both within and outside of the academy. Women's autobiography is now a privileged site for thinking about issues of writing at the intersection of feminist, postcolonial, and postmodern critical theories (Smith and Watson 1998: 5).

Women's autobiographies are a fairly recent phenomenon in Hindi literature with a sudden rise in their number in the late 1990's and the first decade of the 2000's. (Despite the growth, they are still outnumbered by life stories written by men; it reflects a general tendency in literary production dominated largely by men.)

More than other types of writings, life writings are a literary territory where subjectivity is asserted more openly, thus they often turn into battlegrounds of internal and external conflicts between the dominant discourse—shaped by the social and cultural constructs of gender, social position, language identity, religion etc.—and an individual experience. It seems that Indian women share an innermost understanding of the discrepancy between the alleged unimportance of the role assigned to them by society and their obvious significance in the running of that society, and Hindi autobiographies by women voice this incongruity with all its consequent tensions.

Many scholars admit that autobiography is a genre facing an identity crisis. Recent attempts to create a coherent literary theory of autobiography by Paul John Eakin and some other

literary critics draw on philosophical thought on the nature of a subject as a 'narrative self'. Several contemporary philosophers (Adriana Cavarero, Alisdair MacIntyre, Paul Ricoeur and Charles Tylor) speculate that selves are constituted by narratives. Adriana Cavarero writes: "every human being, without even wanting to know it, is aware of being a narratable self—immersed in the spontaneous auto-narration of memory" (Cavarero 2000: 3).[1] These thinkers also argue for an interdependence of subject's auto-narrative with the narratives of others and that the process is culturally and historically specific. In India, which modestly boasts of being the source of every story in the world, the idea of a self defined by auto-narrative seems to be a concept of great appeal, taking us back to *the Kathāsaritsāgara* or *The Ocean of the Streams of Stories* of individual lives.

However alluring this notion may be, I attempt to apply the 'narrative self' concept in my research for other reasons, namely because it offers theoretical apparatus addressing uncertainties of the autobiography genre. I am convinced that this approach allows us to explain many concerns related to the liminal nature of autobiography as a literary intra-genre occupying the no man's land between fiction and a verifiable account of facts. Emotionally charged experiences, tricks of memory or unconscious psychological processes, to name but a few, influence an author's account of the past, which creates an inconsistency between the facts and their narrative.[2] Inspired by the literary critics'

[1] Marya Schechtman (Schechtman 2011: 407) elaborates: "It seems safe to say that no narrative view requires that we compose explicit and complete autobiographies in speech, writing, or thought, but all of them require that we should be able at least occasionally to explicitly narrate at least some portion of our lives. Much of our self-narration is expressed in the way we think, the way we live, and the kinds of explanations we feel called upon to give to others. Beyond this, however, it is hard to say anything much more specific about how self-narration is supposed to work."

[2] Interestingly, Olga Tokarczuk, one of the most popular contemporary Polish writers, admitted that she dislikes the application of a term 'magic realism' to her prose, because even the unreal or surreal events in her books

application of the narrative self theory, I will look at the autobiography not as a factual and objective account of the life and times. Rather, I will read it as a very subjective and individual narrative of life and examine the stylistics of life writings and their contents.

History of the autobiography as a genre in Hindi and other Indian languages runs parallel to the beginnings and then the advancement of prose in pre-modern and modern literatures, which developed at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.[3]

The autobiographical impulses of individual authors, both those openly expressed and those that can be only inferred, seem to be very different in each case; in fact as different as the authors' lives, and as different as their life stories. For Kausalya Baisantri (1926–2009), a Dalit, who in her youth was engaged in the Ambedkar movement, the urge to pen her testimony came from the sense of obligation towards her community, but also as a result of an experience described by her metaphor of a double curse, of being a Dalit and a woman, as alluded in the title of her book—*Dohrā abhiśāp* or "The Double Curse", 1999.[4]

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are informed by a 'psychological reality' (Olga Tokarczuk at the Congress of Polish Literature Translators, Kraków, July 5, 2013).

[3] Due to the brevity of this essay, I will not discuss the history of autobiographical writings in India or in Hindi. To illustrate the genre's development, I will however name the authors of some critically acclaimed life writings, or those whose works are crucial to the genre's development: memoirs of the Mughal emperor Babar (15th–16th c.) and of his daughter Gulbadan (16th c.). Banarasidas (17th c.) composed the first autobiographical account in a dialect of Hindi—in fact, the first in any vernacular Indian language—in verses. Lutfullah's autobiography (1854) was the first written by an Indian in English and Rassundari Dasi's (or Devi, 1876) was the first life story in Bengali and the first by a woman, who self-taught herself reading and writing.

[4] On relation of subaltern, feminist and autobiography studies see: Browarczyk (The Intimate Me in the Public Sphere: Contemporary Hindi Autobiographies by Women—Maitreyi Pushpa and Prabha Khaitan, forthcoming 2013): "In the patriarchal structure of traditional Indian society rooted in the value system informed to a great extent by religious practices (Hinduism,

Though originally a speaker of Marathi, Kausalya Baisantri committed herself to writing an autobiography in Hindi, because there was no earlier written testimony of a Dalit woman in this language. In the introduction to "The Double Curse", she reasonably explains that it did not bother her, for Marathi and Hindi shared the same script, however two paragraphs later she admited that three people proofread her text and Mastram Kapoor—a Hindi journalist—read the manuscript, suggested some modifications and helped her in typing and publishing the book. Only a critical reading of a manuscript would determine what changes were introduced in the original and, if so, to what extent the ideological perspective of the editors—their involvement in the Dalit movement—influenced the editing.

Dalit autobiographies in Hindi emerged in the middle of the 1990's. Critically acclaimed life stories were written by Mohandas Naimisharay (1995), Omprakash Valmiki (1997) and Surajpal Chauhan (2002). Baisantri's story is—to my knowledge—the first

Islam and other religions), women are collective subalterns. At the same time, however, as writers aiming at self-expression, they belong to the intellectual elite of those, who are in a position to shape the views of their audiences and to voice the concerns of their diverse communities. Moreover, as Hindi speakers in the context of multi-lingual India, they occupy incongruous positions. On the one hand, they are local or 'vernacular' for the English speaking elite, but on the other, very central—this due to Hindi and its variants being the most widely spoken language in India, as well as the official language of the federation, and therefore related to the power and the authority at the centre. As speakers of Hindi, women are in a central-peripheral relation with the users of Urdu—the language associated with the religious minority of Indian Muslims, historically and linguistically related with Hindi, and with the Hindu-Muslim coexistence in India. These multiple identities make Hindi women writers' trans-local actors in the religiously, regionally, socially and economically diverse Indian society."

Baisantri's complex subaltern identity comes from the interplay of her various roles of a Dalit, a woman, an activist and an author of the auto-narrative, amongst others.

Dalit woman autobiography in Hindi, Hindi literature being always vaguely behind the literary developments of Bengali and Marathi. In the case of Dalit writings, Marathi literature was an indisputable front-runner as far as the intensity of the Dalit movement in the area was concerned. Dalit life writings in Marathi occurred in the late 1950's (Mukhejree 2010: xii) and the first Dalit autobiographies published in Hindi were translations of Marathi works. Beth elaborates on this historical process:

> However, the development of the Dalit autobiography as a literary genre was not a straightforward adoption from Marathi with similar guarantees of success. Rather a Hindi readership of Dalit autobiographies was explored and consciously cultivated by Hindi Dalit writers through shorter autobiographical articles published in journals and anthology collections (Beth 2007: 571).

Autobiographical motifs predominate Dalit writings. This is due mostly to the fact that Dalit literature *per se* is viewed both by the authors as well as by the readers as a strong manifesto of an exploited people's struggle, voiced by the oppressed themselves with the purpose of enforcing social change, and is perceived as a weapon to fight oppression of the upper castes. Sharankumar Limbale (Limbale 2004: 18), in his study of Dalit aesthetics, defines Dalit literature as: "writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness" (cf. Brueck 2006).

Julia Swindells (Swindells 1995: 7), in her analysis of Aboriginal women's life writings in Australia, underlines that autobiography "has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond individual." Lee Gilmore describes a paradox of an autobiographer, whose story is both unique and representative (Gilmore 2001: 8). Similarly, Baisantri's narrative meanders between displaying her individual story and the testimony of her people's and Dalit women's struggle as witnessed by her, which puts the author under considerable strain.

In the introduction to her book, Kausalya Baisantri informs the readers of her motivations and of the long process of committing

herself to writing her autobiography. It was through constant encouragement from several Dalit women activists, who for years were urging her to write a life story as a testimony of the Dalit community's condition at the beginning of the struggle for its upliftment, that the book was born. Baisantri implies, without stating it explicitly, that it was not her lack of humility that compelled her to share the story of her life—humility which indeed she proves by limited focus on her own achievements and emotions throughout the book. This restraint can partly be interpreted as imprinted on the author by Indian cultural constructs of gender, i.e. an ideal of female modesty.

Baisantri is chosen as the witness because, as she willingly explains, she was one of the very few educated Dalit women of the time. However, in her narrative, she gives credit to her parents—in particular to her mother—for this achievement, diminishing the value of her own perseverance. It is her own decision, however, to pen the story as an evidence of her lifelong struggle as both a Dalit and a woman. This resolution remains a source of constant conflict in the auto-narrative. Thus, on the one hand, Baisantri presents Dalit community as an oppressed group. On the other hand, however, to record the oppression of Dalit women, she provides examples of Dalit men—including her grandfather and husband—as aggressors, which creates a fissure between a positive and a negative image of the community.

The introduction to Baisantri's story not only informs the readers that she wrote it for the cause of Dalit upliftment, but is also a full-fledged teaser giving them glimpses of what awaits them in the book. Baisantri, like an experienced storyteller, makes some humble allusions to her role in the Dalit movement and reveals selected dramatic developments of her disastrous marriage leaving the audience curious for how the story would develop to reach the culmination.

Two opening sentences of the introduction read: "I was living my life holding to the memories of the past. 68 years of my life went by

in the painful struggle to reveal in words what I have really suffered."[5] The word choice is noteworthy—the author's fondness for Sanskritic vocabulary is noticeable (eight direct Sanskrit loanwords (*tatsama*) in these two short sentences and only one Persian). Preponderance of Sanskritic vocabulary may be caused by the influence of Baisantri's mother tongue, Marathi. However, for Hindi native speakers, the usage of *tatsama*s is a conscious choice hinting at a higher language register associated with erudite learning and opinion making. Sanskrit loanwords prove author's competence to present her viewpoint. They also put Baisantri's statements in a context of Dalits' repression, i.e. through associations with the use of language forbidden for untouchables and women in the past.

Sanskritic register, an authoritative rhetoric tool in Hindi, appears in the few passages of Baisantri's life story which present exposition or argumentation. The presence of Sanskritic register is restricted only to loanwords; sentences are not elaborate, there are no intricate grammar structures. Most of Baisantri's narrative—its predominantly descriptive parts and narration of events—are expressed in colloquial Hindi with its vocabulary including non-Sanskrit loanwords, syntax and some of the lively idioms of the informal register. Baisantri's style is like a modest starched cotton sari, her narrative's simplicity—'starched' with Sanskrit loanwords in due measures—adds dignity and honesty to her story, making the coherence of her narrative credible to the readers.

A certain, politically oriented addition to the aesthetics of Sanskritic vocabulary and the colloquial Hindi register are words chosen from the jargon of the movement for the betterment of Dalits (many of them Sanskritic ones, for the authority of this rhetoric). These phrases seem to be quotations from Ambedkar's speeches, Dalit magazines and leaflets of those and of present times, they constitute the lexicon of the Dalit movement (eg. *apmān* —insult, humiliation;

[5] *Maī atīt kī yādõ mẽ apnā jīvan jī rahī thī. Apne bhoge hue yathārth ko śabdõ mẽ utārne ke dvandv kī pīṛā mẽ jīvan ke 68 varṣ bīt gae*.

naitk bal—moral strength; *dalit samāj*—Dalit community; *hīntā*—inferiority; *jāgr̥ti*—awareness). Baisantri—as an Ambedkar's supporter and Dalit activist—employs this vocabulary plausibly; however, again, it can also be an editorial interference, insisted upon to shape her story into a tool of propaganda.

Baisantri describes herself as a fervent follower of Baba Ambedkar. Her parents' admiration for the Dalit leader; his success story, personality and mission; his first speech heard by Kausalya as a girl of about ten years; later a more private meeting with Ambedkar and a group of women activists during his visit to her native Nagpur; all these influenced her profoundly inspiring her to become a person she was.

The word of self-definition Baisantri uses most often is Sanskritic *aspr̥śya* or an 'untouchable'. English translation does not reveal the difference in style between this word and a more vernacular *achūt*, as the two will be rendered in English as 'untouchable'. Baisantri avoids the word *achūt*, but several times she uses its derivative, *chuāchūt*, whenever describing practices of the untouchability in Indian society. In a very few instances, mostly in contemporary context, the word 'Dalit' appears (as a form of self-definition, relevant to the movement and the literature, it has been consequently applied in the article). According to Marathi speakers (two upper-caste informants) *aspr̥śya* is a regular and exclusive Marathi word choice for denoting 'untouchable', however, for Hindi speakers it has a somewhat euphemistic shade.

The story of Baisantri's life is not a narration of events evolving linearly and dramatically; it is merely her literary canvas on which she draws scenes from the past. Her impressions of bygones are generally organized in a chronological order. It is a prevalent technique in autobiographical accounts due to its relation to the natural progress of existence. To narrate imprints of the past, Baisantri meanders through tenses—the past and the present tenses—freely, which the medium of Hindi allows, for example, when in the few opening short chapters she describes as *āj*, or today, a typical Sunday of her childhood. This model

Sunday, the essence of all Sundays of her youth, is just a play of memory, but it carries emotional truth for the subject. It proves Eakin's point (Eakin 1992: 31) that though an autobiographer is factually incorrect, or constructing a fictional narrative, his or her story is still a truthful account, and it is valid to the self-narrative because of its emotional significance for the subject.

The author of "The Double Curse" draws a somewhat idealized picture of her family, while giving a list of Sunday activities of her five sisters and parents. It can be inferred from the narrative that this family—who shared their everyday chores, meticulously described in the order of the ideal Sunday—equally shared both delights and distresses of life, and thus provided comfort and support against outside atrocities and trials for all the family members. This bond, whose tribute is interwoven in the narrative, completes Baisantri's life and is the ultimate source of sustenance.

There is an evident temporal disproportion in the narration—more than nine tenths of the account is dedicated to the twenty-one years of the author's life before her marriage; the remaining forty-seven years of her married—and later divorced—life occupies the rest of the narrative. It is very telling that Baisantri considered her youth as the most important period in life and in her struggle for Dalit upliftment; she is one of the first Dalit pupils and college students not only in her home town, Nagpur, but in India; she engages in the movement for the Dalit cause: she volunteers for Dalit social awareness actions, she is an active member and later even a joint secretary of the Scheduled Caste Students Federation. She idealizes her youth also, because of the unhappiness of her marriage to a quarrelsome, abusive, grudging husband, who separated her from the Dalit cause that made her life purposeful. It seems from the narrative that the picture of the vivid and meaningful past dominates over her present existence.

It is noticeable that particular narrative leitmotifs concerned with purity and food occur in the narrative because of their connection with certain taboos of practicing the untouchablity. Thus the activities described in the first chapters of the book are connected with cleanliness.

Baisantri enumerated how her mother washed the hair of all the sisters, combed it and removed lice; how later all family members washed their clothes, dried them and placed them under their pillows for 'ironing'; how they cleaned house and then took baths. This repeating motif of a hygienic consciousness is to be read in the context of a denial of Dalits's alleged uncleanliness. The Hindu orthodoxy perceived the untouchables as ritually impure for their polluting occupations. Readers, however, infer from Baisantri's account of morning cleaning rituals—there seems to be an air of ritual around them—that these accusations are unjustified. The account of the family's long struggle to get a 'private' water-pipe (author proclaims it victoriously as the first such device in their Dalit colony, otherwise they had to use unhygienic common water taps), Baisantri's abhorrence of unclean latrines and their consequently unhygienic surroundings in the predominantly Dalit colony, her mother's revulsion of her neighbors' practice of carrying meat from the market wrapped in clothes dripping with blood—all of these can be contextualized in this manner.

Another trope referring to the practice of the untouchability as a social exclusion is associated with a strict Hindu taboo of not sharing food with untouchables. Baisantri mentions incidents when as a child—still innocent of Indian society's harsh rules—she was denied water e.g. in her tribal girlfriend's house and in her school, which she described as a humiliating experience. Baisantri appreciatively praises two upper-caste friends instead, for inviting her to their houses to dine; it is significant that she provides the minute details of what dishes were served more than five decades ago; it implies how important this experience was. These incidents seem to be an illustration of how, in the highly restrictive social hierarchy, those pushed to the fringes of society establish their own social order identifying those who would act as positioned lower than themselves, whereas a few liberally inclined or reformative representatives of the upper castes are more willing to break the social taboos.

Baisantri sketches portraits of her family members with love and admiration for the strength and independence of her grandmother;

the fierce courage and only partly realized capabilities of her mother. These female figures are her female ideals, her archetypical Shaktis; they are embodiments of Dalit women's struggle; while Ambedkar serves as an epitome of dedication to the Dalit movement. Baisantri retells the stories about her mother and grandmother from before the time she was born in the voice of an omnipresent third person narrator. It seems that she internalized stories of the women's experiences, which were repeated at home during long hours of domestic chores. These narratives developed into collective stories, a common testimony of the orally transmitted family autobiography retold in unison by many female voices of the family.

Baisantri's father, Ambedkar, the man who congratulated her on her graduation and the engineer who helped the family to get the water pipe are the only men valued by the narrative. The others, both upper-caste and Dalit men, are depicted gravely as a constant threat to women's life, because they abuse their positions of power to exploit them. And women described in Baisantri's life story—including Baisantri herself—endure this treatment in silence. Baisantri revolted against gender inequality at sixty-eight when she decided to write her story and during a separation achieved by her after an ugly court case against her husband. In the introduction she claims the right to express herself in men controlled society by writing her life story. In another passage, after admitting the fact that Dalit widows can remarry—implying her pride in a social advancement of Dalits in comparison with upper-caste Hindus' social backwardness—she builds up a rhetorical comparison of women's and men's rights and asks for the reasons why Dalit widows in her community can only marry a divorcee or a widower, and why they cannot celebrate their marriages. Dalit widowers, however, not only wed unmarried girls but also have the right to rejoice at their second marriage with the same festivity as the first one. She does not provide answers; rhetorical questions are her narrative weapon.

Chapter 14 illustrates how Dalit women are victimized and ill--treated by Dalit men. Baisantri draws from her observations of

the neighbours; many of their sad stories ended tragically, but in particular the one described in the last paragraph. The narration of the event is factual but intersected with exclamations of fright. Initially, Baisantri recalls that she did not notice a crowd of men and a donkey in the courtyard of the neighbours; only then the readers learn that her mother—aware of the vulnerability of her daughters—kept them inside the house. That is when we realize that Baisantri recounted a scene that she, in fact, was prevented from seeing, but her narration—to generate a dramatic effect—reveals the events from the beginning probably narrated to her by others. Later the author describes what she and other women saw looking at the crowd of men through the crack in the doors of their houses:

> After a while Sakharam's wife was brought outside. She was wearing only a sari blouse and a small piece of cloth. […] a garland of old sandals was put around her neck. She was sited on the donkey and marched through the whole colony. People shouting again, and again, threw her out of the colony and came back! Oh my God! What a humiliating lesson was she given![6] (Baisantri 1999: 72–73).

The narrative strategy (very short sentences, spoken Hindi vocabulary) grabs the reader's attention. Passive voice constructions describing the humiliation of the woman by men from the neighborhood give an air of inhumanity to these mortifying atrocities. The fact that the atrocities are described by a woman and watched by all women of the colony keeps them (and the readers) on a vigil: inhuman violence can turn against each and every one of them. It is also a rhetoric strategy that at this point the narration of the event gets suspended, the author explains the cause of the woman's misery—she informed her husband of unwanted attention from a foreman at work, and he accused her of

[6] *thoṛī der bād sakhārām kī aurat ko bāhar lāyā gayā. uske badan par sirf colī thī aur vah choṭā sā kapṛā pahnī thī.* […] *uske gale mẽ cappalõ kī mālā pahnāī gayī. use gadhe par biṭhākar bastī mẽ ghumāyā gayā. bastī ke log ho hallā macākar use bastī ke bāhar se nikālkar vāpas āe. bāp re! kitnī apmānjanak śikṣā dī gayī us aurat ko!*

immoral behavior and asked men from the neighborhood to punish her. Only then did Baisantri return to the appalling incident and concluded with a closing sentence about the woman's suicide in the colony's well. It is a purposeful sequencing of the narrative—exposing the accusations before we learn about the tragic end—that emphasizes how undeserved the treatment of the woman was. Baisantri is equally critical of the colony's women, who were thoughtlessly—unlike Baisantri—supporting men in their allegations and thus following the pattern of the dominant cultural reading of woman's inborn immorality that legitimates the control of men.

Baisantri describes herself as a person whose dreams grew proportionally to the graduation from class to class and from school to school. She first attended the school for Dalit girls only, but later went to another educational institution where she was the only untouchable. Since that moment fear became her constant companion, fear of being exposed as a Dalit. She did not make friends; children noticed that her clothes, tiffin box, food—the non-verbal marks of her social inferiority—were different, which alienated her from the group of her peers. Mortified that her caste would be disclosed, she lied that her father was a government officer because fathers of the other girls had respected, middle class professions (doctor, engineer and lawyer) and she could not disclose that her father—whom she loved dearly and respected—collected and sorted garbage. What the emotional cost of such constant fear and anguish was can only be presumed.

But the 'not only-for-Dalits' schools—where she experienced social exclusion, even though she concealed her identity—were also her first glimpses of a better, appealing world, which made her dreams and hopes change. A sensitive, observant and perceptive girl developed aspirations and hopes for an improved life, like the one of the upper-caste pupils.

Baisantri describes her growing inferiority complex and an increasing awareness of degradation in the dominant society that ostracized Dalits. She recalls many incidents of humiliation, such as an overpowering feeling of shame while she watched her father

begging teachers to let her study though he could not pay fees on time and putting his forehead next to teachers' feet as being untouchable he could not even touch them. Thus the romanticized gesture of humble supplication changed into a sign of contemptible degradation. These occurrences built a mounting anxiety in Baisantri's life story.

Dalit parents working hard to educate their daughters, who studied in schools and colleges, with their house with a newly built bathroom and private water-pipe, made Baisantri's family a target of resentment of not only upper-castes, who did not accept undeserved improvements in Dalits' lives. The changing lifestyle of this family symbolizes social change and development and as such is unacceptable to some members of their own community, whom Baisantri identifies as envious of her family's success. Hostility grew: abuse and stones were hurled at the family and at their house; the colony gossiped about the girls' reputation, which is a powerful tool of social control; the family was in a double blind, ostracized by different sectors of society—upper castes and their own community as well.

Baisantri depicts Dalit customs, beliefs, festivals, the lifestyle of Dalit community of Nagpur and other caste communities in relation with Dalits. Her book is an obvious source of social history, but what is even more essential, it explores the subject's relation to history. It is peculiar and not at the same time that Baisantri does not mention a historical event which shaped the destiny of modern India. She is silent about the Partition. It is not surprising when we go back to the accounts of Dalit women from *The Other Side of Silence* by Urvashi Butalia. A repeating motif in the recorded testimonies of Dalit women is their strong belief that the Partition occurred to Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs; Dalits were excluded for once, safe at the margin of society.

Kausalya Baisantri in her life story speaks both for herself and for Dalit women. She does what Claire Lynch describes as an essence of life writings (Lynch 2010: 216): "to write autobiography is to choose to be representative, both of oneself and of those with whom one is associated." She authors her story and the story of Dalit community

of her times and it is a method of writing her own version of history and thus exercising control over the past both as a woman and as a Dalit. These two constituting dimensions of her identity are inextricably intertwined and her life story reflects that. I would strongly disagree with Beth's statement (Beth 2007: 573) that "Dalit autobiographies are not written for the purpose of personal reflection but are overtly meant for public consumption". Beth comments on Dalit men's writings, but even then the fact that something is written for public readership does not mean that it can have only a single motivation and excludes its reflexive character. Baisantri's life story is both political—written as a public statement of Dalit social history at a particular time—and private—it is her consideration of the past.

The style of Baisantri's narrative is unpretentious; there are neither elaborate figures of speech nor complicated syntax, and thus the form and the content of this self-respect story correspond well. It seems that she narrates her life using techniques of the lore of story-tellers, i.e. on the one hand, she summons the readers' attention and alerts them by referring shortly to further, often dramatic developments in the story; on the other hand, she, purposefully, interrupts the continuity of narration of even dramatic events with some kind of interpolations—to suspend the story. Kausalya Baisantri engages the recipients of her life story with rhetorical questions and exclamations, figures of speech often employed in oral tradition of storytelling.

Kausalya Baisantri's "The Double Curse" has an indisputable literary quality also due to inference, it is not only what is expressed but also what is not expressed *per se* which matters. Rupert Snell (unpublished) remarks on Baisantri's story that "it is a wonderful articulation of the maintenance of dignity and meaning in a life denied social privilege".

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