

IDENTITY CRISIS AND DALIT SELFHOOD IN Y. B. SATYANARAYANA'S 'MY FATHER BALIAH'

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Abstract

Dalit literature has become an important literary and social discourse because it brings into view experiences that were long pushed to the margins of Indian public and literary life. Y. B. Satyanarayana's "My Father Baliah" is significant within this tradition because it traces the history of a Dalit family across generations and shows how caste enters everyday life through labour, education, social relations, and public recognition. This paper examines identity crisis and Dalit selfhood in the autobiography, arguing that caste identity is imposed from outside but is also challenged through education, family aspiration, work, memory, and self-respect. The narrative does not present social mobility as a simple escape from caste. Educational and occupational advancement opens new possibilities, yet inherited stigma continues to influence how individuals are seen and how they understand their own place in society. The family's movement across generations therefore involves both material change and a continuing struggle for recognition. Read alongside Ambedkar's critique of caste, Sharankumar Limbale's discussion of Dalit literary aesthetics, Sharmila Rege's work on Dalit women's testimonios, Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai's reflections on experience and theory, and Eleanor Zelliot's account of the Ambedkar movement, Satyanarayana's narrative can be understood as a record of memory as well as an act of self-assertion. "My Father Baliah" ultimately shows that Dalit selfhood is not a fixed identity but a process shaped by conflict, memory, aspiration, and resistance.

Keywords: *Dalit Literature, Identity Crisis, Dalit Selfhood, Caste, Education, Social Mobility, Self-Respect, Dalit Consciousness*

1. LITERARY CONTEXT: CASTE, EXPERIENCE, AND IDENTITY

Dalit literature has an important place in modern Indian writing because it brings lived experiences of caste into literary expression. Rather than treating caste as a distant social problem, Dalit writers place humiliation, labour, exclusion, education, family, and resistance at the centre of narrative. Sharankumar Limbale argues that Dalit literature has to be understood in relation to the social experience from which it emerges; its literary value cannot be separated from its historical and cultural location. This emphasis on experience is particularly important in autobiographical writing, where individual memory becomes connected with the experience of a wider community. Dalit autobiography therefore does more than tell the story of one life. It records a social world and questions the structures that have shaped that life.

Y. B. Satyanarayana's "My Father Baliah" belongs to this tradition of writing from experience. The book recounts the history of the author's family and places the life of his father, Baliah, within the changing social conditions of the Hyderabad region. The narrative moves across generations and pays close attention to the effects of caste on work, education, mobility, and social relationships. Its central concern is not simply the hardship faced by one family but the manner in which caste continues to influence the possibilities available to them. The family's progress shows that social change is possible, but it also shows that progress does not immediately erase the social identity assigned by caste.

The idea of identity crisis provides a useful way of reading this tension. Identity is formed through the interaction between how people understand themselves and how society names and evaluates them. In a caste-based social order, these two forms of identity can come into conflict. A person may develop a strong sense of ability, dignity, and aspiration while still being treated according to an inherited caste category. For Dalits, this conflict is intensified by a long history of untouchability and social exclusion. The problem is therefore not a private psychological difficulty alone; it is produced by a social system that places different values on human beings. "My Father Baliah" repeatedly reveals this conflict between self-respect and the social meanings attached to caste.

The family's Madiga identity is central to the narrative. Caste is not presented as an abstract label but as something that enters ordinary life. It affects occupation, social contact, access to opportunities, and the treatment of individuals in public spaces. The family's experiences show how a caste name can become more powerful in the eyes of society than an individual's education or ability. Such treatment produces exclusion because the person is first seen through a social category and only afterwards as an individual. The resulting tension is one of the foundations of identity crisis in the narrative: the family seeks to create a life defined by achievement and dignity, while the surrounding social order repeatedly attempts to return its members to the position assigned by caste.

This conflict also has a psychological dimension. Repeated humiliation can affect the way people see themselves, particularly when social prejudice is presented as though it were natural or deserved. Satyanarayana's narrative is valuable because it does not reduce the consequences of caste to material deprivation. Caste also affects confidence, belonging, relationships, and expectations about the future. At the same time, the autobiography does not portray Dalits simply as passive victims. The family's responses to discrimination are varied, but education, perseverance, work, and the desire to provide better opportunities for the next generation become important forms of resistance.

Baliah occupies a central position in this process of transformation. His life represents a refusal to accept the limits imposed upon his family. His determination to educate his children is especially significant because education becomes more than a route to employment. It becomes a way of changing the terms on which the family understands itself. Education gives the younger generation access to spaces that were previously closed to them and enables them to imagine lives beyond hereditary occupation. Satyanarayana thus presents education as a means of acquiring knowledge, confidence, and social mobility, while also showing the difficulties that accompany such movement.

The importance given to education recalls B. R. Ambedkar's insistence on education as part of the struggle against caste. Ambedkar's "Annihilation of Caste" exposes caste as a system of social inequality rather than a harmless cultural distinction. His thought places dignity and equality at the centre of social transformation. The educational aspirations of Baliah's family can be read in this wider context. Their effort to educate the next generation challenges the assumption that Dalits should remain confined to the occupations and social positions traditionally assigned to them. Education therefore becomes both a practical resource and a symbolic challenge to caste hierarchy.

Yet "My Father Baliah" does not suggest that education automatically produces equality. This is one of the most important contradictions in the narrative. Educational qualifications and professional employment improve the material circumstances of the family, but caste prejudice does not disappear with economic advancement. A person can enter a new social environment and still be judged through an old caste identity. Social mobility therefore creates a complicated form of freedom. It opens doors while also exposing the individual to new forms of scrutiny and exclusion. The distance between achievement and recognition is precisely where the crisis of identity becomes most visible.

The family's movement into new educational and occupational spaces also creates questions of belonging. Those who move upward socially may no longer occupy the same position as earlier generations, yet they are not necessarily accepted by dominant social groups as equals. At the same time, movement into new institutions can alter their relationship with the community from which they have come. The result is a shifting sense of identity. The individual carries the memory of earlier deprivation while entering spaces shaped by different expectations. "My Father Baliah"

captures this movement without presenting it as a simple journey from darkness to light. The past remains present even when circumstances change.

This tension between mobility and belonging is closely connected with the question of recognition. Identity is not formed only through private self-understanding; it is also affected by the responses of others. Guru and Sundar Sarukkai's discussion of experience and theory is useful here because it draws attention to the importance of lived experience in understanding social reality. The experiences recorded in Satyanarayana's narrative should not be treated merely as examples illustrating an already established theory. They are themselves a source of knowledge about caste, social hierarchy, and the making of the self. The autobiography gives value to experiences that dominant histories have often overlooked.

Memory is consequently one of the strongest elements in the construction of Dalit selfhood. By writing about his father and earlier generations, Satyanarayana preserves experiences that might otherwise remain private or disappear from public memory. The family history becomes a record of labour, hardship, aspiration, and change. This movement from private memory to public narrative is important because Dalit communities have often had to struggle for representation in literary and historical discourse. Eleanor Zelliot's work on the Ambedkar movement similarly demonstrates the importance of recovering the political and cultural history of communities that have been marginalized. In "My Father Baliah", remembering the past becomes a way of giving that past meaning and dignity.

The narrative therefore resists a representation of Dalits only as victims. Suffering is present, but it is accompanied by effort, decision, ambition, and achievement. Baliah's determination to secure a different future for his children is an example of this agency. The family's progress is not presented as a miracle or as an easy escape from oppression. It is the result of sustained effort within difficult circumstances. This balance between suffering and agency is important to Dalit literary expression. Limbale's critical discussion of Dalit aesthetics emphasizes the relationship between literature and lived social experience, and Satyanarayana's narrative gains its force from precisely this relationship.

The question of labour is another important part of the autobiography. Caste historically connected social status with occupation, and Dalit communities were frequently restricted to forms of labour that were considered degrading by the dominant social order. In such a system, work was not simply a means of earning a living; it also became a marker of social worth. The movement of Baliah's family towards education and different forms of employment therefore carries a significance beyond economic improvement. It challenges the idea that occupation should be determined by birth. At the same time, the narrative shows that changing an occupation does not necessarily change the social attitudes attached to the worker.

The struggle for self-respect consequently becomes as important as the struggle for economic security. Self-respect allows the family to refuse the meanings imposed upon them by caste. This does not mean that social stigma disappears. Rather, the meaning of the self begins to change. The family increasingly understands its future through education, achievement, and dignity instead of through the restrictions of hereditary status. This shift marks the movement from an externally imposed identity towards a more consciously constructed selfhood.

The role of family is crucial to this transformation. The experiences of one generation influence the aspirations of the next. Baliah's hardships become part of the educational and social aspirations of his children, while their achievements in turn alter the meaning of the family's past. Family memory therefore connects suffering with hope. The autobiography does not treat individual success as an isolated accomplishment; it presents achievement as part of a longer intergenerational struggle. Dalit selfhood in the text is consequently both individual and collective.

The autobiographical form strengthens this collective dimension. Although the narrative is organized around the life of Baliah, the story continually moves beyond one individual. The experiences of the family reveal the operation of a larger social structure. Rege's study of Dalit women's testimonios is particularly relevant to this understanding of autobiography as a form that can transform personal experience into social testimony. Although "My Father Baliah"

differs in subject and narrative focus, it similarly demonstrates that the personal can become a means of questioning social structures. The family story acquires significance because it speaks to a wider history of caste and exclusion.

The influence of Ambedkarite thought can therefore be understood as an important intellectual background to the narrative. Ambedkar rejected the idea that caste could be removed through minor social adjustments while leaving the hierarchical structure intact. His emphasis on dignity, education, and equality provides a useful framework for understanding the choices made by Baliah and his family. The family's pursuit of education does not merely seek individual advancement; it challenges the inherited assumption that social position should follow birth. In this sense, education becomes a quiet but persistent form of resistance.

From a literary perspective, "My Father Baliah" also demonstrates why Dalit autobiography cannot be separated from social history. The narrative records everyday experiences rather than presenting caste only through abstract argument. Family relationships, work, education, movement between places, and encounters with social institutions reveal how caste operates in ordinary situations. This attention to everyday life gives the narrative its force. It allows readers to see that caste is reproduced not only through major acts of violence or formal discrimination but also through repeated social habits and expectations.

The language of experience is particularly significant. The narrative does not turn suffering into decoration. Instead, it records the conditions through which a family attempts to change its circumstances. Such writing challenges literary traditions that have often represented marginalized communities through the imagination of outsiders. Dalit writing places the experience of the marginalized subject at the centre of representation. Limbale's arguments about Dalit aesthetics help clarify this point: the social location of the writer and the experience represented are closely related to the literary purpose of the work.

Identity crisis in "My Father Baliah" should therefore not be understood only as a condition of confusion or weakness. It is also a stage through which imposed identities are questioned. When the family encounters the contradiction between achievement and continuing discrimination, the contradiction exposes the weakness of caste-based definitions of worth. The individual begins to recognize that the social identity imposed by others does not fully describe the self. Selfhood develops through the effort to resist that reduction.

This process also has a wider political significance. Dalit consciousness emerges when individual experiences of exclusion are connected to a larger understanding of caste as a social system. The personal story then becomes a form of cultural and political expression. Writing itself becomes an act of recognition: the experiences of the family are declared worthy of being remembered, read, and discussed. The autobiography thus participates in the larger movement through which Dalit writers have challenged the exclusion of marginalized voices from Indian literary culture.

The relevance of the autobiography extends into the present because the conflict between formal equality and lived inequality has not disappeared. Legal and constitutional guarantees have established principles of equality, but social attitudes and practices can continue to reproduce inherited hierarchies. "My Father Baliah" remains significant because it shows how such contradictions are experienced at the level of family and individual life. The narrative does not offer a simple solution; instead, it emphasizes the importance of education, memory, dignity, and sustained resistance.

The autobiography also expands the meaning of literary representation. When a family history that has been shaped by caste enters the public literary sphere, the boundaries of what counts as significant literary experience are widened. Dalit literature does not merely add new subjects to an existing canon; it questions the assumptions through which literary value and social knowledge have traditionally been defined. Satyanarayana's narrative contributes to this process by placing the history of a Dalit family at the centre of its literary and ethical concerns.

The journey of Baliah's family can finally be understood as a movement from imposed identity towards self-assertion. The family cannot simply erase its caste identity, nor does social mobility make prejudice disappear. What changes is

the relationship between caste identity and the sense of self. Through education, work, family aspiration, memory, and self-respect, the members of the family increasingly refuse to allow caste to define the full meaning of their lives. The narrative thus presents identity as something negotiated across generations rather than as a fixed category.

Y. B. Satyanarayana's "My Father Baliah" offers a sustained account of the relationship between caste, identity, and social mobility. The autobiography shows that caste affects not only material opportunities but also recognition, belonging, memory, and self-respect. At the same time, it refuses to allow oppression to become the final meaning of Dalit life. Education opens new possibilities, family memory preserves the struggles of earlier generations, and self-respect challenges the social meanings imposed by caste. Read in relation to Ambedkar, Limbale, Guru and Sarukkai, Rege, and Zelliott, the narrative can be seen as both a family history and a contribution to the larger discourse of Dalit selfhood. Its lasting strength lies in its insistence that dignity is not granted by society but asserted through lived experience, memory, and struggle.

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