



Life-Writing as Working Class Affect: Archive for Integral History

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Abstract

Drawing on the findings of Jeremy Rifkin's *The Empathic Civilization*, Patricia Clough, et al.'s *The Affective Turn* (2007), Antonio Gramsci's theorization of subaltern agency and Giles Deleuze's idea of the ontologies of immanence, this paper intends to foreground the category of the memoir written by subalternised subjectivities across the globe as potential terrains of empathic chronicles or life writings. Such trauma ridden personalized narratives can provide new templates of human emotions associated with subjugation, coercion and resistance and can help in forming an effective pedagogic universe to make us alive to the varied intricacies of affective poignancy and empathy. This paper would attempt to demonstrate the intersection of affective turn and the narrative turn with reference to three subaltern memoirs- Gaiutra Bahadur's *Collie Woman* (2014), Ali Cobby Eckermann's *Too Afraid to Cry* (2015) and Siddalingaiah's *A Word with You, World* (2013) to substantiate the point that plebian life writing can inaugurate a new body of affective intensity necessary for a reformulated epistemology of the future. Gaiutra chronicles the pangs and agonized cries of the coolies, specially the women coolies, who were ferried to the British colonies across the globe as indentured labourers. Ali's story is a testament to the trauma of the 'lost generations' of Australia, who were subjected to feigned brutalities of the state that had hidden agenda of annihilating the Aboriginal people from the country through legitimate forms of legislations. Siddalingaiah's narrative enshrines the journey of the author who being a Dalit had to suffer deprivation and humiliation at every step on his way towards becoming a poet.

Keywords

Subaltern; Immanence; Coercion; Affective; Aborginal

I was still shocked that so many babies had been adopted away from their mothers. (Eckermann, 2015, 83)

Narrative is the medium of human agency, to argue that the concept of a routine resort to a narrativized script ... enables (and constrains) the personal agency of the individualist self. (Mascuch, 1997, 21- 22)

Subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise ... every trace of independent initiative on the part of subaltern groups should therefore be of incalculable value for the integral historian. (Gamsci, 54-55)

I must have a word with you

O cactuses and thorny plants;

I must put a question to the moon who borrows his light:

I should free the beautiful rose from thorns. (Siddalingaiah, 2013)

The recent turn to 'affect' as theorized by both Rifkin and Clough is taking place when critical theory is encountering the analytic challenges of ongoing war, trauma, pain, genocide, and counter/terrorism and these thinkers draw on Deleuze (and ultimately Spinoza) to consider affect as intensity related to a capacity and potential to act. We would argue that subaltern life-writings encapsulate this intensity of affect and therefore nurture the potential to flower into agential roles in unconventional and indirect ways. These forms of biographical articulation, needless to say are deficient in grandiosity or perfection but their sketchy, non-chronological gesticulations of a bruised and battered life-world do suffuse with a unique luminosity of affect that can coronate a new ethics of solidarity and togetherness. Mainstream historiography elbows out any space for all forms of subaltern narratives and the only way for the marginalized to defy the glare of hegemonic elite historiography is to constitute a voice of their own and peripheral memoirs, we argue can disavow the coercive enfeeblement of subalternized agencies through the foregrounding and execution of affect. We would refer to three memoirs as axioms to argue our case – one written by an indentured woman labourer, one by an Australian aboriginal evicted from her life space, and the last one by a Dalit (the lowest caste, considered untouchable in India). A tale of personal loss and suffering can be narrated to the most powerful effect when it is penned by one who has lived through each moment of the traumatic journey. The emotions and feelings, the agonized cries embedded in the narratives make the readers pause and let them empathize with the subject. That is why in all parts of the world subalternised agencies have chosen the autobiographical mode to tell their stories of subjugation and atrocities. Such sombre narratives become the vehicle to voice their resistance against the violence and injustice inflicted upon them. In most cases their language is shorn of conventional literary embellishments but they articulate the real visage of turbulence. The only device that the subalterns imbue their words with is the body of powerful emotions they have gone through. Personal loss and sorrow, a sense of deprivation and humiliation, anger and agitation- all sorts of emotions jostle together to form the narrative structures in these writings evoking empathy in the readers. These are writings free from the lies and hypocrisies or from tropes of cosmetic literary conventions. Here sorrow becomes a powerful language, anger is made pleasant and rage transforms into a voice craving for justice – a perfect repertoire for an affective republic of letters. In what follows we would

first address the recent theoretic argument in favour of the affective turn and would align this theorization with the cluster of affects generated in subaltern memoirs.

The Affective Turn & Subaltern Agency

Jeremy Rifkin in his book *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis* (2009) has argued for a transition from the Age of Faith and the Age of Reason to the Age of Empathy and in a recent lecture on Rethinking Human Nature and the History of Human Journey on the Cusp of a Empathic Era, he emphasized on the possibility of Empathic Sciences in a Collaborative world and his call for the recognition of our empathic being can be further buttressed through our argument of life writing

Social scientists, in turn, are discovering previously hidden strands of the human narrative which suggests that human evolution is measured not only by the expansion of power over nature, but also by the intensification and extension of empathy to more diverse others across broader temporal and spatial domains. The growing scientific evidence that we are a fundamentally empathic species has profound and far-reaching consequences for society, and may well determine our fate as a species. (Rifkin, 2010 lecture)

In similar vein, Michael Hardt, in his foreword to Clough's *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (2007), astutely suggests that the precursors to the (re)turn to affect in the humanities and social sciences can be found in feminist considerations of the body and queer theory's investments in "structures of feeling" such as shame and pride (Williams 1961; Probyn 2005). The affective turn might equally be thought to emerge from the technopolitics of late capitalism, and the convergence of cyber, multimedia, information, and science studies with studies of the body, matter, being and time. Clough et al. would reinforce this argument when they observe

The affective turn ... expresses a new configuration of bodies, technology, and matter instigating a shift in thought in critical theory such that attending to the affective turn is necessary to theorizing the social. (Clough 2007: 2)

The present paper would demonstrate how a new theorization of the social can be achieved through working class or other peripheral forms of life writings – a body of texts that can be used as effective modes of articulating emotions and creating empathy across the globe. As the stories of subalternised subjectivities go unheard or deliberately ignored and as they don't find space in the mainstream cultural forms then the only way to get noticed is to speak for them by themselves. People who are exploited or marginalized and relegated to the fringes have taken recourse to this tool of life writing to narrate their stories to the world. This literary form has proved to be a potential terrain for representing the hitherto unheard of or suppressed stories. We have selected three books from three different countries but the common features that combine them together is the mode in which the narratives are expressed, the emotions they convey and the impact they make upon the readers. All three books are subaltern memoirs and they narrate the traumas and predicaments of the authors and of those the authors represent. Gaiutra Bahadur's *Coolie Woman*, Ali Cobby Eckermann's *Too Afraid to Cry* and Siddalingaiah's *A Word with You, World* are poignant representations of silenced zones of sufferings and oppressions coming

out only now through these representations by the victims themselves. Gaiutra unearths the vast chunk of untold and unwritten history of forceful human deportation and human trafficking carried out in colonial India. The colonial market regimes and global labour requirements necessitated a huge deportation of cheap Indian indentured labour (the coolies) to various corners of the globe and mainstream Indian history is relatively silent on this. The predicament of countless coolie women who were ferried to the British colonies across the globe as indentured labourers have never been scripted let alone theorized or addressed and today when we talk of global labour laws or global working class resistance in the form of the Multitude as conceptualised by Negri such muted traumatic narratives of working class women in far flung regions of the globe can definitely help in formulating a new affective universe of human collaboration and solidarity. If working class coolies were brutalized to cater to the menacing needs of global colonial market, then the surreptitious bio-political control of colonized aboriginal populations in Australia in modern times too subscribe to the same reality of coercion and suppression and Ali Eckermann's story testifies to the muffled cries of the "stolen generations" of Australia, who were subjected to a gross atrocities of the state. Through such narratives we can be enlightened to such cases of legitimized control and ethnic cleansing. The more we foreground such stories of brutal experiences, the more we serve the purpose of the affective turn necessary for a better world of togetherness. In his essay "Dalit Life-writing and Subalternity" published in the recent book *The Political Philosophies of Antonio Gramsci and B R Ambedkar* (Zene, 2013), Udaya Kumar made a brilliant analysis of Dalit life-writing as a mode of validation of real life experience of pain and persecution and in that way reinforcing the fact that subaltern life writing consolidates the affective universe germane to any attempt of reformulating new epistemologies

Dalit literature and in particular Dalit life-writing has been among the most powerful instances of this in contemporary India. It has often been argued that Dalit literature is largely autobiographical. However, the centrality of autobiography is not really an empirical matter; it has less to do with quantitative preponderance than with what may be called autobiography's 'paradigmatic' status in Dalit literary production. (Kumar, 2013, 163)

Siddalingaiah's autobiographic narrative chronicles the real life journey of the author who being a Dalit had to suffer deprivation and excruciating humiliation at every step on his way towards becoming a poet or in other words on his way to enter the mainstream. In the subsequent section we would experience the battered *labenswelt* of an indentured labourer as described by Bahadur and as experienced by her great grandmother and such phenomenological life-reportage builds the affective socios pertaining to issues of rehabilitation and restoration of human glory.

Dislocation, Deprivation and Working Class Affect

Working class writing as exemplified by Gaurita Bahadur maps universal issues of plebian affinity or polysemic coalitional labour solidarity, singularities of subaltern ethics and a radical cognitive universe predicated on colonial subjugation, displacement, stigmatized division of labour and counter currents of resisting subjectivities. It reaffirms Marx's observation as mentioned by Sonali Perera in her book *No Country: Working Class*

Writing in the Age of Globalisation (2014) that the working class have no country of their own as their predicaments are governed by the coercive dynamics of international division of labour cutting across national frontiers and although both Perera and Bahadur narrate divergent territorial events or myriad tropes of dislocation, agony and subjugation located in far flung corners of the globe, yet what brings the two books together are the undercurrents of identical ways of subalternization and dissident agencies occurring through the dark corridors of indentured labour history and working class dissent. If Perera's work is a meticulous re-theorization of working class literature, substantiated by her textual enunciation of selected writers, Bahadur's poignant biographic portrayal of *coolitude* is a superb explication of working class life-writing neglected so far in both the Anglophone academy as well as in conventional Eurocentric postcolonial studies. In the aftermath of Proletarian literature, a *genre* promoted by the 1930's Marxian internationalist writers movement, or in the subsequent period of Subaltern Studies historiography, the idea of the working class has undergone unprecedented changes and Perera refers to both Negri and Hardt's notion of the *Multitude* (something referred to by Clough as well in her notion of the affective turn) in her engagement with the reformulated idea of the proletariat or the working class in today's post globalist scenario and therefore what is required now is a retheorisation of working class writing and Perera's *No Country* exactly does that in a span of four brilliantly argued chapters followed by an Epilogue and she concludes her book by reaffirming the same point that she raises in the beginning and develops across the book

Working class writing has gone relatively unnoticed, except within certain guises and abbreviated contexts. But working class writing is hardly new. It should not now be deemed the repressed subaltern untheorised of postcolonial studies, or indeed the *Lemuria*, so to speak, of world literature. This book then is not a recovery project ... Rather, it proposes that a simultaneously broader and deeper study of working class writing compels new ways of thinking about literature, ethics and the social imagination. (Bahadur, 171)

Such new ways of thinking about literature, ethics and social imagination get perfectly enunciated in Gaiutra Bahadur's portrayal of the Coolie Woman, the colonial indentured labour in her book *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (2014). Bahadur delineates the pains of indentureship during the colonial period in her book that excavates the complex facets of the traumas and agonies of the emigrant Indians and their descendants, which have been buried deep in the official books of history. The entire book unfolds in the form of life writing and as Bahadur travels down history she offers the readers a nuanced and illuminating work of family memoir that includes not only the hidden story of her Great grandmother, Sujaria who at the age of twenty seven left her native village Bhurahupur in Bihar, India and registered her name as an indentured labour to set for British Guiana in 1903, but also those countless Indian men and women who decided to cross the forbidden *Kala Pani* (Black waters) in search of their destiny. Such subalternised labours were devoid of all agential roles as they were forced to migrate amidst heavy odds and their entire life was spent in indescribable pain and therefore the memoir offers some spaces of agency so highly cherished by Gramsci in his theorization of the subaltern. The book opens with the first chapter called *The Magician's Box* in which the author gives vent to her complex feelings at the age of seven during her family's emigration from Guyana to New Jersey in

1981. It was a feeling combined with an apparent sense of alienation and an intrinsic sense of belonging that lingers on even after the temporal and spatial rapture takes place. She writes

Emigrating was like stepping into a magician's box. The sawing in half was just a trick. In time, limbs and coherence would be stored, and a whole, intact self-sent back into the audience. (Bahadur, 4)

This trauma of emigration makes her ponder over whether her great grandmother, Sujaria had similar feelings when she left her family, village and country and boarded the ship on 4 November, 1903. Bahadur weaves the working class life writing of her great grandmother by recounting her enormous struggles – struggles which were suffused with enormous poignancy of affect that recounts her despicable condition of displaced being

She was a pregnant woman travelling alone.... She wonders, how did she ever get to this point of departure, surrounded by so many fragmented families and outcasts, bearing secrets and unstated loss? Did she look back over her shoulder as she boarded the ship? Was there regret in her glance? ... That migration had put thousands of miles and even greater psychological distance between me and the village women of Bhurahupur. Yet their tears seemed to implicate me. (10; 22; 47)

Bahadur's book explores the hidden truths about her roots left behind in the oblivion of past and in doing so she comes to confront the spectres of past that would haunt her constantly. Her exploration unfolds a history of gross injustice in myriad forms of exploitation, coercion, dislocation, and betrayal that her forefathers along with more than a million Indians were subjected to for more than hundred years. At the very outset of the book Bahadur explains why she has chosen the title *Coolie Woman* which may sound offensive to many. The term "*Coolie*" has originated from the Tamil word '*Kuli*' meaning wages or hire. Later on it evolved into a derogatory word, an 'ethnic slur' as a reminder for the indentured labourers of their lowly origins. Most indentured labourers didn't use the term to describe themselves. In folk songs they would say: "Why should we be called coolies/ We who were born in the clans and families of seers and saints"(xx). In 1956 Trinidad's future prime minister urged his countrymen to banish this stigmatizing word and later a movement started to reclaim the word "coolie", endowing "with pride and subvert the old stigma" (xxi). In the mid-1990s the Mauritian poet Khal Torabully started formulating principles for a movement called *Coolitude* that reminds us of oppression and forms of dissidence (xxi). The history of indentured labor has been kept hidden for years but now narratives of their dislocation, dispossession, exclusion, and ostracization are coming to the fore but when people talk of indentureship the story of the injustice and violence meted out to the women still remains suppressed. In her endeavour to exhume that silenced zones of sufferings, Bahadur realizes that most of the women were not literate and thus they did not leave diaries or letters. She writes, "It almost feels like these elusive figures are peeking through the pages, from behind a curtain separating the woman's quarters from the rest of the house of official history" (Bahadur, 23).

Indentureship was part of their state policies and when the slavery system was abolished the British government introduced a new form of slavery underneath the term of

indentureship. From 1838 to 1917 over a million Indians were transported to the British colonies like Guyana, Fiji, Mauritius, Trinidad etc to work in the sugarcane plantations.

A wide array of social and economic deprivations drove villagers from home. The practice of imperial capitalism destroyed traditional livelihoods, plunging weavers into unemployment by flooding India with factory-made textiles from England.... In times of famines in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, more than enough to cause sustained, large-scale displacement. Nor were women sheltered from this. (Bahadur, 25)

Bahadur's minutely researched work reveals that the women who were engaged as indentured labours were victims of utter economic crisis and social exclusion. Those who were abandoned by their families or the widows who were marginalized from the mainstream society and had no option to survive than to become prostitutes were the easy victims. With no option left, women would register themselves as coolie women and the moment they boarded the ships they were exposed to various forms of torture and violence. The British officials used to make them prey to their lust. Life became harder once they arrived on the so called land of "white milk, gold...". Extreme hard labour, physical torture made them nostalgic about the life they had left behind in India. Lives of the coolie women were unbearable as they had to suffer violence both from the British officials and the male indentured labours. Bahadur narrates that Guyana where thousands of coolie women were brutalized was the place where Sir Walter Raleigh had come in search of El Dorado. For Sujaria and her fellow indentured immigrants Guyana was the mythic city of gold, a place that they had imagined would shape their destiny, but when they landed there the atrocious reality of exploitation dawned on to them. Bahadur writes,

These were the workers who bore the brunt of the cane sugar depression ... Life was extremely painful. Apart from hard labour the colonies were not fit for human habitation. Most women had to go right back to work after childbirth, since they weren't paid time off to nurse babies. (Bahadur,87)

To survive in the exploitative environment women were dependent on men who too would maltreat them

Coolie women weren't exactly like Jane Austen heroines, practicing love as a form of social mobility; but they seem to have used their scarcity to survive as best they could in an exploitative environment. (Bahadur,92)

The author's investigation across countries where indentureship was prevailing reveals the atrocities and violence the indentured women were exposed to. Between 1859 and the end of indentureship in 1917, more than 167 women were killed by intimate or would-be intimate partners in Guyana (108). Adultery or mere suspicion of it was the cause in most of these cases. In the chapter "*Beautiful Woman Without Nose*", Bahadur narrates how the mythical story of Surpanakha's disfigurement used to serve as warning - "She serves as a warning to them: a noseless, earless mannequin for the consequences of uncontrolled sexuality"(88). Bahadur gives a long list of cases involving violence against women and it demonstrates that those working class women had two different battles to fight - one with the indentureship system and the indentured labourers and the other with their own Indian men and women. This book resurrects the traumatic affect of indenture and in that way allows the subaltern women to speak. Bahadur concludes her book offering some fleeting

glimpses of the generations who are carrying the baggage of a history of exploitation, degradation and violence

The past was a baggage that she had to heft, somehow, with disfigured arms, as generations of coolie women before her had done. To survive her history, she did as they had. She thought of her family, and she carried on.' (Bahadur, 214)

Bahadur's *Coolie Woman* then is a superb instance of working class life writing that captures agonized moments of proleterisation and struggle, something that seldom figure as a part of our Euro-centric discursive deliberations. The memoir contains memorable photographs of coolie habitations, their pathetic conditions of living – a chunk of history erased but defossilised through Bahadur's wonderful archival research. Similar instances of desilencing also happens in Eckermann's account of her own debasing experiences and in what follows we experience that through the eyes of the persecuted.

Trauma and Colonization of Life-world

Ethnic cleansing has become a household world in the aftermath of the Shoah and the Bosnia war but through the autobiographic details of horror, Ali Eckermann solidifies the nightmarish experience of abuse and forceful colonization tactfully veiled through the mask of philanthropy by the Australian government. The brilliance of affective poignancy is revealed through the following poetic effusion of agony as expressed by Eckermann-

Bruises on my face
Yellow with sunrise
Until the shadow blocks
Out the sun

Black eyes listen
To scratchy words
Of a drunken record
That does not stop

His shadow falls over
Releasing the sun
I stare at him

It is my only way to let him know
I will kill him if he pushes me
too far (Dead Eyes, Eckermann, 2015, 91)

This is really the "only way" to let us know of her gagged voice, her "muted heart hammered/in black and white world/too young to read" (21). Her "frozen tears" are deciphered only through her own effusions or through the mode of life-writing and the gross history of barbarism that got exposed to the readers through Bahadur's earlier somber family memoir finds resonance when we read a similar memoir from this aboriginal writer of Australian continent Ali Cobby Eckermann whose *Too Afraid to Cry* exposes another

forms of state atrocity that was operating in another part of the world during the 20th century. Through the pages of her autobiographic articulations, Ali poignantly tells us about her lived experiences fraught with traumas and tribulations, unmasking in the process the lies and hypocrisies of a nation that observers “National Sorry Day” to apologize for the atrocities unleashed to its Aboriginal inhabitants. Ali’s powerful memoir exposes macabre states of racist politics in Australia as practiced by the modern day Australian government. On the pretext of protecting the Indigenous children from neglect and sexual abuse in their ethnic families and under the garb of providing them with better environment to live in, the Australian government started the notorious ‘Aboriginal children removal programs’. The Aboriginal children were forcefully/cunningly separated from their parents and put to government institutions or adopted out to white families. Underneath its benevolent mask, this cruel Act was intended to deepen White colonization over the Aboriginal population, leading perhaps to the inevitable extinction of the Indigenous communities through the abolition of human rights and ethnicity rights. Before the publication of such experiential memoir few of us could have realized the brutal reality of such legislative practices duly sanctioned by the Australian parliament. Ali’s autobiography then proves to be a powerful indictment of the Australian government’s racist policies that attempted to deny the affective history of the Aboriginal Australians. The silent corridors of atrocities, humiliation and trauma are de-frozened through Ali’s memoir when she discloses the ravaged soul of the sufferer

When Aunty [adopting white mother] went to sleep, Uncle [adopting white father] would sit next to me and rub my chest. I think he was looking for my bosoms. Fat chance! I was only seven years old and hadn’t grown mine yet. (Eckermann,19)

The very opening of Ali Cobby Eckermann’s memoir *Too Afraid to Cry* gives the readers a glimpse of the author’s devastating experiences which are simultaneously personal and universal. The memoir is steeped in sexual traumas and bodily tribulations that have been gnawing at Ali’s soul over the years. Ali herself was an aborigine and one of the ‘Stolen Generations’ who were victims of the Australia government’s heinous racist politics. When the government of Australia implemented its Child Removal Policy (approximately between 1905 and 1969) under the surreptitious terminology of Child Protection, thousands of Indigenous children were separated from their families. The state vindicated such injustices by masquerading it under the tags of “child protection” and ‘civilization.’ The government’s justification was that the Aboriginal children were neglected and sexually abused in their own families and hence necessitated governmental intervention. The policy makers insisted that the Aboriginal children were in urgent need to be separated from their families. The child removal legislation caused removal of children from their families in massive numbers. Policemen or other agents of the state were given the power to locate and transfer children of mixed descent from their families into government institutions or white families to prevent them from being socialized in the indigenous culture. The exact number of the removed children is still not known. The “Bringing Them Home” report says that at least 1000, 000 children were removed from their parents. Professor Robert Manne in his essay *In Denial: The Stolen Generations and the Right* suggests that “approximately

20,000 were removed between 1910 and 1970, based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics report of 1994” (Manne, 2001). The “Bringing Them Home” report (1997) discovered that removed children were, in most cases, placed into institutional facilities operated by religious or charitable organizations, and a significant number, particularly females, were “fostered” out. The trials and traumas of those part-white children, victims of the enforced separation and oblivion have been unearthed first by historian Peter Read who first used the term ‘Stolen Generations’ in 1981. He wrote a 21-page pamphlet titled *The Stolen Generations: the Removal of Aboriginal Children in New South Wales 1883 to 1969*, for the New South Wales Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs. He writes,

In Australia today there may be one hundred thousand people of Aboriginal descent who do not know their families or communities. They are the people, or the descendants of people, who were removed from their families by a variety of white people for a variety of reasons. They do not know where they come from; some do not even know they are of Aboriginal descent... as they grew up, they were expected to think white, to act white, and in the end to be white. (1997[1989]: ix)

Read’s pamphlet accused the authorities like Aborigines Protection Board and Aborigines Welfare Board of ‘attempted genocide’ in their policy of distancing the Aboriginal children from their families. He said, “Genocide does not simply mean the extermination of people by violence but may include any means at all” (ix). Read’s claim was later supported by the official human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Inquiry. Its 1997 “Bringing Them Home” report concluded that “between one in ten and three in ten Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their families between 1910 and 1970” (Eckerman, 5). The report explored the traumatic experiences of these mixed-descent children in government institutions and white families. It is evident that the policy would inevitably cause the elimination of the population of full-blood and half-caste Aborigines. Ali’s memoir underlines the impact of the removal policy on the children who were made to live far away from their families. Being an Aborigine Ali too was taken away from her family and was adopted out to a white family. Her life in the adoptive environment was fraught with sexual assaults and racial abuse. Ali openly writes how from the age of seven she was subject to her Uncle’s sexual molestation. She writes,

Uncle started to kiss me. His chin was all scratchy from not shaving. It felt funny, and I felt like laughing. But when he pushed his tongue down into my throat I screamed. No noise could come out, and I couldn’t breathe. He had put his body on top of mine, and I could not move. And the icy wind was screeching around and around inside my whole body. Ice cold tears forced their way out of my eyes down my cheeks. (Eckermann,20)

With the surreptitious objective of relegating the indigenous communities to the brink of extinction the Australian government has been taking recourse to various forms of manipulative policies. The children removal policy is one of the state’s colonising strategies. This process entailed severing the emotional, physical, cultural and geographical bonds with the child’s Aboriginal culture and tradition. Ali hints at such ideological dislocation in her autobiography when she writes, “Mum [adopting mother] suggested I

should stay away from my Aboriginal friends, because she thought they were dragging me down” (Eckermann, 76). She was not allowed to mix with the indigenous children. The removed children were punished if found speaking their indigenous language. They were forced to adapt to the ways of the new world of the white Australians. The indigenous children faced racial problems when put to the schools mainly populated by the white children. In school due to her skin colour Ali was made to feel as ‘other kind’ on every occasion. The school teachers referred to her as “her kind”, the white girls would dissect her - “Someone held me while other hands pulled my underpants down... They said they wanted to know if I was the same as other girls” (Eckermann, 48). Ali’s faith in life vanishes; “I watched the clouds. I watched trust disappear” (Eckermann, 74). At the school social Ali found some white girls trying to flush her cousin’s head down the dunny. She was also an Aborigine. Ali couldn’t resist her anger and started fighting with them. This incident put Ali in big trouble. She fell victim to the white people’s prejudice about the black. She was called to the principal’s room along with her Mum. The principle said that she would not be allowed in the school anymore for she would be “too much of a disruptive influence on the other students” [1]. The problems of the removed children get more intense as they grow up into the adult world. Ali’s life in the wider world was fraught with multiple tribulations. She writes,

At eighteen, I would be the first unmarried pregnancy in our small country town, and I knew Mum and Dad were ashamed of me. The younger siblings looked at me like I was the devil. I felt like I was carrying the devil inside me. (Eckermann, 98)

She was compelled to give away her son in adoption. After this traumatic separation, Ali underwent a failed marriage. She got addicted to drugs and alcohol, and suffered from depression. The tormented mind does not leave her at peace. “The suicide thoughts would not leave my brain. When I went for walks, I saw myself hanging in the trees” (156). Ultimately she took shelter in a rehab centre to come out of this condition. She was referred to Rosemary, who runs a counselling service for Aboriginal people and there she came to learn about the Aboriginal Link Up service that helped Ali to find out her birth mother. She met with her in Canberra. Ali gets back to her roots by reclaiming the many fragments of her family and finally discovers the solace that she has been searching for. Ali learns that her mother also grew up without her mother, sisters and brother. In her own words; “It is hard to accept that I repeated the history when I adopted out my son’ (Eckermann, 80). Ali says in the poem contained within her memoir, “Circles and Squares”

I was born Yankunytjatjara my mother is Yankunytjatjara .../ my family is Yankunytjatjara/ I have learnt many things from my family elders I have grown/ to recognize that life travels in circles- Aboriginal culture/ has taught me that.” (Eckermann, 205)

Among her own people Ali found it hard to adapt to the Aboriginal ways of life as she has been alienated from this ambience for long. Her growing up in the adoptive family had already erased the language, tradition, culture, history everything she could call her own. She comes to learn that she has lost a life that was close to her soul. She is a part of those people who

... looked into my face and into my eyes. They dance and sing around me. They welcome me back to my traditional country. They give me my skin name. They rub me with their healing powers and heal me using traditional medicine... [She observes] ... My heart is Round to echo the music of my family but the square within me remains. (Eckermann, 194)

The tussle between two cultures ended in the ultimate loss of the indigenous one. Ali can perceive “another way of life” of idyllic beauty and innocence beyond the quagmire of materialism the so called civilized white people are plunged in.

Ali's memoir takes us on a journey through her lived experiences saturated with sexual assaults and racial abuse and in doing so it unmask the state coercion, appropriation and hegemonic policies of the Australian government and their impact on the victims. Through this revision of her past, Ali has exposed many hidden policies, lies and hypocrisies of the state that was determined to render everything black into white. Ali's memoir emerges as a scathing documentation of the racist politics and colonial discourse of the Australian government. The narrative with its blending of blunt prose and intense poetry presents the pangs of thousands of indigenous people, which are at once personal and universal. When Ali talks about the nightmares of a “muted heart hammered in a world of black and white”, or when she asks, “How does a father feel/ After his child is abused? Does he want to kill the man/Who stole the innocence forever?” (Eckermann, 30) the readers can visualize the traumatized heart of all the ‘Stolen Generations’, suffering similarly. She is speaking for a collective, for those who went through similar tragedies for years. Ali's cries give vent to the pent up agonies of all those peripheral voices who are really “too afraid to cry” before the colossal forces of colonization. Such brilliant consummation of affect in life writing gets another version in Dalit life-writing and Siddalingaiah's autobiographic discourse unveils identical domains of persecutive affect.

Dalitude and Homo Hierarchicus

Siddalingaiah's autobiography, *A Word With You, World* (2013) is also a personal memoir fraught with personal agonies resulted from exploitation, atrocities and marginalization based on caste based ideologies as they exist in India. The book narrates the story of the author and in doing so it takes us on a journey through a world where one has to suffer each and every moment for having been born into a family of the lowest caste, i.e. the Dalit family. Siddalingaiah's story betrays the hardships and obstacles the author, a Dalit, had to overcome on his way towards becoming a poet or the mainstream. From a very early age the author was made conscious of their status in the social hierarchy. He writes and we shudder to hear his horrific experience

A man had fastened a yoke onto the shoulders of two other men and was ploughing Ainoru's fields. It was amusing to watch the two men trundle on like bullocks, while the third followed them, swinging a whip and making them plough. Then I realized that one of the men carrying the yoke was my father. A strange agony gripped me at that moment.” (Siddalingaiah, 16)

Siddalingaiah inhabits a society where a human being is treated like a beast and made to serve the upper caste people only for the fact that the former is a Dalit. The author's pathetic financial plight gets manifest when he says, “I was overwhelmed by an unexpected

gratitude. Occasionally, Aioru also gave me some old tattered shirts and pants that his son had discarded” (16). The money his parents earned was not enough. His mother had to go to the forest to collect firewood, which she sold at the weekly market. Siddalingaiah’s mother worked as a sweeper in a Dalit hostel. After the students served their meal, the workers would take the leftovers home. His mother brought home the *mudde* (left overs) they gave her in the mornings, which would solve the food problem of their family. The problem of untouchability is a burning issue in Indian society and Siddalingaiah gives a personal anecdote to show how the Dalits are considered untouchables. He had a friend from an upper caste family. He used to visit their house often and everyone would speak to the author with affection but one day Siddalingaiah noticed that the plate he used for eating was kept in separate corner outside so that it does not tarnish the purity of the upper caste friends. In his college days too he had similar experiences of caste prejudices. He even recounts an incident in which he was almost being stabbed for speaking against caste system. Dalits were not allowed to enter into temples because of their lower castes and he recalls how during a conference in Village near Bangalore the high pitched speeches of some Dalit leaders sparked courage among the listeners and they forcefully entered into the nearby temple. But as they stepped out of the temple they were chased by hundreds of upper caste men armed with axes, choppers, and knives. It was a battle triggered by ignorance and caste bigotry. Siddalingaiah’s narrative not only deals with poverty, caste atrocities unleashed to the Dalits but it also shows ways in which he overcomes those trials and creates an identity for himself. It traces the growth of Siddalingaiah as a resisting subject and that ultimately helped him to flower into a poet. Kannada and Tamil organizations who have anti-caste positions provided him library facilities where he could develop his habit of reading poetry and fiction. Siddalingaiah recalls how while still only as high school student he gave a confident speech on the Ambedkar Day at the Town Hall. The guests and the audience seemed to appreciate his speech and it encouraged him to represent his school at the inter-high schools’ debates. This was how he started his life in the arena of writing and activism. During his college days Siddalingaiah’s poetry composition progressed at a great pace and he drew admiration from stalwarts for his literary works. Later we see him emerging as a revolutionary poet and an activist. Along with his friends Siddalingaiah formed a society called *Vicharavaadi Parishat* (Rationalists’ Forum) that fought for the rights of the Dalit students who suffered many hardships. After the publication of his book *Holemaadigara Haadu*, Siddalingaiah became famous in literary circles and in spite of his Dalit ancestry and in spite of being subjected to all sorts of persecutions, Siddalingaiah established himself as a poet, activist and a teacher. His story serves as an inspiration for the Dalits and exemplifies the ways for their emancipation. Siddalingaiah’s battle with social stratification stems from his questioning of the status quo and he begins that by raising questions that led to his examination of the world

Who has stopped the timely rain?

Who has slashed the stars with rainbow?

Who is hiding the sun so that darkness may bloat and bulge? ...

O world, I must get to know you

And so I must have a word with you (Siddalingaiah, 2013)

With this desire to ‘have a word’ with the world or to know the world of persecution and injustice is born the desire of life –writing to encapsulate the lived experiences of the victim and reading this autobiographic account we realize the importance of such cataloguing of affect in Dalit life writing. Udaya Kumar is absolutely right when he observed

The prominence of personal narratives in the canon of Dalit writing has given rise to the view that Dalit writing needs to be read not in accordance with aesthetic categories of the literary institution, but in reference to the authenticity of experience. It has also prompted the criticism that Dalit writing is no more than mere ‘reportage’ devoid of aesthetic mediations that define realism. There is another view according to which the autobiographical mode is seen as paradigmatic: this identifies the enunciative modality of Dalit writing as truth telling, and looks at the first-person testimonials mode of verification as shaping all Dalit writing. (Kumar, 2013, 163)

While reading this section, readers may get irritated by the prosaic and drab ways of ‘reportage’ of the autobiographical mode but it is perhaps the only possible avenue for a subaltern voice to articulate her/his first-person experience of “autobiographic historiography” which builds on affect and at the same time generates affect for posterity to alter.

Conclusion

All the three formats of life-writing as referred to here are narratives of despair and yet through their expression of despair they can transcend its limit. If we intend to transform from the Age of rationality to the Age of Affect as claimed by Rifkin then we have to leaf through these silenced zones of affect and we conclude our forays into these silenced souls through the following lines of Eckermann as we believe they are the perfect ways to express the strength of affect

I`ve smelt the smell
Of despair
It`s the aroma of souls
Aborted she said
It`s the scent of words
Regretted she said ...
It`s the redolence of bad
Memory she said (Eckermann, 153)

Out of the stench of despair perhaps arises the aroma of the soul or the fragrance of the words of life-writing and therein lies the narrative of agency of emancipation.

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