

**Issues of Space and Place in the Lives and Literature of African Americans and Dalits**

**Dr. Shivaji Sargar**

*Professor, Department of English, University of Mumbai, Mumbai (M.S.) India*

**Abstract**

Space and place are some of the important concepts that are being discussed a lot with reference to the literatures of the marginalized sections. The lack of space in the lives of marginalized people has actually been the result of the oppressive conditions in which they are forced to live by the dominant sections of their respective societies. African Americans in America and Dalits in India are the marginalized people in their respective countries who have been the soft targets of exploitation respectively for the Whites and the Savarnas leading to the loss of their space and place. It is in this context that the present paper attempts to critically analyze the circumstances that lead to the loss of space and place of the African Americans and Dalits.

**Key Words:** Space, place, identity, African Americans, Dalits, autobiography

In geographical sense the term 'space' means 'land, (and also airspace, waters and cyberspace in recent times) and can have a relation to ownership usage. (<http://en.wikipedia.org>) This meaning of 'space' is confined to the ownership of such physical objects which the owner can utilize for himself. However, 'space is not something objective and real, neither substance nor accident nor relation, but something subjective and ideal issuing by a constant law from the nature of the mind.' (Gottfried:1955)' Therefore, psychologists give more importance to the idea of mental space than physical space and speak of personal space as an indispensable requirement for the positive development of one's personality. According to this view, 'personal space is the region surrounding a person which they regard as psychologically theirs. Most people value their personal space and feel discomfort, anger, or anxiety when their personal space is encroached.

Permitting a person to enter personal space and entering somebody else's personal space are indicators of perception of the relationship between the people. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Personal\\_space&oldid=496980991](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Personal_space&oldid=496980991))

It means every individual requires his/her own space to be able to lead a comfortable life. However, the human world is full of inequalities. It is divided into two main classes - the oppressor and the oppressed. Since the ancient times, oppressed people are being forced to forego their legitimate 'space' and lead almost inanimate and invisible life by the oppressors. This loss of space has a crippling effect on the personalities of these people pushing them towards the mental, physical, familial, and social complexities and making their lives horrendous to live. Initially, these suppressed people used to submit meekly to the atrocities of their

oppressors in order to survive their vicious circumstances. However, with the passage of time, these marginalized people started to express their dissent against the prevalent socio-politico-cultural conditions by using various means. Literature is perhaps the most subtle and effective means of protest used by these people to give realistic account of their sufferings and expose the real nature of their enemy.

African Americans and Dalits fall under the category of the oppressed and have been constant sources of exploitation for the Whites and upper-caste Hindus in their respective countries. Consequently, their autobiographies overflow with incidents of oppression and their reactions against such oppression. Taking into consideration this historical aspect of the lives of African Americans and Dalits, this paper attempts to analyze their autobiographies and explore the physical and mental effects of the loss of their 'space' on the self of these writers. As this loss of 'space' has led these people towards the status of the 'other', this paper also aims to investigate how this 'otherness' has forced these marginalized communities to suffer unimaginable pains due to the racial/caste-based politics of the Whites and caste-Hindus. To enable them to enjoy their 'usurped spaces', these privileged communities invented various socio-political institutions to propagate their partial customs and traditions thereby creating complex dilemmas in the personal, familial, social and cultural lives of their victims.

Though both qualitatively and quantitatively the genre of autobiography is

rich in African American and Dalit literature, to make this study more focused, this paper confines itself to Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945) and Era Bell Thompson's *American Daughter* (1946) from African American literature and Laxman Gaikwad's *Uchalya* (1987) and Kumud Pawade's *Antasphot* (1981) from Dalit literature.

The authors of these autobiographies are constantly engaged in an unending struggle to protect their 'space' from the brutal socio-politico-cultural forces of their times and to enable the smooth and positive development of their 'self'. However, the creation and preservation of the 'space' was not an easy task for them as their psychosocial self was always cornered by a number of impediments created by the milieu, and to protect itself from those forces, the 'self' was required to employ various means of protest. Accordingly, the autobiographies of Richard Wright, Laxman Gaikwad, Era Bell Thompson and Kumud Pawade highlight the strategies employed by them to defeat various institutions of their oppressors. It is shocking to see that all these institutions not only deprived these autobiographers of each and every opportunity needed to create and protect their own space but also refused to accept their very right of having it. Naturally, these writers have written about these atrocities in their autobiographies.

The readers are shocked to note that the attempts of these autobiographers to create the space for themselves are thwarted first by their family members. It is universally believed that home is a place where one gets mental solace, a sense of protection from the external forces, much-

needed love and care, a kind of mental, physical and social security which is indispensable for the smooth, positive and all-round development of the younger members of the family. But the familial atmosphere of these autobiographers seems to be quite contrary to this natural expectation. In *Black Boy*, Richard tells the readers that his father had deserted the family and was living with another woman thereby forcing Richard's mother to shoulder the responsibility of her children all alone and making small Richard suffer the pangs of broken family. It was not his father and mother alone but almost all his close and distant relatives treated Richard in the same manner. That is why a critic observes that "Wright never knew love – not even for or from his mother. He was never loved by anyone. He never knew what it meant to love someone." (Burns: 1945)

Laxman Gaikwad has also written about similar familial conditions in his autobiography. In one incident, he tells the readers how his father and brothers used to force him to drink wine:

"Baba and Dada would offer me a glass of that brew. I would refuse it as its strong smell irritated my nostrils. They would say 'Come Bapu, take it. It's good for your cough.' ...When I showed reluctance to take drinks, Dada said, 'Drink, it's good antidote against fever, cold.' They forced me to drink." (Kolharkar: 1986)

This incident throws a flood light on the vicious familial conditions of Laxman. This treatment at the hands of his own near and dear ones left him in a state of mental agony.

The Whites and the upper-caste Hindus regarded African Americans and Dalits as 'others'. But the women of these communities were further marginalized simply because of their 'being women'. That is why Era Bell's treatment at her home was more pathetic than her male counterparts. Her 'being a woman' was the greatest obstacle in her demand for the legitimate space in and outside the family. Therefore, her autobiography begins with an exclamation, 'My Lord, It's a girl!' uttered by her father at her birth. Such words of 'welcome' for the girl were not out of place given the social circumstances of the times.

Her autobiography shows that Era Bell had understood the need of looking at the world with a different approach, if she wanted to survive in it. Being born after three sons, she had developed many attributes of a boy, like playing boys' games and working outdoor, which had made her mother worried about the future of her daughter. That is why she tried to instill the 'womanly qualities' in her daughter to make her acceptable in the male-dominated society. But Era Bell was a girl with a 'difference'. Therefore, instead of submitting to her mother's desire, she spent more time in learning horse-riding and farming. Actually, she didn't like her mother's role of a traditional woman as she had realized the miseries of woman's life. The same has been observed by Eileen De Freece-Wilson:

"She resisted the proscribed "women's work" of her mother's world ... Era Bell Thompson rejected the idea that she had to conform to the expected

female role. She always considered herself to be “different.” (2010)

Such kind of treatment resulted in emotional alienation of these authors from their families. It is observed that the members of African American and Dalit families are quite often disintegrated unlike the members of established society. Even the basic needs of the younger members were not properly taken care of leading to various complex psychological and behavioral problems among the young ones of the family.

However, these writers were deprived of their familial space owing to various issues related to family backgrounds like financial crunch, lack of understanding between husband and wife and parents and children. In addition to their families, the psycho-social self of these writers was further traumatized by the members of their own community about which they have written in their autobiographies. For instance, Richard writes how he was dragged inside the saloons and made to ‘drink and utter obscenities by the members of his own community.’ (Wright: 2006)

It is astonishing to read about the people who, instead of curbing the bad manners, encourage a small child to drink and use bad language.

In *Uchalya*, Laxman Gaikwad recalls how the members of his community threatened his parents of dire consequences if they did not remove Laxman from the school. They even tried to poison his father’s mind by telling him:

“Martanda, teach Laxman our thieving skills. What’s the use of

schooling for him?’...give us Laxman to work in our gang. We shall teach him to pick pockets in a year. Your house will be full of pleasure. There’ll be plentiful earnings.” (Kolharkar: 1986)

However, it was due to the firm stand taken by his father that Laxman could continue his schooling and saved himself from causing irreparable damage to his intellectual growth.

In her autobiography, Kumud Pawade mentions that despite the opposition of some of her teachers, she opted for Sanskrit and scored good marks in examination. After matriculation, she expressed her ambition of doing post-graduation in Sanskrit. When her neighbours came to know of her ambition, they discouraged her by saying that she would not be able to do so as Sanskrit was a difficult subject. Kumud Pawade writes:

Like the previous occasion, our educated neighbours made fun of me. Some of them were professors and lawyers. How is it possible? Though you scored good marks in Matriculation, is it so easy to complete M.A. with Sanskrit? One should not boast of one’s abilities. Should realize one’s capabilities. People were talking. And the amusing aspect of it all was that most of them belonged to our own caste.” (Pawade: 1981)

It is disgusting to see such kind of behaviour of the members of African American and Dalit communities towards their own people. Actually, the values of mutual trust, unity and co-operation were expected to enable them to fight against the mainstream oppressive social institutions and create their

own space. Instead, they were usually seen exploiting the weaker sections of their own communities.

The oppression of these people was based on the falsely upheld concepts of racial and caste superiority. Actually, colour and caste are meaningless concepts. But the Whites and caste-Hindus encouraged Blacks and Dalits to play the colour/caste-game with definite political, social, and economic intentions. They knew it well that if their victims became aware of their exploitation and worked together for their freedom, it would be impossible to rule over them any longer. And regrettably, the Blacks and Dalits were caught unaware in the cunningly spread net of colour/caste politics. This hidden motif of 'divide and rule' helped the oppressors to consolidate their political position as a ruling class and also their claim of being a superior race.

In addition to colour and caste, African Americans and Dalits were further forced to lose their space on the basis of class. Imitating the established classes, African American and Dalit communities had developed their own class structure. But strangely, their social structure was not based on the wealth or property like the traditional social structure of the privileged classes. On the contrary, its basis was 'refinement' and 'respectability'. Grossman explains it in these words:

"Severely truncated at the top, this class structure rested less on wealth or contemporary white definitions of occupational status (except at the highest levels) than on notions of 'refinement' and 'respectability'

maintained by the upper and middle classes." (Grossman: 1989)

Actually, it was absolutely necessary for these oppressed people to work together to eradicate falsely upheld traditions and help the needy and poor members of their community to march ahead on the path of progress. However, these men of society attempted to dishearten and make fun of the poor. That is what Era Bell Thomson says in her autobiography. As she was educated and had a good job with stable income, she felt alienated from the poor Negroes. She started to look at Negroes like a foreigner and to compare the Negro world:

"with white standards, weighing it on white scales, I found it wanting; found myself hating the common Negro who had recently migrated from the South without benefit of freedom or education, who, having never had rights of his own, lacked respect for the rights of others. I hated his loud, coarse manners, loathed his flashy clothes and ostentatious display of superficial wealth." (Thompson:1946)

Era Bell's words clearly indicate that she felt alienated from the working class Negroes who had just come from the South and lacked education and manners. It is so because she herself had succeeded in the White world and acquired its manners and etiquettes.

However, it does not mean that the people like Era Bell were accepted in the privileged society on equal terms. In fact, they were alienated both from their own communities as well as the privileged communities. This problem of double

alienation had a deep effect on the psychosocial self of these people leading to the loss of their emotional space. Such people are found to be searching their space by reexamining and redefining the complex structure of their relation with their community and the wider society. This loss of emotional space was the consequence of the partial political, educational, legal, religious, cultural and literary institutions of the privileged classes, which they shamelessly used to exploit their victims.

It is observed that if these institutions failed to subjugate the victims, the oppressors used indiscriminate violence against them. But there were also few people, both in African American and Dalit communities, who wanted to retaliate violence by violence. But it was never safe for them as many of them knew that their aggressiveness can easily provoke racial trouble which can be a threat for their very existence. So it was necessary for them to change their behaviour and strictly control their natural instinct to grow according to their own desire, if they wanted to survive in their vicious environment. That is why they had invented other subtle means of protest to articulate their condemnation of the existing miseries of their lives.

Due to the dreadful presence of the oppressor in all walks of lives, the Blacks and Dalits tried to get some solace in the company of God and His religion. However, they seem to have failed to understand that the religion they practiced was the religion of their oppressor which was one more institution employed by them to propagate their ideology of oppression. That is why, the younger generations of Black and Dalit

autobiographers look at religion with a sense of irony, disbelief and despise. For example, Kumud criticizes Hinduism for its 'having different rules for men and women.' (Pawade: 1981) She argues that as Hinduism was patriarchal, it had introduced many cruel practices to be observed only by the women. On the contrary, the men had no any religious restrictions.

Like religion, the Whites and caste-Hindus also used educational system to confiscate the lawful space of their victims. Being aware that education plays a momentous role in human life and has far-reaching effects on their personality, they used this institution to promote their own cultural values and political ideology and created false portrayals of their victims and distorted their ethnic, social and cultural history.

As the education had made African Americans and Dalits aware of the depressing conditions of their lives and their right of having equal space in the social structure, they intensified the degree of their battle and started fighting against the merciless socio-cultural institutions of their oppressors. However, as all these institutions were under the control of the privileged classes, they used them to target the victims and their organizations.

But even though the established socio-political structure had succeeded in creating a number of traumatic situations in their lives, the Blacks and Dalits had not given up their battle. All the time they were preparing to fight against their enemy by acquiring newer techniques. During the period of slavery, it is seen that the Blacks used to revolt against their master either by

refusing to eat or work or by meeting force with force or by running away from them. But with the passing of time, these Blacks are seen using other more ingenious and so more effective techniques of expressing their protest. One of these techniques is to make the world aware of the unfavorable conditions of their lives through their literary works.

The African American and Dalit autobiographies show that their writers had realized the power and value of written words and so had made deliberate efforts to master the art of writing which would enable them to create their own space in this hitherto forbidden field. But it should also be taken into consideration that the path of these writers was never smooth because the publishing houses were mostly run by the established classes and governed by the rules and policies of the government. And as the African American and Dalit writers

speak against the government and its agencies through their literature, the established publishers intended to abstain them from taking up any written assignments. Yet, the Black and Dalit writers did not give up their attempts and continued to express themselves through their works.

Though the Whites and caste-Hindus tried to confine African Americans and Dalits to their 'place', these marginalized communities have liberated themselves in the space of imagination, and through their autobiographies, expressed their strong sense of protest against the false concepts of racial and caste-based superiority. These attempts of African Americans and Dalits have succeeded to a great extent as their literature has certainly created its distinct 'space' thereby forcing its detractors to concede it its legitimate 'place' in the domain of world literature.

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