

## Diverse Strands of Resistance in Laxman Mane's *Upara*

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to study diverse strands of resistance in the autobiographical narrative namely *Upara: An Outsider* written by 1981 Sahitya Akademi Awardee, Laxman Mane. Viewed simply, resistance is a response to the oppressive power structures, and acts as a weapon of the disempowered/subjugated people against the powers that be. It is also construed as a willful act and an "intentional process" in which newer "meaning constructions emerge in the form of thinking, feeling, acting" and "living with others" (Chaudhary et al. 2). *Upara* offers considerable textual evidence of various forms of resistance viz., covert, overt, everyday, and disguised aiming at challenging and undermining power. Everyday resistance is least explicit or "confrontational" and comprises "low-profile activities," scarcely "recognized as resistant by the powerful" (Tuli 308). Dalit writers have used life writings as a tool to articulate their voice of dissent vis-à-vis injustice and oppression. Mane's struggle to get education under most oppressive circumstances, evidences resistance of a sort via overcoming discriminating societal norms, which impede his growth at every step. The paper has two parts—the first deals with meaning and theorisation of resistance followed by a brief discussion of resistance in life writings along with typology of resistance. The second part will textually examine *Upara* alongside taking into account Mane's activism and resistance through writing an autobiographical narrative. The vulnerable condition and marginalized status of Kaikadi community in Maharashtra is evident as the writer attempts to lend it a sense of identity via writing its story. The very act of writing on Mane's part, emerges as an act of resistance in several ways.

**Keywords:** Resistance, Life Narrative, Dalit Autobiography, Covert and Overt Resistance, Everyday Resistance, Writing as Resistance.

### I

The terms 'resistance' and 'resistance studies' are 'interdisciplinary,' and as a consequence, "fragmented and heterogeneous" (Bazz et al. 137) like diverse

literary practices and their variedly complex contextual contours. Upon giving resistance a serious thought, one recalls instances such as French revolution, unemployed people's protest, peace activists' peace signs, "inner-city riots" along with hidden form of resistance known as everyday resistance, which may be added to the list (Juris and Sitrin 33). Mostly, resistance is equated with "challenges, protests, intransigence, or even evasions" (Chin and Mittelman 29). It may be defined as a "dislike of or opposition to a plan, an idea, etc." and "refusal to obey" (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* 1086-87). Barbara Bush views it in the context of colonialism as "any action, individual or collective, violent or lawful, covert and overt, that is critical of, opposes, upsets or challenges the smooth running of colonial rule" (16). The act of writing itself by a writer from the margins can be viewed as an effective "action" having the potential to challenge the hegemony of power structures in socio-cultural and political arenas. Marta Iniguez de Heredia describes resistance as the "pattern of acts undertaken by individuals or collectives in a subordinated position to mitigate or deny elite claims and the effects of domination, while advancing their own agenda" (69). Thus, resistance is a ploy to unsettle, question, challenge and undermine power in all its manifestations.

Resistance in life writings (be that autobiography or memoir) is delineated through the first-hand experience of the author. It is an "action" à la Barbara Bush (16) in the form of writing by an individual to topple hegemony or stand against the societal oppression. Autobiography is a powerful medium of expression to question, challenge, and protest against the atrocities done to the oppressed/deprived classes. An autobiographer/memoirist either privileges or marginalizes incidents/events that take place in her/his life depending on the hidden agenda or target audience s/he has in mind. S/he may manipulate certain set of information/events to suit her/his purpose. At times, the writer questions and condemns certain sets of attitudes whereas at other, accepts and endorses them.

When we consider writing vis-à-vis the disempowered class, it becomes an instrument to unearth the atrocities done to them. Life narrative serves as a historical document to remember the past of an individual or community. Jennifer Morgan talks about the "transformative power of the narrative" and believes that "writing history transforms the landscape of the present as much as it engages with the past" (39). She further observes that it is the only tool to "address the reverberant violence of the past" (40). Perkins too argues that history is "traditionally written from the vantage point of the victor and not the

vanquished . . .” (70), and that is the reason why autobiographer’s role becomes significant to reveal the truth of events narrated. Life narrator/ autobiographer, thus offers a counter-narrative to expose and resist the hegemonic history.

Being a distinct genre, autobiography emerges as a medium to bring forth the atrocities done to underprivileged people in a more conspicuous manner. As far as Dalit life narratives in English are concerned, their origin could be attributed to 1990s (Nayar 237); however, when we think of life writings in regional languages like Marathi, more than fifty autobiographies have been written between 1975 to 1990 (Bhongle 160). This speaks volumes about the popularity of the genre, which, besides unearthing sufferings of the deprived and marginalized communities would also strive for seeking equality in the society. Spelling out the objective of Dalit autobiographies clearly, RangraoBhongle writes thus:

If Dalit poetry in Marathi aims at decanonizing literature, Dalit autobiographies seek to unveil the wretchedness and miseries which were a part of Dalit life and experience. . . Dalit autobiographies, however, have little to instruct; rather they explode popular myths about human values and dignity. They reveal that aspect of the society which, in its blatant form of ugliness, speaks for the total disregard for the suffering humanity. (158-59)

In this way, an autobiography provides space for Dalits to voice the violation and blatant disregard of their fundamental human rights. They seldom write to glorify their selves; the writings rather become a form to protest against the age-old unjust treatment meted out to them. The life narrators cannot be judged by their literary style or craft as they are the “wounded souls writhing inside with the age-old social injustice meted out to their forefathers” (Bhongle 160). Pramod K. Nayar views Dalit life writing of Bama, Laxman Mane and Laxman Gaikwad as “testimonios,” which have two main components namely “collective biography” and “witnessing” (248).

As we textually decode Mane’s life narrative, *Upara*, various forms of resistance come to light such as the covert, overt, and everyday resistance. The covert and overt are the two most prominent forms of resistance in literary studies. James Scott’s introduces the concept of “everyday resistance” as the weapon of the weak and subordinate class. This form of resistance operates in a hidden manner; nevertheless, it undermines the hegemonic power structures represented by “superordinate classes” (290).The activities that resist the

dominance are viewed by Scott as “acts of foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, feigned ignorance, desertion, pilfering, smuggling, poaching, slander, sabotage, surreptitious assault and murder, anonymous threats and so on” (Scott 33-34). Moreover, the covert form also includes the everyday activities of powerless people like “laziness,” “misunderstanding,” “disloyalty,” “passivity,” and “escape” where open/overt resistance is risky (Lilja et al. 42). Stellan Vinthagen and Anna Johansson describe everyday resistance as “how people act in their everyday lives in ways that might undermine power.” Further, it is not “easily recognized like public or collective resistance —such as rebellions or demonstrations—but it is typically hidden or disguised, individual and not politically articulated” (2). The above-mentioned actions and behaviours of ordinary people pose a challenge to any “superordinate” individual, class or group, and are thus pertinent in resistance studies.

On the contrary, overt resistance is visible and recognized as resistance by both the target and observer. The aspect of recognition is what sets it apart from everyday resistance. Whereas both covert and overt acts are intended by the actor, the former is not recognized by the target as resistance (Hollander and Einwohner 544). Public protest against a law, policy or decision of state, institution or any organization can be viewed as a form of overt resistance. Karl-Dieter Opp views actions and behaviour of people like “initiating a petition,” “demonstration,” “boycotts,” “sit-ins,” “street blockades” as protest to express voice of dissent (33). Based on these theoretical premises, the paper textually analyzes Mane’s *Upara* to demonstrate various forms of resistance that come to the fore in his autobiographical narrative.

## II

Laxman Mane’s *Upara: An Outsider* poignantly portrays the anguish, pain and plight of the nomadic tribal people, and thus occupies a significant place in Dalit literature. He could anticipate the danger and consequences of writing this life narrative, but did not care about it at all. Being fearless and bent on telling the truth, Mane reflects the resistant nature of ‘the writer in him’. He writes at the outset in *Upara*: “From our Panchayat’s point of view, the very writing of this book is a crime and I am aware of the provision of the punishment for such wrong doing” (6). Thus, writing, which has been discussed as an empowering, resistant act, is being equated with “a crime” by the Panchayat. The ensuing narrative examines Mane’s experiences with a view to demonstrating the streak of resistance present therein. He narrates his poverty-stricken nomadic life as he

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moves from one place to another. We come across the shaping of his personality within that fluid matrix.

*Upara* is a compelling life narrative, which addresses issues like casteism vis-à-vis Kaikadi caste to which Mane belongs. His experience of injustice in a deeply hierarchical, caste-ridden and discriminating society comes alive through his quotidian life. Being a poor nomad, he was deprived of even filling his belly. He joined school to get education but faced discrimination owing to his lower caste status. His teacher would never talk to him. Moreover, the medium of instruction was Marathi, which hindered his learning process since he only knew his Kaikadi dialect. Under such trying circumstances, he gradually acquired knowledge and passed his matriculation to get enrolled in the college. He resisted the repressive dominance of powerful, upper caste people and got married to a Brahmin girl. The aftermath of this inter-caste marriage and the time spent in college was crucial in shaping his mind as a writer. He began to understand more clearly about the vulnerable position of lower caste people through meetings, camps and discussions organized by activists. This resulted in his fight for social and economic justice for the disadvantaged people.

Milind Bokil categorizes four types of nomadic people vis-à-vis their livelihood. Kaikadi is a nomadic community which comes under the category of “goods and service nomads”<sup>1</sup> (151). As regards their constitutional status, the Kaikadis fall under SC, ST, and OBC categories. Bokil argues that Kaikadis come under SC category in the Vidarbha, the north-eastern part of Maharashtra. However, in other parts of the state, they are categorized under VimuktaJatis and Nomadic Tribes (VJNTs). They are classified as STs in Andhra Pradesh (148). Considering the community as de-notified and nomadic tribe, Bokil clarifies the meaning of the terms such as ‘de-notified’ signifying “political,” and ‘nomadic’ implying “ecological” (154). A historical overview reveals that literature has become a tool to highlight the sufferings of De-Notified Tribes (DNTs). The Dalit movement<sup>2</sup> has helped expose the oppression and injustices done to people of nomadic tribes (153). Regardless of his position of nomadic tribes, Mane has been considered as a Dalit writer (Satchidanandan 6), and *Upara* can thus be viewed as an example of “protest writing” (Goswami 129).

*Upara* starts with the childhood condition of the narrator, and portrays utterly poor and abysmal condition of Kaikadi community. Narrating his miserable plight, Mane writes: “A shirt, someone’s charity, covered my body. Mended in several places, it was full of wrinkles. Shorts were luxury. The shirt itself hung

loose serving the purpose of shorts as well” (17). He goes on to describe about his family’s dependence on other people’s “leftovers” (19) along with bhakri (meal) for bare survival. Despite such a pathetic condition, his father’s desire to send the writer to school, opens up possibilities of standing against the adverse/hostile circumstances. The willingness of the writer’s father to send him to school is remarkable, and thus a significant development in the narrative.

Mane becomes the first person to attend school in the entire Kaikadi community with his father’s support. Depicting the practice of untouchability, he writes: “He [the schoolmaster] asked me to sit near the door. The pupils were afraid of any physical contact with me” (20). Owing to their nomadic nature and wandering from one place to another, the author fails to complete his schooling at one place. His father’s earnest plea to admit him in another school falls on deaf ears as it is summarily rejected by the schoolmaster saying: “You funny guy! Do nomadic beggars go to school? . . . If they study, who will weave our baskets? Nothing doing! You want to study, Huh!” (36). Thus, in such deeply hierarchical and discriminating space, only a certain section of people has the privilege of getting education, which is shamelessly denied to an inquisitive boy hailing from the lower strata of life. However, the teacher somehow agrees to allow him to sit outside the classroom, and that is how the narrator is finally able to attend the school despite being ignored and neglected in an utterly inhumane environment. Nevertheless, he could not stay there for long due to his nomadic reality, which demanded him to constantly stay on the move.

The narrator’s father, in fact, wanted to make him an officer, but fails to lend him support due to poor financial condition of the family. Earning livelihood thus was more important to survive. Therefore, his father tells him: “Now it’s high time you stopped reading and writing. Come with me to fetch canes . . . learn the art of weaving basket. . . be an apt musician . . . you should be the best player in the entire community.” (105)

In this way, his zeal to continue his study was hampered by the villagers too as they discouraged him by making fun of his going to school. However, he confronts the hostile and unfavourable atmosphere and persists with his studies.

Mane narrates an incident which shows his awareness of their disadvantaged and vulnerable position, and his determination to challenge it through getting education. It took place when seventh class examination was over. A group photo was taken which revealed an upper caste girl sitting next to him. This

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event triggered such a hue and cry in the village that the upper caste Maratha people had to call Mane's father and beat him severely. The narrator had a narrow escape as he was sent to another village immediately by his mother. The violence with his father and his helpless condition obstructed the writer's schooling. However, Mane understood the importance of education in the crusade against inequity, injustice and discrimination. His behaviour thereafter reveals how he wanted to subvert the hierarchy by marrying a Maratha girl. Even though, he failed in seventh class, his thoughts and gestures clearly evidence his defiant nature: "I knew that everybody wanted me to forget all about it. Father was beaten up by Patil. This made me resolve, come what may, to continue my studies. I'll marry a Maratha girl. And this would be possible only if I studied. As I didn't get admission in Sangvi school, I went to Phaltan" (121).

Thus, he has a defiant mindset despite coming from the underprivileged nomadic position. It also reveals his will to resist. *Upara* thus describes many struggling episodes/narratives wherein the author silently challenges the oppressive circumstances. After the above incident, Mane succeeds in joining class eight in a high school. The acts and thoughts associated with Mane's objective can be viewed as everyday/disguised resistance. James Scott discusses the thoughts and intention of powerless people in *Weapon of the Weak*. He writes that both intentions and acts are "unmoved movers." He further writes that:

[a]cts born of intentions circle back, as it were, to influence consciousness and hence subsequent intentions and acts. Thus, acts of resistance and thoughts about (or the meaning of) resistance are in constant communication— in constant dialogue. (38)

Here Scott emphasizes consciousness as the prime factor which leads to intention and act. The moment an individual realizes and understands the injustice or inequity, it is the beginning of resistance in his mind. In other words, consciousness provokes intentions and eventually the resistance is reflected in a person's acts and behaviour. Therefore, the writer's realization in *Upara* about his vulnerable position and the importance of education, speaks volumes about his consciousness. The acts to rise from the underprivileged position through education can qualify as a disguised resistance. We do find this hidden form of resistance throughout *Upara*. As stated above, the other types of behaviour and techniques which reinforce the idea of everyday resistance are: 'escape,' 'sarcasm,' 'passivity,' 'laziness,' 'misunderstanding,' 'disloyalty,' 'slander' 'avoidance' and 'theft' (Lilja et al. 42).

When we think about the pattern of behaviour vis-à-vis the autobiography; it has been found that Mane frequently talks about marrying a Maratha girl. This thought can be viewed as an important motif to subvert caste discrimination. He writes: “But of course, I had made up my mind that if at all I married, it would be outside my caste—she would be a daughter of a Patil—a Maratha. But what if it didn’t happen? This was only a dream” (133). Scott discusses this type of thought and says that such acts may seem “impractical” or “impossible” at a particular point in time; however, he does not rule out that these may be achieved with change in circumstances (38).

Mane’s autobiography deals with the hidden forms of resistance in a conspicuous manner. The narrator resumed his education from class eight as he joined a high school at Phaltan. He came to know about Patil’s daughter who had joined Mudhoji High School. He wanted to avoid further clash with Maratha people. Hence, he decided to take admission in Shriram High School. At this juncture, the narrator hides his intention and focuses on his studies. A close reading of *Upara* gives us an insight about the autobiographer’s ideas about development in his personality. His choice of joining Shriram High School places him away from the sight of the powerful people. He knew that Maratha boys and girls had taken admission, and thus avoided direct confrontation with them. Mane’s concealment of his own thoughts and prospective future actions corroborates Scott’s idea of “everyday resistance.” Scott discusses “dissimulation” as an important type of hidden resistance wherein the individual does not reveal his intentions or feelings. On the contrary, the focus is shifted from clashing with powerful people to an individual’s self-growth. Mane writes about this technique of powerless people thus: “[T]hey often represent a form of individual self-help; and they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms” (29). Moreover, Stellan Vinthagen and Anna Johansson too view avoidance as a social practice which can be qualified as everyday resistance. They write that, there are several critics who view this act as resistance since it makes difficult for the powerful individual to exercise power (24).

Apart from the writer’s struggle to attend school to earn livelihood, his determination to go for inter-caste marriage may be construed as his courage to question and resist the patriarchal norms. It also contributes to his self-growth by marrying the girl of his choice in the most oppressive situation. Bokil writes about the patriarchal system in a nomadic tribe thus: “The DNTs are mainly patriarchal communities. The authority of elderly males is considered supreme”

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(148). Mane's choice of marrying an upper caste girl is an instance of resisting patriarchy and casteism. He writes about the issue about his father's decision thus: "He[Mane's father] spent a few days with his elder sister and returned only after selecting a bride for me" (113). Mane resists it by silently leaving the house the very next morning. Thus, the marriage could not take place. Similarly, in yet another incident while he was in the college, his father visited and informed him about his selection of a girl for him, but Mane did not care as by that time he had developed a love affair with a girl namely Shashi.

The hostile caste system, however, did not allow Mane to marry Shashi. He views it as an injustice, and questions it, which emerges as one of the most powerful motifs of resistance. The writer reiterates one particular question several times, which evidences his awareness of injustice. He expresses his anger on being rejected due to his caste: "I piss on this social system which is not prepared to consider me as a human being" (177-78). Furthermore, he questions the injustice done to him thus: "When the girl was willing to marry me and when the law allows our marriage, why weren't these people prepared to see us married to each other?" (178). Eventually, with the help of his friend, Narayan and persons like Suresh and Bapusaheb, Mane marries Shashi.

Nevertheless, the post-marriage life was extremely difficult for Mane. He fails to receive assistance from the government due to two complex clauses/conditions that firstly, he or his wife had to prove their being untouchables; and secondly, that their children could claim the caste of either mother or father. Regarding the first condition, Mane questions thus: "A man who resides at places where people come to defecate, is he not an untouchable? If he's not, then who is he? And he who moves from place to place to earn his livelihood, what is he?" (191). Moreover, the second clause too was meant to retain and perpetuate the caste system. It did not aim at the annihilation of caste as Mane perceives. He questions it thus: "And if our offspring did not opt for anyone of our castes, wouldn't he be the citizen of this country?" (192). Mane's questions reveal the injustice done to nomadic tribes such as Kaikadi. Despite leading a life worse than that of a Mahar (3), Mane says that the government is yet to declare Kaikadi as untouchable.

He develops a "criminal tendency" to cope with hunger and poverty. He continues to evoke the reason of his oppression as he questions: "Why does a thief steal? Why do people do something unethical? Are they born like that? How can those people be called moral who earn hundreds of thousands of

rupees without shedding a drop of their sweat?” (192). These are the most pertinent questions that Mane raises after being rejected for getting financial assistance. Mane equates poverty with stealing. The miserable condition forces nomads to steal and *Upara* highlights such acts. During his childhood, the author himself would indulge in stealing to fill his belly. Moreover, Kaikadi women’s involvement has also been highlighted by the author in this regard. The act of stealing comes under the purview of everyday resistance as Scott has used the term “pilfering” (29) for it.

Education plays a crucial role in several Dalit autobiographies and memoirs. It becomes a decisive force to uplift the downtrodden and improve the dehumanized condition of Dalits in a profoundly hierarchical and caste-ridden society. Likewise, in Mane’s self-narrative, education makes the writer aware of the atrocities, and prepares him to fight against them openly. As far as the overt forms of resistance are concerned, the autobiographer narrates his political activism during his college days. He gets to know about the position of Dalits in the society as he attends various camps, programs, seminars and discussions. His personality has been shaped by reading books of Bhausahab Khandekar.<sup>4</sup> He actively takes part in the program of “Seva Dal” (161). Moreover, he has also attended the procession which was against Shankaracharya. It led to his arrest along with other protestors. His protest against caste system and the ideology of Shankaracharya is evident thus:

As he [Shankaracharya] was the supporter of conservation and continuation of the caste system, I was annoyed with him. I started arguing with my friends. As I was determined to prove him wrong, I began reading more and more about the subject. I willingly joined those who opposed the procession of Shankaracharya. (162)

Thus, we observe a radical shift and growth in Mane’s personality in the course of the life narrative. The one who used to resist silently and invisibly, has now become more visible and open. The transformation in him is mainly because of his education, which he received during his college days. Furthermore, his association with Dalit Youth Association and with Dr Ambedkar School of Thought, led him to seek more participation in public protests. He supported Raja Dhale’s controversial article “Black Independence Day”<sup>5</sup> which was published in *Sadhana* (a Marathi newspaper) on the Independence Day. Once a long walk was organized to support *Sadhana*, and Mane turned out to be an active worker for the march as he successfully gathered five thousand Dalit students with the help of other friends,

The last part of the Mane's autobiography revolves around the assessment of his marriage to Shashi. The marriage invites a sharp criticism from his family. The fear of being excommunicated from the Kaikadi community had hit them badly. They visited Mane's house and expressed their displeasure and anger. His father highlighted that it would be difficult to marry his daughters in times to come due to the excommunication. Toward the end, they leave the place by abandoning Mane and his wife. However, after some days, Mane was invited by his maternal uncle to attend his cousin's marriage, and also to settle the caste and excommunication issue. At the end, Shashi was accepted citing the reason that her father cannot be traced, and Mane had to remarry her for the acceptance of the child that she had conceived.

Thus, we can conclude by saying that Mane's autobiographical narrative, *Upara* powerfully delineates issues concerning caste, poverty, education, marriage, and discrimination with a careful and strategic slant toward resistance of diverse sorts. For Mane, writing is resistance as his life narrative is an act of empowerment from the viewpoint the characters portrayed therein hailing from the subordinate class and lower caste. Besides lending them visibility, he also gives them voice to articulate their concerns despite all odds. Mane's autobiography thus may be termed as a resistance narrative wherein diverse strands of resistance have been dealt with to protest against injustice done to him and his Kaikadi community. For the autobiographer, writing becomes an instrument of resistance through which he not only finds his empowered 'self' in the face of crippling poverty and excruciating and discriminatory caste system, but also articulates it most vociferously overcoming the caste barriers which have been jolting him inside out. Moreover, a society which disallows education to a nomad from lower caste, needs to be overhauled. That is why Mane offers correctives to the society by raising pertinent queries in *Upara* concerning callous attitude of upper caste people belonging to superordinate/privileged class, toward lower caste people belonging to subordinate/underprivileged class, in a deeply hierarchized and stratified socio-cultural setup. Mane thus narrates what he experienced profoundly in his life through his life narrative, and his expression has a powerful streak of resistance in it. To quote him: "Whatever I lived, experienced and saw, I poured into my writing. I lived it all again once more" (6). Thus, the courage to live it all once again may arguably be construed as a daring act of resistance on the writer's part.

### Notes

1. The other three categories of nomadic people are: a) “pastoral and hunter-gatherers,” b) “entertainers,” and c) “religious performer.”
2. R.K. Kshirsagar defines Dalit movement as “the organizational or institutional efforts made by Dalit leaders for the liberation of the downtrodden masses.”
3. Maharis an untouchable community in Maharashtra.
4. BhausahebKhandekar is known as Vishnu SakharamKhandekar. He is the winner of Jnanpith Award for his novel, *Yayati*.
5. The article “Black Independence Day” was published on the 25<sup>th</sup> year of India’s independence by Raja Dhale, who was one of the founding members of Dalit Panthers Organization.

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