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Research Article



Literacy and Liberation in Baby Halder's *A Life Less Ordinary*

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Abstract

Autobiographical narratives offer a platform for marginalised voices to express their experiences. *A Life Less Ordinary*, translated into English in 2006, portrays the life experiences of Baby Halder and sheds light on the experiences of Dalit women. Born into a poverty-stricken family, Halder is forced into marriage and motherhood — a reflection of the expectations imposed on women in her community. The title of the memoir underlines the remarkable journey of a marginalised woman who is anything but ordinary. Due to adverse circumstances, Halder was compelled to leave her home and venture out in search of employment. Becoming a domestic worker helped her earn a living. Her book takes us on a turbulent journey from a childhood in a broken family to being forced into marriage at the

tender age of twelve, enduring an abusive husband, and ultimately defying societal norms by leaving him and starting work outside her household. According to Ranajit Guha's definition of the subaltern, Baby Halder embodies three "attributes of subordination": gender, caste, and poverty. Halder's wish to fill the gap left in her formal education motivated her to read and write her life story. This paper explores how literacy opens up opportunities for knowledge, self-discovery, and critical thinking, enabling her to question and challenge the norms that once defined her life. It showcases how education can bring about transformation in the life of a marginalised woman striving for personal and social liberation.

Keywords: Memoir, Marginalised voices, Subaltern, Dalit narratives, Patriarchy, Domestic helper, Gender and Caste, Autobiography, Domestic violence, Literacy, Emancipation

Education is the key to unlock the golden door of freedom.

– George W. Carver (qtd. in Kremer 62)

The life narratives of Dalit women hold significance in Dalit literature as well as world literature. One crucial element of these narratives is how they articulate the past by employing a "narrative strategy of reminiscence" (Christopher 17). The marginalised subject speaks on behalf of the entire community, advocating for social change. Moreover, the life narratives of Dalit women are the "reconstruction of the already existing stories which signify the search for maternal roots, giving meaning and shape to a Dalit woman narrator" (Kumari and Vohra 77).

Dalit women face double marginalisation, experiencing discrimination both within and outside their community due to patriarchy. This makes them the most ill-treated and neglected individuals, often referred to as "Dalits among Dalits" (Bhoite vii). According to Raj Kumar, autobiographical writing is not commonly found in Indian literature. Existing autobiographies can be better described as "personal narratives" since they carry the memories and recollections of the writers' lives. By sharing their life experiences through autobiographies, "Dalits are mobilizing resistance to fight against all forms of oppressions which they have been experiencing for ages" (Kumar 4). Writing gives a sense of empowerment because it reflects an individual's expression of personality. According to Linda Anderson, autobiographers can be seen as "historians of the self" (Anderson 18). The question that arises is "how much...is self-fashioned, and how much is an actual revelation" (Verma 18).

Baby Halder's heartfelt memoir, *A Life Less Ordinary*, tells the story of a domestic helper. The lives of these helpers, as portrayed in Halder's memoir, would have been quite "ordinary" were it not for domestic abuse, alcoholism, and men's general neglect of responsibilities.

Essentially, these women are forced into disrupted lives because of the nature of patriarchy. As Halder shares in her book (originally written in Bengali and later translated into Hindi in 2002 and English in 2006), it is not the socio-economic structures but patriarchy that created the circumstances leading to her difficult and uncertain journey as a domestic worker.

The stories of exploited labour and frustrated workforce have been generally overlooked or, as historian Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests, were relegated to narration's "waiting room" because servants failed to achieve the status of modernity to be considered narrative subjects. However, in recent times, there has been a welcome change towards providing a space for the voices of servants and other marginalised individuals. Baby Halder's *A Life Less Ordinary* makes "the unseen visible, the unheard voice heard" (Rangachari). The quest for an "alternative modernity and the struggle for emancipation are indeed at the heart of Dalit life-writing" (Chatterjee 379).

A Life Less Ordinary portrays the life experiences of Baby Halder and sheds light on the experiences of Dalit women. It narrates not only her story but also highlights the struggles faced by women of her community. The title of the memoir underlines the remarkable journey of a marginalised woman who is anything but ordinary. Due to adverse circumstances, Halder was compelled to leave her home and venture out in search of employment. Becoming a domestic worker helped her earn a living. Her story takes us on a turbulent journey from a childhood in a broken family to being forced into marriage at the tender age of twelve, enduring an abusive husband, and ultimately defying societal norms by leaving him and starting work outside her household. According to Ranajit Guha's definition of the subaltern, Baby Halder embodies three "attributes of subordination" (35): gender, caste, and poverty. Halder's wish to fill the gap left in her formal education motivated her to read and write her life story. This paper examines the interesting interplay between literacy and liberation in *A Life Less Ordinary*.

It is commonly believed that a woman experiences a life away from tension when she is under the care of her parents and the support of her siblings. During childhood, she relies on her father to experience love and genuine affection. As a bride, she has to willingly submit to the authority of her in-laws and husband, although the bond of mutual love is tainted by domination. The final phase entails a woman's reliance on her children, particularly her son, out of love and duty but often marred by annoyance and frustration. This encapsulates the essence of a woman's life in India. However, it raises a question about the number of girls who are fortunate enough to have such an upbringing away from societal pressures and challenges. Halder's story challenges the notion of the ideal family providing solace, protection, and sanctuary, an idea carefully crafted by exponents during colonial times that continues to hold influence today (Chatterjee 1993; Sarkar 2001).

The despondency of Halder's mother affected her upbringing. Despite the challenges, her mother never ventured beyond the confines of their home to seek employment. Society tends to judge women more harshly than men when they deviate from societal expectations. A woman who remains within the household is often seen as virtuous, while one who ventures outside to work is unfairly labelled as "bad". The prevailing notion of an ideal woman revolves around her role within the home, as the family is seen as a haven for the "preservation of traditional moral and religious values" (Zedner 12). The patriarchal system imposes dependence on women and endorses it as a feminine trait. Women going out for work but "worrying about what people will say does not help to fill on empty stomach, does it? (Halder 2). It is not the importance of the individual but rather how society assesses and judges them that becomes significant. Baby Halder highlights the social and cultural causes that impact the public and private lives of Dalit women.

Baby Halder's formative years lacked the nurturing and joy that are crucial for a child's development: "... the child... should grow up in a family of happiness, love and understanding" (Couture 86). Unfortunately, Halder never experienced love, happiness, and understanding from her family, leaving behind a bitter imprint on her sense of self. The childhood trauma and desolation she endured left a lasting impact on her psyche: "Childhood trauma may be accompanied by...a number of changes...These changes last" (Terr 11).

Baby Halder's father was quite peculiar. His lack of attention to his responsibilities and the emotional strain he caused led Halder's mother to leave their home. After her mother left, Baby's sister Sushila became the target of their father's anger. Caroline McGee notices a number of ways in which domestic violence impacts children, including "fear, powerlessness, depression or sadness, impaired social relations, impacts on the child's identity, effects on educational achievement and anger, very often displayed as aggressive behaviour" (69). Furthermore, the child's relationship with their father or father figure is noticeably affected. Baby Halder too distanced herself from her father, wondering, "if it had been Baba who had left instead of her, perhaps things would not have been so bad" (12).

Life is incredibly difficult and painful for girls growing up in poor families. These girls endure harassment and persecution from their husbands and in-laws. Sushila, for example, had to bear the brunt of her husband Mangal's infidelity. When she confronted him about his affair, he strangled her to death. Her funeral was held before any of her relatives could arrive and investigate the cause of her death. Halder's father and Jetha were powerless against the threats posed by Mangal. Thus, Halder became a silent witness to two tragedies in her life: the departure of her mother because of her frustration and the death of her sister due to domestic violence. Despite being left behind to fend for herself, Baby Halder never skipped school as it

provided her solace from the melancholic atmosphere of the house, the abusive father, and the painful memories of her mother and sister.

Baby Halder received love and care at school and from her neighbours. Barring her father, everyone around her admired and appreciated her. She remarks, “I loved school as much as I hated home” (4). Whenever she deeply missed her sister or mother, she sought comfort in playing outside rather than staying indoors. There were times when there was nothing to eat at home, and Halder would go to school on an empty stomach. One day her friend came to pick her up for school and advised her to eat something before leaving. Halder tearfully exclaimed that there was nothing in the house for her to eat. Her father overheard this conversation, and when she returned from school that day, he thrashed her “so badly that it was three days before I could get up and many more before I felt able to go back to school again” (5). The violent act of her father was driven by his wounded male ego.

Her father showed little love or concern for his children and even “did not bother to buy us books and notebooks” (6). Consequently, their education suffered. After some time, he went to Dhanbad in search of work, found a job as a driver, and returned months later to relocate his family. Again, Baby and her brother were sent to school by their father without providing them with the necessary study material. Despite all the challenges they faced, Baby found delight and solace in attending school.

After moving from Dhanbad to Durgapur, her father left the children in the care of a friend. Whenever Baby Halder went to study at her Jetha/Pishi Ma’s house, her father would bring her back using one excuse or another: “the existing position of girl’s education in our country in this first stage leaves much to be desired...” (Mazumdar 28). In our society, girls’ education is often regarded as insignificant. Unfortunately, Jetha could not help Halder attend school because of his financial constraints. The various problems in Halder’s life made her resilient. Halder realised that if she wanted to continue with her education, she had to work it out on her own. Hence, she decided to reconnect with her old school friends and seek their help. After the intervention of one of her friends’ fathers, who kindly arranged everything for her, she resumed her schooling. This marked her first victory in pursuing what she believed in and standing up for herself. However, despite this triumph, her father eventually took her back to help her third Ma with household chores. Her studies were halted again. This time, it was a permanent cessation. Attending school, which was the only silver lining in her life, was no longer an option for her, and this caused her immense distress. With no one around to offer her guidance, Halder felt lost and longed for her mother’s presence, leading to a decline in her health.

Baby Halder’s mind was occupied by only two things: “whether I was asleep or awake, my thoughts would constantly turn to my studies and my mother” (9). This constant

preoccupation eventually led to depression. The doctors could not identify the cause of her illness until she confided in one of them. On learning about her trials and tribulations, the doctor became furious and gave her father a dressing-down. As a result, her vengeful father arranged for her marriage at the tender age of twelve without bothering to investigate the groom's background. It became clear to Baby Halder that her father no longer wanted to bear the responsibility of dealing with her problems, and hence had sent her away from his life.

Halder was more educated than her husband, Shankar. The contrasting attitudes and social behaviours highlighted the difference between them. While Halder was dynamic and cordial with everyone, Shankar remained distant, reserved, and rarely engaged with anyone, including his parents. This ultimately validates Halder's assertion that they had little in common. She had a mindset shaped by her experiences and hardships, which led her to becoming resolute and determined: "...come what may, I would make sure that my children had a good education" (106). Halder faced challenges while striving to educate her children, while her husband shouldered no responsibility.

Shankar's lack of consideration for Baby Halder and the needs of their child only added to her woes as it reminded her of the hardships she faced during her childhood. He neither contributed to the education of his child nor gave his wife money to manage the household. This left Halder feeling helpless in various matters. Similar to her father, Shankar disliked when she went out, interacted with people, or bought things for herself. It seemed that Shankar was an eccentric man who desired to check Baby Halder's movements outside the home to keep her unaware of the world beyond and thus dependent on him. Such reliance often leads to exploitation and suffering for women: "Staying away from public places...not venturing outside the home unless accompanied, and not participating in the labor force are some other means of maintaining seclusion" (Desai and Tamsah 5).

Halder's husband derived pleasure from mistreating her. He even separated her from their child and denied her the opportunity to meet her son for several months. Baby Halder endured both physical and emotional abuse from her husband. One day, he struck her so forcefully with a stick during her second pregnancy that she suffered a miscarriage. Following this incident, she decided not to return to her husband. However, her father took her to the "panchayat house" and in the presence of "Five elders" he cautioned Shankar to ensure that his daughter would never be compelled to leave her home again. Eventually, Halder was forced to return to her abusive husband because of poverty, the unwillingness of her stepmother, and pressure from her father.

Halder lived a meek and tamed life, burdened by the negligence of her father and the absence of her mother. She never voiced any complaints before getting married. Even later, she endured her husband's domineering behaviour and silently suffered through his

mistreatment and apathy. At the societal level, she hears disparaging remarks about her character but lacks the strength to speak up against them and protect herself from further mortification. When she tells her childhood friend Dulal not to bother about how her husband might feel if he visits their home frequently, there is a hint of protest in Baby's voice as she bursts out: "That's enough!... You think he'll beat me? So what?... I don't care anymore" (97-98).

Halder finally erupted, breaking free from her submissiveness. What had once been her nature now transformed into a protest. It was a protest aimed at gaining the liberation she had always yearned for, awakening the woman within her to voice her concerns. This protest provided her with the courage and determination needed to leave her husband behind and embark on a journey to carve her own path in life.

Baby Halder decides to relocate to Delhi despite the disapproval of her father. As Wainryb explains, "Culture involves sets of beliefs and assumptions with which individuals enter into negotiation when they construct themselves and their stories" (215). The subjugation experienced by marginalised individuals is a regular feature of patriarchy. Women often endure exploitation as their predetermined fate and tolerate their plight for the sake of their families, which is the foundation of their womanhood. Accordingly, Baby Halder strives to endure her husband's ruthless behaviour while seeking validation, but faces rejection at every attempt. Halder's choice to move to Delhi with her children signifies a transformation in her sense of self as she transitions from her village to an urban environment. Later, she admits that migrating from her hometown to a city like Delhi granted her the freedom to act as she wished.

Halder found herself filled with concern for the future. She wondered what lay ahead as she left everything behind. Would she be able to look after her children and raise them properly? Such questions weighed heavily on her mind. However, she remained resolute in her decision to embark on a journey of self-discovery and transform not only her life but also that of her children. Like Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), who defiantly breaks free from patriarchal control, Baby Halder seeks to liberate herself from the shackles of male chauvinism and uncover her true identity.

Baby Halder initially lived with her brother in Delhi. However, when she faced difficulties in getting along with his family, she decided to seek employment that also provided accommodation. She spent days searching for work, but no matter where she went, people enquired about her husband's whereabouts. When she told them that she was no longer living with her husband, her job prospects vanished. It is unfortunate that marriage failure is often attributed to the wife and "becomes a reflection of her character, morals or child-bearing ability" (Ramanathan 11). After Baby Halder left her husband, her relatives showed no interest

in maintaining a relationship with her. When Nitai, a friend of her younger brother, tried to help her find work, it didn't sit well with him. He warned Nitai of severing his friendship if he did not mend his ways.

As a single mother, Baby Halder suffered harassment from various quarters. People would gossip about her living in a rented house with her children, which made her an easy target for unwanted attention. This situation reveals the nosy and intrusive nature of the people. Some men would barge into her home under the pretence of seeking water to drink. When she went out with her children, they would tail her and try to engage her in a conversation. It became clear to Baby Halder that as long as she was dependent on others, she would continue to face the challenge of battling poverty while trying to prove her chastity. As a mother of three, she decided to take up the job of a domestic helper for the sake of survival.

Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal, was known to have a large number of domestic workers. Baby Halder hailed from Murshidabad, a district in West Bengal that had Muslim influence during pre-British India. Her decision to move from West Bengal to Delhi can be seen as a transition from the local to the global. New Delhi, the capital of India, had become the fastest growing market for domestic services in the country. This migration trend was not limited to Delhi but was also observed in other metropolitan cities, thus mirroring the historical movement of domestic workers during colonial times when they migrated from rural areas to major cities such as Calcutta.

Most of the domestic helpers were young widows or women who had been deserted by their husbands. These women were poverty-stricken and looked for shelter in urban areas. Many left their children behind in the custody of their parents or in-laws. There were also women with husbands and children who worked, but they mostly had part-time jobs. In these cases, the husbands were either daily wage workers or employed in family estates where their partners worked as domestic helpers (Banerjee 80).

Halder's decision to take up domestic service as a means of survival sheds light on the prevailing gender bias that assigns domestic work to women. Additionally, it highlights the increasing demand for the service by middle-class working women who seek to establish their social status by hiring domestic helpers for household chores. Halder challenges patriarchal norms by playing the role of a breadwinner through her work as a domestic helper and taking charge of decision-making for her family. This defies gender stereotypes deeply ingrained in our society. It is worth noting that a significant portion of part-time domestic workers in urban India are married yet 'single women' are managing their household and children without any support from their spouses (Ray and Qayum 61).

Halder stressed that working in a domestic service allowed her to maintain her dignity and avoid being subjected to sexual exploitation. Unlike her mother, she successfully surmounted

the disgrace attached to working women and, as a working mother, bridged the gap between home and the world, challenging the division that existed within colonial Indian culture. Halder embraced the ideology of ‘respectability’ propagated by patriarchy, embodying qualities such as moral integrity, efficiency, purity, cleanliness and eloquence that were on par with her employing mistresses. Furthermore, while transcending the notion of domestic service as a ‘dirty job’, she instilled middle-class values in her children. By highlighting her experiences in domestic work, Halder elevates the profession’s status as a launch pad for personal growth.

After the initial hiccups, Baby Halder arrives at the house of her employer, Prabodh Kumar (Tatush). One day, Tatush noticed how much she loved books when he saw her dusting in the library of his house. It proved to be the turning point of Halder’s life and marked the beginning of a journey towards a life filled with dignity and respect. Intrigued, Tatush probed into her education and was startled to learn that she had read the works of Rabindranath Tagore, Sukumar Ray, Sharatchandra, Kazi Nasrul Islam, and Satyendranath Dutt. Tatush enquired whether Halder had an interest in reading and writing, and in response, she casually mentioned that reading and writing seemed distant to her. However, with Tatush’s encouragement, she took Taslima Nasreen’s *Amar Meyebala* in her trembling hands and started reading. Her employer believed that her passion for reading and writing would undoubtedly reshape the course of her life.

Halder started reading a page or two of Nasreen every day. Through the book, she not only learnt about Taslima Nasreen’s life story but also found parallels with her own hardships during childhood. Halder’s neighbours were quite taken aback and started commenting on her reading habits, but she was not bothered. One of the authors that Tatush suggested to Halder is Ashapura Devi, a Bengali writer known for her storytelling prowess, who wrote extensively about the various challenges faced by women in early twentieth-century India. Devi’s writings had a profound impact on Halder and her perspective on life.

One day Tatush found Halder lost in thoughts and advised her to try a time-tested remedy - telling stories. The act of narrating is an exercise through which the storyteller truly experiences life. Writing serves as a balm for the bruised mind and leads to self-discovery. Following this, Tatush proceeded to give Halder a notebook and a pen. Encouraged by her employer to tell her story, Halder began jotting down some points about her life in her notebook. Despite hesitation due to her lack of writing experience, Halder poured out her thoughts and memories at the end of each day. It is worth noting that literacy plays a role in “transforming the social and political structures that imprison them in their ‘culture of silence’” (Freire and Macedo 59). It develops into an instrument through which the oppressed can restate their ‘history, culture and language practices’.

Tatush edited the drafts before seeking input from his literary circle and eventually published them without Baby Halder's knowledge. To Halder's astonishment, her writings gained immense recognition over time. It was quite fascinating for her to transition from being a domestic helper to becoming a published writer. Halder's understanding of her hidden abilities and her suppressed self helped her find answers to the conflicts that troubled her mind. As Pasupathi observes, "In constructing relations between who we are, and what we experience we create the autobiographies that make sense of our own development" (106).

Halder develops a habit of reading newspapers and even attempts to read letters in English. A household filled with peace, humour, and a studious atmosphere allowed Baby to feel relaxed. She also began exploring poems, stories, and cookery books. Being an enthusiastic reader increased her chances of becoming a better writer.

The educated liberals believe that books serve as a defence against tyranny by fostering empathy and inspiring positive change. While books might not have held that significance in Baby Halder's life, they can be seen as sources of comfort for marginalised and oppressed individuals like Halder. *A Life Less Ordinary* also stresses the importance of an individual's growth acknowledging that nurturing the mind is dependent on ensuring stability and security for the body. Working class women's bodies can easily become targets of violence and social conflict, which can lead to feelings of powerlessness and anxiety. However, Halder found support in a male figure who played a major role in her educational journey. At the end of her memoir, she expresses gratitude for having a mentor who helped her improve her reading and writing skills, which ultimately enabled her to write her life story.

Halder's memoir is deeply moving in its portrayal of women's hardships. It showcases a region where women's progress is seen as inappropriate and they are confined to their predefined roles of sexuality and domesticity. Their voices either remain unheard or are muzzled, causing them both physical and psychological distress and suffering. Any woman who dares to challenge the norms is labelled as immoral, which has an impact on the social well-being of all women. Despite marginalisation, some resilient women have come forward to address and fix problems, which speaks volumes of their strength and courage.

The main driving force behind Halder's narrative, as stated in her book, is her declaration that she believed herself to be an unfortunate person. This perception of herself shapes Halder's actions throughout much of the memoir, making her appear vulnerable and powerless. However, it is when she makes the decision to leave her village and embark on a new journey that the tone and direction of her narrative start to change. This transformation is catalysed by her employer, who gradually helps Halder find her voice. As a result, Baby Halder matures into a more refined narrator than she was at the outset of her journey.

A significant “subtext of the memoir is enlightenment and instilling of awareness in a mind steeped in the dark oblivion of social conditioning, acquired through reading books” (Mukherjee 83). Reflecting on her father’s desertion of family responsibilities, Halder portrays her mother as a survivor of domestic violence who, despite all her problems, “did not let us stop studying” (2). When Halder’s mother unexpectedly departs, she leaves behind a secret note for survival - “studying”. Both patriarchy and lack of education are to blame for the hardships faced by oppressed women in India. Women who find themselves working as domestic helpers in India have a desire to provide education to their daughters. They believe that education may protect their daughters from falling into servitude or degradation if they are abandoned or mistreated by the men they marry in hopes of finding security. Education would equip their daughters with skills so that they could forge their own paths instead of following in their mothers’ footsteps. Furthermore, it would empower them to make better decisions when choosing their life-partners. However, for Baby Halder, education holds value as it allows one to explore a spectrum of inspiring and enlightening ideas. Halder’s quest for knowledge is driven by curiosity rather than being a mere means of achieving a goal.

Baby Halder, a woman of humble origins, undergoes a remarkable journey of self-discovery and transformation. Her story affirms the fact that women in India regardless of their class, caste, or economic status have the power to make contributions to both societal progress and literary development. She dedicates her life narrative to her teachers, “both the masters and the didis, who taught me the Bengali language and Bengali literature at school” (Halder, Dedication v). Throughout her journey, Halder’s mother continued to be a source of inspiration and support. She says, “Ma, come and see once, I still want to read and write, I want my children read and write. They need your blessings Ma” (172). Her life story serves as a message for women to strive for liberation rather than depending on others. Halder affirms, “It’s possible to change. Look at me. I have managed to break free” (Nandi). By taking control over her destiny, Halder continues to inspire those who are struggling to find meaning in their lives.

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