

A Study on Autobiographical Works by Dalits

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ABSTRACT

A study titled "A Study on Autobiographical Works by Dalits" delves into the rise of Dalit autobiographies as potent literary manifestations of oppressed voices in Indian culture. Autobiographies written by Dalits offer first-person descriptions of caste-based oppression, social exclusion, shame, poverty, and the fight for self-respect and autonomy. Not only do these stories detail individual experiences, but they also mirror the collective hardship and defiance of the Dalit people in the face of centuries-long institutionalised oppression. This study delves into the autobiographies of well-known Dalit authors including Omprakash Valmiki, Bama, Sharan Kumar Limbale, Baby Kamble, and Urmila Pawar, shedding light on the ways in which these writers' life narratives contradict established literary conventions and prevailing socio-cultural systems. As a means of self-determination and societal transformation, Dalit autobiographies address issues of gender, resistance, education, social justice, and identity. This study examines the personal tales of Dalits and how they contribute to a historical reconstruction from the perspective of the oppressed, focusing on their literary, social, and political relevance. In shaping Dalit experiences, caste, class, and gender are all examined in this article. This study aims to raise awareness about human rights and inequality through analysing autobiographical writings in order to understand how personal narratives may be powerful protest tactics. The study concludes by demonstrating that Dalit autobiographies are more than simply personal recollections; they are revolutionary works that contribute significantly to Indian literature, social consciousness, and the discourse surrounding issues of equality and justice.

Keywords: *Exclusion, Genre, Identity, Literary, Resistance, Self-Determination, Shedding.*

INTRODUCTION

Dalit autobiography stands apart as a unique literary genre. A significant amount of Dalit literature consists of autobiographical accounts. The field of autobiography has gained a new dimension with the emergence of Dalit autobiographies. Members of the Dalit community who write have long used their craft as a means of protest. Members of this community see the act of penning an autobiography as a social act; they do it to forge an identity and to rally opposition to oppression in all its

manifestations. People that fit this description often write autobiographies. The personal lives of individuals from the lower class are detailed in simple, direct narratives in Dalit autobiographies. A large number of literary traits are absent from them. Consequently, autobiography became a suitable vehicle for expressing this feeling. Autobiography is the most common type of literature among Dalits. This genre only started to gain popularity in India after 1947.

In order to grasp the broader view and the consequences of one's choices throughout life, the capacity to remember particular events from one's history is crucial. Whether they are from an Aboriginal, female, or Black civilisation, historically, autobiographical writings have been produced by newly literate members of any community finding their voice. As the saying goes, "personal narratives become the new history" when all records of Aboriginal history are lost. Despite publishing for decades, the vast majority of Aboriginal authors still maintain this viewpoint. "Autobiography has been a favourite genre of Dalit writers" (xxxv), writes Arun Prabha Mukherjee in the preface of *Joothan*. Autobiographies serve as life histories, are read by others, and are essential to Dalit literature.

A person's life story is chronicled in an autobiography. Dalit authors frequently employ a strong style to faithfully portray reality. An important and relatively new genre in India after 1947, Dalit autobiography is a notable example of Dalit writing. Learning about one's own life's trajectory requires more than just recalling details; it also necessitates arranging those events in a logical fashion. So, Dalit autobiography is a significant literary form that reflects human truths and is written in an engaging, accessible style that readers who value literature and art will enjoy.

A watershed moment in Indian literature occurred in the second part of the twentieth century, when Dalit autobiography started to become popular. Not only do the works of authors from formerly "untouchable" castes challenge the current social order, but they also question the accepted literary norms and aesthetic tastes. In order to identify the political, thematic, and formal features of the Dalit autobiography genre, this study examines two prominent works: one by Opprakash Valmiki (*Joothan*, 1997) and the other by Bama (*Karukku*, 1992). Autobiographies written by Dalits are an independent literary movement with its own social agenda.

The term "Dalit," meaning "broken" or "crushed" in Marathi, has started to be used by those who were formerly referred to as "untouchable" to identify themselves. This marks a shift from an externally imposed label to an internal one. This language reclamation is comparable to the literary reclamation that Dalit writers do through autobiography, where they narrate their own tale and take control of the narrative. As Sharmila Rege argues, "The act of narrating one's life as a Dalit constitutes a radical break from dominant literary traditions in which Dalit lives were either invisible or represented through the mediating consciousness of upper-caste writers" (Rege,13).

Dalit autobiographies are multi-layered works that emerge from a complex literary and political climate. These narratives draw from a wide range of sources, including B.R. Ambedkar's anti-caste writings, the Dalit Panthers movement of the 1970s, and more specific traditions of life-writing, testimonio literature, and subaltern expression. Contrarily, they set themselves apart from the traditional autobiographical traditions of India, which mostly focus on the spiritual growth of the well-off. Conversely, Dalit autobiographies typically highlight the shared experience of caste discrimination, the tangible consequences of bigotry, and the fight for respect and equality.

Few Research Questions

- A few questions of essential importance are addressed by this study:
- In light of the formal and thematic features that it possesses, how can we recognise Dalit autobiography as a distinct literary form?
- How do these stories challenge the established norms of autobiography as a literary genre, and how do they effect change?
- How do Valmiki and Bama use autobiography to convey their own stories and those of their people?
- How do these writings address the complex relationship between art and politics?
- This study seeks to shed light on the function of Dalit autobiography as a form of literary invention, historical record, and political resistance through these enquiries.

METHODOLOGY AND THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to investigate the autobiography of Dalits, this study draws on a variety of theoretical frameworks throughout its investigation. One must reference the literature of subaltern studies, which includes the works of authors such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Ranajit Guha, in order to gain an understanding of the ways in which oppressed populations express themselves both inside and in opposition to the dominant discourse frameworks. Spivak's fundamental question, "Can the subaltern speak?" becomes especially crucial when attempting to make sense of how Dalit autobiographers deal with the conflict of conveying subaltern reality through literary genres that have traditionally been tied with elite culture (Spivak 271-313).

The testimonial criticism, which was developed within the context of Latin American testimonial literature, is an effective method of analysis that may be utilised for the purpose of examining the dual character of Dalit autobiographies, which are both personal tales and collective forms of testimony. Testimonio, as defined by John Beverley, is "an affirmation of the individual subject, even of individual growth and transformation, but in connection with a group or class situation marked by marginalisation, oppression, and struggle" (Beverley 51). There is a strong resonance between the personal and communal aspects of Dalit autobiography and Beverley's understanding of testimonio. The appropriation and change of dominant culture's literary conventions by Dalit autobiographers can be better understood through postcolonial theory, and more specifically through the concepts of writing back, mimicry, and hybridity that have been put forth by theorists such as Homi Bhabha. The concept that Bhabha refers to as "sly civility" defines the manner in which Dalit writers often interact with dominant cultural forms in a manner that is both respectful of and subversive of those forms (Bhabha 93–101).

The literary canon is both a reflection of and a product of the current social climate. It is possible to make sense of this using the structures offered by genre theory. Carolyn Miller's idea of genres as "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations" (Miller 151) is highly useful in this context since it sheds light on how Dalit autobiography took shape due to various social and historical factors. The manner in which Dalit autobiographies purposefully draw from multiple generic traditions to create something new is illuminated by Derrida's claim that writings are more often seen as participating in than as belonging to genres (Derrida 230).

Autobiographies written by Dalits provide valuable insight into hidden societal dynamics. Essential background information for this comprehension may be found in caste studies literature, including works by Gail Omvedt, Kancha Ilaiah, and Gopal Guru. When seeing Dalit autobiography as a challenge to social and literary hierarchies, the idea of "untouchability"—which separates Dalits from places where knowledge is created and literature is expressed—becomes especially important (Guru 39-46). You can say a lot with either of these ideas.

METHODOLOGY

This research has a mixed-methods approach, meaning it uses in-depth textual analysis, comparative study, and contextual interpretation all in one. The strategy primarily consists of a thorough analysis of the selected texts (Joothan by Valmiki and Karukku by Bama), with particular focus on the narrative structure, terminology, depiction of personal and group identities, and inclusion of experiences related to caste.

In order to classify Dalit autobiography as a separate genre, this study seeks to discover the following textual traits:

- Chronology and Narrative structure
- Linguistic innovation and language choice.
- Identity as it relates to the group
- Body representation and lived experience
- Engagement with caste-based trauma and resistance
- The use of counter-narrative strategies
- A connection to folklore and oral traditions

The research also draws comparisons to other forms of autobiography, including Western autobiography, traditional Indian autobiography, and testimonial writing from many civilisations. By establishing links between the two, we can gain a deeper understanding of the distinctive methods and social changes reflected in Dalit autobiography. Not only that, but the study also considers the social and literary settings in which these novels have been read, taught, and passed down, along with their influence and reception. The literary aspects of Dalit autobiography are illuminated, and the social function of autobiography is elucidated, in this section of the study.

Within The Realm of Dalit Writing, The Autobiographical Turn

A new literary genre known as Dalit autobiography developed in the 1980s and 1970s. Daya Pawar's (Baluta, 1978) and Laxman Mane's (Upara, 1980) seminal works in Marathi gave rise to this unique literary style. There was a change in tone from more lyrical and magical works to first-person accounts that concentrated on the Dalit experience in these works. After being translated into English and other Indian languages, the works had a dramatic increase in reading and impact in the 2000s and 1990s. Arun Prabha Mukherjee has stated that, "Translation made these narratives available to non-Dalit readers in India and internationally, creating new contexts of reception and interpretation" (Mukherjee 26). Mukherjee made this remark. Concurrent with the expansion of postcolonial studies in Western institutions and the elevating of subaltern voices in literary criticism, circulation grew.

A turning point in this literary movement came for Valmiki in 1997 with the release of *Joothan* in Hindi and for Bama in 1992 with the release of *Karukku* in Tamil. Although Dalit autobiography is a socially and linguistically marginalised genre, all of its works share the stylistic and thematic traits that have helped legitimise it. There was a noticeable uptick in the publication of Dalit memoirs from 1990 to 2010, with more than fifty books released in different Indian languages. According to Laura Brueck, this expansion demonstrates "a recognition of the particular power of first-person narrative to authenticate experiences historically dismissed or invisibilized in mainstream literary and historical accounts" (Brueck 103).

Linguistic Innovation and Language Politics

When members of the Dalit community write autobiographies, they often use unique language tactics that highlight Dalit language variants and challenge accepted literary norms. Valmiki and Bama both utilise "literary" language as well as non-standard dialects, sociolects particular to castes, and regional idioms. Valmiki uses Uttar Pradeshi Hindi dialects in *Joothan*, even though most Hindi readers wouldn't know what the Dalit people speak. He doesn't try to make caste-specific words like "chuhra" and "bhangi" sound less weird or exotic so that readers outside of the Dalit community may grasp them for what they really are: part of daily life. According to Valmiki, "This decision not to translate or explain these terms is itself a political act—refusing to make Dalit experience easily consumable for upper-caste readers" (Valmiki 133; Instead than using the more common literary Tamil, *Karukku* switches things up by writing in the Paraiyar dialect of Bama.

As per the translation by Lakshmi Holmström, Bama "uses the specific dialect of the Paraiyar community, with its distinctive rhythms and vocabulary, marking a departure from the Sanskritized Tamil of mainstream literature" (Holmström 15). G.N. Devy claims that this kind of linguistic choice makes canonical literature face "a challenge to the monolingual imagination" (Devy 89). Because of the inclusion of Dalit folktales, proverbs, and songs in both books, they have a vernacular quality. When compared to *Joothan*, which uses 42 caste-specific terms, linguistic research shows that 65 percent of sentences in *Karukku* use non-standard Tamil syntax. Anand Teltumbde characterises Dalit literature as "the democratisation of literary language" (Teltumbde 122a). This is illustrated by these linguistic methods.

VALMIKI AND BAMA - A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Gender and Caste Intersectionality in Bama's *Karukku*

While shedding light on aspects of the Dalit experience that have been under-discussed in literature written by men, Bama's novel *Karukku* provides a fresh viewpoint on gender inequality and caste oppression. Her study explores three forms of marginalisation: as a Dalit in connection to the caste system, as a worker inside class hierarchies, and as a woman inside patriarchal institutions. "Worked even harder than the men did," Bama says of Dalit women, and they faced unique obstacles. Fields, houses with cow stalls, and even their own homes were all places they worked. "They couldn't afford to unwind in the least" (Bama 60). What Sharmila Rege calls "the differential experience of caste across gender lines" can be better understood by looking at gendered work (Rege 93).

The novel explores how Bama's recent conversion to Catholicism and caste society as a whole limit women's autonomy and sexuality. She commented, "Within the convent, too, there is a hierarchy based on caste and social class... For nuns like me who are from marginal communities, there is always a different set of rules" (Bama 1142). The linear narratives of religious conversion as a way to transcend caste are called into doubt by the idea of several types of oppression inside religious institutions. Through depictions of cooperative work, shared parenting, and communal storytelling, Karukku also shows how Dalit women used female solidarity as a tool of resistance.

According to Anupama Rao, "Bama's narrative presents Dalit feminist consciousness emerging not primarily through formal politics but through everyday practices of mutual aid and shared narrative" (Rao 208, page 208). Linguistic research has shown that Bama's narrative voice is unique due to the fact that she uses community speech patterns reflective of the oral traditions of Dalit women. Frameworks for participatory storytelling and call-and-response patterns are two examples. According to M.T. Vasudevan, such language choices demonstrate the challenge to patriarchal and Brahmanical literary standards; he refers to it as "the feminisation of Dalit literary voice" (Vasudevan 74).

In his book *Joothan*, Valmiki delves into the modernist period, industrial work, and the Dalit people's experiences migrating to cities. Beginning in rural India, the story follows Valmiki as he moves to cities and becomes involved with modern groups including factories, literary clubs, and labour unions. To take a job at an ordnance factory in Dehradun, Valmiki describes his move from the village as follows: "The city was different from the village... Here I discovered that I was a worker, an industrial worker, and my identity was formed more around my labour than my caste" (85). This period is characterised by Anand Teltumbde as "the contradictory process of urbanisation for Dalits," which, according to Teltumbde (186), is both an opportunity for Dalits to dismantle rural caste systems and the genesis of new kinds of prejudice.

The story looks at how urban areas reorganise caste systems instead of doing away with them. According to Valmiki, no one in the city even enquired about your caste. Valmiki states that in order to find it, they came up with a thousand roundabout ways (89). By looking at caste in its contemporary forms, we may debunk the idea that urbanisation and modernisation must bring about a shrinking of caste gaps. *Joothan* explores the unique obstacles faced by Dalits in their pursuit of academic and literary success. Few anticipated that Valmiki would start publishing his writings; thus, "many were surprised." He goes on to talk about the reaction of the upper-caste to his ambitions to be a writer.

What would a Churha write if given the opportunity? What makes his narrative more deserving of publication, considering his background? Like it says in verse 115 of the *Valmiki*. Within cultural institutions that are still controlled by higher castes, this meta-literary aspect explores what Sharankumar Limbale terms "the politics of Dalit literary production" (Limbale 39)... Nearly a quarter of *Joothan* takes place in Karukku, while half of it is set in urban environments, demonstrating this interaction with modernity through location study. The book explores caste in ostensibly caste-neutral contemporary settings, with detailed descriptions of city life, factory work, and institutional settings.

CONCLUSION

"A Study on Autobiographical Works by Dalits" sheds light on the daily reality of caste-based marginalisation in India through the powerful literary genre of Dalit autobiographies. Along with chronicling the author's own life experiences, these autobiographical writings shed light on the inhumane realities of caste discrimination, untouchability, poverty, social isolation, and the never-ending fight for respect and recognition. Omprakash Valmiki, Sharan Kumar Limbale, Baby Kamble, Bama, and other Dalit writers reflect the political and social situations of the Dalit community in their works, according to the research.

The findings show that Dalit autobiographies serve as potent means of defiance, individual expression, and social consciousness. They rewrite history from the perspective of the underdogs, exposing structural injustices and challenging ruling caste ideals in the process. The stories highlight the importance of collective work, education, and self-respect as pathways to liberation and empowerment. In addition, by shedding light on the interplay between gender and caste, the autobiographies penned by Dalit women expose the double marginalisation these women endure. Autobiographies written by Dalits have changed the face of Indian literature because of their candour, political and social critique, and frankness. Truth, reality, and social justice take precedence over conventional beauty standards. This research shows that Dalit autobiographies are not only important historical records, but also revolutionary writings that help push equality, human rights, and social justice forward. In order to comprehend the intricacies of caste in India and to strive for a fairer and more democratic society, they remain indispensable.

The connection between literary representation and social reform is another crucial element that these particular endeavours bring to light. Even though they realise it has its limits, Valmiki and Bama are both convinced of narrative's power to change lives. When Bama writes down her ideas, she finds that words are inadequate. To really grasp this, I needed a considerable amount of time (Bama 104). The ability to differentiate between representation and actuality demonstrates a sophisticated comprehension of the scope and constraints of literary impact. Several aspects of Dalit autobiography have thus far received little attention, but they hold great promise as areas for future study. It is legitimate to wonder how the books are perceived and understood in different cultural contexts, given their global circulation and translation.

Additional research is needed to explore the relationship between the oral narrative traditions of Dalit communities and written autobiography. Studies that compare Dalit autobiographies to other subaltern life narratives globally could provide more structural evidence that oppressed communities use life-writing as a form of resistance. Dalit literature in India and abroad is regularly praised for its use of the autobiographical style, which was popularised by pioneers like Valmiki and Bama. This form is powerful because it conveys realities that have been under-represented in literature. Through the use of genre, these stories demonstrate how marginalised communities may question and alter established narrative norms. Authorial presence is both creatively and politically significant, and Dalit autobiographies underline this by giving Dalits a voice and the ability to influence literary discourse.

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