



## VOICES OF DALIT LITERATURE THROUGH SELF NARRATION

Disha Mondal

**ABSTRACT:** *Autobiography has remained a significant segment of Dalit literature since nineteen hundred and sixties. Dalit literature has emerged through the Dalit movement in Maharashtra. It has been a favorite genre with Dalit writers. This paper seeks to analyse Omprakash Valmiki's Joothan: A Dalit's Life (2003), Sarankumar Limbale's The Outcaste: Akkarmasi (2007), and Bama's Karukku (2001). In these autobiographies, one finds a complete representation of the self and its problems. Although autobiography is a European genre, concerned with the representation of the self, Dalit autobiography is strikingly different from the European models in that it makes "self" only a locus for representing the social reality. In other words, in Dalit autobiography the focus is not on "self" but "Dalit community". Dalit autobiography is not just of a remembrance of things past, but a shaping and structuring of them to help one to understand one's life and the society. The act of narration involves the political act of self-assertion and self creation. So, these are the public functions of Dalit autobiographies. On the other hand, authenticity of experience is the most outstanding quality of Dalit autobiography. It articulates the rage against education and social system that privileges the upper caste. However, it is incorrect to say that Dalit autobiography is a mere reportage of the pain and suffering of the untouchables. The ultimate goal of Dalit literature is to evoke the Dalit consciousness.*

**KEYWORDS:** Untouchable, Caste, Torture, Filthy, Dalit Literature, Autobiography

### INTRODUCTION

Autobiography has remained a significant segment of Dalit literature since 1960s and 70s. The Dalit writers termed the autobiographical narratives as 'self stories' (Atmakatha) or 'self reportings' (Atmavrittantya). Dalit literature, as a genre, has emerged through the Dalit movement in Maharashtra in 1960s, and later on in the other parts of the country. Dalit autobiography not only provides authenticity of the experience of Dalit self, it also serves as an exemplar to other Dalits. The assertion of Dalit identity is a recurrent theme of their autobiographies as a strategy to resist the normative codes of the mainstream values and make a critique of the hypocritical stance of the high caste people, the hierarchies prevalent in social structure, and the Brahminical ethics that essentially govern every aspect of social order. Thus, the Dalit autobiographies are formidable examples of subaltern narrative of the self. In this paper I shall try to analyse Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, Sarankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste: Akkarmahi* (2007), and Bama's *Karukku* (2001).

Dalit authors of autobiographies have faced criticism both for their choice of genre and the content of their autobiographies; these texts have been deemed "artless outpourings of Dalit writers' unmediated experience" and have been called *repetitive and stereotypical*. In response to this, Valmiki stresses the importance of shaping and structuring the past as to "arouse a passion for change" in both Dalit and non-Dalit readers. Autobiographies are seen by certain critics as a genre that "should belong to people of 'lofty reputation' or people who



have something of ‘historical importance’ to say” thus showing how social and class distinctions are even carried into literary discourse.(Anderson,8).Their status as previously untouchable still proves to be a barrier. Their trauma is definitely of historical importance. Moreover, as Sharankumar Limbale indignantly asks, *Dragging and cutting dead animals-how will non-Dalits write about this experience of Dalits with the power of their imagination? How will they feel the angry ideas rising in the hearts of untouchables on the basis of their helpless imagination?* (Limbale qtd. in Mukherjee xxiv). In fact, their experiences are so similar that *Dalit writing demands a new dictionary*.

This kind of literature deconstructs the conventional sense of aestheticism. Regarding the aesthetics of literature, Plato says literature is a lie so he wants to cast away all the poets from his Commonwealth. Aristotle says that literature combines fact of history and abstraction of philosophy. In Horace’s opinion poetry instructs while pleasing. Finally, Longinus says creation of sublimity is the aim of literature. On the other hand, the Indian concept of *Rasa* is matter of phelicitous use of language and metaphor. Actually, most of the Indian literature was courtly and religious in nature. Thus, there was no space of profanity. Only purity and beauty would be there in the literature. But Dalit writers are deliberately rejecting the Eastern and Western notion of aesthetics. Valmiki, Limbale and Bama are talking about the aesthetic of painful reality.

The Dalit narratives are a public exposure of their private and collective trauma. Most Dalit texts, in one way or another, address the politics of location (*Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki). There is careful attention to the village geography. All the three autobiographers are deconstructing the grander narrative of Indian village. It has been portrayed as a utopian space for very long in Indian literature. The first chapter of Bama’s text is a detailed description of her village. She describes it using the colloquial names for the peaks surrounding the village, the numerous ponds, the streets, the temples and local shrines. She is revealing the attention because of the sometimes-troubled relationship Dalit has with the earth. Valmiki says that rain would often make their muddy huts crumble, the dirt lanes reserved for them would get infested with worms and bugs. They were at marcy of nature.

The authors also address the consequences of transgression. Valmiki describes as incident wherehe and his classmate were viciously beaten when they mistakenly ate upper-caste cooked food inside an upper-caste household, a crime for which many people suggested that they should be *tied to a rope and hangedon a tree* (Valmiki 60).

The use of language is an important phenomenon in the Dalit autobiographies. All of them, even in translation into English, incorporate the regional language in their narratives in certain ways. The word *Joothan*, the name of Valmiki’s autobiography encapsulates the pain, humiliatiom and poverty of his community, which not only had to rely on *joothan* but also relished it. *Joothan* is the contaminated left over of food. The Dalits are seen as a contaminated body, the marginalized of the society. *Joothan* is an important metaphor in this text and Valmiki gives us a detailed description of collecting and eating *joothan*. Bama’s narrative is full of colloquial words and names; for instance, she uses the Tamil slang words *di* and *ei*. The word *akkarmasi* depicts illegitimate child, which Limbale is. The word is packed with the pain Limbale had to face from his community due to being the *son of a whore*. Language is the vehicle through which they reveal the trauma they have faced to the readers of their texts.



The experiences at the educational institutions have powerful impacts on them. Sarankumar Limbale describes the terrible conditions in which he tried to get an education. The village school was run in a temple, and while the upper-caste Hindu boys and girls sat inside the temple, the Mahar boys and girls sat at the entrance of the temple, as they were not allowed to set foot in it. They were still expected *to smear the floors and walls with cow-dung paste* (Limbale 4) and sweep the floors. During the monsoons, the classes were held at the house of an upper caste Marwari, where he and the other Mahar students *sat amidst the foot wear flung all around us* (5). Valmiki and Limbale both had to balance getting an education and doing odd jobs; they both describe how they were taunted by fellow classmates for having the job of dragging away and skinning the dead animals found in the villages. Bama in *Karukku* discloses that she was a very good student. But she says, *however much you study, whatever you take up, caste discrimination stalks us in every nook and corner and drives us into a frenzy* (26)

While the education system is indicted as death dealing for Dalits, Valmiki pays tribute to the Dalit organic intellectuals who help nurture the growth of a Dalit consciousness in him. Valmiki came to know about Dr. Ambedkar's biography. Reading this book is a magical transformative moment for him; his silence transformed into voice.

*Joothan*, *Akkarmasi*, and *Karukku* then are multivalent, polyvocal texts, healing fractured self through narrating, contributing to the archive of Dalit history, opening a dialogue with the silencing oppressors, and providing solace as well as frank criticism to own people.

For the fact that they have become a speaking subject indicates that Indian democracy has opened some escape hatches through which a critical mass of educated Dalits has emerged. On the other hand, the harsh realities that he portrays so powerfully underscore the fact that the promises made in the Constitution of independent India have not yet been fully met. *Joothan*, *Akkarmasi* and *Karukku* are manifestoes for revolutionary transformation of society and human consciousness.

## REFERENCES

- Bama, (1992) *Karukku*, translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom, Oxford Publication, India  
Omprakash Valmiki, *Joothan*, translated as *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* by Arun Prabha Mukherjee (2003) Columbia University Press New York, India  
Sarankumar Limbale, (2007) translated by Santosh Bhoomkar, *The Outcaste: Akkarmasi* Oxford Publication (2007) India