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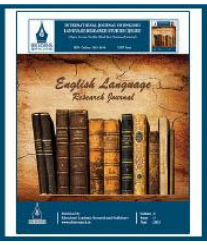

Dalit Autobiography as Counter-Canonical Literary Genre

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Abstract

Dalit autobiography is not a comfortable genre. It is not supposed to be. When Omprakash Valmiki published Joothan in 1997 and Bama published Karukku a year earlier, they were not adding politely to the Indian literary canon; they were challenging its foundations. This paper examines both texts as interventions that unsettle the aesthetic norms, epistemological assumptions, and social hierarchies embedded in mainstream Indian literary culture. Drawing on autobiography theory (Lejeune, Smith and Watson) and Limbale's aesthetic of Dalit literature, I argue that Valmiki and Bama deploy life-writing not as self-expression in the liberal humanist sense but as political testimony, communal witness, and aesthetic provocation. Their narratives demand to be read on their own terms terms that privilege fidelity to experience over formal elegance, collective identity over individual personality, and the urgency of social justice over the pleasures of aesthetic contemplation. Whether the Indian literary establishment is ready for that demand is another question.

Keywords:- Dalit Autobiography, Omprakash Valmiki, Bama, Caste, Life-Writing, Counter-Narrative

Introduction

The title Joothan is a slap. In colloquial Hindi, the word means leftover scraps the food discarded by upper-caste families and passed to Dalits after celebrations. Valmiki chose this title deliberately, refusing the sanitized vocabulary with which polite discourse typically discusses caste. He wanted the word to sting. And it does.

Bama's Karukku the Tamil word for palmyra leaf, whose serrated edge can cut makes a similar gesture, though in a different register. Where Valmiki is controlled and furious, Bama is exuberant and defiant. Where Joothan chronicles the caste violence of rural North India with documentary precision, Karukku navigates the intersecting oppressions of caste, gender, and institutional Christianity in Tamil Nadu with a narrative energy that keeps threatening to overflow its own banks.

Together, these two autobiographies represent something genuinely new in Indian literary history not the first Dalit writing (the Marathi tradition is older), but among the first to reach a national and international audience and to force the question: what happens to the Indian literary canon when Dalits start telling their own stories? My argument is that Dalit autobiography does not merely expand the canon. It calls the entire idea of the canon into

question, exposing the caste privileges and aesthetic assumptions that have governed which stories count as literature and which do not.

Theory: What Kind of Autobiography Is This?

Lejeune defined autobiography as a "retrospective prose narrative" focused on "individual life" and "the story of his personality" (Lejeune 4). It is a definition that works tolerably well for Rousseau or Augustine but runs into trouble with Dalit life-writing, where the self is constitutively social. Valmiki does not write about himself as an autonomous individual navigating personal choices. He writes about himself as a member of a community defined by its subjection to a system of inherited degradation. The "I" of Joothan is always also a "we," and to read it as a story of individual development is to misunderstand its fundamental purpose.

Smith and Watson's broader theorization of "life-writing" is more helpful, precisely because it recognizes that autobiographical practice takes radically different forms in different cultural contexts and that the Western emphasis on individual selfhood is not universal but culturally specific (Smith and Watson 14). The Latin American genre of testimonio provides another useful reference point: Beverley defines it as a first-person narrative that speaks for a community, using personal experience as evidence of collective oppression and as a call to action (Beverley 33). Dalit autobiography shares these features: testimony, collective address, the inseparability of the personal and the political.

Ambedkar's Shadow

You cannot talk about Dalit literature without talking about Ambedkar. His Annihilation of Caste (1936) the speech he was never allowed to deliver, which became instead one of the most devastating critiques of Hindu social organization ever written provides the intellectual foundation for everything that follows. Caste, Ambedkar argued, is not a corruption of Hinduism but its organizing principle (Ambedkar 263). Reform from within is impossible; the system must be destroyed.

Ambedkar's personal trajectory from an Untouchable child humiliated in school to the architect of the Indian Constitution is itself the ur-narrative of Dalit autobiography: the story of an individual who transcends impossible circumstances while insisting that individual transcendence is not enough, that the structures must change. The Dalit literary movement that emerged in Maharashtra in the 1960s and 1970s, with writers like Baburao Bagul and Namdeo Dhasal, took Ambedkar as its founding figure. Dangle's anthology Poisoned Bread (1992) brought this tradition to anglophone readers and demonstrated its range .

Valmiki: The Refusal to Look Away

Joothan opens with a geography of exclusion the Chuhra settlement in Barla, physically separated from the main village, located near the pond where animals are washed and garbage is dumped. This is not setting as backdrop; this is setting as argument. The spatial organization of the village is the caste system made material, and Valmiki describes it with a refusal of literary embellishment that is itself a literary choice.

The incidents accumulate: the young Valmiki made to sweep the school compound while his classmates study; his father forced to carry dead cattle; the family eating joothan from upper-caste weddings. Mukherjee, in her introduction to the English translation, notes that Valmiki's prose "refuses to dress up the wound, to make it palatable" (A. Mukherjee xvi). This is exactly right. The absence of sentimentality is not artlessness; it is a deliberate rejection of the aesthetic conventions that would transform Dalit suffering into a pleasing literary object. Valmiki will not give you the satisfaction of a beautiful sentence about ugliness.

The pivot comes when Valmiki encounters Ambedkar's writings and his experience reconfigures from personal misfortune into systemic oppression. Guru has argued that this is the characteristic movement of Dalit autobiography: from the individual to the structural, from suffering to analysis, from testimony to politics (Guru 5004). Joothan performs this movement with a clarity that leaves the reader no room for comfortable sympathy. It does not want your sympathy. It wants your outrage.

Bama: Caste, Gender, Christianity, and the Body

Karukku complicates the picture. Bama is a Dalit woman, which means she faces discrimination not only from the caste system at large but within the Dalit community itself. She is also Catholic, which adds another layer: the promise of Christian equality turns out to be, in practice, another mask for caste hierarchy. The nuns who ran her convent school reproduced the same discriminatory patterns Dalits assigned menial tasks, denied authority, treated as charity cases rather than equals that the Church was supposed to have transcended.

Bama's prose is as different from Valmiki's as you can imagine. Where he is controlled, she is exuberant. Where he strips language down to bare testimony, she fills it with the rhythms and idioms of Tamil Dalit speech colloquialisms, slang, the distinctive vocabulary of the Paraiyar community. Holmstrom notes in her translator's introduction that Bama deliberately violates standard Tamil literary conventions, asserting the dignity and expressiveness of a linguistic register that the literary establishment treats as beneath notice (Holmstrom ix). The language itself is an act of resistance.

Brueck's work on Dalit women's writing highlights the double marginalization at stake: Dalit women challenge both the caste hierarchy of the dominant society and the gender hierarchies within their own communities (Brueck 89). Bama's narrative bears this out. Her account of convent life exposes caste discrimination within the Church; her depictions of village life expose the sexual exploitation and domestic violence that Dalit women endure at home. Karukku does not pick one axis of oppression and stick with it. It insists on the intersection and that insistence is what makes it so difficult and so necessary.

Conclusion

Dalit autobiography matters not as a subcategory of Indian autobiography but as a direct challenge to the principles on which the Indian literary mainstream has operated. Valmiki and Bama do not write to be admired. They write to be heard, and they write in the full knowledge that the literary establishment they are addressing has been built on the erasure of voices like theirs. Limbale's call for a Dalit aesthetic grounded in experience, justice, and collective identity rather than formalist criteria (Limbale 19) is not a lowering of standards; it is a redefinition of what standards should mean in a society still structured by caste.

Whether the canon can absorb these texts without neutralizing them is an open question. There is always the risk that incorporation becomes domestication that Dalit autobiography will be added to syllabi and anthologies in a way that allows the institution to congratulate itself on its inclusiveness without confronting the structural inequalities that made the exclusion possible in the first place. Valmiki and Bama, I suspect, would be unsurprised by this outcome. They have seen how systems absorb dissent. But they wrote their books anyway, and the books remain sharp-edged, uncomfortable, unassimilated. That is their greatest achievement.

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