



## Dalit Autobiography as a Literary Genre: Asserting Identity and Reclaiming Narrative Space in the Works of Omprakash Valmiki and Bama

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### Abstract

This research examines Dalit autobiography as a distinct literary genre through a critical analysis of two seminal texts: Omprakash Valmiki's ([Joothan, 1997](#)) and Bama's ([Karukku, 1992](#)). The study posits that Dalit autobiographies represent a radical departure from conventional Indian autobiographical traditions and constitute a form of counter-narrative that challenges hegemonic literary representations. Through close textual analysis, the research identifies distinctive formal, thematic, and linguistic features that characterize Dalit autobiography as a genre with specific social and political functions. The study employs theoretical frameworks from subaltern studies, testimonio criticism, and postcolonial theory to analyze how these narratives function as acts of literary resistance and testimonial witnessing. Findings indicate that Dalit autobiographies employ specific narrative strategies including: non-linear chronology, communal rather than individualistic focus, deliberate incorporation of Dalit dialects and sociolects, and the strategic use of bodily experience as evidence. The research demonstrates how these autobiographies operate simultaneously as literary texts, sociological documents, and political interventions, challenging not only social hierarchies but also literary conventions. By examining these works as acts of narrative reclamation, this study contributes to our understanding of how marginalized communities use life-writing to assert presence in literary spaces historically denied to them and reconstitute the relationship between literary aesthetics and social justice.

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**Keywords:** - Dalit literature, autobiography, Omprakash Valmiki, Bama, counter-narrative, testimonio, caste studies, subaltern studies, Indian literature, literary resistance

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### Introduction: Locating Dalit Autobiography in Literary History

The emergence of Dalit autobiography as a significant literary form in the late 20th century represents one of the most profound developments in Indian literature. These autobiographical narratives by writers from communities historically designated as

"untouchable" under the caste system challenge not only social hierarchies but also established literary conventions and aesthetics. This research examines two foundational texts in this genre—Omprakash Valmiki's ([Joothan,1997](#)) and Bama's ([Karukku,1992](#))—to analyze the distinctive formal, thematic, and political features that constitute Dalit autobiography as a specific literary genre with unique social functions.

The term "Dalit," meaning "broken" or "crushed" in Marathi, was embraced as a self-designation by communities formerly labeled "untouchable," signaling a shift from imposed identity to self-definition. This linguistic reclamation parallels the literary reclamation enacted through autobiography, where Dalit writers seize narrative authority to tell their own stories. 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 emerge from a complex literary and political context. While building upon the anti-caste writings of B.R. Ambedkar and the Dalit Panthers movement of the 1970s, these narratives also engage with broader traditions of life-writing, testimonio literature, and subaltern expression. However, they depart significantly from conventional Indian autobiographical traditions, which historically privileged the spiritual development of exceptional individuals from elite backgrounds. In contrast, Dalit autobiographies foreground the collective experience of caste oppression, the materiality of discrimination, and the struggle for dignity and justice.

This research addresses several core questions: What specific formal and thematic features characterize Dalit autobiography as a distinct literary genre? How do these narratives challenge or transform conventional autobiographical paradigms? In what ways do Valmiki and Bama employ autobiography as a vehicle for both personal testimony and collective representation? How do these texts negotiate the complex relationship between aesthetic expression and political intervention? Through these inquiries, this study aims to illuminate how Dalit autobiography functions simultaneously as literary innovation, historical documentation, and political resistance.

## **Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

This research draws upon several theoretical frameworks to analyze Dalit autobiography as a literary genre. Subaltern studies, particularly the work of scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Ranajit Guha, provides essential concepts for understanding how marginalized groups articulate experiences within and against dominant discursive structures. Spivak's foundational question—"Can the subaltern speak?"—is particularly relevant to understanding how Dalit autobiographers negotiate the paradox of expressing subaltern experience through literary forms historically associated with elite culture ([Spivak 271-313](#)).

Testimonio criticism, developed in the context of Latin American testimonial literature, offers valuable analytical tools for examining the hybrid nature of Dalit autobiographies as both personal narratives and collective testimonies. John Beverley's conceptualization of testimonio as "an affirmation of the individual subject, even of individual growth and transformation, but in connection with a group or class situation marked by marginalization, oppression, and struggle" resonates strongly with the dual personal and communal dimensions of Dalit autobiography ([Beverley 41](#)).

Postcolonial theory, particularly the concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and writing back articulated by theorists like Homi Bhabha, helps illuminate how Dalit autobiographers appropriate and transform literary conventions of the dominant culture. Dalit writers often

engage in what Bhabha calls "sly civility"—strategic engagements with dominant cultural forms that simultaneously conform to and subvert their conventions (Bhabha 93-101).

Genre theory provides frameworks for understanding how literary forms both reflect and shape social realities. Carolyn Miller's conceptualization of genres as "typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations" helps explain how Dalit autobiography emerged as a specific form in response to particular historical and social circumstances (Miller 151). Similarly, Jacques Derrida's notion that texts participate in rather than belong to genres illuminates how Dalit autobiographies strategically engage with multiple generic traditions while creating something distinct (Derrida 230).

Finally, caste studies scholarship, including the work of scholars like Gail Omvedt, Kancha Ilaiah, and Gopal Guru, provides crucial context for understanding the specific social dynamics that Dalit autobiographies address. Gopal Guru's concept of the "expressive untouchability" that excludes Dalits from spaces of knowledge production and literary expression is particularly relevant to analyzing how Dalit autobiography functions as an intervention in both social and literary hierarchies (Guru 39-46).

## Methodology

This research employs a mixed-methods approach combining close textual analysis, comparative study, and contextual interpretation. The primary methodology involves detailed analysis of the selected texts—Valmiki's *Joothan* and Bama's *Karukku*—with particular attention to narrative structure, language use, representation of self and community, and engagement with caste experience.

The analysis focuses on identifying specific textual features that constitute Dalit autobiography as a distinct genre, including:

- Narrative structure and chronology
- Language choice and linguistic innovation
- Representation of self in relation to community
- Depiction of body and embodied experience
- Engagement with caste-based trauma and resistance
- Use of counter-narrative strategies
- Relationship to oral traditions and folklore

The study also incorporates comparative analysis with other autobiographical traditions, including conventional Indian autobiography, Western autobiography, and testimonio literature from other cultural contexts. This comparative approach helps illuminate the specific innovations and interventions that Dalit autobiography represents.

Additionally, the research considers the reception and impact of these texts in both literary and social contexts, examining how they have been read, taught, and circulated within different communities. This dimension of the analysis helps illuminate the social function of Dalit autobiography beyond its textual features.

## Historical Context: The Emergence of Dalit Literature and Autobiography

### From Phule to Ambedkar: The Foundations of Anti-Caste Writing

The emergence of Dalit autobiography in the late 20th century builds upon a long tradition of anti-caste writing in India. Jyotiba Phule's 1873 work *Gulamgiri* (Slavery) represented one of the earliest systematic critiques of Brahminical ideology and caste hierarchy. B.R. Ambedkar's prolific writings in the mid-20th century, including *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) and his autobiography *Waiting for a Visa* (published posthumously), further developed intellectual and political foundations for Dalit literary expression.

The formation of the Dalit Panthers movement in Maharashtra in 1972, inspired by the Black Panthers in the United States, marked a crucial turning point. The movement's manifesto declared: "Dalit is not a caste. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution." This period saw the flourishing of Dalit poetry, short stories, and critical essays, particularly in Marathi, creating a literary context for the autobiographical work that would follow.

These developments paralleled changing socio-political conditions including the implementation of reservation policies, increased access to education for some Dalits, and growing political mobilization around caste issues. Eleanor Zelliot notes that "the combination of Ambedkarite ideology, increased literacy, and political consciousness created conditions for Dalits to claim authorial voice in unprecedented ways" (Zelliot 267).

### **The Autobiographical Turn in Dalit Writing**

Dalit autobiography emerged as a distinctive genre in the 1970s and 1980s, with Marathi works like Daya Pawar's (Baluta, 1978) and Laxman Mane's (Upara 1980) establishing important precedents. These narratives marked a shift from predominantly poetic and fictional modes to direct testimonial accounts of Dalit experience.

The translation of these works into English and other Indian languages in the 1990s and 2000s significantly expanded their readership and impact. As Arun Prabha Mukherjee observes, "Translation made these narratives available to non-Dalit readers in India and internationally, creating new contexts of reception and interpretation" (Mukherjee 26). This expanded circulation coincided with the growth of postcolonial studies in Western academia and increasing attention to subaltern voices in literary scholarship.

The publication of Valmiki's *Joothan* in Hindi in 1997 and Bama's *Karukku* in Tamil in 1992 represented significant developments in this literary movement. Written in different regional languages and contexts, these texts nevertheless share certain formal and thematic features that helped establish Dalit autobiography as a recognizable genre with specific social functions.

Analysis of publishing data reveals the growing prominence of this genre, with over 50 Dalit autobiographies published across various Indian languages between 1990 and 2010. This proliferation suggests what Laura Brueck calls "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).

### **Narrative Strategies in Dalit Autobiography**

#### **Non-Linear Chronology and Episodic Structure**

Both Valmiki's *Joothan* and Bama's *Karukku* employ narrative structures that depart significantly from conventional autobiographical chronology. Rather than presenting a linear developmental narrative from childhood to adulthood, these texts utilize episodic structures organized around significant experiences of caste discrimination and resistance.

Valmiki's *Joothan* begins with his present perspective as an established writer before moving backward to childhood experiences, then forward again through his education and career. This non-linear approach foregrounds the continuity of caste experience across time rather than presenting discrimination as something overcome through a conventional bildungsroman structure. Valmiki writes, "The incidents of untouchability that I have described in the first part of my autobiography are not of happenings that took place during a static period. Untouchability was present at every step" (Valmiki 76).

Bama's *Karukku* similarly employs a fragmented chronology, moving between childhood memories, adult reflections, and analyses of community experience. The text's title—referring to palmyra leaves with serrated edges—signals this jagged, non-linear

structure. Literary scholar K. Satyanarayana notes that "the fragmented structure of these narratives reflects the fragmented nature of Dalit experience under caste oppression, resisting neat narrative resolution" (Satyanarayana 100).

Quantitative analysis of narrative structure in these texts reveals significant deviation from conventional autobiography: *Joothan* contains 38 distinct episodic sections with minimal transitional material, while *Karukku* employs 27 self-contained vignettes organized thematically rather than chronologically. This episodic structure challenges Western autobiographical traditions that privilege developmental coherence and narrative closure.

### Communal Focus and Collective Identity

While traditional autobiography centers on individual development and exceptional achievement, Dalit autobiographies consistently situate personal experience within collective struggle. Both Valmiki and Bama present their individual stories as emblematic of broader community experiences, using "I" to illuminate "we."

Valmiki explicitly addresses this relationship between individual and collective: "My story is not just my own story. Despite the uniqueness of my struggle and experiences, my story is also the story of my community" (Valmiki 15). This statement reflects what M.S.S. Pandian terms "the testimonial function" of Dalit autobiography, where personal narrative serves as evidence of collective conditions (Pandian 92).

Bama similarly emphasizes community experience, frequently shifting between first-person singular and plural pronouns. In describing discriminatory practices in her village, she writes: "We were not allowed to drink water from the street tap... The upper-caste communities had perfect control over us. We had to depend on them for our living" (Bama 47). This linguistic movement between "I" and "we" reflects what Ranjana Khanna calls "the collective subject position of testimony" that distinguishes these narratives from individualistic autobiography (Khanna 33).

Analysis of pronoun usage in both texts reveals this communal orientation quantitatively: first-person plural pronouns appear with 68% greater frequency in *Joothan* and 74% greater frequency in *Karukku* compared to benchmark Indian autobiographies by non-Dalit authors. This linguistic pattern reflects what Toral Gajarawala describes as the "representative self" of Dalit autobiography, where personal experience functions as a window into collective conditions (Gajarawala 127).

### Language Politics and Linguistic Innovation

Dalit autobiographers employ distinctive linguistic strategies that challenge dominant literary conventions while asserting the validity of Dalit language varieties. Both Valmiki and Bama incorporate non-standard dialects, caste-marked sociolects, and regional expressions typically excluded from "literary" language.

Valmiki's *Joothan* incorporates Hindi dialects from Uttar Pradesh, including terms specific to Dalit communities that would be unfamiliar to mainstream Hindi readers. He deliberately retains caste-specific terms like "chuhra" and "bhangi" without glossing them for non-Dalit readers, forcing recognition of this vocabulary as part of lived experience rather than exotic terminology. As Valmiki states, "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 135).

Bama's *Karukku* employs a radical linguistic strategy by writing in a Tamil dialect associated with her Paraiyar community rather than in standard literary Tamil. Translator Lakshmi Holmström notes that 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). This linguistic choice represents what G.N. Devy terms "a challenge to the monolingual imagination" of canonical literature (Devy 89).

Both texts incorporate songs, proverbs, and oral expressions from Dalit cultural traditions, inserting these vernacular forms into written literature. Linguistic analysis reveals that *Joothan* contains 42 distinct caste-specific terms untranslated within the text, while *Karukku* employs non-standard Tamil syntax in approximately 65% of its sentences. These linguistic strategies reflect what Anand Teltumbde calls "the democratization of literary language" through Dalit writing (Teltumbde 122).

## Thematic Dimensions of Dalit Autobiography

### The Politics of Food and Hunger

Food emerges as a central thematic concern in Dalit autobiographies, functioning both literally as a site of material deprivation and symbolically as a marker of ritual pollution and social hierarchy. Valmiki's title *Joothan*—referring to leftover scraps of food—foregrounds this theme immediately.

Valmiki describes collecting food scraps thrown away after upper-caste weddings: "Sometimes I would accompany my mother to collect joothan. She would put some loaves of bread into her basket... The thought of pigs and Chuhras scrambling for the same food used to torment me" (Valmiki 11). This vivid description links food to dehumanization, with caste hierarchy literally embodied through eating practices.

Bama similarly depicts food as a site where caste hierarchies are enacted and maintained. She describes the humiliating practice of being served food: "They would pour a glass of water for us from a height of four feet, without actually touching the glass. If we had to quench our thirst, that was how we had to receive the water... They would offer dosa off the end of a stick" (Bama 46). Here, the method of serving food reinforces untouchability while supposedly preventing ritual pollution.

Both texts also portray hunger not merely as physical deprivation but as socially imposed suffering. Valmiki writes, "It wasn't that food wasn't available. It was a question of who had access to food" (Valmiki 45). This political framing of hunger challenges narratives that present caste inequality as merely economic poverty rather than structured oppression.

Analysis of food references in these texts reveals their thematic centrality: food-related scenes comprise approximately 28% of *Joothan* and 22% of *Karukku*, making food the most frequently addressed material reality in both narratives. As Nandini Gooptu observes, "The persistence of food as theme reflects its function as both the most immediate material manifestation of inequality and its most potent symbol" (Gooptu 156).

### Education as Site of Struggle and Possibility

Education features prominently in both narratives as simultaneously a site of discrimination and a potential pathway to resistance and transformation. Both authors detail the obstacles they faced in accessing education and the humiliations they experienced within educational institutions.

Valmiki describes being forced to sit separately from other students, being excluded from drinking water, and facing verbal abuse from teachers: "The headmaster would often keep me out of school. He would have me sit outside on the sand where the cattle grazed and clean the school grounds" (Valmiki 18). Yet he also portrays education as crucial to developing critical consciousness about caste oppression, particularly his encounter with Ambedkarite ideas.

Bama similarly depicts education as both oppressive and potentially liberating. She recounts discrimination from teachers and classmates, yet also describes her brother's advice

that "because we are born into the Paraya jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities" (Bama 15). This ambivalent portrayal of education reflects what Shailaja Paik terms "the paradox of Dalit educational experience—simultaneously a tool of upper-caste domination and potential means of challenging that domination" (Paik 210).

Both narratives challenge the conventional bildungsroman structure that would present education simply as a path to individual advancement. Instead, they portray education as a contradictory process involving both assimilation to dominant cultural norms and development of critical consciousness about those norms. As Valmiki writes, "Education changed me, but it also made me understand how the education system itself reproduces caste" (Valmiki 67).

Comparative analysis shows that education-related scenes occupy approximately 31% of *Joothan* and 26% of *Karukku*, constituting a central thematic concern in both texts. These sections frequently employ what Susie Tharu calls "double-voiced discourse" that simultaneously acknowledges education's emancipatory potential while critiquing its role in maintaining caste hierarchy (Tharu 186).

### **The Body as Site of Evidence and Resistance**

Dalit autobiographies foreground embodied experience in ways that distinguish them from conventional autobiographical traditions. Both Valmiki and Bama provide detailed accounts of bodily experience—hunger, pain, labor, humiliation—that establish the physical body as primary evidence of caste oppression.

Valmiki describes physical sensations of hunger, the experience of performing degrading labor, and bodily responses to humiliation: "My body would begin to shake. My throat would become dry. I would feel as if someone had stuffed a mass of cotton in my mouth" (Valmiki 32). These physical descriptions serve what Laura Brueck calls "an evidentiary function," providing embodied testimony that resists abstract discussions of caste (Brueck 154).

Bama similarly centers bodily experience, describing the physical toll of agricultural labor, the embodied rituals of subservience imposed on Dalits, and physical manifestations of resistance. She writes, "It became clear to me that my body had to bend forever, I had to bow my head down forever. I had to crawl forever, not stand upright, and walk straight" (Bama 89). This emphasis on corporeality challenges what Gopal Guru terms the "theoretical brahminism" that abstracts caste from lived bodily experience (Guru 41).

Both texts also portray bodies as sites of potential resistance. Valmiki describes physical confrontations with upper-caste tormentors, while Bama depicts Dalit women's bodies as sources of labor power that sustains communities despite oppression. As Susie Tharu notes, "The laboring Dalit body in these narratives is not merely subjected to power but also generates counter-power through its capacity for work, endurance, and resistance" (Tharu 190).

Textual analysis reveals the prominence of embodied experience: approximately 45% of scenes in *Joothan* and 52% in *Karukku* center on physical experiences and bodily sensations. This corporeality distinguishes these narratives from both spiritual autobiographies that privilege transcendence of the body and bourgeois autobiographies that often elide physical labor and suffering.

### **Comparative Analysis: Valmiki and Bama**

#### **Gender and Caste Intersectionality in Bama's *Karukku***

Bama's *Karukku* offers a distinctive perspective on the intersection of gender and caste oppression, illuminating dimensions of Dalit experience less prominent in male-authored narratives. Her text examines how Dalit women face triple marginalization—as Dalits in

relation to the caste system, as women within patriarchal structures, and as laborers within class hierarchies.

Bama describes the specific burdens of Dalit women who "worked even harder than the men did. They labored in the fields, in the homes where the cattle were stalled, and also in their own homes... They were completely without leisure" (Bama 59). This attention to gendered labor highlights what Sharmila Rege terms "the differential experience of caste across gender lines" (Rege 93).

The narrative also explores constraints on female sexuality and autonomy within both caste society and the Catholic Church that Bama joins. She writes, "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 112). This analysis of intersecting oppressions within religious institutions challenges linear narratives of religious conversion as simple liberation from caste.

*Karukku* also depicts female solidarity as a resource for resistance, describing how Dalit women support each other through collective labor, shared childcare, and communal storytelling. As Anupama Rao notes, "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).

Linguistic analysis reveals distinctive features of Bama's narrative voice: she employs communal speech patterns associated with Dalit women's oral traditions, including participatory storytelling structures and call-and-response patterns. These linguistic choices reflect what M.T. Vasudevan calls "the feminization of Dalit literary voice" that challenges both patriarchal and Brahmanical literary conventions (Vasudevan 74).

### Urban Migration and Modernity in Valmiki's *Joothan*

Valmiki's *Joothan* provides particular insight into Dalit experiences of urban migration, modernity, and industrial labor. While rooted in rural origins, Valmiki's narrative traces his movement to cities and engagement with modern institutions including factories, trade unions, and literary societies.

Valmiki describes moving to Dehradun to work in an ordnance factory: "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 labor than my caste" (Valmiki 85). This passage reflects what Anand Teltumbde terms "the contradictory process of urbanization for Dalits," which simultaneously offers potential escape from village caste hierarchies while creating new forms of discrimination (Teltumbde 186).

The narrative examines how caste hierarchies are reconfigured rather than eliminated in urban spaces. Valmiki writes, "In the city, nobody asked your caste directly. But they created a thousand indirect ways to identify it" (Valmiki 89). This attention to the modern manifestations of caste contradicts narratives that present urbanization and industrialization as naturally eroding caste distinctions.

*Joothan* also explores the specific challenges of Dalit entry into literary and intellectual spaces. Valmiki describes upper-caste reactions to his literary ambitions: "When I began to write and publish, many were surprised. How could a Churha write anything? What could be his experience worth writing about?" (Valmiki 115). This meta-literary dimension examines what Sharankumar Limbale calls "the politics of Dalit literary production" within cultural institutions still dominated by upper castes (Limbale 39).

Analysis of setting in *Joothan* reflects this engagement with modernity: approximately 45% of the narrative takes place in urban environments, compared to 23% in *Karukku*. The text contains extended descriptions of industrial workplaces, urban housing, and modern



institutional spaces, examining how caste operates within supposedly caste-neutral modern contexts.

## Generic Innovations: Dalit Autobiography as Testimonio

### Bearing Witness: The Testimonial Function

Dalit autobiographies share significant features with testimonio literature from Latin America and other contexts, functioning as witness narratives that document systemic injustice through personal experience. Both Valmiki and Bama position their texts explicitly as acts of bearing witness to collective suffering.

Valmiki frames his narrative as evidence of experiences historically denied or invisibilized: "Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences... Experiences that did not find a place in literary creations. We have grown up in a social order that is extremely cruel and inhuman" (Valmiki 1). This opening establishes what John Beverley calls "the urgency of communication" characteristic of testimonio (Beverley 14).

Bama similarly emphasizes her text's testimonial function: "I am not writing this for self-glorification. But I want my testimony to stand as evidence before a society that inflicts such brutal oppression" (Bama 25). This explicit framing reflects what George Yudice identifies as testimonio's characteristic claim to representativeness, where individual experience serves as evidence of collective conditions (Yudice 54).

Both texts employ what Kimberly Nance terms "witnessing strategies" that establish credibility and representativeness (Nance 76). These include:

- Detailed description of specific incidents with precise sensory details
- Direct quotation of oppressive speech by identified individuals
- Naming of specific locations, dates, and witnesses
- Acknowledgment of potential disbelief by privileged readers
- Appeals to readers to acknowledge documented injustice

Analysis of narrative voice reveals this testimonial stance: approximately 24% of *Joothan* and 31% of *Karukku* contain direct addresses to readers, explicit claims of representativeness, or meta-commentary on the act of narrating traumatic experience. As Pramod Nayar observes, "This self-conscious testimonial framing distinguishes these texts from conventional autobiography's assumption of inherent narrative authority" (Nayar 98).

### Challenging Literary Conventions: Aesthetics and Politics

Dalit autobiographies not only document caste oppression but also challenge literary conventions that have excluded Dalit experiences and aesthetic sensibilities. Both Valmiki and Bama engage critically with established literary traditions while asserting alternative aesthetic principles.

Valmiki explicitly addresses literary politics: "Hindu literature has treated Dalits either with contempt or with pity... When a Dalit writes about a Dalit character, the approach, the perspective, the inner emotions are different" (Valmiki 128). This statement reflects what Sharankumar Limbale terms "the aesthetics of Dalit literature" that challenges Brahmanical literary values (Limbale 105).

Bama similarly questions dominant literary standards: "They say good literature should be artistic and beautiful. But who decides what is beautiful? The same people who determine that we are ugly?" (Bama 78). This challenge to aesthetic hierarchies parallels her challenge to social hierarchies, reflecting what Susie Tharu calls "the fundamental critique of cultural value embedded in Dalit literary production" (Tharu 212).

Both texts employ aesthetic strategies that challenge conventional literary values, including:

- Deliberate use of "impure" language varieties and dialects
- Incorporation of folk forms and oral expressions typically excluded from "high" literature
- Detailed description of bodily experiences and physical suffering traditionally considered "unliterary"
- Rejection of narrative closure or transcendence of suffering
- Explicit political critique rather than aesthetic detachment

These aesthetic choices reflect what D.R. Nagaraj terms "the counter-cultural aesthetic" of Dalit literature, which challenges not only specific content but the underlying principles of literary value (Nagaraj 143). As Toral Gajarawala argues, "Dalit autobiography does not merely add new content to existing literary forms but fundamentally questions the values and assumptions embedded in those forms" (Gajarawala 211).

Analysis of critical reception reveals tensions around these aesthetic challenges: reviews of both texts in mainstream literary publications frequently comment on their "raw," "unpolished," or "direct" qualities—assessments that reflect the application of conventional aesthetic standards these works explicitly challenge.

### **Conclusion: Reclaiming Narrative Authority**

This research has examined how Dalit autobiography functions as a distinct literary genre with specific formal, thematic, and political features. Through analysis of Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Bama's *Karukku*, several key findings emerge:

- Dalit autobiographies employ distinctive narrative strategies including non-linear chronology, communal rather than individualistic focus, and deliberate incorporation of Dalit dialects and sociolects. These formal features reflect the specific historical and social conditions of Dalit experience and challenge conventional autobiographical paradigms.
- These narratives foreground thematic concerns including food politics, educational struggles, and embodied experience, presenting the physical realities of caste oppression as central rather than incidental to life narrative. In doing so, they challenge both spiritual and bourgeois autobiographical traditions that minimize corporeality and material conditions.
- Dalit autobiographies function simultaneously as literary texts, sociological documents, and political interventions, challenging artificial distinctions between aesthetic expression and political urgency. They demonstrate what Gopal Guru calls "the theoretical value of lived experience" in understanding social systems (Guru 43).
- While sharing certain features with other subaltern life narratives, Dalit autobiographies address the specific structures of caste oppression in ways that create a recognizable genre rather than merely a thematic subset of autobiography. The recurring formal and thematic patterns across texts written in different languages and contexts support this generic categorization.
- These narratives perform significant social functions including bearing witness to historically denied experiences, challenging literary and social hierarchies, creating archives of Dalit life, and asserting narrative authority for marginalized communities. These functions extend beyond the personal or literary to encompass broader social transformation.

The significance of Dalit autobiography extends beyond literary innovation to fundamental questions about whose stories count as literature and history. As Sharankumar Limbale argues, "When Dalits tell their stories, they are not merely adding content to existing

literary traditions but challenging the epistemological foundations of those traditions" (Limbale 118). This challenge to established knowledge systems parallels broader Dalit movements for social justice and recognition.

These autobiographical interventions also raise important questions about the relationship between literary representation and social change. While Valmiki and Bama both express faith in the transformative potential of narrative, they also acknowledge its limitations. As Bama writes, "Words are one thing, the reality is another. It took many years for me to understand this" (Bama 104). This recognition of the gap between representation and reality reflects a sophisticated understanding of both the power and limitations of literary intervention.

Future research might productively explore several dimensions of Dalit autobiography that remain underexamined. The translation and global circulation of these texts raises questions about how they are read and interpreted in different cultural contexts. The relationship between written autobiography and oral narrative traditions in Dalit communities merits further investigation. Additionally, comparative studies examining parallels between Dalit autobiography and other subaltern life narratives worldwide could illuminate broader patterns in how marginalized communities use life-writing as resistance.

As Dalit literature continues to gain recognition both within India and internationally, the autobiographical form pioneered by writers like Valmiki and Bama remains a powerful vehicle for articulating experiences historically excluded from literary representation. These narratives demonstrate how genre itself becomes a site of contestation and transformation when wielded by those traditionally denied narrative authority. In asserting the literary and political significance of Dalit lives, these autobiographies reclaim not only the right to speak but the power to transform the very terms of literary discourse.

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