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A Comparative Study of Autobiographical Resistance in Dalit Narratives by Bama, Omprakash Valmiki, and Arjun Dangle

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of autobiographical writing as a mode of resistance and self-assertion among Dalit writers in Indian English literature. It examines how caste, class, and gender intersect in the narratives of Bama (*Karukku*), Omprakash Valmiki (*Joothan*), and Arjun Dangle (*Poisoned Bread*) to reclaim agency and re-inscribe identity. The study addresses the research problem of underrepresentation and marginalization of Dalit voices in mainstream Indian literature, aiming to highlight how autobiographical forms serve as counter-discourses to Brahmanical hegemony. Using close textual and comparative analysis rooted in subaltern theory and Dalit aesthetics, the paper interrogates narrative techniques, linguistic choices, and cultural symbolism in these works. The findings suggest that Dalit autobiographies reconfigure narrative space as a form of protest, offering testimony, rupture, and community consciousness. This study contributes to expanding the canon of Indian English literature by centering the experiential authenticity of Dalit life narratives.

Keywords: Dalit Literature, Autobiographical Resistance, Caste, Subaltern Voice, Bama, Valmiki, Arjun Dangle, Narrative Protest.

Introduction

Writing from the Wounds

The history of Indian literature has long been scripted by the privileged – upper-caste, urban, and patriarchal. For centuries, the voice of the oppressed was reduced to silence, or worse, tokenized in literary footnotes. However, the emergence of Dalit autobiographies has

ruptured this literary hegemony, transforming personal pain into political protest. Writers like Bama, Omprakash Valmiki, and Arjun Dangle don't merely narrate – they testify.

The research problem emerges from the marginality of Dalit voices in English-language literary discourse. Even as Indian English literature flourishes globally, the experiences of caste-based discrimination remain

underexplored. Existing scholarship has touched upon caste and identity, yet a comparative, technique-focused lens on autobiographical Dalit writing remains underdeveloped.

This study aims to bridge that gap by:

- Examining autobiographical modes as resistant discourse.
- Analyzing narrative strategies unique to Dalit self-writing.
- Investigating the gendered aspects of voice, especially in Dalit women's narratives.

Research Questions:

1. How do Dalit autobiographies reframe identity and resistance through narrative?
2. What are the unique narrative techniques deployed by Bama, Valmiki, and Dangle?
3. How does gender inflect the protest in Dalit women's autobiographies?

This paper attempts to position Dalit life narratives not as mere accounts of suffering, but as deliberate political acts of reclaiming history from the margins.

Review of Literature: Dialogues from the Margin

The rise of Dalit autobiographical narratives in Indian literature marks a radical shift from literary elitism to subaltern expression. Early scholarship by Eleanor Zelliot and Gail Omvedt identified Dalit literature as a political-cultural movement rooted in Ambedkarite ideology, rather than a mere literary trend. However, it was Sharmila Rege who reconceptualized Dalit women's autobiographies as *testimonios* – narratives that serve both personal and collective memory. Her book *Writing Caste, Writing Gender* (2006) positions Dalit women's voices like Bama's as

sites of resistance against both caste and patriarchal oppression.

Bama's *Karukku* has attracted attention for its linguistic hybridity and thematic layering of religion, caste, and gender. Critics such as Mini Chandran argue that Bama's prose blurs the boundary between the oral and the literary, making her narrative a radical pedagogical tool. Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* is often studied for its unflinching realism and linguistic austerity. Scholars like Anand Teltumbde have pointed out how Valmiki reclaims the "polluted" labor of the Dalit body as a source of moral authority and social critique.

On the other hand, Arjun Dangle's role is twofold – as a personal narrator and as the editor of *Poisoned Bread*, a foundational text in Dalit literature. While *Poisoned Bread* has been widely anthologized, Dangle's own writings have not received comparable critical attention. His contributions, however, are vital in mapping the politics of representation and voice.

Despite this growing scholarship, a comparative focus on narrative technique – especially through the lens of caste, class, and gender – remains limited. This study situates itself within this gap, aiming to explore how Dalit autobiographies employ form, voice, and structure as tools of resistance.

Theoretical Framework: From Subaltern to Subject

This study is anchored in the theoretical traditions of Subaltern Studies, Dalit aesthetics, intersectionality, and narrative theory. At its core lies Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's provocative question: *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Spivak critiques how elite discourses often appropriate or silence subaltern voices, rendering them invisible in mainstream epistemology. Dalit autobiographies, however, offer a powerful counter to this erasure. The answer they provide is a defiant yes—but not through inherited literary forms. Instead, Dalit life narratives *rewrite the rules of discourse*,

employing rupture, orality, and fragmentary storytelling as methods of reclaiming voice.

Michel Foucault's theory of *power and knowledge* further informs this study. Foucault's idea that knowledge systems are not neutral but structured by power relations helps unpack how Brahmanical ideology has historically constructed and sustained caste hierarchies. Dalit writers subvert this by exposing the violence behind such "knowledge" – schooling, scripture, language – and replacing it with experiential truths rooted in everyday suffering.

The study is also guided by Sharankumar Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, which rejects traditional literary standards and argues for a distinct Dalit aesthetic grounded in social justice, lived experience, and moral outrage. For Limbale, authenticity and political urgency outweigh structural elegance. This insight allows us to appreciate why Dalit autobiographies often defy linearity, polish, or closure.

From a feminist standpoint, Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality is pivotal. Caste cannot be examined in isolation from gender and class. Bama's *Karukku*, for example, reveals how Dalit women navigate multi-layered oppression—from the state, the church, and their own communities. Crenshaw's framework helps decode these overlapping systems of marginalization.

Key theoretical concepts woven into this analysis include testimonio (narrative as collective memory and resistance), cultural trauma (the shared psychic scars of caste violence), counter-memory (remembering against dominant historical narratives), and narrative ethics (the moral obligation embedded in storytelling).

In sum, this theoretical framework does not simply interpret texts; it aligns with their intent – to speak back, shout out, and claim space. It allows us to understand how the subaltern not only speaks, but writes, resists,

and remembers in ways that reconfigure the literary and political landscape.

Methodology: Comparative Close Reading as Resistance

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach, rooted in the tradition of comparative literary analysis. The primary methodology employed is close reading—not just as a literary exercise, but as an act of resistance, a means of uncovering the subtle yet sharp ruptures that Dalit autobiographies carve into the dominant narrative fabric.

By placing Bama's *Karukku*, Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, and selected writings by Arjun Dangle into comparative conversation, the study seeks not to homogenize Dalit experiences but to highlight the spectrum of oppression and agency articulated through diverse narrative voices. These texts are read not only for *what* they say, but *how* they say it – tone, language, structure, silences, and disruptions become tools of analysis.

Why Comparative Close Reading?

- Because every sentence in a Dalit autobiography is a site of struggle – against erasure, against beautification, against forgetting.
- Because comparing Bama's gendered Catholic Tamil world with Valmiki's North Indian caste-ridden Hindu milieu reveals caste as a pan-Indian wound, differently inflicted.
- Because Dangle's editorial and personal voice brings in meta-narratives of representation and questions about *who gets to tell* the Dalit story.

Corpus of Study:

- *Karukku* by Bama (translated by Lakshmi Holmström)
- *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki (translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee)

- Selected essays and autobiographical fragments by Arjun Dangle, especially from *Poisoned Bread*

Analytical Tools and Strategies:

- **Close textual reading** of stylistic devices: narrative voice, fragmentation, digression, multilingualism
- **Comparative lenses** that foreground:
 - Gendered experience (Karukku vs Joothan)
 - Editorial intervention and meta-narrative (Dangle's role)
 - Thematic parallels: shame, dignity, memory, education, faith, labor
- **Contextual analysis** linking autobiographical elements to larger socio-political structures: caste violence, systemic exclusion, religious institutions, and state apathy
- **Intertextuality and counter-memory:** Identifying how these texts speak back to canonical Indian literature and historiography

Method as Protest:

Close reading here is not neutral. It is an act of political listening — a deep, intentional engagement with texts that refuse to be silenced or beautified. Each chapter, line, and pause is treated as a deliberate rhetorical choice — a protest wrapped in prose.

Analysis and Discussion

1. "I Speak Because I Must": The Urgency of Dalit Testimonio

Dalit autobiographies do not whisper; they wound. They are not retrospective memoirs but urgent interventions. Bama's *Karukku* opens not with calm reflection but with a sting — the slur against her brother that unlocks her caste consciousness. Her voice trembles with immediacy, like someone writing

not from distance but from within the fire. In *Joothan*, Valmiki recreates caste atrocity with disturbing precision — maggot-infested leftovers, humiliation, and caste cruelty writ large on a child's psyche. *Poisoned Bread*, curated and introduced by Arjun Dangle, blends editorial insight with personal investment, chronicling the Dalit collective struggle as not just a subject but a lived condition. These narratives function as *testimonio* — not mere storytelling but testimonial acts of defiance. The urgency is not stylistic flourish; it is survival. They don't seek literary approval; they seek justice. Their compulsion to speak is political, not personal. They write because silence would be complicity.

2. "The Language of Pain": Stylistics and Syntax of Protest

Dalit autobiographies wield language like a weapon — sharp, necessary, and unadorned. Ornate literary tropes are discarded in favor of a gritty, grassroots idiom. Bama's bilingual dexterity — code-switching between Tamil and English — isn't just linguistic play; it evokes orality, reclaiming the rhythms of village life and subaltern memory. Valmiki's *Joothan* is written in deliberately unpolished Hindi, eschewing classical and Sanskritized registers that symbolize Brahminical elitism. His prose is direct, almost surgical in its precision — a voice sharpened by pain, not privilege. Dangle's syntax disrupts expectations: blending prose with verse, critique with memory, he injects polemic into narrative and shatters linear storytelling. This stylistic disobedience refuses "good literature" in favor of truthful literature. The very grammar of these texts rebels against literary traditions that excluded them. Their rawness is political. Their fragmentation is intentional. Their words do not soothe — they *scar*. They do not imitate form; they *invent* it.

3. "Her Body, Their Battleground": Gendered Suffering and Writing

Caste and gender intertwine in Dalit women's narratives like twin poisons in a single

vein. Bama's *Karukku* brings out this dual oppression — not just through ideological critique but via the lived body. Her body becomes a text, marked by labor, menstruation, and public shame. The Catholic convent, which should offer solace, instead enacts a different patriarchal control. Male autobiographies like Valmiki's *Joothan* recount public humiliations — beatings, hunger, exclusion — yet often omit the private, domestic sphere. Dalit women, however, cannot afford to be abstract. Their stories record how violence enters the kitchen, the bedroom, the temple courtyard. Arjun Dangle's editorial curation, while powerful, also leans toward male-centered narratives — a gap that Bama's voice counters with ferocity. The politics of the Dalit female body — shamed, controlled, yet defiant — is central. In Dalit women's writing, gender is not a side note; it is the battlefield itself.

4. "Writing Us into History": Community over Individualism

Unlike Western autobiographies that champion the lone hero's journey, Dalit narratives are profoundly communal. They speak not "I" but "we." *Karukku* may carry Bama's name, but its pulse belongs to an entire Dalit Christian village — women, workers, children, rebels. The self becomes a lens to document collective trauma. In *Joothan*, Valmiki's life reflects a generational inheritance of indignity, where family, neighborhood, and caste overlap. His hunger is not his alone. Even Dangle, in *Poisoned Bread*, curates an anthology that transcends authorial ego — he transforms the personal into a pedagogical protest. This collectivity is crucial; it resists the neoliberal atomization of pain and reframes memory as a communal archive. Dalit autobiographies do not ask for sympathy for the self. They demand justice for the community. By reclaiming history through personal testimony, these writers do not insert themselves into dominant narratives; they reconstruct history from the margins outward.

Findings / Observations

Dalit autobiographies, as revealed through the close reading of *Karukku*, *Joothan*, and Arjun Dangle's curated writings, emerge as counter-histories — texts that reject dominant narratives and instead offer lived archives of caste-based oppression. These are not traditional life stories but ruptured testimonies; their fragmented structure, nonlinear timelines, and emotional crescendos serve as stylistic resistance against Brahmanical literary expectations. Rather than adhering to coherence or polish, these autobiographies deliberately foreground rawness, rage, and rupture. The act of writing itself becomes an intervention — one that unsettles sanitized versions of India's progress and forces a reckoning with the ugly underbelly of caste violence. The testimonios are not concerned with redemption arcs or literary finesse; they are driven by the compulsion to speak, to document, to remember — on behalf of communities too long silenced.

Significantly, gender plays a transformative role in shaping narrative voice and the portrayal of trauma. Bama's writing particularly highlights the double marginalization faced by Dalit women, weaving Christian patriarchy, bodily humiliation, and systemic exclusion into a single, searing tapestry. In contrast, male-authored texts like *Joothan* often center public and occupational degradations, yet underplay private, domestic forms of violence. Across the corpus, a collective ethic overshadows the Western autobiographical obsession with the solitary self. These narratives speak in plurals, invoking family, caste, community, and ancestry. Finally, language itself becomes a battlefield — Dalit writers reject Sanskritized, elite idioms in favor of code-switching, colloquialism, and linguistic rebellion. In every sense, these texts are not just about protest; they *are* protest — on the page, in the sentence, within the syntax.

Conclusion: From Silence to Song

This study affirms that the autobiographical writings of Bama, Omprakash Valmiki, and Arjun Dangle are not acts of introspection alone – they are radical interventions. These narratives transform the very fabric of literary form: rejecting linearity, embracing fragmentation, and turning emotion into epistemology. Through raw language and ruptured structure, these authors refuse to conform to the aesthetics of the dominant canon. Instead, they offer a poetics of protest, where each sentence is a wound, each memory a rebellion, and each page a reclamation of voice.

By foregrounding caste, community, and gendered trauma, Dalit autobiographies not only reclaim representation – they demand redefinition. The margin no longer pleads for space in the center; it reconstructs the map entirely. Future research could trace parallels across global oppressed narratives – exploring dialogues between Dalit and Black autobiographies, or unpacking how translation impacts authenticity. In a time when historical erasure still looms large, these narratives remind us that the personal is always political, and silence – when broken – can become a song. Literary criticism must continue to engage with such voices, not out of charity, but out of necessity. For these are not stories we *want* to hear – they are stories we *must*.

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