

**Dalit Autobiographies : A comparative study of Bama's *Karaku* and Om
Prakash Valmiki's *Jhoothan***

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Dalit literature has emerged with a great historical significance. Dalit writing can be attributed as post-Independence literary phenomenon. It has been aptly defined by Arjun Dangle as “one which acquaints people with the caste system and untouchability in India....It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary” (Beesupogu Exp 2 L 2).

Dalit is not a new word and Dalit Literature appropriately reveals the life of Dalits. “Apparently, it was used in the 1930s as a Hindi and Marathi translation of ‘depressed classes’, a term Britishers introduced for what we now know as the Scheduled Castes” (Bharati Exp 46 L 40-45). In 1970s the Dalit Panthers exploited the term “Dalit” for religious, political and economical gains. According to Gangadhar Pantawane, “ To me, dalit is not the caste. He is a man exploited by the social and economic traditions of this country. He does not believe in God, rebirth, soul, holy books teaching separatism, fate and heaven because they have made him a slave. He does believe in humanism. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution” (Bharati Exp 33 L 85-92). The word ‘Autobiography’ has Greek etymology i.e. auto means self; bios means life; and graphy means to write about oneself and his intention in writings. Autobiography became favorite genre of many prominent writers to express Dalit experiences before the world.

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE WRITERS

Omprakash Valmiki (30 June 1950 – 17 November 2013) *Joothan: A Dalit's Life, the Autobiography* by Omprakash Valmiki was composed in the year 1993. Valmiki traces his early life at a village close to Muzaffarnagar in Uttar Pradesh. He was born into the Chuhra caste and his community was pushed to the edges of the village. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* is the narrative of how he confronted torment and humiliation because of the upper castes in his everyday life and education. The autobiography charts his experiences in escaping caste discrimination after he got himself a job in the Ordnance factory. The latter half of the work is about his

persistent engagement with questions of caste and identity of Dalits in Post-Independent India; and his life as a writer cum activist.

Bama Faustina Soosairaj aka Bama (born 1958), was born in a remote village in Tamil Nadu in 1958. She belonged to a Dalit family who had converted to the Roman Catholic faith. After college education, she got trained as a teacher and joined a Catholic convent to become a nun in order to serve the poor and raise awareness about Dalits. However, she left it after seven years when she understood the hypocrisy and double standards within the catholic church towards Dalit Christians. *Karakku* was the first Dalit woman's autobiography in Tamil.

In *Karukku* Bama depicts an incident at school which torments her. At the point when reprimanded by the dean, she is tormented, not, at being not able to demonstrate her innocence, but rather in light of the fact that she “was in agony as [she] had been shamed and insulted in front of all the children” (Bama 19). This continues even in college where a Lecturer unflinchingly asks “Harijan children to stand up” (Bama 21). The encounters at the educational institutions have another function in a way that the narrator's body and its visibility are tied to the community from which they come. When this body becomes visible, it is acted upon. Valmiki is made to sweep the school giving the reason, “it is, after all, your family occupation”. Once this body which is tied to the community is made visible, it is difficult to escape from the clutches of the hegemony. (Nisha M. Exp 279 L 114-116). In *Joothan*, a Brahmin teacher asks the students to rip out several pages from their textbooks which deal with Ambedkar. This incident can also be treated as a deliberate attempt to erase the history of Dalits and expurgation of the historical backdrop of Dalits from the mainstream.

Valmiki's book's title, *Joothan* itself catches the pain of being related to the leftovers of food which epitomizes a feeling of subservience. However, Valmiki recalls the act of resistance by his mom at a wedding when she is refused sweets by Sukhdev Singh Tyagi, that night the Mother Goddess Durga entered my mother's eye. It was the first time I saw my mother get so angry. She emptied the basket [of joothan] right there....Sukhdev Singh had pounced on her to hit her, but my mother had confronted him like a lioness without being afraid. And after this incident she had also stopped taking joothan. (Valmiki 11)

Food plays an integral role in the construction of self as well as cultural identity. In *Karukku*, Bama notes, "...The Naicker lady came out with her leftovers, leaned out from some distance and tipped them into Paatti's vessel, and went away...Sometime later, I said to Paatti she should not lay herself open to such behaviour; it was ugly to see" (Bama 16). Giving up Joothan or leftover food, and refusing being a subject to inferiority is an act of defiance and revolting against the hierarchical caste system. Caste names especially those of Dalits had often been used as terms of abuse. "For the upper castes, Valmiki is always 'Chuhre Ka' and Bama of the 'Paraya jati'. Both Bama and Valmiki lay emphasis on education as it is a means of social empowerment" (Nisha M. Exp 375 L 255). The chance of education was considered to be a privilege to Dalits and especially for the girls from the community. Bama despite the humiliation, criticism and torture received on daily basis considers herself privileged and uses her position for the upliftment of the caste and girls. Bama's Anna tells her, "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 17-18).

SOCIAL RELEVANCE

The works of Dalit writers are not only a very important part of Indian literature but are equally significant for World literature. Reading Dalit autobiographies makes us aware of discrimination still prevalent in our traditional society which has always portrayed women as inferior to men. Although untouchability, which was a major issue in colonial India, was abolished under India's constitution in 1949 but discrimination still prevails in Indian society. The significance of this research paper is to focus on Dalit lives. In present time our world is like a large melting pot of various cultures. One culture mingles with the other one but still Dalit literature is seen as marginal literature and not related to mainstream literature. Dalit literature is different from other literatures because this literature is the narration of pain, sufferings, humiliation faced by a large group of people.

A close reading of both the texts reveal that the construction of the society in India was such that this particular segment of the society belonging to lowest platform of the Hindus had been denied the status of humans due to scavenging. The books document the ground reality of these communities in day-to-day lives bringing out

evidences where even in Independent India they had to willingly submit to higher classes. During an incident of unwillingness to work in Valmiki's *Joothan* the police would arrest whoever they could lay their hands on and took them to the office of the village 'panchayat' (council) where they, " were being made to stand like a rooster, a very painful crouched up position...The women and children of the basti were standing in the lane and crying loudly...They could not think of what else they could do but cry" (Valmiki 38). The situation in India was at its worst that it was to which Valmiki responds with unmistakable directness untrammelled by any anxiety of literary embellishment, which is the usual style one finds in Dalit autobiographies. Untouchability was so rampant that while it was considered quite all right to touch dogs and cats, or cows and buffaloes if one [a higher-caste person] happened to touch Chuhra one got contaminated or polluted. The Chuhras were not seen as human. They were simply things for use. Their utility lasted until the work was done. Use them and the throw them away. (Valmiki 2)

AUTOBIOGRAPHY: A TOOL OF ASSERTION

Arun Prabha Mukherjee, in her introduction to *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, says, "Autobiography has been a favourite genre of Dalit writers" (Valmiki xxviii). Dalit autobiographies reflect in general the sufferings and pains suffered in their life. These writers focus on Dalit culture and aim at awakening the Dalits and raising their consciousness. These autobiographies promote the heritage of the Dalits and are not the writings of vengeance to spread hatred against the upper caste Hindus. The Dalit autobiographies focus re-constructing and re-defining the self-identity which demands for an authentic space in literature and culture.

Quest for identity is one of the foremost aspects of the Dalit autobiographies, which depict the struggles and difficulties faced by the Dalits in terms of social equality and justice. Bama's *Karakku* and Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* are the representatives of this era of struggle for self-identity. Sharan Kumar Limbale in his work *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature* has stated that Dalit literature is precisely that literature which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by Dalits" (Moushumi Exp 92 L 190-192). Valmiki, in his preface to the Hindi Edition of the book himself has stated the motive behind writing the autobiography. According to him "Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that

did not manage to find room in literary creations” (Valmiki vii). Through this book Valmiki proves that the Dalit, the subaltern can also speak in response to “Gayatri Spivak’s famous question: ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ ” (Valmiki x). Bama deals with multiple identities of a Dalit, Christian and woman. The main reason behind writing *Karukku*, as mentioned in the Introduction to the work, was to tide over a “personal crisis” (Bama vii). Raj Gautaman, a well-known Dalit critic in Tamil comments on the function of Dalit Literature, “Dalit Literature should awaken in every reader a consciousness of the oppressed Dalits”, (*Dalit women’s writing* Exp 904 L 447-449).

BLURRING BOUNDARIES: ASSERTING IDENTITIES (With reference to Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan: A Dalit’s Life*)

The Chuhras(Bhangi) refer to an untouchable caste which was used much before the self-assertive term “Dalit” was coined. The protagonist has to face the no-win situation like – “Abhy, Chure ka, he has come dressed in new clothes...If one went wearing old and shabby clothes, then they said, ‘Abey, Chure ke, get away from me, you stink’ ” (Valmiki 3). It draws attention to oppressed and repressed condition of the subaltern by the high caste people in many ways. For instance, the treatment of school teacher Kaliram to the protagonist is inhuman. When the teacher knows the caste of the author, the protagonist is asked to sweep the whole class and ground of the school. The caste hinders the way of progress in education of Dalit students.

Valmiki’s family serves the Tyagis, a dominating group of the village. They are responsible for the inhuman and horrible plight of the community and the narrator’s family work for Tyagis family in return they have to rely on Joothan. The family of the narrator has to endure the humiliation despite hard work. The subalterns fight throughout their lives for two time meal. Besides, the rainy season brings the disaster in their colony. Due to consistent rain, they have to spend sleepless nights, repair houses, drink the polluted water, go through the ill health, and lose the opportunity of work. The narrator comments, “Literature can only imagine hell. For us the rainy season was a living hell. This terrible suffering of village life has not even been touched upon by the epic poets of Hindi. What a monstrous truth that is” (Valmiki 24).

Valmiki's struggle follows the degree of difficulties associated with regaining dignity for himself and his community. "I too have felt inside me the flame of Ashwatthama's revenge. They keep on burning inside me to this day. I have struggled for years on end to come out of the dark vaults of my life" (Valmiki 23). *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* is filled with such episodes, every single one of which left a profound scar in the author's mind. In the wake of seeing the beating of his people out in the open for denying unpaid labour, the writer reflects, "My mind was filled with a deep revulsion. I was then an adolescent and a scratch appeared on my mind like a line scratched on glass. It remains there still" (Valmiki 39). He questions, "Why is it a crime to ask to be paid for one's labor? Those who keep singing the glories of democracy use the government machinery to quell the blood flowing in our veins" (Valmiki 39). Valmiki appears to pronounce his final judgment in the opening lines of the preface to *Joothan*, "Dalit life is excruciatingly painful, charred by experiences. Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creations (Valmiki vii).

DALIT AMONG DALITS: BREAKING THE SHELL OF GENDER

(With Reference to Bama's *Karakku*)

"*Karukku* is an experience of a Dalit woman, a long ordeal, through which she could recognize herself. Bama did make a space for her caste as well as for women who were victims of two-fold hierarchy" (*Karakku* is an experience of Dalit woman Exp 1 L 1-2). The women suffered at the hands of patriarchy as well as caste discrimination. Bama focuses on the humiliation, abuse, loneliness on account of their patriarch, however, through her story she has become a model for the rest of Dalit women. They were victims of caste discrimination as well as patriarchy. In the novel she has demonstrated the predicament of Dalit women, their sufferings and discrimination on account of their patriarch, however, through her own story she has advanced herself as a good example for the rest of Dalit women.

Bama's *Karakku* is, the story of Bama growing up in the village eventually dissolves into a story of her community. In an interview, Bama speaks of her identity as a Dalit woman: "How can I think of my life as one individual? I am a Dalit....In that sense I do not have a story of my own, my story is my community's

story.” (Bama int). While fighting the triple monster of caste, class and gender, the Dalit female also has to struggle against the Dalit patriarchy. This plight of a Dalit woman is dealt in all detail in Bama’s story. In the place of the weak and mumbling cry of a Dalit female, which is usually heard in male Dalit autobiographies, one can hear in *Karukku* the powerful voice of the protest of the Dalit female.

REVIEWING DALITS FROM THE LENS OF GENDER: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

This section shall deal with the comparative study of Dalit male and Dalit female autobiography i.e. Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan: A Dalit’s Life*, and Bama’s *Karakku*. The story of Dalit women writers is the story of all the suppressed women. Dalits are on the periphery but in the Dalits also there is a group which is more marginalized i.e. woman. A Dalit man is not able to portray the true picture of a woman’s life so they hold the pen in their hands and started writing about themselves. There is a vast difference in the portrayal of Dalits by a Dalit male and a Dalit female. Dalit female writer always look at the society from a different perspective. They are not allowed to participate in any activity. Society always creates some rules and woman is forced to behave according to those rules. Bama’s story revolves around looking for a sense of belonging and connection to something significant, which she finds lacking in her community at home. She leaves home to join the convent in her twenties, after working for a few years as a teacher, hoping to contribute to a cause larger than caste, class and identity. However, she finds the convent is not different from the spaces outside. “If you are born into a low caste, every moment of your life is a moment of struggle. People screw up their faces and look at us with disgust the moment they know our caste....It seems like we have to swallow our anger and just carry on with our troubled lives” (Bama 27). One of the reasons for triple discrimination against women is lack of education and extreme poverty. According to Arpita Anant, Dalit women face triple monsters of caste, class and gender and no one practices untouchability while raping a woman whereas they consider their shadows as polluted and unclean. The reason Bama entered educational institutes was because she wanted Dalit women to be aware of rights. Dalit women are one of the most marginalized segments in the society. Their condition is more vulnerable than non-Dalit women as they are oppressed by upper caste men, women as well as Dalit

men who try to occupy the centre and use the same mechanisms to oppress them as used by upper caste against them. They suffer from multi-disadvantages socio-economical, cultural marginalization, being women and being a Dalit woman.

Karakku traces the three-fold discrimination against women on the basis of caste, class and gender. The word ‘Karakku’ means a palmyra leaves, these leaves have saw like edges, fine toothed, sharp cutting, they can hurt but they can also be used as weapons to inflict hurt or wounds on the body of enemy, on one side the society cuts them, bleeds them while on the other side they cut the society and make their way through it. In one of the incidents fellow nun slapped her while she was asleep and one knocked on her forehead while Bama continued reciting poems to her students. However, these are not the things that matter the most to her. There is something else much worse. The idea of preordained destiny that they planted into Dalit children’ minds instead of telling them about their rights is disheartening. The sister’ behaviour taught them to comply with the status quo. These vicious deliberate policy of deforming and weakening the mind was carried out by the nuns which was the last straw for an outspoken woman like Bama who was sensitive to the systematic debasement heaped upon Dalits and Dalit children by the Varna system. Dalit women are different from non-dalit as they are oppressed not only by upper caste men and dalit men but also by upper caste women. The reason she joined convent was to raise awareness about Dalit women but it goes against Bama and she leaves convent within seven years of joining it. She says, “It is because of this that even though Dalits like we might wish to take up the path of renunciation, we find there is no place for us there” (Bama 80). Here false laughter is symbolic of humiliation and insults inflicted on Bama by fellow sisters and nuns. It is also symbolic of how women as a gender are not united but try to cut through each other. Bama says,” I am like a bird whose wings were broken...but if it comes out, it can only flap its wings uselessly, unable to fly. And that is the stage in which I am now” (Bama 121).

CONCLUSION

The vicious cycle of discrimination still continues, however, the awareness and discrimination has increased considerably. Even after decades of Independence

people still discriminate on the basis of caste and gender. Dalit is a constructed identity which needs to be deconstructed by the society. Why only Dalits? All kinds of discrimination on caste, creed, gender and religion should be eradicated from society through law and policy makers. Despite all the movements over the years, whether on small scale or at international levels which aimed to bring about dynamic changes in regarding statuses of females in the society, it has been an absurd and upsetting truth that women have not been able to accomplish that position. The most saddening notion here is that, even after twenty years of writing the autobiographies, the discrimination still exists because such lopsided perception of genders has prevailed for so long that something as basic and fundamental as equality now seems as achievement for this weaker section per say.

The distinction occurs not only in the lower strata through casteism, child marriage but it is quite prominent in big economic industries as well. Here, women face issues and taboos relating to their personal choices like their conjugal aspirations, maternity leaves, etc. to even receiving unequal income for the same designation. All in all I definitely believe that with great power comes great responsibility, and with immense power in the human kind we can bring about changes. It is vital to note that now, gender discrimination should not only be dealt with by women but also men in the society so that good sense prevails.

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