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Writing Dalitness Across Languages: Comparative Narratives of Trauma and Resistance

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Abstract

Over the past several decades, Dalit autobiographical writing has emerged as a distinct intellectual and political force within Indian literature, offering a counter-archive to dominant historical narratives that have long marginalized Dalit voices. This paper investigates five landmark Dalit autobiographies—Bama's Karukku (Tamil), Daya Pawar's Baluta and Baby Kamble's The Prisons We Broke (Marathi), and Omprakash Valmiki's Joothan and Sheoraj Singh Bechain's My Childhood on My Shoulders (Hindi)—and offers a comparative study based on subaltern theory, trauma studies, and Dalit aesthetics with the aim of discussing how they collaborate to develop Dalitness both as a lived experience and as a political identity in different linguistic and cultural environments. The paper claims that though these narratives came out of different socio-cultural contexts, they all crystallize around the shared structural experiences of caste oppression: embodied trauma, spatial segregation, ritualized humiliation, educational exclusion, and gendered violence. Simultaneously, they articulate shared modes of resistance-testimonial witnessing, memory work, linguistic assertion, religious conversion, educational mobility, and political consciousness-which displace the Dalit subject from a passive victim to an active agent and site of social change. This paper identifies Dalit autobiography as a unique genre that operates at once as personal testimony, collective archive, social criticism, and revolutionary practice.

Keywords

Trauma narratives, subaltern studies, Dalit aesthetics, testimonial writing, gendered violence, educational exclusion, trans-regional identity, collective memory

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In the past few decades, Dalit autobiographical writing has emerged as a distinct intellectual and political formation in Indian literature. Spanning multiple regions and languages in India, it provides a counter-archive to the hegemonic historical narratives that have erased Dalit voices. (Rege 15-17). The paper 'Writing Dalitness Across Languages: Comparative Narratives of Trauma and Resistance,' shows how Dalit autobiographies across Tamil, Marathi, and Hindi traditions translate lived experiences of caste trauma into collective practices of resistance, crystallizing Dalitness as a trans-regional identity. The paper investigates five landmark Dalit autobiographies—Bama's *Karukku* (Tamil), Daya Pawar's *Baluta* and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (Marathi), and Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Sheoraj Singh Bechain's *My Childhood on My Shoulders* (Hindi)—and provides a comparative study based on subaltern theory, trauma studies, and Dalit aesthetics to examine how they work together to develop Dalitness both as a lived experience and as a political identity in different linguistic and cultural environments.

The paper proposes that although these narratives emerged from different socio-cultural contexts, they all crystallize around the shared structural experiences of caste oppression: embodied trauma, spatial segregation, ritualized humiliation, educational exclusion, and gendered violence (Guru 113-140). At the same time, they express shared modes of resistance—testimonial witnessing, memory work, linguistic assertion, religious conversion, educational mobility, and political consciousness—that move the Dalit subject from passive victim to active agent and site of social change. Through a comparative mode of inquiry, this paper argues that Dalitness is a trans-regional identity formation that transcends linguistic boundaries while also remaining rooted in specific regional histories. The Tamil, Marathi, and Hindi autobiographical traditions are all shaped by specific anti-caste movements and distinct literary conventions, but have a collective role in producing counter-hegemonic knowledge, challenging Brahminical historiography and upper caste literary hegemony (Dangle 264-270). This article recognizes Dalit autobiography as a unique genre that performs simultaneously as personal testimony, collective archive, social criticism, and revolutionary practice. By examining how these texts negotiate the tension between regional particularity and trans-regional solidarity, this study demonstrates the critical role of Dalit life writing in contemporary Indian literature in documenting structural oppression as a counter-history while theorizing radical social change.

Dalit self-writing has been established as one of the most influential literary and political genres in contemporary Indian literature, representing a substantial alteration in the representation of caste, identity and lived experience (Limbale 29-35). Although canonical Indian literature has been framed from the limited perspective of dominant castes, Dalit autobiographies confront the epistemic authority of this

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mode of representation by foregrounding voices that have been silenced, distorted or erased. Their coming to literature is not simply a new thematic addition but the creation of an archive that disrupts the Brahminical monopoly on knowledge and validates the experiential correctness of Dalit subjectivity (Mukherjee 41-48). Since the late twentieth century, autobiographies by Dalit writers from across the subcontinent have articulated a sense of literary consciousness that connects the singularity of personal memory with collective history, and converts the experience of individual suffering into a necessarily political grammar of resistance (Narayan 57-63). The form of autobiography has been central to this process, though the Dalit autobiographical and life-writing tradition is significantly distinguishable from an autobiographical genre that tends to celebrate personal achievement or, inevitably, individual exceptionalism. Dalit autobiographies represent the self, not as an exceptional instance of undergoing social boundary crossing, but as an instantiation of systems of violence. They represent, not the "rise" of an individual, but rather the quotidian humiliations, exclusions and brutalities of an entire community (Rao 123-129). In this respect, the texts act as 'testimonios'—a concept and term used in Latin American and African contexts.

As a subaltern discourse, Dalit literature recounts the existing social conditions of the Dalits and creates appropriate space for them in the Indian mainstream literature. The Dalit studies emphasize the relationship of cultural identity to individual identity in historical circumstances (Chakravarti 3-9). With the cultural affirmation of what is marginalization, the Dalit studies attract the intelligentsia demanding unrestricted equal rights to self-affirmation. The Dalit literary studies pursue the inclusion of the socially marginalized groups and their writings into the mainstream canon and discourse. The emergence of the Dalit theory and political praxis attempts at centralizing the margins and it needs to be understood as responses to the failure of the reformative, nationalist and leftist movements, led by the upper castes (Omvedt 273-280). The Indian forms of marginalization and subordination have dehumanized and obliterated the knowledge and identity of the marginals. Prior to the advent of their own literature, Dalits were defined as irrational, uncivilized, and their 'selves' were awarded with a sense of inferiority. The identities in Dalit literature in India are formed in their dissent against their distinctiveness—the negative insights of the caste (Guru and Chakravarty 45-52). Dalit literature is an integral part of the Dalit culture and politics. The Dalit literary studies mark change in the critical and political agenda; for it not only revise its previously known parameters, but also suggest new talks about Dalit writing. In this sense, Dalit literature is a gesture towards reinventing Dalit literary studies as well as a call for broadening the scope of Indian literature.

The analysis of Dalit autobiographical writing requires an interdisciplinary

framework that draws on subaltern studies, trauma theory, and Dalit aesthetics (Anand 88-95). The above-mentioned frameworks demonstrate how Dalit narratives operate simultaneously as personal testimonies, socio-historical documents, and political forms of dissent. The first analytic frame is subaltern theory. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's framing of the subaltern as one who "cannot speak" within dominant epistemic structures illustrates how caste slaughters the ability of Dalits to speak as they live (Spivak 271). Dalit autobiography directly subverts this silence through returning narrative space and affirming experiential knowledge as adequate. As Sharmila Rege argues, Dalit life-writing makes a new "counter-cultural epistemology," specifically talking back to Brahminical versions of reality, and establishing as central the political consequences of lived experience (Rege 13). From this point of departure, Dalit autobiographies can be read not just as personal narratives, but also as significant interventions into social theorizing in and of Indian society (Pandey 156-162).

The second analytic frame is trauma studies. Dalit narratives are saturated with recountings of humiliation, violence, and exclusion—each form of trauma that are more structural than episodic. Cathy Caruth describes trauma as an event that is both "unassimilable," and yet it continually demands to be told (Caruth 4). Dalit autobiographies exemplify this elaboration: Dalit writers turn repetitive social harm into narrative testimony (Kandasamy 201-208). Dominick LaCapra offers a helpful distinction in this context between "acting out" and "working through" the trauma of violent memory (LaCapra 141-143). Dalit writers "work through" in this sense, creating memory formations of pain, in order to make sense.

Arjun Dangle takes this argument further, insisting that Dalit literature is fundamentally tied to the larger struggle for social change. It is not simply reflective or descriptive; it is active, interventionist, and openly political. In Dangle's view, anger is no fault of Dalit writing—it is a valid and necessary aesthetic modality (Dangle xviii-xxii). Protest, defiance, and resistance do not exist on the edges of the literary text. They are often also at the seam of the text's possibilities for signification and engagement. This framework helps explain one key stylistic feature of Dalit autobiographies: their preference for plain, direct, often stark language. These are not accidental or unsophisticated choices. They are deliberate. The refusal of literary ornamentation is itself an ideological gesture—a rejection of the Brahminical literary tradition that has long equated beauty with distance from the body, from labor, from pain (Limbale 112-118). Dalit writers choose bluntness over elegance because their purpose is not to please but to disturb, not to comfort but to confront. The aesthetic, in other words, serves the political—and in doing so, creates its own standards of literary value xxii). Protest, defiance, and resistance do not exist on the edges of the literary text. They are often also at the seam of the text's possibilities for

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Dalit autobiographical literature in Tamil, Marathi, and Hindi constitutes a key intervention in Indian cultural and political discussions. While each text is situated in its own language, region, and socio-historical contexts, the life narratives share a thematic constellation of caste oppression, systemic trauma, cultural erasure, and a collective assertion of human dignity (Satyanarayana and Tharu 1-18). A comparative reading illustrates that Dalitness is not specific to language, but rather a lived political consciousness that exhibits its own grammar of suffering, its own rhetoric of protest, and its own counter-hegemonic aesthetics. This article engages five canonical texts: Bama's *Karukku* (Tamil), Daya Pawar's *Baluta* and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (Marathi), and Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Sheoraj Singh Bechain's *My Childhood on My Shoulders* (Hindi). These autobiographies reveal the multivalent violence of caste as it functions across multiple domains—familial structures, labor relations, religious institutions, spatial arrangements, and the educational apparatuses. Simultaneously, they depict different modalities of resistance—through testimonials, educational mobility, Ambedkarite political awakening, and the discursive construction of alternative identities (Rawat and Satyanarayana 3-12). Although each writer draws from their own narrative approaches based on specific regional literary conventions and individual subjectivities, their texts cohere around a common thread.

Tamil Dalit Autobiography: Bama's *Karukku*

Tamil Dalit writing has emerged from a certain historical and social context. This context is shaped by the unyielding caste hierarchies of rural Tamil Nadu and, somewhat ironically, by the influence of Christian missionary education (Geetha and Rajadurai 71-79). Bama's *Karukku*, published in 1992, means not only is it one of the earlier Tamil Dalit autobiographies by a woman, but it is also situated in a unique position in the Tamil Dalit tradition. Bama is describing her experience as a member of a Catholic Paraiyar community and what she reveals is disturbing: caste never disappears, even within Christianity. Caste remains, silently and mercilessly, even in structures that publicly profess a message of equality and brotherhood (Bama 15-22). Her critique is therefore

double-edged; she critiques Hindu orthodoxy and, in the same vein, critiques the church, arguing that they have reproduced the hierarchy that they profess to reject. Stylistically, Karukku is unlike many Dalit autobiographies that adopt a more linear, documentary text. Bama's rich prose is elliptical, emotionally charged, and intensely personal. Bama's narrative is not a simple recounting of events; she circles around wounds, revisits them, attempts to make sense of them (Holmström x-xiv). The Dalit community woman is central to Bama's narrative and her identity is fractured across fragmented lines that converge around caste. Gender not only plays a central role in Bama's narrative, but the attitudes and expectations we have of women as they perform the work of domestic labor, bear the burden of physical violence, take in public embarrassment, and then hold the community together, enact the stories of the community, and relay the work of resilience (Dietrich 45-53). What distinguishes Karukku from many other autobiographies is a sustained confrontation with spiritual crisis. Bama does not write from the vantage point of someone with a faith resolved or an identity reconciled; rather, she openly wrestles with disillusionment—with how far the promise of Christianity fell short of what the Church delivered (Bama 74-81). She describes times when the nuns and priests who were supposedly allies became the enforcers of caste oppression. She argues that conversion did not lead to liberation; it only delivered new forms of the same violence. Here, Karukku depends upon and operates as both personal testimony and political indictment—as an autobiographical assertion against the Church, against caste society, and against the ongoing myth that an affiliation with an institution could undo centuries of Christian caste oppression. The authorial choice Bama makes about language is both intentional and politically significant. She writes in colloquial Tamil, even as she encounters opportunity and pressure to work and live in syntactically standardized domains. Bama's writing is not lax writing; it is strategic writing that affirms the legitimacy of everyday Dalit speech and activity, and to that end, Bama effectively undermines the Tamil bourgeoisie's challenge to Dalit cultural production (Geetha 139-145).

Marathi Dalit Autobiographies: Daya Pawar's *Baluta* and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*

Dalit literature has been the most politically animated, due to the influence of the Ambedkarite movement, and the radical energies of the Dalit Panthers (Brueck 23-31). The autobiography of Daya Pawar is representative of this tradition of resistance. Daya Pawar's *Baluta* (1978) is widely recognized as the first significant modern Dalit autobiography in Marathi (Zelliot 267-274). Pawar's narration is stark, unadorned, and brutally candid. The term "baluta"—referring to conventional social obligations wherein Dalit labor is performed in exchange for inadequate goods—is transformed into a metaphor for inherited embarrassment (Pawar 7-12). Pawar moves

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and presents a sweeping portrait of Dalit life characterized by poverty, spatial segregation, violent police action, drunkenness, and perpetual want. What sets Baluta apart is its tone of self-reflexivity. Pawar does not romanticize or clean up for his community; he records its internal complexities, conflicts, and weaknesses (Kumar 78-84). The rawness of his text challenges sentimental or moralized depictions of the oppressed. The narrative is informed by Ambedkarite ideology, emphasizing the need to stake a claim to pride, personal dignity, and honor, even when the prospects of resistance seem flimsy (Pawar 95-103). When remembering the everyday humiliations of caste significance, such as being refused water, being sneered at for the caste mark on his forehead, and accepted as not being worthy.

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (1986) is one of the very first autobiographies written by a Dalit female in India, and it showcases the different aspects of women's writing as opposed to the male-centric texts that were predominant in the very beginning of Dalit literature (Kamble ix-xiii). Kamble collects all the layers of violence that the Mahar women underwent—besides being upper-caste landlords' workers who were engaged in tireless draining marriages, they also experienced religious ideologies that condemned them as being forever impure. The story gets its uniqueness from Kamble when she presents a collective voice. She does not say "I," instead she says "we," which gets her story mingled in the Mahar women's common sufferings. This is a conscious political decision: the pain she narrates is structural, not a personal misfortune, and her writing asserts that truth (Rege 85-92). Kamble pulls no punches while denouncing Brahminical Hinduism. She does not go after ideas but very down-to-earth practices and reasons; she shows how the Hindu notion of purity is but a simple ploy where Dalit bodies, especially women, are first denigrated and then made to bear the brunt of being polluted. Pollution is more than a figure of speech; it dictates who is going to sweat, eat, and live (Kamble 23-29). Still, *The Prisons We Broke* can be described as a historical repository as well. Kamble moves back to the times of the early Ambedkarite movement in her locality which was marked by mass assemblies, Ambedkar's speeches, the community's decision to accept Buddhism, etc. The latter sections maintain the very delicate growth of the unity of consciousness, the slow shifting from what she describes as "slavery" to self-respect (Zelliot 285-291). The title itself signals both the victory and the continuing fight: the prison is caste-determined and self-loathing, and liberation is still partial but undoubtedly in process.

Hindi Dalit Autobiographies: *Joothan* and Sheoraj Singh Bechain's *My Childhood on My Shoulders*

The emergence of Hindi Dalit autobiography was much later when compared with the already established Marathi and Tamil traditions—but it came with an

inescapable urgency (Ravikumar 112-119). Omprakash Valmiki's Joothan (1997) and Sheoraj Singh Bechain's My Childhood on My Shoulders (2016) chronicled the grinding, everyday violence of caste as it operated in North India: the humiliations in school, the compelled labors, the casual insults of teachers and neighbours who treated Dalit children as if they were not even human beings from their perspective. Both authors saw education not as a neutral promise but as a contested area—every move forward had to be battled (Kumar 156-163). Valmiki writes the truth bluntly, expressing personal shame as a public indictment. Bechain, who is writing almost 20 years later, contributes something quieter: the narration of the state of being vulnerable, the psychological toll that humiliations make, and the gradual process of healing through the unity and self-expression. It is a combined work of these texts that delineates the coordinates of the Dalit experience in the Hindi-speaking areas, where caste's power was and still is very harshly unbroken.

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (1997) is one of the most critically acclaimed and widely read texts in Dalit literature (Mukherjee 167-173). By declaring the use of the blazing trail of a Dalit to the people of the cities, Valmiki describes the brutal reality of the past and the rapid spread among Dalit communities. The title itself—joothan (leftover food deemed impure)—encapsulates the way Dalits are positioned within Hindu society: as consumers of discarded humanity (Valmiki 1-9). Valmiki's narrative is linear, descriptive, and sharply confrontational. His revelation goes through the Gandhian hypocrisy and the inadequacy of the nationalist narratives that ignore caste, and shows the complicity of state institutions in the perpetuation of marginalization (Valmiki 36-45). Education has turned out to be both a battlefield and a way to dignity. His struggles in the school and in college assert that literacy is not only a personal triumph but also a political act (Narayan 201-207). Valmiki's storytelling converts shame into assertion, memory into resistance.

Sheoraj Singh Bechain's autobiography *My Childhood on My Shoulders* (2016) depicts bonded labour, caste violence, and extreme poverty as the main themes of his childhood (Bechain 12-20). The point of the title is that of "carrying childhood on one's shoulders," which indicates the weight of the adult responsibilities that are put on the children of Dalit communities. Like Valmiki, Bechain considers education as a power that can change life, but he also stresses emotional resilience. The narrative of Bechain is a mixture of tenderness and anger; it shows how the company of peers, teachers, and activists helped him to be successful academically in the long run (Bechain 78-86). What sets Bechain's work apart is that he dares to investigate Dalit masculinity not only in terms of anger and opposition but also of tenderness (Tartakov 89-96). He discusses the emotions of terror, humiliation, and the lengthy

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journey of acquiring the ability to articulate and write himself into being. The conventional portrayal of Dalit existence as a series of harsh experiences is replaced by something that has more layers: the long, bumpy road of recovery, the necessity of being backed up by others, the delicate building of one's value in a situation that is meant to wipe it out.

Despite their linguistic and geographical variations, Dalit autobiographies from Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and Hindi-speaking North India convey remarkably similar messages (Sarangi 45-51). The main issue that is common to all of them is spatial segregation—no matter if it is referred to as cheri, Maharwada, or simply the Dalit basti, the physical fact of being pushed to the edge of the village marks the people as impure and their lives as peripheral. The caste system divides labour according to its brutal consistency: a certain category of work is classified as degrading and hence Dalit, synonymizing the body with the inherited subjugation (Guru 48-52). Unfortunately, schools which were expected to provide the escape, turned out to be the sites of humiliation—Dalit kids were made to do cleaning while the upper-caste kids were learning. The religious institutions whether Hindu or Christian often behaved in a similar way and reinforced the hierarchies they claimed to be transcending (Narayan 89-95). For Dalit women the situation was even worse as they had to bear the brunt of the patriarchal control from both within and outside their communities (Rege 156-163). This is what the texts show collectively that caste is not isolated prejudice but a systemic, widespread trauma of which the negative impact is felt throughout the subcontinent in the areas of space, labour, education, religion, and gender relations.

These autobiographies, although speaking different languages and coming from different regions, still have an essential dedication in common: to reveal the truth regarding the impact of caste on people, and to maintain that change could happen (Anand 201-208). The common reading reveals that while Dalitness manifests differently in Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, and North India, the patterns of violence and exclusion are remarkably similar—as are the responses. Reading these autobiographies together—*Karukku, Baluta, The Prisons We Broke, Joothan and My Childhood on My Shoulders*—makes it evident that the Dalit experience, despite its regional differences, is pervasively characterized by disturbing similarities in pattern (Satyanarayana and Tharu 89-97). The process of spatial segregation serves to keep Dalits in a state of physical separation and symbolic impurity. Just like the case of laborers' caste, certain types of work are also designated degrading and hence inherited. Schools are almost as good as the hierarchies that they claim to challenge. Religious establishments, irrespective of the religion, seldom liberate themselves from caste logic. However, the texts are not just simple witnesses to suffering. They are testimonies:

the fight for education through impossible odds, the building of collective consciousness by the Ambedkarite movements, women who refuse both caste and patriarchal control, and the radical act of writing one's life when the dominant culture sounds a silence-around-you notice (Limbale 178-185). What a comparison of these readings clearly brings out is that Dalit autobiography, no matter the languages and regions, plays the role of counter-history. These writers do not seek compassion. Instead, they call for acknowledgement, contest the narratives of India about herself, and pronounce caste to be neither a part of nature nor an inevitability (Pandey 289-295). The writing itself unfolds as a protest against oppression.

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