

# Narratives of Pain and Survival: Psychological Trauma in Dalit Autobiographical Writings

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## Abstract

The stories of Dalit life articulate both the extreme psychological impact of caste-based discrimination and lend expressions of opposition and resistance to such discrimination. Based on the trauma theory, and especially the work of Cathy Caruth, the study explores the processes behind the caste discrimination as a latent and internalised precipitate of violence that affects the emotional experience, memory, and identity building. Dalit autobiographies prove humiliation, isolation, and shame are not accidental cases, but apparently built into everyday life, with long-lasting psychological consequences.

The study looks at the classic literature, such as *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki and *Karukku* by Bama, to explain how memory and narrative form the crucial processes of the reconstruction of traumatic events. Through narratives, writers transform shattered and awful memories into comprehensible narratives, a move that restores to them their powers and supports their identity. Story telling thus becomes a form of therapy and political action as well. At the same time, the study points out that Dalit autobiographies should not only be painful narratives. These texts are inspired by the idea of the freedom as developed by B. R. Ambedkar who asserts that education, self-representation, collaboration are the means to liberate. Sharmila Rege argues that the poems can be used as a communal testimony that personal grief is transformed into a critique of a greater societal scale. Dalit autobiographical writings are good cultural records which demonstrate oppression but also demonstrate strength and dignity. They challenge dominant discourses by turning tragedy into stories of survival and empowerment and contribute very significantly to the literary, psychological, and social understanding.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Dalit Autobiographical writing has emerged to be one of the most powerful literary forms in modern Indian literature with closely personal yet politically significant narrations of caste victimization, caste affront and highlight. Unlike the conventional autobiographies which are often inclined to concentrate on the personal accomplishment or self-worship, the stories of Dalits life anticipate the lives of a social stigma and marginalization of caste developed within the caste hierarchy. These memoirs are both stories of oppression and uprising and personal memory is rendered history. Through the term humiliation, deprivation and social stigma, Dalit writers reveal that caste oppression generates widespread psychological trauma which constitutes identity and selfhood. Scholars have

speculated that trauma is not a result of a single violent occurrence but a condition that is caused by repetitive occurrences of oppression and exclusion. The trauma is more likely to be disclosed when an unpleasant experience is not fully understood and fall in it when this has already occurred and is repeated both by remembering and telling it (Caruth 4). A good illustration of the dynamics of the Dalit autobiographies is when the writer narrates his childhood memories of being humiliated in school, village and the working place whereby the caste identity dictated the social interaction. Similarly, a psychiatrist, Judith Herman, asserts that a history of long-term domination has long-term psychological wounds, which constitute an individual identity and sense of belonging (Herman 33). It is precisely this type of caste as a historically based social order of social hierarchy that creates conditions of chronic psychological

violence. The autobiography writing of such writers as Omprakash Valmiki, *Joothan*, Bama in *Karukku* and Baby Kamble in *The Prisons We broke* assist in noting that autobiographical storytelling is a significant medium to convey trauma and at the same time argue against oppression. It has been demonstrated through such writings that the Dalit autobiographies are not only personal memory but powerful socio-political documents that are applied to demonstrate the psychological effects of caste discrimination. A criticism of these stories based on the trauma theory and social psychology, this paper explores how the experiences of pain are transformed into narratives of survival and collective power of Dalit autobiographical writings.

### Caste Oppression and Psychological Trauma

The caste system is historically known to make Indian society rigidly divided and hierarchical as it favours upper castes and marginalizes Dalits, thus defining the social and economic relations as well as psychological experiences. This regime controls the available resources, education and movement, and at the same time creates inner sensations of inferiority, humiliation and alienation among the oppressed groups. Caste systems as it is famously explained by B R Ambedkar are not merely a division of labour, but a division of labourers, a system that dehumanizes people by placing them in predetermined and inferior social classes (Ambedkar 83). This kind of structural inequality is a systematic destruction of self-respect and dignity and, consequently, caste oppression is a highly psychological experience.

This inner aspect of caste-based discrimination has been vividly captured through Dalit autobiographical writings where a single action of exclusion and humiliation turns into insignificant but accumulated in memory and identity. These experiences can be explained by the trauma theory. Cathy Caruth mentions that trauma develops as a manifestation in the form of unassimilated distressing event at the time when it happened and reenters later in terms of fragmented memories and narrative representation (Caruth 4). The untouchability, segregation, and verbal abuse that occurred during childhood in Dalit stories are frequently revisited as haunting memories, which define the narrator. In his article, Hugo Gorringer depicts the Dalit in the following lines:

*"In villages around Madurai, Dalits commonly steer clear of the 'oor' (main village) unless summoned to accomplish some tasks. Social interactions between Dalits and caste Hindus emphasize the inferiority of the former. On the approach of a locally dominant caste member, village Dalits assume a hunched posture, take their towel off their shoulders and tie it round their waist (or tuck it under their arm), lean forward and raise one or both hands in greeting. When conversing with higher castes their hands are held behind their backs or to their sides and their heads remain inclined. In sum, they pay exaggerated forms of respect, which are expressed non-verbally through bodily positioning."* (Gorringer)

The paragraph describes the role of caste hierarchy in the everyday behaviour of the rural setting as it is not only practiced there but is an institution. The Dalits must remain outside the "oor", the main section of the village where the caste Hindus are the majority until they are hired to work in the villages surrounding Madurai. This geographical division depicts their lack of presence in the social and cultural life. More important, it is the strict guidelines of physical behaviour that perpetuate inequality that determine the interaction between Dalits and dominant castes. According to Hugo Gorringer, caste discrimination is embedded in the body through routine postures

and gestures. To express their excessive reverence, Dalits are supposed to apply non-verbal signs, bending their bodies, lower heads, and putting their hands in a subservient behaviour. These behaviours, which are their disadvantaged status with the caste system, are socially necessary but not a decision. The stooped pose symbolises tyranny that is internalised, and the process of removing a towel off the shoulder and put it back to the correct location symbolizes humility and submission.

Judith Herman, in her turn, makes it clear that trauma is caused by the mechanisms of dominance and no single moments (Herman 33). This is exactly how the caste system works, causing psychological harm daily with its day-to-day routines of exclusion. Therefore, Dalit autobiographies demonstrate the fact that caste-based violence are not limited to physical oppression but also cause long-term emotional traumas, affecting identity-construction, perception of oneself, and the fight against the humiliation.

### Memory and the Reconstruction of Trauma

Dalit autobiographical writing prefigures the memory as a strong narrative tool using which individual challenges of caste oppression are created and maintained. The word memory in such texts does not just refer to memorizing what has already occurred, but it is a dynamic form of rebuilding trauma, identity, and resistance. Dalit writers rekindle subjective memories by going back to childhood experiences, family background, and daily humiliations to convert them into collective memories of system discrimination.

Omprakash Valmiki is a vivid childhood memoirist of *Joothan* who describes his childhood in the rural Uttar Pradesh where untouchability defined the entire social life. The recollection of having to sit apart in school and how he was made to do degrading chores by the teachers belonging to the upper caste shows how caste-based discrimination can enter the minds of a child in early years. The memories are characterized by a strong feeling of humiliation, anger, and alienation that are still reflected in his consciousness, as an adult. The concept of memory is seen as a tool of revealing normalized violence within the educational and social institutions. Nayar described *Joothan* as a representation of Dalit pain in these lines:

*"Joothan is at one level the story of Valmiki-the-individual's life, it is also the narrative of a community, a caste, and therefore of a larger collective. Dalit trauma narrative does not contain a 'problematic hero' (as in fiction). Instead, it has a 'problematic collective situation'. This marks the trauma narrative to be of an entirely different order than individual life-stories of abuse (though by no means is individual trauma to be treated as less agonizing). In Dalit trauma narratives, it is an entire community that becomes victim. In this aspect, its closest parallel would be genocide narratives or holocaust testimony. Valmiki, like other Dalit writers, underscores the social status of the victims: 'lower' caste."* (Nayar)

In the above line, Nayar refers to *Joothan* as a story that exists at both the personal and the social level. His experiences of prejudice and humiliation are narrated in the work, but the Dalit community is also suffering. The narratives of Dalit trauma are contrasting to conventional autobiographical or fictional narratives as they are not based on one problematic hero, as Pramod K. Nayar puts it. Instead, it underscores a problematic group situation whereby systematic injustice affects an entire social group.

This distinction matters because it shifts the focus away towards individual suffering and towards structural injustice. The suffering depicted in *Joothan* is a common fact that is determined by caste rank and not an isolated event. The Dalit identity is formed as a result of shared experience of abuse, dehumanisation and exclusion in transforming personal memories into communal memories. Dalit autobiographies resemble the stories of pervasive past tragedy, such as Holocaust witnessing or genocide, where entire communities suffer. This story by Valmiki tends to bring out the imposed identity of being in a lower caste, where social status influences the capacity of being human and possessing dignity. Consequently, *Joothan* is not only a personal story, but it is a powerful document of collective pain that shows how caste discrimination can be an omnipresent and unrelenting social phenomenon.

On the same note, *Karukku* by Bama uses memory to track the development of Dalit identity in a caste-stratified society. Her childhood memories include the times of confusion and emotional suffering as she slowly realizes the unseen borders dividing the people. These are not mere memories; they are memories that go into critical thinking and opposition. By her story, Bama questions the internalization of the caste hierarchies, and she takes back her voice as a Dalit woman writer. Notably, the role of memory in Dalit autobiographies is used as a means of protest against dominant historiographies, which obliterates or disenfranchises the subaltern experiences. The silence of upper-caste discourses is challenged by the fact that these narratives document lived realities. In this way, as such, memory of the Dalit life writing is not only a means of narration but also a means of politics as scholars such as Sharmila Rege argues that the Dalit autobiographical writing is a kind of testimonio that is not only the means of narration but the means of politics as well, where individual suffering is a tool of critique of structural inequality. It empowers authors to re-assert control, declare identity and defy the oppressive social structures. By remembering, the Dalit authors do not just act as witnesses to their trauma, but also re-brand it as the place of resistance and empowerment.

### The Body as a Site of Humiliation

Dalit autobiographies are a strong prognostication of the body as a place where caste oppression is marked, organized, and lived. The Dalit body is conspicuous with the concepts of ritual impurity and the place where social hierarchies are imposed in the first place. Such practices that include physical segregation, forced labour, and limitation of touch create embodied consciousness of inferiority which have material and psychological effects. Through these stories, we see that caste discrimination is not an abstract concept as it is practiced by ordinary bodily experiences.

*Joothan*, comes up with a scathing report of his humiliations in the educational system, as his body is exposed to abuse by the system. He is a child who as such has to sweep the school premises just because of his caste identity. It is not only that, but a symbolic imposition that makes his body an instrument of menial labour. The constant application of these practices makes him feel full of shame and alienation, which in turn forms his personality. The account by Valmiki shows how discipline and control of the Dalit body is enforced to create a normalization of the caste hierarchies and thus humiliation is a normal practice ingrained in the everyday lives (Valmiki 27-30). On the same note, in *The Prisons We broke*, Baby Kamble dwells on the interplay of caste and gender by emphasising the Dalit female body as a locus of compounded oppression. The Dalit women not only face the setbacks of caste exclusion, but also face that of patriarchal domination both within their circles and external to their circles. Kamble portrays the way in which poverty, exploitation of labour and sexual helplessness intersects on the

body of women by making them spaces of pain and manipulation. The body thereby turns into a land on which various power structures collide with each other, escalating the process of humiliation and marginalization (Kamble 45-50).

Scholars like Sharmila Rege suggest that Dalit life writing reveals the embodiedness of caste in its connection of life experiences with the wider socio-political text. The body in these stories is not passive, it witnesses violence, and it is also availed as a source of resistance. Through bodily humiliation narration, Dalit writers contest the mainstream discourses that justify caste persecution and obscure its impact (Rege 20-25). Therefore, Dalit autobiographies indicate that the caste controls the bodies in daily life. The social exclusion through physical practices among the Dalit cannot be separated with the psychological trauma they are going through. Revoking their bodily experiences, these authors turn places of degradation into strong statements of opposition and self-identity.

### Shame, Stigma, and Identity

Shame takes centre stage in the psychological life of caste discrimination as it serves as a personalised feeling and a socially sanctioned circumstance. Based on the concept of stigma developed by Erving Goffman, we can consider caste as a mechanism where some communities are branded as inferior and hence create an identity known as spoiled identity (Goffman 1963). At the Indian level, stigma is not a concept but rather a reality, which holds itself through the daily performance of segregation of space, degrading labour, verbal insults, and denial of shared resources among Dalits. According to B. R. Ambedkar, caste is not division of labour, but division of laborers and it is entrenched in the social psyche, making inequality a normal aspect of society (Ambedkar 1936).

Dalit autobiographies are very effective in exposing the influence of such stigma in identity development since childhood. Such works as *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki describe the process of inferiority-internalization of the young Dalit children in response to the discrimination in schools and in the streets. The humiliation is recurrent and leads to the development of shame that is psychologically instilled. According to Gopal Guru, humiliation in caste society is not an accident but is structured, which defines the way people see themselves and how they interact with others (Guru 2009). Nevertheless, these accounts are not just accounts of atrocity; they also include resistance. Education is a key point of change. According to Valmiki, in *Joothan*, education turns out to be a method of regaining honour and denying the caste-related stereotypes of intellectual inferiority. This relates to the fact that education as a practice of freedom can allow the poor to perceive oppressive organizations critically as suggested by Paulo Freire (Freire 1970). Therefore, the same mechanism of social control, which is the shame in caste hierarchies, is converted by Dalit life writing into the arena of defiance. Dalit writers not only reveal the psychological violence of caste by narrating the experiences, but also establish self-respect and agency that redefines the identity beyond stigma. In the article *Caste, Social Stigma and Identity Processes* Meena portrays about the caste, social identity in these lines:

*"The salience of social representations of caste-based stigma is likely to depend upon social context. For instance, Crocker et al. have argued that 'stigmatized individuals possess (or are believed to possess) some attribute, or characteristic, that conveys a social identity that is devalued in some particular social context'. However, here it is argued that, in many cases, caste identity constitutes a particularly salient identity category of psychological*

*importance across a wide range of social contexts. This may be attributed to the significance of caste in a multitude of distinct social domains. This is one of the unique characteristics of caste identity, which distinguishes it from other social identities such as gender, religious and national identities.” (Meena)*

In the above line, Shame, stigma, and identity are especially intertwined in the situation of caste-related social order. According to Jitendra Meena, caste identity is not the identity among others but the category that is deeply rooted in multiple spheres of daily life functioning. Based on the efforts of Jennifer Crocker among others, stigma is conceptualized as a devalued characteristic in society that identifies people as inferior in given situations. Nevertheless, caste is not similar to other stigmatized identities since its impact is not only seen in isolated cases, but it cuts across almost every facet of social interaction such as education, occupation, marriage, and community life. Such widespread character of caste stigmatizing contributes to its inseparable nature and makes it a regular aspect of the human psyche, with its inherent effect on the way a person views themselves and is viewed by others. In contrast to other identities like gender or even nationality, which can change in meaning with the context, caste identity is always salient and hard to avoid. Consequently, people that belong to underprivileged castes might develop beliefs of inferiority and shame that may influence their self-esteem and social conduct. Caste-based stigma is continuously reinforced creating a sense of social exclusion that is entrenched in an individual. Shame is not only an affective state, but also a structural state that is associated with identity itself. Therefore, caste is a strong psychological structure that defines individual identity and social relations, which makes stigma a permanent and widespread feature of life.

#### Women's Voices and Gendered Trauma

The autobiographies of Dalit women offer a deep insight into how caste and gender interplay with each other to create a lot of psychological torture. The Dalit women experience an oppression of various forms that is worse than the one experienced by Dalit males. The reason is that discrimination on the basis of caste and control by the patriarchy collaborate to make them further marginalised. The concept by Kimberle Crenshaw of intersectionality can be of great use in this case since it demonstrates how various components of the identity of a person can converge to cause certain experiences of distress and marginalization (Crenshaw 1989).

At *Karukku*, Bama discusses the daily issues of Dalit Christian women including lack of sufficient funds, excessive work in the home, and humiliation in the community. The narration reveals how women are expected to undergo these issues quietly and embrace pain in order to survive. Bama also emphasizes the power of the Dalit women as they are portrayed as the emotional support system of their communities that holds their family and social connections firm even during the time when they are being oppressed.

*The Prisons We broke* also discusses the plight of Dalit women due to both caste hierarchy as well as patriarchal norms. The story of Kamble reveals how women are often manipulated and mistreated using their bodies and their voices are often suppressed in the community and the society at large. Nevertheless, her work also emphasizes that it is very important that women should stand up as she says that experiencing grief jointly will enable women to struggle back (Kamble 2008). In his research article, Sanjay Kumar mentioned about the work *The Prison We Broke* in these lines:

*“In The Prisons We broke, Babytai states that the Mahars were a superstitious people. Diseases of the body were typified as being possessions of the soul by gods and goddesses, further justifying a person's death due to such disease as their entry into the met a physical realm. This was because Mahars had neither finances nor access to medicines, but mostly because of a culture against education perpetrated by the upper castes to keep the Mahars from bearing the fruits of civilisation. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar changed such fundamental thinking of Mahars when he arrived in villages attired in a three-piece suit exhorting them to aim better material well-being and give up on the lifestyle designed for them by the Hindu caste system.” (Kumar)*

In the passage above, Baby Kamble offers an interesting account of how caste discrimination and structural deprivation shaped the Mahar people beliefs and practices. She says that most Mahars relied on superstition to describe the phenomenon of death and illness and usually interpreted sickness as something godly. This perspective was a product of institutional marginalization in healthcare, education and monetary means and not necessarily a matter of cultural choice. The group had no choice but to depend on the ceremonial explanations since they had no access to the modern medical care and information systems that added to the further marginalisation.

The work focuses on the intention of the caste system to ensure that Dalits did not experience the fruits of civilisation that would make them ignorant and dependent. B. R. This situation makes the participation of Ambedkar revolutionary. Given that Ambedkar was a supporter of education, reason, and self-respect, his admission was a primary breakthrough of forced inferiority. He initiated a culture of social and psychological awakening when he encouraged Dalits to abandon dehumanising practices such as eating the dead and practicing cruel rituals.

Specifically, Kamble puts a strong accent on the role played by women in this transformation. Focusing more on the education of their children and denying superstitions, Mahar women who had accepted the rule of patriarchy began doubting the old rules. This change is a major awakening shift and social enhancement. The book thus reveals how the community succeeded in changing into internalised oppression to dignity, reason and group empowerment through the help of the Ambedkar thought.

Other scholars like Sharmila Rege have argued that the Dalit feminist literature is re-conceptualising trauma because it puts trauma in the context of living caste and gender realities instead of viewing it as an abstract mental phenomenon (Rege 2006). These stories show that shame is not a personal process, but rather a socially constructed and gendered process. The autobiographies of Dalit women contribute to the discussion of a psychological trauma by focusing on intersectionality. They exemplify the community power of gendered humiliation experiences, as well as the resilience and resistance to them and their awareness.

#### Illustrations of Defiance and Endurance

The Dalit memoirs promote the effective survival and resistance strategies that expose bare agony and question centuries old caste hierarchies. These stories stress on the changing power of education, political awareness, and group solidarity. Education has been the main issue that Dalit writers have emphasized on to attain emancipation, which they have been inspired by B. R. Ambedkar. The principle of educate, agitate, and organise, by



Ambedkar, brings out the importance of knowledge in destroying the conceptual base of caste and helping the underprivileged communities to demand what they deserve (Ambedkar 1936). The availability of information can also help one avoid humiliation and recover dignity, and this could be best demonstrated by two pieces of autobiographical literature, *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki and *Karukku* by Bama. Through these works, it is revealed that education is not a personal achievement but an objective and a tool of self-respect and social mobility. Similarly, *The Prisons We broke* focuses on the way in which Dalits overcame caste oppression and internalised inferiority through community knowledge and collaboration (Kamble 2008). Even writing is a very strong weapon of resistance. According to Sharmila Rege, Dalit autobiographies, which can also be referred to as testimonios, can be described as testimonies which give alternative histories founded on personal experience and which also challenge mainstream upper-caste accounts (Rege 2006). The Dalit writers can reclaim their power to representation through their own stories, and by refusing to be misrepresented. Also, Gopal Guru observes that the act of sharing degrading experiences inverts power relations as it transforms personal pain to social disapproval (Guru 2009). Hence, Dalit life writing makes misery a point of struggle. These tales encourage decency, strength and reform in the society through self-expression, group cohesiveness and education as well as reveal the atrocity of caste.

## 2. CONCLUSION

Autobiographical literature of Dalits has become a very significant literary and cultural genre. These writings bring to stark focus the psychological face of caste oppression, and at the same time offer ways of resistance and renewal. These stories are not only meant to share personal experiences; they are also meant to show how caste operates at the level of mind and affects the building of identity at the early stages, as well as the formation of feelings of guilt, dread, and humiliation. The recurrence and persistence nature of caste-based violence can be learned through the prism of the trauma theory as articulated by Cathy Caruth. This theory can be considered as a certain perpetual psychological damage exceeding just individual cases and being embedded within the daily experience. But what is unique with Dalit autobiographies as compared to any other form of autobiographies is their non-conformity to the victimisation paradigm. Some writers, are like Omprakash Valmiki and Bama, can turn their grief into resistance and assertion in their writings. By telling their stories, individuals can take back control of their identities and confront the mainstream discourses that have historically suppressed or misconstrued them. In this way, they agree with the emancipatory vision of B. R. Ambedkar whose stress was heavy on the importance of self-representation, education, and critical awareness as the means of emancipation.

According to Sharmila Rege, these memoirs serve as collective letters to the world, thus, transferring personal pain to a collective denunciation of society. Besides offering an account of injustice, they help the marginalised groups to have a sense of solidarity and a sense of collective consciousness. Once that is the case, memory and narrative become political practices, which allows authors to rebuild identities that are broken and

declare themselves to be dignified in the presence of institutional dehumanisation.

Finally, the human spirit is strong; the strength of Dalit literature is evident in the autobiographical literature that was published by them. This power to narrate, remember and fight is preserved even within systems of the most horrible oppression as this statement proves. These works not only break caste systems, but also expand the ethical and emotional boundaries of literature in itself which is what can make it an indispensable instrument of social reform. This is achieved through making traumatic experiences work into a story of survival and empowerment.

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