

## RETROSPECTION AND INTROSPECTION OF DALIT LIFE: A STUDY OF OMPRAKASH VALMIKI'S *JOOZHAN* AND BAMA FAUSTINA'S *KARAKKU*

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### ABSTRACT

*This research paper attempts to study epiphany moments of Dalit consciousness that focus on the socio-cultural aspects of being Dalit and its relation to caste discrimination in India. This research paper aims to set up the moments of epiphany to make a vital contribution to reading about Dalit subjectivity in select autobiographies. The proposed research paper undertakes a comparative study of the selected fiction of Bama Faustina and Om Prakash to explore the present circumstances of marginalised society due to the practice of traditional caste hierarchies in the Hindu community concerned with aesthetics in writing. This research work is based on the different aesthetics ideas concerned with dalit social values. Despite the constitutional rule for over half a century, we could not get rid of our casteist structural problems in India.*

*Keywords: Dalit consciousness, epiphany, autobiography, marginalised, Aesthetics.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In Dalit Literature, the term 'Dalit' suggests documents the lives of downtrodden or 'broken' people who have been brutally marginalised and denied a standard of social life because of their birth status for centuries. The birth of Dalit itself is filled with misery because unknowingly, they are imparted with a sense of degradedness. In Indian context largely consists of the people belonging to the so-called upper caste. That is the reason that a Dalit child who is yet to understand our social system has to face innumerable discriminatory levels which perhaps any other child could not have ever imagined. They are marginalised from all spheres of life. Very early in their life, they realise that the world outside is very hostile to everything they try to do. A majority of the society's inhabitants are ready to crush their aspirations and dreams. Dalits are born out of bleakness and, at times, even hopelessness. Dalit literature scripts majorly the experiences of such people and in doing so. Laura R. Brueck, in the book *Writing Resistance: The Rhetorical Imagination of Hindi Dalit Literature*, sums "Dalit literature in its activist, social role, orients itself towards two specific target audiences: a Dalit audience among whom it intends to foster political consciousness, and a non-Dalit audience for whom it endeavours to reveal the 'reality' of caste society" (Brueck).

Dalit literature has tried to play on the idea of consciousness as it aims to create a distinct one of its own. By forming a totality, Dalit literature has consolidated its stand. Now it is placed on the firm ground of being regarded as a counter-cultural discourse, where several voices merge and move towards a goal of self-emancipation. The social sanctions that have been laid down have later become the power of the Dalits, and they reconstruct themselves with renewed zeal and enthusiasm. This research paper heavily relies on 'reality' as exhibited in Dalit literature. The sense of 'reality' in the context of Dalit literature is both very unique and ironic. The research relied on autobiographical narratives like Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*(1997)and Bama's *Karukku* (1992). The selection of these works would give me a perspective of both genders – the male and the female. On one side, Valmiki speaks about his life as a Dalit and his hardships while growing up within a highly discriminatory society. On the other side, Bama's stories reflect the plight of Dalit women who are marginalised both inside and outside their homes. While *Joothan* is regarded as one of the earliest Dalit novels, Bama's *Karukku* is the first Dalit autobiography written in Tamil. Even if both these accounts are written from the Dalit perspective, they are dissimilar in their nature of handling the subject and speak of different societies inhabited by different kinds of people. *Joothan* is very appealing because of its faithful depiction of Dalit life. At the same time, *Karukku*'s time of publication is crucial as it was the time of anti-Mandal commission agitations and the demolition of the Babri Masjid, which strained communal relations to a great extent.

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The existing cultural studies have mainly discussed the aesthetic dimension of life and its reality while giving less room for discussing culture and diversity. Aesthetics as a dominant force is present in every culture, but in the context of the Dalits, the aesthetic itself is life. It is a way of seeing the world primarily through their experiences. Dalit writings are essentially the writings of protest, and through these renderings, they create a world that has portrayed the renewal of hope. The spirit of resistance speaks loads of Dalit literature as it is the life that matters. It is the constitutive category behind their aesthetic. Before consolidating the Dalit category, many different but dominated categories were used to study marginalisation, but Dalits are the major resistance category of counter-hegemonic culture. As a community, despite facing centuries of onslaught and public harassment over their social and human lives, the Dalits have gained a position to reckon with. This is the fruit of struggles that founders of Dalit thought who had visions of such a society. The most important thing that has to be understood is that Dalits have also created the field of new interventions by creating a contemporary aesthetic.

This field is now that of possibility, and it can only be deeply engaged with when we can create a sense of understanding of the lives of Dalits. The larger creative domain is now well placed because of the creation of this new aesthetic – an aesthetic that is full of life and hope and can successfully inspire several generations to come. Arun Prabha Mukherjee in his translated edition titled *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* pointing towards Dalit education and bases of literature, argues “a literary critic, reared in an educational system that taught a canon of literature focused solely on the privileged sections of society, whether of India or the West, must tread cautiously in this new territory, using the benchmarks provided by Dalit literary theory and continuously on guard against those kinds of formalist analyses that privilege form over content”<sup>1</sup> (Mukherjee, xxxix). He also mentions in the introduction to his translated edition that Dalit literature is very distinct. It should be dealt with proper empathy to realise its true potential. The importance of Dalit literature has been linked with ‘Dalit consciousness’ by critics like Limbale and Arjun Dangle. While the Dalit critical imperative to differentiate between the writings of Dalits and the non-Dalits is part of the ideology. Still, it has even at times become too dismissive about their general role in life. While the Dalit literary movement has had an important socio-political and literary impact in various Indian linguistic regions, there has been little sustained scholarly attempt to situate the writings within a modern and contemporary critical framework.

The art forms were also part of the Dalit oral tradition. The Dalits being denied access to schools had some historical references that they used to sing and recite. Within all forms of Dalit literature, autobiographies were considered the essential genre. They provided an ‘interior’ access to the Dalit lives and had faithful accountability, which was less in other genres. Noting the importance of autobiographies, Raj Kumar observed in his book *Dalit Personal Narratives*: “Autobiographical narratives constitute a significant segment of Dalit literature. The Dalit writers termed these narratives as ‘self-stories’ There is a need to examine and evaluate Dalit historical experiences from the perspective of caste, economic class, politics, and patriarchal angles, aimed towards transforming work, wages, and family life. They should attempt to emphasise the unity of caste, class, and gender and reject the efforts to bifurcate their identities” (Kumar, 55).

In *Karukku*, Bama presents the interior life of the women who are subjected to deprivation since her birth and the fact that she is a Dalit makes her life all the worse. The aesthetical subjectivity could be better fleshed out and discussed in detailed form by critically engaging with the texts. The proposed research article undertakes a comparative study of the selected fiction of Bama Faustina and Omprakash to explore the present circumstances of marginalised society due to the practice of traditional caste hierarchies in Hindu community in the light of aesthetic mode of writing. Further, Bama Faustina Soosairaj, is a Tamil novelist who served as a nun for seven years, but then she left the convent and began writing. Her novels are a predicament of casteism and gender discrimination. She wrote on her childhood experiences, which formed her first work, *Karukku* published in 1992. *Karukku*, an autobiography by Bama, is one of the path-breaking works in Dalit aesthetic and literature. In this work, she has depicted the plight of Tamil Dalit Christians. A distinguishing feature predominating in this fiction is the depiction of the sufferings of Periyar untouchables as Christian

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<sup>1</sup>Mukherjee, ArunPrabha. *Joothan: An Untouchable's Life*. 2003. P. xxxix.

Dalits that is caste within a caste is being exploited by the upper-class people. In this way, Bama's situation is "triple marginalised" as she is a woman in a Dalit community. K. W. Christopher, critiquing the oppression inflicted upon Dalit women, writes:

Her re-reading of the Bible enables Bama's critique of the Brahminical structures within the Church. Karukku records the trajectory of her faith from its childhood simplicity to a mature understanding (19)<sup>2</sup>. *Karukku* is a Tamil word that implies a double-edged sword and freshness and newness. The autobiography presents the author's bewilderment about her identity as a Catholic and a Dalit woman. Her belief as a Catholic guide her way to a spiritual development and familiarises her with the socio-political context as a Dalit. Reading of the spiritual texts enables her to see hope for the oppressed. She aspires to help the Dalits rise from their low status and the atrocities inflicted by the upper caste upon them. She tries realising this hope of overcoming oppression by becoming a nun in a Church. After serving for a few years, she realises that her perspective is different from the Church and the convent where she is serving. As a child, Bama always went to the church and had a deep faith in Catholicism. When she grew up, she decided to become a nun. As a nun, she realised that there are separate training places for Dalit Catholics. At this juncture, she was too overwhelmed and gave up her wish to become a nun. Her consciousness of caste-based discrimination in a religious place like church affected her immensely. The conflict and resolution that she is faced with as a Catholic Dalit shaped the plot of her autobiography. The whole journey as a Catholic woman and a nun henceforth sprouts her caste and gender consciousness simultaneously.

Bama began to challenge gender inequality right from her childhood. At the onset of the story, she mentions games they used to play. She noticed that girls and boys play different games. In a deliberate attempt to naturalise her liking towards a game which usually boys play in a highly gendered society like India, she admits that *kabaddi* was her favourite game (a wrestling game played in India). She spoke to a writer in Delhi: "Sometimes we were cops and robbers, sometimes husband and wife. But my favourite game was kabaddi (a team wrestling game played in many Indian villages). I liked the whole business of challenging, crossing over and vanquishing the opponent,"<sup>3</sup> Most gender writings challenge this notion of different games for boys and girls- that condemns the use of terms like 'sissy' and 'tomboy'. Gender typing of play behaviour forms an essential part of early socialisation and shapes gender identities. Bama began to challenge gendered socialisation right from her childhood. Bama presents herself as a character who is assertive and vocal. Amidst the strong opposition from her significant others, she still expresses her desire to be a nun. She is aspiring as she believed in her wishes and ambition. She thought that going to convent will allow her to live her life as she wants viz. in the service of God as well as humanity. She says, "*They said I could do far more useful work as a layperson than I would do as nun. They said that caste-difference counted for a great deal within convents.*" (23)<sup>4</sup>

In *Karukku*, Bama points out that her community is generally discriminated in terms of wage payment. She writes- "When I saw our people working so hard night and day, I often used to wonder from where they got their strength. And I used to think, that at the rate they worked, men and women both, every single day, they should be able to advance themselves. But of course, they never received the payment that was appropriate to their labour." (54) She recognises the economic discrimination that Dalit women face in particular. Bama says that the women of her community are quite hardworking but do not get any financial assistance from their husbands. In the wage market too, they face discrimination. Bama asserts unhesitatingly, "Even if they did the same work, men received one wage, women another. They are always paid more. I don't understand why." Women face discrimination for getting basic education as well. Later in the book, she also remembers the discrimination she faced while she was trying to find a job. She applied at a number of places but never heard back. Finally, she got a call from a school run by Nadar (upper caste) in that area. She shows her contempt that how they asked her a thousand and one questions and agreed to pay only a four hundred rupees as salary.

<sup>2</sup>Christopher, K.W. "Between two Worlds: The Predicament of Dalit Christians in Bama's works. P. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Karukku, 2002

<sup>4</sup> Karukku, 2002

Many Dalit women in cities find difficulty in finding a good job. Bama was not spared of this discrimination either. She felt that it was the first time she was dealing with the real world. While living in the convent, she could not see the life of a Dalit and the oppression. Bama also shares her dissent about untouchability. She has cited an incident about her grandmother who worked as a servant for Naicker (the upper caste in the village) families. She calls the little boys of the family as 'the master'. When women in the Naicker families have to give water to Dalits, they would pour water from a height of four feet. Bama feels awful about all these inhumane treatment given to her people. She questions, "Are Dalits not human beings? What do we lack?" (27) She also expresses her contempt when she saw that even Christianity followed untouchability.

Following *Karukku*, Bama published *Sangati* (2005) which again is a biography in the form of events in the lives of various Dalit women. As she puts it, "While *Karukku* is an autobiography of an individual, *Sangati* is the autobiography of a community." In *Sangati*, the readers can see Bama's consciousness maturing into *Dalit feminist consciousness*. Bama narrates various incidents where the women attempt to rebuild their lives by using resistance and disobedience as a tool to stand against patriarchy. She feels that women of her community are in a better position to negotiate power than the women belonging to upper castes. Sakunthala A. I., in analysing Bama's text says, 'The Dalit women hurl abuses, curses and obscene usages without any sense of shame. For them, there is no obligation to display angelic virtues of beauty and defiance.'

Bama shows how within her own community there is a huge gender inequality. Power, whether political or economic is vested in the hands of Dalit men. Unequal economic power is explained by the differential wage rates for Dalit men and women. Unequal political power is explained by absence of females in the caste courts in the village where she lives. The rules for sexual conduct are different for men and women. Om Prakash Valmiki, a significant Indian Dalit author got fame with his literary text *Joothan* (1997). He is a writer who has written in Hindi, but his literary works have been translated into English by Arun Prabh Mukherjee. *Joothan*, depicts the conditions of a Dalit boy who has to face indiscrimination in his school days. Later on, he conceals his caste only because that caste is not respected in the society. The word "Joothan" summarises the pain, humiliation, and poverty of a community forced to live at the bottom of social pyramid of Indian caste system. Mukherjee explains the Hindi term joothan as- *food left on an eater's plate, usually destined for the garbage pail in a middle class, urban home.* (Mukherjee, 2003). *Joothan*, as a Dalit literary text, has received appreciation and criticism alike. It is not just an autobiography but also the tale of the community to which Valmiki belonged. Valmiki belonged to the Chuhra community of Uttar Pradesh. The Churhas worked for Tagas, the upper caste of his village. He was brought up in a society which was feudal and dominated by Brahamins. Untouchability was one social evil that Valmiki had to confront as a child. Valmiki writes in his autobiography, "*Untouchability was so rampant that while it was considered all right to touch dogs and cats or cows and buffaloes, if one happened to touch a Chuhra, one got contaminated or polluted. The Chuhras were not seen as human*". (2)<sup>5</sup> *Joothan* depicts that Valmiki's family support was very significant for his education and success he attained in his life.

However, when it comes to Dalit women, they have to struggle for the kind of care the support they receive should come from their families. In *Karukku*, when Bama expresses her desire to practice nunnery, her family was very resistant to her decision. Subashree Krishnaswamy<sup>6</sup> in "A Call for Action" presents the typical picture of a Dalit woman: "As Dalit women, they have double cross to bear: not only are they exploited outside home by the upper castes, they are also abused by the highly patriarchal men within the community"<sup>(4)</sup>. Thus, both are autobiographies that describe the tales of an individual and the community, the voices of resistance are different. In *Joothan*, there is a rejection of traditional Hindu culture and caste hierarchy. On the other hand, the voice of Bama represents rejection to caste as well as gender superiority. Some of the themes are parallel in *Karukku*, *Sangati* and *Joothan*. This includes description of village and house structure- most Dalit are depicted in Dalit literature as living in worst conditions. They lack basic amenities live in Kaccha houses. This has a great

<sup>5</sup> ibid 1997

<sup>6</sup> Link to the article: [http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/56448/9/09\\_chapter%203.pdf](http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/56448/9/09_chapter%203.pdf)

significance in showing the physical and spatial segregation which exists in society based on caste. Water sources are separate for Dalits, and their presence near water sources of upper caste is considered to be polluting. Another parallel seen in both these autobiographies is the importance of education in the life of Dalits. Education proved to be a liberating force in Bama's life and Valmiki. Valmiki's parents supported his education and knew its importance. Bama's father served in the Army and he realised that it is essential for all the four children to be given education, even amidst poverty. Equally important is the role of social capital in shaping individual personalities. In the early childhood, both Bama and Valmiki had to face discrimination because of the kind of clothes they wore. Since caste is deeply linked to class, lower castes find it difficult to move up in ladder of course, up till some generations. In Karukka and Joothan, the narrators' clothes, rather rags, became a subject of ridicule for the upper caste children.

Both the autobiographies point out a fundamental fact about Dalit literature in general. Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* describes the episode of food gathering he had witnessed as a boy and from which the novel's title has been derived. He narrates "During a wedding when the guests and the baratis, the bridegroom's party, were eating their meals, the Chuhra's would sit outside with huge baskets. After the party had eaten, the dirty pattals or leaf plates were put in the Chuhra's basket, which they took home, to save the joothan sticking to them. The little pieces of pooris, the bits of sweetmeats, and a little bit of vegetable was enough to make them happy. The joothan was eaten with a lot of relish. The bridegroom's guests who didn't leave enough scraps on their pattals were denounced as gluttons. Poor things, they had never enjoyed a wedding feast. So they had licked it all up. During the marriage season, our elders narrated with thrilled voices, stories of baratis who had left several months of joothan. (19)

All these leftover pooris would be dried and consumed by us later.'<sup>7</sup> If we see it very carefully both *Joothan* and *Karukku* are very important studies into the facts of childhood, and comparing it with any childhood aspirations would give us more alternative pictures. Think of a situation when a child in any traditional household is pampered and showered with lots of kindness and love, we see amidst them the protagonists of *Joothan* and *Karukku* being abused from their very initial days and made to have a realisation that they were unfortunately born in such a social segment where discrimination and hatred is the order of the day. The episodes are presented so that it brings out the ultimate appeal of the subjectivity which moves from the fringes of torture to the courts of inhumanity. If we take the case of *Joothan* we can very well see that sitting at our homes it can be very easy to brandish the rhetoric of equality but what goes on with experience is something that only the person can feel. This is the core of all the views presented as part of the negotiations of pain and disgust.

If Valmiki's *Joothan* describes the ill effects of superstition in Dalit social life, Bama's *Karukku* very powerfully questions the different stereotypes involved within the organisation of the order of the society. She tries to see beyond the evil world of discrimination that has been carried out in the text with the labels of Christian beliefs and their inherent hypocritical practices. She poses some questions in the minds of the readers like who are the Dalits? Are they really powerless? If yes, why are they so powerless? Seeking answers to some of the most critical life questions she tries to use the words as her only form of resistance which as a girl child she very confidently states with an objective. Caste is a very important element within the social imaginary of the Indian state. It is so intertwined with one's identity that it is the only major signifier that matters in the long run of life and not the person's good deeds. It is rather ironical that in a country like ours where we can easily find multitude of cultural voices and practices we can also see the existence of various other forms of identity and its related crisis. These things have been noted in the books that have been written within the zone of humanity and its overlapping feelings. In one of the episodes, Bama relates this at a very seminal level. She says, "The warden sister of our hostel could not abide low caste or poor children. She'd get hold of us and scold us for no rhyme or reason. If a girl tended to be on the plump side, she'd get it even more. These people get nothing to eat at home; they come here and they grow fat, she would say publicly. After the holidays, when we returned to the school, she would say, look at the Cheri children! When they stay

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<sup>7</sup>Mukherjee, Arun Prabha. *Joothan: An Untouchable's Life*. 2003. Pp. 9-10.

here, they eat the fill and look as round as potatoes. But look at the state they come back from home, just skin and bones”<sup>8</sup>( Bama, pp.17-18). The idea of food and its relationship with hunger has also been related by Valmiki in his novel where he would recount his childhood days and how there was extreme shortage of food, a condition that developed into an inhuman potential where scraps or leftovers of food became an item to relish and enjoy. This theme has been explored by major Dalit writers and has also provided a backdrop for much of aesthetic thought as it is part of their daily struggle, where Dalits being stripped off the basic necessities in life have to live on the mercy of so many upper caste people. It is also a matter of rivalry that took place between the majoritarian people and the ones belonging to the marginal sections as the upper caste people felt that the right over food was exclusively theirs whereas ironically most of the times it was the people from the poor sections who had produced crops and made them food for all of us.

Both have employed the notion of food and the discrimination at the hands of teachers the novelists wherein food becomes a medium of struggle and further channelling of energy. Describing one of the episodes of torture for doing something that was not meant for the lower caste people Bama asks about food as she writes, ‘And Paatti, will they give them food to eat after they have beaten them up? What food? They’ll give them a tiny bit of ragi or cholam gruel in the name of food, they say. Now if they were rich, or upper caste, or if the police were obliged to them in some way, they would just have given them a couple of light taps. And, Paatti when will they let them go home? They have to survive, first of all. After all those blows, after they have been subject to torture, after the case is adjourned several times, and then heard at last, heaven only knows when they’ll come home’.<sup>9</sup> This exchange between the grandmother and a small child holds significance as the child at a very early age get to know about the evil social system and how this etching within the child’s psyche demands that even an infant mind who is supposed to enjoy the intimate bonds of the world has to grapple with the harsh reality that could only give the person the lesson of life that if she transcends or even tries to transcend the boundaries of faith and other forms she will be cruelly punished.

Finally, this research has introduced to trace some of the diversions and confluences of various sites of differing aesthetics in Dalit life today and exercise of all the arguments that have been explored. Through a detailed analysis and depth interpretation of the texts in this research work, looking the fresh medium and the future directions. The research work is based on the study of aesthetic as a social category and its relevance amongst the Dalits. Dalits created for themselves was a necessary tool of analysis and not a meaninglessly handed down category. This aesthetic category that is full of pain and oppression has helped the Dalit writers and critics with an objective of direction using which they can presently create the best of all works of literature.

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<sup>8</sup>Bama. Trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom. *Karukku*. 2012. pp. 17-18.

<sup>9</sup>Bama. trans. Lakshmi Holmstrom. *Karukku*. 2012. pp. 36.