

## The Lingering Scars: Caste and Childhood in Dalit Autobiographies

**Princy**

(First Author)

**Dr. Nisha Thakur**

(Second Author)

### Abstract

This paper will explore Dalit autobiographies through the lens of childhood and will examine the intersection of caste, childhood, and memory. The autobiographies taken for discussion are *Karukku* (1992) by Bama, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (1997) by Omparakash Valmiki, and *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit* (2017) by Manoranjan Byapari. It focuses on childhood experiences and examines how their surrounding environments, coupled with discrimination, humiliation, and caste hegemony, shape their identity. It will also delve into how these children find solace in playing in nature or mimicking their real-life experiences in games that temporarily escape the harsh reality.

**Keywords:** Dalit literature, Caste, Childhood, memory, autobiography, hegemony

### Introduction

Unlike other forms of literature, Dalit literature is born out of socio-cultural and economic marginalization faced by Dalits. For centuries, Dalits have been marginalized within Indian society, a marginalization that extends to their literary works, which have often been dismissed or overlooked by upper-caste writers and critics. Dalit literature challenges this by presenting authentic experiences. The richest source of these authentic lived experiences is autobiographies. The objective of an autobiography is to represent the 'self' but in Dalit autobiographies, the author narrates not just about the 'self' but the whole community. They represent the first-hand and real experiences faced by them and their community. Manoranjan Byapari asserts in his autobiography, *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit*, "This is a great difficulty with autobiographies- that there is no veil that I can draw around me" (x). These autobiographies have played a vital role in advocating social, economic, and political equality and justice for Dalits by presenting the authors' first-hand experiences and struggles. The field of Dalit literature is dynamic, reflecting the evolving socio-political landscape and the continual quest for social justice and equality as it addresses

major themes such as untouchability, poverty, resistance to identity, and resilience. Childhood is also an important part of Dalit autobiographies as these works chronicle the journey of experiences from a very early age.

### **Dalit Childhood in Dalit Autobiographies**

Childhood universally is often idealized as a phase of life that witnesses innocence, joy, and exploration. It is just like a fairy tale where everything seems easy, admirable, and full of happiness. However, it is different in the case of Dalit children where they were born within a societal hierarchy and with confined boundaries. The autobiographies show how their childhood is a site of pain, humiliation, and systemic oppression that leaves deep scars on their lives. An angle of these autobiographies also highlights the unbiased nature or innocence of childhood, where children find joy and happiness in small things. Despite pervasive discrimination and hardships, Dalit children often find solace and happiness in the simplest aspects of life. When they have a realization that they can't afford some things, they enjoy merely observing them. As Bama mentioned in *Karukku*, the way to her home takes ten minutes but;

It would take me half an hour to an hour to dawdle along, watching all the fun and games that were going on there...the pongal offerings being cooked in front of the temple; the dried-fish stall by the statue of Gandhi; the sweet stall, the stall selling fried snacks...Each thing would pull me to a standstill and not allow me to go any further. (13-14)

The things out there mesmerized the heart of a child that made her forget everything they suffer temporarily for a while. Children mimic their real-life incidents or what they see around them in their games. They are so influenced by their lives that even at the time of enjoying or playing, they choose their real-life incidents and surroundings over other things. It demonstrates that this hierarchical structure maintained by society is deeply ingrained into their little minds. Bama has illustrated these games in her autobiography:

Two or three boys would play at being Naicker. The rest of us would call them 'Ayya, Ayya', and pretend to be their pannaiyaal. These boys would act as if they had a lot of power over us. They'd call out to us, 'Yeppa, Yeppa', humiliate us, and make us do a lot of work. We'd pretend to eork in their fields all day, and then collect our wages and go home. (56)

Childhood holds a particular significance in Dalit autobiographies, as it shapes the foundation of their experiences and identity. These experiences are something that keeps pinching whole life and it is way more difficult for narrators to pen them down as Omparakash Valmiki explains in Author's Preface to *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*,

Putting these experiences on paper entailed all sorts of dangers. After a long period of procrastination, I started to write. Once again, I had to relive all those miseries, torments, neglects, abominations. I suffered a deep mental anguish while writing this book. How terribly painful was this unraveling of my self, layer upon layer. (viii)

Childhood memories offer glimpses of the life of Dalit Children that are full of their traumatic and humiliating experiences. Omparakash Valmiki describes an incident in *Joothan*, where his mother asks an upper-caste man for fresh food but he humiliates her by saying, "Don't forget your place, chuhri. Pick up your basket and get going". The impact of this incident on Valmiki as a child is profound as he recounts, "Those words of Sukhdev Singh Tyagi penetrated my breast like a knife. They continue to singe me to this day" (11). Hearing such degrading words directed at his mother deeply hurts a child, creating a lasting memory that he carries throughout his life. At an age when they do not even understand the concept of untouchability, they face and feel the embarrassment that leaves a traumatic impression on their personalities. This is evident in *Karukku* as well, when Bama asserts, "When I was studying in the third class, I hadn't yet heard people speak openly of untouchability. But I had already seen, felt, experienced, and been humiliated by what it is" (13). Manoranjan Byapari also articulates in his autobiography, *Interrogating my Chandal Life*, "At the age when children live a happy and carefree world, I was pushed by fate into a hard and harsh reality" (31). Manoranjan Byapari spent his childhood in between a lot of riots and murders, with blood everywhere during the time of partition. One day alone, he too caught by three adults and their first question was, "Abbe you, what's your jaat" (49)? He as a small child gathered all this strength and hit one and got rescued himself. He also faced sexual abuse by a policeman, Amulya Thakur, when he was working in the mess of a jail. These children do not live in a dreamy world as in mainstream children's stories but face the harsh realities of society. They always keep thinking about why their life is that different from others. Valmiki shared a memory of his childhood in *Joothan* saying, "When I was a young boy, I used to go with my parents to help them out. Looking at the food of the Tagas, I

would wonder why we never got to eat food like that” (10). Getting an education in such scenarios was a challenging task. Some of them went to schools struggling with their conditions but some neither went to school nor enjoyed their childhood as they had to join their parents to survive. Bama asserts in *Karukku*;

These tiny, crab-like children pour their kuuzh into their carriers half asleep, totter along to the van, climb in and go off to work...At an age when they should be going to school, studying like everyone else and playing about in the evenings, they are shut up inside the factories instead...these little ones' fate is the smell of matchbox solution, not the smell of knowledge or learning. (55)

Dalits have been dominated, ignored, rejected as human beings, and treated as animals for centuries. The prevailing hegemony is so deeply ingrained in their minds that many have accepted their perceived inferiority and the supposed superiority of others. A critic, Gopal Guru discusses this historical rejection and ignorance faced by Dalits in his book *Humiliation: Claims and Context* (2009), stating:

The rejection of the untouchable continues to be complete, suggesting a concentrated expression of repulsion. It not only makes the untouchable invisible but even unimaginable. The ideology of purity- pollution cancels out a vast section of people from the social interaction both in terms of time and space. The caste system and the ideology of purity- pollution produces a kind of total rejection which seeks to push a person or an entire social group in question beyond the civilizational framework, rendering the latter completely un-seeable, unapproachable and untouchable. (212)

It is this rejection of ignorance based on caste within the societal hierarchical structure that is important for Dalit literature and the Dalit community. Gopal Guru refers to this concept as “rejection of rejection.” This rejection results in angst that gives birth to resistance and it is through resistance that an individual attains resilience. These help the voiceless to voice for themselves.

The feelings of humiliation and fear create trauma and an inferiority complex in the hearts and minds of Dalits, affecting not only adults but also children. In her paper, “Nuanced Absences and Presences of Innocence: Reading Dalit Childhood in Select Poems” (2022), Rini Reba Mathew asserts,

Dalit children are not living in the beautiful imaginary lands like a wonderland in Alice in Wonderland. They are not dreaming about a prince charming coming on a horse and taking them to a palace, as was portrayed in children's fiction by mainstream writers...Their childhood is not about hearing the stories told by grannies; instead, they started working to earn their livelihood from a very early age. (e590)

Mathew elucidates the distinction between Dalit childhood and its mainstream counterpart. She contrasts the idyllic portrayal of childhood found in mainstream literature, explained through works such as R.K. Narayan's *Swami and His Friends* and *Alice in Wonderland*, with the stark realities faced by Dalit children. Mainstream childhood is full of dreams and fantasies, whereas Dalit children do not live in dreams but live in reality. She pointed out another aspect that differentiates Dalit children: language. The language used by teachers in schools alienates Dalit students, as Mathew explains: "The teachers speak and take classes in a different language, which only the non-Dalits could understand" (e591). This early educational barrier reinforces their marginalization and suppression.

In the poem *Which Language Should I Speak?* by Arun Kamble, published in *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* (1992), the poet addresses the identity crisis and alienation he experiences due to his language. The poem reflects his inner turmoil and the broader issue of linguistic marginalization faced by Dalits.

Here is an excerpt from the poem:

Chewing totters in the badlands  
My grandpa,  
The permanent resident of my body,  
The household of tradition heaped on his back,  
Hollers at me,  
'you whore-son, talk like we do. Talk, I tell you!'

Picking through the Vedas  
His top- knot well oiled with ghee,  
My Brahmin teacher tells me,

‘you idiot, use the language correctly!’

Now I ask you, which language should I speak? (54)

The poem vividly encapsulates the struggle of Dalits who find themselves caught between their native language and the dominant language imposed by society. This linguistic alienation contributes to their sense of identity crisis and further reinforces their marginalization. Another significant barrier preventing Dalits from overcoming systemic oppression is hegemony—the ingrained beliefs and mind-sets that perpetuate the caste hierarchy. This hegemonic control manifests in the internalization of caste-based inferiority and societal norms, which restrict Dalits' ability to envision and pursue liberation and equality.

The punishments that Dalit children faced in their schools were filled with pain and humiliation. These punishments and the discriminatory treatment they received contributed significantly to their troubled childhoods and long-lasting memories. For Dalit children, getting an education was not easy; they were not treated like other children. While teachers are supposed to be mentors guiding students, in their world, teachers often put them down and humiliate them. Valmiki has well illustrated this in *Joothan* that his teachers and students call him ‘Abey Chuhre’ and ‘Chuhre Ka’ to humiliate him. The children used to beat him without any reason. When other children studied in the classroom, he was forced to clean the school by the teacher. He shared an incident that happened in school with his friend in *Joothan*;

Sukkhan Singh had developed a boil on his belly, just below his ribs. While in class, he used to keep his shirt folded up so as to keep the boil uncovered. This way the shirt could be kept clear of the puss on one hand, and on the other, the boil protected from the blows of the teacher. One day while thrashing Sukkhan Singh, the teacher’s fist hit the boil. Sukkhan screamed with pain. The boil had burst. Seeing him flailing with pain, I too began to cry. While we cried, the teacher was showering abuse on us nonstop. (4)

Since these humiliating and embarrassing experiences have a profound psychological impact, education is the only way for individuals to unlock the doors for both themselves and their community because Dalit literature is there to represent not only the individual but the whole

community. Great influencers such as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Jyotirao Phule who profoundly impacted Dalit writing emphasized the importance of education as a crucial tool for fighting against systemic oppression and advocating for rights. Their teachings underscore the belief that education is the key to empowerment and social change for Dalits. This is also the opinion of a contemporary author and journalist, Yashica Dutt, who states that “our education was our only strength.” in the prologue of her *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir* (2019). Also, Narendra Jadhav asserts in his book *Untouchables* (2005) that, “Education was the only way to ensure life of dignity” (xvi). Education awareness is an element in all the self-narratives that come through different people who know the fact that education will lead to their empowerment. Manohar Mauli Biswas wrote an autobiography titled *Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal* (2015), describing his baba as that person in his life who “believed that education would bring a new phase in our lives- there would be an improvement in the hereditary occupation” (4). Jadhav's father, greatly influenced by Dr. Ambedkar, aspired to provide his child with an education in a good school. This desire stemmed from the belief that quality education was essential for overcoming systemic barriers and achieving social mobility. Jadhav illustrates, “The only thing he could hear was Babasaheb Ambedkar’s voice urging his people to educate their children” and when he got admitted his son in school, “Only the sight of his child sitting down in the classroom soothed his mind put to rest all his doubts” (xvi). It is not only education that is needed to resist the system. It is now believed that courage is equally essential alongside education to voice against all these atrocities. Even after obtaining an education, Dalits continue to face humiliation, and the caste baggage remains with them everywhere. Malagatti also says, “One needs to have a brave heart to write all this” (4) and he also asserts that, “Even though we Dalits receive good education and financial facilities, the ghost of caste does not stop haunting our inner psyche” (98). Manoranjan Byapari also shared his opinion on this in his book *Interrogating My Chandal Life*,

There are not a few doctors, engineers, artists, politicians, poets writers from among the Namashudra community today. While it is true that in the professional sphere the doctor gets his due respect from his patient, the poet from his reader and the teacher from his student, the discrimination continues.

(11)

He also holds a strong view that “It is not a change of name but a change of heart and mind that was required” (11). It is through this awareness that narrators have arrived at a point where they not only represent themselves but their entire community.

## Conclusion

The childhood memories that are recounted in these autobiographies serve essential purposes. These memories are not just an act of writing but it is an act of writing back that helps the whole community all over the world to stand strong. These memories give strength to voice out. I also help to reclaim their identity. These autobiographies are the source to realize, resist and attain resilience.

## Works Cited

### Primary Sources

Bama. *Karukku*. Translated by Lakshmi Holmstrom. OUP, 1992.

Byapari, Manoranjan. *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit*. Translated by Sipra Mukherjee. SAGE Publications, 2017.

Valmiki, Omparakash. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*. Trans. Arun Prabha Mukherjee. Samya Publication, 1997.

### Secondary Sources

Biswas, Manohar Mouli. *Surviving in My World: Growing Up Dalit in Bengal*. Trans. and edited by Angana Dutta and Jaydeep Sarangi. Samya Publications, 2015.

Dangle, Arjun, editor. *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature*. Orient Longman, 1992.

Dutt, Yashica. *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir*. Aleph Book Company, 2019.

Gidla, Sujatha. *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India*. Farras, Straus and Giroux, 2017.

Guru, Gopal, editor. *Humiliation: Claims and Context*. Oxford UP, 2009.

Jadhav, Narendra. *Untouchables: My Family's Triumphant Escape from India's Caste System*. Scribner, 2005.

Mathew, Rini Reba. “Nuanced Absences and Presences of Innocence: Reading Dalit Childhood in Select Poems.” *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, vol. 10, no. 11, journal-article, Nov. 2022, pp. E509-91.