

Margins Rewritten: A Comparative Exploration of Gender, Caste and Identity in *Joothan* and *Karukku*

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An autobiography is a glimpse into a person's life. The term 'autobiography' consists of three words-'autos', 'Bios' and 'Graphe' which means – 'self', 'life' and 'to write' respectively. In other words, the term 'autobiography' refers to self-life writing/narrative. Until twentieth century commonly used term was memoir. It typically tells the chronological story of an author's life-from birth to the present. Autobiographies are infused with the author's personality and perception of himself/herself and the world. Though autobiography paired well with theories such as structuralism, post-structuralism seemed to be a fertile ground for reconsidering the divide between fact & fiction, challenging the possibility of presenting a life objectively. Autobiography attracts the writers and readers, for it reveals the "hidden forms of inwardness" and the writer's self succeeds in establishing the writer's portrait in the public eye (Sodhi 123).

After centuries of silence, when the Dalit writers felt the need to express themselves, they could only turn inward and talk about their own experiences. Autobiography thus became a fitting vehicle for this expression. The portrayal of the life of the Dalit individuals was representative of the entire community. In this sense, a private gesture 'me-ism' gives way to 'our-ism' and superficial concerns about 'individual subject' usually give way to 'the collective subjection' of the group. Thus autobiography obliterated the distinction between the private and the public. That was why after setting up of the Dalit Panthers Party, a number of autobiographies were written in Marathi followed by Kannada. Autobiography, for many

reasons, has been a favourite genre of Dalit writers. It is this literary genre where they can demonstrate their pain, anguish and humiliation. It helps them to search for their selfhood. Moreover, they want to bring up social reformation by demonstrating their own miseries. For social enlightenment too, they adopt autobiography as a suitable device. They want to enlighten the oppressed and at the same time by delineating their pitiable condition they want to bring change in the hearts of non-dalit readers. In other words, Dalits want to sensitize non-Dalits through projecting their own life stories. Thus the aesthetics of Dalit's autobiographies is linked with their politics. On the one hand, they make an assertion for equal rights and equal status in the society and on the other hand, they protest against inequality and inhumanity and suggest the ways to eradicate it. Thus Dalit aesthetics encapsulates the 'I-we' dialectics, intertwining of individual, community and nation, a transformation of the public sphere through expression of agitation and interrogative rhetoric. It involves as much of speaking, as speaking to, speaking up and speaking for.

The hegemonies namely gender and castes are the prime factors in the construction of individual selfhood as well as the collective identity of Dalits. Since the works are autobiographical, these hegemonies as the socio-historical background form the essential component of an autobiography namely the contemporaneousness and experiential reality. Though both the autobiographical works *Joothan* and *Karukku* are primarily a critique of caste system, they also throw significant light on classicist structure of Indian society. The choice of a self-narrative by a man and a woman each also gives a penetrative insight into the gender difference in the perception of the issues of caste and class besides pointing out the situation of Dalit women in post-colonial India.

Dalit consciousness is a widely accepted critical term which is directly related to literary endeavour to write on Dalit themes particularly discussing the question of Dalit identity. Dalit aesthetics, though said to be still evolving and rooted in the context and text, is essentially grounded in the interface between authenticity of experience and creative effort of the narrator/author. The aesthetics of Dalit autobiography thus has a paradoxical conflation of aesthetics. Both the Dalit writings and autobiographies are recreation of experience(s), through the lens of memory with a dialectical relationship between the present and the past. As such while the past

determines the present, the present also conditions the past. Thus the aesthetics of both Dalit writings and autobiography lies in the context, text and its politics.

Joothan by Om Prakash Valmiki was published in 1997 whereas Bama's *Karukku* was published in 1992. In this dissertation work, *Joothan* is taken up first in the chronological order though it was published five years later than that of *Karukku*. *Joothan* is dealt first because it goes back into time and thereby covers more time period than *Karukku*. Bama's *Karukku* portrays the picture of Indian Dalit society of mid 1960s in the South of India. *Joothan* on the other hand describes the Indian society of early 60s. It simultaneously manifests the perspective of North India.

Going deep into both Dalit self-narratives it is found that the problematic question is 'Caste'. Both of the Dalit narrators became quite sensitive to the oppression even at a very early age. These self-narratives highlight the complex relationship between caste and class in post-independence India. Another point to be noted is that the autobiography is used by the Dalit narrators as a means of political assertion. Written as self-narratives both *Joothan* and *Karukku* narrate the individual experience in different geographical spaces, but both as the autobiographies of the third world deviate from the Eurocentric tradition, which is rooted in individualism. Both these self-narratives besides being search for individual subjectivity are testimonies of the experiences of the whole community. Consequently, the very act of writing becomes a political act for the voice of both the Dalit narrators and caste and class he/she belongs to. Their voice becomes representative of the collective voice of the entire community for contesting and subverting the institutionalized narrative of the western bourgeois.

Since the autobiographies are a reconstruction of the past experiences mediated by the mature mind, both Valimiki and Bama look at their childhood experiences, capture the emotions/thoughts these events generated followed by the reflection of an introspecting and retrospecting mind. On the other hand, Valmiki born in a 'chuhra' family in a North Indian village is a recreation of his journey from silence to subjectivity. While Valimiki's self-narrative adheres to linearity of narration, Bama's self-narrative is circular and cyclic, coming back in each effort of recollection to the same point of time. *Karukku* draws its complexity from its

intensity and from its circularity while *Joothan* owes its intensity to the bitterly sarcastic rhetoric of the text.

Memories of past experience lays bare not only the material deprivation, but also offer incisive insight into the psychological conditioning of the authors. The self-narratives expose the subtle complexes and conflicts the socio-economic conditions create. The self-narratives therefore are as much the efforts to survive in the casteist and classicist social system as they are individual efforts to overcome the internal turmoil the material exigencies cause. They are efforts to find solutions to personal problems as well as transform the public sphere.

Bama, born into the Paraya community in Tamil Nadu, a community of agricultural labourers which occupies the lowest strata of the caste-ridden hierarchical society, too experienced caste discrimination. Her work *Karuku* describes these incidents first in a comic way. But with the passage of time as she matures her voice acquires solemnity. Valmiki too suffers the pangs of humiliation because of having taken birth in an untouchable ‘chuhra’ community. His description doesn’t have the comic note we find in *Karukku*. It is because the seeds of rebellion are sown by his parents early in his childhood. Both Valmiki and Bama while recounting their past stress on the role of education in their life, and for that, talk about the role their families play for that. While the parents of Valmiki fought tooth and nail for his education, Bama fought her family to send her to college. Both Dalit narrators want to escape caste and therefore make severest efforts to gain and excel in educational field. While Bama was able to excel but could not achieve professional success, Valmiki after failures and foibles was able to attain professional success. The major issue that differentiates and determines their success stories is their movement in the public sphere. Valmiki being a man could move freely. Besides he did not affiliate himself to any stifling religious system. No wonder, therefore we find in Bama a sever indictment of the church, though she also categorically makes it clear that being a woman she found herself being limited too. Both Valimiki and Bama face hurdles largely in the way of getting education because getting education for Dalits is not an easy job. Both face a lot of discrimination and injustices done to them by their classmates and teachers. But emphasize on hard work and single-mindedness. Both of them lay emphasis on the importance of education as they believe that education is the only redeeming factor and the only means to escape the

indignities and humiliation. But both are disillusioned with the same as the social stigma of being a Dalit follows them everywhere. Another point that differentiates them is their return to the family.

Analyzing both self-narratives we find that these narratives are situated mainly in rural background. Both narrators move from rural society to urban society. *Karukku* scales the minute demographic description while *Joothan* maps the broad details regarding demography. We find the detailed description of castes and sub castes in *Karukku* whereas in *Joothan* we find that Valimiki describes not more than three or four castes. The opening of these self-narrative marks the basic difference. Valmiki begins by describing the filthiness, dirt spreading round his 'chuhra basti' but Bama gives a lyrical beginning to her self-narrative, thus highlighting the difference in the authors' aesthetics.

Autobiographies move on the dynamics of memory and memory though abstract and insubstantial owes itself to materiality. Hence materialism is the main feature of self-narratives. In both *Karukku* and *Joothan*, food is used as a metaphor of material deprivation. Bama seems to be accepting hunger as an essential condition of the untouchable. Again and again Bama talks about food items, which indicates her sense of deprivation. The title *Joothan* itself indicates the poor economic condition. By such delineation the class structure of Indian society clearly emerges. The kind of clothes that Bama and Valmiki wear describes the material description of their environment. Their houses too are not in good condition. Both the Dalit narrators show that there is a clear demarcation between the houses of low caste people and high caste people indicating the influence of casteism.

Like education Valimiki and Bama also deal with the issue of religion. Religion and conversion has been seen less as a faith and more as strategy to escape the stigma of untouchability. While in Valimiki's self-narrative, this issue gets a different treatment. Valmiki aims at blasting and deconstructing the Hindu myths. He, however, uses those myths positively such as that of Kali that are empowering to Dalits. His *Joothan* does not focus much on rituals and culture, though stray references are made to the cultured beliefs of his community, which are looked at as outdated, useless and superstitious. Bama, on the other hand, incorporates the same as magical realism. Religion finds the epicenter of literary focus of Bama, who eventually rejects

institutionalized religion and tries to equate it with spirituality. Valimiki's silence on the religion of conversion is conspicuous. Bama's primary concern in *Karukku* is to expose the caste hierarchies within church, while Valimiki's aim is to expose the casteist Hindu dispensation.

Gender issues too have been given voice in both the Dalit narratives. But these issues get a more prominent place in *Karukku* than in *Joothan*. Bama gives a detailed picture of physical, socio-economic exploitation faced by Dalit women. Valmiki, on the other hand, does not show much sympathy for the female characters in his autobiography. His 'bhabhi' is a kind of motherly figure for him. But he does not show much affection for her. His attitude towards female characters in this autobiographical novel is less empathetic than that of male characters. On the other hand Bama time and again acknowledges the support and guidance she received from her brother. Both Bama and Valmiki also accept the truth that Dalit women are doubly oppressed. Both Dalit narrators give a lot of instances in this regard.

Both *Karukku* and *Joothan* are primarily severe indictment of caste system. While Valimiki's *Joothan* critiques the Hindu system, Bama's *Karukku* exposes how the caste/class hierarchies remain unchanged even after conversion into Christian order. While both these self-narratives have talked about the intersection of caste and class, portrayed the Dalit culture, decipher the social activism of the authors and growth of their selfhood, both works are different in more than one way. Valimiki's *Joothan* does not come out of a moment of crisis. It is less an effort to resolve inner dilemma and crisis, though it reflects on internal weaknesses than satirizing the Hindu dominated socio economic system. Bama's self-reflection arises out of a moment of deep crisis. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why *Joothan* looks like a propagandist text. The primary purpose of both the narratives is different. The aesthetics of the two self-narratives also varies in that while Valmiki's *Joothan* is aimed at the transformation of the public sphere alone, Bama adds lyrical and fictional quality to her narrative by making her plot non-linear besides concentrating on her inner life. While the cultural beliefs add the element of magical realism in *Karukku*, Valmiki rejects such beliefs in superstitions. Besides Bama's work is a redefinition of the term 'spirituality'. Though Bama too describes her spatial mobility, Valmiki's *Joothan* being a male self-narrative encompasses more geographical space and hence addresses issues at a more expansive level. Both works resort to interrogative rhetoric, both

describe childhood experiences, recapture the childhood emotions and reactions before adding the adult perspective by way of reinterpretation, the tone in both the works is significantly different. Valmiki's *Joothan* employs bitter satire as a weapon of condemnation of high caste and class hypocrisy, Bama's tone remains largely ironical. Both the works coming from the most marginalized section of a third world with 'I', 'We' and 'You' dialectics add a significant feature of collectivism to the genre of autobiography, which conventionally has been an individualistic, western genre. However, Bama's use of 'You' in *Karukku* also attributes an orality, which is a distinctive Indian narratological feature though also often associated with women writers of the third world. The lyrical quality, the element of magical realism forms an essential aspect of her aesthetics. The very structure of the novel enhances the feminist appeal of the text. The issues of women's education, her insecurity, her role in the rural economy, her double burden of labour, gender discrimination in wages and remuneration, subordination to men etc are some of the issues she has raised in her autobiographical novel. Simultaneously she has pointed out her efforts at preservation of her culture and above all her resilience that makes the work a meaningful feminist text.

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