International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences
Vol-10, Issue-6; Nov-Dec, 2025

Peer-Reviewed Journal
Journal Home Page Available: https://ijels.com/
Journal DOI: 10.22161/ijels

Breaking the Barrier: Reinterpreting Dalit Autobiographical Narratives from Postcolonial Perspective

Dr. Dipanjoy Mukherjee

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Chhatna Chandidas Mahavidyalaya, West Bengal, India

Received: 09 Nov 2025; Received in revised form: 03 Dec 2025; Accepted: 08 Dec 2025; Available online: 13 Dec 2025

Abstract—*Dalit autobiographical literature has emerged as a powerful genre for contesting the hegemonic narratives of caste, class, and identity in postcolonial India. This paper re-interprets key Dalit autobiographies through a postcolonial lens, exploring how these narratives confront the lingering effects of colonialism and Brahmanical patriarchy. While postcolonial theory has largely focused on colonial subjugation, this study extends its boundaries to analyze the internal colonization of Dalits within the Indian socio-political framework. Texts such as Omprakash Valmiki's* Joothan*, Bama's* Karukku*, and Sharan Kumar Limbale's* The Outcaste (Akkarmashi) *are examined as testaments of resistance, reclaiming agency, dignity, and cultural voice. These texts not only narrate individual trauma but also function as collective chronicles of social injustice, disrupting sanitized narratives of Indian nationalism. The article underscores the need to integrate Dalit perspectives into postcolonial discourse, emphasizing intersectionality and the politics of representation.*

Keywords— ***Dalit autobiography, postcolonialism, resistance, identity, subaltern, marginality***

I. INTRODUCTION

> We will build the organization of workers, dalits, landless, poor peasants through all city factories, in all villages. We will hit back against all injustice perpetrated on Dalits. We will well and truly destroy the caste and varna system that thrives on the people's misery, which exploits the people, and liberate the dalits (*Dalit Panthers Manifesto* 1973 xi)

Prakash Louis in his book *Political Sociology of Dalit Assertion* says that the deeply rooted inequality had not only existed in the traditional Indian social structure but it was also formalized and institutionalized through the caste system based on which, the lower castes, including the Dalits, were exploited, oppressed, marginalized and considered "impure" (42-43). Literature has always been considered as a crucial avenue to raise the consciousness of the marginalized section of the society. One such example is the Dalit literature which echoes the age-old existence of despair and oppression inflicted on the Dalit who are the stigmatized section of the society. Therefore, the focus of the Dalit literature has been the liberation of the Dalits and abolition of the caste system. The Dalits who remain ostracized from the mainstream society because of being classified as untouchable, belong to the lowest ladder of the social hegemony in India representing the Indian version of the subalterns. The word subaltern was first used by the Italian Marxist socialist Antonio Gramsci who in his work *Prison Notebooks,* published in 1971, declares that the subalterns were the subjected untouchables of the society on whom the dominant power exerted its hegemonic influence for centuries (145). Edward Said, a renowned scholar and cultural critic in his book *Orientalism* (1978) conceptually talks about the impacts of colonialism and imperialism addressing the oppressed subalterns by the white-men resulting in the domination of the other (25). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak an Indian scholar, feminist critic and literary theorist also argues in her famous essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* on the notion of subaltern, and the vast restriction, subjugation and prohibition which they countered in the society. Dalit literature too emerged as a protest literature

to delineate all the inhuman humiliations, to reveal the caste prejudices prevalent in the society, to inculcate a new cultural and social consciousness and to establish a separate identity of their own. The young Dalit writers Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle, and J. V. Pawar, and the pioneer of Dalit literature, Baburao Bagul, who formed 'Dalit Panthers' in 1972 admitted that the scattered utterances of their discontent needed a more militant ventilation. In their manifesto they attempted to exhibit their literary mission, and establish their social identity and political concerns. In the years following the explosive debut of the Dalit Panthers, autobiography became the most effective expression of Dalit empowerment.

In the tapestry of Indian literary tradition, Dalit autobiographical literature has emerged as a potent form of resistance and reclamation. In the canon of Indian literature, the voice of the Dalit has historically been marginalized, silenced, or misrepresented. Dominant caste narratives have long controlled the modes of literary production, historiography, and cultural representation, systematically excluding Dalit experiences and perspectives. However, the rise of Dalit autobiographical narratives from the late twentieth century onwards has redefined this literary landscape. These narratives are not merely personal recollections; they serve as powerful instruments of socio-political resistance. This essay explores the transformative journey from imposed silence to vocal resistance within Dalit autobiographical writing, reinterpreting these texts as acts of reclaiming agency, memory, and identity.

In a postcolonial nation where freedom from colonial rule did not equate to social emancipation for all, Dalit narratives have worked as counter-discourses to dominant histories. Postcolonialism, as a theoretical framework, interrogates colonial domination and its afterlives, yet it often neglects the structural inequalities—like caste—that persist within the so-called "postcolonial" state. Dalit autobiographies, when re-read through postcolonial perspectives, illuminate the internal colonization perpetrated through caste hierarchies and Brahmanical ideologies, thereby challenging the completeness of Indian independence.This paper re-interprets select Dalit autobiographies—namely *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki, *Karukku* by Bama, and *The Outcaste (Akkarmashi)* by Sharan Kumar Limbale—as sites of postcolonial contestation. These narratives do not merely recount the personal sufferings of Dalits but unveil the systemic and inherited violence embedded in the Indian social fabric. In doing so, they critique the exclusionary nature of nationalist and literary canons and reconstruct a history from the margins.

II. POSTCOLONIALISM AND THE DALIT EXPERIENCE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To understand Dalit autobiographies as acts of resistance, it is crucial to frame them within theories of subalternity, voice, and self-representation. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" becomes relevant here, as it foregrounds the historical silencing of marginalized voices. Dalit autobiographies challenge this silence by articulating lived experiences that were previously invisible or suppressed. These narratives do not merely insert Dalit voices into existing literary structures; rather, they often dismantle and reconstruct those very structures, creating new literary forms and languages of dissent. The act of writing itself is a radical one for Dalit authors. As Sharmila Rege notes in *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*, Dalit autobiographies function as testimonios—texts that bear witness to systemic violence and oppression, while simultaneously asserting the author's dignity and humanity (Rege 12). The testimonial form aligns with global traditions of resistance literature, including African-American slave narratives and Latin American testimonio, situating Dalit literature within a broader transnational framework of subaltern resistance.

Postcolonial theory primarily critiques European imperialism, its cultural ramifications, and its continuation in the neocolonial world. Thinkers such as Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha have foregrounded the significance of hybridity, mimicry, and subalternity. However, their frameworks, often centered on race and colonial binaries, inadequately address the specificity of caste as a socio-historical construct in South Asia.Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" is particularly relevant when applied to Dalit subjectivities. In the Indian context, Dalits represent the subaltern par excellence, having been denied voice, history, and representation for centuries (Spivak 66). Dalit autobiographies, however, constitute a direct response to this silencing. These texts speak with urgency and authenticity, asserting the right to narrate one's history and identity.Gopal Guru argues that Dalit narratives must not be subsumed under elite academic discourse but must be understood as epistemologies in their own right (Guru 36). Therefore, a postcolonial reading of Dalit texts must move beyond abstract theorizing and engage with the embodied realities of caste, oppression, and survival.

Breaking the Silence: The Rise of Dalit Autobiographies

Before the emergence of Dalit autobiographical narratives, mainstream Indian literature—especially in regional languages—largely failed to represent Dalit

experiences with authenticity. When Dalits were depicted, it was often through the lens of pity, caricature, or tokenism. The dominant-caste writers controlled both the means of production and the literary themes, which left little room for authentic Dalit self-representation. The absence of Dalit voices was not simply a matter of omission but a deliberate act of epistemic violence. This erasure maintained the social order by denying Dalits the right to narrate their own lives. In this sense, silence functioned as both a symptom and a tool of oppression. The publication of autobiographies like Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (1997), Baburao Bagul's *When I Hid My Caste*, and Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi* (*The Outcaste*, 2003) marked a turning point. These texts did not just share personal stories; they became declarations of resistance against caste-based oppression.

In *Joothan*, Valmiki recounts the indignity of being denied education and basic human dignity because of his caste. The title itself—referring to the leftover scraps given to Dalits—becomes a metaphor for the social status imposed on Dalits in Indian society. His writing dismantles the sanitized narratives of a casteless, inclusive India, exposing the brutal realities of caste discrimination. Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi* similarly recounts his experience as an "illegitimate" child born of an upper-caste father and a lower-caste mother, symbolizing the complex intersections of caste, class, and gender. The text challenges the dominant narratives of identity and belonging, offering a fragmented, polyphonic self that resists easy categorization.

Narrative Strategies as Resistance

Dalit autobiographies differ significantly in form and style from traditional Indian autobiographies. The conventional autobiography, often written by elite men, focuses on personal achievement and individualism. In contrast, Dalit autobiographies are collective in nature, rooted in the community's struggle and suffering. Many Dalit autobiographers consciously reject literary embellishments and aestheticism. Their language is raw, direct, and unflinching, often drawing from oral traditions, folk idioms, and regional dialects. This stylistic choice is political—it resists the aesthetic standards imposed by upper-caste literati and reclaims the legitimacy of Dalit linguistic expression. For example, Bama's *Karukku* (1992), one of the first Dalit autobiographies by a Tamil Christian woman, uses a conversational tone and colloquial Tamil to narrate her journey from a convent to activism. Her use of the word "karukku," which refers to the serrated edges of palm leaves and metaphorically to a wounded yet resilient identity, embodies both suffering and strength.

Dalit women's autobiographies add a crucial layer to this narrative of resistance. They confront not only caste but also gender and patriarchy, both within and outside the Dalit community. Texts such as Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* articulate what Rege calls the "double burden" of being Dalit and female. In *The Prisons We Broke*, Kamble offers a rare glimpse into the lives of Dalit women in rural Maharashtra, highlighting both systemic oppression and internalized patriarchy. Her narration is unapologetic, often confrontational, and deeply rooted in collective memory. By documenting rituals, folk practices, and everyday violence, she reclaims Dalit women's histories from oblivion. Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* interlaces personal memories with socio-political commentary, weaving a narrative that is as much about personal transformation as it is about community evolution. Her writing resists the binaries of private/public and personal/political, asserting that the two are inextricably linked in the lives of Dalit women.

***Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki: The Politics of Purity and Pollution**

Valmiki's *Joothan* is a searing autobiographical account of growing up in a Dalit family in Uttar Pradesh. The title itself—"joothan," meaning leftover food—encapsulates the dehumanizing conditions under which Dalits were expected to survive. The text critiques the Hindu caste order which, despite India's political independence, continued to enslave Dalits socially and spiritually.Valmiki's experiences at school, where he was made to sit separately and clean the premises, mirror colonial structures of othering and subjugation. He writes, "I had to sit away from the others in the class, on the floor. The mat on which the rest of the class sat was out of bounds for me" (Valmiki 5). This exclusion parallels the racial segregation of colonial rule, indicating that caste functions as an internal colonizer. Furthermore, the memoir debunks the myth of post-independence progress. Valmiki's struggle to access education and employment reflects the state's failure to dismantle Brahmanical structures. Postcolonial theorists have often celebrated the hybrid identities emerging from colonial encounters; Valmiki's narrative, however, foregrounds purity-pollution dichotomies that remain deeply entrenched and non-negotiable in casteist India.

***Karukku* by Bama: Gender, Caste, and Religious Hypocrisy**

Bama's *Karukku* is an intersectional text that examines caste from the dual lens of gender and religion. A Dalit Christian woman from Tamil Nadu, Bama recounts her awakening to caste discrimination both within

her village and inside the Christian Church. Her disillusionment with religious institutions, which perpetuated rather than eradicated caste, forms a central critique of postcolonial India's moral duplicity.The autobiography challenges the glorified image of Christianity as an egalitarian faith introduced by colonial missionaries. Bama reveals that Dalits, even after conversion, remain segregated within churches and schools. "Even in our church, we were given a separate place to sit," she writes (Bama 18). This reveals how colonial legacies of religious conversion failed to translate into social liberation.Postcolonial discourse often valorizes hybridity as a form of resistance; however, Bama's experience exposes hybridity as a trap for Dalits who convert but remain subjugated. Her narrative deconstructs the myth of "emancipatory modernity" promised by both colonialism and postcolonial nationalism. As a woman, Bama also critiques the patriarchal norms within Dalit communities themselves, making *Karukku* a radical text that interrogates both external and internal systems of oppression.

***The Outcaste (Akkarmashi)* by Sharan Kumar Limbale: Reclaiming Dalit Aesthetics**

Limbale's *The Outcaste* is a compelling narrative of identity fragmentation. Born from an inter-caste relationship between a Dalit woman and a dominant caste landlord, Limbale's life is marked by illegitimacy and rejection. The term "akkarmashi," meaning outcaste, symbolizes the liminal and subordinate position of Dalits within the nation-state. Limbale's text is not only a personal narrative but also a political manifesto. He asserts, "My writing is not literature. It is a weapon. It is the history of my community" (Limbale 4). This declaration marks a departure from aestheticized literature towards a functional, activist literature. In postcolonial studies, this aligns with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's call for a decolonized and people-oriented literature. Limbale also critiques the tokenism of caste representation in upper-caste literary circles. The very act of writing, for him, becomes an act of reclamation—of both voice and visibility. His concept of "Dalit aesthetics" challenges Brahmanical canons that marginalize the experiences of the oppressed. By giving literary form to pain and humiliation, Limbale extends the boundaries of postcolonial literature to include the interior landscapes of caste trauma.

Towards a Postcolonial Dalit Discourse

These autobiographies reveal that the project of Indian nationalism and the postcolonial state has failed to deliver justice to its most marginalized citizens. Dalit autobiographies expose the paradox of a postcolonial nation that remains caste-colonized. They reframe the meaning of freedom—not as political sovereignty from foreign rule, but as social liberation from internal hierarchies.While scholars like Partha Chatterjee have critiqued the limits of Western liberalism in postcolonial contexts, Dalit writers go further by critiquing the Indian state itself as a Brahmanical institution. These texts demand a re-writing of history, a re-imagining of nationhood, and a decolonization of literature itself.A re-reading of Dalit autobiographical literature from a postcolonial perspective thus necessitates a methodological shift—toward intersectionality, toward subaltern agency, and toward literary activism. These narratives are not mere testimonials; they are insurgent texts that reclaim the right to self-definition, challenging both colonial and casteist regimes.

Autobiography as Collective Testimony

While these narratives are autobiographical, they are rarely individualistic. They serve as collective testimonies that speak for a larger community silenced by centuries of oppression. The "I" in these texts often morphs into a "we," underscoring the communal nature of Dalit suffering and resilience. This collective dimension is particularly evident in the use of communal rituals, oral traditions, and shared experiences of violence and resistance. By rooting personal experience within collective memory, Dalit autobiographies break the boundaries of genre, becoming ethnographies, political manifestos, and social commentaries all at once.

III. CONCLUSION

Dalit autobiographical narratives have resonated beyond the Indian context, finding parallels in African-American slave narratives, Indigenous life writing, and other forms of subaltern expression. Works like Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life* or Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* echo similar themes of dehumanization, resistance, and self-fashioning. The journey from silence to resistance in Dalit autobiographical narratives marks a profound shift in the politics of representation, memory, and identity. These texts do not merely fill a void in Indian literature; they redefine the contours of literary discourse itself. By asserting their right to speak, remember, and narrate, Dalit writers transform the very act of writing into a tool of liberation. Their stories demand to be read not as exceptions or isolated instances, but as urgent calls to dismantle caste hierarchies and reconstruct a more equitable society. In reclaiming their voice, Dalit autobiographers compel the reader to confront uncomfortable truths and to imagine a world where

dignity, justice, and equality are not privileges but rights. Dalit autobiographical literature is an indispensable archive of resistance and assertion in postcolonial India. Texts like *Joothan*, *Karukku*, and *The Outcaste* not only document personal trauma but also confront the systemic violence of caste, complicating the dominant narratives of postcolonial liberation. Through the lens of postcolonialism, these works re-inscribe history from the vantage point of the oppressed and demand recognition within the national imaginary.A postcolonial re-reading of Dalit autobiographies compels scholars and readers alike to confront the unfinished business of decolonization—wherein freedom must be both external and internal, political and social, national and individual. In this way, Dalit autobiographical literature does not simply supplement postcolonial studies; it transforms it.

REFERENCES

[1] Bama. *Karukku*. Translated by Lakshmi Holmström, Oxford UP, 2000.

[2] 'Dalit Panthers Manifesto (Bombay, 1973)' in Barbara Joshi, ed. *Untouchable! Voices of the Dalit Liberation Movement.* Zed Books, 1986, pp. 145–146.

[3] Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*. Penguin Classics, 1982.

[4] Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. ElecBook, 1999. https://uberty.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/gramsci-prison-notebooks.pdf

[5] Guru, Gopal. "Dalit from Margin to Margin." *India: Another Millennium?*, edited by Romila Thapar, Penguin Books, 2000, pp. 31–47.

[6] Kamble, Baby. *The Prisons We Broke*. Translated by Maya Pandit, Orient BlackSwan, 2008.

[7] Louis, Prakash. *The Political Sociology of Dalit Assertion.* Gyan Publishing House, 2003.

[8] Limbale, Sharan Kumar. *The Outcaste (Akkarmashi)*. Translated by Santosh Bhoomkar, Oxford UP, 2003.

[9] Pawar, Urmila. *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*. Translated by Maya Pandit, Columbia UP, 2008.

[10] Rege, Sharmila. *Writing Caste/ Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios.*Zubaan, 2006.

[11] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994, pp. 66-111.

[12] Valmiki, Omprakash. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*. Translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, Columbia UP, 2003.