IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Narrating Untouchability: Trauma, Memory, And Dalit Claims To Citizenship In Joothan And Karukku

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Abstract

By placing the Joothan by Omprakash Valmiki and Karukku by Bama in the frameworks of intersection among trauma, memory, and citizenship, this paper examines how the process of untouchability is represented in these Dalit autobiographies. The two readings indicate that caste violence does not merely exist in the form of blatant discrimination but it also takes place in the form of day-to-day social activities in which long-lasting psychological and physical injuries are inflicted. The paper states that through these daily experiences of humiliation at school, in the religious venue, and the village community, it makes the experience of being humiliated a constant form of trauma instead of a suffering instance. Memory consequently becomes a vital tool of narrative whereby these authors re-write their childhood experience and their early adulthood with critical consciousness informed by their subsequent political awareness.

With an account of untouchability presented through the prism of lived experience, Joothan and Karukku challenge the mainstream nationalist discourse which glorifies citizenship as an unproblematic and universal legal category. Rather, these writings reveal the disjunction between the constitutional principles and the social facts and show how Dalits are constantly denied a status of full citizenship even when they are formally equal. Even the process of writing about oneself turns into an assertion of agency and personal suffering is made into a people-wide reproach against caste-based exclusion. As argued in this paper, Dalit life writing would redefine citizenship not as the ability to be included under the law but the right to dignity, voice and social presence.

By predicting trauma as an individual and a political state, the paper underlines the way Dalit autobiographies represent the counter-narratives, which rebuke hegemonic histories and require a more inclusive interpretation of postcolonial Indian democracy.

Keyword : Dalit autobiography; untouchability; trauma and memory; caste and citizenship; lived experience; Joothan; Karukku

Introduction

Although India as a country has been self-representing itself as the largest democracy in the world, it still faces latent and acute tensions on the question of citizenship and social belonging. The egalitarian manifesto of the democratic citizenry, as a system of equality, dignity, and participation of all inhabitants, has been disproportionately fulfilled. In most present-day democracies, citizenship has not been able to mediate socio-economic disparities or even avoid marginalizing historically vulnerable populations. The modern nation-state, as James Holston argues, is experiencing an emergence of citizenship as a battleground, with marginal social groups expressing their discontent with the systems that are contributing to their systematic deprivation of social justice and insecurity (Holstal 3). India does not stand out of this trend across the world.

Even though Indian Constitution offers such wide protections to the socially and educationally disadvantaged groups, the tangible experience of Dalits, the formally named untouchables, demonstrates the boundary of formal inclusion in the law. The rigid hierarchy of social order, entrenched in the caste society, still serves to govern the availability of education, jobs, space and dignity, thus hindering the ability of Dalits to become the subjects of stigmatization to full-fledged members of the democratic public space. This recognition of the disparity between constitutionalism and experience is emphasized by the existence of social-spatial segregation, day to day humiliation, and economic exploitation. Intersecting caste- and gender-oppression structures add to the marginalization faced by Dalit women.

The paper tackles the issue of citizenship as a lived and not a legal condition through memory, trauma, and social exclusion. Through reading Joothan by Omprakash Valmiki and Karukku by Bama as an autobiographical testimony, the study foreshadows the functioning of untouchability as a daily trauma that is marked on the bodies and minds of Dalits. The stories are indicative of the fact that citizenship, as it is applied in practice, is still a process of differentiation and marking, and conditional inclusion, depriving a social recognition. Although the purpose of such differentiated citizenship is to secure the vulnerable populations, it even tends not to break traditions of caste animosities and to establish the so-called horizontal comradeship that B. R. Ambedkar discussed as being a form of associated living, a form of conjoint communicated experience (Ambedkar 260).

Placing the Dalit life writing into the context of discussing the trauma and democratic belonging, the paper will claim that Joothan and Karukku turn the personal memory into the political critique. Their stories reveal the frailty of Indian democratic pretensions and claim yet another vision of citizenship based on dignity, voice, and experienced equality than an imaginary constitutional rights.

Even though the rhetoric of democratic and inclusive citizenship is expected to remedy the historical inequalities and socio-economic discrepancies, it has not managed to build a true sense of social solidarity among the citizens in India. Everyday life remains to be defined by various types of violence, exclusion, and social distancing, as well as chronic obstacles to economic opportunity and political participation, assured by

constitutional provisions, among the Dalits. The shift of the Dalits towards being equal participants in the democratic polity as opposed to the stigmatized untouchable identities is yet to be achieved. The perpetuated deprivation of dignity and substantive equality has led to their status as nominal citizens and not real citizens in practice which has strengthened a social inferiority situation in the country.

It is against this context of the ruptured democratic belonging that the rise of the Dalit literature can be considered an important intervention in the cultural and intellectual landscape of India. Its growing presence is an indication of the changing world without the domineering literary practices that, in the past, neither acknowledged nor represented Dalit practices. Dalit writing does not just document the daily habits of humiliation and structural oppression but sees and predicts survival, resistance and self-assertion. By using literature, the Dalit writers question the caste-based rules and wrongs that deprive them of their identity and place, and dismiss the misconstructions they have created by upper caste writers in the mainstream discourse. By doing that, Dalit literature reclaims narrative agency and expresses other forms of identity based on dignity and self-respect.

Within this literary movement, in particular, Dalit autobiographies play a very important role. They also insist on the truth telling as a political act and they require a mode of representation that is based on lived reality instead of aesthetic detachment. These stories are not only life stories of a single person and are being used to describe a collective social memory, personal memory being turned into a collective testimony. Dalit life writing, through focusing marginal voices on a literary center stage, destabilizes the long-established hierarchies of knowledge production and breaks the intellectual prevalence of upper-caste positions. Narration of autobiography is therefore one way of establishing subjectivity and agency in a society that has historically refused to recognize Dalits as thinking and feeling and independent citizens.

Dalit autobiographical writing, along with other resistance literature traditions around the world, is also related to the world of narratives written by African Americans that describe slavery and racial oppression in the United States. This literary statement was popularized in India with radical cultural politics of Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra in 1970s. Their actions were political activism and culture at the same time, which resulted in aggressive counter-narratives of anger, refusal, and defiance. These writings reveal the hidden dynamics of caste oppression and economic exploitation that challenge the social structures that systematically marginalize Dalits and deny them the right to live a full life of democratic life.

The autobiographical narration is an effective form of self-articulation and action of resistance that Dalit authors use based on personal experiences, historical wounds, and personal experience of suffering, drawing on their autobiographical experience. These stories are not just the stories of personal suffering but they are aimed at building solidarity among the oppressed groups of people by revealing the compartmentalized systems of caste, gender and class suppression. By doing so, Dalit autobiographies are conscious in rebuffing the traditions of upper-caste life writing, especially its interest in restraint, aestheticism and bourgeois individualism. Dalit writers contend that such literary conventions are not sufficient to show the lives that have been affected by systematic humiliation and deprivation. The address to individual story therefore is an indication of the attempt to construct a different literary sensibility based on social reality instead of elite decorum which has helped in shaping a new aesthetic practice in Indian writing.

Such scholars like Raj Kumar stress that the images of Dalit life are made real through the experience of the people who have experienced caste repression. In this sense, even what is sympathetic, when created by writers who are not Dalits, is usually constrained by a lack of experience. Dalit autobiographical writing thus makes

the need to engage in self-representation to be an ethical and political requirement. Its core desire is not to simply write about marginality but to reestablish the marginalized voices in the vanguard of cultural discussion and to challenge the dominant Hindu ideologies and to establish the principles of freedom, dignity, and self-respect. Literature is a place where oppressed histories are repossessed and where disenfranchised subjects can establish their right to speak in their own voice.

On a larger scale, Dalit literature expresses the vision of social change on the basis of equality and justice. Even though the Indian Constitution envisions the establishment of a community based on liberty, equality, and fraternity, society remains divided in terms of caste, religious, and ethnic factors. Quite on the contrary, modern India is characterized by the hostilities that do not help the country to reach the social cohesion, on the contrary, the ideals of a democratic project to be more inclusive. The hierarchies founded upon caste, which are supported by both the daily social practices and the political movements, still pose a challenge to the achievement of the truly egalitarian public sphere.

Over seventy years since the attainment of Independence, Dalits are still left out of the material provisions of citizenship. Despite being legally recognized citizens, they are still discriminated, stigmatized by society, and deprived of material resources when it comes to their relations with other members of the polity. When citizenship is narrowed down to mere membership, it cannot help take care of the more profound needs of dignity, recognition and social engagement. Significant belonging does not merely involve legal status, but lived access to rights, resources and respect as the scholars of citizenship have remarked. However, to the Dalits, such substantive citizenship is as far as the wind blows and their inclusion is merely symbolic.

The continuation of caste as an organization factor in the Indian society is a key factor in perpetuating these inequalities. The egalitarianism of citizenship is constantly undermined by social stratifications, which give priority to the interests of superior caste groups and discriminate against subordinate groups. Although the theoretic conceptualization of substantive citizenship provides opportunities of resisting, organizing themselves collectively and initiating democratic change, Dalits have had few institutional resources in ensuring that these ideologies are actually translated into their practicalized versions. Dalits are systematically deprived of psychological and social belonging in the normative order of caste society where they find the nation-state as a surveillance and exclusion zone instead of a shelter. The effect of this systematic denial is that they are once again marginalized in terms of being substantive citizens, which further strengthens a situation where Dalits are citizens in law and outsiders in social life.

The recent scholarship has focused particular attention on the special vulnerability of Dalits, and in particular, Dalit women, whose real lives are created by the concurrent forces of caste hierarchy, economic oppression, and patriarchy. Also relevant, in studies that work with the writings of Dalit feminists, are readings of the works of a writer who is also a feminist, such as The Prisons We Broke by Baby Kamble, which highlights the simultaneous operation of caste and gender that create lasting forms of trauma in the daily lives of the people that have lived through them. The experiences of Dalit women show that the social exclusion is not a single phenomenon but stratified as these women have to face discrimination in the dominant caste relations as well as in the gendered social relations. The idea of their fight over recognition and dignity is therefore not well covered in the feminist and social mainstream discourses.

It is the rise of Dalit feminist views that has helped to reveal the underlying links between labour, violence, and the ideological structure of purity and pollution that supports the caste society. Dalit feminist writing demands the politics of emancipation by foreshadowing these intersections in a manner that does not single out the oppression of gender as existing outside of caste based oppression. Rather it requires a re-

conceptualization of social justice that considers the cumulative aspect of marginalization of Dalit women. These interventions provoke dominant discourses that naively disregard caste in analysis of gender or use the experience of Dalit women as a minor part in the greater feminist discussions.

Researchers have also noted that the further mobility of Dalits, as well as their right to politics, is restricted by the inability to stop the existence of caste as a predetermined identity that organizes access to resources and power. The effect of this condition is continued material deprivation, political marginalization and social humiliation. The struggle of Dalits towards inclusive citizenship cannot, therefore, be viewed as simple request of getting legal rights but as a long term process of attempting to rebuild the connotations of untouchability. Dalit communities use political assertion and cultural expression as the means to alter stigmatized identities into the means of collective agency and, thus, contest the social logic on which they remain to be excluded as the full-fledged members of the society.

Dalit as the Outcaste in Hindu Society.

In a caste-marked social formation, Dalitas are placed in an internal periphery whereby they are usually treated as part of a foreign or hostile culture. The caste ideology provides Dalit bodies with a concept of inborn and unremovable impurity, which justifies its societal avoidance and physical segregation by so-called upper castes. Though the Dalits may be on paper regarded as citizens of the nation-state, this citizenship is mostly not very real since the principle of equality, liberty and fraternity are daily dissuaded in their daily lives. This exclusion reveals the imperfections of procedural democracy when there is legal citizenship without the guarantee of human dignity or social respect. As a secondary group, Dalits are often deprived of fundamental human rights as humans and this fact Sharankumar Limbale highly denounces by theorizing Dalit literature as an undertaking directed towards redeeming the oppressed with a restoration of humanity and self-esteem.

Omprakash Valmiki in Joothan records how pain, humiliation, and social exclusion provide the framework of ordinary Dalit life. Instead of being empathised with or solidarity, Dalits are forced to carry out stigmatized kind of labour given to them by caste systems which strengthens their reliance on the dominant communities to survive. Valmiki recounts how he was compelled to perform duties like getting rid of animal remains which are considered as a form of pollution but it is a duty of Dalits as a caste. This social degradation is further aggravated by material deprivation in that landlessness and abject poverty leave Dalit communities in the state of extreme precarity. In the story by Valmiki, we can see that caste stigma is more prominent than the individuality; social value is realized at birth and is more important than the proclamation of equal citizenship.

This internalized superiority is expressed by the regular verbal abuse and humiliation in public. Valmiki describes the time when his mother is unfairly scolded after she asks to be given more of the food that has been given out, which serves the purpose of focusing on the harshness of caste discipline and the demand of Dalits to understand their role in the social structure. These encounters do not identify Dalits as fellow citizens but as sub-human subjects who are fighting to be acknowledged. The weight of the caste identity is so great that anonymity is a survival mechanism, where Dalits are trying to avoid social aggressiveness and marginalization. The very title of Valmiki is a noticeable symbol of stigma, constantly referring to his caste roots and denying him even his rights as a citizen. His ascriptive identity is always overshadowing his civic identity making constitutional guarantees virtually useless in actual reality.

The Karukku of Bama also reinvents the memories of a childhood full of a strict caste segregation. She remembers that the spatial relationships between villages were organized caste-based and that the boundaries were very strict in order to maintain the ritual purity of dominant groups. The Dalits were restricted to settlements, which were considered marginal to the rest of the society, which controlled their movements.

Bama notes that even the physical proximity of Dalits was viewed as something contaminating and this belief gave the moral legitimacy to the practice of untouchability to continue. This kind of spatial marginalization strengthens social stigma, making discrimination a natural way of life. Bama answers this continued dehumanization with a forceful statement of Dalit humanity, demanding recognition, dignity, and equality with other people in the social structure.

The deprivation of decent living conditions is another way to see how citizenship among Dalits is unachieved. The marginalized groups are usually put in the most neglected and dirty places and this is a reflection of the lack of interest in their welfare in the wider society. According to scholars, when this happens, citizenship is rendered futile since the prevailing social and economic order inhibits the Dalits to operate as independent and sovereign beings. Both Valmiki and Bama show how environmental negligence, which is manifested visibly in the form of unsanitary conditions and infrastructural deficiency, is not the accident, but rather the structural product. Such circumstances are a straightforward breach of the constitutional principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, which highlights the mismatch between the postcolonial Indian reality of the Dalits and the democratic principles.

Citizenship in Hindu society is realized in an uneven manner in the caste-ordered hierarchical society. The dominant caste groups can fancifully adopt the rights, protection and privileges that come with citizenship and the communities previously subordinated to history are systematically relegated to the periphery of civic existence. Even though the Dalits are recognized as full-fledged citizens of the country, they are often treated as partial, or conditional citizens of the polity, and in the worst case scenarios, as non-social people. Enduring stigma, deep-seated inequality, and daily practices of exclusion force these groups to survive under a kind of social control, without the enjoyment of any meaningful rights as attached to their social identities. It has been observed by scholars that the aspirations of the Indian Constitution of inclusion are systematically eroded by daily practices of violence and discrimination against lower castes that results in the creation of hierarchies of citizenship based on caste and religious principles and essentially forms populations of second-order citizens.

Dalits are living in systematic indignity in their everyday social world. The caste ideals force them to engage in socially undervalued and symbolically demeaning labour, even though they are vital to the operation of the society. Manual scavenging, waste collection, and handling of animal carcasses are an example of the occupations which are structured as dirty according to caste ideology, which only adds another layer of aversion and hostility by the dominant populations. This type of occupational stigmatization limits the ability of the Dalits to engage in social and cultural life, making it normal to marginalize them and curtail their chances of mobility and visibility. B. R. One can also refer to the critique of Indian villages as the place of deep-rooted ignorance and domination of caste that was outlined by Ambedkar because the principles of purity and pollution still justify the segregation and social distancing. These deeply entrenched hierarchies hinder progress of the individuals and emancipation of the groups, bringing out the dissonance between the democratic principles and the social realities experienced.

Dalits have acutely vulnerable economic position as it can be explained in terms of precarity. To a great extent deprived of land and productive resources, they rely on wage labour that has been dominated by superior caste groups. This reliance renders them to chronic unemployment, unsustainable living and material deprivation. Similar to the precariat in the rest of the world, Dalits tend to be unemployed without steady jobs, institutional support and welfare or social security programs. They live in uncertainty and have low levels of support networks, which makes them disproportionately exposed to economic shocks and social crises.

In a caste-stratified economy, marginalized labour has been historically exploited by dominant groups in order to advance in terms of material progress. Privileged sections often monopolise state resources and economic opportunities, which contributes to the power of the classes and castes and continues to perpetuate the deprivation of the Dalits in large numbers. The effect of this structural exclusion creates the situation of stratified vulnerability- social, economic and political where Dalits are enslaved into insecurity circles. Consequently, Dalit citizenship remains a weak and imperfect attribute that is incapable of providing the protections, dignity, and agency that democratic and liberal systems offer.

Caste Oppression and Christianity.

Dalits have found conversion to religions as a tool to avoid the stigma and structural violence inherent in caste Hindu society across the periods of history. Conversion has been frequently envisioned as a path to social respectability, religious revitalization and a more egalitarian kind of citizenship. B. R. The act of Ambedkar converting to Buddhism has been a historic event in the anti-caste movement which was based on the belief that significant liberation of Dalits could not be achieved in Hinduism. To most Dalits, abandoning Hinduism has been not only a change of belief system but a deliberate political and ethical abandonment of caste stratification in the quest of human appreciation and equality.

The conversion of the Bama to Christianity represents a comparable urge to escape the humiliation by caste and to gain the feeling of dignity and belonging. But Karukku is able to show that this equality promise is not considerably implemented in the Christian institutional context. Rather than freedom, Bama meets the continuation of caste differentiation in the Church, where the upper-caste converts dominate and use their power and influence over religious and administrative matters. Her experience highlights an ironic truth that is painful: conversion that is seen as escaping the caste oppression, in fact, recreates the same patterns of exclusion and Dalit Christians are left disillusioned and marginalized.

Even though Christianity is claimed to be based on equality and compassion, Bama discovers nothing to be the case, since the institutional practices do not translate these principles into reality. The convent experience turns into a form of imprisonment and not freedom with strict discipline and deprivation of individual agency. The fact that she refers to herself as a bird with broken wings is a metaphor describing how completely she was emotionally and spiritually suffocated. Religious life, on the contrary, does not bring comfort or strength but requires new obediences to one that stifles opposition and does not allow one to think freely.

Bama also reveals the oppressive authority of the higher ranks in the convent that kills individuality and freedom of choice. There is centralized decision-making, and subordination to superiors that is to be unquestioningly followed which makes the institutional instructions equal to the will of God. Although driven by a sincere wish to minister to the poor and ease the human plight, Bama finds out that the Church does not give her much chance to provide her with a chance to act on her humanitarian desires. The controlled and standardized order of convent life slowly resembles the repressive society she was trying to get out of.

At the end, Bama realizes that the practices of the Church are in conflict with its ethical assertion. Ritual vows and religious discipline are not oriented toward spiritual development but rather they are control mechanisms. She notes that the privilege in the Church is usually connected with the caste origin because even after conversion, clergy members still insist on upper-caste identities and symbolic purity. These contradictions reveal the shortcomings of religious organizations to break caste hierarchies and refute the idea that conversion is the only way of ensuring dignity or equal citizenship. Bama is disillusioned, in this way, furthering one of the main arguments of Karukku that caste is a very concrete social logic that can permeate even the space that boasts of moral and spiritual equality.

Conclusion

As indicated in the close reading of Joothan and Karukku, the dream of equality of citizenship in India is yet to be fulfilled by Dalits. In both autobiographical accounts, caste is revealed as still governing social relations, to create a situation where Dalits are officially incorporated in the nation-state but practically marginal to its moral, economic and civic life. In spite of constitutional rights and democratic systems, the Dalit communities are yet to realize the material deprivation and social stigma that deny them the full benefits of citizenship. These documents bring into view the discrepancy between law and practice and how citizenship becomes an unequal and conditional status and not a universal right.

The liberal ideals of equality, freedom, and fraternity, central to the discourse of democratic citizenship, have proved insufficient in dismantling entrenched caste hierarchies. As Valmiki and Bama illustrate, social prejudices rooted in notions of purity and pollution continue to regulate access to dignity, opportunity, and belonging. Dalits are routinely denied recognition as equal members of society, encountering exclusion in everyday interactions as well as in institutional spaces. The persistent neglect of Dalit claims to inclusive citizenship results in the reproduction of class exploitation and socio-cultural marginalization across generations.

Moreover, the narratives underscore the limitations of the democratic state in addressing the structural disadvantages faced by Dalits. While citizenship is formally conferred, the absence of substantive protections allows caste-based violence, economic insecurity, and social segregation to persist with impunity. The continued violation of basic human rights reveals the fragility of democratic ideals when confronted with deeply embedded social hierarchies.

Ultimately, Joothan and Karukku function as powerful counter-narratives that challenge celebratory accounts of Indian democracy. By transforming personal memory and trauma into political testimony, these autobiographies demand a reimagining of citizenship grounded in dignity, equality, and social recognition. They call for the dismantling of caste-based exclusions and envision a more inclusive social order in which citizenship is not merely a legal label but a lived experience of justice, belonging, and human worth.

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