

The Aesthetics of Testimony: A Comparative Study of Caste, Spatial Violence, and Subaltern Agency in Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Bama's *Karukku*

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Article Detail:	Abstract
Received: 12 Sep 2026; Received in revised form: 07 Oct 2026; Accepted: 10 Oct 2026; Available online: 15 Oct 2026 Keywords— Dalit literature, Joothan, Karukku, Testimony, Caste hegemony, Symbolic violence, Subaltern agency, Intersectionality, Reclamation, Literary forms, Counter-hegemonic assertion. ©2026 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).	The present research paper provides a comparative textual and sociological analysis of Omprakash Valmiki's <i>Joothan: A Dalit's Life</i> (1997) and Bama's <i>Karukku</i> (1992) to examine how Dalit autobiographical narratives undermine canonical aesthetics and construct a politics of subaltern resistance. Set in disparate linguistic, geographical and cultural settings—a Valmiki (Chuhra) community in rural Western Uttar Pradesh and a Paraiyar Catholic community in Tamil Nadu—both texts eschew individualistic Western autobiographical conventions, and instead function as collective testimonies of institutionalised humiliation. Dalit literature highlights the intense suffering and marginalisation of Dalits in a feudal society based on caste which outcasts an entire community of people by birth. The shocking tradition of upper caste oppression of the Dalits, raping their womenfolk, burning their houses, whipping them at will, throwing stones at their houses to 'teach them a lesson', humiliating them and forbidding their presence in public places is the sorry truth of Indian society even today. By analysing the intersections of caste, religion and institutional pedagogy, the paper demonstrates how the school and the church operate not as neutral spaces of social mobility, but as apparatuses of systemic exclusion. Furthermore, the paper compares the gendered aspect of caste violence in <i>Karukku</i> with the occupational and physical indignities in <i>Joothan</i>, pointing out Bama's navigation of the 'double marginality' of being Dalit and female within institutional religion. Using theories of B.R. Ambedkar, Pierre Bourdieu (cultural capital and symbolic violence), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (subaltern agency), this study claims that the reclamation of non-standard, vernacular registers and the documentation of bodily trauma are radical epistemic breaks from mainstream literary forms, reconfiguring life writing as an archive of counter-hegemonic assertion.

I. INTRODUCTION

Dalit autobiographical writing represents an ontological and aesthetic break within Indian literary modernism. The dominant autobiographical traditions in India, historically shaped by upper-caste bourgeois subjects, have largely followed the canonical paradigms of the 'Atmakatha'—a narrative form based on Enlightenment individualism, spiritual introspection, and personal development toward civic or spiritual eminence.

The self in this classic Westernised Bildungsroman and upper-caste autobiographical form is an autonomous sovereign being whose interior struggles, moral choices and individual genius drive the narrative trajectory. Dalit life writing systematically undermines this insular paradigm. When subaltern writers tell their life stories, the autobiographical act is no longer an exercise in bourgeois self-fashioning but becomes what Latin American critical theory calls *testimonio* (Beverly, 1989), a collective social witnessing and counter-hegemonic indictment of systemic oppression.

As Arun Prabha Mukherjee observes, the Dalit autobiographical subject does not speak 'I' in isolation; rather the 'I' is inextricably bound with, and stands in solidarity with, the historical 'We' of the marginalised collective. The narrative voice registers not only a personal journey but the structural, bodily, and communal trauma of the caste hierarchy.

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (1997) and Bama's *Karukku* (1992) are two monumental interventions in this paradigm shift that emerge from different regional, linguistic and socio-religious matrices. Valmiki writes from the Hindi heartland of Western Uttar Pradesh, charting the rural feudalism of the Chuhra (scavenger/sweeper) community subjected to everyday untouchability, physical brutality and forced labour (begar). Conversely, Bama writes in a colloquial, oral register of the Paraiyar Christian community in rural Tamil Nadu, revealing the acute paradox of casteism operating within the Roman Catholic Church—an institution theoretically premised on Christian egalitarianism. Despite their different geographies—dusty village lanes of Muzaffarnagar

and agrarian settlements (cheris) of South India—both narratives converge on a singular existential reality—the inescapable violence of caste.

This paper employs the political philosophy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar along with the sociological apparatus of Pierre Bourdieu to rigorously analyse the mechanics of caste subjugation and subaltern resistance in *Joothan* and *Karukku*. In *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) Ambedkar diagnoses the caste system not as a division of labour, but as a rigid and punitive 'division of labourers.' Unlike simple class systems with binary tensions, caste operates through what Ambedkar calls graded inequality—an ascending scale of reverence and a descending scale of contempt.

This architectural gradation guarantees that every caste (save the very highest) looks down on another, systematically frustrating the possibility of unified subaltern solidarity. Ambedkar noted that caste hierarchy is not only maintained through overt physical coercion, but through religious dogma and institutional legitimacy, requiring an epistemic and structural revolt: 'Educate, Agitate, Organise.'

In both *Joothan* and *Karukku* we see the enactment of Ambedkar's thesis in lived experience: educational and religious structures are neither neutral nor emancipatory by default, they are sites where graded inequality is enforced and institutionalised. The sociological concepts of Pierre Bourdieu, particularly *habitus*, cultural capital and symbolic violence, provide a useful complement to Ambedkar's political critique by focusing on the subtle and internalised mechanisms of caste domination, Bourdieu describes *habitus* as a system of durable, transposable dispositions that social agents have through which they feel, perceive, and act in the social world. In a caste society, *habitus* is somaticised from early childhood.

The upper-caste body internalises entitlement, clean spaces, and command, while the subaltern body is conditioned into gestures of deference, downcast gazes, and spatial withdrawal. The hegemonic castes control the linguistic correctness, urbane behaviour, and academic competency that contemporary establishments esteem and compensate as inherent merit or brains, not as accrued social advantage.

This refers to the subtle, non-physical violence through which the dominated agents unconsciously accept the legitimacy of their own domination. The rural school in *Joothan* and the convent school in *Karukku*, like hegemonic institutions in general, are classic fields of symbolic violence. They cloak caste-based exclusion in the language of discipline, academic rigour, religious piety or spiritual humility.

This framework also includes the Dalit Feminist Standpoint as articulated by sociologists like Sharmila Rege to address the gendered dimension inherent to Bama's text. Rege stresses that caste cannot be divorced from gender; the endogamous preservation of caste demands the severe surveillance and regulation of women's sexuality, labour, and bodily autonomy. Bama's story exposes the triple burden of caste oppression, class exploitation and patriarchal subjugation that Dalit women are subjected to, both from the upper-caste masters and within subaltern domestic spaces.

Joothan and *Karukku* are more than of sociological value; they constitute an assault on traditional Sanskritic aesthetics 'saundaryashastra.' Classical Indian aesthetic theory, based on *rasa* (taste/aesthetic sentiment), 'aucitya' (decorum/propriety) and 'satyam', 'shivam', 'sundaram' (the true, the auspicious, the beautiful), has historically functioned as an elite gatekeeping mechanism. It has systematically excluded subaltern life worlds—marked by filth, hard labour, physical degradation, hunger, and righteous rage—as vulgar 'ashleela' or unworthy of high literary representation.

Valmiki titles his autobiography *Joothan* (food scraps left on plates, thrown away for animals and untouchables), weaponising the very marker of his community's ritual pollution into a title of defiance: The scraps the Chuhra eat are not just food but the incarnation of our centuries of degradation. To write them into literature is to force the upper castes to see what they have made us eat. (Valmiki, 1997) Also similar is the title of Bama's *Karukku*, which refers to the serrated, double-edged stem of the palmyra leaf, an everyday agrarian tool that provides subsistence but also inflicts blood: "There are many odds and ends in

my life... like the serrated palmyra leaves, they scratch and wound, but they also cut through the bonds that tie us down." (Bama, 1992)

Both authors consciously reject the standard, Sanskritised, sanitised literary registers. Valmiki writes in the raw colloquial Hindi-Urdu dialect of the rural Muzaffarnagar, laced with crude abuses and vernacular expressions. Bama rejects the standard literary Centamil in favour of the spoken dialect of Paraiyar Tamil, with its oral rhythms, proverbs and vernacular inflections. In this act they dislodge upper-caste aesthetic hegemony, showing that subaltern testimony requires an unapologetically vernacular literary language.

This present research paper explores the transformation of personal memory into a collective manifesto of subaltern resistance by Valmiki and Bama in the part of this paper. The Geographies of Exclusion maps the spatial organisation of the rural village in terms of the high-caste core and the segregated periphery 'basti' and 'cheri' and studies untouchability as spatial and somatic conditioning. Institutions of Exclusion, compares the classroom in *Joothan* with the Roman Catholic convent in *Karukku*, to examine the ways in which secular and religious institutions inflict physical and symbolic violence on Dalit subjects.

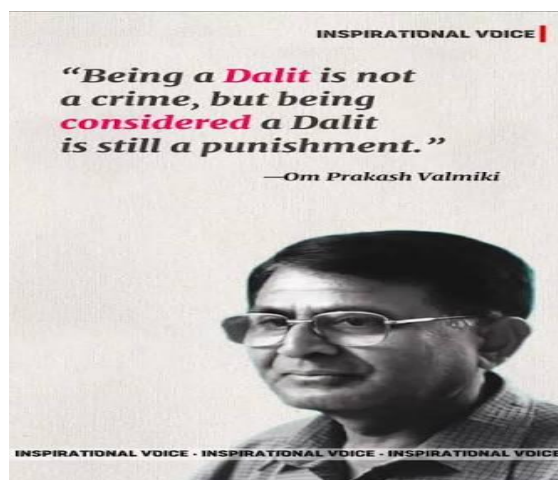


Figure 1

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The Materiality of Degradation examines the bodily trauma of caste through the semiotics of joothan (polluted food scraps), unpaid labour 'begar' and gendered agricultural toil. Language, Aesthetics, and Counter-Discourse investigates the politics of language in the colloquial dialects and demonstrates how the subversion of the canonical 'saundaryashastra' involves an epistemic rupture with the mainstream literature. Awakening, Agitation, and Subaltern Agency traces the trajectories of resistance in both texts by comparing Valmiki's ideological awakening through Ambedkarite thought and the Dalit Panthers with Bama's construction of a subaltern Christian liberation theology. It can be concluded in the theoretical and textual discoveries and discusses how Dalit testimonio continues to be relevant today as a tool to critique ongoing institutionalised casteism in present-day India. Caste hierarchy is not an accidental byproduct of settlement history, but the concrete, architectural manifestation of spatial organisation in rural India.

In both *Joothan* and *Karukku* village cartography is an instrument of social control, mapping ritual notions of purity and pollution directly onto physical geography. This section examines Barla in Western Uttar Pradesh and Bama's village in Tamil Nadu to demonstrate how space acts as a disciplinary matrix that generates and regulates what Pierre Bourdieu terms the caste habitus—a bodily repertoire of dispositions, bodily inhibitions, and spatial deferrals that naturalises subaltern subordination.

Both texts start by establishing the unyielding, non-negotiable physical separation that splits the Indian village into two mutually hostile moral universes: the dominant-caste settlement and the subaltern periphery. In *Joothan*, Valmiki carefully charts the topography of his home village, Barla (Muzaffarnagar district):

Right at the edge of the village, along the pond, was the settlement of the Chuhra... On one side was the village pond, the Johad, which reeked with filth. Pigs wandered through the narrow lanes, rooting in the refuse. The houses were kuccha, made of mud and straw, and during the monsoons, they threatened to collapse under the ceaseless downpour. (Valmiki, 1-2)

The location of the Chuhra quarter right next to the johad (village pond) is intentional. The dominant landowning Tagas (Tyagis) inhabit the high, dry, pucca center of the village, while the Chuhra are thrust down into a marshy basin where human excrement, animal droppings, and stagnant water pool together.

This spatial configuration results in an ontological link: by forcing the community to live in filth, the upper castes point to the very environment as proof of the Chuhra's inherent ritual pollution. The village cartography makes of an imposed ecological condition an essentialised moral judgement.

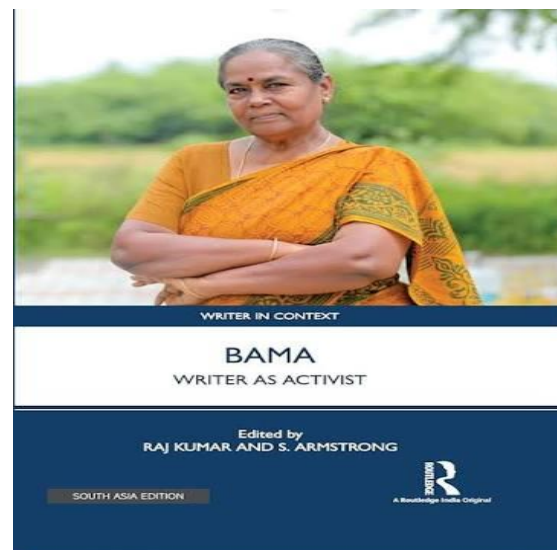


Figure 1

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Bama's agrarian world of *Karukku* is structured by a matching spatial divide. Here, the landscape is divided between the Ur (the main village where dominant castes such as the Naickers live) and the Cheri (the segregated Dalit settlement pushed to the margins):

Our Street was the Paraiya Street, separated from the Naicker streets by distance and by a deep divide of custom. The Naickers lived in well-built stone houses with wide courtyards; we lived in cramped quarters, constantly subject to eviction or the threats of the landlords whenever wages or labour were contested." (Bama, 14-16)

The frontier separating the Ur from the Cheri is not merely an asphalt road or a band of fallow land; it is a cordon sanitaire. The Ur monopolises the civic amenities: the stone temple, clean communal wells, the village administrative office, and paved arterial routes. The Cheri, by contrast, is beset by water scarcity, fragile housing and systematic institutional neglect.

This spatial arrangement across both texts highlights Ambedkar's observation in *Annihilation of Caste*, that the village is neither a cohesive social unit nor a pastoral republic, but a site of spatial apartheid designed to keep the subaltern physically available for exploitation but socially insulated from ritual equality.



Figure 2

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The division of space is not only beyond the boundary of the village; it also regulates the body of Dalit. Habitus is the physical embodiment of cultural capital and social conditioning, a durable system of dispositions acquired through early experience that structures bodily posture, gesture, and movement. Pierre Bourdieu succinctly describes as:

The body courses are social order realised in the body, realised in the form of bodily hexes, a permanent disposition, a durable way of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking." (Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 93)

In *Joothan* and *Karukku* the spatial movement from periphery to the dominant center causes an immediate, forced shift in the subaltern hexis. The Dalit body is not allowed to simply occupy the space of the upper castes; it has to shrink, apologise, and signal submission. Valmiki calls this physical training an unspoken code, inherited from parent to child. Whenever a Taga elder passed down a lane, a Chuhra had to step off the lane into the mud, lower his gaze, and offer verbal subservience 'Salaam, Maharaj.'

Insistence on walking upright, looking directly into a high-caste man's eyes, or wearing clean clothes within the Taga precinct were read as acts of insolence 'dhithai' that invited retaliatory violence. Valmiki details the physical tension his father felt each time they entered the upper-caste neighbourhoods for work—the stiffened neck, the careful step, the bodily memory of past attacks, anticipating violence at every threshold.

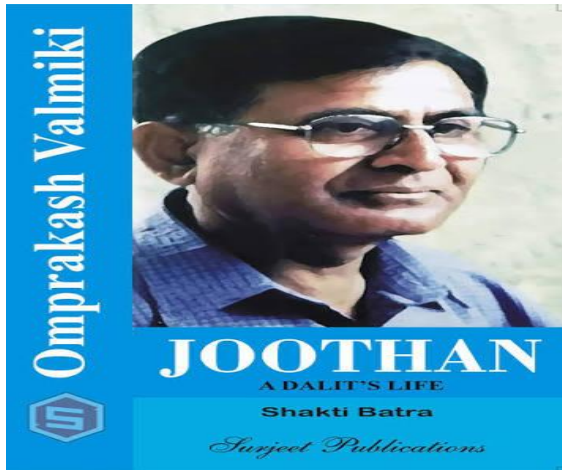


Figure 3

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In *Karukku*, Bama captures this bodily conditioning in a formative childhood memory that marks her awakening to caste society:

An elder of our street came along the road from the direction of the bazaar. He was carrying a small packet, wrapped in banana leaf and tied with string, holding it by the string alone, dangling it away from his body without touching it... He walked in a funny, bent-over way, cupping his mouth, and bowed low to the Naicker sitting on the stone ledge, handing the packet over by the thread, careful that his fingers did not graze the master. (Bama, 15)

First, young Bama laughs at the scene, thinking it is comical slapstick. When her elder brother, Annan, explains that the man was carrying fried parcels for the landlord and that a Paraiyar touch would 'pollute' the snack, her amusement gives way to visceral outrage. Bourdieu's habitus is most purely illustrated in the old man's bowed back, dangling string and cupped hand: a bodily habit so deeply internalised that the elderly man humiliates himself in an automatic way, without the need for an upper-caste master to issue a verbal

threat. His body has absorbed the spatial and somatic rules of caste.

There is nowhere where the violence of caste geography is felt more acutely than in the spatial regulation of water sources. Water, in South Asian culture, is doubly burdened: it is essential to physical survival, yet uniquely vulnerable to ritual pollution. In *Joothan* Valmiki describes the physical torment of the village school as:

The thirst was unendurable during the hot summer months. The handpump inside the school premises belonged to the high castes. I could not go and pump water for myself. I had to wait, parched, near the pump until some high-caste boy took pity on me and pumped water from above, pouring it into my cupped hands without letting our skin or vessels touch. If no one came, I spent the school day with a dry throat. (Valmiki, 16)

The school well does not serve as an egalitarian civic resource; it is an outpost of village apartheid. The pump's physical structure mirrors the caste hierarchy. The upper-caste child is elevated above at the mechanical lever, while the Dalit child sits lower in the dust with palms cupped, waiting for the water to fall like a conditional gift. The same spatial logic is documented by Bama in *Karukku*.

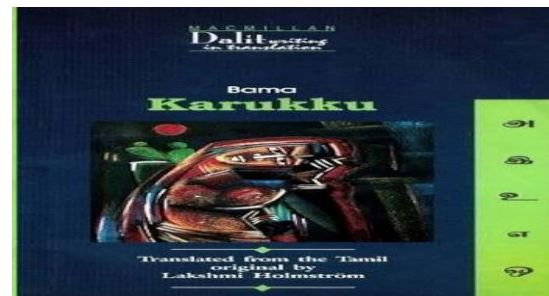


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Dalit women in the cheri are forced to walk miles to collect water from muddy riverbeds or wait submissively beside the upper-caste irrigation wells,

praying that a Naicker landowner will turn the valve. When upper-caste women arrive at a common source, the Paraiyar women have to move back several steps, give up their place in the queue and wait until every upper-caste pot is filled:

If even a drop of water from our pots fell on them, they would scream as if they had been scalded, they would go home, wash their clothes, bathe again and leave our pots shattered into pieces. (Bama, 22)

Access to water becomes a daily reminder of subordination. Dalit are told about their lowly status not just on special occasions but every single day with every cup of water they are forced to beg for.

The spatial price of subaltern mobility spatial segregation inside the village depends on spatial containment. When a Dalit transgresses these physical boundaries—be it through geographical mobility, education, or economic assertion—the dominant castes respond with spatial violence to force the subaltern back into their designated place.

In *Joothan*, when Valmiki arrives at school, his movement on the village roads in clean clothes carrying books ruptures the expected spatial aesthetics of the village. The Tagas do not see an aspiring student; they see a Chuhra who is trying to escape from the physical role assigned to him:

Look at this sweeper's brat, walking about as if he were an equal, with clean clothes and books tucked under his arm! What if these sweepers get ideas, who will clean our cattle, sheds? (Valmiki, 19)

Education breaks the visual hierarchy of the village. The upper castes take offence at the sight of a Chuhra body moving through the street without carrying a broom, a dung basket or a bundle of firewood. Physical assaults, attacks on lonely paths connecting the village and neighbouring towns, and arbitrary detentions at the village square serve as

intentional reminders to the Dalit body that it belongs on the outskirts, bent double in labour.

Similarly, Bama writes in *Karukku* that when Dalit labourers demand higher agrarian wages or refuse to do degrading tasks, the upper castes retaliate by denying them access to shared space. The Naickers prohibit the Paraiyars from using the village roads, gathering firewood from the community scrublands, and relieving themselves in the local fields:

As soon as our people stood up to fight for their rights, the landlords showed their power. They closed the ways that crossed their fields. They said our women could not walk past their houses to reach the main road. They locked us in our own cheri, turning our homes into a prison until hunger brought people back to their knees. (Bama, 48-50)

Space is a weapon in economic and social war. The geography of the village is a kind of open-air prison. The fields, paths and water sources are all mapped out so that any collective demonstration of dignity can be met by cordoning off the Dalit neighbourhood.

Both *Joothan* and *Karukku* map these physical constraints to establish that caste violence is embedded directly in rural geography. The core-periphery division, the physical conditioning of subaltern bodies, the policing of water sources, and the territorial retaliation against subaltern mobility all show that the village is not a neutral backdrop. It is an active instrument of caste power. For Valmiki and Bama, emancipation means escaping this spatial and psychological architecture, an escape that begins with documenting its hidden spatial rules and rejecting the deferential habitus that is drilled into the subaltern body from birth.

Schoolhouse and the convent contemporary institutional philosophy views educational and religious spaces as egalitarian domains governed by universal rationality, civic merit, or divine grace. But in both *Joothan* and *Karukku*, these modern and

modernising apparatuses– the rural state school in Western Uttar Pradesh and the Roman Catholic convent in Tamil Nadu – are stripped of their emancipatory veneer. They are not vehicles of upward mobility but disciplined outposts of caste power. This section looks at the weaponisation of pedagogy, architecture and spiritual discipline in the schoolhouse in *Joothan* and the convent in *Karukku* to enforce caste hierarchies.

The analysis draws upon Pierre Bourdieu's theorisation of institutional reproduction and symbolic violence, and Louis Althusser's formulation of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). Headmaster Kaliram and Pedagogical Violence

In *Joothan* the village schoolhouse does not disturb the feudal order of Barla but incorporates it and formalises it. Omprakash Valmiki's entry into formal schooling is not a process of civic integration but one of spatial segregation and pedagogical neglect.

He is denied a seat on the mats reserved for students of the upper caste and forced to sit on the naked dusty floor near the doorway of the classroom – physically placed half inside and half outside the pedagogical field. This liminal positioning serves a symbolic function: it marks the Dalit body as an intruder in the domain of letters. The latent hostility of the institutional apparatus is exploded into explicit physical coercion through the figure of the headmaster of the school, Kaliram.

Kaliram immediately collapses the boy's identity as a student back into his hereditary caste occupation by addressing Valmiki using derogatory caste epithets:

Arrey Chuhre ke,' he shouted, 'go climb that teak tree, break its twigs, make a broom and sweep the entire school ground till it is as clean as a mirror. After all, this is your family's work... What business do you have with reading and writing?'

(Valmiki, 5)

The violence of this demand is in its public, intentional nature. For three days running, while upper-caste boys are inside learning maths and language, young Omprakash is made a public spectacle:

The dust had settled in my hair, got into my eyes, my mouth, and covered my lungs. I was thirsty, but I was not allowed to drink water from the pump. The other children were studying, while I was sweeping the courtyard, my back aching, my hands covered in blisters. All the teachers and students watched this tamasha from their windows. (Valmiki, 6)

The school ground becomes an open air theatre of humiliation. The teak broom strips the child of his academic agency, reinscribing hereditary sanitation labour on the subaltern body within an institution ostensibly built to transcend that very fate. The pedagogical gaze of teachers and peers does not see an atrocity; it normalises the spectacle as the natural social order.

The cycle is broken not by institutional intervention or state accountability, but by the physical arrival of Valmiki's father, Chhotan Lal. When the father sees his son crying from exhaustion while sweeping the grounds he snatches the broom from him, throws it across the yard and confronts the institutional authority of the headmaster:

Who is that teacher who makes my son sweep the school instead of teaching him?... He roared so loudly that the entire school fell silent: 'You are a teacher, so I am leaving you now. But remember this much, Master... this boy will study right here, in this very school. And not only him, but many more will come after him! (Valmiki, 7)

Chhotan Lal's intervention represents a fundamental rupture in the text. The father confronts

Kaliram, rejecting deferential subaltern habitus. He reveals the institutional authority of the 'Master' as a mask of feudal arrogance, asserting a radical right to literacy that bypasses the exclusionary design of the school.

Joothan depicts the unconcealed, violent collusion between rural feudalism and the secular state school, while Bama's *Karukku* outlines an insidious, spiritualised form of institutional exclusion within the Roman Catholic Church and its monastic orders. Drawn by the promise of the Christian gospel that all human beings are children of God that all are equal before God, and that the poor must be protected, Bama joins a convent, hoping to dedicate her life to educating the marginalised children of Dalits:

I entered the convent with the burning desire to serve the poor, especially the children of our community who were crushed by poverty and caste. I thought inside the religious order, away from the crude casteism of the village, all would be equal in the eyes of Christ. (Bama, 68)

Instead, Bama finds the convent as an elite high-caste bureaucracy that utilises religious vows—especially the vow of obedience—as a method to silence critique and naturalise internal social hierarchies. In South India, the Catholic Church, while taking in mass conversions of Dalits looking to escape Hindu ritual apartheid, retains graded inequality in its sacred architecture. In the convent, caste discrimination is not usually exercised through direct physical violence, but through what Bourdieu calls symbolic violence—the subtle, sanctified codes of taste, conduct and lineage:

In the convent, they talked endlessly about poverty, but lived in luxury. The convent authorities and the senior nuns were drawn almost entirely from upper-caste families—Naickers, Nadars, and Syrian Christians. They treated the Dalit nuns and the servant girls who cleaned their latrines and kitchens with deep, unexpressed contempt. Whenever they spoke of poor children or Dalit communities, it was always with condescension, describing

them as dirty, lazy, and without culture. (Bama, 72)

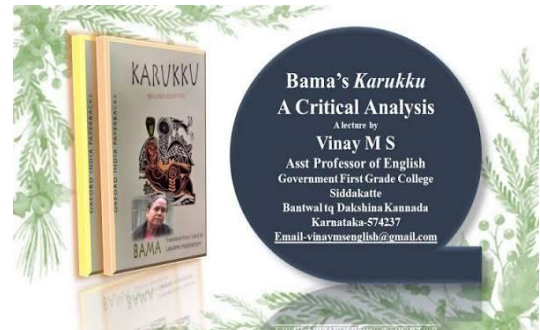


Figure 5

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Bama illuminates the inner division of labour in the convent, which mirrors the village caste divisions within the cloistered walls. Upper-caste nuns occupy administrative, pedagogical and supervisory positions, while Dalit postulants and domestic workers are funnelled into heavy kitchen work, sweeping and cleaning latrines. When Bama protests the abuse of lower-caste domestic servants or the discriminatory admissions policies that privilege wealthy students over poor Dalit applicants, the institutional leadership reframes her sociopolitical critique as a spiritual flaw: a lack of 'humility', an inability to 'surrender one's ego', or a violation of the vow of holy obedience.

This gaslighting shows how Christian monastic piety can be turned into an instrument of caste subjugation. The subaltern nun is expected to accept degradation not merely as social reality but as spiritual duty. Bama's decision in the end to shed her nun's habit and leave the order after seven years is an institutional refusal:

I thought I could change things from within. But I saw that the convent was a prison built on lies. They did not want the spirit of Jesus;

they wanted blind obedience to maintain their power and privileges. I realised that if I stayed there, my soul would wither and I would become a hypocrite like the rest of them. So, I walked out into the world, empty-handed, but with my self-respect intact. (Bama, 93)

Whereas in traditional spiritual autobiographies, leaving an order is portrayed as a moral failure or loss of faith, Bama's apostasy is an act of political self-preservation and authentic Christian liberation. The illusion of the institution crumbles when you step out of the convent and you realise that the caste system was just baptised by the catholic order and nothing else.

Both Valmiki and Bama exemplify the way in which the dominant caste monopolises control of institutions via the monopoly of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). In both the school and the convent, institutional standards of merit, virtue, and aesthetic refinement are calibrated to upper-caste cultural norms, marking the Dalit subject as deficient from the very outset.

In *Joothan*, the Hindi that is used in textbooks and spoken by upper-caste teachers is heavily Sanskritised, elevated, and deliberately alien to the vernacular idioms of the Chuhra community. Valmiki's language is constantly made fun of. His teachers consider his accent and dialect 'uncouth' 'ganwaar' and use it as an excuse to give him poor marks and to verbally abuse him. Academic merit is thus revealed not as an intrinsic intellectual quality, but as the institutional recognition of upper-caste cultural capital.

In *Karukku*, Bama narrates an incident from her school days when an upper caste girl lost some money and the upper caste headmistress singled her out for blame only on the basis of caste identity:

The headmistress, without questioning anybody else, without making any enquiries, pointed her finger at me in front of the whole assembly and called me a thief, screaming, 'You Paraiya girl, you must have stolen it! That

is what your people do!' She humiliated me in front of the entire school until I wept hysterically. (Bama, 18)

The institutionalised hierarchy casts moral criminality upon the Dalit body. Purity and honesty are coded as upper-caste virtues, while thievery and deception are pathologised as intrinsic subaltern traits. The subaltern subject is always suspect of the institutions; always in need of proving innocence that the upper-caste body is assumed to have.

Both stories see the physical boundaries of the institutions re-creating the segregation of the village. In *Joothan*, Valmiki is barred from entering the teachers' staffroom or touching clean water pitchers. In *Karukku*, Dalit students and day labourers are compelled to enter through service gates and to eat sitting on verandas and not in common dining halls. Modern architecture does not dismantle caste geography; it embeds it into the institutional floor plan.

The central thematic difference between *Joothan* and *Karukku* is that neither protagonist remains a passive victim of institutional violence. Both texts lead to a moment of institutional refusal in the same manner.

Valmiki's refusal transforms literacy and critical awareness. He appropriates the written word as a weapon when higher education institutions attempt to sideline him into technical vocations to prevent intellectual development. He immerses himself in Ambedkarite literature, theatre and socialist critique, and uses writing to put the institutional oppressor on trial.

Bama's refusal takes the form of conscious institutional abandonment. By discarding her nun's habit, she disavows the moral authority of the Catholic Church over her life, preferring economic vulnerability and social brightness to complicity with a hypocritical monastic hierarchy. These acts of defiance occurring in both life narratives negate the myth of institutional neutrality in post-independence India.

The schoolhouse and the convent, celebrated in national and religious discourses as instruments of

enlightenment, are shown to be disciplined spaces of social reproduction. For the Dalit subject, authentic emancipation requires confronting, exposing, and ultimately overthrowing these very institutions. Caste domination does not work only through ideological mystification, metaphysical edicts, or spatial cartography; its most vicious enforcement is visceral, somatic, and material.

In both *Joothan* and *Karukku*, caste takes the form of an economic and biological stranglehold: the systematic denial of nutritional sustenance, the extraction of unfree physical labour, the reduction of the subaltern body to an instrument of sanitary and agricultural maintenance. In this section, I interrogate the semiotics of joothan (polluted food scraps) alongside the coercive economies of begar (unfree, unpaid labour) and agrarian exploitation to reveal how the physical survival of the Dalit community is weaponised to manufacture permanent indebtedness and ritual defilement.

Food is the prime medium of ritual transaction in classical Brahmanical sociology. As Louis Dumont notes in *Homo Hierarchicus*, commensality is tightly regulated by principles of purity and pollution: food prepared in water (*kachcha*) or that remains from another's plate (*ucchiṣṭa* in Sanskrit; *joothan* in Hindi) carries the bio-moral pollution of the eater. To be on the lowest rung of ritual being is to eat the saliva-stained scraps of another human being, a biological status that only scavenging dogs and pigs share.

In *Joothan*, Valmiki digs this dynamic out of abstract theology and plants it firmly within the brutal material realities of the Chuhra community in Barla: Valmiki describes with agonising clarity the ritual collection of *pattals* (leaf plates) during upper-caste Taga weddings. As wedding guests feasted on *puris*, *kheer* and sweets, the Chuhras sat patiently outside the courtyard gates with large woven baskets (*tukras*):

When the guests finished eating, the leaf plates were collected and thrown outside in the dirt. We would fall upon them like scavengers, gathering the discarded leaves into our baskets. The pieces of *puris* stuck to the leaves, the half-eaten sweets, the scraps of vegetables

covered in spittle—this was our *joothan*... We would carry them home and spread it. The dominant castes consciously transform surplus food into a biological expression of contempt: rather than sharing fresh food, they toss their saliva-stained leftovers into the dust, compelling the Chuhras to scavenge among village dogs. The dried *joothan*, preserved on cots and teeming with ants and dust, is a tangible reminder that the subaltern's survival is sustained by what the dominant caste has spat out. (Valmiki 11)

Challenging Sukhdev Singh Tyagi This process reaches a climax in a key scene where Valmiki's mother defies the feudal transaction. After Sukhdev Singh Tyagi's daughter's wedding feast, Valmiki's mother approaches Tyagi, having worked for hours cleaning utensils and carrying heavy pots, to ask for a small bowl of fresh food for her hungry children:

Sukhdev Singh pointed his finger at the basket of dirty leaf plates and roared, 'You are taking a basketful of *joothan*, and on top of that you have the insolence to ask for fresh food for your brats? Pick up your basket and get out of here or I will have you whipped!' My mother stood still for a second. Her face burnt like an ember. She looked him straight in the eyes, picked up the basket of *joothan* and dumped it right there at his doorstep. She spat on the floor and hissed, 'We are human beings, not your dogs. Keep your *joothan* to yourself! (Valmiki, 11).

This confrontation is a historic rupture in subaltern life writing. The mother declines the *joothan*, refusing the false generosity of the feudal patron. Her act of dumping the basket directly onto the landlord's threshold is an act of counter-defilement; she returns the physical marker of humiliation to its producer, asserting human dignity '*manushyata*' over mere biological survival.

In both Western Uttar Pradesh and rural Tamil Nadu, Dalits' economic survival was inextricably linked to the extraction of unfree, unpaid labour. In *Joothan*, this operates under the feudal institution of begar (forced labour without remuneration), enforced by dominant landowning Tagas. Valmiki recounts how Taga landowners entered the Chuhra quarter at dawn, demanding young men and boys for field labour, ditch digging and manure hauling. Refusal was met with swift and organised retaliation:

If anyone had the temerity to say, 'I have work today' or 'Pay me my daily wage,' the Tagas would come with clubs and canes. They would drag men out of their huts, beat them until they bled, and force them into the fields. There was no law, no Police, no court for us. The Tagas were the law. (Valmiki, 24)

Begar denies the subaltern subject sovereignty over time and body. The Dalit owns none of his own labour time. His muscles, sweat, endurance are the common property of the dominant village landowners. The paltry payment at harvest, handfuls of chaff-filled grain and cast-off remnants, is not wages but a sustenance ration, to keep the labourer alive long enough to work another day, never allowing him to take capital or achieve autonomy.

In *Karukku* and *Joothan* highlights the ritual defilement of sanitation labour and begar, but Bama's *Karukku* foregrounds the repetitive, grinding bodily exhaustion of agrarian field labour in Tamil Nadu. Bama's narrative reveals a system of brutal economic extraction hidden behind the lush pastoral image of the South Indian countryside. Bama describes the relentless physical toll imposed on the Paraiyar labourers, especially women, who work in the groundnut, paddy, and sugarcane fields of the dominant Naicker landlords:

From dawn to dusk, we bent double in the mud, our hands blistered from weeding, our backs breaking under the heat of the scorching

sun. We sowed the seed, we watered the crops, and we harvested the grain. Yet, when the harvest was over, our houses were empty. The grain flowed into the landlords' granite silos, while we returned to our huts with only a few annas and empty bellies. (Bama, 42-44)

Bama's narrative brings an important intersectional dimension that sets her apart from Valmiki's *Jhootan*.

In *Karukku* the Dalit woman is caught in a double cycle of extraction. The wage gap in the field upper-caste landlords systematically pay Dalit women half or two-thirds of the daily wage offered to Dalit men for the same or harder hours of stoop labour (weeding, planting, transplanting seedlings in waterlogged fields). The day for the Dalit woman starts hours before sunrise, fetching water from distant, brackish wells, collecting twigs for firewood, looking after children and preparing thin millet gruel (kanji), and stretches far into the night after field labour is over.

Bama is not romanticising the Dalit household. She writes that the male workers, beaten down by the daily humiliations of the Naicker masters and numbed by cheap liquor, often vent their impotent rage on women through domestic violence:

The men were humiliated in the fields all day, treated like dirt by the Naickers. At night they came home drunk, cursing their fate, and beat their wives black and blue. The woman bears the weight of the whole world—the landlord's contempt, the hunger of her children, and the fists of her husband. (Bama, 45)

Caste hierarchy consumes the physical health, joints and organs of the lower-caste labourer, discarding them as soon as their utility is over. Valmiki recalls cleaning the open-pit latrines of the Tagas during harsh winters:

The stench was so overwhelming that it made you gag and vomit until your stomach emptied itself of bile. Carrying baskets of human excrement on our heads, the filthy liquid would leak through the wicker, dripping down our hair, our foreheads, our necks. No amount of washing could remove that smell from our skin; it became our very identity. (Valmiki, 15)

In *Karukku*, Bama uses the palmyra leaf (karukku) as a central metaphor precisely because of its physical brutality on the working body:

The edges of the palmyra stem are serrated with razor-sharp teeth. As you slash and strip the leaves, they cut into your flesh before you even realize you are bleeding. By evening, your palms and forearms are cross-hatched with cuts that burn when sweat touches them. That is our life: cutting through thorns, our bodies bleeding every single day just to keep our throats wet. (Bama, 1)

In both texts, the physical degradation of the Dalit body is not accidental; it is functional. It marks the subaltern subject with the visible signs of their low status — stains, scars, callouses, and odours — to which the upper caste then points as justification for their physical exclusion. Neither Valmiki nor Bama lets this material analysis slide into resignation. Instead, the documentation of these economic and physical indignities becomes an indictment of the material foundations of caste in the life writing.

In *Joothan*, the author's mother's refusal of joothan, and subsequently Valmiki's refusal to engage in hereditary carcass skinning or agricultural begar eventually, indicates the severing of the subaltern body from the feudal economy. In *Karukku*, Bama identifies economic independence through education as the only sustainable route out of agrarian servitude:

We must study. We must learn to stand on our own two feet. If we depend on the Naickers for our daily grain, we will remain their slaves forever. It is better to starve for a day while learning our rights than to eat their kanji and live like beasts. (Bama, 55)

In exposing the mechanics of joothan, begar, and agricultural exploitation, Valmiki and Bama prove that caste is fundamentally a material apparatus of economic extraction and bodily destruction. Emancipation requires the dismantling of its spiritual illusions and the coercive economic conditions that leave subaltern bodies hungry, indebted and bound to physical labour.

The emergence of Dalit autobiographical literature challenges not only a sociological system of oppression but also a well-entrenched aesthetic regime. In the history of South Asian literature, classical Sanskrit aesthetic theory 'saundaryashastra' — formalised by theorists including Bharata Muni 'Natya Shastra', Anandavardhana 'Dhvanyaloka', and Abhinavagupta — has functioned as an elite gatekeeping framework.

This canon, based on metaphysical balance, refined sentiment 'rasa', propriety 'aucitya' and idealised harmony 'satyam, shivam, sundaram', explicitly eschewed the lived material realities of the untouchable castes — manual labour, physical mutilation, filth, starvation and righteous fury — calling them vulgar 'ashleela', grotesque 'vibhatsa' or unworthy of high literary representation.

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Bama's *Karukku* carry out an epistemological insurrection by deploying non-standard vernaculars, coarse dialects, and uncensored bodily vocabularies. They reject the sanitised, Brahmanical literary standards of Hindi and Tamil, developing what Sharankumar Limbale theorises as a Dalit Aesthetic 'Dalit Sahityache Saundaryashastra': an aesthetic based not on transcendental escapism, but on equality, human dignity, and the unvarnished materiality of pain 'vedna' and revolt 'vidroha'.

Classical Sanskrit aesthetics holds that the ultimate purpose of literature is the evocation of rasa, a

concentrated, contemplative aesthetic savouring which lifts the reader above worldly pain into a universalised emotional harmony 'sadharanikarana'. Dalit life writing systematically disrupts this contemplative detachment.

In *Joothan*, Valmiki does not allow the reader to consume his trauma as passive aesthetic pleasure. Valmiki overturns the classical 'Vibhatsa Rasa' (the aesthetic of disgust) by documenting the treatment of human excrement, the flaying of decomposing cattle carcasses, and the boiling of mouldy, saliva-encrusted food scraps.

Vibhatsa in classical poetics is an auxiliary sentiment meant to produce worldly detachment (vairagya). Valmiki strips it of ascetic spiritualism, confronting upper-caste hypocrisy with the visceral reality of filth:

Dalit life is not made of sweet songs, fragrant gardens or heroic romance. Our truth is born out of open sewers, stinking gutters and the daily indignity of carrying other people's filth on our heads. To sanitise our words so that upper-caste readers feel comfortable is to commit treason against our own pain. Our language must burn like acid on their skin. (Valmiki, 1997)

In the same way, Bama's *Karukku* challenges traditional Tamil notions of literary decorum (ilakkiya nayam). In Tamil literary history, centamil (formal, classical, purified literary Tamil) and koduntamil (informal, colloquial, 'crooked' spoken dialects) have long been a rigid diglossia. High literary prose had demanded for centuries the systematic erasure of low-caste, working-class speech patterns. Bama rejects Centamil entirely and opts for the fast, raw, oral speech of the Paraiyar Christian community:

When I sat down to write I did not want to write in that artificial, high-flown Tamil that we were forced to learn in schools – a language that belonged to the upper-caste masters and

priests, a language that never spoke our truth. I wrote in the very words that poured from my mother's mouth, the language of our streets, full of raw curses, sweat, laughter, and rage. (Bama, Preface to *Karukku*)

By bringing Paraiyar colloquialisms, syncopated rhythms, and street idioms into print, Bama dismantles the linguistic border patrol of Dravidian literary purism, asserting that subaltern speech has its own aesthetic coherence. In *Joothan*, Valmiki's linguistic resistance is aimed at Shuddha Hindi, a register consciously cultivated in post-independence India to build a Sanskritic, Hindu-nationalist civil identity.

Valmiki inserts into this standard Hindi coarse rustic expressions (dhithai, tukras, dher) and unapologetic transcriptions of casteist slurs hurled by villagers of the upper castes. Instead of euphemising he confronts the reader with the words Chuhra and Bhangi in their full humiliating context. The language does not plead for inclusion. It compels the reader to witness institutionalised verbal assault.

In *Karukku*, Bama disturbs the linguistic purity of Tamil literature by breaking up standard grammatical structures. She employs colloquial verbs, regional contractions and phonetic transliterations of Roman Catholic liturgy as spoken by illiterate Dalit villagers (e.g. representing Latin liturgical terms through colloquial Tamil phonology). Lakshmi Holmström notes in her translator's foreword that Bama's style was a radical challenge to traditional models of translation:

Bama leaves behind the polite, decorous language of traditional autobiography. Her style is conversational, urgent, raw, breaking standard rules of grammar and punctuation... It was a language that had never been seen in modern Tamil print culture before, shocking critics and purists alike. (Holmström, *Karukku*, xi-xiii)

By refusing to clean up the text for literary arbiters, Bama proves that classical syntax was designed to muffle the cry of the subaltern. To enforce standard grammar on subaltern testimony is to reenact symbolic violence in the name of editorial polish.

Both authors ground their literary titles in quotidian, abject objects, re-inscribing them as counter-hegemonic symbols of critique. In classical Brahmanical thought, joothan is an untouchable substance, an icon of biological shame that must be kept out of sight. Valmiki brings this secret shame to light, presenting it as a title on bookshop shelves and university syllabi.

The word itself becomes an epistemic weapon: upper caste readers whose cultural identity is contingent on ideas of purity are made to utter and face the word Joothan. The polluted scrap becomes an indictment of the society that produced it, transformed from an instrument of silent subjugation.

Karukku is the name given to the serrated edge of the stalk of the palmyra leaf. For rural Tamil Nadu, the palmyra tree with its jagged teeth provides thatch, sugar and firewood. It also provides a stream of cuts, scars and wounds on the hands of the Dalit labourers who harvest it. Bama employs this dual imagery:

The word *Karukku* means the sharp, saw-like edge of the palmyra leaf. It tears the skin, it draws blood, and it leaves permanent marks. But that very same edge, when held firmly, can cut through thick brush, slice away thorns, and clear a path forward. My words are like that *karukku*—‘they scratch, they bleed, but they are also forged to cut through the chains of caste.’ (Bama, Author’s Preface)

The serrated stem becomes an instrument of subaltern agency: an everyday rural tool transformed into an ideological blade to cut through the hypocrisies of both the village *Ur* and the Catholic Church.

The counter-discourse in both texts is critically directed against upper-caste paternalistic representations of Dalits, particularly the Gandhian

sentimentalism of the ‘*Harijan*’ (Children of God). In twentieth-century literature, both in Hindi and in the regional languages, the progressive or reformist upper-caste writers like Premchand, in stories such as *Kafan* or *Sadgati* often portrayed the Dalit as a tragic, helpless victim meant to evoke the reader’s feelings of sympathy, guilt, and moral pity (*karuna*). Valmiki and Bama reject this reformist gaze.

In *Joothan*, Valmiki directly critiques Hindi writers who claim to write about Dalits through ‘*sahanubhuti*’ (sympathy) rather than *svanubhuti* lived experience in his views as:

One cannot understand the agony of caste simply by feeling pity. Those who have never carried a basket of human excrement on their heads, who have never felt the lash of a landlord’s cane for sitting on a cot, can write beautiful, tear-jerking poetry about us. But their pity is an insult. We do not want your tears; we want our rights. Dalit literature cannot be written with the pen of sympathy; it demands the ink of our own blood. (Valmiki, 64)

In *Karukku*, Bama rejects the institutional Church’s framing of Dalits as passive beneficiaries of Christian benevolence. She demonstrates how the rhetoric of ‘uplifting the downtrodden’ converts the subaltern into an object of spiritual merit for upper-caste patrons, while denying them systemic rights, land ownership, and administrative leadership.

Toward an Autonomous Subaltern Epistemology *Joothan* and *Karukku* not only supplement Indian literature; they redraw its boundaries by replacing classical *rasa* with *vidroha* (revolt), by setting aside Sanskritised and literary registers for living oral dialects, and by elevating abject symbols into literary manifestos. Language is reclaimed from its role as a device of upper-caste gatekeeping and turned into a mechanism of subaltern self-determination.

Valmiki and Bama demonstrate that subaltern liberation entails an aesthetic revolution: If the house of

caste is to be destroyed, the refined, exclusionary language that sustains its foundations must first be overthrown. In Dalit life writing, the transition from endurance to active insurrection marks the emergence of the subaltern political subject.

In both *Joothan* and *Karukku*, emancipation is not granted by benevolent reformers, nor is it attained through passive absorption into the dominant civic institutions. It demands an epistemic rupture, a radical dismantling of internalised social conditioning and the subsequent reconstruction of an autonomous consciousness.

Omprakash Valmiki locates his political awakening in the secular militant rationalism of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and the literary activism of the Dalit Panthers. Bama charts her liberation through a subaltern reclamation of Christian Liberation Theology that deconstructs Christ of ecclesiastical dogma to reveal him as an insurgent ally of the oppressed.

In his early life, Valmiki had no ideological grammar to account for his oppression. The feudal village considers untouchability to be an immutable karmic condition, and this encourages fatalism among the subaltern elderly. The turning point comes when Valmiki leaves the village—first for technical training in Dehradun, and later for the industrial surroundings of Ordnance Factory in Jabalpur and Maharashtra. This geographical dis-location result in an intellectual encounter: He comes across the life and writings of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Reading Ambedkar's biography and political treatises shatters Valmiki's internalised sense of inferiority:

Reading Ambedkar was like being struck by a bolt of lightning. A dark curtain was torn from my eyes. For the first time I realised that our poverty, our degradation, our eating of joothan was not our destiny, nor was it God's will; it was the direct consequence of a social and political order engineered to crush us. Ambedkar gave me words for my silent pain; he gave me an intellectual weapon to strike back. (Valmiki, 72–74).

Ambedkar's tripartite slogan, 'Educate, Agitate, Organise', becomes Valmiki's operational compass. Secular literacy is liberated from upper-caste gatekeeping and repurposed as a tool of political critique. Valmiki rejects the paternalistic literature of mainstream Hindi reformism and turns to sociological, anti-caste writings.

In Maharashtra, Valmiki encounters the raw energy of the Dalit Panther movement and the pioneering Marathi Dalit literature of Namdeo Dhasal, Baburao Bagul and Arjun Dangle. The Panthers' militant stance gives him an unapologetic vocabulary of confrontation that bypasses elite civility.

Valmiki makes ideology practical for community life. He uses art as a weapon for public agitation through street theatre, public readings and cultural organisations (like the Meghdoot theatrical group). Radical theatre staged in working-class neighbourhoods turns aesthetic production into collective political mobilisation.

Bama and Subaltern Liberation Theology unlike Valmiki, who completely rejects religious orthodoxy in favour of constitutional and secular rationalism, Bama's path to agency in *Karukku* is one of an internal ideological civil war within Christianity itself. Being a Paraiyar Catholic, Bama is forced to confront an institution that claims to teach universal brotherhood but practices everyday caste exclusion.

Rather than surrendering to religious cynicism, Bama executes a radical theological pivot that aligns with the core principles of Liberation Theology (Gustavo Gutiérrez; Leonardo Boff), interpreting scripture through the lived struggle of the subaltern: Bama reclaims the historical Jesus from the clerical hierarchy, stripping away centuries of feudal European and upper-caste Indian theological mystification:

Jesus was not a friend of the wealthy landowners, priests, and kings. He walked with the poor, the outcasts, the lepers, and the prostitutes. He ate with those whom society called unclean. Why then does the Church

build palaces for priests and neglect the starving Dalits? Why do the nuns kiss the rings of rich patrons while driving away the poor children of our cheri? Jesus stood against the hypocrites and Pharisees of his day, and if he were to return today, he would stand with the Dalits against this very Church. (Bama, 94–96)

By contrasting the radical, egalitarian Jesus of Nazareth with the institutional Roman Catholic Church, Bama achieves psychological liberation from spiritual guilt. The convent deployed ‘holy obedience’ to suppress dissent against caste discrimination. Bama re-interprets resistance as divine duty rather than sin. Serving casteist overlords is betraying the authentic gospel of liberation. The act of leaving the convent becomes a liberating declaration of faith rather than an act of spiritual failure.

Finally, by doffing the nun’s habit, she is able to rejoin her community in the cheri, claiming that true solidarity with the oppressed cannot happen in an elite cloister. The modes of subaltern awakening in *Joothan* and *Karukku* are indicative of their different intellectual genealogies, but they converge in the rejection of fatalism and the reclamation of bodily and intellectual autonomy. For both Valmiki and Bama, to write an autobiography is itself the ultimate exercise of subaltern agency.

In the classical autobiographies, writing is the quiet recollection of a life fulfilled. Writing in Dalit testimonio is an act of resistance—a direct intervention in the public sphere. Valmiki and Bama refuse closure or pastoral reconciliation. Both texts end in a deliberately open-ended manner.

Valmiki ends *Joothan* not in individual victory but with an uncompromising challenge to upper-caste society:

Our struggle is not yet over. It has only just begun. The fires that have burnt in our bellies for centuries will not be doused by mere promises or tokens of charity. We will shake the foundations of your society until every

stone of this caste prison is turned to dust. (Valmiki, 134)

Bama ends *Karukku* with an open horizon of collective struggle:

I have no security now, no permanent home, and no steady salary. But I am free. I can breathe. I can stand alongside my people in the dust and the sun. We are like the seeds buried deep in the dark earth—you may step on us, you may bury us, but we will burst through the soil and grow. (Bama, 104)

Neither author seeks the acceptance of the dominant castes. Agency is achieved in *Joothan* and *Karukku* by the subaltern speaking for itself, without mediation, recording trauma for the purpose of condemning the oppressor, and mobilising the marginalised community for systemic change.

Review of Literature

The comparative analysis of Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan: A Dalit’s Life* and Bama’s *Karukku* demonstrates that, although the manifestations of caste violence are heavily inscribed by regional geography, linguistic matrices and religious institutions, the essential structure of caste oppression is built upon a common logic of spatial containment, material exploitation and bodily degradation. Across these geographical landscapes both life writings challenge the foundational assumptions of traditional autobiography.

Neither Valmiki nor Bama writes an autobiography that is focused on the bourgeois, self-actualising individual. Instead they transform life writing into a collective testimonio (Beverley; Mukherjee). The ‘I’ of the narrator is an open conduit to the historical, somatic, and economic wounds of the Chuhra and Paraiyar collectives.

The texts de-mythologise the modernisation narrative which views secular education and Christian missionary institutions as organic engines of equality. In *Joothan*, the government school house replicates the village feudal system by turning the student into a manual sweeper under the casteist authority of Headmaster Kaliram.

In *Karukku*, the Roman Catholic convent becomes a cloistered hierarchy, sanitising caste discrimination through the vows of obedience and holy poverty. Both institutions extort subaltern labour without providing social and intellectual dignity. Valmiki and Bama take the signs of ritual pollution and physical suffering and turn them into instruments of moral indictment. Their stories focus on the rejected leftovers from the upper-caste table (*joothan*) and the sharp, skin-cutting stems of the palmyra tree (*karukku*).

This aesthetic gesture breaks the classical 'Sanskritic saundaryashastra' and bourgeois literary decorum, demonstrating that a genuine subaltern literature must write through the visceral materiality of the marginalised body. The texts present complementary models of subaltern consciousness. Valmiki frees himself by accepting the secular, constitutional and radical rationalism of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and the literary militancy of the Marathi Dalit Panthers.

Bama creates her agency through an intersectional Dalit feminist revolt, freeing the figure of Jesus Christ from ecclesiastical capture to build an indigenous liberation theology that refuses high-caste Church hypocrisy and patriarchal violence in the subaltern home. *Joothan* and *Karukku's* textual interventions are not merely a literary concern. They require a complete reconfiguration of the methodologies employed in South Asian sociological, historical, and cultural studies.

Indian historiography, even in early iterations of Subaltern Studies, often depicted the subaltern as a silent or fragmented figure, primarily visible through colonial court records, police reports, missionary annals, or dominant nationalist archives (Spivak, 1988). *Joothan* and *Karukku* contest the claim of subaltern

voicelessness. They build an autonomous subaltern archive that values oral memory, sensory evidence, bodily pain, and localised vernaculars over state-sanctioned documents.

Dalit life writings reveal that the subaltern has always spoken; elite institutional listening apparatuses were just tuned to ignore their speech. A persistent hypothesis in post-independence Indian sociology was that the twin forces of urbanisation and institutional modernisation would gradually dissolve caste consciousness into class-based social formations.

Valmiki and Bama demonstrate that modern spaces, such as laboratories, university corridors, government offices, monastic institutions, and urban residential blocks, do not abolish caste; they only refine its technologies. Caste moves from overt physical untouchability to institutional microaggressions, coded evaluations of 'merit' and linguistic gatekeeping. Both texts, by extending these dynamics into modern professional settings, offer critical tools for diagnosing contemporary forms of institutional casteism within higher education and corporate labour markets.

Karukku, read in conjunction with Valmiki's account of his mother's resistance, solidifies what Sharmila Rege conceptualises as the Dalit Feminist Standpoint. Bama makes Dalit studies impossible to think of the subaltern subject as exclusively male, or for the mainstream Indian feminism to think of 'woman' as a caste-blind universal category.

By focusing on the intersection of agrarian wage disparities, domestic abuse, sexual vulnerability and religious exclusion, *Karukku* establishes that any anti-caste discourse that ignores internal gender hierarchies remains structurally incomplete, just as any feminist discourse that ignores caste complicity functions as an elite ideology.

Objectives of the Paper

Finally, both texts critique the aesthetic gatekeeping of Indian comparative literature. Valmiki and Bama, by refusing to translate their lived experiences into 'Shuddha Hindi' or classical Centamil,

create non-standard dialects, colloquial curses, rustic rhythms, and oral syntax as legitimate vehicles of high theoretical thought. They demonstrate that language itself is a primary battleground; scholarship must reject the linguistic purification that considers working-class vernaculars substandard, crude, or inarticulate so as to dismantle caste hegemony.

Thus, finally *Joothan* and *Karukku* do not offer neat, comfortable resolutions nor do they seek the reader's cathartic pity. They end on open, combative horizons of continued struggle. In claiming dignity, Omprakash Valmiki's reclamation of the broom and the pen and Bama's rejection of the monastic habit to walk the unpaved streets of the cheri together make the claim that dignity is never bestowed from above; it is wrested from below.

Both texts are seminal monuments in modern Indian letters in that they transform the record of systemic degradation into an enduring literature of resistance. They remind scholars, students and society that the real test of democracy in South Asia lies not in its constitutional abstractions or civilisational claims, but in its material willingness to confront, answer for and annihilate the lasting violence of caste.

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