
Voices from the Margins: Vulnerability and Precarity in the Testimonies of Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Bama's *Karukku*

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Abstract: This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Bama's *Karukku*. Through the lens of Subaltern Theory, it foregrounds the vulnerability and precarity that shape Dalit subjectivity in postcolonial India. The texts emerge as counter-narratives to the caste system, expressing lived experiences of exclusion, marginalization, and the struggle for dignity. The study demonstrates how the voices of the Dalit community are silenced, employing the subaltern theory of Gayatri Spivak and Ranajit Guha. *Joothan* depicts the brutal North Indian caste system, while *Karukku* explores the life of a Tamil Nadu Dalit Christian woman. Both autobiographical works portray deep emotional and social scars, illustrating the pervasive impact of caste on education, religion, and employment. Facing vulnerability, the narrators exist in a state of constant precarity, wherein writing emerges as a potent form of resistance against imposed silence. These writings become political works that compel readers to acknowledge the entrenched reality of caste-based oppression. By engaging with the discourse of silenced and excluded voices, the paper argues that these autobiographies transcend personal stories. They subvert traditional notions of identity, power, and caste, offering a powerful voice to the marginalized.

Keywords: Vulnerability, Precarity, Subaltern, Resistance, Identity

Introduction

Caste-based discrimination, one of India's most pervasive oppressive regimes, routinely marginalizes Dalit communities. Social isolation and untouchability practices persist today, far from being relics of the past. Dalit voices, through literature, particularly autobiographical writings, now challenge prevailing narratives and reclaim agency. In a society that often denies Dalits the ability to recount their experiences, Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Bama's *Karukku* stand as iconic Dalit autobiographies, representing fearless acts of self-assertion and

resistance. According to Ghanshyam Shah, “Dalit includes those termed in administrative parlance as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes” (Shah 8).

This paper explores the themes of precarity and vulnerability in Joothan and Karukku through the lens of Subaltern Theory. The study contextualizes Dalit subjectivity, considering the silencing of subaltern voices and the radical potential of testimonial literature, drawing on the seminal works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Ranajit Guha. These literary works reveal the suffering, resilience, and resistance of Dalit individuals against institutional oppression, providing a robust response to Spivak’s famous question, “Can the subaltern speak?” (Spivak 271).

These works do not merely conceptualize precarity and vulnerability; they embody them as lived realities. In Joothan, Valmiki, from the Chuhra caste in North India, recounts his humiliation and marginalization, including being denied basic dignity and education. Similarly, Karukku addresses the challenges faced by Bama, a Dalit Christian woman in Tamil Nadu, highlighting how caste and religion intersect to dominate and exclude. These texts depict a state of precarity marked by institutional brutality, instability, and lack of opportunities.

The study frames Joothan and Karukku within Subaltern Studies to demonstrate that they are more than personal memoirs; they are acts of defiance against dominant power structures. These works not only engage with the lived realities of caste-based vulnerability but also underscore the political significance of autobiographical writing in reclaiming power and agency. Their testimonial power compels readers to confront the pervasive nature of caste-based violence and its implications for social justice, identity, and power.

Theoretical Framework: Subaltern Theory, Vulnerability, and Precarity

The Subaltern Studies Group, initiated in the early 1980s, offered a bold approach to shift focus from elitist and colonial histories, emphasizing the voices and experiences of marginalized groups in South Asian contexts. Ranajit Guha, a key figure, defined “subaltern” as individuals whose voices are excluded from dominant narratives and whose histories remain unwritten (Guha 1). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her seminal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), questions whether the subaltern can express themselves within dominant discursive frameworks, noting that their words are often mediated or distorted by prevailing ideologies (Spivak 271). Spivak’s insights illuminate how caste-based prejudice silences Dalit voices and undermines the authenticity of their experiences. According to Sharankumar Limbale, “Dalit literature is not ahistorical. The historicity of Dalit experience is conveyed through its strategy of liberating certain figures of history and myth from the demonizing prison hold of upper-caste literature and using them to connect the present with the past” (Limbale 13).

Dalits, as a subaltern group in India, are systematically excluded from the Hindu caste system, denied access to education, religious authority, and political participation. Dalit literature counters this exclusion by serving as a form of knowledge that challenges dominant norms, beyond merely personal narratives. Joothan and Karukku exemplify counter-narratives that demand to be heard, allowing readers to engage directly with Dalit experiences without the mediation of upper-caste perspectives. Arjun Dangle, a Dalit writer, views Dalit not as a caste but as “a realization” tied to “the experiences, joys, sorrows, and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of society” (Dangle 264).

The analysis integrates Judith Butler’s concepts of vulnerability and precarity through the lens of Subaltern Theory. In *Precarious Life and Frames of War* (2009), Butler distinguishes precarity as a socially induced condition resulting from power relations, unlike vulnerability, a universal human condition. Butler argues that precarity stems from power dynamics that designate certain lives as grievable and others as not (Butler 22). For Dalits, upper-caste domination has long rendered their lives precarious, marked by tyranny and hardship, excluded from public discourse. Both Joothan and Karukku depict this precarization, with protagonists constantly fearing social exclusion, illness, and sudden financial instability.

Combining Subaltern Theory with vulnerability and precarity provides a robust framework for analyzing Dalit autobiographies. It elucidates how caste-based structural systems perpetuate suffering and marginalization while highlighting the stakes of Dalit resistance. By narrating their stories, Valmiki and Bama reclaim space in a public discourse that has historically ignored or belittled them. Writing becomes an assertion of humanity and a challenge to systems that deem Dalit lives disposable. Thus, this paper views Joothan and Karukku as subaltern texts that not only document suffering but also theorize it through lived experience. From this perspective, vulnerability is a state of political possibility rather than passivity, and precarity is a condition to be confronted and resisted, not accepted as fate.

Textual Analysis of Omprakash Valmiki’s Joothan

Joothan: A Dalit’s Life (2003) by Omprakash Valmiki is a landmark in Dalit literature, chronicling the life of a Dalit man in post-independence North India. This autobiographical narrative transcends personal memory to reflect the collective Dalit consciousness, marked by humiliation, endurance, and social exclusion. Valmiki uses his experiences to construct a powerful counter-narrative exposing the cruelty of the caste system and the complicity of political, religious, educational, and familial institutions in perpetuating caste-based oppression. The text becomes a site for subaltern memory, assertion, and resistance. Valmiki writes, “Dalit consciousness does not make an account of or give a report on the anguish, misery, pain, and exploitation of Dalits, or draw a tear-streaked and sensitive portrait of Dalit agony; rather it is that which is absent from ‘original’ consciousness, the simple and straightforward perspective that breaks the spell of the shadow of the cultural,

historical, and social roles for Dalits, that is Dalit Consciousness. ‘Dalit’ means deprived of human rights, those who have been denied them on a social level. Their consciousness is Dalit consciousness” (Valmiki, Dalit Sahitya 29).

Joothan urges dismantling social and cultural norms to foster change, enabling the “voiceless” to become “voiced.” The title Joothan, meaning food scraps left on a plate, remains untranslated in the English edition, as Valmiki believes it encapsulates the pain, suffering, and anguish of the Chuhra community living on society’s margins. He recounts the humiliating experience of collecting, preserving, and eating joothan, recalling scraping leftovers from leaf plates after village wedding feasts and storing them, mostly puris, for the rainy season. He writes, “What sort of life was that? After working hard day and night, the price of our sweat was just joothan” (Valmiki, Joothan 10). The term joothan carries historical weight; Dr. Ambedkar urged Dalits to reject it, despite upper-caste perceptions of such refusal as insolence. This is powerfully depicted when Valmiki’s mother empties a basket of joothan in front of Sukhdev Singh Tyagi, an upper-caste man, after he insults her: “That night, the mother Goddess Durga entered my mother’s eyes. It was the first time I saw my mother get so angry. She emptied the basket right there” (Valmiki, Joothan 11).

In Joothan, the school where Valmiki studies is a critical site where precarity and vulnerability are evident. His narrative begins with stark depictions of childhood caste humiliation and deprivation: “The anguish of my community, the anguish of my own life, would lie coiled within me like a snake” (Valmiki, Joothan 13). His identity is shaped by a system regulated by touch, access, food, and labor. He describes being forced to mop the school grounds, sit apart from other children, and endure verbal and physical abuse from teachers: “The headmaster called me a Chuhra in front of the whole class. He would make me sweep the entire school yard every day” (Valmiki, Joothan 15). Such treatment exemplifies how the educational system, meant to foster social mobility, reinforces caste-based discrimination. Dalit education is marked by psychological violence that delegitimizes their presence in empowering spaces, compounded by material poverty.

Joothan critiques Hindi literature’s romanticized portrayals of village life. Valmiki contrasts idyllic depictions with the harsh reality of the Chuhra community, relegated to the village outskirts, performing menial tasks like cleaning cattle sheds and disposing of dead animals without compensation, and denied basic rights like clean water and education. He vividly recalls being forcibly taken to plant cane in Fauza Singh’s fields the day before his math exam: “My mind was set aflame by his swearing. A fire had engulfed my innards that day. The memories of these cronies of the Tyagi continue to smoulder deep inside me, emitting red-hot heat” (Valmiki, Joothan 57). Reflecting on upper-caste Hindi literature, Valmiki asserts that it can only imagine hell, while for the Chuhra community, the rainy season was a living

hell, untouched by Hindi epic poets. He also condemns the tradition of low-caste brides and grooms showing respect door-to-door to upper-caste villagers: “The bridegroom goes from door to door at his own wedding. It is awful. The bridegrooms from higher castes don’t have to do that” (Valmiki, Joothan 32). He awakens his community’s consciousness, stating, “It is caste pride that is behind this centuries-old custom. The deep chasm that divides the society is made even deeper by this custom. It is a conspiracy to trap us in the whirlpool of inferiority” (Valmiki, Joothan 33).

Valmiki’s experiences in the ordinance factory and public life further illustrate how precarity shapes Dalit identity. Despite formal education and a government job, he faces institutional discrimination, social exclusion, and casteist taunts. He endures both ontological and economic precarity, perpetually feeling like an outsider in upper-caste society. His caste background serves as a disciplinary tool, controlling his social and professional interactions and fostering persistent unease.

Crucially, Joothan is not a tale of helpless suffering but a document of self-determination and resistance. Valmiki’s engagement with Dalit literature, activism, and decision to narrate his life challenge the subaltern condition. By claiming the freedom to recount and theorize his oppression, he subverts Spivak’s notion of subaltern speechlessness. His writing exposes ideological frameworks that render Dalit lives silent and insignificant, becoming an act of agency. The autobiographical form is significant, grounding real experiences with urgency and authenticity, unlike fictional depictions that risk dehumanizing or romanticizing suffering. Joothan confronts readers with the everyday realities of the caste system, rejecting abstraction. Its political power lies in its testimonial nature, demanding ethical engagement with the author’s world.

Valmiki’s use of language is remarkable. Writing in Hindi, the dominant language of North India, he adopts an honest, straightforward, and unapologetic tone, refusing to cater to upper-caste sensibilities. He critiques the system using the oppressor’s rhetoric, turning the master’s tools against the master, embodying subaltern assertion.

In conclusion, Joothan demonstrates that Dalit vulnerability is systematically manufactured, not innate, resulting from social structures designed to render Dalit lives expendable. Precarity encapsulates the ongoing insecurity and instability affecting Dalits’ social and psychological well-being beyond material conditions. Intimate, urgent, and defiant, Valmiki’s autobiography portrays life in such a context while showcasing resistance through memory, storytelling, and speaking back.

Textual Analysis of Bama’s Karukku

Karukku (2000), often hailed as the first autobiography by a Tamil Dalit woman, is a groundbreaking work chronicling Dalit oppression in Tamil Nadu.

While Bama's identity is shaped by gender, the narrative emphasizes caste as the primary source of structural violence. Through an honest depiction of her life as a Dalit Christian, Bama reveals how caste-based precarity persists in religious, educational, and socioeconomic institutions. Like Valmiki's Joothan, *Karukku* is a political autobiography affirming subaltern voice, agency, and resistance.

The title *Karukku*, meaning the serrated edges of palm leaves used in Christian liturgy, poetically conveys the sharpness of Dalit suffering. Bama's narrative is replete with moments of betrayal, disappointment, and outrage, particularly regarding religious institutions that claim salvation but uphold caste hierarchies. She recalls witnessing a Dalit man carrying food on a leaf held by a string to avoid polluting an upper-caste recipient (Bama 15). In *Karukku*, the Catholic Church, rather than a haven, enforces caste distinctions. Bama describes how Dalits were excluded from ecclesiastical authority and assigned separate seating during mass, creating a unique precarity where even worship spaces devalue Dalit lives.

Bama's school experiences mirror Valmiki's, foregrounding education as a site of aspiration and humiliation. Despite her academic excellence, she is constantly reminded of her caste: "All the teachers had their favorites... and I knew they would never choose someone like me" (Bama 22). She details the persistent humiliation of Dalit students, treated as innately inferior: "We were not allowed to mix with the Naidu children. They would never touch us... We were always made to feel that we were low" (Bama 14). This treatment reveals how educational institutions, meant to be enlightening, function as caste-control mechanisms, exacerbating Dalit precarity through systemic neglect, social exclusion, and emotional abuse.

Karukku critiques the false promise of integration through Christian conversion. Despite Christianity's historical appeal to Dalits in Tamil Nadu for rejecting Hindu casteism, Bama shows that conversion did not yield social equality. Caste remained a guiding principle in Christian communities, with Dalits relegated to the bottom of the hierarchy, enduring the same humiliations they sought to escape. This persistent exclusion underscores caste as a social construct enforced by power dynamics, not a belief system easily discarded.

Bama's use of Tamil, written in a conversational style, defies conventional literary norms. Her fragmented, sometimes aggressive narrative reflects the ruptures in Dalit life. By preserving Dalit dialects and idioms often lost in mainstream Tamil literature, Bama reclaims linguistic control, ensuring the subaltern speaks on their own terms.

Karukku portrays Dalit precarity as existential, beyond mere economics. Bama's decision to leave the convent and her disillusionment with the Church reflect a broader quest for genuine liberation. Rejecting institutions that perpetuate caste

norms, her departure signifies a shift from vulnerability to agency, from charity recipient to fighter. Unlike tidy redemption narratives, Karukku embraces unresolved tensions, anger, and fragmentation. Its strength lies in refusing to whitewash suffering, focusing on naming, confronting, and envisioning new modes of existence. Bama's narrative becomes a political assertion of Dalits' right to self-determination, critiquing structures that marginalize them and expressing hope for a caste-free future.

Karukku demonstrates that vulnerability, when politicized, becomes a basis for collective resistance, not weakness. Precarity is rejected, not accepted. The narrative moves toward cultural restoration, community, and solidarity. Bama's voice, echoing countless Dalits in Tamil Nadu and beyond, continues to challenge caste discrimination.

Comparative Discussion: Convergences and Divergences

Bama's *Karukku* and Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* are pivotal works in Dalit literature. Written in Tamil Nadu and North India, respectively, they are united by their vivid portrayals of caste-induced precarity and vulnerability. As political interventions, they reshape perceptions of Dalit life through caste discourse and memoir. While both emphasize lived experience and subaltern voices, making them complementary, they differ due to their settings, social structures, and theological contexts. Baburao Bagul notes, "Hindu writers find it difficult to cope with the Ambedkarite hero who is a rebel with a scientific and rationalist attitude. On the other hand, heroes like Karna and Eklavya are consistent with the cultural and mythical value structure they have internalized" (Omvedt 96).

A key convergence is their depiction of Dalits' daily vulnerability. Both narratives portray schools as liberating yet humiliating spaces. Valmiki and Bama describe how Dalit students are forced to sit apart, perform menial tasks, and endure teacher and peer bullying, reinforcing inferiority and normalizing suffering. These experiences highlight vulnerability as a product of institutional structures, not chance.

Both texts also emphasize how caste renders Dalit identity inherently insecure. In *Joothan*, Valmiki faces social marginalization and casteist taunts despite education and employment. In *Karukku*, Bama finds that Christian conversion does not shield her from caste discrimination; the Church becomes another site of exclusion. Social mobility does not equate to social acceptance, underscoring ontological insecurity—constantly being reminded of one's "place"—beyond material conditions.

Writing as resistance is another shared theme. Both authors use autobiography to assert voice and agency, not to evoke pity. By dismantling sanitized narratives of caste-blind nationalism and religious harmony, they expose India's deep social divides. Valmiki and Bama transform vulnerability into political consciousness, compelling readers to confront and ethically engage with depicted

injustices.

However, the sources and mechanisms of oppression differ. Joothan is rooted in North India's Hindu caste system, emphasizing purity-pollution binaries and occupational segregation. Valmiki's experiences include physical acts like scavenging and beatings, confronting a system upheld by Brahmanical conservatism. In contrast, Karukku navigates the tension between Christianity's universalist claims and caste-based exclusion. Caste persists in Bama's community despite conversion, manifesting in church hierarchies and restricted spiritual access. Bama critiques both the Church's failure to uphold equality and Hindu casteism, broadening the discourse beyond Hinduism.

The narratives' tones and structures also diverge. Joothan is linear and stoic, tracing Valmiki's journey from exclusion to partial inclusion, prioritizing testimony over dramatization. Karukku is cyclical and fragmentary, with a conversational, poetic tone, engaging readers and the Dalit community. These differences reflect distinct literary traditions and intended audiences.

Conclusion

Joothan by Omprakash Valmiki and Karukku by Bama are powerful literary representations of Dalit struggles in postcolonial India. Their autobiographical form exposes the entrenched caste structures that shape and restrict Dalit lives. Both explore precarity and vulnerability as structural conditions imposed by the caste system, not transient emotions, integral to caste's role in social control. Through Subaltern Theory, Valmiki and Bama's testimonies not only speak but demand to be heard, challenging Spivak's query, "Can the subaltern speak?" Their writing reclaims narratives suppressed or misrepresented by dominant castes, exposing the silent violence of exclusion in institutions and the brutality of manual scavenging.

Beyond documenting oppression, Joothan and Karukku establish a politics of resistance. Writing transforms personal suffering into public memory, asserting cultural identity, pride, and dignity. As counter-histories, they challenge discourses of caste denial, religious harmony, and Indian nationalism.

A comparative analysis reveals how caste operates variably across regions, religions, and social structures, yet the core Dalit experience of marginalization persists. Valmiki and Bama demonstrate that Dalit subjects can assert agency, voice, and reimagine their futures despite oppressive structures.

Ultimately, Joothan and Karukku are more than survival stories; they are assertions of agency. They confront readers with the ongoing reality of caste and the humanity, intelligence, and defiance of Dalit voices. As scholarly texts, political documents, and human stories, they remain profoundly impactful.

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