

Beyond Caste: A Comparative Analysis of the Autobiographies of Dalit Writers and their Representation of Social Hierarchies

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Article Received: 16/12/2025

Article Accepted: 18/01/2026

Published Online: 19/01/2026

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.8.01.204

Abstract

This paper presents a comparative analysis of the autobiographies of prominent Dalit writers—Omprakash Valmiki (Joothan), Sharankumar Limbale (The Outcaste), Aravind Malagatti (Government Brahmana), and Bama (Karukku)—to explore their representations of social hierarchies and the enduring impact of the caste system in India. Through these autobiographies, the authors offer personal narratives of oppression, resistance, and self empowerment, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of caste discrimination. The study examines common themes such as caste as a system of social exclusion, the psychological trauma of internalized inferiority, and the transformative potential of education as a tool for social mobility and resistance. It also delves into the diverging narratives shaped by regional contexts, religious backgrounds, and gendered experiences. While Valmiki and Limbale focus on the rural, often brutal realities of caste oppression, Malagatti explores caste dynamics within educational spaces, and Bama provides a unique intersectional perspective, addressing both caste and gender oppression within the Christian church. By comparing these narratives, the paper highlights how each writer negotiates the boundaries of caste and identity, offering both a critique of the system and a vision for social change. Through their powerful autobiographies, these Dalit writers contribute to a broader discourse on caste, identity, and social justice, advocating for dignity, equality, and empowerment in a society still grappling with deeply entrenched hierarchical structures.

Keywords: Dalit Autobiographies, Caste System, Social Hierarchies, Resistance and Empowerment, Intersectionality

Introduction

Dalit autobiographies have emerged as a significant genre within Indian literature, offering

a

powerful critique of the caste system and its entrenched social hierarchies. Caste, as a social structure, has long determined the lives of millions of individuals in India, dictating their social position, access to resources, and opportunities for advancement. For Dalits—those at the bottom of the caste ladder, often referred to as "untouchables"—this social hierarchy has been a source of systemic oppression and exclusion. The genre of Dalit autobiography, however, offers a unique and profound lens into the lived experiences of these marginalized individuals. By narrating their personal stories of caste-based discrimination, these autobiographies not only serve as personal testimonies but also act as social critiques, challenging dominant narratives and ideologies that have long justified caste-based oppression [1].

Autobiographies by Dalit writers such as Omprakash Valmiki (Joothan), Sharankumar Limbale (The Outcaste), Aravind Malagatti (Government Brahmana), and Bama (Karukku) have played a crucial role in exposing the brutal realities of caste discrimination and the internalized sense of inferiority it fosters in Dalit individuals. These works are deeply personal, recounting the authors' struggles with caste-based humiliation, exclusion, and marginalization. Yet, they are also profoundly political, offering an alternative vision of resistance, resilience, and the quest for dignity and equality. These autobiographies engage with themes of identity, social justice, education, and the transformative power of self-narrative [2].

One of the most significant contributions of Dalit autobiographies is their representation of caste not merely as an abstract social concept but as a lived, embodied experience that shapes individuals' identities and opportunities. Through their personal narratives, Dalit writers critique the hierarchical caste system and its pervasive influence across various spheres of life, from family and community to education, work, and religion. Their autobiographies highlight how caste-based discrimination operates both overtly and covertly, shaping relationships, limiting access to resources, and defining the contours of social and personal dignity [3].

Furthermore, these autobiographies give voice to the Dalit experience, which has historically been marginalized or silenced in mainstream discourse. They explore the intersection of caste with other social factors, such as class, gender, and religion, offering a nuanced understanding of the complex ways in which Dalit individuals experience and navigate the social hierarchy. While these autobiographies reveal the dehumanizing impact of caste oppression, they also foreground the resilience, resistance, and agency of Dalit individuals who challenge and transcend the oppressive structures imposed upon them [4].

In this paper, we will examine the autobiographies of Valmiki, Limbale, Malagatti, and Bama to analyze how these writers represent social hierarchies within their personal narratives. By comparing these works, we aim to understand the diverse ways in which Dalit

writers engage with the caste system and how their autobiographies contribute to the broader conversation about caste, identity, and social change in India. This analysis will reveal the transformative potential of Dalit autobiographies as a medium of resistance, personal empowerment, and social critique, offering a compelling vision of life beyond caste-based discrimination.

Dalit Autobiographies: A Brief Overview

Dalit autobiographies have become a powerful form of expression and resistance in the literary landscape of India. Historically marginalized and oppressed, Dalits—formerly referred to as “untouchables”—have been denied the opportunity to share their stories and experiences in mainstream literature. However, with the rise of Dalit literature in the 20th century, these autobiographies have emerged as crucial narratives that offer firsthand accounts of caste-based discrimination, social exclusion, and the struggle for dignity. Through their autobiographies, Dalit writers have not only challenged the prevailing social hierarchies but have also created spaces for self-expression and cultural validation [9].

Dalit autobiographies are significant because they provide personal insights into the deeply ingrained social injustices faced by Dalits and serve as a critique of the pervasive caste system. These autobiographies offer an intimate view into the lives of those who have suffered under the weight of caste oppression, and they serve as both personal testimonies and collective critiques. They often highlight the contradictions and limitations of a system that claims to promote social order, revealing how caste operates in everyday life and shapes individuals' identities, relationships, and opportunities [5].

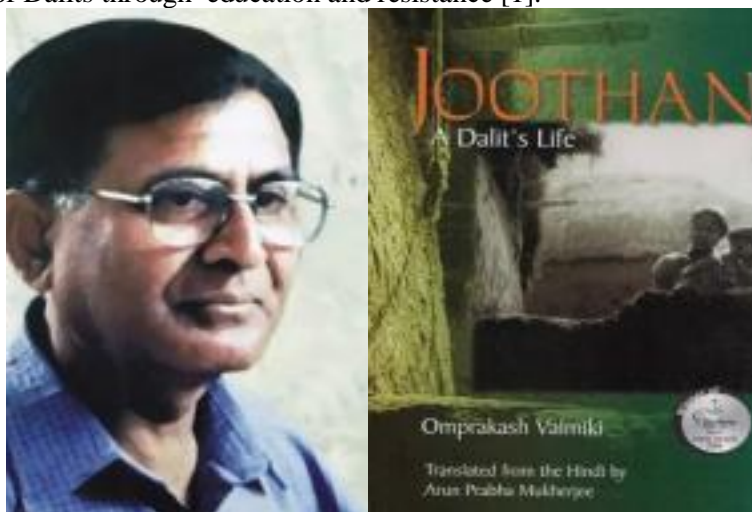
The rise of Dalit autobiographies began in the mid-20th century, particularly after the Indian independence movement, which failed to significantly address the issue of caste-based discrimination. Early works in Dalit literature drew inspiration from the anti-caste movement led by figures like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who challenged the caste system and fought for the rights of Dalits. These autobiographies were written by individuals who had lived through the harsh realities of caste discrimination, and their works became instruments of resistance against the system that had subjugated them for centuries [6].

Among the earliest and most influential Dalit autobiographies are those written by Omprakash Valmiki, Sharankumar Limbale, Aravind Malagatti, and Bama. These works collectively represent the voices of Dalit individuals from different regions, religious backgrounds, and social contexts. Each of these writers narrates their unique experiences, but their stories converge in their critique of the caste system and the emphasis on education, self determination, and social justice as means of overcoming caste oppression [7].

Omprakash Valmiki's Joothan (1997)

Valmiki's autobiography is one of the most seminal works in Dalit literature. It recounts his experiences growing up in a village where he was forced to live in squalid conditions due to his Dalit identity. Through his life story, Valmiki exposes the horrors of

untouchability and manual scavenging. The term “joothan” refers to the leftovers of food that Dalits were given by higher-caste individuals, a symbol of their degradation. Valmiki’s narrative not only documents his personal struggle but also advocates for the empowerment of Dalits through education and resistance [1].



(a) (b) Figure 1: (a)

Omprakash Valmiki (b) **Joothan (1997) Sharankumar Limbale’s The Outcaste (2003)**

Limbale’s autobiography examines his life as a Dalit in rural Maharashtra. It reflects on the profound impact of caste discrimination on his self-image and his efforts to break free from the restrictions imposed by the caste system. Limbale critiques the deeply ingrained social hierarchies that confine Dalits to certain roles and positions in society, and he emphasizes the

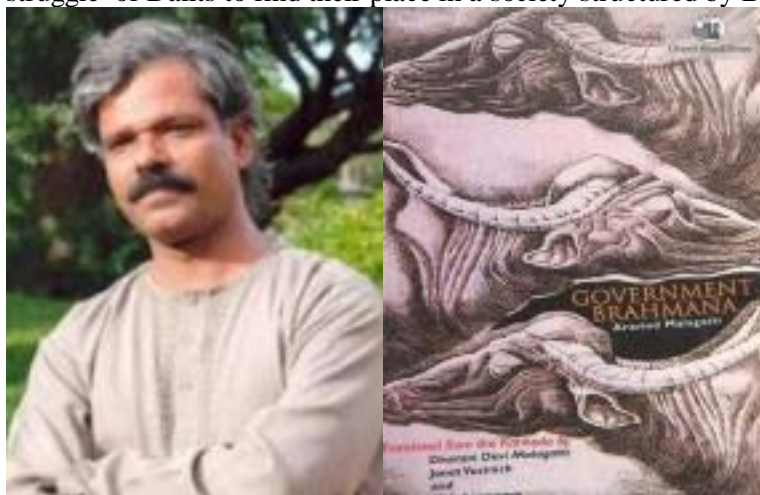
role of literature and education in Dalit emancipation. His autobiography is not only a personal account but also an exploration of the complexities of caste identity [2].



(a) (b)

Figure 2: (a) Sharankumar Limbale (b) **The Outcaste (2003) Aravind Malagatti’s Government Brahmana (2006)**

Malagatti's autobiography offers a critique of the caste-based hierarchies within educational institutions. Born into a Dalit family, Malagatti describes the obstacles he faced in pursuing education and his journey toward self-discovery. The title of the autobiography itself—Government Brahmana—suggests a critique of the Brahminical control over education and other institutions that perpetuate caste dominance. His narrative focuses on the internal struggle of Dalits to find their place in a society structured by Brahminical values [3].



(a) (b)

Figure 3: (a) Aravind Malagatti (b) **Government Brahmana (2006)** **Bama's Karukku (1992)** Bama's autobiography is unique in that it explores the intersection of caste and religion. A Dalit Christian woman from Tamil Nadu, Bama's narrative examines the discrimination she faced both within the caste system and the church. Karukku reflects her journey of self-empowerment as she challenges caste discrimination within religious communities. Through her personal experience, Bama critiques the exclusionary practices of the Christian faith while also highlighting the agency of Dalit women in resisting oppressive structures [4].



(a) (b)

Figure 4: (a) Bama (b) Karukku (1992)

These autobiographies represent the diversity of Dalit experiences and the multiple dimensions of caste-based oppression. They give voice to those who have historically been silenced, allowing Dalits to tell their own stories and assert their identities. Dalit autobiographies are more than just personal recollections; they are a form of social critique, an act of reclaiming dignity, and a challenge to the caste system that continues to shape social relationships in India [11].

In addition to their social and political relevance, Dalit autobiographies also contribute to the broader literary tradition by expanding the scope of Indian literature. These works offer alternative narratives that challenge the upper-caste-centric literary canon, and they provide an opportunity for readers to engage with the lived experiences of marginalized communities. They also underscore the importance of self-writing as a tool for resistance, healing, and empowerment. As a genre, Dalit autobiographies not only chronicle the past but also inspire ongoing discussions about caste, identity, and social justice. They are vital documents in the struggle for Dalit rights and the creation of a more equitable and just society [12].

Representation of Social Hierarchies in Dalit Autobiographies

Dalit autobiographies provide an intimate and unflinching look at the complex and pervasive nature of caste-based social hierarchies in India. These works portray caste as not only an abstract system of social stratification but as a deeply ingrained, lived reality that shapes the lives of individuals and communities. The caste system, with its rigid divisions and untouchability practices, is depicted in these autobiographies as a tool for social and economic exclusion, oppression, and dehumanization. Through the personal experiences of Dalit writers such as Omprakash Valmiki, Sharankumar Limbale, Aravind Malagatti, and Bama, we gain insight into how caste operates as a multi-dimensional force, impacting individuals' identities, relationships, opportunities, and life trajectories [13].

Caste as an Instrument of Social Exclusion and Segregation

One of the key features of Dalit autobiographies is their portrayal of the caste system as an instrument of social exclusion and segregation. The Dalit authors describe how caste hierarchies are not only institutionalized but are also manifest in everyday life, determining where individuals live, what they eat, and whom they can associate with. Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* portrays the social and physical segregation faced by Dalits, particularly in rural India. Valmiki's family is forced to live in an isolated corner of the village, far away from the homes of upper-caste families. The "joothan" (leftovers) that Dalits are offered as food symbolizes the social distance and degradation imposed upon them by the caste system. Valmiki narrates how even something as basic as food becomes a tool for reinforcing caste hierarchies—upper-caste families throw their leftovers at Dalit families, a gesture that dehumanizes them and reminds them of their place at the bottom of the social ladder [14]. Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste* similarly emphasizes the spatial segregation imposed by caste. Limbale describes how the Dalit community in his village is assigned a specific

area to live, apart from the higher castes. This physical separation goes hand in hand with social exclusion, where Dalits are barred from accessing common resources such as drinking water from the village well or sitting in the same space as upper-caste individuals.

Caste and Internalized Inferiority

Dalit autobiographies often depict how the caste system inflicts psychological harm on individuals, leading to the internalization of inferiority. Dalits are socialized to accept their subordination, and this internalized oppression can be seen in their struggles with self-worth, identity, and dignity [15].

In Limbale's *The Outcaste*, the author speaks about the emotional and psychological scars caused by caste-based discrimination. Limbale discusses how, as a child, he was made to feel inferior, unworthy of basic human dignity, and constantly reminded of his low status. This internalization of inferiority becomes a powerful force in the lives of Dalit individuals, shaping their perceptions of themselves and their place in society [16].

Bama's *Karukku* explores the deep self-loathing that can arise from caste discrimination, especially within religious contexts. As a Dalit Christian, Bama is discriminated against both within the church and in society at large. Despite the church's teachings of equality, Bama faces caste-based exclusion from religious rituals and spaces. Her autobiography reveals how caste-based discrimination forces Dalits to view themselves through the lens of inferiority, and how overcoming this internalized caste identity becomes a significant part of her struggle for self-dignity.

Caste and Economic Disadvantage

Another critical aspect of social hierarchies represented in Dalit autobiographies is the economic disadvantage imposed by caste. The Dalit community is often relegated to menial labor, with limited access to education, wealth, or social mobility. This economic subjugation is a key feature of caste oppression and plays a major role in the authors' experiences.

Aravind Malagatti's *Government Brahmana* highlights the economic marginalization of Dalits in educational institutions. Malagatti discusses the systemic barriers Dalits face when trying to access education, a field traditionally dominated by Brahmins and other upper castes. The autobiography underscores how the caste system extends beyond social relationships and into the economic and educational spheres, where Dalits are often denied opportunities for upward mobility.

In Valmiki's *Joothan*, Valmiki's family is forced into scavenging for a living, which is not only a physically taxing and degrading job but also a low-status occupation deemed "impure" by higher-caste society. Through his account, Valmiki highlights the vicious cycle of poverty and caste—how economic disadvantage is a direct consequence of caste-based

discrimination, with Dalits often being restricted to specific, low-paying, and degrading jobs.

Caste and Social Mobility

While Dalit autobiographies often highlight the restrictive nature of caste, they also represent the struggle for social mobility. The desire to break free from the limitations of caste is a central theme in these works, with education and self-determination serving as key tools of resistance and empowerment.

In Malagatti's *Government Brahmana*, education emerges as a path to self-liberation. Despite the deep-rooted caste discrimination in educational institutions, Malagatti strives to overcome these barriers. His success, despite the odds stacked against him, is a testament to the transformative potential of education as a means to challenge caste hierarchies.

Similarly, Valmiki's emphasis on education in *Joothan* reflects his belief that self-empowerment through learning is one of the few ways Dalits can rise above caste oppression. Valmiki's narrative stresses the importance of education in breaking the chains of caste-based subjugation, as it offers Dalits a means of achieving economic independence and social recognition.

Caste and Gender

Dalit women, in particular, experience a unique form of oppression due to the intersection of caste and gender. Dalit women face both gender-based violence and caste-based discrimination, and their autobiographies often highlight these compounded struggles. Bama's *Karukku* provides a powerful commentary on the intersection of caste and gender. As a Dalit woman in a patriarchal society, Bama faces discrimination not only from men but also from higher-caste women who, while sharing the same gender, participate in the social exclusion of Dalits. Her autobiography critiques both caste and patriarchy, illustrating how Dalit women are doubly oppressed.

Limbale's *The Outcaste* also touches upon the experience of Dalit women, particularly in rural Maharashtra, where caste and gender combine to severely limit women's autonomy and opportunities. Limbale's account provides a glimpse into how caste-based violence and oppression are gendered, with Dalit women suffering the most from both domestic and public forms of abuse.

Dalit autobiographies offer powerful and nuanced representations of social hierarchies, highlighting how caste operates as a multi-dimensional system of oppression. Through the personal experiences of writers such as Valmiki, Limbale, Malagatti, and Bama, we see how caste influences not only the material conditions of life—such as access to food, education, and work—but also deeply affects personal identity, psychological well-being, and social relationships. These autobiographies do not merely serve as chronicles of victimhood; they are also acts of resistance, offering both personal and collective strategies

for overcoming the boundaries imposed by caste. Through self-writing, Dalit writers reclaim agency and challenge the very hierarchies that have marginalized them, contributing to an ongoing discourse on caste, identity, and social justice in India [17].

Comparative Analysis: Common Themes and Diverging Narratives

The autobiographies of Dalit writers, including Omprakash Valmiki's Joothan, Sharankumar Limbale's The Outcaste, Aravind Malagatti's Government Brahmana, and Bama's Karukku, share several common themes that emerge from their individual experiences of caste-based oppression, but they also diverge in significant ways depending on their personal backgrounds, regional contexts, and approaches to resistance. While these autobiographies represent different lived realities, they collectively provide insight into the pervasive nature of caste hierarchies in India and the powerful responses of Dalit individuals who challenge these systems. Here is a comparative table summarizing the common themes and diverging narratives across the Dalit autobiographies of Omprakash Valmiki (Joothan), Sharankumar Limbale (The Outcaste), Aravind Malagatti (Government Brahmana), and Bama (Karukku):

Table 1: Common themes and diverging narratives across the dalit autobiographies

Theme	Omprakash Valmiki - Joothan	Sharankumar Limbale - The Outcaste	Aravind Malagatti - Government Brahmana	Bama - Karukku
Caste as a System of Oppression	Highlights the physical segregation and humiliation of manual scavenging.	Describes social ostracization and caste induced inferiority in rural Maharashtra.	Caste-based exclusion in educational institutions; critiquing Brahmin dominated spaces.	Caste discrimination within Christian church, compounded by gender-based oppression.

Psychological Impact of Caste	Internalization of inferiority and self loathing due to caste discrimination.	Explores psychological trauma of caste-induced inferiority and self-doubt.	Psychological scars of caste, particularly in educational settings.	Internalized caste inferiority, especially for Dalit women within the church.
Education as a Tool of Resistance	Education as a way to assert identity and voice despite caste discrimination.	Literature and education as resistance to break free from caste's psychological hold.	Education as a means of resistance and self-liberation, overcoming caste-based barriers.	Education depicted as a means of self realization and empowerment for Dalit women.
Resistance and Agency	Self-writing and education to	Literary activism and social critique	Resistant assertion of dignity through	Spiritual resistance to caste and gendered

	fight caste oppression.	through education and writing.	education, fighting caste dominance in schools.	oppression within the church.
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Regional Context & Caste Hierarchies	Rural Uttar Pradesh, with extreme caste segregation and physical isolation.	Rural Maharashtra, with emphasis on urbanization and changing caste dynamics.	Urban educational context, where caste operates within formal institutions.	Southern India, focusing on intersectionality of caste and religion, particularly within the Christian church.
Religious Intersectionality	Focuses primarily on Hindu caste discrimination.	Focuses on Hindu caste oppression in rural Maharashtra.	Focuses on Brahminical control within educational institutions.	Focuses on caste discrimination within Christianity and religious spaces.
Gender and Dalit Identity	Primarily a male perspective, education as a path to empowerment.	Male perspective, with limited exploration of gendered experiences.	Male perspective, with an emphasis on education overcoming caste.	Dalit women's experience of caste and gender oppression, focusing on church discrimination.
Approach to Writing and Resistance	Raw and personal, emphasizing the emotional and social struggles of caste.	Literary criticism and social activism through personal experience.	Intellectual critique of caste in education, with focus on Brahminical domination.	Symbolic and spiritual resistance, with focus on self and healing and reclaiming identity.

This table provides a clear comparison of the shared themes in Dalit autobiographies, such as caste oppression, education as resistance, and psychological impact, as well as the divergent narratives based on regional contexts, religious experiences, gender perspectives, and approaches to resistance in each author's work.

Conclusion

The autobiographies of Omprakash Valmiki (Joothan), Sharankumar Limbale (The Outcaste), Aravind Malagatti (Government Brahmana), and Bama (Karukku) collectively offer powerful, personal insights into the deeply entrenched caste system and its oppressive impact on Dalit lives. While these autobiographies share common themes—such as caste as a system of oppression, the psychological trauma of internalized inferiority, and the role of education and resistance as pathways to social mobility—each writer's narrative diverges based on personal experiences, regional contexts, and the intersectionality of caste, gender, and religion. The theme of caste as a dehumanizing force emerges strongly across all four works, but the authors' experiences vary based on where and how caste oppression manifests. Valmiki and Limbale focus primarily on rural caste-based discrimination, while Malagatti critiques the caste system in the context of education, and Bama offers a unique perspective by illustrating how caste intersects with gender and religion, particularly within the Christian community. Additionally, the theme of education as a tool of resistance plays a central role in all the autobiographies, where the authors see education not just as a means to break free from caste but as a transformative force for personal and collective empowerment. However, the experiences vary in terms of educational access, with Malagatti and Limbale facing systemic barriers within educational institutions, while Bama underscores how gender and caste compound the difficulties faced by Dalit women in both educational and religious contexts.

These autobiographies also represent various approaches to resistance and agency—from raw personal narratives and literary activism to spiritual resistance and intellectual critique. The different forms of agency highlighted in each work offer a multi-faceted view of the strategies Dalits employ to resist the oppressive caste system and to carve out spaces of dignity and self expression. In conclusion, Dalit autobiographies are not just personal accounts but significant social documents that provide a counter-narrative to mainstream Indian literature. They amplify the voices of those who have been marginalized for centuries and challenge the pervasive social hierarchies imposed by the caste system. Through these works, the writers not only assert their individual dignity but also contribute to the ongoing discourse on social justice, Dalit rights, and the fight for equality in India. These autobiographies, despite their differences, unite in their critique of caste, their exploration of identity, and their resilience in the face of systemic oppression.

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