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**Language and Identity in Dalit Autobiography:  
A Comparative Study of Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Bama's *Karukku***

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**Dr. Gurudev Kushal**

Lecturer in English, Larambha College, Larambha

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**Abstract:**

This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of language and identity in two foundational works of Indian Dalit autobiography: Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (1997; trans. 2003) and Bama's *Karukku* (1992; trans. 2000). Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theorization of subaltern speech, Sharankumar Limbale's Dalit aesthetics, B. R. Ambedkar's philosophy of linguistic and social emancipation, and Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, the paper argues that language in these texts functions not as a neutral communicative medium but as the primary site at which caste identity is enforced, contested, and reclaimed. Through close textual reading and interdisciplinary analysis, the paper examines five interlocking dimensions: the politics of naming; linguistic style as oppositional aesthetic practice; language in educational and institutional spaces; the tension between individual and collective autobiographical voice; and the cultural politics of translation. While both texts use life-writing as an act of political testimony, they do so in materially different registers — Valmiki through the unadorned directness of testimonial Hindi prose, Bama through the deliberate grammatical transgressions of vernacular Tamil — and it is precisely this difference that reveals the plural, regionally situated, and gendered character of Dalit identity formation in postcolonial India. The paper concludes that Dalit autobiography's most radical achievement is not merely to narrate suffering but to enact, through the very texture of its language, a claim to full literary and human citizenship.

**Keywords:** Dalit autobiography; language and identity; caste; Omprakash Valmiki; Bama; subaltern studies; testimonial; Dalit aesthetics; postcolonial theory; translation

**Introduction**

The question of who speaks, in which language, and to what end has always been entangled with the question of power. In the caste order of the Indian subcontinent, the right to language — to compose verse, to record history, to name the world — was among the

many privileges monopolized by the upper castes and denied, often by force, to those designated as untouchable. It is against this backdrop that the emergence of Dalit autobiography as a literary genre acquires its full historical weight. When Omprakash Valmiki published *Joothan* in Hindi in 1997, and when Bama published *Karukku* in Tamil in 1992, both were doing something that the logic of the caste system had spent centuries declaring impossible: they were writing themselves into existence.

The present paper reads these two texts comparatively, centering on the relationship between language and identity. The choice of these particular texts is deliberate. *Joothan* and *Karukku* are widely regarded as foundational works of Dalit autobiography — the first a Hindi-language text from north India, composed by a man from the Chuhra (sweeper) caste; the second a Tamil-language text from south India, composed by a woman from the Paraiyar caste who is also a Roman Catholic. Their geographical, linguistic, gendered, and religious differences are not incidental: they prevent any premature homogenization of “the Dalit experience” while enabling a genuinely comparative analysis of how language mediates identity across different axes of oppression. As recent scholarship has confirmed, Dalit autobiographies employ specific narrative strategies including non-linear chronology, communal rather than individualistic focus, deliberate incorporation of Dalit dialects and sociolects, and the strategic use of bodily experience as evidence (Prabha 2025).

## 2. Literature Review

Scholarship on Dalit literature and autobiography has expanded substantially since the 1990s, in tandem with the wider globalization of postcolonial and subaltern studies. The foundational critical interventions, however, came from within the Dalit literary movement itself. Sharankumar Limbale’s *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (2004; originally published in Marathi as *Dalit Sahityache Saundaryashastra*), translated into English by Alok Mukherjee, remains the most important theoretical statement produced from inside the tradition. Limbale argues that Dalit literature is not a subset of Indian literature but a distinct literary tradition grounded in the Dalit community’s lived experiences of caste-based discrimination, violence, and marginalization. He insists that “to assert that someone’s writing will be called literature only when ‘our’ literary standards can be imposed on it is a sign of cultural dictatorship” (Limbale 2004). The paper — built on an author’s social commitment, life-affirming values, and a consciousness of equality, freedom, justice, and fraternity — provides the normative framework within which both *Joothan* and *Karukku* may be read.

The translation of both texts in English opened them to international critical purview. The most influential early account of *Karukku* is Pramod K. Nayar’s “Bama’s *Karukku*: Dalit Autobiography as Testimonio” (2006), which treats the text as a form of *testimonio* — an

atrocities narrative that documents collective trauma and demands rhetorical listening from its readers. Nayar's argument builds on the Latin American *testimonio* tradition (as theorized by John Beverley) while insisting on the specificities of the Dalit context. His work has been widely cited and remains the most developed account of *Karukku* as a genre hybrid between individual life-writing and collective biography.

Sunaina Arya and Akash Singh Rathore (2020), among others, have situated both texts within feminist Dalit criticism, attending to the intersections of caste and gender in ways that single-axis analyses of class or caste alone cannot capture. The article "Other Tongues" (Haider 2015) repositions *Karukku* and Bama's later *Sangati* as autoethnographies, drawing on Bakhtinian dialogics and feminist theory to argue that Bama's appropriation of dialectal Tamil constitutes a radicalization of Dalit women's consciousness through the creation of dialogic spaces that simultaneously subordinate and subvert. This reading has been productive for the present paper's One of the critical studies, represented by Binda Sah and Debabrat Medhi (2026), situates *Joothan* within the frameworks of Paulo Freire (on education and conscientization), Pierre Bourdieu (on cultural capital and social reproduction), and B. R. Ambedkar (on caste as an enclosed class), examining education, food, and religion as everyday sites where caste is both maintained and contested. A growing body of comparative work has read *Joothan* and *Karukku* together, often alongside other Dalit autobiographies such as Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* and Siddalingaiah's *Ooru Keri*. The most comprehensive recent comparative study is published in the (Prabha 2025), which identifies shared formal features — non-linear chronology, communal voice, deliberate dialectal incorporation — while acknowledging their regional and gendered differences. The present paper builds on this comparative tradition while narrowing its focus specifically to the language-identity nexus, bringing it into dialogue with a theoretically explicit framework drawn from subaltern studies and Dalit critical theory.

Important work on Dalit Studies as a field — notably K. M. Seethi's 2025 overview "Dalit Journeys: Speaking beyond the Subaltern" — has clarified the critical relationship between Dalit Studies and Subaltern Studies, noting that where Subaltern Studies drew on Gramsci, Dalit Studies draws centrally on Ambedkar, and that where Subaltern Studies foregrounded class and peasant insurgency, Dalit Studies places caste, dignity, and untouchability at the core. This disciplinary context informs the theoretical commitments of the present paper, which takes seriously the call for frameworks that are not merely applied from outside but developed in dialogue with Dalit critical traditions. One significant gap in existing scholarship deserves acknowledgment. While the language of both texts has attracted critical comment — particularly Bama's use of vernacular Tamil — there has been

relatively little sustained comparative analysis of how language functions as an identity-constituting practice across both texts simultaneously. This paper attempts to address that gap.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

This paper is guided by four intersecting theoretical traditions: Dalit critical aesthetics (Limbale); subaltern speech and representation (Spivak); Ambedkarite philosophy of language and social emancipation; and dialogic linguistics (Bakhtin). Each is briefly outlined below, and the relationships between them clarified.

#### **3.1 Dalit Aesthetics: Limbale**

Sharankumar Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (2004) provides the foundational normative framework. Limbale argues that the aesthetics of Dalit literature rest on three principles: first, the artist's social commitment; second, the presence of life-affirming values in the artistic creation; and third, the capacity to raise the reader's consciousness of fundamental values of equality, freedom, justice, and fraternity. Crucially for this paper, Limbale insists that Dalit literature is characterized by its use of "new words, new sensitivity, and a new way of expressing Dalit suffering and revolt." This attention to the newness of language — not just what is said but how — is central to the present argument. The formal choices of Valmiki and Bama are, in Limbale's terms, not peripheral to their political project but constitutive of it. Dalit literature develops as resistance of the Dalit community, and Limbale argues that revolutionary literature must harness aesthetic features as powerful instruments of that resistance.

#### **3.2 The Subaltern and Speech: Spivak**

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's foundational essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) poses a question whose very formulation shapes the present analysis. Spivak proposes a terminology for the experiential language of historically marginalized communities who have been systematically oppressed, arguing that for the "true" subaltern group, whose identity is constituted by its difference, there is no ready subject position from which to speak that will be heard within dominant representational systems. Her argument is not that subalterns are mute but that the institutional and discursive conditions of audibility are structured to exclude them. This theoretical claim is directly relevant to Dalit autobiography: both *Joothan* and *Karukku* can be read as responses to the condition Spivak describes — texts that insist on speaking precisely because the structures of audibility deny them a hearing. Spivak's additional argument that subaltern women are doubly silenced — by both dominant caste and patriarchal structures — is particularly pertinent to *Karukku*, where Bama navigates marginalization by caste, by the Catholic Church, and by gender simultaneously. At the same time, this paper registers, with Dalit Studies scholars such as Seethi (2025), that Spivak's framework has limitations when applied to Dalit autobiography. Spivak's subaltern is always already silenced; Valmiki and Bama have, in fact, spoken and been heard. The

value of Spivak's framework lies not in treating them as paradigmatic subalterns but in illuminating the structural conditions against which their speaking constitutes an act of resistance.

### **3.3 Ambedkar: Language, Caste, and Emancipation**

B. R. Ambedkar's political and philosophical writings provide a third theoretical pillar, one drawn from within the Dalit tradition rather than from outside it. Ambedkar's central insight — that caste is not merely a division of labor but a division of laborers (*Annihilation of Caste*, 1936) — undergirds the analysis of language as a caste instrument. For Ambedkar, the Hindu social order maintains itself through the regulation of bodies, occupations, and, crucially, minds. Education, and the access to language it entails, was for Ambedkar the most powerful instrument of emancipation: "Educate, Agitate, Organize." Both *Joothan* and *Karukku* enact this program, treating the acquisition and deployment of language as central to the project of Dalit self-liberation. Ambedkar's framework also illuminates the limits of that project: his own experience of caste discrimination despite his extraordinary educational achievement is echoed in both texts' recognition that literacy does not automatically dissolve the caste identity inscribed in the body and the name.

### **3.4 Heteroglossia and Dialogism: Bakhtin**

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia — the simultaneous coexistence of multiple social languages within a single linguistic community, each associated with a particular social position — offers a productive framework for reading the linguistic choices of both authors. Bakhtin argues that the novel (and by extension other literary forms) is a site where different social voices and their associated worldviews contend. In *Joothan* and *Karukku*, the language of the Dalit narrator is constantly in dialogue — and in tension — with the official languages of upper-caste literary culture, the school, the Church, and the state. Bama's vernacular Tamil is, in Bakhtinian terms, a centrifugal force: it works against the centripetal pressure of standardized, upper-caste literary Tamil, insisting on the dialogic multiplicity that the standard language seeks to suppress. This framework, applied in existing scholarship on *Karukku* in (Haider 2015), is here extended to a comparative reading of both texts.

These four frameworks are not fully compatible with one another, and the paper does not attempt to synthesize them into a unified theory. Rather, each is deployed at the points where it illuminates a specific dimension of the language-identity nexus in the texts under analysis. The productive tension among them — particularly between Spivak's skepticism about subaltern speech and Limbale's insistence on Dalit aesthetic agency — is itself part of the argument.

## **4. Language as Caste Marker**

One of the most striking demonstrations of the link between language and identity in both texts is the act of naming: how a name encodes caste and determines social location. In *Joothan*, Valmiki examines the implications of his own surname in considerable detail. Because “Valmiki” is also the name of the revered author of the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*, everybody encountering his name assumed he was a Brahmin (Nayar 2006, citing Joothan 124–32). The irony is precise: the same name that marks his caste community — the Valmikis, historically designated as sweepers — also bears the name of one of the most revered figures in the upper-caste literary canon. This irony is not an accident of history but a symptom of the way in which caste vocabulary is encoded in everyday language, so that even a proper noun carries the weight of hierarchical social structure.

The title of the autobiography performs an act of linguistic reclamation. The Hindi word ‘joothan’ translates as “leftovers” — food one would throw away because it is no longer consumable — and the narration of pain embedded in this title transforms a term of degradation into a narrative of resistance. As Valmiki writes in his preface: “Experiences that did not manage to find room in literary creations. We have grown up in a social order that is extremely cruel and inhuman... I have harboured the desire to put the narrative of my pain into writing for a long time” (Valmiki vii). In choosing this word as his title, Valmiki does not sanitize or transcend the vocabulary of humiliation: he inhabits it, redeploys it, and forces the reader to confront its implications. Furthermore, upper-caste people in the text are shown to have developed a system of idioms, speeches, and derogatory body language that stigmatized Dalits wherever they lived, signaling that the inferiority assigned to Dalits had settled into the very communicative habits of dominant society.

In Bama’s text, the politics of naming operates differently but with equal symbolic force. The title *Karukku*, meaning the double-edged palmyra leaf, carries a complex charge: it is simultaneously a signifier of the community’s sharpness and its precarity. In her foreword, Bama draws attention to this symbol, referencing the words of Hebrews in the New Testament: “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword” (Hebrews 4:12). Language, for Bama, cuts both ways — it wounds and it heals; it subjugates and it liberates. Bama herself writes under a pen name, and as Lakshmi Holmstrom notes in the introduction, this convention “adds to the work’s strange paradox of reticence and familiarity” (Holmstrom xii). The act of choosing a public name is itself a negotiation of identity: a refusal of the given and a claim of the self-authored.

### **5. Linguistic Style as Oppositional Aesthetic Practice**

The formal choices of both authors are, in Limbale’s terms, constitutive of their political project. Valmiki’s use of plain, direct Hindi — unadorned by the ornamental Sanskrit-heavy diction of upper-caste literary culture — asserts what Limbale calls the “new

words, new sensitivity” of Dalit aesthetic practice. His prose refuses to beautify suffering and insists on the validity of ordinary Dalit experience as literary material. This is not a failure of craft but a conscious aesthetic program: a rejection of what Limbale describes as the “traditional aesthetics” that “will not be able to do justice with Dalit literature” because they are the aesthetics of those who have historically excluded Dalit experience from the literary.

Bama’s linguistic interventions are more radical still at the level of form. As Lakshmi Holmstrom writes in the introduction to *Karukku*:

Bama is doing something completely new in using the demotic and the colloquial regularly, as her medium for narration and even argument, not simply for reported speech. She uses a Dalit style of language which overturns the decorum and aesthetics of received upper-class, upper-caste Tamil. She breaks the rules of written grammar and spelling throughout, elides words and joins them differently, demanding a new and different pattern of reading.

This is, in Bakhtinian terms, the inscription of a centrifugal social voice within a literary form previously monopolized by centripetal, standardizing upper-caste authority. *Karukku* agitated the Tamil literary establishment precisely because Bama used idiomatic lexicon as a medium of narration, contravening grammar rules and establishing a different pattern of reading in the history of Tamil Dalit literature. Moreover, in *Karukku*, language expresses both resistance and subjugation: Bama challenges linguistic hierarchies by fusing Tamil and English, claiming the legitimacy of her community’s voice as a valid literary register (Kannalil, Saju Jose, and R. Shanth. 2025).

Where Valmiki insists on the legibility of pain in plain language, Bama insists on the illegibility — to upper-caste norms — of Dalit Tamil as an act of cultural sovereignty. Both moves are Limbale’s “life-affirming” aesthetic in action: each author deploys the resources of their linguistic community to constitute, through the act of writing, an identity that the dominant order has sought to prevent them from possessing. The very act of Dalit writing stands in direct opposition to elitist writing in almost everything — motivation and purpose, ideology and aesthetics, and in the nature of experiential reality. It is shaped by the absence of power and recognition, and yet it transforms that absence into the ground of a new claim.

## **6. Language, Education, and the Double Bind of Institutional Speech**

Both texts represent educational and institutional spaces as arenas where language becomes simultaneously a tool of humiliation and, paradoxically, of potential liberation. For Valmiki, the classroom is a battlefield of linguistic authority. When he speaks up in class, a teacher screams: “Darkest Kaliyug has descended upon us so that an untouchable is daring to talk back,” and orders him to assume the painful *murga* (rooster) pose as punishment

(Valmiki 25). The act of speaking — of using language in the public space of the school — is read as transgression, as a violation of the social order that has assigned Dalits to silence. Upper-caste speech carries authority; Dalit speech carries presumption. This is Spivak’s structural condition of non-audibility dramatized at the level of the individual classroom encounter.

Scholarship has argued that while education is a vital tool for mobility in *Joothan*, it does not automatically eliminate caste-based discrimination: many educated Dalits still encounter prejudice and identity negation based on their surnames alone. This is precisely Ambedkar’s dilemma reproduced at the biographical level: the promise of the “Educate” injunction founders against the residual force of caste stigma. Language acquisition and literacy are necessary but insufficient conditions for Dalit social dignity. The caste identity — encoded in the surname, inscribed in the body — exceeds and outlasts the linguistic capital that education provides.

Bama’s experience in religious institutions mirrors this structure. The language of the convent — of “obedience,” hierarchy, and docility — functions to suppress her Dalit identity just as surely as the language of the village does. The term “obedience” is especially offensive to Bama since it is used to control nuns and keep them docile, even in the face of injustice or insensitivity (Holmstrom xix). The theological vocabulary of the Church, like the pedagogical vocabulary of upper-caste schools, is a language that was not made for the Dalit subject — or rather, was made to manage her. Bama’s departure from the convent is thus also a departure from a language regime that she experiences as yet another form of caste discipline dressed in religious garb. The intersection of gender makes this doubly constraining: as Spivak notes, subaltern women are silenced by both patriarchal and dominant-caste structures, and *Karukku* dramatizes exactly this double bind.

In Bakhtinian terms, the official language of institutions — whether the school or the convent — is the centripetal voice of authority, which seeks to impose a single official register and suppress the heteroglossic multiplicity of social speech. Both Valmiki and Bama experience this centripetal pressure as the demand for silence: to speak the institution’s language is to assent to one’s own subordination; to speak one’s own language is to be heard as insubordinate. The autobiography as a form is their assertion that this double bind does not exhaust the possibilities.

### **7. The Collective Voice and the Grammar of Dalit Identity**

A significant dimension of language and identity in both texts is the oscillation between the individual autobiographical “I” and the collective voice of the community. This oscillation is not a formal inconsistency but a theoretically significant choice. As Dalit

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autobiography scholars have argued, these texts are not simply recollections of painful memories but a shaping and structuring of them to create awareness and arouse a passion for change in the reader. The individual “I” repeatedly opens outward into a communal “we,” dissolving the boundary between personal memoir and collective testimony.

Although autobiography is a European genre concerned primarily with the representation of the individual self, Dalit autobiography is strikingly different in that it makes “self” only a locus for representing social reality. In other words, in Dalit autobiography the focus is not on “self” but on the Dalit community (Giri 2025). This redirection of autobiographical grammar is itself a political claim: it insists that the self cannot be understood apart from the social relations that constitute it, and that those relations are relations of caste.

In *Karukku*, this collective dimension is enacted through linguistic form as much as through content. Scholarship drawing on Bakhtinian dialogics has shown how Bama enables an understanding of the radicalization of Tamil Dalit women’s consciousness through the appropriation of different registers — the self, the cultural, and the ethnographic — and dialectal Tamil. The text’s first-person narration regularly dissolves into the communal voice of the Paraiyar community, so that Bama’s individual experience functions as a microcosm of collective suffering and resistance. Bama’s work has for the first time brought to focus the lived experience of the Dalit Christian community — a community that is doubly marginalized, by caste within Christian institutions and by religion within the broader caste Hindu social order (Nayar 2006).

Valmiki similarly refuses an individualist reading of his autobiography. He describes his literary project as carrying out his anguish as the communal trauma of his community; his voice stands as a collective claim for his society. The linguistic choice to narrate personal memory as representative experience is itself an identity statement: neither author is merely writing *their* life. They are writing the life of their people. The grammar of Dalit autobiography — the oscillation between singular and plural, between the past and the witness-present — is itself a theory of identity: individual identity is always already social, always constituted in and through community.

Yet both texts also register the difficulty of sustaining collective identity in the face of internal differentiation. *Karukku* is centrally concerned with the single issue of caste oppression within the Catholic Church and presents Bama’s life as a process of lonely self-discovery; the tension throughout is between the self and the community. In *Joothan*, Valmiki’s education and professional life distances him, geographically and culturally, from

his village community — a distance that the act of writing both acknowledges and attempts to bridge. Language, in this sense, is not only what divides Dalit subjects from upper-caste society; it is also what marks the internal transformations and dislocations of Dalit selfhood over time.

### **8. Translation, Readership, and the Limits of Linguistic Mediation**

Both texts have reached wider audiences through translation, and this raises important questions about how language mediates the identity that the text performs. Valmiki's autobiography was written in Hindi; its translation into English by Arun Prabha Mukherjee secured for it national recognition by expanding the scope of readership. Bama's *Karukku* was originally written in Tamil in 1992 and translated into English by Lakshmi Holmstrom in 2000, winning the Crossword Award for best fiction in Indian languages. However, Holmstrom found it extremely difficult to translate the text because of its "agglutinative" structure — the very features of Bama's demotic Tamil that constitute its identity politics resist easy transfer into the normalized prose of English.

This tension is not merely technical. When Dalit writing is translated into a metropolitan language, the linguistic resistances that constitute its identity claims risk being smoothed over, rendered legible on terms not their own. The colloquial deviations of Bama's Tamil — her elisions, her non-standard spellings, her grammatical transgressions — are not errors to be corrected but meaning-bearing features. To translate them into grammatically normative English is to perform, at the level of linguistic form, precisely the kind of upper-caste disciplining that the original resists. In Bakhtinian terms, the translation risks re-imposing the centripetal standard against which the centrifugal original was written. Similarly, the sparse, unglamorous Hindi of *Joothan* risks aestheticization or sentimentalization when rendered for audiences who approach Dalit autobiography from a position of intellectual solidarity rather than lived experience.

Scholars of Dalit literature have noted that while academic inclusion can provide legitimacy, it also poses the risk of co-opting these narratives, and that when Dalit texts are primarily examined through Western frameworks or abstract theories, their political relevance may be overlooked. The question of translation is thus inseparable from the question of reception: who reads, in which language, from which social position, and with what political commitment? The globalization of Dalit autobiography through translation is a doubled process: it expands visibility and enables cross-cultural solidarities, while potentially domesticating the very alterity that makes these texts politically potent. What is needed, in Nayar's (2006) terms, is a practice of "rhetorical listening" — an ethical reading that attends to what resists translation as much as to what is successfully conveyed.

### **9. Conclusion**

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Language and identity in *Joothan* and *Karukku* are inseparable, mutually constitutive, and politically charged. In both texts, language is not a neutral vessel: it is the primary medium through which caste is enforced, identity is suppressed, and — crucially — through which resistance is articulated and selfhood reclaimed. Valmiki’s memoir is not merely an autobiography but a public record of caste trauma and collective resistance. Bama’s *Karukku*, through its formally disruptive Tamil, serves not only as a personal narrative but as a powerful socio-political critique that redefines Dalit literature from within.

The theoretical framework advanced here — drawing on Limbale’s Dalit aesthetics, Spivak’s theorization of subaltern audibility, Ambedkar’s philosophy of emancipation through language, and Bakhtin’s heteroglossia — illuminates different facets of this relationship. From Limbale, we understand the formal choices of both authors as constitutive of their political commitment: the “new language” of Dalit literature is not accidental but programmatic. From Spivak, we understand the structural conditions of non-audibility against which their speaking constitutes an act of resistance — while noting the limits of applying a framework designed for subjects who cannot speak to authors who manifestly have. From Ambedkar, we understand both the promise and the limit of language as an instrument of emancipation: education and literacy expand the possibilities of Dalit self-assertion without dissolving the residual force of caste stigma encoded in the name and the body. From Bakhtin, we understand the formal dynamics by which vernacular and official languages contend in the literary text, and why Bama’s formal transgressions are, at the same time, political ones.

Reading *Joothan* and *Karukku* comparatively, illuminate different but complementary dimensions of the language-identity nexus in Dalit autobiography. Valmiki works from within the Hindi literary tradition while fundamentally challenging its assumptions about whose pain deserves representation and in what register. Bama works from within Tamil vernacular tradition while fundamentally challenging the grammar of upper-caste literary decorum. Both demonstrate that the choice of how to write — which words, which syntax, which register, which title — is never politically innocent in a caste society.

Taken together, these texts suggest that Dalit autobiography’s most radical achievement is not simply to narrate suffering but to enact, through the very texture of its language, a claim to full humanity, full voice, and full literary citizenship. Spivak asks whether the subaltern can speak; Valmiki and Bama answer: we are not only speaking, we are writing, and we are writing in our own voices, on our own terms. To speak is to claim existence; to write in one’s own voice is to refuse erasure. The language of these texts is not

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a means to an end but the embodiment of the end itself: a world in which the Dalit voice is not exceptional, translated, or explained — but simply, and irreducibly, heard.

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