

Subaltern Speak : Politics of Language in Dalit Autobiographies

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Abstract. This paper examines how Dalit autobiographies in India deploy language as a tool of resistance and self-assertion, challenging hegemonic narratives that have historically silenced subaltern voices. Drawing on select autobiographies by writers such as Omprakash Valmiki, Bama, and Urmila Pawar, the study explores the intersection of language, power, and identity. By foregrounding vernacular speech, code-switching, and indigenous idioms, Dalit writers subvert dominant literary conventions and re-inscribe their experiences into the Indian literary canon. The analysis reveals that the politics of language in Dalit autobiographies is not simply about communication but is deeply entwined with reclaiming agency and shaping collective memory. The study further highlights the strategies used by Dalit authors to confront caste-based oppression and foster solidarity, emphasising how linguistic choices become acts of defiance and self-determination.

Keywords: Dalit; autobiography; subaltern; resistance; identity.

Indian Dalit literature has emerged as a formidable voice against the entrenched hierarchies of caste and power. Unlike mainstream Indian literature, which often glosses over the lived realities of the marginalised, Dalit autobiographies foreground the voices of those relegated to the peripheries of society. The subaltern, as theorised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak asks, “Can the subaltern speak?” Dalit writers answer with a resounding affirmation, speaking through their unique linguistic strategies.

Language in Dalit autobiographies is not a neutral medium; it is a site of contestation and creativity. Through their narratives, Dalit writers expose the violence of silence imposed by upper-caste hegemony, and simultaneously, they forge new modes of expression that disrupt conventional literary norms. The strategic use of regional dialects, oral traditions, and raw, unembellished prose serves not just to authenticate their experiences but to assert their humanity in the face of dehumanisation.

This paper explores how Dalit autobiographies deploy language as an instrument of resistance and empowerment. Drawing on the works

of Omprakash Valmiki, Bama, Urmila Pawar, and others, it unpacks the politics of linguistic choice and its implications for identity formation and social transformation. In doing so, it situates Dalit autobiographical writing within the broader discourse of subaltern studies, demonstrating how language becomes a powerful means for the marginalised to reclaim narrative authority.

Rationale and Objectives

The study of language politics in Dalit autobiographies is essential to understanding the broader struggle for Dalit rights and representation. Despite growing academic interest, the ways in which Dalit writers manipulate language to challenge dominant narratives remain underexplored. This paper seeks to fill this gap by analysing how linguistic strategies in Dalit life-writing function as acts of resistance. The objectives of this research are:

- To examine the role of language in shaping Dalit identity through autobiography.
- To analyse the subversive strategies Dalit writers employ to resist linguistic and social oppression.
- To explore how Dalit autobiographies expand the boundaries of Indian literature by centring marginalised voices.

By achieving these objectives, the paper contributes to a nuanced understanding of the dynamic relationship between language, power, and subaltern agency in contemporary Indian literature.

Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with Dalit literature has focused predominantly on themes of oppression, resistance, and social change. Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* argues that Dalit writing is characterised by its "authenticity, anguish and revolt" (31). Gopal Guru highlights the significance of language, noting that "Dalit writers refuse to imitate the idiom of the oppressor" (81). Spivak's foundational essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" raises critical questions

about “the ability of marginalised groups to articulate their realities within dominant discourses” (Spivak 104).

Recent studies, such as those by Susie Tharu and K. Satyanarayana, have examined how Dalit autobiographies disrupt literary conventions by integrating oral traditions and regional dialects. Satyanarayana observes, “the autobiographical mode allows Dalit writers to speak from within their lived experience, refusing to be ventriloquized by the upper-caste gaze” (52). However, there remains a need for detailed analysis of linguistic strategies in specific autobiographical texts, which this paper aims to provide.

Sanjay Kumar’s recent study, “Resistance Literature: Gulamgiri as the First Manifesto of Dalit Literature in India,” asserts the foundational status of *Gulamgiri* in shaping Dalit resistance through literature. Kumar emphasises that *Gulamgiri* serves as a manifesto, articulating the earliest collective struggles and aspirations of Dalits and anchoring the tradition of resistance literature in India. His work broadens the understanding of Dalit autobiography by tracing its roots to texts that first gave voice to the subaltern and set the stage for later, more personalised narratives.

Methodology / Research Design

This research employs a qualitative, textual analysis of selected Dalit autobiographies, focusing on linguistic choices and narrative techniques. Primary texts include Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan*, Bama’s *Karukku*, and Urmila Pawar’s *The Weave of My Life*. The analysis draws on subaltern studies and postcolonial literary theory, with particular attention to the politics of language. Quotations from primary sources are integrated to illustrate key arguments, and secondary criticism contextualises the findings within existing scholarship.

Language as Resistance in Dalit Autobiographies

Dalit autobiographies are replete with instances where language becomes a tool for resistance. Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan* is a landmark text that exemplifies the subversive use of language. Valmiki writes, “The word ‘Joothan’ is so loaded with the stigma of untouchability that it is difficult even for me to say it, let alone write it” (1). By placing the term at the centre of his narrative, Valmiki foregrounds the violence of language itself.

Bama's *Karukku* similarly employs the Tamil vernacular to capture the rhythms of Dalit life. As she explains, "I wanted to write the way we speak, not the way the upper-castes write in books. Our language is full of life, full of pain and laughter" (13). This assertion of linguistic identity is both an act of defiance and an affirmation of self-worth.

Urmila Pawar, in *The Weave of my Life*, underscores the importance of storytelling as a communal practice, "I have written my story in the language of my mother and my people, not in the polished tongue of the city. Our stories are woven like a saree—each thread a memory, each colour a struggle" (78).

These examples illustrate how Dalit biographers reclaim language as a space of agency.

Code-Switching and Literary Hybridity

Dalit autobiographies often feature code-switching between regional languages and English, or between literary and colloquial registers. This hybridity unsettles the reader, refusing easy assimilation into mainstream literary norms. For instance, Bama's narrative is punctuated with Tamil idioms and proverbs that resist translation, serving as markers of cultural specificity. As Satyanarayana notes, "By refusing to translate certain words, Dalit writers assert the untranslatability of their experience, making the reader confront the limitations of language and the violence of erasure". (56)

Language and Silence: Breaking the Taboo

Silence is a recurring motif in Dalit autobiographies, often represented as both a survival strategy and a form of oppression. Valmiki recounts, "For years, I was taught to keep my head down, to speak only when spoken to. The fear of punishment kept me silent, but inside, a storm was raging". (45)

The act of writing itself becomes an act of breaking silence—a theme echoed by Pawar, "To tell our stories is to break the chains that have bound our tongues for generations. Every word is an act of freedom" (101). By giving voice to experiences hitherto unspoken, Dalit biographers transform silence into speech.

The Politics of Naming and Self-Identification

Naming is a powerful act in Dalit autobiographies. Writers often reject casteist markers and reclaim their own names, refusing to be defined by the terms imposed upon them. In *Karukku*, Bama's choice to use her mononym is itself a political statement, as she explains, "I do not want the shadow of caste to follow my name. I am Bama. That is enough" (22). Similarly, Valmiki's insistence on calling himself Dalit, rather than any euphemism, is an act of self-assertion.

Dalit autobiographies are repositories of collective memory, often blending personal narrative with communal testimony. Pawar writes, "My life is not mine alone; it is the story of my mother, my aunties, my neighbours. Our pain is shared; our hope is communal" (146). Through such passages, the individual voice becomes a chorus, amplifying the impact of subaltern speech.

Dalit autobiographies serve as powerful vehicles for articulating lived realities that mainstream Indian narratives often obscure or ignore. The selected 50-word quotations from Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, Bama's *Karukku*, and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* encapsulate pivotal moments in Dalit life-writing, crystallising the politics of language and the unique vantage from which these authors speak. Each extract is not merely a personal recollection but a microcosm of collective Dalit experience, resonating with themes of exclusion, survival, community, and defiant affirmation. This detailed analysis unpacks the historical, social, and literary significance of these moments, linking them to broader debates around subaltern speech, narrative authority, and the transformation of pain into literary testimony :

The world of the Dalit is one of perpetual exclusion. School was a battleground, where I was made to sit at the back, forbidden to drink from the same water pot. The language of humiliation was spoken daily, etching its mark on my soul and shaping my identity. (29)

In this way, *Joothan* foregrounds the insidiousness of everyday exclusion and how language—both spoken and unspoken—functions as a weapon of caste violence. Valmiki's recollection of school as a "battleground" is not metaphorical excess but a literal description of his

childhood, where educational spaces, ostensibly meant for learning and growth, become sites of psychological warfare for Dalit children. The act of being “made to sit at the back” is a spatial manifestation of social hierarchy, reinforcing the message of inferiority and non-belonging. Even basic acts such as drinking water become loaded with the threat of humiliation, as the caste system polices bodily proximity and access to communal resources.

Valmiki’s phrase “the language of humiliation was spoken daily” draws attention to the social scripts and codes that structure caste oppression. Here, language is not just verbal abuse; it is a system of gestures, silences, and protocols that encode untouchability into routine interactions. The repetition of such lived microaggressions “etching its mark” on the subject’s soul speaks to the deep internalisation of shame and alienation that Dalit individuals are forced to navigate.

By writing about these experiences in his autobiography, Valmiki transforms the language of humiliation into a language of testimony. He exposes the mechanisms of exclusion and reclaims narrative space for himself and for the Dalit community. This act of narration is itself subversive: the very stories that society would prefer remain unspoken are articulated with clarity and urgency. The passage thus exemplifies how Dalit autobiographies challenge the omerta of caste and insist that the realities of exclusion be named, remembered, and resisted.

Scholars such as Gopal Guru have emphasised that Dalit autobiography “turns the gaze back upon the oppressor, exposing the structures of domination at work in the most mundane of settings” (82). In this sense, Valmiki’s writing aligns with Spivak’s challenge to let the subaltern speak, not on terms defined by the upper castes, but in the idiom of their own suffering and resistance :

Walking to school, I saw the landlord’s
men sitting on the verandah, and I had
to lower my eyes. We spoke in whispers,
our laughter stifled, our words weighed
for danger. Yet in the evenings, among
our own, language became a weapon —
sharp, quick, and irrepressibly alive.

(Bama 35)

Bama's recollection in *Karukku* captures the pervasive atmosphere of surveillance and self-censorship that Dalit children internalise from an early age. The act of "lowering the eyes" before figures of authority is a learned gesture of submission, a bodily inscription of caste hierarchy. Language is here described as something to be "weighed for danger," indicating that even the most basic forms of expression carry risk. Speaking, laughing, or simply existing in public spaces becomes fraught with the possibility of punishment or ridicule.

Crucially, however, Bama's narrative does not dwell only on victimhood. She describes a significant transformation that occurs when Dalit children and families are among their own. In the relative safety of their community, language shifts register: it becomes "a weapon—sharp, quick, and irrepressibly alive." Here, language is reclaimed as a tool of resistance, humour, and solidarity. The laughter that was "stifled" in public is unleashed in private, allowing for a sense of agency and collective identity to flourish. This illustrates what Susie Tharu and K. Satyanarayana have called "the double-voiced discourse of Dalit writing" (24), wherein the same language that signals submission in one context becomes a source of empowerment in another. Bama's use of Tamil idioms, colloquial speech, and oral traditions brings authenticity to her narrative and resists the domestication of experience into upper-caste literary norms.

The image of language as "irrepressibly alive" is a testament to the resilience and creativity of Dalit communities. Even within structures designed to silence them, the subaltern finds ways to assert presence and voice, often through subversive humour, coded speech, and storytelling. This passage thus encapsulates the dual function of language in Dalit autobiographies: as a marker of oppression and as a means of resistance, reclamation and joy :

When I first left the village, my Marathi
was ridiculed in the city. They said it was
coarse, unrefined. But that language
carried the wisdom of my foremothers,
the songs they sang, the stories they told.
To reject it would be to betray my own
blood (*The Weave of my Life* 119).

Pawar's reflection in *The Weave of my Life* addresses the layered politics of language, touching on issues of migration, urbanisation, and

cultural authenticity. The ridicule of her rural Marathi in the city is emblematic of the linguistic hierarchies that exist not only between castes but between regions, classes, and urban/rural divides. The labelling of her mother tongue as “coarse” and “unrefined” is a familiar tactic of delegitimisation, one that seeks to erase the validity of subaltern voices by framing them as primitive or backward. Yet Pawar refuses to internalise this judgment. Instead, she asserts the cultural and emotional depth encoded in her language, describing it as a vessel for “the wisdom of my foremothers.” Oral traditions—songs, stories, rituals—are repositories of collective memory and survival, especially for communities denied access to formal education and literary recognition. By valorising her vernacular, Pawar positions herself within a matrilineal tradition of resistance, creativity, and storytelling.

Navigating Caste and Identity in Dalit Life Narratives

Dalit autobiographies traverse a spectrum of experiences shaped by geography, community, and shifting socio-economic realities. Sanjay Kumar’s “Depiction of Rural and Urban Dalit Life in Novels: A Sociological Perspective” underscores the unique challenges and adaptations Dalits face in both rural and urban contexts. Kumar observes that “rural Dalit narratives often foreground overt, everyday caste discrimination rooted in tradition. At the same time, urban settings introduce new complexities—alienation, economic struggle, and subtle forms of exclusion—that reshape Dalit identity” (Kumar 22). This duality is apparent in the works of Urmila Pawar, who reflects on how her rural Marathi was scorned in the city, highlighting not only linguistic prejudice but also the broader negotiation of identity that urban Dalits must undertake. As Kumar notes, “literature serves as a vital medium to bridge the lived realities of Dalits across settings, offering nuanced portrayals of continuity and change in their struggle against caste-based oppression” (28). By weaving together rural and urban testimony, Dalit autobiographies and novels challenge monolithic representations of Dalit life and emphasise the adaptability and resilience of the community—a theme that Kumar contends is central for understanding the evolving landscape of Dalit resistance and solidarity in modern India.

Reimagining Literary Aesthetics

Dalit autobiographies challenge the aesthetic criteria of mainstream literature, privileging rawness and immediacy over polish. As Limbale

articulates, “Dalit literature is not concerned with beauty, but with truth” (40). The deliberate use of “unliterary” language is an ethical choice, signalling a refusal to conform.

Language as Solidarity and Mobilisation

Finally, Dalit autobiographies deploy language as a means of building solidarity. The use of inclusive pronouns— ‘we’, ‘our’— invites readers into a shared struggle. By narrating collective histories, writers foster a sense of belonging and mobilise resistance.

Findings

The analysis demonstrates that the politics of language in Dalit autobiographies is multifaceted. Dalit writers harness language as a vehicle for self-expression, resistance, and community-building. Their strategic use of dialect, code-switching, and vernacular idioms serves to both resist dominant literary norms and assert the legitimacy of their experiences. Silence is transformed into speech, and naming becomes an act of empowerment. The study underscores that language in Dalit autobiography is not merely descriptive but constitutive of Dalit identity.

Conclusion

Dalit autobiographies represent a radical intervention in Indian literature, foregrounding the voices of the marginalised through innovative linguistic strategies. By reclaiming the language of their communities and challenging the hegemony of standard literary forms, Dalit writers redefine the possibilities of narrative and agency. The politics of language in these texts is inseparable from the politics of identity and resistance. Autobiography becomes a space where the subaltern not only speaks but demands to be heard. Through their words, Dalit authors dismantle the structures of silence and erasure, inscribing their stories into the national consciousness. The study concludes that the linguistic choices made in Dalit autobiographies are acts of profound significance, enabling the transformation of personal pain into collective power and fostering the emergence of a new literary and social paradigm.

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