



Lives Shaped by Caste: An Intersectional Study of *Joothan* and *The Outcaste*

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Abstract

Caste oppression has been a prevalent approach in Dalit autobiographies, but this approach has the effect of reducing marginalization to a single and homogenous experience. The paper will provide an intersectional analysis of two texts by Omprakash Valmiki, *Joothan*, and Sharankumar Limbale, *The Outcaste* (Akkarmashi), to explore the workings of caste at the intersection of other identity axes, including gender, poverty, labour, and social legitimacy. Based on intersectional theory, this paper argues that caste is not just one category among many, but the primary framework in which other forms of oppression are created and lived.

The paper uses a comparative textual analysis to examine three overlapping dimensions: structural intersections in institutions such as education and religion, embodied experiences of humiliation and exclusion, and narrative strategies that allow Dalit subjects to reclaim agency. As *Joothan* predicts that caste overlaps with poverty and education to form group resistance, *The Outcaste* demonstrates that caste, gender, and illegitimacy interact to create disjointed and agonizing subjectivities. Placing Dalit autobiography as a location of



lived theory, this paper analyzes the concept of intersectionality in the Indian socio-cultural context and points out how personal stories build up stratified oppression into political claims and self-identity.

Keywords: Dalit Autobiography, Intersectionality, Caste and Identity, Social Exclusion, Caste and Gender, Hunger and Poverty, Resistance Narratives.

Dalit autobiographical literature takes a significant place in Indian literature as a means of protest against centuries of caste-based oppression. In contrast to the traditional autobiographies, where the main character is usually concerned with personal success, Dalit life stories predetermine the collective victimization, social rejection, and structural violence. *The Outcaste* (Akkarmashi) by Omprakash Valmiki and *Joothan* by SharankumarLimbale are among the most prominent Dalit autobiographies that reveal the realities of caste discrimination experienced by Dalits in postcolonial India. Although several scholars have addressed these texts mainly as an oppression of caste, these approaches tend to offer the Dalit experience as a homogeneous and unitary experience.

This paper argues that caste cannot explain Dalit marginalization. Rather, it needs to be analyzed in terms of an intersectional approach that takes into account the intersection of caste with gender, class, work, education, and social legitimacy. Based on the intersectionality theory by Kimberle Crenshaw, this paper re-contextualizes the theory to the Indian caste system, such that caste is the organizing axis in which other oppressions are organized and experienced. The paper will examine through a comparative reading of *Joothan* and *The Outcaste* how layered identities generate specific Dalit subjectivities and how the autobiographical narrative of the self is turned into a political subject.



Dalit autobiographies such as Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste* have been widely discussed as powerful testimonies of caste oppression. Critics like Arun Prabha Mukherjee highlight how *Joothan* exposes the everyday humiliation embedded in social institutions, while Limbale, in *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, frames Dalit writing as literature born out of collective suffering and resistance. Gopal Guru's essay *Dalit Women Talk Differently* further complicates Dalit discourse by showing that caste oppression is also shaped by gendered experience.

However, most studies focus primarily on caste as a single axis of marginalization. There is limited comparative work that examines how caste intersects with gender, poverty, education, and legitimacy in shaping different Dalit subjectivities. This paper addresses that gap by reading *Joothan* and *The Outcaste* together through an intersectional lens rooted in the Indian caste context, rather than treating identities as separate or merely overlapping categories.

Intersectionality and Indian Caste Context.

Kimmerer Crenshaw introduced intersectionality as a concept to explain why Black women face intersecting challenges of discrimination that cannot be understood through race or gender alone. She contends that "I used the concept of intersectionality to denote the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's employment experiences" (Crenshaw 1244).

Although the framework developed by Crenshaw was a result of the Western feminist discourse, the main assumption of the framework can be strongly applied to the Indian caste system. Nonetheless, using intersectionality directly on Dalit experiences without changing it can lead to dismissing the social power of caste. Caste in India is not just another marker of



identity; it is a strict hierarchy where access to education, work, space, and even dignity is predetermined by birth. Gopal Guru provides the idea that Dalit experience is to be approached as a theory to be studied, not as a piece of analysis, but as “the lived experience of Dalits contains within it an epistemological challenge to dominant knowledge systems” (Guru 255).

In this paper, thus, intersectionality is reframed to put caste as the main structuring power, whereby gender, poverty, and social legitimacy are created. Caste in *Joothan* and *The Outcaste* does not relate to other identities on equal terms, but caste controls the manner in which other identities are lived, regulated, and narrated.

Caste, Education, and Labour Structural Crossings.

The institution of education is one of the most evident areas of intersectional oppression in *Joothan*. Valmiki narrates how his school life was organized on the basis of caste-based humiliation, whereby learning becomes a struggle against the forces instead of being empowered. He remembers how he was segregated with students of the upper caste and verbally abused: “The other children in my class were studying, and I was sweeping. Headmaster was sitting in his room and watching me.” (Valmiki 4-5). In this case, caste overlaps with education and labor.

The Dalit child is not an identified student but rather a working body who should serve. The fact that Valmiki is excluded from the process of education is not a coincidence, but a systematic procedure. The school that is meant to be the place of social mobility instead replicates caste hierarchy. Structural oppression is manifested in a different way but with the same intensity in *The Outcaste*. Marginalization of Limbale is because he is an illegitimate child born of a Dalit woman and an upper-caste man. The question Whose son am I, really?



(Limbale 37). This is not only a manifestation of personal confusion of Limbale, but also the social violence that is created at the crossroads of caste, gender, and legitimacy. Being born to a Dalit mother and an upper-caste father who does not acknowledge them, the identity of the narrator remains between social categories.

Caste excludes him, patriarchy deprives him of a fatherly right, and social morality stains his life with the label of impurity. This query thus reveals the mechanisms of intersectional oppression not just by material deprivation but also by the denial of lineage, belonging, and selfhood. In contrast to *Joothan*, where caste oppression ultimately results in group assertion, *The Outcaste* shows a disjointed subjectivity that is formed by the unresolved questions of origin. The way that fatherhood is interrogated by Limbale shows how caste governs the very kinship to make sure that the Dalit bodies can be abused sexually.

According to Limbale, the exploitation of Dalit women is based on caste and gender: “the father of my children may be different, but they are all born for me” (Limbale 63). This highlights that the Mahar woman is used as property. The Dalit women were forced to accept the responsibility of motherhood without social recognition. In this way, caste and gender intersect to create a framework in which Dalit women are oppressed twice.

Embodied Intersections: Hunger, Shame and the Casteed Body.

Dalit autobiography intersectionality is powerful when it is articulated through the body. Hunger in *Joothan* is a repetitive symbol of caste oppression. Valmiki tells about eating the leftovers discarded by upper-caste families, “leftover roti at noon every day, specially made by mixing the flour with husk since it was for the Chuhras. Sometimes the joothan, scraps, would also be put in the basket with the rotis for us” (Valmiki 9). Here, hunger is not simply a lack of money, but a caste-based state that is a social order of things.



“Starvation was written in our lot from the moment of our birth” (Limbale 21). The combination of caste, poverty, and inheritance makes deprivation a predetermined state of Dalit existence. Hunger in *The Outcaste* is not caused by individual inability or a temporary lack of money; it is an element that is given at birth due to caste hierarchy. This is the line that demonstrates the naturalization of material deprivation and the inevitability of starvation among the Dalits. The caste structures access to land, labor, and resources, and poverty is a guarantee of dependence on exploitative labor. The phrase “written in our lot” implies a social script written by the dominant caste dominance, in which Dalit bodies are already marked to be hungry before taking action or making a choice. This concept bears a close resemblance to *Joothan*, where Valmiki explains how he survived on scraps of food, which once again confirms that hunger is a racially coded experience that is common in all parts of the world.

Dalit autobiography is not merely storytelling of how it has been tormented, but it is a political action. Valmiki and Limbale both rely on personal memory as a way to create a challenge to the dominant history that silences Dalit voices. According to Valmiki, writing is the only way to fight back against caste norms. He can regain agency and dignity through his writings.

Even though *Joothan* and *The Outcaste* have one thing in common, which is the need to expose caste injustice, their intersectional configurations yield varying results.

Joothan focuses on collective resistance based on education and activism and indicates that social change might be possible. On the contrary, *The Outcaste* reveals a divided identity that is being formed by sexual stigmatization and existential dilemma. This distinction brings out one of the central points of the paper that intersectionality does not result in homogenous



oppression but rather in discriminated Dalit subjectivities. The story of Valmiki leads to assertion, whereas the story of Limbale is characterized by unresolved trauma.

Conclusion

The current paper has analyzed *Joothan* and *The Outcaste* in the intersectional framework that places caste in the forefront as the organizing axis of oppression. The paper shows that the Dalit marginalization is neither absolute nor fixed by examining structural, embodied, and narrative intersections. Rather, it is generated by the interplay between caste and gender, labor, education, and legitimacy. This study can add to Dalit studies by transforming the additive approaches to oppression by reconsidering intersectionality in the Indian scenario. Dalit autobiographies are both a place of theory, resistance, and epistemic intervention, as well as a place of suffering. Valmiki and Limbale reclaim voice, dignity, and political agency through their narratives and force the readers to examine the complexities of caste in modern India.

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