

Reclaiming the Literary Space by the Genre of Autobiography in the Era of ‘Post-Truth’: A Critical Inquiry

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Abstract

The concept of “post-truth” has gained currency since its inclusion in the Oxford Dictionaries as the international word of the year in 2016. Though the culture of disinformation and propaganda politics has been traced to antiquity, the term “post-truth” relates, specifically, to a political environment of “populist discourse” and “fake news” prevalent in the age of information technology. Literary scholars have linked “post-truth politics” to postmodernism’s rejection of certainties and absolute truths. Conversely, literary studies in the twenty-first century and the stance of various novelists point towards “reality hunger” among readers, confirmed by a boom in reality television, and the publication of non-fiction that exudes honesty and authenticity in representing reality. This article explores the post-fictional scenario in literary discourse by analysing two Dalit writers’ autobiographies—Bama’s *Karukku* (2000) and Sharankumar Limbale’s *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi* (2003)—as counter-narratives to post-truth. These postcolonial narratives propose a new aesthetics by breaking genre boundaries to match the requirements of their varied subjective experiences in a highly polarised world.

Keywords: post-truth, autobiography, authenticity, postmodernism, disinformation, non-fiction

Introduction

“We live in an age of post-truth, where the distinctions between right and wrong, fact and fiction, are becoming increasingly blurred and irrelevant,” exclaims Eline Reinhoud.¹ The concept of “post-truth” signifies the socio-political condition and “apolitical culture” of our times, where objective facts and factual information have become irrelevant, where the truth has become “an inconvenience,” and “the apparatus of lying” has become “institutionalized,”² with the prevalence of “alternate facts” and “fake news.” It works through targeting the emotions of the populace, and a deliberate disregard for facts. The Oxford Dictionaries mentions that post-truth reflects the circumstances in which “the objective facts are less influential in shaping the public opinion than appeals to emotion and public belief.”³ Thomas Zoglauer has noted that in a post-truth society, truth “serves only a rhetorical function. Post-

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¹ Eline Reinhoud, “The Post-Truth Era: Crises of Truth in (Post-) Postmodern Literature” (Master’s thesis, Utrecht University, 2019), p. 3.

² Mustafa Bayoumi, “The Iraq war Started the Post-Truth Era. And America is to Blame,” *The Guardian*, 14 March (2023). At: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/mar/14/iraq-war-9-11-george-bush-post-truth>.

³ Alison Flood, “‘Post-Truth’ Named Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries,” *The Guardian*, 16 November (2016). At: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/nov/15/post-truth-named-word-of-the-year-by-oxford-dictionaries>.

truth operates as a strategy of detaching discourse from reality. Facts are ignored and empirical evidence is disregarded.”⁴ Post-truth is “a deliberate strategy” to create an environment where certain events and experiences lose their meaning and the “scientific truth is delegitimized.”⁵

Since its popularisation during the 2016 American presidential elections and the United Kingdom Brexit referendum, “post-truth” has become a global phenomenon. The speed and scale of the Internet, increased accessibility, and lack of accountability on social media has made the dissemination of (dis)information so quick and diversified that it becomes almost impossible to distinguish factual information from fictional accounts. Objective truth is undermined, subverted, and “delegitimized” so as “to disarm the threat” that the truth poses to the post-truthers, and “alternative facts” are created to construct a new reality to suit certain political goals and ideology.”⁶ Many scholars, like Yuval Noah Harari, relate the phenomenon of post-truth to pre-historical era, and consider it an essential part of power politics. He argues that the fictional stories and fake news have always been a major tool to reinforce religious beliefs and ideologies, and that Homo Sapiens is “a post-truth species,” which had conquered and ruled over the earth by their ability “to create and spread fictions.”⁷ Hannah Arendt also draws attention to the universality of the phenomenon of post-truth; she states that “lies have always been regarded as necessary and justifiable tools not only of the politician’s and the demagogue’s but also of the statesman’s trade.”⁸

In our argument post-truth does not refer to the general fictional mode of life lived since ages, nor does it deal with the metaphysical or philosophical view of truth to find answers to the existential dilemmas. It is considered as a phenomenon specific to the twenty-first century signifying a specific attitude, and a deep apathy towards “factual truth” which reflects shifting power relations and strategies. It has a specific historical and cultural context referring to the age of information boom, unregulated social media and the exponential growth in digital media technology. We focus ontologically on the socio-cultural conditions created by post-truth, and proposes that postmodern literature, like the autobiographies of postcolonial subaltern subjects, with its verifiability and authenticity, presents a counter-narrative to the culture of deliberate lies. We employed a qualitative research methodology, and the argument is supported by the textual analysis of Sharankumar Limbale’s *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi* (2003), and Bama’s *Karukku* (2000), reading them within a cultural studies framework.

Truth and Post-Truth: A Brief History

The study of truth has been a central concern of philosophy, theology, science and arts, and has been much-contested for thousands of years. Philosophers and scholars, since Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle to the present day have grappled with the question of truth to understand its

⁴ Thomas Zaglauer, *Constructed Truths: Truth and Knowledge in a Post-Truth World* (Berlin: Springer Vieweg, 2023), p. 26.

⁵ Zaglauer, *Constructed Truths*, p. 27.

⁶ Zaglauer, *Constructed Truths*, p. 27.

⁷ Yuval Noah Harari, “Humans are a Post-Truth Species,” *The Guardian*, 5 August (2018). At: <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2018/aug/05/yuval-noah-harari-extract-fake-news-sapiens-homo-deus>. Accessed 05/02/2023.

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: The Viking Press, 1969), p. 227.

epistemological and ontological dimensions. There were many theories of truth prevalent in twentieth century. Simon W. Blackburn traces the germ of correspondence theory to the Aristotelian formulation of representation: “To say of what is that it is, or of what is not that it is not, is true.”⁹ The coherence theory moves further than a mere correspondence of individual utterances to outer reality, and proposes that truth must be “a feature of the overall body of belief considered as a system of logically interrelated components,” thus an individual belief in a system is true if it sufficiently coheres with enough other beliefs.¹⁰ The pragmatists propose that many systems of beliefs can be internally coherent, some of which may prove to be more useful to society than others, as is contended by the American pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, “the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real.”¹¹

Modernist philosophy attempted to find a path towards absolute truth; it was based on the eighteenth century philosophy of the Enlightenment, which elevated human reason. It was an attempt to find an identity and congruity, and oneness of thought and being, inner and outer world, subject and object. Postmodernism, on the other hand, subverts any such attempt to establish absolute truth and universalisation, as in postmodern culture, “the grand narrative has lost its credibility.”¹² It rejects certainties as totalising superstructures, and shows incredulity towards metanarratives. This postmodern condition of ephemerality, flux and plurality in the absence of “transcendental signified,” to use Jacques Derrida’s term, has, often, been considered as the root cause of devaluation of “factual truth” which is reached *a posteriori*, and is based on real experiences. Since “facts and events” are “invariable outcome[s] of men living and acting together,” contends Hannah Arendt, “factual truth” is “much more vulnerable” than all kinds of “rational truth” (which is *a priori*, viz., mathematical, scientific, or philosophical truths).¹³ Distinguishing between these two kinds of truths, Arendt states, “The opposite of a rationally true statement is either error and ignorance, as in sciences, or illusion and opinion, as in philosophy. Deliberate falsehood, the plain lie, plays its role only in the domain of factual statements.”¹⁴ The first is involuntary, second is voluntary, and post-truth relates to the second.

The political ramifications of the concept of post-truth have already been hinted at by many scholars, like Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault. Nietzsche rejected the idea of universal constants and objective truth, as he takes truths as human creations and “illusions” which serve only the practical purposes. Nietzsche asks “What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically.”¹⁵ Nietzsche suggests that truth is subject to constant re-interpretations and change, and is influenced by shifting cultural and historical contexts. Foucault postulates a close connection between truth and power, and views truth embedded within a given power structure, stating that “every

⁹ Simon W. Blackburn, “Truth,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2 May (2023).

At: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/truth-philosophy-and-logic>.

¹⁰ Blackburn, “Truth.”

¹¹ Blackburn, “Truth.”

¹² Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 37.

¹³ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 231.

¹⁴ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 232.

¹⁵ Walter Kaufmann (ed. and trans.), *The Portable Nietzsche* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), pp. 46-47.

society represents a ‘regime of truth’ that determines by its discursive power what is true and what is false.”¹⁶ Many critics view this emphasis on the fluidity of the phenomenon of truth embedded in the post-structuralist and deconstructionist discourse as one of the major causes of the growth of post-truth culture in public domain.

Whatever the reasons for the prevalence of the culture of post-truth, it is certain that it has firmly established itself in the media-driven twenty-first century. However, its coinage and first use are still the points of debate. The Oxford Dictionaries claims its first use by the Serbian-American playwright, Steve Tesich, in his 1992 essay about the Iran-Contra scandal where he highlights the apathy of the public towards the lies spread during the War. He exclaims: “we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world.”¹⁷ Jayson Harsin finds its prevalence in academic circles in 1990s.¹⁸ Moustafa Bayoumi, an American journalist, argues that it was Iraq War in 2003 that “ushered in the post-truth era.”¹⁹ Some scholars relate the origin of the term to the publication of Ralph Keyes’s book *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life* (2004) where he discusses the blurring of boundaries between truth and lies. Despite these differences about the etymology of the term, there is a general agreement about the nature and context of the phenomenon of post-truth. It has established itself as a specific phenomenon of twenty-first century with two major components: “a selective use of information; and an apathetic disregard towards lies.”²⁰ Harsin describes it as “a historical and cultural concept” reflecting “the changing power relations and strategies” with the deliberate and strategic use of disinformation so as to manipulate and polarise public opinion in politics: “Post-truth is thus not simply about lies and false beliefs,” it is, rather, “about confusion amid a surfeit of information and influential appeals,” and, thus, about “the constant selective use and presentation of information and appeals for strategic (and business) ends.”²¹ The general environment of information overflow makes it impossible to distinguish between facts and manipulated information.

It is pertinent to note that in its current usage, the prefix ‘post’ does not mean “after a specified situation or event,” rather it refers “to a time in which the specified concept has become unimportant or irrelevant.”²² Thus, post-truth refers to a “socio-political condition” of the digitised world of new communication technologies and social media, the key components of which are the circulation of deceptive statements and promotionalism. Historian Harari hints at this situation when he states that, “it seems that we are indeed living in a terrifying era of post-truth, when not just particular military incidents, but entire histories and nations might be faked.”²³ Focusing on its deliberate and strategic nature Arendt suggests, “the hallmark of factual truth is that its opposite is neither error, nor illusion nor opinion, no one of which reflects upon personal truthfulness, but the deliberate falsehood, or lie.”²⁴

¹⁶ Zaglauer, *Constructed Truths*, p. 32.

¹⁷ Flood, “‘Post-Truth’ Named Word of the Year.”

¹⁸ Jayson Harsin, “Post-Truth and Critical Communication Studies,” *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Communications*, December 20 (2018).

¹⁹ Bayoumi, “The Iraq War Started the Post-Truth Era. And America is to Blame.”

²⁰ Reinhoud, *The Post-Truth Era*, p. 7

²¹ Harsin, “Post-Truth and Critical Communication Studies.”

²² Flood, “‘Post-Truth’ Named Word of the Year.”

²³ Harari, “Humans are a Post-Truth Species.”

²⁴ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 249.

Post-Truth and Autobiography

Literature and literary studies have a long history of engagement with truth and reality. Since post-truth is a problem of (mis)representation, and literature being the “representation of life,” the role of literature and literary studies becomes central in the study of representation of reality. The phenomenon of literary representation has, however, been problematised with the rise of postcolonial literary theory, and it is no more considered to be an innocent or apolitical activity. Edward Said, a pioneer of postcolonial studies, alludes to Foucault’s discourse theory of power structures in his questioning of the Western representation of the Orient in the literary texts. Said asserts that the representation of the East and the discourse of the Orient created by the Western writers was polarised, hegemonic and ideological. It was used as a means of justification of the colonial rule over the East. He writes: “In any instance of at least written language, there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a re-presence, or a representation. The value, efficacy, strength, apparent veracity of a written statement about the Orient therefore relies very little, and cannot instrumentally depend, on the Orient as such.”²⁵ Said’s arguments render representation as an act of will which defines the power structures in any given society.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has also highlighted the problematic status of literary representation while distinguishing between “political representation” and the “aesthetic or semiotic representation,” when she argued that all “this question of representation, self-representation, representing others, is a problem”, however, any closure to the problem of representation “with demands for authentic voices” is undesirable, as only “a persistent critique” of it will avoid any sort of “homogenization” and “constructing the Other simply as an object of knowledge, leaving out the real Others because of ones who are getting access into public places....”²⁶ In such a scenario of politicised representations, the autobiographies of the postcolonial writers might be seen as a critique of the dominant modes of representation of the Other by the colonisers. Through the realistic portrayal of the first-hand experiences of their narrators, their self-representations and historical referentiality, they aim at subverting the hegemonic ideologies by presenting themselves as the sites of cultural discourse and counter argument against the “post-truth politics” of mis-representation and “alternative facts.” These personal narratives of “subaltern” subjects have contributed significantly in the growth of the genre of autobiography in the twenty-first century. As Benaouda Lebdai notes the “postcolonial African and Indian writers have advanced the development of the genre.”²⁷ Philip Holden also talks about “the shifting status of autobiography under decolonisation.”²⁸ He notes its growing popularity, citing Caren Kaplan’s idea of “an ‘out-law’ genre becoming a ‘master’ genre.”²⁹

Many critics have raised doubts about the truthfulness and veracity of autobiographical representations. Regarding Roy Pascal’s *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (1960), James

²⁵ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 21.

²⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 63.

²⁷ Benaouda Lebdai (ed.), *Autobiography as a Writing Strategy in Postcolonial Literature* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2015). p. 1.

²⁸ Philip Holden, “Postcolonial Auto/biography,” *The Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature*, ed. Ato Quayson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 121.

²⁹ Holden, “Postcolonial Auto/biography,” p. 121.

Onley asks “whether in discovering or imposing a design the autobiographer is not playing fast and loose with truth.”³⁰ However, the genre of autobiography does not depend on “precision” of detail. Literature is not a mere “report,” it does not “merely describe or represent,” states Philip Roth, “it also makes an effort to understand, to feel, to look beyond appearances, to find meaning, and helps audience understand reality by making it believable and recognisable.”³¹ This meaning making concept of representation has been well discussed by W. J. T. Mitchell who elaborates upon the quadrilateral “structure” of both “political and semiotic forms of representation” which he describes as having “two diagonal axes, one connecting the representational object to that which it represents, the other connecting the maker of the representation to the beholder,” the second, the “axis of communication” between writer and the reader, generates meaning.³² In this article, autobiography is viewed as the representation of reality by developing the argument along the “axis of communication.” It deals with “factual precision” alongside the “real precision of the poetry,”³³ and the “factual truth,” opines Arendt, depends upon “witnesses” and “testimony” and “concerns events and circumstances in which many are involved.”³⁴ This article draws some inferences on the basis of a close reading of the selected autobiographies.

Though no universally accepted definition of autobiography is available, it will be pertinent, however, to understand some of its nuances. Traditionally, autobiography has been defined as the “biography written by the subject about himself or herself.”³⁵ It has been considered as a true, factual, and historically verifiable account of the writing self’s past, and a form of “life writing” or “a literary genre of retrospective narrative that undertakes to tell a significant part or entire life of the writer seeking (at least in its classic version) to reconstruct his/her personal development in a given historical, social and cultural framework.”³⁶ Pascal has asserted prescriptively that it is a “retrospective account of the writer’s life,” and “a review of a life from a particular moment in time” that involves “a search for true self.”³⁷ But, in the most recent poststructuralist theories no “historically true self” could be located as the “self” and all “truth” have been problematised, and are viewed as the social and “cultural constructs” and unstable entities. Therefore, in modern critical practices the contemporary autobiography, unlike the “spiritual autobiography” of past, has been viewed as having a hybrid make-up, where the writers have given up grand, linear narratives in favour of fragmented, micro narratives. Autobiography can be defined, in Nietzsche’s term, as the story of “how one bec[ame] what one is.”³⁸ Though the process of selection and ordering based on memory plays a significant role in life-writing, ownership of experience forms its bedrock; autobiography is

³⁰ James Onley (ed.), *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 11.

³¹ Reinoud, *The Post-Truth Era*, p. 5.

³² W. J. T. Mitchell, “Representation,” *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, eds Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLauahlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 12.

³³ Arundhati Roy, *Field Notes on Democracy: Listening to Grasshoppers* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2009), p. 3.

³⁴ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 238.

³⁵ M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Stanford: Cengage, 2016), p. 30.

³⁶ Helga Schwalm, “Autobiography,” *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, eds Peter Huhn, Jan Christoph Meister, John Pier and Wolf Schmid (Hamburg: Hamburg University Press, 2014).

³⁷ Charles Berryman, “Critical Mirrors: Theories of Autobiography,” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, vol. 32, no. 1 (1999), pp. 71-84.

³⁸ Schwalm, “Autobiography.”

"simultaneously historical record and literary artefact, psychological case history and spiritual confession, didactic essay and ideological testament."³⁹

The autobiographies of the post-1990s have broken the mainstream aesthetic of Western world and have gained critical recognition for their counter-fictionality and first-hand experiences of the writers. Limbale's autobiography *The Outcaste* is a classic example of the post-fictionality of the genre of autobiography. The writer's narrative of life as an "outcaste" and an "illegitimate" child, candidly expresses his pain and anguish at the humiliation of being rejected by, both his own community and the upper caste: "I have put in words the life I have lived as an untouchable, as a half caste, as an impoverished man.... I have written this so that readers will learn the woes of the son of a whore."⁴⁰ He calls it "a tale" of his "burden of inferiority."⁴¹ His commitment to factual truth reflects the apolitical attitude of the writer.

G. N. Devy has called *The Outcaste* a "literary classic," a "philosophically potent and poetically powerful narrative."⁴² It is "a saint's quest to understand the meaning of the world" which is read in "the alphabet of hunger and want."⁴³ Highlighting its factuality and its aesthetic and emotional appeal, Devy notes:

It is shattering experience to see in Limbale's graphic depiction of want and woe, a saintly forgiveness, compassion and detachment. In the life narrative, one finds that whereas the narrator should be boiling with anger, he is meditating on the very fundamental issues related to social relationships and ethics. It is this detachment and the ability to turn away from the personal, that makes *Akkarmashi* a disturbing life narrative.⁴⁴

Devy's reading puts it into the category of the postmodern hybridised autobiography where the narrative of self is interspersed with philosophical musings, anecdotes, stories-within-the-story, and tirades against social injustice, discrimination, exploitation and hypocrisy. The narrative often shifts from the reflections on the self to the representation of the reality of the community, describing the incidents of discrimination and humiliation of Mahars, in general. His sketches of a graphic picture of the irrational and exploitative caste-ridden Indian society chart out the poignancy and pain of Dalits who are deprived of even the basic necessities of life: "The spades and shovels of Mahars were used to dig the well. The Mahars gave their sweat for it.... They, the Mahars, are the reason why there is water in the well. But now the same Mahars are not allowed to draw water from it, not even drinking water."⁴⁵ Such fictional elements like story-within-story used in the personal account, and the digressions and disjointed narration, in fact, heighten the intensity of torment and agony hidden within the saga of hunger, exploitation and ostracisation. These are the aesthetic tools used artistically by Limbale, paradoxically enough,

³⁹ Berryman, "Critical Mirrors," p. 80.

⁴⁰ Sharankumar Limbale, *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*, trans. Santosh Bhoomkar (London: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. ix.

⁴¹ Limbale, *The Outcaste*, p. x.

⁴² Limbale, *The Outcaste*, p. xxv.

⁴³ Limbale, *The Outcaste*, p. xxiv.

⁴⁴ Limbale, *The Outcaste*, p. xxiv.

⁴⁵ Limbale, *The Outcaste*, pp. 80-81.

to reach at some understanding of life and his own position therein, thereby, to recreate the wholeness of his identity hanging in-between the two worlds belonging to none.

This non-chronological narrative shifts frequently from one episode to another without losing its coherence and emotional intensity. Many times, the writer digresses on some anecdote or philosophical generalisation, which act as a means to make the readers introspect deeply about the questions of existence. The scathing attack on man's insatiable hunger and lust serves as a tool to uncover the promiscuity and hypocrisy of the upper caste, on the one hand, and on the other, it brings out the pathetic condition of the empty bellied have-nots:

Man then went to God and said, 'O God,... I want to eat and drink a great deal, it will be a blessing if you give me two stomachs.' God replied, 'Oh Man.... First try filling this one stomach and then come back to me. I will certainly give you one more.' Since then man has been striving to satisfy his stomach. Filling even one stomach proved difficult for him.... He started selling himself for his stomach. A woman becomes a whore, and a man a thief.⁴⁶

Such insightful provocative passages interspersed throughout the personal account serve double purpose—thematically, these accentuate the trauma and soreness of the writing self which belongs nowhere, neither to the higher caste which fathered him but did not acknowledge him, nor to his "own" people who have snapped the umbilical cord; structurally, these take this life narrative beyond the bounds of the traditional autobiography of the coherent grand narratives of "historically true selves." The writer's life, located in the present moment, has evolved under the influence of various social, cultural and political forces, which impinge on its attempts to show the past, giving it new colour and meaning without affecting its veracity.

The writer's honesty is perceptible in his candid confessions when he makes readers understand that the entire narrative may not be based on his first-hand experiences, some episodes may be heard accounts from his elders. The self-referential remarks like "even to this day I clearly remember an event which neither Dada nor Santamai had told me,"⁴⁷ make *Akkarmashi* a postmodern text. It is not akin to Western notions of autobiographies which, as Devy notes, are "written by the persons at the fag-end of their lives looking back on life with cool composure."⁴⁸ Rather it is, at once, the "presentation of social, cultural and political processes of marginalisation," an "autobiography of a community," and a "life-writing" where the fragmented incoherent structure of the text metaphorically presents the reality of the multiplicity of "selves" and "identities" of its writer.⁴⁹ It is an autobiography where the fixities of 'fact' and 'fiction,' 'truth' and 'design,' 'private' and 'communal,' 'history' and 'literature' have melted into a hybridised form.

Autobiography in its re-invented form, thus, does not offer us a narrative of a coherent subject; rather, the perpetually defeated self moves in and out of a flurry of experiences, memories, impressions and images. Tamil writer Bama's autobiography *Karukku* is a chronicle of her traumatic lived experience of poverty, rejection, violence, humiliation, suffering, protest

⁴⁶ Limbale, *The Outcaste*, p. 8.

⁴⁷ Limbale, *The Outcaste*, p. 11.

⁴⁸ Limbale, *The Outcaste*, p. xxiii.

⁴⁹ Limbale, *The Outcaste*, pp. xiii-xxiv.

and survival. She presents an honest and vulnerable account of her “wounded self”⁵⁰ as she documents her life lived in a caste-ridden social structure of subjugation and ostracization, from childhood to the life of an adult as a nun in a convent, and beyond. Through this saga of her intersecting identities of a Dalit-Christian-woman and triple marginalization based on class, caste and gender, she tries to re-construct her self, and bears a witness to a social structure whose foundations lay in humiliation and oppression. She explicitly narrates her aim in the prologue: “That book was written as a means of healing my inward wounds; I had no other motive.”⁵¹ Unabashedly, she gives expression to her inner self, her feelings as a child and as an adult and her world view through random musings, which she never attempts to tie together.

The title itself is suggestive enough to foreground the bitter experiences of the writer while growing up as a member of Dalit Christian community. Bama explains the two-fold significance of the “double-edged karukku”⁵² or palmyra leaves; on the one hand they symbolise her agonising experiences which scratched, and tore her soul away; on the other, they “became embryo and symbol,” and driving force that grew into and shaped her autobiography. She confesses in the opening of her preface:

The driving forces that shaped this book are many: events that occurred during many stages of my life, cutting me like karukku and making me bleed; unjust social structures that plunged me into ignorance and left me trapped and suffocating; my own desperate urge to break, throw away, and destroy these bonds; and when the chains were shattered into fragments, the blood that was spilt—all these taken together.⁵³

Karukku is a testimony about a life lived in abject conditions, and an attestation of truth. It gives expression to the sufferings and indignities faced by a Dalit Christian woman at the hands of privileged classes: “Everyone seemed to think Harijan children were contemptible. But they didn’t hesitate to use us for cheap labour.”⁵⁴ She is disillusioned even at the convent which is also caste-ridden, and she feels as though she “had arrived at a place which had no connection at all with me.”⁵⁵ She battles constantly with the conflict and anger raging inside, as her identity as a Christian nun is heavily mediated by her identity as a Dalit. She writes: “According to their notions, low-caste people are all degraded in every way.... And I sat there like a lump of tamarind, listening to all this and dying several deaths within.”⁵⁶ The entire narrative palpitates with Bama’s inner struggle with her emotions -- her bitterness and anger against the prejudiced, savage Indian society on one side, and on the other, the love for her community.

Bama’s autobiography is a double narrative of her agonised self, as well as of the tortured psyche of her subaltern community. She gives voice to the voiceless victims of socio-economic, political and cultural ostracisation. She works and lives within socio-cultural and political structures which get a vivid and authentic representation in the merger of the identity of an individual into that of the community. The title is significant; it symbolises the congruity

⁵⁰ Bama, *Karukku*, trans. Lakshmi Holmstorm (New Delhi: Macmillan India, 2000), p. x.

⁵¹ Bama, *Karukku*, p. ix.

⁵² Bama, *Karukku*, p. xxiii.

⁵³ Bama, *Karukku*, p. xxiii.

⁵⁴ Bama, *Karukku*, p. 18.

⁵⁵ Bama, *Karukku*, p. 23.

⁵⁶ Bama, *Karukku*, p. 26.

of “the saw-edged palmyra Karukku” with both the writer’s tormented self, as well as her oppressed community which itself has become “like double-edged Karukku, challenging their oppressors.”⁵⁷ *Karukku* is a collective archive of suffering which Bama gives expression to:

The story told in *Karukku* was not my story alone. It was the depiction of a collective trauma – of my community – whose length cannot be measured in time. I just tried to freeze it forever in one book so that there will be something physical to remind people of the atrocities committed on a section of the society for ages.⁵⁸

Pramod K. Nayar describes Bama’s autobiography as a “testimonio” or “a collective document” where the narrative “moves from individual to community through a narration of trauma.”⁵⁹ As “testimonial life-writing” it enables its writer “to share her tale of pain, so that personal testimony becomes accurate historical witnessing of a social structure of traumatic oppression.”⁶⁰ Her identification with her community is complete and deeply felt, the connecting link being the trauma and saga of torment and exploitation: “Today I am like a mongrel... I share the same difficulties and struggles that all Dalit poor experience.”⁶¹

Like other Dalit writers, Bama is a writer-activist who is committed to the cause of underprivileged. Her activism is reflected in her passionate appeal to her people: “we who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us.... It is we who have to place them where they belong and bring us about a changed and just society where all are equal.”⁶² It is her commitment and directness of speech which has sustained her narrative, as she asserts herself that “it has been a means of relieving the pains of others who were wounded.... *Karukku* stands as a means of strength to the multitudes whose identities have been destroyed and denied.”⁶³ Bama’s account of her life is interspersed with the stories of the toil and hard work of Dalits, the topography and the social fabric of the village, and the rituals, superstitions and beliefs of the entire community. *Karukku* is, thus, a significant text which stands apart, in the age of post-truth and fabricated narratives, for all the convincing details of its writer’s personal experiences of the life lived on the margins of society. Mini Krishnan, the book’s editor, describes it as, “part autobiography, part analysis, part manifesto”; Bama’s conviction of thought, honesty of confession, and intensity of expression make it compelling, such that “no one can ignore her experience.”⁶⁴

Conclusion

To conclude, both the life-narratives analysed in this study emerge as the organic postmodern accounts of the lives of subaltern subjects. Both stand out by the force of their sheer fidelity to lived experiences, and the commitment of their writers to truthful expression. Even as the Dalit

⁵⁷ Bama, *Karukku*, p. xxiii.

⁵⁸ Pramod K. Nayar, “Bama’s *Karukku*: Dalit Autobiography as Testimonio,” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2006), pp. 83-100.

⁵⁹ Nayar, Bama’s *Karukku*, p. 84.

⁶⁰ Nayar, Bama’s *Karukku*, p. 85.

⁶¹ Bama, *Karukku*, pp. 78-79.

⁶² Bama, *Karukku*, p. 28.

⁶³ Bama, *Karukku*, p. x.

⁶⁴ Bama, *Karukku*, p. xxv.

protagonists seek to present themselves against the hegemonic politics of representation, their accounts remain very much within the horizons of the genre of autobiography, where truth is never compromised, and in the words of Bama herself: “not only that Truth alone is victorious, but that only the truth is the Truth.”⁶⁵ The autobiographies, of course, are written out of the specific, personal experiences of the writers, yet these exhibit a universality “which questions all oppressions, disturbs all complacencies.”⁶⁶ The truths they speak may be unsettling to some, but these are the strengths which herald the arrival of a new autobiography of the subaltern subject that has developed on the debris of fictionality and brings in a greater degree of intimate authenticity and factuality in its hybridised form without much aesthetic gloss or any overarching fictional indirection.

⁶⁵ Bama, *Karukku*, p. xi.

⁶⁶ Bama, *Karukku*, p. xiv.