

The Poetics of Postcolonial Atrocity: Dalit Life Writing, *Testimonio*, and Human Rights

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If, as Michael Ignatieff proposes, human rights is the *lingua franca* to articulate and address the problems of suffering (7), then it follows that particular forms of suffering might generate specific forms of narrative within this language of rights. Local social and cultural conditions of atrocity are tied in to universal discourses—including legal—of human rights via a narrative that is simultaneously local and global, even as the legal domain of human rights permeates other realms of politics and culture (Ahmed and Stacey 1). An atrocity narrative is, then, irreducibly “double voiced”: it is located within a discursive structure specific to a time and place, thus ensuring that the atrocity is made recognizable, and the demand for rights is made part of a universal schema of values. Anthony Langlois argues that the discourse of human rights presupposes definitions of the “human,” thereby proposing a narrative tradition in which the “human” emerges (Langlois). The circulation and/or acceptance of narratives about what it means to be human determine what is defined as a “human right” (Slaughter).

My essay discusses Dalit life writing, a genre of Indian texts that emerged first in regional languages, and, in the 1990s, in English; the genre situates personal and collective suffering within a larger discourse of human rights. “Dalit,” derived from the Marathi—the predominant language of Maharashtra state—literally means “of the earth” and “that which has been ground down” and now signifies socially oppressed caste groups and tribals. Ironically, these marginalized Dalit peoples constitute a large segment of the population, and have been forced to mobilize themselves in order to fight for rights and justice in postcolonial India. Dalit human rights emerge in a national context but, as this essay shows, can be usefully integrated with a larger international-global discourse of suffering, trauma and human rights. While Dalit life writing explicitly

references conditions of atrocity in India, it also develops a notion of the human subject that can be serviceable within multiple contexts of suffering. Indeed, the genre's narrative tradition of recognizing the outcast human in India offers strong parallels with other such humans the world over. In its representation of suffering humans, Dalit life writing generates abject-types for (possible) ethical appropriation by a global literary field for human rights. I invoke "abjectification"—deliberately echoing "objectification"—to signal social processes of economic and political oppression, modes of atrocity and injustice, but also the representational process. Abject-types are figures of abjection occurring in literatures of trauma across the world. They demonstrate the consequences of political and social processes and emerge through representations of atrocity and suffering.

"Life writing" includes genres as diverse as autobiographies, autofictions, and confessional forms (Henke). Dalit life writing is a personal atrocity memoir that calls attention to oppressive conditions within a community. It folds the atrocity narrative into testimonies and evidentiary statements that are explicitly political; as Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith have demonstrated, memoirs by victims are intrinsically linked to contemporary global rights movements (Schaffer and Smith).

Thus far, studies of Dalit people have been largely sociological and rarely attentive to the narrative, aesthetic, and formal properties of Dalit writings (Dumont; Omvedt; Ghose). Such studies foreground crucial issues such as oppression, atrocity, and protest as major themes in Dalit writing but do not investigate or provide an account of the forms in which these themes are conveyed (exceptions include the works of Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature*; Dharwadker; Beth; Nayar, "Bama's *Karukku*"; Rege). My earlier work proposed that Dalit writing may be treated as *testimonio* (Nayar, "Bama's *Karukku*"). *Testimonio* is defined as "a novel or novella-length book or pamphlet . . . , told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a 'life' or 'significant life experience'" (Beverley 92). It is also a narrative in which the protagonist writes her or his own experience as an agent of a collective memory, identity, and experience (Yudice).

The present essay builds upon my earlier reading of Dalit texts and explores the formal and aesthetic properties of Dalit life writing in order to investigate how the genre generates a discourse of human rights. I suggest that, through a narrative strategy that includes trauma writing and “performance,” the Dalit text generates (political) roles for the narrator as a primary witness. I identify these narratives as “claims narratives” that are in dialogue with global human rights discourses and with national-local contexts. I argue that Dalit human rights politics adopts particular narrative conventions and aesthetic modes to stake political claims and that human rights discourses are implicit in Dalit life writing. Trauma and testimony discourses in Dalit texts reveal the construction of an abject human subject both denied his or her human rights and seeking to advance rights claims. In moving from trauma to witness to human rights, this essay maps the emergence of an implicit human rights narrative rather than fitting Dalit texts into an already existent paradigm. The genre can be aligned with other similar narratives in an “affective cosmopolitanism” that maps global atrocity and suffering, thereby offering a truly global literature of human rights.

Testimonio narratives are at once personal and public, singular and collective, autobiographical and biographical. Written testimony also possesses an aesthetic dimension because there is a clear literary component to the works of Dalit writers such as Laxman Mane, Laxman Gaikwad, Bama, Omprakash Valmiki, and Sharankumar Limbale; Linda Brooks has termed this the “poetics” of *testimonio* (Brooks). This poetics of *testimonio* is, in fact, a poetics of atrocity wherein the poetics of trauma and suffering slides into or is informed by a politics of rights. Mane’s *Upara* (1997), literally “outsider,” was first published in Marathi, and is an account of his life as a member of the Kaikadi caste. *Uchalya* (1998), or “branded,” is Gaikwad’s autobiography of his life as a member of a caste declared a “criminal tribe” by the colonial administration in nineteenth century India as well as his evolution into a Dalit activist and Ambedkarite, as the followers of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar’s ideology, politics, and ideals are called. Bama’s *Karukku* (2000) is the first autobiography by a Dalit woman in Tamizh, the language of the southern Indian state of Tamizh Nadu. *Karukku* differs from other Dalit

autobiographies in that Bama's position as a Christian allows her to unpack the caste prejudices that exist even in the convent and demonstrate the pernicious hold of caste across India. Bama writes that, despite the Dalits' conversion to Christianity, they remain "lower castes" in the convent: at once outside the caste system, yet always inside it. Valmiki's *Joothan* (2003), first published in Hindi, is an autobiographical account of growing up as a member of the "lower castes" in rural India and his journey through education to a metropolitan life, even as caste continues to haunt him and his family. Limbale's *The Outcaste* (2003), again translated from the Marathi, is the autobiography of a Mahar, or "lower-caste," boy who fights all caste-informed odds and goes on to become a major literary figure and government official. Each text is primarily an autobiography. The narrator in each shows a remarkable ability to shift narration between her or his own life and the lives of the communities, with the text functioning as a social document with a specific political agenda. This agenda, I argue, is one of human rights.

I. Trauma and the Dalit Memoir

The Dalit atrocity memoir is a trauma narrative that embodies individual, collective, and cultural injury through a "traumatic realism" (Rothberg), a method through which the reader is shocked into recognition of a world that violates all previous experiences. The Dalit memoir's "traumatic realism" foregrounds the body as the principal site of oppression. Dirt, starvation, and pain intersect to make the Dalit body truly abject. Valmiki's *Joothan* emphasizes the material conditions of Dalit life entirely in bodily terms. Describing the village community's habits of personal hygiene, Valmiki writes, "The stench was so overpowering that one would choke within a minute" (1). Narendra Jadhav's *Outcaste: A Memoir* describes how his father was asked to guard a dead body for hours on end and then beaten even though he was starving (3–6, 9). In *Karukku*, Bama begins her Preface with a description that metaphorizes her caste-based suffering in corporeal terms:

I pick[ed] up the scattered palmyra karukku [a kind of leaf with spikes] in the days when I was sent out to gather firewood,

scratching and tearing my skin as I played with them. . . . 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. (xiii)

In Dalit life writing, the body is the center of various kinds of unpleasant discrimination. Insults, for instance, impinge primarily upon the body. Valmiki recounts experiences at school where he is insulted and then physically abused by his headmaster (5; see also 47–8, 55, 68–70). Insults, he states, “penetrated [his] breast like a knife” (11), were felt as “a thousand stings on [his] body” (57), and continue to hurt him in (metaphorically) corporeal ways (95, 134). Each day, writes Bama, “brings new wounds” (*Karukku* 105).

“Traumatic realism” demands such a rhetoric of intensification, which forces readers to focus on the human nature of suffering by revealing what Jeannine DeLombard calls the embodied subjectivity of the experiences. Dalit life writing presents embodied suffering because speaking of vulnerability, brutalized bodies, and pain defines the Dalit as a human (body).¹

Dalit life writing links the individual body’s suffering with collective trauma. Thus, Dalit trauma’s “body” is more than the biological body of the individual: it is the body of a community/caste, and “trauma” is a name “for experiences of socially situated political violence” (Cvetkovich 3). Dalit life writing links the individual body’s suffering with collective trauma. The survivor or traumatized body is located within a social body, where the suffering is not simply inscribed upon the individual but proceeds from a systemic condition and affects the social body of a community. Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collective feel they have been subject to events that leave an “indelible mark upon their consciousnesses” (Alexander 2). It enables them to build solidarity, assign responsibility for the causes of the trauma, and thereby to constitute a domain of political action (Alexander 2).

Valmiki gestures at the location of his physical trauma within the cultural trauma of his entire community when he writes: “The cuts I have received *in the name of caste*, even aeons won’t suffice to heal them” (52,

emphasis added). Valmiki also states that “The Dalit readers had seen their own pain in those pages of mine” (vii). Mane is informed that his “offspring can claim the caste of any one of the parents.” He responds, “That meant that the caste system . . . should be consolidated!” (191). In both cases the protagonist situates his own suffering within the cultural-economic condition of caste and caste discrimination. Mane discovers the persistence of caste identity even as he hopes to erase it. His experience is a metonym for cultural trauma experienced by his family over generations and his community as a whole. His “location” of cultural trauma within a social system stakes a claim for recognizing the collective nature of an individual’s pain; cultural trauma must first be claimed by a people before it can be recognized by others.

Dalit trauma consists of not one injurious event, but instead exists as a continuum; it is less a major catastrophe than a series of horrific incidents. Hence, Dalit trauma cannot be placed alongside trauma “events” such as the Holocaust because the former’s trauma is “insidious” trauma, with no single point or cause of origin (Cvetkovich 32–3). Trauma is experienced in what Lawrence Langer has called “durational time,” never-ending and perpetually returning (69). Even subsequent developments and changes do not erase the suffering, for the Dalit’s trauma has “an endless impact on life” (Caruth 7). In most cases, then, Dalit memoirs eschew specificity of time, chronology, and place. As a narrative device, this lack of specificity suggests a continuum of suffering, almost as though the Dalits’ clock has stopped registering a passage of time except as a continuation of oppression.

“Durational time” also demonstrates a resistance to forgetting, an acknowledgment of the history of an event that has never stopped being an event. “Durational time” in the Dalit memoir is about trans-generational trauma, in which an entire family, over generations, is subject to suffering, atrocity, and violence.² The suffering cannot be forgotten, not only because it is a feature of everyday life, but because it afflicts an entire community or family for generations. Jadhav’s memoir about his father maps such trans-generational suffering. At the conclusion of his text, Jadhav describes how he took his son to visit his former home in order to refresh his own memory of past suf-

ferings (258–59). Bama opens her narrative by describing how her grandmother and other elders had suffered but endured, grateful for “favours” from the upper-castes (*Karukku* 14–15). Valmiki, throughout *Joothan*, describes how his mother suffered abuse and exploitation at the hands of the village landlords and other men. Significantly, trans-generational trauma extends the event(s) of the past into the present and the future. Thus, Mane concludes his narrative with a self-discovery that is as traumatic as his discovery of caste: “Once again, I had acquired all the rights of my caste” (211). Here Mane is referring to his re-entry into the community (he had been excommunicated), but the re-entry only cements his Dalit identity. Valmiki wonders, in the very last lines of his memoir: “Why is caste my only identity?” (134). Valmiki’s question introduces the discovery, common in Dalit life writing, that one cannot ever abandon one’s caste; consequently, as caste is both the source of trauma and foundational to identity, past trauma remains a never-ending event.

Claiming cultural trauma requires transforming a narrative of personal pain into a narrative of larger, collective suffering for the world to recognize and acknowledge. In Dalit life writing, this transformation takes place through two particular representational strategies: performance and witnessing. Dalit life writing that embodies individual and collective trauma can be productively read as performance in the way that Brooks reads *testimonio* as a poetics. This is not to argue that this performance within the narrative is “artifice” or unreal. Rather, it foregrounds the literary-aesthetic and representational component of Dalit life writing while proposing that such “performances” enable the narrative to acquire a political purchase.

One performative technique common in Dalit texts is the act of staging the scene before the curtain opens on the Dalit narrator’s life. Staging involves editorial prefaces, translators’ notes, and the protagonist’s own comments preparing readers for the “action” to follow, and is marked by three key elements. First, staging includes the “setting” of the narrative and its protagonist vis-à-vis the publication process and editorial collaboration. Often, Dalit memoirs include prefatory comments from the author, editor, translator, and Dalit protagonist through

which the textual performance is initiated. Staging may also include a description of the setting in which the editor or translator met the Dalit protagonist, the motive for the ensuing *testimonio*, and, frequently, an emotional description of the relations between the protagonist and the editor/translator.

This “staging” is also a feature of oral accounts that recollect with strong emotion the abuse, pain, and suffering experienced by the narrator/protagonist. Such an emotional staging highlights the tension within the human rights narrative itself: how is the messy, emotional, and personal narrative to be codified or standardized into the concept of rights, the language of law, and the presentational formats of an “inquiry” (Schaffer and Smith 37)? Is there a narrative form available to the Dalit narrator to express these concepts? And does human rights discourse recognize these articulations as demands for restitution or recognition?

When Limbale describes, in deeply emotional terms, how Mini Krishnan, the editor at Oxford University Press, “struggled” with his writing, he refers to the process of “translat[ing]” his personal narrative into another kind of discourse (*Outcaste* x). As Limbale employs the term, translation indicates not only a linguistic process, but also a transfer between contexts: personal atrocity and a global readership; Dalit life and the world at large. Santosh Bhoomkar, the translator of the text, thanks Limbale for responding to his (Bhoomkar’s) letters which “provided . . . [him] . . . with meanings of words and phrases which were otherwise not available in any dictionary nor known to anybody . . . except him” (xi). Valmiki, pointing to the contexts of his writing and publishing, stresses that well-wishers persuaded him to write down and publish his memoirs (vii). P.A. Kolharkar describes how Gaikwad “elucidated the meanings of certain obscure passages and unfamiliar words” and how Gaikwad’s “explanations” helped him “catch the spirit of the book” (Gaikwad vi). Notes from translators and editors are exergues: they frame the work to follow by suggesting a social context and a collaboration between both Dalit and non-Dalit “agents,” and they authenticate the text by informing readers that the translation of both language and context has been approved by the Dalit protagonist.³

Staging is the site of a dialogue, of intercultural exchange where the possibilities of a programme of emancipation can emerge in the nexus between the Dalit protagonist and the non-Dalit editor/translator/activist. It emphasizes the progressive re-alignment of social relations between sympathetic non-Dalits and Dalit victims/protagonists. This alignment is highlighted when Kolharkar thanks the Academy of Letters and Gaikwad himself for facilitating the work (vi). Gaikwad, in turn, acknowledges the role played by various intellectuals and activists in his work (x-xi). Valmiki thanks his manuscript readers and those who supported him during the writing (viii). In his preface to the 1983 edition of *Upāra*, Mane expands the setting of his text and readership: “While we understand the sufferings of these nomads, let us actively cooperate with each other, in lessening their sufferings. For this is a struggle of human liberation” (15).

Such statements work to authenticate the narrative by highlighting the narrator-protagonist’s background and character. They verify that what follows is not the story of a fictional character but that of a real human being. “Performance,” then, consists of the staging of authenticity, where references to personal settings, personalities, and characters lend an air of reality to a context that may otherwise feel alien. Mane writes: “Whatever I lived, experienced and saw, I poured into my writing. . . . If this book proves useful in initiating a social debate . . . I shall feel satisfied” (6). In order to emphasize that the writing proceeds from an experiential condition rather than from any particular writing ability, Kolharkar notes that “Sri Laxman Gaikwad has not had much formal education” (Gaikwad vi). Gaikwad foregrounds his community locations: “I have been experiencing from my childhood the poverty and miserable exploitation of the people of this community in which I was born, lived and struggled” (vii). Limbale also documents his position in order to underscore the authenticity of his narrative. Limbale draws attention to the fact that he is the “illegitimate” progeny of the liaison between an upper-caste landlord and a Dalit woman: “There is a Patil in every village who is also a landowner. He invariably has a whore. I have written this so that readers will learn the woes of the son of a whore” (*Outcaste* ix).

Finally, staging invites readers to participate in the narrative's social agenda, thereby making Dalit life writing a collaboration between reader and Dalit protagonist. Gaikwad writes: "The book it is hoped, will help the movement for emancipation" (ix). Mane asks, "Can the enlightened people of our society, who have appreciated *Upara* and its author come out in the open, breaking social barriers, and join hands with the hundreds of *Uparas*?" (12). Arun Prabha Mukherjee categorizes *Joothan* as a "testimony," a rewriting of the village pastoral, and a manifesto for "revolutionary transformation of society and human consciousness" (Valmiki xxxiii, xxxv, xxxix).

Staging grapples with matters of form: should Dalit texts be read merely as political propaganda in autobiographical form? or as revolutionary/resistance writing? or as literature? While most editors and translators prefer to focus on the political edge of Dalit writing, Mukherjee's preface to *Joothan* explores the literary-aesthetic merits of a Dalit text. Staging asks readers to consider texts in political ways, while paying attention to the intensely personal experiences of the protagonists. It frames the Dalit at the center of the narrative as a kind of hero/ine and, finally, it prepares readers for the "performance" of the Dalit that follows.

"Performance" is here taken to mean a fuller representation of a situation (in fact etymologically "performance" originally meant "bringing to completion") (Turner). Dalit "performance" underscores the human nature of the "actors" (Dalit protagonists) and their contexts so that viewers/readers become fully aware of the complete set of horrific conditions in which the narrator lives/lived. Dalit narrators perform the conscious physical acts or emotional moments with full awareness of the audiences they address or face. The "embodied subjectivity" noted above is performance *par excellence* because the Dalit does not narrate a story as evidence: instead, he offers himself, as Jacques Derrida has said of testimony (38). The representation of his brutalized body is in itself the act of testimony. A corporeal act of testimony and the representation of corporeal pain is an integral part of the Dalit narrative's performance because it emphasizes the human—a being who suffers pain because of an unjust social structure.

In addition to this “embodied subjectivity,” the Dalit text, like a trauma narrative, forges a connection between politics and emotions. The Dalit protagonist-narrator selects elements in her/his story and projects or emphasizes an emotional component for the sake of the audience. This is not false representation or pretension, but rather a fuller representation of the nature of the oppressive incident that the audience is cued to register. Performance here is the display, via narrative, of emotions when recalling the past. For instance, Limbale describes his constant hunger: “We had just pieces of dry bhakari which were hardly enough to satisfy the cave of hunger” and “I was *ashamed* of my food and felt guilty eating it.” Limbale underscores the significance of food when he describes how the upper-caste children gave the Dalit students their leftovers. Later, his mother asks him angrily, “Why didn’t you get at least a small portion of it for me? Leftover food is nectar.” Limbale reproduces his extreme emotion at his mother’s anger: “her words made . . . [the feast] . . . quiver in my stomach” (2–3). Gaikwad opens with a description of policemen beating his grandfather and molesting his grandmother (1–2) and then records his own reactions: “Whenever the police visited our hut, I panicked. . . . As the police entered and began to search the hut and thrash and kick the inmates, I often pissed and shat in my shorts” (3). When he speaks at school programmes, he is threatened by the other students: “I was terribly afraid of them. Frightened that anyone of them might beat me” (81).

The recording of emotional responses—affect—is the narrative’s “traumatic realism” that demonstrates how bodily injury folds into emotional trauma. As in the case of autobiographical narratives, emotional content is central to Dalit life writing’s staging of past events (Bauer et al). A dramatic performance of personal trauma serves the important public-political purpose of reiterating the human nature of the body that suffers.⁴ The Dalit narrator’s performance is the interplay of aesthetic and social drama: Limbale’s or Mane’s emotionally charged description (the aesthetic drama of the narrative) of their very individual hunger is linked with the processes that produce hunger in particular castes (the socio-political drama of the narrative). This element of Dalit

performance—which I argue is coded into the corporeal trauma and the affective component of the narrative—emphasizes the humanity of the protagonist.

The emotional “performance” by the Dalit *testimonio* moves to another level when the individual enmeshes his/her story (the “performance”) with that of the caste or community. The Dalit narrative’s role as a document about human rights demands that the protagonist of the narrative functions as a witness rather than an individual “hero” or “heroine.” Personal testimony functions doubly as the historical and socio-political witnessing of national structures of oppression. Indeed, the term “witness” derives its force from a performative: the capacity to provide evidence because of a first-hand experience. The autobiography, while foregrounding individual pain, suffering, and trauma, always gestures at something *beyond*. The *testimonios* of Bama, Mane, Gaikwad and Limbale give voice not only to their own suffering but also to that of other victims who might otherwise remain voiceless. Dalit life writing has two components in its role as *testimonio*: its character as a collective biography (Nayar, “Bama’s *Karukku*”) and the very structure of witnessing.

Bama has stated that “The story told in *Karukku* was not my story alone. It was the depiction of a collective trauma—of my community. . . . 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” (Bama, “Recognition”). Her *testimonio* acts as a collective biography rather than simply her own life story. Like Bama, Mane declares in his preface: “*Upara* is not alone. . . . *Upara*’s success is not the success of one man, it’s the success of a social movement” (14). Similarly, Limbale asserts that his work represents “the pain of millions in India” (*Outcaste* x). In Dalit life writing, unlike in a conventional autobiography, the focus is not on the individual. And, unlike novels, which contain “problematic hero[s],” *testimonios* contain what Beverley terms “problematic collective situation[s]” (95)—in this case of caste, community and class.

Dalit life writing places the individual life in the public domain. It takes highly personal experiences and makes them public, blurring the

line between what can and cannot be said. Thus, life inside the home—generally regarded as a safe haven for children or as a private space—is revealed as brutal, unjust and oppressive. The narrator moves the pain outward from the individual body to the community body, revealing the dangers, injustices, and cruelties of the “private” space of home or the “secure” space of the democratic state.

Limbale, for instance, locates his flawed family life, parentage and upbringing within the social system. He reveals what ought to be a shameful secret (his problematic individual situation as an illegitimate son) by using it as a critique of the social structure. He notes that his father belongs to the upper caste Lingayat community but that his mother’s side of the family is Mahar. He admits that he is illegitimate before concluding: “Half of me belongs to the village, whereas the other half is excommunicated. Who *am* I? To whom is my umbilical cord connected?” (*Outcaste* 38–9).

Limbale discovers that he is a border-crosser through no fault of his own. This personal secret becomes a public document of atrocity, exploitation, and caste-linked gender oppression. Limbale converts the story of his shame into statements that sound like aphorisms. He declares that “to be born beautiful among Dalits is a curse,” and states that his mother “was beautiful and suffered for it” (*Outcaste* 37–8). Limbale converts personal experiences of suffering into truisms that capture the condition of an entire community’s shame. The revelation of such secrets defines Dalit life writing as collective biography. By breaking down the barrier between private and public, the Dalit protagonist serves as a witness.

Thus, the Dalit autobiographical narrative works as a *testimonio* through a process of narrating a collective biography, by rendering public what is private, and by locating the private within the public. The Dalit narrator is, like the narrator of a trauma memoir, a witness who recounts his/her personal trauma as well as that of the community. Contextually, such narratives must be located *as witnesses* within the dynamics of rights discourses and atrocity inquiries. *Karukku* or *The Outcaste* must be seen within the context of social movements against caste oppression and media reportage of atrocities.

II. Dalit Life Writing and the Ethics of Witnessing

Two crucial elements make up what I call “the ethics of witnessing” in Dalit life writing. One is the narrator-author’s own “performance” of the drama of personal and communal aesthetic and social suffering. The second is the injunction upon the reader to bear witness to whatever is recorded. Dalit *testimonio* is akin to the genre of legal testimony in that it is evidence that asks readers and listeners to bear witness.⁵ The *testimonio* is structured around the witnessing by the Dalit survivor-narrator (primary witnessing) *and* by the reader who bears witness to the Dalit’s witnessing document (secondary witnessing). The primary witness is the victim who is, in the process of writing the memoir, engaged in a “retrospective testimonial act” (Hesford 106). Primary witnessing involves two overlapping components: narration of personal battles and survival, and speaking for the Other.

In the first component, the Dalit’s narrative approximates a heroic narrative. The Dalit narrator points to the individual victim’s rise to success, the trials, and traumas the individual overcomes, and the protagonist’s recognition of his or her selfhood. Dalit life writing charts the protagonist’s trials and strategies of survival. Bama’s narrative, for example, highlights her individual achievements and thus enacts a particular kind of self: heroic, successful, and determined (*Karukku* 18, 64, 71, 75). Similarly, Gaikwad describes how he contested elections, opened a bicycle repair store, filed police and court cases about atrocities, acquired a motorcycle, took loans, started a general store and worked at creating a movement about the Nomadic and Denotified Tribes (Gaikwad 166, 187, 196, 231–3). The last line of Mane’s *Upara* reads: “I . . . was to recover from this terrible affliction of caste and stand upright again on my feet” (212). Mane demonstrates his overcoming of difficult circumstances through individual effort. Bhoomkar suggests that *Upara* embodies “the growth of a political consciousness” (Mane xxi). The Dalit text is aligned with the *Bildungsroman*, in which the individual’s growth, battles with society, and ultimate triumph constitute the main narrative (Slaughter 2006).

In the second component of primary witnessing, the narrator moves from the absolute singularity of her or his suffering to the suffering of

others. It is in the recognition of the (Dalit, traumatized) Other—that is, by bearing witness to another Dalit—that the protagonist of the Dalit narrative discovers her or his own humanity. The primary witness moves from seeing the Other’s suffering to voicing a demand. Witnessing is the reconstruction of seen events in verbal narrative elsewhere. Voicing is advocacy wherein the primary witness proposes a programme for the community, nation, or even humanity. This is the ethics of primary witnessing: to narrate from memory the atrocities of the self and Others, for it is the survivor’s duty to remember (Agamben 26).

Advocacy occurs when a *testimonio* moves from the individual to the collective. In the latter part of her Preface, Bama writes that “In order to change this state of affairs, all Dalits who have been deprived of their basic rights must function as God’s word. . . . Instead of being more and more beaten down and blunted, they unite, think about their rights, and battle for them” (*Karukku* xiii). Valmiki makes the issue of voicing a key part of his own Preface: “The Dalit readers had seen their own pain in those pages of mine. They all desired that I write about my own experiences in greater detail” (vii). His readers, having seen their own pain in Valmiki’s *Joothan*, want him to elaborate his suffering, almost as though it is their pain that he is describing.

If, as the primary witness, the Dalit narrator moves from a narration of her or his heroic survival towards a voicing or advocacy of the suffering of another, he also seeks to build a common platform with sympathetic others by making a demand on his readers. Thus, Mane asks his readers to understand and work towards the alleviation of the suffering of the nomadic tribes (13–14). Secondary witnessing suggests the “possibilities for solidarity and affiliations among critics, interviewers, translators and the subject who ‘speaks’” (Caplan). The Dalit text places an imperative upon its readers to respond in certain ways to the text.

Mini Krishnan’s editorial comments, discussed earlier, highlight the significance of Bama’s text and position readers as secondary witnesses by drawing them into the process of evidentiary testimony. Lakshmi Holström, Bama’s translator, suggests, “What is demanded of the reader is, in Gayatri Spivak’s term ‘a surrender to the special call of the text’. . . . And as readers of her [Bama’s] work, we are asked for nothing less than

an imaginative entry into that different world of experience and its political struggle" (*Karukku* vii). The suggestion of an "imaginative entry" is actually a demand that readers respond sympathetically, as humans, to the narrative's trauma. In her introduction to *Joothan*, Mukherjee also insists that *Joothan* "demands a radical shift from the upper caste and upper class reader by insisting that such a reader not forget his/her caste or class privilege" (xxxvii). What is underlined here, as Holström's introduction emphasizes, is the *difference* to which readers must respond compassionately as *humans*; that is, readers must situate themselves imaginatively in the contexts described within the texts. It is in this response that the listeners define their humanity—this is the ethics of listening to Dalit life testimony. But it is also in this dimension of listening that the crisis of witnessing arises: how are listeners to respond to the sheer singularity of the suffering in the Dalit text?

The Dalit text, to adopt Shoshana Felman's description of testimonial narrative, must be treated as a "point of conflation between text and life, a textual testimony which can *penetrate us like an actual life*" (Felman 2). It must, that is, possess the power of something greater than a mere text. One way of experiencing this textual power would be to relate to the text with what Dominick LaCapra has termed "empathetic unsettlement" (699). The listener respects the sheer otherness of the victim; one cannot, under any circumstances, incorporate the Other into ourselves, or stand in for the victim. In LaCapra's terms, one cannot identify with the victim but can register and reflect upon, for oneself as well as others, the trauma and the unsettlement. The contract between the Dalit text and its readers, then, presents an ethics of witnessing. "Secondary witnessing," as LaCapra terms the process, means paying attention to the irreducible heterogeneity of Dalit space, empathizing with it, never standing in for the Dalit, but seeing the narrative's performance as an aesthetic and social drama that entails particular forms of reading (699). Or, to borrow Wendy Hesford's phrase, the text calls for a process of "rhetorical listening."

"Rhetorical listening" demands that readers hear voices such as Limbale's or Bama's alongside those of the other, silent Dalits.⁶ Narrators of Dalit gesture towards both witnessing and "rhetorical listening."

Bama has admitted that “There were many significant things that [she] chose not to recall in *Karukku*” (Bama, “Recognition”). Similarly, Valmiki states, “In the process of writing these words, a lot has remained unsaid. I did not manage to put it all down. It was beyond my power” (viii). Both statements implicitly argue that trauma exists beyond what is represented in the text. This absence at the heart of *testimonio* may in fact constitute its true value (Agamben 34, 145, 158). Testimony’s “truth,” argues Anne Cubilié, is an interplay of consciousness, memory and community, of the narrator’s physical experiences, the sights she or he saw, and the actions she or he took as part of a larger group (242–43). The reiteration by the survivor of her or his inability to speak and bear witness to all that has happened emphasizes the traumatic valence of the narrative. The silences that Bama and Valmiki discuss gesture toward the many Dalits whose pain can only be staged through their particular survivor’s narratives and to whose suffering the readers must somehow bear witness. “Rhetorical listening” asks readers to imagine, through their consumption of the narrative, a trauma beyond textual representation. Bama engages with this aspect of witnessing when she asks: “Are Dalits not human beings? Do they not have common sense? Do they not have such attributes as a sense of honour and self respect? Are they without wisdom, beauty, dignity? What do we lack?” (*Karukku* 24). Bama transitions from describing Dalits to a broader description of humanity in which Dalits share the attributes inventoried. She asks readers to be attentive to the conditions in which some members of the human species are denied human attributes; it is this traumatic context that readers must consciously witness.

Secondary witnessing thus complicates the process of reading Dalit texts. On the one hand, secondary witnessing asks that readers pay attention to it as a singular event of trauma. On the other, it asks that readers move beyond it, to see the text as a metonym for something that is—and can only be—presented through this particular text. In other words, an act of ethical listening would be to understand that Bama constitutes only one voice in the midst of many Dalit silences.

Testimony of trauma always includes the hearer (Laub). The bodily “distress” of the Dalit would mean nothing without our commitment

as hearers and secondary witnesses, to keep the event “open,” to adapt Lauren Berlant’s argument about trauma narratives (Berlant). Keeping the event open means that it must be transmitted outward in order to gather more secondary witnesses of the event. Thus Arun Prabha Mukherjee hopes that her translation of *Joothan* will arouse the reader’s “empathy” (Valmiki xl). What she calls for, I suggest, is a process of engagement with both textual and extra-textual contexts of a Dalit narrative in which the reader functions as a secondary witness.

Conclusion: Dalit Life Writing as Human Rights Narratives

Dalit life writing generates evidentiary documents and narratives about human rights in postcolonial India. Life writing occupies a key role in the demand for human rights and is located within what Hugh Gorringe has called a “repertoire of protest” of Dalit campaigns, agitations, and even violence (Gorringe). Dalit life writing belies dominant triumphalist narratives of economic prosperity and the achievement of democracy in India and provides a parallel narrative tradition revealing the violated human rights of individuals and entire communities. Dalit authors point out that the trauma of Dalits is at least partly the consequence of a flawed religious and historical narrative tradition, inasmuch as Hindu law, colonial discourses and practices, colonialism, and post-independent Indian politics rely upon narratives that construct the Dalit as a lesser human being within the Indian nation. Valmiki contends, “There would be speeches on Republic Day when narratives of devotion to the country were repeatedly told, but they never included the name of the maker of the Constitution [Dr. Ambedkar]” (71). Building on his critique of India’s dominant narratives, Valmiki writes that “the lie that the textbooks had been injecting in my veins in the name of cultural heritage had been shattered” (121); his experiences ran counter to the textbook narratives of equality and rights. The textbooks construct “mythologies” of “chivalry, of ideals,” while what actually exists is a “defeated social order” (134). Referring to the myths that enable and justify upper caste oppression of the Dalits, Limbale says, “My tongue is circumscribed by Manu’s innumerable laws” (*Outcaste* 90). Kancha Ilaiah rejects cultural texts that have defined the human or “Indian” in

exclusionary ways. Ilaiah writes: “We knew nothing of Brahma, Vishnu or Esvara until we entered school. When we first heard about these figures they were as strange to us as Allah or Jehova or Jesus were” (7).

“We had been excluded from history,” notes Ilaiah about textbooks and history writings that excluded Dalit beliefs and practices (54). With this exclusion theme, Dalit life writings expose the duplicity of dominant discourses within India, generating a different history of India because, with their narrative recovery of trauma, they point to the faultlines, conflicts, and repression within dominant historical narratives. Gaikwad describes how, as a school boy, he wrote a letter to Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India, in which he asked her: “when is Gandhiji’s dream going to be fulfilled?” (79). Gaikwad’s narrative counteracts the historical narrative of Indira Gandhi’s “Garibi hatao” [remove poverty] movement. Other Dalit narratives, in the same fashion, reveal that, decades after political independence, social justice is still a dream for Dalits. They reveal, to use Nancy Miller and Jason Tougaw’s apposite phrase, “the shame of modernity” (5).

Dalit *testimonio* narratives such as the ones explored in this essay are narratives of loss and survival. They also generate what Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith identify as the key effects of life narratives: affect, activism, and awareness (225). They build solidarities through the charged content of their life narratives, build awareness of the hidden history of India, and enable the making of activist intervention by those who are affected by what they read. This is a dual process of “translation”—a process that translates Dalit life and contexts for the world to recognize, and translates an emotionally charged “performance” or narrative into a larger discourse of rights. When, in 2002, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination declared caste to be a form of racism, it mapped a global structure of oppression (Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination 2002). It is upon this map that Dalit life narratives insert themselves. If human rights narratives are linked, as Schaffer and Smith suggest, to global agendas of justice, Dalit *testimonio* narratives fit directly into this twentieth-century mediascape of testimony, truth-telling, and advocacy (Schaffer and Smith 20). Readings of Dalit life writing must forever

move beyond the immediate textual representation of trauma or suffering to the unspoken exergues: the voiceless and the disempowered who are available to readers only through the “presence” of Bama or Limbale. The link between Dalit *testimonio* and human rights discourses is also future-directed at two levels: (i) there is always a temporal gap between the moment of witnessing and the moment of *bearing witness*, and (ii) the bearing witness is directed at a future program of emancipation and justice through the recognition of Dalits as humans. The *testimonios* constitute the preliminary moments, the evidence and the demand for emancipation and rights.

Dalit life writing creates a space where two key “rights” narratives are played out. First, the narratives serve as what I term “claims narratives,” texts that open spaces of deliberation with their claims of cultural trauma and demands for justice. Michael Ignatieff argues that, when victims speak, “rights language applies” because “it is the claim of abuse that sets a human rights process moving” (56). The emphasis is on the narrative—claims—that sets the process and politics of rights on its course. Rights discourses, Ignatieff points out, are built on the foundations of human history and the “testimony of fear,” both of which, incidentally, rely upon narratives (80). Such “claims narratives” need not be articulated as rational discourse or demands for rights. I propose (aware of the risk of reinstating the old binary of rational West versus emotional East) that “claims narratives” are often cast in the language of emotion and trauma—but this cannot be a reason for excluding them from the public sphere or the realm of human rights debates. The “testimony of fear” that Ignatieff refers to relies, I suggest, precisely on such emotional narratives of brutalization, suffering, and injustice. It is the presence and acknowledgement of these narratives that provoke what Ignatieff terms “deliberation,” because the “minimum condition” for deliberation is a “willingness to remain in the same room, listening to claims one doesn’t like to hear” (84). The “claims narrative” first fits itself into a mainstream and universal discourse of rights because it maps their violations for individuals and communities. Here the appeal is to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, international agencies and tribunals—in short, to the global community. Scholars writing on Dalit rights have

invariably situated this discourse in relation to global discourses and castigated the Indian government for refusing to see caste-based oppression as another form of racist discrimination (Pal 9–16; Thorat 67–80; Shinde). Others have argued that a transnational Dalit politics and movement seems to be emerging (Smith).

Dalit claims narratives move from the local to the global when taken up in forums such as the 2002 World Conference Against Racism. This move enables the making of what Thomas Laqueur has termed a “moral imagination” to expand the capacity to feel the “exigency of wrongs suffered by strangers at a distance” (Laqueur 134). Once more I return to the question of imagination: to be able, when called upon, to imagine distant suffering when we consume the narrative we hold in our hands. It is in the global circulation of local wrongs via narrative that I find Dalit life writing’s insertion into universal discourses of rights.

Dalit life narratives also carve out a space for themselves within Indian public space—what sociologists following Nancy Fraser’s influential formulation have termed “counter-publics”—and discourses of rights. In some cases, this aspect of Dalit writing can be traced back to the nineteenth century (Fraser; Rege 32; Constable; Beth). Gopal Guru points out that Dalits need to retain their unique cultural identity and pleads for Dalit collective and cultural rights as different but equal “citizens” within Indian rights discourses. Dalits claim justice from Indian society because they envisage, rightly, their oppression as a collective condition within Indian society.

But how do Dalit communities form a counter-public? They do so by presenting affective narratives of suffering, thereby generating what I have called “claims narratives.” Human rights claims are implicit within narratives of atrocity in which the atrocity proceeds from an unjust social order. My reading of these texts as trauma narratives suggests a narrative form that seeks to capture and convey a horrific social system. The trauma narrative and the related strategies of performance, staging, and witnessing enable the narrator to move beyond herself to a larger community, and therefore to stake a (rights) claim on behalf of that community. The body of Dalit life writing constitutes a tradition of such trauma-affect-claims narratives of human rights violations. As I

have argued elsewhere in the case of women's writing from India, these texts represent an "archive of trauma".⁷

Further, this archive of trauma in Dalit life writing invites readers to map a comparative history of trauma, inasmuch as it embodies "affect" that can reach across geographical and political barriers. There is considerable risk, of course, in calling for such a history, because oppression is not the same in either form or impact across the world. Such a homogenization erases the specificities of the local in favour of over-arching connections on the global level. Occasionally, the interaction of the local and global is conflictual, and so to subsume the local (Dalits in India, blacks in the United States, Aboriginals in Canada and Australia) under the global may perpetuate the very structural inequalities that produce the trauma. Nevertheless, it may be possible to think of a solidarity of suffering through which victims can constitute a new political order that restrains, in however minimal a fashion, the march of global oppression.

Ashis Nandy proposes a system in which territories and expressions of suffering can be linked, a schema that can be productively applied to demonstrate how a comparative history of trauma can be developed. Nandy, arguing a case for treating the Third World's suffering as representative of global suffering, writes:

The only way the Third World can transcend the sloganeering of its well-wishers

is, first, by becoming a collective representation of the victims of man-made suffering everywhere in the world and in all past times; second, by internalizing or owning up to the outside forces of oppression and, then, coping with them as inner vectors; and third by recognizing the oppressed or marginalized selves of the First and Second Worlds as civilizational allies in the battle against institutionalized suffering. (Nandy, "Third World Utopia" 441)

R. Radhakrishnan proposes that Nandy suggests an entirely different "content" for Third World utopias based on suffering (97) and makes a case for seeing suffering as a "universal and omni-locational phenomenon" (98–99). On the contrary, I have elsewhere argued that Nandy

proposes nothing short of an “affective cosmopolitanism that “builds on affect, empathy and an ethics of recognition of the Other’s suffering” (Nayar, “Affective Cosmopolitanism” 8).

Nandy’s “affective cosmopolitanism” constitutes a comparative history of trauma, mapping suffering across places and thereby generating a new geography of the world, which provides a record of absent, abused, and rejected human rights. Comparative histories of trauma therefore are not only about Rwanda or Abu Ghraib or India, about blacks or Pathans or Dalits. They expand the notion of “human rights” to include all peoples whose rights have been eroded and who have suffered as a result. Nandy’s call to respond to the suffering of the Other is answered by treating Dalit life writing in a global literary context (thereby also offering a new vision of “world literatures”). This literary context, in turn, allows human rights to live up to their potential universality.

While this might seem a homogenizing move that erases the historical specificity of suffering (surely the genocides of Rwanda, the torture in Abu Ghraib, and the intergenerational trauma of Indian Dalits are different), I view such a homogenizing as essential if human rights discourses have to be relevant to all parts of the world. Drawing upon Nandy’s work, I propose a cosmopolitanism of affect and suffering in order to facilitate a cosmopolitanism of human rights and emancipatory movements. If such a cosmopolitanism demands a certain (admittedly problematic) homogenizing, then I advocate it as a cost in the cause of a global discourse of suffering and human rights. The suffering Dalit within life writing narratives develops a certain subject-position. This subject position can be aligned with similar suffering subject-positions worldwide, even if their suffering emerges from different contexts. Such a literature of suffering generates what I call *abject-types* (in line with “archetypes” and, in the context of cyberculture, what Nakamura terms “cybertypes”). Abject-types are figures of abjection occurring in literatures of trauma across the world that are remarkably similar to each other and that possess qualities that are iterable out of context (for instance, in terms of “staging” and “performance,” affect and corporeality). Abject-types, I propose, are tropes in the discourse of suffering and are universal.

I must stress that I view Dalit life writing texts as developing the theme of human rights only implicitly via discourses of trauma, testimony, and the representation of abject-types. I am more concerned with the appropriation of these texts in global contexts. How best can we incorporate these texts into a global discourse of trauma? I have outlined the answer in the preceding two paragraphs: we should treat these texts as demonstrating human rights violations and locate them within intertextual networks of similar discourses and literary texts. We should see them as embodying suffering from varied locations and political formations but unified in their emphasis on suffering and injustice. They may not explicitly address human rights philosophies, politics, or conventions—that task is left to us when we “consume” these texts and respond ethically to them.

Life writing texts across continents and cultures help to define the locations where human rights are absent or insufficient. If, as Brooks argues, *testimonios* serve “intercultural exchange” (187), Dalit life writing is a genre that simultaneously foregrounds the uniqueness of the caste-based oppression in Indian society and aligns itself with trauma narratives from around the world. It finds its place beside trauma narratives from Guatemala, Sudan, Rwanda, Serbia, and any location in which the “human” is called into question and redefined as the abject.

Notes

- 1 There is, of course, a paradox in that the Dalit narrative seeks to deconstruct “caste” as part of its political agenda yet also grounds caste oppression as “embodied subjectivity” that reinstates the Dalit body as “abject-type.” While acknowledging the risks involved in such an essentialism as “abject-type,” I also see it as necessary to the Dalit narrative’s focus on corporeal and emotional trauma. Trauma cannot be explained merely as an abstract condition. In the Dalit case it requires a body, even if in the process of essentialising the Dalit’s abject-body trauma reinstates caste difference and stereotypes. I see abject-types as an anterior moment to deconstructing caste where the Dalit narrative shows the traumatized body to foreground affect, trauma, and injustice.
- 2 I adapt here Hirsch’s work on the “transgenerational transmission of trauma.”
- 3 The problematics of authenticating atrocity narratives is beyond the scope of this essay. However, I acknowledge the significance of questions such as what kind of “internal” authentication—ethnographic details, historical facts, or experiential

accounts—is possible in texts documenting social or historical atrocities (for instance, in African American slave narratives; contemporary domestic abuse narratives; or war survivor memoirs)? And what constitutes external authentication? Who is “qualified” to authenticate the narrative? And what role does doubt on the part of witnesses play in authenticity (see Goldberg)?

4 There is, of course, considerable risk involved in representing poverty and suffering. Such narratives have been accused on a regular basis in mainstream Indian newspapers of using Indian/Asian/African poverty as a saleable commodity, as an exotic form of pornography (commonly referred to as “poverty porn”) catering to elite (Western) audiences. How does one distinguish the Dalit’s self-representation of authentic suffering from the sensationalized “poverty porn” of, say, Danny Boyle (whose film *Slumdog Millionaire*, much reviled in India, won eight Oscars)? Whose politics and what politics (emancipation? commodification for profit?) are served by the representations?

5 See Nayar, “Bama’s *Karukku*.”

6 See Nayar, “Bama’s *Karukku*.”

7 See Nayar, “Trauma, Testimony and Human Rights.”

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