

AN EXPLORATION OF FOUR DALIT NARRATIVES
AS TRAUMA LITERATURE

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is my original work and it has been written by me in its entirety. I have duly acknowledged all the sources of information which have been used in the thesis.

This thesis has also not been submitted for any degree in any university previously.



Upaasana Suresh

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CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| Summary | 1 |
| Introduction | 4 |
| The History of Caste and Untouchability in India, and a Consideration of Dalit Autobiographies as Trauma Literature | |
| Chapter One | 26 |
| Form and Narrative Structures in Dalit Autobiographies as Reflective of Trauma | |
| Chapter Two | 43 |
| Themes and Trajectories in Dalit Autobiographies as Reflective of Trauma | |
| Chapter Three | 66 |
| Gender in Dalit Autobiographies as Reflective of Trauma | |
| Conclusion | 89 |
| Dalit Autobiographies as Trauma Literature | |
| Works cited | 92 |

SUMMARY

Dalits, considered to be the lowest in the hierarchical Indian caste system and subjected to systemic oppression, are a subaltern community who experience the trauma of persecution in ways that are unique due to the complex social, cultural, political, and economic environment prevailing in India. Dalit literature in various native Indian languages offers a window of insight into their lives. They are narratives of anger and helplessness, violence and fortitude, pain and sorrow, humour and pathos, despair and hope. An extensive reading of Dalit writing leads one to believe that they can be approached from the perspective of ‘trauma literature’ for a more nuanced and universal perspective.

To substantiate why I believe Dalit autobiographies should be considered as trauma literature, in this thesis, I have chosen the autobiographies of four eminent Dalit writers: Baby Kamble, Bama Faustina Soosairaj (known simply as Bama), Omprakash Valmiki, and Sharankumar Limbale. The reason I have chosen these autobiographies is that they are all accepted English translations from languages with a strong background of Dalit literature: Bama’s *Karukku* was originally written in Tamil and translated to English by Lakshmi Holström, Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan* was originally written in Hindi and translated to English by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* was originally written in Marathi as *Jina Amucha* and translated to English by Maya Pandit, and Sharankumar Limbale’s *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi* was originally written in Marathi too, and translated to English by Santosh Bhoomkar. Furthermore, two of the autobiographies are written by women and two by men, and I have

chosen so because the comparative study of the lives of Dalit men and Dalit women is a key part of my exploration of Dalit trauma.

For the purposes of my research, I have consulted the primary texts to understand and extract the descriptions of trauma as narrated by the authors, as well as included research by a number of critics in my reading of these primary texts. I have also referred to numerous essays and articles on Dalit literature, with a focus on Dalit autobiographies, and on trauma literature to substantiate my proposal that Dalit autobiographies should be included in the canon of trauma literature.

To illustrate my argument, I have divided my thesis into three chapters, which are preceded by an introductory chapter. In the introduction, I explore the development of the caste system and its traumatic effect on Dalits (previously known as the untouchable caste), and use literary trauma theory to highlight some key reasons that Dalit autobiographies can be considered as trauma literature. In the first chapter titled “Form and Narrative Structure in Dalit Autobiographies as Reflective of Trauma,” I have explored in detail why the genre of autobiography is the preferred mode for writers of trauma literature, as well as analysed the various narrative elements in the four selected autobiographies that are reflective of trauma. In the second chapter, “Themes and Trajectories in Dalit Autobiographies as Reflective of Trauma,” I have delineated the themes that are reflective of trauma which are found in the four autobiographies: ‘Hunger,’ ‘Gender,’ ‘Education and Enlightenment,’ and ‘Religion’ are the four themes I have identified. Then, in the third and final chapter “Gender as Reflective of Trauma,” I have done an in-depth analysis of how gender affects the experiences of trauma of Dalit men and

women in different ways, showing that ultimately, it is the caste system that is the root problem. Finally, in the conclusion of my thesis, I reiterate why Dalit autobiographies should be considered as trauma literature.

INTRODUCTION

The History of Caste and Untouchability in India, and a Consideration of Dalit Autobiographies as Trauma Literature

In ancient India, the dominant Hindu society was stratified into various castes organised around their occupations; those at the bottom of the pyramid and those who fell outside the caste system were severely oppressed and consigned to the far margins of society. Dalits, or Untouchables as they were previously called, are the people who fall outside of the caste system. The four *varnas* (the word ‘varna’ literally translates to colour, which refers to the tiers or gradations of the hierarchical system)¹ into which the thousands of castes in the country are divided are the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas, and the Shudras, each with their own hereditary occupations,² and the castes that fall outside this system are the Untouchable castes, the “*avarna* castes, the Ati-Shudras, subhumans” (Roy 24);³ they were literal outcastes, having to live outside the boundaries of the villages where people of the upper castes resided. As the iconic Dalit leader B.R. Ambedkar said,⁴ “Some closed the door. Others found it closed against them.” It is indeed worrying that caste, an institution that is “one of the most brutal modes of hierarchical social organisation that human society has known” (22), has not been severely derided internationally the way institutions like racism and sexism have been.

¹ Mukherjee, Arun Prabha. Introduction. *Joothan*, by Omprakash Valmiki, translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, 1997, Columbia University Press, 2003, pp xvii-xlvi.

² What is known as the caste system today was called *varnashrama dharma* or *chaturvarna* in Hinduism’s founding texts. Historically, the Brahmins were priests, the Kshatriyas were soldiers, the Vaishyas were traders, and the Shudras were servants (Roy 24).

³ Roy, Arundhati. *The Doctor and the Saint. Annihilation of Caste*, by B.R. Ambedkar, 1936, Verso, 2014.

⁴ Ambedkar, B.R. “Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis, and Development.” The Anthropology Seminar of Dr. A.A. Goldenweizer. Columbia University. 9 May 1916. Speech.

There was hope that the wave of change sweeping Indian society during and after the struggle for independence from British rule would liberate the Untouchables and grant them a life of equality and dignity, but Dalits today remain hostage to the oppression of caste, even though Untouchability was legally abolished in 1949 (Mukherjee xvii).

The question of how the caste system came to be is a subject that is still widely debated. India's population is made up of "a mixture of Aryans, Dravidians, Mongolians, and Scythians" (Ambedkar). Constant contact with one another led to conflicts over land, cultural and social practices, and resources between "a people who called themselves Aryans...and the various communities of indigenous people that ranged from citizens of highly developed city-states to forest-dwelling hunters and gatherers." One of the major conflicts stemmed from the fact that the outcastes continued to eat beef even after the Gupta kings had banned it, and so, they were banished to the outskirts of the villages, where they survived by doing menial tasks for the upper-caste people or *savarnas*, including getting rid of the carcasses of dead cows in the villages. Thus, based on their eating beef and handling the bodies of dead animals, they became "polluted" and "untouchable" (Mukherjee xxii).

How the members of each *varna* are meant to behave is described in the ancient Sanskrit manifesto, *Manusmriti*. Amongst several other entitlements that they were deprived of, the Shudras, the bottom-most *varna*, and the Untouchable castes were not granted the right to study the Vedas. Disturbingly, this practice of denying education to people belonging to low castes and Untouchable castes pervaded Indian society to such an extent that its effect is still felt to this day; for instance, Ambedkar's brothers, who were

Dalits, were not allowed to study Sanskrit as it is the language used in the Vedas, and Dalit students across the country face bullying and harassment in universities, proving that “the colonisation of knowledge was a central tenet of the caste system” (Roy 96). The *Manusmriti* is a pivotal text when it comes to the issue of caste, although whether it actually proposed the social practices it preaches, or just propagated the ideas and customs of that period of time is debatable. At least in Ambedkar’s opinion, caste existed even before Manu (the lawgiver) and he was only an upholder of it. However, it can still be seen as “the fountainhead of the *varna/jati* ideas in India” (Devy 16).⁵

Another significant text for the possible “origin” of caste is the *Rigveda*,⁶ in which the Gods divided Purusha, or the universe, and from the mouth came the Brahmins, from the arms the Kshatriyas, from the thighs the Vaishyas, and from the feet the Shudras.⁷ In the *Manusmriti*, Purusha is replaced by the god Brahma. While all cultures around the world have stories of origin, what is astounding is that in the case of the Hindu caste system, these myths were used as “a basis for law governing intercommunity relations” (18). As Devy demonstrates, the very real ramifications of myth on real life can be seen, for example, through the case of the *Upanayana*, which is a ceremony linked to the possibility of a metaphorical rebirth. In one of the hymns in the *Rigveda*, it is described how the *Upanayana* was denied to the

⁵ Devy, G.N. “Caste Differently.” *Dalit Literatures in India*, edited by Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak, Routledge, 2016, pp. 15-25.

⁶ Both Roy and Devy (18), for instance, credit this ancient text, which is one of the four Vedas, as a possible source. “The Vedas (*veda* means knowledge), which date back to between the second and seventh centuries A.D., are considered the most sacred texts of Hinduism and were transmitted orally for centuries before being written down. The *Smritis* (*smriti* means remembered), also sacred texts but of a later period, stress the religious merits of giving gifts to Brahmins and lay down codes of behaviour and law” (Mukherjee xxii).

⁷ The Shudras had the hereditary job of having to serve the upper-castes, but they were not “untouchable” and still had some privileges like being allowed to enter Hindu temples.

Shudras because of their dispute with the Brahmins. The ceremony includes the donning of a sacred thread (which is called *Yajnopavita*) and since it is only an entitlement of the first three *varnas*, it takes away from the Shudras the possibility of a second birth, and means that they were destined to be re-born only as Shudras. Consequently, they were not allowed to study the Vedas, since that was an entitlement of “initiated male Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaisyas”, where the initiation was the *Upanayana* (Mukherjee xxii). The justification given by the upper-castes for this was that the Shudras must have committed some grievous sin in their past lives to be deserving of it. Gradually, this meant they were denied the right to other rites and customs as well; as Roy puts it “they were, thus, ‘ritually exiled’” (19). The caste system hence got more cemented into place, as those at the top of the hierarchy found the arrangement to their advantage and resisted any attempts to reform it.

However, as stated previously, it is important to keep in mind that Ambedkar himself did not believe that caste originated solely within Hinduism, and he strongly condemned the idea that “Hindu society was somehow moulded into the framework of the Caste System and that it is an organization consciously created by the *Shastras*” (Ambedkar). As Dirks clarifies, the notion that “caste is fundamentally religious” is false (Dirks 61).⁸ The domain of religion and politics cannot be seen as completely separate of each other, and as Dirks writes, the British colonial powers “appropriated, and in many cases reinvented” the institution of caste for their own benefit (61), by portraying it as sociologically and institutionally rooted in India and separate

⁸ Dirks, Nicholas B. “The Original Caste: Power, History and Hierarchy in South Asia.” *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1989, pp. 59-77.

from the political sphere. He states that “colonialism seems to have created much of what is now accepted as Indian ‘tradition’, including an autonomous caste structure with the Brahman clearly at the head” (63), and cautions against replicating dominant assumptions about caste, specifically the idea of purity and pollution, since these are “in large parts artefacts of colonialism” (71); while it is axiomatic that the caste system was to a certain extent propagated by Hindu India, it is essential to note that in fact caste is “a colonial construction, reminiscent only in some ways of the social forms that preceded colonial intervention” (74).

A very crucial part of tracing Dalit history is tracing the history of the name ‘Dalit.’ The word itself means “‘oppressed’, ‘broken’, ‘crushed’, and ‘downtrodden’” in Marathi (Abraham and Misrahi-Barak 8).⁹ It has its origin in the Sanskrit word ‘dal’, which means “to crack open, split, crush, grind” lentils and grains, and metaphorically represents the oppression of not only untouchables, but all downtrodden people (Mukherjee xviii). “A prostitute is as much a dalit as is the spouse of an upper caste patriarch who is ill-treated, as are the victims of ethnocide and communalism irrespective of whether they are Hindus, Christians, Muslims, or Sikhs” (Mukherjee 139).¹⁰ The various Untouchable castes were thus called because their touch was thought to be polluting; their very shadow, impure. As Untouchables fought for equality and dignity, they wanted to discard the names bestowed upon them by their oppressors and take on a new name to show that they were above and beyond

⁹ Abraham, K. Joshil and Judith Misrahi-Barak, editors. *Dalit Literatures in India*. Routledge, 2016.

¹⁰ Mukherjee, Sipra. “Creating Their Own Gods: Literature from the margins of Bengal.” *Dalit Literatures in India*, edited by Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak, Routledge, 2016, pp. 128-142.

the caste system; hence “they adopted names like Adi-Andhra, Adi-Hindu, and Adi-Karnataka¹¹ to lay claim to an aboriginal identity” (xxxviii). Furthermore, they were given official umbrella terms like ‘Depressed Classes’ and ‘Backward Castes’ by the British government, although the term that has stuck is ‘Scheduled Castes’. Then, they were christened by Mahatma Gandhi as ‘*Harijans*’, which literally translates to ‘people of God’, “though to infantilise them even further, in translation they are referred to as ‘Children of God’” (Roy 129). Owing to his massive influence in the nation, it became widely adopted, but due to fervent protests by Dalits who found it patronising, it ceased to be used. ‘Dalitbahujan’ was a name proposed by author Kancha Ilaiah, where the word ‘bahujan’ means the Scheduled Castes, Backward Castes, and the religious minorities of the country, who echoed other Dalit writers and activists in thinking that the term ‘Dalit’ should encompass not only untouchables, but “all victims of poverty and exploitation” (Mukherjee xxxi). Ambedkar and other Dalit scholars adopted the word ‘Dalit’ in the early twentieth century, and it found acceptance across untouchable communities all over the country as, for the first time, they weren’t being given a name by someone else, but had collectively adopted it themselves. Furthermore, “Dalit is a political identity, not just a caste name. It expresses Dalits’ knowledge of themselves as oppressed people and signifies their resolve to demand liberation” (xix).

A major event in Indian, and Dalit, history is the dispute between Ambedkar and Gandhi on some key matters. They were “their generation’s emissaries of a profound social, political and philosophical conflict that had

¹¹ Where “the word *adi* means “from the beginning.”

begun long ago and has still by no means ended” (Roy 37). Gandhi thought the caste system was a wonderful system of organisation and he believed that Untouchability was a “mere distortion” of Hinduism which could “gradually be removed through social reform and education” (Abraham and Misrahi-Barak 6), whereas Ambedkar knew that it wasn’t only untouchability that was the problem, but the whole caste system itself. He believed that it was not just the prejudice or the degrading concept of “pollution” and untouchability, but caste itself that had to be dismantled as a whole. The practice of untouchability, although it was cruel, was only “the performative, ritualistic end of the practice of caste. The real violence of caste was the denial of entitlement: to land, to wealth, to knowledge, to equal opportunity” (Roy 98). The top tiers of the caste system are “pure” and enjoy all the benefits, while the Untouchables are “polluted” and have no benefits, but all the duties (that no one else wants to do) which they are expected to perform for little to no pay. Ambedkar was one in a long line of Dalit activists.¹² When the British government announced separate electorates for Muslims, he campaigned for separate electorates for the Untouchables too, because he felt they were as different from Hindus as Muslims were; however, Gandhi was extremely opposed to this, and went on a fast until Ambedkar was forced to sign the Poona Pact, which offered Dalits reservation within the general electorate itself. Dalits view the pact as a betrayal by Gandhi as it shot down their demand for a separate electorate.¹³ As India moved closer to finally gaining

¹² Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Iyothee Thass, Poikayil Yohannan, and Periyar E.V. Ramasamy are some examples of famous Dalit activists (Abraham and Misrahi-Barak, 5-6).

¹³ “Gandhi went on a fast unto death...He got his way. Ambedkar, forced to withdraw his demand, signed the so-called Poona Pact of 1932. Indian history textbooks today rarely mention his capitulation under pressure” (Mukherjee xxvi).

independence from colonial rule, both men were very concerned about the fate of the minorities in the country. Whereas Gandhi was optimistic about *swaraj* or self-rule, Ambedkar was much less optimistic and dreaded the idea of religious minorities and Untouchables being governed by the majority Hindus; in fact, “the prospect of India’s Untouchables being ruled by nothing other than the moral heart of India’s predominantly Hindu people filled him with foreboding” (44-5).

With Hinduism’s upper-class and upper-castes resisting any attempts at reform, and the Mahatma himself extolling the virtues of caste system, thousands of Dalits across India realised that the caste system and Hinduism were intrinsically bound, and so even more of them converted to other religions like Buddhism, Sikhism, Islam, and Christianity to escape the shackles of the caste system.¹⁴ Just months before his death, Ambedkar, along with millions of his followers, converted to Buddhism. However, after the independence of the country, the practice of conversion became more significant because it had major consequences (for Hindus). At the time, the number of Untouchables was at around 44.5 million (54). If these people, who were listed as Hindus, began converting in large numbers, what would that mean for the Hindu majority of India? For this reason, Hindu reformers worked hard to try and stop Untouchables from converting, by ploys such as publicly inter-dining with them, and granting them entry to their temples. As Roy elaborates, “conservative Hindu organisations like the Hindu Mahasabha...began to proselytise energetically against untouchability.

¹⁴ Although “conversion was by no means new. Seeking to escape the stigma of caste, Untouchable and other degraded labouring castes had begun to convert to other religions centuries ago” (Roy 53).

Untouchables had to be prevented from defecting... They had to be brought into the Big House, but kept in the servants' quarters" (56). Ambedkar knew that there were deep ideological differences between Dalits and Hindus; however, as many converts realised, caste is something that transcends religious boundaries, and their problems did not end. As Jasbir Jain points out,¹⁵ even if they converted to other religions, as many did, they were treated by the upper-caste/class of those religions with disdain, and "the tasks assigned to them in schools, missions, and other such bodies were a continuation of their menial occupation" (97).

Ambedkar was the primary drafter of the Constitution, so he did manage to put in place some laws to protect the rights of the Untouchables. He was also very troubled by Hinduism's treatment of women, and believed that "the caste system advanced itself by controlling women, and one of his major concerns was to make Hindu personal law more equitable for women" (Roy 46), so he tried to get the Hindu code bills passed, but did not succeed.¹⁶ It's true that the practice of untouchability has been legally abolished, but it is ignorant to believe that the caste system is a mere remnant of the past and not representative of the situation in the country today, when across educational campuses, workplaces, and social and cultural spaces, Dalits continue to face mistreatment and violence because of their status as Dalits.; the case of the University of Hyderabad student Rohith Vemula, a Dalit who was harassed

¹⁵ Jain, Jasbir. "Negotiations with Faith." *Dalit Literatures in India*, edited by Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak, Routledge, 2016, pp. 93-107.

¹⁶ "The bill he proposed sanctioned divorce and expanded the property rights of widows and daughters," but it was opposed by everyone from the President at the time, Rajendra Prasad, Hindu sadhus, industrialists, and zamindars. Even after much effort to make it more compliant with Hindu conservatives, it was not passed. Finally, he resigned as the law minister (Roy 46).

and shunned by students and professors alike until he was driven to commit suicide, is just one in a long list of cases of harassment faced by Dalit students in universities across the country.¹⁷ Dalits are still discriminated against in villages, with age-old problems like not being allowed to draw water from public wells still being faced today.¹⁸ Therefore, more so than ever, Dalit literature, and especially Dalit autobiographies, is so important in documenting their struggle against the injustices they continue to face. As Mukherjee says, Dalit literature is “one of the major sites of their resistance and creativity” (xxxii).

Dalit literature was initially a form of protest and resistance against the everyday humiliations that Dalits, as individuals and as a community, had to face, and to an extent, this still holds true (Abraham and Misrahi-Barak 10). Even today, the Indian Railways employs manual scavengers even though it is technically against the law, and around 90% of those designated as ‘sweepers’ by the government who do jobs ranging from cleaning the streets and maintaining the sewage system are Dalits (Roy 35-6). The institutionalised prejudice and discrimination faced by Dalits has by no means been completely eradicated, and writing is their way of documenting this. As Abraham and Misrahi-Barak explain, because of the political agenda and the context in which Dalit literatures are engaged, the mode of autobiography is the obvious choice many Dalit writers choose, as this is a literature “whose urgency is to be first and foremost a testimonial” (11). Although there are Dalit authors who

¹⁷ Vajpeyi, Ananya. “Ancient prejudice, modern inequality.” *The Hindu*, 20 January 2016. Web. Accessed 13 November 2016.

¹⁸ This and other forms of discrimination that are still prevalent in villages as noted by Dalit Scholar Bhagwan Das is quoted by Arun Prabha Mukherjee (xxxii).

prefer to write poetry, fiction, or drama, the tendency to favour autobiographies is because testimonials are thought to have more of an emotional and political impact than other modes of writing.

The word ‘Dalit,’ as I have outlined, was adopted by the Untouchables of India but encompasses all victims of trauma, and the term ‘Dalit literature’ was first used in 1958.¹⁹ An official definition of ‘trauma’ is that it is an event that has a clearly recognizable “stressor that would evoke significant symptoms of distress in almost everyone” (Visser), although what constitutes a “stressor” is debatable and subjective. According to The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms, literary trauma theory has its origins in 20th century psychological research into the effects of traumatic events such as “assault, rape, war, famine, incarceration, etc.” upon people. Initially limited to psychological research, it has, since the 1990s, gradually developed into an interdisciplinary field of study incorporating literature, psychology, history, and philosophy. In literature, trauma theory has already been applied, for example, to “memoirs of Holocaust survivors and war veterans” and in this introduction, assuming the caste system as a whole as a traumatic experience for Dalits, I will outline for what reasons trauma theory can be applied to Dalit autobiographies, which are memoirs of survivors of the brutal caste system.

As Joshua Pederson writes, literary trauma theorist Cathy Caruth believes that “imaginative literature...can “speak” trauma when normal, discursive language cannot...her theory of trauma is a ringing endorsement of

¹⁹ Mukherjee xviii.

the testimonial power of literature” (Pederson 334).²⁰ One of Caruth’s core theories is “traumatic amnesia,” an idea that was first proposed by Freud, i.e. when the trauma is so painful that the mind cannot process it, and as a result, the victim partially or completely forgets the traumatic event; this idea of hers has been challenged by new psychological research by trauma theorist Judith Herman and scientists including Harvard university’s Richard McNally that proves, by analysing multiple cases, that while “victims may *choose* not to speak of their traumas, there is little evidence that they *cannot*” (334). Herman argues that writing is a powerful tool, “enabling integration of traumatic experience and aiding healing and recovery” (Visser 274).²¹ McNally draws an important difference between not thinking about the traumatic event and being unable to recall it. Another of Caruth’s findings that McNally is sceptical of is her assertion that trauma is unspeakable, or hard to express in normal, language. For him, trauma is both memorable and describable. And as Pederson says, when the science of trauma studies alters, so should the literary study of trauma (Pederson 334). These new findings are applicable in the case of Dalit trauma, since for Dalit authors, writing about their experiences is a cathartic process of dealing with their trauma, and in their case, traumatic amnesia does not seem to occur. The very preference of Dalit authors for the mode of autobiography highlights this. The interaction between trauma theory and autobiographical narrative offers “new, formerly unspeakable stories” and has the power to “intervene in imposed systems of meaning” (Visser 274). Pederson offers a new three-part model of literary trauma theory, where he

²⁰ Pederson, Joshua. “Speak, Trauma: Towards a Revised Understanding of Literary Trauma Theory.” *Narrative*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2014, pp. 333-353.

²¹ Visser, Irene. “Trauma theory and Postcolonial Literary Studies.” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2011, pp. 270-282.

says that critics should focus on the text itself instead of “gaps in the text”; should look for evidence of “augmented narrative detail” instead of focusing on possible traumatic amnesia; and should focus on the depictions of the experiences themselves, and how literature can capture the distorted depictions of trauma, by which he means things like distortions of space and time, descriptions of the feeling of time slowing down, etc. (337-339). This model is suitable for understanding Dalit literature.

“Religion, nation, race, ethnicity, gender, class – each of these dimensions can be a medium for inflicting social pain” and causing trauma (Alexander 1).²² The institution of caste, as I previously mentioned, has not been derided internationally to the extent that social prejudices such as racism and sexism have been, even though, like racism, it is a form of prejudice that discriminates against people on the basis of something they have no control over: their descent. This could be because a person’s caste isn’t a physical trait, unlike a person’s gender or ethnicity, and isn’t easily discernible the way a person’s religious affiliation can be (for example, the headscarf worn by Muslim women). Or, as Arundhati Roy points out, it could be because caste, at least until recently, wasn’t seen for the social evil it really was even in India; there are still people who believe in the merits of the caste system and uphold it (Roy 22). Hinduism is not just a religion, but “a way of life that pervades everything— birth, death, war, marriage, food, music, poetry, dance. It is their culture, their very identity. How can Hinduism be renounced only because the practise of caste is sanctioned in its foundational texts, which most people have never read?” (47). The collective experience of trauma is framed by

²² Alexander, Jeffrey C. *Trauma: A Social Theory*. Polity, 2012.

individual accounts of prejudice and suffering, and trauma becomes collective when it is “conceived as wounds to social identity.” Then, the question becomes “not who did this to me, but what group did this to us?” (Alexander 2). What is appalling in the case of Dalits is that it isn’t just the caste system that was prejudiced against them. Religion, nation, ethnicity, gender, and class—these are all dimensions and institutions from which they faced discrimination; ‘religion’ because upper-caste Hindus played the major role in their abuse, but also because even after many of them converted to other religions, they still faced discrimination based on their status as untouchables²³; ‘nation’ and ‘ethnicity’ because the caste system is deep-rooted in the country and the aspirations of downtrodden Dalits were, and still are, challenged by the government itself; ‘gender’ because the caste system “advanced itself by controlling women;”²⁴ and ‘class’ because the caste system is classist and based on endogamy at its core. Dalits were discriminated against in every possible way.

Cultural, collective trauma occurs when members of a group feel that they have been subjected to terrible treatment over time, which leaves “indelible marks upon their group consciousness” (Alexander 6) and permanently and irrevocably affects the future constructions of their identities. In the case of India’s Untouchables, as I have explored, the treatment meted out to them is without parallel. For example, Omprakash Valmiki’s autobiography is titled “Joothan,” which is the practice of collecting the

²³ As Bama highlights in her account of caste-ism within the church in *Karukku*, and as Ambedkar writes in *Annihilation of Caste*, “Christianity, Sikhism, Islam and Zoroastrianism were not impervious to caste discrimination” (131)

²⁴ As Ambedkar said (Roy 46).

leftover scraps of food from Hindus of higher castes after they had eaten, and is just one of the many humiliations that were part of the daily lives of Dalits; however, it also has a historical connotation: when Ambedkar advised his fellow Dalits to start living lives of dignity and stop accepting *joothan*, the upper-caste villagers threatened the Untouchables with violence if they refused to accept it (Mukherjee xl), although at the same time they looked down upon the *avarnas* for accepting their leftovers. Their touch was considered to be polluting; their shadow a bad omen. They were virtually enslaved by their employers and paid meagrely, if at all. They were socially ostracized and made to live in settlements away from everyone else. And when they tried to resist and reform the caste system, they faced resistance and criticism from upper-caste Hindus including the Father of the Nation himself; one of the many condescending things he said about Dalits is that “some of the untouchables are worse than cows in understanding” (Roy 134). It is only as recently as a few decades ago that untouchability was legally abolished, but actually enforcing that law is another matter altogether, with Dalits across the country still facing prejudice in different forms today. Therefore, Dalit trauma can be classified as collective trauma that is found “between the poles of the individual and society” (Balaev 151).

Alexander opines that traumatic status can be ascribed to a phenomenon not because of its actual harmfulness or effect, but because of how “abruptly” it affected their individual or collective identity (14). However, I put forth the idea that the abruptness of a traumatic phenomenon cannot be considered as a major factor in deciding what is damaging and traumatic to collective identity; facing harassment on a daily basis from a

system that is apparently divinely ordained (as both *Manusmriti* and *Rigveda* seem to sanction it)²⁵ and has been institutionalized for centuries is certainly traumatic, though not abrupt. Besides, a Dalit's life just a few decades ago was composed of numerous abrupt traumatic events in the form of being mentally and physically abused by the upper-caste Hindus that was just part of their daily lives.

One of the trends in trauma literature as identified by Michelle Balaev is the important role played by place. "Descriptions of the geographical place of traumatic experience and remembrance situate the individual in relation to a larger cultural context that contains social values that influence the recollection of the event and the reconfiguration of the self" (149). Place does not mean the geographical location alone, but is the coming together of culture and nature, and includes both their relationship to the geographical space and how they were treated there. I would like to draw specific attention to the idea of situating the individual in a larger cultural context, and that of the re-configuration of self, as these are especially important when it comes to Dalit autobiographies. "By and large, the nation state has been the representational space of Dalit life in Dalit writing of the 1970s and 1980s" (Satyanarayana 291). Untouchables were not only socially ostracized, they were physically shunned too, relegated to living on the outskirts of villages, not having access to the same schools, wells, and temples as the other castes did, and this is a major contributing factor to their trauma. Furthermore, the "reconfiguration of the self" that Balaev mentions usually happens, in the case of Dalits, when they move away from their village of birth to other cities or countries. This is

²⁵ As Mukherjee notes (xxii).

expressed by Satyanarayana when he says that “the locational shift of the Dalit family from the village to the cities...is critical to the transformation and remarkable success of the family” (291), in which he is talking about Narendra Jadhav’s success story as captured in his memoir, *Outcaste: A Memoir*. The importance of place as a major trend in literary trauma theory thus lends itself to the analysis of place in Dalit autobiographies. Bama, Omprakash Valmiki, Baby Halder, and Sharankumar Limbale are examples of Dalit authors who credit their liberation to when they moved away from their hometowns for higher education or employment.

Dalit trauma is also intergenerational, which is just one of the several reasons Dalits identify and sympathise with African-American victims of slavery and racism. Jyotirao Phule²⁶ believed that Untouchables and Shudras would understand slavery because “they have a direct experience of slavery as compared to others who have never experienced it...Shudras were conquered and enslaved by Brahmins” (Roy 76). As a sign of solidarity with African-Americans, young Dalit activists named their organisation ‘Dalit Panthers’ after the ‘Black Panthers’ (Mukherjee vxiii). Although slavery was abolished in the nineteenth century, the traumatic experience of it has “produced a “learned cultural shame” that is an inherent quality of contemporary black identity” (Balaev 150); similarly, the traumatic experience of Dalits and Shudras decades ago has had an impact on the collective identity of Dalits today. If we accept that “individual identity is defined by a certain historical experience of her or his racial/religious/gender group” (151), Dalit identity

²⁶ He was born into the Mali caste that were traditionally gardeners, and he worked on the eradication of the caste system and women’s education along with his wife, Savitribai Phule.

today is shaped, if not defined, by the horrors of their past. Furthermore, prejudice against Dalits is still prevalent today, although in seemingly subtler forms. As mentioned before, most of the menial workers in cities across India continue to be Dalits, and another major form of discrimination Dalits face in an urban setting is the protest against reservation and quotas for people belonging to Scheduled Castes. Dalits have been denied knowledge and education for thousands of years. Now, when this is being challenged by the aspirations of young Dalits across the country, there have been “privileged-caste protests against the policy of reservation in government jobs and student quotas in universities.” As Roy very aptly puts it, “The presumption is that ‘merit’ exists in an ahistorical social vacuum and that the advantages that come from privileged-caste social networking and the establishment’s entrenched hostility towards the subordinated castes are not factors that deserve consideration. In truth, ‘merit’ has become a euphemism for nepotism” (34). Casteism is by no means completely eradicated; the prejudice just manifests itself in new ways in the 21st century. The importance of the intergenerational quality of trauma literature is that “significant lessons can be learned and passed between generations through the recital of a story about loss and suffering;” Dalit men and women today learn about the hardships faced and the progress made by the previous generations through Dalit testimonials, and can use that information in tackling prejudice themselves.

Trauma theorists also delineate the transmissible quality of trauma, and argue that in a certain sense, it is transmitted to the readers, since reading about trauma is the “reviviscence of the traumatic memory” and the “implantation of something coming from outside.” Transmissibility is still a

“fuzzy concept” and trauma theorists should be wary of the difference between the victims of collective trauma and those not directly experiencing it. In the quest for empathy and for understanding the trauma faced by the author, transmissibility shouldn’t trivialize the actual nature of the trauma itself.

In this introduction, trends in literary trauma theory were used to analyse Dalit literature and demonstrate why they can be included in the canon of trauma literature; the autobiographies going to be studied in this thesis are Sharankumar Limbale’s *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi* translated from Marathi to English (2003), Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan* translated from Hindi to English (2003), and Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* translated from Marathi to English (2008), and Bama Faustina Soosairaj’s *Karruku* translated from Tamil to English (2012). Cathy Caruth’s formulation of literary trauma theory is still valuable, but the new findings that disprove her understanding of trauma as being so severe as to lead to traumatic amnesia, and trauma being unspeakable, have been used in this introduction. Therefore, the features of trauma literature which have been identified and outlined in this introduction and applied to Dalit autobiographies are: a) Dalit trauma does not conform to Caruth’s proposal of “traumatic amnesia” or the unspeakability of trauma. Writing is cathartic and a space of resistance, and Dalit trauma is both remembered and describable; b) the notion of collective trauma. Dalits have faced collective trauma as a community that has borne the brunt of severe prejudice and institutionalised discrimination for centuries; c) the trauma faced is not abrupt, but is something that has festered over time. Their trauma arises from the daily forms of harassment that they have had to face; d) the primacy of “place,” which can be understood as the meeting point of nature and

culture, is an important trend in literary trauma theory and in Dalit autobiographies; e) trauma is intergenerational, and therefore shapes Dalit identity today; and f) the “transmissibility” of Dalit trauma shouldn’t lead to the trivialization of the traumatic experience of the author. The process of trauma growing from independent to collective also includes a lot of activism, and in the case of Dalit trauma, this has been achieved in the form of speeches, protests, meetings, laws, storytelling, and writing. Dalit trauma is also especially relevant because it is *current*, and discrimination based on caste is still prevalent in India, be it in villages or cities.

Dalit authors of autobiographies have faced criticism both for their choice of genre and the content of their autobiographies; these texts have been deemed “artless outpourings of Dalit writers’ unmediated experience” and have been called “repetitive and stereotypical.” In response to this, Valmiki stresses the importance of shaping and structuring the past so as to “arouse a passion for change” in both Dalit and non-Dalit readers (Valmiki qtd. in Mukherjee xxxvi). Autobiographies are seen by certain critics as a genre that “should belong to people of ‘lofty reputation’ or people who have something of ‘historical importance’ to say” thus showing how social and class distinctions are even carried into literary discourse (Anderson 8).²⁷ Their status as previously untouchable still proves to be a barrier. Dalit autobiographies are therefore important for many reasons including that when it comes to a community of people that have faced the kind of institutionalized prejudice that Dalits have, their experience cannot be appropriated and imagined by upper-caste non-Dalits; and knowledge and literacy was an

²⁷ Anderson, Linda. *Autobiography*. Routledge, 2001.

entitlement claimed only by the upper-caste Hindus, so the mere act of writing these autobiographies is a form of resistance and progress. Their trauma is definitely of historical importance. Moreover, as Sharankumar Limbale indignantly asks, “Dragging and cutting dead animals—how will non-Dalits write about this experience of Dalits with the power of their imagination? How will they feel the angry ideas rising in the hearts of untouchables on the basis of their helpless imagination?” (Limbale qtd. in Mukherjee xxiv). In fact, their experiences are so singular that “Dalit writing demands a new dictionary” (xxxix). As for being repetitive, this is clearly not the case; for instance, the experience of a Dalit from Tamil Nadu and a Dalit from Maharashtra will be markedly different, as will the experience of a Christian Dalit convert and a Buddhist Dalit convert be different, and even that of a Dalit man and a Dalit woman is markedly different.

“Dalit aspirations are a breach of peace,” (Roy 22) and their narratives are a public exposure of their private and collective trauma. *Joothan*, *Karukku*, *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*, and *The Prisons We Broke* are a small selection of autobiographies by Dalit authors of different backgrounds and from different parts of the country, and they exemplify in different ways, as this thesis aims to delineate, why Dalit autobiographies can be considered trauma literature. In the first chapter, “Form and Narrative Structure of Dalit Autobiographies as Reflective of Trauma,” I will discuss how these autobiographies lend themselves to be read as trauma literature by analysing the genre and the narrative structures of each autobiography. In the second chapter, “Trajectories and Themes in Dalit Autobiographies as Reflective of Trauma,” I will explore the similar themes and motifs in the autobiographies I have

chosen, showing how they are indicative of trauma. In the third chapter, “Gender as Reflective of Trauma,” I will look at the differences and similarities in the specificities of the traumatic experiences of Dalit men and women, showing that the root cause of their struggles lies in the caste system, and this will be followed by the conclusion of the thesis.

CHAPTER ONE

Form and Narrative Structures as Reflective of Trauma in Dalit

Autobiographies

Dalit authors have shown a strong inclination for writing autobiographies, which is unsurprising “in light of the emphasis that they place on authenticity of experience” (Mukherjee xxxv).²⁸ Dalit autobiographies are personal accounts of the lives of people who had once been deemed untouchable and polluted, and their experiences cannot be appropriated by non-Dalit writers. As a form of writing, autobiographies are ideal for trauma literature, because when marginalized people write about their experiences of suffering, especially suffering that was socially and religiously sanctioned (like in the case of Dalit trauma), these narratives possess great “transformative power” (x) and can be very impactful. In this chapter, I will first examine why the autobiographical form is ideal for writers of trauma literature, and then identify the various narrative structures that are reflective of Dalit trauma in *Karukku*, *The Prisons We Broke*, *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*, and *Joothan*.

Dalit literature is “largely a product of the last two decades” (Gajarawala 1),²⁹ before which Indian literature was dominated by upper-class and upper-caste writers claiming to represent the Indian voice. By voicing their struggles in their autobiographies, they invalidate this claim of the elite

²⁸ Mukherjee, Arun Prabha. Introduction. *Joothan*, by Omprakash Valmiki, Columbia University Press, 2003, pp. xvii-xlvi.

²⁹ Gajarawala, Toral Jatin. *Untouchable Fictions: Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste*. Fordham University Press, 2012.

Indian authors by documenting the “violence, oppression, and structural inequality engendered by casteism” (1-2) that they had had to endure. They also stress the fact that “only a Dalit by birth can have the sensitivity and experience to be a genuine Dalit writer” (Kumar 147).³⁰ This raises the complicated question of representation; for instance, even the critically acclaimed *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, in which there is a Dalit character called Velutha, is deemed by Dalits as a book that is written in an “appropriative voice, a voice that contains, rather than expresses, the Dalit experience” (Mukherjee x). It is useful to mention what Mohanty writes about not “using the universal to erase the particular” (Mohanty 501)³¹ here; her critique of “Eurocentric analytic paradigms” (509) and white feminism for their “discursive colonization of Third World Women’s lives and struggles” (501) can be applied in this case to the appropriation of Dalit voices by upper-caste elite Indians, who represent them as “pathetic characters, unable to act or speak about their oppression” (Mukherjee x). It can also be applied directly to the treatment of Dalit women’s voices by elite Indian women through a kind of “Brahminical feminism” which has been primarily concerned only with issues affecting upper-caste, upper-class women (Kumar 216). Dalit authors overturn this perception and representation of them by others through the act of representing their own voices and laying claim to their own lived experiences.

³⁰ Kumar, Raj. *Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation, and Identity*. Orient Blackswan, 2010.

³¹ Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. “‘Under Western Eyes’ Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles.” *Signs*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2003, pp. 499–535.

Another important reason that autobiographies are the mode most preferred by Dalit authors is revealed by Gajarawala's critique of realist novels in Hindi for their representation of the marginalized. Despite having the same goals as Dalit autobiographies, i.e. the representation of their experiences for a wider readership, Gajarawala finds that the Dalit character in realist novels of Premchand (for example) is "always a failed individual who rarely has the possibility of transcendence" and that therefore, Dalit critique of realist novels has to do with two things: the depiction of Dalit characters, which reiterates the significance of Dalit autobiographies- nationalist writing and realist novels, while sharing similar concerns and goals as Dalit autobiographies, cannot successfully appropriate their experiences as 'real'; and the problem of "novelistic holism" or the "circular enclosure of the novelistic world" (Gajarawala 42), by which he means the failure of the genre to aptly portray a 'real' experience of a Dalit character. This might be because the *raison d'être* of Dalit authors is still political (brought out through their autobiographies in the struggle for liberation and equality), whereas "sympathy is an essential project of realist fiction...the work of the realist novel, as many have suggested, has been to expand the circle of readerly sympathy" (45). This reveals, I propose, another crucial point of difference between 'realism' in novels, which may choose to portray the Dalit/marginalized character in pathetic, sympathetic light in order to garner sympathy, and realism in (Dalit) autobiographies.

Omprakash Valmiki describes the process of writing his autobiography as an "unravelling" of his self and a reliving of the "miserics, torments,

neglects, admonitions...mental anguish” (Valmiki xiv)³² that he has faced in his life. Dalit autobiographies have been criticised for apparently being “unstructured, artless outpourings...repetitive and stereotypical” (Mukherjee xxxvi), in defence of which Valmiki says, “personal experience brings out reality in striking ways” (Valmiki qtd. in Mukherjee xxxvi). Another reason that Dalit authors, including the ones focused on in this thesis, prefer the form of autobiography is because Dalit literature is inherently linked with the movement for Dalit liberation, and if its “raison d’être” (Mukherjee xxxiii) is still the commitment towards the struggle for rights of Dalits, autobiographies are the ideal vehicle through which to convey their message to readers, both Dalit and non-Dalit; their writing is not just of literary value, “it is also a cultural and social movement” (xxxiii).

An important quality about the form of autobiography, as Dalit critic Gopal Guru mentions, is the line that it straddles between representing the individual and representing community.³³ He claims that this may be because of the “limited value” that is attributed to individuality by Hinduism, as Hinduism is “morally constituted by the tradition of renunciation” (Guru 158). Individuality is a “precondition for writing autobiographies” (158), and thus the act of writing an autobiography can itself be seen as an act of resistance by Dalit authors against mainstream upper-class and upper-caste Hindu writing, because it positions them as the storyteller, resisting the position of the “voiceless” that had been thrust upon them for centuries. Yet, while they are specific, unique narratives, they also represent the collective Dalit struggle,

³² Valmiki, Omprakash. *Joothan*. Translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, Columbia University Press, 2003

³³ Guru, Gopal. Afterword. *The Prisons We Broke*, Orient Longman, 2008.

which the authors themselves stress. For instance, Baby Kamble's autobiography reads more as a history of the Mahar community she grew up in rather than a personal narrative; Maya Pandit writes that it seems like "more of a socio-biography rather than an autobiography" (Pandit ix).³⁴ Bama's *Karukku*, too, reads like a "community manifesto" (229) which documents the casteism the Parayars faced from the Catholic Church and its institutions. They show that the individual cannot be completely separated from the community; i.e., as Gopal Guru postulates, the "self is partly constituted by the life-story and acquires larger meaning only in the context of the narrative of the community" (Guru 160).

While Valmiki believes that for Dalit writers of autobiographies, the process of writing is like reliving their suffering, Gajarawala interestingly argues that the "narrative reconstruction of the self as a result of social and historical forces" (Gajarawala 177), which is an intrinsic part of autobiographies, is "undermined by Dalit texts" (177). What he means by this, I propose, is not that there is *no* reconstruction of the self, but that while Dalit autobiographies do elaborate on the social injustices they faced which affects their identity to this day, they undermine the importance of historicity. In the introduction, I drew attention to Joshua Pederson's claim³⁵ that in trauma literature, there is a distorted depiction of time and space which literary trauma theorists should focus on; what this precisely means is that in the Dalit autobiographies, the authors do not deem it of utmost importance to arrange the events they describe in chronological order. In fact, what Dalit

³⁴ Pandit, Maya. Introduction. *The Prisons We Broke*, Orient Longman, 2008.

³⁵ Pederson, Joshua. "Speak, Trauma: Towards a Revised Understanding of Literary Trauma Theory." *Narrative*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2014, pp. 333-353.

autobiographies do is to re-investigate “historical causality, the relations among things, and relationality more broadly” (178). This is the first narrative element that will be discussed in this chapter: the representation of realism and historicity in Dalit autobiographies.

Gajarawala proposes that Dalit texts should be read as an articulation of “posthistoricist”³⁶ realism (170), which, he explains, is a realism that is not dependent on the relationship between the individual and historicity/historical events; for instance, if an autobiography seems indifferent to important historical events like the Partition, critics could refrain from reading it as self-obsessed or “identity driven” (171), but instead as being posthistoricist, and comprising a different kind of realism. He further explains that Dalit literature has always been concerned with “historical resurrection, representation, and revision, as well as with its own historicity” but is written by people who “perceive themselves and are perceived to be outside history” (170-71). An apt example of this is how Indian historical discourse has blurred out the importance of Ambedkar’s work in the Dalit movement for liberation, and has largely represented him as important only for having drafted the Constitution of the country. As Arundhati Roy puts it, “History has been unkind to Ambedkar” (Roy 43).³⁷ The history that is predominantly taught is one that does not represent the horrors of the caste system; Indian ‘history’ in textbooks is the history of the upper-castes which is an “elaborate and cumulative response to Dalit self-assertion” (Gajariwala 172).

³⁶ Where “posthistoricist” means “neither ahistorical nor apolitical” (Gajarawala 170).

³⁷ Roy, Arundhati. *The Doctor and the Saint. Annihilation of Caste*, Verso, 2014.

More so than in other autobiographies, realism plays an especially important role in Dalit autobiographies. This is depicted through Gajarawala's exploration of realism in Hindi upper-caste and Dalit writing. Premchand, an author so iconic that Gajarawala writes "modern Hindi literature, it is said, begins with Premchand." (Gajarawala 32), emerged in the literary scene and became known for his departure from the then-popular modes of writing such as "essay, satire, literary journal," etc. when he began to write in the mode of 'realism'; his depiction of a Chamar (one of the many untouchable castes) in his novel was burnt by the Dalit literary association³⁸. An important point Gajarawala makes about realist writing in India is that from the outset, it was a form of writing that was associated with nationalism and the "social issues" of the time (35), which is one of the ways in which Dalit autobiographies make a departure from mainstream nationalist writing (including nationalist autobiographies). Premchand, while being an advocate for literature not being the domain of the upper-classes only, and also representing radically new characters in his writing like "villainous Brahmins" and "untouchable characters" (37), was accused by Dalit critics of type-casting them and only portraying them in certain ways, "constrained...to a certain type" (37). This highlights my previous statement about representation made in the introduction of this thesis; their experiences cannot be appropriated and voiced by non-Dalits or upper-caste/upper-class Hindu writers. Gajarawala, for example, depicts how in Premchand's novels, the untouchable characters were defined by their caste and not by other factors like "kindness or social class" (41), which rightly echoes Mukherjee's postulation that elite Indian authors

³⁸ The 'Bharatiya Dalit Sahitya Akademi.'

cannot claim to understand and write *for* Dalits, since they type-cast them and represent them as “pathetic characters, unable to act or speak about their oppression” (Mukherjee x).

In *Karukku*, Bama shifts from narrating a story about the nearby temple (Bama 11-12),³⁹ to describing how caste affected her education (18-22), to a commentary on the caste system (27-8), and back to her childhood (29). Gajarawala aptly terms this kind of writing in Dalit autobiographies as a “Dalitization of narrative time” where the chronology is “nonnational, nonhistorical, event-driven” (Gajarawala 173). I would like to draw attention to the term “event-driven,” since it proves very true for the chronology of events as represented in the four Dalit autobiographies. Bama starts a chapter with the words “I was eleven years old. My mother delivered twin babies; I remember it well” (Bama 29), which reflects how she remembers her past not in terms of years or major historical events, but by significant and personal life events. Baby Kamble writes in *The Prisons We Broke* how the *maharwada*⁴⁰ that they lived in consisted of sixteen houses, where almost everyone was illiterate, and their “lives were governed by various calamities” (Kamble 49),⁴¹ and so they had no way of or need to communicate with the world beyond their village. All they knew was their institutionalised oppression. Gajarawala echoes activist and author Ramanika Gupta’s notion that the social condition of Dalits is “entirely historically determined,” and Dalits had no say in it— “If they appear inert, they are not; if they appear lifeless, they are not; they have

³⁹ Bama. *Karukku*. Translated by Lakshmi Holström, Oxford University Press, 2012.

⁴⁰ *Maharwada* means the settlement or the “residential colony of the Mahar community located outside the village” (Kamble 175).

⁴¹ Kamble, Baby. *The Prisons We Broke*. Translated by Maya Pandit, Orient Longman, 2008.

been produced as such” (Gupta qtd. in Gajarawala 174). History is overshadowed in their texts by the descriptions of their privations, like where they would get their next meal, trying to get a decent education, and the fervent desire for a better life.

The outside world then, for Dalits, is primarily in the margins of their consciousness, and is “largely sidelined for the day-to-day struggles, the day-to-day histories of one boy, one family, one community, one caste. The narrative eye is exclusively focused on, and in fact born from, the aforementioned peripheral space” (181). This statement of Gajarawala’s introduces the next narrative element in these autobiographies that is reflective of Dalit trauma: space or place. As I briefly explored in the introduction, in Dalit autobiographies, “place” as the coming together of culture and geographical space plays an important role in Dalit autobiographies. They were literal out-castes, forced to live on the outskirts of the villages where the upper-castes resided, and usually in deplorable conditions.⁴² Bama, Valmiki, and Limbale all explicitly credit their first taste of liberation from their lives of oppression to moving away from the villages they were brought up in. Limbale writes that when he moved to boarding school, all the impressions he had had of religion and superstition “faded slowly. Now there were Dalit boys around all the time. Buddhism began to cast its spell on me” (Limbale 74),⁴³ and how after that, when he returned home, he “hated the idea of untouchability” and the fact that “caste had been thrust” upon them even

⁴² For instance, Kamble describes living in “tiny huts” that were “eternally stricken by poverty” (Kamble 7), and Valmiki writes that “the pigs wandering in narrow lanes, naked children, dogs, daily fights” (Valmiki 1) was the environment he grew up in.

⁴³ Limbale, Sharankumar. *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*. Translated by Santosh Bhoomkar, Oxford University Press, 2003.

before they were born (76). He realised that “the roots of this injustice went deep into history, for many thousands of years” (79). Bama, too, discusses the disillusionment she felt when she moved to college and realised that the nuns and priests who had furthered the superstitions and entrenched casteism in her village in the name of religion were, in reality, “hypocrites and frauds” and that all the rituals and superstitions she had once believed in “began to seem meaningless and just a sham” (Bama 102). Valmiki describes how after he moved away from home for higher education and later work, he began to be more involved in Dalit activism, became “more attracted to social realism” and realised how caste did not manifest itself in such overt ways as it did when he was younger (Valmiki 99). It is also important to note, however, that even though they all write about a sort of escape from their village, they never completely escape oppression based on their caste. The move to the city, or the move from rural to urban, brings “neither financial nor emotional fulfilment” to the narrator, argues Gajarawala (184). However, I argue that they all achieve liberation to a certain extent: liberation at least from outright displays of casteism like untouchability, which they achieve through paths like education, reading about Ambedkar and other visionaries, and Buddhism; for instance, Kamble was first made aware of Ambedkar when she was a young child by her activist father, which leads her to assert that she is a “product of the Ambedkar movement” (Kamble 125), which in turn resulted in her pursuit of further education and her conversion to Buddhism.

About the importance given to place, Gajarawala writes that in these stories on untouchability, “location is a driving force and the passing of time is processed spatially” (184), which I have corroborated above with some

examples from the four autobiographies. “Most Dalit texts, in one way or another, address the politics of location...there is a careful attention to village geography, the delineation of space and its relation to power, the price of transgression, and so forth” (184). This opinion, too, is reflected in the autobiographies of Kamble, Valmiki, Bama, and Limbale. The first chapter of Bama’s text is a detailed description of her village, which she describes using the colloquial names for the peaks surrounding the village, the numerous ponds, the streets, and the temples and local shrines (Bama 1-12), revealing the attention paid to the local geography. Village geography is also given special attention because of the sometimes-troubled relationship Dalits had with the earth. For example, rain would often mean their homes made of mud and/or clay would crumble and leak, the dirt lanes would get slippery and dangerous, and the wells reserved for them would get infested with worms and bugs (Valmiki 23). They were at the mercy of nature.

Kamble describes how young daughters-in-law in her village would repeatedly try to run back to their mother’s house, which represented a safe space for them, as opposed to the oppression and abuse they faced at the hands of their husbands and in-laws in their new homes (Kamble 98-99). She also discusses how the space occupied by the upper-caste Hindus, including their streets and houses, was not to be polluted by the touch of the untouchables; “they were not allowed to use the regular road that was used by the higher castes. When somebody from these castes walked from the opposite direction, the Mahars had to leave the road, climb down into the shrubbery, and walk through the thorny bushes on the roadside” (Kamble 52). When the Mahar women went to the Brahmin neighbourhoods to deliver bundles of grass or

firewood to the Brahmin women, “every house in this lane had a chest-high platform, like a wall, to prohibit Mahars from directly reaching the door” (54). These examples clearly illustrate the relationship between power and space that used to exist in the villages.

The authors also address the “price of transgression” that Gajarawala mentions. They had to always be very aware of the restricted access they had to spaces that were clearly designated as the property or right of the upper-caste Hindus. For instance, Kamble narrates how if a Mahar woman failed to bow and greet an upper-caste man when they crossed paths, “all hell would break loose” (53) and the upper-caste man and the Mahar villagers themselves would direct their wrath at the unfortunate girl. Valmiki describes an incident where his classmate and him were viciously beaten when they mistakenly ate upper-caste cooked food inside an upper-caste household, a crime for which many people suggested that they should be “tied to a rope and hung from a tree” (Valmiki 60). These incidents are a clear indication of the kind of consequences that awaited Dalits if they dared to transgress their limits and not respect the place/power relationship.

So far, the unique treatment of realism and historicism in Dalit autobiographies, and the importance of place are two narrative elements I have explored. The third narrative structure that stands out as reflective of trauma in these autobiographies is the use of language. All of them, even in translation to English, incorporate the regional language in their narratives in certain ways. For example, in Baby Kamble’s autobiography, she refers to the months “Ashadh...Ashwin and Kartik” (Kamble 12) which are names the non-Dalit or non-Maharashtrian reader would be unfamiliar with. Mukherjee explains that

the word “*Joothan*,” the name of Valmiki’s autobiography which is a reference to the practice of collecting leftover and unwanted food from the upper-caste Hindus, “carries the connotations of ritual purity and pollution, because *jootha* means polluted. I feel that words such as *leftovers* or *leavings* are not adequate substitutes for *joothan*...*Scraps* and *slops* are somewhat closer to *joothan*, but they are associated more with pigs than humans” (Mukherjee xxxix), revealing the extent of trauma that even one word can contain. Valmiki mentions how much it pains him to look back at the humiliating treatment that was meted out to them, especially the degrading practice of having to grovel for *joothan* (11). As I mentioned before, Bama’s narrative is peppered with colloquial words and names; for instance, she uses the Tamil slang words “*di*” and “*ei*” (Bama 64). Lakshmi Holström writes that by doing so, Bama “overturns the decorum and aesthetics of received upper-class, upper-caste Tamil. She breaks the rules of written grammar and spelling throughout, elides words and joins them differently, demanding a new and different pattern of reading” (Holström xix).⁴⁴ The use of language in their autobiographies is therefore very deliberate. It is also interesting to focus on the names of the four autobiographies. “*The Prisons We Broke*,” “*Joothan*,” “*Akkarmashi*,” and “*Karukku*” are names that though mean very different things, have one thing in common—the use of the title itself to convey meaning and trauma to the readers.

This tendency to intersperse colloquial words and local dialect in their writing was initially read as revealing the inability of the Dalit author to handle serious literature. Elite critics “found the world of cultural references in

⁴⁴ Holström, Lakshmi. Introduction. *Karukku*, Oxford University Press, 2012.

Dalit writing confusing, shocking, and lacking in ‘cultural’ depth” (Mukherjee xxiii). The word “*akkarmashi*” means illegitimate child, which Limbale is. As Mukherjee rightly elaborates, while being brought up in a single-parent household might not appear problematic “to a Western reader and even to many Indian readers of this English translation” (xxiv), the word is packed with the pain Limbale had to face from his community due to being the “son of a whore.”⁴⁵ Language is the vehicle they use to reveal the trauma they have faced to the readers of their texts, and also to subtly restrict the monopolizing of Indian literature by elite writers who deemed their writing as unliterary. By using their regional language and colloquial words despite the fact that the upper-caste, upper-class, and non-Dalit reader would not be able to easily grasp the references, they assert their right to have a space and a voice that is not mediated by elite Indian authors and critics. It is also interesting to note that in the four autobiographies, the specific names of the upper-caste oppressors are not mentioned, although specific incidents of oppressions are elaborated on. This could be a deliberate move, I propose, because when you name the oppressor, it is a form of ascribing them with importance and legitimacy; anonymity defaces the specifics of the oppressors, and represents the oppression of Dalits within a larger, more universal, pattern of oppression. Bama’s decision to not only not name her oppressors, but also to not mention the names of family members is interesting. “The concept of anonymity in narration has a special function. By refusing to give names, Bama is perhaps trying to make a universal statement about oppression even though it exists at

⁴⁵ As Valmiki refers to himself (Valmiki ix).

the local level...Anonymity thus becomes a mode of invoking larger solidarities” (Pandian qtd. Kumar 233).

In Dalit texts, there is a new vocabulary introduced: literally, “in the form of dialects, of caste-bound speech, and of non-standardized” (Gajarawala 193) use of languages like Marathi, Hindi, and Tamil, and figuratively, since the language is one that represents a “resistance, atrocity, and violence heretofore unknown within the space of the literary” (193).

The use of metaphors and puns is another way in which these Dalit authors convey trauma in their narratives. The title of Bama’s autobiography, *Karukku*, is a pun. The word “*karukku*” in Tamil refers to the leaves of the Palmyra plant which have serrated edges and “are like double-edged swords” (Holström xv), and it is used as a pun by Bama, for the word contains within it the word “*karu*” which literally translates to seed, but also means growth and freshness; this therefore implies that Dalits will continue to grow and flourish, like a seed does, although their lives are filled with pressures and challenges, represented by the serrated edges of the Palmyra leaf (xv). I also propose that an incident that Valmiki narrates about when an upper-caste classmate, believing that Valmiki had become arrogant after being allowed to get an education, says “You will remain a Chuhra, however much you study” (Valmiki 33) and threw his bag and books on the muddy ground, is a metaphor for how upper-caste Hindus have historically reacted to Dalit revolts and aspirations. The other authors also indicate through specific instances,⁴⁶ which can be read as metaphors for a larger pattern of oppression, that the upper-

⁴⁶ See Bama 24, Limbale 76-78 and 83, and Kamble 108 for other specific instances of upper-caste resistance to Dalit education.

caste Hindus were resistant to a reform of the caste system through education of Dalits. As Arundhati Roy aptly says, “Dalit aspirations are a breach of peace” (Roy 22).⁴⁷

Another narrative element that is common to all the autobiographies is the use of myth, folklore, and superstitions in the narratives. Kamble writes extensively on the various superstitious beliefs held by the villagers about possession (of people by spirits) and forecasts about the future, and also about the marriage rituals that included coy, sexual innuendo-loaded songs about the mothers of the bride and groom (Kamble 91-93). Bama’s narrative too includes within it the playful song sung to the bride and groom (Bama 63), and her narrative is replete with regional words and colloquial references. I suggest that the authors incorporate myths and superstition in their narratives to bring out a contrast between their lives before, and after they had been educated and introduced to the ideas of Ambedkar and other thinkers, and to the humanist religion of Buddhism. As they write these autobiographies and re-live their trauma, their community’s senseless belief in these superstitions pains them; for instance, Limbale writes about when he realised that casteism is “a long tradition that has come down to us from our forefathers” (Limbale 76); and Kamble, who elaborates on how highly superstitious and religious the Mahars were in her narrative, scathingly addresses the upper-caste Hindus directly, writing that she has now realised “how utterly worthless your religion is” (Kamble 56) when after years of pointlessly praying to Hindu gods, Dalits continued to be downtrodden. These customs, rituals, and superstitions they depict represent “the composite apparatus of Brahminical dominance

⁴⁷ Roy, Arundhati. *The Doctor and the Saint. Annihilation of Caste*, Verso, 2014.

perpetrated through superstitions, illiteracy, ignorance, and oppressive practices” (Pandit x).

Therefore, the genre of autobiography, specifically Dalit autobiographies, has been explored as the ideal form for trauma literature, after which the narrative elements in *Karukku*, *The Prisons We Broke*, *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*, and *Joothan* have been examined as being reflective of Dalit trauma. The narrative structures that were studied include the representation of realism and historicity, the importance of place and its relationship to power structures, the use of colloquial and ‘unsophisticated’ language, the use of metaphors and puns, and the inclusion of myths and superstitions in the four autobiographies. As Gajarawala suggests, caste should be read in “the realm of the aesthetic: language, metaphor, form” (Gajarawala 29), which I have attempted to do. In the next chapter, I will look at the content of the autobiographies, analysing how the common themes and trajectories are reflective of trauma.

CHAPTER TWO

Trajectories and Themes in Dalit Autobiographies as Reflective of Trauma

Something that unmistakably stands out in the Dalit autobiographies chosen for study in this thesis is how a Dalit's childhood, if not life, is characterized by acute hunger; therefore, "hunger" can be identified as the first major theme that is reflective of Dalit trauma. Images and scenes portraying food and hunger abound in their writing; the title of one of the autobiographies, *Joothan*, itself is a reference to the degrading practice of receiving the leftover food from the upper-castes, and reflects the hunger and humiliation that the rest of the text delineates. The feeling of hunger is "not only physical and anthropological but also psychological and narratological," (Hichri),⁴⁸ which is made apparent in these narratives. Asma Hichri writes that in Toni Morrison's novels, and other African-American slave narratives, the theme of hunger is related to the experience of deprivation, of course, but also contains within itself patterns of appropriation and "domination devised by their enslavers," which can be extended to the theme of hunger in Dalit autobiographies as well. In this chapter, the common themes, motifs, and trajectories that reflect trauma in Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*, Bama's *Karukku*, Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* are going to be highlighted.

⁴⁸ Hichri, Asma. "Hunger "Beyond Appetite: Nurture Dialectics in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, vol. 44 no. 2, 2013, pp. 195-220. Web.

Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi* abounds with accounts of growing up hungry and never having enough food to feel satiated. As G.N Devy pertinently describes it, his autobiography is a "narration of humiliation and hunger" (xxv),⁴⁹ which is evidenced by lines such as "I always felt half-fed...our stomachs were as greedy as a beggar's sack" (Limbale 3),⁵⁰ "I realized God had made a mistake by endowing man with a stomach" (8), "The teacher asked the high-caste boys and girls to collect the leftovers on a piece of paper and give it to us" (3), and "Hunger is bigger than man. Hunger is more vast than the seven circles of hell. Man is only as big as a bhakari,⁵¹ and only as big as his hunger. Hunger is more powerful than man. A single stomach is like the whole earth. Hunger seems no bigger than your open palm, but it can swallow the whole world and let out a belch. There would have been no wars if there was no hunger" (50). These lines of Limbale's also serve to highlight a point about trauma literature that was made in the introduction—Caruth believed that trauma is hard to express in words, but trauma theorists now disagree. While the first of the literary trauma theorists, including Caruth, believed that in the aftermath of a traumatic experience, the person may tend to completely forget it and be incapable of expressing it in words, it is now believed that "traumatic amnesia is a myth" (Pederson 334)⁵². After extensive research, trauma theorists in the fields of psychology and literature believe instead that "proponents of traumatic

⁴⁹ Devy, G.N. Introduction. *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*, by Sharankumar Limbale, 1984, translated by Santosh Bhoomkar, Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. xiii-xxvi.

⁵⁰ Limbale, Sharankumar. *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*. Translated by Santosh Bhoomkar, Oxford University Press, 2003.

⁵¹ Bhakari is an "unleavened bread made of millet" (Limbale 115).

⁵² Pederson, Joshua. "Speak, Trauma: Towards a Revised Understanding of Literary Trauma Theory." *Narrative*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2014, pp. 333-353.

amnesia conflate an unwillingness to think about trauma with an inability to do so” (337), and while the memory of the event(s) can be altered in the aftermath, it cannot be altogether forgotten. These authors’ eloquence in describing traumatic situations like their perpetual, gnawing, hunger proves this postulation of trauma theorists like McNally and Pederson, i.e. that trauma is definitely memorable and describable.

In *Joothan*, Omprakash Valmiki describes how the Chuhras⁵³ were given barely any payment by the Tagas⁵⁴ after they had harvested the latter’s fields, but they did not and could not protest against this injustice when confronted with their hunger; although they resolved to ask for fair pay every year, “the resolutions passed at the meetings evaporated in thin air the moment harvesting began” (Valmiki 9).⁵⁵ He elaborates on the eponymous act of *joothan* and how humiliated he is when he thinks about how his community would greatly relish these leftovers, and also clearly remembers the day his mother stopped accepting *joothan* from anyone (12). He, like other Dalit authors, also describes being bullied for eating pork or beef; when the teachers themselves used to taunt him for eating pork, he would remember angrily “all the Tyagis who came in the darkness of the night to the Bhangi (meaning untouchables, of which Chuhra is a subcaste) *basti*⁵⁶ to eat pork” (21).

⁵³ The “Untouchable” caste to which Valmiki belongs.

⁵⁴ Upper-caste Hindus; Taga is “the abbreviation of the surname Tyagi” (Valmiki 1).

⁵⁵ Valmiki, Omprakash. *Joothan: A Dalit’s Life*. Translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, Columbia University Press, 2003.

⁵⁶ A *basti* literally means settlement, a “place where people have settled in villages and in towns or squatted without official sanction in towns. Often people of the same caste live side by side” (Valmiki 155).

When a cow died in the village where Limbale grew up, the upper-castes required the Mahars⁵⁷ to come and get rid of it, yet at the same time they ridiculed them for eating beef. As explained in the introduction, this is related to the idea of purity and pollution; it dates back to the time when the Gupta kings has banned their subjects from eating beef, but the outcastes continued to do so for sustenance, and therefore, based on their handling and eating of dead cows, they were relegated to live in the outskirts of the villages, and this cycle then carried on for centuries. Bama⁵⁸ describes how the Naickers, the upper-caste Hindus in her village, would get furious if the Parayars⁵⁹ ate even one or two of the nuts while shelling the harvested groundnuts, and she also brings up the same hypocrisy of the upper-caste Hindus that Limbale and Valmiki recognise when she says “So many people of other castes eat beef secretly these days, it’s getting more and more difficult for us to get any meat. All of them eat their fill, but see, it’s only we people who are called low-caste” (Bama 64).⁶⁰

One of the things Bama highlights about life in the convent is how although the nuns take a vow to live in poverty, there is no real poverty in the convent. “When the bell rang, there was a meal. And was it just rice that we were served? There was always food of all kinds” whereas back in her village, where people live in real poverty, “they live on gruel every day...the struggle to fill their bellies is the main struggle after all” (77). Hunger is one of the main reasons that Dalits are not able to break free from the cycle of abuse,

⁵⁷ The “Untouchable” caste to which Limbale belongs.

⁵⁸ “Bama’ is the pen-name of a Tamil Dalit woman from a Roman Catholic family” (Holstrom xv).

⁵⁹ The “Untouchable” caste to which Bama belongs.

⁶⁰ Bama. *Karukku*. Translated by Lakshmi Holstrom, Oxford University Press, 2012.

which she recognises when she says “for how many days can one fight in the name of justice and strength when one is hungry and thirsty? Even for a daily meal we have to depend on someone else. We dance to someone else’s tune, even for a serving of rice. And of course, knowing this fully well the wealthy control and crush Dalits” (80). Limbale is also aware of how hunger dictates a Dalit’s life; he says that for the sake of food, “a woman becomes a whore and a man a thief” (Limbale 8). A scene he describes which starkly depicts the extent of their hunger is when Santamai, his grandmother, used to collect fresh cow-dung during the harvest season, retrieve the “undigested grains of jowar⁶¹” from the excrement, wash and dry the grains, grind them to make flour, and then eat the *bhakari* made from it (10). He laments that “starvation was written in our lot from the moment of our birth” (21). In Baby Kamble’s narrative, she describes how they lived in a state of “ever hunger,” and only in one month of the whole year which was considered holy did they manage to eat well (Kamble 28).⁶² The women had to beg for provisions from the contemptuous upper-caste shopkeepers, who would throw food for them from a distance.

There are numerous other examples in these texts which demonstrate the extent of the hunger they all felt almost constantly while growing up. Food and hunger, to reiterate, is one of the ways that the upper-castes attempt to keep the caste system in place; as all the authors describe, they were willing to put up with the abuse and humiliation because they depended on the benevolence of the upper-castes for food. Furthermore, as Roy explains in her

⁶¹ Jowar means millets (Limbale 115).

⁶² Kamble, Baby. *The Prisons we Broke*, Translated by Maya Pandit, Orient Longman, 2008.

introduction to *Annihilation of Caste*, inter-dining and inter-marriage are two of the major practices followed to maintain the purity of each *varna* (Roy 41).⁶³ The idea that Dalits were considered so “polluted” that the people from the upper-caste would not even touch them while giving them their leftover food or while pouring them water is truly deplorable. Limbale wonders “Is one’s caste more important than one’s friend? Is caste more important than thirst?” (Limbale 20). “What is so peculiar about our touch that it pollutes water, food, houses, clothes, graveyards, tea shops, God, religion, and even man?” (81). In *Karukku*, Bama writes “What did it mean when they called us ‘Paraya?’ ...It was a long time before I realized that Paatti⁶⁴ was bringing home the unwanted food that the Naickers were ready to throw away” (Bama 16). As I have highlighted, hunger was an all-encompassing, deciding force in their lives, especially when they were children, and those experiences of hunger and humiliation stayed with them even after they moved away and grew up, as is evident by their recollections of abject poverty and hunger. In fact, Bama says that to her, it seems like “our society is divided into those who toil and those who sit down and feast” i.e. those who are hungry and those who are not. Limbale describes how they were sometimes so hungry that they were driven to steal (Limbale 21), and Valmiki reports that during the monsoon season, their wells would get contaminated with long-worms, but “we had no alternative but to drink that water. We did not have the right to take water from the well of the Tagas” (Valmiki 23), thus showing that even at the risk of their own health and knowing that the water in their well was full of worms,

⁶³ Roy, Arundhati. *The Doctor and the Saint. Annihilation of Caste*, by B.R. Ambedkar, 1936, Verso, 2014.

⁶⁴ The term she uses to refer to her grandmother

they did not dare to drink the water from the wells reserved for the upper-caste Hindus. These extensive descriptions of their hunger can be read through the model of literary trauma theory that I cited in the introductory chapter for the purposes of this thesis, offered by Joshua Pederson; one of the three factors that he believes should be focused on in trauma writing is “augmented narrative detail,” which can definitely be applied here. Another factor is a shift of focus from what is *not* said in the text, or what is apparently forgotten, to what is actually described in the text, like these descriptions of hunger. This calls for a departing from the “potentially harmful” (Pederson 338) theory of traumatic amnesia, which he believes takes agency away from the victims, and a focusing on how speaking/writing about trauma is cathartic and possibly “hastens the process of rehabilitation” (338).

All these experiences, and several others they describe, make it obvious that the hunger, and the humiliation they faced on the basis of their hunger, was definitely traumatic for them, and shows that “hunger” can be seen as one of the themes that reflect trauma in Dalit autobiographies. As I explored in the introduction, one definition of trauma is that it is an event that has a clearly recognizable cause “that would evoke significant symptoms of distress in almost everyone” where that cause could be something like assault, war, or famine, amongst others (Visser).⁶⁵ The acute hunger that they grew up with can definitely be seen as a cause that evokes distress in the reader; as Limbale writes, their situation was so dire that “most of the time, all my sisters went to sleep without eating anything. Nobody woke them up for dinner,

⁶⁵ Visser, Irene. “Trauma theory and Postcolonial Literary Studies.” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2011, pp. 270-282.

because there was nothing to eat. I at least ate something. Mother only gulped water” (Limbale 21). However rich or poor, hunger is a universal feeling, and readers can relate, to some basic extent, to their accounts of hunger.

Furthermore, this hunger isn’t a result of any famine or drought caused by the environment, but inflicted upon them by the cruel caste system, which, in my opinion, intensifies the traumatic nature of hunger faced by their community.

It is also apparent on reading these books that even hunger seems to be biased and affects Dalit women more than it does men; as I mentioned, Limbale’s grandmother would suppress her own hunger for the sake of her grandchildren, and would eat dry *bhakaris* as if “pushing garbage into a furnace” (11), and his mother and sisters always went to bed hungry; Bama too describes how “sometimes we children would finish off whatever gruel or porridge there was. Then it was my mother who had to go hungry” (Bama 73). Kamble describes how the young daughters-in-law of the household had to wait for everyone else to finish eating before they could eat, and how pregnant women had to suffer because of not having anything to eat after giving birth, “not even the water leftover from boiling rice,” thus seriously risking their lives (Kamble 57). Food insecurity and hunger “disproportionately affects female-headed households, households with children, and people of colour” (Chilton)⁶⁶ as research shows about African-American households, and the same can be applied to Dalit households. It is important to point out here that the Dalit experience is specific to its time and place, as it is a result of caste-

⁶⁶ Chilton, Mariana. “Hunger of the Body and Hunger of the Mind: African American Women’s Perceptions of Food Insecurity, Health and Violence.” *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2007, pp. 116-125. Web. Accessed 07 December 2016.

based oppression in India, but it is interesting to draw parallels with the experiences of other oppressed groups, so that Dalit problems can be seen as part of a global pattern of power and oppression. This leads me to the consideration of “gender” as a trajectory that is reflective of trauma in Dalit autobiographies, though this will be more thoroughly discussed in the next chapter.

Using Ranajit Guha’s definition of a subaltern, Dalit women are affected by three levels of subordination; namely “her sex, her poverty and her caste” (Guha qtd. in Woerkens 225).⁶⁷ “The gendering of trauma continues to be a silenced space. There is a need to highlight and acknowledge the gendered nature of suffering” (Segalo).⁶⁸ Sharankumar Limbale, an *akkarmashi* or illegitimate child whose mother was the “keep” of different men throughout her life, is of the opinion that “every time the dominant classes attack and exploit the weak, they violate their women” (Limbale xxiv). Dalit literature and the Dalit movement as a whole helped him realise that his mother is not an adulteress, but rather “a victim of the social system” (ix) because it is she who has had to “carry the rape in her womb. That rape has to be borne, fed, and raised” (xxiv). Limbale’s autobiography is replete with examples of how Masamai and Santamai, his mother and grandmother respectively, had to sacrifice so much and suffer on the basis of their gender. He blames his mother’s suffering on the fact that she was beautiful; “to be born beautiful among Dalits is a curse...Masamai was beautiful and she

⁶⁷ Woerkens, Martine van. “A Life Less Ordinary: The female subaltern and Dalit literature in contemporary India.” *Dalit Literatures in India*, edited by Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak, Routledge, 2016, pp. 224- 237.

⁶⁸ Segalo, Puleng. “Trauma and Gender.” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, vol. 9, no. 9, 2015, pp. 447-454. Web. Accessed 07 December 2016.

suffered for it” (37-38). In exchange for providing them with work and food, the upper-caste villagers had their way with the Dalit women, and Limbale poignantly expresses his distress at this when he says “I can’t bear to think of Masamai caught between bread and lust” (64), which she sadly was, as she had to find a way to make ends meet and provide for her children as they did not have a steady father figure in their household, except for Dada, the Muslim partner of their grandmother. While Lakshmi Holström, the translator of *Karukku*, identifies that the autobiography doesn’t make any clear connections between gender and caste oppression, she feels that it still “argues so powerfully against patriarchy and caste oppression” (Holström xiv).⁶⁹ Omprakash Valmiki describes a pivotal moment in his life when Sukhdev Singh Tyagi speaks insultingly to his mother when giving her a basket of leftovers, in response to which “goddess Durga entered my mother’s eyes...She emptied the basket right there” (Valmiki 12), thus resisting, at least for a moment, both gender and caste discrimination.

Critic Puleng Segalo writes that in the case of African women, “subordinate social status under the apartheid regime intersected complexly with class exploitation and racial oppression” (Segalo). Similarly, in addition to class and caste oppression, Dalit women have a subordinate social status in Dalit life; many men turned to alcohol as an escape from their lives of poverty and degradation, and in many cases, they gambled away the little money they managed to earn, and even sold their land and houses, in order to drink. Kamble addresses this when she writes about how they only had sufficient

⁶⁹ Holström, Lakshmi. Introduction. *Karukku*, by Bama, 2000, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. xv- xxi.

food when her father managed to not squander away the money he earned, especially because he did not allow his wife to work, and shut her in the house “like a bird in a cage” (Kamble 5). If a couple had children, “when their men run away from shouldering family responsibilities, it is they⁷⁰ who are responsible to run their families with a meagre income” (Kumar 217).

An important connection that can be made between African-American narratives and Dalit narratives is the importance of the role played by the grandmother, which is an example of the intergenerational quality of the collective Dalit experience. There is an “intergenerational transmission of spiritual values” (Brown)⁷¹ from African-American women to their grandchildren, and I propose that the same can be said about Santamai and Limbale’s relationship— for instance, through Santamai’s relationship with her partner, Dada (who is Muslim). He is a kind of father-figure to Limbale, who feels more of a connection to and love for Dada than for his biological father, a man he rarely saw growing up. He says “neither his religion nor my caste was a hindrance to us. Is it a man who is a hindrance to religion or the other way round?” (Limbale 39). The way Santamai and Dada are able to live together peacefully, while praying to different gods,⁷² makes him wonder why people are so bothered about religion and caste. Santamai is very attached to her grandson, and when he leaves to college, it is she who tries to get the money to pay for it. It is obvious that his mother and grandmother have had a

⁷⁰ The Dalit women.

⁷¹ Brown, Teresa Fry. *“God Don’t Like Ugly”*: *Intergenerational Transmission of African American Spiritual Values by Grandmothers and Othermothers as Depicted in African American Women’s Literature, 1960- present*. Dissertation, Univeristy of Denver, 1996. Web

⁷² Santamai “prayed to goddesses like Ambabai and Laxmi. On the other hand Dada uttered names like Haidari Khwaja, Bandenawaj, Hajimling, Langishawali, Sidhayappa, Allah Bismillah, Maulah” (Limbale 33).

major impact on Limbale, for he says “my history is my mother’s. At the most my grandmother’s” (ix). In Bama’s *Karukku* too she mentions how hard her grandmother worked all her life when she writes “At home, my mother and grandmother laboured from sunrise to sunset, without any rest...Everybody said that my Paatti was a true and proper servant” (Bama 48-49), and this instilled in her the importance of hard work. At an age when these old women should be resting, they had to work from dawn to dusk to scrape together some money or food. They act as anchors, alleviating trauma in whatever way they can, and functioning as the impetus to overcome trauma. Baby Kamble’s opening words in her autobiography are “Children love their grandparents’ home...Naturally, children would prefer their grandparents’ home to that of their own parents” (Kamble 1), as she was brought up by her grandparents. These authors have inherited both knowledge and a negation of trauma from the intergenerational link between them and their grandparents. The issue of gender as reflective of trauma in Dalit autobiographies is one that needs detailed exploration, which I have done in the next chapter.

The only way to try and break free of their lives of poverty, hunger, and abuse in the villages was to try and get an education, and this is exactly what Limbale, Valmiki, Bama, Kamble, and most other Dalit authors strived to do. “Education and enlightenment” is thus the next theme that is common to these autobiographies, and one way that it is reflective of trauma is that when these authors look back at the abuse and humiliation they faced (after being educated), it is almost like re-living that same trauma again. B. R. Ambedkar recommended to his fellow Dalits to “shine by your knowledge” as Woerkens quotes (235), for he believed education was the only way for them to rise

above the years of abuse they had faced. Baby Kamble describes how the backward outlook of the villagers began gradually changing once they hear what Ambedkar had to say about the importance of education. As Arundhati Roy writes in her essay *The Doctor and the Saint*, “the colonisation of knowledge was a central tenet of the caste system” (Roy 96). From not being able to study the Vedas centuries ago, to not being allowed to learn Sanskrit decades ago, to now, when cases of harassment of Dalit students in universities are aplenty, education has been recognized as a threat to the status quo by the upper-caste Hindus. Dalit aspirations are seen as “a breach of peace” (22).

In the introduction to *Joothan*, Arun Prabha Mukherjee writes that Ambedkar was “constantly reiterating how they were denied access to education, ownership of land, and jobs above the level of scavenging, picking up garbage, cleaning latrines, and other menial occupations” (Mukherjee xxviii).⁷³ In the autobiographies, Bama, Valmiki, Limbale, and Kamble all describe in detail how much trouble they had to go through to get an education. Not being allowed to go or not having enough money was only the first hurdle, and the harassment and abuse they constantly faced from the other students and the teachers took a toll on them. Valmiki describes how even after finally being allowed to go to school, “the boys would beat me in any case, but the teachers also punished me. They tried all sorts of strategies so that I would run away from school and take up the kind of work for which I was born” (Valmiki 3). Shockingly, he also tells the readers how his

⁷³ Mukherjee, Arun Prabha. Introduction. *Joothan*, by Omprakash Valmiki, translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, 1997, Columbia University Press, 2003, pp xvii-xlvi.

perception of teachers has been permanently soured in part because of how some teachers he had would “fondle good-looking boys and invite them to their homes and sexually abuse them” (5). The headmaster, after a few days, makes Valmiki sweep the whole school and miss his classes, and it was only because of the determination and persistence of his father that he was allowed to sit in class with the other students again. He describes how anytime he dared to raise a question or disagree with the teacher, they would be incensed that “an untouchable is daring to talk back” (26). The teachers that he writes about seem too deeply entrenched in their own archaic beliefs about untouchability to give these students a fair education, but somehow, after crossing numerous obstacles, he successfully finished his high school education and entered university.

Sharankumar Limbale too describes the terrible conditions in which he tried to get an education. The village school was run in a temple, and while the upper-caste Hindu boys and girls sat inside the temple, the Mahar boys and girls sat at the entrance of the temple, as they were not allowed to set foot in it. They were still expected to “smear the floors and walls with cowdung paste” (Limbale 4) and sweep the floors. During the monsoons, the classes were held at the house of an upper-caste Marwari, where he and the other Mahar students “sat amidst the footwear flung all around us” (5). Valmiki and Limbale both had to balance getting an education and doing odd jobs; they both describe how they were taunted by fellow classmates for having the job of dragging away and skinning the dead animals found in the villages. Bama in *Karukku* describes how she was a very good student, and because her elder brother drilled into her the importance of education in liberating them from their

shackles, she always studied very hard. When she tops her examinations one year, she wonders “Is it impossible for a Harijan to study, or what? I felt a certain pride then, a desire to prove that we could study as well as others, to make progress” (Bama 21). However, she too realises that her status as an “untouchable” complicates things, and that in this country, it seems like “however much you study, whatever you take up, caste discrimination stalks us in every nook and corner and drives us into a frenzy. It is because of this that we are unable to study well and progress like everyone else... if ever a Dalit gets wise to this and wants to live with some honour and self-respect, they jump up and down as if something really outrageous is happening. They seem to conspire to keep us in place” (26-27), where the “they” refers to the upper-caste Hindus who seem to be unwilling to allow the Untouchables to get an education, for this will mean gradually losing their hold over them. Kamble also recognises how upper-caste Hindus are implicit in trying to keep the caste system in place by destroying their reasoning and “ability to think” (Kamble 49). Until Babasaheb Ambedkar made them realise the importance of education, they “were not human beings” and were only alive in the sense that their eyes “moved in their sockets” but they had no awareness beyond this (122). These authors hold up a mirror to their society and show the readers how they are deterred as much as possible from getting an education and becoming aware of their situation. They are verbally, physically, and even sexually abused by the teachers. Their experiences show that the process of gaining education and becoming knowledgeable and literate can indeed be traumatic.

This idea of the upper-caste and upper-class trying to keep Dalits in place brings in the practice of reservation and quotas. In government jobs and universities, there are a certain number of seats that are reserved for those belonging to castes known as “Scheduled Castes.” Recently, there have been protests against this practice by people saying that merit is the only factor that should matter in gaining admission to universities and securing jobs; however, as Roy rightly points out, this is based on the absurd notion that “‘merit’ exists in an ahistorical social vacuum and that the advantages that come from privileged-caste social networking and the establishment’s entrenched hostility towards the subordinated castes are not factors that deserve consideration” (Roy 34). Bama, Valmiki, Limbale, and Kamble all describe the hardships that they had to endure until they got admission into universities, where again they had to deal with numerous burdens, like still being asked what caste they belong to and being ridiculed for wearing tattered clothes. The moment these authors gain a sort of enlightenment is when they move away from their villages to the cities for higher education, which highlights how important education is. Limbale describes how he changed after going to boarding school; “there were Dalit boys around me all the time. Buddhism began to cast its spell on me... We hated the very idea of untouchability. With our education, there grew in us a sense of pride. Casteism made us bitter... Everywhere we were condemned. Our houses were in places that other villagers used as latrines... Our caste had been thrust upon us even before we were born” (Limbale 74-76). A fellow Dalit student introduces Valmiki to the writings of Ambedkar, after which Valmiki felt as though a new chapter in his life had begun, and he started to become very involved with Dalit activism and

writing. He soon became disillusioned with religion too even though he was repeatedly warned that “education did not mean that one should stop obeying the hallowed customs of our people” (Valmiki 118). Kamble describes Ambedkar as being the epitome of ‘sheel and satwa’⁷⁴ and writes how the “young were simply electrified” by his words once they started learning about him. These experiences of the authors, where they describe the process of moving away from their villages as going hand-in-hand with their education and enlightenment, also reiterates the point made in previous chapters about the importance of ‘place’ or space in Dalit trauma narratives.

In fact, Limbale directly addresses these privileged-caste protests against reservation in his autobiography. He describes how whenever he would hear of protests against reservation or plans to get rid of it, he used to get scared. “If these facilities are cancelled, give us our own Dalitsthan. We are educated only because these facilities exist; they were like a father to us. If there were no facilities we would have no such education, we would have been at home grazing cattle and helping our parents. Instead we were living in cities away from home, in order to get an education. Our parents were toiling to death there. I often thought of their hard labour, hunger, and hopes for our future...Those who say that facilities must be cancelled should first face casteism themselves” (Limbale 89-90).

In their autobiographies, the Dalit authors show how their own people believe that being born into their caste is their fate and that they shouldn’t rebel against it, and they have come to believe in their “untouchable” status to

⁷⁴ Where “sheel” means character and “satwa” means truth (Kamble 177).

such an extent that they hold themselves back. Dalit children either cannot focus on their education because they have to do menial jobs, or they are bullied and harassed in schools by their teachers, and if they make it to university, their right to education is challenged.⁷⁵ They face so many obstacles, but the only way to enlightenment and change is, as they prove, through education, which is what their iconic leader Ambedkar campaigned so strongly for. Therefore, “education and enlightenment” is a theme in these Dalit autobiographies that is also reflective of trauma. It is because of education alone that they “managed to survive among those who spoke the language of caste-difference and discrimination” (Bama 22).

Finally, another trajectory that also plays an important role in these autobiographies is that of “religion.” For Dalits, religion is reflective of their trauma because it is Hinduism and its followers who had for centuries upheld the caste system. As Ambedkar stressed to his followers, the main reason for the suffering and trauma of the Dalits was not the practice of untouchability only, but the whole caste system and the entire institution of Hinduism itself, which legitimised and perpetuated casteism. Many of the traumatic incidents they describe, like having to receive leftover food from the upper-caste Hindus, not being allowed to enter the temples, and even the basic fact of having to live on the outskirts of villages in flimsy settlements, along with various animals like pigs and dogs, seem to be religiously sanctioned. As I explored in the introduction, while the origins of caste are still debated and

⁷⁵ By the upper-classes and upper-castes, as they all demonstrate. “The high-caste people hated our confidence” Limbale writes, which they gained after getting educated on the injustice of their treatment. But as these educated Dalits realized, “self-esteem had unusual strengths” (Limbale 76).

unclear, the *Rigveda* and the *Manusmriti*, which are both important foundational texts in Hinduism, could be possible sources, and Hinduism has since held the caste system in place for centuries. The authority of the upper-castes is “sanctioned by religion” (Limbale 38) and they use this very authority to exploit Dalits. Therefore, religion can be analysed as a theme that is reflective of trauma in these books. Of the four Dalit authors in question, Bama is a Dalit Christian, and Limbale, Kamble, and Valmiki are all born Hindus but become disillusioned with Hinduism and captivated by Buddhism, the religion Ambedkar famously converted to along with millions of his followers.

Limbale recognises the pivotal role that Buddhism has played in the lives of Dalits. After getting an education, more and more young Dalits started to become aware of their rights, and also started to realise why they were treated the way they were. “A generation of militant youths generated by the movement also threatened the Hindus and the thought of untouchables living contented lives with jobs made available to them, irritated them. Dalits refused the lowly jobs that they once did for the Hindus. Such changes within the Dalit community occurred with their conversion to Buddhism” (Limbale 103). Also, because of the situation he grew up in with his grandmother being a Hindu (whose husband had left her) and her partner being a Muslim, he always questions the divisions caused by the institutions of religion and caste: “In the name of religion there is bloody carnage, riots, and crusades...Why does religion hinder them? Why is man imprisoned by convention?” (102). Valmiki also does not associate himself with Hinduism and says he has “no faith in these stone idols” (Valmiki 107), and is attracted by the values of Buddhism.

He does not understand how people can defend the *varna* system and the Hindu scriptures, which in his opinion try to establish archaic values instead of promoting equality and liberty. The fact that the caste system has upholders to this day confounds him; it is a “social order in the clutches of hopelessness, poverty, illiteracy, narrow-mindedness, religious inertia, and priestocracy, a social order embroiled in ritualism...the Hindus who worship trees and plants, beasts and birds, why are they so intolerant of Dalits?” (154).

Kamble, like the other authors, wonders why if they were truly Hindus, the upper-caste Hindus treated them so miserably. Growing up, the Dalits in Veergaon naively spent so much time in the “senseless worship of stones” (Kamble 11), praying to deaf ears in the hope of a better future, although it is the very gods they were praying to that apparently inflicted their lives of suffering and poverty upon them. “Hindu philosophy had discarded us as dirt and thrown into their garbage pits, on the outskirts of the village. We lived in the filthiest conditions possible. Yet Hindu rites and rituals were dearest to our hearts” (18). This is evident in her narration of the many rituals and superstitions that were common in her community, since the villagers believed that spirits and goddesses frequently possessed the women. This is why she laments that now, years after Ambedkar’s death, Dalits seem to be going back into the folds of a religion that has systematically traumatised them for centuries; “you narrate stories of gods as if it is true history” she says to the educated Dalits today, when the religion that they should be following is Buddhism.

Bama, on the other hand, shows how caste transcends the boundaries of religion, as even though she is a Dalit Christian, her life too is marred by

her experience within the convent. “Religious conversion in India has hardly brought any remarkable improvement in the lives of Dalits” (Kumar 229). In fact, Lakshmi Holström describes *Karukku* as being focused on the “single issue of caste oppression within the Catholic Church and its institutions” (Holström xvii). Bama Faustina Soosairaj is a Tamil Dalit Christian, and after obtaining an education, she decided to become a nun in order to work for and help educate low-caste children, because when she was teaching in a convent, she realized that the nuns “collectively oppressed Dalit children” (Bama 23). But once she enters the order, she realises that “Tamil people were looked upon as a lower caste,” so not only was she being discriminated on the basis of her caste and gender, but also her ethnicity. Gradually, she realises how rampant discrimination is within the institutions of the Catholic church. Instead of being taught, the lower-caste children looked after “sweeping the premises, swabbing and washing the classrooms, and cleaning out the lavatories...in the convent, as well, they spoke very insultingly about low-caste people” (25), and she comes to the realisation that “in the churches, Dalits are the most in numbers alone. In everything else, they are the least. It is only the upper-castes who hold all the high positions, show off their authority, and throw their weight about. And if the Dalits become priests and nuns, they are pushed aside and marginalized...It is because of this that even though Dalits like me might wish to take up the path of renunciation, we find there is no place for us there” (80). Therefore, she decided to leave that life behind, although it included many comforts and advantages for her. Her experience made her understand that it doesn’t seem that one can ever escape their caste status. Just like upper-caste Hindus, the upper-caste Christians discriminated

against Dalit Christians too. As she poignantly says, the upper-caste priests and nuns teach the Dalit Christians “to shut their eyes when they pray, with deliberate intention that they should not open their eyes and see. They teach them to shackle their arms together and to prostrate themselves in prayer at full length on the ground so that they should never stand tall. What kind of piety can this be?” Bama therefore shows how as a Dalit Christian woman, she has to defy “the Hindu tradition, the Dalit tradition, and the Christian tradition” (Kumar 238) as well as gender roles imposed upon her.

Hunger, gender, education and enlightenment, and religion are thus the four themes that have been highlighted as reflective of trauma in the Dalit narratives of Bama, Omprakash Valmiki, Sharankumar Limbale, and Baby Kamble. By comparing and contrasting the varied experiences of these authors in this chapter, certain common themes and trajectories were identified, which show that while their experiences are personal and specific, the trauma they faced can be seen as a cultural, collective trauma. This echoes the point I made in the introduction about Dalit trauma being collective trauma; as Jeffrey C. Alexander writes, collective, cultural trauma occurs when a group of people feel that the trauma they have endured “leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Alexander 6).⁷⁶ This is definitely true for the millions of Dalits who were marginalized for centuries, including the authors chosen for study in this thesis. These themes also highlight other points about Dalit trauma that I made in the introductory chapter, including that Dalit trauma does not conform to existing, accepted

⁷⁶ Alexander, Jeffrey C. *Trauma: A Social Theory*. Polity, 2012.

critical discourse on trauma in that it is not trauma that is abrupt, but rather trauma that plays out in other, more long-drawn-out ways, like those highlighted in this chapter. The model of literary trauma theory that Joshua Pederson puts forth, which was cited in the introduction, where he calls for a shift of focus from the idea that trauma is neither memorable nor describable, was used to augment my arguments here.

CHAPTER THREE

Gender in Dalit Autobiographies as Reflective of Trauma

Of the four autobiographies chosen for this thesis, two are written by men and two by women, allowing for a balanced perspective on how gender impacts the lives of Dalit men and Dalit women differently. *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi* and *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* while documenting the specific experiences of two Dalit men, Sharankumar Limbale and Omprakash Valmiki respectively, also represent the collective struggle of Dalit men; similarly, the specific struggles of Bama and Baby Kamble as narrated in *Karukku* and *The Prisons We Broke*, respectively, are reflective of the daily struggles of Dalit women. In this chapter, I aim to explore the similarities and differences in the experiences of Dalit men and women, and show how they are ultimately subsumed under the umbrella of caste-based oppression.

From a very young age, Dalit children began to work and help their parents in any way possible. One of the jobs that was the sole responsibility of the men and boys of the locality was the disposal of animal carcasses from the neighbouring upper-caste villages, which involved the skinning and butchering of the dead animal, whose flesh and organs the whole community would divide amongst themselves and eat. Both Valmiki and Limbale describe this traumatic experience in their autobiographies. “As a tough boy I was always asked to help in small ways. I used to hold the legs. Men peeled the skin off with knives. My hands would be sticky with blood and flesh” (14)⁷⁷ writes Limbale, and Valmiki too describes how he hated the process: “My

⁷⁷ Limbale, Sharankumar. *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*. Translated by Santosh Bhoomkar, Oxford University Press, 2003.

hands were trembling as I held the knife... That day something broke inside me. I skinned the bullock under Uncle's guidance. I felt like I was drowning in a swamp, I was being drawn into the very quagmire that I had tried to escape from. The wounds from the torment that I suffered with Uncle on that hot afternoon are still fresh on my skin" (Valmiki 41).⁷⁸ They also face other occupational hazards; for instance, Limbale describes how the men in charge of manually lighting the gas lamps in the village were burnt when a gas lamp exploded, splattering them with kerosene and lighting them on fire (Limbale 32). In the introduction to *Joothan*, Arun Prabha Mukherjee aligns Dalit writers with other writers from marginalized groups like "aboriginal writers in the United States and Canada" when she quotes both Limbale's and Valmiki's stance that only they can write about such traumatic experiences; non-Dalits cannot claim to understand and write about issues like the skinning of dead animals (Mukherjee xxxiv).⁷⁹ This is congruent with the idea of representation of Dalits that I had discussed in the previous chapter, and highlights again the importance of Dalits representing their own marginalized voice by writing autobiographies.

Furthermore, as Valmiki and Limbale highlight, their caste followed them like a shadow even when they moved to cities and towns in search of higher education or jobs; "urban spaces too, were segregated along caste lines. Dalit men were confined to the worst jobs, the dirtiest work in industry and relegated to the most squalid neighbourhoods" (Gupta 312).⁸⁰ Valmiki

⁷⁸ Valmiki, Omprakash. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*. Translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, Columbia University Press, 2003.

⁷⁹ Mukherjee, Arun Prabha. Introduction. *Joothan*, by Omprakash Valmiki, translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, 1997, Columbia University Press, 2003, pp xvii-xlvi.

⁸⁰ Gupta, Charu. "Feminine, criminal or manly? Imaging Dalit masculinities in colonial north India." *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2010, pp. 309-342.

describes how after facing all odds and managing to get a job in Dehra Dun,⁸¹ he had to search for a whole month before finding a house, because the moment they heard his surname and realised he is a Dalit, the landlords would make an excuse to not rent out the apartment to him (Valmiki 148). Limbale mentions that when he was transferred to the town Latur for work, his caste posed a problem in finding a place to live in, and finally, he had to live in a decrepit neighbourhood where “the houses did not have bathrooms” and because of it being situated near a graveyard, “the whole place smelt of burning flesh” (Limbale 107).

Anupama Rao identifies and contextualises the emasculation of Dalit men caused by the caste system while discussing one of the consequences as “leading to a complex set of fantasies of retribution that involve the sexual violation of upper-caste women in retaliation for their emasculation” (Rao 11)⁸² which they see as a way of asserting their masculinity in the public sphere. This can be corroborated by an incident narrated by Limbale in which he and a friend began questioning an upper-caste classmate on why she thought that their touch would pollute her; in fact, he says “we wanted to rape her by way of revenge. Shobhi stood before us as a symbol of the caste system” (Limbale 71). As Charu Gupta writes about Dalit masculinity in colonial times, “claiming manhood, for example, could become a way of articulating dignity, social status and extending the rights of Dalits” which would have proven problematic for the colonial authorities and upper-caste Hindu men, and so they emasculated them in order to keep the hierarchy in

⁸¹ This is how Valmiki, or the translator have chosen to spell Dehradun

⁸² Rao, Anupama. Introduction. *Gender and Caste*, 2005, Zed Books Ltd., pp 1-47.

place and to prevent any form of dissent (Gupta 310). Limbale describes how the Dalit boys in his neighbourhood were all told of a case when upper-caste men raped and impregnated Dalit women of a whole community while their husbands were locked up in prison, as a way of cautioning them against daring to even look at high-caste women (Limbale 71). During colonial times, the Dalit male body was not included in the construction of a national male identity; “National manhood was overwhelmingly constructed as a Hindu upper-caste story...the Hindu upper caste and colonial male gaze froze Dalit bodies into accepted rigid forms, embedded in existing hierarchical power relations...On the one hand, they were portrayed as meek and docile, strong but stupid, ready to serve their masters. On the other, there was an equally strong projection of them as criminals, violent, threatening” (Gupta 315).⁸³ Mukherjee mentions this in the foreword to her translation of *Joothan*, stating that prior to the Dalit literary movement, Dalits were portrayed in upper-caste writing as “mute and pathetic characters, unable to act or speak about their oppression...tragic figures and objects of pity, incapable of talking back or feeling enraged” (Mukherjee x).

Valmiki describes several incidents in his autobiography that show how upper-caste men mercilessly beat Dalit boys and men in case they dared to disrespect the boundaries of caste,⁸⁴ ensuring that the untouchables lived in mortal fear of inciting their wrath. These “memories of trauma” abound in the text and “convey the brutality and violence of the social order” (xl). Bama

⁸³ Gupta unpacks the reasoning behind this construction of the Dalit man: “Since Dalit men did hard manual labour, justification for the harsh conditions forced upon them required a representation of their bodies as resilient but dim-witted...They were considered as a form of agricultural machinery, valued primarily for their hard work, endurance and productive capability. They were the beasts of burden and workhorses.” (Gupta 315).

⁸⁴ See pgs. 6-7, 56-7, 60, 73.

belongs to the Paraiyar caste of Tamil Nadu, and similar to castes in North India, men were made to feel emasculated by the upper-caste women who used to pour food and water for them from a height, and call them derogatorily by their first name even if the men were much older than them (S. Anandhi et al. 4399).⁸⁵ They were also emasculated by being infantilized; Gandhi christened the Untouchables “Harijans” or “children of God” (Rao 129),⁸⁶ and in Indian upper-caste writing, “stereotypes of Dalit men repeatedly characterised them as childlike, inferior, and unfree...infantilised, tamed and trained for practical use” (Gupta 315). Also, similar to the (racist) way black men were compared to white men in America, the physical appearance of Dalit men was pitted against that of the upper-caste Hindu men, where the dark, strong Dalits and the fair Brahmins were depicted as each having dispositions that mirrored their skin tone; the language used by colonial authorities, Christian missionaries, and upper-caste writers which described the dark untouchables “reinforced the assumption that their supposed physical attributes were also an expression of their moral qualities” (320). Their intellectual qualities, on the other hand, were described as being inferior and weak, “playing on a mind/body separation” (316) and rendering them as unable to make decision by themselves, and thus, infantilising them and keeping them in their place in the social order.

This is reminiscent of the way African-American men were represented during colonial times; in America, black men were “emasculated

⁸⁵ S. Anandhi et al. “Work, Caste and Competing Masculinities: Notes from a Tamil Village.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 37, no. 43, 2002, pp. 4397–4406.

⁸⁶ Roy, Arundhati. *The Doctor and the Saint. Annihilation of Caste*, by B.R. Ambedkar, 1936, Verso, 2014.

by the historical vicissitudes of slavery and contemporary economic forces” and similar to the case of Dalit men, they were stereotyped as being “psychologically impotent.” They were derogatorily addressed as “boy” in order to infantilize them (Staples 2-3).⁸⁷ In both cases, this seems to be the way that the upper-caste (in the case of Dalits in India) or white (in the case of African-Americans) men tried to keep the power structure in place so as to not have to deal with dissent or revolt from the Dalit/black men, respectively.

Besides occupational hazards and the emasculation and infantilisation of Dalit men, another significant way in which gendered caste-based oppression affects Dalit men is in the form of police brutality and imprisonment. Sharankumar Limbale describes how the families who were plying the liquor trade in their neighbourhood, which included his family, had to live in constant fear of the police because they “caught whoever they suspected” and treated the men roughly in prison (Limbale 29). When Dalit men quarrelled with men of higher-caste, the police invariably arrested the Dalit men; “how will the police or the government be on our side? It seems that every single man they could catch sight of they beat up and arrested...they’ll take them and they’ll whip them like they whip animals until they can neither see nor breathe, and then they’ll clap them in jail, barely alive” (Bama 36)⁸⁸ as Bama’s paatti⁸⁹ elaborates after a clash between men of the Paraiyar community and the upper-caste Chaaliyar community. This stems from the fact that they were portrayed as being violent and inclined to commit

⁸⁷ Staples, Robert. “The Myth of the Impotent Black Male.” *The Black Scholar*, vol. 2, no. 10, pp. 2-9.

⁸⁸ Bama. *Karukku*. Translated by Lakshmi Hölstrom, Oxford University Press, 2012.

⁸⁹ ‘Paatti’ means ‘grandmother’ in Tamil.

crimes, and this stereotyping was advanced by the colonial authorities; as Arundhati Roy points out, the British authorities “solidified and freeze-dried” the caste system, classifying whole communities as “‘criminals’ and ‘warriors’ and so on” solely based on their judgement (Rao 54)⁹⁰. In *Joothan* too, Valmiki describes how when the Untouchables showed the slightest sign of rebellion, like not accepting to work without pay, the policemen would arrest all the men in the Dalit *basti*⁹¹ that they could catch hold of, and would beat them harshly in a “festival of valor” until they were numb with pain (Valmiki 45).

Police brutality against Dalit men is by no means a matter of the past; as news articles in the country often report, crimes against Dalits are still very prevalent. Furthermore, the nexus of upper-caste Hindus, corrupt policemen, inept government officials, and a judiciary which seems to prefer to uphold the caste system over providing justice means that those at fault rarely get convicted. Therefore, the trauma that Dalit men face in account of occupational hazards, a culture of emasculation and infantilization, and police brutality can be attributed to gender-specific caste-based oppression.

The caste-based oppression faced by Dalit women is more complicated than that faced by the men, because they are victims of two patriarchal structures: a “brahminical form of patriarchy that deeply stigmatized dalit

⁹⁰ Charu Gupta writes in more detail about this: In official British documents, they “identified untouchables as having criminal attributes as a result of their genetic inheritance”; for example, Chamars were associated with cattle theft, Bhangis were described as being “addicted to crime”, and other castes were painted as being thieves or drunkards. Basically, “the lines between criminals and low castes were constantly blurred and the two terms were almost used interchangeably” (Gupta 320-21).

⁹¹ A *bassti* is a settlement, a “place where people have settles in villages and in towns or squatted without official sanction in towns” (Valmiki 155)

women because of their caste status, as well as the more intimate forms of control by dalit men over the sexual and economic labour of “their” women” (Rao 1). The social seclusion and restriction of Dalit women by upper-caste men and women and Dalit society itself is one way through which the trauma they face is gendered.

As Baby Kamble writes in *The Prisons We Broke*, it used to be customary for the women to stay at home, since “the honour enjoyed by a family was in proportion to the restrictions imposed on the women in the house,” and they stayed inside most of their lives, so much so that even “the rays of the sun” did not fall on them (Kamble 5).⁹² In her autobiography, she creates an interesting dichotomy between how the women of the house were treated usually, and how they were treated when they were believed to be possessed by goddesses or spirits. When the women possessed by holy spirits or goddesses would forecast a bad future for the community, the Dalit men would take off their turbans and respectfully lay it at their feet, when at other times, these were men who “commanded great respect as the father-in-law or brother-in-law of the woman possessed” (23). These were men who would frequently beat their wives, causing them much agony and suffering. Bama describes in *Karukku* that of the many restrictions imposed on the women of her caste by the men, one was that they were not allowed to go to the cinema lest men from other communities heckled and harassed them there (Bama 58). Unanimously, the four autobiographies depict that most Dalit women stayed back at home, managing the household chores and bringing up the children,

⁹² Kamble, Baby. *The Prisons We Broke*. Translated by Maya Pandit, Orient Longman, 2008.

while the men were away in search of a job, if at all.⁹³ Even if the women did work, “men received one wage, women received another. They always paid men more” (55). As Valmiki writes too, his mother stayed at home and constantly worried about him when he left his village in pursuit of work. This is because in many societies, “social norms about gender reinforce the idea that women and girls should take care of their home and act as their families’ caregivers, while men and boys are expected to work productively outside the house” (Segalo)⁹⁴ and this was the case in Dalit society too. It is women like Bama, Baby Kamble, and Baby Halder, amongst many others, who challenged these entrenched patriarchal views despite facing backlash from their own communities.

A significant way that these social norms dictated the lives of young Dalit girls was in the denial of their education, because in many cases, it was customary for the girls and women to stay at home and manage the chores while the boys and men looked for work, or studied. Although Dalit men, like Valmiki and Limbale, struggled to get an education themselves, it was even harder for Dalit girls to get educated beyond a certain age. Education of Dalits was seen by the upper-caste Hindus as posing a threat to the accepted way of life, and rightly so: it is through education that Dalits, including the four authors, became aware of their situation, attempted to break the barriers of caste and shed the superstitious beliefs imparted upon them. As Bama highlights, the upper-caste Hindus were against Dalit children getting an

⁹³ In many cases, the men were either absent from their lives, or alcoholics who gambled away any money earned.

⁹⁴ Segalo, Puleng. “Trauma and Gender.” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, vol. 9, no. 9, 2015, pp. 447-454. Web. Accessed 04 January 2016.

education because through education, “a Dalit gets wise to this and wants to live with some honour and self-respect” (Bama 27) which would mean that the upper-castes would lose the people they had abused as free labour for centuries, and so they conspired to keep the Dalits uneducated and unaware. When the family is struggling for a single meal daily, “the girl children cannot see the sense in schooling, and stay at home, collecting firewood, looking after the house, caring for the babies, and doing household chores” (79). Bama laments that being born a Dalit woman, even if they struggled to study hard, they “live a life of humiliation and degradation” until their last breath (26). Even if they were admitted in schools, the girls were made to do chores like sweeping and cleaning the schools instead of focussing on their education. Early marriage of young girls barely in their teens, usually to much older men, cut their education short and in most cases engendered traumatic experiences. Kamble narrates the life-changing memory of when Ambedkar delivered a speech to them, urging the women to take the first step, ditch their superstitions, and to educate their children, after which in her village of Veergaon, slowly but steadily, the Dalit parents began sending the girls to school, cutting their hair and dressing them in more than just rags that covered their private parts, despite initially facing much resistance to these changes from the village elders (Kamble 66-70). Therefore, education was also a way that caste-based oppression proves to be gendered, because of the practice of child marriage of young girls.

Dalit women also faced harassment from upper-caste Hindu women. All the authors describe how interactions between upper-caste women and Dalit women lack any sign of solidarity or empathy, and in fact are fraught

with caste-based discrimination too; for example, Kamble describes how in her village of Veergaon, when the Dalit women delivered firewood or bundles of grass to the Brahmin households, the Brahmin women made them check every stick and every blade of grass for any stray hairs or threads, because otherwise, the carelessness of the “dumb Mahar women” would mean the whole house had to be cleansed with cow dung, and every cloth in the house washed to get rid of the “polluted” touch of the Dalit woman (Kamble 55). Especially so in rural settings, they faced a unique sort of discrimination from middle and upper-caste Indian women who “assumed that the domination they were undergoing was universally the case” for all women, which is why Dalit women argued that mainstream Indian feminism could not presume to represent their struggles. Bama mentions this too when she writes about the discrimination she faced after becoming a nun from the upper-caste nuns, who discriminated against her based on her caste and also linguistic background (she is a Tamil Dalit Christian), and “spoke as if they didn’t even consider low-caste people as human beings” which fills her with pain and humiliation (Bama 25). One reason for this, as Kancha Ilaiah postulates, is because the restriction placed on an Indian woman’s mobility limits the interaction not just between men and women, but interestingly, also “between ‘upper’ caste and Dalitbahujan women” (Ilaiah 86).⁹⁵

The most traumatic way, however, that Dalit women face gendered caste-based oppression is through the physical abuse and sexual exploitation they face at the hands of men, both upper-caste Hindu, and Dalits themselves.

⁹⁵ Ilaiah, Kancha. “Why I am not a Hindu.” *Gender and Caste*, edited by Anupama Rao, 2005, Zed Books Ltd., pp. 86-89.

They face caste-specific oppression by upper caste men and abuse at home from their own husbands; as critic Gabriele Dietrich puts it, “dalit women have been targets of upper-caste violence. At the same time, dalit women have also functioned as the “property” of dalit men” (Dietrich qtd. in Rao 11). The autobiographies chosen for study abound with descriptions of the physical and sexual abuse Dalit women face. Sharankumar Limbale is an *akkarmashi* or illegitimate child, whose father was an upper-caste Hindu who had slept with and impregnated his Dalit mother. His mother had been the “keep” of upper-caste men through whom she had had many children,⁹⁶ which he explains was almost the norm: “the Patils in every village have made whores of the wives of Dalit farm labourers. A poor Dalit girl on attaining puberty has invariably been a victim of their lust. There is a whole breed born to adulterous Dalits” (Limbale 38). Even this statement of Limbale’s, where he calls them “adulterous Dalits,” is problematic in its labelling of victimised, helpless women as “adulterous;” after all, they had no choice in the matter. The upper-caste men impregnated the lower-caste women but did not shoulder any of the responsibility of raising the children born out of wedlock, though families like Limbale’s lived in constant hunger because of there being so many mouths to feed. Furthermore, “some farmers even harassed them sexually, pulled them into the crop, and raped them” (79), showing that they were not safe from sexual abuse anywhere.

Baby Kamble writes in her autobiography about how women led the most miserable existence, and the women who suffered most were those that

⁹⁶ Specifically, nine children: Nagi, Nirmi, Vani, Sooni, Pami, Shrikant, Indira, and Sidamma are Sharankumar Limbale’s eight siblings with different biological fathers (Limbale 20).

were newly married; girls as young as eight or nine years old were married off and moved to their in-law's house, where they would be put to work by their mothers-in-law, who would constantly insult and abuse their housekeeping skills. Their lives, however, became far worse once they reached maturity, when the *sasu*⁹⁷ would begin turning her son against his wife, which led the men to beat their wives "to a pulp" (Kamble 97). Once a girl was married, "anybody could torture her as they wished" (97). She and Limbale even chillingly reveal that sometimes this domestic abuse went so far as to lead the husband to cut off his wife's nose.⁹⁸ Limbale's sisters were married when they were children too, and promptly deserted by their much older husbands, which meant that they had to stop marking their foreheads with kumkum, and his own wife had delivered three times by the time she was eighteen; "marriages were broken up like a game of dolls" (Limbale 109-112). This was the kind of life awaiting a girl once she was married.

Yet again, parallels can be drawn between the experience of Dalit women and African-American women who have in common "shared battles" (Paik 79)⁹⁹ against the entrenched patriarchy propagated by their oppressors as well as men of their own community. Dalit women face various levels of discrimination because of caste and gender: by upper-caste men, upper-caste

⁹⁷ Mother-in-law

⁹⁸ "In those days, at least one woman in a hundred would have her nose chopped off...Husbands, flogging their wives as if they were beasts, would do so until the sticks broke with the effort. The heads of these women would break open, their backbones would be crushed, and some would collapse unconscious" and when they would run away to escape such torture, the husband would be urged by his parents to cut the girl's nose off as punishment for being such a "slut", until he would "sit on her chest and taking his own time, cut off her nose" (Kamble 98-101). Limbale also mentions that his friend Harya "was ready with a knife to cut his wife's nose and breasts" when he caught her cheating on him (Limbale 111), although men were hardly ever loyal to their wives.

⁹⁹ Paik, Shailaja. "Building Bridges: Articulating Dalit and African American Women's Solidarity." *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 3/4, 2014, pp. 74-96

women, and Dalit men; similarly, Black women face a “double discrimination” because of their race and gender (80). In both cases, mainstream feminism was criticized when it claimed to represent “all” women by making baseless claims such as “‘all women are niggers’ and ‘all women are dalits’” (Rege 90)¹⁰⁰ which is simply not the case; their struggles are specific to their situation and cannot be appropriated and represented by middle and upper-class women. Paik also forms a connection between the shared experiences of hunger and poverty of Dalit and Black women as being uniquely traumatic and magnified because of their gender (81). Here, it is helpful to draw from Mohanty’s critique of Western/white feminism’s fallacy of “producing/representing a composite, singular ‘third world woman’” (Mohanty 62).¹⁰¹ As she aptly writes, “The assumption of women as an already constituted and coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location, implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy which can be applied universally and cross-culturally” (64), which is simply not the case because class, caste, race, ethnicity, and religion are all paradigms that cannot be ignored.

This leads me to the next way that Dalit women are critically impacted by gendered caste-based oppression, which is in their experience of hunger and health. Because of being married so young, girls often became pregnant at an age when their bodies were not completely capable of handling pregnancy and childbirth. This, coupled with the fact that most of them lived in abject

¹⁰⁰ Rege, Sharmila. “A Dalit Feminist Standpoint.” *Gender and Caste*, edited by Anupama Rao, Zed Books Ltd., 2005, pp. 90- 101.

¹⁰¹ Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses.” *Feminist Review*, no. 30, 1988, pp. 61–88.

poverty and had no access to proper healthcare, magnifies their trauma.

Kamble describes the wretched state of young pregnant women and mothers in her book; “there would be no food in the house, not even the water leftover from boiling rice, to satiate the fire of hunger raging inside the belly of the new mother” and so they would have to lie down and eat whatever could be scrounged together, hoping to survive (Kamble 57). Furthermore, they had virtually no access to hospitals, and had to trust the ignorant midwives of their community, who “would keep thrusting their hands into the poor girl’s vagina to see how far the baby had progressed,” (58) invariably making the process of giving birth more painful. Pregnancy was literally a battle with death, and “one in every ten lost their lives during childbirth” (60-61). These experiences are surely traumatic for the young women. Though both Dalit men and women face the burden of caste oppression, Dalit women bear a “disproportionately higher share of this burden” (Malik 103)¹⁰² because of the lack of access to clean water and sanitation facilities, which are central to the hygiene requirements and health of a woman. “All the women of the village, young girls, older women, even the newly married brides, would sit in the open space behind these homes at the edges of the pond to take a shit” writes Valmiki about the state of sanitation in the Chuhra dwelling (Valmiki 1).

Limbale, Bama, and Kamble all highlight how while Dalits in general lived in a state of constant hunger, the Dalit women had to suffer more, be it the mothers, daughters, or daughters-in-law. Limbale’s mother, grandmother, and sisters went to bed most days having barely eaten a meal, whereas he at

¹⁰² Malik, Bela. “Untouchability and Dalit Women’s Oppression.” *Gender and Caste*, edited by Anupama Rao, Zed Books Ltd., 2005, pp. 102-107.

least ate something. Kamble describes in detail the hierarchy that existed in a household which determined who ate when, with the daughters-in-law only allowed to eat once the children and their mother had had their fill, although they were hardly more than children themselves.¹⁰³ Bama too describes that on many days, the children would eat what little food there was in the house, which meant her mother had to go hungry (Bama 73). “The struggle to fill their bellies is their main struggle after all” she aptly writes (77). For Dalit women, their struggles are also magnified because of their husbands usually being either absent from the picture, or drunkards, and so they have to put the needs of their children ahead of their own and make sure they are fed whenever possible. “The distinct relationship that women have to domestic institutions that constitute the fabric of society and culture plays a substantial role in defining women's experience of trauma” (Segalo), and in the case of Dalit women, society and culture dictate that they be subservient, selfless, and chaste, which defines their experience of trauma. Since they are expected to be subservient, they are abused by the upper-caste men and women and their own Dalit husbands at any given chance and in all ways conceivable;¹⁰⁴ since they are expected to be altruistic and self-sacrificing, their health is often compromised because of having the least access to food and water in a family, and having to deal with menstruation and pregnancy without proper facilities and healthcare; and since they are expected to be chaste, there is a public ownership of their sexuality which means that they are verbally abused and

¹⁰³ See Kamble pgs. 28-30, 51-2.

¹⁰⁴ Everything from way they tie their saris to the way they have to bow in the presence of an upper-caste man is dictated.

called sluts and whores, even as they are sexually abused by upper-caste and Dalit men.

So far, I have highlighted that social seclusion, denial of education, oppression by upper-caste women, physical and sexual abuse, and health and hunger are some ways in which Dalit women's trauma is gendered. And occupational hazards, the emasculation and infantilization of Dalit men, and police brutality are issues that specifically affect Dalit men and inflict trauma upon them. However, I believe that while the trauma faced by Dalit men and especially Dalit women is in fact gendered and unique, the root problem is the caste system in Hindu society. In fact, one of the major reasons Ambedkar wanted to get rid of the caste system is because "he believed that the caste system advanced itself by controlling women, and one of his major concerns was to make Hindu personal law more equitable for women" writes Arundhati Roy (46). The control and "subjugation of women [are] constitutive to the very existence of caste" (Kannabiran qtd. in Dietrich 70),¹⁰⁵ and irrespective of the fact that in all the autobiographies chosen for this thesis the practice of worshipping goddesses is prevalent, as I have previously highlighted,¹⁰⁶ this fact "in no way contradicts the institutionalised oppression of women" (70). In the autobiographies chosen for study, the worship of local goddesses and spirits, and not dominant Hindu gods or goddesses, is a factor that stands out. Dietrich agrees with Kannabiran's stance on goddess worship in Hinduism,

¹⁰⁵ Dietrich, Gabriele. "Dalit Movements and Women's Movements." *Gender and Caste*, edited by Anumpama Rao, Zed Books Ltd., 2005, pp. 57-79.

¹⁰⁶ Mahars, like Baby Kamble, believed in goddesses like Lakshmi aai, Mari aai, Barama, and Satwai (Kamble 21, 62) and the women were frequently believed to be possessed by different spirits and goddesses; Limbale's grandmother prayed to goddesses like Ambabai and Laxmi (Limbale 33); and Chuhars like Valmiki also believed in goddesses like Lakshmi, amongst others (Valmiki 28, 46).

which is that the “incorporation of goddess-religion into Brahminic religion...is a device to integrate the goddess into an androcentric patriarchal framework. This counters the claim that Hinduism is by itself feminist since it promotes goddess religion and shows how promotion of the goddess image can go together with enhanced caste restrictions on women” (71). In the four autobiographies, numerous regionally-specific goddesses and female spirits are worshipped, and so, “it is logical to expect that women in general benefit by sharing that elevated status” (Rajan 35).¹⁰⁷ However, this is not the case, as is clear on reading these autobiographies. Rajan also addresses the practice of “possession” of women, which is elaborated on in great detail especially by Kamble, and writes that it can be seen as a way to “effectively resist oppression or devaluation in the family by laying claim to spiritual prowess” (35).

The problems faced by Dalit women, including their sexual exploitation, is not a feminist issue alone; “the question of rape cannot be grasped merely in terms of class, criminality, or a psychological aberration or an illustration of male violence. The caste factor also has to be taken into account which makes sexual violence against dalit or tribal women much more severe in terms of intensity and magnitude” (Guru 81).¹⁰⁸ Moreover, issues of sexuality cannot be separated from caste and religious oppression, and Sharmila Rege writes that if one attempts to address the issue of “sexual politics” without challenging the role of Brahmanism in propagating these

¹⁰⁷ Rajan, Rajeswari Sunder. “Is the Hindu Gooddessa a Feminist?” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 33, no. 44, 1998, pp. 34–38

¹⁰⁸ Guru, Gopal. “Dalit Women Talk Differently.” *Gender and Caste*, edited by Anupama Rao, Zed Books Ltd., 2005, pp. 80-85.

ideas, it is a form of “lifestyle feminism” (Rege 93) which does nothing for the liberation of Dalitbahujans.

All the chosen autobiographies reveal a disillusionment with the caste system and the dominant Hindu religion; however, Bama extends this further to illustrate how the caste system seems to transcend even religious boundaries, for she faces discrimination on the basis of her status as an Untouchable even in the Catholic order. She recognizes that the struggles she faced as a Dalit Christian woman are in fact because of the caste system and a conscious effort by upper-caste Hindus and upper-class Christian priests and nuns to deny the downtrodden Dalits enlightenment and education. She poignantly says that the priests and nuns turn Dalits into “slaves in the name of God” and “teach them to shut their eyes when they pray, with deliberate intention that they should not open their eyes and see. They teach them to shackle their arms together and to prostrate themselves in prayer at full length on the ground so that they should never stand tall” (Bama 108).

Baby Kamble, Omprakash Valmiki, and Sharankumar Limbale have in common the disillusionment with Hinduism. Born as Hindus, they depict their departure from Hinduism, superstition, and meaningless religious rites and rituals as their awakening and enlightenment. “Generation after generation wasted away in the senseless worship of stones, in utter misery” writes Kamble (11), whose enlightenment was in the form of being introduced to Ambedkar and Buddhism, like in the case of Valmiki and Limbale. In her autobiography, Kamble writes in detail about the many rituals and superstitions practiced by her community; even though “Hindu philosophy had discarded us as dirt...yet Hindu rites and rituals were dearest to our hearts”

(18). Arun Prabha Mukherjee writes that “implicit in every literary work of significance is a serious critique of the society within which it takes birth” (Mukherjee xii), and these autobiographies are definitely critical of the Hindu society within which they are placed.

Limbale asks “Can’t man exist without religion and caste?” (Limbale 40). He too narrates the life-altering moment when Ambedkar entered his life, making him realize how destructive Hinduism has been to its low-castes and Untouchables. He questions the intentions of ‘God’ itself and the idea that the caste system is religiously sanctioned when he asks, “What kind of God is this that makes human beings hate each other? We are all supposed to be the children of God, then why are we considered untouchable? We don’t approve of God, nor this religion, nor this country because they ostracize us... Why this discrimination between one human being and another? After all, isn’t everybody’s blood red?” (Limbale 62). After moving away for higher education, he realises that like Ambedkar, Buddhism is the path for him.¹⁰⁹ Valmiki writes about his father’s fears that he would become a Christian, to which he wanted to reply that he did not identify as a Hindu either, because if Dalits were truly Hindus, then “why does caste superiority and caste pride attack only the weak? Why are Hindus so cruel, so heartless against Dalits?” (Valmiki 48). The defining moment in his life was when he was given a copy of Ambedkar’s biography by his friend, after which he began to read about Ambedkar’s contributions to the liberation of Untouchables, and realise how wrong it was that Gandhi was lauded by the nation for being sympathetic to the Untouchables who he has christened “Harijans” or “Children of God,” but

¹⁰⁹ See Limbale pgs. 74-6.

Ambedkar was mostly forgotten, except for his role in drafting the Constitution. He, too, like Kamble¹¹⁰ and Limbale, realises that Buddhism may be the path for him.¹¹¹

In *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar announces his stance almost immediately: he is of the belief that “it is not possible to break caste without annihilating the religious notions on which it, the caste system, is founded” (Ambedkar 188). He explains that practices that the Untouchables had to follow, like carrying a broom to sweep the ground on which they walked and a pot around their neck to collect their spit so it does not fall on the ground, expose the “tyranny practised by the Hindus” (214). India is a country where religiously sanctioned practices many a times hold more sway than the law itself; where “the priest holds sway over the common man often greater than that of the magistrate, and where everything, even such things as strikes and elections, so easily takes a religious turn” (227), which is reflected in the accounts of Kamble, Limbale, Valmiki, and Bama, who write about how they truly achieved liberation only when they discarded the centuries of superstitious beliefs and religiously sanctioned ways of living imposed on them by the dominant Hindu society. Ambedkar pinpoints what is truly wrong with the caste system: it is not just a division of labour, as its proponents declare, but “a division of labourers” that is not based on natural talent or aptitude for a certain profession, but “on the social status of the parents” (233-34). In this way, caste is different from race, because it literally is a social

¹¹⁰ “Why did Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar convert to Buddhism? Buddhism means good character...That is why Dr. Ambedkar introduced Buddhist philosophy as the path of truth and righteousness. Before him, millions of our people had broken their heads against the stone steps of temples, trying to reach their voices to gods who would not hear them” (Kamble 117).

¹¹¹ “Buddha’s philosophy on freedom attracted me” (Valmiki 116).

division of a nation of people of the same race, by people of the same.

Therefore, the gendered trauma of Dalit men and Dalit women that I have explored are subsumed under the common enemy of caste-based oppression propagated by Hinduism, the solution to which Ambedkar says is “the destruction of such a religion” (306).

From the era of Ambedkar, Gandhi and the British rule to now, exactly seventy years after India gained independence from British rule, much has changed in the Dalit society. The experiences of oppression that these four authors encapsulate, especially accounts of untouchability and pollution, were largely relegated to the rural villages they grew up in. Reservations in education, jobs and in administrative, legislative bodies have meant that there is now a generation of educated and empowered Dalits in the government, judiciary and industry. Dalits have occupied high positions, as Arundhati Roy highlights (Roy 26), including that of the President of India, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Chief Ministers, Ministers in central and state governments and high-ranking bureaucrats. They have successfully established an entrepreneurial footprint across diverse industry and trade sectors. Literacy and health levels have improved significantly. Yet, in vast swathes of rural India, Dalits still continue to be denied equal rights, and denied access to clean water, community resources and right to pray in Hindu temples. They face the wrath of other castes and city-dwellers in urban India for apparently abusing the reservations and quotas in universities and government offices. However, the supportive legal framework, increasing political strength, and a growing social awareness about caste-based

discrimination, have moved significant sections of Dalit society towards the mainstream.

CONCLUSION

Dalit Autobiographies as Trauma Literature

In this thesis titled “An Exploration of Four Dalit Narratives as Trauma Literature,” my aim was to delineate the many reasons why Dalit autobiographies should be included in the canon of Trauma Literature by exploring in detail the qualities of Bama’s *Karukku*, Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan*, Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke*, and Sharankumar Limbale’s *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*. In the introduction to this thesis, “The History of Caste and Untouchability in India, and a Consideration of Dalit Autobiographies as Trauma Literature,” I traced the origins of the caste system to illuminate how the oppression faced by Dalits is caused by the hierarchy of the *chaturvarna* or caste system, which placed them at the bottom of the pyramid. I drew attention to the fact that these Dalits were essentially downtrodden for centuries because of the upper-caste belief in the ancient texts of Hinduism, and highlighted that the very name “Dalit” is a political identity, one that represents the severe trauma that they had endured for centuries and also encapsulates the suffering of other marginalized groups. Using literary trauma theory, I showed why Dalit autobiographies conform to the rubric of trauma literature: their institutionalised trauma is memorable and describable, which they represent through their autobiographies; the individual accounts of suffering represent their collective trauma as a marginalized group; the importance of place and its relation to power structures is

elaborated on; and Dalit trauma is intergenerational, and transmissible to a certain extent to the readers.

In the chapter titled “Form and Narrative Structures as Reflective of Trauma in Dalit autobiographies,” I analysed the genre or form of autobiography, and explored why Dalit authors show an inclination to writing in this form, like other authors from marginalized groups. I then identified and elaborated on various narrative structures and elements in the four texts that can be read as reflective of trauma. The balance between individual and community, the representation of realism, historicity and the “Dalitization of narrative time,”¹¹² the primacy of location, the unique use of language and dialect, the use of metaphors and puns, and the interspersing of myth and superstitions in the narratives were all analysed to reveal how they can be read as reflective of Dalit trauma, and are in some instances deliberate decisions by the authors to convey their trauma to the readers.

In the second chapter, “Trajectories and Themes in Dalit Autobiographies as Reflective of Trauma,” I identified some common themes and trajectories in the four texts that reflect their trauma. These include Hunger, Gender, Education and Enlightenment, and Religion. Since gender is a complicated, vast topic, I dealt with it in more detail in the third chapter, “Gender in Dalit Autobiographies as Reflective of Trauma.” Here, I brought out the differences in the experiences of trauma of Dalit men and women; while occupational hazards, emasculation and infantilization, and police brutality were shown to be gender-specific caste-based oppression faced by

¹¹² Gajarawala, Toral Jatin. *Untouchable Fictions: Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste*. Fordham University Press, 2012.

Dalit men, social seclusion, denial of education and child marriage, harassment from upper-caste Hindu women, physical abuse and sexual exploitation by upper-caste men and Dalit men, and health and hunger are some of the ways Dalit women's trauma proves to be gendered. Ultimately, as I described, their oppression was due to the caste system, and I concluded with a brief note on how the caste system manifests itself today in an urban setting.

The discussions in the chapters illuminate how Dalit trauma is truly unique, because their trauma is not caused by environmental factors, like famines or droughts, or the trauma inflicted by one person on another; it is trauma that is engendered by the social institution of the caste system, and was religiously sanctioned for centuries, and as Bama shows, even transcends the boundaries of religion. While untouchability has been legally abolished for many decades now, and the position of Dalits in cities at least has improved, these autobiographies are a testimony to the centuries of suffering and trauma that Dalits had to endure. Therefore, I hope to have clearly indicated the various reasons why Dalit autobiographies should be considered as Trauma Literature.

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