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## **The Burden of Caste: Shame, Anger, and Catharsis in Dalit Autobiographical Writings**

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### **Abstract**

Dalit autobiographical writings have a unique position in Indian literature as they provide readers more than just personal accounts, they are historical records, texts of the collective memory and psychological survival of members of the group. Dalit autobiographical writing purports lived experiences of humiliation, violence, and tenacity to survive within the caste system and record the inexorable realities of oppression and survival that mainstream society and literature frequently ignore or take for granted. Unlike conventional autobiography, which too often centres on the personal and as an achievement for individual purposes, Dalit life writing foregrounds the psychological and socially-exclusionary impacts of the everyday on the self. There is authentic and real disempowerment written into the disguise of what is meant to be a hermetic genre - autobiographies are places where private traumas meet public injustices, the personal meets the political.

This paper will discuss how shame, anger, and catharsis are three components of an emotional triad in Dalit autobiographical writings. Shame is a universal feature of everyday life and lived experiences of social stigma: children asked to leave classrooms, laborers instructed to do the degrading work their caste identity enforces, and families branded within the set of a particular caste identity. These narratives serve to highlight how shame destroys self-esteem, while showing how writing restores dignity through naming and exposing the shame.

Anger is both disruptive and transformative. Anger is not destructive fury; anger is moral dissent-the force with which marginalized people resist silencing. In texts such as Omprakash Valmiki's "Joothan", anger collapses invisibility imposed by caste society, while Bama's "Karukku" transforms anger into activist energy that reclaims education, equality, and social justice. Sharan Kumar Limbale's "Akkarmashi" embodies a similar anger that critiques caste hypocrisy and insists on the recognition of Dalit personhood.

Catharsis, the third element of this emotional triad, opens up the possibility of healing through narration. For many Dalit writers, writing acts as therapy: it makes private pain, a communal testament. Through the act of storytelling, pain is not eliminated; it is reframed into strength that empowers both the individual writer and the collective reader. The cathartic dimension evokes

Aristotle's concept of emotional purification, but in the Dalit context it also invokes political action, where healing is inextricable from dissent.

Using works like Omprakash Valmiki's "Joothan," Bama's "Karukku" and Sharan Kumar Limbale's "Akkarmashi" the article demonstrates how the Dalit autobiographical project includes the personal anguish of historical oppression but moves on to present collective acts of resistance. These autobiographies are highlighted from both a psychological and literary standpoint, not simply as records of suffering but also as therapeutic undertakings that resist the problem of 'subjectivity'. They assert a liberated Dalit self that chooses not to be contained within the negating historical practice of caste. The Dalit autobiographical project ultimately stands as monuments of resilience to injustice and urges readers to act against injustice while continuing to seek dignity, agency and hope.

### **Keywords**

Dalit literature; autobiography; caste; shame; anger; catharsis; trauma; resistance; identity; psychological literature

### **Introduction**

Caste in India is not simply a social structure but a lived reality that impinges on every dimension of life. For Dalits, whose identity has been historically built through shame, life stories tend to begin in disgrace and proceed in anger, before ending in catharsis. Dalit autobiographical writing tends not to celebrate one's individual heroic achievements as in normative autobiographies, but exposes structural injustice and expresses a collective struggle (Zelliot 59).

In the discipline of psychology, shame and anger are often framed as private phenomena. In contrast, in Dalit autobiographies, shame and anger are collective and political. The authors express their shared consciousness of a socially constructed oppressed community (Tangney and Dearing 19). This paper considers the representing burden of caste through the triad of shame, anger, and catharsis in Da-

lit autobiographical writing, which turns personal trauma into cultural memory and public dissent.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This project draws on concepts from three related fields:

**Trauma Studies:** Cathy Caruth notes that trauma isn't fully experienced in its happening; instead, it returns, belatedly, in ghostly forms (Caruth 4). Many Dalit stories tend to exemplify this delayed understanding of caste trauma.

**Psychology of Feelings:** June Tangney identifies shame as the most self-conscious, damaging emotion; it is often tied to a global self-inferiority (Tangney and Dearing 25). James Averill argues anger is a moral protest that can inspire social change (Averill 127).

**Subaltern Historiography:** Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argue that underrepresented subjects counter-historize the past (Guha 45; Spivak 285). Dalit autobiographies present precisely these counter-histories.

### **Shame: The Inescapable Burden**

Shame stands out prominently as perhaps the most durable and disruptive emotion in Dalit autobiographies, not just an affective response to a moment, but also a condition for existence under caste oppression. The reason for shame's durability is that it is so deeply embedded in social practices, enforced through everyday humiliations, segregations, and symbolic degradations.

In Joothan, Omprakash Valmiki's childhood experience of being made to sit outside the classrooms signifies this deeply embedded condition of shame. He is not only excluded from the physical space of academia, but symbolically made to understand that as an "untouchable" knowledge-bearer, he is like the scraps of food-joothan, leftovers-relegated to the margins and signified by only being fed what others discarded (Valmiki 13). The title not only names this shameful practice, but crystallizes it as a metaphor for a whole collective social position.

In a similar way, Bama's *Karukku* shows how children's innocence is simultaneously infiltrated by shame, as the casual taunts, insults, and hints at her caste identities shape her understanding of her self (Bama 27). It is a twisting logic in which, through continuous unease and worry about the comments reminding her of her caste, the debasement of her caste begins to feel normal, and the embarrassment takes on a more inward shape, establishing her identity. The conscious act of determining her caste even outside her control serves as a slow-onset existential harm that, as Frantz Fanon would argue, has become a kind of mental "internal colonization."

Shame in the stories we have traced here is never an act solely personal to the individuals, it is always a collective, systemic, and social phenomenon, as it circuses through their lives. Dominant castes use shame as a sanctioning form of discipline - a subtle yet completely disastrous weapon - that is weaponized to reproduce caste order without activity engaging in higher forms of violence in the form of capital punishment or assault. The embarrassment is created to be visible, as in social reputation, and public, as in physically within social hierarchy, and made to seem like a natural occurrence without need for further justification.

But what makes the Dalit autobiography differently potent than the repetition of shame, is the transformation of shame itself. When performed in the form of first-person testimony, the power and isolating salience of shame is entirely diminished: what was once experience alone, now becomes experience as social condition. Within the world of writing, what is "unspeakable" becomes "speakable". This act of narrating the shame imparts a flip: shame transforms from the disabling silence, the core of the individual into the space for solidarity and critique.

Shame, psychologically speaking, usually results in withdrawal, concealment, and silence (Tangney and Dearing 42). However, Dalit autobiographies give rise to the opposite response of reflection, articulation, and ultimately, defiance. To name shame, in turn, denies the predominant castes its power. What was

once an "inescapable burden" is now seen through the lens of anger, dignity, and confrontation.

Consequently, shame is not simply the emotional byproduct of caste in Dalit life-writing, but an important moment in the dialectic of oppression and resistance. It demonstrates the continuum between the interpersonal aspect of structural violence and the moment of interruption through the reclamation of agency. To document shame is to strip it of secrecy, expose its structural conditions, and begin arranging a politics of assertion.

### **Anger: The Energy of Protest**

If shame is the wound inflicted by caste hierarchies, then anger is the cauterizing fire. Anger in Dalit autobiographies does not erupt in an uncontrolled breach of civility or outpouring of emotion-anger emerges as a rational, ethical, often assiduous response to the structural violence of caste society. The rage is emphatic not because of the individual's particular temperament; the rage emerges from the universal experience of humiliation, exploitation, and social exclusion.

Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi* (The Outcaste) is a stark example of this kind of dignified, passionate rage. Limbale's writing seethes with outrage at the audacity of caste Hindu society—the same society that exploits Dalit labor, whether agricultural, manual or sexual, will simultaneously, and openly, refer to Dalits as "untouchable" and deny their human dignity (Limbale 64). This rage is not mindless. It is not destructive. It is clinical: it reveals our ethical incapacity to live with knowingly dehumanized populations who create the world we completely depend on.

For Bama in *Karukku*, anger takes on a transformative trajectory. Initially born from bitter experiences of mockery and subordination, it evolves into a resource for collective empowerment. Channeled through activism, pedagogy, and literature, her anger is honed into an instrument of social critique (Bama 102). By naming injustice, she refuses the internalization of inferiority and turns her indignation into a language of solidarity. In this sense, an-

ger transcends the personal and becomes communal, guiding a shift from pain to purposeful resistance.

Thematically, Dalit narratives illustrate how anger has the potential to counteract shame. While shame has a tendency to further isolate the self, anger reclaims relationality by asserting voice and presence. Where shame silences, anger speaks. This transformation underscores that anger is not merely reactive, but rather deeply productive. It can facilitate the reconstitution of subjectivity, allowing for the humiliated Dalit self to become a resistant Dalit subject.

Psychologically, anger occupies a loaded space—it is often associated with aggression, loss of control, or destruction. Nevertheless, anger can be inherently normative, as Averill indicates: "anger suggests possible violations of justice and demands a change in the offending behavior" (Averill 145). In each of the Dalit autobiographies I examined, anger fills this normative role. Anger exposes systemic cruelty but also facilitates the reclamation of selfhood. Anger, here, is not pathology but power; not fragmentation but possibility.

What is perhaps most noteworthy is that anger disrupts the caste system precisely through refusal to obey. Anger becomes an affective politics—a force that takes silence and transforms it into testimony, humiliation into critique, marginality into an affirmation. Writing is an act of creative anger, an anger that refuses to allow anything about Dalit experience to go unrecorded or misrepresented.

Anger is thus, in Dalit autobiographical writing, a necessity, not a negativity: the ethical fuel of protest that can become a counterroadside to centuries of systemic degradation. Anger can change emotion into action, while reclaiming dignity from an affect that is designed to diminish it.

### ***Catharsis: Writing as Healing***

In a traditional Aristotelian sense, catharsis meant the release of pity and fear through tragic drama, providing an aesthetic cleansing of the self and restoring emotional equilibrium. In Dalit autobiographical writings, how-

ever, catharsis has implications much broader than individual emotional relief. It is bodily and political; and is restorative not just for the self, but also for the collective identity of a stigmatized group.

For Dalit writers to tell a story about their life is to fully reclaim. With the telling comes the undoing of centuries of silencing, stigmatization, and received invisibility through one's witness. To write is to confront shame and humiliation directly with and by retelling. It is an undoing of the shame and humiliation. The emotional release is not an end-but instead a beginning -an entering into a different mode of subjectivity and a communal affirmation.

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* illustrates this double movement. The recollection of humiliating experiences from childhood: being forced to sit outside the class rooms, being forced to collect discarded food that is called "jooth," functions as a self liberatory act. Valmiki's turning memory into testimony strips humiliation of its private sting and turns it into a public critique (Valmiki 89). Valmiki's writing is cathartic not because it erases suffering, but because it transmutes suffering into resistance.

Bama's *Karukku* also illustrates how catharsis in writing is further linked to faith and activism. While the text recalls substantial injuries arising from caste and gender hierarchies, it also traces Bama's movement toward affirmation (and empowerment) as she turns to activism, education, and literature to resist oppressive forces (Bama 120). In this context, the notion of catharsis is based not just on personal release, but on generating hope for others. Writing, in this way, enacts a bridge between personal and collective sense making, where healing can be a collective and generative practice.

Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi* (The Outcaste) ends with a blatant call to justice and dignity (Limbale 140). The cathartic aspect does not come from acceptance, rather it is from assertion - they channel anger, shame and hurt and demand change. This radically reframes catharsis - it is not strictly relief or mere psychological comfort; it is a reconstitu-

tion of a wounded identity into political subjectivity. In this reconceptualization of catharsis, writing does double-duty. On the one hand, it provides the writer a way to confront and process the traumas brought on by caste. On the other, it compels readers - be they Dalit or non-Dalit - to wrestle with the truths that disturb the perceived harmony of caste society. For Dalit readers, the outcome is affirmational, since it reinforces a shared experience and disrupts solitude. For non-Dalit readers, the catharsis is excruciating and ultimately unavoidable; like a bruise, one is forced to examine it which can catalyze the onset of awareness, and therefore conscience.

Therefore, in Dalit literature, catharsis is much more than an emotional release, in an Aristotelian sense; it is an affective politics. It entails the possibility for mourning on one hand yet a way not to be stuck in sorrow. It allows for the possibility of reconstructing dignity, reinvention of self, and reconceptualizing Dalits in the public sphere as claimants of justice rather than, merely victims. By reformulating lived trauma to collective testimony, Dalit autobiography makes catharsis revolutionary healing: both intimate and insurgent and reparative.

### **Identifying a New Burden: The Transition from trauma to Testimony**

The interrelated points of shame, anger, and catharsis signals a way how Dalit autobiographies redirect psychological burden into political agency. Shame exposes structural oppression; anger resists dehumanization; and catharsis transfigures suffering as dignity. Thus, as personal confession, social history and psychological treatment exploring the entangled networks of caste, Dalit autobiographical writings engage as an interconnected whole. They help us to theorize that the burden of caste is not a private trauma, but a collective trauma subject to collective recognition. Yet through writing, Dalit authors are able to renegotiate authorial agency in their identities and reconstruct a sense of self in a space outside of caste.

### **Conclusion**

From a psychological point of view, Dalit autobiographical texts demonstrate the highly developed emotional labor of being one who is oppressed by the caste system. The overwhelming emotions of shame and anger emerge as the cathartic form of a type of self-esteem and self-advocacy. What began as a history of shame has become a form of dignified narrative agency. A degree of paradoxical power resides in the Dalit autobiography: it is literature as well as therapy, history as well as prophecy. By carving their writing in place, Dalit authors encouraged not only a restoration of presence to themselves, but also their healing, empowerment, and a re-imagined positionality of equality.

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