

Pain, Personhood and the Collective: Dalit Life Narratives

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Abstract: *Dalit life narratives have gained prominence in the last two decades in line with the increasing visibility of Dalits in the Indian public sphere and their vociferous demands for a more just political and social order. This can be productively situated not just in the contemporary global context of the proliferation of narratives and testimonios of human rights violations in other parts of the world, but also in the context of an emerging conversation on the nature of “Dalit personhood” in the Indian public sphere, a category infinitely more complex than legal subjectivity and abstract citizenship. The Dalit narratives analysed here are rich illustrations of this double movement: they witness on behalf of a suffering community and keep alive the singular, non-universal nature of Dalit pain through an aesthetic that is not wholly translatable into the lexicon of rights and justice. By invoking the historical and rhetorical force of two prose fictional genres, the Bildungsroman and the picaresque, the analysis has sought to recast the testimonio less as a proxy for the legal witnessing and amelioration of Dalit pain than as a rich and expressive medium of Dalit personhood. This way of reading Dalit lives accords India’s ex-untouchables a stature beyond that of victims at the mercy of the capricious sentimentality of upper-caste solidarity.*

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Introduction

Not long ago, in Khairlanji, an obscure rural town in the western Indian state of Maharashtra’s Bhandara district, often called the state’s “rice bowl”, Surekha Bhotmange, a Dalit woman in a neo-Buddhist household, was getting ready to cook dinner for her family. Her husband, Bhaiyalal, was due to return from the paddy

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field. Her three teenage children, Priyanka, Sudhir and Roshan, were studying nearby, a sight that must have been a source of daily cheer for Surekha. She herself had studied up to year nine and had taken to heart the Dalit leader Babasaheb Ambedkar's urging that the untouchable castes educate their children. Priyanka cycled to her college in a nearby town. The previous year she had topped her class in year ten. But on that evening, 29 September 2006, Surekha and Priyanka were anxious about an unspoken horror hovering on their threshold. While they had over the years grown immune to the everyday taunts of their upper-caste neighbours, they could not ignore the crescendo of threats that had pursued them in recent days. At 6.30 pm their fears were realised. A truck came to an ominous halt in front of their home and around sixty villagers, including women, armed with cycle chains, knives, sticks and axes, alighted from it. They rushed in and dragged Surekha and her three children outside. In full view of the village, the women marauders stripped the mother and daughter naked and beat them with their weapons. Sudhir and Roshan were likewise beaten mercilessly and then commanded to rape their mother and sister. When they refused, their genitals were crushed and they were beaten to death. Meanwhile, the two women were dragged further away from their home. What followed was a horrific spectacle of gang rape and mutilation with eyewitness accounts indicating that the rapes continued long after the women were dead. In the culmination of this public orgy of Hindu caste rage, the four bodies were tossed into the canal that watered the meagre land of the Bhotmange family.

The attack was ostensibly carried out in the name of "moral justice". Surekha, a 40 year-old mother of three and a vocal Dalit woman inspired by Ambedkarite Buddhism, was alleged to have had an illicit relationship with a wealthy Dalit landowner from a nearby town, Siddharth Gajbhiye. Not surprisingly, investigations revealed multiple dimensions to this killing, not least a land dispute in which Surekha had dared to take this issue to the court and seek some assistance from Gajbhiye. Reasonably well educated by the literacy levels among Dalit women, Surekha was also a proud Ambedkarite and played an active role in the community of Dalit Buddhist women. Her husband owned a small plot of land on which he laboured hard and her older son was employed elsewhere in the village. While not exactly prosperous, her family was self-sufficient. These facts, combined with her pride in her children's education, would have given her a modicum of confidence. In short, Surekha epitomised a Dalit woman who dared to forget her place in the hierarchy of castes. She had to be punished.

In the India of 2006, nearly sixty years after the nation's dramatic transformation from abjection under the British in 1947 to one of the world's economic powers, one incontrovertible fact remained: the persistence of violence against the Dalits, the 170 million ex-untouchable castes, the detritus of subcontinental history for over two millennia. The public massacre of Surekha and her children was not an isolated incident. According to the modest estimates of the National Crime Bureau, every day two Dalits are murdered, three Dalit women are raped, two Dalit houses are destroyed and eleven Dalits are beaten up (Ambedkar, nd; Teltumbde, 2009, p. 9). The general apathy of the state machinery to these heinous crimes, the complicity and incompetence of the medical establishment in the face of murders and rapes, and the blindness of the mainstream media to these depredations is also routine.

The Khairlanji case, however, became a catalyst for change when a major publishing house, Navayana, launched a series entitled ‘Holocaste’. Each book in the series is dedicated to a gruesome crime against a Dalit and situates it in a socio-cultural and historical context. The editorial credo is unequivocal:

Atrocities pile up, forming a landscape of tears, blood and ashes. It could be said this is not genocide. It could be argued this is not a holocaust. What is it then, this slow, everyday ritual of murder? Unreported and easily forgotten. What should we call a holocaust in installments – a “Holocaste”? This series from Navayana chronicles Dalit massacres that go almost unnoticed in the world’s largest democracy (Teltumbde, 2008).¹

The first title in the series, *Khairlanji: A strange and bitter crop* by Anand Teltumbde (2008), provides narrative ballast to the rape and murder of the Bhotmange family in a way that journalistic reporting in the least read sections of the national daily newspapers and the statistics of the National Crime Bureau cannot. It would not be possible to reconstruct Surekha’s everyday world in quite such detail but for this publication. In sum, the book seeks to restore for the reader, desensitised by the plethora of skeletal crime reporting, the humanity of Surekha and her unfortunate family.

The Navayana initiative, I suggest, can be seen as a high point in the last two decades in Dalit attempts to wrest the power of narrating human rights abuses against them from dominant media outlets. For their part, the mainstream media have given more visibility to the elite who are disgruntled with the rise of low-caste power than to the abysmal lows to which the ordinary rural Dalit has sunk in the era of globalisation. Media slights and obfuscations have been countered in recent years by the proliferation of multiple genres of Dalit life-writing – autobiography, memoir, *testimonio*, collective biography – that narrate the extreme violence these communities confront in their daily lives. More generally, this corpus of writing can be seen as an integral part of a continuing contest within Indian democracy over the role of caste and its visibility/invisibility in the public sphere. It also brings to the fore the low-caste rejection of the civilisational claims of Indian nation-making while at the same time embracing its liberating potential. Most significantly for the purposes of this essay, the narratives herald the emergence of Dalit personhood as a figure of suffering, unsettling the celebratory mood of late modern Indian democracy, and moving towards realising its true potential by demanding due recognition. The logic of democracy, as political philosophers have reminded us, resides in the idea of an absolute extension of personhood to *everyone*.

This essay is a study of two representative life-writing narratives by Dalits from Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra, *Joothan* (Leftovers) by Om Prakash Valmiki (1997), and *Akkarmashi* (The Outcast) by Sharan Kumar Limbale (1984). The genre of life-writing has been an important component of Dalit literature since the publication in Marathi of Daya Pawar’s *Balute* in 1978. Other landmark publications include Laxman Mane’s *Upa* (The Outsider, 1980) and Laxman Gaikwad’s *Uchalya* (Petty Thief, 1987). Life-writing texts first emerged in Marathi, for the post-Independence Dalit literary movement began in Maharashtra. Since the 1980s, the genre has spread to other literary/linguistic clusters such as Tamil, Hindi,

Gujarati, Telugu, Kannada and Punjabi. The recent dominance of life-writing over poetry and the short story is a significant development and occurred in tandem with an incremental increase through the 1990s in the vocalisation of low-caste aspirations in the public sphere. This is intimately linked not just to an increased questioning of the foundations of the secular and modernising Nehruvian state through the 1980s, but also to an enhanced connectivity to the discourse of human rights on the international stage.² The National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights and the National Federation of Dalit Women, both established in the 1990s, are now powerful forums for the national and global articulation of Dalit rights.³

While situating the two life narratives *Joothan* and *Akkarmashi* in their specific regional contexts, this essay highlights critical points of convergence in their modes of witnessing the ravages of Dalit existence and articulating a vision for a Dalit future. The analysis attends closely to the formal qualities of the texts and makes a case for why a simple categorisation of these works under the rubric of *testimonio* – eyewitness accounts of collective suffering in the first person – is inadequate to convey their narrative potential to bestow “personhood” on the suffering Dalit (Pandian, 2003; Nayar, 2003; Rege, 2006). The term *testimonio* gained currency in biographical studies in the 1990s to describe first person accounts of horrific abuses suffered by minority groups around the globe. Its roots lie in the word “testimony”, which means testifying or bearing witness in a court of law. In 1992, the Latin American historian John Beverley facilitated its translation into the lexicon of literary genres by defining *testimonio* as “a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet . . . form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts and whose unit of narration is usually a ‘life’ or a significant life experience”. Scholars have since made explicit the braiding implicit in such readings of the *testimonio*, of the *aesthetics* of witnessing suffering with the *legalities* of recognition and redress. It is worth examining the implications of locating Dalit life-writing in the debate on the globalisation of testimonial discourses on human suffering, a phenomenon captured succinctly by Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith (2004). Schaffer and Smith document the imbrication of human rights and narrated lives across myriad contemporary sites: post-apartheid South Africa, Latin America, Indigenous Australia and Canada, post-Tiananmen China and the transnational zones of human trafficking. Their argument is squarely on the side of reading subaltern life narratives as *evidence* of suffering, documented by eyewitnesses, that would pass muster in the international law court.

The idea of human rights was institutionalised by the United Nations in the postwar decade. In the last two decades it has figured as the predominant mode of addressing extremes of human suffering that find no redress in the constraints of the positive law frameworks of independent nation-states (Claude and Weston, 1992; Owen, 2003; Brown, 2004). In the case of Dalits, constitutional law in India prohibits discrimination on caste grounds and has explicit provisions to promote low-caste mobility and protect Dalit life and security. However, as many studies show, atrocities against Dalits have continued to grow in proportion to India’s accelerated economic growth under its liberalisation policies in the globalised world economy (Teltumbde, 2008; Sainath, 2003). It is hardly surprising that the Dalits, much to the embarrassment and annoyance of the Indian political and social

establishment, took a delegation to the 2001 United Nations Racism Conference in Durban to draw international attention to abuses against their communities. It is not unreasonable to deduce that the power of their appeal in that forum was informed by the plethora of Dalit life narratives already made available globally in English translations through the efforts of the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights and the National Federation of Dalit Women working with publishers that are both sympathetic to the Dalit cause and acutely aware of the market potential of subaltern life stories. To that extent, Smith and Schaffer's thesis linking human rights with life narratives is persuasive.

This essay, in situating Dalit life-writing within a global conversation on human suffering, does not suggest that the human rights regime is an antidote to the apathy of India's legal apparatus. There is enough scholarship on the limits of contemporary human rights to discourage any such optimistic reading (see Baxi, 2002; Douzinas, 2000; Ranciere, 2004). Rather, this essay foregrounds the imperative to attend to the aporias that mark the language of law in literary narrative, especially through its focus on the Dalits' "unfulfilled" quest for personhood through a narrative of pain. In writing about the trauma/testimony model for analysing contemporary life narratives, Lauren Berlant perceptively notes that this model "assumes that the law describes what a person is, and that social violence can be located the way physical injury can be traced" (Berlant, 2000, p. 42). It also assumes that once the pain is identified it can be made to go away – or as Berlant puts it, "it is . . . to imply that in the good life there will be no pain" (ibid). In a late liberal world, personhood through the privacy of pain takes more forms than citizenship language allows. One of these forms is a public poetics of recognition through literature and narrative, a poetics that carries a political charge primarily through its circulation and iteration in a constantly expanding discursive sphere of reciprocal respondents. Such a public is also a "rhetorical space of intersubjectivity . . . bearing witness" to unspeakable social suffering (Hesford, 2004, p. 105). But, unlike the juridical power of testimony that aspires to render "pain" transparent and remediable, such a public poetics keeps alive the singularity and inevitability of pain even in a "just" world.

Drawing on Berlant's critique of the trauma/testimony paradigm, my argument is that, in the life narratives discussed here, the Dalits articulate an aspiration to personhood through the realisation of *full* citizenship. They are also already aware not just of its impossibility due to a crushing historical legacy, but also of its inadequacy – in its logic of abstract equivalence – to address the *singular* nature of Dalit pain. Hence my attempt below not only to problematise the genre of *testimonio*, but also to recast Valmiki's *Joothan* and Limbale's *Akkarmashi* as variations of other literary genres – the *Bildungsroman* and the picaresque. These latter genres do not invest in the notion of "witnessing the truth" of history in any transparent way, but are nevertheless apposite in attributing a form of "personhood" to the Dalit protagonists that both resonates with and exceeds the dynamics of subject-making in liberal democracies. Both trace the process of coming into mature adulthood by a protagonist who encounters many hurdles and painful setbacks amidst a hostile and intractable social ethos during the course of an arduous physical and psychological journey. But there are also critical differences between the two.

A caveat to this argument is not out of place here. I invoke the *Bildungsroman* and the picaresque in respect to what Franco Moretti calls their “capaciousness” in providing, in a *functional* rather than in a strictly *formal* sense, a measure for all narratives of individual development and modern subject-formation. “Even those novels that clearly are *not Bildungsroman* or novels of formation,” writes Moretti, “are perceived by us against this conceptual horizon; so we speak of ‘failed initiation’ or of a ‘problematic formation’” (Moretti, 2000, p. 15). The distinction between the “functional” and the “formal” is crucial to my analysis, lest I be open to the charge of unproblematically claiming a formal exactitude between the novel and Dalit life narratives. While I do claim some parallels in their respective modes of narrative development, more importantly, I claim a functional equivalence in that these Dalit life narratives in late modern India play a critical role in enabling the ex-untouchable castes to imagine a coherent community of oppressed individuals, honed in the hellfire of caste persecution and emerging as “persons” in their own right in the process. On this “functional” ground I argue also that the opposition posited in recent scholarship on subaltern life-writing between “individualist” and “collectivist” genres – with the novel and autobiography seen as instances of the former, and the *testimonio* as an instance of the latter – is not as absolute. Typically, the argument sees the “individualist” genres as proxies for privilege and power, as expressive modes of the dominant majority. On this logic, the “collectivist” genres are seen as products of marginalisation and oppression, expressive modes that draw the readers in as witnesses to suffering and that aspire to circulate in a communal context of healing, amelioration and resistance. While not wishing to devalue the critical distinction between the privileging of authorial voice and collective witnessing and resistance, I want to highlight that an overstated opposition between individualist and collectivist genres *does* obscure the fact that even *testimonios* that are read as witness documents of collective suffering do aspire to recover the “personhood” of the traumatised victim/s, and in both national and international contexts such aspiration is articulated in the language of “rights” squarely based on a conception of the “individual”. Equivalence in the eyes of the law can only be posited in terms of the abstract individual, whether she is the “citizen” in the context of national law or the “human” in the context of international human rights law (see Brugger, 1996; Yeatman, 2000). To that extent, like the *Bildungsroman* and the picaresque, *testimonios* ultimately function within the conceptual horizon of individual self-making through the recovery of personhood in a collective socio-cultural context. This is the burden of my explication and analysis of the Dalit life stories that follow.

History’s Leftovers: *Joothan* as *Bildungsroman*

Om Prakash Valmiki’s *Joothan*, published in Hindi in 1997, is a graphic and confronting narrative of the life experience of scavengers from northern India – *churhas* or *bhangis*. The narrator’s last name, “Valmiki”, is a generic term for this community, a name that he consciously adopts to avow his low-caste identity, much to the embarrassment of his now upwardly mobile family. The name “Valmiki” or “Balmiki” was given to the scavenger community by the Arya Samaj, a powerful Hindu reformist movement in northern India that originated in the nineteenth

century. The Samajists were alarmed at the large-scale conversion of this community to Christianity and Islam in the 1920s. A robust Hindu cultural revivalism in the same period, of which the Arya Samaj was one manifestation, mobilised its forces to keep the *bhangi* community within the Hindu fold. The result was the conferring of the label “Balmiki” on them, a name they adopted with pride because in the popular Hindu consciousness Valmiki is the composer of the epic *Ramayana*. In seeing themselves as descendants of such an illustrious ancestor, the scavengers recovered some of their dignity, and as Vijay Prashad has noted, closer to Independence they preferred to be on the majoritarian side of cultural Hinduisation for reasons of survival and protection (Prashad, 1999, p. 189; 1995).

This symbolic shift, however, did not see their conditions improve after Independence. As scavengers dealing with the disposal of human dirt, garbage and excreta, the taint of “pollution”, the single most incriminating feature of caste status, was indelibly etched on their lifeworlds. Even as “Balmikis” they continued to languish at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Their condition was especially abysmal in villages, where they were forced to live in filthy enclaves segregated from upper-caste quarters. Om Prakash Valmiki’s *Joothan*, in fact, opens with an inverse tableau of the village pastoral, a dominant theme and genre in mainstream Hindi literature and a model of wholesome living in the Gandhian imaginary. The narrative begins in 1955 with the author’s recollection of his days in the *churha basti* [the scavengers’ settlement], divided from the “purer” upper-caste homes by a pond, his family’s exploitation by the landed gentry, and his segregation from his upper-caste fellow students in the village school:

The country had become independent eight years ago. Gandhi’s uplifting of the untouchables was resounding everywhere. Although the doors of the government schools had begun to open for untouchables, the mentality of the ordinary people had not changed much. I had to sit away from the others in the class, that too on the floor. The mat ran out before reaching the spot I sat on. Sometimes I would have to sit way behind everybody, right near the door. And the letters on the board from there seemed faded (Valmiki, 1997, pp. 2–3).

In his first person narrative voice, Valmiki plays brilliantly with the theme of purity and pollution that has since antiquity marked the corporeal chasm between touchability and untouchability in the subcontinent’s caste hierarchy. The term “*joothan*”, which translates roughly into “leftovers from another’s plate”, becomes a metaphor for the sub-human status that the scavengers are reduced to in Indian villages. In Valmiki’s narrative, soiled food from upper-caste homes, destined for the garbage bin, makes its way into the bare kitchens of the *churhas*. The shame and degradation of relishing these leftovers as a child haunts the narrator for the rest of his life, even when as an adult he has the satisfaction of feeding the grandson of his upper-caste neighbour, Surendra, in his own home. As a child he had witnessed his mother’s humiliation at the hands of Surendra’s grandfather, Sukhdev Singh Tyagi, at the wedding of Tyagi’s daughter, where his mother had laboured hard as a cleaner. When she demanded more than just leftovers from the wedding feast for her children, he became irate: “You are taking a basketful of *joothan*. And on top of that you want food for your children. Don’t forget your

place, *Churhi*. Pick up your basket and get going” (Valmiki, 1997, p. 11). We learn that the use of the abusive “*churhi*” is common practice, a way of reducing the scavenger’s sense of self to her destined caste, a form of recognition that doubles as an insult (Butler, 1997). From that day his mother did not return to the Tyagi house, and she instilled in her children the discipline to resist upper-caste leftovers, no matter how hungry they were. This one incident marks the start of the narrator’s transformation from a little *churha* boy reconciled to assuaging his hunger from upper-caste “leftovers” to a battler against the scourge of untouchability, a transformation that I suggest is captured in a narrative frame quite akin to the *Bildungsroman*.

The *Bildungsroman*, which has its antecedents in the evolution of the eighteenth-century novel in Germany, came to fruition in England during the Victorian era with the works of Charles Dickens and George Eliot. It is a genre that relates an individual’s development from childhood to maturity within a given social order. Scholars have identified “idealist” and “realist” versions of the genre. The former posits a more dialectical relation between the individual and society, one in which both are malleable and the individual has sufficient initiative to transform the existing social norms even as he or she comes to maturity. In the realist version, the individual has no agency to change society, but achieves wholeness by adapting to existing social mores and structures (Hirsch, 1979, p. 298). The narrative takes us through the protagonist’s often arduous and agonising journey, both physical and psychological, as he confronts many obstacles, challenges the dominant norms of the social order he was born into, and eventually learns to adapt his desires and aspirations to them. The journey ends with the hero as a fully “socialised, normalized, and incorporated” member of his society (Slaughter, 2007, p. 179). This, at least, is the case with the *affirmative Bildungsroman* of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, which epitomised a conception of a liberal public sphere as an egalitarian imaginary that enabled the “people” to “produce and reproduce the norms and forms of themselves as ‘citizen-subjects’” (Slaughter, 2007, p. 178). The ideal of a “unified” and “developed” human nature in this literary genre is naturally suited to a liberal public sphere in which (private) “differences are erased through the universal equivalence of citizens” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 181).

In a study of more contemporary postcolonial novels, Joseph Slaughter makes a case for a “dissensual” *Bildungsroman*, one in which the ideals of socialisation, incorporation and normalisation are frustrated by a malformed and discriminatory social order, which simultaneously asserts in principle and denies in practice the universality of rights and the abstract equivalence of citizenship. The dissensual *Bildungsroman* performs a “double-demonstration by making a twofold rights claim that protests the protagonist’s exclusion from the public realm of rights, yet articulates this protest within the normative genre of the rights claim, thereby asserting a right to make such a public narrative demonstration” (Slaughter, 2007, pp. 181–82). It foregrounds the minoritarian exclusions that are constitutive of the liberal public sphere’s hegemonic functioning. The dissensual *Bildungsroman* is an apt analogue for what Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner have conceptualised as the “counter-public” (Fraser, 1993; Warner, 2002), the minoritarian *doppelgänger* of the Habermasian public sphere of the bourgeois liberal democracy.

Valmiki's *Joothan*, I argue, functions with precisely such a dissensual force in its narration of the painful stages of the evolution of an untouchable *churha* boy to an educated writer, activist and professional in modern India. From the start we are in the midst of a consciousness that is fully aware of the discrepancy between the rhetoric and reality of citizenship rights. The boy has the "right" to education and avails himself of it at every opportunity. But the disadvantage of his "polluted" caste rarely leaves him. He is made to sweep the school grounds while the upper-caste children are in their classrooms. His teachers cane him at the slightest provocation. He is barred from extracurricular activities for fear his touch would pollute. During examinations, the peons refuse to let him drink water from a glass. He fails his year twelve examination due to his Chemistry teacher's refusal to let him handle laboratory equipment during the year. His family members are often not paid for their labour and are then mercilessly beaten by the police for asserting their "right" to wages. "Why," he demands, "is it a crime to ask for the price of one's labour? Those who keep singing the glories of democracy use the government machinery to quell the blood flowing in our veins. *As though we are not citizens of this country*" (Valmiki, 1997, p. 39). The syntactical "conditional negative" of this last phrase captures the "double demonstration" of the "twofold" rights claim referred to earlier: an assertion of the abstract "right" to protest against the refusal, in practice, to extend to *all the universality* of the rights claim in normative citizenship-talk. In the context of Dalit writing, this twofold movement is also concretely manifest in the Dalit's *embrace* of the liberatory promise of the Indian nation-state's liberal democratic framework and the *rejection* of its civilisational claims to diversity and inclusion.

It is pertinent that Valmiki rejects all religious affiliations – Christian, Hindu and Buddhist – to which his community has aspired in its desperation to escape the stigma of untouchability. His eventual adoption of the name "Valmiki" is *not* an endorsement of his community's assimilation under a majoritarian Hindu ethnos and ethos. It is, rather, a defiant and ironic gesture, daring the upper-caste citizen to take him on as a "recognisable" Dalit, one who is not ashamed of his identity but intent on "shaming" the privileged citizen into recognising it as a legitimate one. The adoption of "Valmiki" as his last name is also a mark of his protest at his own community's desire to hide behind an upper-caste bourgeois identity in its path to upward social and professional mobility. He narrates a clash with his niece Seema, who refuses to introduce him to her college mates. "You may be able to face it," his niece says defensively. "I can't. What is the point of going around with the drum of caste tied around your neck?" (Valmiki, 1997, p. 128). Seema's argument epitomises for the narrator a denial of the ravages of a fractured social order, an order that, as M.S.S. Pandian notes in his reading of upper-caste life stories, is intent on rendering structural inequalities invisible even as they are manifested in myriad ways in everyday life (see Pandian, 2002). In such a context, the mark of an evolved self is the courage to confront the insularities and cruelties of the social order by wresting, on one's own terms, the claims of citizenship made by the liberal democratic Indian state. Both are possible, Valmiki's life narrative avers, through a stubborn will to educate oneself and actively partake of the legacy of the Dalit leader B.R. Ambedkar's fight for Dalit empowerment during the critical decades of the 1930s and 1940s when the Indian nation was being imagined into existence by its other

dynamic and better-known leaders from upper-caste communities, Gandhi, Patel and Nehru. *Joothan*, thus, to recapitulate my argument about its narrative framing, functions well within the generic horizon of the *Bildungsroman*, albeit in the “dissensual” mode invoked earlier, one that exposes the limits of the generic promise of full human personality development.

Destiny’s Deformed Child: The Picaro in *Akkarmashi*

Sharan Kumar Limbale’s *Akkarmashi*, while manifesting an epidermal likeness to *Joothan* in its life story of a hapless Dalit who educates himself out of his degrading circumstances, functions more as a picaresque narrative than as a *Bildungsroman*. The picaresque, unlike the *Bildungsroman*, is not only unstructured by a causally related series of events that might give the journey its organic shape;⁴ it is also less oriented to the end point of the journey, the incorporation/transformation of the protagonist within a given social order and his evolution into full personhood. As opposed to the organic plot, the organically developed individual and the semblance of a restored moral order of the *Bildungsroman*, the hallmarks of the picaresque are the episodic plot movement and the protagonist’s tortured consciousness at odds with his chaotic environs and an oppressive and immutable social order. A picaro remains a social outcast. His volatility and capriciousness signal an abdication of organic self-determination within a social ethos he abhors and has no agency in. The picaresque, in the words of Stuart Miller, “reveals . . . the endless real possibilities of life’s dirt . . . Behind the narrator of each picaresque novel we feel the moralistic implied author shrieking hate at the world’s . . . chaos, shrieking in rage at what the world has done to him personally” (Miller, 1967, p. 72).

If Valmiki’s *Joothan* lies towards the *Bildungsroman* end of the developmental narrative spectrum, Sharan Kumar Limbale’s *Akkarmashi*, a life story of a bastard child born of the seduction of a Dalit woman by her upper-class landlord, can be located at the picaresque end. “Rage” is the predominant mood of *Akkarmashi*, held grimly aloft by two narrative prongs: the protagonist’s illegitimate, half-caste status and the constancy of hunger. In a passage of unmitigated fury, Limbale cries:

Why didn’t my mother abort me when I was a foetus? Why did she not strangle me as soon as I was born? We may be children born out of caste but does that mean we must be humiliated? What exactly is our fault? Why should a child suffer for the sin of its parents? [. . .] Whenever I look at my mother I grow wild with anger (Limbale, 1984, p. 64).

“Hunger” spreads its tentacles through the narrative, often with biting anger: “I realised that God had made a mistake in endowing man with a stomach” (ibid, p. 7); sometimes in stark realism: “those were the days we starved” (ibid, p. 21); occasionally in the figurative: “A flock of crows fluttered in our stomach” (ibid, p. 7); and ever so often in the contemplative: “*Bhakari* [tough bread made of jowar] is as large as man. It is as vast as the sky and bright like the sun” (ibid, p. 50).

Limbale’s narrative is based among the Dalit community of Mahars in the western Indian state of Maharashtra, also the home of the first Dalit political and literary movement of the twentieth century under the leadership of Ambedkar.

While the impact of Ambedkar does appear to temporarily ameliorate the protagonist's identity crisis, especially with his participation in the Marathwada agitation of 1978 when the Dalits demanded the renaming of the Marathwada University after the Babasaheb, the narrative as a whole has a quintessential picaresque momentum with "life's chaos assaulting the [picaro] in one event after another", almost in a series of "accidents" beyond the hero's control (Miller, 1967, p. 12, p. 36). The reader's experience with *Akkarmashi* is primarily one of traumatic confrontation as episode after episode relates the gruesome depredations of a life torn apart by the accident of birth and caste. As a traumatised child, the protagonist staggers between "homes" that lack nurture and nourishment of even the most elementary kind. As the abandoned bastard son of an untouchable woman, he carries the mark of his mother's rape/seduction and life-long exploitation at the hands of the upper-caste landlords of his village. He has no sense of belonging to either his untouchable Mahar community or his unacknowledged paternal community of upper-caste Lingayats. Unlike the protagonist of *Joothan*, he never even has a roof over his head except for the few years he spends with his grandmother and her Muslim partner, a situation tailored to make him feel even more of an *akkarmashi* than if he had lived with his mother and her series of lovers. Even this brief period of protection is marked by desperate hunger. Eating baked bread that smells of dung or stealing grain left with corpses at the crematorium seems routine to him:

Maharwada [village enclave of the untouchable Mahars] meant a heap of *jowar* gathered at the resting place of a corpse. Each person was like a grain. Why don't they too eat the *jowar* connected with the rites of the dead? It too was food. Why should such *jowar* not be touched? (Limble, 1984, pp. 12–13).

It is hard to miss the cold anger of this rationalisation, the protagonist's fury at the limitless poverty of his community. In fact, it is hunger and the next available source of its assuagement that provide some semblance of a "home" for him, whether his grandmother's hut, or the bus stand where he awaits bleak-eyed the arrival of passengers who might deign to toss him a few coins in exchange for help, or even his mother's nauseating liquor den. The wild, anarchic nature of his experiences in a stark and amoral world of astonishing deprivation is matched not just by the violence of his emotions, but also by the inconsistencies and vacillations in his narration. Was his "father" a reasonable provider for his illegitimate children? Which "father" does he refer to when he uses the term "*kaka*"? Any or all of his mother's lovers? Is his mother a whore *and* a raped woman? Somehow, these facts seem irrelevant in the face of the overwhelmingly confronting nature of the narrator's brutalised sensibility. The chaos of the protagonist's outer and inner worlds is matched by the abrupt and fragmented nature of the narrative, which leaps from incident to incident in a jagged array of nauseating tableaux, each poised to pierce the reader's sense of comfort. Even towards the end of the narrative, when the protagonist has moved away from his wretched village and has found employment after a struggle with education, we see a tortured soul struggling to reconcile the contradictions of his inheritance with his new-found mobility as an urban, educated

Dalit. He can now afford to rent a home for his young wife and children, but has difficulty finding one in the caste-conscious small town. The anger surfaces yet again:

I faced the problem of finding a house in a new town and my caste followed me like an enemy . . . Should I put this town to the torch? Such a big town – but I could not get a single room (Limbale, 1984, p. 106).

He settles for a home in the Dalit ghetto but feels alienated and disgusted:

Here the houses did not have bathrooms and toilets. Women bathed openly and urinated everywhere . . . Cycle-rickshaw drivers, porters and labourers were the main inhabitants of this locality. People lived in the smallest possible spaces. Each one worried only about his hunger. The stomach was the threshold of their capability . . . The locality nauseated me. I didn't want to adopt the values of such a locality. I was a Dalit who had become a Brahmin by attitude (Limbale, 1984, p. 107).

The life story ends in a spiritual abyss with the narrator paralysed by the aporetic nature of life and death in a cultural and moral vacuum:

My wife Kusum had had a baby boy. I had already thought of a name for him. It was Anaarya . . . At this early age of twenty-five . . . I had to contend with so many responsibilities . . . Who will undertake Dada's [his "grandfather"] funeral? Will Muslims attend his cremation? How can they perform rituals after his death? What will happen to his corpse? . . . Would people come for the rituals on Santamai and Masamai's [his grandmother and mother] deaths? Why this labyrinth of customs? Who has created such values of right and wrong . . .? If they consider my birth illegitimate what values am I to follow? (Limbale, 1984, p. 113).

Apart from his determination to name his son "*Anaarya*" (literally Un-Aryan), a gesture firmly locating Dalit futures in opposition to the origin myth of Hindu India, said to be rooted in Aryan culture, the narrative of his life does not culminate in the emergence of a strong and coherent self. The protagonist stands ravaged and fragmented by the singularity of his pain, a singularity that stubbornly resists translation into the lexicon of "rights" in the "dissensual" mode that marks *Joothan*. The very singular, non-universal nature of the pain documented – for it is not pain experienced by upper-caste communities, for instance – propels the reader to confront and calibrate the extremity of each painful episode against the world of the everyday *outside* Limbale's wretched Dalit ghetto. To that extent *Akkarmashi* stays faithful to its picaresque narrative mode, even as it interpellates the reader as "witness" to the protagonist's trauma in the modality of the *testimonio* which, in a "human rights" framework, could translate "empathy into beneficent action" (Hesford, 2004, p. 107).

What does this non-universality of Limbale's pain mean in terms of the juridical power claimed, albeit as proxy, on behalf of the "truth" of such a narrative? For it is

precisely this truth-making power of law in narrative – a power bestowing universality on the Dalit experience of pain – that is claimed by critics on behalf of Dalit “*testimonios*”:

Once truth has been established through *testimonio*, it entails, indeed demands, reparation and justice. As witnesses we are obliged to engage in change. Reading *testimonio* like Bama’s [another Dalit writer] enables us – readers, critics and students – to interpellate ourselves in a relation of solidarity with social reform and liberation movements. It provides a discursive space where an alliance between the intelligentsia and the subaltern can take place (Nayar, 2006, p. 97).

Such a claim on behalf of the *testimonio*, I conclude, is not open to confronting the aporia of legal subject-making and the limits of sentimental solidarity with subaltern pain that the life narratives discussed here bring to the fore. This is because the dissensual force of these texts lies precisely in their embodiment through an aesthetic of suffering of the *unrealisability*, the “not-yet-ness”, of citizenship rights and human rights universalism.

Notes

1. These words appear on the front inside cover of *Khairlanji: A strange and bitter crop*.
2. Indeed, the stories detailed here also suggest the significant connection between Dalit suffering, gender and human rights, a dimension that is beyond the scope of this essay. For an important discussion of these issues, see Hildson et al. (2000).
3. Details on <http://www.ncdhr.org.in>, and on www.ambedkar.org.
4. As Welck and Warren note in their *Theory of literature*, “In the picaresque novel, the chronological sequence is all there is: this happened, then that . . . A more philosophic novel adds to chronology the structure of causation” (p. 222).

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