



**EPISTEMIC DISOBEDIENCE AND DALIT COUNTER-KNOWLEDGE:
REWRITING MARGINAL EPISTEMOLOGIES THROUGH *JOOZHAN* AND
*KARUKKU***

Priyanshu Shivhare

*Ph.D Scholar, SoS English, Maharaja Chhatrasal Bundelkhand University, Chhatarpur,
Madhya Pradesh, India*

Abstract

*Dalit literature has been often read as the literature of protest, testimony, or identity. However, its deeper epistemological significance remains insufficiently examined. This paper explores Dalit autobiographical writing as a form of counter-knowledge that challenges dominant epistemic structures shaped by caste hierarchies. It asks how Dalit narratives transform lived experience into knowledge and thereby unsettle established literary and intellectual traditions. Drawing on subaltern historiography and decolonial thought, the study analyses *Joozhan* and *Karukku* as texts that convert memory, embodiment, and rupture into epistemic resources. Through close textual analysis, the paper argues that these works resist epistemic violence not only by narrating oppression but by redefining what counts as knowledge. Memory becomes archive, the body becomes testimony, and marginality becomes method. By situating Dalit writing within wider debates on subalternity and epistemic disobedience, the paper demonstrates that Dalit autobiographies offer a powerful intervention into the politics of knowledge production. Ultimately, the study proposes that Dalit literature should be read not merely as sociological evidence or resistance writing but as a transformative intellectual practice that compels literary studies to rethink epistemology from the margins.*

Keywords

Dalit Literature, Dalit Autobiography, Counter-Knowledge, Caste and Knowledge, Subaltern Epistemology, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Dalit writing occupies a distinctive place within modern Indian literature because it emerges from histories of exclusion that are not only social and economic but also epistemic. For centuries, access to literacy, education, and textual authority was structured through caste hierarchies. The result was not simply inequality but the systematic marginalisation of Dalit voices within the domain of knowledge itself. In this context, Dalit literature must be read as more than expressive writing; it is an intervention into the politics of knowledge production.

Much of the early critical engagement with Dalit literature focused on its testimonial force and political urgency. While such readings remain important, they often risk reducing Dalit writing to documentation of suffering. This paper approaches Dalit autobiographical writing differently. Instead of asking what these texts represent, it asks what they do to knowledge. How do Dalit narratives reshape our understanding of memory, authorship, and experience as sources of knowledge?

To address these questions, the paper turns to two influential autobiographies: Valmiki's *Joozhan* and Bama's *Karukku*. Both texts foreground lived experience as an epistemic resource and challenge the authority of dominant narratives. Reading them together allows us to see how



Dalit life writing converts everyday humiliation, bodily experience, and spiritual crisis into forms of knowing that unsettle literary and epistemological hierarchies.

Reading *Joothan*: Memory as Ethical Witness:

One of the most striking features of *Joothan* is its refusal to soften memory. Valmiki's narrative does not present the past as something safely contained within recollection; rather, memory appears as an active, unsettling force that resists closure. The recurring image of leftover food—the titular *joothan*—captures this dynamic powerfully. What might otherwise appear as a mundane detail becomes an enduring marker of humiliation and exclusion. By returning repeatedly to this image, the narrative insists that caste operates not in abstraction but through everyday practices (Valmiki, 27).

This insistence on the everyday gives *Joothan* its epistemic force. The text refuses grand historical framing and instead foregrounds small, recurring acts of degradation. In doing so, it challenges the authority of sanitised histories that erase such experiences. Valmiki's recollections function as a counter-archive, preserving forms of knowledge that rarely find space in official narratives. Memory here is not nostalgic; it is accusatory.

The treatment of hunger further deepens this epistemic dimension. Hunger in *Joothan* is not merely physical deprivation but a social condition structured by caste. The act of consuming leftovers becomes a lived pedagogy of humiliation, teaching the Dalit child his place within a hierarchical order. By narrating these experiences without rhetorical embellishment, Valmiki allows their starkness to speak for itself. The narrative voice remains restrained, yet the effect is deeply unsettling, precisely because it resists dramatization (Valmiki, 45).

Education, too, appears in the text as a fraught terrain. Scenes from school reveal how institutions associated with enlightenment and progress reproduce caste boundaries. The classroom becomes a space where knowledge is both offered and withheld, where the Dalit student learns not only literacy but also exclusion. In such moments, *Joothan* exposes how epistemic access is regulated through humiliation, revealing the complicity of educational structures in sustaining caste hierarchies.

Reading *Karukku*: Fragmentation and Spiritual Awakening:

If *Joothan* derives its power from stark realism, *Karukku* unsettles readers through fragmentation. The very title evokes sharpness and rupture, referring to the serrated edges of palmyra leaves. This imagery resonates throughout the text, which unfolds in a non-linear, episodic manner. Rather than offering a cohesive life story, Bama presents fragments of experience that resist neat narrative ordering (Bama, xii).

This fragmented form is not simply stylistic experimentation; it reflects the fractured subjectivity produced by caste oppression. The narrative moves between childhood memories, moments of awakening, and reflections on faith, creating a structure that mirrors emotional and spiritual dislocation. By refusing linear coherence, the text challenges conventional expectations of autobiography, suggesting that marginal lives cannot be contained within orderly narrative frameworks.

Religion occupies a central place in this epistemic disruption. Bama's account of her engagement with Christianity exposes a painful contradiction: a faith that preaches equality yet reproduces caste discrimination in practice. This disillusionment becomes a turning point in the narrative, prompting a profound questioning of institutional authority. Faith, once a source of solace, transforms into a site of interrogation (Bama, 84).

What makes *Karukku* particularly compelling is its emotional intensity. Anger, disillusionment, and urgency permeate the narrative voice. Rather than moderating these emotions



to conform to literary decorum, Bama foregrounds them as integral to testimony. In doing so, she challenges the expectation that knowledge must be articulated through calm detachment. Here, feeling itself becomes epistemic, a mode through which injustice is recognised and articulated.

Embodiment and the Politics of Experience:

Both *Joothan* and *Karukku* foreground the body as a site of knowledge. Experiences of hunger, labour, and humiliation are inscribed onto the body, making it a living archive of caste violence. This emphasis on embodiment disrupts epistemological traditions that privilege abstraction and disembodied reason.

Dalit autobiographical writing repeatedly returns to sensory detail: the taste of stale food, the sting of insult, the exhaustion of labour. Such details do more than create vivid imagery; they assert the epistemic legitimacy of lived experience. In a literary culture that often privileges aesthetic distance, this insistence on immediacy becomes a radical gesture. The body is not merely represented; it becomes the ground of knowing.

This embodied mode of narration also challenges the hierarchy between intellectual and manual labour. Within caste society, manual labour has historically been devalued, associated with impurity and inferiority. By foregrounding labouring bodies, Dalit texts expose the ideological foundations of this hierarchy. Labour emerges not as absence of knowledge but as a different form of knowing rooted in survival and resilience.

Memory as Counter-History:

A recurring feature across Dalit autobiographical writing is the transformation of memory into counter-history. Unlike official histories that rely on documentation and institutional authority, Dalit narratives foreground personal recollection as a legitimate historical source. This shift destabilises conventional distinctions between history and storytelling.

In both texts, individual memories expand into collective experience. Valmiki's recollections of childhood humiliation resonate beyond the personal, reflecting shared histories of caste oppression. Similarly, Bama's narrative frequently shifts from the singular "I" to a collective voice, emphasising that her experiences are not isolated but communal (Bama, 102).

This collectivisation of memory has important epistemic implications. It challenges the individualism that underpins many autobiographical traditions and foregrounds relational modes of knowing. Knowledge here emerges not from solitary reflection but from shared histories of suffering and resistance.

Language, Directness, and the Refusal of Literary Politeness:

The linguistic texture of both texts plays a crucial role in their epistemic intervention. Neither Valmiki nor Bama adopts the polished language often associated with canonical literary prose. Instead, their writing is marked by directness and immediacy. This stylistic choice has sometimes been misread as lack of refinement, but such readings overlook its political significance.

The refusal of literary ornamentation functions as an aesthetic stance. By stripping away decorative language, these authors foreground urgency and authenticity. Their prose resists the distancing effects of literary polish, compelling readers to confront the rawness of experience. In this sense, language becomes an instrument of epistemic refusal, rejecting norms that prioritise form over lived reality.

The presence of oral rhythms further reinforces this effect. Both texts carry traces of spoken storytelling, creating an intimacy that blurs the boundary between narration and testimony. This oral quality situates Dalit writing within traditions of community storytelling, expanding the scope of what counts as literature.

Toward a Dalit Epistemology:

Taken together, *Joothan* and *Karukku* gesture toward what might be described as a Dalit epistemology—an approach to knowledge grounded in experience, memory, and relationality. Such an epistemology challenges dominant models that privilege abstraction, neutrality, and institutional authority.

This perspective resonates with broader theoretical debates on subalternity. Scholars have long argued that marginal voices are not merely absent from dominant archives but actively excluded through epistemic violence (Spivak, 280). Dalit autobiographies respond to this exclusion by creating alternative archives rooted in lived experience. In doing so, they transform marginality from a position of silence into a site of knowledge production.

The idea of epistemic disobedience further clarifies this intervention. To disobey epistemically is to refuse the authority of dominant frameworks of knowing and to assert alternative modes of knowledge. Dalit writing enacts this refusal by foregrounding experiences that dominant epistemologies struggle to accommodate. In this sense, Dalit autobiographies do not simply demand inclusion within existing frameworks; they compel those frameworks to change.

Conclusion: From Testimony to Theory:

Reading Dalit autobiographical writing through the lens of epistemology allows us to move beyond reductive interpretations that confine it to protest or documentation. As this paper has shown, texts like *Joothan* and *Karukku* transform testimony into theory by reconfiguring the grounds of knowledge production. Through memory, embodiment, and narrative experimentation, they challenge deeply entrenched assumptions about who can know and what can be known.

Such a perspective invites a broader rethinking of literary studies itself. If knowledge can emerge from the margins in such transformative ways, then the boundaries of literary theory must expand to accommodate these epistemic interventions. Dalit literature, in this sense, is not merely a regional or identity-based corpus but a vital intellectual resource that reshapes conversations about knowledge, history, and literary value.

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