



From Margin to Mainstream: The Politics of Learning in Dalit Life Narratives

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how learning (education) acts as a political tool in Dalit life narratives. It shows how these autobiographies challenge dominant knowledge and use education to resist, build identity, and seek social change. Dalit narratives offer counter-histories to caste oppression. While widely studied for their social and literary value, fewer works focus on how they depict learning. Influenced by Ambedkarite thought, these texts present education as both a site of struggle and hope. The study uses qualitative textual analysis. It focuses on Dalit autobiographies by Bama, Omprakash Valmiki, and Sharan Kumar Limbale. The analysis applies critical pedagogy and subaltern studies to explore education, exclusion, and empowerment. Education is shown as more than personal gain. It is a shared political act. The texts highlight caste bias in schools, language barriers, and flawed curricula. Yet they also show how learning fuels resistance and shapes awareness. Education is portrayed as both oppressive and liberating. It reinforces caste lines but also breaks them. Learning includes school knowledge, community memory, and oral traditions. Dalit narratives make education a political subject. They expose how caste shapes access and meaning in learning. These stories push us to rethink equity through caste, voice, and power. The study deepens our view of learning as a site of resistance and marginality

INTRODUCTION

Dalit life narratives have become powerful literary and political tools in modern India. These autobiographies do not just tell personal stories – they act as collective testimonies. “The term Dalit signifies not simply a statistical category of the marginalized people but a generic and collective vocabulary of high sounding political meaning reflecting consciousness of the oppressed in terms of caste discrimination and cultural marginality that kept them aloof from accumulating varied forms of resources that can be converted into capital” (Chandhoke, 2012: 140). As a result of this, “Dalit autobiography has joined protest poetry as a leading genre of Dalit literature since the nineteen seventies” (Queen, 2021: 281). They expose caste-based violence and reclaim voice and agency. “Our struggle as women, men, blacks, workers, Brazilians, North Americans, French, or Bolivians is influenced by our gender, race, class, culture, and history, conditionings that mark us. Our struggle, nevertheless, departs from these conditionings and converges in the direction of being more, in the direction of universal objectives. Or else, for me at least, the fight would make no sense” (Roberts, 2008: 86).

Written in many Indian languages and translated widely, these texts challenge dominant narratives. They speak of identity, justice, and the right to be heard. A recurring theme in many of these texts is education and learning. For Dalit writers, education is more than a personal path. It is a weapon of resistance and a tool for change. Thinkers like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar stressed its power, captured in the slogan, “Educate, Agitate, Organize.” “Dalit community sought to establish themselves as an independent panthic community within Hinduism and began to provide a Dalit perspective of Indian society which challenged varna Hindu cultural values and practices, and provided a foundation for the later Dalit movement under the leadership of Dr B. R. Ambedkar” (Constable 1997: 317). Yet, Dalit experiences of education are full of contradiction. Schools and colleges, which promise growth, often become spaces of humiliation and exclusion. Dalit autobiographies reflect this tension. They show how learning can uplift and also hurt.

Table 1. Dalit Literature and Education as Resistance

Aspect	Dalit Literature	Education	Combined Impact
Purpose	To expose caste oppression and reclaim voice	To empower Dalits through knowledge and critical awareness	Challenges caste hegemony and promotes social transformation
Mediums of Resistance	Autobiographies, poetry, novels, essays (e.g., Joothan, Karukku)	Formal schooling, community learning; Ambedkarite pedagogy	Create narratives that inspire and educate
Key Figures	Bama, Omprakash Valmiki, Sharan Kumar Limbale	B.R. Ambedkar, Savitribai Phule	Intersection of intellectual and literary resistance

Themes	Identity, humiliation, dignity, assertion	Liberation through learning; anti-caste curriculum	Promotes self-respect and critical consciousness
Tools Used	Vernacular language, personal experience, realism	Reading, writing, social sciences, legal knowledge	Encourages questioning of caste ideology
Audience	Both Dalit and non-Dalit readers; national and international reach	Marginalized communities; new generations of Dalit students	Fosters solidarity and inter-caste understanding
Challenges Faced	Marginalization in mainstream literary discourse	Discrimination in schools, curriculum bias	Resistance to both exclusionary knowledge and cultural systems
Challenges Strategy	Rewriting history, asserting Dalit identity	Building alternative education spaces (e.g., Dalit-run schools, study circles)	A dual-front struggle: cultural and structural
Resistance Strategy	Rewriting history, asserting Dalit identity	Building alternative Dalit identity	A dual-front struggle: cultural and structural

Scholars have widely studied these narratives, focusing on caste, mobility, and voice. But education as a theme remains underexplored. These texts offer more than just stories. They hold sharp critiques of India’s education system – its content, teaching, and values. They question how knowledge is controlled and who gets to learn. This study focuses on this theme: the politics of learning in Dalit autobiographies.

This study addresses a gap in the research. While many have written about barriers Dalits face in education, few have looked at how Dalit authors tell these stories themselves. These autobiographies offer deep insights into everyday exclusion and resistance. They show how reading and writing become acts of rebellion. The key question this study asks is: How do Dalit life narratives represent the politics of learning, and what do they reveal about the links between caste, education, and power?

This study has three main goals. First, it seeks to explore how formal and informal learning is represented in Dalit autobiographies. These narratives depict not only the experience of structured education within schools and universities but also the informal, everyday forms of learning that take place through community knowledge, oral traditions, religious texts, and personal reflection. By examining both these forms, the study aims to highlight how Dalit individuals construct knowledge systems that often exist outside mainstream institutions. This also allows for an understanding of how learning is shaped by social location, especially caste and class. Second, the study aims to examine how these autobiographical texts critique the caste-based structures embedded in

India's education system. Dalit narratives frequently expose the deeply entrenched hierarchies in educational institutions—manifested in curriculum biases, teacher discrimination, language politics, and social exclusion. The study analyzes how these experiences are represented not just as personal setbacks but as systemic failures that reflect the persistence of caste ideology in spaces supposedly dedicated to merit and equality. Finally, the research intends to understand how learning becomes a powerful site of resistance, identity assertion, and political consciousness. For many Dalit authors, the act of reading, writing, and gaining access to knowledge is more than a personal journey; it becomes a form of defiance against centuries of social exclusion. Through their life stories, these writers present education as a transformative force—one that helps reclaim dignity, question authority, and imagine new futures. The study, therefore, reads these autobiographies as more than narratives of suffering—they are blueprints for liberation and acts of reclaiming intellectual agency.

This study argues that Dalit autobiographies turn education into a political issue. They reject the idea that learning is neutral or fair. Instead, they show how education can both oppress and empower. These texts reveal the harsh reality of caste in classrooms. But they also show how Dalits use learning to speak, fight, and transform. This research adds to Dalit studies by looking closely at how learning is shown in life stories. It also speaks to critical education studies, which ask how power shapes learning. And it adds to postcolonial literary studies, by showing how marginalized voices push back against dominant views. This work challenges the idea that education is always a force for good. It shows that for many, learning is shaped by struggle, rejection, and resilience. The findings may also help inform education policy and social justice debates.

The study looks at three major Dalit autobiographies: *Karukku* by Bama (Tamil), *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki (Hindi), and *Akkarmashi* (The Outcaste) by Sharan Kumar Limbale (Marathi). These texts were chosen for their depth, impact, and focus on education. While they offer powerful stories, they do not cover all Dalit experiences. The study does not include all regions, castes, or languages. Also, it does not use fieldwork or data analysis. The focus is on reading and interpreting the texts through theory and context. This study uses qualitative textual analysis, with help from critical pedagogy, subaltern studies, and Dalit literary theory. It involves close reading of the texts to find patterns, symbols, and key themes about learning. These are placed within larger social and political contexts. The study also uses other scholars' work to support and guide the analysis. It is literary and critical in its approach, not empirical or quantitative.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study uses Dalit Literary Theory framework to help uncover how education in the texts works as both oppression and resistance. Dalit "narrative serves as an important intervention in the social history of India because it is a product of a Dalit agency where the story is written from the point of view of Dalits, a perspective often marginalized by mainstream narratives" (Sivateja,

2025: 116). Dalit Literary Theory comes from writers like Baburao Bagul and Sharan Kumar Limbale.

The literature on Dalit identity and anti-caste resistance presents a powerful intersection of political thought, autobiography, and cultural critique. B.R. Ambedkar's *The Triumph of Brahmanism* exposes the regressive shift from Buddhism to Brahmanical dominance, forming the ideological backbone of Dalit movements. Gail Omvedt's *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution* further traces Dalit political assertion in colonial India. Dalit autobiographies like Bama's *Karukku* and Limbale's *Akkarmashi* present personal narratives that challenge caste and gender oppression, using lived experience as a form of resistance. Philip Constable explores early Dalit cultural expressions in western India, while Madhavan and Komath focus on regional anti-caste discourses in Kerala. Neera Chandhoke interrogates the disconnect between theoretical equality and lived humiliation, emphasizing respect as a political demand. Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* offers a global framework for understanding caste as a pedagogical problem, aligning with the emancipatory goals of Dalit education. Collectively, these texts highlight the ongoing struggle against caste-based exclusion in India.

Patankar and Omvedt's seminal article on the Dalit liberation movement during the colonial period traces its ideological roots and sociopolitical challenges. Christopher Queen examines how Dalit autobiographies in English communicate both resistance and identity reconstruction, offering global readers insight into caste-based oppression. Sivatejaa's reading of *My Father Baliah* emphasizes the development of Dalit consciousness and the intergenerational struggle for dignity. Peter Roberts extends Freirean pedagogy by emphasizing its relevance to liberation struggles, including caste, through his review of *Pedagogy of Indignation*.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology grounded in literary analysis and cultural studies to examine how Dalit life narratives portray the politics of learning as a form of resistance, empowerment, and social mobility. The methodology is both textual and interpretive, aiming to uncover the socio-political significance of education in Dalit autobiographical writings.

1. *Selection of Texts*: The primary sources include selected Dalit autobiographies written in English or translated into English. Representative texts such as *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki, *Karukku* by Bama, and *Akkarmashi (The Outcaste)* by Sharan Kumar Limbale are chosen based on their thematic engagement with education, caste discrimination, and identity formation. These texts reflect diverse regional, linguistic, and gendered experiences within Dalit communities.
2. *Analytical Framework*: The study employs a thematic and discourse analysis approach: Thematic analysis identifies recurring motifs related to schooling, exclusion, access to knowledge, and pedagogical violence. Discourse analysis, inspired by theorist like Paulo Freire, investigates how power relations are encoded in the language of learning and teaching. Additionally, postcolonial

theory and subaltern studies provide a theoretical lens to interrogate how marginalized voices contest dominant narratives of education and progress.

3. *Contextual and Interdisciplinary Approach*: This research situates the literary texts within broader historical, sociological, and political contexts: The role of the Indian education system in perpetuating or challenging caste hierarchies. The impact of government policies, such as reservation and affirmative action, on Dalit access to education. Gendered dimensions of Dalit education, especially in narratives by women writers.
4. *Data Collection and Interpretation*: All data is drawn from published literary texts, interviews, prefaces, and essays by Dalit authors. These are supplemented by secondary materials such as scholarly articles, government reports, and educational statistics to support textual interpretations.
5. *Ethical Considerations*: The research recognizes the ethical responsibility of representing marginalized voices with care and integrity. Autobiographical texts are read as testimonios, not just literary works, emphasizing their political and experiential authority.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Dalit literature has become a key field in Indian literary and cultural studies. This rise followed the publication of major autobiographies like Joothan, Karukku, and Akkarmashi. These texts are more than personal stories. They are political documents that resist caste dominance. They offer a voice from the margins and rewrite India's social history. Scholars such as Susie Tharu and K. Satyanarayana argue that Dalit writing works as a counter-narrative to upper-caste traditions. It confronts privilege and asserts the authority of lived experience. Most research on Dalit autobiographies focuses on caste, oppression, identity, and protest. Gopal Guru stresses that Dalit writing shows moral and political agency, not just suffering.

Similarly, Anupama Rao and Sharmila Rege link Dalit texts to Ambedkarite thinking. They show how personal stories reflect broader struggles for justice and dignity and question the "status of dominance leads them to extend systemic violence and contempt for the people who are deployed at the lower strata as castes of perpetual debasement (Madhavan, 2023: 352). Yet, the role of education in these texts is often overlooked. Many scholars mention schooling as a theme but do not explore its deeper meanings. These texts reveal how schools act as sites of pain and potential. Rege's *Writing Caste, Writing Gender* touches on the politics of knowledge, but not in full detail. The ways Dalit narratives show learning—as an emotional, cultural, and political act—need deeper study. This project fills that gap. It sees education not just as content, but as a space of power, struggle, and resistance.

Education in Dalit Life Narratives

The landmark Dalit autobiographies—Karukku by Bama (Tamil), Joothan by Omprakash Valmiki (Hindi), and Akkarmashi (*The Outcaste*) by Sharan Kumar Limbale (Marathi)—to examine how each text represents education as both an instrument of hope and a site of exclusion. These narratives present learning not only as a pathway to self-respect and agency but also as a space where caste violence, humiliation, and resistance unfold. The experiences shared

in these autobiographies reflect the complex, contradictory politics of learning in caste-bound societies. "Dalit literature has been a major cultural artefact in struggles against caste based oppression and discrimination" (Vyas, 2020: 157).

Karukku by Bama

Karukku (1992) is a seminal Tamil Dalit Christian autobiography in which Bama recounts her formative years in a rural Dalit community. As a child, her fascination with language, books, and the act of learning is palpable: "As soon as I learned to read, that was the beginning of a new life for me" (Bama 12). Education is not merely a path forward; it serves as a lifeline—a means to understand the world and one's place within it. Yet Bama's schooling is marked by painful encounters with caste boundaries that pervade everyday educational spaces. She is aware that her skin, her clothing, even her accent set her apart. Her performance in class, though commendable, fails to shield her from institutionalized bias. As she describes, "When I raised my hand to answer, the teacher would glance at my skin and dismiss me," while classmates whisper sarcasm about "people like us being here" (Bama 28). Her successes—good grades and open curiosity—are routinely questioned, undermined by the toxic caste lens through which she is perceived.

Despite these barriers, Bama experiences moments of personal triumph and exhilaration. She remembers the thrill of understanding a new text or winning praise for a school assignment. However, these instances of intellectual joy are shadowed by social humiliation. In the classroom, she is often asked to carry books for upper-caste students or to perform menial tasks like sweeping floors. Teachers—vested with power—sometimes refer to her in terms steeped in casteist mockery: "the untouchable girl should know her place," they insinuate (Bama 35). These incidents reveal how casteism is embedded not just in societal attitudes but in the very structures and rituals of schooling. "While all castes, except Brahmins, were polluting to those above them, the un touchable castes, in performing the essential tasks of removing the most polluting elements of the entire society represented a kind of absolute impurity or pollution that was the polar opposite of the Brahmin's absolute purity" (Patankar, 1979: 116-17). This double bind—being able but unwelcome—is central to Bama's educational journey. On one hand, education offers a chance for growth and voice. On the other, each page she turns reminds her of her "place" in a rigid caste hierarchy.

Bama's response to this environment is not loud protest but quiet defiance. She adopts education as a form of silent resistance. In one revealing moment, she internally declares, "I will not let their mockery defeat me. I will read on" (Bama 52). This inner vow becomes her refuge and shield. As she grows older, Bama channels her struggle into vocation. She trains to become a teacher, believing that those who teach can transform minds and break cycles. Still, her faith in institutional education is tested. Teaching in a convent school, she repeatedly encounters religious and caste prejudice. One nun remarks "You're not like us—you don't even belong," during a faculty gathering (Bama 74). Such reminders push Bama to reevaluate her path. Ultimately, she leaves the convent and formal teaching, choosing instead to live and teach in a milieu that aligns with her convictions. In her words, "True teaching happens among my people, where I do

not need to prove my worth” (Bama 80). Education for Bama is no longer defined by accreditation or institutional validation – but by its capacity to uplift and root itself in communal dignity.

In Karukku, Bama vividly portrays how caste, gender, and religion intersect to shape her experience. As a Dalit woman, she is subjected to gendered forms of oppression frequently absent from her male counterparts’ narratives. A female teacher once reprimands her in front of classmates: “You are too-bold, unbecoming of a Dalit girl learning alongside others” (Bama 46). In another episode, a male peer pushes her to the back of the class and mocks her for “bringing the smell of the gutters” (Bama 49). These moments underscore how her gendered body is not seen as a legitimate subject of learning, but as a racialized, gendered “other.” Her Christian identity further compounds her marginalization within Tamil schools dominated by Brahminical Hindu norms. She recounts being told to “learn Hindu prayers properly or be silent,” as if her own prayers held less value (Bama 55). These compounded exclusions – casteist, gendered, religious – demonstrate how schooling often replicates multiple layers of social injustice.

Bama’s narrative positions education as both an empowerment tool and a source of wounding. On one hand, it gives her literacy, the ability to articulate her self-worth, and the confidence to resist invisibility. On the other hand, education reveals the cruelty of a casteist system. She reflects, “For every poem I learned, I was reminded of the dirt beneath my feet” (Bama 60). The contrast between her early enchantment with learning and her later disillusionment with institutional education highlights a broader truth: in caste societies, the benefits of schooling are never fully accessible to marginalized groups. Education becomes a test of endurance – requiring not only intellectual effort but emotional labor, social navigation, and ethical fortitude.

Bama’s journey exemplifies Paulo Freire’s notion of the “banking model” of education, where students are expected to memorize and conform rather than question and interpret (Freire, 2000: 71). The teacher-student “relationship involves a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient, listening objects (the students). The contents, whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified. Education is suffering from narration sickness” (Freire, 2000: 71). Her story reveals how this model is weaponized against Dalits. She challenges it by pursuing a more liberatory, dialogic form of pedagogy when she teaches—one that centers empathy, respect, and communal relevance. Her teaching philosophy reflects the ideals of critical pedagogy, even if unconsciously. She builds curricula around local histories, oral traditions, and community values. She asks students to compose essays on their everyday experiences, to use writing as testimony, and to reclaim their narratives. She refuses exam-focused rote learning in favor of experiential and culturally grounded methods.

In Karukku, education is neither simply hopeful nor hopeless. It is both – a space of possibility and pain. Bama’s narrative exemplifies how Dalit women negotiate multiple forms of exclusion even as they carve out intellectual and spiritual agency. Her story forces readers to confront the fact that mainstream

understandings of education—especially in caste societies—often overlook the emotional and ideological violence embedded in schooling. Yet, it also celebrates the resilience of marginalized learners. Bama shows that for Dalits, education is not an optional journey—it is a contested battlefield where dignity must be earned. She redefines teaching as an act of care, solidarity, and subversion. Above all, Karukku insists that the politics of learning is inseparable from the life of the oppressed and the struggle for justice.

Joothan by Omprakash Valmiki

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (1997) is a landmark Hindi Dalit autobiography that chronicles his childhood and adolescence in a Valmiki Dalit family in a small town in Uttar Pradesh. From the beginning, the school environment is hostile and exclusionary. Valmiki recalls that he was made to sit apart from other students, often on the floor, a deliberate act of segregation based on caste. "The teachers would make me sit on the floor and would not allow me to sit on benches like others," he recounts, underscoring the deeply ingrained casteist practices in educational spaces (Valmiki 14). Beyond spatial segregation, he was assigned menial and degrading tasks—sweeping school grounds, cleaning toilets—chores that reinforced his supposed 'unclean' status. The humiliation extended to verbal abuse and social ostracism. Teachers mocked him openly, questioning his worth and ability. Peers kept their distance, reinforcing his isolation. Valmiki's experiences illuminate how the Indian education system mirrors the broader caste hierarchy, not only socially but institutionally. He describes how his history and cultural narratives were conspicuously absent from the curriculum: "We never learned about our people, their stories, or our struggles" (Valmiki 31). This curricular exclusion reinforced the invisibility of Dalit identity in mainstream education.

Despite this hostile environment, Valmiki's hunger for knowledge and dignity propels him forward. Lacking resources and a supportive environment, he often read under dim streetlights after school and borrowed books from friends and acquaintances to satisfy his curiosity. "Reading was a way of escaping the humiliations I faced daily," he admits (Valmiki 58). His persistence in staying in school amid adversity is a testament to the transformative potential of learning even when faced with systemic barriers. Valmiki's narrative does not romanticize education. Instead, *Joothan* reveals it as a space of continual negotiation, where he must carefully hide his identity and suppress his pain to survive. He recounts moments of forced silence and self-censorship: "I learned to speak carefully, avoiding any mention of my background to avoid further humiliation" (Valmiki 46). This survival strategy highlights the psychological toll education takes on Dalit students in hostile environments.

The journey from a marginalized boy to a recognized writer and intellectual embodies the complex, painful, yet powerful role of education in Dalit lives. Valmiki's story exemplifies how learning is intertwined with political awakening and resistance. Writing *Joothan* itself becomes an educational act, challenging dominant narratives and demanding recognition of Dalit experiences. As Valmiki explains, "My autobiography is my way of reclaiming my history and voice, which were denied to me in classrooms" (Valmiki 203).

Education in Joothan extends beyond formal schooling; it encompasses self-education, political consciousness, and the reclamation of Dalit memory. Valmiki's self-taught knowledge and critical reflections exemplify a broader Dalit epistemology that contests mainstream educational paradigms.

Valmiki's depiction shows how caste shapes every facet of schooling – from seating arrangements and teacher-student interactions to curriculum content and peer relationships. The physical separation in classrooms, such as making Dalit children sit on the floor, is a spatial metaphor for their societal marginalization. This everyday segregation reproduces caste hierarchy and exclusion within supposedly egalitarian educational institutions. The denial of Dalit histories in textbooks erases their contributions and struggles, perpetuating ignorance and prejudice. As scholar Gail Omvedt argues, this curriculum bias serves to normalize Brahminical dominance and Dalit invisibility. Valmiki's experiences underscore how the education system functions as a site where caste power is reproduced and contested.

Despite the systematic marginalization, Valmiki asserts agency through his learning journey. His pursuit of books and knowledge outside formal education illustrates the resilience and self-determination of Dalit learners. The act of reading and writing becomes a form of resistance that challenges dominant power structures. Valmiki's eventual rise as a writer and intellectual is not just a personal achievement but a political statement. His autobiography subverts casteist narratives by documenting lived experiences that mainstream histories omit or distort. The act of narrating his life publicly educates readers and activists alike, fostering solidarity and awareness. Joothan reveals that education for Dalits is a complex, fraught journey marked by humiliation and exclusion but also by hope, resistance, and self-empowerment. Valmiki's story exposes the systemic casteism embedded in Indian education while celebrating the transformative potential of knowledge to reclaim identity and dignity. His autobiography remains a powerful testament to the politics of learning in Dalit life narratives.

Akkarmashi (The Outcaste) by Sharan Kumar Limbale

Akkarmāṣī (1984) is a foundational Marathi Dalit autobiography that explores the fractured identity of Sharan Kumar Limbale, born from an inter-caste relationship between a Mahar mother and a Brahmin father. Limbale's early life is marked by poverty, hunger, and the social stigma associated with his "mixed" caste background. Education in his narrative emerges as a fragile promise, often compromised by the harsh realities of caste discrimination and economic deprivation. Limbale's schooling is a terrain of struggle rather than nurture. Hunger gnaws at him constantly, making concentration in class nearly impossible. He recalls, "I often sat with an empty stomach, my mind too weak to focus on lessons" (Limbale 23). His teachers, far from sympathetic, often display indifference or outright cruelty. He is not seen as a child to be nurtured but rather as one to be controlled and marginalized. Like Omprakash Valmiki, Limbale is frequently forced to perform menial tasks during school hours, such as cleaning or carrying materials for others, duties that signal his caste and poverty rather than his potential as a learner.

The school system, instead of accommodating his dire material circumstances or social position, exacerbates them. Merit and effort are overlooked in favor of casteist and classist biases. Even when Limbale excels in his studies, his achievements are met with suspicion or resentment. "They believed my success was a fluke, not the result of my hard work," he notes (Limbale 38). This reflects a broader societal unwillingness to acknowledge Dalit intellectual capacity or challenge entrenched hierarchies through education.

Despite these obstacles, Limbale gradually cultivates a sharp intellectual consciousness. He begins to engage deeply with the works of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, whose writings on caste and social justice inspire him to question the world around him. "Ambedkar, like Marx, did not spend the major part of his active life in research and writing, with political activism as a sideline; rather, the demands of leadership absorbed the major part of his time" (Omvedt, 1994: 226). Limbale writes poetry and personal reflections, using language as a tool of self-expression and resistance. He understands that education transcends formal schooling: "True learning was not only in books but in questioning the structures that kept us down" (Limbale 57). His autobiography critiques the idealized notion of meritocracy and exposes the myth that education alone can dismantle caste barriers. Limbale reveals that caste prejudice is so embedded in social institutions that merit cannot operate fairly within them. As he poignantly observes, "The system pretends to be fair, but it is rigged against us from the start" (Limbale 65). This critique resonates deeply with the Dalit experience, emphasizing that education must be coupled with systemic change to be truly liberatory.

Akkarmashi also highlights the complex intersections of language and identity in the learning process. Limbale writes in Marathi, the language of Maharashtra's dominant castes, which carries historical and cultural authority. Yet he subverts this authority by using Marathi to narrate a Dalit story often erased or ignored in mainstream discourse. His use of the "master's language" is a deliberate political act, turning a tool of dominance into a vehicle for marginalized voices. He explains, "By writing in Marathi, I spoke the language of power but told the truth of the oppressed" (Limbale 82). This act of linguistic reclamation allows Limbale to assert his identity while challenging the cultural hegemony of dominant groups. His poetry and prose become sites of resistance, articulating pain, pride, and defiance.

In Limbale's story, education is both a site of hope and betrayal. It promises escape from poverty and stigma but frequently delivers humiliation and exclusion. His experiences reveal the contradictions of an educational system that purports to uplift all but is deeply complicit in reproducing caste inequality. Education, as presented in Akkarmashi, is a contested space where Dalit learners negotiate exclusion and belonging, resistance and resignation. Sharan Kumar Limbale's Akkarmashi contributes significantly to the politics of learning in Dalit narratives. It exposes the brutal realities of caste and economic oppression within educational institutions while celebrating the power of intellectual and creative resistance. Limbale's life story insists that education alone cannot erase caste but remains a crucial battleground for identity, dignity, and justice. His work

amplifies the voices of those who learn at the margins and insists that their stories be brought into the mainstream.

Across Karukku, Joothan, and Akkarmashi, education emerges as a double-edged force. It offers a path for social mobility, self-awareness, and tools for political resistance. Yet, education also reflects and reinforces society's deepest inequalities. In each narrative, Dalit protagonists face schooling systems steeped in caste, class, and cultural violence. Together, these narratives challenge the idea that education is neutral or inherently liberatory. Instead, they expose schooling as a contested space where caste and class hierarchies operate. Yet, they also show Dalits claiming education as a right. They reshape learning's meaning and wield it as a weapon for dignity and liberation. In this way, education becomes both a site of struggle and a source of empowerment for Dalit communities.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined how Dalit life narratives act as political tools. They bring marginalized voices into mainstream discourse. Learning, both formal and informal, plays a key role in reshaping Dalit identity and resistance. Dalit autobiographies are more than personal stories. They serve as sites of political learning and awareness. These narratives challenge caste hierarchies and reveal struggles around education. Learning involves self-awareness, cultural reclamation, and engaging with power structures. The findings highlight the need to include marginalized voices in education and policy. Dalit narratives offer valuable knowledge for social justice. Storytelling can be a powerful educational tool for empowerment.

The study focused on selected written autobiographies. It may not represent all Dalit experiences or regions. Oral traditions and other forms of expression were not fully explored. Future work could include ethnographic research on learning in Dalit communities. Studies might compare Dalit narratives with those of other marginalized groups. Research on the effects of education reforms inspired by these stories would be useful. Dalit life narratives show learning as a political act. They move voices from the margin to the mainstream. These stories challenge inequality and enrich our understanding of resistance and empowerment. This study aims to support efforts toward justice and inclusion.

FURTHER STUDY

This research still has limitations, so it is necessary to conduct further research on the topic *From Margin to Mainstream: Politics of Learning in Dalit Life Narratives* in order to perfect this research and increase insight for readers.

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