



# African American Women's Autobiographies and Indian Dalit Women's Autobiographies: A Comparative Study

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**Abstract:** This paper undertakes a comparative study of African American women's autobiographies and Indian Dalit women's autobiographies, exploring their thematic intersections, political dimensions, and contributions to feminist and subaltern discourse. Despite being geographically and culturally distinct, both literary traditions share a history of systemic oppression, gendered marginalization, and resistance. African American women's autobiographies, such as those by Maya Angelou, Harriet Jacobs, and Audre Lorde, articulate the trauma of slavery, racism, and sexism, while simultaneously asserting Black female subjectivity. In parallel, Dalit women's autobiographies, including *Karukku* by Bama, *Sangati* by Bama, and *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble, foreground caste-based discrimination, poverty, sexual exploitation, and social exclusion within Indian society. The comparative framework highlights how both bodies of literature challenge dominant narratives, foreground double marginalization, and construct counter-histories. This study employs intersectionality theory, subaltern studies, and feminist frameworks to analyze these texts, arguing that African American and Dalit women's autobiographies together form powerful archives of memory, resistance, and identity formation.

**Key Words:** Autobiography, Race and Caste, Double Consciousness, Dalit Consciousness, Feminism, Subaltern Studies, Trauma Studies, Intersectionality, Marginalization, Resistance

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Autobiography as a genre has historically been associated with individual subjectivity, the assertion of selfhood, and the quest for identity. Yet for marginalized women, particularly African American women and Dalit women in India, autobiography becomes more than personal narrative; it is a political act. Their writings articulate the experiences of oppression, trauma, and resilience, transforming personal suffering into collective testimony.

African American women's autobiographies emerged in the crucible of slavery, racial violence, and systemic exclusion. Texts like Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) pioneered the narrative of enslaved women, foregrounding both racial and gendered oppression. Later, works like Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) and Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) continued this tradition, weaving narratives of racial discrimination, sexism, sexuality, and resilience.

Dalit women's autobiographies, though a later development, serve a similar function in the Indian context. Emerging prominently in the 1980s and 1990s, they give voice to those silenced by caste hierarchies and Brahmanical patriarchy. Texts like Bama's *Karukku* (1992), Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2008, trans. Maya Pandit), and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2008) not only record caste discrimination but also foreground the gendered dimensions of Dalit oppression.



The comparative study of these two bodies of literature enables us to understand the intersections of race, caste, gender, and class, and how marginalized women transform the autobiographical mode into a weapon of resistance. By placing African American women's self-writing in dialogue with Dalit women's autobiographies, this paper investigates shared strategies of survival and self-assertion, while also attending to the specific historical and cultural contexts of their struggles.

## 2. Theoretical Structure

- i. **Subaltern Studies:** Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's provocative question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) remains central to this study. Autobiographies by African American and Dalit women provide an emphatic response: yes, subalterns not only speak but write, document, and resist. Their texts represent counter-narratives to dominant histories that erased their presence.
- ii. **Double Consciousness and Dalit Consciousness:** W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness" describes the fractured identity of African Americans, forced to see themselves through the eyes of a racist society (Du Bois 1903). Dalit autobiographies articulate a parallel "Dalit consciousness," as theorized by scholars like Gopal Guru, reflecting an acute awareness of being seen as polluted or inferior under Brahmanical hegemony.
- iii. **Intersectionality:** Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality (1989) is crucial in analyzing these texts. Both African American and Dalit women endure not only race/caste discrimination but also patriarchy and class exploitation. Their autobiographies expose how oppression operates through multiple, overlapping systems of power.
- iv. **Trauma Studies:** Cathy Caruth's work on trauma (1996) highlights the importance of testimony and memory. Both traditions employ narrative as a means of working through collective trauma—slavery in one context and caste violence and untouchability in the other.

## 3. African American Women's Autobiographies

- i. Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) was groundbreaking as one of the first slave narratives written by a woman. Jacobs emphasizes not only the brutality of slavery but also its gendered dimension: the sexual exploitation of enslaved women. Her act of writing was itself revolutionary, transforming private suffering into political testimony. Jacobs frames her narrative to appeal to white female readers, employing sentimentality as a rhetorical strategy to build empathy and mobilize anti-slavery sentiment (Yellin 1987).
- ii. Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) reflects the struggles of growing up as a Black girl in the segregated South. Her narrative foregrounds issues of racism, sexual violence, and the search for voice. The metaphor of the "caged bird" symbolizes both personal confinement and collective racial oppression. Angelou's lyrical style transforms autobiography into poetry, and her narrative emphasizes resilience, education, and self-empowerment.
- iii. Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) redefines autobiography as "biomythography." Lorde weaves personal narrative, myth, and poetry to foreground her identity as a Black lesbian feminist. Her text highlights the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality, emphasizing community as a site of resistance. Lorde's insistence on difference as a source of power becomes central to later feminist thought.

## 4. Indian Dalit Women's Autobiographies

- i. Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (Jina Amucha, 1986; English trans. 2008) provides a rare insider account of life in a Mahar community in Maharashtra. Kamble's narrative is not only autobiographical but also collective, portraying the humiliation, poverty, and resilience of her people. Her text blends personal experience with social history, embodying Ambedkarite thought and advocating for education and reform.
- ii. Bama's *Karukku* (1992) revolutionized Dalit literature by employing Tamil vernacular idioms and Dalit Christian experiences. Bama exposes both caste discrimination and the hypocrisy of the Church, foregrounding the intersection of religion and caste. The "karukku" (double-edged sword) becomes a metaphor for her sharp critique and for the resilience of Dalit identity.



- iii. Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2008) integrates personal narrative with the history of the Dalit women's movement in Maharashtra. Pawar highlights the double marginalization faced by Dalit women—by upper-caste society and by Dalit men. Her weaving metaphor symbolizes both her personal struggles and the collective resilience of Dalit women.

## 5. Thematic Similarities and Differences

- i. **Double Marginalization:** Both groups of women face double oppression — racial slavery and patriarchy for African American women, caste untouchability and patriarchy for Dalit women. Jacobs narrates the sexual vulnerability of enslaved women. Kamble and Pawar describe Dalit women's exploitation not just by upper-caste men but also by Dalit men within patriarchal structures.
- ii. **Race and Caste as Structures of Oppression:** Both sets of texts articulate systemic oppression rooted in social hierarchies—race in the U.S. and caste in India. While Jacobs describes slavery's commoditization of women's bodies, Bama recounts caste humiliation in everyday life. Both expose how oppressive systems invade the most intimate spheres of existence.
- iii. **Gendered Oppression:** Sexual vulnerability is central to African American women's narratives (Jacobs, Angelou), while caste-based patriarchy structures Dalit women's narratives (Kamble, Pawar). Yet both highlight women's resilience in reclaiming voice and asserting agency.
- iv. **Community and Collective Testimony:** Both traditions emphasize community survival. Lorde reimagines community as a site of empowerment, while Kamble and Pawar foreground Ambedkarite solidarity. These autobiographies resist the individualism of traditional Western autobiography, foregrounding collective experience.
- v. **Spirituality and Resistance:** African American narratives often invoke biblical imagery (Jacobs, Angelou) as sources of strength. Dalit women, while sometimes rooted in Christianity (Bama), also draw upon Ambedkarite Buddhism as a path to dignity and liberation.
- vi. **Community and Solidarity:** Unlike mainstream autobiographies focused on individual success, these texts foreground collective experience. Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* reflects the struggles of a Black community, while Bama's *Karukku* emphasizes Dalit Christian solidarity.
- vii. **Education as Liberation:** Education appears as a recurring motif of resistance. For African American women, literacy was an act of rebellion against slavery. For Dalit women, access to education marked emancipation from caste hierarchies, despite constant humiliation.
- viii. **Religion and Spirituality:** African American women often draw strength from Christian faith traditions (though also critiquing institutional racism within churches). Dalit women draw from Ambedkarite Buddhism or reinterpret Christianity from subaltern perspectives (as in Bama's *Karukku*).
- ix. **Intersectionality:** Both sets of narratives highlight the intersection of oppressions, what Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) theorized as *intersectionality*. Their works articulate how systems of power — race/caste, class, gender, religion — intersect to produce unique modes of marginalization.
- x. **Language and Narrative Strategy:** African American women often employed literary strategies palatable to white audiences (Jacobs's sentimentalism, Angelou's lyricism), whereas Dalit women deliberately adopt colloquial and direct styles to challenge literary elitism (Bama's Tamil vernacular, Pawar's oral idioms).

## 6. CONCLUSION

African American and Indian Dalit women's autobiographies share a common politics of resistance through writing. These autobiographies, despite arising in distinct historical and cultural contexts, share a profound commitment to documenting oppression and reclaiming agency. They transform private suffering into public testimony, constructing counter-histories that challenge dominant structures of race, caste, and patriarchy. Both traditions transform autobiography into an act of resistance, breaking silences imposed by slavery, caste, patriarchy, and colonialism. Their comparative study underscores the universality of struggles against oppression while foregrounding the particularities of each context. By asserting subjectivity in societies that sought to deny their humanity, African American and Dalit women use autobiography as a radical feminist act. Their voices demand recognition, justice, and liberation, demonstrating the power of life writing to reshape literary canons and political consciousness alike. Through a comparative lens, one sees how women articulate marginalization not as passive victims but as active agents of



resistance and survival. Their narratives not only expand the literary canon but also serve as political interventions, challenging systemic oppression. In the global context, these autobiographies form part of a broader archive of subaltern voices that continue to shape struggles for justice, equality, and dignity.

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