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Language, Caste, And Resistance: A Sociolinguistic Reading of Selected Dalit Autobiographies

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Abstract

Dalit autobiographical writing in India has emerged as a powerful mode of self-representation and social critique, challenging caste hierarchies through an insistence on lived experience and embodied memory. This paper offers a sociolinguistic reading of three key Dalit autobiographies – Laxman Gaikwad's *The Branded* (translated from the Marathi *Uchalya*), Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste (Akkarmashi)*, and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*. It explores how these texts mobilise regional dialects, caste-marked lexis, narrative orality, and gendered voices to undermine the symbolic authority of standard, Brahminical language. Drawing on sociolinguistic theories of language and power, especially the work of Pierre Bourdieu and William Labov, and on Dalit literary criticism by scholars such as Sharankumar Limbale, Sharmila Rege and Eleanor Zelliot, the paper argues that linguistic strategies are central to the texts' political project. In each narrative, language functions simultaneously as evidence of oppression and as a tool of resistance: it registers the violence of caste, but also constructs a collective Dalit subject capable of naming and contesting that violence. The analysis shows that Dalit autobiographies do not merely describe marginality; they perform it linguistically, insisting that “polluted” speech, low dialects and women's voices belong at the centre of literary discourse.

Keywords: Dalit Autobiography; Sociolinguistics; Caste and Language; Linguistic Resistance; Dalit Literature

1. Introduction: Dalit Autobiography and the Politics of Voice

Dalit life-writing has radically reconfigured the Indian literary field over the last four decades. Autobiographies by authors from communities historically stigmatised as “untouchable” have disrupted both canonical literary aesthetics and dominant historiographies of the nation. These texts are not simply psychological introspections; they are testimonies grounded in the collective experience of caste injury, deprivation and struggle (Limbale). They document humiliation, violence and exclusion while affirming Dalit agency and dignity. Language lies at the heart of this intervention.



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In *The Branded*, *The Outcaste* and *The Prisons We Broke*, the narrators do not speak in a neutral or “transparent” medium. They speak in specific dialects, with words marked by caste location, region and occupation. Their texts are filled with colloquialisms, abuse, ritual terms, names of food, labour and everyday objects that belong to Dalit bastis rather than to the Sanskritised idiom of upper-caste prose. By foregrounding forms of speech traditionally labelled vulgar, “impure” or “illiterate”, these autobiographies transform stigmatised language into a site of political self-assertion (Rege).

At the same time, Dalit autobiography is deeply self-conscious about its own entry into print and into the “high” literary sphere. Writers such as Gaikwad and Limbale repeatedly stage the act of telling one’s story as an act fraught with risk: the fear of retaliation from dominant castes, the possibility of misrecognition by upper-caste readers, and the worry that the pain of Dalit life will be consumed as spectacle rather than as a call to political responsibility. Language mediates these anxieties. The choice between standard and dialect, between a distancing narrative voice and a conversational, addressive mode, becomes a choice about audience and solidarity.

This paper reads the three autobiographies through a sociolinguistic lens, focusing on how they stage the relationship between language and caste. It asks: How do these texts represent caste through speech? How do they reframe “low” language as morally and politically superior to the polished discourse of caste privilege? How do women narrators in particular refashion domestic idioms, gossip and lament into forms of critique? The aim is to show that Dalit autobiography is not only about what is said but about how it is said, and that attention to linguistic form reveals a complex politics of voice at work.

2. Sociolinguistics, Language Hierarchies, and Caste

Sociolinguistics studies language as a social practice rather than as a purely formal system. It treats linguistic variation as patterned by social variables such as class, gender, region and ethnicity (Labov). This approach is particularly useful for understanding caste in India, because caste is not only a ritual or economic structure; it is also encoded in everyday speech. Honorifics, kinship terms, modes of address, formulae of deference and insult all reflect and reproduce caste hierarchy.

Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of “linguistic capital” and “symbolic power” is helpful here. Bourdieu argues that languages and dialects are unequally valued in linguistic markets; what is recognised as “standard” or “correct” speech usually reflects the interests of dominant groups and institutions (Bourdieu). Within such markets, speakers of stigmatised dialects internalise feelings of linguistic inferiority and may attempt to accommodate to the standard in order to gain recognition. In the Indian context, Sanskrit, classical literary Marathi and later standard English often function as forms of “high” linguistic capital, while Dalit basti dialects are marked as crude or obscene.



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Dalit writers explicitly challenge this hierarchy. Limbale insists that Dalit literature must remain faithful to the speech of Dalit communities and resist the temptation to polish its language for upper-caste readers (Limbale). Sharmila Rege similarly argues that the “coarse” language of Dalit women – filled with sexual expletives, references to bodily labour, and direct insults – is part of a counterpublic discourse that unsettles caste respectability (Rege). Rather than treating non-standard forms as a deficit, Dalit literary aesthetics valorise them as resources for truth-telling. Sociolinguistic work on “vernacular literacies” also illuminates why these autobiographies foreground oral, conversational and dialogic styles. Scholars of literacy have shown that communities historically excluded from formal schooling often develop rich oral repertoires of narration, song and proverb that function as archives of collective memory and resistance (Street). When such repertoires enter written literature, they bring with them the rhythms and interactional patterns of oral storytelling. Dalit autobiographies often read like extended conversations with the reader, punctuated by direct address, rhetorical questions and interjections. This stylistic orality is not an accident; it is a way of refusing the impersonality of official genres and asserting the legitimacy of Dalit speech.

Thus, a sociolinguistic perspective allows us to see the three texts not simply as accounts of caste, but as experiments in reordering the linguistic market. Their authors lay claim to the right to narrate in voices previously marked as “unfit” for literature, and in doing so, they challenge long-standing associations between linguistic purity and moral or aesthetic superiority.

3. Regional Dialects and Caste-Marked Expressions

All three autobiographies are written in or translated from Marathi, and they carry the imprint of specific regional dialects from Maharashtra. *The Branded* emerges from the world of the Uchalya, a denotified “criminal tribe”, whose speech is marked by the vocabulary of theft, surveillance and itinerant labour (Gaikwad). *The Outcaste* is rooted in the rural Maharwada of Solapur district, where the everyday talk of Mahars, Mangs and other Dalit castes intersects with the language of landowners, priests and village officials (Limbale). *The Prisons We Broke* evokes the Mahar settlement of Veergaon near Pune, with its crowded lanes, shared wells and public spaces policed by ritual taboo (Kamble).

In each text, dialect is not simply background colour; it is a key means of mapping social relations. Caste-based names for occupations and ritual services appear alongside slurs that dominant castes use for Dalit communities. Abuse is often caste-specific, saturated with imagery of pollution, animality and sexual degradation. Dalit speakers, in turn, appropriate some of these terms in ironic or defiant ways, turning labels of shame into emblems of solidarity. This resembles what sociolinguists describe as “reappropriation” of slurs, where stigmatised groups reclaim derogatory terms to weaken their injurious force (Galinsky et al.).



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Food vocabulary also signals caste. The texts linger on details of stale bhakri, watery dal, offal meat, and the seasonal hunger that forces Dalit children to forage for wild greens. Contrasts are drawn with the rich, ghee-laden diets of upper-caste households. These culinary lexicons are not incidental: they inscribe onto language the structural inequalities of access to resources. By naming each dish and its scarcity, the narrators insist that caste is experienced through material deprivation, not merely through ritual status.

Prayer, ritual and insult all have distinctive linguistic registers. In *The Prisons We Broke*, Baby Kamble records the devotional songs and slogans associated with the Ambedkarite Buddhist movement, which introduced new forms of collective chanting into Mahar localities. The repetition of “Jai Bhim” and other slogans creates a counter-ritual language that directly challenges Brahminical mantras. The phonetic texture of these phrases in the original Marathi – their brevity, rhythm and alliteration – helps them function as linguistic weapons in street protests and public meetings (Kamble).

Translations into English often struggle to convey the full force of these dialects and caste-marked expressions. Yet even in translation, the presence of regional words, untranslated kinship terms, and italicised phrases signals that the narrative is not operating within a neutral, pan-Indian idiom. The retention of Marathi terms forces non-Marathi readers to confront their own linguistic outsiderhood, partially reversing the usual direction of alienation in which Dalits are made to feel linguistically inadequate.

4. Voice, Tone and Narrative Strategies

The narrative voices in these autobiographies are strikingly different, yet all are shaped by the tension between the singular “I” and the collective “we”. Laxman Gaikwad’s narrator moves rapidly between childhood memories and reflections from adulthood, shifting from the frightened boy who internalises social stigma to the critical adult who can name and analyse it (Gaikwad). His tone alternates between bitter irony and quiet despair. Short, clipped sentences reproduce the immediacy of fear when the police raid an Uchalya settlement or when a child is beaten for stealing. At other moments, long reflective passages consider the broader criminalisation of the community by colonial and postcolonial law.

Sharankumar Limbale’s narrative voice in *The Outcaste* is often described as raw and unsentimental. There is little romanticisation of village life. Instead, the tone is accusatory, and the addressee is often implicitly the upper-caste reader who has refused to acknowledge Dalit humanity. The narrator repeatedly asks rhetorical questions: “Are we not human?”; “What crime have we committed that we should be treated worse than animals?” Such questions function as challenges to the reader’s moral complacency. They echo Dalit public oratory, especially the speeches of B. R. Ambedkar, which frequently used questions to break through caste denial (Ambedkar).



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In *The Prisons We Broke*, Baby Kamble's narrative voice is distinctly gendered and communal. She rarely speaks as an isolated "I"; rather, she speaks as "we women", "we Mahars", emphasising shared experience over individual differentiation (Kamble). Her tone can be scathing when she criticises Mahar men for internalising patriarchal attitudes, and mocking when she describes the hypocrisies of Brahmin priests. At the same time, there are moments of tenderness when she narrates the solidarity of women in childbirth, mourning and shared labour. This shifting tone reflects the double struggle against both caste and gender oppression.

All three texts draw on oral storytelling conventions. Episodes are often introduced with formulaic transitions: "There was a time when...", "It so happened that...", "I remember how...". These formulae mimic the spoken narratives told at night in courtyards or around village fires. Dialogues are reproduced with attention to accent and register, conveying the different ways in which landlords, teachers, policemen, mothers and children speak. Direct speech occupies large portions of the narrative, reducing authorial mediation and conveying immediacy. This echoes what sociolinguists describe as "constructed dialogue", where narrators recreate speech to index social identities and relationships (Tannen).

The narratives also employ strategic silence. Certain experiences, especially sexual violence, are hinted at rather than described in detail. This is not a sign of prudishness; rather, it reflects the complex shame and danger attached to naming such violence in communities where women's sexuality is heavily policed. At the same time, the very presence of these ellipses signals the unspeakable nature of caste and gender violence. The gaps in language become a form of testimony to what cannot be fully articulated.

5. Gendered Language and Dalit Women's Voices

Dalit women's autobiographical writing has drawn attention to the fact that Dalit men's narratives often marginalise women's experiences even while challenging caste (Rege). Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* is widely regarded as a pioneering text because it insists that the story of the community cannot be told without centring women's labour, suffering and resistance (Kamble; Rege). The language of Kamble's narrative is filled with metaphors drawn from domestic work, childbirth, child-rearing and ritual impurity. These metaphors make visible the ways in which caste and patriarchy intersect at the level of everyday bodily discipline.

Kamble records the abusive terms husbands use for their wives, the curses mothers-in-law heap on daughters-in-law, and the gossip that circulates when a woman transgresses sexual norms. Such language is often obscene, yet Kamble refuses to sanitise it. By reproducing it, she exposes how deeply misogyny is embedded in both Dalit and non-Dalit speech. At the same time, she also records the affectionate nicknames women have for each other, the joking insults that express intimacy, and the songs they sing while working. These forms of speech build a female counterpublic inside the basti, providing women with spaces to share anger, grief and hope.



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Limbale's and Gaikwad's texts, though written by men, also contain moments where gendered language reveals the specific vulnerabilities of Dalit women. Descriptions of landlords' sexual demands, of the fear of daughters being assaulted while fetching water, and of the stigma attached to "illegitimate" children foreground the gendered dimension of caste oppression (Limbale; Gaikwad). However, women often appear as silent sufferers rather than active narrators. This contrast with Kamble's first-person voice highlights the importance of Dalit women's life-writing for a more complete understanding of Dalit sociolinguistic worlds (Rege; Pawar).

Thematically, gendered language is tied to questions of respectability and shame. Dalit women are expected to embody the community's honour even as they are the most exposed to upper-caste sexual violence. Kamble's narrative frequently plays on the double meaning of words related to "purity" and "pollution", showing how women's bodies are constructed as sites where the entire caste's status is negotiated (Kamble). By appropriating the language of shame and turning it outward – directing it at oppressors rather than victims – she reverses the economy of humiliation.

In this sense, Dalit women's linguistic practices exemplify what feminist theorists describe as "speaking bitterness", the use of testimony to transform private suffering into public critique (Spivak). The orality of Kamble's prose, with its repetitions, exclamations and direct forms of address, mirrors the collective speaking bitterness of Dalit women's gatherings, protests and meetings. Language here is not merely descriptive; it is performative, enacting a new political subjectivity.

6. Language as Resistance and Identity Assertion

Across the three autobiographies, language functions not only as a record of oppression but as a means of resisting it. The narrators assert pride in their communities' ways of speaking, recalling songs, slogans and jokes that sustain morale in the face of brutality. Gaikwad recounts how the Uchalyas share stories of outwitting the police, using coded slang to warn each other of danger. This coded language becomes a tool of survival, a way of circulating knowledge under the radar of state surveillance (Gaikwad).

Limbale emphasises the transformative impact of Ambedkar's speeches on Dalit youth. He describes listening to Ambedkar's addresses on the radio or at public meetings, and being struck by the clarity and force of his Marathi – neither Sanskritised nor rustic, but a modern, rational idiom that dignifies Dalit claims to equality (Limbale). Through Ambedkar, Dalit listeners encounter a new model of authoritative speech that is not tied to traditional caste status. This experience reshapes their sense of what it means to speak publicly and to claim rights.

Kamble foregrounds the shift from Hindu ritual language to Buddhist chants in Mahar localities after conversion. The repetition of "BuddhamSharanamGachhami" and "Jai Bhim" creates a



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sonic environment in which old caste-based hierarchies lose some of their power (Kamble). The new liturgy, in a Pali-inflected Marathi, symbolises a break with the past and a commitment to a more egalitarian ethic. In sociolinguistic terms, this is a reconstitution of the linguistic market: new forms of sacred speech displace Brahminical Sanskrit as the most valued register.

Writing itself is a form of linguistic resistance. Many Dalit autobiographers describe their first encounters with literacy as transformative, providing access to new vocabularies, histories and conceptual tools (Limbale; Pawar). Yet they also remain wary of the alienating potential of highly Sanskritised or Anglicised language, which may cut them off from their communities. Hence, they adopt a hybrid style that blends literacy with orality, standard forms with dialect, theory with anecdote. This hybridity allows them to reach both Dalit and non-Dalit audiences without fully assimilating to the expectations of upper-caste literary culture.

Language, then, is where Dalit subjectivity is most visibly reconfigured. The shift from being named by others – as “criminal”, “untouchable”, “bastard”, “illegitimate” – to self-naming as “Dalit”, “Buddhist” or “Ambedkarite” is a shift in linguistic and symbolic control (Zelliot; Yengde). Autobiography becomes the narrative space where this self-naming is dramatized. By telling their stories in their own words, these authors claim the authority to define their identities, histories and futures.

7. Conclusion

A sociolinguistic reading of *The Branded*, *The Outcaste* and *The Prisons We Broke* reveals that language is not a neutral medium of representation but a terrain of struggle. These autobiographies expose how caste is embedded in everyday speech – in insults, jokes, ritual formulae, and even in the silences around certain topics. They show how dominant groups maintain power partly by controlling linguistic norms and devaluing the speech of the oppressed. At the same time, the texts demonstrate that Dalit communities have developed rich linguistic repertoires of resistance. Through dialect, reappropriated slurs, oral narrative strategies, slogans and new ritual languages, they contest the legitimacy of Brahminical and state discourse. Dalit autobiographers occupy a liminal position in this process: they mediate between oral community knowledge and written, often academic, publics. Their stylistic choices – when to use dialect, when to approximate standard, when to withhold information – reflect complex calculations about audience, solidarity and risk.

By foregrounding caste-marked and gendered speech, the three autobiographies challenge readers to recognise that there is no abstract, disembodied “Indian English” or “Marathi”. There are only situated ways of speaking, evaluated within unequal structures of power. Dalit writing insists that those structures must be named, confronted and changed. Language is one of the principal tools with which this confrontation takes place.



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