Journal Literary Aesthetics
Volume No: 12, Issue No: 1, Year: 2025 (January-June)
PP: 68-72
ISSN: 2347-8705
Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 5.8)
Journal Website www.literaryjournal.org

FROM PRIVATE PAIN TO PUBLIC HISTORY: LIFE WRITING AND WITNESS IN MAYA ANGELOU AND OMPRAKASH VALMIKI

Saroj Kumar Ray

NET (JRF), English

Village - Ukhra, Narsara, Darbhanga, Bihar

ABSTRACT

This study examines life writing as a form of witness in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*. Both texts transform individual suffering into public testimony by situating childhood pain within broader histories of racial segregation, caste hierarchy, poverty, labour exploitation, and social humiliation. Although Angelou writes from the African American experience in the United States and Valmiki from the Dalit experience in India, both authors show how private memory becomes historical evidence when it exposes the everyday structures through which domination is reproduced. The study argues that life writing in these texts is not merely autobiographical narration but a social archive. Angelou and Valmiki convert trauma, silence, hunger, labour, and insult into counter-history. Their autobiographies make visible those forms of violence that official histories, elite literary traditions, and dominant social memories often exclude. The study also reads both works through an economic lens, emphasizing how race and caste operate not only as cultural identities but also as material systems that regulate access to food, education, dignity, work, and social mobility.

Keywords: Life writing, witness, Maya Angelou, Omprakash Valmiki, caste, race, Dalit autobiography, African American autobiography, public history, economic marginality.

I. INTRODUCTION

Life writing has often served as a counter-archive for communities whose histories have been misrepresented, silenced, or absorbed into dominant narratives. In autobiographical writing, the self does not merely remember; it testifies. Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, first published in 1969, narrates the early life of a Black girl in the segregated American South and converts personal trauma into a larger statement on race, gender, language, and survival [1]. Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, first published in Hindi in 1997 and translated into English by Arun Prabha Mukherjee in 2003, records the author's experience of growing up as a Dalit in post-independence India, where constitutional equality coexisted with severe caste humiliation and material deprivation [2]. Publication details and broad descriptions of both texts are also documented by major reference and publisher records.

The title of the present study, "From Private Pain to Public History," indicates the central argument: Angelou and Valmiki do not present suffering as isolated personal misfortune. They locate it within structures of power. In Angelou, childhood rape, racial insult, economic vulnerability, and linguistic silencing are connected to the historical afterlife of slavery and segregation. In Valmiki, hunger, forced labour, school discrimination, and the politics of "joothan" are connected to the long history of caste-based exclusion. Both texts therefore challenge the boundary between personal memory and public history.

Life writing theory has emphasized that autobiography is not a simple mirror of experience but a narrative act shaped by memory, identity, social location, and historical context [3]. In

© Copyright @ Authors

ISSN: 2347-8705
Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 5.8)
Journal Website www.literaryjournal.org

this sense, Angelou and Valmiki write not only as individuals but also as witnesses to collective injury. Their texts show that oppression is not always spectacular. It is often ordinary, repeated, and socially normalized. A child being renamed by a white employer, a Dalit student being made to sweep a school compound, leftover food being accepted as caste entitlement, or a girl withdrawing into silence after sexual violence—these scenes become historical documents because they reveal how power enters everyday life.

II. LIFE WRITING AS WITNESS AND COUNTER-HISTORY

Autobiography becomes witness when the narrator's personal experience speaks beyond the private self. Angelou's narrative begins with displacement: Maya and her brother Bailey are sent to Stamps, Arkansas, to live with their grandmother. This journey is not simply a family arrangement; it places the child within the racial geography of the segregated South. The store run by her grandmother becomes a small economic and cultural centre for the Black community, but it also reveals the restricted world in which Black life must organize itself under white domination [1].

Valmiki's *Joothan* begins with caste-marked childhood in Barla village. His family's labour, hunger, and humiliation are not represented as exceptional events but as a social order. The very word "joothan" refers to leftovers, the scraps of food that Dalits were expected to collect from upper-caste households. Valmiki turns this word into a political symbol. Food becomes evidence of social hierarchy. Hunger becomes historical knowledge. The body that consumes leftovers becomes an archive of caste economy [2].

Both authors use childhood perspective to reveal the violence of socialization. Children learn their place not through abstract ideology but through repeated encounters with insult, exclusion, fear, and deprivation. Angelou learns that Blackness is treated as inferior in white public space; Valmiki learns that caste determines where one sits, what one eats, what work one performs, and how one is addressed. The child's confusion becomes the adult narrator's critique. This double perspective—child experience and adult interpretation—is a major strength of both autobiographies.

III. PRIVATE PAIN AND THE MAKING OF PUBLIC MEMORY IN ANGELOU

In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou's personal pain is inseparable from racial history. The most painful episode is her rape as a child and her subsequent silence. The trauma is intimate, but the text does not treat it as merely private. It reveals the vulnerability of Black girlhood, the limits of protection within family structures, and the difficulty of speaking in a world where truth itself can become dangerous [1]. Angelou's silence after the assault is not emptiness. It is a historical silence, shaped by fear, guilt, and the burden placed on violated children.

Language plays a decisive role in Angelou's recovery. Mrs. Flowers introduces Maya to literature and the spoken word, helping her return to speech. This movement from silence to voice is central to Angelou's life writing. Voice is not only personal healing; it is social reclamation. In a society that attempts to define Black subjects through stereotypes, speech becomes a means of self-definition. African American autobiography has long used literacy and narration as instruments of resistance, from slave narratives to modern memoirs [4].

Angelou also records the economic dimensions of racial segregation. The Black community's dependence on limited local commerce, the dignity attached to labour, and the fragile security of family survival show that racism is also an economic system. Segregation restricts not only social respect but also mobility, employment, education, and bodily safety. The famous scene of the Joe Louis fight, where the Black community gathers to listen to the radio, illustrates

© Copyright @ Authors

ISSN: 2347-8705
Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 5.8)
Journal Website www.literaryjournal.org

how collective hope is invested in symbolic victory because material equality remains denied [1].

Angelou's witness therefore operates on multiple levels. She testifies to sexual violence, racial humiliation, poverty, community resilience, and the power of language. Her autobiography transforms the wounded child into a public narrator who speaks for herself and, indirectly, for a community historically denied full humanity.

IV. CASTE, HUNGER, AND TESTIMONY IN VALMIKI

Valmiki's *Joothan* is one of the most important texts of Hindi Dalit autobiography because it exposes caste not as a past social evil but as a lived structure of humiliation in modern India. The text is especially powerful because it refuses polite language. It names caste violence directly. The title itself rejects concealment. "Joothan" signifies leftover food, but in Valmiki's narrative it becomes a metaphor for the entire caste economy in which Dalits are expected to survive on what dominant castes discard [2].

The economic significance of *Joothan* is central. Caste is not only ritual hierarchy; it is also an organization of labour and resources. Valmiki's community performs stigmatized labour, receives little dignity, and remains materially dependent on dominant caste households. The acceptance of leftovers is not charity. It is a sign of unequal social relations. In this sense, Valmiki's autobiography contributes to the political economy of caste by showing how humiliation and poverty reinforce each other [5].

Education becomes a major site of conflict in the text. Valmiki's school experience reveals that formal institutions can reproduce caste power even when they claim neutrality. The incident in which he is forced to sweep the school compound shows that education, which should create mobility, becomes a mechanism of caste discipline. The Dalit child is reminded that his assigned social role is labour, not learning [2]. This scene is not only personal memory; it is an indictment of institutional casteism.

Dalit autobiography, as scholars have noted, differs from elite autobiographical traditions because it is less concerned with individual achievement alone and more concerned with collective testimony [6]. Valmiki's "I" is never detached from the "we" of Dalit experience. His personal narrative carries the memory of a community. This is why *Joothan* functions as public history. It documents the emotional and economic cost of caste from below.

V. COMPARATIVE READING: RACE, CASTE, AND THE ECONOMICS OF HUMILIATION

Angelou and Valmiki write from different historical locations, but their texts share a deep concern with the relationship between identity and material life. Race and caste are not presented merely as labels. They are systems that shape labour, food, education, space, and self-worth. Angelou's Black childhood unfolds under racial segregation; Valmiki's Dalit childhood unfolds under caste exclusion. In both cases, the child's body becomes the site where history is enforced.

The economics of humiliation is visible in both texts. Angelou's community survives through small commerce, domestic labour, and collective endurance under racial restrictions. Valmiki's community survives through caste-bound labour and the degrading circulation of leftovers. In both works, poverty is not natural. It is socially produced. The poor are not poor because of personal failure; they are kept vulnerable by institutions and customs that regulate opportunity.

© Copyright @ Authors

ISSN: 2347-8705
Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 5.8)
Journal Website www.literaryjournal.org

There is also a difference in the structure of social mobility. Angelou's narrative places strong emphasis on language, literature, and voice as routes of recovery. Valmiki's narrative places strong emphasis on education, assertion, and political consciousness as routes of resistance. Both writers value learning, but their contexts differ. Angelou's recovery from silence is tied to the cultural force of speech; Valmiki's resistance is tied to the rejection of caste-assigned labour and the assertion of Dalit dignity.

Gender is more central in Angelou's text, especially through the representation of Black girlhood, sexual violence, and bodily vulnerability. Caste is more central in Valmiki's text, especially through labour, food, and institutional exclusion. Yet both works show that oppression is intersectional in practice. Angelou's pain is shaped by race, gender, age, and class. Valmiki's pain is shaped by caste, poverty, village hierarchy, and educational exclusion. Their autobiographies therefore resist single-axis readings of suffering.

VI. WITNESS, MEMORY, AND ETHICAL REPRESENTATION

The ethical force of both autobiographies lies in their refusal to aestheticize pain without accountability. Angelou writes with lyrical intensity, but she does not convert trauma into sentimental spectacle. Valmiki writes with direct anger, but he does not reduce experience to complaint. Both writers create a disciplined form of witness. They remember in order to expose, and they expose in order to transform public understanding.

Life writing scholars argue that autobiographical narration involves acts of selection, interpretation, and self-positioning [3]. This does not weaken its truth. Rather, it shows that memory becomes meaningful when organized into narrative. Angelou and Valmiki do not claim to produce detached institutional history. They produce embodied history. Their authority comes from lived experience, but their significance comes from the way that experience reveals larger systems.

The two texts also challenge dominant literary canons. Angelou expands the tradition of African American autobiography by centring Black female childhood. Valmiki expands Hindi literary discourse by bringing Dalit experience into the centre of autobiographical writing. Both authors force literature to confront those realities that refined literary culture often excludes: rape, leftovers, insult, fear, labour, hunger, and shame.

VII. CONCLUSION

Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* demonstrate that life writing can transform private pain into public history. Their autobiographies are not only records of suffering; they are acts of witness. Angelou shows how racial segregation, sexual trauma, and silence shape Black girlhood, while Valmiki shows how caste, hunger, labour, and educational humiliation shape Dalit childhood. Both writers convert memory into counter-history by narrating experiences that dominant societies often suppress.

The economic dimension of both texts is especially important. Race and caste function as material systems that determine access to food, work, education, dignity, and social movement. Angelou and Valmiki show that humiliation is not only emotional; it is institutional and economic. Their narratives therefore belong not only to literary studies but also to the broader study of social inequality.

Ultimately, both authors make the personal historically accountable. They teach that autobiography can become a public document when it speaks from the margins with moral

© Copyright @ Authors

ISSN: 2347-8705
Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal (IF: 5.8)
Journal Website www.literaryjournal.org

clarity. Their life writing turns wounded memory into collective knowledge and transforms the act of narration into a form of resistance.

REFERENCES

1. M. Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. New York, NY, USA: Random House, 1969.
2. O. Valmiki, *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, A. P. Mukherjee, Trans. New York, NY, USA: Columbia University Press, 2003.
3. S. Smith and J. Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 2nd ed. Minneapolis, MN, USA: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
4. W. L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865*. Urbana, IL, USA: University of Illinois Press, 1986.
5. B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*. New Delhi, India: Navayana, 2014.
6. A. Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*, A. P. Mukherjee, Trans. Hyderabad, India: Orient Longman, 2004.
7. G. Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, Eds. Urbana, IL, USA: University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.
8. P. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA, USA: Harvard University Press, 1993.
9. S. Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios*. New Delhi, India: Zubaan, 2006.
10. H. Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*. New York, NY, USA: Harper & Row, 1980.
11. D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, NJ, USA: Princeton University Press, 2000.
12. T. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge, MA, USA: Harvard University Press, 1992.

© Copyright @ Authors