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BA English Honours | Semester VI | ENG6EJ301

Dalit Literature: An Overview

Module 3: Dalit Life-Writing: Autobiographical Testimony as Political Act • Comprehensive Notes

Chapter 3: Dalit Life-Writing: Testimony, Body, and Memory

Dalit life-writing departs fundamentally from Western bourgeois autobiography, which typically celebrates individual exceptionalism and career triumphs. In Dalit literature, the autobiographical 'I' is inseparable from the communal 'We'; individual memory serves as collective legal testimony indicting centuries of institutional apartheid.

2.1 Omprakash Valmiki's Joothan: A Dalit's Life

Omprakash Valmiki's Hindi masterpiece *Joothan* (1997) takes its title from the contaminated food scraps left on plates by upper-caste wedding guests, which the Chuhra (scavenger) community was forced to collect, dry, and consume. Valmiki recounts how his school headmaster forced him to sweep the entire schoolyard instead of studying, solely because of his caste. Valmiki's unvarnished prose unmasks the persistent violence of modern Indian education and civil society.

2.2 Bama's Karukku: Dalit Christian Intersections

Tamil Dalit writer Bama's *Karukku* (1992) uses the sharp, serrated palmyra leaf (*karukku*) as a central metaphor for double alienation. Leaving her village to join a Catholic convent with the hope of serving the poor, Bama discovers that the institutional Catholic Church reproduces the very caste prejudice and discrimination it claims to transcend.

Advanced Critical Theory, Hermeneutics & Literary Praxis

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1. Hermeneutic Paradigms and Textual Mechanics

Critical inquiry into Module 3: Dalit Life-Writing: Autobiographical Testimony as Political Act reveals how textual forms construct meaning through complex aesthetic strategies and structural choices:

- **Structuralism and Semiotic Deconstruction:** The organization of signs, tropes, and syntactical structures establishes narrative authority while simultaneously revealing internal fissures. Binary oppositions embedded within the discourse—such as center versus margin, tradition versus modernity, and subjective interiority versus objective reality—are systematically problematized through textual slippages and ambiguous signifiers.
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2. Historiographical Context and Reception Theory

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3. Comparative Aesthetic and Thematic Matrix

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