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Ethical Testimony and the Politics of Suffering in Kannada Dalit Autobiographies: A Study of *Manegara* and *Samboli! Beware!*

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Abstract:

Dalit autobiographical writing in India has often been approached as resistance literature or counter-history. This paper proposes an alternative reading by conceptualizing Dalit autobiography as ethical testimonya narrative form that demands moral accountability rather than empathy or representation. Through a critical analysis of Manegara by Tumbadi Ramaiah and Samboli! Beware! by Lakshman, the study argues that these texts transform lived suffering into ethical knowledge, compelling readers to confront the normalized violence of caste society. Drawing upon Ambedkarite thought, Sharmila Rege's notion of testimony, and Gopal Guru's critique of experiential marginality, the paper demonstrates how caste operates through ritual humiliation, institutional discipline, and embodied suffering. Rather than offering aesthetic consolation or narratives of triumph, these autobiographies refuse closure and insist on ethical discomfort. By foregrounding witnessing, shame, and moral responsibility, the paper repositions Dalit autobiography as a mode of ethical intervention that unsettles dominant literary, social, and historical frameworks.

Keywords: *Dalit autobiography, ethical testimony, caste violence, Ambedkarite thought, suffering, Kannada Dalit literature*

Introduction

Dalit autobiographical writing in India has been widely recognized as a powerful intervention against caste oppression, social exclusion, and historical erasure. Scholars have often approached these narratives as forms of resistance literature, counter-history, or expressions of Dalit modernity that challenge Brahminical literary canons and dominant historiography. While such readings have significantly contributed to Dalit literary criticism, they tend to emphasize assertion, empowerment, and political agency, often overlooking the ethical function of Dalit life writing.

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This paper proposes an alternative critical framework by reading Dalit autobiographies as ethical testimonies narratives that do not merely resist oppression or reclaim voice but demand moral accountability from caste society. Rather than seeking empathy, aesthetic appreciation, or narrative closure, these texts confront readers with the normalized violence of caste and compel them to reckon with their ethical implications. Dalit autobiographies, in this sense, operate not as celebratory narratives of triumph but as unsettling moral documents that expose caste as a profound ethical failure.

Focusing on two Kannada Dalit autobiographies *Manegara* by Tumbadi Ramaiah and *Samboli! Beware!* by Lakshman this study argues that these texts transform lived suffering into ethical knowledge. They function as testimonies that bear witness to ritual humiliation, institutional betrayal, and embodied violence, insisting that such experiences be recognized not as isolated injustices but as structural features of caste society. The narratives refuse sentimentalization and instead position suffering as moral evidence against the social order that produces it.

Unlike conventional autobiographies that foreground individual self-fashioning or personal success, Dalit autobiographies locate the self within structures of caste, labour, religion, and education. The "I" in these narratives is never purely personal; it is inseparable from collective suffering and historical injustice. Ramaiah's restrained documentation of exclusion and Lakshman's visceral account of bodily humiliation do not aim to inspire admiration but to expose the everyday cruelty embedded in social institutions. Their writing demands that readers move beyond passive consumption toward ethical engagement.

Drawing upon Ambedkarite thought, Sharmila Rege's concept of testimony, and Gopal Guru's critique of experiential marginality, this paper repositions Dalit autobiography as a genre of ethical intervention. It contends that *Manegara* and *Samboli! Beware!* challenge not only literary conventions but also the moral foundations of caste society by transforming personal suffering into an indictment of social injustice. In doing so, the paper foregrounds Dalit autobiography as a form of writing that insists on responsibility rather than representation, accountability rather than empathy.

Theoretical Framework: Testimony, Ethics, and Dalit Knowledge

Any ethical reading of Dalit autobiography must be grounded in the intellectual legacy of B. R. Ambedkar, who consistently framed caste not merely as a social hierarchy but as a **moral** and civilizational failure. Ambedkar's critique of caste emphasized its destruction of fraternity and its ability to normalize cruelty through religion, custom, and everyday practice. His insistence that social reform requires justice rather than

charity provides a crucial ethical lens for understanding Dalit life writing.

Sharmila Rege's conceptualization of Dalit autobiographies as **t**estimonios offers an important framework for this study. Drawing from Latin American traditions of testimonial writing, Rege argues that Dalit autobiographies transform individual suffering into collective political knowledge. Testimony, in this sense, is not a personal confession but an ethical act that bears witness to systemic injustice. It seeks neither sympathy nor validation; instead, it demands recognition of social wrongs that are otherwise rendered invisible or acceptable.

Gopal Guru's distinction between experiential knowledge and ethical knowledge further sharpens this framework. Guru cautions against reducing Dalit narratives to mere expressions of experience, arguing that such readings risk sentimentalizing suffering without addressing its ethical implications. Ethical knowledge, by contrast, confronts the moral responsibility of society and exposes the injustice embedded in social structures. Dalit autobiographies, when read as ethical testimonies, challenge the reader to move beyond empathy and toward accountability.

This paper also engages with broader scholarship on testimony and witnessing, which emphasizes the ethical relationship between the witness and the listener. Testimonial narratives position the reader as a moral respondent rather than a neutral observer. In *Manegara* and *Samboli! Beware!*, suffering is not narrated for aesthetic effect; it functions as moral evidence that indicts caste society and its institutions—religion, education, and labour.

By integrating Ambedkarite thought with testimony theory and Dalit epistemology, this study frames Dalit autobiography as a genre that produces ethical knowledge. These narratives assert that lived experience is not only socially significant but morally authoritative. They challenge upper-caste monopoly over interpretation and insist that those who benefit from caste privilege confront their complicity in sustaining injustice.

Dalit Autobiography as Ethical Testimony

Dalit autobiography occupies a distinct ethical position within Indian literary traditions. Unlike dominant autobiographical forms that often celebrate individuality, achievement, and self-realization, Dalit life writing foregrounds suffering, humiliation, and exclusion as social facts that demand ethical response. These narratives do not aspire to aesthetic refinement or emotional consolation; instead, they insist on the moral urgency of lived experience.

As ethical testimony, Dalit autobiography refuses neutrality. Caste society normalizes violence by embedding it in everyday practices rituals, customs,

institutions, and language. Dalit autobiographies disrupt this normalization by exposing the cruelty that is often dismissed as tradition or discipline. By narrating experiences of untouchability, segregation, and humiliation, these texts transform what is socially accepted into what is ethically unacceptable.

A defining feature of ethical testimony is its relationship with the reader. Dalit autobiographies do not position the reader as a passive consumer of stories or as a sympathetic observer. Instead, they compel the reader to confront uncomfortable truths and question their own moral location within caste society. The absence of narrative closure, redemption, or triumph is deliberate; it prevents the reader from achieving emotional resolution and instead sustains ethical discomfort.

In *Manegara*, Ramaiah's restrained and documentary narrative style functions as a form of ethical witnessing. His calm documentation of temple exclusion, educational discrimination, and internalized caste hierarchies avoids emotional excess, thereby intensifying the moral indictment. Silence, repetition, and factual narration become ethical strategies that expose the banality of caste cruelty.

In contrast, *Samboli! Beware!* offers an embodied testimony where suffering is inscribed directly onto the Dalit body. Lakshman's narration of school violence, ritual humiliation, and bodily punishment transforms the body into an archive of caste history. The visceral quality of the narrative denies aesthetic distance and forces readers to confront the physical and psychological consequences of caste oppression.

Together, these autobiographies demonstrate that Dalit life writing is not merely about narrating injustice but about bearing witness to it. Ethical testimony converts suffering into moral evidence and insists that literature engage with questions of responsibility, complicity, and justice. In doing so, Dalit autobiography challenges both literary conventions and social complacency, asserting that writing itself can function as an ethical act.

Manegara: Ethical Witnessing through Restraint and Documentation

Tumbadi Ramaiah's *Manegara* exemplifies ethical testimony through its restrained narrative voice and documentary realism. Unlike autobiographical narratives that foreground emotional intensity or heroic resistance, Ramaiah adopts a measured, almost understated tone that records caste exclusion as an ordinary yet morally indefensible reality. This restraint is not a narrative limitation; rather, it functions as an ethical strategy that exposes the banality of caste cruelty.

The term *manegara*, meaning messenger, becomes a powerful metaphor for the Dalit condition under caste society. Ramaiah's occupational mobility his constant movement between villages does

not translate into social freedom or dignity. Instead, it reveals a paradox where Dalit bodies are permitted movement only within tightly regulated boundaries. This paradox exposes caste as a system that controls not only status but also access, proximity, and belonging. Ramaiah's narration of this condition is devoid of overt commentary, allowing the injustice to speak for itself and thereby intensifying its ethical force.

Religious exclusion emerges as a central site of moral indictment in *Manegara*. Ramaiah records the continued denial of temple entry to the Manegara community despite their devotion to the very deities that exclude them. This contradiction exposes the ethical bankruptcy of caste-based religiosity, where faith is demanded without recognition and devotion is accepted without dignity. Ramaiah's refusal to dramatize these exclusions transforms them into ethical evidence, revealing how religion functions as an apparatus that normalizes injustice while presenting itself as sacred tradition.

Education, often idealized as a pathway to social mobility, appears in *Manegara* as a site of profound institutional betrayal. Ramaiah's account of his brother Veeranagappa's deliberate academic failure illustrates how educational institutions discipline Dalit aspiration when it threatens caste hierarchy. The narrative does not frame this tragedy as an isolated injustice but as a predictable outcome of a system designed to maintain graded inequality. The quiet documentation of his mother's grief transforms private loss into ethical testimony, compelling readers to confront the moral consequences of institutionalized discrimination.

Importantly, *Manegara* also exposes internalized caste hierarchies within Dalit communities. The existence of separate wells for different Dalit subgroups demonstrates how caste ideology penetrates even the lives of the oppressed, fragmenting solidarity and reproducing exclusion. By recording these uncomfortable realities without romanticization, Ramaiah refuses narratives of moral purity and instead presents caste as a totalizing system that corrupts social relations at every level.

Ramaiah's ethical witnessing lies in his refusal to offer resolution. Although the narrative includes moments of political awakening and collective engagement, these are not framed as redemptive endpoints. Instead, they coexist with ongoing exclusion, reinforcing the idea that ethical testimony does not resolve injustice but exposes its persistence. *Manegara*, therefore, functions as a moral document that indicts caste society through patient observation, making cruelty visible precisely by presenting it as ordinary.

***Samboli! Beware!*: Embodied Suffering and Moral Exposure**

If *Manegara* operates through restrained ethical witnessing, Lakshman's

Samboli! Beware! confronts caste violence through embodied testimony. The narrative situates the Dalit body as the primary site upon which caste is inscribed, disciplined, and remembered. From childhood onward, Lakshman's body becomes an object of surveillance, punishment, and humiliation, revealing caste as a system that governs not only social relations but also corporeal existence.

The title itself—*Samboli! Beware!* derives from a caste practice that required Dalits to announce their presence to avoid "polluting" upper castes. This practice transforms the Dalit body into a perpetual warning sign, denying it privacy, dignity, and autonomy. By foregrounding this act of compulsory self-announcement, Lakshman exposes caste as a regime of ritualized fear and social control.

The school, often imagined as a neutral space of learning, emerges in Lakshman's narrative as a site of systematic violence. The differentiated punishment meted out to Dalit children—symbolized by the teacher's use of separate canes reveals how caste hierarchy is reproduced through everyday institutional practices. These acts are not portrayed as aberrations but as normalized routines that teach Dalit children submission and self-doubt. Lakshman's testimony exposes the ethical failure of education systems that claim moral authority while perpetuating cruelty.

Ritual humiliation occupies a particularly disturbing place in *Samboli! Beware!*. Acts of so-called charity during religious festivals, such as the distribution of *panaka* from a height, transform benevolence into public degradation. These rituals function as ethical violence, disguising domination as generosity. Lakshman's refusal to aestheticize or soften these experiences exposes the cruelty masked by tradition and forces readers to confront the moral hypocrisy of caste-based charity.

Physical assault and enforced contact with filth further mark the Dalit body as a site of punishment and shame. Lakshman's account of being forced to retrieve filthy slippers with his clothing exemplifies how caste society demands the internalization of pollution. Such acts are designed not merely to humiliate but to inscribe inferiority onto the body itself. The body thus becomes an archive of caste memory, carrying trauma that extends beyond the moment of violence.

Yet *Samboli! Beware!* does not frame suffering as passive endurance. Through reflection and articulation, Lakshman transforms embodied pain into ethical testimony. Writing becomes a means of reclaiming the body from silence, converting humiliation into moral exposure. The narrative insists that these experiences are not personal tragedies but social crimes, demanding recognition and accountability.

Reading Suffering: Shame, Witnessing, and Reader Responsibility

A defining feature of ethical testimony is the relationship it establishes between the narrator and the reader. Dalit autobiographies such as *Manegara* and *Samboli! Beware!* do not invite readers into a space of empathy alone; they position them as ethical witnesses who must confront their own implication within caste society. The act of reading becomes ethically charged, disrupting the comfort of detachment.

These narratives generate what may be described as ethical discomfort. They refuse narrative closure, redemption, or catharsis, preventing readers from resolving injustice through emotional satisfaction. Instead, suffering remains unresolved, insisting on sustained moral engagement. This refusal of closure challenges dominant literary expectations and exposes the inadequacy of aesthetic consolation in the face of structural violence.

Shame plays a crucial role in this ethical dynamic. Unlike guilt, which can be individualized and resolved, shame destabilizes moral innocence by revealing complicity within unjust systems. By exposing how caste violence is normalized through religion, education, and everyday practice, these autobiographies compel readers particularly those situated within caste privilege to confront the ethical implications of social inheritance and silence.

Gopal Guru's distinction between experiential knowledge and ethical knowledge is particularly relevant here. When Dalit suffering is consumed merely as experience, it risks being aestheticized or sentimentalized. Ethical testimony resists this by converting suffering into moral evidence that demands response rather than sympathy. *Manegara* and *Samboli! Beware!* insist that the reader's role is not to feel but to reckon.

Ambedkar's insistence on fraternity as the moral foundation of democracy further sharpens this argument. The absence of fraternity in caste society is not merely a social defect but an ethical collapse. Dalit autobiographies expose this collapse by documenting how everyday practices deny dignity and recognition. In doing so, they transform literature into a site of ethical confrontation.

Ultimately, these narratives reposition Dalit autobiography as a genre that unsettles rather than reassures. They deny the reader the comfort of moral distance and demand accountability for the social structures that sustain injustice. Ethical testimony, therefore, is not only about speaking truth to power but about forcing power and its beneficiaries to listen.

Conclusion: Dalit Autobiography as Moral Indictment

This paper has argued for a critical rethinking of Dalit autobiographical writing by conceptualizing it as ethical

testimony rather than solely as resistance literature or counter-history. Through close readings of *Manegara* by Tumbadi Ramaiah and *Samboli! Beware!* by Lakshman, the study has demonstrated that these narratives function as moral documents that expose the normalized violence of caste society and demand ethical accountability from readers and institutions alike.

Rather than offering narratives of empowerment or redemption, both autobiographies insist on witnessing. Ramaiah's restrained documentation of religious exclusion, educational betrayal, and internalized caste hierarchies reveals the banality of caste cruelty, while Lakshman's visceral account of embodied humiliation exposes the intimate and physical dimensions of caste violence. Together, the texts show that suffering is not incidental but structural, sustained through everyday practices, rituals, and institutional mechanisms.

By foregrounding testimony, this paper has emphasized the ethical relationship between the narrator and the reader. Dalit autobiographies do not invite passive empathy or aesthetic appreciation; they compel ethical engagement. The refusal of narrative closure and consolation disrupts literary comfort and forces readers to confront their moral location within a society structured by caste. In this sense, Dalit autobiography redefines the purpose of literature itself from representation to responsibility.

Drawing upon Ambedkarite thought, the study has further argued that caste represents a profound ethical failure, marked by the absence of fraternity and moral recognition. Dalit autobiographies expose this failure not through abstract critique but through lived evidence that cannot be dismissed or neutralized. Writing becomes an ethical act, converting private suffering into public indictment and demanding accountability rather than charity.

Ultimately, *Manegara* and *Samboli! Beware!* affirm Dalit autobiography as a radical ethical genre that unsettles dominant literary frameworks and social complacency. By bearing witness to injustice without offering resolution, these texts insist that the work of ethics remains unfinished. They challenge readers, critics, and institutions to respond not with sympathy, but with responsibility, transformation, and justice.

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