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Bama's Karukku: Dalit Autobiography as Testimonio

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Abstract

This essay argues that Dalit autobiographies must be treated as *testimonio*, atrocity narratives that document trauma and strategies of survival. Using Bama's *Karukku* as a case-study, it explores the shift between the generic conventions of individual life-writing and collective biography in this text. It analyses the strategy of witnessing in Bama's narrative, arguing that she functions as a witness to a community's suffering, and calls upon readers to undertake "rhetorical listening" as secondary witnesses. This act of recording trauma and witnessing, the essay proposes, is one of subaltern agency.

Keywords

Dalit writing, Bama, trauma, subaltern, *testimonio*, witnessing

This essay argues that Indian Dalit autobiography must be read less as an individual's "life-writing" than as a *testimonio*.¹ Using the first autobiography in Tamil by a woman, Bama's *Karukku* (2000), as an illustrative text,² it demonstrates how "autobiography" as a narrative mode is inadequate to capture the various dimensions of such writing. Curiously, while Dalit writing in India has been compared to Black writing there has been no comparison made to what I believe is its closest literary relation – *testimonio*.³ Like *testimonio*, Dalit writings are narratives of trauma, pain, resistance, protest and social change. Dalit texts document the sufferings of and atrocities committed upon a large section of the population. The writing proceeds from a lived experience of poverty, violence, rejection and suffering. "Trauma" traditionally refers to the destruction of subjects and the self.⁴ But, as Cathy Caruth argues,

“trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival”,⁵ and this is what Dalit writing achieves. It reveals the structure of the traumatic experience (caste in India) while also gesturing at the ways in which the victims have fought, overcome and *survived* the event. Dalit life-writing is about the *re*-construction of the self after the traumatic event. I treat trauma throughout this essay as a structure that induces this destruction and provokes a reconstruction of the Dalit self. It is through this process of recovery that, I suggest, Bama produces a *testimonio*. This essay explores the elision between individual and the community in *Karukku* and proposes that this *testimonio* calls for certain modes of reading because what is at stake here is the “programme” of witnessing.

Bama’s *Karukku* appeared in the Tamil version in 1992 (English translation, 2000). It details the life of an individual Dalit woman and in the process reveals the casteism of an Indian village. *Karukku* is a powerful critique of Indian civil society itself: the educational system, the church and the bureaucracy and highlights the complicity between class and caste in post-independence India.

Testimonio is a genre commonly associated with Latin American atrocity narratives. John Beverley defines it thus:

A novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a “life” or significant life experience.⁶

It is a narrative that exists at the margins of literature, representing those subjects excluded from authorized representation.⁷ In most cases *testimonio* narratives are documents of atrocities and suffering, bringing one into contact with the victimized. The *testimonio* is the voice of one who witnesses for the sake of an other, who remains voiceless. That is, the speaking subaltern subject of the narrative gives voice to the lived experiences of herself and of those who are victims of social and linguistic-literary marginalization.⁸

Testimonio is a collective document here and *Karukku* moves from individual to community through a narration of trauma. Bama described *Karukku* this way:

The story told in *Karukku* was not my story alone. It was the depiction of a collective trauma – of my community – whose length cannot be measured in time. I just tried to freeze it forever in one book so that there will be something physical to remind people of the atrocities committed on a section of the society for ages.⁹

What is significant is that the authenticity of Bama’s suffering also

gestures at something beyond it. *Karukku* as testimonial life-writing enables Bama to share her tale of pain, so that personal testimony becomes accurate historical witnessing of a social structure of traumatic oppression.

The Individual and the Communal

Autobiography presupposes an autonomous individual subject. *Testimonio*, on the other hand, is a genre where the narrator stands in for the whole social group. Bama's constant movement from the individual to the collective suggests that *Karukku* is less an autobiography than a collective biography. Unlike autobiography where the narrator is a person of some social stature, *testimonio* is about the common (wo)man, but a common (wo)man who metonymically stands in for the community. There is no "problematic hero" as in a novel, but there is a "problematic collective situation".¹⁰ The "problematic collective situation" in *Karukku* is caste.

Bama opens her Preface with the personal "I": "there are many congruities between the saw-edged palmyra karukku and my own life" (p. xiii). She describes the contexts of her life – "events that occurred during many stages of my life", "unjust social structures that plunged me into ignorance" – in the second paragraph. And in the third paragraph the narrative changes: "There are other Dalit hearts like mine". She declares that she speaks for an entire community: "They, who have been the oppressed, are now themselves like the double-edged karukku" (p. xiii). *Karukku* is thus both the title of her personal autobiography and an account of the whole community.

It is significant that the first *noun* in Bama's narrative is not a unified subject "I" but a collective "our". This is the opening line of *Karukku*: "Our village is very beautiful" (p. 1). When she describes her community she never uses "my people". Instead she writes: "Most of our people are agricultural labourers" (p. 1). Bama has clearly stated the genre here – it is not a personal autobiography alone, but a collective archive of suffering. Bama is the narrative voice through which the sufferings and atrocities of two communities, Dalit and Christian, are addressed to us.

Chapter two is divided into two sections. The first details her personal experiences as a Dalit woman in a casteist society. It is full of the "I" narrative, as a result. The second section, interestingly, uses the personal pronoun only once in four pages. The entire section is a passionate plea for the Dalit cause, social reform and change. Bama moves from the "I" narrative to the "we" narrative in one chapter, clearly distinguishing between the two, but suggesting that one *follows* from the other. It is almost as though Bama moves from the individual to the collective by

expanding her identity – her self *into* the world. She opens chapter two with “when *I* was studying in the third class” (p. 11, emphasis added). By the relentless narrative logic of a *testimonio* she moves into the “we” and concludes the second section (and the chapter) thus:

We who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us. *We* must not accept the injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it is our fate, as if *we* have no true feelings: *we* must dare to stand up for change . . . (p. 25, emphasis added)

The movement is repeated in chapter nine which also begins with a personal “I” and then shifts to the communal. The movement from individual to communal is a retrieval of trauma, but one that is shared with other Dalits: what holds the community together is trauma. Bama writes:

Today I am like a mongrel-dog, wandering about without a permanent job, nor a regular means to find clothes, food and a safe place to live. I share the same difficulties and struggles that all Dalit poor experience. I share to some extent the poverty of the Dalits who toil far more painfully through fierce heat and beating rain . . .

Life is difficult if you happen to be poor, even though you are born into the upper-castes. When this is the case, the condition of those who are born into the Paraya community, as the poorest of the poor struggling for daily survival, doesn’t need spelling out. (pp. 67–8)

The rest of this chapter talks only about the collective experience of Dalits in India. *Karukku* expands the boundaries of identity construction as the singular “me” evolves into the plural “us”.

In the opening chapter Bama undertakes both the narrative strategies identified with Australian Aboriginal autobiography (especially that written by women):¹¹ the sense of communal life evoked through the individual story; and the intimate relationship with the land. In the very first chapter, even before we know anything of the narrator’s life, we get a glimpse of the community – we are given the story of Bondan-Maama (pp. 4–5). The legend of Bondan-Maama, like Bama’s listing of nicknames for boys and girls (pp. 7–8), the story of Kaaman (pp. 8–9), or that of Nallathangal (pp. 9–11) focuses our attention on the community rather than the narrator. In fact, we get almost no personal details of the narrator in the opening chapter. In order to focus on the community Bama refers to the toils of the Dalits in the fields, the spatial organization of the village and the community’s rituals and superstitions. For instance, her recourse to collective myths and beliefs rather than her family’s modes draws our attention to an entire community. Bama spends considerable narrative space describing the topography of the village, the landmarks or the seasons (pp. 1–4). Four complete pages devoted to the setting and descriptions of people follow only later.

Later Bama describes the hard work of the Dalit labourers: "driving cattle in pairs, round and round, to tread grain from the straw" (p. 12). One entire chapter (chapter four) is devoted to a detailed description of Dalit labour in agricultural activities of her village (pp. 41–48; also p. 66). Bama foregrounds land and community here because, historically, land distribution/ownership and caste hierarchies have been closely linked.¹²

It is significant that we are not given the narrator's name anywhere. Further, "Bama" is itself a pen name and we are not told what her "real" name is. The two taken together suggest a crucial occlusion, or perhaps elision, between the personal "I" who is unnamed/unidentified and the community.

The use of a pseudonym is common to atrocity narratives. However, there are more important "pseudonymous" elements that have to do with the individual-community elision I have pointed to in *Karukku*. First, the Series Editor, translator and the author herself authenticate the narrative. The translator states: "it [*Karukku*] grows out of a particular moment: a personal crisis and watershed in the author's life which drives her to make sense of her life as a woman" (p. vii). The Series Editor writes: "Part autobiography, part analysis, part manifesto. . . . No one can ignore her experience" (n.p.). The popularization of the pseudonym, with absolutely no reference to her "real" name suggests that the "real" name is less important than her social identity, as "Dalit", "woman" and "Tamil". The reader pays attention to *Bama-the-Dalit-woman* rather than the "real" Bama. Rather than seek to know anything more about her as a person, we are asked to pay attention to the structures within which a Bama functions and lives. Pseudonymity is at once a mode of distancing (from Bama-the-person) and intimacy (Bama-the-Dalit-representative). We do not here find the "private" Bama under the pseudonym (which we would have, if we knew the "real" name, as Genette has argued) and *Karukku* becomes a *testimonio* addressed to a stranger.¹³

However, this is not to say that the personal is completely effaced. Though the narrator is unnamed throughout the narrative, the "I" is often foregrounded. Personal humiliations, suffering and feelings are recorded. Chapter two, in sharp contrast to the opening chapter, opens with the individual: "When I was studying in the third class . . ." (p. 11). What also makes Bama's text irreducibly testimonial is that, like *testimonio*, it is rooted in the trauma experienced through and by the *body*. Numerous descriptions of the corporeal occur in Bama's text and each bodily image is located within the social structures of caste. That is, caste inscribes itself into and on the Dalit body. Bama had already rooted her narrative in the corporeal in her Preface when she writes:

Not only did I pick up the scattered palmyra karukku in the days when I was sent out to gather firewood, *scratching and tearing my skin* as I played with them . . . The driving forces that shaped this book are many: events that occurred during many stages of my life, *cutting me like Karukku and making me bleed* . . . (p. xiii, emphasis added)

Recording the sensation of being wounded – as Bama does in the Preface – is the ultimate *testimonio*. For the body's suffering is singular to *that* person. Atrocity victims are often called upon to show evidence of torture and suffering, almost as though the scars are texts that speak the language of oppression. This is precisely what Bama does. And here she achieves that difficult move – of conjoining corporeal pain (which is singular) with collective oppression and suffering. The body metaphors and images that haunt *Karukku* suggest that survival and testimony is now contingent on the act of re-entering those socio-cultural, linguistic/literary and political structures contiguous with those that were responsible for their (Dalits') abuse. Bama disturbs the boundaries between bodies, individuals and groups when she writes:

In order to change this state of affairs, *all Dalits* who have been deprived of their basic rights must function as God's word, *piercing to the very heart*. Instead of being *more and more beaten down and blunted*, they unite, think about their rights, and battle for them. (p. xiii, emphasis added)

Bama underscores the corporeal aspect of social oppression early in her narrative:

When I was studying in the third class, I hadn't yet heard people speak openly of untouchability. But I had already *seen, felt, experienced* and been humiliated by what it is. (p. 11)

Bama's first sustained description of caste-related humiliation also takes recourse to corporeal imagery. She watches a Dalit elder take some *vadais* (a savoury made of lentils) to an "upper caste" man. The Dalit holds the packet by its string so as to not "pollute" the food item with his "untouchable" touch. Her brother informs the puzzled Bama: "Naickers were upper caste, and therefore must not touch Parayas" (p. 13). She then sees some Naicker women give water to her grandmother:

The Naicker women would pour out the water from a height of four feet, while Paatti and the others received and drank it with cupped hands held to their mouths. I always felt terrible when I watched this. (p. 14)

The taboo and social barriers are therefore enforced through prohibitions about the bodily. When Bama is humiliated by the priest in full view of her class, the caste system's oppression is inscribed in terms of Bama's "shamed" body:

When I entered the classroom, the entire class turned round to look at me, and I wanted to shrink into myself as I went and sat on my bench, still weeping. (p. 17)

Later, in order to underline the abhorrence with which Dalits are held by the so-called upper castes, Bama writes:

How is it that people consider us too gross even to sit next to when traveling? They look at us with the same look they would cast on someone suffering from a repulsive disease. Wherever we go we suffer blows. And pain. (p. 24)

Here caste is inscribed upon the Dalit's body through its very rejection: the body and how it is received/treated becomes a marker of caste. The trauma retrieved is, again, of a community's body. Bama describes the trembling bodies of old, "abused" Dalits (p. 23) and her racing heartbeats when she sees caste violence (p. 26). She feels a "burning anger" when she sees the atrocities perpetrated (p. 23). Dalit *bodies* are hurt and brutalized because social structures allow (even enable) the brutalization. When there is a riot in Bama's village, the police arrive. They then proceed to engage in acts of sheer physical violence upon the Dalits (pp. 34–6).

Bama's modes of self-upliftment are also cast in corporeal terms: "I studied hard, with all my breath and being, in a frenzy almost. As Annan [elder brother] had urged, I stood first in my class. And because of that, many people became my friends, even though I am a Paraichi [her caste]" (p. 15). In her Afterword Bama returns to the corporeal image when she writes: "each day brings new wounds . . . I have seen the brutal, frenzied and ugly face of society" (p. 105).

Sharankumar Limbale has argued that Dalit writing must be rooted in the material suffering of the Dalits and that "giving extraordinary pain" must also be recognized as an artistic value.¹⁴ Thus the experience of suffering is what generates Dalit narratives and literature. This experience of suffering is a collective one, where social, historical and political structures oppress *all* Dalit communities. Bama suggests that one suffers as a *Dalit*, even though the pain is singular to the suffering *individual* body. There is thus a critical narrative tension here, where descriptions of localized, individual corporeal suffering are located within larger historical contexts of collective pain. The crucial component of *testimonio* is that the singular is universalizable¹⁵ – that *any* Dalit would have had the same experience as Bama's narrator. Bama interprets her own life in terms of her social identity. *Karukku* – as the quote from pp. 67–8 (see above) demonstrates – details those structures that have shaped her life as it moves from the discrete individual to the Dalit community itself.

Dalit *testimonio* places the individual's story in the public domain, in a discourse that makes the story shareable with others. Confessional writing and *testimonio* are haunted by the question of where to draw the (narrative) line when describing bodily distress or trauma. Readers are embarrassed by revelations, for example, of child abuse in the family or the description of state-sponsored torture/violence since one *expects* the home to be safe and the state to be protector. It is precisely this problematic of what to say and what to leave out that Bama calls into question when she describes atrocities. What the narrative does is to induce unsettlement (a point I will return to) through a break with the "politeness" of narration itself. Mini Krishnan warns us: "Readers might find Bama's expose of certain aspects of our society shocking" (n.p.). Lakshmi Holmström warns that it is not "comfortable reading" (p. xii) and that Bama's writing generates a whole new aesthetics (p. xi). I propose that this is the aesthetic of the *testimonio* where, as the distinction between private and public break down, pain moves outward from the narrator to the narrator's community, where things that cannot be written about *are* written about. Bama airs Indian society's secrets. Two crucial instances of this are her revelation of the casteism within the church and the caste-based violence perpetrated by the police. The injunction to remain silent about such matters is precisely what Bama breaks.

Bama enters the convent to "work hard for other children" but discovers that "the convent I entered didn't even care to glance at poor children" (p. 66). The lifestyle in the convent is also a shock: "Before they became nuns, these women take a vow that they will live in poverty. But that is just a sham. The convent does not know the meaning of poverty" (p. 66). "It is only the upper-caste Christians who enjoy the benefits and comforts of the Church . . . if Dalits become priests or nuns, they are pushed aside and marginalized first of all", writes Bama (p. 69). She adds: "There was no love to be found in that convent . . . there was no love for the poor and the humble . . . In the name of God they actually rob from the poor who struggle for their livelihood" (pp. 92–4. See also pp. 21–2 and 97–103). The second instance reveals the complicity of state machinery – the police – with caste- and class-oppression. The Chaaliyar community invites the police, feasts them and then unleashes them on to the Parayas (pp. 30–39). Paatti asks: "here we are, struggling just for this watery gruel. So how will the police or the government be on our side?" (p. 31). The law also discriminates between communities and favours the wealthier Chaaliyars.

Karukku is significant because it takes into the public domain shameful secrets. In fact Bama's ethics consist of breaking the aesthetic of silence around issues of caste oppression, social inequality and the biases of the legal system. Extreme conditions call for extreme genres

and the *testimonio* is a genre that deals almost entirely with extremities, bearing witness to incommensurable acts.

Witnessing

The *testimonio* is a narrative of witnessing. The narrator is the witness *recounting* the trauma.¹⁶ The genre enlists the reader as a witness to this trauma. Dalit writing is the small narrative that “detotalizes” (the term is Geoffrey Hartman’s) the official narrative of India.¹⁷

Bama’s text must be read alongside other texts that serve as *testimonios*. While reading such texts as Laxman Gaikwad’s *Uchalya* or Laxman Mane’s *Upara* and media reports of atrocities against Dalits, we also need to understand the obligations of *witnessing* these atrocities.¹⁸ Dalit writing functions within a dynamic where silences are increasingly pierced by voices such as Bama’s. When abuses against women and Dalits are being “heard” in courtrooms and public documents, these oral/written documents function as *testimonio*. Dalits who have been outside the “law” (note the number of tribes classified as “criminal tribes” in India¹⁹), outside expression, outside genre, outside everything, produce autobiographical statements about their lives as part of a larger social text. The genre thus acquires the power of resistance through two means in the Dalit autobiography. One is through the author’s own testimonial to suffering, linked with the suffering of the entire community. The second is an injunction upon the reader to bear witness to whatever is recorded.

Knowledge is predicated upon validation and the evidentiary process. *Testimonio*, like the genre of legal testimony, is evidence that asks readers/viewers/listeners to *bear witness*. *Karukku* uses specific rhetorical strategies to create a space of intersubjectivity, of bearing witness. There are two levels of witnessing at work in Dalit *testimonio*: the *primary* witnessing by the victim (here, Bama) and the *secondary* witnessing by the reader. The primary witness is the victim, a witness to *herself*, who engages in a retrospective testimonial act. But this primary witness is also one who witnesses/hears the testimony of *another*. The move between these two forms of primary witnessing occurs through narrativization and advocacy.

Bama is what we may term a “primary witness”. The narrative is a retrospective account of *her* experiences. The sheer singularity of events is recorded as they occurred to *her*. I suggest that the primary witness in Dalit *testimonio* makes a move from *seeing* to *voicing*. Witnessing is about the *reconstruction* of seen/experienced events in verbal narrative elsewhere. In short, the witness through her speech/textualization has attained narrative clarity and coherence over the (embodied but

elsewhere) experience. That is, there are two parts to Bama's retrospective testimonial act: her *experience* of events in her village and convent and her *narration* of it elsewhere, years later. Bama's Preface itself marks this move from experience to narration. She begins by stating that what follows is a narrative of her experiences: she is the witness/victim of the rendered experiences. This is the first part of her function as primary witness. But Bama is also speaking for another, bearing witness to another's suffering. In the course of her narration of her own experiences, Bama moves from individual to collective, experiential testimony to polemics. In the later part of the Preface she writes:

In order to change this state of affairs, all Dalits who have been deprived of their basic rights must function as God's word, piercing to the very heart. Instead of being more and more beaten down and blunted, they unite, think about their rights, and battle for them. (p. xiii)

This is the second part of her witnessing. What Bama has done here is to engage in an act of *advocacy*, of proposing a programme of action for the *entire community*. She moves into the role of advocate *within* the role of witness.

Bama has already documented her problems that result from her social identity. Her sufferings, as noted earlier, metonymically stand in for the entire community's. Later, in the convent/church she again undergoes suffering as a Dalit woman. What is significant is that, like the figures in autobiography who document momentous changes in their lives, Bama charts the significant moments of her life. She, for instance, details how she left the church. Admittedly, her sufferings do not end (pp. 100–103). However, her exit from the convent is an act of agency driven by her will to work for the Dalit cause. The negated subject asserts individual agency by leaving the community. Bama's exit – like her efforts at studying and improving herself, earlier in the narrative – is meant to stand as an example to other Dalits. It is surely significant that Bama highlights her individual achievements throughout the narrative (pp. 18, 64, 71, 75). Advocacy here is worked/achieved through personal example. And here the *testimonio* conflates with autobiographical conventions: where the narrator holds up her own life as an example for others to follow. Her discovery of the hypocrisies of the church is followed by what can only be seen as a primary witness shifting into advocacy:

Nowadays, now that I have left the order, I am angry when I see priests and nuns . . . How long will they deceive us, as if we are innocent children . . . Dalits have begun to realize the truth . . . They have become aware that they too were created in the likeness of God. There is a new strength within them, urging them to reclaim that likeness which has been so far repressed, ruined, obliterated: and to begin to live again with honour,

self-respect and with a love towards all humankind. To my mind, this alone is true devotion. (pp. 93–4)

The “I” who leaves the convent shifts, through the space of a few paragraphs into the entire Dalit community’s discovery of religious oppression and hypocrisy. Bama’s advocacy is based on the irreducibility of her personal experience. She concludes her narrative with *her* life as example: “I have courage; I have a certain pride. I do indeed have a belief that I can live; a desire that I should live” (p. 104). This self-affirmation functions as advocacy, proposing a personal code for survival: “I comfort myself with the thought that rather than live with a fraudulent smile, it is better to lead a life weeping real tears” (p. 104). This is what makes Dalit *testimonio* a narrative of trauma *and* survival.

Secondary witnessing/ testimonio proposes the “possibilities for solidarity and affiliations among critics, interviewers, translators and the subject who ‘speaks’.”²⁰ We need to see Dalit writing’s emergence as a mark of this “solidarity”, a solidarity that is based, I shall propose, on the responsibility of “bearing witness”. The exergues of *Karukku* suggest this solidarity. Mini Krishnan, then Editor for Macmillan’s Dalit Writing in Translation series writes in her note to the text:

Breaking a silence that has lasted for more generations than we can count comes Bama’s *Karukku*, a text which though structured like a novel, is not fiction . . . Part autobiography, part analysis, part manifesto, Bama’s is a bold account of what life is like outside the mainstream of Indian thought and function. (n.p.)

Mini Krishnan proposes a mode of reading Bama’s narrative here by outlining the mix of genres, the experiences of the author-narrator, the uniqueness of the “speaking subject”, among others. The note thus creates the context where a solidarity axis between victim-narrator-translator-critic-reader is forged. The translator’s Introduction underscores the “authenticity” of the narrative when she writes: “it [*Karukku*] grows out of a particular moment: a personal crisis and watershed in the author’s life which drives her to make sense of her life as a woman” (p. vii). Bama’s own Preface states:

The driving forces that shaped this book are many: events that occurred during many stages of my life, cutting me like *Karukku* and making me bleed. . . . (p. xiii)

These exergues taken together forge a pact between the author and reader where we see the ensuing text as a sincere effort by the author to come to terms with her own life. They tell us to read the text as *testimonio*: an authentic record of personal suffering that we, as readers are expected to respond to, *bear witness* to. It links author-critic-reader in a

relationship of solidarity, recognizing the oppression that produces such *testimonios*.

Karukku constructs the reader as a witness too. And it is here that we need to exercise extreme caution. *Testimonio*, as noted before, calls for certain responsibilities – to respond to the suffering and trauma of the other. We have already noted the exergues of *Karukku* (Mini Krishnan's and Lakshmi Holmström's). Mini Krishnan in fact declares: "no one can ignore her experience", having already described the work as coming from "life outside the mainstream". Lakshmi Holmström writes:

What is demanded of the translator and reader is, in Gayatri Spivak's term a "surrender to the special call of the text" . . . Bama is writing in order to change hearts and minds. And as readers of her work, we are asked for nothing less than an imaginative entry into that *different* world of experience and its political struggle. (pp. xi-xii, emphasis added)

The crucial word here is "difference" on which is predicated the crisis of witnessing. For Lakshmi Holmström is making a very important theoretical point: *how* does one read/respond to such a *testimonio* of suffering?

The reader is called upon to witness the atrocities that India has inflicted upon an entire population. *Karukku* disturbs our poise with its revelations, producing what Dominick LaCapra writing on Holocaust *testimonio* has termed an "empathetic unsettlement".²¹ But what is important is that one needs to respect the sheer *otherness* of the victim. The "crisis of witnessing" is that we cannot/should not incorporate the Other into ourselves.²² Readers of Dalit writing can only be "secondary witnesses".²³ The crisis of witnessing of this secondary witness can be articulated as a question: how can one respond to/witness Dalit suffering without standing in for the victim? Standing in for the victim would mean erasing the crucial difference that is the very structure of their suffering – their experience, unique to them. The solution is for the reader to "reactivate and transmit not the trauma but an unsettlement . . . that manifests empathy (but not full identification) with the victim," as LaCapra puts it.²⁴ It is a contract of listening because *Karukku* is a testimony addressed *to* somebody. *Testimonio* bridges the gap between the suffering individual and the communities of listeners who (should) provide empathetic responses. It is admittedly a difficult aporia – to both empathize and respond to the other, but to not stand in for the other.

What such "secondary witnessing" forges is solidarity between Dalits (victims, primary witnesses), critics, readers and translators (secondary witnesses) and progressive thinkers.²⁵ It is this empathetic secondary witnessing that *Karukku* calls us to perform. The solidarity axis can be forged only through secondary witnessing, *paying attention to the sheer*

heterogeneity of Dalit space, empathizing with it, but never hoping/seeking to stand in for the victim.

Dalit narratives are “out-law” genres. An out-law genre, in Caren Kaplan’s terms,²⁶ disrupts literary conventions and constitutes resistance literature in postcolonial societies. Dalit writing is produced in a society where entire communities are disallowed the right to narrate. Bama said in an interview:

One thing that gives me most satisfaction is that I used the language of my people – a language that was not recognized by the pundits of literature, was not accepted by any literary circle in Tamil Nadu, was not included in the norms of Tamil literature.²⁷

Testimonio, I propose, arises as an “out-law” genre when available structures of writing/speaking are inaccessible or inadequate.

Testimonio presupposes a witness, an audience. Here the autobiographical text serves as *formal* evidence. Witnessing itself is a rhetorical structure – with its own processes, syntax and politics of location (the court, the church, the inquiry commission). The crisis of witnessing, as we have already noted, is that we cannot *stand in for* the victim. However, for the reader to be “empathetically unsettled” on reading a text like *Karukku*, there needs to be a referentiality. What is the value attributed to such a truth-telling? There is a paradox inherent at the heart of representing trauma: are violent representations necessary for empathetic engagement? “How does one get heard” – this, I suggest, is the central question in Dalit autobiographies. And the question immediately locates itself within the issue of witnessing and readership.

Following Wendy Hesford,²⁸ I suggest that Dalit autobiographies must be “produced” through a process of “rhetorical listening”. Rhetorical listening is central to *testimonio* because it is not about mere reception of texts. Trauma of the kind Bama details cannot simply be remembered: it calls upon the listener to react in certain ways. The task of the audience is to keep the event “open”, which entails, in Lauren Berlant’s words, “experiencing the trauma of someone else’s story and communicating it in a way that keeps it traumatic *for others*”.²⁹

Such a rhetorical listening in the case of *Karukku* or other Dalit autobiographies entails locating Bama as one voice that *stands alongside* several thousand Dalit voices that *do not speak*. In an interview she states: “There were many significant things that I chose not to recall in *Karukku*. I was witness to many violent incidents related to caste conflicts.”³⁰ Bama’s function is not, in such a rhetorical listening, to stand for herself, but to witness a trauma, to give trauma a presence. Bama states unequivocally: “there are other Dalit hearts like mine” (p. xiii). However, because these other Dalits are not *present* for us, we are in a

rather strange position as readers. We cannot appropriate the trauma of these others through any form of identification. However, Bama's testimony bears the cultural "stigma" of being a victim. Because Bama never names her individual oppressors we need to contextualize the *absence* of other such victims and perpetrators within the identity of politics and culture in that region and in India.

This means proceeding *beyond* the frames of the narrative itself. We need to imagine the trauma that occurs beyond *textual* representation. Witnessing is not in the rhetorical sense of shared *experiences* but through *other rhetorical modes of identification*. In Bama's case it is an appeal to human rights and notions of justice. At one point she seeks to go home for her First Communion. The school denied her permission. Bama writes: "I stood my ground . . . insisting that there cannot be different rules for different castes, only the same rules for everyone" (p. 19). Later Bama asks:

Are Dalits not human beings? Do they not have common sense? Do they not have such attributes as a sense of honour and self-respect? Are they without wisdom, beauty, dignity? What do we lack? (p. 24; see also p. 94)

She later debates the issue of justice (p. 25), unequal wages for upper-castes and Dalits (p. 47). In each of these cases Bama takes recourse to the discursive register of human laws and justice. Rhetorical listening involves paying attention to a discourse beyond the immediate referentiality of the text to those absences whose trauma achieves a presence *in* Bama. That is we need to go via dis-identification – since other victims/perpetrators are not *named* here – to identification. The national "institution" of untouchability, casteism and the politics of emancipation are our frames when working with rhetorical listening. In other words we *bear witness to what cannot be seen*. Witnessing here works in both senses – of seeing with one's own eyes and the contemporary political and ethical sense of testifying to that which cannot be seen. We read these contestatory historical narratives and *testimonio* through juridical discourses, just as Bama does when she asks questions of justice and the law.

Engaged in rhetorical listening to Bama's text enables us to work with those social structures that make her an agent or self. Bama constructs a subjectivity for herself by *addressing* others (Dalits and other readers), but engages us in this process by asking us to respond: for one cannot read *testimonio* without responding – this is the special call of the text. This address-response structure is witnessing. Bama herself speaks of the distinction between "victims" and "affected". She writes:

The victimized ones are those who fall prey to these bickerings, who lose their homes, families etc . . . in these riots, who are in the direct line of

fire. The affected ones are those who are not directly involved but are innocent bystanders who leave the scene with some scars.³¹

Rhetorical listening, responding to the special call of the text, means *bearing witness*, being one of the “affected”.

Witnessing is always structured around address-response and this is what *Karukku* asks us to do – respond. Witnessing and listening to Bama is to treat material-rhetorical acts such as testimony as not only reclaiming lives but as political acts of survival, reconstruction and empowerment. As readers we are called upon, through such rhetorical devices, to be witnesses in dynamic knowledge discourses such as Bama's. Most importantly, we are engaged in the construction of truths. Witnessing here involves looking at the text and beyond the text, at the present, the past and the potential for the future. *Testimonio* is a record of trauma and survival, as *Karukku* shows. But it is also, within the frame of rhetorical listening and an ethics of reading, a programme for future action. Once truth has been established through *testimonio*, it entails, indeed demands, reparation and justice. As witnesses we are obliged to engage in change.

Reading *testimonio* like Bama's enables us – readers, critics and students – to interpellate ourselves in a relation of solidarity with social reform and liberation movements. It provides a discursive space where an alliance between the intelligentsia and the subaltern can take place. Dalit life-writing such as Bama's fashions a discourse of testimony and self-revelation, to establish a sense of agency, to articulate a personal history in and onto the texts of a traditional patriarchal, casteist culture.

NOTES

- 1 The term “Dalit” comes from the Marathi “dala”, meaning “of the soil”. It also suggests, “that which has been ground down”. Today its usage includes social suppressed caste groups in India. Its semantic scope has been extended to include tribals, landless farm-labourers, so-called “criminal tribes” and the exploited. On the Indian caste system, see Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications*, New Delhi: OUP, 1980; Gail Omvedt, *Dalit Visions*, New Delhi: South Asia Books, 1998; and Sagarika Ghose, “The Dalit in India”, *Social Research*, 70, 1 (2003), 83–109. I follow Suzette Henke's notion of “life-writing” as including confessional forms, autofictions, diaries, journals, *Bildungsromane*, autobiographies and biomythography, Henke, *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing*, London: Macmillan, 1998.
- 2 Bama, *Karukku*, trans. Lakshmi Holmström, Chennai: Macmillan, 2000. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited in the text.
- 3 See N.M. Aston, ed., *Dalit Literature and African-American Literature*, New Delhi, Prestige, 2001; Sharankumar Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit*

Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations, trans. Alok Mukherjee, Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2004. V.T. Rajshekar even refers to Dalits as the “black untouchables of India”. See his *Dalit: The Black Untouchables of India*, Atlanta, Ottawa: Clarity, 1987.

- 4 Traumatic events “shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others . . . cast[ing] the victim into a state of existential crisis”, Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, New York: Harper-Collins, 1992, p. 51. Post-traumatic stress disorder is clinically defined as “recurrent and intrusive recollections of the [traumatic] event . . . or recurrent distressing dreams”, often resulting in feelings of detachment, social estrangement, self-destructive and impulsive behavior, dissociate symptoms, somatic complaints . . . hostility and social withdrawal (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th edn., Washington DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1994, pp. 424–5).
- 5 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996, p. 58.
- 6 John Beverley, “The Margin at the Center: On *Testimonio* (Testimonial Narrative)”, in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds, *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women’s Autobiography*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992, pp. 91–114. Also see Beverley’s “‘Through All Things Modern’: Second Thoughts on *Testimonio*”, *Boundary 2*, 18, 2 (1991), 1–21. The most famous example of *testimonio* is, of course, *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, trans. Ann Wright, London, Verso, 1994 (1984), which deals with the oppression of Mayan Indians in the country.
- 7 Beverley, “On *Testimonio*”, p. 93.
- 8 George Yudice suggests that the witness in a *testimonio* writes her own experience as an agent (rather than a representative) of a collective memory and identity, “*Testimonio* and Postmodernism”, *Latin American Perspectives*, 18, 3 (1991), 15–31. Lauren Berlant argues that the witness bears the “burden of the structurally subordinate”, “Trauma and Ineloquence”, *Cultural Values*, 5, 1 (2001), 41–58.
- 9 Bama, “Recognition for the Language of My People is The Biggest Award I Can Win”, Interview, 26 April 2001. <http://www.ambedkar.org/entertainment/RecognitionFor.htm>. Accessed 20 April 2005.
- 10 Beverley, “On *Testimonio*”, p. 95.
- 11 Kateryna Oliynyk Longley, “Autobiographical Storytelling by Australian Aboriginal Women”, in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds, *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women’s Autobiography*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992, pp. 370–84.
- 12 Statistics reveal that 49% of Dalits today are agricultural labourers, while only 25% are cultivators. Since 1961, despite a host of land reforms, a great many Dalits have even lost the little land they had and have had no choice but to join the ranks of landless agricultural labourers. Today over 86% of SC (Scheduled Caste) households are landless or near landless and 63% are wage-labour households. “Black Paper on the Status of Dalit Human Rights”, <http://www.dalits.org>.

- 13 Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997, pp. 46–54. On addresses to strangers as a feature of *testimonio*, see Lauren Berlant, “Trauma and Ineloquence”, *Cultural Values*, 5, 1 (2001), 41–58. Omprakash Valmiki in his *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, trans. Arun Prabha Mukherjee, Kolkata: Samya, 2003, examines in considerable detail the implications of his name (Valmiki, the author the Hindu epic, *The Ramayana*). Everybody encountering his name assumed he was a Brahmin. See *Joothan*, pp. 124–32
- 14 Sharankumar Limbale, *Dalit Literature*, p. 108.
- 15 Andrea Frisch, “The Ethics of Testimony: A Genealogical Perspective”, *Discourse*, 25, 1&2 (2003), 36–54.
- 16 Wendy S. Hesford, “Documenting Violations: Rhetorical Witnessing and the Spectacle of Distant Suffering”, *Biography*, 27, 1 (2004), 104–44.
- 17 Geoffrey Hartman, “Witnessing Video Testimony”, Interview, *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 14, 1 (2001), 217–32.
- 18 Laxman Gaikwad, *Uchalya: The Branded*, trans. P.A. Kolharkar, Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1998; Laxman Mane, *Upara: An Outsider*, trans. A.K. Kamat, Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1997. For documents on atrocities on Dalits see www.dalits.org and Human Rights Watch's *Broken People: Caste Violence against India's "Untouchables"* (NY: Human Rights Watch, 1999). The Human Rights Watch reports that there have been cases of discrimination against Dalits in disbursement of assistance for tsunami victims. See <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2005/01/14/india10019.htm>.
- 19 The Criminal Tribes Act was passed by the British colonial government of India in 1871. The Act identified 160 communities as “criminal”. The Act was subsequently amended several times to include nomadic cattle grazers, wandering singers and acrobats. Nomadic tribes were the main targets here. In 1952 the Government of India officially “denotified” the stigmatized communities. Since 1961 the Government of India, through the state machineries has published state-wide lists of “Denotified and Nomadic Tribes”. Laxman Gaikwad's *Uchalya* is the autobiographical narrative of a member of one such “criminal tribe”. But atrocities against such “denotified tribes” have continued. See Mahasweta Devi's 2002 essay on the topic at <http://www.indiatogether.org/bhasha/budhan/birth1871.htm>.
- 20 Caren Kaplan, “Resisting Autobiography: Out-law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects”, in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds, *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992, pp. 115–38.
- 21 Dominick LaCapra, “Trauma, Absence, Loss”, *Critical Inquiry*, 25 (1999), 696–727.
- 22 Hesford, “Documenting Violations”, 107.
- 23 LaCapra, “Trauma, Absence, Loss”, 699.
- 24 *ibid.*, 722.
- 25 Sharankumar Limbale points to this solidarity when he declares during the course of an interview: “there is a need to bring together the Dalits and the progressive savarnas [“upper-caste” Hindus]”, *Dalit Literature*, p. 152. Arguments about the *testimonio* genre have made the point that, despite the

appeal to the authority of an “actual” subaltern voice, it is in fact a staging of the subaltern by someone who is not a subaltern, by perhaps an elite committed to social change and democratization. See, for example, John Beverley, *Subalternity and Representation: Arguments in Cultural Theory*, Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1999, pp. 69–71. The risk of appropriation of the subaltern by savarnas for academic careerism is, of course, very real.

- 26 The term “out-law” genre refers to genres that lie outside the pale of standard, canonical literary conventions, and includes prison-memoirs by women, aboriginal autobiographies and, in this case, Dalit writing. See Kaplan, “Resisting Autobiography”, pp. 122–3.
- 27 Bama, “Recognition”, <http://www.ambedkar.org/entertainment/RecognitionFor.htm>.
- 28 Hesford, “Documenting Violations”, 104–44.
- 29 Lauren Berlant, “Trauma and Ineloquence”, 41–58.
- 30 Bama, “Recognition”, <http://www.ambedkar.org/entertainment/RecognitionFor.htm>.
- 31 Bama, “Recognition”, <http://www.ambedkar.org/entertainment/RecognitionFor.htm>.