



From Caste To Race: Comparative Sociolinguistic Strategies In Dalit and African American Autobiographical Writing

Yamini Natali

Research Scholar, Department of English, Maharaja Agrasen Himalayan Garhwal University

Dr. Veer Singh

Professor, Department of English, Maharaja Agrasen Himalayan Garhwal University

Abstract

This paper offers a comparative sociolinguistic analysis of selected Dalit and African American autobiographies, with particular attention to language as a site where caste and race are simultaneously reproduced and contested. Taking Indian Dalit autobiographies such as Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste* and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* alongside African American classics like Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*, Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the study explores how subordinate groups narrate their lives in relation to dominant linguistic norms. Using theoretical insights from W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness", Geneva Smitherman's work on African American English, and sociolinguistic accounts of language, power and stigma, the paper argues that both Dalit and African American writers navigate a tension between vernacular speech and standard languages (English or high Marathi). Vernaculars function as repositories of community memory and solidarity, while standard registers are associated with education, mobility and institutional authority. Through code-switching, stylistic hybridity and metalinguistic commentary, these autobiographies transform linguistic vulnerability into critical self-awareness. The paper concludes that, although the structures of caste and race are historically specific, a comparative focus on language reveals convergent strategies of resistance and important limits to analogy.

Keywords: Dalit; African American; Vernacular; Code-switching; Resistance

1. Introduction

Comparisons between Dalit experience in India and African American experience in the United States have become increasingly prominent in scholarship and activism, especially around questions of structural inequality, segregation and violence (Yengde; Zelliott). At times, such comparisons risk flattening differences, but they can also illuminate how distinct systems of domination generate similar forms of everyday humiliation and collective resistance. Literature has been a central site of this comparative work. Autobiographical narratives by Dalit and African American writers do not simply chronicle suffering; they theorise oppression from within, offering subtle analyses of power that often precede formal academic theory.

Language is one of the most important dimensions of this theorising. Both caste and race mark bodies, but they also mark speech: accent, vocabulary, syntax and pragmatic norms. Dalits and African Americans have historically been represented as speaking "broken" or "incorrect" language, in contrast to a supposedly neutral standard associated with upper castes or white middle classes (Smitherman; Rege). Autobiographical writing from both traditions therefore



faces a double challenge. It must expose the injustice of linguistic stigmatisation while negotiating the demands of literary markets that often reward conformity to standard forms. This paper offers a comparative reading of how Dalit and African American autobiographers manage that challenge. It focuses on three interrelated questions: How do they represent their own and others' speech? How do they use code-switching between vernacular and standard varieties to signal shifts in identity, audience and power? And how do they link language to broader questions of selfhood, memory and liberation? Rather than seeking direct equivalence between caste and race, the analysis emphasises patterns of convergence and divergence in the sociolinguistic strategies adopted by writers across the two traditions.

2. Caste, Race and the Politics of Language

In both India and the United States, language has been a key site of social classification. In the United States, African American English (AAE) has been caricatured as evidence of intellectual inferiority, criminality or moral laxity, despite extensive linguistic research demonstrating its systematic grammatical structure and rich rhetorical tradition (Smitherman; Green). In India, Dalit speech – often rural, non-standard and saturated with local idioms – has been dismissed as vulgar or uncultured, while Sanskritised and standardised forms of language have been treated as bearers of civilisation (Limbale; Rege). These judgements are not linguistic facts but ideological constructs; they justify unequal access to education, employment and public voice.

W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of "double consciousness" in *The Souls of Black Folk* captures how racialised subjects internalise the gaze of a dominant society that judges both their bodies and their speech (Du Bois). Du Bois describes the "peculiar sensation" of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, measuring one's soul by their contemptuous standards. This double consciousness has a linguistic dimension: African Americans learn to monitor their own speech, to "talk proper" in certain contexts and to suppress aspects of their vernacular that might confirm racist stereotypes.

Dalit thinkers, from B. R. Ambedkar to contemporary scholars like SurajYengde, have similarly analysed how caste creates a split subjectivity in which Dalits are forced to see themselves through Brahminical norms that define them as impure and unworthy (Ambedkar; Yengde). Language is part of this struggle: many Dalit autobiographers recall feeling ashamed of their home dialects in school, where teachers mock their pronunciation or vocabulary. In both contexts, linguistic self-consciousness is a form of social pain.

At the same time, both African American and Dalit movements have reclaimed their vernaculars as sources of cultural pride and political strength. African American writers and activists have celebrated AAE as the language of blues, jazz, sermons and street poetry, valuing its creativity and expressive power (Smitherman). Dalit writers insist that authentic Dalit literature must draw on Dalit speech and resist purification into elite registers (Limbale). These counter-moves complicate double consciousness, turning what was once experienced purely as stigma into a site of critical reflection and creativity.



3. Vernacular Orality and Standard Literacy

Autobiographical narratives in both traditions are centrally about education and the acquisition of literacy. Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* famously charts his journey from a childhood in bondage to leadership at Tuskegee Institute, emphasising the transformative power of reading, writing and oratory (Washington). Richard Wright's *Black Boy* recounts how libraries and books offered him a way out of Southern racism, even as his reading alienated him from black and white communities alike (Wright). Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* depicts literature as a lifeline that helps a traumatised child rediscover her voice (Angelou).

Similarly, many Dalit autobiographies narrate the struggle to access schooling against the odds of poverty, discrimination and family scepticism. Limbale describes walking miles to school barefoot, enduring insults from upper-caste classmates and teachers, and discovering the writings of Ambedkar as a revelation (Limbale). Kamble records how Ambedkarite activists encouraged Mahar children, especially girls, to pursue education, challenging older generations' fatalistic acceptance of caste roles (Kamble).

From a sociolinguistic perspective, these narratives show subjects moving between vernacular orality and standard literacy. Home is associated with spoken stories, songs and proverbs; school with textbooks, examinations and "proper" grammar. Mastery of standard language opens doors to employment and public influence, but it also threatens to distance individuals from their communities. Autobiographers use language itself to dramatise this movement.

Washington's prose in *Up from Slavery* is remarkably polished, adopting the restrained, formal style expected of an early twentieth-century public figure. Oral features are muted; the text clearly seeks acceptance by white middle-class readers as evidence of black respectability (Washington). Wright and Angelou, writing later, integrate more colloquial dialogue and vivid imagery, but their narrative voices still lean towards standard written English, reflecting both the conventions of publishing and the authors' positioning within broader literary networks (Wright; Angelou).

Dalit autobiographers are more likely to retain dialect words, exclamations and oral narrative devices even in written form. Translations complicate this picture, but studies of the original Marathi texts underline the persistence of spoken rhythms and grammar (Limbale; Rege). This difference partly reflects the different locations of the two traditions within national literary fields. African American writers have long sought entry into a predominantly white-controlled publishing world, which has rewarded certain forms of stylistic assimilation. Dalit writers, working more recently and often for alternative or radical presses, have been freer to foreground linguistic nonconformity, though they still face pressures to conform.

Autobiographical texts thus become laboratories where the tension between vernacular and standard is negotiated. The narrators simultaneously affirm the value of their home speech and display competence in high-prestige codes. The outcome is often stylistic hybridity: stretches of standard narrative punctuated by vernacular dialogue, songs, slogans and proverbs. This hybridity is not just aesthetic; it reflects the lived experience of moving between social worlds.

4. Code-Switching and Stylistic Hybridity

Code-switching – the alternation between different languages or varieties within a single discourse – is a central feature of both African American and Dalit autobiographical writing. In literary texts, code-switching can signal shifts in addressee, mood or social context, and can index different facets of the narrator’s identity (Gumperz).

In *Black Boy*, Wright uses direct dialogue to reproduce Southern black speech patterns, including non-standard verb forms, double negatives and distinctive intonation, while narrating in a more standard written English. The contrast foregrounds the difference between the child’s embeddedness in a local black community and the adult narrator’s critical distance and broader horizon (Wright). Angelou similarly alternates between lyrical, highly crafted prose and dialogues in which characters speak in the cadences of black Southern English. The musicality of church sermons, jokes and insults is captured through repetition, call-and-response patterns and imagery (Angelou).

Smitherman has argued that such strategies bring the “black oral tradition” into print, challenging the hegemony of white middle-class norms and affirming African American English as a legitimate literary resource (Smitherman). Code-switching allows writers to show competence in standard English while refusing to abandon their vernacular heritage. It is a way of “talkin’ and testifyin’” on the page, addressing both black and white readers in different keys.

Dalit autobiographies display parallel but not identical patterns. In the Marathi originals of *Akkarmashi* and *JinaAmucha (The Prisons We Broke)*, shifts occur between a relatively standard narrative voice and stretches of reported speech that reflect village dialects, caste-specific slang and ritual formulae (Limbale; Kamble). Abusive and obscene terms, often directed at Dalits by upper castes or at women by men, are reproduced in full rather than euphemised, forcing readers to confront the linguistic violence of caste (Rege). At the same time, when narrators comment on social structure or political ideology, they sometimes adopt a more abstract, Sanskritised vocabulary associated with modern social science and Ambedkarite discourse.

This alternation between earthy dialect and abstract theory is itself a form of code-switching, signalling a movement between experiential and analytical registers. It allows the text to function both as testimony and as social critique. When Limbale discusses “Dalit consciousness” or the “structure of caste society”, his language aligns with Ambedkarite political thought; when he recounts a landlord’s insults, he falls back into the raw dialect of the village (Limbale). Both codes are necessary to convey the full reality of Dalit life.

Translators struggle to reproduce these shifts in English. Some solutions include leaving key Marathi terms untranslated, using italics to signal them, or approximating dialect through non-standard punctuation and contractions. While these strategies cannot fully capture the sociolinguistic nuance of the original, they do preserve traces of code-switching and remind readers that the text is rooted in a multilingual world.

5. Memory, Trauma and the Narrative “I”

Autobiographical writing in both traditions is deeply concerned with memory and trauma. The narrators revisit painful events: beatings, humiliations, sexual assaults, hunger, and the deaths of loved ones. Language becomes the means of making these memories bearable and communicable. At the same time, the act of narration is shaped by the awareness that such stories will be consumed by readers who may not share the narrator’s background or risks.

Angelou’s description of childhood rape in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is a powerful example. She uses metaphors and partial euphemisms to convey the horror without graphic detail, integrating the event into a broader narrative about silence, guilt and eventual recovery of voice (Angelou). Wright recounts brutal beatings and racial violence in a matter-of-fact tone, allowing the starkness of events to speak for itself, while occasionally breaking into analytic commentary about the “environmental” roots of black rage (Wright). Washington, writing earlier and for a different audience, downplays the violence of slavery and emphasises reconciliation and progress, a rhetorical choice that has been both praised and criticised (Washington).

Dalit autobiographers similarly balance directness and reticence. Limbale describes hunger, public humiliation and domestic violence with unflinching clarity, but hints rather than details sexual abuse, reflecting both cultural taboos and his positionality as a male narrator (Limbale). Kamble, by contrast, centrally foregrounds the violence of early marriage, repeated pregnancy and domestic labour in the lives of Dalit women, and uses repetition and rhetorical questions to convey the sense of being trapped in an unending cycle (Kamble).

Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness helps explain why these writers are so attuned to how their narratives will be read (Du Bois). They are aware of multiple audiences: hostile or sceptical readers from dominant groups, sympathetic allies, and members of their own communities. Linguistic choices – how much dialect to use, how much violence to show, how much to explain – reflect these imagined audiences. Autobiographical “I” is thus never purely individual; it is a relational construct oriented towards others.

In comparative perspective, we can see that both African American and Dalit autobiographers use linguistic strategies to manage the risk of retraumatising themselves or their communities. Humour, irony and understatement often soften the blow of horrific events, while sudden shifts in tone or register signal moments when pain threatens to overwhelm language. These stylistic features are part of what makes the texts ethically and aesthetically powerful.

6. Limits of Analogy and the Specificity of Structures

While the parallels between caste and race are striking, a comparative sociolinguistic analysis also highlights differences that caution against simple equivalence. Caste in India involves a complex hierarchy of many jatis, regional variations and religiously framed notions of purity and pollution; race in the United States is structured by a history of chattel slavery, segregation and binary black/white classifications, even as it now operates in more complex ways (Dirks; Omi and Winant).

These structural differences affect language. In India, caste is often encoded in surnames, honorifics, ritual phrases and the use of second-person pronouns that express hierarchy. In the



United States, race is more closely linked to phonological features, lexical items and grammatical constructions associated with AAE, as well as to accents that mark regional and ethnic differences (Green; Smitherman). Dalit autobiographies therefore pay particular attention to the language of ritual, address and insult; African American texts foreground the music and rhetoric of sermons, blues and street talk.

Furthermore, the national languages in which these texts circulate occupy different positions in global hierarchies. English, as the primary language of African American autobiography, is also the dominant international language, which means that African American voices have historically had greater access to global readerships than Dalit voices, which are often mediated through translation from regional Indian languages. This affects not only reception but also stylistic choices: African American writers may anticipate a more international audience, while Dalit writers may primarily address domestic publics or specific activist networks, even when translated.

Comparative work must therefore hold together similarity and difference. To say that both Dalits and African Americans face linguistic stigma is true but insufficient. The nature of that stigma, the spaces where it is reproduced, and the resources available for resisting it vary. Rather than forcing one tradition into the mould of the other, a careful comparative sociolinguistic approach allows each to illuminate the other's blind spots. The concept of double consciousness, for example, may enrich our understanding of Dalit subjectivity, while Dalit critiques of ritual purity may shed light on aspects of African American religious experience that are otherwise overlooked (Du Bois; Ambedkar; Rege).

7. Conclusion

A comparative sociolinguistic reading of Dalit and African American autobiographical writing reveals that language is a crucial interface between personal experience and social structure. Through their choices of dialect, register, code-switching patterns and narrative tone, writers in both traditions capture the lived reality of caste and race as systems that shape not only material conditions but also speech, silence and self-perception.

Dalit texts such as *The Outcaste* and *The Prisons We Broke* show how caste is encoded in the smallest details of village speech, in insults shouted across wells and in the whispered consolations of women. African American autobiographies like *Up from Slavery*, *Black Boy* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* demonstrate how racism permeates language, from teachers' dismissive comments to the expectations encoded in "proper" English. In both contexts, autobiography becomes a space where these linguistic injuries are reworked into narratives of critique and survival.

At the same time, the comparison underscores that Dalit and African American histories are not interchangeable. Their sociolinguistic landscapes differ, as do their relationships to national and global languages. The value of comparison lies not in collapsing these differences but in tracing patterns of convergence and divergence that sharpen our understanding of each tradition.

The study suggests that any serious engagement with caste and race in literature must take language seriously. Questions of accent, vocabulary, register and code-switching are not



stylistic ornamentation; they are central to how oppressed communities make sense of their worlds and assert their right to be heard. By placing Dalit and African American autobiographies in dialogue, we gain a richer sense of how marginalised voices retool language itself as an instrument of freedom.

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