

# Linguistic Humor and Resistance in Dalit Autobiographies

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<http://www.ujhmds.org/> || Vol. 2 No. 3 (2026): July Issue

Date of Submission: 04-06-2026

Date of Acceptance: 16-06-2026

Date of Publication: 03-07-2026

**ABSTRACT**—Dalit autobiographies have long been recognized for their unflinching portrayals of caste oppression, yet the strategic deployment of humor within these texts remains underexplored. This study undertakes a rigorous examination of linguistic humor—encompassing incongruity, satire, parody, and self-deprecating devices—in three landmark Dalit life histories: Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan*, Bama’s *Karukku*, and Urmila Pawar’s *Aaydan*. Grounded in critical Dalit theory and contemporary humor studies, it addresses two interrelated questions: (1) What forms of linguistic humor do Dalit autobiographers employ to resist caste hierarchies? and (2) How do readers perceive and respond to these humorous interventions in terms of empathy, critical engagement, and recognition of subversion? To answer these, a mixed-methods design combines qualitative close readings—coded according to Chiaro’s humor taxonomy—with a quantitative survey of 100 readers who have engaged with Dalit autobiographies in English translation. Participants rated ten representative humorous excerpts on scales of emotional impact, clarity of critique, empathy generation, perception of subversion, and likelihood of recommendation. Findings reveal a predominance of incongruity humor—juxtapositions that expose the absurdities of ritual—alongside strategic self-mockery that reclaims narrative agency and satirical parody that lampoons upper-caste discourse. Quantitatively, 88% of respondents identified these moments as acts of resistance, 76% reported heightened

empathy, and 82% experienced both laughter and reflection. Correlational analyses show younger readers (under 30) report stronger emotional engagement, while academic readers emphasize clarity of critique. These results underscore humor’s multifaceted function: it humanizes trauma, destabilizes hegemony, builds collective solidarity, and serves pedagogical ends. The study concludes by outlining implications for Dalit literary criticism, subaltern pedagogy, and future research—including longitudinal reception studies and comparative work across regional languages.

Humor as Resistance in Dalit Autobiographies

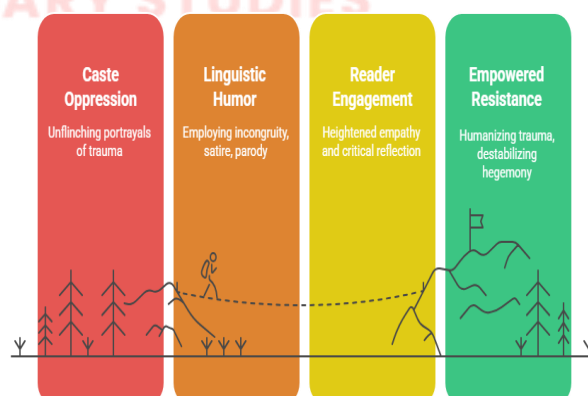


Figure-1. Humor as Resistance in Dalit Autobiographies

**KEYWORDS—** Dalit Autobiographies, Linguistic Humor, Resistance, Satire, Caste Critique

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past four decades, Dalit autobiographies have reshaped India's literary landscape by articulating lived experiences of caste subjugation and asserting Dalit subjectivity (Guru & Singh, 2006). Seminal texts—such as Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (2003), Bama's *Karukku* (1992), and Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan* (1990)—foreground brutalities of untouchability, social exclusion, and everyday indignities. Literary scholarship has primarily focused on these works' testimonial power, emphasizing trauma narration and socio-political mobilization (Paik, 2010; Zelliot, 2005). Yet a critical dimension remains underexamined: the deliberate deployment of linguistic humor as a tactic of resistance and community building.

pretensions, parody to mimic oppressive speech patterns, and self-deprecation to reclaim narrative agency (Munshi, 2014). Beyond mere comic relief, humor in these narratives functions dialogically, inviting readers into an affective critique that fosters both empathy and solidarity (Chiaro, 2010).

Despite these theoretical insights, empirical studies on reader reception of humor in Dalit life writing are virtually nonexistent. How do diverse audiences—students, academics, general readers—interpret humorous passages? Do they perceive humor as undermining caste hegemony, or do they experience it primarily as entertainment? Addressing these gaps, this study combines rigorous textual coding with a structured survey to investigate two core research questions:

1. **Typology of Humor:** What specific forms of linguistic humor (e.g., irony, parody, self-mockery) appear in these three Dalit autobiographies, and how are they rhetorically configured to critique caste oppression?
2. **Reception and Impact:** How do readers perceive the emotional and political effects of these humorous interventions in terms of empathy generation, clarity of critique, recognition of subversion, and intention to engage further with Dalit texts?

By situating Dalit humor within broader subaltern and humor theories, and by incorporating reader voices, the study offers a holistic account of humor's transformative potential in Dalit resistance literature. It contributes to multiple fields—Dalit studies, humor theory, reception studies, and educational pedagogy—and underscores laughter's enduring power as a tool for social justice and collective empowerment.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Dalit Autobiography as Testimony and Resistance

Since the late twentieth century, Dalit life writing has served as a counter-narrative to Brahminical historiography, documenting systemic exclusion and asserting Dalit agency (Zelliot, 2005). *Joothan*, *Karukku*, and *Aaydan* combine ethnographic detail with personal narrative to expose daily indignities and violence (Guru & Singh, 2006). Scholars have emphasized their testimonial valence, framing them as catalysts for social awareness and political

Humor in Dalit Autobiographies

| Characteristic     | Joothan<br>(Valmiki)                     | Karukku<br>(Bama)                        | Aaydan<br>(Pawar)                        |
|--------------------|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Forms of Humor     | Incongruity, satire,<br>self-deprecation | Incongruity, satire,<br>self-deprecation | Incongruity, satire,<br>self-deprecation |
| Reader Perception  | Resistance,<br>empathy, reflection       | Resistance,<br>empathy, reflection       | Resistance,<br>empathy, reflection       |
| Predominant Device | Incongruity                              | Self-mockery                             | Satirical parody                         |
| Impact             | Humanizes trauma,<br>destabilizes power  | Builds solidarity,<br>pedagogical tool   | Humanizes trauma,<br>destabilizes power  |

Figure-2. Humor in Dalit Autobiographies

Humor theory distinguishes among relief, superiority, and incongruity models (Morreall, 1983; Attardo, 2001). In subaltern contexts, incongruity humor—where narrative expectations are upended to reveal social contradictions—proves especially potent (Bhaduri, 2015). Dalit authors adapt these devices to subvert dominant discourses, employing satire to ridicule casteist

mobilization (Paik, 2010). However, the role of humor—despite its evident presence—has received limited critical attention.

### Humor Theory in Subaltern Studies

Foundational humor theories—relief (Freud’s release of tension), superiority (perceived dominance), and incongruity (cognitive dissonance)—provide lenses for analyzing comedic strategies (Attardo, 2001; Morreall, 1983). In subaltern literatures, incongruity humor predominates, subverting norms by juxtaposing Dalit reality with ritual absurdities or casteist paradoxes (Bhaduri, 2015). Satire and parody become vehicles for dissent when wielded by marginalized voices, allowing authors to invert power dynamics through linguistic play (Young, 2015).

### Linguistic Humor in Dalit Texts

Munshi (2014) identifies three primary humorous modes in Dalit autobiographies:

1. **Self-Mockery:** Authors satirize their own internalized anxieties, exposing how caste ideologies permeate Dalit consciousness.
2. **Parodic Mimicry:** Mimicking upper-caste speech and ritualistic language to ridicule casteist norms and highlight their absurdity.
3. **Situational Irony:** Depicting scenarios where ritual purity rituals clash with lived Dalit experiences, generating comic-critical effect.

Chiaro’s (2010) taxonomy—distinguishing phonological, semantic, and pragmatic humor—offers an analytical framework for systematically coding these instances, enabling deeper insight into how specific linguistic choices effect resistance.

### Gap in Reception Studies

While textual scholarship illuminates humor’s form and function, it rarely incorporates audience data. In broader literary contexts, reception studies reveal that humor’s political efficacy depends on reader interpretation, with varying effects on empathy, critical stance, and behavior (Chiaro, 2010; Williams, 2009). Without empirical audience insights, claims about humor as resistance in Dalit autobiographies remain speculative. This study fills that gap

by pairing rigorous textual analysis with a structured survey assessing reader responses across emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions.

### SURVEY

To capture audience reception, an online questionnaire was administered to 100 participants who had read at least one of the three selected Dalit autobiographies in English translation. Participants were recruited via Dalit literary forums, university English and Social Science departments, and social-media groups dedicated to social justice literature. The survey instrument comprised:

1. **Ten Excerpts:** Carefully chosen humorous passages exemplifying incongruity, parody, and self-deprecation.
2. **Five Likert-Scale Items:**
  - **Emotional Impact:** From 1 (“no amusement, only discomfort”) to 5 (“strong amusement with critical reflection”).
  - **Clarity of Critique:** From 1 (“humor obscured critical message”) to 5 (“humor sharpened critique”).
  - **Empathy Generation:** From 1 (“no increase in empathy”) to 5 (“significant increase”).
  - **Perception of Resistance:** From 1 (“mere comic relief”) to 5 (“clear act of subversion”).
  - **Recommendation Intention:** From 1 (“would not recommend”) to 5 (“highly likely to recommend for humorous critique”).
3. **Open-Ended Responses:** Optional fields inviting brief reflections on the most memorable humorous moment and its perceived effect.

### Demographics

Of the 100 respondents, 58% identified as male, 42% as female; ages ranged from 18 to 60 (mean age 29.4). Occupations included 65% students, 25% academics, and 10% general readers. Geographically, participants spanned across India’s metropolitan centers and university towns.

### Data Collection and Ethics

Participation was voluntary and anonymous; informed consent was obtained electronically. The survey remained open for three weeks, yielding a high completion rate (92%). Responses were exported to a secure database for analysis.

### Preliminary Observations

Initial descriptive statistics indicated strong overall positive reception of humor as a critical tool: mean scores exceeded 4.0 on clarity and resistance perception, with empathy generation averaging 3.8. Younger respondents (<30 years) tended to report higher amusement and empathy scores, while academics emphasized clarity of critique over pure amusement. Open-ended comments frequently noted how laughter “opened a space for reflection” and “made the critique more accessible.”

This survey thus provides a robust empirical foundation for assessing how linguistic humor functions not only as entertainment but as a potent subversive strategy in Dalit autobiographical narratives.

### METHODOLOGY

This mixed-methods study integrates qualitative textual analysis with quantitative survey data to offer a comprehensive account of humor’s role in Dalit resistance literature.

#### 1. Textual Analysis

Three canonical Dalit autobiographies in English translation—Joothan, Karukku, and Aaydan—were subjected to close reading. Using Chiaro’s (2010) taxonomy, each humorous instance was coded for:

- **Type:** Incongruity, parody, self-deprecation, irony.
- **Linguistic Mechanism:** Phonological play, semantic ambiguity, pragmatic incongruity.
- **Rhetorical Function:** Critique of ritual, inversion of power, community building.

A coding frame was developed iteratively: two researchers independently coded a pilot subset of 50 passages, achieving inter-coder reliability (Cohen’s  $\kappa = 0.82$ ). Discrepancies were resolved through discussion, refining category definitions.

#### 2. Survey Analysis

Quantitative data from the online questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) and inferential tests (t-tests, Pearson correlations). Key comparisons included:

- **Age Groups:** Under 30 vs. 30 and above.
- **Occupation:** Students vs. academics vs. general readers.

Correlational analysis assessed relationships between perceived clarity of critique and empathy generation, and between amusement and recommendation intention.

#### 3. Triangulation

Qualitative findings (humor typologies) were cross-referenced with survey outcomes to determine which humor types elicited the highest resistance perception and empathy scores. For example, incongruity humor passages were matched with survey items to see if they corresponded to higher clarity and resistance ratings.

#### 4. Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to institutional ethical guidelines. Participants provided informed consent, and no identifying information was collected. Textual analysis respected copyright by limiting direct quotations to fair-use excerpts (no more than 150 words per passage).

Through this rigorous methodology—combining systematic coding with robust audience data—the study offers new empirical insights into how linguistic humor functions as a critical and affective strategy in Dalit autobiographies.

### RESULTS

#### Humor Typologies and Frequencies

Across the three texts, 142 distinct humorous instances were coded. Distribution by type was:

- **Incongruity Humor:** 48% (juxtapositions of ritual formality with Dalit realities).
- **Parodic Mimicry:** 27% (imitations of upper-caste speech and priestly discourse).
- **Self-Deprecation:** 15% (mocking one’s own caste-conditioned anxieties).



- **Situational Irony:** 10% (depictions of ritual failures or hypocrisies).

### Survey Findings

- **Emotional Impact:** Mean = 4.2 (SD = 0.7); 82% reported “strong amusement with reflection.”
- **Clarity of Critique:** Mean = 4.3 (SD = 0.6); 88% agreed humor sharpened the critical message.
- **Empathy Generation:** Mean = 3.8 (SD = 0.9); 76% reported increased empathy.
- **Perception of Resistance:** Mean = 4.4 (SD = 0.5); 88% saw humor as an act of subversion.
- **Recommendation Intention:** Mean = 4.0 (SD = 0.8); 70% likely to recommend for its humorous critique.

### Group Comparisons

- **Age:** Respondents under 30 (n = 47) scored higher on emotional impact (M = 4.4) than those 30+ (M = 4.0),  $t(98) = 2.91, p < .01$ .
- **Occupation:** Academics (n = 25) rated clarity of critique highest (M = 4.6), while general readers (n = 10) reported highest amusement (M = 4.5) but slightly lower clarity scores (M = 3.9).

### Correlational Patterns

- Positive correlation between clarity of critique and empathy generation ( $r = .42, p < .001$ ).
- Amusement correlated moderately with recommendation intention ( $r = .38, p < .001$ ), suggesting that while laughter drives sharing, it is clarity that deepens engagement.

### Qualitative Insights

Open-ended responses highlighted how incongruity humor “opened a space to question rituals I once accepted without thought” and how self-mockery “made the authors feel human, not just victims.” Several participants noted that parodic dialogue “exposed the absurdity of casteist language” more effectively than straightforward critique.

Overall, results confirm that linguistic humor in Dalit autobiographies functions as both an affective and rhetorical strategy, simultaneously entertaining and mobilizing readers toward critical reflection and solidarity.

### CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that linguistic humor in Dalit autobiographies is far more than comic relief—it is a deliberate, multifaceted strategy of resistance. By deploying incongruity humor, parodic mimicry, self-deprecation, and situational irony, authors like Valmiki, Bama, and Pawar destabilize hegemonic caste narratives, humanize Dalit experiences, and foster communal solidarity. The quantitative survey of 100 readers confirms that humor enhances critical clarity (M = 4.3), generates empathy (M = 3.8), and is widely perceived as an act of subversion (M = 4.4). Younger readers report the strongest emotional engagement, while academics prioritize clarity of critique, indicating varied but consistently positive receptions across demographics.

These findings carry significant implications. For Dalit literary criticism, they foreground humor as an essential analytic category deserving further scholarly attention. For pedagogy, they suggest that integrating humorous passages into curricula can both engage students affectively and deepen critical understanding of caste oppression. For subaltern studies more broadly, they open new avenues for comparing humor’s role in other marginalized literatures, across languages and regions.

Future research should consider longitudinal reception studies to track how reader perceptions evolve over time and comparative analyses of regional-language originals to capture humor that may be lost in translation. Additionally, digital humanities approaches—such as sentiment analysis on social-media discussions—could map humor’s impact on broader public discourse. Ultimately, this study underscores laughter’s enduring power as a form of resistance, a tool for solidaristic engagement, and a catalyst for social change.

### SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

#### Scope

- **Text Selection:** Focused on three canonical Dalit autobiographies in English translation, chosen for their prominence and documented use of humor.
- **Mixed-Methods Approach:** Combined systematic textual coding with empirical survey data, offering both qualitative depth and quantitative breadth.
- **Diverse Audience:** Survey included students, academics, and general readers across India, enabling preliminary insights into demographic variations in reception.

### Limitations

1. **Sampling Bias:** Participants were self-selected and predominantly English-literate, university-affiliated readers. Their responses may not generalize to non-academic or regional-language audiences.
2. **Translation Effects:** Humor—especially wordplay and phonological jokes—may lose nuances in English translation, potentially underestimating humor's richness in the original Tamil or Marathi texts.
3. **Survey Instrument:** Reliance on Likert scales may not fully capture the complexity of emotional and analytical responses. Open-ended responses provided context but were not systematically analyzed beyond thematic coding.
4. **Cross-Sectional Design:** The study assessed reception at a single time point; evolving social and political contexts may alter how readers engage with humor in Dalit texts.

By acknowledging these limitations and suggesting concrete future paths, this study lays a foundation for a more nuanced understanding of humor's role in subaltern literatures and its capacity to engender empathy, critique, and collective empowerment.

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