

Trauma Without Event: Caste, Chronicity, and the Limits of the Western Trauma Paradigm in Bama's *Karukku* and Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants*

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Abstract

Literary trauma theory, as consolidated in the 1990s around the work of Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Geoffrey Hartman, rests on a specific model of injury: a discrete, overwhelming event that exceeds cognitive assimilation and returns belatedly as intrusive repetition. This paper argues that the model, however productive for Holocaust and post-war European literatures, is structurally unable to account for the injury narrated in Dalit life-writing. Reading Bama's *Karukku* (1992; trans. 2000) alongside Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* (2017), the paper contends that caste trauma is not an event but a condition — chronic, quotidian, inherited and socially sanctioned — and that the two texts consequently generate narrative forms that the event-based paradigm reads as failures. *Karukku*'s refusal of chronology and its withheld resolution are not symptoms of an unassimilated shock; they are the formal signature of an injury that has no before. *Ants Among Elephants*, conversely, distributes trauma across three generations and two political movements, producing a genealogical rather than a psychological account of suffering. Drawing on Stefan Craps's critique of the Eurocentrism of trauma studies, Michael Rothberg's multidirectional memory, and Maria Root's concept of insidious trauma, the paper proposes three revisions to the paradigm: the substitution of chronicity for belatedness, of collectivity for the wounded individual psyche, and of political redress for therapeutic working-through. The argument is offered not as a rejection of trauma theory but as an insistence that its categories be provincialised before they are applied to South Asian material.

Keywords: Dalit literature, trauma theory, *Karukku*, Sujatha Gidla, testimonio, insidious trauma, caste, life-writing

1. Introduction

Trauma studies entered literary criticism with a striking claim: that certain experiences are not experienced at all when they occur, and that literature is uniquely equipped to register this gap. Cathy Caruth's formulation — trauma as "unclaimed experience," an event known only through its belated return — gave the field its organising figure and its ethical prestige (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 4). Three decades on, that figure has been exported well beyond the historical archive in which it was formed. Postcolonial literary criticism in particular has absorbed the vocabulary of latency, repetition and unspeakability with remarkable ease.

The ease is the problem. Stefan Craps has argued that trauma theory, as practised, fails postcolonial texts on four counts: it marginalises non-Western traumatic events, it universalises Western definitions of trauma, it privileges modernist aesthetics of fragmentation as the only ethical mode of representation, and it prescribes an individualised, therapeutic model of recovery that leaves the structures producing the injury untouched (*Postcolonial Witnessing* 2–5). Each of these charges bears directly on Dalit writing, and the fourth bears on it with particular force.

This paper takes two texts that are conventionally grouped together as Dalit life-writing and reads them for what they do not do with trauma. Bama's *Karukku*, first published in Tamil in 1992 and translated by Lakshmi Holmström in 2000, is the autobiography of a Tamil Dalit Christian woman who spent seven years in a religious order before leaving it. Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India* (2017) is a family memoir written in English from the United States, centred on the author's uncle K. G. Satyamurthy — Maoist poet, co-founder of the People's War Group — and her mother Manjula. The two books differ in language, genre, generation and address. What they share is a subject whose injury has no originating moment.

My argument proceeds in four movements. Section 2 sets out the event-based paradigm and identifies the assumptions that make it inhospitable to caste. Section 3 reads *Karukku* as a text whose formal peculiarities — its abandoned chronology, its collective pronouns, its unresolved ending — are misread as trauma-symptoms when they are in fact strategies of testimony. Section 4 reads *Ants Among Elephants* as a genealogical counter-model in

which trauma is transmitted not through psychic haunting but through documented, material inheritance. Section 5 draws the three theoretical revisions that follow.

2. The Event-Based Paradigm and Its Blind Spots

The classical model has three load-bearing components. First, the *event*: a bounded occurrence of such magnitude that it cannot be processed at the moment of its happening. Second, *belatedness* — the temporal structure by which the event returns as flashback, nightmare or compulsive repetition, its meaning available only after the fact. Third, *unspeakability*: the claim that traumatic experience resists narrative representation, and that fragmented, non-linear, aporetic forms are therefore the aesthetically and ethically appropriate response.

Michelle Balaev has noted the circularity here: the theory identifies a class of texts as traumatic on formal grounds, then reads the form as evidence of the trauma it presupposed (149–52). But the more consequential difficulty for our purposes is anthropological. The model assumes a subject who possessed, prior to the event, an intact world — a stable epistemology, a functioning social contract, a self that the event then shattered. Judith Herman's account of the recovery process is explicit about this: the therapeutic task is the "restoration" of connections and meanings that violence has severed (*Trauma and Recovery* 133).

For the Dalit subject, there is no prior intactness to restore. Untouchability is not an interruption of the social order; it is the social order, functioning as designed. Ambedkar's insistence in *Annihilation of Caste* that caste is not merely a division of labour but a "division of labourers," hierarchically graded and religiously sanctioned, identifies precisely what the trauma paradigm cannot see: an injury that is normative rather than exceptional (Ambedkar 47).

Two concepts developed at the margins of trauma theory begin to close the gap. Maria Root's notion of *insidious trauma* describes the cumulative effect of the "daily, repetitive" experiences of subordination visited on people because of their identity — experiences that are individually sub-catastrophic and collectively devastating. Laura Brown's elaboration of Root's category makes the decisive point that such trauma lies "not outside the range" of ordinary human experience but squarely inside it, for those on whom it falls (Brown 100–02). Kai Erikson's parallel work on collective trauma shifts the site of injury from the individual psyche to the "tissues of community," describing damage to the social body itself (185–87).

Neither concept, however, has been genuinely integrated into literary trauma criticism, which continues to read for latency and rupture. What follows is an attempt to read instead for chronicity and continuity.

3. Karukku: Testimony Without Recovery

3.1 The Absent Origin

Karukku opens not with an incident but with a landscape: the geography of the narrator's village, its streets divided by caste, its water sources, its churches. This is not scene-setting deferred before the real narrative begins. It is the narrative of the injury, because the injury is spatial and structural before it is ever episodic.

The book's most-discussed passage — the young narrator watching an elder from her community carry a packet of snacks by its string, holding it away from his body so that his touch will not pollute the food destined for an upper-caste landlord — is instructive precisely because it is not a scene of violence. The child finds the sight comic. The trauma is not in the event; it is in the retrospective recognition, delivered by an older brother's explanation, that the comedy was a performance of one's own untouchability. What the narrator receives is not a shock but an *education*.

This inverts the Caruthian structure exactly. In the classical model, the event arrives too fast to be known and returns later as an unassimilated intrusion. In *Karukku*, the material conditions have been present continuously; what arrives belatedly is not the experience but its *interpretation*. Belatedness here is epistemic and political, not psychic. There is no repressed content struggling to surface. There is a child learning the name of the water she has always been swimming in.

3.2 Form as Argument

Critics have consistently remarked on the text's disregard for chronological autobiography. It moves by theme rather than by sequence — work, education, the church, faith — and its chapters loop back over the same terrain from different angles. Read through the event-based paradigm, this looks like the fragmentation symptomatic of unprocessed trauma.

It is more usefully read as the form appropriate to a condition without a plot. Chronological autobiography presumes a life with a shape: a before, a rupture, an after. Bama's structure declines that presumption because the material does not supply it. The repetition in *Karukku* is not compulsive; it is cumulative. Each return to the same ground adds another institution to the indictment — first the village, then the school, then the seminary, then the order itself.

Pramod K. Nayar's influential reading positions *Karukku* as *testimonio* rather than autobiography, and the generic reclassification does considerable work (Nayar 83–86). Following John Beverley, *testimonio* is defined by a narrator who speaks as a representative of a collective, whose account carries an urgency of political witness rather than a project of self-exploration, and whose truth-claim is social rather than confessional (Beverley 30–33). *Karukku*'s constant slide between "I" and "we" — a slide that would register as instability in a psychological autobiography — is in *testimonio* a structural feature. The narrator is not a wounded individual recovering a coherent self. She is a witness assembling a case.

3.3 The Withheld Ending

The most significant divergence from the trauma paradigm is the book's refusal of resolution. Bama leaves the convent; she does not arrive anywhere. There is no reintegration, no restored community, no achieved wholeness. The narrator is unemployed, isolated from both the religious institution she has left and, in part, from a village that cannot quite receive her back.

For Herman's therapeutic model this is failure — the third stage of recovery, reconnection, has not been reached. For Dominick LaCapra the distinction between "acting out" and "working through" would place the text in the former, still caught in the repetition it cannot master (LaCapra 21–22). But both readings measure the book against a norm of individual psychic settlement that it never accepts as its goal. *Karukku*'s ending is withheld because the conditions it documents have not changed. To narrate recovery would be to falsify the world. Sharankumar Limbale's insistence that Dalit literature is written with the "purpose" of transforming society, not of achieving aesthetic or personal closure, is relevant here: the incompleteness is a claim on the reader, not a symptom in the narrator (Limbale 19–21).

The point can be put more sharply. In the therapeutic paradigm, an unresolved narrative indicates a subject who has not yet healed. In *Karukku*, an unresolved narrative indicates a society that has not yet been reformed. Locating the incompleteness in the text's psychology rather than in its politics is precisely the depoliticising move that Craps warns against.

4. Ants Among Elephants: Genealogy Instead of Haunting

4.1 Trauma as Inheritance, Documented

Gidla's memoir begins from a position of enforced articulacy: the recognition that what was simply the texture of life in India becomes narratable only from outside it. Her frequently cited opening observation — that her family's stories were not stories in India, but merely life — states the central problem of caste trauma with unusual economy. Narratability requires distance; the ordinary does not announce itself as an injury to those living inside it.

What follows is not a psychological memoir. Gidla reconstructs three generations: her grandparents, displaced from forest land and converted by Canadian Baptist missionaries; her uncle Satyamurthy, poet and revolutionary, eventually expelled from the very party he helped found, on grounds his family understood as caste prejudice; her mother Manjula, whose education and career are narrated as a sequence of humiliations administered by colleagues, institutions and in-laws.

The transmission mechanism here is worth attention. In the dominant model of intergenerational trauma — Marianne Hirsch's postmemory, for instance — inheritance is affective and imaginative: the descendant inherits images and silences, not experiences. Gidla's inheritance is different in kind. It is land not owned, a name that marks its bearer, a village that will not sell you a house, a party that will not let you lead it. The transmission is material and institutional, and it is documented rather than haunted. Gidla conducts interviews. She reconstructs dates. Her method is closer to that of the historian than the analyst.

4.2 The Political Movement as Site of Injury

The memoir's most theoretically interesting material concerns Satyamurthy's expulsion. The Communist movement to which he gave his life is narrated — as the family understood it — not as a refuge from caste but as another arena in which it operates, the revolutionary organisation reproducing the hierarchy it claimed to abolish.

This is a scenario for which the trauma paradigm has no ready category. The injury is not inflicted by an identifiable perpetrator in a bounded encounter; it is administered through committee decisions, factional splits and the slow withdrawal of recognition over decades. Toral Jatin Gajarawala's argument that Dalit literary realism performs an epistemological critique — insisting on the referential and the documentary against the seductions of literary indirection — helps explain Gidla's method (Gajarawala 12–16). The book's plainness of style is a claim about evidence.

4.3 Gendered Chronicity

Manjula's narrative supplies the memoir's account of trauma at its most chronic. Her suffering is composed almost entirely of small administrative violences: transfers denied, lodgings refused, promotions withheld, remarks made. No single incident would qualify as traumatic under the classical definition. The aggregate is a life.

Gopal Guru's argument that Dalit women "talk differently," facing a double subordination that neither caste politics nor mainstream feminism fully addresses, is directly applicable (Guru 2548–49). What Manjula's story demonstrates formally is that the traumatic unit in this material is not the incident but the pattern, and that a criticism trained to look for the incident will find nothing.

5. Toward a Caste-Sensitive Trauma Poetics

Three revisions follow from the readings above.

From belatedness to chronicity. The temporal signature of caste trauma is not the return of a buried event but the continuous presence of a structuring condition. Where the classical model asks *what happened, and when did it come back?*, a caste-sensitive criticism must ask *what persists, and how is it renewed?* Root's insidious trauma and Erikson's collective trauma give the concept; literary criticism has yet to develop the reading protocols.

From the wounded psyche to the injured collective. Both texts locate injury in a community rather than in an individual interiority. The pronoun instability of *Karukku* and the genealogical structure of *Ants Among Elephants* are, on this reading, not stylistic accidents but epistemological positions. Rothberg's multidirectional memory offers a model of memory as public, comparative and negotiated rather than privately held, and is a more useful starting point than any therapeutic framework (Rothberg 3–5).

From therapeutic working-through to political redress. This is the decisive revision. The classical paradigm makes healing the horizon of the traumatic narrative and locates it in the survivor. Both texts refuse this horizon. Their unresolved endings assert that the injury cannot be closed at the level of the individual because it is not produced at the level of the individual. To read that refusal as a symptom is to perform exactly the depoliticisation the texts are written to resist.

A caveat is necessary. None of this argues that trauma theory should be abandoned for South Asian material, nor that Dalit writing is untouched by psychic injury in the ordinary clinical sense. The claim is narrower: that the paradigm's categories were derived from a particular archive, that they carry that archive's assumptions about the shape of a life and the meaning of recovery, and that applying them unmodified to caste produces systematic misreading — of *Karukku*'s form as symptom, of Gidla's plainness as artlessness, of both books' unresolved endings as failures of narrative rather than indictments of a society.

6. Conclusion

Karukku and *Ants Among Elephants* narrate an injury with no origin, no perpetrator locatable in a single encounter, and no available resolution. Read through the event-based trauma paradigm, both texts appear deficient: fragmented where they should be coherent, unresolved where they should heal, documentary where they should be haunted. Read on their own terms, the deficiencies become arguments. Bama's abandoned chronology is the form of a condition without a plot; Gidla's genealogical method is the form of an inheritance that is material rather than spectral.

The larger implication concerns the direction of theoretical traffic. Postcolonial literary studies has largely imported trauma theory and applied it. The texts examined here suggest the reverse movement is overdue: that Dalit life-writing, with its chronic temporalities and collective subjects, constitutes a body of evidence capable of revising the paradigm itself. Trauma theory has taught literary criticism to read for the wound. Caste requires it to learn to read for the scar tissue that never had a wound to begin with.

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