

From Silence to Assertion: Representation of Caste Reality in Dalit Literature

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Received: 17 Jul 2026; Received in revised form: 12 Aug 2026; Accepted: 16 Aug 2026; Available online: 20 Aug 2026

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Abstract— For centuries, Dalits have been carried an agony inside them, a pain born not out of fate, but out of a man-made system that chose to deny them their humanity. Their lives were not just limited; they were controlled—where they could walk, what they could touch, how they could live. They were made to feel that their very existence was impure. A child born into a Dalit family did not just inherit a name, but a lifetime of rejection, humiliation, and silent suffering. They were stopped at the doors of temples, turned away from schools, and forced into work that stripped them of dignity. Even their basic needs—water, food, respect—were often given with conditions or not given at all. The pain was not always loud; it lived in everyday moments—in the lowered eyes, the unheard voices, the spaces they were never allowed to enter. It was the agony of knowing that no matter how hard they tried, society had already decided their worth. And yet, what makes this journey even more poignant is that they continued to live, to endure, and to hope. Beneath years of injustice lies a quiet but unbreakable strength—a longing not just to survive, but to live with dignity, equality, and respect. Their journey reflects not only suffering, but also a deeply human desire to be seen, accepted, valued and treated as a human like anyone else. Dalit Literature has emerged as a significant body of Indian writing that explores the lives, struggles, and oppression of the Dalit community which they have been experienced for centuries. It goes beyond personal stories to portray the collective hurt and strength of the oppressed people under constant discrimination based on caste. The transition “from silence to assertion” reflects the historical journey of marginalized communities within dominant literary and cultural traditions. Rising as a literary expression of discrimination on the basis of caste, Dalit literature poignantly describes the suffering, poverty, and humiliation faced by the Dalits along with fighting for social justice and equality. It takes the forms of the poems, autobiographies, novels, and essays, broaching themes of freedom, revolt, and defiance of caste orders. It had its roots initially in Marathi but soon developed in other Indian languages such as Tamil, Telugu, Hindi, and Bengali. The authors like B. R. Ambedkar, Omprakash Valmiki, Bama, and Sharan Kumar Limbale, critically examined the narrative strategies that help to convert pain to political assertion and collective consciousness. This paper is an analysis of the agony of Dalits and the manner in which Dalit literature can be seen to express both the reality of caste discrimination and at the same time are coming out as a strong voice of opposition, identity, and social change.



Keywords— Dalit, caste, injustice, agony, societal injury, trauma.

In India the Caste System is a Hierarchical social structure, which is deeply inherent in Hinduism. It divides people into groups on the basis of birth and occupation, leading to social and economic inequalities. ‘Manusmriti’, a metrical

text on dharma topics such as duties, rights, laws and virtues of Hinduism, is regarded most important and authentic book on Hindu religion. This book separates caste system into four main categories: Brahmins who got

the first rank, believed to have created from Brahma's mouth (Brahma- is the creator of this universe), Kshatriyas who have been originated from Brahma's arms, ranked second, third place is of Vaishyas (traders) created from Brahma's thighs and the last one are Shudras, have created from the feet of Brahma so they are considered to do all degrading things or tasks. The caste system of India has been maintaining for centuries among the world's oldest existing forms of categorization. There were so many sub-castes in caste system. Dalits were considered acchuts and out of any rank or status. Indian castes have been governed on the basis of caste system for a long time. It was very disgusting experience for those who belonged to lower castes for infinite time, while this system facilitate many benefits for upper class.

Some early 11th and 12th century writers raised voice against caste hierarchies and Varna system. As Marathi Dalit Bhakti poets like Chokha Mela and Karmamela were also key figures in disrupting caste hierarchies. Chokha Mela of the Mahar caste wrote many *Abhangs*, among them the popular "*Abir Gulal Udhlit Rang*," which were translated into English later by Chandrakant Kaluram Mhatre. His son, Sant Karmamela, revolted against the Varna system in his works. In Odia literature, the Panchasakha poets—Balarama Dasa, Jagannatha Dasa, Achyutanda Dasa, Jasobanta Dasa, and Ananta Dasa—during 1450-1550 AD made way for the employment of colloquial Odia literature, breaking with Sanskrit-chauvinist traditions. Sudramuni Sarala Dasa, born a Sudra and a forefather of social protest movements during 15th-century Odisha, portrayed the lives of lower classes in his compositions like Odia Mahabharata, Bilanka Ramayana, and Chandi Purana. These works criticized the preeminence of Sanskrit literature and royalty-based themes. Telugu Dalit literature traces its origins to the 17th century with poets Potuluri Veerabrahmam and Yogi Vemana discussing such societal ills as caste injustice and untouchability in their works. This literary tradition is witness to a long-standing struggle against caste oppressions in regional languages.

The term "Dalit" originates from the word "Dal" or "Dalan" (a Sanskrit word). It was in the late 19th century that Jyotirao Phule, a leading social reformer of Maharashtra, coined the term "Dalit" in Marathi to refer to the outcastes and untouchables who were subjected to systemic oppression and marginalization within Hindu society. The Sanskrit word "Dalit" means "broken" or "scattered," which represents the condition of these groups. Phule employed this term to bring attention to their difficulties and fight for their rights within the strict caste hierarchy. As Dalits always have oppressed by upper class so this word "Dalan" is given to them. Dalits are the

people who fall outside (achhuta) from the Hindu caste system according to *Manusmriti*, they often referred to as untouchables and now they are trying to seek their identity and empowerment. Dalits were banished from fourfold Varna (caste) system which consists of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisya, Shudras and they were scrutinized as forming a fifth Varna (caste), that is famous as Panchama, or Parihars (Harijans). They have faced severe social injustice due to their position in caste hierarchy. After facing discrimination for centuries, finally movements, revolts are emerged against these caste based oppression and discrimination. Mahatma Gandhi introduced the term Harijan, which means children of God, to spot the prior Dalits. Dalits have been considered polluted, impure, and excluded from society from the very beginning of the world so they have always been suppressed, exploited, and oppressed. The word Dalit expresses the people who are exploited, discriminated, tortured and never got social justice as we see poetry of Bijay Kant Dubey, an Indian poet and writer, known for his unique style and thought provoking poetry. In his poem "What does Dalit Signifies", he says-

"Dalit, Dalit is a word signifying

What is it trodden, suppressed, oppressed

And exploited and tortured...."

B. R. Ambedkar began a movement in 1956 as Dalit Buddhist Movement for empowering Dalits in India. It was both a political and religious movement. Ambedkar reinterpreted Buddhism to create a new school of thought called Navayana, which broke with conventional Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana philosophies. The reinterpretation put Buddhism on the forefront of social and political reform, opposing Hinduism and dismantling the caste system that excluded Dalits. The movement gained strength when almost half a million Dalits, who had been treated as untouchables in the past, converted to Navayana Buddhism following Ambedkar. This collective conversion was a protest against caste oppression and a claim of Dalit rights. Ambedkar considered Buddhism to be a tool for the remaking of society on the basis of justice, equality, and freedom, with elements of social protest incorporated into its practice. Navayana Buddhism stresses the overthrow of caste hierarchy and dignity for subjugated communities. It has been a source of inspiration for Dalit Panthers and other such movements and remains a source of inspiration for contemporary Dalit activism. Authors such as Arjun Dangle have explained Dalit identity in terms of common experiences of struggle and survival, promoting a revolutionary perspective that addresses inequalities in society. It denounced Hinduism, critiqued the Indian caste system and advocated Dalit rights. The

movement also dismissed Mahayana, Theravada and Vajrayana traditions of Buddhism teaching; however, the movement maintains itself as an engaged Buddhism according to the teaching of Ambedkar. The movement was a reaction to the oppression and discrimination against Dalits (once referred to as “untouchables”) in the Hindu caste system. Dalits adopted Buddhism as a means of rejecting Hinduism and the caste system, in search of freedom and equality. The movement worked to advance the rights of the Dalit group and oppose social and political structures that maintained inequity. The movement caused a remarkable boost in the number of Buddhist communities all over India, especially in Maharashtra. It is regarded as a socio-political act of protest, representing a step towards freeing oneself from the omnipresence of caste. The movement remains to inspire and influence Dalit people in India, with numerous still referring to themselves as Ambedkarite Buddhists.

Contemporary Dalit literature, which started to develop in the late 1960s, is an expanding corpus of work that responds to caste domination and social injustice. It developed as a separate genre through the efforts of reformist intellectuals and writers like Jyotirao Phule, Sree Narayana Guru, B.R. Ambedkar, Iyothee Thass, Sahodaran Ayyappan, and others. Scholars such as Satyanarayana and Tharu contend that Dalit literature picked up pace following the Dalit Panther Movement, which carried on Ambedkar’s vision, challenged Gandhian nationalism, and initiated a new social movement focused on Dalit rights and empowerment. Dalit writing gradually developed into a national phenomenon, focusing on issues of caste and re-questioning the effects of colonialism and missionary work. Some of the leading figures in contemporary Dalit literature are Mahasweta Devi, Arjun Dangle, Sachi Rautray, Rabi Singh, Bama, and Mangal Rathod. They have contributed significantly to the genre by writing on resistance, identity, and social justice. Their literature continues to provide insights into the lived reality of marginalized communities and promotes equality and empowerment.

The term Dalit Literature first used in the first Dalit literature conference, (Dalit Sahitya Sammelan), which was held in 1958 organized by Annabhau Sathe. Annabhau Sathe, a poet, writer and social worker, born in Dalit community is often considered founder of Dalit literature. He has significant contribution in Samyukta Maharashtra Movement (a samiti advocated for creation of Marathi speaking state as result Maharashtra created) Resolution 5 of this conference states that *“the literature written by Dalits and by others about Dalits in Marathi be accepted as a separate entity known as Dalit literature.”* Firstly Dalit literature started in Marathi and then spread to other

languages like Gujrati, Punjabi, Hindi, Telugu, Kannada and Bengali. Mulk Raj Anand was the first to take apart through his novels like *Untouchable*, when Bakha aware of his status as an untouchable; “Posh keep away, posh, sweeper coming, posh, posh, sweeper coming, posh posh, sweeper coming”! B. R. Ambedkar played a role of prominent leader for the depressed classes, his writings and speeches influenced movements like Dalit Panther Movement, founded by Namdeo Dhasal. Arjun Dangle, a writer and leader of Dalit Panther Movement writes; *“Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows and struggles of those in the lowest strata of society. It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary.”* In recent years, new voices have emerged, broadening the scope and influence of Dalit literature such as “The Grip of Change”, work by P. Sivakami is known for its insights into Dalit life, and Vijila Chirrapad, kerala writer, exposes the unique challenges facing by Dalit females. The founder of Apna Theatre Dev Kumar has also used drama to promote Dalit consciousness.

Dalits or Dalit writers have faced caste discrimination from their childhood. They faced cruel behaviour and bad treatment of so called upper class people. Dalits have always been labourers, untouchables and discriminated on their caste, they never got equality in social rights. They have always been tolerated worse than animals. Om Prakash Valmiki says in his autobiography “Joothan: A Dalit’s Life” that *“Untouchability was so rampant that while it was considered all rights to touch dogs and cats or cows and buffaloes, if one happened to touch Churha, one got contaminated or polluted. The Churhas were not seen as human. They were simply things for use. The utility lasted until the work was done. Use them and then throw away.”* Dalit writers have experienced that they are only known by their caste names in upper castes and it is cause of humiliation. They have not only expressed this caste experiences in their autobiographies but also realized to the world that how a community of upper class treats other lower class community. Dalit literature is the portrait of identity crisis and self-assertion of Dalits. Dalit literature raise voice for identity of Dalits, it speaks that Dalit are not meaningless in this society they also have dignity and self-respect. There are many autobiographies, poetry, short stories, and novels have written to explore the reality that Dalits are trying to overcome the difficulties and they interpreted that they can claim their identity as the respectable human being. Dalit writers tolerated suppression, and inhuman treatments, but gave a strong voice to their sufferings to assert their identity. Dalit literature protested to cast out the subalternity. They

revolted against demonic caste system and atrocities, and they claimed that they cannot tolerate anything anymore, they have realized that what is their place in society. Dalit literature represents the strength for fighting spirit against all odds in society. Dr. Narendra Jadhav's works ("Amma Baap Aan Amhi", "Outcaste", "Untouchables") tell story of his struggle for dignity with his family and their journey out of caste. In his most famous work *Outcaste* he realistically portrayed the struggling journey of his family as well as whole community. It is a memoir in which Jadhav puts three generations of his family together, his grandfather, father and himself. He shares his fathers' experiences as Yeskar worker, who is assigned village duties of guarding dead bodies. Jadhav characterized his father as Damu who was witness of many atrocities, social boycott, and excluded life because of hegemony in hierarchical society. He criticizes Hindu tradition saying that, *"what kind of tradition is this that treats Mahars worse than cats and dogs? I spit on these inhuman traditions, I am not going to abide by such traditions. I am a man of dignity and I will not go from house to house begging for Baluta, what are all of you going to do? Kill me?"* (Jadhav 10). These words of Damu show a painful criticism against Hinduism. The Dalit had been deprived of the possibility of expressing themselves over centuries. Social norms, religious restrictions and education barriers repressed their voices. Their voices were not always expressed in mainstream literature, which did not portray them in a true way and was rather stereotypical and sympathetic. Such silence was not the mere chance, but an outcome of systematic marginalization. Dalit could not even go school and hence they could not write their stories and publish them. They were usually translated in the context of dominant caste writers even in cases when their experiences were taken into consideration. Dalit literature silences this by giving voice to the marginalized voices. It will turn literature into a place where oppressed groups of people are able to write their own history and make their own identity. Dalit writers do so through storytelling, poetry, and biographies, which react against the histories of misrepresentation of the narratives. This silencing was largely facilitated by the denial of education, since it denied Dalit the freedom to write, publish, and portray their views. This situation is eloquently exemplified in *"joothan"* by Omprakash Valmiki, who writes, *"school was a place where I was constantly reminded of my caste"*, which also underscores how caste was used as a depiction of dignity and a depiction of the self. This marginalization was not only limited to the exclusion of social life but also an exclusion of the epistemic life as their knowledge and voices were devalued and de-epistemized on a systematic basis. People of upper caste

can't tolerate the presence of Dalit, they often humiliate them because of their place in society, because of their poverty, and education on which they have no even single right. Not even the uneducated people do same but educated people even people who are fighting against such type of exploitation and discrimination, can't accept Dalit near to them. As Vijay Tendulkar shows in his work *"Kanyadan"* through his Arun Athwale who is Dalit exposes the hypocrisy of educated people who claim equality but feel uneasy in the actual presence of a Dalit person saying, *"you people ashamed of me... of my language, my habits, my very being."* Tendulkar further shows how Jyoti Devalikar's parents shows superficial modernity when they oppose her decision to marry a Dalit boy (Arun). She feels that their parents are educated but not free from caste thinking despite of believing in equality and liberalism, even they are working against caste exploitation. She confronts conflict between their ideals and their action, exposing educated families' bound by deep-rooted caste consciousness in these words, *"you taught me equality, Baba, but now when I live it, you cannot accept it."*

Aravind Malagatti, an Indian prominent poet and writer of Kannada language, in his autobiographical text *"Government Brahamana"*, addresses the challenge of the paradox of identity in a caste based society. Its name alone is ironical, in that it implies how state institutional forms (such as education and reservation) seek to raise Dalits, but caste consciousness remains what makes them who they are and cages them. Malagatti tells about his experience of education by narrating how he acquires access to the institutional spaces only to always stay socially marginalized. Through his experiences, it comes out that education does not necessarily wipe out the caste discrimination. It rather reveals the subtle and systemic forms of this discrimination. Irony and reflective narration are employed in the text as an attack on the hypocrisy of the society and constraints of institutional reform. His most famous quote or line, *"Caste follows you like your shadow"* reinforces that even when Dalits gain voice through education, structures of oppression persist, making assertion an ongoing struggle. Similarly a Telugu writer named G. Kalayan Rao, who himself a Dalit, also tries to challenge such type of marginalization of lower castes in his renowned work *"Untouchable Spring"*. This novel restores the Dalit history in the form of memory, folklore and group narrations. It changes the erasure (silence) of history by the reclamation (assertion) of the culture of Dalit life as rich, multifaceted, and resistant. *"Our bodies were buried, but they were never dead"*, this is a very strong symbolism of shift between erased histories into re-discovered voices. Thus it is both a historical text and

reminiscence that seek to bring to life the pain of several generations of a Dalit family in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana. It rewrites their history of art, literature, and of struggle for social justice and upliftment. Thus the novel reflects various types of Dalit struggles and their possibility of relative good. It also shows a person as a hero who is fighting against exploitation. But the forms of opposition pursued in the novel are antithetical to traditional types of revolution employed by the lower caste. It uses conversion to Christianity and boycotting Hinduism to liberate themselves of the label of untouchables.

Dalit rights movement has only talked about only Dalit men's sufferings, experiences and struggle while Dalit women also tolerated many challenges because of caste discrimination, lack of education, and poverty. The experience of Dalit women have been ignored in Dalit Literature written by men. Dalit women or feminist writings throw light on the problems of caste identity to Dalit feminist literature. Dalit women also suffer from violence at high rates, it include kinds of violence which are especially done for Dalit women. They were forced to prostitute as Devadasi or Jogini which are specifically reserved for Dalit women. They became the victims of violence like molestation, rape because they and their families were not aware of their rights. According to wiritnig of Kiran Kumar Boddu and Siva Nagaiah Bolleddu in English Studies International Research Journal, sexual violence is regular and routine issue of oppression against Dalit women. Indian women movements, which have been launched on a large scale by middle and upper-class women, have been criticized by Dalit women to ignore the problems that they uniquely faced. The caste issues faced by Dalit women have also ignored by Feminist academics. Dalit feminism challenges the idea of Indian feminism that all women have same problem as being the same. Dalit women have always endured dual oppression from caste and gender, which are not mutually exclusive but intertwined categories. Dalit women were actively involved in anti-caste and anti-untouchability movements in the 1920s. In the 1930s, they were engaged in the Non-Brahman movement, joining hands with efforts against social ills like child marriage and the system of dowry. Their activism persisted in the 1940s, with 25,000 Dalit women participating in the All India Depressed Classes Women Conference in Nagpur in 1942. The conference adopted important resolutions supporting women's rights to divorce, condemning polygamy, enhancing labor conditions, and encouraging education for lower-caste women. Dalit women also participated in social movements in the 1970s and early 1980s. The first Dalit women's national conference was

organized in Bangalore in 1987, which was a major step towards organizing their collective voice. In the 1990s, some organizations headed by Dalit women came into existence, including the National Federation of Dalit Women and the All India Dalit Women's Forum. These organizations sought to solve problems particular to Dalit women while building alliances with Dalit men and non-Dalit women to further their cause for equality and empowerment. Dalit women started to write their biographies and testimonies based on their lives and experiences of caste, class, and gender. Writers like Urmila Pawar, Babytai Kamble, Bama, Mukta Salve wrote about the complexities of caste, gender in society.

Bama, a Tamil Dalit feminist, highlights the intersection of caste and gender discrimination in her autobiography "*Karukku*", where she writes, "*I had to suppress all my pain anger and pain within me*", reflecting the internalized silence imposed by caste oppression. She is a teacher and novelist. She joined a nunnery but left because of bad conditions of Dalits. Her experiences of teaching found out that catholic nun oppressed the Dalit teachers and children. After that she began to write on Dalit experiences. Her works involves caste and gender discrimination in Christianity and Hinduism. She also shared her childhood experiences and wrote autobiographical novel "*Karukku*" in a dialect of Tamil.

Dalit literature often portrays the harsh realities of rural life where caste discrimination is deeply embedded in social and economic structures. Dalits are frequently denied access to education, clean water, temples and social spaces. These experiences are vividly depicted in Dalit narratives, making readers confront the uncomfortable realities of caste-based inequality. As Babytai Kamble was an Indian activist and writer, is universally acclaimed for her autobiographical novel *Jina Amucha* (The Prisons We Broke) published in Marathi, which is a strong description of caste domination, poverty, violence, and the triple discrimination experienced by Dalit women ("*We were treated worse than animals*"). Her work also condemns the violation of Dalit women by both upper castes ("*the upper castes kicked us and beat us as they pleased*") and Dalit men ("*even our men, drunk and broken, would vent their anger on us.*"), furnishing a distinctive discourse on gender and caste oppression. Kamble was an active part of the Dalit movement in Maharashtra and also a member of Mahila Mandal Phaltan. She made efforts toward social reform through writing articles and poems on Dalit issues and by managing a residential school for children belonging to vulnerable communities. Her memoir is one of the most powerful accounts of the lived lives of Dalit women, interweaving personal testimonies with critical understandings of India's socio-political history of

precolonial and postcolonial times. The rise of the Dalit literature signifies the culmination of this enforced silence to a strong assertion. Works like “*Karukku*” are such examples of this change as they give an unmediated narrative of caste oppression and experience. Equally in “*Sangati*”, Bama predicts the common plights of Dalit women noting that “*our women have to work like beasts of burden*” thereby revealing meeting point between caste and gender exploitation. Similarly, “*The Grip of Change*” by P. Sivakami (a dalit-feminist writer predominately writing in Tamil.) accentuates the importance of opposition and agency asserting that, “*freedom is not given; it has to be taken,*” that explains the transformation from passive suffering to active assertion. Nevertheless, the novel progressively reveals that resistance is muddled up by internal patriarchy. The character Kathamuthu, who claims that he is fighting against injustice ends up supporting the power hierarchies since it proves that assertion must address internal domination. P. Shivkami, one of the first Tamil Dalit authors who highlight the dual marginalization of Dalit women by both Dalits and upper caste men on this basis of their caste and gender. Sivakami explains how discrimination in society has curbed progress of Dalit women in their own community. They have to pay much because of the gender bias they are being exposed to in their daily lives. By emphasizing on the persistence and never-say-die attitude of the Dalit women, Sivakami has not only brought into the limelight the negative sides of the issue but also its positive sides.

Conclusion- Thus, Dalit literature is being used as an instrument of empowerment in this shift of silence to assertion. It interferes with hegemonic discourses, reinstatement of literature canons, and provides space to other voices. After all, it is not merely a literature but a movement that attempts to rebuild history, confront social hierarchies, as well as enshrine humanness in those who were long deprived of it. The authors like Bama, kamble, Valmiki, Sivakami and Aravind Malagatti illustrate the process of the shift between the forced silence to the active assertion. These authors reclaim their agency through autobiographical stories and socially engaged fiction and defy major literary traditions. Their texts are also documenting lived experiences of caste oppression, as well as situating literature as a place of resistance and identity formation, and epistemic justice. In this way, Dalit literature changes the role of literature itself, which has been an area of dominance of elite representation into a place where marginalized voices and lived experiences of existence are given a place. It also becomes a place of resistance where writers are not only writing about the oppression but also reclaiming identity, dignity and authority of the narrative. Therefore, Dalit literature

manages to dismantle the silence of history in which the discriminated groups have been kept and reorganize literature as a social and political statement.

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