



Dalit Identity and Resistance in Indian English Literature

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Abstract— *Dalit literature in English constitutes a formidable movement of courage and self-assertion. For generations, India's Dalit communities—historically designated as "untouchables"—endured systemic oppression under the caste hierarchy, their narratives either silenced or appropriated by dominant voices. This article analyzes how Dalit writers transform this reality through potent literary expression, converting personal trauma into collective resistance and reclaiming fundamental human dignity. The investigation specifically examines how authors, including Omprakash Valmiki, Bama Faustina, and Meena Kandasamy deploy literature to confront centuries of discrimination. Their work transcends mere documentation of suffering, innovating narrative forms that synthesize traditional folk idioms with contemporary literary techniques. The strategic adoption of English facilitates dual objectives: engaging educated Indian audiences often detached from caste-based realities, and forging transnational connections with global struggles for human rights. Furthermore, the article traces the literary movement's emergence from the ideological foundations laid by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who conceptualized education as an instrument against caste subjugation. Critical attention is given to intersectional dimensions, particularly Dalit women's compounded struggle against caste and gender oppression. The analysis also evaluates the literature's societal impact: its role in reshaping educational curricula, catalyzing national discourse on privilege, and empowering new generations.*



Keywords— *Dalit identity, resistance, caste, intersectionality, Ambedkarite thought, Indian English literature.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Dalit literature in Indian English has become a lively area for resistance, self-expression, and cultural rethinking. Born from centuries of silenced voices and ignored histories, Dalit authors are now challenging dominant narratives by sharing their real-life experiences. Grounded in historical injustices, Dalit literature not only tells personal stories of suffering but also turns that pain into a form of collective political strength (Kumar, 2011; Rao, 2009).

The rise of Dalit voices in Indian English literature aligns with broader social changes such as the democratization of education (Omvedt, 1994), the growth of publishing platforms (Anand, 2007), and the increased influence of subaltern and postcolonial studies (Guha, 1982; Spivak, 1988). The English language, once a tool for the elite, now

serves as a means of empowerment for marginalized communities (Tharu & Satyanarayana, 2013). Dalit writers use English to share their experiences, reaching a wider audience both in India and abroad. As these voices grow, Dalit literature serves as a vital counter-narrative to dominant Brahmanical and upper-caste representations (Rege, 2006).

Additionally, Indian English Dalit literature redefines artistic boundaries by departing from traditional, polished literary styles. It embraces raw storytelling, fragmented structures, and local language to reflect authentic Dalit experiences (Limbale, 2004; Mukherjee, 2012). The literature acts as both a personal and political tool, shedding light on the historical oppression and current strength of Dalit communities.

II. HISTORICAL ROOTS AND AMBEDKARITE FOUNDATIONS

Dalit literature has strong ties to the sociopolitical ideas of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who promoted education, social justice, and political awareness as routes to freedom. Ambedkar's call for the end of caste (Ambedkar, 1936) motivated many Dalits to express their resistance through activism and writing. A strong literary culture centered on Dalit identity emerged directly from the foundation laid by early 20th-century anti-caste movements in Maharashtra (Zelliot, 2005; Keer, 1990).

The Dalit Panthers movement in the 1970s drew direct inspiration from the African-American civil rights movement, combining community activism with literary creation (Omvedt, 1994; Dangle, 1992). Writers like Namdeo Dhasal and Raja Dhale used poetry and prose to protest against dominant caste narratives and to advocate for dignity and equality (Teltumbde, 2010). The deliberate translation of Dalit works from their regional origins in Marathi, Tamil, and Telugu into English, particularly accelerating in the 1990s, served as a key strategy. As Tharu and Lalita (1993) observed, this move was instrumental in making these vital narratives accessible to a significantly wider audience.

This period also coincided with the growth of India's education system and the introduction of reservation policies (Guru, 2009; Thorat & Newman, 2010), which enabled a new generation of Dalits to pursue higher education. English, the language of academia and global conversation, became a medium for Dalit writers to share their stories beyond local contexts. It evolved from a symbol of colonial privilege to a tool for freedom and collective action (Yadav, 2011).

III. CRAFTING DALIT SUBJECTIVITY

The formation of Dalit identity through literature is based on first-person accounts that highlight personal experience and emotional truth. Autobiographies like Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (2003) and Sharan Kumar Limbale's *The Outcaste* (2003) offer significant insights into the daily humiliation encountered by Dalits. These texts serve not only as personal reflections but also as representations of shared memory and common trauma (Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2011).

Dalit identity is complex and intersects with variations in region, religion, gender, and economic status (Rege, 2006). For example, Bama's *Karukku* (2000) tells the story of being a Dalit Christian woman in Tamil Nadu, revealing how religious conversion didn't ensure social freedom

(Hardtmann, 2009). Instead, she shows that caste bias continues even within Christian institutions.

Language plays an important role in shaping identity. Dalit writers often break standard English rules to include regional dialects, folk phrases, and untranslated terms (Anand, 2007; Limbale, 2004). This blend of languages challenges literary norms and asserts the importance of subaltern speech patterns, pushing against the dominance of upper-caste language (Spivak, 1988; Guha, 1997).

IV. CASTE AND REPRESENTATION: BREAKING THE SILENCE

A key role of Dalit literature is its refusal to stay silent about caste-based violence and exclusion. Traditionally, mainstream Indian English literature has either romanticized rural life or focused on the concerns of the elite, often neglecting deep-seated caste structures (Nayar, 2008; Mehrotra, 2003). Dalit literature changes that by making caste visible—without apologies, without hesitation, and with urgency. The works of Valmiki (*Joothan*, 2003), Bama (*Karukku*, 2000), and Limbale (*The Outcaste*, 2003) highlight caste oppression as a central experience, not a minor detail.

Representation in Dalit writing is about regaining narrative power. Instead of allowing others to speak for them, Dalits tell their own stories, using their experiences to critique oppressive systems (Rege, 2006; Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2011). This active self-representation counters dominant caste narratives that have historically portrayed Dalits as objects of pity, charity, or crime. For instance, in *Karukku*, Bama's autobiographical voice dismantles sanitized views of caste-blind Christianity, exposing exclusion even within religious communities (Hardtmann, 2009).

Dalit authors craft counter-narratives that celebrate community strength and cultural richness. Oral traditions, songs, festivals, and rituals are woven into the literary landscape, challenging historical accounts that often erase subaltern histories (Chakravarty, 2008; Teltumbde, 2010). In this way, literature acts as both evidence and archive, reclaiming histories overlooked by Brahmanical accounts.

V. RESISTANCE AS AESTHETIC AND POLITICAL PRACTICE

Resistance in Dalit literature works on two connected levels: artistic subversion and political challenge. Thematically, Dalit writing critiques caste, patriarchy, capitalism, and government indifference. Formally, it moves away from the refined styles of traditional literature, embracing raw, emotional, and often disjointed storytelling (Limbale, 2004; Kumar, 2011). This conscious rejection of

polished narratives is not a flaw but a political statement—it resists conforming to the aesthetic standards set by the dominant.

Meena Kandasamy's poetry, for example, channels anger, satire, and irony in works like *Touch* (2006) and *Ms. Militancy* (2010), using language that is intense and confrontational. Similarly, the anthology *Poisoned Bread* (Dangle, 1992) became a significant work for its diversity of voices and its challenge to traditional aesthetics. Such texts demonstrate that the artistic format of Dalit literature cannot be separated from its political purpose.

Dalit literature also builds solidarity across caste boundaries by exposing the moral necessity of resistance. These writings develop a political awareness that connects personal anguish with broader critique. As Teltumbde (2010) points out, Dalit literature does not seek approval from elite literary authorities; it demands justice and recognition.

VI. DALIT WOMEN'S VOICES: INTERSECTIONALITY IN FOCUS

The contributions of Dalit women writers significantly expand the scope of both Dalit and feminist discussions. They express a dual marginalization—by caste and by gender—that neither dominant feminism nor mainstream Dalit politics fully addresses (Rege, 2006; Guru, 1995). Writers like Baby Kamble (*The Prisons We Broke*, 2008), Urmila Pawar (*The Weave of My Life*, 2008), and Bama (Sangati, 2005) offer insights that critique patriarchy within Dalit communities and exclusion in feminist circles.

Gopal Guru (2009) introduced the idea of "dalitization of feminism," arguing that without addressing caste, Indian feminism remains incomplete. Dalit women's literature fills this gap by highlighting everyday acts of resistance—like household work, community support, and education—as forms of political action. Their stories break the stereotype of Dalit women as silent victims, portraying them instead as active agents of change.

These voices also challenge literary canons that have prioritized male experiences and urban perspectives. They assert that domestic and bodily experiences hold literary value. The trauma of manual labor, sexual violence, and societal humiliation is revealed—not for shock but as a plea for recognition and justice (Pawar, 2008; Kamble, 2008).

VII. LANGUAGE, TRANSLATION, AND ACCESSIBILITY

The shift to English in Dalit literature raises important questions about authenticity, audience, and access. For

many Dalit writers, English is not their first language but a chosen vehicle for protest and self-assertion. As Satyanarayana and Tharu (2011) note, English allows them to bypass regional caste hierarchies and reach national and global audiences. However, this choice also brings up concerns about cultural translation and the potential loss of emotion or meaning.

Translations from regional languages into English—like *The Prisons We Broke* (Kamble, 2008) or *Karukku* (Bama, 2000)—are essential for broadening readership. Translators like Lakshmi Holmström and Arun Mukherjee highlight the need to preserve cultural nuances while making texts understandable to outsiders. Holmström (2001) emphasizes that maintaining code-switching and untranslated phrases is crucial for retaining cultural identity.

Moreover, many Dalit writers challenge standard English by blending in Indian expressions, interjections, and oral traditions. This mix of languages asserts linguistic resistance and underscores how Dalit voices are rooted in local knowledge systems. These techniques push back against colonial language standards and upper-caste literary dominance (Anand, 2007; Yadav, 2011).

VIII. DALIT AESTHETICS: REDEFINING LITERARY STANDARDS

Dalit aesthetics challenge established norms by questioning what constitutes "literature." Mainstream Indian English writing often values distance, subtlety, and irony—qualities that might not resonate with those writing from direct experiences of trauma. In contrast, Dalit writing emphasizes honesty, intensity, and lived experience (Limbale, 2004). This does not undermine artistic value but seeks to redefine it. As Limbale argues, Dalit literature should be judged by its ability to drive social change.

Dalit aesthetics embrace forms typically dismissed as non-literary: oral stories, songs, folk tales, and oral histories. These forms challenge Western literary traditions and affirm the worth of alternative knowledge systems (Tharu & Satyanarayana, 2013). Thus, Dalit literature becomes a space for both critique and creativity.

Writers like Yashica Dutt, Meena Kandasamy, and Kalyani Thakur Charal incorporate experimental prose, performance, and poetry that extend beyond the written page to include performance, digital activism, and art. This trend of disruption, discomfort, and defiance marks a new wave of Dalit creativity (Kandasamy, 2010; Dutt, 2019).

IX. PUBLISHING POLITICS AND ACADEMIC RECEPTION

Despite the rising visibility of Dalit literature in academic and publishing circles, access to publishing remains a significant hurdle. Mainstream publishing houses often hesitate to back Dalit voices unless their work conforms to stories of suffering and social realism, which limits the diversity and innovation within Dalit writing (Anand, 2007; Rege, 2006). The aesthetic preferences and market demands of upper-caste editors can blur or water down the political impact of these writings (Tharu & Satyanarayana, 2013).

Interest in Dalit literature has increased since the late 1990s, supported by the growth of postcolonial and subaltern studies (Guha, 1982; Spivak, 1988). However, scholars like Satyanarayana and Tharu (2011) warn that while academic inclusion can provide legitimacy, it also poses the risk of co-opting these narratives. When Dalit texts are primarily examined through Western frameworks or abstract theories, their political relevance may be overlooked (Guru, 2009).

Independent Dalit-run publishers like Navayana and magazines like Dalit Voice have been vital for asserting editorial control and enabling self-representation. These platforms create space for experimental, radical, and community-centered literary work (Paik, 2014). Meanwhile, the inclusion of Dalit texts in national syllabi—such as Joothan, *The Weave of My Life*, and *Karukku*—marks a shift toward greater institutional acknowledgment, though it must stay alert to the threat of tokenism.

X. COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES: GLOBAL PARALLELS

The themes and styles of Dalit literature strongly connect with other global literatures of resistance, especially African-American, Indigenous, and post-Apartheid South African writing. These connections show how structural oppression, whether through caste, race, or colonialism, leads to shared experiences of marginalization, identity formation, and cultural resistance (Young, 2000; hooks, 1992).

For example, the autobiographical methods in Dalit texts resemble African-American slave narratives, which mix personal stories with political critique. Frederick Douglass's narrative (1845) and Valmiki's *Joothan* (2003) serve as both historical documents and emotional calls for justice. Similarly, Meena Kandasamy's poetry shares similarities with Audre Lorde and Maya Angelou, particularly regarding its feminist viewpoint (Kandasamy, 2010; Lorde, 1984).

Global platforms like PEN International and the Dalit Panthers' connection with the Black Panthers show clear solidarity across regions. Scholars like Gopal Guru and Anupama Rao argue for transnational frameworks that

consider caste as not just an Indian issue but as part of a larger global inequality (Rao, 2009; Guru, 2009).

Moreover, contemporary Dalit writers like Yashica Dutt and Sujatha Gidla (author of *Ants Among Elephants*, 2017) increasingly take part in cross-cultural literary discussions, reflecting on caste in both diasporic and urban settings. These comparative studies help place Dalit literature in the wider context of global human rights and social justice literature.

XI. RECEPTION AND CRITIQUE

Dalit literature has sparked a range of responses—from admiration for its bravery to discomfort due to its honesty. Many critics praise its political impact and emotional truth. Others, however, question its literary value or claim it relies too much on personal suffering (Nayar, 2008; Kumar, 2011). These critiques often come from dominant literary standards that prefer abstraction over immediacy and detachment over engagement.

Dalit writers have pushed back by saying that their work's worth lies not in fitting elite preferences but in revealing lived experiences. As Sharan Kumar Limbale (2004) points out, Dalit literature should be judged by its ability to awaken conscience and spark change. Meena Kandasamy particularly addresses criticism of her poetry by stressing the urgency of anger as a literary tool (Kandasamy, 2010).

Including Dalit literature in literary festivals and academic programs has increased its visibility, but it has also raised concerns about tokenism and commodification. Authors like Yashica Dutt caution against the allure of Dalit suffering for elite audiences, instead calling for ongoing engagement and structural change (Dutt, 2019).

XII. EDUCATIONAL INCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPACT

Incorporating Dalit literature in education is a crucial step to breaking down caste-based ignorance. When students read texts like *Karukku*, *Joothan*, or *The Outcaste*, they encounter the emotional, historical, and political sides of caste that traditional textbooks often overlook (Rege, 2006; Tharu & Satyanarayana, 2013).

However, teaching these texts requires thoughtful methods. Educators should place these works in the context of caste's historical realities and help students navigate any discomfort they may cause. Scholars like Uma Chakravarti (2003) and Anupama Rao (2009) highlight the need for feminist and anti-caste teaching approaches that empower students to examine their own privileges.

Institutions should also broaden their syllabi beyond a few Dalit authors to ensure representation from various regions, languages, and gender identities. Establishing student-led reading groups, seminars, and translations can deepen involvement. This approach can turn educational spaces into platforms for consuming Dalit literature while also engaging in its transformative politics.

XIII. CONCLUSION

The exploration of Dalit identity and resistance in Indian English literature marks a significant change in India's cultural and intellectual landscape. Dalit literature has transformed from a marginal genre into a powerful means of self-representation, cultural affirmation, and social change. These stories do not just recount trauma; they redefine dignity, reshape history, and envision the future.

Throughout its evolution, Dalit literature has shown a strong commitment to truth, challenging centuries of caste-based erasure and exclusion. Its use of English, the bold integration of personal elements, and defiance of traditional norms contribute to a new literary form rooted in resistance and strength. Dalit writers, especially women, have enriched this discourse by introducing frameworks that reveal the connections between caste, gender, and class oppression.

Facing systemic marginalization, Dalit authors have created a literary space that demands recognition and justice. They have rewritten literary norms by prioritizing lived experiences over abstractions, directness over embellishments, and protest over silence. Growing academic interest, expanding readership, and increasing global discussions confirm that Dalit literature is not just relevant—it is essential. It serves as a reminder that literature should reflect the full spectrum of human experiences and act as a tool for empathy, resistance, and change.

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