



NIRWAN UNIVERSITY JAIPUR

“Breaking the Chains of Caste: Literary Articulations of Dalit Resistance and Selfhood”

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Abstract

This paper examines the transformative role of Dalit literature in articulating resistance against caste-based oppression and constructing a collective Dalit selfhood rooted in Ambedkarite ideology. Tracing the evolution of Dalit literary praxis from the foundational writings of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar to contemporary literary productions across India, the study explores how literature functions as a site of epistemological decolonization, political assertion, and identity reclamation. Through an analysis of key Dalit literary texts across multiple Indian languages, this paper argues that Dalit literature represents not merely a genre of protest but a comprehensive philosophy of liberation that challenges dominant Brahminical narratives and centers subjugated knowledges. The paper concludes by examining the continuing relevance of Ambedkarite literary praxis in contemporary struggles for social justice.

Keywords

Dalit literature, B.R. Ambedkar, caste, resistance, selfhood, subaltern studies, Ambedkarite praxis, literary articulation, Dalit feminism, autobiographical narrative

1. Introduction

The emergence of Dalit literature in twentieth-century India represents one of the most significant literary and political movements in postcolonial South Asia. Born from the lived experiences of caste oppression and nurtured by the emancipatory vision of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956), Dalit literature has evolved into a powerful instrument of resistance, self-articulation, and social transformation. Unlike dominant literary traditions that have historically marginalized or erased Dalit voices, Dalit literature centers the experiences, perspectives, and aspirations of communities historically designated as "untouchable" within the Hindu caste hierarchy.

The title of this paper—"Breaking the Chains of Caste"—invokes both the material reality of caste-based oppression and the liberatory potential of literary expression. The metaphor of chains is particularly apt, for caste operates as a system of bondage that constrains not only physical mobility and social opportunity but also imagination, self-perception, and narrative authority. Dalit literature, informed by Ambedkarite philosophy, seeks to break these chains through acts of naming, witnessing, and reimagining identity beyond the dehumanizing categories imposed by Brahminical ideology.

This paper examines how Dalit writers have employed literary forms—autobiography, poetry, fiction, and criticism—to articulate resistance against caste oppression and construct affirmative visions of Dalit selfhood. The analysis proceeds through several interconnected sections: first, an exploration of Ambedkar's philosophical and literary contributions as the foundational praxis of Dalit literature; second, an examination of key themes and formal innovations in Dalit literary production; third, a discussion of the politics of language and translation in Dalit literary circulation; fourth, an engagement with Dalit feminist interventions in the broader Dalit literary movement; and finally, a consideration of contemporary trajectories and challenges facing Dalit literary praxis.

2. Ambedkarite Foundations: Philosophy, Literature, and Praxis

2.1 Ambedkar as Literary and Political Architect

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's contributions extend far beyond his well-documented roles as architect of the Indian Constitution, scholar, and political leader. Ambedkar was also a profound literary figure whose writings established the epistemological and ethical foundations of Dalit literary praxis. His extensive body of work—including *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), *Who Were the Shudras?* (1946), *The Untouchables* (1948), and *Buddha and His Dhamma* (1957)—combines rigorous historical scholarship with powerful rhetorical strategies that anticipate key features of subsequent Dalit literature.

Ambedkar's literary significance lies not only in the content of his arguments but in his revolutionary deployment of narrative authority. Writing as a Dalit intellectual during an era when Dalit voices were systematically excluded from public discourse, Ambedkar claimed the right to interpret Indian history, challenge Hindu scriptures, and articulate an alternative vision of social organization. His famous declaration—"I had been a slave to the Hindu religion, and now I am free"—encapsulates the journey from subjugation to self-assertion that would become a central motif in Dalit literature.

2.2 Key Ambedkarite Principles in Literary Formation

Several principles derived from Ambedkar's thought have shaped Dalit literary praxis:

The Primacy of Experience: Ambedkar insisted that authentic knowledge about caste oppression emerges from lived experience rather than abstract theorization. This principle legitimizes autobiographical and testimonial modes as valid forms of knowledge production, establishing the epistemological foundation for Dalit life writing.

Historical Revisionism: Ambedkar's historical works challenged dominant narratives about caste origins and Dalit identity, arguing that Dalits were originally Buddhist communities marginalized through Brahminical hegemony. This revisionist approach encourages Dalit writers to reclaim and reinterpret historical memory.

Conversion as Liberation: Ambedkar's embrace of Buddhism in 1956, accompanied by hundreds of thousands of followers, represented a radical act of self-redefinition. The motif of religious and ideological conversion recurs throughout Dalit literature as a symbol of agency and transformation.

Education as Emancipation: Ambedkar's famous exhortation—"Educate, Agitate, Organize"—emphasizes the role of intellectual development in liberation struggles. Dalit literature reflects this commitment through its didactic dimensions and its attention to educational access.

3. Themes and Forms in Dalit Literature

3.1 The Autobiographical Imperative

Autobiography has emerged as the preeminent genre of Dalit literary expression, constituting what scholar Arun Mukherjee calls "testimonies of oppression and resistance." Dalit autobiographies differ significantly from conventional life writing in their emphasis on collective rather than individual identity and their explicit

political purpose. The Dalit autobiographical subject does not write as a unique individual but as a representative of community experience.

Several autobiographical works have achieved canonical status within Dalit literature:

- **Bama's *Karukku*** (2000, originally in Tamil): This groundbreaking autobiography narrates Bama's journey from village childhood through convent education to religious life and eventual departure from the convent. The text's innovative narrative structure and linguistic experimentation—incorporating Dalit Tamil dialect—established new possibilities for Dalit women's writing.
- **Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*** (2003, originally in Hindi): Valmiki's autobiography provides unflinching depictions of caste-based humiliation in rural Uttar Pradesh, documenting both the brutality of oppression and the transformative potential of education. The title refers to leftover food scraps that Dalits were forced to accept, symbolizing the degradation inherent in caste hierarchy.
- **Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkar Mashí* (The Outcaste)** (2003, originally in Marathi): Limbale's narrative explores the intersection of caste and illegitimacy, examining the complex position of a child born to a Dalit mother and upper-caste father. The text interrogates hierarchies within Dalit communities while maintaining focus on broader structures of oppression.

3.2 The Aesthetics of Pain and Resistance

Dalit literature has developed distinctive aesthetic strategies for representing experiences of violence, humiliation, and resistance. Unlike mainstream literary traditions that often aestheticize suffering or universalize pain, Dalit writing insists on the specific, historically grounded nature of caste-based trauma. This approach involves what literary critic G.N. Devy terms "the activation of the personal voice against the authoritative voice of tradition."

Key aesthetic features include:

Unflinching Realism: Dalit texts frequently employ graphic depictions of violence and degradation, refusing to sanitize the realities of caste oppression. This representational strategy serves testimonial and evidentiary functions, documenting experiences often denied or minimized in dominant discourse.

Linguistic Subversion: Many Dalit writers incorporate dialect, folk speech, and non-standard linguistic forms associated with Dalit communities. This practice challenges the Sanskritized, Brahminical norms of literary language and affirms the legitimacy of Dalit linguistic traditions.

Collective Voice: While autobiographical in form, Dalit texts often employ collective pronouns and communal perspectives, positioning individual narrative as representative of broader community experience.

Humor and Irony: Despite their engagement with painful material, Dalit texts frequently deploy humor, satire, and irony as modes of resistance. Laughter functions as a weapon against oppression, denying oppressors the satisfaction of complete control over the oppressed psyche.

3.3 Poetry as Political Weapon

Dalit poetry, particularly in Marathi, Tamil, and Kannada, has played a crucial role in the broader Dalit literary movement. Poets such as Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar, and Meena Kandasamy have employed poetic form to express rage, articulate resistance, and imagine liberation. Dalit poetry often features:

- Direct address to oppressors and potential allies
- Reclamation of stigmatized identities and practices
- Imagery drawn from Dalit labor, bodies, and lived environments
- Rhythmic and sonic elements drawn from Dalit musical and oral traditions

Namdeo Dhasal's *Golpitha* (1972), written in the register of Mumbai's underworld and red-light district, revolutionized Marathi poetry through its visceral language and radical politics. The collection established

poetry as a vehicle for expressing the experiences of urban Dalit communities navigating poverty, criminalization, and exploitation.

4. The Politics of Language and Translation

4.1 Linguistic Decolonization

Language occupies a central position in Dalit literary politics, as caste hierarchy has historically been maintained and naturalized through linguistic means. Sanskrit, the classical language of Brahminical tradition, was for centuries restricted to upper-caste men, while Dalits were denied literacy and forced to communicate through devalued vernaculars. Dalit literature challenges this linguistic hierarchy through multiple strategies.

Many Dalit writers consciously employ what Bama calls "the language of the Dalit people," incorporating dialect, folk expressions, and non-standard forms. This practice involves not merely linguistic preference but political commitment to validating Dalit cultural production and challenging Brahminical control over literary language.

4.2 Translation as Mediation and Continuation

The translation of Dalit texts into English and other Indian languages has played a crucial role in building pan-Indian and international awareness of Dalit literature. However, translation also raises complex questions about audience, accessibility, and representation. Translators such as Mini Krishnan, Arun Prabha Mukherjee, and Joseph Koyippally have navigated these challenges through various strategies, including extensive annotation, preservation of culturally specific terms, and collaborative translation processes involving original authors.

The circulation of Dalit literature through translation has facilitated solidarity among Dalit communities across linguistic and regional boundaries while also exposing these texts to upper-caste and international audiences. This expanded circulation creates both opportunities and risks: while broader awareness may generate support for Dalit struggles, it also enables appropriation and commodification of Dalit experience.

5. Dalit Feminist Interventions

5.1 Intersectionality of Caste and Gender

Dalit women occupy a uniquely marginalized position within Indian society, facing oppression based on both caste and gender. Dalit feminist writers and critics have developed distinctive analyses that challenge both Brahminical patriarchy and the male-dominated Dalit movement. This work anticipates and contributes to broader theoretical developments in intersectionality and critical race feminism.

Key interventions include:

Critique of Dalit Patriarchy: Dalit feminist writers have documented and challenged patriarchal structures within Dalit communities, arguing that the struggle against caste oppression must incorporate attention to gender-based violence and inequality. Works such as Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan* (Weave of My Life) explore the particular challenges faced by Dalit women navigating both external oppression and internal patriarchal dynamics.

Recovery of Dalit Women's History: Scholars such as Sharmila Rege and Gail Omvedt have worked to recover the historical contributions of Dalit women to social movements, challenging dominant narratives that center male leaders and upper-caste women's experiences.

Literary Innovation: Dalit women writers have developed distinctive literary forms and voices, often incorporating domestic spaces, family relationships, and bodily experiences into narratives of resistance and self-formation.

5.2 Key Dalit Feminist Texts

In addition to Bama's *Karukku*, several texts have been central to Dalit feminist literary production:

- **Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon's *Amhihi Itihas Ghadavila* (We Also Made History)** (1989): This pathbreaking work recovers the contributions of Dalit women to the Ambedkarite movement, compiling interviews and documents that challenge the male-centered narrative of Dalit political history.
- **Baby Kamble's *The Prison We Broke*** (2008, originally in Marathi): Kamble's autobiography provides detailed depictions of Dalit women's lives in rural Maharashtra, examining both the constraints of patriarchal tradition and the possibilities for resistance.
- **Meena Kandasamy's Poetry**: Kandasamy's collections, including *Touch* (2006) and *Ms. Militancy* (2010), employ experimental poetic forms to explore intersections of caste, gender, and sexuality.

6. Contemporary Trajectories and Challenges

6.1 Institutionalization and Its Discontents

Dalit literature has achieved significant institutional recognition over recent decades, with Dalit texts entering university curricula, receiving literary awards, and attracting scholarly attention. This institutionalization brings both benefits and risks. Recognition may legitimate Dalit voices and provide platforms for emerging writers, but it may also domesticate radical content and commodify Dalit experience for upper-caste consumption.

The emergence of Dalit studies as an academic field, with dedicated journals, conferences, and degree programs, represents a significant achievement. However, scholars have raised concerns about the dominance of upper-caste academics in shaping Dalit studies and the potential displacement of Dalit scholars from discourse about their own communities.

6.2 New Media and Digital Dalit Literature

The proliferation of digital media has created new platforms for Dalit literary expression and political organizing. Dalit writers and activists have employed social media, blogs, and online publications to circumvent mainstream media gatekeepers and reach audiences directly. Digital platforms have facilitated transnational Dalit solidarity and enabled rapid response to incidents of caste-based violence.

However, digital spaces also present challenges, including harassment, surveillance, and the proliferation of misinformation. Dalit digital activists have developed strategies for navigating these risks while leveraging the democratizing potential of new media.

6.3 Continuing Questions

Despite the achievements of Dalit literature, significant questions and challenges remain:

- How can Dalit literature maintain its radical edge while achieving mainstream recognition?
- How should Dalit writers navigate the tensions between local specificity and broader political solidarity?
- What role should non-Dalit allies play in circulating and supporting Dalit literature?
- How can Dalit literary praxis engage with other movements for social justice, including those addressing class, religious, and regional oppression?
- How should Dalit literature respond to contemporary political developments, including the rise of Hindu nationalism and ongoing attacks on Dalit rights?

7. Conclusion

Dalit literature represents one of the most significant developments in Indian literary history and a crucial contribution to global traditions of resistance literature. Born from centuries of oppression and nurtured by Ambedkarite philosophy, Dalit literary praxis has developed distinctive forms, themes, and strategies for articulating resistance and constructing affirmative selfhood. Through autobiography, poetry, fiction, and criticism, Dalit writers have broken silences imposed by caste hierarchy, challenged dominant narratives about Indian society, and imagined possibilities for liberation.

The journey from subjugation to self-assertion that structures so many Dalit texts mirrors the broader trajectory of Dalit communities navigating contemporary India. As this paper has demonstrated, this journey involves not merely the acquisition of political rights or material resources but the fundamental reclamation of narrative authority—the right to speak, to be heard, and to define one's own identity. In breaking the chains of caste through literary articulation, Dalit writers have not only transformed Indian literature but have contributed to ongoing global struggles for human dignity and social justice.

The continuing vitality of Dalit literature depends on its ability to maintain connections to lived experience, grassroots movements, and Ambedkarite principles while engaging creatively with changing social conditions. As new generations of Dalit writers emerge, they inherit both the achievements of their predecessors and the responsibility to continue the unfinished work of liberation. Literature alone cannot dismantle caste hierarchy, but as a mode of consciousness-raising, community-building, and imaginative projection, it remains an indispensable component of broader struggles for equality and justice.

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