

Assertion of Dalit Identity in Indian Writing in English

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Abstract

Dalit literature in Indian English has emerged as a significant mode of self-expression, resistance, and cultural assertion against centuries of caste oppression. Rooted in the ideological vision of B. R. Ambedkar, this literary tradition transforms personal suffering into collective political awareness. Through autobiographies, novels, poetry, and testimonial narratives—either translated from regional languages or originally written in English—Dalit writers challenge dominant Brahmanical discourses, reclaim marginalized histories, and foreground issues of caste, gender, and class. This article examines major authors and texts in greater depth to explore how English functions as a medium for amplifying Dalit voices at national and global levels while simultaneously reshaping literary aesthetics and critical standards.

Keywords: Dalit identity, caste resistance, Ambedkarite thought, Indian English literature, intersectionality, Dalit aesthetics.

1. Introduction

The caste system in India has historically pushed Dalits (formerly referred to as “untouchables”) to the fringes of society, denying them dignity, education, economic mobility, and equal social participation. For generations, their voices were either excluded from mainstream literary traditions or filtered through upper-caste perspectives that frequently romanticized, distorted, or silenced the realities of caste oppression. Dalit writing emerged as a transformative response to this exclusion by foregrounding lived experiences of humiliation, systemic violence, survival, and collective resistance.

Dalit literature initially developed with remarkable force in regional languages, especially Marathi during the rise of the Dalit Panther movement in the 1970s, which combined radical political activism with literary expression. From the late twentieth century onward, translations and original works in English significantly expanded its reach within Indian Writing in English. English became an important medium through which Dalit writers could transcend regional and caste boundaries while engaging with global conversations on human rights, subaltern studies, and intersectionality. More than a body of testimonial writing, Dalit literature in English represents a profound political and aesthetic challenge to the upper-caste dominance of the Indian English literary canon.

Historical Roots and the influence of Dr.B.R.Ambedkar

Dalit literary assertion is inseparable from anti-caste social reform movements. Jyotirao Phule laid early groundwork through his critiques of Brahmanical dominance, but it was Dr. B.R. Ambedkar who

provided the enduring ideological foundation. Ambedkar's calls for education ("Educate, Agitate, Organize"), annihilation of caste, and strategic conversion (to Buddhism in 1956) emphasize dignity and structural transformation. His *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) remains a sacred text for Dalit writers, critiquing Hindu scriptures and advocating radical social change.

The 1970s Dalit Panther movement in Maharashtra, modeled partly on the Black Panther Party, blended street-level activism with literature. Poets like Namdeo Dhasal used visceral, militant verse in collections such as *Golpitha* to depict urban Dalit poverty, sexual exploitation, and police brutality. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a boom in autobiographical writing, coinciding with expanded educational reservations, political democratization, and growing subaltern consciousness. Anthologies like *Poisoned Bread* (edited by Arjun Dangle, 1992) played a pivotal role in translating Marathi Dalit writing into English, making these voices accessible to wider audiences.

Crafting Dalit Subjectivity: Autobiography as Resistance

Autobiography dominates early Dalit literature because it privileges authentic, first-person testimony over fictional detachment common in elite traditions. These narratives meticulously document systemic discrimination, manual scavenging, segregated living, physical violence, and the psychological toll of untouchability, while charting journeys toward self-respect and collective assertion.

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* (1997, English trans. 2003) stands as a cornerstone text. The title refers to leftover food scraps that Dalits were forced to consume, symbolizing profound humiliation and poverty. Valmiki recounts childhood in rural Uttar Pradesh where his family faced ostracism, menial labor, and constant degradation. A pivotal scene describes him guarding drying *joothan* from animals while upper-caste children played freely. The memoir critiques Gandhian paternalism ("Harijan" upliftment) and highlights Ambedkar's emancipatory influence. Valmiki's arc—from illiterate poverty to educated writer and critic—embodies individual awakening and broader Dalit consciousness. Education emerges as both a site of humiliation (discriminatory teachers and peers) and liberation.

Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi*, translated into English as *The Outcaste* (1986; trans. 2003), is one of the most influential autobiographical works in Dalit literature. In this powerful narrative, Sharankumar Limbale examines the deeply fragmented identity of a child born to a Dalit mother and an upper-caste landlord father. The title itself, *Akkarmashi*, meaning "illegitimate" or "half-caste," symbolizes the protagonist's painful existence outside accepted social categories. Neither fully accepted by the upper-caste world nor entirely secure within the Dalit community, the narrator grows up in a condition of intense psychological and social alienation.

The autobiography vividly portrays the cruel realities of caste discrimination, poverty, hunger, and humiliation that shaped the everyday lives of Dalits in rural Maharashtra. Limbale's childhood is marked by deprivation so severe that food itself becomes a recurring symbol of oppression and survival. The narrator witnesses his mother's exploitation by upper-caste men and experiences constant insults from society, which denies him dignity and belonging. His uncertain parentage intensifies his identity crisis, as he is repeatedly reminded that he does not fit into any stable social category. Through this personal struggle, Limbale exposes the hypocrisy of the caste system, particularly the exploitation of Dalit

women by dominant-caste landlords who refuse to acknowledge responsibility for the children born from such relationships.

At a deeper level, the text explores the psychological trauma produced by caste hierarchies. The protagonist internalizes shame, confusion, and anger, yet gradually transforms these experiences into social awareness and political consciousness. Education and collective resistance become important means of empowerment. As the narrative progresses, the author begins to recognize solidarity with the larger Dalit community as a source of identity and strength. Rather than remaining trapped in personal despair, he embraces Ambedkarite ideals of equality, dignity, and self-respect.

Akkarmashi is not merely the story of one individual's suffering; it is a collective history of Dalit oppression and resilience. By articulating experiences long silenced in Indian society, Limbale transforms autobiographical writing into an act of resistance. The text stands today as a landmark contribution to Indian Writing in English and Dalit literature, foregrounding themes of identity, dignity, resistance, and the struggle for social justice.

Bama's *Karukku* (1992, English trans. 2000) offers a semi-autobiographical account of a Dalit Christian Paraiyar woman in Tamil Nadu. It exposes caste discrimination persisting within the Catholic Church—separate cemeteries, menial jobs for Dalit converts, and upper-caste dominance in religious institutions. The title *Karukku* (serrated palmyra leaf) metaphorically represents dual-edged pain and resistance. Bama's fragmented, oral-inflected style mirrors community storytelling. Her journey from convent aspirations (seeking escape through religion and education) to activist awakening underscores self-assertion and communal solidarity.

Additional key works include **Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*** (weaving personal, familial, and political narratives of Mahar women in Maharashtra) and **Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke***. These texts collectively recover “histories from below” and assert Dalit subjectivity against erasure.

Dalit Women's Voices and Intersectionality

Dalit women's writing occupies a crucial space within Indian literature because it reveals the complex and layered nature of oppression experienced by women located at the intersection of caste, gender, and class. Unlike upper-caste feminist narratives, which often focus primarily on patriarchy and gender discrimination, Dalit feminist discourse argues that caste cannot be separated from the experiences of womanhood in India. Dalit women therefore experience what scholars frequently describe as “triple marginalization”: they are oppressed not only as women in a patriarchal society, but also as Dalits within a caste-based social hierarchy and as members of economically disadvantaged communities. Their voices have historically been silenced both within mainstream feminism dominated by savarna (upper-caste) women and within male-centered Dalit movements that often prioritize caste over gender concerns.

Dalit women writers challenge this invisibility by bringing their lived realities into literature. Their writings “dalitize” feminism by insisting that caste is central to understanding women's oppression in India. In doing so, they expose the limitations of mainstream feminist movements that frequently ignore caste privilege and the specific violence faced by Dalit women. At the same time, these writers critique

patriarchy within Dalit communities themselves, thereby refusing to romanticize Dalit male leadership or present Dalit society as free from gender inequalities.

Bama is one of the most influential voices in this context. In works such as *Karukku* and *Sangati*, she portrays the harsh realities of Dalit women's lives in rural Tamil Nadu. Her narratives depict women burdened with exhausting domestic labor, agricultural work, and social humiliation while also facing sexual exploitation from upper-caste men and patriarchal control within their own families. Bama vividly illustrates how Dalit women are expected to shoulder both productive and reproductive labor without recognition or dignity. Yet her writing is not merely a chronicle of suffering. She highlights the resilience, humor, solidarity, and resistance of Dalit women, particularly through oral storytelling traditions, communal support, and education. Her female characters emerge as strong survivors who challenge oppressive norms through everyday acts of defiance.

Similarly, Urmila Pawar, in *The Weave of My Life*, presents a deeply nuanced account of Dalit womanhood shaped by Ambedkarite ideology and social activism. Pawar interweaves personal memories with the broader history of Dalit political movements, showing how women actively contributed to struggles for equality and social transformation. Her memoir emphasizes that Dalit women are not passive victims awaiting rescue; rather, they are organizers, wage earners, mothers, activists, and custodians of cultural memory. Pawar also highlights the transformative role of education in enabling Dalit women to challenge inherited systems of oppression. Through her portrayal of economic hardship, widowhood, domestic responsibilities, and political participation, she reveals the multiple burdens carried by Dalit women while celebrating their agency and determination.

An important contribution of Dalit women's writing lies in its critique of savarna feminism. Mainstream Indian feminism has often been criticized for focusing on issues such as domestic confinement, marriage, and sexuality from predominantly upper-caste, middle-class perspectives while neglecting caste violence, manual labor, poverty, and untouchability. Dalit feminists argue that gender oppression cannot be universally understood without accounting for caste hierarchies. For instance, while upper-caste women may struggle against restrictions within the household, Dalit women frequently face public humiliation, caste-based sexual violence, and exploitative labor conditions outside the home as well. Thus, Dalit feminist writings call for a more inclusive and intersectional feminist politics that recognizes differences in women's experiences.

Furthermore, these narratives expose intra-Dalit patriarchy by showing how Dalit women often experience domination from men within their own communities. This dual critique distinguishes Dalit feminism from both mainstream feminism and male-centric Dalit discourse. Writers like Meena Kandasamy extend this critique through poetry and political essays that fiercely confront caste violence, misogyny, and institutional discrimination. Their works insist that liberation movements must address both caste oppression and gender inequality simultaneously.

Dalit women's literature therefore expands the scope of Indian feminism by foregrounding intersectionality long before the term gained widespread academic currency in India. These writings challenge literary, social, and political structures that marginalize Dalit women's experiences. By transforming personal pain into collective resistance, Dalit women writers create a powerful discourse of

self-representation, dignity, and empowerment. Their contributions not only redefine feminist thought in India but also enrich global discussions on identity, oppression, and social justice.

Poetry and Militant Assertion: Meena Kandasamy

Meena Kandasamy is a leading voice composing directly in English. Her collections *Touch* (2006) and *Ms. Militancy* (2010) deploy raw anger, irony, satire, eroticism, and mythic re-tellings to confront untouchability, Brahminical hegemony, patriarchy, and nationalist erasures.

For Kandasamy, writing—especially in English—is itself rebellion for a Dalit woman. She views language as a site of subjugation and subversion. Poems address the politics of “touch,” bodily autonomy, sexuality, temple violence, and feminist militancy. Her work situates Dalit struggles within global anti-oppression movements while critiquing how caste persists in “modern” India. The personal and political intertwine powerfully, making her poetry a tool of identity repair and political dissent.

Dalit Aesthetics and the Politics of Language

Dalit literature rejects elite aesthetic norms—polished realism, emotional restraint, and “art for art’s sake”—in favor of raw immediacy, anger, oral rhythms, and social commitment. In *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (English trans. 2004), Sharankumar Limbale argues that Dalit writing must be judged by Ambedkarite consciousness, lived experience, and revolutionary potential rather than Sanskrit *rasa* theory or Western formalism. Beauty, for Limbale, arises from truth-telling and the pursuit of justice, not detached pleasure.

Writers hybridize English with regional idioms, slang, curses, and untranslated terms to resist cultural homogenization. Translation involves complex negotiations between authenticity and accessibility. This process “dalitizes” Indian English literature, expanding its range and challenging its historical upper-caste character.

2. Societal Impact and Continuing Challenges

Dalit literature has transformed curricula, public discourse, publishing (e.g., Navayana Press), and activism. It fosters empathy, demands policy reforms (e.g., against manual scavenging or atrocities), and inspires new generations. Works like *Bhimayana* (graphic narrative) demonstrate formal innovation.

Challenges remain: limited mainstream publishing and visibility, accusations of didacticism or “lack of sophistication,” tensions between English-literate intellectuals and grassroots communities, and persistent caste violence. Despite these, the field continues expanding with new voices, forms, and global dialogues.

3. Conclusion

The assertion of Dalit identity in Indian Writing in English represents one of the most transformative developments in modern Indian literature. For centuries, Dalit communities were systematically denied not only social equality and economic opportunities but also the right to narrate their own experiences. Their voices remained suppressed within a rigid caste hierarchy that privileged upper-caste perspectives in literature, history, and culture. Dalit writing disrupts this historical silence by reclaiming language, memory, and representation as instruments of resistance and liberation. It marks a decisive movement from invisibility and marginalization to self-articulation and cultural assertion.

Unlike earlier literary depictions of Dalits by sympathetic upper-caste writers, Dalit literature speaks from within lived experience. It rejects patronizing representations and instead foregrounds authentic testimonies of humiliation, suffering, struggle, and resilience. In this sense, Dalit writing is not merely a literary trend but a socio-political intervention aimed at dismantling caste-based oppression and reclaiming human dignity. The emergence of Dalit voices in English further amplifies this intervention by carrying local experiences into national and global intellectual spaces.

Writers like Omprakash Valmiki, Bama, Sharankumar Limbale, Urmila Pawar, and Meena Kandasamy transform personal trauma into collective political consciousness. Their works are rooted in everyday realities—untouchability, hunger, humiliation, forced labor, exclusion from education, sexual violence, and social segregation. Yet these narratives are not confined to victimhood. Instead, they convert pain into protest, memory into resistance, and literature into activism.

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* exposes the degrading practices of untouchability through vivid autobiographical detail, while simultaneously asserting the transformative power of education and Ambedkarite awakening. Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi* explores fractured identity and social exclusion, articulating the psychological violence of caste society. Bama, in *Karukku* and *Sangati*, foregrounds the experiences of Dalit Christian women, revealing how caste persists even within religious institutions that preach equality. Urmila Pawar expands Dalit discourse by documenting women's participation in social movements and emphasizing the intersection of caste and gender oppression. Meanwhile, Meena Kandasamy employs sharp irony, militant language, and feminist assertion to confront Brahminical patriarchy and caste violence in contemporary India.

A defining feature of Dalit literature is its deep engagement with the philosophy of B. R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar's ideals of equality, education, social justice, and the annihilation of caste provide the ideological foundation for much of Dalit writing. Literature becomes an extension of Ambedkar's socio-political movement, functioning as both documentation and resistance. Dalit writers repeatedly emphasize education as a means of liberation and self-respect, echoing Ambedkar's famous call to "Educate, Agitate, Organize." Their works therefore move beyond recording oppression to envisioning emancipation and collective transformation.

Dalit writing in English also challenges conventional notions of literary aesthetics. Traditional literary criticism often valued refinement, detachment, and formal elegance, but Dalit literature prioritizes authenticity, urgency, emotional intensity, and social commitment. The rawness and directness of Dalit narratives become deliberate aesthetic choices that reject elite literary standards shaped largely by upper-caste sensibilities. As Sharankumar Limbale argues in *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, literature must be evaluated not only by artistic form but also by its ethical and social significance.

Moreover, Dalit literature compels a rethinking of Indian identity and democracy itself. India often celebrates itself as a democratic and pluralistic nation, yet Dalit narratives reveal the persistence of caste violence, exclusion, and structural inequality beneath this democratic framework. By exposing these contradictions, Dalit writers question nationalist narratives that ignore caste realities. Their works insist that true democracy cannot exist without social equality and dignity for all citizens.

The growing presence of Dalit voices in Indian Writing in English has also broadened the scope of literary discourse by incorporating regional experiences, oral traditions, and marginalized histories into mainstream academia and publishing. Translations from Marathi, Tamil, Hindi, Kannada, and other languages have made Dalit experiences accessible to global audiences, situating Dalit struggles alongside other international movements against racism, colonialism, and social exclusion. This global visibility has strengthened comparative studies involving African American literature, postcolonial theory, subaltern studies, and intersectional feminism.

Importantly, Dalit literature is no longer confined to autobiographical testimony alone. Contemporary Dalit writers are experimenting with fiction, poetry, drama, criticism, digital media, and graphic narratives, thereby expanding both form and thematic range. Younger generations of writers continue to diversify Dalit discourse by engaging with urbanization, migration, queer identities, environmental justice, and globalization while remaining rooted in anti-caste politics.

Thus, the assertion of Dalit identity in Indian Writing in English signifies far more than the emergence of a marginalized literary category. It represents a profound cultural, political, and epistemological shift that redefines the meaning of literature itself. Dalit writing transforms literature into a space of resistance, memory, and social change. By reclaiming the right to speak, narrate, and imagine, Dalit writers challenge centuries of exclusion and compel Indian society to confront uncomfortable truths about caste, power, and humanity. Their works ultimately envision a future founded on equality, dignity, justice, and the annihilation of caste.

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