

A Critical Evaluation of the Counter-Culture Narrative in Dalit Autobiographies and Literature of Resistance in Indian Context

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Abstract

Dalit literature is one of the most prominent counter-discourses about caste in modern Indian literature. It highlights the suppressed experience and seeks to undermine the credibility of caste hierarchy and the historical legitimacy of any particular caste to hold its superior position over the others. One of the most prominent genres of Dalit literature is autobiography, which is a highly personal narrative of the oppressed Dalit who was humiliated on a daily basis. The objective of this paper is to assess the themes and tools of resistance used in the counter-culture narrative of selected Dalit autobiographies and poetry. This paper aims to examine the accounts of caste oppression in *Annihilation of Caste* by B. R. Ambedkar, *Baluta* by Daya Pawar, *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble, *The Outcaste* by Sharan Kumar Limbale, *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki, and *Karukku* by Bama, as well as more recent forms of Dalit resistance poetry. The analysis will be conducted using the theoretical framework of cultural hegemony, counter-culture, subaltern, testimony, and Dalit aesthetics. It will be argued that Dalit literature and especially autobiography represent a true counter-culture discourse. Firstly, because Dalit writers transform the individual “I” into a collective “we”. Secondly, because they turn the humiliating Dalit experiences into testimony and a call for action. Additionally, the paper will explore why Dalit literature should not be viewed through the lens of one concept only despite being one of the most remarkable cultural practices of the oppressed caste members who seek to re-establish their place in society.

Keywords: Dalit Literature , Counter-Culture, Dalit Autobiography, Resistance, Caste, Ambedkarite Thought, Testimony, Dalit Aesthetics, Cultural Hegemony, Counter-Narrative

1. INTRODUCTION

Indian literature has a long history of depicting social injustice, but the advent of the so-called Dalit writing is distinctly different in one essential aspect: its reflection of social reality and the political and

cultural counter-identity that it represents. The genre of Dalit writing gives voice to voices that have been suppressed for centuries. The very fact of including their experiences in the literary tradition disrupts the system in which literature was created and understood until recently. The topics of caste oppression, untouchability, exclusion, and societal violence are now brought into the center of attention, as well as the experiences of people who were previously forced to work for others, humiliated, and degraded. This literature also gives its creators the opportunity to become authors for the first time.

The word “Dalit,” which refers to oppressed people, has become a symbol of protest in modern Indian society. “Dalit” means “crushed” or “broken,” but it has been given new life and now embodies the ideal of protest. One of the reasons for this is the anti-caste movement and its leader B. R. Ambedkar, who drew attention to the problem of caste inequalities through his statements and writings. His speeches highlighted the importance of education, self-development, self-awareness, equality, freedom, and friendship.

Modern Dalit literature began in Maharashtra in the twentieth century and then spread to northern India, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, and Bangladesh. It was the Dalit Panthers movement of the 1970s that gave Dalit literature a new wave of development. Thus, this type of writing has turned from a literary genre depicting the hardships of the oppressed into a real protest.

Autobiographical writing is a significant genre within Dalit literature. The novels *Baluta* by Daya Pawar, *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki, *The Outcaste* by Sharan Kumar Limbale, *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble, and *Karukku* by Bama are remarkable examples of this genre. First of all, this is due to the fact that the authors of these works had very limited opportunities to tell their stories any other way. Autobiographical works of this kind are the voice of the marginalized, who for a long time were unable to communicate their experiences, suffering, and feelings to the broader world. Secondly, the autobiographical genre is also significant for the fact that the self is inseparable from the community in these writings. While talking about their lives and struggles, the authors describe themselves as part of a more significant whole, namely, the Dalit community.

I suggest using the concept of counter-culture narrative to better understand this topic. Narratives that seek to undermine a dominant culture by questioning its assumptions and articulating an alternative conception of culture are understood by counter-culture narrative. In other words, a counter-culture narrative contains cultural material that competes and takes precedence over conventional cultural codes. It is this feature that makes Dalit literature a real protest. While the writers of the past depicted the lives of heroes who were previously considered “higher” caste, members of the oppressed groups drew attention to themselves and their problems. Therefore, counter-culture narrative is an attempt to interpret culture through the lens of the dominated, not the dominating group.

2. OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The objectives of this study are to explore how Dalit autobiographies and resistance literature present themselves as counter-cultural discourse and practice. The thesis attempts to assess how Dalit literature engages in its counter-cultural mission, particularly in terms of unmasking caste domination and articulating new understandings of social and cultural values.

The paper will address the following research questions:

1. In what ways is Dalit autobiography a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse of Indian literature and society?
2. How is the autobiographical self converted into the collective self?
3. How do Dalit writers depict caste through such markers as the body, labor, food, education, and language?

4. How do female Dalit writers intervene in the discourse of caste?
5. What innovations does Dalit literature introduce into poetic and prose discourse?
6. Do you think Dalit literature represents a monolithic tradition, or is it better to speak of several distinct trends?

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The thesis will adopt a qualitative approach to the research since the objectives of the study require close reading analysis. The method of textual research will be combined with reading criticism and cultural studies literature. The texts under investigation will be Daya Pawar's *Baluta*, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, Sharan Kumar Limbale's *The Outcaste*, Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, and Bama's *Karukku*. In addition, M. G. Smith's *Reading Dalit Literature* and B. R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* will be used as resources for research. Gramsci's notion of hegemony, Raymond Williams's understanding of the dominant culture, subaltern studies, testimonial literature, and the concept of Dalit aesthetics will inform the analysis, which aims to investigate how Dalit literature engages in the discourse of hegemony.

4. DALIT LITERATURE AND CULTURAL HEGEMONY

Gramsci's concept of hegemony is particularly relevant for the study of Dalit literature, which engages in a dialogue with the Indian culture of caste. Broadly speaking, hegemony denotes the ability of a member of a dominant social group to persuade others that the perspective, vision, and interests of the leaders represent the general interest. In other words, hegemony makes it possible for power to be institutionalized and normalized in society, which is why any unjust social order is supported by a set of cultural phenomena, ranging from folklore traditions and rituals to educational institutions and literary discourses.

The notion of hegemony helps understand why the Indian caste system has persisted for centuries and why it continues to survive today. The idea of social equality is not alien to the caste system, which has been traditionally sanctioned by rituals, popular beliefs, and mythology. Popular religion and superstitions provide a rich context for the development of Dalit literature and its discourse of rights. The very fact that Dalits have been deprived of the right to education, have been forced to perform menial labor for their oppressors, and have been denied access to resources has determined the themes and subject matter of Dalit literature, as well as its aesthetic principles and narrative techniques.

However, it is the literature of the Dalits, with its emphasis on self-expression and new narrative forms, that unveils the true nature of the caste system. The literature of the oppressed exposes the age-old injustices of the caste system and seeks to de-normalize thousands of years of Dalit suffering. By depicting scenes of humiliation and harassment, Dalit writers show that the social order dictated by upper-caste Indians is not general but rather a specific perspective that has been imposed on the Dalits through various means of cultural hegemony. In other words, Dalit literature seeks to de-legitimize caste-based oppression, which has been presented as a natural order of things.

5. AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE SELF

One of the most significant features of the Dalit autobiography is the transformation of the individual "I" into the collective "we." The traditional autobiography typically dwells on the development of the individual, his or her achievements, and the formation of the personality. The Dalit autobiography, however, is not individualistic, because caste oppression determines the social position of a person from the start.

In *Joothan*, Omprakash Valmiki narrates about his childhood experiences of discrimination, segregation, and exploitation that were typical for many Dalits in the caste system. The personal experiences of the narrator are transformed into a universal story that represents all the Dalits who have suffered from caste

oppression.

Limble's *The Outcaste* similarly demonstrates the transformation of the individual into the representative of the oppressed caste, as the story reflects not only the experiences of the narrator but also the entire community of the Dalits. Marginalization, illegitimacy, and other phenomena are presented in the story as universal experiences of the lower caste.

The autobiographical self, therefore, is transformed into a social and historical figure through the lens of the narrator, who represents himself and his community as a victim of the caste system. The personal experiences of the Dalit narrator are universal for all Dalits, and the transformation of the individual into the representative of the entire Dalit community is the main characteristic of the Dalit autobiography.

6. THE BODY

The body is one of the central themes of the Dalit literature, as the very concept of the caste system is built around the notion of purity and pollution. The Dalit body is subject to suppression, harassment, and even violence. The marginalization of the Dalit is presented in the literature as the physical and mental harassment of a person who is exploited by the upper caste.

The Dalit literature elevates the oppressed body to the status of the object of art, as the physical body of the Dalit is presented as a polluted and undesirable element in the ideal Dalit society. The experiences of hunger, fatigue, harassment, and other forms of oppression are transformed into the literary heritage that exposes the injustice of the caste system.

The representation of the body in the Dalit literature is, therefore, significant for two reasons. First, the Dalit writers depict the experiences of marginalization and harassment that are not always covered in the traditional historical narratives. Second, the physical body of the Dalit is presented as the archive of caste, which means that the experiences of the Dalit are the key to understanding the history and culture of the caste society.

7. FOOD, POVERTY, AND JOOTHAN

Food plays a significant role in Valmiki's *Joothan*, as the title of the book suggests. The concept of food in the Dalit literature is strongly correlated with the notions of poverty, social inequality, and caste oppression. The food in the caste society is distributed according to the principles of purity and pollution, and the food habits of the upper caste are different from those of the lower caste.

The food in *Joothan* represents social inequality, as the narrator and his family are forced to eat leftovers, while the upper caste enjoys their meals. The concept of food in the novel, therefore, is strongly associated with poverty and social injustice.

The word *joothan* itself is used in the title to emphasize the importance of food in the life of the Dalits and to demonstrate how the concept of food is used by the upper caste to harass and humiliate the lower caste. The Dalit literature, therefore, exposes the social injustice committed against the lower caste by depicting the food as the symbol of harassment and poverty. By using the word *joothan* in the title, Valmiki demonstrates how the upper caste discriminates against the Dalits and how the Dalit culture is different from the culture of the upper caste.

8. LABOUR AND THE POLITICS OF VISIBILITY

The topic of labor is of particular importance in the Dalit literature, as the Dalits are traditionally subject to exploitation due to their low social status. The Dalit literature seeks to elevate labor to the status of the category of art by depicting the experiences of the Dalits who perform menial jobs such as agricultural labor, cleaning, and leatherwork.

The themes of labor and exploitation are closely intertwined in the Dalit literature, as the social status of the Dalits is traditionally low, and they are often forced to perform menial jobs. The Dalit writers depict the experiences of the exploited and oppressed people who are subject to humiliation and harassment because of their work.

The relationship between caste and labor is demonstrated in *Baluta* by Daya Pawar, who narrates about his experiences as a Dalit in the urban and rural areas. The caste system persists even in the modern society, as the social hierarchy based on caste determines people's access to resources and opportunities. The Dalit characters in the novel are subject to exploitation and harassment because of their low social status. The topic of labor, therefore, is presented in *Baluta* as the key element that determines people's lives and social relationships.

9. EDUCATION AS A SITE OF RESISTANCE

Education is one of the dominant themes in the Dalit autobiography. Education was considered as a means of emancipation by Ambedkar and is an important aspect of Dalit literature.

The school in the Dalit autobiography is both a site of discrimination and a means of overcoming it. The discrimination of the lower caste students is evident in Valmiki's experience, as well as the attitude of his teacher and peers towards him.

Education, however, also provides the oppressed Dalit with the opportunity to overcome this injustice. Literacy gives the previously oppressed individual access to the public discourse, and enables them to become the ones who can criticize society.

The very fact of writing the autobiography is a manifestation of this aspect of education. The community that was previously denied education now produces intellectuals, writers, poets, and critics.

10. LANGUAGE AS COUNTER – CULTURE

The theme of language is also significant in the context of Dalit literature and its relationship with the dominant culture. The upper-caste writers have been using standard, literary languages, including Sanskrit. The Dalit writers, on the other hand, used dialects and colloquialisms.

The choice of language to write in is political. It is an act of resistance, as it challenges the notion of standard languages being superior to the dialects and regional variations of the language.

Bama's *Karukku* is written in the language of the Dalit community, and is full of colloquialisms and sayings typical of the Dalit people. This choice makes the speech more authentic, and grounds the narrative in the real life of the Dalit community.

11. BAMA'S KARUKKU: CASTE, RELIGION AND GENDER

Bama's *Karukku* is a remarkable text in terms of its ability to depict the injustice of the caste system within a religious framework. Although the narrator and her family are Christian, they are still subject to the oppression of the caste system.

The text reveals the impossibility of eliminating caste relations through religion, as both are deeply intertwined. In addition, *Karukku* depicts the life of a Dalit woman, who is subject to both caste-based exploitation and gender-based oppression.

The position of women in society is lower than that of men, and they are often forced to work for the survival of their families, as depicted in the story of Bama's sister. Thus, *Karukku* expands the meaning of anti-caste protest to include a feminist one.

12. BABY KAMBLE AND CRITICISM OF PATRIARCHY

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* is another example of Dalit counter-culture that exposes not only the injustice of caste-Hindu society but also patriarchy in general.

This aspect of Kamble's writing is particularly significant because a genuine Dalit emancipation literature should not depict Dalits as one group of people who have the right to dominate others. Moreover, women should not be subordinate to men within the oppressed community as well. Thus, Kamble's expose' of marriage, domestic drudgery, sex and gender, and social status of Dalit women is another contribution to the critique of caste-Hindu society.

By writing about the difficulties Dalit women have to endure, Baby Kamble's adds another dimension to the literature of resistance. Since her book, as well as other Dalit women's writings, unveil the relations between gender and caste, they extend the discourse of emancipation literature. It actually constitutes the basic argument of the chapter that the Indian feminist criticism has to take into account the discrimination based on both gender and caste.

13. LIMBALE AND THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY

Limbale's *The Outcaste* is a brilliant work of art that portrays the complexities of caste-Hindu society and the identity of its outcastes. The author struggles with the ambiguity of his own identity being himself illegitimate and belonging to the lowest caste.

The very title suggests that the problem of identity is in the focus of the writing. Moreover, the protagonist seems to be 'in between' several groups of people and thus, unable to identify himself as a member of one particular community. This theme actually underscores the ambiguity of Dalit identity in caste-Hindu society. What is more, Limbale's account reveals the diversity of Dalits, for these people are not a homogenous group of individuals.

Their social status is further determined by their regional affiliation, level of education, occupation, family status, and gender. One single experience of discrimination cannot characterize the entire Dalit community. The author's identity is singular and multiple at the same time, and so is the literary representation of his experience.

14. DALIT POETRY AND ITS AESTHETICS

Dalits have expressed their protest not only in prose but also in poetry. Namdeo Dhasal's poems, in particular, seek to depict the experience of marginalization and transgress the boundaries of conventional literature. They also demonstrate how the repressed group resorts to a variety of means to communicate their message to the oppressors. Thus, Dhasal's poetry is a powerful aesthetic instrument to bring Dalits into the spotlight of social awareness.

It is necessary to elaborate on the specifics of the poetic language used by Dhasal. It includes such themes and motives as humiliation, caste pride, poverty, frustration, sexuality, revolution, and so on. It is evident that the poet uses words that were never characteristic of the aesthetic norms of traditional literature. He appeals to the reader's sensibility in order to raise his consciousness about the social reality that is the reason why Dalits, especially women, are treated unfairly. The aesthetics of Dalit literature aims to expose caste-based discrimination and uncover the exploitation of the oppressed by the dominant groups. Therefore, it should not be measured by the standards of academic literature but evaluated in terms of social relevance and authenticity, human dignity and anger, and social responsibility and ethics.

15. LITERATURE AS COUNTER-PUBLIC

The Dalit literature also finds its space in journals, pamphlets, magazines, literary circles, and

organizations, and movements that also create a so-called Dalit counter-public. Generally speaking, a counter-public is a space that allows one to develop a political discourse outside of the “mainstream” public sphere. It provides marginalized groups with opportunities to promote their narratives, identities, and claims.

Therefore, it is wrong to consider the emergence of Dalit literature as a phenomenon separate from the broader socio-political context in which it developed and exists. In particular, Ambedkarist organizations and activities are the driving forces behind this literary genre. Moreover, it is necessary to consider Dalit literature within the context of Ambedkar’s vast activity, which seeks to fight against social inequality and develop a political culture among the Dalits. Thus, the text of Dalit literature is part of a more significant cultural and political history.

16. DALIT LITERATURE AS ALTERNATE HISTORY

The literature created by the members of the Dalit community also has the function of alternate history. The traditional historical periodization and narration are built on the actions of the authorities, the development of legislation, and the interactions between the most influential social groups. However, when studying history from the bottom up, historians begin their narrative from the lives and struggles of ordinary people.

Therefore, in the context of Dalit literature, historical reconstructions are built on the lives and problems of the oppressed members of society. This genre of historical narrative is also known as micro-history. The focus on the lives and struggles of ordinary people is a distinctive feature of Dalit literature, highlighting the need to tell history from the perspective of the oppressed. Thus, a wide range of topics associated with the life of the working class in the past becomes the subject of historical reconstructions.

17. COUNTER-CULTURAL CAPITAL AND ITS LIMITS

When examining the phenomenon of Dalit literature, one must remember that this literary genre has some limitations due to its novelty. First of all, this literature was created in the context of a counter-cultural public sphere. Therefore, when interpreting the works of Dalit authors, one should consider their meanings in terms of both art and historical culture. A living tradition of Dalit culture and literature shapes the perceptions and attitudes of this cultural layer. From this perspective, the authentic nature of Dalit literature is subject to debate.

The authenticity problem is related to the very nature of this type of literature. On the one hand, it is natural to expect more authentic reflections of reality from the point of view of the oppressed Dalits. However, one should remember that most of these works represent a narrative, which means that they are built on subjective thinking and perceptions. On the other hand, it is not entirely true to say that the authors of mainstream literature cannot represent Dalits. The reason for this is the difference in the social position of the authors, as well as their historical and cultural particularities. The question of authenticity is complicated by the fact that many Dalit literary works, especially those published in English, are translated from regional languages. Therefore, when analyzing Dalit literature, it is necessary to take into account both the authenticity of the original works and the accuracy of their translation.

18. THE PROBLEM OF HOMOGENISING DALIT EXPERIENCE

Secondly, it is essential not to confuse the different castes that comprise the so-called Dalit community. A Dalit Christian’s experience may be entirely different from a Valmiki’s or from a Mahars’s one. Therefore, when talking about the experience of a Dalit, it is vital to remember their religion, ethnicity, and social attitudes.

A Dalit woman's experience, on the other hand, might be entirely different from the experience of a Dalit man. And this diversity should be reflected in the literature: the representation of a "single" voice is not always accurate when discussing the experiences of suppressed castes.

That is why the "counter culture" should be viewed as a set of different voices. The concept of "Dalits" encompasses many different groups of people with varying social and cultural legacies. When discussing their literary tradition, it is necessary to use the term "counter-culture" instead of "protest literature".

19. FROM PROTEST TO CULTURAL RECONSTRUCTION

The main difference between protest literature and counter-cultural one is that the latter does not focus solely on the act of protesting. Although Dalit literature certainly protested against caste oppression, it did not stop there. Counter-cultural literature seeks to create alternatives for the culture of the oppressors.

Dalit writers' prose and poetry strive to articulate a different kind of values. Instead of being based on the principles of untouchability, their creations present the idea of dignity. They reject the norms of the caste system and preach equality; they oppose the official Dalit history and rewrite it on their own terms.

Dalit literature redefines beauty and art, opposing Dalit aesthetics. It highlights the impact of caste suppression on mental development: the humiliation experienced by untouchables transforms into protest. This literature does not only depict the situation of the Dalits and emphasize their dignity; it also conveys a need for change, pointing out the necessity of reconstructing society and building a new nation. Therefore, it is not enough to talk about Dalit literature as only protest literature, and about Dalits only as about a suppressed caste. There is a need for conceptualizing the literature produced by them, and perceiving it as counter-cultural.

20. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Thus, the research leads to several conclusions. Firstly, the literature created by Dalits contributes to the development of a collective consciousness about caste discrimination. Secondly, the literature created by Dalits promotes the shift from the vertical view on the oppressed to the horizontal one. Thirdly, the literature created by Dalits highlights the importance of food, labor, body, education, and speech in the discrimination process.

Fourthly, it can be concluded that Dalit literature promotes the development of an alternative literary tradition. Fifthly, it can be stated that Dalit writing promotes the need for the reconceptualization of the public sphere and the formation of new genres. Sixthly, it can be concluded that Dalit literature is not only a reflection of the situation of suppressed castes but also a tool for fighting this suppression. Finally, it can be asserted that Dalit literature is not a homogeneous body of writing; the different voices it comprises cannot be ignored in favor of the construction of a single voice.

21. CONCLUSION

Dalit literature is one of the most remarkable counter-cultural manifestations in Indian literary history as it presents the perspective on the suffering of the oppressed caste, converting it into the feeling of knowledge, memory and humiliation.

It is most important to start the discussion on the literature of the oppressed with the analysis of autobiographical writings as the inner self-consciousness of the writers is intertwined with the socio-cultural events, making it impossible to separate the personal and the general. The autobiographical genre is particularly striking in the novels *Baluta*, *The Prisons We Broke*, *The Outcaste*, *Joothan* and *Karukku* as the events described are built on the relations between upper and lower castes, which means that the personal experience of the authors is directly connected with the socio-cultural history of their

people.

Furthermore, the literature created by the members of the oppressed caste, who strive to represent their experience, is counter-cultural as it introduces the elements of dialectics, oral literature and physical experiences, using untraditional means of narration. The language, memory, body, oral tradition, metaphor and imagery used in the Dalit literature challenge the canon and the status quo, deeming it inappropriate and ineffective. Thus, it can be noted that the Dalit literature does not seek inclusion in the traditional canon, but rather aims to change the system, replacing the existing standards with new ones.

The legacy of Ambedkar who promoted the rights of the oppressed, access to education, equality and dignity is visible throughout the writings of the authors who discuss the horrors of the caste system, bringing it onto the pages of the books, discussing their struggles and seeking change. The later authors build upon the ideas introduced by Ambedkar, extending the topics of dignity, gender, labor, faith, region and language. However, despite being united by the goal of fighting the oppressive caste system, the writers of the Dalit literature greatly vary in their approaches, methods and focuses.

Such diversity is most visible in the literature written by women who address both caste and gender discrimination, proving that the issues of the Dalits are not singular. The variety of the experiences and visions reflected in the Dalit literature proves that the anti-caste discrimination movement is not monolithic, uniform or singular, but rather consists of numerous layers of opinions, experiences and theories. The language used in the texts created by the members of the oppressed caste challenges the readers, seeking to determine whether they would accept the dignity of the Dalits, extend their critical thinking to the literature produced in the local language or recognize the suppressed history of the oppressed caste.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the originality of the literature created by the members of the oppressed caste resides in its counter-cultural nature. This characteristic is derived from the focus on the dignity of the oppressed people, who are striving to achieve equality, change the status quo and reconstruct the nation. The literature of the Dalits seeks to replace the existing order with a new one, based on compassion, equality and respect for all. The goal of such literature is to transfer the experience of suppression and struggle to the readers, enabling them to become active members of the reformist movement. Thus, the literature of the oppressed seeks to de-hegemonize the culture, making it possible to build the society based on fairness, dignity and human rights. For these reasons, the autobiographies and the literature of resistance created by the authors of the Dalit caste are essential for understanding the history of the oppressed caste and the role of the anti-caste discrimination movement in Indian history, sociology and democracy.

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