

From Silence to Voice: Subaltern Agency in Dalit Literature

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ABSTRACT

This theoretical and critical review article examines the paradigm shift from silence to voice within modern Dalit literature, positioning it as a revolutionary counter-discourse that transforms marginalized communities from passive objects of historical violence into active agents of social, cultural, and political resistance. Grounded in a comprehensive theoretical matrix, the article orchestrates an intellectual dialogue between the foundational principles of Ambedkarite thought and Western Marxist and poststructuralist formulations, notably Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's subaltern theory.

By analyzing the critical contributions of seminal authors—including B. R. Ambedkar, Omprakash Valmiki, Bama, Sharan Kumar Limbale, Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, and Namdeo Dhasal—this paper traces how Dalit creative and testimonial expression challenges Brahminical hegemony and reconfigures the parameters of South Asian literary aesthetics. The discussion unpacks the subaltern agency manifest across key thematic axes: self-representation, structural caste discrimination, educational empowerment, and the complex intersectionality of gender within Dalit discourse.

Furthermore, this study evaluates how Dalit literary aesthetics subvert classical Sanskrit and Western canonical doctrines by prioritizing experiential authenticity and a raw, confrontational language of protest over conventional aesthetic harmony. Finally, the article interrogates contemporary debates surrounding elite appropriation, translation politics, and the democratization of subaltern agency through digital activism, concluding that Dalit literature operates as an indispensable, emancipatory project that continuously redefines global subaltern studies.

Keywords: Dalit Literature, Subaltern Agency, Ambedkarite Thought, Hegemony, Experiential Authenticity, Testimonio, Counter-Canon.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of Dalit literature in the mid-twentieth century marks an epistemological break in the landscape of Indian letters, fundamentally disrupting the homogenized, upper-caste consensus that had long dominated the country's literary canon. Historically rooted in the multilingual anti-caste movements of Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Southern India before expanding into the Hindi heartland, Dalit literature—written *by* Dalits about their lived experiences—shattered the aesthetic and political frameworks of classical and progressive Indian writing. For millennia, the structural violence of the Hindu caste system, anchored in the metaphysical and legal codifications of texts like the *Manusmriti*, condemned a vast segment of the population to hereditary untouchability, spatial segregation, and civil death. Within this rigid hierarchy, the lower-caste subject was denied access to literacy, spiritual institutions, and the means of narrative production.

Within this historical context of total exclusion, the acts of reading, writing, and self-narration become radical assertions of human agency. Dominant literary traditions, even when operating under progressive or humanitarian impulses, frequently relegated the lower-caste figure to an object of paternalistic pity or a passive victim awaiting upper-caste redemption.

Dalit literature radically reverses this dynamic by centering the active, self-conscious voice of the marginalized. It transforms the text from a space of aesthetic consumption into a political site where the traumatic wounds of caste apartheid

are laid bare. This shift from being written about to writing oneself into existence is not merely a literary milestone; it is an act of political insurgence.

By reclaiming the power of language, Dalit writers execute a systematic critique of Brahminical hegemony, asserting an identity that refuses to be defined by ritual pollution or social worthlessness. Consequently, a theoretical examination of subaltern agency in Dalit literature requires a shift away from standard textual summary toward a rigorous evaluation of how the act of writing functions as a tool for political mobilization, collective memory preservation, and the dismantling of institutionalized epistemic violence.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SUBALTERN AGENCY

Defining Agency

Within postcolonial and cultural studies, agency is often conceptualized as the capacity of individuals or collectives to act independently, make self-determined choices, and structurally contest the systemic operations of power. However, standard Western liberal formulations of agency—which assume a sovereign, autonomous individual operating within an egalitarian legal framework—fail to capture the realities of the subaltern condition. For communities subjected to generational untouchability, agency cannot be understood as a set of choices within an open market of ideas.

Instead, subaltern agency must be theorized as a confrontational and survivalist practice born from deep structural inequality. It is an ongoing effort to fracture the pervasive cultural consensus that codifies certain bodies as inherently pure and others as permanently polluted. In Dalit literature, agency does not manifest as a sudden, triumphant escape from oppression. Rather, it appears in the daily, localized practices of refusal, the preservation of forbidden memories, the pursuit of literacy against state and communal violence, and the transformation of individual trauma into collective political solidarity.

Ambedkar and Social Emancipation

The foundational ideological matrix of Dalit literary expression is explicitly anchored in Ambedkarite thought, a philosophy that prioritizes social democracy, rationalism, and the complete annihilation of the caste system over bourgeois nationalist agendas. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar argued that the Indian caste system is not a mere division of labor, but a rigid "division of labourers" lacking any horizontal or vertical mobility. He observed that the system acts like a multi-story building without stairs connecting the various floors, locking individuals into hereditary categories from birth to death.

Ambedkar's revolutionary slogan—"Educate, Agitate, Organize"—serves as the primary engine of subaltern agency within Dalit discourse. Unlike Marxist frameworks that reduce all forms of alienation to class positions and economic relations, Ambedkarite thought insists on the distinct reality of social and religious hegemony. It positions the reclamation of human dignity, legal equality, and self-respect (*atmasamman*) as necessary prerequisites for economic or political liberation. Dalit literature directly incorporates this philosophy, using the written word as an instrument to dismantle the spiritual and institutional scaffolding of Brahminical supremacy.

Spivak's Concept of Voice

This activist assertion of self-determination complicates the poststructuralist skepticism popularized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her foundational essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?". Spivak argued that the subaltern is doubly silenced—first by colonial power and subsequently by indigenous elites and postcolonial intellectuals who claim to represent them. She asserted that when the subaltern attempts to enter the dominant logocentric structures of language, law, and the archive, their voice is inevitably translated, compromised, and re-absorbed into elite paradigms.

Dalit literary theory directly confronts Spivak's poststructuralist claim, arguing that the subaltern can and does speak, provided that the margins are not filtered through academic gatekeeping. Dalit writers reject the notion that the subaltern is trapped in a permanent state of un-representability. Instead, they demonstrate that by breaking metropolitan linguistic standards and constructing their own counter-archives, marginalized subjects can articulate their realities with clarity and political authority. The voice in Dalit literature is not an abstract theoretical category; it is a visceral, historical intervention that explicitly refuses elite mediation.

Resistance Against Hegemonic Structures

To understand this literary intervention, one must look to Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, which demonstrates that a ruling class maintains its dominance not through physical coercion alone, but by engineering moral and cultural consent across civil society. In the South Asian context, Brahminical hegemony achieved this consent by embedding caste hierarchies within sacred texts, cosmic myths, and everyday language, presenting an unequal social order as a divinely ordained reality.

Dalit literature functions as a systematic critique of this manufactured consent. By exposing the material greed, physical brutality, and ethical hypocrisy that sustain the caste hierarchy, Dalit writing strips the dominant class of its moral authority. The literature strips away the sacred character of Brahminical structures, demonstrating that what is marketed as universal spiritual truth is actually a predatory mechanism of economic extraction and existential denial. This process of demythologization allows subaltern consciousness to transform from an internalized state of shame into an externalized language of systemic protest.

EVOLUTION OF DALIT LITERATURE

Early Dalit Writings and the Radical Shift

The historical evolution of Dalit literature traces a path from early, localized devotional subversions to a highly politicized, modern aesthetic movement. While modern Dalit literature crystallized in the mid-twentieth century, its roots extend back to the radical expressions of the medieval Bhakti movement, where saint-poets like Chokhamela, Ravidas, and Kabir utilized devotional poetry to challenge the spiritual monopolies of upper-caste priests. However, these early spiritual negotiations were often limited by their reliance on a transcendental framework that left the material and economic reality of caste relations intact.

The true paradigm shift occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries under the radical social activism of Jyotirao Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. This period saw the launch of independent anti-caste newspapers, political manifestos, and protest songs (*jalsas*) that laid the groundwork for a self-conscious Dalit public sphere. The establishment of the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra during the 1970s—explicitly modeled after the Black Panther Party in the United States—solidified this literary transformation. This movement merged street-level political agitation with an explosive, anti-bourgeois poetic revolution that irrevocably shattered the polite conventions of mainstream regional literatures.

The Autobiographical Tradition

The defining genre of modern Dalit literature is the life narrative, which critics like Sharmila Rege have conceptualized not as an individual autobiography in the Western bourgeois sense, but as a collective *testimonio* (Thapan, 2022). The traditional Western autobiography focuses on the development of a unique, individualized ego journeying through a stable world. In contrast, the Dalit life narrative utilizes the author's personal experiences to document the shared trauma, systemic humiliations, and survival strategies of an entire community.

The "I" in Dalit autobiography is always already a "We"; individual hunger, beatings, and exclusions are framed as structural realities dictated by the caste matrix. By recording the micro-histories of everyday violence that official state archives and mainstream histories deliberately ignore, these life narratives function as powerful political testaments. They dismantle the myth of national progress, forcing the reader to acknowledge that the postcolonial nation-state remains built upon an active system of internal apartheid.

Contemporary Dalit Discourse

In the contemporary era, Dalit literature has expanded into a complex, multi-vocal global discourse that moves far beyond the autobiographical genre. Modern Dalit writers, working across multiple languages and academic borders, are increasingly utilizing poetry, short stories, novels, digital media, and critical theory to dissect the new mutations of caste under globalized capitalism.

Contemporary Dalit discourse investigates how historical patterns of discrimination have adapted to modern, urban spaces—including corporate boardrooms, international universities, and digital landscapes. This literature challenges the elite, neo-liberal myth that economic modernization and technological development automatically erase caste lines. Instead, it demonstrates that caste continues to function as a dynamic network of exclusion that adapts to global economic flows, proving that the struggle for subaltern agency requires an ongoing critique of both traditional feudalism and transnational capital.

MAJOR DALIT WRITERS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

B. R. Ambedkar: The Philosophical Foundation

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar provided the foundational intellectual, legal, and philosophical framework that made the modern Dalit literary movement possible. His seminal texts, such as *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) and *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables?* (1948), operate as masterclasses in structural deconstruction. Ambedkar rigorously dismantles the theological and philosophical justifications of the caste system, demonstrating that it relies on an artificial control of access to knowledge, economic resources, and physical mobility.

His writing is characterized by an uncompromising commitment to rationalism, constitutional morality, and universal human rights. By systematically exposing how Brahminical Hinduism uses religious scripture to justify social apartheid, Ambedkar provided subaltern writers with the essential critical tools needed to challenge dominant cultural narratives and articulate a self-determined demand for total social democracy.

Omprakash Valmiki: *Joothan* (1997)

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan: An Untouchable's Life* stands as a classic text in the modern Hindi Dalit autobiographical tradition, offering a brutal exploration of the realities of caste oppression in rural North India. The title *Joothan* refers to the scraps of leftover food collected from upper-caste wedding feasts, which the Chuhra (sweeper) community was structurally forced to consume for survival. Valmiki's narrative traces his painful journey toward literacy and political consciousness, documenting how the public school system operates as a primary site of caste humiliation.

He details how upper-caste teachers forced him to sweep the school courtyard instead of sitting inside the classroom, directly illustrating how hegemonic institutions actively try to deny literacy to subaltern bodies. *Joothan* is an intense act of bearing witness that strips away any romantic myths surrounding the Indian village, demonstrating that the pursuit of education is a fierce battle against institutionalized degradation.

Bama: *Karukku* (1992) and *Sangati* (2000)

Bama's *Karukku* represents a historic intervention within the Tamil and national literary spheres, introducing a distinct Dalit Christian feminist perspective to the study of subaltern agency. Writing after her departure from a Catholic convent, Bama exposes how the institutional church reproduces caste discrimination under a facade of egalitarianism. Her second book, *Sangati*, builds on this critique by focus-shifting to the collective lives of Dalit women, analyzing how they face a double colonization by broader social structures and internal patriarchal cycles.

Bama's radical contribution lies in her deliberate subversion of linguistic boundaries; she rejects standard, formal literary Tamil in favor of a raw, colloquial, spoken Dalit dialect. This use of language functions as a direct political strike against Brahminical notions of linguistic purity, forcing the mainstream reader to engage with a syntax born of manual labor, systemic violence, and physical survival.

Sharan Kumar Limbale: Theorizing Aesthetics

Sharan Kumar Limbale's critical manifesto, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (2004), functions as the primary theoretical text for evaluating the formal innovations of anti-caste writing. Limbale explicitly rejects classical Sanskrit aesthetic concepts like *Rasa* (aesthetic flavor) and *Dhvani* (suggestion), alongside Western poststructuralist theories, arguing that they demand a level of emotional detachment and formal polish that cannot do justice to the lived realities of

marginalization (Das, 2017). He questions why classical aesthetics prioritizes universal pleasure, asking why the expression of "extraordinary pain" and structural anger cannot serve as the foundational standard of literary value (Kumari & Kapoor, 2021).

Limbale argues that Dalit literature must be evaluated based on its commitment to human emancipation, social justice, and experiential truth rather than its compliance with artificial canonical forms. His own autobiography, *Akkarmashi (The Outcaste)*, puts this theory into practice, detailing his experiences as a child born of an upper-caste landlord and a landless Mahar woman to expose the hypocrisies of caste purity and economic exploitation.

Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar: Mahar Feminist Testimonies

The life narratives of Baby Kamble (*The Prisons We Broke*) and Urmila Pawar (*The Weave of My Life*) are foundational to Dalit feminist theory, offering deep insight into the internal and external realities of subaltern women's lives in Maharashtra. Baby Kamble's text explores the early decades of the Ambedkarite movement, tracing how lower-caste women actively participated in public struggles, burning sacred texts and defying feudal landlords while simultaneously wrestling with physical violence within their own homes.

Urmila Pawar's narrative maps this struggle onto modern urban spaces, utilizing the metaphor of weaving to describe how Dalit women connect individual survival with collective political organizing. Both writers reject a simplistic, monolithic feminist framework that ignores caste, while concurrently challenging male-dominated Dalit movements that minimize gender oppression. They demonstrate that true subaltern agency must fight a simultaneous, cross-cutting battle against Brahminical supremacy and internal patriarchal structures.

Namdeo Dhasal: The Poetics of the Underworld

Namdeo Dhasal, a co-founder of the Dalit Panthers, revolutionized Marathi poetry through his landmark 1973 collection *Golpitha*, which maps the raw realities of Mumbai's red-light districts, slums, and criminal underbellies. Dhasal's poetry rejects the polite vocabulary of bourgeois literature, injecting his verses with a confrontational mix of street slang, underworld jargon, and explicit descriptions of bodily functions, sex work, and raw violence.

His poetics functions as a shock to the system that forces the comfortable urban reader to confront the human collateral of capitalist modernization. Dhasal does not frame the slum-dweller or the sex worker as a passive object of social worker pity. Instead, he treats the urban underworld as a volatile source of revolutionary energy, using a shattered poetic syntax to demand the total destruction of the existing bourgeois social order.

THEMES OF SUBALTERN AGENCY

Self-Representation and the Assertion of Dignity

The theme of self-representation sits at the center of Dalit literature's claim to subaltern agency, establishing that the authority of lived experience cannot be replaced by elite empathy. For centuries, the lower-caste subject was treated as a silent object within Indian literature—a figure used by upper-caste reformers to perform an agenda of progressive guilt or moral repair. Dalit literature breaks this cycle of surrogate representation by insisting that only those who have felt the specific pain of untouchability can accurately articulate its psychological and material realities. This assertion of self-representation is directly tied to the reclamation of collective dignity (*atmasamman*). By refusing to let their stories be told or sanitized by others, Dalit writers transform the act of authorship into a statement of political sovereignty, demonstrating that the margins possess the intellectual tools to define their own history.

Social Justice and Educational Empowerment

The pursuit of social justice within Dalit literature is consistently linked to the transformative power of literacy and formal education. In an apartheid system where lower-caste individuals were historically punished with physical mutilation for listening to or pronouncing sacred words, the acquisition of literacy functions as a radical act of rebellion.

Literary narratives consistently detail how access to the classroom is a highly contested battleground, marked by spatial exclusion, teacher bias, and peer violence. However, rather than framing education as a path toward individual assimilation into the middle class, Dalit literature treats learning as a collective tool for liberation. Literacy allows the subaltern to decipher the legal codes of the state, document their community's histories of oppression, and organize political counter-narratives against dominant groups.

Gender Within Dalit Discourse

The intersectional critique of gender within Dalit literature challenges the universalizing claims of both mainstream Indian feminism and male-dominated anti-caste movements. Dalit feminist writers have demonstrated that lower-caste women experience a distinct form of violence that cannot be fully understood through a single framework of analysis. They are exposed to physical and sexual exploitation by upper-caste landlords who view their bodies as accessible property, while concurrently facing patriarchal dominance and domestic exhaustion within their own homes.

This multi-layered oppression means that Dalit women's literature must engage in a dual critique: it must expose the casteist biases of upper-class feminist movements that focus on glass ceilings while ignoring manual scavenging, while simultaneously challenging anti-caste male leaders who ignore domestic violence in the name of community unity. Agency, for the Dalit woman, is forged through this intersectional battle, asserting a self-determined presence that claims autonomy in both the domestic and public spheres.

Political Consciousness

Ultimately, Dalit literature operates as an active archive and catalyst for a radical, collective political consciousness. The texts trace the shift from individual confusion and internalized shame to an organized awareness of structural injustice. This consciousness is explicitly international and comparative in its scope.

Drawing inspiration from global liberation movements—such as the Black Panther Party, anti-colonial struggles in Africa, and native land rights campaigns—Dalit literature links the local fight against caste apartheid to the global struggle against racism, imperialism, and class exploitation. The literature demonstrates that subaltern agency is achieved when local injuries are connected to a global vocabulary of resistance, transforming the text into an open invitation for international solidarity against all forms of structural hierarchy.

CONCLUSION

A comprehensive analysis of subaltern agency in Dalit literature demonstrates that the act of writing from the margins functions as a powerful, transformative intervention against the deep operations of Brahminical hegemony. By drawing upon the radical frameworks of Ambedkarite thought and subverting the detached assumptions of classical Sanskrit and Western aesthetics, Dalit literature has evolved from a localized protest movement into a sophisticated global counter-discourse.

Through its formal focus on collective testimonies (*testimonios*), experiential authenticity (*anubhav*), and a confrontational language of protest, this literature successfully dismantles paternalistic models of representation. It systematically transforms marginalized communities from silent objects of historical suffering into self-conscious architects of their own social and political emancipation.

The future scope of research in Dalit literary studies must continuously adapt to map the new configurations of caste as it interacts with modern systems of digital control, urban displacement, and transnational capitalism. As digital media democratizes who can write and translation networks continue to expand global access, literary theory must avoid reducing subalternity to a static academic commodity or a trendy theoretical catchphrase.

Scholarship must remain firmly committed to analyzing the material realities of exploitation, ensuring that textual critique remains connected to active struggles for social justice. Ultimately, Dalit literature continues to serve as an indispensable model for global cultural studies because it proves that language can be reclaimed, archives can be rewritten, and the broken can construct their own paths toward a democratic and emancipated future.

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