



Dalit and Indigenous Women's Writing: Voices of Resistance, Identity, and Cultural Assertion

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the literary and oral narratives produced by Dalit women in India and Indigenous women in settler-colonial and post-colonial contexts (with a focus on North America, Australia, and Latin America) as distinct yet analogous sites of counter-hegemonic discourse. While originating from different historical material conditions—caste-based untouchability in South Asia versus colonial dispossession and genocide in the Americas and Oceania—both literary traditions deploy writing as a weapon of epistemic violence against dual oppressions: the external patriarchal dominance of mainstream society and the internal patriarchal hierarchies within their own communities. This article argues that Dalit and Indigenous women's writing transcends the mere documentation of suffering to enact a tripartite project of resistance, identity reclamation, and cultural assertion. Through comparative analysis of genre, language politics, embodiment, and spatial memory, the article demonstrates how these writers forge a decolonial, anti-caste feminist poetics that challenges both Western liberal feminism and nationalist masculinist frameworks.

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Introduction: The Subaltern as Author

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), famously concluded that the subaltern cannot speak because the very structures of power—colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist—erase her voice before it can be heard. Yet the past four decades of Dalit and Indigenous women's writing offer a powerful rejoinder: the subaltern not only speaks but sings, shouts, and testifies. However, her speaking is never a transparent, unmediated act. It requires a relentless struggle against what Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa term "theoretical violence" (1981)—the tendency of dominant academic and literary institutions to appropriate, exoticize, or silence dissident voices.

Dalit women (formerly "untouchable" castes in South Asia) and Indigenous women (First Nations, Native American, Aboriginal, Māori, Adivasi, and other original peoples) share a structural position as doubly minoritized: within the nation-state, they are racialized/caste-oppressed subjects; within their own communities, they face patriarchal control over their bodies, labor, and sexuality. Yet their writings are not reducible to victim narratives. Instead, they constitute a vibrant archive of what Leela Gandhi calls "affirmative resistance"—the refusal to accept the terms of oppression as the totality of existence.

This article proceeds in four sections. First, it outlines the historical and political contexts of Dalit and Indigenous women's literary emergence. Second, it analyzes key thematic convergences: the body as a battleground, the reclamation of oral traditions, and the critique of state-sanctioned violence. Third, it examines divergent strategies, particularly the role of caste as a distinct form of graded inequality versus colonial blood quantum and tribal enrollment. Finally, it argues for a comparative framework that respects specificity while building solidarities across struggles.

I. Historical Contexts: Two Genealogies of Erasure and Emergence

Dalit Women's Writing: Breaking the Brahminical Archive

The modern history of Dalit literature in India begins with the Mahar Buddhist movement led by B.R. Ambedkar and the 1956 conversion to Buddhism as a rejection of caste Hinduism. However, Dalit women's writing emerged belatedly within the Dalit Panthers movement of the 1970s, which was dominated by male voices like Namdeo Dhasal and Daya Pawar. As writer and activist Urmila Pawar notes, "The men wrote about hunger, unemployment, and police brutality. We wrote about those things too, but also about the kitchen, the womb, the devadasi system, and the four walls that contained us" (Pawar, 2008).

The landmark anthology *We Also Made History: Women's Writings from the Dalit Movement* (Pawar & Moon, 1989, Marathi original; English translation 2008) marked a rupture. Writers like Pawar, Shantabai Kamble, and Kumud Pawde narrated autobiographically how caste and gender intersected: a Dalit woman's body is valued for its labor (manual scavenging, agricultural work) but considered polluting for its very presence; her sexuality is hypervisible to upper-caste men yet subject to violent policing by Dalit men seeking to protect "community honor." Kamble's autobiography *The Kaleidoscope Story of My Life* (1982) recounts how her mother was forced into sexual relations with a village patil (upper-caste headman) while her father could only watch—a scene that refuses romanticized narratives of working-class solidarity.

Indigenous Women's Writing: Survivance and Storywork

Indigenous women's literary traditions, by contrast, emerge from a history of settler colonialism aimed at physical and cultural genocide. The Indian Residential School system in Canada (1883-1996), the Stolen Generations in Australia (c. 1910-1970), and the Boarding School era in the United States (1879-1960s) specifically targeted Indigenous children to "kill the Indian, save the man." Writing became an act of survival and repatriation of stolen language and memory.

Pioneering figures like Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo), Louise Erdrich (Ojibwe), and Joy Harjo (Mvskoke, current U.S. Poet Laureate) in North America; Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Aboriginal Australian) and Kim Scott (Noongar); and from Aotearoa New Zealand, Patricia Grace (Māori) and Witi Ihimaera—all challenge the ethnographic gaze that reduced Indigenous women to either "Indian princess" or "drunken squaw" archetypes. Harjo's poem "She Had Some Horses" (1983) exemplifies this: "She had horses who were bodies of sand. / She had horses who were maps of the world." The horse becomes a metaphor for the multiple, contradictory selves an Indigenous woman must inhabit under colonial patriarchy.

Crucially, Indigenous feminist writing is inseparable from land. As Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) argues, "Nishnaabeg intelligence is not a theoretical orientation but a lived reality rooted in the land, in the body, in the family, and in the nation" (Simpson, 2017). Writing is thus not an individual act of self-expression but a collective practice of storywork (Archibald, 2008)—reconnecting fragments of knowledge stolen by colonialism.

II. The Body as Archive and Battlefield

Dalit Women: Stigma, Touch, and the Gendered Carcass

One of the most visceral motifs in Dalit women's writing is the abject body. Bama Faustina's autobiographical novel *Karukku* (1992, Tamil; English translation 2000) opens with a child narrator watching her brother being publicly humiliated for eating a mango from an upper-caste tree. The body becomes a site of inscribed caste: the Paraiyar woman's smell, her walk, her very shadow are coded as polluting. Bama writes, "The upper-caste women would hold their noses and run past us. We learned to laugh at this, but the laughter always turned sour in our throats."

Sexual violence is a recurrent theme. In Meena Kandasamy's poetic sequence *Touch* (2006), the Dalit woman's body is a contested territory where untouchability coexists with rapacious desire. Kandasamy, a Tamil Dalit feminist, writes: "The master touches / the maid in the kitchen / not with his hands / but with his eyes / that leave bruises." This poem refuses the sensationalism of atrocity reporting; instead, it focuses on the mundane, everyday nature of caste-gender terror—what scholar Sharmila Rege calls "the everydayness of humiliation" (Rege, 1998).

Dalit women's autobiographies also challenge the figure of the devadasi (temple prostitute), historically romanticized by upper-caste nationalists as a sacred dancer. Writers like P. Sivakami and S. Anand reveal how the devadasi system was a caste mechanism to keep Dalit and lower-caste women in hereditary sexual servitude to upper-caste men. Sivakami's novel *The Grip of Change* (2006) shows a Dalit woman refusing to send her daughter into the system, thereby breaking a multigenerational chain of sanctioned rape.

Indigenous Women: The Missing and Murdered, and the Resilient Womb

For Indigenous women, the body is marked by colonial cartography. The crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) in Canada and the United States—where Indigenous women are murdered at rates up to ten times the national average—has generated a literature of testimony and reckoning. Poet Natalie Diaz (Mojave) in *Postcolonial Love Poem* (2020) writes: "The river is a body. The body is a river. / They dammed the river. They dammed my body."

Unlike Dalit women's focus on untouchability, Indigenous women's writing often centers on reproductive sovereignty. The forced sterilization of Indigenous women in the United States (by the Indian Health Service into the 1970s) and in Peru (under Fujimori in the 1990s) appears in testimonial narratives like *The Condor and the Eagle* (documentary, 2019) and in poetry by Lorna Dee Cervantes (Chumash). Cervantes' "Poem for the Young White Man Who Asked Me How I, an Intelligent, Well-Read Person, Could Believe in the War Between Races" (1981) directly links reproductive violence to land theft: "They took our wombs / and planted corn in them. / The harvest was a nation of ghosts."

Simultaneously, the body is reclaimed as a site of continuance. Joy Harjo's "Eagle Poem" (1990) invokes the body as a prayer: "To pray you open your whole self / To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon / To one whole voice that is you." This is not an individualistic New Age spirituality but a specific Mvskoke epistemology: the body's breath, heartbeat, and movement enact kinship with non-human beings. Writing itself becomes an embodied act of re-membering—literally putting back together the body parts scattered by colonialism.

III. Language Politics: The Vernacular as Weapon and Wound Dalit Women: Rejecting Sanskritized Aesthetics

One of the sharpest points of divergence between mainstream Indian feminism and Dalit women's writing is language. Upper-caste and middle-class feminists often write in English, the language of power and global circulation. Dalit women writers, by contrast, overwhelmingly choose their mother tongues—Tamil, Marathi, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Hindi—and explicitly reject the Sanskritized, Brahminical literary standards that dominate these languages.

As Urmila Pawar argues, "When I write in Marathi, I am writing the language of the master. But I refuse to write 'shuddha' (pure) Marathi. I write the Marathi of the streets, of the slums, of my grandmother who never saw a school" (Pawar, 2008). This choice has material consequences: Dalit women's works are often dismissed by Marathi literary elites as "crude" or "polemical" rather than literary. Yet it is precisely this crudeness that constitutes a political aesthetic—what Toril Moi calls "the politics of the vernacular."

Translation further complicates the picture. Bama's *Karukku* was translated into English by Lakshmi Holmström, a non-Dalit translator, raising questions of mediation and betrayal. In the English version, the raw, repetitive, oral rhythms of Tamil become smoother, more "literary." Dalit critic S. Anand has called for "Dalit translation" as a distinct practice—one that refuses to correct grammatical "errors" and instead maintains the syntax of struggle.

Indigenous Women: Writing in English Against English

Indigenous women writers face a different paradox. Many Indigenous languages (Wampanoag, Eyak, many Aboriginal Australian languages) are extinct or critically endangered due to colonial language policies. Writing in English seems like surrender. Yet as Mohawk scholar Annette Akomolafe (2017) notes, "English is a cage, but it is the only cage we have to rattle." Writers like Louise Erdrich embed Ojibwe vocabulary and syntax within English sentences, creating what critic J. Edward Chamberlin calls "a hauntology of translation."

Others, like Gloria Anzaldúa (Chicana, a Mestiza Indigenous identity), forge new languages entirely. In *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), Anzaldúa code-switches among English, Spanish, Tex-Mex, and Nahuatl, deliberately violating the purity of each. She writes: “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself.” The very act of switching languages mid-sentence performs the borderland existence of Indigenous and mestiza women who live in the hyphen between cultures.

The question of oral tradition is paramount. Indigenous women’s writing often deliberately mimics the rhythms of oral storytelling: repetition, call-and-response, direct address to the listener. Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* (1977) weaves Laguna Pueblo stories (including the figure of Thought-Woman, who creates the world by thinking it) into a novel about a returning WWII veteran. The novel refuses linear Western narrative, circling back on itself like a ceremonial chant. This is not experimental for its own sake; it is a political insistence that Indigenous epistemologies require Indigenous forms.

IV. Cultural Assertion: Beyond Resistance to Re-existence

Reclaiming Goddesses and Ancestors

A common critique of resistance literature is that it remains trapped within the terms of the oppressor. Dalit and Indigenous women’s writing, however, moves from resistance to what Peruvian scholar Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui calls re-existence: the active construction of alternative worlds using fragments of pre-colonial and non-capitalist traditions.

For Dalit women, this means reclaiming figures demonized by Brahminical Hinduism. The goddess Matangi—associated with pollution, outcaste communities, and the left-hand Tantric path—appears in poetry by Sujatha Gidla and K. Suneetha Rani. Similarly, the figure of Rohini, a Dalit woman in the Mahabharata who challenges the god Balarama, becomes a feminist icon. In Gogu Shyamala’s Telugu short stories, the Dalit woman’s kitchen garden—growing kanda (yams) and tangedu (cassia) forbidden by upper-caste purity codes—becomes a site of gastronomic rebellion.

Indigenous women’s cultural assertion often centers on matrilineal clan systems. The Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) tradition of clan mothers who select and depose chiefs appears in Beth Brant’s (Mohawk) essay “Grandmothers of the Light” (1991). Brant argues that European colonizers deliberately undermined the political authority of Indigenous women, imposing patriarchal models of governance. Writing becomes a method of restoring those matrilineal archives. In Aotearoa, Māori writer Patricia Grace’s *Potiki* (1986)

centers on a whānau (extended family) fighting land confiscation; the grandmother's knowledge of carving and weaving becomes a form of legal testimony that Western courts cannot recognize.

The Limits of Analogy: Caste vs. Race

While this article has drawn analogies between Dalit and Indigenous women's writing, it is crucial to note incommensurabilities. Caste is not race. Caste is a system of graded hereditary occupation and endogamy with no geographical escape; one cannot "pass" as a different caste in the way one might pass as white. Moreover, caste operates through purity/pollution based on birth, not phenotype (though caste and race intertwine in practice, especially with Afro-Dalit communities).

Indigenous identity, by contrast, is tied to specific land bases, treaties, and sovereign nationhood. A Dalit woman from Tamil Nadu has no claim to pre-colonial sovereignty in the way a Navajo or Māori woman does. This difference matters for literary form: Indigenous women's writing often includes tribal enrollment numbers, land claims, and treaty rights as narrative elements; Dalit women's writing focuses on the village, the slum, the urban workspace—spaces of displacement and migration.

Furthermore, the role of religion differs. Many Dalit women have converted to Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam to escape caste, but these religions carry their own patriarchal baggage. Indigenous women's writing often reclaims pre-Christian spiritualities (Midewiwin, the Sun Dance, Candomblé), but these are also subject to state repression and New Age appropriation. A Dalit Buddhist woman writes against the caste Hindu majority; an Indigenous woman writing about sweat lodge ceremonies writes both against Christian colonialism and against white tourists who commodify her spirituality.

V. Conclusion: Towards a Comparative Decolonial Feminist Praxis

Dalit and Indigenous women's writing is not a niche subgenre. It is a central archive for understanding how the most marginalized subjects transform trauma into theory, pain into poesis, silence into song. These writers refuse the demand to be "authentic" victims or "inspirational" survivors. They are, as Anzaldúa said, *nepantleras*—border-crossers who dwell in the uncertain space between worlds, translating one system of violence into another system of possibility.

For mainstream feminism, these writings offer a brutal correction: liberal feminism's focus on workplace glass ceilings and reproductive choice looks provincial next to the Dalit woman fighting manual scavenging or the Indigenous woman fighting for her child not to be taken by social services. For postcolonial and

decolonial theory, they remind us that nationalism (both Indian and settler-state nationalisms) is often a masculine project that sacrifices women's bodies at the altar of "tradition."

Finally, these literatures demand a new practice of reading—one that is slow, attentive to vernaculars, and willing to sit with discomfort. As Bama writes in *Karukku*, "The story of our lives is like a thorn. If you try to pull it out carelessly, it will break and fester. But if you remove it with patience, you can heal." The work of reading Dalit and Indigenous women's writing is that patient removal of thorns—not to extract them for academic display, but to let the wound finally close.

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