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From Silence to Defiance: A Study of Dalit Consciousness and Subaltern Resistance in Narendra Jadhav's *Up Against Bondage* and Bandhu Madhav's *The Poisoned Bread*

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ABSTRACT

Dalit literature emerged as a powerful mode of resistance against the caste-based oppression that has historically marginalized large sections of Indian society. Rooted in the ideology of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Dalit writings seek to challenge hegemonic narratives, reclaim human dignity, and articulate the lived experiences of the oppressed. This paper examines the manifestation of Dalit consciousness and subaltern resistance in Narendra Jadhav's *Up Against Bondage* and Bandhu Madhav's *The Poisoned Bread*. Through a comparative analysis of the protagonists Damu and Yetalya, the study investigates the transition from passive acceptance of caste oppression to active resistance and self-assertion. Employing the theoretical perspectives of Ambedkarite thought and Subaltern Studies, the paper argues that both narratives portray the awakening of Dalit consciousness as a transformative force that enables individuals to challenge entrenched structures of social exclusion and humiliation. The study further highlights the significance of education, self-respect, and collective identity in the struggle for social justice. By analyzing the symbolic and ideological dimensions of the texts, the paper demonstrates how Dalit literature functions as a counter-discourse to caste hegemony and contributes to the broader project of social emancipation.

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Introduction

Indian society has historically been shaped by caste-based hierarchies that determine social status, occupation, access to resources, and relationships between communities. The caste system has denied dignity and equal opportunities to Dalits, subjecting them to untouchability, economic exploitation, and social exclusion. Although legal and social reforms have challenged these practices, caste continues to influence various aspects of contemporary Indian life. Dalit literature has emerged as an important form of resistance against this historical injustice. It brings marginalised experiences into literary and public discussions and questions the social structures that have normalised discrimination.

Unlike literary representations that approach caste primarily from an external perspective, Dalit literature frequently presents the experiences of oppression from within the community. It records humiliation, suffering, anger, and resistance while asserting the right of Dalits to represent their own histories. Such writing transforms personal experiences into a broader critique of caste-based inequality. It also challenges dominant narratives that portray traditional social arrangements as natural or unquestionable.

Narendra Jadhav and Bandhu Madhav are significant contributors to Dalit literature, whose writings expose the deep-rooted inequalities of the caste system and foreground the struggles of marginalized communities for dignity, equality, and social justice. Narendra Jadhav is an eminent Indian economist, writer, and educationist whose literary works explore caste-based discrimination, social mobility, and the transformative influence of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's ideology. His narrative *Up Against Bondage*, an excerpt from *Untouchables: My Family's Triumphant Journey Out of the Caste System in Modern India*, portrays the emergence of Dalit self-respect through Damu's defiance of oppressive caste authority. Bandhu Madhav, a pioneering Marathi Dalit writer, is known for his realistic portrayal of caste oppression, economic exploitation, and the struggle for human dignity. His short story *The Poisoned Bread*, published in the anthology edited by Arjun Dangle, exposes the dehumanizing effects of caste-based servitude and highlights education as a means of emancipation. Although their narratives differ in their representations of resistance, both writers challenge caste hegemony and demonstrate how the awakening of Dalit consciousness can inspire the pursuit of freedom, self-respect, and social transformation.

Although the works differ in their narrative approaches, both demonstrate that resistance begins when oppressed individuals recognise the injustice of the social order. Their experiences also reveal that resistance does not always take the form of open confrontation. It may emerge through refusal, education, questioning inherited practices, and the determination to live with dignity.

The importance of education connects these works to contemporary society. Education can provide marginalised individuals with knowledge, employment opportunities, social mobility, and the ability to question discrimination. However, educational access alone cannot guarantee equality when caste prejudice, economic disadvantage, and institutional exclusion continue to exist. Reading these works in the present context therefore helps us understand education not merely as a means of individual advancement but also as a means of developing social awareness and challenging inequality.

Caste as a System of Oppression and Control

Caste oppression in both works operates through the control of labour, food, social relationships, and personal dignity. The characters are not merely victims of individual prejudice; their experiences reveal a system that benefits from the continued subordination of Dalit communities. Their suffering is connected to social structures that restrict their choices and treat their labour as an obligation rather than a contribution deserving fair compensation.

In *Up Against Bondage*, Damu belongs to the Mahar community and is expected to perform hereditary village duties associated with his caste. These duties are not presented as freely chosen occupations. They are part of a social arrangement in which Dalits are expected to serve dominant caste authorities and accept humiliation without protest. Damu's position illustrates how caste attempts to regulate not only a person's occupation but also the extent to which that person is permitted to exercise individual freedom.

The demand that Damu perform a degrading task demonstrates the connection between caste hierarchy and institutional authority. The police officer expects obedience because Damu belongs to a subordinated community. His personal feelings and dignity are treated as irrelevant. The incident exposes the unequal distribution of power within the village, where the authority of dominant groups is reinforced by the expectation that Dalits must submit.

A similar structure of domination appears in *The Poisoned Bread*. Yetalya Aja works for Bapu Patil, an upper-caste landlord, but his labour does not guarantee him adequate food or respectful treatment. The landlord controls access to essential resources and uses his social position to humiliate Yetalya. The relationship between the two characters demonstrates how economic dependency strengthens caste-based authority.

In both narratives, the oppressed characters are denied the freedom to negotiate their conditions. Their labour sustains the social and economic order, yet their contribution does not earn them equal

recognition. Caste therefore functions through both material exploitation and psychological domination. It limits access to resources while encouraging the belief that certain people are naturally entitled to command and others are expected to obey.

The two works challenge this arrangement by revealing its cruelty through the experiences of ordinary individuals. Their narratives make visible the injustice concealed within everyday practices and expose the human cost of a social system built on inherited inequality.

Labour, Food, and the Denial of Human Dignity

Food is an important symbol in *The Poisoned Bread*. It represents not only physical survival but also the unequal relationships through which caste oppression is maintained. Yetalya's dependence on the landlord for food reveals the vulnerability of people whose labour is controlled by socially powerful individuals. His inability to obtain proper food after working reflects the denial of a basic human necessity. The bread that Yetalya receives from the cattle pen is contaminated and unfit for consumption. Nevertheless, he takes it because his circumstances leave him with limited alternatives. The incident exposes the extent to which caste-based poverty can force people to accept conditions that threaten their health and dignity. Food, which should sustain life, becomes a means through which humiliation is experienced. The consequences are devastating. Yetalya becomes seriously ill, and the doctor attributes his illness to toxins associated with the mouldy food. His suffering reveals that caste oppression can have direct physical consequences. The discrimination he experiences is not limited to social insults; it affects his health, security, and survival.

In *Up Against Bondage*, the denial of food similarly demonstrates how caste authority operates through control over basic needs. Damu is expected to obey orders even when his own dignity and physical needs are disregarded. His experience exposes the cruelty of a system in which those who perform essential duties are denied humane treatment. The significance of these incidents extends beyond the historical settings of the stories. In contemporary society, unequal access to food, secure employment, housing, healthcare, and educational resources continues to affect disadvantaged communities. Although these inequalities cannot all be explained by caste alone, caste discrimination can intensify existing economic disadvantages.

By foregrounding food and labour, both works demonstrate that social equality must involve more than formal recognition of rights. It requires access to the resources necessary for a dignified life. Their

representation of everyday deprivation encourages readers to examine how discrimination is sustained through ordinary economic and social relationships.

From Silence to Defiance: The Emergence of Dalit Consciousness

Dalit consciousness develops when oppressed individuals begin to recognise that their suffering is not an unavoidable part of life but the result of an unjust social order. This awareness challenges the belief that inherited social positions must be accepted without question. In both works, the movement towards resistance begins with the recognition that human dignity should not be sacrificed to caste expectations.

In *Up Against Bondage*, Damu's confrontation with the police officer marks a decisive moment in this process. When he is ordered to retrieve a dead woman's body, he refuses to comply with the demand. His refusal challenges the expectation that a Mahar must obey upper-caste authority regardless of the humiliation involved. The officer responds with physical violence, attempting to restore the hierarchy through force. Damu's response becomes particularly significant when he resists the beating and refuses to submit. His action breaks the pattern of unquestioning obedience expected from him. He does not simply reject a particular order; he challenges the authority that assumes his inferiority. His declaration that he will no longer bow down expresses a newly asserted sense of self-respect. However, resistance comes at a cost. Damu's family criticises his decision because his behaviour challenges established customs and threatens the security associated with familiar social arrangements. Their response reveals how oppressive systems may be maintained not only through direct violence but also through fear, social pressure, and the internalisation of traditional expectations. Damu eventually leaves the village with his wife, Sonu. Their departure suggests that liberation may require separation from an environment in which humiliation has been normalised. His resistance is not merely an emotional reaction; it represents a refusal to continue living under conditions that deny his humanity.

In *The Poisoned Bread*, resistance develops through the relationship between Yetalya and Mahadeva. Yetalya's suffering exposes the injustice of economic dependence, while Mahadeva's education allows him to interpret this suffering as a consequence of caste-based inequality. The older generation's experience becomes a source of knowledge for the younger generation. Yetalya's final appeal is significant because it transforms suffering into a demand for change. Although he cannot reverse the conditions that have shaped his life, he urges Mahadeva to pursue a different future. Education becomes a means of challenging the social restrictions that have limited the community's opportunities.

The contrast between the two works is important. Damu expresses resistance through direct confrontation, while the narrative of Yetalya and Mahadeva presents resistance as a gradual movement towards awareness and change. Both forms challenge the idea that Dalits must accept their inherited position. Together, they demonstrate that resistance may involve immediate refusal as well as the long-term transformation of consciousness.

Intergenerational Resistance and the Transformation of Identity

Both works examine the relationship between generations and reveal that resistance often develops through the transmission of experiences, memories, and aspirations. The older generation bears the immediate burden of caste oppression, while the younger generation may inherit both the memory of suffering and the possibility of challenging it.

In *Up Against Bondage*, Damu's rebellion creates a conflict between his desire for dignity and the expectations of his family. The criticism he receives demonstrates that generations shaped by long-standing social restrictions may regard resistance as dangerous. Their concerns are understandable within a system in which challenging authority can lead to violence, exclusion, and economic insecurity. Damu's decision to leave the village suggests a break with the conditions that have defined his family's life. His action challenges the assumption that future generations must continue to perform inherited duties. The decision opens the possibility of imagining an identity beyond the social position assigned by caste.

In *The Poisoned Bread*, the intergenerational relationship is expressed through Yetalya's appeal to Mahadeva. Yetalya's experience becomes a warning against the continuation of caste-based dependency. He wants his grandson to gain the knowledge and opportunities that were denied to him. His words transform suffering into a legacy of resistance. Mahadeva's education therefore carries both personal and collective significance. It offers him an opportunity to improve his own circumstances while also enabling him to understand the historical conditions that shaped his grandfather's life. His development represents a shift from simply experiencing the consequences of caste to critically examining the system responsible for them.

The two narratives demonstrate that social transformation is rarely completed within a single generation. Resistance may begin with a refusal, continue through the preservation of painful memories, and develop further through education and collective action. The younger generation inherits not only the effects of oppression but also the responsibility and possibility of challenging it.

Education as a Pathway to Emancipation

Education is an important means of challenging caste oppression because it enables individuals to question inherited beliefs, understand their rights, and imagine alternatives to established social hierarchies. It can also create opportunities for economic independence, social mobility, and participation in public life. In Dalit literature, education is not merely a means of acquiring knowledge or qualifications; it represents the possibility of overcoming the social restrictions imposed by caste. Both Narendra Jadhav's *Up Against Bondage* and Bandhu Madhav's *The Poisoned Bread* explore the struggle for dignity and freedom, although they present different paths towards emancipation.

In *Up Against Bondage*, Damu's resistance to caste authority demonstrates the importance of questioning inherited social obligations. As a member of the Mahar community, he is expected to perform hereditary duties and obey the demands of upper-caste authorities. His refusal to retrieve the dead woman's body challenges the assumption that his caste identity requires unquestioning submission. Although his rebellion is not presented as the direct result of formal education, it reflects the development of a critical awareness of injustice. Damu recognises that tradition cannot justify the denial of human dignity. His confrontation with the police officer therefore represents a rejection of the beliefs that sustain caste hierarchy. From an educational perspective, his experience illustrates the importance of developing the ability to question oppressive customs rather than accepting them as natural or unchangeable. Education can encourage this critical consciousness by helping individuals understand equality, freedom, and their rights as human beings. Damu's decision to leave the village with his wife further suggests that emancipation requires the courage to reject social arrangements that restrict individual freedom.

In *The Poisoned Bread*, education is presented more explicitly as a means of overcoming caste-based dependency. Yetalya Aja's suffering under Bapu Patil exposes the economic and social conditions that prevent Dalits from living with dignity. Despite his labour, Yetalya is denied adequate food and forced to accept contaminated bread from the cattle pen. His experience reveals how poverty and caste discrimination can deprive individuals of even their most basic needs. Before his death, Yetalya urges his grandson Mahadeva to pursue education and free the community from the humiliating conditions represented by the accursed bread. His advice expresses the hope that the younger generation will not remain trapped in the same cycle of exploitation. Mahadeva's education provides an opportunity to understand the injustice experienced by his grandfather and to question the social structures responsible for it. Education thus becomes a means of developing critical awareness as well as improving one's social and economic circumstances. Yetalya's appeal also gives education an intergenerational significance: the suffering of one generation becomes a reason for the next generation to seek change.

A comparison of the two narratives reveals that emancipation requires both the rejection of oppressive authority and the development of knowledge that enables sustained social transformation. Damu's refusal represents an immediate assertion of self-respect, while Mahadeva's education offers a means of understanding and challenging the structures that produce caste-based humiliation. Although education is not explicitly identified as the cause of Damu's rebellion, his action illustrates the critical questioning that education can nurture. Similarly, Mahadeva's education is meaningful not simply because it offers individual advancement but because it enables him to recognise the injustice underlying his grandfather's experiences. Both narratives therefore connect emancipation with the recovery of dignity and the rejection of inherited inferiority.

These representations remain relevant to contemporary society, where education has expanded opportunities for Dalit communities but has not entirely eliminated caste discrimination or unequal access to resources. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds may continue to face financial difficulties, social exclusion, and discrimination within educational institutions. The experiences represented in these works remind us that access to education must be accompanied by an environment that ensures dignity, equal opportunity, and freedom from prejudice. Education becomes a genuine instrument of emancipation when it develops critical thinking, challenges discriminatory beliefs, and enables individuals to participate fully in society. Read together, *Up Against Bondage* and *The Poisoned Bread* demonstrate that the struggle for equality involves both the courage to resist oppression and the knowledge needed to transform the social conditions that sustain it.

Dalit Literature as a Form of Social Resistance

Dalit literature challenges the silence surrounding caste oppression by presenting marginalised experiences as essential to understanding society. It records the everyday realities of discrimination and exposes the violence concealed within supposedly ordinary customs. In doing so, it questions dominant histories that have often neglected the experiences and contributions of oppressed communities.

Up Against Bondage presents resistance through Damu's refusal to submit to an unjust command. His experience exposes the violence required to maintain caste authority and demonstrates the significance of an individual's refusal to accept humiliation. The narrative restores agency to a character whom the social system expects to remain obedient.

The Poisoned Bread uses the experience of Yetalya and the development of Mahadeva to reveal the relationship between caste, poverty, and education. The poisoned bread becomes a powerful symbol of the

material and psychological consequences of social exclusion. Yetalya's appeal to Mahadeva transforms the memory of suffering into a demand for a different future.

Both works also challenge the assumption that Dalit communities should be represented only through suffering. Although they depict painful experiences, they also emphasise the capacity for awareness, refusal, learning, and change. Their characters are not simply passive victims. They participate in the struggle to define their identities and imagine alternatives to the social order.

The educational value of these narratives is equally significant. Including Dalit literature in academic curricula can broaden students' understanding of Indian society and make marginalised histories visible. It can also encourage discussions about caste discrimination, constitutional equality, social justice, and the responsibilities of educational institutions.

Literature alone cannot dismantle caste oppression, but it can challenge the beliefs and silences that allow discrimination to continue. By encouraging readers to confront uncomfortable histories and recognise the humanity of marginalised people, Dalit writing contributes to the development of a more critical and inclusive public consciousness.

Comparative Analysis: Different Paths towards Emancipation

Although *Up Against Bondage* and *The Poisoned Bread* address the same broad problem of caste oppression, they present different approaches to resistance. Jadhav's narrative centres on a decisive act of defiance, whereas Madhav's narrative emphasises suffering, memory, and the possibility of transformation through education.

Damu's resistance is immediate and confrontational. He refuses to perform a degrading task and challenges the authority that expects his submission. His experience demonstrates the importance of asserting dignity even when resistance involves physical danger and social consequences. His departure from the village represents a rejection of the conditions that have restricted his freedom.

In *The Poisoned Bread*, resistance is expressed through the desire to prevent the continuation of suffering across generations. Yetalya's experience reveals the destructive consequences of caste-based dependence, while Mahadeva's education offers a means of understanding and challenging that dependence. The narrative suggests that emancipation requires both the recognition of injustice and the development of opportunities to overcome it.

The role of education distinguishes the two works without separating their central concerns. Damu's act of defiance illustrates the importance of self-respect and the refusal to accept inherited inferiority. Mahadeva's educational development demonstrates how knowledge can strengthen such resistance by enabling a deeper understanding of social structures.

Both narratives also reveal the limitations of individual action when the surrounding system remains unchanged. Damu's refusal challenges caste authority, but the social conditions that produce such oppression extend beyond one incident. Mahadeva's education creates new possibilities, but education must be supported by social and institutional changes if its benefits are to contribute to collective emancipation.

Their combined message is that resistance requires multiple forms of action. Immediate confrontation may expose injustice, while education can provide the knowledge and critical awareness necessary for sustained transformation. Self-respect, access to resources, collective awareness, and institutional equality must work together to challenge the continuing effects of caste.

Conclusion

Narendra Jadhav's *Up Against Bondage* and Bandhu Madhav's *The Poisoned Bread* offer significant representations of caste oppression, Dalit consciousness, and subaltern resistance. Through the experiences of Damu, Yetalya Aja, and Mahadeva, the narratives reveal how caste regulates labour, restricts access to resources, subjects Dalit bodies to humiliation, and limits individual freedom. At the same time, they demonstrate that oppression does not eliminate the possibility of resistance.

Damu's refusal to perform a degrading hereditary duty challenges the authority of caste directly. His confrontation with the fauzdar exposes the violence beneath the demand for obedience, while his decision to leave the village expresses the desire to escape the social relationships that deny him freedom. In *The Poisoned Bread*, Yetalya's suffering exposes the consequences of caste-based economic dependence, and his final appeal to Mahadeva transforms personal suffering into a demand for intergenerational change. Education becomes a means of questioning caste ideology and seeking alternatives to inherited dependence.

Read through Ambedkarite thought, the narratives challenge a social order that assigns unequal worth to individuals on the basis of birth. Subaltern studies helps explain how their characters contest structures that restrict their agency and marginalise their experiences, while the concept of hegemony

reveals how caste is maintained through both direct coercion and the normalisation of unequal social relationships.

The comparison establishes that resistance takes multiple forms. Damu's direct defiance challenges immediate oppression, while Mahadeva's pursuit of education represents a gradual effort to transform the conditions that reproduce caste dependence. Neither action guarantees complete emancipation, but both reject the assumption that subordination is inevitable.

Ultimately, the movement from silence to defiance represents a transformation in the understanding of authority, identity, and dignity. Silence may be imposed by fear and dependency, whereas defiance begins when oppressive practices are recognised as unjust and open to challenge. Through their representations of self-respect, resistance, and education, *Up Against Bondage* and *The Poisoned Bread* affirm that freedom begins with the rejection of caste-based subordination. Their central message is that the struggle for emancipation requires both the courage to challenge oppressive authority and the determination to create a more equal social future.

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