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Beyond the Subaltern: Dalit Literary Theory as a Challenge to Postcolonial Abstraction

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Abstract:

This paper explores the critical tension between postcolonial abstraction and caste-based realism by examining how Dalit Literary Theory challenges the assumptions of Subaltern Studies and postcolonial discourse. While Subaltern Studies emerged to recover the voices of the marginalized in colonial historiography, it often failed to account for the specificity of caste oppression in India. Postcolonial theory, similarly, tends to universalize resistance through abstract categories like hybridity and mimicry, sidelining the lived experiences of Dalits. In contrast, Dalit Literary Theory, rooted in Ambedkarite thought and the Dalit Panthers movement, insists on self-representation, political urgency, and experiential truth. Through close readings of key texts such as *Joothan*, *Karukku*, and *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, this paper argues that Dalit literature not only speaks from the margins but also redefines the very terms of marginality. It offers a grounded, confrontational, and transformative literary praxis that resists elite mediation and theoretical erasure.

Keywords: subaltern, Dalit literary theory, postcolonial, abstraction, marginalised.

1. Introduction

The intellectual landscape of postcolonial India has been shaped by a range of critical frameworks that seek to interrogate power, voice, and representation. Among these, Postcolonial Theory and Subaltern Studies have played a pivotal role in challenging colonial

historiography and recovering the agency of the oppressed. However, these frameworks have often been critiqued for their failure to adequately engage with caste, a deeply entrenched system of social stratification unique to the Indian subcontinent. While Subaltern Studies aimed to write history “from below,” its early focus on class-based peasant insurgency largely ignored the structural violence of caste. Similarly, Postcolonial Theory, with its emphasis on hybridity, mimicry, and the colonizer-colonized binary, tends to universalize oppression in ways that obscure the specificity of Dalit experience.

Dalit Literary Theory emerges as a powerful counterpoint to these limitations. Rooted in the lived realities of caste discrimination and inspired by the radical politics of B.R. Ambedkar and the Dalit Panthers, it offers a literature of resistance that is unapologetically political, autobiographical, and confrontational. Dalit writers reject the need for elite validation or theoretical mediation, insisting instead on the authority of lived experience. Their works challenge not only Brahminical hegemony but also the academic elitism of postcolonial discourse.

This paper seeks to explore how Dalit Literary Theory reconfigures the notion of the subaltern by asserting a self-representational aesthetic that is grounded in pain, protest, and political consciousness. Through a comparative analysis of key texts and theoretical debates, it argues that Dalit literature does not merely seek inclusion within existing frameworks but demands a rethinking of the frameworks themselves. In doing so, it challenges the abstraction of postcolonial theory and reclaims the right to speak, write, and resist on its own terms.

2. Postcolonial Theory and Subaltern Studies

Postcolonial theory emerged in the latter half of the 20th century as a response to the cultural, political, and epistemological legacies of colonialism. It interrogates how colonial power structures persist in literature, language, and identity even after formal decolonization.



Foundational thinkers such as Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have shaped the field by emphasizing the hybridity of postcolonial identities, the ambivalence of colonial discourse, and the silencing of subaltern voices.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) laid the groundwork by exposing how Western representations of the East were not innocent or objective but deeply embedded in imperial power. Homi Bhabha introduced concepts like mimicry, ambivalence, and the "Third Space" to describe the complex negotiations of identity in colonial and postcolonial contexts. These ideas, while influential, often remain abstract and focused on cultural representation rather than material conditions.

In the Indian context, Subaltern Studies emerged in the 1980s as a historiographical intervention led by Ranajit Guha and a group of scholars who sought to "write history from below." Their goal was to recover the agency of peasants, tribals, and other marginalized groups who had been excluded from both colonial and nationalist narratives. Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983) exemplifies this approach by focusing on the autonomous political consciousness of rural insurgents.

However, Subaltern Studies has been critiqued for its early neglect of caste. While it aimed to recover the voices of the oppressed, it often privileged class-based analysis and peasant insurgency over the structural violence of caste hierarchies. Moreover, the reliance on archival sources and elite academic discourse raised questions about whether the subaltern could ever truly "speak" within such frameworks.

Gayatri Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) addresses this dilemma. She argues that the subaltern is doubly silenced—first by colonial power and then by postcolonial intellectuals who claim to represent them. Her critique is both a call for ethical representation and a warning against the epistemic violence of speaking for others. Yet,

Spivak's own dense prose and theoretical abstraction have led some critics to question whether her work is accessible to the very subalterns she seeks to empower.

In sum, while postcolonial theory and Subaltern Studies have made significant contributions to understanding power and representation, their limitations become evident when confronted with the specificity and immediacy of caste-based oppression in India. This gap is precisely where Dalit Literary Theory intervenes.

3. Dalit Literary Theory: Origins and Philosophy

Dalit Literary Theory is not merely a literary framework—it is a political and cultural movement rooted in the lived experiences of caste oppression in India. Unlike postcolonial theory, which often emerges from academic institutions and elite discourse, Dalit Literary Theory is forged in the crucible of social struggle. It is shaped by the writings of B.R. Ambedkar, the activism of the Dalit Panthers, and the voices of countless Dalit writers who have used literature as a tool of resistance and assertion.

The philosophical foundation of Dalit Literary Theory lies in Ambedkar's radical critique of caste and Hindu orthodoxy. In *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar argued that caste is not merely a social hierarchy but a system of graded inequality that dehumanizes millions. His insistence on dignity, education, and self-respect became the cornerstone of Dalit consciousness. Dalit literature, therefore, is not just about aesthetics—it is about asserting humanity in the face of systemic dehumanization.

The Dalit Panthers, formed in Maharashtra in 1972, played a crucial role in politicizing Dalit identity and catalyzing a literary renaissance. Inspired by the Black Panthers in the United States, they rejected Gandhian paternalism and demanded radical social change. Their manifesto emphasized the need for Dalits to write their own stories, challenge Brahminical dominance, and create a literature that reflects their pain, anger, and aspirations.



Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (2004) is a seminal text that articulates the principles of Dalit Literary Theory. Limbale argues that Dalit literature must be judged not by conventional literary standards but by its capacity to convey the truth of Dalit life. He emphasizes that Dalit literature is born out of suffering and struggle, and its aesthetic is one of protest, not polish. It is raw, direct, and confrontational—qualities that are often dismissed by mainstream critics but are central to its power.

Dalit Literary Theory also challenges the notion of literature as a neutral or universal space. It insists that literature is always political and that the dominant literary canon in India has historically excluded Dalit voices. By foregrounding autobiography, oral history, and vernacular expression, Dalit literature reclaims narrative space and redefines what counts as literary.

In essence, Dalit Literary Theory is a praxis—a fusion of theory and action. It is a literature of the oppressed, by the oppressed, and for the oppressed. It does not seek validation from elite institutions; it demands transformation.

4. Critique of Postcolonial Abstraction

One of the most persistent critiques of postcolonial theory—especially in the Indian context—is its tendency toward abstraction and elite mediation. While postcolonial discourse has been instrumental in deconstructing colonial narratives and exposing the cultural legacies of empire, it often fails to engage with the material realities of caste. This oversight is not merely academic; it has profound implications for whose voices are heard and whose struggles are theorized.

Postcolonial theory frequently operates within the realm of metaphor and semiotics. Concepts like hybridity, mimicry, and the “Third Space,” as articulated by Homi Bhabha, are intellectually rich but often disconnected from the lived experiences of marginalized

communities. These frameworks tend to universalize oppression, collapsing diverse forms of marginality—race, class, gender, caste—into a homogenized postcolonial subject. In doing so, they risk erasing the specificity of caste-based violence and resistance.

Gayatri Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is emblematic of this tension. While Spivak critiques the epistemic violence of elite representation, her own prose is notoriously dense and inaccessible. Her conclusion—that the subaltern cannot speak without being spoken for—has been both influential and controversial. Dalit writers and scholars have challenged this claim, arguing that the subaltern not only speaks but does so with clarity, urgency, and authority—provided they are not silenced by academic gatekeeping.

Moreover, the institutional location of postcolonial theory—often within Western universities and English-language scholarship—raises questions about its relevance to grassroots movements. Dalit Literary Theory, by contrast, emerges from vernacular traditions, oral histories, and community activism. It is not a discourse imposed from above but one that rises from below, grounded in the everyday realities of caste discrimination.

The abstraction of postcolonial theory also manifests in its aesthetic preferences. Literary texts that conform to postcolonial tropes—fragmentation, irony, intertextuality—are often celebrated, while those that employ direct, confrontational language are dismissed as unsophisticated. Dalit literature, with its raw autobiographical style and political urgency, challenges these aesthetic norms. It insists that literature must serve the oppressed, not merely entertain or theorize.

In sum, postcolonial abstraction, while valuable in certain contexts, becomes problematic when it obscures the structural violence of caste. Dalit Literary Theory confronts this erasure by foregrounding experience over theory, protest over metaphor, and voice over mediation.



5. Dalit Literature as Counter-Discourse

Dalit literature does not merely exist as a subcategory within Indian literary traditions—it actively resists and redefines those traditions. It functions as a counter-discourse to both Brahminical literary norms and the elite abstraction of postcolonial theory. By foregrounding lived experience, political urgency, and self-representation, Dalit literature challenges the dominant paradigms of voice, aesthetics, and legitimacy.

One of the most powerful aspects of Dalit literature is its autobiographical impulse. Texts like Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* and Bama's *Karukku* are not fictionalized accounts but direct testimonies of caste-based humiliation, resistance, and identity formation. Valmiki recounts the indignity of being forced to clean toilets and eat leftovers—"joothan"—as a child, exposing the everyday violence of untouchability. Bama, a Dalit Christian woman, narrates her journey through caste and gender oppression, offering a rare intersectional perspective. These narratives are not mediated by elite intellectuals; they are authored by Dalits themselves, asserting their right to speak and be heard.

Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* provides a theoretical framework for understanding this literature. He argues that Dalit literature must be evaluated not by conventional literary standards but by its capacity to convey the truth of Dalit life. Limbale writes, "Dalit literature is not a literature of imagination. It is a literature of reality." This insistence on realism, pain, and protest stands in stark contrast to the metaphorical and symbolic language often favored in postcolonial texts.

Dalit literature also challenges the notion of literary universality. Mainstream Indian literature, dominated by upper-caste voices, often portrays caste as a peripheral issue or romanticizes rural life without acknowledging its brutal hierarchies. Dalit writers reject this erasure. Their works are confrontational, refusing to conform to sanitized narratives or aesthetic expectations. They

write in vernacular languages, use colloquial expressions, and draw from oral traditions—strategies that disrupt the elitism of literary production.

Moreover, Dalit literature reclaims the act of writing itself as a political gesture. In a society where Dalits were historically denied education and literacy, the very act of writing becomes revolutionary. It is a declaration of agency, a refusal to be silenced. This is particularly significant in contrast to postcolonial theory, which often theorizes resistance without embodying it.

Dalit literature also critiques the gatekeeping of literary institutions. Many Dalit writers have struggled to find publishers, faced censorship, or been excluded from literary festivals. Yet, they persist, creating alternative platforms and communities. Journals like **Dalit Voice** and **Forward Press**, and anthologies like **Poisoned Bread**, have played a crucial role in amplifying Dalit voices.

In essence, Dalit literature is not just a response to oppression—it is a redefinition of literature itself. It challenges who gets to write, what gets written, and how writing is judged. It is a literature of rupture, resistance, and reclamation—a counter-discourse that demands not inclusion but transformation.

6. Intersectionality and Emerging Voices

While Dalit Literary Theory has traditionally focused on caste as the primary axis of oppression, recent developments have expanded its scope to include intersectional perspectives. Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, refers to the overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination—such as caste, gender, class, and religion—that shape individual experiences. In the Indian context, Dalit feminism has emerged as a powerful force that critiques both Brahminical patriarchy and the male-dominated narratives within Dalit discourse itself.



Writers like Urmila Pawar and Baby Kamble have brought gender into the heart of Dalit literature. Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* and Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* are groundbreaking autobiographies that explore the double marginalization faced by Dalit women. These texts challenge not only caste hierarchies but also the patriarchal structures within Dalit communities, demanding a more inclusive and nuanced literary theory.

Dalit queer voices are also beginning to reshape the discourse. Writers and activists are exploring how sexuality intersects with caste, revealing new dimensions of marginalization and resistance. These emerging voices expand the boundaries of Dalit Literary Theory, making it more reflective of the diverse realities within Dalit communities.

Digital platforms have played a crucial role in amplifying these voices. Social media, blogs, and online journals allow Dalit writers to bypass traditional publishing gatekeepers and reach wider audiences. Initiatives like *Dalit Camera* and *Velivada* provide spaces for dialogue, critique, and community-building. These platforms democratize literary production and challenge the elitism of both mainstream and academic discourse.

In embracing intersectionality, Dalit Literary Theory becomes not only more inclusive but also more powerful. It moves beyond singular narratives of caste to engage with the complex, layered experiences of Dalit individuals. This evolution strengthens its challenge to postcolonial abstraction and reaffirms its commitment to representing the full spectrum of subaltern voices.

7. Contemporary Relevance in Indian Society

In contemporary India, the relevance of Dalit Literary Theory has intensified amid rising caste-based violence, political polarization, and cultural resurgence. While postcolonial theory continues to be taught in universities and debated in academic circles, Dalit literature has become a living force in grassroots activism, social media discourse, and community

mobilization. Its immediacy and authenticity make it a vital tool for confronting the persistent realities of caste oppression.

The resurgence of caste-based discrimination in education, employment, and public life underscores the urgency of Dalit narratives. Incidents such as the institutional harassment and death of Rohith Vemula in 2016, and the continued marginalization of Dalit students in elite institutions, reveal how caste continues to shape access to knowledge and power. Dalit literature responds to these injustices not with theoretical abstraction but with direct, emotionally charged testimony that demands accountability.

Moreover, Dalit Literary Theory has influenced political movements and legal reforms. It has inspired campaigns for reservation, anti-discrimination laws, and the assertion of Dalit identity in electoral politics. Writers and activists often collaborate, using literature as a platform for advocacy and resistance. This fusion of art and activism distinguishes Dalit literature from postcolonial texts that often remain confined to symbolic critique.

The digital age has further amplified Dalit voices. Platforms like *Dalit Camera*, *Velivada*, and *Round Table India* provide spaces for Dalit writers, scholars, and artists to share their work, critique dominant narratives, and build solidarity. These platforms democratize literary production and challenge the gatekeeping of mainstream media and academia.

In contrast, postcolonial theory's relevance in India has waned in practical terms. Its abstract formulations and elite orientation make it less accessible to those engaged in everyday struggles. Dalit Literary Theory, by centering lived experience and political urgency, offers a more grounded and transformative framework for understanding and resisting oppression in modern India.



8. Conclusion

Dalit Literary Theory stands as a radical intervention in the landscape of Indian literary and cultural criticism. It not only challenges the aesthetic and political assumptions of postcolonial and subaltern frameworks but also redefines what it means to write from the margins. While postcolonial theory and Subaltern Studies have contributed significantly to the critique of colonialism and elite historiography, their abstraction and elite mediation often render them inadequate for engaging with the brutal specificity of caste oppression.

Dalit literature, by contrast, is grounded in lived experience. It speaks with urgency, clarity, and defiance. It does not seek to be theorized by others—it theorizes itself. Through autobiographical narratives, vernacular expression, and political assertion, Dalit writers reclaim voice and agency from structures that have historically silenced them. Their work is not merely a supplement to existing theories; it is a challenge to the very foundations of those theories.

As India continues to grapple with caste-based violence, discrimination, and exclusion, Dalit Literary Theory remains a vital tool for resistance and transformation. It demands that literature serve the oppressed, that theory be accountable to lived reality, and that representation be rooted in authenticity. In doing so, it compels scholars, writers, and readers to rethink the politics of voice, the ethics of representation, and the purpose of literature itself.

Ultimately, Dalit Literary Theory does not ask whether the subaltern can speak—it declares that the subaltern has spoken, is speaking, and will continue to speak. And it insists that we listen.

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