

Fictional Representations of Dalit Womanhood and Resistance in Post-2000 Indian Novels.

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Abstract—In recent decades, Indian fiction has shown a growing interest in representing the lives of Dalit women with greater depth and sensitivity. Earlier literary narratives often portrayed Dalit women only as victims of caste and gender violence, leaving little space for their emotional worlds or personal agency. This research paper studies selected post-2000 Indian novels *The Grip of Change* by P. Sivakami, *Pyre* by Perumal Murugan, *I Have Become the Tide* by Githa Hariharan, and *Let the Rumours Be True* by Pradnya Daya Pawar to examine how fictional narratives depict Dalit womanhood and resistance. Using Dalit feminist and intersectional perspectives, the paper explores how caste, patriarchy, community pressure, memory, and emotional labour shape the everyday experiences of Dalit women. The study argues that these novels redefine resistance not as dramatic rebellion but as a continuous process expressed through silence, endurance, love, memory, and self-awareness. Fiction, therefore, becomes an important space for making visible the inner lives and quiet struggles of Dalit women in contemporary India.

Index Terms—Dalit women, Indian fiction, resistance, caste, gender, intersectionality

I. INTRODUCTION

Dalit women have remained largely marginalised in Indian literary traditions for a long time. Even within Dalit literature, which emerged as a strong response to caste-based oppression, women's voices were often sidelined. Early Dalit narratives focused mainly on collective caste suffering and male experiences of discrimination, leaving little room to explore how caste and patriarchy together shape the lives of Dalit women. As a result, Dalit women were frequently portrayed as silent sufferers rather than active individuals with emotional depth and agency. After 2000, Indian fiction began to address this absence more seriously. Contemporary writers started

paying attention to the everyday lives, emotional conflicts, and psychological struggles of Dalit women. These narratives do not simply document suffering; instead, they explore how Dalit women think, endure, resist, and negotiate their identities within restrictive social structures. Fiction allows writers to imagine inner lives, complex relationships, and symbolic situations that reveal deeper truths about lived experience.

The novels selected for this study *The Grip of Change*, *Pyre*, *I Have Become the Tide*, and *Let the Rumours Be True* represent this shift in literary focus. Though different in narrative style and setting, all these texts centre Dalit women and examine how they navigate caste, gender, family, and community control. Rather than presenting resistance as loud or revolutionary, these novels highlight quiet and everyday forms of agency such as emotional strength, silence, memory, and refusal.

By focusing on fictional narratives, this paper avoids confusing autobiography with the novel form. Fiction provides the freedom to explore emotional realities and social tensions without being restricted to personal testimony. This study aims to show that post-2000 Indian fiction redefines resistance as a slow, ongoing process rooted in daily life rather than heroic confrontation.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

This study is informed by Dalit feminist thought and the concept of intersectionality. Dalit feminism challenges mainstream feminist approaches that often ignore caste while discussing women's oppression. It argues that Dalit women experience discrimination differently because caste and gender operate together,

not separately. Their social position is shaped by multiple forms of inequality, including caste hierarchy, patriarchy, economic dependence, and community control.

Intersectionality, a term developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, helps explain how different systems of power overlap and intensify one another. When applied to Dalit women's fiction, intersectionality reveals how caste-based discrimination deepens gendered vulnerability and affects access to safety, education, love, and voice. This framework allows resistance to be understood not as a single political act but as an everyday negotiation of selfhood.

Methodologically, the paper follows a qualitative textual analysis. Close reading is used to study characterisation, narrative voice, symbolism, and thematic patterns in the selected novels. Special attention is given to silence, emotional labour, memory, and internal resistance elements often ignored in historical or sociological accounts. A comparative approach helps identify shared concerns across texts while recognising their differences.

Fictional Narratives of Dalit Womanhood and Resistance

Patriarchy Within the Community in *The Grip of Change*

P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* offers a critical look at power relations within the Dalit community itself. Instead of presenting oppression as coming only from dominant castes, the novel exposes how patriarchal control continues to shape women's lives within marginalised communities. Male characters who speak about equality and reform often fail to treat women as equals in their personal lives.

Dalit women in the novel are expected to support social movements while silently accepting injustice at home. Their labour and emotional strength are taken for granted, and their voices are frequently ignored. Sivakami shows how women are asked to sacrifice personal dignity for the sake of community unity. This creates a situation where resistance is difficult and risky.

Resistance in *The Grip of Change* develops slowly. It appears through moments of awareness, exhaustion, and inner questioning rather than open rebellion. Women begin to recognise the limits of endurance and

the cost of silence. The novel suggests that true social change is impossible unless gender inequality within oppressed communities is also addressed.

III. LOVE AND CASTE VIOLENCE IN *PYRE*

Perumal Murugan's *Pyre* focuses on an inter-caste marriage and reveals how deeply caste is rooted in everyday life. The novel shows that caste violence is not always sudden or visible; it exists in silence, gossip, and collective memory. Love across caste boundaries becomes a powerful but dangerous act.

The female protagonist's decision to marry outside her caste challenges social norms and exposes her to constant fear and surveillance. Her body becomes the site where caste honour and control are enforced. Murugan portrays how women bear the greatest consequences of transgression, as their choices are closely monitored and punished.

Pyre does not present resistance as triumphant. Instead, it highlights the emotional cost of defiance and the vulnerability of women who challenge social boundaries. Love becomes a political act that exposes the limits of personal freedom in a rigid caste system.

IV. MEMORY AND STORYTELLING IN *I HAVE BECOME THE TIDE*

Githa Hariharan's *I Have Become the Tide* explores resistance through memory and storytelling. The novel challenges official histories that erase Dalit voices and experiences. By reclaiming the right to narrate the past, Dalit women assert control over their identities. In this novel, resistance is intellectual and emotional rather than physical. Education, reflection, and reinterpretation of history become tools of empowerment. Dalit women question inherited narratives of shame and marginality by remembering differently.

Hariharan suggests that memory itself is a form of resistance. By telling their own stories, Dalit women challenge dominant versions of history and claim space within cultural discourse.

V. RUMOUR AND PSYCHOLOGICAL RESISTANCE IN *LET THE RUMOURS BE TRUE*

Pradnya Daya Pawar's *Let the Rumours Be True* examines how rumour and public opinion control women's lives. Reputation in the novel is shaped by

community judgement rather than truth. Rumours function as tools of discipline that regulate women's behaviour and identity.

The protagonist's resistance is largely internal. She learns to detach her sense of self from the stories told about her. By refusing to internalise shame and by asserting emotional independence, she reclaims agency.

The novel shows that resistance does not always require confrontation. Sometimes, refusal and self-recognition are powerful forms of defiance.

VI. DISCUSSION: RESISTANCE AS AN EVERYDAY PROCESS

A comparative reading of the selected novels reveals that resistance in Dalit women's lives is rarely sudden or spectacular. Instead, it is slow, layered, and deeply rooted in everyday existence. These fictional narratives challenge the dominant understanding of resistance as overt political rebellion and instead highlight how agency is expressed through emotional endurance, silence, memory, and self-awareness. By focusing on ordinary experiences, the novels present resistance as a continuous process rather than a single transformative event.

One of the most significant aspects of resistance across these texts is the role of silence. Silence is often viewed as submission, but these narratives complicate that assumption. For many Dalit women, silence becomes a survival strategy in environments where speech can invite violence or exclusion. In *The Grip of Change* and *Pyre*, silence reflects the limited choices available to women, yet it also signals awareness and emotional resistance. This form of resistance may not dismantle oppressive systems immediately, but it allows women to retain a sense of self within hostile conditions.

Another important theme is emotional labour. Dalit women in these novels are expected to bear emotional responsibility for family harmony, community reputation, and social stability. Their suffering is normalised, while their resilience is rarely acknowledged. Resistance, therefore, often takes the form of emotional withdrawal, refusal to comply fully, or private acts of self-preservation. Fiction allows these invisible struggles to be articulated, giving value to forms of resistance that are often dismissed as passive.

Memory and storytelling also function as powerful tools of resistance. In *I Have Become the Tide*, reclaiming history becomes a way of challenging erasure and asserting identity. By remembering differently, Dalit women resist dominant narratives that position them as inferior or voiceless. Similarly, in *Let the Rumours Be True*, the rejection of imposed narratives allows the protagonist to reconstruct her identity beyond community judgement. These texts suggest that resistance begins internally, through the redefinition of self.

Together, these novels redefine resistance as relational and lived. It exists in daily negotiations with family, community, and the self. By foregrounding such experiences, post-2000 Indian fiction expands the scope of Dalit feminist discourse and invites readers to recognise resistance in its most human and enduring forms.

VII. CONCLUSION

The fictional narratives examined in this paper demonstrate a significant shift in the way Dalit women are represented in contemporary Indian literature. Moving away from earlier portrayals that confined Dalit women to the role of passive sufferers, post-2000 novels present them as emotionally complex individuals who actively negotiate their identities within intersecting systems of caste and patriarchy. Through nuanced storytelling, these texts bring attention to the inner lives of Dalit women—their fears, desires, memories, and quiet acts of resistance which have long been ignored in dominant literary and social discourse.

The analysis of *The Grip of Change*, *Pyre*, *I Have Become the Tide*, and *Let the Rumours Be True* reveals that resistance does not always take the form of visible rebellion or political confrontation. Instead, it is often embedded in everyday practices such as emotional endurance, refusal to internalise shame, preservation of memory, and the assertion of dignity in private spaces. These novels suggest that resistance is not a singular event but a continuous process shaped by lived experience. By foregrounding such subtle forms of agency, the texts challenge conventional understandings of resistance that prioritise spectacle over survival.

Furthermore, these fictional narratives highlight the importance of storytelling as a political act. By reclaiming voice and narrative authority, Dalit women

resist erasure and challenge dominant histories that have excluded their experiences. Fiction becomes a powerful medium through which silenced perspectives can be articulated, allowing readers to engage with the emotional and psychological realities of caste and gender oppression. In doing so, these novels contribute to a broader reimagining of Dalit feminism that acknowledges vulnerability, resilience, and complexity as integral aspects of resistance.

In conclusion, post-2000 Indian fiction plays a crucial role in reshaping the literary landscape by centring Dalit women's experiences and redefining resistance in more inclusive and humane terms. These narratives not only expand the scope of Dalit literature but also invite readers and scholars to reconsider how agency, dignity, and empowerment are understood. By recognising resistance in everyday life, contemporary fiction affirms the enduring strength of Dalit women and underscores the need for literary spaces that continue to amplify marginalised voices.

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