Marked Flesh, Managed Lives: Caste, Gender, and the Politics of the Body in One Part Woman and Coming Out as Dalit

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Abstract: This study examines how caste and gender intersect to construct the body as a site of oppression, resistance, and identity in contemporary Indian writing. Through a comparative analysis of Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* (2013) and Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit* (2019), the research shows that the caste-gendered body is not simply marked by dual systems of discrimination but is produced through their mutual constitution. Where Murugan's rural narrative exposes the reproductive violence enacted on lower-caste women's bodies, Dutt's urban memoir reveals the aesthetic surveillance that polices Dalit bodies in professional spaces. The study applies intersectionality theory alongside frameworks of body politics to address a persistent gap in scholarship: the tendency to treat caste and gender as parallel rather than co-constitutive forces. Close textual analysis reveals how both authors deploy the body as a narrative strategy to make visible what dominant social orders render invisible. The research argues that these texts demand a reading method attentive to the corporeal dimensions of social hierarchy, where skin, hair, fertility, and physical presence become battlegrounds for dignity and selfhood.

Keywords: ***Caste-body, intersectionality, Dalit literature, gender oppression, body politics, reproductive violence, passing, testimonial narrative.***

I. INTRODUCTION

The body carries history. In India, it carries caste. A Dalit woman's body is not her own; it belongs to a social order that has spent millennia deciding what it means, where it can go, what it can touch. Perumal Murugan and Yashica Dutt write from vastly different worlds—one a novelist imagining rural Tamil Nadu in the early twentieth century, the other a journalist recounting her twenty-first-century flight from caste in cosmopolitan Delhi and New York. Yet both authors return obsessively to the same territory: the flesh itself, as the primary site where caste and gender wage their wars.

This research takes seriously the claim that literature does more than represent social reality—it produces knowledge about how power operates on and through bodies. *One Part Woman* and *Coming Out as Dalit* are not merely texts about caste or about gender. They are anatomies of intersecting violence, maps of how two systems of domination collaborate to create forms of suffering that exceed the sum of their parts. Put simply, Murugan and Dutt show us what happens when a body is marked twice: once by caste, once by gender. The result is a kind of double inscription that transforms the body into what this study calls the "caste-gendered body"—a corporeal site where social hierarchies become flesh.

Existing scholarship has made important strides in documenting caste atrocities and analyzing gender-based violence in South Asian contexts. Dalit studies scholars have mapped the political economy of caste (Guru 1995; Rege 2006), while feminist critics have exposed the patriarchal structures that constrain women's lives (Chakravarti 2003; John 1996). What remains underexplored is the specific mechanics of their intersection—the precise ways caste hierarchies rely on gender norms and vice versa. Most studies treat these as separate analytic categories that occasionally overlap. Few examine how they produce each other.

This gap is not accidental. Academic disciplines encourage specialization: one studies caste *or* gender, Dalit politics *or* women's movements, rural marginalization *or* urban discrimination. The comparative method adopted here cuts against that grain. Placing a Tamil novel beside a Hindi-English memoir, a fictional narrative beside a testimonial one, a story of rural dispossession beside an account of urban passing—these juxtapositions risk violating disciplinary boundaries. But they also reveal patterns that single-text analysis obscures. Both authors, working in radically different genres and geographies, arrive at the same insight: the body is the substrate on which caste and gender write their joint declaration of who matters and who does not.

1.1 Research Problem

The central problem this study addresses is the fragmented understanding of caste and gender oppression in literary scholarship. While critics have examined how Dalit literature represents caste-based exclusion (Limbale 2004; Dangle 1992) and how feminist fiction portrays gendered violence (Joshi 2013; Tharu and Lalita 1991), few have developed theoretical frameworks adequate to the task of reading texts where caste and gender cannot be separated—where a woman's reproductive failure is inseparable from her caste positioning, where a Dalit's professional success depends on performing upper-caste femininity. The problem is both methodological and political. Methodologically, we lack reading practices that can track how these systems reinforce each other at the level of narrative, metaphor, and bodily description. Politically, this scholarly silence mirrors the broader erasure of Dalit women's experiences, which remain marginal even within progressive social movements (Rege 2006).

The comparison between Murugan and Dutt intensifies this problem. One writes fiction, the other memoir. One depicts the past, the other the present. One is canonized within Tamil literature, the other is a debut work in English. Conventional literary criticism would study them separately, in different scholarly conversations. This study argues that their separation is itself symptomatic of how academic knowledge production reproduces caste-gender hierarchies—by keeping rural and urban, fictional and testimonial, Tamil and English apart, we miss the through-line that connects them: the relentless focus on bodily discipline as the instrument of social control.

1.2 Research Questions

This study is organized around three core questions:

1. How do *One Part Woman* and *Coming Out as Dalit* represent the body as a site where caste and gender oppression intersect, and what narrative strategies do the authors employ to make this intersection visible?
2. What are the similarities and differences in how caste marks the body in rural versus urban contexts, and in fictional versus testimonial genres?
3. How do Murugan's protagonist Ponna and Dutt herself navigate, resist, or internalize the corporeal norms imposed on them, and what do their responses reveal about the possibilities and limits of bodily agency under intersecting oppressions?

1.3 Objectives

The research pursues the following objectives:

1. To establish a theoretical framework that treats caste and gender not as additive categories but as mutually constitutive systems that produce distinct forms of embodied oppression.
2. To conduct close textual analysis of body-centered episodes in both texts—scenes of reproductive shaming, aesthetic policing, public humiliation, and physical marking—in order to identify patterns in how the caste-gendered body is constructed and disciplined.
3. To compare the representational politics of fiction and memoir, examining how genre shapes what can be said about the body and who has the authority to say it.
4. To contribute to Dalit feminist scholarship by demonstrating that literature is not merely a reflection of social conditions but an epistemological tool for understanding how power operates through corporeal means.

1.4 Justification and Significance

This study matters because the violence it examines is ongoing. Caste-based sexual assault, reproductive coercion, and aesthetic discrimination are not historical artifacts; they structure contemporary Indian society. The Hathras rape case of 2020, in which a Dalit woman's body was cremated by the state before her family could claim it, demonstrated how the denial of bodily autonomy remains central to caste domination (Kannabiran 2020). Similarly, the continued policing of Dalit women's clothing, speech, and physical appearance in educational and professional settings shows that the body is still the primary battlefield (Paik 2014).

Literature provides access to dimensions of this violence that other discourses cannot reach. Legal documents record atrocities; sociological studies quantify discrimination. Fiction and memoir do something else: they render the phenomenology of living in a caste-gendered body. Murugan makes us feel Ponna's shame when her womb fails to produce an heir. Dutt makes us understand the terror of a bad hair day when your straightened hair is proof of your ability to pass. These affective registers matter. They show us not just that oppression happens but how it feels, how it worms its way into the most intimate experiences of selfhood.

The comparative method is essential here. Reading these texts together reveals that caste-gender oppression operates through similar mechanisms across vast differences in time, place, and genre. The rural Tamil woman of the 1940s and the urban Dalit professional of the 2000s both experience their bodies as sites of scrutiny, sources of shame, and potential instruments of resistance. This continuity demands explanation. It suggests that despite economic modernization, urbanization, and legal reforms, the fundamental logic of caste—the idea that bodies can be ranked, that some flesh is pure and some polluted—remains intact.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW: THEORIZING THE CASTE-GENDERED BODY

Scholarship on caste and gender in South Asia has grown exponentially over the past three decades, yet most studies maintain an analytic separation between these categories. This review maps the existing terrain across five dimensions—what literary critics call the "5 C's": Core theories, Common arguments, Contrasts and tensions, Critiques and gaps, and Connections to the present study. The goal is not encyclopedic coverage but strategic positioning: to show where this research intervenes in ongoing debates.

2.1 Core Theoretical Frameworks

Three theoretical traditions anchor this study's approach to the caste-gendered body.

Intersectionality Theory emerged from Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) analysis of how race and gender create compound discrimination that legal frameworks fail to recognize. Crenshaw argued that Black women's experiences could not be understood by adding racism to sexism; rather, their positioning at the intersection produced qualitatively distinct forms of marginalization. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) extended this framework through the concept of the "matrix of domination," showing how multiple systems of oppression interlock to create both constraint and resistance. Applied to the Indian context, intersectionality reveals how caste and gender are not parallel structures but deeply entangled ones. A Dalit woman does not experience caste discrimination the same way a Dalit man does, nor does she face gendered oppression identically to an upper-caste woman. Her experience is irreducible to either category alone.

Recent scholarship has begun adapting intersectionality to caste (Guru 1995; Rege 2006; Kannabiran 2006). Sharmila Rege's work on Dalit women's testimonial writing argues that their narratives challenge both mainstream feminism's caste blindness and Dalit political movements' gender blindness. Gopal Guru (1995) introduced the concept of "Dalit in Dalit," highlighting how Dalit women occupy the most marginalized position within an already marginalized community. This scholarship is foundational, yet much of it focuses on political movements and social history rather than literary

representation. The question of how intersectionality operates as a reading practice—how we identify it in narrative, metaphor, and characterization—remains open.

Body Politics and Theories of Embodiment provide the second pillar. Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1977) theorized the body as the primary target of modern power, arguing that social control operates not through repression but through the production of docile, self-regulating subjects. Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter* (1993) extended this insight through the concept of performativity, showing how gender is not an essence but a repeated stylization of the body. Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* (1966) analyzed how societies establish boundaries between clean and polluted bodies as a way of maintaining social order.

These frameworks translate productively to caste analysis. The caste system is fundamentally a technology of bodily regulation—it determines which bodies can touch which objects, enter which spaces, consume which foods. As Anupama Rao (2009) argues in *The Caste Question*, the body is "the site at which caste becomes real." Touch pollution, commensality rules, and endogamy all presuppose a body that can contaminate or be contaminated. When we add gender to this analysis, the body becomes even more heavily inscribed. The Dalit woman's body is not just untouchable; it is sexually available to upper-caste men (Kannabiran 1996), reproductively suspect (sterility as a mark of low caste), and aesthetically inadequate (dark skin, coarse hair as signs of pollution). This study uses body theory to read for moments when texts make visible these layered forms of corporeal control.

Subaltern Studies and Testimonial Literature constitute the third framework. Ranajit Guha's foundational work (1982) argued that colonial historiography systematically erased the agency of peasants, workers, and other subordinated groups. Gayatri Spivak's famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) complicated this project by asking whether metropolitan intellectuals could represent subaltern experience without appropriation. In Latin American contexts, testimonio emerged as a genre that gives voice to those excluded from official history (Beverley 2004). Dalit autobiography has been read through this lens as a form of counter-history that challenges Brahminical narratives (Limbale 2004).

The genre distinction between Murugan's novel and Dutt's memoir matters here. Fiction grants imaginative freedom but raises questions of authenticity and representation: can a non-Dalit author write Dalit experience? Memoir claims truth but faces suspicion: is this one person's story representative? This study argues that both genres are necessary to understand the caste-gendered body. Fiction can render experiences too painful for direct testimony; memoir can assert truth claims fiction cannot. Reading them together produces a more complete picture.

2.2 Common Arguments: The Body as Site of Resistance

A significant body of scholarship reads the marked body as a potential site of resistance. This "body-as-resistance" argument appears across multiple fields. In Dalit studies, scholars analyze how autobiographies reclaim degraded bodies. Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste* (2003) describes his body as a "half-half" (son of a Dalit mother and upper-caste father), transforming a mark of shame into a political identity. In feminist theory, Adrienne Rich (1986) argues that claiming the body can be an act of revolutionary refusal. Scholars of Dalit literature often emphasize moments when Dalit writers refuse to be shamed by their bodies (Guru 1995; Rege 2006).

This reading has merit but also limits. As Gopal Guru (2009) warns, celebration of Dalit identity can slide into romanticization that ignores ongoing suffering. The body-as-resistance framework risks suggesting that oppression can be overcome through individual assertion, obscuring the structural violence that continues regardless of how individuals claim their identities. Sarah Pinto's (2014) ethnographic work shows that Dalit women's bodies remain vulnerable to state and community violence even when they articulate resistance. This study remains skeptical of easy celebrations. It asks: when do Ponna and Dutt successfully resist bodily norms, and when does resistance itself become another form of punishment?

2.3 Contrasts: Fiction versus Testimony, Rural versus Urban

Genre creates one line of tension in existing scholarship. Studies of Dalit autobiography (Mukherjee 2009; Rao 2009) emphasize the truth-claims of first-person testimony, arguing that Dalit writers possess epistemic authority about their own experiences. Literary critics of fiction (Shankar 2012; Prasad 2015) defend the novel's ability to imagine alternatives to existing social relations. These two scholarly communities rarely engage each other. This produces a situation where rural, historical, fictional representations (like Murugan's) are read through literary-aesthetic frameworks, while urban, contemporary, testimonial accounts (like Dutt's) are read as sociological documents. The result is that we miss the literary strategies Dutt employs and the social documentation Murugan provides.

Geography creates another divide. Dalit studies has long been dominated by attention to Maharashtra, where anti-caste movements have the deepest history (O'Hanlon 1985; Zelliot 1992). Tamil Nadu's different caste configurations and political landscape remain less studied (Gorringe 2005). Urban studies of caste (Jodhka 2015; Deshpande 2013) document discrimination in employment, education, and housing but often use quantitative methods that cannot capture embodied experience. This study brings rural and urban, fiction and testimony, into conversation—not to erase their differences but to identify the mechanisms of bodily control that persist across contexts.

2.4 Critique: The Missing Intersectional Analysis

The primary gap this study addresses is the scarcity of sustained intersectional analysis in literary criticism of Indian texts. While scholars acknowledge that caste and gender interact, few trace this interaction through close reading. Uma Chakravarti's (1993) historical work on "Brahminical patriarchy" comes closest, arguing that upper-caste women's sexuality is policed to maintain caste boundaries through endogamy. But her focus is historical rather than literary. Literary critics who write about Murugan (Krishnamoorthy 2016; Geetha 2015) discuss his representations of sexuality and caste separately. Reviews of Dutt (Muralidharan 2019; Roy 2019) read her as a Dalit voice or a feminist voice but rarely both simultaneously.

This gap is not simply scholarly oversight. It reflects how power operates by fragmenting the experiences of those it subordinates. Dalit movements have sometimes marginalized gender analysis, seeing it as a distraction from caste (Rege 2006). Feminist movements have been dominated by upper-caste women who fail to recognize caste privilege (Guru 1995). Academic disciplines reproduce these divisions. The lack of intersectional literary criticism mirrors the broader invisibility of Dalit women's specific experiences.

2.5 Connection: How This Study Intervenes

This research addresses the identified gap through a methodology that treats close reading as an intersectional practice. It asks: what narrative techniques make caste-gender intersections visible? How do metaphors of the body encode multiple systems of power? When do characters experience caste and gender as inseparable, and how do texts represent that inseparability?

The comparative design is central to this intervention. Placing Murugan beside Dutt forces us to see continuities that periodization obscures. Both authors write about bodies under surveillance, about the fear of exposure, about the violence that follows when bodily norms are violated. Reading across genre reveals that fiction and testimony employ different but complementary strategies for representing corporeal oppression. Reading across geography shows that urban mobility and education do not erase bodily marking; they simply change its form. The study argues that these texts, read together, constitute a Dalit feminist literary archive that has yet to be recognized as such.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs qualitative, text-based comparative analysis grounded in intersectionality theory. The decision to use qualitative methods stems from the study's central aim: to understand how

literary texts represent the lived experience of inhabiting a caste-gendered body. Such representation cannot be quantified. It requires interpretive methods attentive to language, narrative structure, and figurative meaning.

3.1 Research Design: Comparative and Intersectional

The comparative design places two texts in dialogue: Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* (originally published in Tamil as *Mathorubhagan* in 2010, English translation 2013) and Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit* (2019). The choice of these particular texts is strategic. They differ maximally in genre (fiction/memoir), setting (rural/urban), language (Tamil translated to English/English), time period (early 20th century/21st century), and authorial position (upper-caste novelist/Dalit memoirist). These differences make their similarities all the more striking. Both organize their narratives around bodily shame, reproductive anxiety, and the performance of social acceptability. Both reveal the body as the primary site where caste and gender hierarchies are enacted and enforced.

The intersectional approach means reading for moments when caste and gender cannot be separated—when a character's suffering or resistance is simultaneously caste-based and gender-based. This requires moving beyond content analysis (what happens in the plot) to examine form (how narrative structures position the body). For example, Murugan's use of free indirect discourse allows readers to inhabit Ponna's consciousness as she experiences her childlessness as both personal failure and caste stigma. Dutt's shift between past and present tense tracks her movement from secrecy (Dalit identity as shameful) to disclosure (Dalit identity as political). These formal choices are not stylistic ornaments; they are the means by which authors make intersectionality legible.

3.2 Primary Data: Textual Corpus

The study's primary data consists of:

1. *One Part Woman* by Perumal Murugan (English translation by Aniruddhan Vasudevan, 2013). The analysis focuses on the 2013 Penguin edition, with occasional reference to scholarly discussions of the Tamil original where relevant to questions of translation.
2. *Coming Out as Dalit* by Yashica Dutt (2019, Aleph Book Company). The analysis uses the first edition.

These texts constitute the evidentiary base. All claims about how the authors represent the caste-gendered body must be supported by close reading of specific passages.

3.3 Secondary Data: Critical and Theoretical Sources

Secondary sources fall into four categories:

1. Theoretical texts on intersectionality (Crenshaw, Collins, Cho et al.), body politics (Foucault, Butler, Douglas), and subaltern studies (Guha, Spivak, Beverley).
2. Dalit studies scholarship, including historical work (Rao, O'Hanlon), autobiographical criticism (Limbale, Dangle), and Dalit feminist theory (Rege, Guru, Paik).
3. Literary criticism of Murugan's work, Dalit life-writing, and contemporary Indian literature in English.
4. Historical and sociological context on caste practices, temple prostitution, reproductive technologies, and contemporary caste discrimination in urban India.

All secondary sources are used to contextualize, theorize, and compare findings from close reading. They do not replace textual analysis but provide frameworks for interpretation.

3.4 Analytical Method: Close Reading and Thematic Coding

The analysis proceeds in three stages:

Stage One: Segmentation and Initial Coding. Each text was read multiple times, with passages related to bodily representation marked for analysis. Initial coding identified eight thematic clusters: (1) Bodily shame and purity anxiety, (2) Masculine anxiety and fragility, (3) Reproductive bodies and fertility, (4)

Passing and aesthetic labor, (5) Public humiliation and exposure, (6) Trauma and enforced silence, (7) Reclamation and resistance, (8) The ethics of visibility. These categories emerged from the texts rather than being imposed a priori.

Stage Two: Close Reading for Intersectional Mechanisms. Within each thematic cluster, I conducted close reading of key passages, asking: How does this scene represent the body? What sensory details are emphasized? How does narrative voice position the reader? Where do caste and gender operate together to produce meaning? This stage generated detailed notes on specific textual strategies: Murugan's use of natural metaphors that make Ponna's body continuous with the barren land; Dutt's deployment of mirror scenes where she sees her body through upper-caste eyes.

Stage Three: Comparative Synthesis. After analyzing each text individually, I compared findings across texts. This comparative work identified both continuities (e.g., both authors link bodily shame to surveillance by community) and divergences (e.g., Murugan emphasizes reproduction while Dutt emphasizes aesthetics). The comparison also revealed genre effects: fiction allows Murugan to represent sexual violence obliquely while memoir's truth-claims prevent Dutt from inventing experiences she did not have.

3.5 Limitations and Ethical Considerations

Several limitations shape this study. First, I read *One Part Woman* in English translation, which introduces distance from Murugan's original Tamil. Where possible, I consulted scholarship that discusses the Tamil text, but translation effects remain a limitation. Second, the study analyzes only two texts. Broader claims about Dalit literature or Indian fiction would require a larger corpus. Third, my position as a researcher conducting academic analysis of Dalit experiences raises ethical questions about appropriation and voice. I have attempted to mitigate this through careful citation of Dalit scholars and by framing my work as contributing to rather than replacing Dalit feminist analysis.

The study also confronts the ethical problem of writing about suffering. Both texts describe sexual violence, reproductive coercion, and psychological trauma. Close reading requires dwelling on these scenes, analyzing them, perhaps even aestheticizing them through literary interpretation. I have tried to maintain analytical clarity without obscuring the real violence these narratives reference and represent.

IV. ANALYSIS: THE CASTE-GENDERED BODY IN *ONE PART WOMAN* AND *COMING OUT AS DALIT*

4.1 Reproductive Bodies: Fertility, Sterility, and Social Death

Reproduction sits at the heart of caste maintenance. Endogamy—the rule that one must marry within one's caste—depends on controlling women's reproductive capacity. When reproduction fails, the body that fails is marked as deficient twice: once as a woman who cannot fulfill her social role, once as a caste body that cannot reproduce the caste.

In *One Part Woman*, Ponna's childlessness after twelve years of marriage transforms her body into a public problem. Murugan writes, "The town that had been so dear to them was slowly becoming a place of torture" (Murugan 32). This is not metaphor. Ponna experiences literal torture: the stares, the questions, the hands that touch her belly without permission, the comparisons to fertile women. Her body is not her own; it belongs to a community that has decided she has failed.

The novel links Ponna's reproductive failure to broader landscapes of barrenness. When Kali (her husband) looks at their land, Murugan describes "soil that would yield nothing" (Murugan 87). The parallel is explicit: Ponna's womb mirrors the unproductive earth. This is body politics operating through metaphor. The land, like Ponna, is lower-caste land—marginal, rocky, exhausted. Upper-caste families own the fertile fields. Ponna's sterility becomes a sign not just of individual misfortune but of caste positioning. Her body cannot produce because bodies like hers are not meant to flourish.

The novel's central crisis—the pressure on Ponna to have sex with a stranger at the temple chariot festival to conceive a child—reveals how reproductive failure strips women of bodily autonomy. The festival tradition allows married women to have anonymous sexual encounters, with any resulting children considered gifts from the gods. Ponna's mother-in-law and others push her toward this solution without her clear consent. Murugan writes, "She felt she was being dragged" (Murugan 201). The passive construction is telling. Ponna is the object, not the subject, of her own reproduction.

What makes this scene unbearably intersectional is how caste operates within it. The festival is a lower-caste practice, scorned by upper-caste Brahmins as primitive and immoral. Yet it persists because lower-caste communities need strategies to survive infertility without access to modern medicine or the resources for adoption. Ponna's body becomes the site where caste-based exclusion from reproductive healthcare meets gender-based denial of sexual autonomy. The violence done to her is not simply patriarchal (men controlling women's bodies) or simply casteist (upper castes denying resources to lower castes). It is the product of their interaction.

Dutt's memoir addresses reproduction through a different register: the anxiety of passing. She writes about her terror that having children would expose her Dalit identity: "What if my children looked dark-skinned? What if they looked like my grandmother?" (Dutt 178). Here, reproduction is dangerous because it might produce bodies that cannot pass. Children inherit physical traits—skin color, facial features, hair texture—that mark caste. For Dutt, who has successfully passed as upper-caste through aesthetic labor, motherhood threatens exposure.

This passage makes visible what caste ideology obscures: the belief that bodies carry inherent, visible markers of caste. Dutt internalizes this belief even as she critiques it. She knows intellectually that skin color does not determine caste, yet she has absorbed the aesthetic hierarchy that links darkness to low caste, fairness to high caste. Her reproductive anxiety is inseparable from caste anxiety. The same body that might create new life might also betray her.

The comparison reveals a pattern: both texts represent reproductive bodies as sites where caste and gender anxieties converge. For Ponna, the failure to reproduce makes her socially dead. For Dutt, the prospect of reproduction threatens social death through exposure. In both cases, the reproductive body is never simply reproductive. It is always already a caste-gendered body, subject to forms of scrutiny and control that exceed individual women's desires or choices.

4.2 Marked Bodies: Skin, Hair, and Aesthetic Surveillance

If reproduction marks the body from inside (through what it produces or fails to produce), aesthetics mark it from outside. Caste has always relied on visual markers—clothing, ornaments, even where on the body one can wear jewelry. But the modern period intensifies aesthetic surveillance through new technologies: skin-lightening creams, hair-straightening treatments, cosmetic surgery. These technologies promise individual transformation while reinforcing collective hierarchies.

Coming Out as Dalit is, among other things, a catalog of aesthetic labor. Dutt describes her efforts to erase visible signs of her Dalit identity: "I straightened my hair every week... I scrubbed my skin with fairness creams... I watched how upper-caste girls walked, talked, laughed" (Dutt 89). Every sentence uses active verbs—*I straightened, I scrubbed, I watched*—that signal agency. But this is agency in service of erasure. Dutt is working to unmake her body, to transform it into something acceptable to upper-caste standards.

The hair straightening receives particular attention. Dutt writes, "My naturally wavy hair was a giveaway. Upper-caste girls had smooth, silky hair that fell like curtains" (Dutt 91). Hair becomes a technology of detection. Its texture, its movement, its response to humidity—all of these can betray caste. Dutt's weekly straightening ritual is not vanity. It is survival. Passing depends on bodily modification that must be constantly maintained. One humid day, one missed appointment, and her hair's natural texture might reveal what she has worked so hard to hide.

Skin color operates similarly. The equation dark = Dalit, fair = upper-caste is not biologically true (Dalits and upper-castes exist across the color spectrum), but it functions as social truth. Dutt internalizes this logic. She describes her grandmother's dark skin as something that must be hidden, her own medium skin tone as something that must be lightened. The fairness creams she uses are sold across India with the promise that lighter skin will bring success, marriage, happiness. What goes unspoken is that they sell upper-caste belonging.

Murugan's novel operates in a different aesthetic register—rural, pre-industrial, where bodies are marked not by consumer products but by labor and ritual. Yet he, too, shows bodies under constant surveillance. Ponna is watched whenever she appears in public. Her clothing, her gait, her facial expressions—all are read for signs of fertility or sterility. When she becomes pregnant (or appears to be pregnant) after the festival, the community scrutinizes her body with new intensity: "Women touched her belly, trying to feel the child" (Murugan 214). Touch is surveillance. The community claims the right to verify her pregnancy through physical examination.

The difference between Dutt's urban aesthetic labor and Ponna's rural bodily exposure is one of mode, not of kind. Both women experience their bodies as objects of public assessment. Both learn that their bodies do not belong to them. The specific criteria of judgment differ—in Ponna's world, the key question is fertility; in Dutt's, it is the ability to mimic upper-caste aesthetics. But the structure is identical: women's bodies are sites where social hierarchies are made visible and enforced.

4.3 Masculine Fragility and the Gendered Distribution of Shame

Both texts complicate the assumption that caste-gender oppression only affects women. They show how men, particularly lower-caste men, experience bodily shame through their inability to protect women or to meet patriarchal standards of masculinity.

Kali, Ponna's husband in *One Part Woman*, suffers acutely from their childlessness. Murugan writes, "He felt his body, his very existence, was pointless" (Murugan 44). The phrase "his very existence" signals how completely Kali's sense of self has collapsed into his reproductive failure. Patriarchy tells him that his value lies in his ability to continue his lineage. When he cannot, he experiences this as bodily failure—"his body... was pointless."

What makes Kali's shame intersectional is its class/caste dimension. He lacks resources to pursue other solutions. Upper-caste men in his position might remarry, adopt, or consult doctors. Kali can do none of these. His lower-caste status means he has limited options, and the option that is available—the temple festival—requires sacrificing his wife's bodily autonomy. His masculine shame pushes him to endorse Ponna's participation in a ritual that will likely traumatize her. The novel shows how patriarchy distributes pain unequally: Kali feels shame, but Ponna bears the bodily consequences.

Yet the novel does not let Kali off easily. Murugan shows him withdrawing from Ponna, unable to speak about their shared pain. This silence is gendered. Women are expected to perform emotional labor, to process trauma through talking. Men are allowed—even encouraged—to retreat into silence. Kali's silence becomes a form of violence. It leaves Ponna isolated with her shame.

Dutt's memoir includes a powerful scene involving her father's reaction to her coming out as Dalit. She writes, "He said nothing. His silence was louder than any accusation" (Dutt 203). Her father has spent his life passing, building a life where caste does not (visibly) determine outcomes. His daughter's public disclosure threatens to undo that work. His silence is not neutral; it is a form of refusal. He refuses to affirm her choice, but he also refuses to forbid it. This silence, too, is gendered. Dalit men can sometimes access patriarchal privilege (authority over wives and daughters) even as they are denied caste privilege. Dutt's father is caught between these positions. He cannot protect his daughter from caste violence, but he can register his disapproval of her refusal to keep caste hidden.

These scenes matter because they show that caste-gender systems do not simply oppress women while empowering men. Rather, they distribute vulnerability unevenly. Lower-caste men have more power than lower-caste women in many contexts, but they also experience shame and powerlessness that differs from upper-caste masculine experience. The challenge is to acknowledge this without minimizing the specific violence done to women. Both texts manage this by showing men's pain while making clear that women pay the higher price.

4.4 Passing, Secrecy, and the Violence of Disclosure

Both texts organize themselves around secrets about the body. In *One Part Woman*, the secret is what happened at the festival. In *Coming Out as Dalit*, the secret is Dutt's caste identity. The parallels are striking. Both secrets concern bodily shame. Both involve communities that police disclosure. Both reveal that visibility can be as violent as invisibility.

Dutt's memoir is structured as a coming-out narrative, a genre borrowed from queer literature. The metaphor is apt. Like queerness, Dalit identity can be invisible; it can be hidden through performance; and its disclosure can result in social death. Dutt describes her years of passing as a kind of death: "I was living a half-life, present but not visible" (Dutt 156). The phrase "half-life" evokes radioactive decay—something that diminishes over time. Passing extracts a cost. It requires constant vigilance, constant performance, constant fear of exposure.

When Dutt finally comes out, the response is predictable: some upper-caste friends disappear, others express surprise, a few offer support tinged with voyeurism. But the most painful responses come from other Dalits who have chosen to remain hidden. One cousin tells her, "You've made it harder for the rest of us" (Dutt 217). This captures a real tension in Dalit politics. Visibility can be empowering, but it can also provoke backlash. Dutt's disclosure is her choice, but it has consequences for others who share her caste and might prefer secrecy.

Murugan's novel does not use the language of coming out, but it is preoccupied with the same problematic: what happens when bodily secrets become public knowledge. After the festival, Ponna becomes pregnant. The community immediately speculates about the child's paternity. The secret of what happened at the festival (whether Ponna had sex with a stranger, whether she was raped, whether she consented) threatens to become public. Kali cannot bear this uncertainty. His masculine pride depends on knowing whether the child is "his." His inability to know drives him to madness.

The novel suggests that there are bodily truths that cannot and should not be known. Ponna's pregnancy makes visible what was meant to remain hidden. Her body becomes evidence in a trial she never agreed to undergo. The parallel to Dutt is instructive: in both cases, the female body is expected to confess, to make visible its secrets. In both cases, disclosure is framed as revelation—as if the truth of identity (Dalit or non-Dalit, legitimate or illegitimate) has been waiting to emerge. Both texts challenge this framework. They suggest that secrecy is sometimes survival, that disclosure can be violent, and that the demand for bodily truth is itself a form of control.

4.5 Reclamation, Resistance, and the Limits of Agency

The question of resistance haunts both texts. Can the caste-gendered body be reclaimed? Can shame be transformed into pride? Can disclosure be empowering rather than merely exposing?

Dutt's memoir ends hopefully. After coming out, she writes, "I finally felt like I could breathe" (Dutt 289). The metaphor is physical—breathing, the most basic bodily function. Passing had been suffocating, a life where she could not inhale fully. Coming out allows her to claim her body, her history, her identity. The memoir frames this as liberation.

But the text also records the costs. Dutt loses relationships, job security, the comfort of invisibility. She becomes hyper-visible as "the Dalit journalist," her work read through her caste rather than its merits. The reclamation is partial, provisional. She has claimed her Dalit identity, but she has not escaped caste. Upper-caste readers consume her memoir as

voyeuristic access to Dalit suffering. She has spoken, but she cannot control how she is heard.

Ponna's story offers no such hope. The novel ends with her suicide attempt. She tries to hang herself after realizing that Kali suspects the child's paternity. Her body, which has been the object of so much surveillance and control, becomes the instrument of her own escape. But even this is denied her. She is discovered and cut down. The novel's final lines suggest she survives, but survival is not the same as resistance.

Critics have debated whether Ponna's suicide attempt is an act of agency or the final proof of her powerlessness (Geetha 2015; Krishnamoorthy 2016). This study argues that the either/or framing misses the point. Ponna's attempt is both. It is agency constrained to the point where self-destruction seems like the only choice. This is what intersectional oppression does: it narrows the field of possibility until resistance and annihilation collapse into each other.

The comparison between Dutt's hopeful ending and Murugan's tragic one might tempt us to read urban modernity as more liberatory than rural tradition. This would be a mistake. The texts are not making historical arguments about progress. They are showing different faces of the same structure. Dutt's ability to come out depends on class privilege (education, employment, geographical mobility) that most Dalits lack. Her resistance is real but not generalizable. Ponna's suicide attempt is a response to conditions that have not disappeared; they have simply been rearranged. Both texts insist that reclamation is necessary and insufficient. The body can be claimed, but it remains marked. The terms of social existence can be negotiated, but they cannot be unilaterally refused.

4.6 Genre and the Politics of Representation

The comparison between fiction and memoir illuminates what each genre can and cannot represent. Murugan's novel gives him imaginative freedom. He can construct scenarios, control narrative pacing, deploy symbolism. He can make Ponna's interior life available to readers through free indirect discourse. He can represent sexual violence obliquely, through metaphor and ellipsis, in ways that gesture toward trauma without reproducing it graphically.

But this freedom comes with limits. Murugan is not Dalit. He is not a woman. His representation of Ponna's experience is necessarily mediated through his own positioning. Critics have raised questions about whether male authors can ethically represent women's sexual trauma (Geetha 2015). The novel was banned in Tamil Nadu after protests that it defamed Hindu traditions. Murugan's authorial freedom was curtailed by the very power structures his novel critiques.

Dutt's memoir operates under different constraints. She can only write what she experienced. She cannot invent scenes or imagine alternative outcomes. Her truth-claims depend on verifiable autobiography. This limits narrative possibility—there are stories she cannot tell, experiences she did not have. But it also grants her a form of authority that fiction cannot claim. When Dutt writes "I straightened my hair," readers know this is not metaphor or invention. It happened. This testimonial authority is especially important for Dalit writing, which has long been dismissed as exaggeration or special pleading.

Yet memoir has its own risks. Dutt's confessional mode makes her vulnerable. She reveals family secrets, admits to shame and self-hatred, describes her failures to live up to her own political ideals. The genre demands this kind of exposure. But exposure is not the same as empowerment. Upper-caste readers can consume her pain without changing their own behavior. The memoir risks becoming another form of spectacle—the Dalit body on display, this time voluntarily.

The study argues that both genres are necessary. Fiction can imagine what has not yet happened, can represent experiences too painful for direct testimony. Memoir can claim truth, can insist that this happened and continues to happen. Reading them together creates a fuller picture than either could provide alone. We need Murugan's imaginative sympathy and we need Dutt's testimonial authority. We need the artistic distance of fiction and the raw immediacy of memoir.

The body represented in these texts exceeds any single genre's capacity to capture it.

V. DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS AND BROADER SIGNIFICANCE

The analysis demonstrates that the caste-gendered body is not a metaphor. It is a material reality shaped by intersecting systems of power. When we read Ponna's reproductive failure or Dutt's hair-straightening ritual, we are not encountering symbols of oppression. We are encountering oppression itself, operating through corporeal means.

This has several implications. First, it challenges scholarship that treats caste and gender as analytically separable. The texts show that separation is impossible. Ponna's suffering is not 70% gender-based and 30% caste-based, divisible into neat components. It is 100% the product of their intersection. Similarly, Dutt's passing is not sequentially about being Dalit and then about being a woman. Her aesthetic labor addresses both simultaneously—she must look like an upper-caste woman, a category that fuses caste and gender.

Second, the study reveals the body as a primary site of social control in ways that extend beyond legal or political structures. Laws prohibit caste discrimination, but the body remembers. Hair textures, skin tones, fertility anxieties—these operate below the level of policy. They constitute what Foucault calls "micro-physics of power," the capillary forms of discipline that shape subjects from within. Literature makes these micro-physics visible in ways that legal or sociological discourse cannot.

Third, the comparison between rural and urban, past and present, shows that modernization does not erase bodily marking. It transforms the techniques but maintains the structure. Ponna faces touch pollution rules; Dutt faces aesthetic surveillance. Different mechanisms, same function: to render certain bodies as less-than, to mark them as inadequate, to justify their exclusion from resources and recognition.

Fourth, the analysis complicates narratives of resistance. Both texts show characters who resist, but neither offers a triumphalist account of resistance overcoming oppression. Dutt comes out, but caste does not disappear. Ponna tries to escape, but she is caught. The body can be claimed, but it remains marked. This is not pessimism; it is realism. It insists that we acknowledge ongoing violence rather than prematurely celebrating individual acts of defiance.

Finally, the study models a method: intersectional close reading. This means reading for moments when multiple systems of power converge on the body, when narrative techniques make visible what social structures try to hide. It means asking not just what happens but how it is represented—what metaphors are used, what narrative voices deployed, what formal choices made. Genre, language, perspective—all of these shape what can be said about the body. An intersectional method attends to these mediations.

VI. CONCLUSION: THE BODY AS ARCHIVE AND ARGUMENT

This study began with a claim: the body carries history. The analysis has shown how it does so. Through reproductive failure and fertility policing, through skin color and hair texture, through visibility and secrecy, the caste-gendered body becomes an archive of oppression. It stores the traces of touch pollution, endogamy rules, aesthetic hierarchies. It remembers what laws claim to have abolished.

But the body is not only archive. It is also argument. When Murugan writes Ponna's body, when Dutt writes her own, they are making claims about how power operates. They are theorizing caste and gender from the ground up, from the flesh itself. Their insights match and sometimes exceed academic theories. They know, because they show us, that caste is not primarily about belief or custom but about corporeal control. They know that gender operates not through ideas about femininity but through the disciplining of female bodies.

The comparison between these texts reveals a literary tradition that has yet to be named as such: a Dalit feminist body poetics. This tradition includes fictional and testimonial writing. It includes work by Dalit authors and sympathetic non-Dalit authors. It includes

Tamil and Hindi and English texts. What unifies it is the insistence that the body matters—not as metaphor, but as the primary location where caste and gender hierarchies are enacted and contested.

Future research might expand this analysis. A larger corpus could include other Dalit women's autobiographies (Bama, Kumud Pawde, Baby Kamble), other novels about caste-gender intersection (Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*), poetry and performance that foreground the body. Such work could trace regional variations, historical changes, genre effects. It could ask how Dalit men write the body differently than Dalit women, how upper-caste authors who address caste differ from Dalit authors, how English-language texts reach different audiences than vernacular ones.

But this study has established a foundation. It has shown that Murugan and Dutt, despite vast differences in context and form, are engaged in a shared project: making visible the caste-gendered body. They write against erasure. They insist that we look at what society wants to hide—the flesh that bears the marks of hierarchy, the skin that remembers violence, the womb that is never simply reproductive but always political.

The final question is: what do we do with this knowledge? Recognition is not enough. Knowing that caste-gender operates through bodily control does not stop it from operating. Literature cannot legislate equality. But it can do something laws cannot: it can make us feel what it means to live in a marked body. It can create empathy and outrage. It can disturb our comfort. These are not minor achievements. In a society organized around forgetting—around pretending caste is historical, gender is natural, bodies are neutral—literature's insistence on remembering is a form of resistance.

Ponna's body hangs in the air, suspended between life and death. Dutt's body walks through the world, visibly Dalit now, no longer hiding. Both bodies are arguments. Both bodies demand that we recognize the violence done in the name of caste and gender. Both bodies refuse to disappear. This study has been an attempt to honor that refusal, to read carefully what they have to teach us. The work of transformation remains. But transformation begins with seeing. These texts make us see.

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