

PAPER ID: 20260202007

Inherited Wounds and resistant Voices: exploring Trauma and Intergenerational Trauma in contemporary Dalit Literature

Dr. Laksheyata¹ Yadav and Neelam Garwa²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of English, Sanskaram University, Jhajjar

²Research Scholar, Department of English, Sanskaram University, Jhajjar

Abstract: Dalit literature has become a potent tool to express the reality of the Dalit daily life experiences of caste oppression and social marginalisation, and resistance, in India. The present study tries to investigate the depiction of trauma and trauma of successive generations in modern Dalit literature with an examination of the works of Yashica Dutt, Thenmozhi Soundararajan, Meena Kandasamy, Ajay Navaria, Yogesh Maitreya and Sharankumar Limbale. The study builds on the theories of Trauma Theory, Intergenerational Trauma Theory, Dalit Literary Theory, and Memory Studies to explore how caste-based discrimination, humiliation, violence, and marginalization are intergenerational and are in the consciousness of the individual and the collective. The study examines the interweaving themes of inherited suffering, collective memory, identity formation, gendered trauma, shame, resistance, and self-reclamation through qualitative textual analysis. The results indicate that caste is not only a socio-political system, but it is also a root of the psychological and emotional trauma that remains across generations and affects the life of Dalit communities. The chosen documents reflect both the ability to resist oppression and the passage of memories of oppression through the family and culture, as well as a sense of solidarity and political consciousness. Moreover, the research shows how literature functions as a place of testimony, a place of healing, and a place of social critique; it is the place where the personal suffering is transformed into collective resistance and empowerment. This study, which brings together elements of trauma theory and Dalit criticism, helps to deepen understanding of the emotional aspects of caste oppression and how contemporary Dalit writers assert themselves through storytelling. In sum, the study suggests that Dalit literature can be considered as a reflection of the historical injustice as well as a tool of social change as it questions the exclusionary structures in place and dreams of dignity, equality and liberation.

Keywords: Dalit Literature, Trauma, Intergenerational Trauma, Caste Oppression, Collective Memory, Identity, Resistance, Dalit Consciousness.

1. Introduction

Trauma is a significant field of research in literary and cultural analysis, especially regarding the impact of oppression, violence, and marginalization on people and communities in the long run. Trauma, according to Caruth (2016), is a distressing experience that is too difficult to process at the time of the event and thus resurfaces in memory, repetition, and narration. Herman (2015) also states that trauma can be more than just an individual psychological condition, it can be a system of power and domination. Trauma studies started by looking at war, genocide, or catastrophic events but now, scholars take into account structural violence, such as caste discrimination, which can be a source of collective and intergenerational trauma.

In India, the caste acts as a deeply entrenched social system which has historically kept Dalit communities in a condition of exclusion, humiliation, violence and deprivation of human dignity (Srinivasulu, 2021). These experiences go beyond material disadvantage and have deep psychological impacts upon self-image, self-esteem and social relations. The ongoing generational oppression has resulted in what scholars refer to as

intergenerational trauma, where memories and impacts of oppression are passed down through family stories, culture traditions and collective consciousness (Heart, 2003). As a result, many Dalit people suffer from the socio-economic effects of caste and from the emotional and psychological burden of historical injustices.

Dalit literature is an important platform on which to explore these experiences. In the context of social-political struggles, motivated by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the Dalit writing brings the realities of caste oppression to the fore and questions dominant narratives (Kumari & Kapoor, 2021). Dalit writers describe their experiences of discrimination in autobiographies, memoirs, novels, and essays, and they present their expression of resistance, self-assertion, and collective empowerment. Those sorts of texts are both personal and political, and help maintain collective memory.

Memory is a key element of trauma and resistance narratives. Memory researchers claim that collective memories contribute to the formation of individual identities and communal consciousness (Halbwachs, 1992; Assmann, 2011). The Dalit community keeps alive and passes on memories of caste violence,

social exclusion and humiliation in its literature, to help it remember historical injustices and build solidarity and resistance. The entanglements of memory, trauma and identity are thus a useful perspective for reading today's Dalit accounts.

The aim of the study is to look into the portrayal of trauma and intergenerational trauma in the selected works of Yashica Dutt and Thenmozhi Soundararajan. In the paper, caste-based suffering is examined as a phenomenon of inheritance, memory, narration and transformation towards resistance in contemporary Dalit literature in the light of Trauma Theory, Intergenerational Trauma Theory, Dalit Literary Theory and Memory Studies.

2. Inherited Suffering and Collective Memory

Yashica Dutt and Thenmozhi Soundararajan's works offer potent discussions of the long-term and multi-generational trauma stemming from caste oppression. Both authors depict the psychological effects of caste discrimination through a memoir, testimony and a socio-political reflection, and both show the way inherited memories of suffering continue to affect Dalit identities in present-day India.

In her book, *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir of Surviving India's Caste System* (2019), Yashica Dutt shares her journey of hiding her caste identity to access educational and professional opportunities in urban India. The memoir demonstrates the power of the caste trauma that functions through silence, secrecy and fear of being cast out of the social sphere. The family of Dutt adopted strategies of concealment to prevent discrimination - a long term psychological impact of historical caste oppression. Her story reveals the intergenerational nature of the coping strategy of self-hiding, born out of generations of stigma and exclusion (Dutt, 2024).

Memory is central to Dutt's memoir, both as burden and resistance. Memories of family histories of untouchability and social stigma show that collective trauma is alive in Dalit communities. In parallel, by coming out as a Dalit, Dutt has engaged in a radical act of self-reclamation. She speaks about caste and breaks the silence that pervades it, thereby engaging in a process of unlearning the internalised shame and becoming part of a greater narrative of Dalit assertion and visibility (Dutt, 2024).

Likewise, in *The Trauma of Caste: A Dalit Feminist Meditation on Survivorship, Healing, and Abolition* (2022), Thenmozhi Soundararajan analyses caste from the perspective of traumatology and social justice activism. Caste must be viewed not just as a system of social stratification, but also as a collective psychological injury, Soundararajan argues. Based on her personal experiences, community narratives and interdisciplinary research, she shows how caste violence and exclusion permeates the emotional lives of oppressed communities (Soundararajan, 2022). One of the key ideas in Soundararajan's work is that caste trauma is not just an individual and generational phenomenon, but also a

collective one. Memories of untouchability, discrimination and violence are passed on through families and communities, forming a shared historical consciousness, as was described by cultural trauma theorists (Alexander et al., 2004). Such memories of fear, vulnerability, and social alienation are passed on through generations, and affect today's experiences, even for people who might not have faced traditional forms of caste oppression. Thus, Soundararajan broadens the field of trauma studies to reveal the lasting emotional impacts of caste-based injustice.

For both Dutt and Soundararajan, testimony is an act of healing and resistance. They tell stories that disrupt the prevailing social frameworks that aim to silence or marginalise caste oppression and put marginalised experiences on the map. They share their own experiences and become activists, turning their suffering into collective consciousness and political action. Their writing shows that the process of articulating trauma can be an empowering way to maintain historic memory, to build community resilience and to gain a sense of control.

In addition, both books indicate there is intergenerational resistance that goes hand in hand with intergenerational trauma. Inherited memories may include painful and psychological burdens, and they may also include histories of survival, dignity, and struggle. Previous generation experiences become inspirations of the current Dalit activism and assertiveness. As a result, trauma is not only depicted as a state of being a victim, but also as an opportunity to become empowered and create a social change.

In addressing inherited suffering, collective memory, identity and resistance, Yashica Dutt and Thenmozhi Soundararajan make significant contributions to the current Dalit literature and trauma studies. Their pieces show the effects of caste oppression from generation to generation and suggest the power of testimony, memory, and activism to fight against structures of inequality.

3. Gendered Trauma, Silence, and Self-Reclamation in Meena Kandasamy's Writings

Meena Kandasamy's work lies at a unique intersection in the contemporary Indian literary field: an intersection of caste, gender and political resistance. She brings to light the intersectionality of patriarchy and caste oppression in creating a complex form of trauma for women. Though her novels are mainly about issues pertaining to violence against women, they also reveal the structural inequalities in Indian society and show how caste and patriarchy relate to one another as interrelated systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). Kandasamy's novel, which uses experimental narrative techniques and autobiographical elements, examines the psychological effects of abuse, silence and social control and highlights possibilities of resistance and self-reclamation.

When I Hit You tells the story of a young woman caught in an emotionally manipulative, physically violent, sexually coercive and intellectually stifling marriage told by Kandasamy. The novel is a convincing depiction of trauma as a continuum, not a one-time occurrence. Like Herman (2015) views of trauma, the protagonist feels fear, isolation and fragmentation of selfhood due to the constant abuse. The private sphere, which is normally seen as a space of safety, turns into a space of violence and psychological confinement.

Silence is a major theme of the novel. It is significant that the protagonist cannot directly confront her abuser – this is symptomatic of wider social structures that accept and enable violence against women, and that prevents women from talking about what has happened to them. Silence is a tool of oppression and a sign of trauma. The narrative slowly, however, turns silence into voice and demonstrates the ability of story to take control and to resist patriarchal domination. The protagonist's use of writing helps to restore her fractured identity and to take ownership of her experiences, thus turning a sense of victimhood into resistance (Kandasamy, 2020).

In a similar fashion, *Exquisite Cadavers* continues Kandasamy's exploration of trauma by focusing on the interplay between violence, memory, and representation of narratives. The novel undermines traditional narrative forms and brings the process of telling and interpreting traumatic experiences into the foreground. The process of blurring fiction and reality, Kandasamy highlights the complexities of capturing trauma, and at the same time, he shows the potential of emancipatory narrative expression (Caruth, 2016).

Caste and patriarchy continue to be important in Kandasamy's literary work. According to Dalit feminist scholars, caste-based oppression and gender-based violence are mutually reaffirming and affect disproportionately marginalised women (Rege, 2014). While the ideology of caste does not always become the central theme of Kandasamy's novels, there is a constant challenge to the systems that uphold inequality and exclusion. Her female characters are subjected to violence, as well as to cultural norms limiting women's autonomy and expression.

The reconstruction of identity is another important aspect of Kandasamy's writings. Trauma may result in a sense of disempowerment, alienation and loss of self. But Kandasamy's protagonists are not willing to be passive victims. They assert themselves, resist power structures and regain agency through acts of narration, memory and resistance. They tell stories which feminist trauma theorists recognize as having transformative power in the therapeutic process of testimony, the speaking of traumatic experiences, that can lead to healing and empowerment (Felman & Laub, 1992).

In this way, *When I Hit You* and *Exquisite Cadavers* are potent depictions of gendered trauma in India's present-day society. These texts provide a window into the complexities of caste, patriarchy, identity and violence, and they also serve as an example of literature as a space for self-reclamation and social critique.

4. Caste, Shame, Identity, and Dalit Consciousness in Ajay Navaria, Yogesh Maitreya, and Sharankumar Limbale

The work of Ajay Navaria, Yogesh Maitreya and Sharankumar Limbale collectively explores the psychological, social and political aspect of the oppression of caste in contemporary India. Their works show how experiences of humiliation, exclusion and marginalisation impact on Dalit identities, and how they at the same time produce resistance and political consciousness. These writers, in a variety of literary genres, grapple with caste-based trauma and its legacy, and imagine other forms of dignity, selfhood, and freedom.

In *Unclaimed Terrain*, Ajay Navaria explores intricacies of dalit identities in an urban landscape, which is considered to be devoid of the traditional casteist hierarchy. The narratives depict Dalit characters who are educated, professionally successful, but still face subtle discrimination and exclusion. Through Navaria, Dawar (2023) shows that caste lives on in the modern urban setting, creating an alienation, anxiety and psychological disintegration. His characters often find themselves in the process of negotiating identities in order to come to terms with the desire for social mobility, yet they are continually confronted by the reality of caste bias.

One of the themes in Navaria's work that comes up frequently is shame. According to scholars, shame is one of the most common psychological effects of caste oppression as it is internalized stigma and social devaluation (Guru, 2011). Navaria's stories illustrate the ways that caste oppression can be internalized and form the basis of one's sense of self and social interactions. But his characters also defy this inherited shame, proclaiming their identity and challenging dominant caste ideologies.

Yogesh Maitreya's *Flowers on the Grave of Caste* too places emphasis on the crux of memory, caste and resistance. Documenting Dalit experiences and collective memory is a key emphasis of Maitreya's essays and reflections. He suggests that writing can function as a political intervention that can contest the "erasure of caste" and recover marginalised histories (Maitreya, 2019). His work ties one's own experiences of discrimination to social struggles for social justice and equality.

For Maitreya, literature becomes a way to write trauma into political consciousness. The memory of past wrongs is not a mere replay of suffering, but rather can facilitate critical reflection and collective mobilization. His writings reflect an Ambedkarite vision of resistance that involves the annihilation of the caste

through education, self-representation and through intellectual activism (Ambedkar, 2014).

Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi (The Outcaste)* is one of the most influential autobiographical works in the Dalit literature. The book portrays the life of poverty, social marginalization and identity struggle of the person named Limbale, born into a socially stigmatised community. The title itself gives an idea of the trauma of being regarded as illegitimate in a caste-ridden society. In the narration of the story of Limbale, one can see how caste oppression is evident in daily life -- in food, in education, in dignity and in social recognition (Limbale, 2003).

Fragmentation of identity is a central theme to *Akkarmashi*. The psychological distress of the limbales is great, since they are in an ambiguous position in the caste system. His story demonstrates the effects of systemic exclusion and exclusion in both producing feelings of alienation and insecurities and creating a demand for self-definition and resistance. Limbale's autobiography is also a criticism of caste and an account of how the personal suffering of individuals becomes the collective suffering of the caste.

Navaria, Maitreya and Limbale show that caste trauma is not just physical deprivation but also psychological pain, feelings of shame and social alienation. However, these authors highlight the importance of Dalit consciousness as a source of empowerment and resistance. They evoke Ambedkarite ideas and criticize the caste-based hierarchy through literary representation and political assertion. Their works have taken personal stories and made them into stories of struggle and resilience, and have been important to current debates on trauma, identity and social justice in Dalit literature.

5. Comparative Analysis

The chosen texts of Yashica Dutt, Thenmozhi Soundararajan, Meena Kandasamy, Ajay Navaria, Yogesh Maitreya and Sharankumar Limbale present a complex picture of trauma and intergenerational trauma in the present day Dalit literature. While these authors vary in their genre, writing style, historical context, and thematic emphasis, all of them share a common theme that caste is a problem that is deeply entrenched which causes psychological, social, cultural and emotional harm to generations. They shed light on how feelings of humiliation, exclusion, violence, and marginalisation are inscribed in individual consciousness and collective memory, through memoirs, novels, autobiographical texts, essays and critical reflections.

When these texts are read comparatively, there are patterns of caste-based suffering. A major theme is the ongoing social exclusion and stigmatisation. In *Coming Out as Dalit*, Yashica Dutt considers how the burden of caste concealment is experienced in order to be accepted in privileged social spaces. In a similar vein, Ajay Navaria's *Unclaimed Terrain* shows how caste oppression remains in the shadows in cities, in spite of seeming

social progress. Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi* translates the feelings of exclusion in its most literal sense: poverty, illegitimacy, social ostracism. These stories collectively demonstrate that caste oppression has been able to adjust itself to the changing social situations, and still influence the Dalit life in a significant way.

Another pattern that can be seen is that Trauma is transmitted through memory. Intergenerational trauma is an explicit theme in both books as Dutt and Thenmozhi Soundararajan point to how the memory of caste violence, humiliation and exclusion are passed down across generations. Through their works, it becomes clear that caste trauma is not just an individual one but also is passed on through family histories, social stories and cultural memory. The results are consistent with the theories of cultural trauma, which suggest that collective suffering becomes a part of the group identity and historical consciousness (Alexander et al., 2004). Amidst the horror of the present, memories of the past injustice are a reminder of the oppression and a source of solidarity.

Memory and identity come to be another major area of intersection. In all the chosen texts, identity is represented as a contested and evolving concept with an impact of experiences of caste discrimination. Selfhood, belonging and social recognition are major issues for characters and narrators. Dutt's public affirmation of her identity as a Dalit, Navaria's articulation of urban Dalit subjectivity and Limbale's quest for social acceptance are all instances of the psychological effects of her exclusion. We can see that all these stories bear witness to the fact that being a member of caste society, identity is constructed very much as a result of inherited memories and social experiences.

The issue of gendered nature of trauma is pointedly seen in the works of Meena Kandasamy and Thenmozhi Soundararajan. Both writers make a point that caste oppression intertwines with patriarchy to bring about specific suffering for women. In *When I Hit You* and *Exquisite Cadavers*, Kandasamy explores the themes of domestic violence, emotional abuse, and gendered silencing, highlighting the interconnectedness of these issues within larger frameworks of social oppression. Soundararajan also speaks of particular vulnerabilities of Dalit women who suffer from discrimination at the nexus of caste and gender. They make intersectional feminist claims, which contend that oppression should not be analyzed on just one axis of oppression, but that all oppression must be understood as multiple axes of power (Crenshaw, 1989). Thus, the study highlights that there is no gender-neutral trauma in Dalit literature, but these are defined by intersectionality's of caste, gender, class and social location in complex ways.

None of the chosen texts are solely narratives of victimhood, although all of them speak of the suffering. Rather, they always turn trauma into resistance and empowerment. As it writes, writing

becomes a powerful act of self-assertion and political intervention. In *Flowers on the Grave of Caste*, Yogesh Maitreya explicitly thinks of literature as a way of remembering and of resisting social injustice. Similarly, the auto-biographical account by Limbale, the memoirs of Dutt, the activist scholarship of Soundararajan, and the feminist narratives of Kandasamy all translate pain into collective resistance. These works imply that the articulation of trauma is not just an act of recalling what has happened to them in pain, but also a process of regaining their agency and dignity.

The texts also illustrate the therapeutic and transformative powers of literature. Trauma theorists suggest that it is important to tell the story of what has happened to help heal the trauma; to face and integrate the painful memories (Herman, 2015). Storytelling in Dalit literature has more social and political roles. It questions mainstream narratives about the past, it saves the experiences of those on the margins and it offers opportunities for collective recognition and solidarity. Literature consequently becomes evidence and action, personal memory and social change. In doing so, Dalit writers give voice to those who have been silenced over the years and help to advance the struggles for equality and justice.

6. Conclusion

The present study shows that trauma is an overarching theme in the modern Dalit literature, and even intergenerational trauma is one of the key themes. The chosen texts show that the caste oppression has long term psychological, emotional and social implications, which is transmitted from one generation to another in the family memory, collective consciousness and through narratives and culture. As autobiographical, fictional, or political, the authors all view trauma as something lived through that affects how one views oneself or others, how one views the world, and, ultimately, how one sees one's own identity.

One of the key insights of the study is that caste-based trauma is at individual and collective levels. Humiliation, exclusion, violence and stigma are not isolated cases but a symptom of an overall social system which historically has marginalized Dalit communities. The research also shows that memory is an essential tool for elaborating trauma, for passing it on and safeguarding it. Family histories, community narratives, and cultural memories hold a space for suffering and resistance and provide ways to successive generations of people to engage with the legacy of caste oppression.

Theoretically, it has identified the importance of using the concepts of Trauma Theory, Intergenerational Trauma Theory, Dalit Literary theory and Memory studies. It is an interdisciplinary approach, which gives a broader picture of the role of caste as a social phenomenon, as well as a psychological and cultural phenomenon. The study contributes to the literature on trauma by showing that particularly structural and systemic oppression can

have long-lasting traumatic consequences that can be likened to those of war, displacement and other collective violence.

The study helps to move Dalit literary studies beyond the political and economic aspects of caste oppression to the emotional and psychological aspects, and to the significance of literature as a space of resistance and self-representation. It also makes its mark in trauma studies, adding the question of caste as a major frame to consider collective and intergenerational suffering in postcolonial societies. The chosen authors through their varied narratives contest the dominant images of Dalit communities and insist on alternative visions based on dignity, equality and social justice. It may be possible to further investigate the intersections of caste trauma with other identities such as gender, class, religion, disability, and region in future studies. Comparative examination of Indigenous, African American or other historically marginalized literatures may also yield insights into the global aspects of intergenerational trauma and resistance. Moreover, future studies can explore new avenues of Dalit expression in digital media, social activism and present-day cultural productions and understand how new generations are dealing with the inherited wounds and producing resistant voices for future times.

References

1. Alexander, J. C. (2004). Toward a theory of cultural trauma. *Cultural trauma and collective identity*, 76(4), 620-639.
2. Ambedkar, B. R. (2014). *Annihilation of Caste*. Navayana. (Original work published 1936).
3. Assmann, J. (2011). *Cultural memory and early civilization: Writing, remembrance, and political imagination*. Cambridge University Press.
4. Caruth, C. (2016). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. JHU press.
5. Crenshaw, K. (1989). University of Chicago Legal Forum.
6. Dawar, R. (2023). Critique of Everyday Dalit Marginalisation Across Terrains in Ajay Navaria's Unclaimed Terrain. *Language in India*, 23(9).
7. Dutt, Y. (2024). *Coming out as Dalit: A -e Outcaste Akkarmashi: A Frantic Quest for Caste Identity*.
8. Felman, S., & Laub, D. (1992). *Testimony: Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history*. Taylor & Francis.
9. Guru, G. (2011). Humiliation: Claims and context.
10. Halbwachs, M. (1992). On collective memory University of Chicago Press. *Chicago IL*.
11. Heart, M. Y. H. B. (2003). The historical trauma response among natives and its relationship with substance abuse: A Lakota illustration. *Journal of psychoactive drugs*, 35(1), 7-13.

12. Herman, J. L. (2015). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence--from domestic abuse to political terror*. Hachette uK.
13. Kandasamy, M. (2020). *When I hit you: Or, a portrait of the writer as a young wife*. Europa Editions.
14. Kumari, P., & Kapoor, M. (2021). Understanding Dalit literature: A critical perspective towards Dalit aesthetics. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 13(4), 1-8.
15. Limbale, S. (2003). *The Outcaste (Akkarmashi)*. Oxford University Press.
16. Maitreya, Y. (2019). *Flowers on the Grave of Caste*. Panther's Paw Publications.
17. Rege, S. (2014). *Writing caste/writing gender: Narrating Dalit women's testimonies*. Zubaan.
18. Sahu, V., Singh, R. P., Singh, P., Srivastava, M., & Pedhekar, S. R. Caste, Space, and the Shrunk Self: A Biopsychosocial Synthesis of Trauma and Resilience in Dalit Women.
19. Soundararajan, T. (2022). *The trauma of caste: A Dalit feminist meditation on survivorship, healing, and abolition*. North Atlantic Books.
20. Srinivasulu, K. (2021). Dr Ambedkar and Annihilation of Caste. In *The Routledge Handbook of the Other Backward Classes in India* (pp. 87-99). Routledge India.