

The Concept of Differend in Dalit Literature: Epistemic Silence and the Politics of Self-Representation

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Abstract

Dalit literature emerged as a powerful literary and political intervention against caste oppression, structural violence, and cultural erasure in India. It provides a voice to communities that were historically silenced within the rigid structure of the caste system. This paper examines Dalit literature through the theoretical framework of the *Differend*, a concept developed by the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard. According to Lyotard, a differend occurs when injustice is inflicted upon an individual or community, yet the victim lacks the linguistic, institutional, or discursive authority required to express that injustice within dominant systems of judgment. In the Indian context, the caste system functioned as such a structure by denying Dalits the right to represent their own experiences and by rendering their suffering socially invisible. This paper explores how Dalit writers challenge this historical silence through autobiographies, fiction, poetry, and critical essays. It analyzes the contributions of major writers and thinkers such as B. R. Ambedkar, Omprakash Valmiki, Bama, Baburao Bagul, and Sharan Kumar Limbale. The study also examines the role of Dalit feminism, language politics, and alternative aesthetics in constructing a counter-discourse against Brahmanical dominance. Ultimately, the paper argues that Dalit literature is not merely a literary category but an epistemological and political movement that seeks linguistic, cultural, and social justice.

Keywords: Differend, Dalit Literature, Epistemic Injustice, Self-Representation, Ambedkar, Caste, Resistance, Dalit Feminism.

Dalit literature represents one of the most significant transformative movements in modern Indian literary history. Emerging from centuries of social exclusion, humiliation, and systemic oppression, it challenges both literary traditions and social hierarchies. The word *Dalit*, meaning “broken,” “oppressed,” or “crushed,” has evolved into a political and cultural identity associated with resistance, dignity, and self-assertion. For centuries, Dalits were denied access to education, property, religious institutions, and public spaces under the caste system. Their exclusion was not only material but also cultural and linguistic. Mainstream Indian literature, historically dominated by upper-caste voices, either ignored Dalit experiences or represented them through stereotypes and paternalistic sympathy. As a result, Dalits remained absent from the structures of literary and intellectual authority. Dalit literature emerged from the necessity of self-representation. It allowed marginalized communities to narrate their own experiences without mediation from dominant groups. Unlike mainstream literature that often emphasized idealism and universality, Dalit writing foregrounded hunger, violence, humiliation, labor exploitation, and social exclusion.

The concept of the *Differend*, proposed by Jean-François Lyotard in *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (1983), offers a useful framework for understanding this historical silence. Lyotard explains that a differend arises when a victim cannot communicate suffering because the dominant system lacks the capacity or willingness to recognize the victim’s language and experience. In such situations, injustice becomes permanent because the structures of judgment themselves are biased. The historical condition of Dalits closely reflects this theoretical model. Brahmanical social structures controlled religion, education, language, and cultural production. Dalit experiences of humiliation and violence were either normalized or erased within these dominant frameworks. Consequently, Dalit literature became a counter-discourse that

challenged the monopoly of upper-caste representation and established new modes of expression rooted in lived experience. This paper examines how the concept of the differend operates within Dalit literature. It explores the politics of language, the role of autobiography, the emergence of Dalit feminism, and the development of alternative aesthetics that challenge dominant literary traditions.

Jean-François Lyotard developed the concept of the differend to explain a form of conflict in which one party suffers injustice but lacks the means to express that suffering within accepted institutional or linguistic systems. According to Lyotard, a differend differs from an ordinary legal dispute because the victim cannot appeal to a shared framework of judgment. In a conventional dispute, both parties operate within the same discursive system and recognize the same rules of evidence and reasoning. In a differend, however, the dominant system determines what counts as legitimate speech, truth, and evidence. As a result, marginalized individuals or communities cannot articulate their suffering in a way that the dominant order accepts as valid. Lyotard argues that social institutions privilege certain discursive frameworks over others. When the experiences of oppressed communities cannot be translated into these dominant frameworks, a differend emerges. The victim is silenced not because suffering does not exist, but because the structures of recognition themselves are exclusionary.

The caste system in India historically operated through such exclusionary mechanisms. Brahmanical discourse established social hierarchies based on notions of ritual purity and pollution. Within this system, Dalits were denied humanity, dignity, and intellectual legitimacy. Their experiences of violence were not recognized as injustices but were justified through religious and social ideology. This situation created a deep linguistic and epistemological silence. Dalits lacked access to education and literary institutions, and therefore lacked the authority to narrate their own experiences publicly. Their voices were either erased or distorted by upper-caste representations. Dalit literature emerged as a response to this silence. By

creating autonomous literary spaces, Dalit writers challenged dominant interpretive systems and established alternative forms of knowledge rooted in lived reality.

The origins of Dalit literature can be traced to anti-caste movements led by social reformers such as Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Periyar, and B. R. Ambedkar. These thinkers recognized that caste oppression was maintained not only through economic exploitation but also through control over education, religion, and knowledge production. Jyotirao Phule's *Gulamgiri* exposed the historical oppression of lower castes and criticized Brahmanical authority. Savitribai Phule emphasized the importance of education for marginalized communities, especially women. Periyar challenged caste hierarchy and religious orthodoxy through rationalist thought and social activism. The most influential figure in the development of Dalit consciousness, however, was B. R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar argued that caste was a system of graded inequality that divided society into hierarchical layers. According to him, caste prevented social democracy by institutionalizing humiliation and exclusion. Dalit literature as a modern literary movement gained momentum during the 1960s and 1970s in Maharashtra. The rise of the Dalit Panthers, inspired partly by the Black Panther movement in the United States, transformed Dalit politics and cultural expression. The Dalit Panthers adapted radical anti-oppression politics to the specific realities of caste violence in India.

Writers such as Baburao Bagul, Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar, and Sharankumar Limbale introduced a new literary realism centered on the everyday experiences of Dalit communities. Their works rejected elite literary conventions and focused instead on labor, poverty, violence, and social exclusion. This literary movement later spread into Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Punjabi, Kannada, and other regional literatures. Writers like Omprakash Valmiki and Bama expanded Dalit discourse by combining autobiographical testimony with social critique. Dalit literature therefore emerged not merely as a literary trend but as a collective movement for social and epistemological liberation.

One of the most significant aspects of the differend is the concept of silence. Victims are often unable to express suffering because dominant society lacks the interpretive tools necessary to recognize their experiences. This condition resembles what philosopher Miranda Fricker describes as epistemic injustice. Fricker identifies two major forms of such injustice: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker's credibility is unfairly reduced because of social prejudice. Dalits historically faced this problem because upper-caste society viewed them as intellectually and morally inferior. Their testimonies regarding caste violence were often dismissed or ignored. Hermeneutical injustice occurs when society lacks the conceptual framework to understand the experiences of marginalized groups. Mainstream literary criticism frequently failed to understand Dalit writing because it judged these texts according to elite standards of aesthetics and refinement. Dalit literature directly challenges this epistemic exclusion by transforming private suffering into public testimony. It rejects the idea that literature should focus only on beauty, harmony, or elite concerns. Instead, it foregrounds structural violence and social inequality. Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan* is an important example. The text narrates the humiliation experienced by Dalit communities forced to survive on leftover food discarded by upper castes. By placing this reality at the center of literary discourse, Valmiki forces readers to confront forms of violence that mainstream narratives had normalized or erased. Similarly, Bama's *Karukku* exposes caste discrimination within Christian institutions. Her writing demonstrates that caste oppression extends beyond Hindu social structures and shapes everyday interactions even within supposedly egalitarian spaces. Dalit literature therefore becomes an archive of suppressed histories and experiences. It restores visibility to lives historically excluded from dominant narratives.

Language occupies a central place in Dalit literature because the differend itself is fundamentally linked to linguistic exclusion. Historically, elite literary traditions in India

privileged Sanskritized and highly formal language associated with upper-caste culture. Dalit writers challenged this linguistic hierarchy by employing regional dialects, colloquial speech, oral traditions, and working-class idioms. This stylistic shift was not merely aesthetic but political. It asserted that the language of marginalized communities possessed equal legitimacy and expressive power. The rejection of elite literary language also represented a rejection of upper-caste cultural authority. Dalit writers refused to translate their experiences into refined forms acceptable to dominant readers. Instead, they foregrounded the immediacy and rawness of lived experience. Namdeo Dhasal's poetry, for instance, introduced the language of urban slums and red-light districts into Marathi literature. His poems disrupted conventional literary expectations by using aggressive imagery and colloquial expression. Bama similarly emphasized the importance of writing in the spoken dialect of her community rather than standardized literary Tamil. By doing so, she challenged linguistic purity and affirmed the cultural identity of Dalit communities. This linguistic resistance is deeply connected to the politics of self-representation. Dalit writers insist that oppressed communities must speak for themselves rather than be represented through dominant perspectives. Their works therefore reject paternalistic sympathy and demand recognition of Dalit agency.

The intellectual foundation of Dalit literature is inseparable from the philosophy of B. R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar transformed the discourse on caste by shifting it from the realm of religious morality to that of constitutional rights and social justice. In *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar argued that caste could not be reformed within traditional Hindu structures because those structures themselves legitimized inequality. He emphasized that social democracy required liberty, equality, and fraternity. Ambedkar's famous slogan "Educate, Agitate, Organize" became central to Dalit political consciousness. Education, for Ambedkar, was not simply a means of economic advancement but a tool for intellectual liberation and self-respect. From the perspective of the differend, Ambedkar provided Dalits with a modern political

vocabulary through which they could articulate injustice. He challenged the authority of Brahmanical discourse and replaced it with the language of citizenship, constitutionalism, and human rights. Dalit literature remains deeply influenced by Ambedkarite thought. Many Dalit writers portray Ambedkar as a symbol of dignity, rationality, and resistance. His writings continue to shape Dalit literary aesthetics and political imagination.

Autobiography occupies a central position in Dalit literature because it allows marginalized individuals to narrate their own histories directly. Dalit autobiographies differ significantly from conventional autobiographical traditions because they focus less on individual achievement and more on collective social suffering. These texts transform personal memory into social testimony. Individual experiences become representative of broader structures of caste oppression. Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan*, Daya Pawar's *Baluta*, and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* reveal how caste violence shapes everyday life, education, labor, and interpersonal relationships. Such texts challenge the romanticized image of Indian villages often presented in mainstream literature.

Dalit autobiographies also disrupt dominant historical narratives by documenting experiences ignored by official histories. They preserve collective memory and resist cultural erasure. Unlike elite autobiographies that often celebrate personal success, Dalit autobiographies foreground systemic exclusion. They reveal how humiliation becomes embedded within social institutions, including schools, temples, workplaces, and families. The autobiographical form therefore becomes a powerful tool of resistance against epistemic silence.

Dalit feminist writing expands the understanding of the differend by examining the intersection of caste and gender oppression. Dalit women experience discrimination not only from dominant castes but also within patriarchal social structures. Gopal Guru argues that Dalit women "talk differently" because their experiences cannot be fully represented either within mainstream feminism or within male-centered Dalit politics. Mainstream Indian feminism

historically focused primarily on upper-caste women, often ignoring caste-based violence and labor exploitation. At the same time, male-dominated Dalit movements sometimes marginalized gender concerns in favor of broader caste politics. Dalit feminist writers challenged both forms of exclusion. Writers such as Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Bama, and P. Sivakami highlighted issues such as domestic violence, sexual exploitation, labor oppression, and social invisibility. Their writings reveal how caste and patriarchy intersect to produce unique forms of marginalization. Dalit feminist literature insists that liberation cannot remain incomplete or selective. It emphasizes that the voices of the most marginalized members of society must occupy the center of political and literary discourse. By documenting both external caste violence and internal patriarchal structures, Dalit feminist writers create a more complex understanding of oppression and resistance.

Traditional Indian literary criticism often evaluated literature according to classical concepts such as *Rasa* and *Dhvani*, which emphasized emotional harmony, refinement, and aesthetic pleasure. Dalit writers and critics challenged these standards by arguing that literature must also confront social reality. In *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, Sharankumar Limbale argues that Dalit literature requires its own critical framework based on truth, social experience, and resistance. According to Limbale, literature cannot remain detached from material suffering. Dalit aesthetics therefore prioritize realism over ornamentation. The value of a text lies not in decorative language but in its ability to reveal structural injustice and provoke ethical awareness. Anger occupies an important place within Dalit aesthetics. While traditional criticism often viewed anger as disruptive or aesthetically inferior, Dalit writers treat anger as a necessary response to centuries of oppression. Dalit literature also rejects abstract universalism that ignores historical inequalities. Instead, it emphasizes contextual and lived realities. This alternative aesthetic framework challenges dominant literary institutions that historically excluded marginalized voices from the canon.

Dalit literature functions as a counter-discourse against Brahmanical and upper-caste cultural dominance. It dismantles idealized representations of Indian society and exposes the violence hidden beneath narratives of harmony and tradition. Mainstream literature often portrayed Indian villages as peaceful and unified communities. Dalit writers reveal villages as spaces marked by segregation, untouchability, and institutional humiliation. Dalit texts document spatial divisions within villages, exclusion from water sources, discrimination in schools, and restrictions on social mobility. These works challenge nationalist romanticism by foregrounding the realities of caste violence.

Dalit literature also critiques religious ideologies that justify inequality. By questioning sacred texts and ritual practices, Dalit writers expose the relationship between religion and social hierarchy. At the same time, Dalit literature creates alternative histories and collective memories that resist cultural erasure. It establishes autonomous spaces of expression through magazines, publishing houses, literary movements, and academic scholarship. Thus, Dalit literature becomes not only a critique of oppression but also a project of cultural reconstruction.

In contemporary India, caste discrimination continues despite constitutional guarantees of equality. Dalits still face violence, economic exploitation, educational discrimination, and social exclusion. Modern Dalit writers and activists have adapted to changing social realities by using digital platforms, translations, and global networks of solidarity. Social media and independent publishing have weakened traditional literary gatekeeping structures and enabled direct communication between writers and readers. Translations of Dalit texts into English and other global languages have also introduced Dalit discourse to international audiences. Scholars increasingly compare caste oppression with other forms of structural inequality such as racism and colonialism.

However, globalization also creates new challenges. There is a risk that Dalit suffering may be commodified for academic or cultural consumption. Contemporary Dalit scholarship therefore

emphasizes the importance of retaining political urgency and historical specificity. Works such as *Bhimayana* demonstrate innovative ways of combining visual art, history, and political critique to reach wider audiences without diluting radical content. Dalit literature today continues to evolve while remaining deeply committed to social transformation and democratic justice.

Jean-François Lyotard's concept of the differend offers a valuable theoretical framework for understanding the historical silencing of Dalit communities within Indian society. The caste system functioned not only as a structure of economic and social exploitation but also as a mechanism of linguistic and epistemological exclusion. Dalits were denied the authority to narrate their own suffering within dominant cultural and institutional frameworks. Dalit literature emerged as a collective response to this exclusion. Through autobiographies, poetry, fiction, and criticism, Dalit writers reclaimed the right to self-representation and challenged dominant structures of knowledge and aesthetics. Thinkers and writers such as B. R. Ambedkar, Omprakash Valmiki, Bama, Baburao Bagul, and Sharankumar Limbale transformed Indian literary discourse by foregrounding lived experience, social realism, and resistance. Dalit feminist writers further expanded this discourse by examining the intersection of caste and gender oppression. Ultimately, Dalit literature is not simply a body of texts about marginalization. It is a radical epistemological and political movement that seeks dignity, recognition, and justice. It reminds society that true democracy requires more than legal equality; it requires the recognition of historically silenced voices and the dismantling of structures that deny humanity to marginalized communities.

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