Constructing Tamil Dalit Identity: Tamil Dalit Literature as a Form of Resistance

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Introduction

Literature has been used as a critical tool of resistance for oppressed peoples in many different contexts. Dalit literature, besides being original and indigenous in nature, has also drawn on the work of African Americans, Latin American movements and Post-colonial literatures. The relationship between Dalits and the upper-castes is one of violence and material subjugation. Between March and July 2020, 81 incidents of caste-based atrocities were recorded in Tamil Nadu alone, including 14 murders (Rani 2020). The visceral subjugation of Dalits across India remains an active presence to this day, but all too frequently remains hidden behind what Krishnaswamy describes as 'he hegemonic, normative version of Indian modernity' (2005: 74). As Omvedt explains for the colonial British, and then later the nationalist elite, the history of India was based on an 'ancient Indian tradition' that was synonymous with 'dominate caste Hindu society' (1994: 244). The Dalit movement developed by political thinkers such as Dr Ambedkar, Phule and Periyar, challenged this historical construction, and looked to "construct an alternative identity… based on non-north Indian and low-caste perspectives" (Omvedt 1994: 244).

Since the early stages of the Dalit movement, the written word has been crucial to this project of identity formation and a critical intervention for disrupting upper-caste hegemony. The term hegemony is used specifically because it draws on Gramsci's theory of hegemony and counter-hegemony. As well as Said's argument that it is 'cultural hegemony' which he analyses through written works, that gives the discourse he terms 'orientalism' its 'durability and strength' (2003: 7). Literature is a place in which the Tamil Dalit identity which has been stigmatised and erased, can be constructed, contested and explored in a way that resists this hegemonic ideology. By tracing the movement back to its roots from the Bhakti poetry of the medieval period, to the modernism of 20th century Marathi Dalit novels, we can see that Dalits have been using literature to communicate their experiences, their anger, and their resistance to caste oppression for centuries.

Throughout these centuries, the people now known as Dalits, have taken on many different names. Some of these shaped by Dalits themselves, such as the self-respect term *Adi-Dravida.* However many other terms were imposed upon them by those who knew that the best way to contain and supress Dalit resistance was to define their identity as inextricably tied to oppressive caste relationships. For example, the implications of servitude and pollution contained in the term *untouchable,* as well as terms such as Gandhi's *Harijans* (meaning child

of god) that, although designed to be emancipatory, insisted that Dalit identity could only exist within the boundaries of Hindu society. Literature creates space to contest, complicate, and test the boundaries of this identity. It therefore serves as a powerful form of resistance to those who have used identity as a means of oppression.

This thesis will be split into three chapters. Chapter I; Literature in Context, will deal with the historic context for Dalit identity and Tamil Dalit Literature. Then, in chapter II; Forms and Strategies of Resistance in Tamil Dalit Literature, I will set out the central research questions, and explore these through an analysis of four primary texts of Tamil Dalit Literature. Lastly, in chapter III; Literature and Emancipation I will explore the emancipatory potential of Tamil Dalit Literature as a new and distinct canon, in relation to an Indian state that is increasingly embracing Hindu nationalism.

Chapter I: Literature in context

I: The Formation of Dalit Identity

The term Dalit is of Sanskrit origin and literarily means 'broken', 'crushed', or 'downtrodden' (Mosse 2012:1). The term connects identity to the experience of oppression, rather than low social status, or material 'impurity' and; as Zelliot explains, contains "an inherent denial of pollution, karma and hierarchy" (1992: 267). Therefore, Dalit can be understood, not as a caste identity but a commitment to the annihilation of caste. In this section I will discuss how Dalit identity has been historically and socially constructed by bringing together various cultural and political resources, including literature.

Scholars have offered alternative historical and sociological accounts of caste in pre-colonial India, identifying forms of caste resistance in the pre-colonial period. Zelliot (1992) identifies 13th /14th century Bhakti movements and cites writing from this time, such as the song (see below) by the Maharashtrian Bhakti saint and untouchable[1] *Chokhamela.* In this example we can see that the logic of pollution that underpins caste was not unquestionably accepted (Zelliot 1992: 3).

The only impurity is in the five elements.
There is only one substance in the world.
Then who is pure and who is impure?
The cause of pollution is the creation of the body.
In the beginning, at the end, there is nothing but pollution.
No one knows anyone who was born pure.
Chokha says, in wonder, who is pure.
(Abhanga 11, quoted in Zelliot 1992: 5-6).

Similarly, Mosse discusses mass conversions by Dalits to Christianity in southern states during the mid 19th century (2012: 53). He offers historical evidence to suggest that these conversions were motivated by a 'rejection of social inferiority' and a desire to improve social status by acquiring a new religious identity (Mosse 2012: 53-4). These examples challenge a

[1] The word *untouchable* is used by Zelliot to describe Chokhamela, based on what is known about his life from historical legend

historiography that has been preoccupied with Indian society as a holistic and harmonious social system, epitomised by Dumont's (1980) *Homo Hierarchicus,* where he argues that caste system is a self-maintaining system in which all castes, high or low, accept their position within the hierarchy, believing it to be just.

Gorringe argues that prior to colonial rule caste resistance was 'rarely widespread, systematic or organised' (2012: 120). Towards the end of the 19th century however, these strands began to coalesce into non-Brahmin/anti-brahmin movements. Jatirao Phule founded the first non-Brahmin movement, the *Satya Shodak Samaj (Truth-Seeking Society),* in Pune, Maharashtra, in 1873 (Zelliot 1992: 37). This movement stressed two important ideas, education for the masses, and the reduction of Brahmin ritual power (Zelliot 1992: 39). The central impetuous for the non-Brahmin movement at this time was to reduce the ritual or religious reliance on Brahmins, rejecting need for a priest to mediate the relationship between a human being and god (Zelliot 1992: 39). However, Phule's radically secular education message would prove highly influential on later leaders and movements. As O'Hanlon explains "Phule regarded western education, with its emphasis on secular and rationalist truths about the external world, as the most potent of weapons for the liberation of the lower castes" (O'Hanlon 2009: 126). Phule's ideas contributed to the creation of a collective identity for lower castes in Maharashtra, centred around a critique of Brahminism and Brahminical purity. O'Hanlon uses the example of a play written by Phule in 1855 entitled *The Third Eye.* She states;

> "one of the aims of the play was to convince his audience that the heterogeneous collection of social groups that fell within these terms did, in fact, share common interests and a common social position … The new social construction was to be *the community of the oppressed itself*, with its explanation of social evils in term of the exploitation of all by one group, and its atmosphere of hope and striving for change"
> (O'Hanlon 2009: 131- emphasis added).

The term *Shudra* was used by Phule in a 'new and radical' fashion to refer to the 'community of the oppressed', who recognised a common social position and common interest based on rejecting Brahmin dominance within Hindu society and Hindu ritual life (O'Hanlon 2009: 131-2). The concept of a unified 'community of the oppressed' articulated through

literature/art can be seen as an early blueprint for Dalit literature, that would later become centrally important to the movement.

A pan-Indian caste movement began to emerge in the 20th century, with the influence of Dr B.R. Ambedkar whose influence on the Dalit movement is difficult to overstate. A brief survey of the movement's development is useful here. Ambedkar's assertion of an independent Dalit movement gained purchase in the politics of 1920s Maharashtra. During this decade he collaborated with those in the *anti-brahmin movement*, while remaining critical of their hesitancy to reject the caste system. His seminal work, *The Annihilation of Caste* (first published 1936), analyses how caste functions and advances the argument that there is no hope for Dalit emancipation within Hindu society. It provoked a debate with Gandhi, which would become centrally important to the Dalits place within independent India. For Ambedkar untouchables or Dalits constituted their own 'social group', 'as completely different as Hindus and members of other religions' (Omvedt 1994: 146). It was therefore essential that untouchables had their own political interests represented, and that they were representing themselves. In 1923 Ambedkar returned to India from Britain where he had been studying at the London School of Economics, and became fully immersed in Dalit activism and advocacy.

1930 to 1936 are cited by Omvedt as containing "a 'turning point' in the history of the Dalit movement in India" (1994: 161). Ambedkar solidified his position on accommodations for elections, taking up the cause of a separate electorate and representatives for untouchables precipitating a major disagreement with Gandhi, eventually leading to the signing of the Poona Pact in 1932.

Contemporaneously, a Marxist critique had taken root in India, which, though failing to articulate a real alternative to Congress reformism, continued to influence Ambedkar's thinking. The Marxist view conflated caste as 'belonging to the superstructure'; as something that would dissolve with the destruction of class (Guru 2021: 124). Ambedkar, continued to argue that caste was a social structure that required theorising outside of Marx's class paradigm. As Guru states "Marx focuses on the alienation of the proletariat, whereas Ambedkar on that of the untouchables" (Guru 2021: 124). In 1935 he stated that he 'would not die a Hindu', and that he would "no longer encourage any attempt to gain rights in the Hindu world" (Zelliot 2008: 807). In 1956, after many years of study, Ambedkar converted to Buddhism, adopting a form that "discarded the mythical elements of Buddhism, stressing a humanistic, rational, compassionate Buddha" (Zelliot 2008: 808). Contursi states that Dalit Buddhism should be considered a 'popular religion' because it was formed through 'the activity of popular

struggle', provides a 'new identity for Dalits', and is antagonistic towards the 'dominant culture' (1993: 322).

Ambedkar remains central to contemporary Dalit identity: since the centenary of his birth (1991) there has been what Gorringe refers to as a process of *Ambedkarization.* Statues, posters, portraits and plaques have been commissioned, paying homage (Gorringe 2012: 123), as asserting a direct connection between him and current Dalit identity. In Limable's study of the Aesthetic of Dalit Literature he cites 'Ambedkarite ideology' as the 'the true inspiration for Dalit literature' (2004: 46) and his life and ideas as the well-spring of Dalit communities' 'found self-respect' (Limbale 2004: 46).

Dalit identity became central to caste politics in the 1970s and 1980s, again with Maharashtra, particularly Bombay, at its centre. Dalit communities in the city's slums were becoming frustrated at the failures of the communist and Dalit parties to bring about meaningful political or social change. This new wave of Dalit assertion 'is best characterised by the Dalit Panthers' (Gorringe 2012: 122). Taking their name and inspiration from the Black Panther movement in the USA; they focussed on direct action rather than democratic politics, forming an identity that was highly critical of the politics of independence, and the continuing domination of Hindu society and the Hindu elite in India. Following Ambedakar's assertion in *The Annihilation of Caste* that 'Hindu society is a myth', it is only a 'collection of castes' (2014: 241-242), Dalit political thought is founded on a critique of the Hindu elite who propagate the idea of a collective Hindu identity in order to maintain their high status position within it. As Omvedt explains the term Dalit has been about the creation of 'alternative interpretations of Indian identity (or identities)' (2006: 5). Using this critique of upper-caste hegemony, the term Dalit has been broadened out to include a range of groups that fall into these 'alternative identities.' This broad definition of who is included in the term Dalit was used in the 1972 manifesto of the Dalit Panthers Members who defined the term as "Members of Scheduled Castes and tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless labourers and poor peasants, women, and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion" (Quoted in Omvedt 2006: 72).

Drawing inspiration from the African American political struggle, the Dalit Panthers were interested in tying Dalit identity to a commitment to 'radical politics'; "Dalit Panthers movement produced the dalit as the subject of revolutionary politics" (Muthukkaruppan 2011:37). This identity grew out of the context in which the movement began. Started by a number of Dalit writers and poets including Namdev Dhasal, Raja Dhale, and Arun Kamble,

the movement began in the Dalit communities living the slums of Bombay. As Rao argues, this radical politicisation of everyday life came out of the experience of caste relations in the new modernity of Bombay. Far from emancipating the Dalits from the caste bound structure of the rural village, in the city caste became 're-inscribed … on to practices of social and spacial segregation' and the 'commodification of labour' (Rao 2017: 154).

The movement was steeped in writing as both a means of communication and as a form of resistance; as Bagul stated "Dalit Sahitya[2] is not a literature of vengeance. Dalit literature is not a literature that spreads hate. Dalit Sahtiya first promotes man's greatness and man's freedom and for that reason it is an historical necessity" (Quoted in Zelliot 1992: 278). They saw writing as a 'project of political aesthetics' (Rao 2017: 148), a way of challenging the norm of Indian literature, and creating an alternative narrative of the new independent nation. Caste should be understood as a hegemonic 'proscription of the seeable and the sayable', which dalit writing challenges by making the violence and suffering of Dalit lives its subject (Rao 2017: 148). In other words, where caste Hindu society negates, abjects, and makes invisible the Dalits, literature brings them into view. In this sense, literature is a powerful assertion of Dalit identity, and shows that the assertion of this identity is itself an inherently political act.

II: Dalit Identity in Tamil Nadu

Geetha argues that "[n]early two decades before Ambedkar's crusade against untouchability in Maharashtra, there were distinct voices of protest in Tamil Nadu" (2014: 131). In the 1920s non-Brahmin and Dravidian movements became influential in Tamil Nadu. These movements constructed an identity around the term *Adi Dravida* meaning 'original Dravidian', which encouraged members of the 'depressed classes' to identify with an original egalitarian and casteless Tamil society, later suppressed by Aryan Invaders from the north (Geetha 2011a: 119, Gorringe 2016: 9). Pundit Iyothee Thoss (1845-19140), influenced by the ideas of the Theosophist Henry Olcott[3], became a leading proponent of the construction of a Tamil Buddhist past (Pandian 2007: 103) and also of Buddhism. However, his writing focused on the antagonism between the Paraiyar in Tamil Nadu, and the figure of the Brahmin (Pandian 2007: 103), rather than a collective Tamil Dalit identity.

[2] Sahitya; साहित्य Hindi word for literature or literary composition; derived from Sanskrit

[3] One of the founders of the Theosophical society in Ceylon 1880, a religious movement based on a westernised reading of Buddhist and Hindu philosophy

These critiques focused on challenging Brahmin domination and ridiculing the ideas of Brahminism, paved the way for the Self-Respect Movement. Begun by E.V Ramasamy Naicker (Periyar) in 1926, the movement is described by Pandian as having "the primary objective of advancing a rationalist critique of caste, religion, and mainstream nationalism" (2007: 191). Periyar expanded Thoss' focus on the Paraiyar caste to bring together all different 'interiorized identities' including caste, gender, region, language, in opposition to Brahminism in Indian society (Pandian 2007: 209).

However, by the time of the 'communist upsurge in the 1940s previously active caste politics in Tamil Nadu had waned', as Geetha explains "Communists relegated caste-related issue giving primary emphasis of class and economic subordination" (2011a: 127). The Indian communist movements insistence on the 'primacy of class struggle' left little room for Adi-Dravida identity (Geetha 2011a: 127). This change was reflected in the self-identification of Dalit writers at the time. Towards the 1940s, earlier Dalit writers such as Poomani and Daniel, coming out of a primarily Marxist inspired literary tradition often resisted the term 'Dalit writer', arguing that it was a stigmatising qualifier placed on their work.

In later 20th century Ambedkar's ideas and pan-Indian Dalit identity remained influential, but in Tamil Nadu a number of different caste movements failed to coalesce into a singular Dalit identity. Caste groups focused on the uplift of their own specific caste identity, rather than on common Dalit interest. For example, Mosse cites the DKV (Devēntira Kula Vēlālar) association formed in the 1980s to promote the interest of Pallars, arguing that "caste in India 'cannot be eradicated' … Pallars must therefore struggle for self-advancement" (2012: 176). This lack of cohesion persisted into the 1990s when Dalit consciousness, formed through the political movement started in Maharashtra, began to gain purchase in Tamil Nadu (Geetha 2011c: 400). Geetha cites the centenary of Ambedkar and accompanying nationwide celebrations as a catalyst for the spread of Dalit identity to oppressed castes in Tamil Nadu (2011c: 400). Dalit writers in Tamil Nadu began to self-consciously identify themselves as expressing a distinctive Tamil Dalit identity through their work.

III: Evolution of Dalit Literature in Tamil Nadu

Literature was central to the Dalit movement and Dalit emancipatory politics since the origins of a distinctive movement at the start of the 20th century. For Tamil Dalits primarily occupying the southern state of Tamil Nadu, the movement originally centred around a collection of caste-based organisations beginning in the 1920s (Geetha 2011b: 118). A number of journals and magazines carried the ideas of the movement, exemplified by Iyothee Thass

Pandithar's influential journal *Oru Paisa Tamilan*, published from 1907 to 1914 (Pandian 2007: 103). They published material relating the experience of untouchability, and interrogating ideas of Brahmanical superiority, largely using the forms of political commentary and polemical tracts, rather than the prose and poetry that would later become dominant.

In conjunction with a range of consciously political actions aimed at promoting Adi-Dravida pride and identity, Periyar began publishing (1925) the Tamil language newspaper *Kudi Arasu*. During this time publishing in Tamil was a part of the formation of an explicitly political identity, promoting what were traditionally seen as inferior, or vernacular cultural forms. Another milestone in the development of Tamil Dalit literature was V.V. Murugesa Bhagavathar's *Adi Dravida Samuga Seerthirutha Geethangal* (1931). This collection of poems is considered as one of the earliest works of Tamil Dalit literature (Geetha 2011b: 120), and like much of the later writing, it is written in a realist mode that testifies to the conditions and suffering of Dalit communities.

"You offer Pongal to your gods
and still keep us in starvation.
All god's creation were equal,
till traitors intercepted
and pushed us to the bottom.
Everything here is modern
Under the rule of the British
Ships and trains post and telegraphs,
Universities and hospitals.
It is time for us to rise"
(extract from a poem in Ad Samuga Seerthirutha Geethangal by V.V. Murugesa Bhagavathar 1931 – quoted in Geetha 2011b: 121).

This extract contains themes that would develop in Tamil Dalit literature, remaining central to this day. In the first four lines we see experiences of caste oppression used as material for abstract writing. Modernity is raised as a possible means of emancipation but is understood as a double-edged sword. Ambedkar, like the self-respect movement, expounded a 'modern, rational, liberal' politics, however as Bama saw and Dharman draw on in their writing, the promises of 'modernity' often turned out to be empty.

It was not until the Communist upsurge of the 1940s that literary writing would become common in the Tamil Dalit arena with writers such as Daniel, Selvaraj, and Poomani, aligning themselves with the Communist movement. Dalit writers across India were influenced by Marxism and literature coming out of Russia, "culminat(ing) in the genre of progressive literature [which] … foregrounded the problems of the underprivileged sections of society, who were economically exploited" (Geetha 2011b: 127), and which, for Geetha "marked the beginning of Tamil Dalit Literature (2011b: 127). Allegiance to the communist movement also led a number of Tamil writers to supress or disavow caste identity. The term Tamil *Dalit* writer remains contentious to this day, highlighting some complexities of the identity.

From this milieu a modern canon of Tamil Dalit literature emerged. Bama's *Karukku* is the first, and emblematic example of this literature expressing an explicit *Dalit* identity. The aesthetic of social realism exemplified by the autobiography, has helped shape a theoretical framework through which this body of work has been understood and valued. Tamil Dalit identity has evolved in close association with the development a recognisable canon of Tamil Dalit literature. In 1972 the newly-formed Dalit Panthers made a bold statement of Dalit identity as "Members of Scheduled Castes and tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless labourers and poor peasants, women, and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion" (Quoted in Omvedt 2006: 72). For the panthers, Dalit identity was a political expression that aspired to enable political emancipation for a broad category of oppressed groups; in effect a pan-Indian dalit identity (Geetha 2014). However, the development of a Tamil Dalit consciousness has, as the term would suggest, not been such a universalist stance in regards to the term Dalit. It was not until the 1992 publication of Bama's Karukku that a separate, literary identification as a Tamil Dalit became available, in contrast to other writers who had led both a Tamil and a Dalit life, but positioned themselves as belonging to the professional category of 'writer'. Bama on the other hand has explicitly referred to herself as a *Tamil Dalit Writer* stating that she views this identity as that of a collective or community. Autobiography is an important form in Dalit literature, conventionally understood as the life narrative of an individual, but the boundaries of this convention is extended to an entire community.

IV: Literature review

The primary works that form the core analysis in this thesis, are translated out of the original Tamil texts. The limited availability of Dalit writing in translation, has restricted the development of a wider academic discourse around the genre. Academic discussion of Dalit literary works originally written in Tamil is extremely scarce prior to the 1990s when English translations began to be produced. An important development in the secondary discourse around Dalit Literature was the publishing of a handful of anthologies such as *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* (1992, Dangle), which was a landmark moment for the establishment of Dalit Literature as a distinct canon. It was not until 2011 that Tharu and Satyanarayana published *No Alphabet in Sight,* whose first dossier focused on dalit literature from South India originally written in Tamil or Malayalam. This was followed in 2012 by *The Oxford India Anthology of Tamil Dalit Writing* (Ravikumar & Azhagarasan), which recognised the particular contribution of the Tamil language and experience to Dalit writing.

Bama's first two novels *Karukku (1992)* and *Sangati (1994),* discussed in this thesis, are of particular significance. Many commentaries on Tamil Dalit Literature use Bama's *Karukku* as a primary example for a discussion of the form and aesthetic mode of the canon. As the autobiography of a Tamil Dalit woman, *Karukku* exemplifies the social realist, confessional, or testimonial form that is argued as the defining characteristic of the canon. As more material becomes available we can detect trends in the literature. Firstly, much of the writing that address the question of the form of Dalit literature focuses on a discussion of a single work, or a comparison between two works. In particular, there are a plethora of academic articles analysing Bama's novel *Karukku (1992 (2000 in Translation))* both as a singular focus; (Nayar 2006), (Adalin Monika 2015), and in comparison with works by Bama or other authors; see (Geetha 2011a), (Haider 2015), (Christopher 2012), (Ravichandran et al 2012).

Much of the academic writing on this literature uses Bama's writings to argue that Dalit identity primarily comes out of a collective experience of the suffering with stark, or even banal description of this everyday reality adding power to the testimony. Nayar writes, "This essay argues that Dalit autobiographies must be treated as *testimonio,* atrocity narratives that document trauma and strategies of survival" (2006: 83); also see (Muthukkaruppan 2017),

(Pandian 2008), (Adalin Monika 2015). Another recognisable form is the 'life narrative' (Christopher 2012), or 'autoethnography' which as Haider (2015) explains seeks to position the individual narrative within a wider socio-cultural context. Other examples taking this form include P.Sivikami's *the Grip of Change* (2006), K.A. Gunasekaran's *Vadu [Scar]* (2005), L.Elayaperumal's *Cittirai Neruppu [The Flames of Summe] (1998),* and Bama's follow up work *Sangati [Events]* (1994).

While the importance of Bama's work is indisputable, the focus on it within the academic literature has led to an over-emphasis on the autobiographical and testimonial form as the defining characteristic of the canon. There is little to no academic commentary on Tamil Dalit poetry, or on the work of the accomplished writer Cho Dharman, a contemporary of Bama, whose novel *Koogai* (2005 (Translated as *The Owl* 2015)) is more abstract in its aesthetic choices.

Gopal Guru, an important theorist in the academic discourse around Dalit literature, foregrounds the concept of Dalit experience as useful for defining what constitutes Dalit literature, as opposed to literature about Dalits. His epistemological argument that knowledge is inherently tied to experience leads him to conclude that any 'creative' or 'theoretical' reflection on the identity or experience of Dalits, must come from an individual who can draw on their own lived experience (Guru 2012: 75). Sharankumar Limbale's 1996 work *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (published in Marathi with English translation by Alok Mukherjee, 2004) is a polemic on the nature and form of Dalit literature. He makes a similar connection between Dalit literature and experience, arguing that Dalit literature is a new and revolutionary form, because it articulates something that was previously inaccessible. He terms this *Dalit consciousness* and states "it is separate and distinct from the consciousness of other writers" (Limbale 2004: 32).

In *The Cracked Mirror* (2012); debate between Gopal Guru and Sundar Surukkai on the concept of experience, Guru argues that social sciences in India have been organised around a cultural hierarchy, a 'pernicious dichotomy between theoretical Brahmins and empirical Shudras' (2012:10). He argues that theorising is a 'social necessity' and 'moral responsibility', but that it should be firmly rooted in the experience of being Dalit. Surukkai, responds with philosophical reflection on the concept of experience that helps to illuminate the value in Dalit literature. He argues that by learning to trust subjective experience, rather than objective knowledge, we can see autobiography or even fiction, as 'a legitimate mode of theorising' (Surukkai 2012: 37). Surukkai's approach draws on the idea of phenomenology in Indian and

Western philosophical traditions. Pandian contributes to the debate with his article *Writing Ordinary Lives* (2008), refuting Guru's claim that theory-making is a necessity for Dalits and subaltern groups. Instead, in a discussion of the literary strategies in Bama's *Karukku,* and Gunasekharan's *Vadu.* he posits a 'radical empiricism' that 'can bring together experience, affect, and politics as inseparable' (2008: 40),

He uses this approach to explore the question of gender in Dalit politics, and the form and purpose of Dalit women's writing. In *Dalit Women Talk Differently* (2003), he argues that Dalit women have a specific 'social location which determines the perception of reality' incorporating both caste and gender, and importantly the ways in which the two interact (2003: 81). Drawing on the earlier discussion of experience, he argues that Dalit women must represent or 'talk' for themselves, without being subsumed by the women's movement or Dalit movement. This argument is also made by Tharu and Niranjana who argue that the normative Indian is structured as an upper-caste and middle-class Hindu (1996: 99). This normative idea of the 'Indian woman' as archetypal of the women's movement in India, largely fails to engage with the distinctive problems of lower caste women (Tharu & Niranjana 1996: 99). Similarly within the Dalit Panther movement, 'Dalit women, both in their writing and in their programme, remained firmly encapsulated in the role of the 'mother' and the 'victimized sexual being' (Geetha 2012: 415). Like bell hooks' description of the double oppression of black women in America in *ain't i a woman* (2015), the Dalit woman is similarly oppressed, located in a secondary or subjugated positon in both Dalit and Women's political movements. Anupama Rao suggests that the Dalit feminist standpoint would re-examine gender relations *as fundamental to the broader ideologies of caste in Indian society*, understanding gender as not simply an additional layer, but integral to the functioning of caste in Indian society (2003: 5). Some academics have discussed Bama's work from this intersectional standpoint; Haider argues that Bama's work articulates a unique 'Dalit female subjectivity' due to the dialogical nature between 'plural aspects of the self' (2015: 343), and Brueck (2017) suggests that the 'collectivity of experience' expressed in works such as Bama's *Sangati,* is not 'accidental' but an active political construction.

One major theme in the academic work on Tamil Dalit literature is a tension between the political and aesthetic. Limbale argues, that "any aesthetic consideration of Dalit literature must be based on Ambedkar's thought' (2004: 20) and that 'universal values' for critically evaluating art are 'obsolete' in the eyes of Dalit writers, because what is deemed 'universal' is actually the standards of English and Sanskrit literary theories (Limbale 2004: 106). This bias

is exemplified by Kannan and Gross (2002) who argue that Tamil Dalits are yet to develop a literature because they have not been able to move beyond 'simply documentary', to a distinctive aesthetic. This claim has been challenged, by arguing that a critique of the aesthetics of Dalit literature is inherently inappropriate in relation to a genre who's primary purpose and ends is political, a stance that has pervaded much of the secondary commentary on Tamil Dalit Literature. We can see this in Nayar (2006), who reads Bama's *Karukku* as 'testimonio' or 'atrocity narratives'; and Geetha (2011a) describing Tamil Dalit novels as an 'effective tool' for expressing protest.

This reluctance to engage with an aesthetic discussion of Tamil Dalit literature obscures our understanding of the genre in two ways. Firstly, it assumes that the literary aesthetic, particularly of Dalit women's writing, is purely a reflection of the 'trauma' of Dalit experiences, rather than the intentional artistic crafting of a writer. Secondly, it fails to acknowledge that Dalit literature is an aesthetic intervention on the normative conception of literature, which hides both its colonial and upper-caste nature under the guise of universality. Misrahi-Barak et al(s) *Dalit Text, Aesthetics and Politics Re-Imagined* (2020) brings together current thinking around this debate. The central argument that, not only has the understanding of Dalit literature as primarily political stood in the way of discussions that prioritise the concept of Dalit art, but that "the traditional opposition set up between the aesthetics and politics of literature" (Misrahi-Barak et al 2020: 9) is fundamentally unhelpful. More recently, articles by Muthukkaruppan (2017) and Satyanarayana (2017), have called for more careful consideration of the intentional aesthetic choices in Tamil Dalit literature. Thiara (2016) rises to this challenge, analysing the 'experimental features' of three Dalit novels including Bama's *Sangati.*

One area that is frequently touched upon, but lacks theoretical analysis, is Dalit literature in the context of an increasingly Hindu nationalist Indian state. Limbale argues that Dalit subalternity should be read, not from the perspective of colonial structures, but instead as rooted in the 'caste-based social, cultural and economic structure of Hindu society' (2004: 2). Dalit literature adds complexity to the picture by showing 'how a subjugated society such as that of pre-independence India could, simultaneously, be a subjugating society" (Limbale 2004: 17). Limbale argues that post-colonial theorists such as Spivak, have little to contribute to the discussion of Dalit literature because they remain 'caught up in the binary framework of the colonizer and the colonised' (Limbale 2004: 17). Krishnaswamy's 2005 article is a more

useful intervention, discussing Dalit literature in relation to postcolonial theories of modernity from Appadurai and Bhabha, however few have picked up this thread.

There remain gaps in the academic discourse, including an attempt to position Dalit literature as a part of, and antagonist towards, the broader canon of Indian literature and questions as to whether the category of post-colonial literature is a useful lens through which to think about Tamil Dalit literature.

In this thesis I will analyse fictional and autobiographical works written by Tamil Dalit authors, identifying a number of forms and strategies of resistance. Previous work analysing the literary form of Tamil Dalit writing has argued that its political force is a function of its sociological significance. I will follow both Brueck (2017) and Misrahi-Barak et al (2020) in arguing that the emphasis on how closely Dalit literature portrays the 'authentic' experience of Dalit lives and suffering, leads to lack of acknowledgment of artistic authorship. My central argument is that literature, as both a political and aesthetic project, is an effective form of Tamil Dalit resistance. To address this question I offer a comparative reading of four works of Tamil Dalit literature, three of which are autobiographical, and one work of narrated fiction. I will identify different strategies of resistance that are "actively, politically, and consciously constructed in the course of the narrative" (Brueck 2017: 2).

In the final chapter I will discuss the possibility of defining Tamil Dalit literature as a form of post-colonial literature within a neo-colonial context. In the same way that post-colonial literature has contested the ontological domination of the post-colony by the colonial powers, Tamil Dalit literature itself contests the elite Hindu domination of Indian politics and society. It does this by combining both a subaltern Dalit identity, with a regional South Indian perspective. This framework allows us to view Tamil Dalit literature not only as a call to acknowledge the moral outrage of caste discrimination, but as a political aesthetic that confronts and challenges our current understanding of Indian literature.

V: Methods

My central aim is to identify forms and strategies for resistance within Tamil Dalit literature through analysis of four primary texts. I will use this analysis to address questions of how we can define the genre in terms of its political and aesthetic content, and from this, to assess the significance of literature as one form of resistance, within the larger movement of Tamil Dalit emancipation.

I have chosen four texts, including the first two published works by Bama; her first novel *Karukku,* an autobiography cited as a foundation text for the genre of Tamil Dalit literature. Her second work *Sangati* (Events), is a work of autobiographical fiction that uses an un-named narrator to portray the lives of Tamil Dalit community. The third work *Viramma: Life of a Dalit* was first published in French in 1995 (English translation 1997). Defined by Diamond as an 'ethno-autobiography' (2016: 143), it differs from the other works in that is was written collaboratively with ethnomusicologist Josiane Racine from a series of conversations between the two. Unlike Bama's work, it is not expressing an anti-caste politics on the part of Viramma, the eponymous co-author and central protagonist. It was selected as a point of comparison, in order to question what constitutes the defining feature of the genre. The fourth work, first published in Tamil in 2005, (English translation 2015), is Cho Dharman's *Koogai* (The Owl), a novel which complicates the question of how Tamil Dalit writing can be defined. Unlike the pervious works, and much of the Dalit literary canon, it is not autobiographical, but rather a work of narrative fiction, making use of abstract metaphor rather than ethnographic detail. This quartet of differentiated literary forms offers four points of comparison that push the boundaries of what this genre can contain.

In selecting these texts, I made use of anthologies of Dalit writing that form a survey of the literature as well as analysis of the different forms of writing, including poetry, short stories, and novels. The principal anthology used was *The Oxford India Anthology of Tamil Dalit Writing (2012,* edited by Ravikumar and A. Azhagarasan).

My choice to make novels the object of analysis had two justifications. Firstly, poetry or shorter narrative works that have been of greater significance within Dalit writing for a longer period. Up until the 1970s when novels became a popular form in the Dalit Panther movement, Dalit writing primarily took the form of short poetic works. Consequently, Dalit poetry has been much more readily available in English translation, for example, one of the earliest anthologies of Dalit writing in translation *An Anthology of Dalit Literature (Poems),* (1992, Anand and Zelliot), as was the landmark *Poisoned Bread: Translations From Modern*

Marathi Dalit Literature (Dangle) comprising almost exclusively poetry and short stories. Consequently, in the secondary literature, these forms have received more attention. In comparison, Dalit works in the Tamil language did not reach prominence until the 1990's when Dalit consciousness saw a significant resurgence, and as Ravikumar and Azhagarasan explain, long form works in Tamil "cannot be explicitly traced" to this moment (2012: 145). This historical development of the genre, combined with the limited availability of works in translation, the genre of Tamil Dalit novels remains under theorised and under defined within the academic literature.

My second justification for selecting novels, is to bring them into a productive engagement with the concept of post-colonial writing, and the issue of narrative as a way of conceptualising the nation. It allows me to discuss the definition of Tamil Dalit literature in relation to how post-colonial writing, and subaltern writing has been defined. In this I will use a definition of post-colonial writing in Ashcroft et al's *The Empire Writes Back (1994),* as well as the work of Homi Bhabha.

The purpose of choosing to analyse the content of primary texts, rather than engaging in an historical or anthropological inquiry on the role of writing within the Tamil Dalit movement, is in order to focus on literature as a form of resistance in and of itself. The nature of oppression is such that it only becomes possible when those that are oppressed are silenced and becomes, as Butler defines it, 'unknowable' and their suffering is not viewed as an ethical imperative. Producing artistic works that turn lived experience into self-constructed identity is therefore foundational to resistance movements, because it allows people to be seen and heard through their own words. Although, these works may precipitate direct political action, I aim in this thesis to consider them as affective forms of resistance apart from this question.

Chapter II: Forms and Strategies of resistance in Tamil Dalit Literature

I: Texts and Authors

Cho Dharman

Cho Dharman, born 1953 in the Thootukudi district in Tamil Nadu. His writing is considered part of Karisal literature, the term referring to four southern districts of Tamil Nadu, also known as the 'black soil regions' (Muthukkaruppan 2017: 67), out of which a number of influential Tamil writers have emerged. A number of writers from the region were inspired by the father of Karisal literature Ki Rajanarayan. The historical context of the region is important for understanding the significance of events throughout Dharman's novel *Koogai,* for example the building of match factories and the movement from the 'traditional' village to the 'modernity' of the town. The book also deals with the division between Dalit castes in Tamil Nadu.

Bama

Bama is the pen name of a woman, born in Tamil Nadu to a Roman Catholic family in the Paraiyar community. Bama, having chosen to leave her life as a nun in 1992, has published autobiographical novels and short story collections dealing with life as a Tamil Dalit woman. In 1992 her first book, the autobiography *Karukku,* was published. This was, as Holmström, states in her introduction to her English translation, "the first autobiography of its kind to appear in Tamil" (2017: xv). It is cited as an inaugural text for what is now a recognisable canon of 'Tamil Dalit Literature', displaying a distinct aesthetic and perspective that was previously unseen in a published work. *Karukku,* referring to the double saw-edge of the Palmyra leaves, tells the story of Bama's life, from her childhood in the village, to her eventual return to her community and an identity that brings her comfort and strength. This was closely followed by her second novel *Sangati* (1994), a work of autobiographical fiction that centres on the community of these women.

II: The autobiography of a community; Tamil Dalit Identity

Stuart Hall argues that identity is not a pre-existing state of being, but a 'process of becoming' that makes use of "the resources of history, language and culture" (Hall 2003: 4). Bama's *Karukku,* is one of the first cultural products to express a distinctive 'Tamil Dalit identity.' It has been described as a strategy of resistance and applauded for its subversion of the traditional personal narrative autobiography, instead making community identity the subject of the narrative.

Bama captures this in the very first sentence of *Karukku* with the collective pronoun 'our'; *"Our village is very beautiful"*(2017: 1). She then goes on to punctuate the life of the protagonist, with stories of everyday life. For example:

> *"In the afternoon, after five o'clock, the streets were all noise and bustle. Men and Women would be out there, shouting and yelling. Usually there were fights going on amongst those who waited their turn at the single water pump, It took such an age to fill a single water pot, even if you worked the pump strenuously. But the quarrels and fights going on there really made you laugh"*
>
> *(Bama 2017: 8).*

Although the narrative of *Karukku* is an individual life, descriptions of the life of the community provide the meaning, or what Bama terms the 'truth' of the novel (2017: x). Haider argues that combining individual experience with the 'sociocultural milieu' creates a distinctive literary form which she terms 'autoethnography' (2015: 336). This genre "that links the personal to the cultural, positioning the self within a social context" (Haider 2015: 336). Is reinforced by the non-linear narrative, interspersing Bama's struggles in the convent with memories from childhood. Bama's anger over the way Dalit children are treated by the nuns, is followed by a return to the origins of her Christian faith as a young girl; *"When I lived at home as a child, the people who taught me about devotion to God were my mother, Paati, my teachers, and later the nuns" (2017: 81).* This device structure has the effect of contrasting her experience of caste discrimination in educational and religious institutions, with the carefully drawn descriptions of the community that she values.

After *Karukku,* Bama's second novel, *Sangati,* dispenses entirely with first-person narrative. Instead she "disrupts received notions of what a novel should be" by using a series

of short narratives by an unnamed narrator, to build an autobiography of a community (Haider 2015: 334). A sense of collective identity is achieved through reference to the ethnographic context that places the novel in space and time. For example, the Christianity is portrayed both as an ethnographic fact, and as an expression of the evangelising colonial mission in Tamil Nadu. Christian belief amongst Tamil Dalits is placed in context through an incident where Paatti, the family matriarch, voices her concern for her sixteen-year-old granddaughter, the tragic Mariamma, who is yet to come of age. One woman suggest that Mariamma be taken to a *pujaari,* who will perform a lucky mantra over her while another cautions against this idea; "Just last week our priest preached that once you've joined the faith, it's a mortal sin to go to pujaaris and ask for spells. He frightened us saying you'll definitely go to hell forever" (Bama 2005: 14). The first woman argues that many still ask for *mantrams* and that they cannot all be crazy, suggesting that "if you feel worried about it, you can always go to confession after you've been to the pujaari, get a pardon, and take communion" (Bama 2005: 14). Missionary attempts to convert Dalits in Tamil Nadu to Catholicism are referenced but filtered through the extant life and culture of Tamil Dalits.

Another way that Bama structures Tamil Dalit identity as a form of resistance, is through the narrative arc of Karukku. In *Karukku* the protagonist, Bama, decides to abandon her life in the convent, return to her community, and identify 'primarily as Dalits' (Geetha 2011a: 323). After finishing her schooling she leaves her home village, moving to the town to become a nun and teacher, yet is unable to shake of the discrimination and limitations of caste. When Bama moves to the town to attend college, she assumes that there "nobody would bother about such things as caste" (Bama 2017: 21). Having been told that education would provide her ticket out of the caste-bound village, she works hard and is academically successful but when she and another student are asked to stand up in class, in order to identify scheduled caste children for extra tuition, she is humiliated by the insinuation that this would be necessary and states; "It struck me that I would not be rid of this caste business easily, whatever I studied, wherever I went" (Bama 2017: 22).

Disillusioned with the institutions of the Catholic church, and the world outside the village, Bama finds solace on returning to her community. Although structured as an autobiography, tracing the life of the author/protagonist from childhood to the present, the power as a form of resistance literature derives from the expression of collective identity. The narrative concludes with a return to this collective Dalit identity, which is both an act of self-preservation, as well as a self-consciously political decision;

"I am truly happy to live with a whole and honest mind. I feel a certain contentment in leading an ordinary life among ordinary people. I can breathe once again, independently and at ease, like a fish that has at last returned to the water"

(Bama 2017: 121).

By the end of *Kurruku* Bama has once again become one of these 'ordinary people' that populated the stories from her early childhood. In *Sangati*, collective identity becomes the central protagonist following the decision to leave the first-person narrator unnamed and of ambiguous identity. When Bama identifies herself as a 'Tamil Dalit writer', that this is less a statement about her own identity, than a statement regarding the central purpose of her work. It is what she describes as the 'praiseworthy life of a community', one deserving of literary record, that becomes her focus and motivation.

III: An ethnographic literature; experience and theory

In Gopal Guru's work he argues for "the primacy of experience" (2012: 2) in the practice of social science in India. He asserts that writing or theorising about Dalits should epistemologically and ethically come from Dalits themselves, who have an embodied experience of caste oppression. In this chapter I will explore the idea that the assumed superiority of theoretical works compared to works of narrative storytelling, limits the potential of literature as a form of political resistance. In *Viramma: Life of Dalit,* he hints at this potential, by showing a Dalit woman's narrative without conscious political identity. We can use the questions posed by this book to analyse later Tamil Dalit autobiographies, written with explicitly political intent and ask, what are the ethical and political implications of literature that aims to record the experience of an oppressed social group. In this chapter I will look at both Bama's *Karukku* and *Viramma: Life of a Dalit* through the lens of Pandian's concept of 'radical empiricism' (2008: 34).

"Will a non-Dalit writer be able to author Dalit literature if he wants to? He will not. Because he has not experienced the life of the Dalit. He does not know the pain, the shame the anger of a Dalit's life"

(Bypari 2020: 15).

The above quote, from Bengali Dalit writer Manoranjan Byapari, known as the *rickshaw puller turned author,* makes the claim that a non-Dalit will never be able to write Dalit literature, not because he cannot understand or empathise with the plight of Dalits, but

because he has not experienced a Dalit life (Mukherjee 2020: 15), suggesting that only Dalit literature can express these experiences. The ability to recreate this experience through the medium of literature acts as a form of evidence, allowing the reader to witness the reality of Dalit discrimination and oppression, giving the literature its potency as an indictment of the prevailing socio-political system.

Both Bama's *Karukku,* and another Dalit woman's autobiography; *Viramma, life of a dalit* provide ethnographically valuable accounts of Dalit life and experience, but speak of women with very different aims in terms of conscious resistance to caste oppression. *Viramma* is a unique and arresting document of the life of an 'untouchable' woman from Karani, Tamil Nadu, who experienced life before and after the creation of Independent India. Originally published in French, the book draws on ten years of conversations between Josiane and Jean-Luc Racine and Viramma, out of which they created a record of her life expressed by a first-person narrator. Unlike *Karukku,* where Tamil Dalit consciousness is purposefully embodied in the narrative of the book, and caste and gender oppression is actively questioned by the restless narrator, *Viramma* is the story of a woman who, "accepted caste hierarchy as something natural to be followed, and who silently surrendered to the system of oppression" (Geetha 2012: 426).

> *"The reason is that we don't own any land. God only left us these eyes and these hands to earn our living. By working hard at the Reddiars we've been able to lead our lives in the proper way"* (Viramma 2005: 156)

And yet the book reads as a powerful call for Dalit emancipation, due to detail and directness with which it voices the experiences of a life previously unheard. Siddiqi suggests that the book gives an affirmative response to the question 'Can the subaltern speak?', arguing that "the self-description of Viramma as a Paraiyar is really no more than a locating of her experience in her own time. And yet, it remains very much the voice of a Dalit" (Siddiqi 140). "Even when the question of emancipation – the Dalits' goal and that of the Gramscian modern 'prince' – is not made explicit within the narrative structure, it looms large as an encoded imperative" (Pala 150). Even when Dalit literature does not articulate an explicit desire for emancipation, it remains implicit in the narrative and the recording of these events is a self-evident expression of the case for emancipation. However, this reading of Viramma comes from a secondary theorising of her life, frequently from the perspective of non-Dalits. Guru argues that the theoretician that uses the experiences of the oppressed as a 'tool for theorization'

functions in the same way as 'the tormentor', in relation to the oppressed, because 'both of them achieve their success based on the objectification of the victim" (Guru 2012: 72).

In contrast, in *Karukku*, we also see honesty and directness in the descriptions of her experiences, but the author herself is both consciously writing a resistance narrative and expressing a form of caste resistance embedded in Dalit identity. Passages that deal with the experiences of a Tamil Dalit woman are strikingly similar. We can compare for example the following two passages that both deal, in painful but stark terms, with the death of children;

"If we went to that office, perhaps they could tell us how many children I've had and what their names were as well. Ayo! Look at that, I don't remember any more. They're born, they die. I haven't got all my children's names in my head! Sometimes they die before I even give them a name"

(Viramma 2005: 79)

"Nallathangaal gathered her children about her, and not knowing what to do or how to survive, pushed all seven of them into a nearby well, and then jumped in after them and perished"

(Bama 2012: 12)

In *Karukku* the narrative story is interpreted by the protagonist, with expressions of confusion or anger at the discrimination she faces. One place where this frequently happens is when the protagonist and author, Bama goes to work as a teacher at a school run by Christian nuns, and becomes disillusioned and angry that caste discrimination is endemic to the nuns and religious institutions;

"Besides the usual lessons, they could have educated the Dalit children in many matters, and made them aware of their situation in the world about them. But instead, everything they said to the children,... suggested that this was the way it was meant to be for Dalits; ... As I saw all this, I became very troubled at heart. I was angry; I thought to myself, what sort of nuns are these, they claim they are helping the poor and the needy, yet this is how they are. At times I confronted them and argued with them."

(Bama 2012: 103)

In this excerpt she is angry at the way the Dalit children are treated by the other nuns,

and openly challenges them, suggesting that if they were truly interested in helping the poor and needy, they would be active in resisting caste by educating the children about 'their situation.'

For Guru, this is the kind of empirical and theoretical work, stemming from experience, that is an effective form of resistance to oppressive structures such as caste. Guru makes an epistemological claim that knowledge is connected to experience; he states that "experience provides an *initial epistemological condition* for the *creative reflection* or *theoretical representation* of experience" (Guru 2012: 75 emphasis added). In other words, any form of secondary representation of an experience, creative or theoretical, must be a product of the thing itself. In particular, Guru is interested in humiliation as an embodied experience that produces a kind of knowledge that cannot be found elsewhere. He claims that Indian social sciences have suffered from a perceived dichotomy between the 'empirical Shudra' and the 'theoretical Brahmin', and in order to work towards caste emancipation, Dalits must become the subject/author as well as object of theorising. For Guru the production of theory is still an important part of producing useful and politically effective knowledge about Dalits. Pandian, in response to this claim, suggests that the assumption that theory is necessary is itself a symptom of a higher-caste world view, and that there is a political and epistemological value in what he terms 'radical empiricism.' This does not necessarily mean that we can read a narrative of Dalit resistance into works that were not written with this intention. But that the form itself contains the potential to be a form of resistance, without a theoretical framework through which to view it.

This literature is not attempting to universalise the experience, instead the authors allow the reader to bear witness to someone else's experience. As Guru explains, "Any claim to universality (and thus duplicity/replicability) is seemingly lost in the domain of experience" (Guru 2012: 2). Viewed through the lens of 'radical empiricism' this lack of universality becomes a strength, creating what Butler calls an ethical witnessing of others suffering, through an acknowledgment of a 'shared state of precarity' (2016: 33). The experience of suffering recorded in these works demands ethical and moral attention, without removing it from its social context.

IV: Gender

In the introduction to bell hooks' *ain't i a woman*, an essential of intersectional feminism in the African American context, she states that for black women;

> *"Our silence was not merely a reaction against white women liberationists or a gesture of solidarity with black male patriarchs. It was the silence of the oppressed – that profound silence engendered by resignation and acceptance of one's lot"* (hook 2015: 1).

In line with a long tradition of black or African-American, and Dalit solidarity, these words resonate across cultures and continents. Dalit women have frequently found themselves at the intersection of feminism and Dalit politics, subordinated and discriminated against in both settings. Throughout Tamil Dalit literature we see intersecting identities that complicate, and sometimes challenge a collective Dalit identity. Building on the previous discussion of experience and the value of literary texts, I will argue that by writing from a female and Tamil perspective, these novels create spaces for resistance that explore the pitfalls of assuming a pan-Indian Dalit identity.

The creation of the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) in 1995 constituted an 'independent and autonomous assertion' of identity for Dalit women, reflecting a need for Dalit women to 'talk differently' (Guru 2003: 80). This need espresses factors 'external' to the Dalit movement; namely Dalit women's exclusion from the Indian women's movement, as well as 'internal factors', such as the patriarchal nature of Dalit society and the Dalit movement (Guru 2003: 80). Guru argues that Dalit women's need to represent themselves goes beyond the historical failure of other movements to properly incorporate the concerns of Dalit women. Instead the experiences and social location of Dalit women, shapes their perception of reality (Guru 2003: 80-1). Guru therefore argues that at the level of, both 'politics and theory', it is essential that Dalit women speak for themselves and are the authors of their own narratives.

In Bama's autobiography *Karukku* she explores shifting identities. That Bama is living the life of a woman is a defining feature throughout the narrative, even though it is not explicitly addressed in the early sections of the book describing her childhood, it is implicit in the kinds of stories that are told. Careful attention is paid to the social and domestic lives of Dalit women such as a description of her grandmothers' lives as servants for upper-caste Naicker families (2017: 16). Detailed description of the agricultural work done by women; the rearing of children; and the lives of small children form the social world of the novel. Once Bama leaves the world of the village she enters a differently gendered space of the Catholic convent. For

Bama, rather than marrying a man and living a life where she states: "[I] would have to live the rest of my life and even die in the end for the sake of one man" (2017: 131), she hopes that by joining a convent of women dedicated to serving a community, she could live a life that was useful to others and to society (2017: 131). She is disappointed to find that instead of a space where the oppressed can be helped and uplifted, this community is bound by rigid ideas of caste hierarchy. Whereas her description of her childhood is embedded in a strong sense of community, and of the collective life of Tamil Dalit women (explored later in *Sangati),* life outside the village is one in which she is repeatedly forced to the fringes of collective life.

Rao argues in her introduction to *Gender & Caste,* an understanding of the distinct identity of Dalit women must incorporate both "[t]he symbolic economies of gender and sexuality and the material reality of the economic dispossession of dalit women" (2003: 5). She suggests viewing caste as 'a form of embodiment'; "as the means through which the body as a form of "bare life" … is rendered expressive and meaningful"

Rege argues that Dalit women have been marginalised both by the Dalit movement and the women's movement; the 'dalit male' and the 'upper class, upper caste women's' experience was universalised as the subject of these movements, leaving Dalit women silenced; without subjectivity of voice (Rege 1998: 42). In *Sangati* the narrator gives a stark account of the different way in which boy and girl children are dealt with in her community:

> *"When they are infants in arms, they never let the boy babies cry. If a boy baby cries, he is instantly picked up and given milk. It is not so with the girls … It is the same when the children are a bit older, as well. Boys are given more respect. They'll eat as much as they wish and run off to play … My Paatti was no exception in all this. She cared for her grandsons much more than she cared for us" (Bama 2005: 7).*

In all of Bama's work, gender discrimination is interwoven with the Dalit narrative and simultaneously stands apart as a separate question. Particularly in *Sangati* the identity of Tamil Dalit woman is never homogenised, but is represented through the spectrum of female characters that appear. Like hooks, Bama's work makes the telling point that a collective identity of the oppressed or the subaltern, cannot make some forms of experience subservient to others.

V: Birds and Gods; a Tamil Dalit aesthetic

Aesthetic considerations of Dalit writing are either absent or unconsidered in secondary literature. Some have gone further, arguing that a defining feature of Tamil Dalit literature is the lack of interest or attention paid to aesthetics. The perceived empiricism and the ethnographic nature of Tamil Dalit literature and descriptions of Dalit experience have yielded both praise and criticism. Both of which draw on the same assumption; that it is a literature lacking in aesthetic merit. I will use Cho Dharman's *Koogai* as an excellent example of the potential for a distinctively Tamil aesthetic within Dalit literature and will argue that the aesthetics of this literature constitute a form of resistance that is radical in its subversion of high-caste norms.

Departing from the tradition of ethnographic autobiography, *Koogai* weaves a complex narrative of the events and caste conflict in a village in post-independence Tamil Nadu. It is set primarily in a fictionalised village near the town of Kovilpatti, in the Southern '*Karisal*' region of Tamil Nadu, and is largely narrated by a single protagonist, a Dalit man named Seeni. Seeni is given the house of the land-owning Brahmin *Nataraja Iyar* who moves to the town, and leaves the Dalit workers in charge of his land, thereby restructuring the relationships of caste obligation in the village. After this Seeni becomes an impromptu leader for his people, as they attempt to cultivate the land they were given, and suffer violent backlash from upper caste groups. Seeni puts his faith in the protection of the Koogai-Samai, the great owl that is worshipped by the Dalits in the temple by the large Banyan tree, and in turn protects them from violent retaliations of the upper-castes. As the book progress he becomes increasingly frustrated and disillusioned, as his community losses faith in Koogai.

Although the novel primarily takes place within the village, there are three distinct physical spaces that help to form the narrative landscape. Foremost is the village, epicentre of caste and agrarian conflict in which the full extent of their oppression in the village is revealed through the violent backlash to their new status as land 'owners'. Simultaneously the village is the location for collective Dalit identity and culture, embodied in the Koogai-Samai temple. This contradiction over the village as a physical space is demonstrated when Seeni goes to ask Koogai whether they should accept the land from the Brahmin land owner:

"Saami! For generation after generation we Pallar-kudi folk have been worshipping you ... That day when you died for us – ever since then ... we never forget to light a lamp for you ... Every day we have been beaten and trampled, kicked and insulted, and we have taken

it all as coming from you, yourself. And now there is this great ordeal that's come to test us – should we accept it or not/ Only you can tell us, Saami" (2015: 39).

In this passage Seeni explains that, like an omnipotent god, Koogai is both the great protector, sacrificing himself for the people of the Pallar-Kudi and, simultaneously the source of their oppression; *'we have taken it all as coming from you.'* Koogai thus reflects the constant tension throughout the novel between attempting to free oneself from the caste relationships, and the loss of Dalit community and collective culture.

The second place is the jungle where the widow Peichi and her daughter Mariamma live, after she and her husband, a higher-caste Thevar, were banished for marrying outside of caste. Here the novel shifts from the inter-community conflicts of the village, to a place of isolation and loneliness, outside the caste/community nexus. The third and final location is the town which promises emancipation from caste bondage but ultimately inscribes it on to the new modernity of post-independence Tamil Nadu. At the denouement of the novel, when the Dalits have been forced to move to the town to find work, they discover that not only is their fate once again inextricably tied to their higher-caste bosses, they have also been stripped of the great Koogai that once symbolised the distinctiveness of their community. This is dramatized in the final sentences when Koogai, the Owl has been slain:

"Great wings spread open and stirring up the dust, the slain owl has being dragged along, its gory face roughly scraping the earth" (2015: 355)

Birds act as a metaphor and leitmotif throughout the book, an alternative world in which the Dalit community exists. The birds, like the Dalits, suffer as a consequence of the world around them while retaining an implicit connection to the natural environment. The Dalits for their part, struggle to secure material ownership of land but belong to the land, and take pride in this belonging. For example, when the banyan tree by the Koogai temple catches fire Seeni worries about the birds, and asks,

"if the wood vanished, how could birds live? If the birds perished, how could there be any forests? Devouring the fruit, and seeding the sky was a feat that only birds could perform.

... Till daybreak old Seeni stayed awake, pondering over it"

(Dharman 2015: 40)

Dharman himself has spoken of the importance of situation literary works about Dalits in relationship to the physical environment. In a critique of Dalit literature Dharman states, "In

such self-claimed Dalit novels, I don't find a rainfall, don't find the sound of a bird, a crow, or even a tree … They don't represent a life experience" (Dharman 2020: 48). Again we can see that *Koogai* is a novel that is intimately tied to place and space, reinforced by the dislocation at the end of the novel when the community is forced to move to the industrialising town.

Ultimately the hopes of finding freedom from the cycle of oppression and violence in this new modernity are crushed, when those who move find their lives are still controlled by the same rigged economic and caste hierarchies that existed in the village.

"In those days, in that backward place where we used to live, all we had in our hands were axes, shovels, sickle, a few boxes of palm straw to keep our rags and tatters. The forests and gardens and fields were all in your hands … and what did we have to show for it? Nothing but our own bare bones …

'So we left that old backward place and went to the town, to somehow survive. And now, what we held in our hands were iron basins to fill with heavy loads to carry on our heads…

'And now, what you held in your hands were match companies and ginning factories, medical shops, and hospitals … stone quarries and sand quarries…

'And we stood stupefied, you stuck what you stuck into each man's two hands were a party flag and a bottle of arrack!

'So, from now on, all power will remain in your hands, and we'll hole up, and cringe and cower forever. Like owls…'"

(Dharman 2015: 354)

Despite having left the 'backward place' of the village, they are forced to labour in factories owned by their earlier tormentors. Their suffering, placated by the new vices of the city; *'a bottle of arrack'* and by the false promises of the leftist parties; *'a party flag',* reveals the irony of the Dalit position in this new modernity.

Throughout the novel, the dichotomy between the traditional village and the imposition of modernity, is asserted and subverted. The conversion of the Paraiyars to Christianity is one of a number of strategies used by Dalits to mitigate the tyranny of the upper castes but which compromises Dalit identity symbolised by the worship of Koogai. Seeni, the central protagonist of the novel (an avatar of Achebe's Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart (2001),* is astonished to find that he is a lone protestor against religious conversion. At first, he is amused by the behaviour of the newly converted; "Their transformation astounded Seeni, and the sight of Kitnan of all people, going around with a cross dangling from his chest, struck him as so

funny that he could hardly keep from laughing, from laughing out loud" (Dharman 2015: 230). But quickly Seeni becomes the only one left defending Koogai. Kitnan suggests "just quietly leave this Owl-Saami and come to our side" (Dharman 2015: 231). Unlike Bama's celebration of collective identity in Sangati, Dharman leaves off on a significantly more ambivalent and bitter note regarding Dalit consciousness.

Chapter III: Writing the Indian Nation: Tamil Dalit Literature as Post-Colonial Literature

"Through your literary creations cleanse the stated values of life and culture. Don't have a limited objective. Transform the light of your pen so that the darkness of villages is removed. Do not forget that in our country the world of the Dalits and the ignored classes is extremely large. Get to know intimately their pain and sorrow, and try through your literature to bring progress in their lives. True humanity resides there" (Ambedkar 1976: 8).

In this final chapter I return to the debate between Ambedkar and Gandhi in the years leading up to Indian independence. For Ambedkar caste was not, as Gandhi felt, a split internal to the social organisation of Hindus. It could not be solved by religious reform, nor would it be dissolved through socialist revolution. As Ambedkar states, "Men will not join in a revolution for the equalisation of property unless they know that after the revolution is achieved they will be treated equally" (2014: 232). For Ambedkar caste was a more profound division within India', a 'fixed notion in the mind of every Hindu (2014: 2320), that fatally undermined the project of a new independent nation:

"You cannot build anything on the foundations of caste. You cannot build up a nation, you cannot build up a morality. Anything you will build on the foundations of caste will crack, and will never be a whole." (Ambedkar 2014: 283-4)

Ambedkar and Gandhi's wholesale disagreement on the nature of caste fuelled debates that were foundational in the creation of independent India. Clause 9 of the Communal Award of 1932 laid out the terms under which the 'Depressed Classes' or 'untouchables' would be allotted a separate electorate to obviate the fact that, due to the 'depressed condition' of these classes they would be, "unlikely … to secure adequate representation in the legislature" if they were included in the Hindu electorate (Anand 2014: 362). For Ambedkar, the issue of separate electorates for the Untouchables went beyond adequate political representation for their interests. It was, he argued, essential that the democratic structure of the newly independent nation recognised that Dalits would not gain political freedom or independence, if they were subsumed into a Hindu whole. The preferred device was provision for a number of reserved seats, to be filled "by election from special constituencies in which only members of the 'Depressed Classes' electorally qualified will be entitled to vote" (Anand 2014: 362).

But Gandhi was insistent that the Hindus be treated as a singular whole and began a "fast – unto death – until the Award was revoked" (Anand 2014: 363). The day before the beginning of the fast, the 19th September 1932, Ambedkar stated, "I can never consent to deliver my people bound hand and foot to the Caste Hindus for generations to come" (Anand 2014: 364). But on the 24th, fearing the wave of terrorism that would be unleashed on to his people in the event of Gandhi's death, Ambedkar relented and signed the Poona Pact, giving up the separate electorate and the vital political power that he had won for the Dalits. This failure, by those who were crafting independent India, to provide for the political independence of a significant percentage of its population, would serve to deeply embed a lack of freedom and dignity at the heart of the newly free, post-colonial nation. Ambedkar's political gesture to Gandhi did not change his heart and, as a member of the Bombay Legislative Assembly in 1939, he stated, "I'm not a part of the whole. I am a part apart" (Anand 2014: 364), and he warned that a simplistic first-past-the-post system that failed to address these divisions in Indian social and political life would "result in a Hindu communal majority parading as a political majority" (Anand 2014: 360).

Since India gained independence, the modern nation-state has provided the background for telling the stories of Indian lives and Indian identity. The concept of a national literature has been vitally important within post-colonial studies which seek to elucidate the vital moment of break with colonisation. Drawing attention to this process of forming the new nation through literary narrative Homi Bhabha writes that, "to study the nation through its narrative address does not merely draw attention to its language and rhetoric; it also attempts to alter the conceptual object itself" (Bhabha, 2003: 3) In other words, the nation is not simply reflected in its narratives, but is formed and changed through them. For post-colonial literature the forming of a national identity and culture was at the forefront of their concerns. In *the Empire Writes Back,* post-colonial literature is defined as a literature that has emerged out of 'the experience of colonisation' and 'foreground[s] the tension with the imperial power … emphasising their differences from the assumptions of the imperial centre' (Ashcroft et al 1994: 2). As in other post-colonial nations around the world, literature in India was a key part of repudiating the hegemony of colonial ideology and replacing it with a new national culture. What constituted this national culture, or the possibility of its existence at all was, as Bhabha suggest, not simply given but constructed. The form of this construction was ideologically

contestable and, in the years surrounding independence, was significantly determined on the ideological battle field in which Ambedkar and Gandhi clashed.

In order to understand the emancipatory project of Tamil Dalit literature I would like to argue that it would be productive to situate it as a form of post-colonial literature that is writing back to the post-colonial state. Dalit literature, as a mode of resistance that is antagonistic towards some of the foundational ideals of Indian independence, is an example of a form of resistance that does not take the post-colonial moment as a defining realignment of relations with its oppressor. The Dalit movement was seen by many nationalists and Marxist leaders as 'divisive' and 'dangerously pro-British', because it was articulating a kind of resistance that did not fit into the 'main contradiction' between 'the oppressed Indian nationality and imperialism' (Omvedt 1994: 14). As Pala argues that, 'even progressive and postcolonial historians' have framed resistance 'almost exclusively in term of nationalism' (2013: 149). And by seeing resistance as simply 'a mirror response to imperialism', it has reasserted forms of exclusion (Pala 2013: 149).

In both Bama and Dharman's work the distinction between the 'traditional' and 'caste dominated' village, and the promise of 'modernity' is dismantled, replaced with an implied critique of the terms under which the new nation was created, modernity is for Dalit writers "both a promise and a predicament" (Satyanarayana 2019: 15). For Bama, the promises that education outside of the village would eventually bring caste emancipation proved a cruel fallacy. And for the Dalit community in Dharman's Koogai, moving to the industrialising town would only serve to reify their positon as a subjugated group. As Krishnaswamy explains, in the new secular nation-state "the modernity of the uppercaste Indian became the hegemonic, normative version of Indian modernity" (2005: 74). But just as caste did not intrude on Gandhi's narrative of a singular Hindu community, it fitted poorly into a new national project that had enshrined equality into the constitution. As caste discrimination continued to replicate itself throughout Indian society, it was simultaneously obscured from view and, at worst, understood as an overspill from an early pre-modern state.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have argued that Tamil Dalit literature makes use of a number of forms and strategies to articulate resistance to caste oppression. In the work of Bama the concept of collective identity is expressed through literary form and narrative. The rich description of Dalit lives, and the narrative of return to community expresses pride and identification with a stigmatised identity. Guru's theory on the concept of experience suggests that the political force of Tamil Dalit literature is a result of its epistemological connection between the author and the words. Tamil Dalit literature is a place in which the subaltern can speak, and as Pandian argues, challenge the theoretical discourse on caste by non-Dalits, instead forming a kind of 'radical empiricism' through literature as resistance.

By analysing the content of these novels, I have argued that we should read them as works that draw upon the autobiographical and lived experience of Tamil Dalits, giving them a distinctive political and ethical value. This is achieved through the artistic voice of the authors, who employ distinctive literary technique and aesthetics. For Bama this is can be seen in the construction of *Sangati,* bringing together a collection of stories to form, at once, both a single and a collective life narrative. In Dharman's *Koogai,* the use of a metaphorical owl allows him to explore both the promise and the disillusionment with Dalit community in the context of post-independence Tamil Nadu.

However, I would like to argue that Tamil Dalit literature's most radical form of resistance is its implicit critique of the post-colonial Indian state. Both in the disillusionment it expresses with the terms of Indian modernity, that have banished caste to a fictitious pre-modern stage. As well as its articulation of an Indian identity that takes pride in a cultural and linguistic heritage that has been denigrated and stigmatised. Tamil Dalit literature as a form of post-colonial literature, attempts to grapple with the terms of a 'national culture', in the wake of the spacial and linguistic disjuncture brought about by colonialism. It finds its most radical political statement in making caste visible and repudiating the notion that the category of 'Indian literature' can be viewed as caste-neutral. This requires moving beyond what Misrahi-Barak et al describes as the "excessive emphasis on the sociological significance of Dalit literature" which has "relegated it to the social and political domain" (2020: 3). Instead viewing it as a genre of literary art, with a consciously political aesthetic.

Glossary

Adi Dravida	meaning original Dravidian; the Adi Dravidar movement started in Tamil Nadu in the early 20th century, and refers to the historical idea that depressed classes belonged to an original, casteless society in south India, which was invaded by the hierarchical Aryans; also used as a collective caste names for Dalit/scheduled castes
Mahar	a Dalit caste primarily found in the state of Maharashtra; the Mahar caste are often cited as the first to adopt the term 'Dalit' and have been particularly active in Dalit politics through their leader Dr Ambedkar, and the Dalit Panthers
Self-respect movement	started in the early 20th century; often attributed to the social activist E.V. Ramasamy 'Periyar'; the self-respect movement encouraged Dalits to refashion traditionally stigmatised practices, in order to attach respect and pride to Dalit culture; it was particular influential in the southern state of Tamil Nadu
Naicker	caste group found in Tamil Nadu; normally positioned just above Dalits in relation to caste hierarchy
Pallar/Mallar	Caste name; Dalit caste predominant in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu; they are the most developed and economically successful of the SC's in Tamil Nadu; they have abandoned the term *Pallar,* in favour of *Mallar* or *Davendra Kula Vellalar* which refers to a higher status or 'kingly' history
Pancharmars	meaning fifth caste; term used in Tamil Nadu to refer to those argued to be the original inhabitant of the Indian sub-continent, originally of Buddhist religion, that were invaded by the Aryans and reduced to low-caste status
Paraiyar/Pariah	Caste name; Dalit caste community in Tamil Nadu; they came to be known by the name Paraiyar due to their connection with playing the Parai drum; their untouchable status is usually traced back to the early medival period
Scheduled Caste	list of historically discriminated castes first complied in 1935 by the British government and later placed into the Constitution of India
Thevar	also called *Mukkulathor;* traditionally said to be a martial caste group; primarily found in central and southern Tamil Nadu where they are now a major land owning caste; now classed as a Backward caste due to low economic and educational indicators; they are marked by a strong sense of caste identity and pride

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