Literature Chronicle ISBN: 978-93-7724-871-0

Chapter-7

Writing the Unwritten: Dalit and Adivasi Narratives as Counter-Discourses of Power

By

[1]Dr. Ambreen Fatima, [2]Dr. Aareena Nazneen &
[3]Dr. Vanya Srivastava

[1,2&3] Assistant Professor, Department of Languages, FOHSS, Integral University, Lucknow

DOI Number:https://literaturechronicle.com/doi-2026-9582

Abstract

This chapter examines how Dalit and Adivasi narratives function as counter-discourses that challenge dominant epistemological frameworks and power structures in contemporary India. Drawing upon subaltern studies, postcolonial theory, and critical race theory, this study argues that these marginalized narratives are not merely representations of subaltern experiences but are active sites of epistemic resistance against Brahmanical and colonial historiographies. Through a qualitative analysis of selected autobiographical, literary, and oral narratives, the chapter demonstrates how Dalit and Adivasi storytellers employ narrative strategies—such as testimonial recounting, mythic re-interpretation, and embodied knowledge articulation—to

foreground marginalized epistemologies and assert agency within hegemonic discourse. The analysis reveals that these counter-discourses operate simultaneously at linguistic, cultural, and political levels, disrupting traditional hierarchies of knowledge production and paving the way for a more pluralistic understanding of Indian society. The chapter concludes by discussing the pedagogical and political implications of integrating these counter-narratives into academic curricula and public discourse, emphasizing the transformative potential of centering marginalized voices in knowledge construction.

Keywords

(*Dalit narratives, Adivasi narratives, counter-discourse, subaltern studies, epistemic resistance, postcolonial India*)

Introduction

The project of writing history and constructing knowledge in India has historically been dominated by elite voices—initially Brahmanical scholars and later colonial administrators and postcolonial intellectuals. This dominance has resulted in the systematic marginalization, erasure, or appropriation of the narratives of Dalits (formerly untouchables) and Adivasis (indigenous peoples), whose lived experiences and cosmological understandings have been relegated to the shadows of mainstream discourse (Guha, 1982; Ambedkar, 1989). The phrase "writing the unwritten" thus carries a dual significance: it refers to the act of documenting narratives that have been excluded from formal historical records, while also challenging the very

frameworks through which "legitimate" knowledge is defined and validated.

This chapter contends that Dalit and Adivasi narratives do not merely fill historical gaps but actively function as counter-discourses of power—to borrow Foucault's (1980) conceptualization of discourse as a system of representation that governs what can be said and thought within a particular historical moment. These counter-discourses challenge the hegemony of upper-caste, bourgeois, and metropolitan narratives by asserting alternative epistemologies, revaluing marginalized identities, and demanding recognition of historical injustices. As Bhabha (1994) suggests, counter-discourse operates in the "third space" of enunciation, where dominant narratives are hybridization, resisted, and transformed.

The significance of this study is threefold. First, it contributes to the growing body of scholarship that decenters mainstream historiography by foregrounding subaltern perspectives. Second, it demonstrates how narrative forms—whether oral, literary, or autobiographical—serve as vehicles for epistemic resistance. Third, it explores the transformative potential of these narratives in reshaping public consciousness and informing social justice movements. By examining specific examples of Dalit and Adivasi narratives, this chapter illustrates how the act of "writing the unwritten" becomes an act of political and epistemological rebellion.

Theoretical Framework/Pedagogical Strategy

Subaltern Studies and the Question of Voice

The theoretical foundation of this chapter draws heavily from the ‘Subaltern Studies’ collective, particularly the work of Ranajit Guha (1982, 1983) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988). Guha's (1982) seminal essay "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India" articulates the need to recover the voices of subaltern classes—peasants, tribals, and marginalized communities—whose agency has been obscured by both colonial and nationalist historiographies. Spivak's (1988) provocative question, "Can the subaltern speak?" remains a critical touchstone for understanding the ethical and political complexities of representing marginalized voices without re-colonizing them.

However, this chapter moves beyond the initial pessimism of early subaltern studies, which often emphasized the impossibility of subaltern voice, to engage with more recent scholarship that identifies moments of subaltern resistance in narrative and practice. Scholars such as Gopal Guru (1995), Sharmila Rege (2003), and Satyendra P. N. (2019) have demonstrated how Dalit and Adivasi narratives actively construct counter-hegemonic knowledge, rather than merely representing a "silence" to be interpreted by elite scholars.

Counter-Discourse Theory

The concept of ‘counter-discourse’ is operationalized through the work of Norman Fairclough (1995), who argues that discourse is both constitutive of and constituted by power relations. Counter-discourses, in this framework, are "transformative" discourses that challenge dominant ideologies and seek to reconfigure power relations. In the

Indian context, Dalit and Adivasi narratives can be understood as counter-discourses that challenge:

1. **Brahmanical epistemology**, which privileges Vedic knowledge and devalues embodied, experiential, and oral forms of knowing.

2. **Colonial classifications**, which froze indigenous identities into static categories and disrupted organic social structures.

3. **Neoliberal developmentalism**, which marginalizes Adivasi communities in the name of "progress" and "modernization."

Pedagogical Strategy: Narrative as Counter-Pedagogy

This chapter also employs a pedagogical strategy informed by critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Hooks, 1994). Freire's (1970) concept of "problem-posing education" emphasizes dialogical learning, where teachers and students co-create knowledge by engaging with lived experiences. Similarly, Hooks (1994) argues for "engaged pedagogy" that recognizes the intellectual and emotional fullness of learning. In this context, teaching Dalit and Adivasi narratives as counter-discourses requires a shift from traditional lecture-based models to dialogical, experiential, and reflexive pedagogies.

The analysis that follows is structured to model this pedagogical approach: it moves from theoretical exposition to concrete textual analysis, encouraging readers to engage

actively with the narratives rather than passively receiving interpretations.

Analysis of the Chapter

Dalit Autobiography: Testimonies of Caste and Resistance

Dalit autobiographical narratives have emerged as a powerful genre of counter-discourse since the 1970s, with seminal works such as Mulk Raj Anand's (1935) *Untouchable* and B. R. Ambedkar's (1958) *The Annihilation of Caste*. However, the most significant contributions to Dalit counter-discourse come from the genre of Dalit autobiography itself—first-person accounts written by Dalits that center their lived experiences of caste oppression and resistance.

One of the most influential examples is Maya Pandit's (1992) *Dhulpet* (Dust), which narrates the author's journey from a marginalized Dalit background to becoming an academic. Pandit's narrative challenges the Brahmanical notion that knowledge is abstract, disembodied, and universal. Instead, she asserts that her knowledge is embodied—forged through the lived experience of caste stigma, physical labor, and daily humiliations. This embodied epistemology directly counters the Cartesian separation of mind and body that underpins Western and Brahmanical knowledge systems.

Similarly, Bama's (1998) *Karukku*, a Tamil Dalit autobiography, employs a unique narrative form that blends oral storytelling traditions with Christian and Dalit cultural references. Bama's narrative resists the linear, chronological structure of conventional autobiography, opting instead for

a cyclical, episodic form that reflects the repetitive nature of caste-based oppression while also celebrating Dalit resilience. The narrative also challenges the assumption that Dalit experiences are homogeneous, foregrounding intra-caste differences and the intersection of caste with gender, religion, and region.

These autobiographical narratives function as testimonies—to borrow from the Latin American *testimonio* tradition (Beverley, 2004)—that not only document individual experiences but also speak for and on behalf of a community. They demand recognition from the reader, compelling an ethical engagement with the narrated suffering and resistance.

Adivasi Oral Narratives: Myth, Memory, and Resistance

Adivasi narratives present a different but equally compelling form of counter-discourse. Unlike Dalit narratives, which are often expressed in written forms (autobiography, literature, essays), Adivasi counter-discourse is predominantly oral—transmitted through songs, stories, myths, and rituals. This oral dimension is not a "lack" but a strength, as it embeds knowledge within living communities and resists the colonial/Western privileging of written text (Vansina, 1985).

Adivasi oral narratives frequently re-interpret dominant myths to assert indigenous sovereignty and cosmological independence. For example, the Santal oral tradition re-narrates the Hindu epic *Mahabharata* to center Santal heroes and values, effectively "decolonizing" a text that has been used to justify caste hierarchy (Bodding, 1925). Similarly,

Munda oral narratives re-tell the story of the divine hero Karma to articulate a philosophy of resistance against oppressive rulers (Prasad, 2009).

These narratives also challenge the ‘developmentalist discourse’ that frames Adivasis as "backward" and in need of modernization. In recent decades, Adivasi communities have used oral narratives to articulate alternative visions of development rooted in ecological sustainability and collective stewardship of land. The Jharkhand movement provides a compelling example, where Adivasi leaders mobilized oral traditions to construct a political identity that resisted both the Indian state and neoliberal extraction (B Chatterjee, 2019).

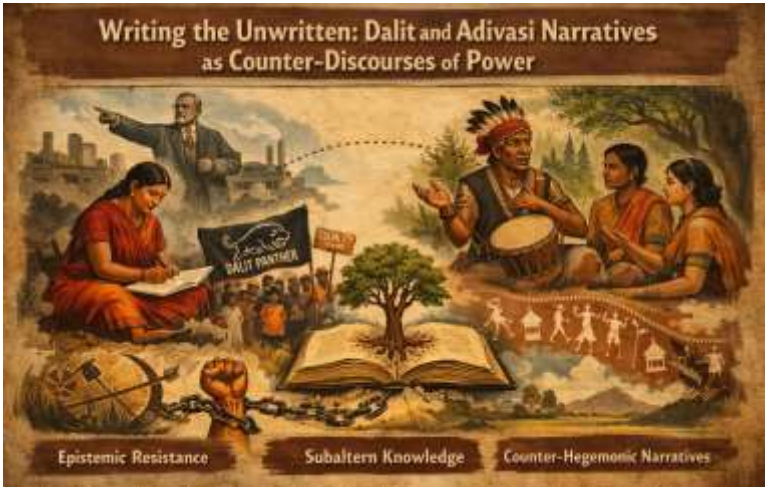
Intersections: Dalit-Adivasi Counter-Discourses

While Dalit and Adivasi experiences are distinct—rooted in different histories, social structures, and political contexts—there are moments of intersection that produce particularly powerful counter-discourses. The Adivasi-Dalit alliance in movements such as the Bodh Gaya agitation (1920s) and the Jharkhand movement demonstrates how shared experiences of marginalization can generate collective resistance.

In contemporary literature, writers such as Mahasweta Devi (1996) have explicitly centered Dalit-Adivasi intersections in their work. Devi's *Hajar Churashir Maa* (Mother of 1084) and *Anandamath* engage with the entanglement of caste and class oppression, while her ethnographic work with Adivasi communities foregrounds their agency and resistance. Similarly, the Kashmir and Northeast India contexts reveal

how caste, ethnicity, and region intersect to produce complex forms of counter-discourse.

These intersections highlight the importance of "intersectionality" (Crenshaw, 1989) in understanding Dalit and Adivasi narratives. Neither caste nor tribe can be understood in isolation; rather, they must be analyzed as mutually constituted categories that are further complicated by gender, class, religion, and region.



(OpenAI, 2026)

Implications of the Study

Academic Implications

This study has significant implications for academic curricula in the humanities and social sciences. The inclusion of Dalit and Adivasi narratives in courses on Indian history, literature, sociology, and political science can challenge the Eurocentric and Brahmanical biases that

persist in many institutions. It invites a fundamental rethinking of:

1. **Canonical hierarchies**: Who decides what counts as "great" literature or "valid" history? By centering marginalized narratives, we can decenter elite canons and create more inclusive curricula.

2. **Methodological nationalism**: The analysis of Dalit and Adivasi narratives requires methodological pluralism—combining textual analysis, oral history, ethnography, and performance studies.

3. **Epistemic justice**: As Fricker (2007) argues, epistemic injustice occurs when marginalized groups are denied the credibility they deserve as knowers. Incorporating these narratives into academic discourse is a step toward epistemic justice.

Political Implications

At the political level, Dalit and Adivasi counter-discourses have informed social movements and policy debates. The Dalit Panther movement (1970s) drew upon Dalit literary production to articulate a radical political program. Similarly, the Adivasi movement in Jharkhand and other regions has used oral narratives to demand land rights, autonomy, and cultural recognition.

These narratives also challenge the neoliberal commodification of identity. In an era where "diversity" is often reduced to corporate branding, Dalit and Adivasi counter-discourses insist on the material realities of oppression and the need for structural transformation.

Pedagogical Implications

For educators, this study suggests that teaching Dalit and Adivasi narratives requires:

1. **Reflexivity**: Teachers must examine their own positionality and biases, particularly if they come from privileged castes or classes.

2. **Dialogue**: Rather than "teaching about" marginalized communities, educators should create spaces for marginalized voices to speak directly—to the extent possible.

3. **Action**: Critical pedagogy is not merely theoretical; it must be linked to action. Students should be encouraged to engage with contemporary Dalit and Adivasi struggles through internships, community engagement, and advocacy.

Conclusion

This argues that Dalit chapters and Adivasi narratives are not merely representational accounts of marginalized experiences but active counter-discourses of power that challenge dominant epistemologies and demand epistemic justice. Through autobiographical testimony, oral myth-making, and literary production, Dalit and Adivasi storytellers assert alternative ways of knowing, being, and resisting.

The analysis has demonstrated that these counter-discourses operate at multiple levels—linguistic, cultural, and political—and that their power lies not in their "authenticity" (a concept that is itself problematic) but in their capacity to disrupt hegemonic narratives and imagine new futures. The

chapter has also highlighted the importance of intersectionality, emphasizing that Dalit and Adivasi experiences cannot be understood in isolation but must be analyzed in their mutual constitution and entanglement with other axes of difference.

The implications of this study extend beyond the academy. In a world where marginalized communities continue to face systemic violence and exclusion, the act of "writing the unwritten" is an act of liberation. As the Dalit poet Kanny Kallat (2018) writes: "The wound has a voice / and it will not be silenced." By centering Dalit and Adivasi narratives, we do not merely "give voice" to the voiceless; we participate in the ongoing project of constructing a more just and plural world.

Works Cited

Ambedkar, B. R. (1958). *The annihilation of caste*. Jaffer.

Ambedkar, B. R. (1989). *Writings and speeches* (Vol. 3). Education Dept., Government of Maharashtra.

Anand, M. R. (1935). *Untouchable*. Arnold.

Bama. (1998). *Karukku* (L. H. Shantha, Trans.). Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1992)

Beverley, J. (2004).*Testimonio: On the politics of truth*. University of Minnesota Press.

Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.

Bodding, P. O. (1925). *Studies in Santal songs and tales*. Calcutta: Asiatick Society.

Chatterjee, B. (2019). *Adivasi politics and governance in India*. Routledge.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989*(1), 139-167.

Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis*. Longman.

Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings*. Pantheon.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.

Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford University Press.

Guha, R. (1982). On some aspects of the historiography of colonial India. In R. Guha (Ed.), *Subaltern studies I: Writings on South Asian history and society* (pp. 1-8). Oxford University Press.

Guha, R. (Ed.). (1983). *Subaltern studies II: Writings on South Asian history and society*. Oxford University Press.

Guru, G. (1995). *The social space of language: Dalit conversation*. Oxford University Press.

Hooks, B. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.

OpenAI. (2026). *ChatGPT* (GPT-5.2) [Large language model]. https://chat.openai.com/

Pandit, M. (1992). *Dhulpet* [Dust]. Oxford University Press.

Prasad, M. (2009). *Myths, gods and the making of modern India*. Penguin.

Rege, S. (2003). *Writing caste, writing gender: Reading Dalit women's testimonies*. Zubaan.

Satyendra P. N. (2019). Dalit counter-discourse: Politics of representation. *Economic and Political Weekly*, *54*(12), 45-53.

Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271-313). University of Illinois Press.

Vansina, J. (1985). *Oral tradition as history*. University of Wisconsin Press.

Authors' Bio

1. Dr. Ambreen Fatima is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Languages at Integral University, Lucknow. She holds a Ph.D. in English Literature and has qualified UGC-NET and MH-SET (2023). Her research areas include Postcolonial Literature; South Asian Women's Writing; Cultural Studies**.**
2. Dr. Aareena Nazneen is currently serving as an Assistant Professor at Integral University, Lucknow, India. She has seven years of teaching experience at the University. She has been working as a Ph.D. Program coordinator and vice-chairperson DQAC, at Integral University, supervising six scholars, and four have been awarded under her supervision for a

Ph.D. in English Literature. She has been actively serving as a coordinator in developing the syllabus for the BA (Hons.) program in accordance with the National Education Policy 2020, which was implemented w.e.f. 2022 in the department. She has published various research papers in international journals, UGC CARE, Scopus and Web of Sciences. She has also published edited books in literature and is the editor of several Journals and newsletters.

3. Dr. Vanya Srivastava is an academic and researcher with a career in English literature, especially in SAARC studies. Currently serving as an Assistant Professor at the Integral University in Lucknow, India, she has over seven years of teaching experience to her role. A recipient of the National Eligibility Test (NET) certification in 2018, her academic prowess is further underscored by her doctoral research on the literature of Bhutan, completed at the University of Lucknow. Her multifaceted talents extend beyond the classroom. During her time at Delhi University, she won the "Best Actor" award from the National School of Drama, Delhi. She has contributed significantly to academic discourse through her guest lectures, publications in esteemed journals, and presentations at both national and international conferences. Her research continues to push the boundaries of literary and cultural studies, offering fresh perspectives on South Asian literature and its global context. Dr. Vanya Srivastava is an academic and researcher with a career in English literature, especially in SAARC

studies. Currently serving as an Assistant Professor at the Integral University in Lucknow, India, she has over seven years of teaching experience to her role. A recipient of the National Eligibility Test (NET) certification in 2018, her academic prowess is further underscored by her doctoral research on the literature of Bhutan, completed at the University of Lucknow. Her multifaceted talents extend beyond the classroom. During her time at Delhi University, she won the "Best Actor" award from the National School of Drama, Delhi. She has contributed significantly to academic discourse through her guest lectures, publications in esteemed journals, and presentations at both national and international conferences. Her research continues to push the boundaries of literary and cultural studies, offering fresh perspectives on South Asian literature and its global context.