

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Reclaiming Identity through Words: Literature as a Catalyst for Social Justice and Equality

Dr. Rajiv N. Aherkar

Associate Professor & Head, Department of English, Late Sow S.S. Mundhe College, Gangakhed Dist Parbhani, Maharashtra, India;  
[rajivaherkar@gmail.com](mailto:rajivaherkar@gmail.com)

Accepted version published on 1st November 2025

 <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17505718>

### ABSTRACT

The paper analyses literature as a tool for resistance and empowerment for marginalised audiences: Jews, 'Blacks,' 'Dalits,' women, and transgender individuals. It documents the shift in literature from a record of oppression to a tool for reclaiming identity and asserting equal rights. Through the works of representative writers such as Elie Wiesel, Toni Morrison, B.R. Ambedkar, A. Revathi, and Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, the study demonstrates how personal stories are transformed into collective struggles for dignity and justice. Each section illustrates the particular historical and social conditions of marginalisation, and how these writers transformed silence into speech and oppression into self-articulation. The paper claims that 'class' literature does more than chronicle marginalisation. However, it redefines the ethical and humanitarian paradigm of civilisation, encouraging readers to interrogate entrenched ways of thinking and propose more 'acceptable' alternatives. It assigns 'class' writing as a core element of human rights and social change advocacy.

**Keywords:** marginalized literature; identity; equality; resistance; human rights

**FULL RESEARCH PAPER****Introduction**

Literary advancements do not signify advancements in civilisation as much as they signify the struggles endured. Writers from the oppressed groups (Jewish, Black, Dalit, women, and Trans) have used their art to rethink protest as a form of liberation. These writers challenge the oppressors and dominant societal structures. For instance, in 'Night,' a book by Elie Wiesel, he is a Jewish author who elaborates on the pain that goes alongside the Jewish Holocaust and the inhumane treatment a person endures because of racial hatred. African American writers such as Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, and Langston Hughes explore the inequities of slavery while highlighting the Black identity and the resilience that was born from it. In B.R. Ambedkar, Omprakash Valmiki, and Bama's case, Indian Dalit literature does not shy away from addressing the caste discrimination that has plagued society in the form of 'untouchability' for centuries. All of them exceeded the expectations of personal suffering, which had now become a collective consciousness, to give dignity to the oppressed. Similarly, women writers from diverse backgrounds, such as Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Arundhati Roy, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, focus on the political frameworks of women, asserting that the emotional autonomy they seek is much needed (Beauvoir 23). All of these authors deeply integrate their personal experiences into their literary works, which in turn become a form of activism, weaponized through the art of writing.

Over the past few decades, the experiences of transgender people, one of the most invisibilized groups in history, have begun to receive some attention in literature. Authors like Leslie Feinberg (Stone Butch Blues) and the Indian writers A. Revathi (The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story), Living Smile Vidya (I Am Vidya), Laxmi Narayan Tripathi (Me Hijra, Me Laxmi), and Kalki Subramaniam (We Are Not the Others) elaborate on the intricacies of gender and the violence of its denial in society (Feinberg 102). These stories do more than portray transgender lives; they unravel the complex systems of gender, class, and sexuality that underpin their oppression. Women's and transgender literature together reveal how patriarchy polices bodies and identities, enforcing rigid social hierarchies that deny individual freedom. By reclaiming language, identity, and narrative authority, these writers dismantle the cultural silencing imposed upon them and assert their right to be seen, heard, and respected.

In the present scenario, dehumanisation based on colour, cast, class, race, and sex is seen not only in India but also all over the world. The dominant forces try to dictate human rights from their own selfish and exploitative outlook. They behave like

---

the custodians of human rights, but attempt to undermine them. Their primary goal is to exploit others and accumulate wealth for their own benefit. This is true with colonisers. In the present scenario, the dominant class becomes the modern colonizers, depriving the suppressed of their human rights. Human rights refer to the basic rights and freedoms to which all humans are entitled, often held to include the right to life and liberty, freedom of thought and expression, and equality before the law. Every day, newspapers publish reports of human rights violations. Human rights violations have become a worldwide phenomenon and are increasing day by day. Human rights violations take place throughout the world. There is no significant difference between developing countries and developed countries in terms of human rights violations. Even in the West, women are treated as second-class citizens. The honour killings are practised. It is very dangerous for developing countries like India, which boasts of unity in diversity, to witness such violence almost every day. Women, children, Dalits, Adivasis, minorities, and other marginalised groups like transgender people are discriminated for no fault of their own. It is rightly stated that 'man is born free but bound everywhere in chains. God gave us 'freedom of choice', but there is no freedom for these communities, so there is no question of choice. Felix Wilfred states that human rights are a matter of regulating right relationships in society, among individuals or groups, which are humanized and therefore fair and just.

### **The Role of Literature in Promoting Equality**

Literature functions as both a mirror and a catalyst for social change. It reflects the harsh realities of oppression while also envisioning the possibility of liberation. Storytelling serves as a vehicle not only for inviting readers to admire the less fortunate but also to interrogate multilayered inequalities that are too often taken for granted. In the classroom, in movements, and on the world stage, the teaching of marginalised literature has become a pivotal, if not indispensable, resource for raising critical consciousness. It opens the eyes, strengthens the spine, and reminds people that equality is a human right, not a gift to be bestowed by those in power. What is most critical and central is the moral responsibility that literature such as this evokes in people, in a world so richly endowed with such abundance, to act in concert against injustice. Literature is an expression of thoughts, feelings, emotions, and ideas. It is a reflection of society. It criticises society. Reading marginalised literature provides insight into how the dominant class has victimised marginalised communities. The marginalisation of the Jew, the Black, the Dalit, the Woman, and the transgender is based on certain norms established by the dominating class. The Jew is marginalised on the grounds of race, the Black is marginalised on the grounds of colour, the woman

---

is marginalised on the grounds of sex, the Dalit is marginalised on the grounds of caste/untouchable, and Transgender individuals face marginalisation primarily due to their gender identity, which diverges from conventional societal norms. This marginalisation stems from deeply ingrained stigma, misunderstanding, and prejudice rooted in the assumption that gender is a fixed, binary construct determined by one's sex assigned at birth. These communities are treated as subhuman, and they are not given equal rights to live. In society, they experience the life of a slave. The writers, other than the writers of these communities, create their image as subhuman, slaves, and give a secondary position in their writings, for example, Christ's killing and Shylock's image. After reading such writing, the image created becomes concrete in the reader's mind. The same is true for Black women and Dalits. By creating such a 'negative image', they are marginalised from society.

The major challenge before marginalised writers has been to construct a positive and dignified image of the marginalised individual—whether a Jew, a Black person, a woman, or a Dalit—in the minds of readers. To accomplish this, they wielded the pen as a powerful weapon against oppression and injustice. Writers such as Bernard Malamud, I. B. Singer, Saul Bellow, Langston Hughes, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Anita Desai, Kamala Das, Tarabai Shinde, Mahatma Jotiba Phule, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Baburao Bagul, Anna Bhau Sathe, Shankarrao Kharat, Namdeo Dhasal, Uttam Kamble, Amrita Pritam, Arundhati Roy, Living Smile Vidya, A. Revathi, and Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, among many others, courageously presented the naked truth of social discrimination with remarkable honesty and intellectual depth. The focal concerns of their writing revolve around themes such as slavery, suffering, the quest for identity and social space, equality, and the demand to be treated as human beings. Marginalised literature has thus become an integral part of world literature. It operates as an effective tool to promote a society based on social justice, equality, and human dignity by remedying the human rights violations of our time. The Indian transgender literature, a part of the dominant literature of the oppressed and silenced, seems to articulate itself in the most intense and revolutionary form of discourse. The transgender authors, just like Dalit, feminist, and even black authors, have always utilised writing as a tool for self-advocacy as well as for advocating social change. The rigidly constructed heteronormative systems have tried to silence the authors and their stories, and even the rest of society, for too long. Authors A. Revathi (*The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story*), Living Smile Vidya (*I Am Vidya*), and Laxmi Narayan Tripathi (*Me Hijra, Me Laxmi*) have changed the definition of literature by presenting extreme case studies of their own life evasion, pain, and self-realisation. These authors fight for their self-respect and expose the social and cultural taboos that are

constructed to deny their existence and dignity through their self-testimonies and narrative reflections. The Indian transgender literature's reflection is, therefore, goes beyond pain and resistance; it is an even stronger assertion of identity and a reflection on social inclusivity and justice.

### **The Jewish Writing: Quest for Space**

To appreciate Jewish literature and the perspective of Jewish authors, it is essential to understand the history, culture, and shared experiences of the Jewish people. Joseph Addison said, 'a reader seldom peruses a book with pleasure, until he knows whether the writer of it be a black, or a bachelor, with other particulars of the like nature, that conduce very much to the right understanding of an author.' Addison highlighted the significance of context and culture in Jewish writing. The history of the Jews has been one of persecution, displacement, and alienation for so many centuries. They have been economically, racially, and politically persecuted, bullied, victimised, and uprooted. For the sake of their existence, they have wandered about and are now eternal exiles. One of the perhaps more fiendish and barbarous acts of contemporary world history was the attempt of Hitler to annihilate the Jews and "free" Europe of the so-called "network of continuity" of the Jewish people. That episode strikes not only as an offence against a community, but as a sort of insult of brutal proportions to the matters and questions of mankind. Hundreds of years of suffering, isolation, and despair saw a portion of the Jewish people leaving Europe and its many ghettos for the so-called "Promised Land", the United States of America. The land was said to be 'a mother of fresh thought and joyous health,' and promised so much to her citizens, but alas, this too was an illusion.

The socio-economic and cultural marginalisation of Jews in America was epitomised through the term "minority group." Wrapped in new forms of ghettoisation, they have continuously been given the moniker "White Negroes" of America."

The Shylock or Christ-killer connotation, though malignant in its application, forms the most prominent document of Shylock in comparison to the rest of the Jews, who came across as lunatics. To rest, and of course, the literary maestros Roth, Malamud, and especially Bellow crafted a renewed balance of intricacy and honour in Jewish identity. Bellow and his cohorts drew a line of difference between Jewishness and literature that now had no traces of shame, only relief and fortitude of immense contemplation—the doctrines of Bellow's 'The Victim' concern the intricacies of humanity and concepts of brotherhood. In a narrow margin, 'Dangling Man'

---

counterposes the unequivocally moral and existentially beset figure of Asa Leventhal. A central aspect of her vision is the Jewish condition, particularly displacement and alienation, as well as the elusive search for a sense of belonging. In their attempts to face the social and inner turmoil of exclusion, they poetically and beautifully articulate the brutal inner struggles that are a hallmark of Jewish literature. In their grappling with identity and space, Jewish televizers shape the personal into the profound, addressing fundamental and ever-pertinent questions about faith, freedom, and humanity.

### **The Black Writing: Quest for Identity and Equality**

The identity and history of Black people and their literature have been overlooked and unacknowledged. It discusses the challenges people face in defining themselves in a society drenched in bigotry. For example, in Morrison's work, the white gaze on Black people and their experience of the gaze is referred to as "the Other." Morrison's work is one of the strongest examples, in 'The Bluest Eye', of the character Pecola and the social obstacles she faces within the construct of identity, alongside Cholly and his absent father, Claudia and her enduring search for fulfilment, and Soaphead Church, who is characterised by the absence of belonging. In her work, Morrison takes pride in tackling issues like identity development, racism, the relationship between parents and their kids, the white social standard of beauty, and socialised friendships.

In the poems and prose of Langston Hughes, he explores the lives of people from the Black working class, highlighting the social, economic, and political challenges that impede their optimal functioning. He has a wishful affection for an America that has made an honest bond with its Black people. Hughes' poem 'I, too, Sing America' shares the same wish and requirement for affirmation, claiming the missing Black voices in the American tapestry. In the same spirit, Maya Angelou, in her autobiography 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings', reveals the selfhood of Black women through the prism of her life. In her poem 'Phenomenal Woman', she breaks the societal norms of beauty and celebrates the self-love and self-worth of women as they are. Writing by Black authors is a testament to the weight of oppression and a testament to resilience, marked by a profound understanding of identity, dignity, and equality.

### **Women's Writing: Search for Space, Equality, and Identity**

Women have long been seen as secondary members of society, often denied rights and freedoms that men typically enjoy. Religious and cultural traditions have

---

often reinforced these inequalities, resulting in social, economic, and cultural disadvantages for women. Many women are vulnerable to various forms of violence and exploitation, including harassment, verbal abuse, domestic violence, sexual assault, dowry deaths, sati, and other forms of physical and psychological abuse. For centuries, women have faced alienation, forced marriages, sale, and humiliation, and their roles in literature have often been limited to supporting or marginalised figures.

The feminist thinker Simone de Beauvoir's influential 1949 book, *\*The Second Sex\**, offers a comprehensive examination of women's oppression and remains a powerful force in modern feminist debates. She explains that while white women are seen as the "second sex," Black and Dalit women experience even deeper layers of marginalisation. The suppression of women as an inferior gender is a common pattern seen across many patriarchal cultures, despite cultural differences. Although women's experiences of oppression often follow a general pattern, they are also shaped by specific social and cultural contexts. Societal ideas of progress and culture tend to be gendered, usually linking advancement with men and thus maintaining women's position as the "Other" compared to the male "Self."

In women's writings, themes like sexual violence, harassment, domestic abuse, alienation, child marriage, sati, gender-based violence, and the fight for autonomy and expression are frequently explored. Through storytelling and literary work, women articulate their identities, challenge systemic inequalities, and advocate for recognition, equality, and a place within society and culture.

### **Dalit writing and its struggle for space and equality**

Dalit literature embodies core human principles and strives for a just society. As Rabindranath Tagore put it, a society 'where the mind is without fear and the head is held high, where knowledge is free.' The Untouchables, now known as Dalits, ranked among the lowest in the hierarchy and perhaps the most oppressed in the country. They were, in some sense, akin to conquered beasts, forced to dwell in slums and ghettos in the most dehumanising conditions. Being a member of a lower caste was a condition that effectively rendered one a non-person, and it was an everyday occurrence. Today, casteism and other vicious forms of discrimination leave Dalits in a state of profound dislocation and estrangement in their own country.

Social reformers like Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar strove the most in bringing about social change and countering the caste system. Phule addressed social imbalance through the Satya Shodhak Movement, and Dr Ambedkar continues to inspire many writers of Dalit literature. India's caste system assigns the

---

status of “untouchable” to Dalits. It deprives them of the right to existence and basic human dignity, subjecting them to systematic oppression, suppression, and marginalisation by the upper castes. Dalits were politically voiceless, economically deprived, and socially immobile, while religion, more often than not, seemed to justify such domination. The stigma of caste and the violence and discrimination meted out to Dalit women continue despite the initiatives of the state, civil society, and the private sector, illustrating the radical gap in education and social reform necessary to address the fundamental broken structures in society.

Among Dalit writers, Namdeo Dhasal and Daya Pawar have profoundly illustrated such experiences in their literary works. Dhasal’s ‘Golpitha’ points out all social and economic inequalities and injustices, while in his poem ‘Mansane’ speaks on the dignity and humanity of the voiceless, arguing that it is the obligation of man to ‘sing the song of man’. Pawar, in his poetry collection ‘Kondwada’, narrates the lived experiences of Dalits and asks why they are forced to live outside the village solely because of their birth. Dalit literature articulates the denial of equal treatment and justice, dignity, and the oppression and ongoing struggle of the Dalits in Indian society.

### **Writings of Transgender: Gender Identity and the Rights of LGBTQ+ Minorities**

Transgender autobiographies within the Indian context present raw, heartfelt accounts of how survivors of trauma have endured, persevered, embraced courage, and become testaments of self-agency. Authors like Living Smile Vidya (I Am Vidya), A. Revathi (The Truth about Me: A Hijra Life Story), and Laxmi Narayan Tripathi (Me Hijra Me Laxmi) have overcome various obstacles and the level of prejudice society has against everything outside its rigid and numerous gender binary. Their voices shatter the social constraints of extreme discrimination, rejection, and even family, when paired with self-defence, identity, and humanity documents.

Vidya and A. Revathi’s autobiographies are part reality, part pain. They are also accounts of healing, empowerment, and education. Revathi’s accounts of childhood trauma are supplemented by social revolution. She also remarkably succinctly dispels the reality of self-alienation and self-eclipse. She quested and fought discrimination against Hijras and transgender people. As Tripathi Laxmi Narayan’s autobiography shifts the narrative, it discusses satisfaction, self-acceptance, self-advocacy, and self-visibility. Context of defending, and extension of Human Rights that relate to, add, advocate, enhance the public, and lack of shame.

These autobiographies emphasise the transformation from trauma to triumph—where the painful experiences of suffering, exclusion, and denial are transformed into resilience and self-empowerment. The writing of these narratives takes the form of autobiographical testimonials, which aim to promote societal change by challenging normative constructions of gender, identity, and social hierarchies. By challenging and ultimately overcoming the barriers set before them, Vidya, Revathi, and Laxmi articulate a powerful vision of self-empowerment, esteem, and equity that advocates for the rights of LGBTQ+ and socially marginalized individuals, specifically the transgender community, and challenges the wider society to recognize and affirm their dignity.

### **Conclusion**

As told in stories and myths, freedom and dignity have long been sought after. Literature is witness to the journey. Each Jewish survivor, Black revolutionary, Dalit activist, woman writer, and transgender author is oppressed, and from their oppressive positions, they speak to the desperate need for recognition, justice, and equality. It is as if their testimonials have not only liberated themselves, but also the readers who engage with these testimonials. Literature, until the day inequality is nonexistent, has and will always be a site of resistance, a place of renewal, proving the pursuit of dignity and equality to be a creative act and the payment of a moral debt. Swift in words and still a silence breaker, literature confirms the essence of humanity and the unbreakable threads of silence.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data sharing policy does not apply to this article.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

### **References**

Ambedkar, B. R. 'Annihilation of Caste'. Navayana, 2014.

Beauvoir, Simone de. 'The Second Sex'. Vintage, 2011.

---

Bellow, Saul. 'The Victim'. Penguin Books, 1996.

Feinberg, Leslie. 'Stone Butch Blues'. Firebrand Books, 1993.

Guttman, Allen. 'The Jewish Writer in America: Assimilation and Crisis of Identity'. Oxford University Press, 1971.

Morrison, Toni. 'The Bluest Eye'. Washington Square Press, 1970.

Phadke, Bhalchandra. 'Dalit Sahitya: Vedana Ani Vidroha'. Vidya Prakash, 1989.

Revathi, A. 'The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story'. Translated by V. Geetha, Penguin, 2010.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Columbia UP, 1988.

Tripathi, Laxmi Narayan. 'Me Hijra, Me Laxmi'. Zubaan, 2011.

Valmiki, Omprakash. 'Joothan: A Dalit's Life'. Translated by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, Columbia UP, 2003.

Vidya, Living Smile. 'I Am Vidya'. Zubaan, 2011.

Wiesel, Elie. 'Night'. Hill and Wang, 2006.

Woolf, Virginia. 'A Room of One's Own'. Harcourt, 1989.

---

**Publisher's Note:** *The author(s) are solely responsible for the content, accuracy of data, and any instances of copyright infringement. Global Humanities Review and its publisher disclaim all responsibility for such matters. Publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.*

---