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Language, Identity, and Margins: Dalit Literature as a Tool for Critical ELT Practice

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Abstract

This study explores the intersection of language, identity, and marginalization in Indian English classrooms by examining Dalit literature as a critical resource for English Language Teaching (ELT). Dalit literature, rooted in lived experience, struggle (*sangharsh*), and resistance, provides powerful narratives that challenge caste hierarchies and linguistic elitism embedded in conventional ELT materials. By integrating texts by writers such as Bama, Omprakash Valmiki, and Meena Kandasamy, educators can promote inclusive pedagogies that validate marginalized voices and foster critical literacy. The study highlights how Dalit literature, through its use of multilingualism, oral tradition, and emotional intensity, enables learners to engage with English not only as a skill but as a tool of empowerment and social critique. Addressing a significant research gap in ELT practice in India, this work emphasizes the need for decolonized syllabi, teacher training, and culturally responsive teaching methods that honor linguistic diversity and social justice. Through a review of key literary works and theoretical perspectives, the paper calls for a transformative approach to ELT—one that recognizes literature from the margins as central to the educational mission of equity, empathy, and liberation.

Keywords: Dalit literature, English Language Teaching, caste and identity, critical pedagogy, linguistic empowerment.

Introduction

In a country as linguistically and culturally diverse as India, language is never neutral—it shapes identities, preserves power hierarchies, and often marginalizes voices that do not conform to dominant norms. English, in particular, has occupied a paradoxical space. While it has been seen as a language of progress and modernity, particularly after India's colonial encounter, it has also reinforced class and caste inequalities. English education, dominated by upper-caste ideologies, rarely reflects the lived realities of marginalized communities. In this context, Dalit literature emerges not just as a literary movement but as a powerful pedagogical resource for critical English Language Teaching (ELT). It enables the classroom to become a space of resistance, reflection, and transformation. This study

explores the intersections of language, identity, and marginalization in Dalit literature and argues for its inclusion in ELT as a critical practice that empowers both teachers and learners.

The purpose of this study is twofold. First, it seeks to highlight the unique linguistic textures of Dalit literature, which includes multilingualism, code-switching, and the integration of oral traditions, as valid forms of English usage. Second, it argues that such literature—rooted in struggle (*sangharsh*), lived experience (*anubhava*), and cultural assertion—can radically transform traditional ELT practices by making them more inclusive, ethical, and socially responsive. In doing so, the study moves beyond literary analysis and enters the realm of pedagogy, proposing that Dalit texts can foster critical thinking, empathy, and awareness of caste-based inequalities among learners.

Despite the increasing visibility of Dalit voices in Indian literature, there remains a significant research gap in the way Dalit literature is integrated into ELT curricula. Much of the current ELT practice in India continues to emphasize standard British or American English, prioritizing grammatical correctness and literary canons shaped by upper-caste aesthetics. Even when Indian writing is included, it is usually limited to urban, Anglophone writers who rarely engage with caste as a lived experience. There is little pedagogical engagement with texts that emerge from the margins—texts that carry the moral urgency, raw expression, and linguistic hybridity characteristic of Dalit literature. This exclusion not only reinforces caste-based silencing but also denies students the opportunity to engage with English as a tool for critique and liberation.

Furthermore, while several scholars such as Limbale (2004), Ilame (2020), and Zecchini (2016) have analyzed the aesthetic and political dimensions of Dalit writing, very few have extended these insights to the ELT classroom. Classroom-based studies, empirical research on learner response, or pedagogical strategies for integrating Dalit literature into ELT are still rare. This study addresses that gap by offering a critical framework for using Dalit literature not just as content but as method—foregrounding student agency, linguistic plurality, and social justice in the language learning process.

The importance of this study lies in its potential to reshape the ethical foundation of ELT in India. Traditional ELT methods often reproduce social hierarchies by rewarding "standard" forms of language and marginalizing regional or non-conforming linguistic expressions. By introducing Dalit texts—autobiographies like *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki (2003), *Karukku* by Bama (2000), or the fiery poems of Meena Kandasamy—teachers can challenge these biases. These works provide rich opportunities for students to explore how language functions as both a site of trauma and a medium of resistance. They also create space for multilingual expression, emotional honesty, and narrative authenticity—qualities often absent from sanitized ELT materials.

Moreover, integrating Dalit literature in ELT aligns with the larger educational goals of critical pedagogy—to create classrooms that are not merely sites of knowledge transmission but spaces of dialogue, questioning, and transformation. As Paulo Freire (1970) suggested, education should help learners "read the word and the world." Dalit literature makes this possible by encouraging students to grapple with questions of caste, identity, and power, using language not just to communicate but to confront injustice.

In essence, this study reimagines ELT as a socially engaged practice, one that honors the diverse voices of India and challenges the linguistic elitism embedded in conventional syllabi. By bringing Dalit literature into the language classroom, educators not only validate

the experiences of the marginalized but also help all learners develop a more critical, compassionate, and inclusive approach to language and society. In doing so, this research contributes to the evolving discourse on decolonizing education, democratizing language, and amplifying voices from the margins.

Language in Dalit Literature as a Tool for Critical ELT Practice

Language in Dalit literature is not simply a medium of expression—it is a site of resistance, identity, and cultural assertion. For critical English Language Teaching (ELT) practice, Dalit literature offers an opportunity to reshape language pedagogy by connecting linguistic forms to lived social realities. Unlike standard literary texts that often emphasize elite idioms and "pure" forms of English, Dalit literature often features multilingualism, vernacular idioms, and hybrid Englishes that reflect the socio-cultural context of the marginalized. This rich linguistic texture challenges the dominant language norms typically promoted in ELT classrooms and enables students to engage with English as a tool for empowerment, not merely a marker of class or caste privilege.

Writers like Bama and Omprakash Valmiki bring into their narratives a language that is rooted in oral storytelling, regional dialects, and emotionally charged expressions of caste-based injustice. In *Karukku* (2000), Bama blends Tamil and English, using rhythm and local speech to narrate her experiences as a Dalit Christian woman. Similarly, Valmiki's *Joothan* (2003) employs direct and raw prose that captures the sting of untouchability and exclusion. These linguistic choices resist dominant aesthetics and offer ELT practitioners a chance to highlight how language reflects identity and lived experience. According to Limbale (2004), Dalit literature must be grounded in *anubhava* (experience) and *sangharsh* (struggle), making it especially powerful in classrooms where students are encouraged to explore the ethical and emotional force of language.

Incorporating such texts into ELT curricula promotes critical literacy. It allows students to question whose English is considered correct, whose stories are legitimized, and how language can both oppress and liberate. Dalit literature offers forms of English that are shaped by multilingual realities, code-switching, and cultural assertion. Rather than seeing such forms as "incorrect," a critical ELT practice values them as valid expressions of socio-political identity (Ilame, 2020). Through discussions, close readings, and reflective writing on Dalit texts, students become aware of the power structures embedded in language itself. They learn that English is not a neutral tool but a contested space that can be reclaimed to speak truth to power.

Furthermore, language in Dalit literature provides a platform for engaging with translation as a critical act. Many Dalit texts are written in regional languages and later translated into English, raising questions about voice, agency, and cultural representation. Classroom conversations around these translations can deepen students' awareness of how language carries cultural weight and how meaning shifts across contexts (Zecchini, 2016). This fosters not only linguistic sensitivity but also empathy and a more inclusive approach to learning.

In sum, the language of Dalit literature enriches ELT by introducing students to diverse linguistic realities and connecting classroom learning to broader questions of identity, justice, and social change. It invites educators and learners alike to embrace a pedagogy where language becomes a means of resistance and recognition.

Dalit literature, rooted in the lived experiences of historically oppressed castes in India, offers a powerful resource for reshaping English Language Teaching (ELT) through a

critical, socially responsive lens. As English continues to dominate the Indian educational landscape, the inclusion of marginalized voices, especially those from Dalit communities, becomes not just an academic imperative but a moral one. This essay explores how Dalit literature challenges the politics of identity and marginalization and how it can be used as a vital tool in critical ELT practices. Through its engagement with language, narrative, and power, Dalit literature opens up spaces for inclusive pedagogy that recognizes and respects difference.

The Role of Language in Shaping Identity in Indian Literature

In Indian literature, language is not merely a mode of expression—it is a marker of identity, power, and belonging. Given India's multilingual and caste-stratified social structure, the language a writer chooses to write in often reveals as much about their positionality as the themes they explore. Language has historically been a tool of both exclusion and empowerment, particularly in the context of caste, region, class, and colonial legacy. In Indian English literature, for instance, English has long functioned as a symbol of modernity, mobility, and cultural capital, often associated with the urban elite. However, for many writers from marginalized communities, including Dalits, tribals, and linguistic minorities, English also represents an opportunity to challenge inherited hierarchies. As Ambedkar (2014) emphasized, English offered the oppressed a path to liberation: "Without education, their plight will not change, and the only path to education was English." This notion has been reinterpreted by a new generation of writers who use English to assert identity and demand recognition in both national and global literary spaces.

Language in Indian literature also shapes identity through its intimate connection to region, emotion, and memory. Writers like Kamala Das, who shifted between English and Malayalam, demonstrate how bilingualism can serve as a form of self-exploration and defiance. Das famously declared, "Why not let me speak in any language I like? The language I speak becomes mine" (Das, 1965). This assertion challenges the cultural policing of language and underscores how linguistic agency contributes to personal and collective identity. Similarly, Dalit authors such as Bama and Omprakash Valmiki use regional dialects within their English or translated prose to retain authenticity and affirm their cultural roots. Their language is deliberately non-conformist, grounded in *anubhava* (lived experience), and saturated with resistance (Limbale, 2004). Bama's *Karukku* (2000), though translated into English, retains the cadence of Tamil oral storytelling, capturing both oppression and resilience. Her choice to retain native idioms and cultural metaphors within the English translation of her work ensures that the identity of the narrator remains firmly rooted in place and history.

Moreover, language shapes how communities are imagined in Indian literature. Postcolonial and regional authors often navigate the tension between English and vernacular languages, portraying how language can act as a bridge or a barrier. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), for instance, blends Indian vernacular expressions into English, coining a hybrid literary voice that reflects India's fragmented identity. Such linguistic experimentation illustrates how multilingualism is not just a backdrop but a defining feature of Indian identity. Yet, this hybridity is not accessible to all. Dalit and tribal writers often critique such literary play as elitist, arguing that it glosses over real social inequalities. Therefore, while language in Indian literature can be a site of creativity and hybridity, it is also a battleground for recognition, dignity, and truth.

Dalit Identity and the Politics of Representation

Dalit identity in literature is not abstract—it is deeply embedded in caste-based discrimination, social exclusion, and historical silencing. Writers like Omprakash Valmiki, Bama, Urmila Pawar, and Meena Kandasamy have used their works to narrate the brutalities of caste oppression and the resilience of Dalit communities. In *Joothan* (2003), Valmiki recounts his childhood experiences of being treated as untouchable, denied food, dignity, and equal opportunity. His narrative is not merely autobiographical; it is emblematic of a larger collective trauma that Dalits have endured across generations. Likewise, Bama's *Karukku* (2000) offers a feminist Dalit voice that confronts both caste and gender-based marginalization within a Christian context. These texts are vital because they do not present Dalit identity as fixed or victimized—they depict it as evolving, resistant, and full of agency (Limbale, 2004). ELT classrooms that incorporate such narratives allow students to encounter the complexity of Indian identities beyond tokenistic multiculturalism.

Language, Power, and Resistance in the ELT Classroom

In conventional ELT settings, language is often taught as neutral and standardized, privileging grammar rules and "correct" usage while ignoring the cultural politics embedded in language. Dalit literature disrupts this norm by using language as a tool of resistance. The English found in Dalit literature is often hybrid, influenced by regional dialects, idioms, and oral traditions. For example, Meena Kandasamy's poetry and prose are known for their sharp, uncompromising tone and their unapologetic use of Tamil-English code-switching. This kind of language reflects the lived realities of multilingual India and invites learners to view English not just as a colonial inheritance or a path to upward mobility, but as a medium for expressing dissent and difference (Ilame, 2020). Teaching such texts in ELT classrooms shifts the focus from linguistic correctness to communicative authenticity, helping students understand that all languages and dialects carry cultural and political weight.

Margins to Mainstream: Reclaiming Curriculum through Dalit Texts

The marginalization of Dalit voices in mainstream syllabi is a reflection of deeper systemic exclusion. Many school and university curricula in India continue to emphasize upper-caste literary figures and sanitized versions of social realities. As Feminism in India (2022) reports, even when Dalit texts are introduced, they are often removed due to discomfort around caste discussions. Critical ELT practices must resist this erasure. Integrating Dalit literature into the curriculum allows students to engage with narratives that are grounded in real social conditions. It encourages them to critically reflect on privilege, bias, and their own position within societal structures. For instance, Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2008) introduces students to the intersections of caste, gender, and labor, providing a textured understanding of what it means to live at the margins. Including such works signals to students from marginalized communities that their voices matter and their languages belong in academic discourse.

Translation, Identity, and Pedagogical Possibilities

Most Dalit literature has been written in regional languages—Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Hindi—and later translated into English. These translations are not mere linguistic conversions; they are acts of cultural negotiation. Translators must decide how much of the original rhythm, idiom, and cultural reference to retain. In ELT classrooms, discussing these choices can lead to rich conversations about voice, fidelity, and representation. For example, Bama's *Karukku* retains many Tamil words that carry cultural meanings not easily translatable. This encourages learners to think beyond literal

translation and appreciate the nuances of language. According to Zecchini (2016), translation in Dalit literature plays a critical role in bringing local struggles into global consciousness. By including these texts in ELT practice, teachers can cultivate linguistic sensitivity and socio-cultural awareness, helping students understand that language carries memory, identity, and power.

From Passive Reading to Critical Engagement

Dalit literature is not meant to be read passively; it demands a response. The emotionally raw and politically charged content requires students and teachers alike to reflect, question, and sometimes confront uncomfortable truths. Critical ELT practice rooted in Dalit literature encourages dialogic teaching—where students are co-creators of meaning rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Assignments can include reflective journals, group discussions on caste and identity, creative responses in students' own linguistic styles, and comparative readings with canonical texts. This approach not only builds language skills but also promotes empathy, critical thinking, and ethical engagement with literature. As Limbale (2004) asserts, Dalit literature must be evaluated not by conventional aesthetic standards but by its capacity to provoke, disturb, and transform. That transformation is precisely what critical ELT should aim to achieve.

Dalit literature offers more than stories; it offers tools for liberation—of thought, of language, of education. In the ELT classroom, it opens space for multilingual, intersectional, and socially conscious pedagogies that recognize the political nature of language and the importance of representation. By bringing Dalit narratives from the margins to the center of English education, educators can help dismantle the casteist structures that persist in academic spaces. They can also foster classrooms where all students—regardless of caste, class, or language background—feel seen, heard, and valued. In this way, Dalit literature is not just a resource but a revolution within critical ELT practice.

Critical Analysis of Research Articles on Dalit Literature as a Tool for Critical ELT Practice

Dalit literature is steadily gaining academic visibility, not only as a site of cultural expression but also as a pedagogical tool with immense potential to transform English Language Teaching (ELT) in India. Several scholars have examined how the integration of Dalit texts into ELT practice challenges dominant linguistic ideologies, promotes critical literacy, and validates marginalized identities. This analysis reviews and critiques selected research articles that address the intersections of Dalit literature, language, identity, and critical pedagogy within the ELT framework. The discussion is organized thematically under side headings for clarity.

Reclaiming Voice and Identity through Language

A key argument across this literature is that Dalit writers use English as a tool of resistance and dignity. Ilame (2020) emphasizes that "the English language, once considered a language of the oppressors, is now used by Dalits as a means of liberation and assertion." This idea reflects Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's vision of English as "the milk of a lioness" that gives the oppressed the courage to roar (Ilame, 2020, p. 878). The article offers a compelling ideological foundation by showing how English enables Dalits to tell their stories in spaces where their voices were previously silenced. However, Ilame's work remains largely theoretical and would benefit from classroom case studies or learner feedback to demonstrate pedagogical outcomes more concretely.

Challenging Linguistic Norms in the Classroom

Bose (2023) provides a more pedagogically grounded critique of how Dalit literature reshapes linguistic norms in Indian

classrooms. In her analysis of Meena Kandasamy's novels and poetry, Bose highlights how Dalit-English—a hybrid, rhythmically Tamilized form of English—disrupts standard English usage. She argues that this linguistic experimentation opens space for marginalized students to see their own speech patterns as valid and powerful. Bose's work is especially useful for ELT practitioners as it connects literary form with classroom practice. However, while she offers a compelling argument about the political aesthetics of language, the article does not explore student responses or institutional challenges in implementing such content in ELT syllabi. Even so, Bose offers a much-needed intervention by pushing the boundaries of what counts as "correct" or "literary" English. Still, it lays the groundwork for using Dalit-English as a pedagogical entry point for critical language awareness. Bose's analysis is particularly useful for ELT educators as it reveals how language variety in Dalit literature can challenge learners' perceptions of 'correct' English. However, while the article is rich in literary analysis, it would be stronger if supplemented with classroom-level implementations or teacher reflections.

Translation, Voice, and Cultural Pedagogy

Zecchini's (2016) work on translation and Dalit literature delves into the nuances of voice and representation. She focuses on how translated Dalit texts, such as *Karukku* and *The Weave of My Life*, retain regional idioms and cultural specificity while being adapted into English. Her research stresses the importance of critical translation pedagogy—where students are not just passive readers but also engaged analysts of the politics of voice and meaning. This article is especially valuable for advanced ELT practitioners who wish to use translation exercises to develop meta-linguistic awareness among students. Zecchini's theoretical rigor and attention to detail make her work stand out, although her article is more suitable for higher education contexts than school-level ELT.

Gender and Intersectionality in Dalit ELT Pedagogy

An important, and often underrepresented, dimension in the discourse on Dalit literature in ELT is gender. The Feminism in India (2022) article addresses this gap by emphasizing the erasure of Dalit women writers from academic syllabi. It points out that while Dalit male voices are occasionally included in ELT materials, the works of Dalit women such as Baby Kamble, Bama, and Gogu Shyamala are often excluded due to their uncomfortable truths about caste and gender violence. The article calls for an inclusive pedagogy that goes beyond tokenism and centers the intersectional experiences of Dalit women. Though non-academic in tone, this piece is a call to action for curriculum developers and ELT educators to diversify their reading lists and teaching practices. It would be more impactful if supplemented with lesson plans or strategies for integrating such texts into existing ELT frameworks. While the article is activist in tone, its observations reflect a broader problem within ELT—the sanitization of language and literature at the cost of lived truth. Though the article lacks empirical rigor, it effectively challenges ELT educators to reflect on whose voices they privilege and whose stories they omit.

Empirical Studies and Grounded Practices

While theoretical and critical perspectives dominate the literature, empirical studies on Dalit literature in ELT are relatively scarce. Rathina's (2009) article stands out as an early attempt to connect Dalit literature to actual classroom engagement. She argues, "Students from marginalised communities find resonance and validation in literature that mirrors their own lives" (p. 13). Her claim is supported by anecdotal accounts of increased learner motivation and participation when Dalit texts are used in reading activities. While her study lacks detailed empirical data, it offers a practical perspective on how Dalit literature can function

as a transformative resource for student engagement, especially in multilingual and caste-diverse classrooms. Future research could build on Rathina's findings by incorporating student voices and learning outcomes to reinforce the case for Dalit literature in ELT. Still, it remains a foundational piece for those interested in action research or classroom-based inquiry on this subject.

Critical Pedagogy and Curriculum Design

Collectively, the reviewed articles agree on the transformative potential of Dalit literature in ELT, but few offer concrete strategies for curriculum integration. Satyanarayana and Tharu's (2013) *The Exercise of Freedom* functions as both an anthology and a pedagogy. They write, "Dalit literature is not about personal pain alone; it is about a shared consciousness that questions every structure of injustice" (p. xiv). Their work is instrumental for ELT practitioners because it moves beyond literary critique into curriculum development. With teaching notes, thematic categorizations, and historical context, this volume offers a blueprint for building critical ELT modules around Dalit literature. By organizing texts according to themes like protest, memory, and dignity, the anthology promotes deep, ethical engagement with literature. The strength of this resource lies in its accessibility and pedagogical framing, making it indispensable for educators seeking to decolonize their syllabi. They emphasize literature as praxis—knowledge rooted in struggle—and argue for a radical rethinking of literary value. Their contribution is especially useful for university educators aiming to decolonize syllabi and adopt socially responsive teaching practices.

Toward a Transformative ELT Practice

The current body of research makes a compelling case for the inclusion of Dalit literature in ELT. These texts offer more than just representation—they provide a language of resistance, a critique of normative English, and a pedagogy rooted in experience and transformation. Scholars like Ilame, Bose, and Zecchini have laid strong foundations, while activists and educators continue to push for more inclusive curricula. However, the field needs more empirical studies that assess the real-world impact of such texts on learners' linguistic, critical, and emotional development. For ELT to be truly transformative, it must embrace the margins—not as supplementary content, but as central to how and why we teach language. Dalit literature, in all its rawness, complexity, and moral force, is a vital tool in that journey.

Language and Dalit Expression in Indian English Literature

Language in Dalit literature is not just a tool of communication—it is a vessel of pain, protest, and self-assertion. In Indian English literature, Dalit writers have used English to articulate experiences that are often ignored or misrepresented in mainstream literary discourse. English, for many Dalit authors, is not the language of colonial power but of emancipation. As Ambedkar famously argued, English was a "gateway to modernity" and a medium through which Dalits could claim intellectual space and dignity in a society that denied them both (Ambedkar, 2014). Contemporary Dalit writers have internalized this vision, using English to break caste silence and to challenge the dominant upper-caste narratives that have long monopolized Indian literature.

Writers such as Omprakash Valmiki, Bama, and Meena Kandasamy exemplify how English can carry the rhythm of regional languages, the urgency of resistance, and the weight of generational trauma. Valmiki's *Joothan* (2003) may have originated in Hindi, but its English translation allows its powerful story to reach global audiences, confronting them with the brutality of casteism. Similarly, Bama's *Karukku* (2000) uses a hybrid English, deeply rooted in Tamil Christian Dalit experience, blending idioms, oral traditions, and code-

switching that reject linguistic purity in favor of authenticity. These linguistic choices are not accidental—they are political. As Limbale (2004) notes, Dalit literature should be judged not by aesthetic pleasure but by its commitment to truth, *anubhava* (lived experience), and *sangharsh* (struggle). English, in the hands of Dalit writers, is transformed into a tool that conveys pain and dignity simultaneously, destabilizing both caste and linguistic hierarchies.

In the broader landscape of Indian English literature, Dalit expression marks a necessary rupture. While canonical Indian English writers like R.K. Narayan or Arundhati Roy have portrayed caste to varying extents, Dalit voices shift the focus from observation to lived reality. They make caste visible not as a sociological concern but as a violent everyday truth. Meena Kandasamy's sharp poetic voice and novels like *When I Hit You* (2017) bring into English not only the experience of caste but also the gendered violence and resistance that come with it. Kandasamy's English is militant, raw, and unapologetically political, demanding that the reader listen on Dalit terms.

Through such expression, Dalit literature in English challenges the sanitized aesthetics of mainstream Indian English literature. It insists that literature must speak from the margins, not about them. Language becomes both a witness and a weapon—documenting injustice while resisting it. In this way, Indian English literature is being reshaped by Dalit expression, which introduces new rhythms, vocabularies, and ethics into its fabric. It is not merely a contribution to diversity; it is a redefinition of what counts as literature and whose voices are worthy of being heard.

The Role of Dalit Literature in Social Change in India

Dalit literature has emerged as one of the most powerful instruments of social change in post-independence India. Rooted in the lived experiences of caste-based discrimination, poverty, and systemic exclusion, Dalit writings have long challenged the deeply entrenched structures of Brahminical hegemony. More than mere narratives of suffering, these texts are acts of resistance—voicing silenced histories and reimagining a just and equal future. Writers such as Omprakash Valmiki, Bama, Urmila Pawar, and Babytai Kamble have used literature as a political tool, documenting the brutal realities of caste while simultaneously inspiring solidarity, awareness, and assertion of identity. As Sharankumar Limbale (2004) argues, Dalit literature is not about artistic pleasure, but about "truth, experience (*anubhava*), and struggle (*sangharsh*)"—its aesthetics are ethical and its purpose is to disrupt and transform society.

One of the most significant contributions of Dalit literature to social change is the way it reclaims language and narrative authority. Historically, mainstream Indian literature has either ignored Dalit life or represented it through a patronizing, upper-caste lens. Dalit writers broke this monopoly by narrating their own stories—raw, unapologetic, and unfiltered. Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (2003) is a landmark autobiography that exposed the everyday violence of untouchability in school, home, and public spaces. By recounting his humiliation in eating leftovers thrown by upper castes, Valmiki shattered the myth of caste as a benign social hierarchy. Similarly, Bama's *Karukku* (2000) spoke of her dual oppression as a Dalit Christian woman, questioning not only caste, but also the role of religion in perpetuating inequality. These narratives did not just raise awareness—they empowered Dalit readers to see their own lives as valid and worthy of expression.

Dalit literature has also reshaped educational and cultural discourse. Its inclusion in university syllabi and literary festivals, though still limited and contested, has opened important conversations around caste, representation, and inclusivity. Scholars like Satyanarayana and Tharu (2013) have played a pivotal role in compiling and anthologizing Dalit writings, making them more accessible to

a wider audience. Literature has thus become a means of activism—disrupting silence, challenging curricula, and forcing institutions to confront their biases. Moreover, the oral traditions and multilingual narratives of Dalit literature challenge the norms of "standard" language and literature, offering a more democratic vision of knowledge production (Zecchini, 2016).

In essence, Dalit literature does not merely reflect social change—it drives it. It is a movement that dismantles caste through storytelling, demands justice through poetry, and reclaims history through memoir. It educates, agitates, and inspires. As Ambedkar envisioned, social reform must come not only through politics or economics but through the transformation of consciousness—and Dalit literature is central to that transformation.

Conclusion

Dalit literature, with its raw emotional honesty, linguistic diversity, and commitment to truth, stands as a powerful force for pedagogical transformation in Indian English Language Teaching (ELT). This study has explored how incorporating Dalit texts into ELT classrooms offers not only a more inclusive and equitable curriculum but also fosters critical consciousness among learners. Unlike conventional English texts that often reflect sanitized or privileged worldviews, Dalit literature confronts the realities of caste, oppression, and social exclusion head-on. Writers like Omprakash Valmiki, Bama, and Meena Kandasamy challenge linguistic norms, introduce alternate worldviews, and empower students to question inherited hierarchies—both in language and society. Their works affirm that English can be a language of resistance, dignity, and self-expression for the marginalized. This reorientation of ELT practice—towards lived experience (*anubhava*), struggle (*sangharsh*), and social justice—aligns with the larger goals of decolonizing the classroom and democratizing access to voice. However, for this shift to be sustainable, institutional changes are needed: curriculum reform, teacher sensitization, and the inclusion of more multilingual, caste-conscious literary materials. In positioning Dalit literature not as supplementary but as central to ELT, this study emphasizes that language learning is not a neutral or technical process—it is a deeply political act. When students engage with texts that speak truth to power, they do not just become better users of language; they become more aware, empathetic, and empowered individuals ready to participate in a more just and inclusive society.

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