

Original Article

From the Ghetto to the Marshland: A Comparative Study of 'Unruly Botany' and Anti-Pastoral Aesthetics in the Poetry of Namdeo Dhasal, Sukirtharani, and Kalyani Thakur Charal

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Abstract

This research explores the intersectional dimensions of Anti-Pastoral aesthetics and Dalit Ecofeminism through a comparative analysis of three seminal works: Wild Words, Andhar Bil, and Antastha. While traditional pastoral literature often romanticizes the rural landscape as a site of idyllic retreat, this study argues that Dalit women's narratives dismantle these tropes by exposing the land as geography of labor, exclusion, and systemic caste violence.

By employing an anti-pastoral lens, the paper examines how these texts subvert mainstream ecological discourse, which frequently overlooks the "internal colonies" of caste. The analysis highlights how the protagonists' relationship with nature is defined not by leisure, but by survival and bodily autonomy. Through the framework of Dalit Ecofeminism, the study further illustrates how the exploitation of the environment mirrors the subjugation of the Dalit female body. Ultimately, this comparative study asserts that Wild Words, Andhar Bil, and Antastha reclaim the natural world as a site of resistance, offering a radical redefinition of environmentalism that is rooted in social justice and the lived realities of the marginalized.

Key Words: Dalit, Ecofeminism, Anti-Pastoral, Caste, Gender, Aesthetics, Resistance, Labor, Land, Marginalization, Subaltern, Environment, Intersectionality, Survival, Hegemony, Patriarchy, Ecology, Justice, Narrative, Reclamation.

Introduction

Contemporary Indian Dalit literature radically disrupts the traditional aesthetic frameworks of the Indian landscape, moving beyond the sanitized and idealized limits of the classical pastoral. While mainstream environmental discourse often focuses on the preservation of pristine 'wilderness', the literary geographies of Namdeo Dhasal, Sukirtharani, and Kalyani Thakur Charal foreground the 'ghetto' and the 'marshland'- spaces defined by waste, manual labor, and systemic neglect. Studying these poets is essential because it redefines ecocriticism beyond elite, Western-centric conservation values as it uncovers 'everyday environmentalisms' which highlight the intersection of caste, gender, and ecology. By analyzing these 'unruly' spaces, we can better understand how marginalized communities use the environment as a site of political resistance and historical reclamation.

The central research inquiry of this paper examines how the transition from the visceral urban decay in Dhasal's Marathi poetry to the ecologically fragile marshlands of Tamil and Bengali Dalit verse constitutes a distinctive 'anti-pastoral' aesthetic. This study argues that through the motif of 'unruly botany'- the representation of wild, irrepressible growth- these poets reclaim the environment as an extension of the Dalit body to subvert traditional notions of purity, order, and spatial exclusion. To support this claim, the paper is organized into three main sections. First, it analyzes Namdeo Dhasal's urban geography to show how the 'ghetto' functions as a site of environmental and social degradation that births a new, radical language. Second, it explores Sukirtharani's eco-feminist 'body poetry', in which the female Dalit form is envisioned as a "nature's fountainhead" that cannot be confined by caste-based barriers.

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Finally, it examines Kalyani Thakur Charal's visceral imagery of the Bengali marshlands, where the 'Charal' identity is asserted through a landscape of hunger, wounds, and systemic resistance against the 'Bhadralok' (genteel) society.

The emergence of Dalit literature as a robust, independent aesthetic and political project represents one of the most radical shifts in the South Asian literary landscape. By centering the lived experiences of those historically marginalized by the Brahminical Varna system, Dalit writers have dismantled the traditional Indian canons that prioritized purity, transcendence, and upper-caste's narratives. This literature review examines a specific, burgeoning subfield: the intersection of Dalit aesthetics and environmental imagination, specifically focusing on the concept of "unruly botany" and "anti-pastoral" aesthetics in the works of Namdeo Dhasal (Marathi), Sukirtharani (Tamil), and Kalyani Thakur Charal (Bengali). While traditional Indian environmentalism often looks toward an idyllic, agrarian past or sacred nature, these poets engage with the environment as a site of 'eco-casteism,' where landscapes- whether urban ghettos, arid village fringes, or deltaic marshlands- are inextricably linked to labor, exclusion, and survival.

The study of Dalit literature requires a foundational understanding of the aesthetic break it performs against mainstream Indian literary theory. Traditional aesthetics, often rooted in Sanskrit texts like Bharatamuni's *Natyasastra*, focused on the lives of upper-caste individuals and emphasized the 'purity' of form and emotion. Dalit aesthetics, as theorized by scholars like Sharankumar Limbale, rejects these 'pure' principles, arguing that literature must instead capture the sorrow, pain, anger, and experiential narratives of the oppressed. This shift is not merely thematic but epistemological; it poses a direct challenge to the traditional knowledge that has historically relegated Dalit voices to the margins. Limbale asserts that literature must be evaluated through a "sociological perspective" that prioritizes "experiential" truth over formalist beauty. He maintains that the purpose of writing is to capture the lived reality of the oppressed-specifically their collective "sorrow, pain, and anger"-to serve as a vehicle for social justice and liberation. (Limbale 19)

In recent years, this theoretical framework has expanded into "Dalit Ecologies". This critical lens, pioneered by researchers like Indulata Prasad, argues that the caste system has profound implications for how Dalits experience the environment. Aligning with "Black Ecologies," this framework conceptualizes 'eco-casteism'- the systemic exclusion of Dalits from natural resources and their disproportionate exposure to pollution and waste. Unlike the conventional and traditional literature written and praised by the upper castes and idealizes rural life as a harmonious escape, the Dalit 'anti-pastoral' exposes the harsh realities of those whose 'touch' pollutes the very elements of nature.

The concept of "unruly botany" emerges here as a trope of resistance. While pastoral botany is ordered and cultivated, unruly botany refers to the 'filth', 'weeds' and 'poisonous' plants that thrive in the spaces of the marginalized. They reflect in spaces like Dhasal's ghetto, Sukirtharani's arid lands, and Charal's marshlands. This literature review evaluates how these three poets utilize such aesthetics to reclaim Dalit subjectivity and agency. Namdeo Dhasal's 1972 collection *Golpitha* remains a watershed moment in Marathi Dalit literature. Dhasal, a founder of the Dalit Panthers, drew his imagery from the red-light district of Kamatipura in Mumbai, an environment he experienced firsthand as a child. His poetry is a radical departure from the "sanitized" nature writing of high-caste traditions, replacing rolling hills and clear streams with the "stinking alleys" and "decaying urban landscape" of the ghetto. Dhasal's 'unruly botany' is found in his portrayal of an environment where "nature is poisonous". (Dhasal 54) In the poem "Kamatipura", he depicts a landscape where "Death gathers" and individuals are forced to "taste / Poison's sweet or salt flavor" (Dhasal 74). This is not a metaphorical toxicity but a literal description of the ecological precarity faced by Dalits segregated into the most polluted urban spaces. Scholarship indicates that Dhasal utilizes this "filth" to assert a 'Dalit subjectivity' by reclaiming the spaces assigned to them by the caste system as 'defiled', he transforms the ghetto into a site of political radicalism.

His language mirrors this physical unruliness. Dhasal's idiom famously mixes words of abuse picked up from the street with phrases from the sacred poetry of the Marathi saints, creating a surrealistic and raw style that plumbed the 'netherworld' of Indian society. This linguistic unruliness serves as a direct critique of the Indian caste system that relies on the categorization of 'pure' vs 'impure' language and space. Dhasal's work also functions as a 'postcolonial gothic' response to the failure of national politics. While the post-independence Indian state projected a narrative of progress and democracy, *Golpitha* revealed the sectarian, gender, class, and caste divisions that continued to define the urban domestic terrain.

In the context of contemporary Tamil literature, Sukirtharani's poetry represents a powerful intersection of Dalit Feminist Theory and ecological imagination. Her work moves beyond the urban ghetto into the arid village fringes and the domestic spaces where Dalit women endure the triple marginalization of caste, class, and gender. A central theme in Sukirtharani's poetics is the interconnection of land, body, and sexuality. For Sukirtharani, the Dalit woman's body is a site of pain inflicted by the hegemony, but it is also a site of radical reclamation. In her poem "Nature's Fountainhead," she defies patriarchal confinement: "The more you confine me, the more I will spill over. I myself will become earth. fire. sky. wind. water". (Sukirtharani) This imagery suggests that the 'natural' elements are continuous with human nature, providing a landscape of resistance against those who would frame her like a picture.

This 'embodied landscape' is further explored in "The Faint Smell of Meat", where she shifts the perspective of her community from the "extreme end of town"- a location of exclusion-to the "forefront," thereby claiming a new

'subjectivity'. Her use of 'spoken Tamil' rather than the 'diglossia' of elite literary Tamil further reinforces this aesthetic of the 'unruly', as she chooses the language of daily struggle over the 'superior' language of the academy.

Sukirtharani's work also addresses the material destruction of the environment. In interviews, she has lamented how agricultural lands were converted into special economic zones and how the requirement for agriculture-related products declined as highways were built across the hearts of agricultural lands. This dispossession leaves Dalit women, who were traditionally engaged in daily wage jobs related to agriculture, both landless and speechless. Her poem "Portrait of my village" is a poignant reflection on how "untouchability" continues to structure these changing landscapes. She writes: "How can I bear to see / my dry lands, surrounded by rocks and hills, / rent, as if by an earthquake's fissures? (Sukirtharani)

The 'Karukku' metaphor, originally used by Bama and expanded in the scholarship surrounding Sukirtharani, perfectly encapsulates the 'unruly botany' of the Tamil Dalit experience. The palmyra leaf, with its 'serrated edges' is a double-edged sword that symbolizes both Dalit oppression and resistance.

The Bengali Dalit experience is uniquely characterized by the geography of the 'bil' (marshland) and the trauma of Partition. Kalyani Thakur Charal, a prominent Namasudra poet and activist, uses the marshland as a central trope to explore "refugee status, class, caste, and gender identity". The "Andhar Bil" (Dark Lake) in Charal's poetry and her novella *Andhar Bil O Kichu Manus* acts as a central character that witnesses the struggle of Dalit refugees from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) to rebuild their lives. Historically, the Namasudra community was defined by its labor in reclaiming marshy lands in the late nineteenth century to become a peasant class. Charal's work connects this historical labor to the sobering and miserable reality of uprooted life after Partition.

Her aesthetics are frequently described as 'emergency literature', a form that records the pain, anger, struggle, evolution, adaption, and eruption of resistance of those living in a neo-precarious condition. The 'marshland' is thus not a site of pastoral beauty but an archive of trauma, alleviation, and recuperation. By focusing on the 'dark lake', Charal disrupts the elitist and nostalgic sayings of the Bengali Bhadrakol, who often overlook the Dalit exiles' point of view.

Charal's ecological identity is also intertwined with the "Matua faith", which provides a 'positive (Pavitra) Dalit identity' rooted in dignity and labor. This faith, centered on 'Thakurbari', offers a spiritual framework for the community's connection to the land and water. In Bengali Dalit narratives, the 'water hyacinth' (Prisnika) often serves as a key ecological metaphor-growing 'unruly' in the bil, viewed as a weed by the elite, yet serving as a symbol of resilience and survival for the Namasudras. Charal's work utilizes these "marginal" species to articulate a sense of "self-worth" in the face of systemic discrimination.

The body of scholarship on Dalit aesthetics and environmentalism has made significant strides in moving away from a purely "sociological approach" to one that recognizes "innovative narrative strategies". However, the critical landscape remains uneven across regions and themes.

The most significant strength of current scholarship is the formulation of "Dalit Ecologies" as a critical framework. By analyzing how "nature is caste-ized through the ideology of Hindu Brahminism," researchers have begun to redress the "blind spot" of excluding Dalit writings from the Indian ecological canon. The integration of "standpoint theory" has also enriched the analysis of poets like Sukirtharani, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how "intersectionality" operates within the Dalit feminist context. Despite these gains, several critical gaps persist. As noted in recent environmental literature reviews, comparative studies across multiple regional languages remain sparse. Most scholarship focuses on a single linguistic tradition. While agrarian and "tribal" ecologies are increasingly studied, the "urban environmental experiences" of Dalits, as seen in Dhasal's work, are often omitted from the ecological canon. Much of the scholarship still "naturalizes social hierarchies" when discussing sanitation or urban labor. There is a need for more research into how 'Dalit patriarchy' and the state interact to affect Dalit women's 'environmental autonomy'. While Sukirtharani's work is well-studied in this regard, a broader comparative analysis of how women's "subjectivity" is linked to specific ecological crises (like water pollution or land dispossession) is needed.

The "unruly botany" of Dhasal, Sukirtharani, and Charal serves as a direct aesthetic response to the "pastoral" masks of the elite. In the pastoral tradition, nature is a 'haven' or a 'timeless escape'. In the Dalit anti-pastoral, nature is a site of struggle, human vulnerability, and class conflict.

Dhasal's use of the poisonous ghetto, Sukirtharani's 'Karukku' blades, and Charal's marshland' archive all function as what may be termed 'lyrical testimonies'. They provide a vocal and non-verbal possibility of expression for the gaps and silences in Indian history. The 'unruly' nature of their botanical metaphors-plants that cut, thrive in filth, or emerge from darkness-mirrors the 'indomitable spirit' and 'cultural resistance' of the Dalit community.

These poets do not merely describe their environment; they theorize it through metaphor, symbol, folk idioms, as well as satire and irony. Their work deconstructs Hindu religious beliefs by showing that the sacred groves and pure rivers are often built on the segregation, dispossession, and dehumanization of the 'ati-Shudra'.

This literature review has evaluated the shifting paradigms of Dalit aesthetics through the lens of environmental imagination. By comparing Namdeo Dhasal's urban anti-pastoral, Sukirtharani's embodied Tamil poetics, and Kalyani Thakur Charal's marshland narratives, it is evident that a 'Dalit eco-literary tradition' is essential

for a complete understanding of South Asian literature. These writers use "unruly botany" to challenge "eco-casteism" and the "sanitized" nature of the Brahminical canon.

Moving forward, the field must address the identified gaps in comparative cross-regional research and the inclusion of urban environments in the ecological canon. As contemporary Dalit poets continue to interconnect the past and present" to create a narrative chain of remembrance, their work will remain a potent critique of social hierarchies and a vital space for identity formation and resistance.

The movement from the ghetto to the marshland is not just a geographical journey but an aesthetic one, marking the emergence of Dalit assertion in the face of enduring sociopolitical issues. Through their firebrand activism and creative talent, Dhasal, Sukirtharani, and Charal ensure that the broken status of the Dalit is transformed into a powerful subject position, capable of redrawing and reformulating the very definition of literature.

The methodology for this research paper is rooted in an interdisciplinary framework that combines Dalit Ecocriticism, Intersectionality, and Transregional Comparative Analysis. Because literary scholarship in this field serves as a formal argument rather than a mere summary, this methodology is designed to move beyond traditional aesthetic evaluations to uncover the everyday environmentalisms at work in marginalized geographies.

Dalit literature is not merely an artistic exercise but a sociocultural activity that reflects the lived reality of being crushed or broken. By using a sociological and ecocritical lens, the paper can justify the artlessness or visceral rawness of the poems as a deliberate political choice that subverts the cleanly portrayed accounts of caste found in dominant literary canons. This approach ensures that the 'ghetto' and marshland are seen not just as backgrounds, but as active participants in the resistance against spatial and social exclusion.

The results of this comparative research demonstrate that Namdeo Dhasal, Sukirtharani, and Kalyani Thakur Charal utilize unruly botany to dismantle the Brahminical pastoral tradition, replacing idealized landscapes with a visceral, antipastoral realism. By examining the urban ghetto, the arid village fringe, and the deltaic marshland, the study finds that these poets reclaim the impure environments of the Dalit experience as potent sites of political and aesthetic resistance.

The first major finding of this study is that Namdeo Dhasal's poetry performs a radical urban antipastoral by framing the ghetto of "Kamatipura" as a site of ecological toxicity that mirrors social exclusion. Dhasal rejects the sanitized and aestheticized nature of high-caste literary traditions, instead utilizing images of decay to articulate a defiant Dalit subjectivity. In his landmark poem "Cruelty", Dhasal utilizes a botanical metaphor to describe his linguistic and existential position within the caste order. He writes:

I am a venereal sore in the private part of language.... A flowering violet has begun to crawl towards horizons.... A young green leaf is beginning to swing at the door of desire. (Dhasal, "Cruelty")

The writer introduces the body as a site of disease (venereal sore) only to immediately juxtapose it with unruly growth (crawling violet, swinging leaf). This suggests that Dalit desire and language sprout precisely from the netherworld of society. Scholar Indulata Prasad argues that such imagery highlights ecological precarity, where Dalits are segregated into poisoned landscapes but use that very filth to reclaim agency. Dhasal's botany is unruly because it refuses the order of the garden (the *Gandu Bagicha*), revealing instead a landscape where God's shit falls on the bed of creation. Sukirtharani's poetics move beyond the urban to the village fringe, where unruly botany serves as a metaphor for the intersection of the female Dalit body and land rights. Her work suggests that the Dalit woman's body is a site of pain inflicted by the hegemony but also a natural fountainhead of resistance. In "Portrait of My Village", Sukirtharani provides a harrowing depiction of agricultural labor that subverts any notion of a harmonious rural past:

How can I bear to see / my dry lands, surrounded by rocks and hills, / rent, as if by an earthquake's fissures?... hands already ripped by ulundu plants — / still pervades the body, like a ductless gland. (Sukirtharani, "Portrait of My Village")

Here, the 'unruly' ulundu (black gram) plant is not a source of sustenance but an agent of physical trauma (hands already ripped). The analysis reveals that this botanical violence is inextricably linked to the pain of caste that drips from our lips. As noted by Lakshmi Holmström, Sukirtharani's bodypolitics weave together caste and body narratives, where memories of oppression are inscribed upon a Dalit body. By representing the land as rent and fissured, Sukirtharani performs an antipastoral critique of the modern state, which has converted agricultural lands into special economic zones, leaving Dalit women landless and speechless.

Finally, the results show that Kalyani Thakur Charal utilizes the bil (marshland) of Bengal as a central character that witnesses the trauma of Partition and the labor of the Namasudra community. Unlike the flowing river which washes away sins, the stagnant, opaque water of the bil merges all sins unto herself. In "Chandalini's Poem", Charal uses the imagery of the marshes to frame the transition from labor to political assertion:

I leave behind these marshes and jungles, / The people of the jungle, / Leave behind the river.... I have become the plough. / And travelled far, riding on the farmer's shoulder. / Tilled the vast expanse. (Charal, "Chandalini's Poem")

This passage illustrates how Charal reclaims the Chandal identity (historically associated with untouchability and marshy environments) as a source of pride. The unruly nature of the marshland—filled with water hyacinth and mossy ponds—is a site of emergency aesthetics. Scholar Jayati Gupta notes that Charal's work records the neo-precarious condition of the Dalit refugee, where the environment is not a picturesque backdrop but a sentient and active

participant in Dalit life. The results indicate that the bil functions as a pedagogical ecology, teaching resilience to a community that has historically survived by reclaiming marshy lands.

The comparative analysis reveals that unruly botany functions as a decolonizing tool across these three regional literatures. By focusing on plants and landscapes that are surplus or out of place, these poets expose the ecocasteism inherent in the Brahminical worldview. Their collective results suggest that the antipastoral is the only aesthetic capable of capturing the broken reality of the Dalit experience while simultaneously asserting an indomitable spirit and a new paradigm for literary criticism. I've detailed the results of the research paper as requested. Let me know if you need any further updates.

The transition from the urban ghetto to the rural marshland in Dalit poetry constitutes a radical antipastoral aesthetic that fundamentally disrupts traditional Indian literary frameworks. Through the motif of unruly botany, Namdeo Dhasal, Sukirtharani, and Kalyani Thakur Charal do not merely describe environments of decay; they reclaim these spaces as extensions of the Dalit body to subvert Brahminical notions of purity, order, and spatial exclusion. While traditional aesthetics celebrate the sanitized beauty of *satyam*, *shivam*, and *sundaram*, this study proves that Dalit poets consciously utilize the artless and the visceral to document a lived reality that is historically crushed or broken.

The synthesis of findings across these three linguistic traditions- Marathi, Tamil, and Bengali-reveals a shared Dalit Botany where wild, irrepressible growth becomes an epistemic agent for survival. In Dhasal's Marathi verse, the ghetto is reimagined as a fertile ground for a radical, explosive language. In Sukirtharani's Tamil poetry, the ecofeminist body poetry transforms the female Dalit form into a nature's fountainhead that cannot be confined by caste-based barriers. Finally, Kalyani Thakur Charal's Bengali verse uses the marshland and Chandal identity to assert a history of resilience against systemic erasure by the Bhadrakalok society. Collectively, these poets demonstrate that the environment is not a separate, pristine wilderness but a site of everyday environmentalism where manual labor and systemic neglect are met with botanical defiance.

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