

Dalit and Women’s Trauma in the Indentured Labour Era: A Comparative Literary Perspective

Deepika

Research Scholar, Department of English, Shri Guru Ram Rai University Dehradun, Uttarakhand

Dr. Praul Aggarwal

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Shri Guru Ram Rai University Dehradun, Uttarakhand

Abstract

Indentured Labourers were workers who by a legal agreement served an employer for a particular period, often in exchange for cheap wages or housing and other basic needs. This immigration of cheap labour system was widely used during the 19th and the early 20th century as a part of European colonial expansion, particularly to supply cheap labour in colonies after the abolition of slavery. The Indenture System, which was primarily used to bring workers from India to colonies such as the Caribbean, Fiji, South Africa, and Mauritius, exploited both men and women, especially Dalit women, who faced many layers of suffering due to their gender as well as caste. Women indentured laborers were especially vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation by overseers, plantations, and owners within the indentured community. The research paper titled "Dalit and Women’s Trauma in the Indentured Labour Era: A Comparative Literary Perspective" examines the experiences of Dalit women during the indentured labour era alongside contemporary Dalit women’s autobiographies. This comparative study explores the intersectionality of caste, gender, and trauma across historical and modern contexts. By analyzing literary and autobiographical narratives, the research highlights continuities in systemic oppression and marginalization, besides the shifts in socio-political conditions that have shaped Dalit women’s experiences over time. The paper employs trauma theory and intersectionality to uncover how caste and gender intersect to amplify suffering while also focusing on the resilience and agency of Dalit women as reflected in literature. By drawing parallels between historical and contemporary narratives, the research aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the ongoing struggles and evolving identities of Dalit women.

Keywords: *Dalit women’s trauma, indentured labour, caste, and gender-based violence, literary analysis, and historical continuity*

I. Introduction

The indentured labour system emerged in the 19th century as a substitute for slavery, primarily facilitating the colonial economy’s demand for cheap labor. “Around 1.3 million Indian migrants who moved abroad were processed through British colonies, traveled on British ships, and worked in British colonies. This entire operation was coordinated and regulated by British officials in Westminster and New Delhi” (David page 62). It involved the migration of workers under binding contracts to plantations and industries across British, French, and Dutch colonies, including the Caribbean, Fiji, and Mauritius. Among these workers, Dalits and women constituted a significant proportion due to their socio-economic vulnerabilities and systemic marginalization in India. The intersection of caste-based discrimination, gender oppression, and colonial subjugation shaped the experiences of Dalit women under this exploitative system. The apprenticeship system denoted to wage labour which is not as completely free as slavery, it was abolished in the Anglophone Caribbean in 1834. “By the time the apprenticeship system that had replaced slavery came to an end in 1839, there were already some 25,000 Indians on Mauritius, including several hundred women. Mauritian planters confidently expected to expand their sugar production by recruiting unlimited supplies of Indentured Indian laborers who would work for less than the resident African freedmen (Thinker, *New System of Slavery* pp, 44-46), the Indians as indentured labour for various plantations were transferred to many other countries during the British Indian period—mostly, subordinates Indians who agreed with cheap labour for immigration.

Despite the British Indian government's ban, on the slavery system, illegally indentured labours were supplied on a five-year contract basis. David mentioned the various investigators' statements that confirm the helplessness of Indians, because of poverty or marginalization Indians were easily agreed for as indentured laborers. According to Lord John Russell, “the British secretary for the colonies, in February 1840 expressed deep reservations about future migrations: "I should be unwilling to adopt any measure to favor the transfer of laborers from British India to Guiana . . . which may lead to a dreadful loss of life on the one hand, or the other, to a new system of slavery." Page, 62, David) Russell's concerns were influenced by reports of mistreatment and poor

conditions faced by Indian laborers in colonies like British Guiana. Investigations revealed instances of disease, inadequate living conditions, and harsh disciplinary measures, including flogging. These findings led to the suspension of the indenture experiment in certain colonies.

The trauma experienced by Dalit women during the indentured labour era through a comparative study with contemporary Dalit women's autobiographies. Likely, Gaiutra Bahadur's *Coolie Women: The Odyssey of Indenture* is ground-breaking work that offers a profound exploration of the lives of women in the indentured labour system, in her book she interweaves personal history with larger historical narratives, she narrates her grandmother's experience during indentured labour period as a lens to examine the experiences of indentured women. This book highlights the unique challenges faced by women, such as sexual exploitation, gendered violence, and social ostracism. By examining literary and autobiographical texts, the study seeks to highlight historical continuities and shifts in the lived experiences of Dalit women, offering a nuanced understanding of their struggles and resilience. The narratives from the indentured labour era not only reflect the economic and physical exploitation of these women but also underscore their emotional and psychological trauma. In contrast, contemporary Dalit women's autobiographies explore similar themes while emphasizing empowerment, identity, and resistance within modern socio-political contexts. The current condition of Dalit women is explored throughout the Dalit women writers' autobiographies which explain the oppression and atrocities of Dalit women through their works. Likely, Urmila Pawar, Bama, Baby Kamble, and many other Dalit women writers raise their voices against gender, caste discrimination, and marginalization. Both historical and contemporary Dalit women's autobiographies highlight recurring themes of trauma, resilience, and the struggle for Identity and agency.

It also emphasizes the trauma theory and intersectionality as theoretical frameworks, this paper aims to bridge the historical and contemporary perspectives, shedding light on the enduring impact of caste and gender oppression. Through a close reading of primary texts autobiography of Gaiutra Bahadur's *Coolie Women* and contemporary autobiographical narrators, a critical examination of socio-historical contexts, the research contributes to the growing body of scholarship that centers on the voices of Dalit women in literary and historical discourse. The study emphasizes the importance of comparative analysis in understanding how literature reflects and critiques systemic injustices, offering insights into the resilience and agency of marginalized communities. This paper argues that the experiences of Dalit women during the indentured labor era and those captured in contemporary autobiographies reveal persistent systemic oppression rooted in the intersection of caste and gender. Despite the shifting socio-political contexts, these narratives expose the continuity of trauma while also highlighting the resilience and agency of Dalit women. By comparing historical and modern literary perspectives, the study emphasizes how caste and gender interplay to shape unique trajectories of suffering and empowerment over time.

Historical background of the Indentured Labour system

The indentured labour system emerged as a response to the global labour shortage that arose following the abolition of slavery in the early 19th century. With the cessation of slavery, colonial powers faced significant challenges in maintaining the productivity of plantations, particularly in sugar-producing regions such as the Caribbean, Mauritius, Fiji, and parts of Africa. Colonial authorities sought alternative systems to address these labor shortages to provide a steady supply of cheap and controlled labor. Indentured labor, a contract-based system, became the solution. Under this system, laborers—primarily from economically marginalized communities—were recruited to work on plantations and other colonial enterprises for fixed periods, typically five to ten years. In exchange, they were promised wages, housing, and other basic provisions. While framed as a mutually beneficial agreement, the system often devolved into a mechanism of exploitation.

Amba Pande who is associated with the School of International Studies, at Jawaharlal Nehru University, dedicated her research works to the Indenture labour period and wrote many research papers related to the people who suffered during the indenture period, there are few works such as *Women in the Indian Diaspora: Historical Narratives and Contemporary Challenges* (Springer 2018), *Women, Gender and the Legacy of Slavery and Indenture*, and the other one *Indentured and Post-Indentured Experiences of Women in the Indian Diaspora* is focused on the women who worked as labour during the indentured period and as the victim of exploitation and sexual violence, according to this paper, women were one-quarter part along with men as labour in this Indentured system, because of multiple plantations women had to engage as low wage labourers and they had faced violence, abuses and socially they were discriminated and humiliated by the authorities of indentured system. Being women, they had to follow the patriarchal trends and it perpetuated the social exploitation and gender discrimination.

Recruitment of Laborers

India became one of the primary sources of indentured labor due to its large population, colonial control under the British, and the widespread poverty caused by exploitative economic policies. Within India, Dalits and other marginalized groups were disproportionately represented among the recruits. These groups, already suffering from caste-based oppression, were often coerced or deceived into signing contracts due to their lack of

education and economic vulnerability. Recruiters, known as "arkatis," frequently misled potential laborers with promises of prosperity and better living conditions overseas.

Hugh Tinker's *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830-1920* published in 1974, in this book author explored the recruitment process and emphasized the exploitative tactics employed to enlist laborers. Thinker studies related to Indian labour who migrated overseas and he analyzed the context of the plantation system in depth to explore the condition of Indian Indentured labourers. His book is finely, dedicated to the detailed description of the growth, origins, and establishment of the Indian indentured system. Uncountable numbers of Indians were transferred for plantation projects to various countries, in which Mauritius was on top, Marina Carter's *Servants, Sirdars and Settlers: Indians in Mauritius, 1834-1874*, was published in 1995, the author analyzed, the various concepts of Indian indenture labours such as the permanent settlements of Indians at places where they were moved for work and because of they unable to return to their home, they married and had to settle over there and this book focuses on indentured labour's exploitation and dominated by the authorities, as well as provides specific examples of how recruiters operated in India and the vulnerabilities of Dalit communities.

The system of indentured labour, was illegal because many countries' governments banned the slavery system, this system was unsympathetic to humans, and humans were treated as animals, to continue the plantation projects authorities introduced the concept of an Indentured labour system in which laborers were required to sign contracts, often written in English or legal jargon that recruits could not understand. These agreements typically bound workers for a few years, specifying wages, working hours, and basic provisions like housing and rations. Ravi Raman's *Global Capital and Peripheral Labour: The History and Political Economy of Plantation Workers in India* (2010) explores how contractual arrangements were manipulated to trap workers in exploitative conditions. Kay Saunders' *Indentured Labour in the British Empire, 1834-1920* (1984) provides insights into the legal framework and its misuse. Laborers were transported in overcrowded ships where conditions resembled the infamous "Middle Passage" of the transatlantic slave trade. Many succumbed to malnutrition, disease, or harsh treatment during the journey, especially with women. Vijay Mishra's *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary* (2007) analyzed parallels between the transportation of indentured laborers and earlier forms of forced migration and the work of Brij V. Lal's, *Chalo Jahaji: On a Journey through Indenture in Fiji* (2000) vividly describes the experiences of laborers during their voyages.

Bhaswati Mukherjee wrote *The Indentured and Their Route*, she is a public speaker, diplomat, as well as president of the India Habitat Centre in Delhi, her works explore the pain of Indentured labours, she states that "When people talk of the kind of horror in today's world that we're seeing right now with Israel and Palestine, they must understand that human bondage and cruelty are documented in history. And yet, we forget about it. Slavery, colonialism, and the Holocaust are all part of that history. As is indenture. Those who are responsible for these atrocities must acknowledge and apologize," (Mukherjee), this statement enclosed the painful livelihood of Indenture labourers who were compulsively engaged with the Indenture system by the authority's power pressure and British colonizers. In her book, she focused on the historical background of indentures and how they involved Indians and enclosing the Indian diaspora. She explains the difference between the Slavery and Indentured systems through her book, how it was the two faces of the same colonial coins.

Mechanics of the Indentured Labour System

Labourers signed legal agreements binding them to work for a specific employer for a fixed period, typically under poorly understood conditions by the recruits. The contracts detailed their wages, working hours, and provisions for food and housing, though these promises were rarely upheld in practice. Once recruited, laborers were transported across oceans under harsh and inhumane conditions. Many died during the voyages due to overcrowding, malnutrition, and disease. Upon arrival, they were placed on plantations where they lived in squalid housing and were subjected to strict control by plantation owners and overseers. On the other side, workers had to go through painful working hours where they were not allowed to rest, it was gruelling labour. the labourers worked long hours under oppressive conditions, often in sugarcane fields. Plantation overseers enforced strict discipline and workers who failed to meet quotas faced physical punishments or wage deductions. The narrative work of Gaiutra Bahadur's *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture* (2013) discusses the daily struggles of laborers, with a particular focus on the experiences of women, and Radica Mahase's *Why Should We Be Called 'Coolie'?: The End of Indian Indentured Labour*, provides an account of the harsh conditions of Indian laborers endured and the mechanisms used to maintain control.

India is a caste-restricted country where people follow the caste hierarchy system and are dominated in their own country, because of the social structure based on caste, Indian people were easily trapped in the indentured system contracts, and the indentured labour system, caste-based prejudices from Indian were often reproduced in diaspora setting, exacerbating the plight of Dalits. Ashutosh Kumar's *Coolies of the Empire: Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies, 1830-1920* (2017) explores how caste structures influenced social dynamics among indentured laborers, and Madhavi Kale's *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indian Indentured Labor in the British Caribbean (Critical Histories)* (1998) examines the cultural baggage that laborers

carried with them, including caste-based hierarchies. The exploitation of women through the indentured period by the overseers, women labourers, especially Dalits faced sexual violence from overseers and male workers and they were often blamed for the disruptions caused by this exploitation, perpetuating cycles of trauma. Likely *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture 2013* is an example of women's exploitation, in this work, focused on women, how women were treated during the period and unbearably, humiliated by the patriarchal dominators. Due to the weak economic condition of Indians, many indentured labourers found themselves trapped in cycles of debt, unable to return to their homelands even after completing their contracts due to the high cost of passage. Clem Seecharan's *Sweetening Bitter Sugar: Jock Campbell, the Booker Reformer in British Guiana, 1934–1966* (2004) explores how laborers were economically bound to plantations, and David Northrup's *Indentured Labor in the Age of Imperialism, 1834–1922* (1995) analyzes the financial and social constraints imposed on workers.

Migration of Indian labourers to the Caribbean, Fiji, Mauritius, and South Africa

Due to the demand for cheap labour to sustain colonial plantations after the abolition of slavery, the migration of Indian labourers was at a peak to various colonies under the indentured labour system was a direct consequence of global economic and political changes during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Indian labourers were first introduced to the Caribbean in 1838 when the British began recruiting workers for sugar plantations in British Guiana and Trinidad. This migration was later extended to Jamaica and Suriname. The British needed a reliable labourers force to maintain sugar production after the abolition of African slavery in 1834. The primary source of Indian labourers was migrated from the regions of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh to the Caribbean, especially Dalits and other marginalized communities were overrepresented among these labourers. Workers endured harsh conditions on sugar plantations, replicating many aspects of slavery. They faced long working hours, poor living conditions, and systemic racism, both from colonial authorities and within the indentured community itself. Indian laborers significantly influenced Caribbean culture, introducing Hinduism, Islam, Indian cuisine, and festivals like Diwali and Holi. However, caste practices persisted, impacting community dynamics. (Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: the export of Indian labour Overseas, 1830-1920*, Brinsley Samaroo, *India in the Caribbean*). During 1879, Fiji became a destination for Indian Indentured labourers, The British sought to support the island's sugarcane industry, which was vital to its economy. Indian labourers were called "girmityas," after the term girmity (agreement). North Indian marginalized caste people were transported to Fiji between 1879 and 1916 around sixty thousand. Women were particularly vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation, often blamed for the tensions within the community caused by colonial policies. Most of the Indians who were migrated, now form a substantial portion of Fiji's population. Still, the colonial experience left a legacy of economic disparity and racial tension between Indo-Fijians and Indigenous Fijians.

Mauritius was among the first destinations for Indian indentured laborers, starting in 1834, millions of Indians immigrated for the sugar industry, it was the backbone of the Mauritian economy, and the abolition of slavery left a labour vacuum that Indian workers filled. In Mauritius primarily from Bihar, Tamil Nadu, and the other northern and southern Indian regions. These Indians belong to Dalit communities and marginalized groups. Despite migration, caste hierarchies persisted in Mauritius. Labourers established temples, preserved Indian languages, and celebrated cultural festivals, blending them with local traditions. Indo-Mauritians are the majority population, and the Indian diaspora has shaped the island's political, cultural, and social identity. Madhavi kale, *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indentured Labor in the British Caribbean*.

The colonial government sought to support agricultural development and expand the economy, from 1860 to 1911, in sugar plantations in Natal (modern-day KwaZulu-Natal), Indian Indentured labourers were first brought to South Africa. Around fifteen thousand Indians migrated to South Africa, many were from Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, while others came from northern India. Dalits were among those who found themselves at the bottom of the social hierarchy, Indian in South Africa have left a lasting cultural impact, contributing to the nation's diversity. However, issues of racial and caste-based discrimination remain relevant in contemporary South African society mentioned in Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed, *Inside Indian Indenture: A South Africa Story, 1860-1914*, and in Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie, *From Cane Fields to Freedom: A Chronicle of Indian South African Life*.

Systemic Marginalization of Dalit labourers in the Indentured System

Dalit laborers, who came from the most oppressed and marginalized caste groups in India, faced unique and multi-layered forms of systemic discrimination during their migration and work under the Indentured labor system. This marginalization was deeply entrenched in the caste, gender, and class hierarchies that shaped their experiences both in India and abroad. Dalit women, in particular, endured a compounded vulnerability that combined caste-based oppression, patriarchal subjugation, and systemic sexual violence. As Thinker mentioned in his works, recruiters often targeted Dalits and other marginalized castes due to their economic vulnerabilities and social invisibility. These people were deprived of land and education, and many Dalits were lured into the indentured system with false promises of wealth and opportunity. Likely, Ashutosh Kumar's *Coolies of the Empire* discusses how caste-based oppression shaped labourers experiences overseas, Dalits were frequently

relegated to the most menial tasks on plantations and were socially ostracized by higher-caste Indians, even in diaspora sceneries.

Dalit women were doubly marginalized as both low-caste individuals and women as well. They were assigned the most physically demanding tasks in the fields and were subjected to systemic sexual exploitation by overseers, plantation owners, and even male labourers from higher castes. Dalit women were often the primary targets of sexual violence due to their caste status, which rendered them “untouchable” in Indian society but exploitable in plantation contexts. Survivors faced stigma within the indentured community, further isolating them. Dalit labourers were typically assigned the harshest and lowest-paying jobs, reflecting their marginalized status in the caste system. This exploitation mirrored the oppression they faced in India, where they were restricted to degrading occupations. For example, Madhavi Kale’s *Fragments of Empire* examines the replication of caste hierarchies in the indentured labour system. Dalits are restricted from communal activities and religious practices which are organized and controlled by higher-caste groups, even in foreign countries such as Mauritius and the other where Indians migrated.

Maintenance of Caste Hierarchies in Diaspora; The migration of Indian Indentured labourers to the diaspora settings did not erase caste identities; rather, these hierarchies were often reconstructed and perpetuated in new environments. Despite being removed from the Indian social fabric, caste structures continued to shape interpersonal relationships, social organization, and economic opportunities in plantation societies. The reproduction was influenced by the cultural baggage carried by migrants, systemic factors in labor settings, and the dynamics of marginalization within the Indian diaspora.

Indian laborers carried caste-based identities with them, even in the ostensibly egalitarian environments of plantation societies. Ritual practices, marriage preferences, and dietary habits reflected these hierarchies. Likely, Marina Carter explored the caste identities of Indian Indentured labourers, who followed caste system rules even in migrated countries for example; high-caste labourers continued to avoid physical contact or sharing meals with Dalits, reinforcing notions of purity and pollution in diaspora contexts. Plantation work reproduced the economic stratification of caste. Dalits, who were assigned menial and degrading jobs in India, were similarly tasked with the hardest and least desirable work in diaspora plantations, such as cleaning, ditch-digging, and handling waste. As per the oral antiquity, “the authorities mostly demanded adults and strong full-bodied people eligible for plantation, during 1840, a large number of laborers who were known as ‘Hill Coolies’ natives from the plains of the Ganges, and after that many other laborers signed the contracts including high castes Brahmins, agriculturists, Muslims, low castes Indians (untouchables) and Christians.” (Indian Indentured Labourers, The National Archives).

Madhavi Kale’s *Fragments of Empire* analysis how colonial governance utilized caste as a tool of control, colonial administrators often exploited caste discrimination to manage labour and prevent collective resistance. For example, in Guyana, sirdars were often designated from higher castes, creating resentment and deepening divisions among labourers. Clem Seecharan’s *Sweetening Bitter Sugar* provides in his book about how caste identities evolved under the pressure of plantation life, in the Caribbean, collective labour strikes sometimes united workers across caste lines, highlighting the potential for solidarity. Dalits played a significant role in shaping diaspora communities' cultural and social identities. However, systemic exclusion contributed to developing cultural practices that transcended caste boundaries, such as festivals, music, and cuisine.

Dalit women's struggles in the Indentured Labor Period

Dalit women, as members of the lowest caste and as women, experienced the harshest forms of systemic oppression during the indentured labor era. Their struggles were marked by intersectional exploitation rooted in caste, gender, and class hierarchies. Specific incidents and case studies provide a vivid portrayal of their experiences, highlighting their suffering and resilience in plantation societies. Brij V. Lal’s *Chalo Jahaji* recounts instances of Dalit women being coerced into sexual relationships by plantation owners, who abused their authority with impunity and examines how Dalit women in Fiji were disproportionately subjected to sexual violence by colonial overseers and plantation managers. Historical records reveal that women who became pregnant from such assaults often faced abandonment by their families and ostracization within their communities.

Labour exploitation often faced by Dalit women, they were assigned the most grueling tasks in the fields, such as cutting cane under extreme heat and hauling heavy loads, there is the incident in the book of Tinker, where records from Guyana detail how Dalit women were beaten for not meeting daily quotas, a punishment rarely inflicted on higher-caste women. Reinforcement of caste norms for instance, in Dalits in diaspora communities, caste norms dictated that Dalit women perform tasks considered “polluting” such as cleaning latrines or disposing of waste, replicating their marginalized in India. Dalit women victims of sexual violence often faced stigmatization within their communities. Likely, Gaiutra Bahadur’s *Coolie Woman* describes the story of a Dalit woman in Trinidad who was publicly shamed after being assaulted by a plantation manager. She was accused of “inviting trouble” because of her social status and economic vulnerability.

Dalit women who bore children resulting from sexual violence often faced abandonment, both by their abusers and by their families. Records from South Africa reveal a Dalit woman's plea for assistance after being abandoned by her plantation manager lover, as documented in Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed's, *Inside Indian Indenture: A South Africa Story, 1860-1914*. Sometimes, Dalit women organized informal networks of solidarity to protect one another from abuse. As noted in Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie's, *From Cane Fields to Freedom*, in this book mentioned that in 1913, women in Natal, South Africa, including Dalit labourers, joined a mass strike to protest unfair wages and abuse. The struggles of Dalit women during the indentured labour period were emblematic of the intersectional oppression they faced as marginalized individuals in terms of caste gender and class.

The Contribution of Contemporary Dalit Women's Autobiographies

Contemporary Dalit women's autobiographies offer profound insights into their lived experiences, showcasing the intersection of caste, gender, and systemic oppression. These narratives not only highlight the historical legacies of caste-based discrimination but also explore modern struggles, including socio-political marginalization, sexual violence, and resistance. These writers belong to the lower class and share their livelihood experience through their work and present the harsh reality of Indian society where Dalits still refer as 'unattainable' and treated as 'inhumanly' likely only Dalits can do menial jobs such as sweeping, cleaning and Scavengers.

In Dalit women writers Bama Faustina one of the former writers, represents to Dalit Christian community, her works are also dedicated to the Dalit community, she wrote *Karukku* in 1992 is a seminal Dalit autobiography, it chronicles her journey from a marginalized Dalit Christian village to becoming a teacher and writer. Bama reflects on the pervasive caste discrimination within both secular and religious institutions. Her works are ground-breaking in its unapologetic portrayal of the lived experiences of Dalit women, emphasizing resilience and agency. Its nonlinear narrative and deeply personal voice make it a powerful critique of systemic oppression. Inspired by the Ambedkarite movement, there is a work written by Urmila Pawar, *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*, it is an autobiography, 'Aaidan' originally written in Marathi language and it was translated into English in 2008, she recounts her journey from a small Dalit village in Maharashtra to becoming a writer and feminist activist. It provides a unique lens into the everyday struggles of Dalit women. This book narrates an important feminist text highlighting Dalit women's contribution to the Ambedkarite movement and critiques the casteist attitudes toward Indian feminism.

The work of Baby Kamble, *The Prisons We Broke*, was originally written in the Marathi language (1986) and it is translated into English by Maya Pandit, in 2018, it is a powerful account of life in the Dalit Mahar community. Kamble offers a detailed critique of caste and its impact on the daily lives of Dalit women. It focuses on the internal contradictions within Dalit society and its role in reinforcing patriarchy. Her voice is a call for internal reform as well as external resistance. In *Coming Out as Dalit* 2019, Yashica Dutt breaks the silence about her Dalit identity and reflects on her journey of passing as an 'upper caste' in elite educational and professional spaces. Dutt's narrative resonates with urban Dalit youth navigating caste in modern, ostensibly meritocratic spaces. It offers a contemporary lens on the persistence of caste in India's socio-economic structures, recently this book (*Coming Out as Dalit*) has been globally published and it provides the psychological toll of hiding one's caste identity. Primarily a novel, P. Sivakami's, *The Grip of Change* (1989) is partly autobiographical and explores the intersection of caste, gender, and power through the lens of a Dalit woman protagonist. Sivakami, who later became a politician, critiques both caste and patriarchy, making her work a critical feminist intervention in Dalit literature.

This research examines Dalit women's Narratives of both historical and contemporary which offer a window into the lived realities of Dalit women, exposing the enduring impact of caste and gender-based oppression. At the same time, they illuminated how socio-political contexts have shifted, altering both the forms of oppression and the modes of resistance available to Dalit women. As a historical context, in the indentured labour system, Dalit women were subjected to physical, sexual, and psychological violence, both by colonial overseers and within their communities. Likely, *Coolie Woman* documents how caste and gender hierarchies were exported to diaspora settings, leading to the exploitation of Dalit women as labourers and sexual objects. Marina Carter's *Servants, sirdars, and Settlers* highlights incidents where Dalit women were excluded from communal spaces and rituals, perpetuating caste-based hierarchies. On the other, contemporary context narrators, like Bama and Baby Kamble's works reveal that Dalit women continue to face structural violence, whether through workplace harassment or domestic abuse, and Yashica Dutt discusses how urban, educated Dalit women face covert forms of exclusion, such as being overlooked for promotions or enduring microaggressions in professional spaces. Despite temporal and geographic shifts, the intersection of caste and gender remains a persistent axis of exploitation.

This contemporary Dalit women's literature is a powerful medium through which the community articulates agency and resilience in the face of entrenched caste and gender oppression, these narratives move

beyond portraying Dalit women as mere victims of systemic injustice, emphasizing their strength, resistance, and transformative potential. For instance, Bama, resilience through education, and her journey of self-discovery empowered Dalit women, despite facing discrimination as a Dalit Christian, Bama transformed her struggles into a critique of institutionalized casteism within religious and secular spaces. This writer's critique of patriarchal norms within Dalit feminist movements underscores her call for equitable change. These types of texts redefine resilience as a collective endeavor, showcasing how solidarity can amplify individual and communal agency. The journey of Dutt illustrates the evolving forms of resilience among Dalit women, particularly in breaking barriers in modern, ostensibly progressive spaces. Present-day Dalit women's literature is a witness to their activity and resilience. Using storytelling to critique oppression, reclaim identity, and inspire change, these writers challenge caste and gender hierarchies while empowering others to do the same. These narratives are not just personal—they are political, serving as acts of defiance and transformation tools.

Durability in Dalit Women's Exploitation

The systemic exploitation of Dalit women during the indentured labour era and in modern contexts reveals enduring patterns of caste-and gender-based oppression. Despite changes in socio-political and legal frameworks, the fundamental structures that marginalize Dalit women have persisted in various forms. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, Dalit women were recruited as indentured labourers in several colonies, and they were subjected to harsh working conditions, long hours, and brutal treatment by overseers. On the other side, in modern times, Dalit women are disproportionately represented in informal labour sectors, such as domestic work, sanitation, and garment manufacturing.

The colonial legal system was primarily designed to protect the interests of plantation owners, leaving labourers, especially women, vulnerable and without protection, nowadays while there are legal protections for Dalit women in contemporary India, the enforcement of these laws is often weak. Dalit women face numerous barriers to accessing justice, including caste bias among police, legal professionals, and within the judiciary itself. “The case study of Hathras case (2020) in Uttar Pradesh, where a Dalit woman was brutally raped and murdered, highlighted the systemic failures in protecting Dalit women and delivering justice, drawing national and international attention to the ongoing plight of Dalit women in India”. (Hostage in Hathras: 4 years later, Dalit victim's family still awaits relocation and justice, Suresh Nidhi).

Dalit women were largely denied access to education, reinforcing their subordinate status and limiting their opportunities for socio-economic mobility, in contemporary times, education has become a critical tool for Dalit women to challenge oppression and improve their socio-economic status. For example, Bama narrates in her works, how education empowered her to break free from caste restrictions and raise voice against violence for the rights of Dalit women.

Conceptual Structure

The articulation of trauma in Dalit women's narratives has evolved significantly over time. Historical accounts emphasize collective suffering and externalized oppression, often lacking the voices of the women themselves. In contrast, contemporary narratives bring individual experiences to the forefront, offering a deeper understanding of the psychological, social, and political dimensions of trauma. Dalit women's narratives can be analyzed through various theoretical lenses, each offering unique insights into how caste, gender, and historical context shape their experiences. These frameworks not only help decode the manifestations of trauma but also reveal its socio-political and cultural underpinnings. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth argues that trauma resists full articulation because it involves an experience that overwhelms the individual's ability to process or narrate. As Cathy Caruth notes, “In Tasso's story, as we read it in Freud, Tancred does not escape the reality of death's impact—specifically, the wounding accident and Clorinda's death—but rather has to experience it twice” (page 7). Caruth focuses on the languages of trauma and testimony, examining literary theory and contemporary discussions about the annihilation and survival of language.

Jeffrey Alexander's concept of cultural trauma can be applied to Dalit women's experiences, as their collective suffering is tied to systemic caste and gender oppression. Alexander's social theory of trauma suggests that trauma is a collective experience rather than just a psychological one. He also discusses why contemporary societies may focus more on the past than the future. Dalit narratives articulate trauma as a collective experience tied to structural violence. Contemporary autobiographies focus on individual psychological experience while retaining the collective context, illustrating the interplay between personal and communal memory.

Postcolonial theory examines colonialism's legacy in shaping identities, power structures, and narratives. It is crucial to analyze Dalit women's trauma during the indentured labour era, as colonial policies exacerbated caste and gender oppression. Likely the concept of ‘Other’ in which Edward Said explains how Dalit women were marginalized as ‘others’ both within Indian society due to caste and in colonial settings. Contemporary writers like Urmila Pawar in *The Weave of My Life* reclaim this space, challenging colonial and caste-based narratives. The Feminist theory focuses on gender-based oppression and its intersection with caste in shaping Dalit women's experience of trauma. The concept of patriarchy and gender oppression covered by feminist critiques highlight

how patriarchal norms within Dalit communities compounded women's suffering, as seen in Baby Kamble's, *The Prisons We Broke*. Feminist theory emphasizes the importance of self-representation, allowing Dalit women to articulate their trauma and resilience.

Resilience theory examines how individuals and communities overcome adversity, emphasizing agency and adaptability. Despite systemic oppression, Dalit women developed strategies for survival and resistance, such as forming solidarity networks within labor camps. Resilience is often articulated through narratives that balance accounts of suffering with stories of empowerment. Likely, in *Coolie Woman*, Dalit women's resilience is seen in their ability to navigate and survive the harsh realities of plantation life and in modern autobiographies, such as *The Grip of Change*, emphasize resilience through education, activism, and storytelling. Analyzing trauma in Dalit women's narratives requires an integrated theoretical framework that combines trauma theory, intersectionality, postcolonialism, feminism, resilience theory, and literary criticism. Together, these frameworks illuminate the evolving articulation of trauma, from silenced and externally mediated accounts to powerful, self-authored narratives that challenge systemic oppression and celebrate resilience. This evolution underscores the transformative potential of Dalit women's literature as a tool for healing, resistance, and empowerment.

II. Conclusion

The comparative analysis has underscored the persistent nature of caste and gender-based exploitation faced by Dalit women from the indentured labor era to the present. Despite evolving socio-political and legal contexts, the fundamental structures of oppression—rooted in caste hierarchies and patriarchal norms—continue to marginalize Dalit women. This continuity highlights the resilience of oppressive systems and the challenges in dismantling them. Despite systemic oppression, the narratives analyzed reveal a consistent theme of resilience and agency among Dalit women. From subtle acts of defiance in the indentured labor system to vocal activism in contemporary times, Dalit women have continually resisted their subjugation. Their stories of survival and resistance serve as powerful testimonies of their strength and determination to reclaim their dignity and rights. The analysis has shown how changes in social, political, and legal frameworks have influenced the experiences of Dalit women. While there have been improvements in legal protections and socio-economic opportunities, the deep-seated biases and structural barriers remain significant obstacles. The study highlights the need for more robust implementation of policies and laws to genuinely improve the lives of Dalit women. Contemporary literature and autobiographies have been instrumental in bringing Dalit women's voices to the forefront. These narratives not only document their experiences but also challenge dominant discourses that have historically marginalized their perspectives. The study emphasizes the importance of these literary works in fostering awareness and sparking discussions on caste and gender issues. While historical narratives often focused on survival and endurance, contemporary works highlight a broader range of emotions and a stronger emphasis on reclaiming agency. This evolution in narrative style reflects the changing socio-cultural landscape and the growing space for Dalit women's voices in public discourse. For future research directions the study opens several avenues for future research, including, comparative studies across regions, longitudinal studies on socio-economic mobility, exploration of digital spaces, and intersection with other marginalized groups.

References:

- [1]. Alexander, Jeffrey C., et.al. Cultural Trauma-, <https://ccs.yale.edu>.
- [2]. Bahadur, Gaiutra, *Coolie woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*, Hachette Book Publishing India Pvt.Ltd.
- [3]. Carter Marina, *Servants, Sirdars, and Settlers: Indians in Mauritius, 1834-1874*, OUP India, 1995.
- [4]. Caruth, Cathy, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma Narrative, and History*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- [5]. Desai Ashwin and Vahed Goolam, *Inside Indian Indenture: A South Africa Story, 1860-1914*, HSRC Press, 2010
- [6]. Dhupelia-Mesthrie, Uma, *From Cane Fields to Freedom: A Chronicle of Indian South African Life*. Kwela Books, 2000.
- [7]. Dutt, Yashica, *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir*, Aleph Book Company, 2019.
- [8]. Faustina Soosairaj, Bama, Karukku, Oxford University Press, 1992.
- [9]. Gounder Farzana, Hiralal, Kalpana, Pande, Amba, S. Hassankhan, *Maurits, Women, Gender and the Legacy of Slavery and Indenture*, Routledge, 2021.
- [10]. *Indentured Labour from South Asia (1834-1917), striking women*, <https://www.striking-women.org>
- [11]. Kale, Madhavi, *Fragments of Empire: Capital, Slavery, and Indian Indentured Labor in the British Caribbean (Critical Histories)*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998.
- [12]. Kamble, Baby, *The Prisons We Broke*, The Orient Blackswan, 2018.
- [13]. Kumar, Ashutosh, *Coolies of the Empire: Indentured Indians in the Sugar Colonies, 1830-1920*, Cambridge University Press, (2017)
- [14]. Mahase, Radica, *Why Should We Be Called 'Coolie'? The End of Indian Indentured Labour*, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2020.
- [15]. Mahoney Michael, *A 'new system of slavery'? The British West Indies and the origins of Indian Indenture*, The National Archives, <https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk>, 2020.
- [16]. Mishra Vijay, *The Literature of the Indian Diaspora: Theorizing the Diasporic Imaginary*, Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures, (2007)
- [17]. Mukherjee, Bhaswati, *The Indentured and Their Route: A Relentless Quest for Identity*, Rupa publication India, 2023.
- [18]. Northrup, David, *Indentured Labor In the Age of Imperialism, 1834-1922*, Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- [19]. Pande Amba, *Indentured and Post-Indentured Experiences of Women in the Indian Diaspora*, Springer Singapore, 2020.

- [20]. Pande, Amba, *Women in the Indian Diaspora: Historical Narratives and Contemporary Challenges*, Springer Verlag, Singapore; 1st ed, 2018.
- [21]. Pawar, Urmila, *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*, Bhatkal&Sen 2008.
- [22]. Raman, K. Ravi, *Global Capital, and Peripheral Labour: The History and Political Economy of Plantation Workers in India*, Routledge Contemporary South Asia, 2010.
- [23]. Saunders, Kay, *Indentured Labour in the British Empire, 1834–1920*, Routledge library editions The British Empire, 2018.
- [24]. Seecharan, Clem *Sweetening Bitter Sugar: Jock Campbell, the Booker Reformer in British Guiana, 1934–1966*, Ian Randle Publishers, Jamaica 2004.
- [25]. Sivakami, P., *The Grip of Change*, Orient Longman, 1989
- [26]. Suresh, Nidhi, *Hostage in Hathras: 4 years later, Dalit victim's family still awaits relocation and justice*, <https://www.newslaundry.com>, 2024.
- [27]. The National Archives, *Indian Indentured Labourers*, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk>.
- [28]. Thinker, Hugh *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830-1920*, London; New York: published for the Institute of Race Relations by Oxford University Press, 1974.
- [29]. V. Lal, Brij, *Chalo Jahaji: On a Journey through Indenture in Fiji*, ANU Press; 2nd ed, 2012.
- [30]. What is meant by "Othering" according to Edward Said? <https://homework.Study.com>.