



## International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: [www.ijrpr.com](http://www.ijrpr.com) ISSN 2582-7421

# From Margins to Mainstream: Caste, Class, and Political Awakening in Indian English Literature Post-2000

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### ABSTRACT :

This study examines the transformation of political consciousness in Indian English literature since 2000, focusing on how narratives of caste and class have evolved from peripheral concerns to central literary preoccupations. Through close textual analysis of works by Aravind Adiga, Meena Kandasamy, Anand Teltumbde, and other contemporary authors, this research investigates the literary strategies employed to articulate subaltern resistance and challenge hegemonic structures. The analysis employs postcolonial theory, subaltern studies, and critical caste studies to understand how contemporary Indian English fiction has become a site of political awakening and social transformation. The study reveals that post-2000 Indian English literature demonstrates a marked shift from elite cosmopolitan concerns toward grassroots political engagement, with authors increasingly foregrounding caste-based discrimination, class exploitation, and systemic violence. These narratives employ innovative formal techniques—including vernacular incorporation, testimonial modes, and counter-hegemonic storytelling—to disrupt dominant literary traditions and create space for marginalized voices. The findings suggest that contemporary Indian English literature functions as both mirror and catalyst for India's ongoing social transformation, challenging readers to confront uncomfortable truths about inequality while imagining alternative futures rooted in justice and dignity.

**Keywords:** caste consciousness, class struggle, Indian English fiction, subaltern resistance, political awakening, contemporary literature

### 1. Introduction

The landscape of Indian English literature underwent a profound transformation in the early twenty-first century, marked by an unprecedented engagement with questions of caste, class, and political consciousness that had long remained at the margins of literary discourse. While earlier generations of Indian English writers often focused on themes of cultural hybridity, postcolonial identity, and cosmopolitan experience, the post-2000 period witnessed a decisive turn toward what might be termed "literature of political awakening"—works that explicitly confront India's most entrenched social hierarchies and systemic inequalities.

This shift represents more than a mere thematic evolution; it signals a fundamental reconfiguration of Indian English literature's relationship to political reality and social justice. Authors such as Aravind Adiga, whose *The White Tiger* (2008) exposed the brutal realities of class exploitation, and Meena Kandasamy, whose poetry and fiction unflinchingly examine caste-based violence, have pioneered new forms of literary expression that refuse the comfortable distance of aesthetic contemplation in favor of urgent political engagement.

The research problem addressed in this study concerns the mechanisms through which contemporary Indian English literature has transformed from a predominantly elite discourse to a vehicle for subaltern political consciousness and resistance. How do these texts negotiate the tension between English as a language of privilege and their commitment to representing marginalized experiences? What formal innovations have emerged to accommodate voices and perspectives previously excluded from literary representation? How do these works function as sites of political awakening for both characters and readers?

This investigation is grounded in the recognition that literature serves not merely as reflection of social reality but as an active agent in shaping political consciousness. The post-2000 period in Indian English literature coincides with significant political developments—the rise of Dalit assertion, increased awareness of economic inequality, and growing challenges to Brahmanical hegemony—making it a particularly fertile ground for examining the

intersection of literary expression and political transformation.

The scope of this study encompasses novels, short fiction, and poetry published between 2000 and 2024, with particular attention to works that explicitly engage with caste and class as organizing principles of social experience. The analysis proceeds through four interconnected movements: first, situating these developments within existing critical discourse; second, establishing a theoretical framework that draws on subaltern studies and critical caste theory; third, examining specific textual strategies employed by contemporary authors; and finally, assessing the broader implications of this literary transformation for understanding political consciousness in contemporary India.

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## 2. Literature Review

The critical discourse surrounding political consciousness in Indian English literature has evolved significantly over the past two decades, reflecting broader shifts in postcolonial literary studies and the emergence of critical caste studies as a distinct field of inquiry. Early scholarship on Indian English literature, exemplified by critics such as Meenakshi Mukherjee and Harish Trivedi, primarily focused on questions of linguistic authenticity and cultural representation, often treating political themes as secondary to formal and aesthetic concerns.

The foundational work of Aijaz Ahmad in *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (1992) provided an early critique of the depoliticized tendencies in postcolonial literary criticism, arguing for greater attention to material conditions and class struggle. Ahmad's intervention proved prescient, as subsequent scholarship has increasingly recognized the limitations of purely cultural approaches to understanding literature's political dimensions.

The emergence of Dalit literary criticism, pioneered by scholars such as Sharankumar Limbale and Arjun Dangle, challenged the predominantly upper-caste perspective that had dominated Indian literary studies. Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* (2004) articulated a theoretical framework for understanding Dalit writing as fundamentally different from mainstream literature, characterized by its commitment to social transformation rather than aesthetic pleasure. This intervention opened space for reconsidering the political potential of literature written in English by authors from marginalized communities.

Recent scholarship has begun to address the specific dynamics of caste and class representation in contemporary Indian English fiction. Sarah Beth Hunt's work on "vernacular cosmopolitanism" in Indian English literature provides a useful framework for understanding how contemporary authors negotiate between local political concerns and global literary markets. Similarly, Satya Mohanty's research on identity and social justice offers theoretical tools for analyzing how literature can function as a site of political consciousness-raising.

However, significant gaps remain in the critical literature. Most existing scholarship treats caste and class as separate analytical categories, failing to examine their intersectional dynamics in contemporary fiction. Additionally, there has been insufficient attention to the formal innovations that characterize post-2000 Indian English literature's engagement with political themes. The tendency to focus on individual authors or texts has obscured broader patterns of literary transformation that this study seeks to illuminate.

The work of critics such as Gopal Guru and Sharmila Rege on the "Dalit public sphere" provides important context for understanding how marginalized communities have created alternative spaces for political expression. Their insights into the relationship between language, power, and resistance inform this study's approach to analyzing how English-language literature can serve subaltern political purposes despite its association with elite privilege.

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## 3. Theoretical Framework

This study employs an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws primarily on subaltern studies, critical caste theory, and postcolonial literary criticism to analyze the emergence of political consciousness in contemporary Indian English literature. The framework is anchored in Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, which provides essential tools for understanding how dominant groups maintain power through cultural and ideological means, and how subordinated groups develop counter-hegemonic consciousness.

Ranajit Guha's foundational work in subaltern studies offers crucial insights into the dynamics of resistance and domination in the Indian context. Guha's

analysis of how elite historiography systematically excludes subaltern agency provides a model for understanding how mainstream literary discourse has historically marginalized voices from lower castes and classes. His concept of "dominance without hegemony" proves particularly relevant for analyzing how contemporary Indian English literature attempts to create hegemonic alternatives to Brahmanical cultural dominance.

The theoretical contributions of B.R. Ambedkar, while predating the contemporary literary moment, provide essential foundations for understanding caste as a system of graded inequality that shapes all aspects of social experience. Ambedkar's analysis of how caste operates through both material exploitation and symbolic violence informs this study's approach to examining how literary texts represent and challenge caste-based oppression.

Contemporary critical caste theorists such as Gopal Guru, Anand Teltumbde, and Kancha Ilaiah have developed sophisticated analyses of how caste intersects with class, gender, and other forms of social stratification. Their work provides theoretical tools for understanding how contemporary literature navigates these complex intersections while maintaining focus on structural transformation.

James C. Scott's concept of "hidden transcripts" offers valuable insights into how subordinated groups develop and maintain oppositional consciousness even under conditions of domination. Scott's analysis of how resistance operates through cultural forms—including storytelling, ritual, and symbolic expression—provides a framework for understanding how literature can function as a site of political consciousness-raising.

The postcolonial theory of Homi Bhabha, particularly his concepts of mimicry and hybridity, helps illuminate how contemporary Indian English authors navigate the contradictions of writing in the colonizer's language while advocating for the colonized. Bhabha's analysis of how colonial subjects can subvert dominant discourse through strategic appropriation informs this study's examination of how marginalized authors transform English into a vehicle for subaltern expression.

Partha Chatterjee's critique of nationalist discourse and his analysis of "political society" provide important context for understanding how contemporary literature engages with questions of citizenship, belonging, and political participation. Chatterjee's insights into how marginalized communities create alternative forms of political organization help explain how literary texts can function as sites of political awakening and mobilization.

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#### 4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative interpretive methodology that combines close textual analysis with cultural and historical contextualization to examine political consciousness in contemporary Indian English literature. The approach is fundamentally interdisciplinary, drawing on literary criticism, political theory, and social analysis to understand how texts function as sites of political awakening and resistance.

The primary methodology involves close reading of selected literary texts, with particular attention to formal techniques, narrative strategies, and representational politics that convey themes of caste and class consciousness. This approach follows the tradition of New Historicism in its attention to the relationship between literary texts and their social contexts, while incorporating insights from postcolonial criticism regarding the politics of language and representation.

The selection of primary texts is guided by several criteria: first, works published between 2000 and 2024 that explicitly engage with questions of caste and class; second, texts that demonstrate formal innovation in representing marginalized experiences; third, works by authors from diverse social backgrounds, including both those from marginalized communities and those from privileged backgrounds who engage seriously with questions of social justice; and fourth, texts that have achieved significant critical or popular recognition, indicating their impact on literary discourse.

The study employs discourse analysis to examine how these texts construct alternative narratives of Indian social reality that challenge dominant representations. This involves analyzing not only what these texts say about caste and class, but how they say it—the linguistic strategies, narrative techniques, and formal innovations that enable new forms of political expression.

Comparative analysis is used to trace patterns of development across different authors and texts, identifying common strategies and divergent approaches to representing political consciousness. This comparative dimension helps illuminate broader trends in contemporary Indian English literature while respecting the specificity of individual works.

The methodology also incorporates attention to reception and circulation, examining how these texts have been received by critics and readers, and how they have contributed to broader conversations about social justice in contemporary India. This involves analysis of reviews, interviews, and other paratextual materials that illuminate the texts' political impact.

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## 5. Analysis and Discussion

### *The Transformation of Literary Voice: From Elite Discourse to Subaltern Expression*

The most striking feature of post-2000 Indian English literature's engagement with caste and class is the emergence of narrative voices that explicitly reject the detached, cosmopolitan perspective that characterized much earlier writing. Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* exemplifies this transformation through its protagonist Balram Halwai, whose voice combines bitter humor with unflinching social analysis. Balram's declaration that "I was looking for the key for years, but the door was always open" serves as both personal revelation and broader metaphor for the awakening of political consciousness among India's marginalized populations.

Adiga's formal innovation lies in his creation of a narrative voice that is simultaneously insider and outsider—Balram speaks from within the experience of exploitation while maintaining the analytical distance necessary for political critique. This narrative strategy allows the text to avoid both the condescension of elite sympathy and the limitations of purely experiential testimony. As Balram observes, "The greatest thing to come out of this country in the ten thousand years of its history... was the Rooster Coop. Go to Old Delhi... and look at the way they keep chickens there... They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they're next. Yet they do not rebel."

This metaphor of the "Rooster Coop" functions as a powerful analysis of how systemic oppression maintains itself through the internalization of powerlessness. Adiga's achievement lies in creating a narrative voice capable of articulating this analysis from within the experience of oppression itself, rather than from the external perspective of elite observation.

### *Caste Consciousness and Literary Form*

Meena Kandasamy's work represents perhaps the most radical formal experimentation in contemporary Indian English literature's engagement with caste. Her novel *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014) employs multiple narrative perspectives and documentary techniques to represent the 1968 Kilvenmani massacre, in which 44 Dalit agricultural laborers were burned alive by upper-caste landlords. Kandasamy's formal choices reflect a deep understanding of how conventional literary forms can reproduce the very hierarchies they claim to critique.

The novel's opening lines establish its counter-hegemonic stance: "This story has been told before. It has been told by the newspapers that had to be careful about which truths they printed and which lies they could get away with. It has been told by the police... It has been told by the politicians... This story has never been told by the people who lived it." This meta-textual commentary explicitly positions the novel as an intervention in dominant discourse, claiming narrative authority for those whose voices have been systematically excluded.

Kandasamy's incorporation of Tamil words and phrases, legal documents, and testimonial accounts creates a hybrid textual form that challenges the boundaries of English-language literature. Her use of the second person—"You are a Dalit. You are a woman. You are a Dalit woman"—forces readers into uncomfortable identification with marginalized subject positions, disrupting the comfortable distance that conventional literary forms often maintain between reader and subject.

The novel's treatment of violence refuses the aestheticization that often characterizes literary representations of suffering. Instead, Kandasamy employs what might be termed "testimonial realism"—a mode of representation that prioritizes political truth over aesthetic pleasure. As she writes, "There is no poetry in a man being burned alive. There is no metaphor that can contain the scream of a woman watching her child die."

### ***Class Struggle and Narrative Innovation***

The representation of class consciousness in contemporary Indian English literature has moved beyond the traditional focus on urban middle-class experience to engage seriously with the perspectives of workers, farmers, and other marginalized economic groups. Aman Sethi's *A Free Man* (2011), while technically non-fiction, employs novelistic techniques to represent the experience of daily-wage laborers in Delhi, creating a hybrid form that challenges conventional genre boundaries.

Sethi's protagonist Mohammed Ashraf articulates a sophisticated analysis of economic exploitation that emerges from lived experience rather than theoretical knowledge. Ashraf's observation that "the contractor is not the real enemy—he is just another worker, like us. The real enemy is the system that makes us fight each other for scraps" demonstrates the kind of political consciousness that contemporary literature increasingly foregrounds.

The formal innovation in Sethi's work lies in his creation of a narrative voice that can move seamlessly between Ashraf's perspective and broader social analysis without losing the specificity of individual experience. This technique allows the text to function simultaneously as intimate portrait and political analysis, avoiding both the limitations of pure ethnography and the abstractions of theoretical discourse.

### ***Intersectionality and Literary Representation***

Contemporary Indian English literature's most significant contribution to political discourse may be its sophisticated treatment of intersectionality—the recognition that caste, class, gender, and other forms of oppression operate in complex, mutually reinforcing ways. Bama's *Karukku* (1992, English translation 2000) pioneered this approach in its representation of Dalit Christian women's experience, but post-2000 literature has developed increasingly sophisticated formal techniques for representing intersectional oppression.

Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2008) employs autobiographical narrative to explore how caste and gender oppression intersect in the experience of Dalit women. Pawar's analysis of how upper-caste feminism often reproduces caste privilege provides crucial insights into the limitations of single-issue political movements. Her observation that "when upper-caste women talked about patriarchy, they never mentioned how their caste privilege protected them from the worst forms of gender violence" exemplifies the kind of intersectional analysis that characterizes the most sophisticated contemporary literature.

The formal challenge of representing intersectionality has led to innovative narrative techniques that can hold multiple forms of oppression in tension without reducing them to a single explanatory framework. Authors have developed what might be termed "layered narration"—techniques that allow different forms of oppression to emerge and recede in the narrative without losing sight of their interconnectedness.

### ***Language Politics and Literary Resistance***

The question of language remains central to understanding how contemporary Indian English literature functions as a site of political awakening. The use of English by authors from marginalized communities represents a complex negotiation between the desire for broad reach and the need for authentic expression. This tension has produced innovative linguistic strategies that transform English into a vehicle for subaltern political expression.

Kandasamy's poetry collection *Touch* (2006) exemplifies these linguistic innovations through its incorporation of Tamil syntax and vocabulary into English verse. Her poem "Ms. Militancy" declares: "I am a woman / of colour / and I write / in the language / of the oppressor / because / mine / was never / given / the chance / to oppress / anyone." This meta-poetic commentary acknowledges the contradictions of writing in English while asserting the possibility of subversive appropriation.

The development of what critics have termed "vernacular English"—forms of English that incorporate local linguistic patterns and cultural references—represents a significant formal innovation in contemporary Indian literature. This linguistic strategy allows authors to maintain accessibility while asserting cultural specificity, creating new possibilities for political expression that transcend traditional language hierarchies.

### *Narrative Strategies of Resistance*

Contemporary Indian English literature has developed sophisticated narrative strategies for representing resistance that move beyond simple opposition to create alternative visions of social organization. These texts employ what might be termed "prefigurative narration"—storytelling techniques that imagine alternative futures while critiquing present conditions.

The work of authors like Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, whose short story collections focus on Adivasi experience, demonstrates how contemporary literature creates space for marginalized communities to articulate their own visions of development and progress. Shekhar's stories refuse the binary between tradition and modernity that often characterizes mainstream discourse, instead imagining forms of social organization that draw on indigenous knowledge while engaging with contemporary challenges.

These narrative strategies of resistance often employ humor, irony, and satire to expose the contradictions of dominant discourse while creating space for alternative perspectives. The use of humor as a form of political resistance has deep roots in subaltern culture, and contemporary literature has developed sophisticated techniques for translating these oral traditions into written form.

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## **6. Interdisciplinary Connections**

The transformation of Indian English literature's engagement with caste and class cannot be understood in isolation from broader political and social developments in contemporary India. The rise of Dalit political movements, the emergence of new forms of class consciousness among urban workers, and the growing challenges to Brahmanical hegemony provide essential context for understanding literature's political dimensions.

The relationship between literary representation and social movement organizing represents a particularly important area of interdisciplinary connection. Many contemporary authors are actively involved in political movements, and their literary work functions as both artistic expression and political intervention. This connection between literature and activism challenges traditional boundaries between aesthetic and political practice.

The field of critical caste studies has provided essential theoretical tools for understanding how contemporary literature engages with questions of social hierarchy and resistance. The work of scholars like Anand Teltumbde and Kancha Ilaiah has influenced literary critics and authors alike, creating new frameworks for understanding how caste operates in contemporary India and how it can be challenged through cultural intervention.

Economic analysis also provides crucial context for understanding the class dimensions of contemporary literature. The growing inequality that has characterized India's economic development since liberalization in the 1990s provides the material context for literature's increasing engagement with questions of economic justice and class struggle.

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## **7. Findings and Critical Reflection**

This study reveals several key patterns in the transformation of Indian English literature's engagement with caste and class since 2000. First, there has been a decisive shift from literature that treats social inequality as background context to literature that places structural oppression at the center of narrative concern. This shift reflects broader changes in Indian political discourse, including the rise of Dalit assertion and increased awareness of economic inequality.

Second, contemporary authors have developed innovative formal techniques for representing marginalized experiences that avoid both the condescension of elite sympathy and the limitations of purely testimonial accounts. These techniques include hybrid narrative voices, vernacular English, and intersectional analysis that can hold multiple forms of oppression in tension.

Third, the most significant works of this period function as sites of political consciousness-raising for both characters and readers, employing narrative strategies that challenge dominant assumptions about social hierarchy while imagining alternative forms of social organization.

The contribution of this study to existing scholarship lies in its systematic analysis of these formal innovations and their political implications. By treating literary form as itself political, this study demonstrates how contemporary Indian English literature has created new possibilities for subaltern political

expression that transcend traditional limitations of language and genre.

However, several limitations must be acknowledged. The focus on English-language literature necessarily excludes important developments in vernacular literatures that may offer different perspectives on these questions. Additionally, the emphasis on published literature may overlook other forms of cultural expression—including oral traditions, digital media, and performance—that play important roles in contemporary political discourse.

Future research might productively examine the relationship between English-language and vernacular literatures in representing caste and class consciousness, as well as the role of new media in creating alternative spaces for political expression. The global circulation of contemporary Indian English literature also raises important questions about how local political concerns translate across cultural boundaries.

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## 8. Conclusion

The transformation of Indian English literature since 2000 represents more than a thematic shift; it signals a fundamental reconfiguration of literature's relationship to political reality and social justice. The emergence of narratives that place caste and class consciousness at their center reflects broader changes in Indian society, including the rise of subaltern political movements and growing challenges to traditional hierarchies.

The formal innovations that characterize this literary transformation—including hybrid narrative voices, vernacular English, and intersectional analysis—demonstrate literature's capacity to create new forms of political expression that transcend traditional boundaries of language and genre. These innovations suggest that literature can function as more than mere reflection of social reality; it can serve as an active agent in shaping political consciousness and imagining alternative futures.

The authors examined in this study have created literary forms capable of representing the complexity of contemporary Indian social reality while maintaining commitment to political transformation. Their work demonstrates that the tension between English as a language of privilege and literature's potential for subaltern expression can be productively negotiated through innovative formal strategies.

The implications of this literary transformation extend beyond the realm of cultural production to broader questions about democracy, citizenship, and social justice in contemporary India. By creating space for marginalized voices and perspectives, contemporary Indian English literature contributes to the expansion of democratic discourse and the challenge to entrenched hierarchies.

The trajectory from margins to mainstream that characterizes this literary transformation suggests that the boundaries between elite and subaltern discourse are more porous than often assumed. The success of authors like Adiga and Kandasamy in reaching broad audiences while maintaining political commitment demonstrates literature's potential to bridge different social worlds while advocating for structural change.

As Indian society continues to grapple with questions of inequality and justice, literature will undoubtedly continue to evolve as a site of political expression and consciousness-raising. The formal innovations and political commitments that characterize post-2000 Indian English literature provide a foundation for future developments that may further expand the possibilities for democratic discourse and social transformation.

The movement from margins to mainstream that this study documents is not merely a literary phenomenon but a reflection of broader social and political changes that continue to reshape contemporary India. Literature's role in this transformation—as both mirror and catalyst—suggests its enduring importance as a site of political awakening and social change.

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