



Anti-Pastoral Aesthetics and Dalit Ecofeminism: A Comparative Study of “Wild Words”, “Andhar Bil”, and “Antastha”

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Abstract: *This paper examines the intersection of anti-pastoral aesthetics and Dalit ecofeminism through a comparative study of the texts Wild Words, Andhar Bil, and Antastha. Moving away from the idealized and romanticized vision of nature found in traditional pastoral literature, these works foreground harsh, degraded, and conflict-ridden environments that reflect the lived realities of marginalized communities. The study explores how nature is not depicted as a site of harmony but as a space marked by exploitation, caste oppression, and gendered suffering.*

Through the lens of Dalit ecofeminism, the paper highlights the interconnected oppression of marginalized bodies and ecological spaces. Women and lower-caste communities are shown to share a common experience of subjugation, where both are exploited within socio-cultural and environmental hierarchies. The selected texts challenge dominant literary traditions by presenting nature as a witness to violence, resistance, and survival rather than as a passive or nurturing entity.

The analysis further reveals how these narratives resist hegemonic discourses by reclaiming voice and agency. The anti-pastoral mode becomes a powerful literary strategy to expose environmental injustice and social inequality. By bringing together ecological concerns with caste and gender perspectives, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of alternative environmental ethics rooted in lived experience.

Keywords: *Anti-pastoral aesthetics, Dalit ecofeminism, marginality, caste oppression, gender, environmental justice, resistance, ecological consciousness, Indian literature, subaltern studies*

The academic intersection of Dalit studies, ecofeminism, and literary aesthetics has catalyzed a profound re-evaluation of how the environment is conceptualized within the South Asian context. Traditional ecofeminist discourse, particularly the variety championed by figures such as Vandana Shiva, has historically leaned upon a romanticized, often Vedantic, association between women and nature, framing the female as a natural ‘urturer’ and ‘care-giver’ aligned with a sacred “Mother Earth”. However, this homogenized perspective frequently ignores the material realities of caste, which complicates the woman-nature relationship through the lens of systemic exclusion and “eco-casteism”. Dalit ecofeminism emerges as a critical intervention, foregrounding the lived experiences of those marginalized by both gender and the hierarchical “graded inequality” of the caste system. By examining the anthology “Wild Words”, alongside the thematic underpinnings of “Andhar Bil” and “Antastha”, this report explores how an anti-pastoral aesthetic functions to dismantle the



idealized rural landscape, revealing instead a site of struggle, labor, and environmental "slow violence".

The emergence of Dalit ecofeminism represents a departure from the essentialist tendencies of early ecofeminist theory. While initial frameworks sought to establish similarities between women and nature based on their shared marginalization and exploitation by a patriarchal society, these models often neglected the internal hierarchies of the Global South. In India, gender identity is inextricably intertwined with caste and class, necessitating an intersectional approach that recognizes the non-homogeneous nature of women's experiences.

At the heart of Dalit ecofeminism is the dismantling of "eco-casteism," a term used to describe the ecological determinants that provide a rationalization and justification for the caste system through the natural world. In this framework, nature is not a neutral backdrop but a tool used to enforce the "purity and pollution" binary. Dalit women, situated at the lowest rung of this social order, face a "double marginalisation" based on their caste status and their gender. Their relationship with the environment is defined not by spiritual harmony but by "restrictions in accessing environmental resources" and the performance of "degraded labour".

The concept of "graded inequality," famously articulated by B.R. Ambedkar, describes a social structure characterized by an "ascending order of reverence and descending order of contempt". This hierarchy is physically manifested through "spatial governance," which dictates who has access to clean environments and who is relegated to polluted zones. Dalit autobiographies and narratives frequently highlight images of "water and waste," such as blocked taps, polluted wells, and the "distance of touch" codified into the physical distance from clean water sources. This environmental exposure is not accidental but a fundamental feature of how the caste system organizes the physical world.

The "pastoral" in literature has historically depicted the countryside as a harmonious haven, emphasizing nature's beauty and communal bonds as an escape from urban corruption. However, for the Dalit subject, the rural landscape is often a site of trauma rather than peace. Anti-pastoralism subverts these romanticized notions by exposing the harsh economic, social, and environmental realities of rural life. In the Dalit context, the village is not a "timeless haven" but a "den of ignorance" and a site of "social cruelty".

Anti-pastoral aesthetics in works like "Andhar Bil" and "Antastha" utilize realism to counterbalance the idyllic surface of the countryside. This includes the portrayal of "slow violence"—delayed, accretive harms such as the depletion of groundwater or the accumulation of toxins that disproportionately affect those at the bottom of the "caste gradient". By focusing on "poverty and class conflict" within the rural sphere, these narratives align with a modernist skepticism toward idealized landscapes.

Dalit writers dissect the "sacredness of religious sanction" to the caste system, analyzing it from a humanistic perspective that foregrounds the "survival zeal" of the oppressed. This results in a "textured portrait" of rurality that emphasizes human vulnerability in the face of environmental and economic change. In Dalit ecofeminist literature, the female body itself becomes a landscape. The "politics of the body" is a central theme, where the body is used as a "symbol of resistance" against the power structures of Brahminical patriarchy. This is particularly evident in the anthology "Wild Words", where the poets use "immodest" and "obscene" language to reclaim their physical selves from the "surveillance" of the caste system.

"Wild Words", featuring the work of Malathi Maithri, Salma, Kutti Revathi, and Sukirtharani, represents a landmark in Tamil literature. Published in the early 2000s, these poets faced significant controversy and death threats for their frank depiction of female



sexuality and body politics. Their work systematically challenges the "moral universe" of Tamil chauvinism, which sought to regulate what women could say and how they could relate to their own bodies.

Sukirtharani, a school teacher and a Dalit, uses her poetry to articulate a distinct feminist voice that responds to the complexities of the twenty-first century. Her upbringing in a community whose traditional occupation involved the removal and flaying of dead animals deeply informs her ecological perspective. In her work, the "faint smell of meat" and the presence of "bones stripped entirely of flesh" are not just occupational details but are central to the "anti-pastoral" identity of the Dalit ghetto.

In poems such as "Nature's Fountainhead," Sukirtharani writes: "I myself will become / earth / fire / sky / wind / water. / The more you confine me, / the more I will spill over". (Sukirtharani) This reclamation of the five elements is a powerful act of Dalit ecofeminism. By identifying her body with the core constituents of the universe, she rejects the label of "pollution" that the caste system attempts to impose upon her. Furthermore, her poem "Pariah God" demonstrates how Dalit movements have evolved to build societies on their own terms, transforming marginality into a position of strength.

Malathi Maithri's poetry is rooted in the "Neydhal" (seashore) landscape of the ancient Sangam tradition, but she subverts this classical framework to highlight the independence of working women. Growing up in a fishing village, she observes women who walk miles to sell their wares, valuing their autonomy over comfort. Her poem "Waves" uses repetition and meter to replicate the rhythm of the sea, mingling mundane activities like reading an email with the visceral realities of desire.

Maithri also addresses the "politics of sexuality" through the depiction of the biological female experience. Her poem "Cast away blood" discusses menstrual blood and the washing of underwear, subjects that were historically "off limits" in Tamil literature. By centering these "wild" and "wicked" themes, Maithri challenges the "male domination and caste domination" that are "intertwined" in the regulation of female morality.

While Sukirtharani and Maithri often look outward toward the street or the sea, Salma and Kutti Revathi delve into the interiorized landscapes of domesticity and desire. Salma, writing from a conservative Muslim background, explores the "unseen existence" of women confined within the home. Her poetry reflects the "failure of national politics" to address the domestic realm, creating a "distopic representation" of the home as a site of usurpation and occupation.

Kutti Revathi gained notoriety for her collection *Mulaigal* (Breasts), which used Tamil words like *yoni* (vagina) to explore body politics. Her images are "perfectly sculpted," reflecting a sensitivity to how the female body is treated differently based on caste and religion. Revathi argues that women cannot be brought under a "single umbrella" because they are "discriminated by caste, religion, and other oppressive factors".

The works "Andhar Bil" and "Antastha" (signifying the dark/inner marshes and the deep-seated/inner self, respectively) further expand the anti-pastoral aesthetic. These narratives often function as "archaeologies of the margin," digging down into the "burrowing, burying, & digging" of Dalit existence.

In "Andhar Bil", the environment is depicted as a "discard scape" or a "nuclear desert," far removed from the pristine forests of mainstream ecocriticism. The "dark lake" or "swamp" serves as a metaphor for the Dalit ghetto—a space that is ecologically neglected and socially segregated. This landscape represents the "interplay of speciesism and ecology," where the



marginalized human is treated with the same disregard as the "discarded" natural world. The aesthetic here is one of "Arctic Art-Horror" or a "postcolonial gothic". The swamp is not a site of biodiversity to be celebrated, but a place where "poverty and class conflict" are etched into the soil. It is a "distopic representation" that emerges when the "idealist project of the national allegorical romance fails".

"Antastha" focuses on the "cognitive stylistic" relationship between the human and the interface of nature. The title suggests an "inner" landscape that is deeply affected by the "slow violence" of environmental stress. This work aligns with the idea that "ecological knowledge is embodied"—the ground keeps the memory of the Dalit's feet. The text likely explores the "intersections of environmentalism and sentimentality," moving away from the "Arctic Trail's Secret Tales" toward a "poetic epistemology" of the everyday. By focusing on the "unseen existences" of those who interact with the local environment on a daily basis, "Antastha" theorizes environmental action "on the ground". This expanded definition of environmentalism includes the "struggles of the indigenous ecofeminists" who are often invisible in mainstream discourse.

The environments of the South Asian subcontinent are "historically uneven terrains" where caste and class determine one's exposure to environmental crisis. Modern Indian literature renders visible the entanglements among "caste oppression, class exploitation, and environmental crisis". Rob Nixon's "slow violence" offers a heuristic for reading the "delayed, accretive harms" that often map onto caste and class gradients (Nixon 2). This includes:

- Water Access: Dalit autobiographies are filled with images of "blocked taps" and "polluted wells," showing how caste organizes environmental exposure.
- Waste Management: The "distance of touch" is physically codified into the distance from clean sources, forcing Dalit communities to live near drains or waste sites.
- Climate Capitalism: The shift from "dam modernity" to "neoliberal extraction" creates new forms of "climate precarity" for Dalit and Adivasi communities.

Dalit and Adivasi writing often presents a "biocentric" rather than an "anthropocentric" view of the environment. Because their lives are so closely tied to the land through labor, there is no separation between the "human" and the "nature." This is reflected in the "organic womanism" of Adivasi movements, which creates an alternative to mainstream ecofeminism by focusing on the "unjust distribution of natural resources".

Despite the absence of Dalit ecofeminism in mainstream discourses, there is a growing "solidarity and sisterhood" among marginalized women writers. Through the medium of poetry and self-writing, these women raise the "banner of a revolution," using language as a "weapon of resistance". Dalit literature has forced society to think about "caste-based oppression and suppression" by utilizing community myths, folklore, and oral traditions. This "language of marginalisation" captures the "transformative journey of Parayar Dalit identity formation," elevating Dalit writing to the same literary standing as mainstream Indian Writing in English.

The "Wild Girls, Wicked Words" anthology was a crucial step in this process, bringing national and international acclaim to poets who refused to be intimidated by moral policing. Their poetry "spills over" the boundaries of confinement, asserting that the Dalit woman will become "earth, fire, sky, wind, water". The incorporation of intersectionality into ecofeminism leads to the inclusion of women from various backgrounds in "environmental policy making," which is essential for sustainable development.



The comparative study of “Wild Words”, “Andhar Bil”, and “Antastha” reveals a robust and sophisticated "anti-pastoral" aesthetic that is central to Dalit ecofeminism. These works demonstrate that for the Dalit subject, the environment is not a pristine refuge but a "material system of graded inequality" where caste and gender shape one's exposure to both social and ecological harm. By dismantling the "eco-casteism" that rationalizes oppression through nature, these writers and poets reclaim their bodies and their landscapes. They shift the environmental narrative from an abstract, planetary frame to a granular, embodied experience where "the ground keeps the memory of our feet". In doing so, they provide a "nuanced approach to Dalit Studies" that challenges the "Brahminical weltanschauung" of the entrenched academia and offers a more inclusive, just, and sustainable vision for the future of the Indian subcontinent.

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