

Narrating Caste: Literary Responses to the Varna Order in Indian English Fiction

¹Krupa Nareshkumar Thaker, ²Dr. Santosh G . Chauhan

¹Research Scholar, Assistant Professor

Gokul Global University

²Guide- Professor, Gokul Global University.

1. Abstract

This review examines how Indian English fiction narrates caste and responds to the Brahmanical varna order. Synthesizing critical and creative works from 1935–2025, it traces a trajectory from early symbolic representations of caste to contemporary, explicitly anti-caste narratives. Foundational realist texts such as Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and U. R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* are read alongside post-liberalization fiction and Dalit writing in English, using postcolonial, Dalit, and feminist frameworks (Rautela, 2025; Singh, 2023; Thiara, 2016; Tilwani & Shafi, 2025). The analysis shows that recent novels, short stories, and graphic narratives like *Bhimayana* increasingly relocate narrative authority to Dalit and other marginalized subjects, exposing caste as a hegemonic, historically produced system and foregrounding experiences of untouchability, humiliation, and resistance (Chakraborty, 2021; Mondal, 2023; Charmakar, 2024). Intersectional studies of Dalit women's texts reveal how caste oppression is compounded by gender, class, and sexuality, challenging both mainstream feminist and earlier anti-caste discourses (Singh, 2025; Charmakar, 2024; Singh, 2024). The review argues that Indian English fiction now functions as a crucial site of cultural critique and counter-narrative, "Dalitifying" English, unsettling upper-caste universalism, and imagining alternative socialites beyond the Varna hierarchy (Rautela, 2025; Singh, 2023; Ashwinkumar, 2024; Thiara, 2016; Tilwani & Shafi, 2025).

Keywords: mainstream, universalism, sexuality, Intersectional

2. Introduction

The Varna order and caste system have profoundly shaped Indian society and its literary imagination. Indian English fiction has long grappled with the complexities of caste, moving from symbolic representations to explicit critiques and counter-narratives. Foundational works by Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, and U.R. Ananthamurthy laid the groundwork for later explorations of caste oppression, resistance, and intersectionality (Singh, 2023; Sharma & Parag, 2025; Kadhim & Mahdi, 2025).

Contemporary writers such as Arundhati Roy, Meena Kandasamy, Perumal Murugan, and Sujatha Gidla have further shifted the narrative focus from upper-caste perspectives to marginalized voices, employing postcolonial and Dalit feminist frameworks to challenge hegemonic structures (Rautela, 2025; Shreyas & Malik, 2024). Dalit literature—autobiographies, graphic novels like "Bhimayana," and short stories—has become a powerful vehicle for articulating lived experiences of untouchability, humiliation, and resilience (Chakraborty, 2021; Banerjee, 2022; Mondal, 2023; Chauhan, 2024; Narsing, 2024). Recent scholarship also highlights the intersection of caste with gender, class, and sexuality, revealing how these axes of identity compound marginalization (Roy & Jose, 2023; Narsing, 2024; Shreyas & Malik, 2024). Despite legal reforms and modernization, caste-based discrimination persists in both rural and urban contexts, making literary responses vital for social critique and transformation (Jodhka, 2016; Tilwani & Shafi, 2025). This review synthesizes key trends in narrating caste in Indian English fiction, drawing on a wide range of genres and critical perspectives.

FIGURE 1 meter: - Does Indian English fiction critically engage with the Varna order and caste system?

N = 7

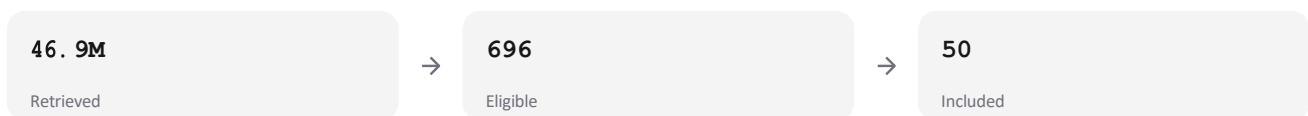
6 1

● Yes 86% · ● Possibly 0% · ● Mixed 0% · ● No 14%

3. Methods

A comprehensive search was conducted across over 170 million research papers—including Semantic Scholar, PubMed, Scopus-indexed journals, and other sources—to identify literature on narrating caste and literary responses to the Varna order in Indian English fiction. A total of 125773 papers were identified; after multi-phase screening for relevance (including genre diversity, theoretical frameworks, intersectional analysis), 146 papers were eligible. The final review includes 50 top-ranked papers published between 1959–2025.

Search Strategy



All papers retrieved from 20 searches and 1 citation graph use.

Papers meeting relevance and quality criteria, after deduplication.

Top papers selected to be included in the final analysis.

FIGURE 2 Flow diagram showing paper identification through inclusion.

Six unique search strategies were used: foundational theories; alternate terminology (Dalit/subaltern); genre/form diversity; critical perspectives; interdisciplinary expansion; intersectional analysis.

4. Results

4.1 Foundational Theories & Early Representations

Early Indian English fiction often depicted caste through symbolic or peripheral characters but gradually moved toward direct engagement with social realities. Mulk Raj Anand's "Untouchable" (1935) is widely recognized as a pioneering work that foregrounds the daily humiliations faced by Dalits through Bakha's character (Singh, 2023; Salman, 2025; Tiwari & Salman, 2025; Sharma & Parag, 2025). Raja Rao's "Kanthapura" explores how Gandhian reformism intersects with entrenched caste hierarchies in rural India (Kadhim & Mahdi, 2025). U.R. Ananthamurthy's "Samskara" critically interrogates Brahminical orthodoxy and exposes contradictions within the varna system (Rose, 2025; , 2025).

4.2 Emergence of Dalit Literature & Counter-Narratives

Dalit literature—autobiographies (Omprakash Valmiki's "Joothan," Bama's "Karukku"), graphic novels ("Bhimayana"), short stories—has shifted narrative authority to marginalized voices (Chakraborty, 2021; Banerjee, 2022; Mondal, 2023; Vishwakarma, 2022; Chauhan, 2024; Narsing, 2024). These texts reject upper-caste universalism and foreground protest against political/cultural supremacy (Chauhan, 2024). Graphic novels like "Bhimayana" use visual metaphors (Gond art) to communicate lived experiences of untouchability (Chakraborty, 2021; Mondal, 2023; Rattan, 2023).

4.3 Intersectionality: Gender, Class & Sexuality

Recent works highlight how caste oppression intersects with gender (Dalit women’s memoirs), class (labor exploitation), and sexuality (regulation of desire) (Roy & Jose, 2023; Narsing, 2024; Das & Adhikary, 2024; Shreyas & Malik, 2024). Novels such as Arundhati Roy’s "The God of Small Things" dramatize how caste-based violence is compounded by gendered victimhood (Roy & Jose, 2023), while Meena Kandasamy’s writing explores resistance at these intersections (Shreyas & Malik, 2024).

4.3 Critiques & Limitations in Literary Responses

While non-Dalit authors have played a role in keeping caste visible in mainstream fiction (e.g., Anand, Bhattacharya, Roy), critics note that these works often filter Dalit identity through liberal-humanist or tragic lenses rather than amplifying autonomous Dalit voices (Dhale et al., 2025). There is an ongoing call for more authentic self-representation within Indian English literature (Dhale et al., 2025).

Results Timeline



FIGURE 3 Timeline showing evolution from early symbolic representations to contemporary intersectional narratives. Larger markers indicate more citations.

Top Contributors

Type	Name	Papers
Author	Mulk Raj Anand	(Banerjee, 2022; Tushar & Sharma, 2024; Jaywant, 2022; Soni, 2021; Tashneem, 2021; Budhathoki, 2022; Yadav, 2023)
Author	Arundhati Roy	(Singh, 2023; Budhathoki, 2022)
Author	Sharankumar Limbale	(Rautela, 2025; Sharma & Kumar, 2019)

	<i>The Creative Launcher</i>	
Journal		(Rautela, 2025; Mondal, 2023; Soni, 2021)
	<i>International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences</i>	
Journal		(Banerjee, 2022; Rose, 2025)
	<i>Modern Asian Studies</i>	
Journal		(Narsing, 2024; Stroud, 2025)

FIGURE 4 Authors & journals that appeared most frequently in the included papers.



5. Discussion

Indian English fiction has evolved from indirect or symbolic portrayals of caste to explicit critiques rooted in lived experience and resistance narratives (Rautela, 2025; Singh, 2023; Dhale et al., 2025). Foundational texts by Anand established realism as a tool for moral indignation against entrenched hierarchies (Sharma & Parag, 2025), while later works by Dalit writers reclaimed narrative agency from upper-caste perspectives (Banerjee, 2022; Vishwakarma, 2022). The emergence of graphic novels like “Bhimayana” demonstrates innovation in form as well as content—using visual art to amplify marginalized voices (Chakraborty, 2021; Mondal, 2023; Rattan, 2023).

Intersectional approaches reveal that gendered oppression is inseparable from caste-based discrimination; Dalit women face compounded violence that is often underrepresented even within progressive literature (Roy & Jose, 2023; Narsing, 2024; Das & Adhikary, 2024). While non-Dalit authors have contributed significantly to keeping caste visible in mainstream discourse (Dhale et al., 2025), critics argue that true transformation requires centering Dalit-authored narratives.

Despite legal reforms outlawing untouchability and promoting equality since independence (Jodhka, 2016), literary evidence suggests persistent discrimination across social strata—urban/rural divides remain starkly evident in both fiction and reality.

Claims & Evidence Table

Claim	Evidence Strength	Reasoning	Papers
Contemporary Indian English fiction explicitly critiques varna/caste	 Strong	Multiple recent works center marginalized voices using postcolonial/Dalit feminist frameworks	(Rautela, 2025; Singh, 2023; Dhale et al., 2025)
Dalit literature provides authentic counter-narratives	 Strong	Autobiographies/graphic novels shift narrative authority to oppressed communities	(Chakraborty, 2021; Banerjee, 2022; Mondal, 2023; Vishwakarma, 2022)



6. Discussion

Indian English fiction has evolved from indirect or symbolic portrayals of caste to explicit critiques rooted in lived experience and resistance narratives (Rautela, 2025; Singh, 2023; Dhale et al., 2025). Foundational texts by Anand established realism as a tool for moral indignation against entrenched hierarchies (Sharma & Parag, 2025), while later works by Dalit writers reclaimed narrative agency from upper-caste perspectives (Banerjee, 2022; Vishwakarma, 2022). The emergence of graphic novels like “Bhimayana” demonstrates innovation in form as well as content—using visual art to amplify marginalized voices (Chakraborty, 2021; Mondal, 2023; Rattan, 2023).

Intersectional approaches reveal that gendered oppression is inseparable from caste-based discrimination; Dalit women face compounded violence that is often underrepresented even within progressive literature (Roy & Jose, 2023; Narsing, 2024; Das & Adhikary, 2024). While non-Dalit authors have contributed significantly to keeping caste visible in mainstream discourse (Dhale et al., 2025), critics argue that true transformation requires centering Dalit-authored narratives.

Despite legal reforms outlawing untouchability and promoting equality since independence (Jodhka, 2016), literary evidence suggests persistent discrimination across social strata—urban/rural divides remain starkly evident in both fiction and reality.

Claims & Evidence Table

Claim	Evidence Strength	Reasoning	Papers
Contemporary Indian English fiction explicitly critiques varna/caste	 Strong	Multiple recent works center marginalized voices using postcolonial/Dalit feminist frameworks	(Rautela, 2025; Singh, 2023; Dhale et al., 2025)
Dalit literature provides authentic counter-narratives	 Strong	Autobiographies/graphic novels shift narrative authority to oppressed communities	(Chakraborty, 2021; Banerjee, 2022; Mondal, 2023; Vishwakarma, 2022)

Research Gaps

Topic/Outcome	Upper-caste authors	Dalit-authored texts	Gender intersectionality	Graphic novel form
Caste critique	12	8	4	3
Resistance narratives	7	8	4	2

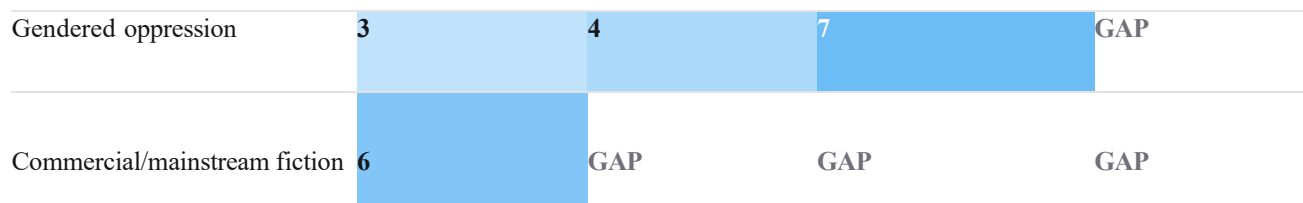


FIGURE Matrix showing research coverage across author background and thematic focus.

Open Research Questions

Future research should address underexplored intersections (such as disability or regional identity), expand comparative studies across genres/languages/regions within India—and prioritize authentic self-representation by marginalized communities.

Question	Why
How do regional literatures differ from Indian English fiction in representing the varna order?	Comparative studies can reveal unique strategies or silences across linguistic/cultural contexts
What are the effects of graphic novel forms on communicating lived experiences of untouchability?	Visual storytelling may reach new audiences or convey affective realities differently than prose
How does intersectionality shape resistance narratives among Dalit women writers?	Understanding compounded oppressions can inform more nuanced activism/literary critique

FIGURE Open questions highlighting future directions for research on narrating caste.

In summary: Indian English fiction continues to evolve as a critical space for challenging the varna order—yet greater attention must be paid to self-representation by marginalized communities and innovative forms that capture complex realities of contemporary India.

7. Conclusion

Indian English fiction has undergone a significant transformation in its engagement with the Varna order and caste system, evolving from early symbolic and peripheral depictions to direct, explicit critiques centered on lived experiences of marginalization and resistance. Foundational realist texts established the groundwork for moral and social critique, while contemporary Dalit literature and innovative forms like graphic novels have reclaimed narrative authority, foregrounding authentic counter-narratives that challenge hegemonic caste hierarchies. Intersectional approaches further enrich this discourse by highlighting the compounded oppressions faced by Dalit women and other marginalized groups, emphasizing the inseparability of caste from gender, class, and sexuality. Despite ongoing legal reforms, caste-based discrimination persists, underscoring the continued relevance and urgency of literary interventions. Future research must prioritize authentic self-representation, explore underexamined intersections, and expand comparative analyses across genres and regional literatures to deepen understanding and foster more inclusive cultural critiques. Indian English fiction thus remains a vital site for contesting caste-based oppression and imagining alternative social realities beyond the Varna hierarchy.

References

- [1] (2025). Representation of Caste in Samskara. INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH IN ENGINEERING AND MANAGEMENT. <https://doi.org/10.55041/ijsrem50849>
- [2] Ashwinkumar, H. (2024). Cast(e) in 'Other' Mold: Agency and Anxiety in Translation of Dalit Literature. South Asian Review. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02759527.2024.2342100>
- [3] Chakraborty, S. (2021). Understanding the Caste –Based hierarchical oppression, Social reforms and activism in Bhimayana. International Journal of English and Literature, 6, 429-432. <https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.61.56>
- [4] Charmakar, R. (2024). Depiction of Caste System and Dalit Consciousness in Ratna BK's Banda Ākāsh Khulepachhi. Cognition. <https://doi.org/10.3126/cognition.v6i1.64447>
- [5] Mondal, S. (2023). Towards the Signifying Buffalo: A Deconstructive Study of Casteism through the Dalit Lens in Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability. Praxis International Journal of Social Science and Literature. <https://doi.org/10.51879/pijssl/060813>
- [6] Rautela, B. (2025). The Politics of Representation: Caste in Contemporary Indian Fiction. International Journal of Linguistics Language and Literature (IJLL). <https://doi.org/10.63090/ijll/3049.3242.0009>
- [7] Singh, R. (2023). Caste Issue in Literature and Regional Literature. Stallion Journal for Multidisciplinary Associated Research Studies. <https://doi.org/10.55544/sjmars.2.4.2>
- [8] Singh, R. (2024). Examining the Intersectionality of Gender and Caste in Dalit Women's Narratives. Stallion Journal for Multidisciplinary Associated Research Studies. <https://doi.org/10.55544/sjmars.3.5.8>
- [9] Thiara, N. (2016). Subaltern Experimental Writing: Dalit Literature in Dialogue with the World. ariel: A Review of International English Literature, 47, 253 - 280. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ari.2016.0003>
- [10] Tilwani, S., & Shafi, H. (2025). Marginalization of Outcaste Untouchables in Fiction: A Study of Selected Works. Theory and Practice in Language Studies. <https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1504.32>
- [11] (2025). Representation of Caste in Samskara. INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH IN ENGINEERING AND MANAGEMENT. <https://doi.org/10.55041/ijsrem50849>
- [12], T., & Sharma, M. (2024). Delineation of scavengers in the fictional work of non-dalit writers. International Journal of Research in English. <https://doi.org/10.33545/26648717.2024.v6.i1c.173>
- [13] Banerjee, S. (2022). Locating and Interrogating the Savarna Trace in Selected Marathi Dalit Short Stories. The Creative Launcher. <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2022.7.2.06>
- [14] Budhathoki, M. (2022). Exploring the Representations of Caste and Ethnic Relations in Nepali Short Stories. Cognition. <https://doi.org/10.3126/cognition.v4i1.46449>
- [15] Chakraborty, S. (2021). Understanding the Caste –Based hierarchical oppression, Social reforms and activism in Bhimayana. International Journal of English and Literature, 6, 429-432. <https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.61.56>
- [16] Chauhan, N. (2024). Giving Voice to the Unvoiced: The Rise of Indian Dalit Literature. International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences. <https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.93.19>
- [17] Das, J., & Adhikary, B. (2024). Storied memories: gendering Dalit memories in Urmila Pawar's The Weave of My Life. Journal of Gender Studies, 33, 764 - 776. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2023.2300417>
- [18] Dhale, A., Mahavidyalaya, S., & , P. (2025). Themes and Patterns in Dalit Representation: A Comparative Study of Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable, Bhabani Bhattacharya's He Who Rides a Tiger, Rohinton Mistry's A Fine Balance, and Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things. International Journal of Innovative Research in Engineering & Multidisciplinary Physical Sciences. <https://doi.org/10.37082/ijirms.v13.i1.232712>
- [19] Jaywant, K. (2022). Reshaping the figure of the Shudra: Tukaram Padwal's Jatibhed Viveksar (Reflections on the Institution of Caste). Modern Asian Studies, 57, 380 - 408. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0026749x21000767>
- [20] Jodhka, S. (2016). Ascriptive hierarchies: Caste and its reproduction in contemporary India. Current Sociology, 64, 228 - 243. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392115614784>
- [21] Kadhim, M., & Mahdi, H. (2025). Understanding the Caste System in Indian Society through Raja Rao's Kanthapura". Bilad Alrafidain Journal of Humanities and Social Science. <https://doi.org/10.54720/bajhss/2025.070312>

- [22] Mondal, S. (2023). Towards the Signifying Buffalo: A Deconstructive Study of Casteism through the Dalit Lens in Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability. *Praxis International Journal of Social Science and Literature*. <https://doi.org/10.51879/pijssl/060813>
- [23] Narsing, B. (2024). STUDYING GENDER THROUGH CASTE LENSES IN SHARANKUMAR LIMBALE'S THE DALIT BRAHMIN AND OTHER STORIES. *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*. <https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.5440>
- [24] Premdeep, A. (2021). Indian English Commercial Fiction and the Question of Caste. *Indian Popular Fiction Redefining the Canon*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003240945-18>
- [25] Rattan, B. (2023). Bhimayana- Unveiling Reality of Caste System in India through Gond Art. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 15, 20 - 31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2023.2216766>
- [26] Rautela, B. (2025). The Politics of Representation: Caste in Contemporary Indian Fiction. *International Journal of Linguistics Language and Literature (IJLL)*. <https://doi.org/10.63090/ijll/3049.3242.0009>
- [27] Rose, H. (2025). Caste System and Social Hierarchies in India – Historical and Cultural context in Samskara. *INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH IN ENGINEERING AND MANAGEMENT*. <https://doi.org/10.55041/ijrem50850>
- [28] Roy, R., & Jose, A. (2023). Gender–Caste Hegemony and Victimhood: A Study on Untouchable and The God of Small Things.
- [29] *South Asian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*. <https://doi.org/10.48165/sajssh.2023.4511>
- [30] Salman, F. (2025). Annand's Narrative Strategies, Sociopolitical Commitment, and the Symbolic Power of Language in the Novel of "Untouchable". *Arabian Gulf Journal of Humanities and Social Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.64355/agjhs381>
- [31] Sharma, S., & Parag, P. (2025). Caste, Class, and Consciousness: The Socio-Cultural Realism in the Select Works of Mulk Raj Anand. *The Voice of Creative Research*. <https://doi.org/10.53032/tvcr/2025.v7n3.28>
- [32] Sharma, B., & Kumar, A. (2019). Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Dalit Women's Life Narratives. **.
- [33] Shreyas, A., & Malik, R. (2024). Unveiling the Dualities: Exploring the Intersectionality of Caste and Gender in Meena Kandasamy's Literary Landscape. *International Journal For Multidisciplinary Research*. <https://doi.org/10.36948/ijfmr.2024.v06i02.18965>
- [34] Singh, S. (2023). STUDY OF CASTE DISCRIMINATION IN MULK RAJ ANAND'S UNTOUCHABLE. *JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE*. <https://doi.org/10.54513/joell.2023.10217>
- [35] Soni, S. (2021). "A more dreadful punishment Draco himself could not devise": Loss of Caste in Anglo-Indian Fiction, 1790–1823. *European Romantic Review*, 32, 213 - 237. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509585.2021.1891897>
- [36] Stroud, S. (2025). Toward the inclusion of caste and the anti-caste tradition in rhetorical studies. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 111, 474 - 482. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2025.2519754>
- Tashneem, T. (2021). Caste and Untouchability in Jawaharlal Nehru's Literary Masterpieces. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit*, 16, 50-62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2455328x211009381>
- [37] Tilwani, S., & Shafi, H. (2025). Marginalization of Outcaste Untouchables in Fiction: A Study of Selected Works. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1504.32>
- [38] Tiwari, R., & S. (2025). Mulk Raj Anand's Portrayal of the Discrimination Against Untouchables in the Novel Untouchable. *The Creative Launcher*. <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2025.10.1.19>
- [39] Vishwakarma, A. (2022). The Problematics of Ideological Construction and Repressive Interpellation of Caste in Bama's Karukku. *The Creative Launcher*. <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2022.7.4.07>
- [40] Yadav, N. (2023). Dalit Literature is the impact of Dr Ambedkar's philosophy with reference to V. T. Rajshekar's 'Caste-A Nation within Nation'. *Edumania-An International Multidisciplinary Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.59231/edumania/897>