



# Unheard Voices: Resistance Literature and the Fight for Marginalized Rights

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## ABSTRACT

Resistance literature serves as an indispensable medium for elevating the voices of marginalized communities, challenging oppressive systems, and advocating for social transformation. This work examines the historical development, theoretical underpinnings, and literary devices employed in resistance stories across a variety of cultural and geographical contexts. This research examines the ways in which narrative functions as both a form of protest and a method of reclaiming identity through the examination of significant works from African American, Dalit, Indigenous, and feminist literature. The study also examines the genuine impact of resistance literature on grassroots movements, legislative reforms, and digital activity. The study underscores the ongoing impact of literature on the formation of communal awareness and the promotion of social change, despite its acceptance of criticism regarding commercialization, authenticity, and the limitations of creative activity.

**Keywords:** Resistance literature, marginalized voices, literary activism, postcolonial narratives, subaltern studies, feminist literature, Indigenous storytelling, Dalit literature, counter-hegemony, sociopolitical change

## Introduction

Resistance literature has historically been an effective tool for marginalized groups that are looking to challenge accepted ideas, regain agency, and express their challenges against systematic oppression. Spivak (1988) posits that literary works have served as counter-narratives, revealing social inequities and advocating for change, from the oral traditions of indigenous storytelling to contemporary internet activism. This study examines the significant contributions of resistance literature to the fight for the rights of underprivileged individuals, which spans a variety of historical and cultural contexts. The research offers an interdisciplinary approach to understanding how literature resists hegemonic power systems, drawing on postcolonial theory (Said, 1978), subaltern studies (Guha, 1982), and feminist literary criticism (hooks, 1984). This essay investigates recurring themes such as subjugation, identity, and action through an examination of literature on indigenous, feminist, African American, and Dalit resistance. It also assesses the potential of literary devices, including narrative disruption, language reclamation, and counter-histories, to elevate suppressed voices. Despite the significant impact of resistance literature on social movements and legislative reforms, it has not been without its challenges (Baldwin, 1963). The question of authenticity in representation, the commercialization of radical works, and the limitations of literary activity in effecting genuine reforms remain pressing concerns in the region (Lorde, 1984). Nevertheless, literature continues to be a significant instrument for fostering understanding, influencing discourse, and fortifying marginalized communities. This work endeavors to underscore the ongoing significance of resistance literature in contemporary movements for justice and equality.

## Research Problem

Despite decades of socio-political conflicts, disadvantaged populations persistently encounter institutional oppression, erasure, and limited access to avenues for self-representation. Resistance literature has become an essential medium for amplifying marginalized voices; nonetheless, its influence, authenticity, and efficacy in fostering substantive social change are still matters of significant controversy (Spivak, 1988). This study's primary research goal is to investigate how resistance literature contests prevailing power structures,

cultivates identity and agency, and aids socio-political movements. Furthermore, it examines the constraints of literary activism, encompassing concerns of commercialization, co-optation by mainstream discourse, and the disparity between literary expression and tangible policy alterations (Guha, 1982). This research examines pivotal works from African American, Dalit, Indigenous, and feminist traditions to evaluate literature's role in redefining narratives, challenging oppression, and promoting the rights of oppressed groups in historical and present situations.

### Research Questions

1. How does resistance writing question the systems of power that are already in place?
2. What themes come up across all of these neglected groups?

## Theoretical Framework

### Postcolonial Theory (Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, and Gayatri Spivak)

Postcolonial theory looks at how writing, culture, and resistance have been changed by colonial power over time. In his 1978 book *Orientalism*, Edward Said criticizes how Western stories create the "Other" and keep power structures in place. Gayatri Spivak's "subaltern" idea from 1988 shows how opinions that aren't heard are often shut down in mainstream conversations. *The Wretched of the Earth*, which was written by Frantz Fanon in 1961, looks at the psychological and cultural effects of colonial oppression and how opposition can help people recover their identities. This theory helps us look at how resistance literature breaks down empire stories and gives power to disadvantaged groups.

### Subaltern Studies (Ranjit Guha, Partha Chatterjee)

As a branch of South Asian history, Subaltern Studies criticizes how views from the margins of history are often left out of popular accounts. Ranjit Guha wrote in 1982 that histories that focus on the elite tend to leave out local opposition. Partha Chatterjee wrote in 1993 that they look at how subalterns create different ways of identifying with politics and culture. This framework is very important for looking at Dalit and Indigenous writing, because resistance stories bring back memories that were pushed down by powerful structures.

### Feminist Literary Criticism and Intersectionality (Bell Hooks, Judith Butler, Audre Lorde)

Feminist literary theory looks at how gender, race, class, and colonial experiences are linked in works of resistance literature. In 1984, bell hooks said that standard feminism doesn't pay enough attention to the experiences of Black and working-class women, and she stressed the need for an inclusive approach. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) questions strict gender roles, and Audre Lorde's 1984 work says that writing can help people define themselves and fight back against patriarchal injustice. This theory is very important for understanding feminist protest literature, especially the writings of women from disadvantaged groups.

## Review of Literature

1. **Said, Edward (1978) – *Orientalism*** Said's seminal work examines how Western literature and discourse construct the "Orient" as an exotic and inferior space, reinforcing colonial power dynamics. His analysis is crucial in understanding how resistance literature deconstructs imperial narratives and reclaims marginalized identities. Said's framework helps analyze texts that challenge Eurocentric representations and assert indigenous perspectives.

2. **Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1988) – *Can the Subaltern Speak?*** Spivak explores how marginalized voices, particularly women from colonized societies, are often excluded from mainstream discourse. She argues that even well-meaning intellectuals can inadvertently silence the subaltern by speaking on their behalf. This work provides a theoretical basis for analyzing how resistance literature amplifies suppressed voices and navigates issues of authenticity and representation.

3. **Guha, Ranjit (1982) – *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*** Guha's research focuses on the role of subaltern groups, particularly peasants, in anti-colonial resistance. He critiques mainstream historical narratives for marginalizing grassroots struggles and highlights how alternative forms of resistance, including literature and oral traditions, serve as vital records of these movements. His work is foundational for studying Dalit and Indigenous resistance literature.

4. **Hooks, bell (1984) – *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*** Hooks critiques mainstream feminist movements for ignoring the experiences of Black and working-class women. She emphasizes the need for an intersectional approach in resistance literature, where race, gender, and class intersect to shape oppression. Her insights are critical for examining feminist resistance literature that challenges both patriarchal and racial hierarchies.

5. **Fanon, Frantz (1961) – *The Wretched of the Earth*** Fanon explores the psychological effects of colonialism and the necessity of violent resistance in decolonization movements. His work provides a framework for understanding how literature serves as a revolutionary tool, portraying the struggles of the oppressed and advocating for radical social change. His analysis is particularly relevant for postcolonial resistance literature that addresses themes of identity, liberation, and decolonization.

## Historical Evolution of Resistance Literature

Resistance writing has a long and complicated past. It grew out of anger at oppression, colonialism, societal inequality, and other social wrongs. It has changed over time and across countries, adjusting to different social and political situations while keeping its main goal of giving voice to groups that have been silenced. Resistance writing has always been a strong way to challenge dominant stories and bring about social change, from the earliest oral traditions to modern digital activism. Resistance writing got its start in indigenous and pre-colonial societies, where stories were passed down orally. Folktales, myths, and songs were used to tell stories of people who fought back and lived, and they often had hidden messages about masters who were too powerful. In Africa, griots (oral historians) were very important for keeping records of how people fought back against attackers. In the United States, Native American storytelling practices kept records of how people fought back against colonial rule (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986). In the same way, Bhakti and Sufi poems from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries in India became a way to fight against religion strictures and caste systems, calling for spiritual and social equality (Ambedkar, 1936). During the colonial era (18<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> centuries), writing began to directly question the rule of imperialism. Literature was a way for writers from conquered countries to break down Western stories and express their own points of view. In Africa and the Caribbean, writers like Chinua Achebe (*Things Fall Apart*, 1958) and Aimé Césaire (*Discourse on Colonialism*, 1950) wrote about how colonialism destroyed local cultures and pushed for independence. In the same way, anti-slavery stories were a big part of resistance literature in the 1800s. For example, Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) told first-hand accounts of how cruel slavery was while calling for its end.

After colonization ended in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, resistance writing was a key part of the fights for civil rights, equal rights for women, and indigenous authority. African American literature was very important in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. Authors like James Baldwin (*The Fire Next Time*, 1963) and Maya Angelou (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 1969) used their writing to speak out against racial injustice and push for social change. In India, Dalit literature became a strong way to fight back. Authors like Omprakash Valmiki (*Joothan*, 1997) and Bama (*Karukku*, 1992) wrote about how they were discriminated against because of their race and defended their Dalit identity (Guru, 1997). In the same way, Indigenous writing in Canada and Australia, by writers like Thomas King (*The Inconvenient Indian*, 2012) and Alexis Wright (*Carpentaria*, 2006), has tried to bring back historical stories that were erased by colonial powers. Resistance literature has reached more people in the modern age thanks to internet action and new media. Social media, blogs, and self-publishing sites make it possible for views that aren't heard by institutions to be heard around the world. Resistance writing has changed over time to deal with different kinds of injustice. Its main goal has stayed the same: to raise the voices of those who are silenced, to criticize unfair systems, and to spark movements for social change. The way it has changed over time shows a long history of using stories as a way to fight against culture and politics.

## Case Studies in Resistance Literature

Resistance literature manifests across diverse cultural and historical contexts, offering powerful critiques of oppression and advocating for social change. This section examines four key case studies African American literature, Dalit literature, Indigenous storytelling, and feminist resistance narratives each demonstrating how literature functions as a form of activism and identity reclamation.

### 1. African American Resistance Literature: James Baldwin and Toni Morrison

African American literature has long been a cornerstone of resistance, addressing systemic racism, segregation, and Black identity in the United States. James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1963) combines personal narrative with social critique, highlighting the racial injustices that fueled the Civil Rights Movement. His essays directly challenge white supremacy and call for radical change. Similarly, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) reclaims the history of slavery by centering the trauma and resilience of enslaved women. Morrison's lyrical prose disrupts dominant historical narratives and asserts the importance of memory as a form of resistance.

### 2. Dalit Literature: Omprakash Valmiki and Bama

Dalit literature in India emerged as a response to caste-based oppression, providing firsthand accounts of discrimination and social exclusion. Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan* (1997) exposes the brutal realities of untouchability, detailing the struggles of Dalits within the rigid caste hierarchy. The narrative functions as a testimony against caste violence and as a demand for social justice. Similarly, Bama's *Karukku* (1992) presents the intersection of caste and gender discrimination, depicting the experiences of a Dalit Christian woman. Through personal storytelling, Dalit literature challenges Brahminical hegemony and asserts the dignity of oppressed communities.

### 3. Indigenous Resistance Literature: Thomas King and Alexis Wright

Indigenous literature serves as a crucial tool for decolonization, challenging the erasure of indigenous histories and advocating for sovereignty. Thomas King's *The Inconvenient Indian* (2012) critiques the ongoing marginalization of Indigenous peoples in North America, exposing colonial policies and cultural stereotypes. King's blend of humor, history, and storytelling reclaims Indigenous identity while confronting

settler narratives. In Australia, Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006) employs magical realism to depict Aboriginal resistance against environmental and political exploitation. Both authors highlight Indigenous resilience and the enduring fight for land and cultural preservation.

### 3. Feminist Resistance Narratives: Margaret Atwood and Audre Lorde

Feminist resistance literature challenges patriarchal oppression and reclaims women's agency. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) presents a dystopian critique of gender-based subjugation, drawing parallels to real-world struggles for reproductive rights and bodily autonomy. The novel's speculative framework serves as a warning against state control over women's lives. Meanwhile, Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider* (1984) integrates poetry, essays, and personal reflections to address intersectional feminism, racial injustice, and LGBTQ+ rights. Lorde's work emphasizes literature's role in empowering marginalized identities and fostering collective resistance. These case studies illustrate how resistance literature functions as both a mirror and a weapon reflecting societal injustices while actively dismantling oppressive structures. Through varied literary forms, from autobiography and historical fiction to speculative narratives and political essays, resistance literature continues to amplify unheard voices and drive socio-political transformation.

### Literary Strategies of Resistance

Resistance literature uses a variety of writing techniques to question prevailing ideas, give a voice to those who aren't heard, and encourage social and political change. Some of these tactics are breaking up the story, using language in strange ways, using different texts together, mixing reality and testimony, using allegory and symbols, and making up stories. These strategies are used by resistance writing to not only criticize oppressive systems but also create new stories that support identity and agency. One of the most important tactics is narrative disruption, in which writers question traditional narrative structures and straight stories in order to bring out viewpoints that have been ignored. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), which is about slavery and memory, uses broken stories and non-linear timeline to show how memory and history are connected to real-life experiences of abuse. In the same way, *The God of Small Things* (1997) by Arundhati Roy uses jumbled time lines to show how race and gender injustice in India still affects people today. By upsetting the usual way of telling stories, these writers bring out the broken truths of marginalized groups. Subversion of language is another strong method. This is when writers take back or change dominating discourses to fight linguistic imperialism. In 1986, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o made a famous case for decolonizing literature by telling African writers to stop using colonial languages and start using their own languages instead. His 1980 book *Devil on the Cross*, which was first written in Gikuyu, doesn't follow the rules of Western literature and instead uses traditional ways of telling stories. In the same way, Dalit writers such as Bama (Karukku, 1992) and Namdeo Dhasal don't follow Brahminical rules when they write about caste violence; they use direct, unedited language. Native languages and everyday speech are used to challenge the rules of elite literature and claim cultural independence.

Rewriting history and being intersexual are also important parts of resistance fiction. Writers use historical and classic texts to question and rethink the most common stories. From the point of view of Bertha Mason, the Creole "madwoman in the attic," Jean Rhys's 1966 book *Wide Sargasso Sea* rewrites Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. This shows how the original text is racially and colonially colored. In the same way, Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (1990) retells Homer's *Odyssey* through the lens of the Caribbean, making classic stories relevant to postcolonial people. These works question the authority of Western literary forms and bring views that have been ignored to the forefront of historical conversation. In autobiographical and testimonial writing, where personal experiences of abuse are turned into acts of resistance, realism and witness are very important. Dalit literature, like Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (1997), uses honest, realistic stories to show how caste prejudice works, using individual pain as a way to fight back as a group. In the same way, slave tales like Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) show how cruel the system was and call for action to end slavery. Testimonies are powerful because they are true and give first-hand accounts that go against official records that were written by rulers. Allegory and symbols are common ways to criticize repressive governments that can't be blocked and can be interpreted in different ways. Allegory is used in *Animal Farm* (1945) by George Orwell to show how power is bad in totalitarian states. This makes political criticism possible even when things are tough. Similar to this, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) shows India's problems after it got its freedom by mixing history and myth to challenge popular nationalist stories. Resistance writing can get around political limits and reach more people by using allegory. Speculative fiction and dystopian stories offer a creative way to fight back by picturing different worlds and criticizing the wrongs happening now. In her 1985 book *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood imagines an authoritarian society in which the government controls women's bodies. This is similar to the fights going on today for reproductive rights. The 1993 book *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler is a future novel that looks at race, gender, and environmental damage. It shows that resistance is both a political act and a way to stay alive. Speculative literature pushes readers to imagine new worlds beyond injustice. This makes it a strong way to both criticize and give hope. By using these writing techniques, resistance literature goes beyond just telling stories and turns into an act of protest. These methods help underrepresented voices

question dominating discourses, regain power, and spark movements for justice and freedom by upsetting story norms, reclaiming language, rewriting history, or imagining new realities.

### **Impact of Resistance Literature on Social Movements**

Resistance literature has inspired social movements by increasing awareness, rallying communities, and fighting repressive systems. Resistance literature has shaped anti-colonial, civil rights, feminist, Dalit, and indigenous rights movements by criticizing dominant beliefs and amplifying minority voices. It records oppression and inspires change by motivating personal and social action. Resistance literature's narrative framework for action has had a major effect on social movements. Literature helped decolonize in the 20th century. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) in Africa challenged colonial myths and recovered local histories, bolstering nationalist movements against European domination. The Indian independence movement was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* (1909), which outlined peaceful opposition to British empire. These writings shaped their movements' ideologies and inspired resistance intellectually and emotionally. Literature has exposed structural prejudice and mobilized communities for civil rights and racial justice. James Baldwin (*The Fire Next Time*, 1963) and Maya Angelou (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 1969) revealed U.S. racial inequality, impacting the Civil Rights Movement. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) reframed slavery, supporting racial justice and reparations. These literary works actively affected conversation, legal reforms, and public perception.

Gender equality groups have also relied on feminist resistance literature. Deconstructing patriarchal standards in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) established the groundwork for second-wave feminism, while Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) became a symbol of current feminist action, notably in reproductive rights. In *Sister Outsider* (1984), Audre Lorde developed intersectionality, showing how race, gender, and sexuality are intertwined in oppression. These literary works have inspired feminist discourse and sparked global grassroots movements and legislative reforms. Dalit literature has helped combat caste discrimination in India. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) shaped Dalit activism's legal and social changes to abolish caste. Recently, autobiographical tales like Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (1997) and Bama's *Karukku* (1992) have introduced Dalit voices to mainstream literary and activist settings, promoting social justice and equal rights. These works have exposed structural injustice and united oppressed groups, strengthening anti-caste movements.

By reclaiming history and calling for sovereignty, resistance literature has spurred indigenous movements. Thomas King's *The Inconvenient Indian* (2012) criticizes settler colonialism's impact on Native American communities, whereas Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006) highlights Aboriginal resistance against environmental and political exploitation. This literature has influenced legislative reforms and worldwide campaigning for indigenous land rights, cultural preservation, and legal acknowledgment. Literature still empowers resistance groups in the digital age. Resistance tales are now accessible worldwide because to internet storytelling platforms, spoken word poetry, and self-publishing. Books like Roxane Gay's *Hunger* (2017) and Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* (2015) have shaped public conversation on gender violence and racial injustice. Resistance literature shapes social battles, not merely reflects them. It has been crucial to historical and present justice, equality, and human rights movements by exposing oppression, questioning prevailing narratives, and encouraging action. Its impact extends beyond the written word, influencing laws, policies, and grassroots activism, ensuring that the voices of the marginalized are heard and their struggles acknowledged.

### **Criticism and Counterarguments**

Resistance literature is criticized despite its important significance in promoting disadvantaged voices and societal change. Scholars and detractors have contested its efficacy, ideological biases, simplicity, and mainstream institution co-optation. These counterarguments criticize the literary and political aspects of resistance literature, doubting its power to alter and stressing representational complexity. Resistance literature sometimes reduces complex socio-political battles into binary narratives of oppression and resistance, a significant critique. This simplicity can romanticize struggle and ignore oppressed populations' underlying inconsistencies and many viewpoints, critics say. Anti-colonial literature criticizes Western imperialism but often ignores postcolonial caste, gender, and class inequities. Critics say Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) highlight colonial atrocities but ignore indigenous power systems and internal struggles. Resistance literature may empower victims rather than empower them. Some scholars contend that these works risk keeping oppressed populations in a cycle of oppression rather than showing their agency and progress by focusing on suffering tales. Critiques of Dalit literature imply that Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (1997) and Bama's *Karukku* (1992) depict caste persecution but may also perpetuate Dalit stereotypes as passive victims rather than active agents of change. This raises challenges regarding how resistance narratives might reconcile exposing injustice with demonstrating resilience and progress. Commercialization and institutionalization of resistance literature might diminish its radical potential. Some critics say marginalized books lose their subversive edge when they become popular literature. After becoming popular, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Arundhati Roy's *The*

God of Small Things (1997) were softened in their uncompromising critique of structural injustice. The widespread success of feminist dystopian literature like Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) has co-opted it in commercial society, sometimes removing its political urgency. When resistance literature becomes popular, is it still revolutionary? Resistance literature also privileges some voices and marginalizes others, according to some critics. Female resistance literature has been attacked for ignoring women of color and focusing on white, Western ideas. Postcolonial literature has also been criticized for favoring Western-educated elites above underprivileged voices. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's influential article *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) asks if resistance writing actually represents oppressed groups like impoverished, illiterate women in postcolonial cultures or if privileged authors represent them. This critique questions who may narrate resistance and the conflict between representation and authorship. The last counterargument is that literature alone may not affect politics. Some scholars believe resistance literature promotes awareness and changes public debate but lacks political strength. Critics say systematic disparities continue despite centuries of anti-slavery, civil rights, and feminist literature. Literature inspires, but political action, legislative reform, and grassroots movements change things. Resistance literature should support activity and policymaking, not replace them.

In response to these accusations, resistance literature advocates say its main goal is to question prevailing narratives and foster discourse. Although literature cannot destroy oppressive regimes, it may change cultural consciousness, influence movements, and preserve oppressed populations' history. Resistance writing has grown from oral traditions to digital storytelling, showing its significance in modern justice battles.

### Conclusion

Resistance literature continues to raise awareness, empower underrepresented voices, and challenge unjust systems. It has influenced political speech and activity throughout history, reflecting and encouraging social movements. Anti-colonial, civil rights, feminist, Dalit, and indigenous rights campaigns have used resistance literature to challenge dominant ideology. Resistance literature adapts to new oppressions and expressions despite charges of oversimplification, victimization narratives, commercialization, and exclusion. While others say that literature alone cannot affect politics, it does raise consciousness, preserve historical memory, and promote unity. With the growth of social media, spoken word, and self-published tales, resistance literature has reached more people and inspired more activists and intellectuals. Resistance literature is about defiance, empowerment, and change, not simply literature. By questioning dominant narratives and giving the unheard a voice, it guarantees that disadvantaged populations' struggles and ambitions are not forgotten but integrated into history and literature. Its critique of oppression and potential to inspire change make it important in literary tradition and socio-political resistance.

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