

From Silence to Defiance: The Voice of a Bengali Dalit Author

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Abstract

The history of literature has long mirrored the social hierarchies within which it is produced. Women, across cultures, have often been relegated to the margins of the literary canon, their creative voices silenced or dismissed under the weight of patriarchal norms. While men were celebrated as the arbiters of culture and intellect, women were tethered to the domestic sphere, their narratives cast as minor or secondary to the dominant tradition. Yet within this silencing lies a persistent undercurrent of resistance. Women's writing has historically sought not only to document their exclusion but also to reclaim language as a tool of self-assertion and critique. In the Indian context, the suppression of women's literary voices has been further compounded by the layered structures of caste. Upper-caste women, though marginalized by gender, still occupied positions of relative privilege, while Dalit women, at the intersection of caste, class and gender oppression, were triply silenced. Their entry into literature thus represents not an aesthetic contribution of beauty but an urgent voice of struggle against the irrational constructions and power structures of the society, one that destabilizes both Brahmanical patriarchy and the elitist assumptions of mainstream feminist discourse. This paper examines how Bengali Dalit woman writer Kalyani Thakur Charal transforms this historical silence into literary defiance through her poetry collection *Poems of Chandalini* and her novella *Andhar Bil*. The paper argues that Charal's writing functions as testimonial resistance, where personal narratives become political interventions. Her work challenges both Brahmanical patriarchy and the exclusions of mainstream feminism by foregrounding Dalit women's embodied experiences as sites of knowledge. The findings demonstrate that Charal reclaims language as a tool of assertion, turning suppressed pain, internalised silence, and marginalised lives into acts of literary and political defiance. In doing so, the paper establishes Bengali Dalit women's writing not as peripheral literature, but as a critical epistemology that demands recognition, dignity, and humanity.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Dalit Women Writers in Literature, Caste and Gender, Resistance, Intersectionality, Bengali Dalit Literature, Feminist Discourse.

Introduction

The voices of Bengali Dalit women acquire a distinctive resonance within a literary culture that has long celebrated itself as progressive and humanist. Despite Bengal's rich literary tradition canonised by figures such as Rabindranath Tagore, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, and later feminist writers like Mahasweta Devi, Dalit women's narratives were systematically pushed to the margins. Experiences shaped by poverty, caste-based discrimination, gendered violence, and social exclusion rarely found articulation within mainstream Bengali literature. Writers like Kalyani Thakur Charal have broken through this silence by placing Dalit women at the centre of literary expression. Charal's writings, in both poetry and prose, insist that the personal is inseparable from the political, and that narrating one's own life is itself an act of resistance.

This emergence must be understood within the larger corpus of Bengali Dalit writing, where testimony, memory, and lived experience form the core of literary expression. Writers such as Manju Bala, through short stories like *Conflict* and *Discrimination*, foreground the everyday humiliations and gendered vulnerabilities faced by Dalit women within domestic and public spaces. Similarly, Lily Haldar's *Bhenga Berar Pachil* explores caste exclusion and the fragile boundaries that separate Dalit lives from social recognition. These narratives function not merely as fiction but as testimonies that expose the persistent workings of caste in ordinary life.

The tradition of Bengali Dalit writing is also shaped by autobiographical and testimonial forms. Manoranjan Byapari's short stories such as *The Fortress*, *The Undead Men* and his autobiography *Interrogating My Chandal Life* narrate caste oppression, hunger, imprisonment, and political awakening with stark honesty, establishing life-writing as a crucial mode of Dalit expression. Likewise, Jatin Bala's *Shikharh Chhenrha Jiban (A Life Uprooted)* documents displacement, refugeehood, and caste marginalisation, linking personal memory to collective Dalit history.

Dalit poetry from Bengal further strengthens this testimonial tradition. Manohar Mouli Biswas's poetry collection *The Wheel Will Turn* articulates resistance, dignity, and political assertion, while critical engagements with his work such as *Bangla Dalit Writer Writes Back* edited by Jaydeep Sarangi highlight the intellectual and aesthetic interventions of Bengali Dalit literature. Anthologies like *Under My Dark Skin Flows a Red River*, translated by Debi Chatterjee, and

Dalit Poems, Songs and Dialogues from Bengal in English Translation edited by Asit Biswas and Shubh Brat Sarkar, have played a crucial role in making these voices accessible beyond the Bengali-reading public.

Within this broader tradition of Bengali Dalit writing, the present research paper focuses exclusively on the works of Kalyani Thakur Charal, particularly her semi-autobiographical narrative *Andhar Bil* and her poetry collection *Poems of Chandalini*. This focus is deliberate. Charal's writings are among the most widely translated Bengali Dalit texts available in English, making them accessible for critical engagement beyond the Bengali literary sphere. More importantly, both texts consistently foreground Dalit women's embodied experiences of labour, hunger, sexuality, illness, silence, and resistance placing the female body at the centre of caste and gender critique. Through poetry and narrative prose, Charal transforms lived bodily suffering into testimony, where personal experience becomes a form of political and epistemic intervention. By closely reading *Andhar Bil* and *Poems of Chandalini*, this paper examines how Dalit women's voices emerge not as marginal narratives but as critical sites of knowledge that challenge caste hierarchies, patriarchal structures, and the silences of mainstream Bengali literature.

While this paper focuses closely on the works of Kalyani Thakur Charal, her writings must be read in dialogue with the wider tradition of Dalit women's writing in India. Across regions and languages, Dalit women writers have used literature as testimony to record embodied suffering, social exclusion, and everyday resistance. Writers such as Bama, Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, also foreground the Dalit woman's body as a site of labour, discipline, humiliation, and survival. Like Charal, their narratives do not seek aesthetic distance but insist on lived experience as a source of knowledge. What unites these writers is a shared emphasis on the everyday food, work, touch, hunger, illness, sexuality, and silence as sites where caste and patriarchy operate together. Testimony, in this tradition, is not only about remembering violence but about exposing how oppression becomes routine and normalized. Charal's poems on burnt lungs, silenced emotions, and the demand to be human resonate with these broader concerns, even as they remain rooted in the specific social and cultural context of Bengal. Reading Charal alongside other Dalit women writers from other regions allows us to see her work not as an exception but as part of a collective Dalit feminist literary practice that challenges national narratives of equality and progress. Her writing thus contributes to an all-India tradition where Dalit women speak not from the margins but from positions of critical authority.

In Dalit literature, testimony should not be understood simply as the narration of personal experience. Rather, it functions as a critical form of knowledge shaped by social location. The importance of Dalit women's testimony becomes clear in the debates initiated by Gopal Guru, especially in his essay *Dalit Women Talk Differently*. Guru argues that Dalit women speak from a position shaped by both caste oppression and patriarchal control. Because they experience these two forms of domination simultaneously, their voices cannot be adequately represented within either Dalit male discourse or mainstream feminist frameworks. Testimony, therefore, is not a personal confession but a form of knowledge rooted in historically produced suffering and exclusion.

Guru's intervention marked an important shift in Indian sociology and feminist thought by placing social location at the centre of analysis. He shows that how one understands social reality depends on where one is positioned within structures of caste, gender, and power. Dalit women's lived experiences, according to Guru, offer insights into social relations that are often invisible to dominant groups. This argument is closely aligned with standpoint theory, particularly Sandra Harding's idea of "strong objectivity," in her essay titled *Strong Objectivity: A Response to the New Objective Question* which suggests that marginalized groups can develop a more critical understanding of society because they experience its inequalities directly. In the Indian context, Dalit women's testimonies thus become crucial tools for analysing caste, patriarchy, and state power together rather than in isolation. The concept of testimony, however, also raises questions of representation. Guru warns that Dalit women's voices are often either absorbed into non-Dalit feminist narratives or sidelined within Dalit political movements dominated by men. As a result, Dalit women face both external marginalisation and internal silencing. This double exclusion makes autonomous articulation essential. The formation of independent organisations such as the National Federation of Dalit Women must therefore be seen not only as political initiatives but also as epistemic acts. By speaking for themselves, Dalit women assert control over how their experiences are named, interpreted, and circulated. Testimony here becomes a claim to authority over meaning rather than a plea for recognition.

Sharmila Rege extends and refines this argument through her formulation of a Dalit feminist standpoint. While she recognises the importance of difference, Rege cautions against treating difference as an end in itself. An excessive focus on plurality, she argues, can fragment political struggle and weaken collective resistance. For Rege, Dalit women's testimonies should not be read merely as

expressions of identity or cultural difference. Instead, they must be understood as structural critiques that expose Brahmanical patriarchy, caste-blind feminism, and the limitations of left politics. Testimony, in this sense, is collective and historical rather than individual and experiential alone.

The debate between Guru and Sundar Sarukkai, particularly in the book titled *The Cracked Mirror*, further complicates the idea of testimony by questioning claims to authenticity. While Guru stresses the ethical importance of lived experience, Sarukkai asks whether experience alone can guarantee representational legitimacy. This tension highlights that testimony is not a transparent reflection of reality but a politically situated form of narration shaped by power, mediation, and context. At the same time, both scholars agree that dismissing Dalit women's voices in the name of theoretical caution risks reinforcing the very hierarchies that critical scholarship seeks to challenge.

Seen within this framework, testimony emerges as a narrative, political, and methodological practice. It challenges the appropriation of Dalit women's experiences by savarna feminism, exposes patriarchal domination within Dalit movements, and resists attempts by the state to absorb or neutralise dissent. Scholars such as Gail Omvedt further situate such articulations within broader traditions of political dissent in India, where marginalised groups "talk differently" in response to institutional failure and unfulfilled promises of equality.

It is within this intellectual tradition that the present paper locates its reading of *Andhar Bil* and certain poems from the book of poetry *Poems of Chandalini*. By foregrounding silence, bodily pain, partial speech, and narrative absence, the novella and the poems function as a form of Dalit feminist testimony in literary form. These works do not seek to resolve suffering or offer closure. Instead, they strive to record lived realities as they are experienced, asserting that even fragmented and muted voices produce valid knowledge. Through this lens, Dalit women's testimony emerges not as a marginal narrative but as a powerful critique of social reality itself.

Kalyani Thakur Charal's work exemplifies how literature can serve as testimony and weapon simultaneously. Her poems, often stark in imagery and unflinching in tone, articulate the pain, anger, and resilience of Dalit women who have long been rendered invisible. They challenge the sanitized narratives of Bengali society, exposing the contradictions between its progressive self-image and the persistence of caste hierarchies. Her novella *Andhar Bil* extends this attempt

into narrative form, weaving together strands of lived experience, memory, and collective suffering. Through its exploration of displacement, humiliation, and survival, *Andhar Bil* foregrounds the voices of women who resist both the everyday violence of caste society and the erasure of their subjectivities. Charal's choice of language is plain, direct, and at times confrontational, portraying her refusal to conform to elite literary norms, embodying instead a Dalit feminist aesthetic rooted in lived reality.

By situating her work within the broader context of Dalit women's writing in India, it becomes clear that Charal's literary interventions are not isolated but part of a larger tradition of writing from the margins. Scholars such as Sharmila Rege have emphasized in her work *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonies* that Dalit women's literature cannot be read solely as art but must be understood as testimony, as a political strategy to reclaim subjecthood and expose structural injustices. In this light, the very act of writing becomes survival. Charal's oeuvre, therefore, is not just literature, it is an articulation of defiance, a refusal to remain silent in the face of erasure.

Silence, Marginalisation and Politics of Voice. The history of Bengali literature is often narrated as one of progressive refinement, where voices of reason, aesthetics, and humanism converged in the works of canonical writers. Yet beneath this grand narrative lies a silence that has systematically erased Dalit women's voices. Their lived experiences of poverty, humiliation, and exclusion rarely found representation in the celebrated Bengali canon dominated by upper-caste men. This exclusion was not accidental; it was a cultural strategy that mirrored the social hierarchies of caste and gender. Women in general, as scholars like Susie Tharu and K. Lalita remind us, were long denied space in literature, but Dalit women faced the compounded marginalization of being both women and Dalit forced into what Gayatri Spivak once called the "shadowy space of the subaltern," where speaking itself became an act of resistance.

Kalyani Thakur Charal's book titled *Poems of Chandalini* emerges from this very space of imposed silence. Her writings reject the sanitized narratives of Bengali modernity and instead speak the raw language of survival and defiance. *Poem 17*, for instance, offers a striking portrayal of internalized violence and the disciplining of emotion:

"In an intimate emotional spell
someone said, 'Don't cry. Be mechanical.'

Overpowered by self empathy

I slapped myself and said

‘Be Mechanical.

Be Mechanical.”

The poem portrays a chilling dialogue between affect and suppression. To “be mechanical” is to internalize the demand that Dalit women bury their pain, conceal their grief, and move like cogs in a machinery that thrives on their silence. The self-slapping here is not just physical but symbolic because it reveals how patriarchal and casteist societies have so successfully normalized the erasure of Dalit women’s emotions that the women themselves become agents of their own silencing. Yet in narrating this act, Charal refuses silence; the very articulation of suppression becomes a form of voice.

Poem 18 extends this exploration of silenced subjectivity into the domain of daily life and nature. The poem opens with lush imagery:

“Orange morning, wet bamboo leaf morning

golden sun rays morning

green carpet morning...”

But this beauty is immediately undercut by the intrusion of despair: “...yet

to uplift the mind I run towards you.

Because you are the reason for a damp mind...

Then rapidly murmur

nothing has happened, all is well

nothing has happened, say nothing has happened

all is right...”

Here, the repeated refrain “nothing has happened” is a powerful metaphor for denial, it is an echo of how Dalit women are trained to dismiss their own suffering, to maintain an outward calm even when weighed down by centuries of systemic oppression. Nature’s beauty is present, but it cannot heal the “damp mind,” suggesting how social realities deform even the most intimate human

encounters with the world. Silence is thus both imposed externally and cultivated internally, but the act of writing ruptures this enforced muteness.

To understand the significance of these poems, we must locate them within larger theoretical frameworks. Gopal Guru's seminal essay titled *Dalit Women Talk Differently* argued that Dalit women's experiences cannot be subsumed under either mainstream feminism or Dalit male discourse. Their voices represent an epistemic rupture, a way of speaking forged in the crucible of caste and gender oppression. Sharmila Rege later developed this into what she called a Dalit feminist standpoint, insisting that Dalit women's testimonies should not be treated as mere autobiographical accounts but as critical knowledge that destabilizes Brahmanical patriarchy and its universalist claims. In *Poem 17* and *18*, Charal embodies precisely this standpoint. Her articulation of suppressed emotion, mechanical survival, and denial exposes the layered violence of caste and patriarchy while simultaneously affirming that even broken speech is a form of defiance.

The politics of voice in Charal's work is also inseparable from her self-identification as a Dalit womanist. As noted in her interviews, her writing is an act of protest, her pen is her weapon. This aligns with Alice Walker's concept of womanism, adapted into the South Asian context where Dalit womanism emphasizes inclusivity, communitarian resilience, and ecological rootedness. Charal's poems, though intensely personal, are always communal; they echo the lives of countless Dalit women who must murmur "nothing has happened" to survive, even as their silence hides centuries of accumulated trauma.

By situating *Poem 17* and *18* in this framework, we can see how Charal's work directly responds to centuries of exclusion. Where the Bengali literary canon once thrived on erasing Dalit women, she insists on narrating the pain of erasure itself. Her poems dismantle the myth that Bengal is free of caste, reminding us that marginalization is not only external but internalized, not only political but emotional. Through the poetics of repetition, negation, and contradiction, Charal exposes the mechanics of silence and simultaneously breaks it.

Narrative Resistance in Andhar Bil. Kalyani Thakur Charal's novella *Andhar Bil* occupies a unique space in Bengali Dalit literature. Neither a straightforward autobiography nor a purely fictional novel, it is best read as a novella that blends memory, autobiography, and community narrative. Through this hybrid form, Charal reconstructs the lived experiences of Dalit women in Bengal,

making visible what mainstream Bengali literature has long obscured. The bil, or marshland, functions as a metaphor for this memory work: stagnant yet layered, its still waters preserve the sediment of everyday sorrows. Where official histories and canonical literature remain silent, *Andhar Bil* insists on bearing witness, foregrounding women's voices as the carriers of collective memory and survival.

One of the striking features of the text is its frank engagement with sexuality and morality within the everyday lives of Dalit women. In Subhadra's story, for example, her son is labeled immoral because his birth is linked to her lascivious brother-in-law. This narrative, told casually within the community, illustrates how women's bodies become sites of rumor, blame, and moral policing. Subhadra herself is denied autonomy over her story, as her son's behavior is explained through a patriarchal and superstitious lens. What Charal does by recording this anecdote is exactly what Rege describes: she transforms a silencing mechanism into testimony. The story is no longer a private whisper used to shame Subhadra but a written account that forces readers to confront how women's sexuality is policed and pathologized. It destabilizes dominant literary traditions that sanitize or omit such embodied realities of Dalit women. From Rege's standpoint theory, this is not merely storytelling but an epistemic act: Subhadra's story, once filtered through patriarchal judgment, is reframed by Charal as a collective truth about how Dalit women's lives are narrated and controlled by others.

Charal's testimonial mode in *Andhar Bil* is further deepened through her attention to the Dalit female body as a site where deprivation, discipline, and perception itself are shaped by caste. A striking example appears in the description of Kamalini's relationship with soap and water as stated in page 25 of the book:

"Kamalini uses soap at intervals of fifteen days or a month. When her mother can manage the time, she gets some hot water and takes Kamalini to the tubewell. As she washes her, she seems to be peeling off a layer of her skin. The soapy water gets into her eyes and burns and the girl shakes herself like a goat being killed... Even when she weeps, Kamalini thinks the eyes of grown up people surely never feel burning pain, and perhaps this is why they do not weep."

This reveals how the most basic acts of hygiene are experienced as violence rather than care. Cleanliness, often celebrated within dominant social discourse as a marker of civility and moral order, here becomes a painful and alien practice

imposed on a Dalit child's body. Kamalini's belief that "grown up people surely never feel burning pain" points to an early internalisation of inequality, where suffering is perceived as natural to her own body but absent from others. The Dalit child's body is thus constructed as fundamentally different which is more vulnerable, more exposed, more expendable. In this sense, Charal's narrative aligns closely with the theoretical significance of Dalit testimony as articulated by Sharmila Rege: lived experience here is not anecdotal but epistemic, producing knowledge about how caste is inscribed on the body long before political consciousness is formed. Kamalini's reluctance to use soap becomes a form of embodied resistance, a refusal shaped not by ignorance but by repeated harm.

Equally revealing is Charal's handling of silence in the episode involving the girl from the Biswas family, a Scheduled Caste community positioned slightly higher within the internal hierarchies of caste. The narrative describes her marriage to a non-resident chandsi and shifts its emotional focus entirely to a young artist as observed in page 26 of the book:

"The unrequited love makes the artist boy shed tears and wet his chest... Curious boys and girls like Kamalini gather round. They see the artist shedding tears, he has no brush in his hand."

What is striking here is not only the recognition of artistic sensitivity and emotional depth in a Dalit man thereby challenging stereotypes that deny Dalit subjects' creative interiority but also the complete erasure of the woman herself. Although she functions as the object of desire, she is denied voice, emotion, or reflection. Her thoughts, fears, or consent remain unrecorded. Even within a narrative that seeks to recover Dalit lives, Charal deliberately exposes how women's subjectivities are sidelined, with male suffering and aspiration occupying narrative centrality. This absence is not a failure of representation but a critical exposure of patriarchal narrative logic at work within marginalised communities themselves. Through this silencing, Charal demonstrates how Dalit women often exist as muses, symbols, or catalysts for male emotion rather than as speaking subjects. The woman from the Biswas family is doubly marginalised: first by caste within the broader social order, and then by gender within her own community's storytelling. By foregrounding this imbalance without resolving it, *Andhar Bil* compels readers to confront how even narratives of resistance can reproduce gendered erasures. This intervention reinforces the paper's argument

that Dalit feminist testimony is essential precisely because it reveals not only oppression from above but also hierarchies operating within marginal spaces.

Equally powerful is the depiction of Kamalini, who considers herself ‘a bit masculine’ and derives satisfaction from her independence as a street vendor. Her negotiation with gender roles complicates stereotypical portrayals of Dalit women as merely passive victims. Selling palm or papaya for a few rupees may seem trivial, yet in the text it symbolizes agency, resilience, and survival amidst poverty. Moreover, Kamalini’s participation in the formation of a Women Matua Group marks a significant intervention in the religious and cultural life of the community. Traditionally barred from practices such as beating the donka or leading religious congregations, these women break taboos by performing kirtan and organizing worship. Their public defiance of scriptural prohibitions, ‘the sacred texts say women are forbidden to hold the butt of the plough’ which exemplifies how community spaces themselves become arenas of contestation. By placing these women at the heart of religious practice, Charal not only recovers their voices but also reimagines tradition itself as pliable and open to feminist reinterpretation.

The novel further foregrounds women’s vulnerabilities within patriarchal structures of kinship and sexuality. The description of widows who live in men’s households, recognized only in relation to the dead like ‘X’s widow, Y’s widow’ shows how women are denied independent identities. Similarly, Haran kaka’s two wives, who quarrel daily but remain trapped in the household, highlight the entrapment of women within polygamous arrangements justified by poverty and social acceptance. These narratives echo Rege’s insistence that Dalit women’s standpoint illuminates how caste patriarchy operates not only through exclusion from public spaces but also through intimate familial arrangements. Charal’s portrayal of such dynamics lays bare how survival itself is negotiated through endurance, compromise, and often silence.

The text also draws attention to the violence of child marriage and reproductive expectations. Kamalini’s astonishment at Angoorbala’s second marriage after menstruation dramatizes how women’s bodies are policed through ritual and custom. The practice of remarrying a child-bride upon puberty naturalizes the idea that a woman’s value is tied to reproductive capacity. The later account of a mother who dies after her seventh child reinforces this burden: “A son, at least one, is necessary. Otherwise does the clan exist?” The loss of life is normalized, even sanctified, through religious consolation. Yet Charal’s narration refuses

to accept this normalization. By embedding these tragedies in her narrative, she challenges the silence surrounding maternal mortality and reproductive exploitation in Dalit women's lives.

Lastly, the lines, "But in the end, she cannot go to Santiniketan... Her older brother says... Kamal has no opinion of her own." show us how Kamalini's voice is muted at a crucial stage in her life. The decision about her education is not hers to make; her desires, ambitions, or opinions are irrelevant. Her brother's word becomes final, and her silence becomes normalised. This reveals how even when Dalit girls show promise and opportunity arises, patriarchal authority whether in the family or society strips them of agency. Kamalini is not portrayed as unintelligent or uninterested; rather, she is denied the right to choose, reflecting how systemic control operates by silencing women's voices in everyday decisions. However, Charal transforms Kamalini's muted moment into testimony, ensuring that what Kamalini could not say becomes part of a collective Dalit feminist voice. Kamalini's voiceless within the story becomes Charal's resistance outside it.

What emerges from these fragments is a testimonial mode, similar to the voices in Charal's poetry. Like *Poem 17*'s insistence on "being mechanical" or *Poem 18*'s refrain of "nothing has happened," Andhar Bil testifies to how women internalize silence and denial as strategies for survival. However, while the poems often present interior monologues of grief and suppression, the semi-novel extends these voices into a communal register. Its dialogic form, where stories are exchanged in kitchens, fairs, and religious gatherings, ensures that individual pain is always embedded within collective memory. In this sense, poetry and prose serve the same political project: transforming silenced suffering into narrative resistance.

Poetic Voices of Resistance: Kalyani Thakur Charal's Poems from Poems of Chandalini. Kalyani Thakur Charal's *Poems of Chandalini* resonates as a counter-canon of Bengali literature, a space where Dalit women's pain, resilience, and defiance are etched into verse. Her poetry exposes the structural violence of caste and patriarchy while simultaneously transforming writing into a space of survival and agency. Through sharp imagery of the body, labor, and everyday landscapes, Charal creates a language of resistance, reclaiming subjecthood for Dalit women and foregrounding their voices in a tradition that historically erased them.

Poem 22 from *Poems of Chandalini* depicts the smoldering inner turmoil of unfulfilled desires: “More you fire up things

I burn myself more
in flames of unfulfilled desires
I burn slowly”

Here, the metaphor of burning conveys both physical suffering and emotional erosion under systemic oppression. The female body becomes the site of exploitation but also the vessel of defiance, refusing to be extinguished despite the flames. The slow burn symbolizes endurance, a refusal to collapse under the weight of humiliation. By voicing this inner fire, Charal converts silence into testimony, transforming private grief into political speech.

In *Poem 25*, the imagery shifts toward the violence of marital and social institutions: “I’m your candle flame

burnt cotton
the girl’s fate
her sad eyes
in a marriage attire...
a wife committed suicide.”

Here, marriage which is sanctified in patriarchal discourse is unveiled as a site of despair and death. The bride, clothed in ritual finery, becomes a symbol of entrapment and silenced suffering. The juxtaposition of luminous imagery (candle, flame, stars) with tragedy (suicide, fate) reinforces the contradictions of womanhood under patriarchy. Charal uses the metaphor of the body in flames to denounce gendered exploitation, refusing to let such violence remain hidden behind ritual sanctity.

Poem 34 deepens the theme of abandonment and collective grief:

“You promised me so much,
but all you got me was a sky full of sorrows
that fall like stars from outer space every night...
Tell her that existence in this world is inhumane in itself.”

Here, the landscape itself, sky, stars, moon becomes an image of broken promises and inhuman existence. The cosmic imagery mirrors the vastness of Dalit women's despair, yet by articulating sorrow as falling stars, Charal transforms it into a visible, shared experience. This move from private abandonment to cosmic scale asserts the universality of caste and gendered violence while centering Dalit women's voices as narrators of truth.

Next, *Poem 35* powerfully foregrounds the Dalit woman's body as the primary site where caste and patriarchy intersect. The violence described in the poem is not abstract or symbolic alone; it is enacted directly upon a woman's body, particularly her lungs, which represent breath, voice, and life itself. The poem begins with an image of forced purification:

“When you were blowing into the furnace
my lungs pulled out
and they turned red like charcoal tikkas
because you wanted them pure like yourself.”

Here, the demand for purity is directed at a woman's body, exposing how caste ideology operates through gendered control. The furnace becomes a metaphor for Brahmanical society that seeks to discipline and cleanse Dalit women, not to purify them but to burn them into submission. The woman's lungs being “pulled out” suggests extreme vulnerability and violation, indicating how Dalit women's bodies are imagined as available for correction, punishment, and pain.

The reference to “charcoal tikkas” is particularly significant because it reduces the woman's body to an object meant for consumption and disposal. This image echoes the long history of Dalit women being treated as expendable labouring bodies rather than as full human subjects. The damage inflicted is not momentary; it is prolonged and intimate. The poem's attention to wounds, pus, and bleeding,

“Even now, the puss persists, and it bleeds”- emphasises how caste violence marks the female body permanently. Pain does not end, it settles into the flesh and becomes part of everyday existence.

The speaker's search for healing further reveals the gendered nature of suffering:

"I've applied a variety of ointments...sold on Gede local trains.

There were no treatments
that could alleviate the discomfort."

The use of local, makeshift medicines sold on trains points to the absence of institutional care for Dalit women's bodies. Their pain is treated as normal, inevitable, and unworthy of serious attention. The lack of cure reflects how Dalit women are expected to endure silently, managing injury through resilience rather than justice or repair.

What transforms the poem into Dalit feminist testimony is its closing address to the oppressor:

"Do you know what these burnt lungs say?

Stay well, wherever you are and with whomever you are

Stay well."

Despite the severe bodily harm inflicted on her, the woman does not speak from hatred or revenge. Instead, she asserts moral strength and emotional restraint. This gesture resists dominant stereotypes that portray Dalit women as either passive victims or uncontrollably angry subjects. The woman's voice here is calm, self-aware, and ethically grounded, asserting dignity even in suffering.

When read through the lens of Dalit feminist theory, Poem 35 shows how testimony emerges from the injured female body. The woman's lungs speak not only of pain but of endurance and selfhood. By allowing the woman's body to narrate its own wounds, Charal converts private suffering into collective knowledge. The poem insists that Dalit women's embodied experiences are not marginal or incidental but central to understanding caste violence. In doing so, it reinforces the claim that Dalit women's testimony offers a crucial and irreplaceable perspective on social reality.

Poem 43 crystallizes the spirit of self-assertion:

"Do not adorn me as moon on the head

I will become a new moon

Allow me to walk the earth's surface

Allow me to be human.”

This demand to ‘be human’ is perhaps the most direct articulation of Dalit women’s resistance. Rejecting ornamental roles and symbolic idealization, Charal insists on recognition of Dalit women’s material, lived humanity. The metaphor of the new moon signifies renewal, visibility, and cycles of change, marking a shift from silence to articulation.

Poem 47 shifts Charal’s focus from intimate bodily injury to the everyday operation of caste power within social and institutional spaces, while still keeping the Dalit woman’s body at the centre of this violence. The poem exposes how caste hierarchy continues to function even within supposedly modern, constitutional settings. The figure of the Kayastha girl, married into a Brahmin household, becomes crucial here. Although she herself faces discrimination

“her mother-in-law does not savour dishes cooked by her”

she reproduces the caste hierarchy by asserting superiority over her tribal colleague:

“Look at my junior

where she sits in the hierarchy!”

This moment reveals how caste prejudice is internalised and enacted through women’s bodies, where food, labour, and proximity become markers of purity and pollution. The tribal woman’s body is not only excluded but actively disciplined. Charal shows how constitutional rights are violated through everyday acts of humiliation and revenge:

“Flouting constitutional right

she exacts her vengeance on her.”

The woman’s body here becomes the site where institutional power is exercised through denial of dignity, opportunity, and recognition. Importantly, the poem exposes the hypocrisy of caste meritocracy by contrasting this treatment with the unchecked promotion of upper-caste men: “that baidya born man

has jumped over at least ten others... and got his promotion.”

While Dalit women are scrutinised and punished, upper-caste male bodies move freely through structures of power without accountability.

Charal further reveals how caste oppression is sustained collectively, not accidentally. Trade union leaders, political figures, and bureaucratic systems are shown to protect upper-caste interests while erasing evidence of injustice:

“RTI will bring you no results
Because all documents have been destroyed.”

The destruction of records mirrors the historical erasure of Dalit women’s suffering, rendering their bodies visible only as targets of control, not as subjects of rights. Violence here is not always physical; it is administrative, systemic, and deeply gendered.

What makes this poem particularly significant within a Dalit feminist framework is its insistence that caste violence does not operate only through overt brutality but through everyday gestures like food refusal, workplace hierarchy, denial of promotion, and silencing through paperwork. Dalit women’s bodies are positioned at the lowest rung of this system, constantly watched, judged, and disciplined. By naming these mechanisms, Charal transforms institutional injustice into poetic testimony. The poem asserts that the Dalit woman’s body is not only a victim of caste but also the lens through which the workings of caste society can be most clearly understood.

Lastly, *Poem 51* marks a significant shift in Poems of Chandalini from individual suffering to collective political awakening. The poem is brief but forceful:

“The early birds call
I call
Wake up black men and women!
Thousand-years-asleep-men and women
Wake up!”

Here, Charal moves beyond personal pain and speaks directly to the Dalit community as a collective. The repetition of the call to ‘wake up’ transforms the poem into a rallying cry, urging Dalit men and women to recognise their long history of oppression and silence.

The phrase ‘thousand-years-asleep’ is particularly important. It does not suggest ignorance or passivity but points to a condition imposed by centuries of caste domination. Sleep here functions as a metaphor for enforced silence, denial of rights, and systematic exclusion from knowledge, power, and self-recognition. By naming this historical sleep, Charal identifies caste oppression as a long-term structural condition rather than an individual failure.

The poet’s voice, ‘I call’ is significant because it establishes the Dalit woman not merely as a victim but as a political speaker. After documenting bodily injury, hunger, humiliation, and silencing in earlier poems, the Dalit woman now assumes the role of one who awakens others. This is a crucial reversal of power. The Dalit woman’s voice is no longer confined to testimony alone; it becomes directive and mobilising. She speaks not only for herself but to her community, asserting moral and political authority.

The reference to ‘black men and women’ further universalises Dalit experience while retaining its rootedness in caste oppression. The term signals shared histories of marginalisation and racialised bodies, allowing the poem to resonate with global struggles against structural inequality. At the same time, the inclusion of both men and women is important. Charal does not isolate Dalit women’s struggle from that of Dalit men; instead, she insists on collective awakening while retaining the Dalit woman’s position as the speaker who initiates this call.

When read within the framework of Dalit feminist testimony, *Poem 51* represents the culmination of resistance. Earlier poems expose what caste and patriarchy do to the Dalit woman’s body and psyche. This poem, however, imagines a future-oriented politics rooted in awareness and action. Testimony here evolves into mobilisation. Thus, it reinforces the central argument of this paper that Dalit women’s poetry is not limited to narrating suffering but actively participates in reshaping social consciousness. By calling her community to wake up, Charal positions Dalit women not at the margins of political thought but at its very centre as thinkers, leaders, and agents of transformation.

Conclusion: From Silence to Speech

In both *Poems of Chandalini* and *Andhar Bil*, Kalyani Thakur Charal demonstrates how writing becomes an act of survival and defiance for Dalit women. Her poems, with their stark imagery of burning lungs, damp minds, and the plea to be human, capture the intimate violence of caste and gender oppression while refusing silence. Her novella, on the other hand, situates

these struggles within community narratives, exposing how child marriage, widowhood, polygamy, and religious taboos shape women's everyday lives. What unites the two genres is their testimonial quality, each line and story stands as evidence against centuries of invisibility. Is this not resistance at its sharpest edge, when narration itself becomes a weapon that unsettles the foundations of caste and patriarchy?

By placing Charal's work alongside Sharmila Rege's Dalit feminist standpoint, we see that these are not isolated experiences but collective epistemologies, ways of knowing and speaking in the world differently. They demand that we read literature not just as art but as politics, as testimony, as resistance. And what greater contribution can literature make than to wound privilege, to fracture complacency, and to demand recognition of the humanity of those deliberately denied it? Hence, 'Writing from the Shadows' is not just a metaphor for exclusion, it is a strategy of survival, a declaration of war against silence. Charal's words reclaim the erased spaces of Bengali Dalit women, reminding us that every line, every fragment of memory, every burst of anger is a step toward dignity. And so isn't it time we ask: if shadows can speak with such fire, how long will we keep pretending not to hear? If the margins have carved a language of defiance, how much longer can the center ignore its own trembling ground?

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