

Ecologies of Marginality: Nonhuman Forces in Dalit Women's Autobiographical Writings

Introduction

By *ecologies of marginality*, I refer to the environmental and material conditions through which marginalized lives. Marginality here is not only social, but ecological. By *nonhuman forces*, I mean animals, rivers, plants, illness, and everyday objects that actively shape lived experience rather than remain in the background. In this connection I want to mention Professor Judith Roof who says, "Life can illustrate the principles of life because all life is connected". This is important, the interconnectedness. The objective of this paper is to explore this interconnectedness in Dalit women's autobiographical writings that challenge anthropocentric and upper-caste humanist ways of thinking.

Kapil Krishna Thakur writes—"The Dalits believed they are the son of the soil of Bengal and intricately connected with its land. The land has given them food, the labor of their ancestors has made the land fertile...the peasants share an emotional relationship and kinship with this land."

This intimate relationship between land, labor, and Dalit life disrupts the human-nature division. Posthumanist ecology builds on such moments of kinship to argue that survival is possible through entanglement with nonhuman forces rather than through human autonomy alone.

Analysis : Kalyani Thakur Charal

In "*Why Do I Write Charal?*", Charal repeatedly evokes nonhuman images such as **the dead cow, the bel tree, jute fibres, and fish**.

The narrative opens with memories of displacement after Partition, where the loss of homeland is articulated not only through human absence but through ecological rupture—the missing rivers, fish, and village landscapes that once sustained everyday life.

Dalit activist writer Ashish Hira writes—"Just as a tree with its roots anchors strongly to the land, these people did not want to leave their homeland, the sky, the trees, the rivers and marshes, their neighbors and relatives" (Hira 2020, 12).

Charal's family lives on scaffolds over floodwater, which reveals the fragile ecological conditions of Dalit life.

The appearance of the dead cow floating in floodwater becomes a particularly charged moment of eco-posthuman entanglement, while Charal's father pushing it away with a stick reveals how nonhuman objects mediate survival. Charal shows how the stick, far from being a neutral tool, emerges as a material extension of power—simultaneously enabling protection, labour, and violence.

Economic survival in the text is likewise structured through nonhuman assemblages. Jute, as a vegetal resource, becomes instrumental in sustaining education and family life.

Charal recalls her childhood friend Chabi, who owns two buffalo carts that Charal and the other friends wish to ride. However, Chabi's command over her buffaloes and her refusal to allow others to ride them reflect her power as a human. As Charal notes, **"This is called power. If one has it, many can be deprived. I then considered Chabi to be a feudal lord."** Power here is not human-centered but emerges from control over nonhuman bodies.

Through these moments in the text, Charal's narrative articulates a Dalit female subjectivity that is profoundly posthuman, formed through floodwater, animals, vegetal economies, and material objects. The text thus challenges upper-caste humanist epistemologies by revealing how life at the margins is sustained through interconnections with the non-human world.

Analysis II: Lily Halder

Turning to Lily Halder's *"College Life,"* we encounter Lily's recollection of her childhood in her uncle's house at Kanchan Nagar in Burdwan that is deeply embedded in an ecological surrounding by bakul trees, and dense shrubs. The fragrance of bakul flowers permeates the entire area,—smell, air, and vegetal presence—actively participates in the formation of memory and subjectivity. Nature here is not a passive background, rather it envelopes everyday life. The presence of peacocks in the nearby forests and the Damodar river further extends this ecological network.

The interconnectedness between the human and the nonhuman becomes especially visible in moments of illness. When Lily's brother is diagnosed with a brain tumour, healing is sought not solely through medical intervention but through ritual practices involving holy water from a prayer pot, which he is instructed to drink. This moment foregrounds a posthuman ecological understanding of the body as porous, where water is charged with spiritual significance and becomes a nonhuman agent in the process of healing.

What emerges from these scenes is a heterogeneous field of relations that exceeds a purely human-centered understanding of experience. Rosi Braidotti formulates this condition as heterogeneity within posthuman thought, arguing that "heterogeneity, complexity and multiplicities open a myriad of possibilities of both resistance and counter-actualization of alternatives."

Conclusion

Dalit women's autobiographical writing thus insists that subjectivity is relational, vulnerable, and materially embedded.

As the discussions in this conference have shown, posthumanism can be understood as an ethical response to the Earth. It invites us to imagine new ways of being in the world by addressing the lives of other species. At the same time, posthumanist thought draws attention to the ways class, caste, and race intersect in shaping ecological conditions.

In this context, this presentation has tried to argue that Bengali Dalit women's autobiographies function as ecological archives of marginality. By foregrounding nonhuman agency, these texts challenge dominant assumptions about the human and open up more inclusive ways of thinking about multi-species ecology that abandons any belief in the species- superiority of the human.