



Adivasi Literatures in India: Disrupting the Norms through Memory, Intersectionality and Critique

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Abstract

The mid-twentieth century saw the rise of postmodernist literary practices and Black feminist thought, both of which resisted dominant power structures. In India, Dalit and Adivasi literatures parallel global postmodernism but maintain distinct identities. Adivasi writing challenges literary canons by foregrounding displacement, dispossession, and erasure, articulating an ethos shaped by historical trauma, cultural alienation, and resistance rather than mere assimilation into postmodernist aesthetics. This paper examines how Adivasi literatures negotiate with postmodernist literary forms while asserting its unique cultural expression, challenging the reduction of its works to postmodernist frameworks. It examines the features of two Adivasi writings, *My Father's Garden* by H.S. Shekhar and *Kocharethi* by Narayanan, to understand the specifics of their narrative forms and how they develop Adivasi literary expression and voice as they explore the boundaries between fiction and reality, but only as something unavoidable given Adivasi subjectivity that undercuts narration. At the same time, it seeks to understand how the specificities and uniqueness of Adivasi literary expression cannot be entirely subsumed within the postmodernist literary ethos. It also takes the English translation of Narayanan's *Kocharethi* as its first text of analysis.

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1. Introduction

The rise of postmodernist literary practices in the mid-twentieth century coincided with the emergence of Black feminist thought in the United States, both of which advocated a politics of difference, decentralisation, and resistance to dominant structures of power, such as patriarchy, racism, and capitalism. While postmodernism emphasises the language of disruption and subversion, its rhetorical tendency often appropriates the voice of marginalised groups without addressing the real material and structural conditions of their subjugation. In the Indian context, the emergence of Dalit and Adivasi literatures in the latter half of the twentieth century occurs alongside the expansion of global postmodernist literary forms. However, the question remains: Can the formal and thematic similarities between postmodernist and Adivasi literatures in India be read as evidence of the latter's subsumption within the former?

Adivasi literatures in India challenge mainstream literary canons through a radical reconfiguration of dominant subject matters, narrative styles, and linguistic conventions. By highlighting experiences of displacement, dispossession, and erasure, Adivasi writing expresses a distinct literary ethos shaped by historical trauma and cultural alienation. This paper examines these assumptions by exploring the uniqueness of Adivasi literary expression and its connection to postmodernist conventions. It primarily draws from two Adivasi literary texts, **My Father's Garden** by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, published in 2018, and **Kocharethi: The Araya Women** (2011) by Narayan, translated from Malayalam into English by Catherine Thankamma, to analyse the formal and narrative strategies that define Adivasi literary expression. These texts blur the boundaries between fiction and reality in ways that reflect an embedded Adivasi subjectivity, unsettling dominant narrative forms without necessarily aligning with postmodernist literary aesthetics. The relationship between self and other, for example, operates differently in Adivasi writing, where the 'other' is not an externalised entity but an extension of the self, rooted in collective existence and intimacy with land, community, and nature. This ontological closeness fundamentally challenges postmodernist assumptions of fragmented and alienated subjectivity. Furthermore, Adivasi literature resists dominant literary canons by focusing on lived experiences rather than formal experimentation.

Methodologically, by combining close textual analysis with attention to the writer's self-narrative, the paper explores how themes of belonging, trauma, and identity emerge both within the text and through the writer's position. This approach enables an understanding of Adivasi writing not merely as a formal literary experiment but as a material and epistemic intervention rooted in lived experience. However, this paper aims to argue that Adivasi literature demands a critical framework distinct from postmodernist interpretations, one that recognises its embeddedness in the lived realities of historical trauma and cultural marginalisation rather than assimilating it within abstract theoretical frameworks.

2. Literary Postmodernism and the Crisis of Modernism

Literary postmodernism emerged in the West during the 1960s in response to the horrific "violations of human rights that took place during the Second World War" (Waters & Russell III, 2012, p. 301). The extensive death, destruction, and conditions of genocide and human oppression

created a context in which the earlier modernist pursuit of meaning and structure seemed irrelevant. Considering the horrors of the Holocaust, the atomic devastation in Japan, and the total dehumanisation enabled by the Japanese internment camps in the United States, postmodernist literary writers emphasised the utter meaninglessness of life. The complete trivialisation and uncertainty of human existence, driven by the whims of others, fostered a sense of meaninglessness that postmodernists believed was necessary to “capture” or “encapsulate” (Jarvis, 1998).

Through the postmodernist framework (or absence thereof), it becomes impossible to perceive the world or reality, thereby leading to a denial or rejection of value systems that attempt to ascribe meaning to the world; this would, for example, include institutions such as religion. With the rejection of meaning and the structures that confer it, postmodernism has resulted in the dissolution of distinctions between high culture and low culture. While modernism focused on defining clear boundaries, postmodernism examines the blending of multiple generic conventions within a single text. The merging of various genres is also associated with the postmodern literary practice of intertextuality, where texts emerge as allegories or assemblages of earlier works; no text exists in complete isolation, and all texts bear traces of another literary work; this could be through themes, narrative styles and tropes, or responses to previous works.

The rise of the postmodernist trend in literature coincided with the development of Black feminist thought in the United States. Many have argued that Black feminist politics and writing are direct outcomes of postmodernism. Postmodernism has challenged the core assumptions and foundations of the sciences, as well as modernist and structuralist literary discourses and practices. Crucially, postmodernism has provided the context and frameworks to critique the oppressive and hierarchical power dynamics within existing systems (Strinati, 2012). It has helped us recognise that norms related to race, gender, and sexuality are not innate or fixed. By arguing that these norms are socially constructed categories of identity rather than inherent truths, postmodernism has equipped us with the conceptual tools to decentre notions and practices that have previously been regarded as “natural” and “true”. Significantly, black feminist thought has also challenged the racist and sexist assumptions underpinning positivist sciences. Much of medical and biological sciences have developed “logics” that portray Black African races as inferior and less than human, thereby justifying their supposed “natural” and “evolutionary” decline compared to Caucasians (Brown, 2013).

Experimentations in the positivist sciences have historically been conducted on non-White bodies. During World War II, German doctors carried out brutal, invasive, and dehumanising experiments on the bodies of Jewish prisoners. These experiments aimed to support ideas of racial hygiene and purity. Nazi physicians focused on three main research questions: first, to test physiological limits and the ability to survive extreme physical conditions for military purposes; second, to evaluate medical drugs and invasive medico-surgical equipment; and third, to advance the Nazi racial and ideological goal of racial homogeneity. These medical experiments were notoriously performed under dehumanising conditions and did not adhere to principles of medico-legal ethics. Given these factors, along with their racist motivation, the outcomes and results of the experiments carried out during the Holocaust have been entirely discredited.

The term scientific racism refers to an entire system of beliefs, theories, and practices that seek to justify the racial superiority of the Caucasian races. Scientific racism misinterprets the findings of various scientific disciplines such as physical anthropology, craniometry, evolutionary biology, and anthropometry to prove that certain groups of human beings are biologically inferior to others. Craniometry, which involves measuring human skulls, was used to argue that White people are more evolved than Black people. By the early twentieth century, the discipline of social sciences also began to support the conclusions drawn by scientific racism (Clough & Herman, 2024). Studies conducted in American prisons showed an overwhelming majority of Black inmates, thereby suggesting that a greater tendency for criminality existed among the African American community. However, such studies in social sciences failed to account for the significant socio-political and economic factors such as ghettoised housing, lack of education and healthcare, limited economic and social mobility, as well as institutionalised racism, and how these factors contributed to the high incarceration rates among Black people. “The murder of George Floyd in 2020, and the Black Lives Matter movement” (Khosla, 2024), which followed, leading up to the conviction of the white police officers who used excessive force in the process of apprehending Floyd and caused his death, has exposed the systemic racism within the police and judicial systems that has led to the unfair imprisonment and deaths of countless Black individuals in America. Despite this stark historical context, scientific racism continues to dominate popular perceptions of the racial and biological superiority of White people.

Postmodernism has highlighted the socially and politically constructed nature of many modernist disciplines, thereby unpacking the logics of hierarchy and domination that underpin these fields. Mainstream psychiatry in America has historically involved the pathologisation and criminalisation of homosexuality and queer bodies and identities. Michel Foucault has been a prominent figurehead of the postmodernist and deconstructionist movements, focusing his research on how institutions and society construct notions of illness and health, in both medicine and psychiatry, as well as the conceptual foundations of prisons and sexual norms and practices. One of Foucault's key contributions to contemporary thought is the relationship between power and knowledge. He famously argued that knowledge and truth are both produced through historical contexts and power structures. The constructed nature of knowledge and truth means that neither can claim to be absolute. Different regimes of power throughout history have contributed to the constantly evolving nature of truth (Foucault, 1984). Importantly, those in power have had both control over and interests in producing knowledge that reaffirms their legitimacy, both in society and in politics.

Foucault's own identity as a gay man was closely linked to his questions about how certain sexualities, other than the heterosexual norm, have been socially constructed as illnesses. The pathologisation of homosexuality took a frantic turn in the 1980s with the AIDS pandemic. Large numbers of people from the gay male community were dying during this period, while facing discrimination for their sexual identity. Institutions such as medicine, government bodies, police, and religion were so entrenched in their fear and stigma of homosexuality that it became an insurmountable barrier to furthering research into finding a cure for the disease. The virulent homophobia hindered, and continues to hinder, members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual (LGBTQIA) community from accessing healthcare, and many remain unaware and undiagnosed. Consequently, homophobia and AIDS-related stigma

not only perpetuated the mistaken notion that gay male bodies were the “origins” of the disease, but also enabled gay men to be more vulnerable to it (Foucault, 1984). Postmodernism has played a significant role in dismantling the elements of a tautological and oppressive hierarchy that produces binaries between the norm and the “abnormal”.

3. Postmodernism and the Lack of Politics thereof

Not unlike postmodernism, Black feminist thought and activism have also challenged modernist knowledge and practices, particularly those related to racism and misogyny. However, this does not imply that Black feminist thought is a product of postmodernism, nor that postmodernism created the environment for anti-racist thought in general, or for Black feminist scholarship and activism to emerge. In fact, there is considerable opposition between the Black movement and postmodernism. For example, the latter dismisses the significant role that religious faith has played in empowering and mobilising the Black community. The postmodernists’ outright rejection of institutionalised and moral knowledge and practices overlooks the historical role of faith for the African American community (Collins, 2000). Importantly, postmodernism’s hostility to moral orientations also made it difficult to develop a concept or framework for social action, even against oppressive and hierarchical practices. Social action and social justice have historically been integral to the Black and civil rights movement in America.

From the late nineteenth century to well into the middle of the twentieth century, a majority of knowledge and truth in the Western world was constructed around the differences between sexes and races. However, postmodernism, as well as Black scholarship and activism, have posed important questions about how power has shaped these differences. Ways of being human in the world are encompassed within binary oppositionalities; that of man and woman, heterosexual and homosexual, White and Black, reason and emotion, and self and the other (Collins, 2000). Moreover, this politics of binary differences not only produces categories on either side of the line of difference as norm but also normalises the antagonism between the two categories, as well as the antagonism between the social and political norm and everything outside it. For instance, popular imagination takes it as given that man and woman are gender norms; however, the antagonism between the two genders is also socially constructed. Hence, the popular saying “Men are from Mars, and Women are from Venus” (Noonan, 2007, p. 50). Historically, the characteristics of womanhood have been defined in terms of a lack of maleness. At the same time, transgender persons pose an important question about their own identity and existence outside of the socially given binaries of man and woman, while society struggles to accommodate trans expression and life within the opposition of maleness and femaleness. Modernist thought and positivist sciences have played significant roles in defining identities through oppositionalities, which have been instrumental in sustaining the oppression of those outside the norm. In many ways, postmodernism has helped us understand how oppression based on race, gender, and sexuality has shaped modern societies.

4. Black Feminism/Identity Politics vis-à-vis Postmodernism

As previously mentioned, postmodernism has been widely criticised for its perceived lack of construction, despite its pervasive critique of social, cultural, and political formations. Many argue that postmodernism's own ethos of critique and celebration of difference and marginality makes it difficult to organise politically and socially against systems of oppression. American literary critic Frederic Jameson (1991) contends that the co-option of postmodernist identity politics by capitalism has commodified social and political differences, stripping them of their political significance and embedding them within hierarchical societal structures. Capitalism further reinforces existing differences by emphasising the "essential" qualities of identities, thus confining individuals within the shells of their identities—as defined by capitalism—rather than enabling awareness of the power relations embedded within these differences (pp. 9-10). Simultaneously, the co-option of postmodernist difference allows white people to appropriate the cultures of Black and Asian communities without fostering conditions for genuine and respectful exchanges. Black individuals have been penalised, lost employment, and faced stereotyping and violations, all rooted in the embodiment of their culture—through skin colour, body shape, and hair texture. Without acknowledging how White cultures have historically demeaned Black people and their cultures, capitalism has facilitated the appropriation of black hairstyles and cultural expressions by white individuals. Postmodernism's emphasis on decentering and differences has become commodified, especially within media representations that use Black celebrities' voices to appear diverse, while in reality perpetuating racial inequalities in the means of production. How can we understand the transformation that marginalised identities have undergone from the conditions of capitalist modernity to those of capitalist postmodernity?

Taking the example of the Black community in America, their social status has shifted from absolute bondage and slavery to that of a profit-driven commodity, where Black identities and bodies are exploited to generate profit for an industry still predominantly controlled by White capitalists and industrialists. The current context of liberal bourgeois individualism sustains conditions of oppression by emphasising individual differences. The individual, regardless of racial, gender, or class identities, becomes the focus of depoliticised difference, erasing the political potential of collective action that underpins the existence and mobilisation of marginalised groups (Crenshaw, 1991). The point is that the politics of postmodernism, in many ways, is rhetorical; it co-opts the language of difference, decentralisation, and resistance against patriarchy, racism, and capitalism—characteristics of movements led by socially and politically marginalised groups. Postmodernist intellectuals have drawn from ideas emerging from collective action practices and returned to the people with an intellectualised language filled with jargon, making it inaccessible to those whose experiences and struggles formed the foundation of these theories. One could argue that postmodernism is endlessly discursive and therefore lacks the potential for genuine political action.

The Black feminist movement has indeed shifted from emphasising difference to developing theories of intersectionality to understand how multiple axes of oppression converge within a single subjectivity. Black feminist scholars such as Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins have established the framework of intersectionality. This concept has been crucial not only in maintaining but also in complicating how systems of dominance and oppression suppress

marginalised groups, and in showing how dominant groups manipulate multiple axes of power to reproduce and sustain their privileges (Mirza, 2015).

The politics of collective action and social justice across the world precedes postmodernist thought and discourse. The Black and civil rights movements in America did not draw on postmodernism. In fact, one may argue that postmodernism offers a theoretical and analytical framework for understanding the social and political assertion of difference at the core of the collective action of marginalised groups.

5. Adivasi Literatures and the Disruption of Mainstream Literary Norms in India

This paper explores the boundaries of postmodernist thought, especially in its engagement with the political struggles of marginalised groups, and considers Adivasi literatures in India as a critical space where mainstream literary assumptions are challenged. Drawing parallels with interventions by Black feminist thinkers who have long examined the exclusions within postmodernist frameworks, the paper highlights how Adivasi literary practices not only engage with but also transcend postmodern literary aesthetics.

Adivasi literatures challenge the dominant literary landscape in India through various means by decentering hegemonic narrative subjects, idioms, and tropes, by highlighting community memory and oral tradition, and by writing in non-dominant or regional languages. While postmodern literary forms favour experimentation, fragmentation, intertextuality, and a playful rejection of fixed meanings, the emergence of Adivasi and Dalit literatures in India, especially since the 1960s, requires a different approach to interpretation. Although there is an overlap in time with the global rise of postmodernism, it would be incorrect to consider Adivasi literary expressions as mere derivatives of postmodernist paradigms. Instead, these literatures present a grounded, historically contextual critique of both colonial and postcolonial modernity, while also resisting full incorporation into the floating signifiers of postmodernism.

This paper turns to two texts, *Kocharethi: The Araya Woman* (2011) by Narayan and *My Father's Garden* (2018) by Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, to explore how narrative form, voice, and symbolic world-making in Adivasi literature present modes of disruption that neither align fully with literary modernism nor with postmodern experimentation.

In her introduction to *Kocharethi*, translator G.S. Jayashree underlines that writing, as a cultural practice, entered Adivasi communities only recently, with orality remaining central to historical and cultural transmission. She writes, "There are not many writers among the Adivasis. In fact, the concept of writing was unknown to the Adivasi until about fifty years ago. They relied on voice and memory, the unspoken word, passed down from generation to generation. To them, voice is life embodied" (2011, p. xvi).

The symbolic world of the Adivasi, she argues, is markedly distinct from the metaphoric or representational logic that governs mainstream literatures:

More importantly, the symbolic universe of the Adivasi is vastly different from that of the non-Adivasi. Essence to the adivasi does not exist behind the appearance metaphorically, but exists materially in its own right, immediately visible and knowable. God is with him as

his friend and neighbour, whom he can appease with a drink, and from whom he can freely ask a favour. The distinction between 'you' and 'me' that marks any 'advanced' society is happily absent in the adivasi's worldview... He does not own any land, but the land is his, as much as it belongs to anyone else in the community. (pp. xvi–xvii).

She continues:

Those who are outside this inclusive way of life call it 'uncivilised'. They take the freedom to idealise, romanticize, or distort it. In Narayan's own words, those representations tended to depict the adivasi as a monochromatic figure, like a demon...of mythological stories. It is to respond to such misrepresentations that Narayan took up the pen. He gives us an authentic picture, the story as told by one who has lived it. He says, 'We wanted to tell the world that we have our own distinctive way of life, our own value system. We are not demons lacking in humanity, but a strong, hardworking and self-reliant community'. (pp. xvi–xvii).

Kocharethi is not merely a story of cultural survival but also a political intervention into how the Adivasi life-world has been consistently misrepresented. Narayan wrote the novel, partly, to counter these distortions where Adivasi figures often appear as caricatures or mythic demons in literature and media. His narrative provides an intimate, internally coherent depiction of Adivasi life that draws from his own memories and community history. However, the novel's form and structure, adhering to certain literary conventions, also mark a departure from the oral traditions it aims to preserve. In this sense, *Kocharethi* occupies a liminal space: it introduces a disruption into mainstream literature while also highlighting the tension between oral culture and the written word.

The novel intertwines everyday life, spirituality, land relations, and social encounters to create a symbolic world that does not easily align with either modernist or postmodernist expectations. Its rejection of the self/other binary, its rootedness in communal belonging, and its portrayal of land as both a material and spiritual resource all challenge the assumptions of literary realism and irony. The text's critique of capitalist individuation, religious conversion, and developmentalist discourse is incisive, yet it never fully detaches itself from the ambivalence brought by modernisation. This complexity underscores the narrative's political strength: it neither romanticises tradition nor conforms to the demand for assimilation.

Narayan's struggles to publish *Kocharethi*, and the critiques he faced even after its publication, further reflect how Adivasi writing continues to be judged against dominant literary standards. As noted, *Kocharethi* took ten years from the time it was initially written to its publication, passing through various hands and reflecting the author's internalised self-doubt about the literary value of his work. Even after its publication, some individuals openly dismissed his style of writing. Narayan mentions how Dr. P.K. Rajashekhara said that the author did not know how to write. While some defended Narayan as an Adivasi writer, he himself felt there was a lack of genuine critical engagement with his work as a literary piece.

That the text is not autobiographical in a conventional sense but still bears the imprint of personal and collective memory complicates any straightforward categorisation. While modernist literature focused on the individual self and postmodern literature questioned its coherence, *Kocharethi*

presents a different approach—a narrative that merges individual memory with community experience without dissolving either.

Turning to *My Father's Garden*, Shekhar's narrative offers a different but equally impactful disruption. Structured in three parts, such as "Lover," "Friend," and "Father," the novel combines elements of the short story form with autobiographical writing. While the fragmented structure might suggest a postmodern sensibility, the emotional and historical stakes are anchored in specific experiences of caste, queerness, and Adivasi marginality. The text explores love, desire, betrayal, and family, not through abstraction but through the embodied, situated experiences of a narrator who remains alienated across multiple social positions.

What makes Shekhar's work unique is not just its queerness, but how queerness connects with Adivasi history and political alienation. The anecdote about the narrator's father called a "man-ape" by outsiders and a "Diku dog" by fellow Santhals illustrates the double alienation faced by Adivasi individuals who pursue social mobility through state institutions. The narrator recalls:

Many years later, I heard my father laughingly recount this story to a friend, one of the only times I ever heard him speak of the discrimination he faced. 'You know, they called me a man-ape when I wanted to join the party. But I still did it!' But the hurt still remained in his eyes. It was only the first of the names he would be called, for discrimination cuts in many ways. Later, after he had joined the party and become well-known in his constituency, there were several Santhals who took to calling him 'Diku seta', the dog of the Dikus, for having joined a party of the non-Adivasis. (2018, pp. 154–155).

The betrayal by both the dominant society and one's own community becomes a central motif across the novel.

Unlike the redemptive arc often linked with autobiographical writing, *My Father's Garden* does not provide closure. Instead, it explores the dissonance between personal longing and collective history, between queer identity and communal loss. The narrator's reconciliation with alienation does not come through healing but through recognising the fractured legacies that shape the contemporary Adivasi condition.

Together, Kocharethi and *My Father's Garden* challenge the narrative conventions that have traditionally silenced Adivasi voices. These texts are not merely contributions to Indian literature from a marginalised perspective; they are radical reconfigurations of what literature can be. They do not just speak from the margins; they redefine the boundaries of the literary field itself.

While postmodernist theory has often claimed to represent marginalised voices through its emphasis on decentralisation and multiplicity, Adivasi literatures pose a deeper challenge. They do not merely multiply voices within an existing framework but confront the epistemological foundations of literary meaning. They are not comparable to postmodernism; they are critiques of its limits.

To view these texts solely through the lens of postmodernism is to diminish their historical particularity and overlook the epistemic rupture they indicate. Instead of trying to classify them within existing aesthetic frameworks, we must see them as disruptive in the most fruitful sense, by breaking, bending, and expanding the literary form to create space for voices long excluded from its narration.

6. Conclusion

Both Kocharethi and *My Father's Garden* exemplify contemporary Adivasi literature, though they are written in markedly different styles and from distinct historical perspectives. While Kocharethi aims to awaken a historical awareness and remind readers of the true Adivasi legacy—not through superficial details but through genuine engagement—*My Father's Garden* addresses the predicament of the Adivasi individual, already shaped and estranged by modern processes, who must navigate various identities tied to their community and sexuality. However, both share a common theme: a consciousness of how modernity has influenced the Adivasi community, resulting in limited social progress and education on one side, and betrayal and alienation on the other—estrangement from all they once called their own. Though both are fictional, they are firmly rooted in Adivasi experience. Despite their critique of modernity, both novels avoid falling into the category of literary postmodernism by employing a historically grounded narrative style. They explore the boundaries between fiction and reality, but only as an unavoidable consequence of Adivasi subjectivity that underpins the narration. Adivasi literature cannot be deemed postmodern solely because it criticises modernity, as it avoids the emphasis on individual difference characteristic of much postmodernist work, and remains inherently connected to the political realities of being socially marginalised as an Adivasi.

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