IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Resistance Literature: Gulamgiri As The First Manifesto Of Dalit Literature In India

Dr. Sanjay Kumar, Assistant Professor, PG Dept of English, Magadh University, Bodh Gaya

Orcid Id - 0009-0001-3116-1451

ABSTRACT

Gulamgiri (Slavery), published in 1873 by Jyotirao Phule, stands as a cornerstone of resistance literature in India, heralding the birth of Dalit literary expression against Brahminical hegemony. Dedicated to American abolitionists, the text reinterprets Hindu myths to expose caste as a form of enslavement akin to chattel slavery, subverting Puranic narratives to empower Shudras and Ati-Shudras. This paper analyses *Gulamgiri* as the inaugural manifesto of Dalit literature, employing postcolonial frameworks like Homi Bhabha's hybridity and Edward Said's counter-discourse to examine its themes of Aryan invasion, cultural resistance, and calls for education and gender equity. Through the dialogic structure between Phule and Dhondiba, the work critiques Brahmin supremacy, drawing parallels with global anti-slavery movements. Phule's inversion of myths—portraying Baliraja as a benevolent ruler oppressed by Vamana—fosters Dalit agency, influencing later figures like B.R. Ambedkar. This study contributes to Dalit studies by positioning *Gulamgiri* as a proto-manifesto that anticipates 20th-century Dalit writings, challenging caste's epistemic violence. In 2025, amid resurgent caste atrocities, Phule's text underscores literature's role in dismantling structural oppression, advocating for a pluralistic canon.

Keywords: Gulamgiri, Jyotirao Phule, Dalit literature, resistance literature, caste slavery, Aryan invasion theory, Satyashodhak Samaj, postcolonial critique, anti-Brahminism

1. INTRODUCTION

In the annals of Indian resistance literature, Jyotirao Phule's *Gulamgiri* (1873) emerges as a revolutionary text, often hailed as the first manifesto of Dalit literature. Born in 1827 into a Mali (gardener) family in Pune, Phule witnessed caste-based humiliations firsthand, fuelling his lifelong crusade against Brahminical patriarchy. Educated in missionary schools, he founded the Satyashodhak Samaj (Truth-Seekers' Society) in 1873, advocating for Shudras (lower castes) and Ati-Shudras (untouchables). *Gulamgiri*, structured as a dialogue between Phule and his friend Dhondiba, retells

Hindu myths to dismantle the caste system's divine sanction, equating it to slavery and calling for emancipation through education and rational inquiry.

The text's significance lies in its prefiguration of Dalit literary aesthetics: autoethnographic critique, mythic subversion, and global solidarity. Dedicated to American abolitionists—"DEDICATED TO THE GOOD PEOPLE OF THE UNITED STATES AS A TOKEN OF ADMIRATION FOR THEIR SUBLIME DISINTERESTED AND SELF-SACRIFICING DEVOTION in the cause of Negro Slavery" (Phule, 1873/1991, p. 3)—it bridges Indian caste oppression with transatlantic anti-slavery discourses. Phule argues that Brahmins, as Aryan invaders, enslaved indigenous populations via religious texts: "The system of slavery, to which the Brahmins reduced the lower classes, is in no respects inferior to that which obtained a few years ago in America" (p. 20). This introduction posits *Gulamgiri* as resistance literature par excellence, challenging Brahminical hegemony and laying the groundwork for Dalit consciousness. By inverting Puranic tales—depicting Vishnu's avatars as tools of subjugation—Phule crafts a counter-mythology that empowers the marginalised. In postcolonial terms, it embodies Said's "contrapuntal reading," juxtaposing dominant narratives with subaltern voices. This paper explores *Gulamgiri*'s manifesto-like qualities, its influence on the Dalit movement, and its enduring relevance in combating caste violence.

2. RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVE

The rationale for this study arises from the resurgence of caste-based violence in contemporary India—over 50,000 atrocities reported in 2024 alone—necessitating a revisit to foundational resistance texts like *Gulamgiri*. Amid debates on Dalit literature's canonicity, Phule's work remains underexplored as a manifesto, overshadowed by Ambedkar's later interventions. Scholarly gaps persist in analysing its global linkages and mythic deconstruction, particularly in light of 2025's digital Dalit activism. Phule's text offers timely insights into epistemic resistance, influencing movements from Satyashodhak to the Bhim Army.

The primary objective is to examine *Gulamgiri* as the first Dalit literary manifesto, focusing on its themes of slavery, mythic inversion, and emancipation strategies. Secondary objectives include tracing its impact on Dalit poetics and evaluating its postcolonial resonance. This analysis repositions Phule as a literary pioneer, enriching Dalit studies.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Resistance literature theory, per Barbara Harlow (1987), frames *Gulamgiri* as a subaltern intervention challenging incarceration, literal and cultural. Postcolonial scholars like Gail Omvedt (2004) laud Phule's Aryan theory as proto-Ambedkarite, while Eleanor Zelliot (2004) traces its Satyashodhak legacy. Anupama Rao's *The Caste Question* (2009) analyses caste as biopolitical slavery, echoing Phule's parallels.

Key studies include Rosalind O'Hanlon's *Caste, Conflict and Ideology* (1985), contextualising Phule's Pune milieu, and Badri Narayan's *Documenting the Undocumented* (2008) on oral Dalit histories. Comparative works, like Laura R. Brueck's *Writing Resistance* (2014), link Phule to modern Dalit fiction. Gaps in manifesto analyses persist; this paper addresses them via textual deconstruction.

4. METHODOLOGY/RESEARCH DESIGN

This qualitative study employs close textual analysis of *Gulamgiri* (1991 English trans.), coding themes like slavery, resistance, and education. Postcolonial theory guides interpretation, supplemented by historical archives. Primary sources: Phule's text; secondary: scholarly monographs. Limitations: translation variances, mitigated by Marathi originals.

5. DISCUSSION

Jyotirao Phule's *Gulamgiri* (1873) transcends mere polemic, emerging as the inaugural manifesto of Dalit literature—a clarion call for cultural, social, and epistemic emancipation from Brahminical thraldom. Composed in Marathi as a dialogic exchange between Phule (the enlightened reformer) and Dhondiba (the sceptical Shudra everyman), the text spans 16 parts, retelling Puranic myths to expose caste as engineered slavery. Its manifesto status derives from explicit calls to action: dismantle Brahmin hegemony, prioritise Shudra education, and forge solidarity with global anti-oppression movements. As Phule declares in the preface, "Let there be schools for the Shudras in every village, but away with all Brahmin schoolmasters!" (Phule, 1873/1991, p. 23), urging institutional reform. This section dissects *Gulamgiri*'s resistance strategies, mythic subversion, global analogies, and lasting influence on Dalit poetics.

At its core, *Gulamgiri* theorises caste as slavery, drawing stark parallels with American chattel bondage to universalise Shudra suffering. Phule contends that Brahmins, as Aryan invaders from Iran, conquered indigenous "Maha-aris" (brave natives) and institutionalised subjugation via religion: "The original ancestors of the Brahmins came here from Iran... and waged a bloody war against the original inhabitants... and conquered and enslaved them" (p. 84). This Aryan invasion narrative, predating modern historiography, reframes caste not as divine order but as colonial violence—an epistemic coup where Vedas and Puranas become "cunning, wicked, and spurious religious tracts" (p. 84). Phule's dedication amplifies this: "DEDICATED TO THE GOOD PEOPLE OF THE UNITED STATES... in the cause of Negro Slavery; and with an earnest desire, that my countrymen may take their noble example as their guide in the emancipation of their Shudra brethren from the trammels of Brahmin thraldom" (p. 3). By invoking the 1865 Emancipation Proclamation, Phule globalises Dalit resistance, positioning Shudras as akin to enslaved Africans—both dehumanised labourers sustaining empires. As he elaborates, "The system of slavery, to which the Brahmins reduced the lower classes, is in no respects inferior to that which obtained a few years ago in America. In the days of rigid Brahmin dominancy... my Shudra brethren had even greater hardships" (p. 20). This analogy, radical in 1873 colonial India,

critiques British rule indirectly while forging transatlantic solidarity, influencing later Dalit internationalism.

In *Gulamgiri*, mythic inversion is the cornerstone of Phule's literary strategy, enabling a radical subversion of Brahminical scriptures and a powerful reclamation of historical narrative for the oppressed. Rather than accepting the sanctity and heroism ascribed to figures of Hindu mythology, Phule systematically deconstructs these tales, exposing them as ideological tools of domination. This approach not only challenges the religious underpinnings of caste but also empowers Dalits and Shudras to claim agency over their own histories.

Central to Phule's method is his reinterpretation of Vishnu's avatars. Where orthodox tradition hails these incarnations as saviours who restore cosmic order, Phule exposes them as vehicles of conquest and subjugation. In Part 6, for instance, he revisits the tale of Vamana, Vishnu's dwarf avatar, who tricks the Asura king Bali to seize his kingdom. For Phule, this episode is emblematic of Brahmin treachery: "He robbed them of all their wealth and enslaved them, calling them 'Shudras' (insignificant people or non-entities) and ordered them to serve his kith and kin as slaves and helots" (p. 49). Here, Vamana's cunning is stripped of its divine veneer, recast instead as a calculated act of dispossession and enslavement. Bali, in this narrative, is not a demon but a symbol of a just, pre-Aryan social order—an early champion of equity and communal well-being, whose downfall marks the advent of Brahminical oppression. In elevating Bali as a proto-Dalit hero, Phule offers his readers a counter-mythology that affirms their dignity and historical presence.

Phule's mythic inversion does not stop with Vamana. In Part 8, he scrutinises the story of Parashurama, the Brahmin warrior sage who annihilates the Kshatriya class. Traditionally portrayed as an act of cosmic rebalancing, Phule exposes this as an allegory for Brahmin consolidation of power: "The Brahmins... practised genocide... on the successive lineage of Hiranyaksha through Baliraja" (p. 53). By reframing these mythological events as episodes of mass violence and usurpation, Phule destabilises the moral legitimacy of Brahmin rule and rewrites the foundational myths of Aryan supremacy as narratives of injustice.

This act of "writing back" aligns Phule with the broader tradition of resistance literature, a paradigm articulated by Salman Rushdie and others, wherein subaltern voices reinterpret and undermine dominant cultural narratives. Phule's dialogic form, embodied in the conversations between Dhondiba and the narrator, democratizes knowledge production. Dhondiba's incredulous questions serve as stand-ins for the audience, while Phule's responses provide critical reinterpretations. This method recalls oral Dalit traditions, where storytelling is a communal process, and also prefigures Ambedkar's dialogic critique in *Annihilation of Caste* (1936).

Phule's satire is another potent weapon in his literary arsenal. By dismissing the Puranas as "the 'game of make believe' played by a handful of little Brahmin girls" (p. 59), he mocks the pomp and authority of Brahminical texts, encouraging a healthy scepticism among Dalit readers toward sanskriti, or

Brahmin culture. This irrelevance not only punctures the aura of scriptural infallibility but also models a critical stance necessary for true emancipation.

In *Gulamgiri*, Jyotirao Phule positions education as the linchpin of his emancipatory praxis, making literacy both a symbol and instrument of resistance. For Phule, the denial of education to Shudras is not merely a social injustice but a deliberate strategy by the Brahminical elite to maintain their hegemony. In Part 9, he explicitly condemns the "ban on educating the Shudras," highlighting that this monopoly arises from the Brahmins' fear that an educated underclass might threaten their dominance. Phule's vivid historical framing—"The brigandish ancestors of these mean Bhat jugglers came to this land... attacked our original ancestors here, and vanquished and enslaved them later on" (p. 62)—exposes education as a site of both conquest and potential liberation.

Phule's advocacy for missionary-run schools for Shudras, with a pointed exclusion of Brahmin tutors, reveals his pragmatic approach to reform. He recognises that Christian missionaries—"The English, Scottish and American (missionaries)... are performing a noble task indeed—that of emancipating our ignorant and Shudra brethren from the inhuman slavery" (p. 65)—offer an alternative to the Brahminical educational system that perpetuates caste hierarchies. By endorsing a model of education that is informed by Christian egalitarianism but rooted in the local context, Phule secularises enlightenment: he appropriates and adapts Western ideals of equality and uses them to challenge indigenous structures of oppression. This hybrid strategy not only destabilises the Brahminical monopoly on knowledge but also prefigures his pioneering efforts in founding schools for girls and lower-caste children as early as 1848—acts that would become foundational to the Satyashodhak Samaj's reformist ethos.

Gender is a crucial intersecting axis in Phule's educational philosophy. He is acutely aware that the subjugation of Shudra women—enforced through practices like sati and prohibitions on widow remarriage—serves to reinforce Brahminical power. By foregrounding women's education and critiquing these oppressive customs, Phule links the emancipation of women to the broader anti-caste struggle. His reforms are not merely about access to literacy but about transforming the social fabric through the empowerment of Shudra women, which is later institutionalised in the rituals and practices of the Satyashodhak Samaj.

Beyond education, Phule's resistance manifests as a sharp socio-economic critique. He portrays the ryot, or peasant, as a "proverbial milch cow" (p. 21), systematically exploited by Brahmin intermediaries such as the Kulkarnis (Part 12). Phule's analysis does not stop at indigenous oppressors; he is equally critical of the colonial bureaucracy—Mamlatdars and Collectors (Part 13)—who reinforce caste structures through the administration of land revenue. Yet, there is a marked ambivalence in his relationship to colonial authority. While Phule lambasts the British for perpetuating caste-based exploitation, he also appeals to their "enlightenment" and sense of justice, urging his fellow Shudras to "place before Government the true state of their fellow humans" (p. 97). This tension—between critique and petition—echoes Frantz Fanon's colonial dialectic, where the colonized subject negotiates the interstitial spaces between resistance and reliance, critique and collaboration.

As a manifesto, *Gulamgiri* catalysed the Dalit movement. Published alongside Satyashodhak Samaj's founding, it inspired non-Brahmin politics in Maharashtra, influencing Periyar and Ambedkar. Ambedkar cited Phule as "the best" anti-caste thinker, adopting his Shudra valorisation. Its mythic retellings birthed Dalit aesthetics: Namdeo Dhasal's poetry echoes Bali's lament, while Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (1986) amplifies Phule's autoethnography. In Tamil Nadu, the Self-Respect Movement tracts mirror its anti-Puranic fervour.

Gulamgiri (Slavery) remains an iconic postcolonial text, especially when examined through the lens of Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity. Bhabha posits that colonial encounters produce "third spaces" where identities, cultures, and resistances are neither wholly indigenous nor foreign, but creatively hybrid. Phule's strategic bilingualism—writing in both Marathi and English—and his use of Western analogies (like referencing American abolitionism) are exemplary of this hybrid approach. By appropriating the coloniser's language and frameworks, Phule reworks them into tools of resistance, thereby destabilising the authority of both colonial and Brahmanical discourses. His methodology opens a "third space" for Dalit agency, enabling marginalised voices to articulate demands that are both locally rooted and globally resonant.

However, *Gulamgiri*'s radicalism is not without its limitations. Critics have observed that while the text foregrounds the oppression of Shudras and women within that category, it does not sufficiently engage with the specific intersections faced by Adivasi communities. The focus on Shudra women, to the relative exclusion of Adivasi or other marginalized female identities, points to a gendered and ethnic partiality that complicates the text's emancipatory claims. Additionally, Phule's reliance on the Aryan invasion theory—framing Brahmins as "Aryan" outsiders—can sometimes slip into essentialist binaries, which, while politically expedient, risk reinforcing the very categories they seek to dismantle.

In contemporary times, the legacy of *Gulamgiri* is being reanimated, especially in the wake of movements like #DalitLivesMatter. The digital sphere has become a new "third space" where Dalit intellectuals and activists invoke Phule's critiques to challenge caste hierarchies and mobilise solidarities. Forewords and essays by figures like Arundhati Roy in new editions of Ambedkar's works underscore the continuing relevance of Phule's ideas, situating him as a foundational voice in the genealogy of anti-caste thought. These digital and literary interventions highlight the adaptability of Phule's hybrid strategies; his text is not a relic, but a resource for ongoing resistance.

In sum, *Gulamgiri*'s dialogic fury, mythic audacity, and emancipatory vision cement its manifesto status, igniting Dalit literature's flame.

6. FINDINGS

Analysis confirms *Gulamgiri* as Dalit literature's first manifesto: its slavery-caste equation (p. 20) universalises resistance; mythic inversion (p. 49) subverts hegemony; education calls (p. 23) blueprint reform. Influence spans Ambedkar to contemporary poetics, fostering hybrid Dalit agency. These affirm Phule's text as an epistemic rupture, vital for ongoing caste abolition.

7. CONCLUSION

Gulamgiri endures as resistance literature's beacon, Phule's manifesto dismantling caste's illusions: "I kicked open the main door of the vast false prison-house of Brahmin cunning and tyranny" (p. 84). Its global dedications and mythic retellings prefigure Dalit poetics, empowering Shudras against epistemic violence. Influencing Ambedkar and beyond, it underscores literature's transformative power. Future studies could explore digital adaptations. In 2025's caste-stricken India, Phule's vision—education sans thraldom—urges renewed emancipation, affirming Dalit narratives' resilience.

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