

Subverting Oppression: The Politics of Deification in Cho Dharman's *Koogai**

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Abstract

This paper examines the subversion of caste and patriarchal hierarchies in Cho Dharman's Koogai, focusing on the deification of violated Dalit women. Through an analysis of the Homo Sacer status of Dalits, the paper discusses how Dharman reclaims the agency of Dalit women by transforming them into goddesses, thereby overturning their position in both the social and spiritual hierarchies. This embodied resistance not only challenges the caste system but also reimagines "untouchability" in a positive light. Drawing on the indigenous folk tradition of Amman worship, this study further explores how Dharman uses these religious tropes to liberate Dalit women from patriarchal and upper-caste control. The divine possession, a common feature in Amman traditions, is reinterpreted here as inhabiting not living bodies but the bodies of women already marked by caste and sexual violence creating a powerful form of resistance and reclamation.

Keywords: Dalit literature; caste; deification; Amman worship; untouchability; resistance.

Introduction

"A new goddess has recently been born in India. She's the Dalit Goddess of English" (Pandey). This headline from a BBC article highlights the establishment of a temple in Uttar Pradesh. The temple, which features a two-foot-tall bronze statue of a goddess holding a pen and a copy of the Indian Constitution, is a symbol of Dalit progress. According to Chandra Bhan Prasad, the Dalit writer behind this idea, the statue represents the English language, and she stands for Dalit renaissance. This deification of a language which can be seen as a catalyst for Dalit awakening is a form of resistance that seeks to celebrate English for its role in emancipating Dalit lives from caste tyranny.

Throughout history, human beings used deification as a response to oppressive social systems. Cultural traditions around the world have employed deification to establish connections between humans and gods. The biblical concept of humans made in God's image reflects this but the idea of deification extends beyond Christianity. The divinization of bodies and symbols as a means of empowerment is a universal practice. This exercise of making objects or persons divine allows them to transcend oppressive influences. The process of deification functions as a strategic means of regaining control by pushing back against power structures. Through sacred objects or figures people transform precarious spaces into sanctified realms. For instance, sacred groves that are preserved through spiritual taboos, protect ecosystems from capitalist exploitation. These groves reflect "the spiritual and ecological ethos" of communities, turning contested land into protected,

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sacred territory (Borthakur 25). Deification thus operates as both resistance and preservation, working to sustain and safeguard cultural traditions.

Literature from marginalized communities has long served as resistance, reclaiming agency and asserting humanity against oppressive structures. Dalit literature reveals caste-based discrimination while offering strategies to resist it. Through their literary works, Dalit authors establish channels for cultural transformation by sharing authentic personal accounts of their existence. As Laura Brueck¹ notes, such subaltern writing challenges the Habermasian public sphere. This resistance often adopts religious expressions to reclaim dignity while critiquing oppressive systems. Cho Dharman's *Koogai* shows how a Dalit group recaptures forbidden spaces by creating sacred sites through unconventional methods. The novel demonstrates how agency assertion by marginalized communities breaks down established caste power frameworks.

Deification in Hindu Society

In *Koogai*, Cho Dharman depicts the sanctification of sites where Dalit women suffer sexual violence, transforming them into sacred spaces that upper-caste individuals cannot violate without spiritual repercussions. This radical act confronts what Sharmila Rege identifies as a linguistic paradox: "In almost all regional languages in India, the word for 'rape' is equivalent to the phrase 'stealing the honour of' and since lower-caste women by virtue of their double oppression have no 'honour' to speak of the right to redressal is often denied" (51). *Koogai* challenges this systemic erasure by restoring dignity through deification, making violated women's bodies not just honorable but divine. This act of deification is rooted in Hindu traditions of elevating virtuous or powerful figures to divine status. In Dharman's text, it becomes a subversive tool. While the worship of Hindu goddess reinforces Brahmanical norms, Dalits in *Koogai* repurposes deification as resistance, reclaiming violated spaces as zones of Dalit empowerment. By equating rape victims with the divine, they weaponize sanctity against patriarchal and casteist violence. *Koogai* thus shows deification's dual function of upholding tradition in dominant Hinduism and destabilizing power structures when used by the oppressed. In both cases, the sacred becomes a contested realm by either reinforcing hierarchy or overturning it.

The concepts of purity and divinity are closely linked in Hinduism. These notions are central to the establishment of social hierarchies. Edward B. Harper observes that "beliefs about ritual purity and ritual impurity form some of the most all-pervasive themes in Hindu culture," with only the ritually pure permitted to have direct communication with gods (151). This worldview privileges Brahmins as closest to divinity while relegating Shudras and Dalits to the margins. In Hinduism, Female deities have been viewed as symbols of strength and purity since the time of Indus Valley Civilization's Mother Goddess (Fane 52). Cho Dharman's *Koogai* subverts this tradition by deifying the violated bodies of Dalit women and transforming sites of caste violence into sacred spaces. Where orthodox Hinduism considers ritual purity as prerequisite for divinity, Dharman reclaims it for the oppressed, challenging the very system that denies Dalits access to the sacred. In this radical act, Dharman validates Ashish Nandy's argument that "the humiliated have some control over their tormentors" despite "asymmetrical power relations" (42). This dynamic manifests when Dalit families, facing the humiliation of their daughters' rapes, reclaim agency through deification rather than internalizing shame. The novel subverts Nandy's observation that Dalits "have traditionally controlled the Savarnas through their power to pollute by touch or presence" (42) by reconstructing untouchability as sacred purity. Dharman's narrative thus inverts caste logic: the deified women's untouchability stems not from pollution but from divine power, exemplifying Nandy's claim about victims' capacity to redefine humiliation. This act also echoes what Stuart H.

Blackburn describes as Hinduism's preoccupation with transcending death through deification (256). In *Koogai*, death is not an end but the beginning of resistance. The deification of Dalit women's bodies challenges the traditional notions of purity by turning spaces untouchable to upper-caste aggressors. The use of deification as a tool of defiance in *Koogai* shows the duality of Hindu divinity which has the power to uphold hierarchy and also the potential to dismantle it when reclaimed by the marginalized.

Folk Traditions and Subversive Deification in *Koogai*

Cho Dharman's *Koogai* performs a radical theological inversion by sanctifying the violated bodies of Dalit women. The author deliberately sacralizes what caste society considers polluted. This transformation unfolds through powerful bodily symbolism in the text. The story begins with Pothi-Amman's ritual bathing, her wet hair "falling to her buttocks" as she combs it—an intimate domestic scene the Jameendar reduces to a "hunting trophy" (208). Following his daughter's rape by the Jameendar, the goldsmith's hands, which once crafted bridal jewelry for "a crore of women", are forced to bury her to "save honour" (208-209). The same hands that once shaped gold for weddings now dig a grave, transforming Pothi Ammal into "the family deity of the goldsmith clans" (209). This narrative strategy draws from South Indian folk traditions that idolize victims of violent deaths. The worship of victims contrasts sharply with orthodox Brahmanical death rituals (Blackburn 256). Mainstream Hinduism marginalizes these folk practices whereas Dharman uses them as tools to challenge caste hierarchy. The deification of rape victims is similar to folk traditions that worship the prematurely dead-figures. In many folk traditions it is believed that the victims possess sacred energy due to their untimely demise. These traditions typically develop around women who died violently, later celebrated as protective deities. *Koogai* adapts this logic but infuses it with anti-caste politics by transforming sites of oppression into spaces of Dalit spiritual sovereignty.

The intervention of Dharman functions through numerous fundamental processes. First, it establishes Dalit-controlled spaces which take control of sacred geography away from upper-castes. Second, by changing the interpretive meaning of wounds and violence into marks of sacred significance, he rewrites bodily semiotics. Third, his methods also introduce new rituals that merge folk customs with Dalit acts of defiance, forming a counter-sacred tradition. Unlike traditional folk deification that often conciliates restless spirits, *Koogai* transforms the practice into one of conscious political act. The deified Dalit woman becomes both protective deity and symbol of communal resistance. The novel illustrates the sacralization process of marginalized individuals which stands in sharp contrast to Brahmanism's exclusive focus on the ritually purity. This resonates with R.S. Sugirtharajah's idea of "hermeneutics of resistance" (2001), which demonstrates how oppressed communities reinterpret religious symbols to challenge dominant power structures. As Sugirtharajah shows in his analysis of liberation theologies, subaltern group reclaim sacred narratives to assert agency. *Koogai* radicalizes this practice by infusing Dalit political consciousness into folk deification, echoing what Sugirtharajah terms "identity-specific reading" (226): a hermeneutic that centers historical suffering as a site of defiance. Where Sugirtharajah critiques classical liberation theology for universalizing oppression (205–206), *Koogai* avoids such homogenization by grounding its resistance in the local—the Dalit woman's body as both sacred and subversive. The novel mirrors the "peoples' reading" model (216–217), where marginalized communities reinterpret texts through lived experience rather than elite theological frameworks. Like the Solentiname peasants who saw their struggles reflected in

biblical narratives (218), *Koogai*'s characters transform deification into a discourse of emancipation.

Sugirtharajah cautions that hermeneutics of resistance risk reinforcing the binaries they seek to dismantle (241). *Koogai* navigates this issue by portraying the deified figure as both victim and avenger, complicating simplistic narratives of liberation. The novel's ambivalence resonates with Sugirtharajah's observation that even radical readings must confront the "hermeneutics of distance" (225), that is, the gap between symbolic resistance and material change. By radicalizing folk traditions through Dalit consciousness, *Koogai* exemplifies Sugirtharajah's claim that religious imagination, when decoupled from Brahmanical or colonial hegemony, becomes a "tool of vitalizing culture and life" (225). The novel suggests true revolution comes not from rejecting tradition, but from reclaiming its most subversive strands - those that have always existed at the margins.

Embodied Resistance: The Subversive Sacred

The Human body represents the intimate space that simultaneously upholds and challenges power dynamics. Michel Foucault conceptualized the body as a political area where institutional power physically "invests, marks, and trains" (Punday 511-512) provides a fundamental framework to study how caste oppression operates through systemic surveillance, regulation, and violation of Dalit bodies. The Brahmanical social gaze makes the Dalit bodies hyper-visible sites of pollution while simultaneously making them invisible as subjects. This erasure of Dalit subjects having rights and dignity is countered in Cho Dharman's *Koogai* where the author powerfully demonstrates how oppression gives rise to transformative resistance. The very embodiment of oppression paradoxically becomes the ground for radical resistance as the violated Dalit body evolves from its original state of misery into a sacred power center.

Koogai's act of deifying raped Dalit women constitutes far more than a narrative device, as it can be seen as a political-spiritual declaration. Dharman makes a significant intervention in the semiotics of caste violence by sanctifying violated bodies. This act represents a dual subversion of dominant power structures. He directly challenges the Brahmanical interpretation which states only pure things can become divine. Through his critique Dharman exposes the Brahmanical system as a fabricated set of beliefs which promotes caste advantages instead of spiritual values. He also uses deification to reclaim narrative and spatial control over physical locations that symbolize trauma while converting these areas into sacred sites. The concept illustrates Foucault's view that power always encounters resistance from those bodies it tries to control. Dharman expands this approach from physical resistance into spiritual dimensions by uniting social activism with spiritual reclamation efforts.

This strategic sanctification leads to what we might call a "counter-theology" of the body. Drawing on one folk traditions of deifying violent deaths while radically questioning the Brahmanical purity-pollution binary, *Koogai* engages in a revolutionary reimagining of Dalit corporeal existence. As feminist scholar Allison Diesel notes, these deified women become "'virgin'...not sexually inexperienced, but independent of male control" (8), their sanctity creating spaces where "a thousand people raised their hands in worship" (Dharman 208). The body that was once the target of caste violence now becomes protected by what we might term a sacred untouchability - not the stigmatized untouchability imposed by caste hierarchy, but a divine untouchability that creates an impenetrable barrier around Dalit spaces and identities.

Koogai reveals powerful ways marginalized communities can turn their very bodies—targeted by oppression—into tools of liberation and shared meaning. The novel shows how the physical

body—its wounds, memories, and presence—can form the basis for a spiritual world that challenges dominant religious systems. This kind of embodied resistance does what political movements often cannot: it creates both a language of protest and a meaningful framework that addresses the mental and spiritual sides of oppression alongside the material. In the end, *Koogai*'s idea of the violated yet sacred body offers a bold alternative to Brahmanical Hinduism and mainstream anti-caste ideas. It suggests that true Dalit freedom needs not just political rights but a whole new way of understanding the body, power, and the sacred. The deities in the novel—women whose harmed bodies become sources of divine strength—show a resistance that is both physical and spiritual, immediate and lasting.

Sacred Subversion: Dalit Reclamation through Deification

The ancient Roman idea of *sacer*—meaning objects or people set apart from the ordinary world and dedicated to the divine (Fowler 57)—offers an important way to understand Dalit oppression and resistance in *Koogai*. Like the *homo sacer*, Dalits have been systematically pushed out of the social order and left vulnerable to violence without legal protection. However, their untouchability stems not from sacredness but from casteist notions of inherent pollution. Cho Dharman's novel radically inverts this logic by deifying violated Dalit women, transforming sites of trauma into spaces of divine power. Where the caste system seeks to fix Dalits as abject, *Koogai* demonstrates how sacredness can emerge from the very bodies and spaces marked as profane, exposing the arbitrariness of caste hierarchies.

This reclamation strongly echoes Giorgio Agamben's concept of *homo sacer*—a figure reduced to "bare life" by sovereign power (142). Dalits live in a state of exception where violence against them is normalized. However, *Koogai* challenges this idea through its act of deification, which doesn't just reflect the *homo sacer* but changes its meaning. The novel's violated Dalit women, once victims of unchecked violence, become untouchable through their sanctification. Their sacred status now excludes the oppressors, turning the usual spatial and symbolic order of caste power upside down. This rebellious theology creates a paradox: the deified Dalit woman is both *sacer* and sanctified, representing exclusion and divine power at the same time.

The exclusion of Dalits from social life is enforced by the Manusmriti² through a theological biopolitics that labels Dalit bodies as inherently polluted like "a menstruating woman, a widow, or a person who has recently been bereaved" (Ghose 84). This ancient legal code gives upper castes the power to ignore ethical rules turning Dalits into Agamben's *homo sacer*: lives without political value, who can be killed but not sacrificed. *Koogai* reveals this logic in scenes such as Muthukkaruppan and Mookkan's hesitation in the clubhouse—where simply sitting on a bench is an act of "blind courage" (Dharman 8). Their overwhelming fear shows the panoptic control of caste, which governs Dalit life down to the smallest actions.

Foucault's idea of biopolitics—the "structural coupling of the political system with biological life" (Alsheh 35) shows up here as a caste-based system that controls Dalit lives through segregation, economic exploitation, and ritual violence. However, *Koogai* presents a powerful form of resistance through its narrative of deification. By making sacred the violated Dalit women, it breaks this biopolitical control and takes back a sense of sacred agency from bodies that are treated as disposable. While the caste system tries to reduce Dalits to "bare life," the novel's rebellious theology affirms their deeply political existence, challenging both the religious ideas behind the Hindu caste hierarchy and the legal systems that support it. Through this process of revealing and reclaiming, *Koogai* creates a counter-sacredness that rises from the margins to disrupt the very systems aimed at erasing it.

This resistance becomes particularly evident through Gopal Guru's spatial framework, which reveals how *Koogai* documents both caste domination and Dalit resistance through its treatment of sacred geography. The novel initially demonstrates Guru's concept that "space is a culturalized phenomenon" operating through "controlling people in finite, enclosed, and divided sites" (82), particularly in how the landlord's sexual violence against Pothi Amman enacts Guru's observation that "the tormentor reconfigures spaces accordingly, so as to seek ultimate regulation of the victim into hegemony and the domination of the former" (73). Yet *Koogai* ultimately embodies Guru's counter-argument that "the victim seeks to reconfigure spaces with the purpose of divesting him or her off the tormenting or humiliating meaning that, as part of the hegemonic politics of the dominant, gets blamed on with the victim" (73), as Pothi Amman's burial site transforms into a temple. This sacred space, "aided by some elements of experience" (78) - specifically collective Dalit memory - illustrates Guru's dialectic between dominant "structuring and restructuring of a given space" (82) by oppressive groups and subaltern reclamations that reconstruct "space as a culturally constructed phenomenon" (82) through resistant practices. The novel thus moves from Guru's condition the tormentor uses "space for producing a particular kind of experience that can morally paralyse a victim" (73) to its revolutionary inversion where "the victim is motivated to restructure and rearrange the space in favour of egalitarianism" (73), completing Guru's spatial theory of caste power and its subversion.

Giorgio Agamben's concept of the biopolitical exception finds its most brutal manifestation in a caste society's treatment of Dalits, whose lives are seen as endlessly expendable under upper-caste rule (142). Cho Dharman's *Koogai* presents a bold theological revolt against this reality in *Koogai*. The story of Pothi Amman—a Dalit girl buried alive by her father to protect family honor from a predatory landlord—becomes a powerful challenge to caste biopolitics. Where the system reduces Dalits to "bare life," Pothi Amman's transformation into a revered goddess changes Dalit existence from disposable to divine (209). Dharman's narrative lays bare caste sovereignty's brutal paradox: the same system that declares Dalit bodies polluting fears their sacralization. The father's act of burying his daughter alive, framed as "saving honor," reveals how caste logic penetrates familial bonds (209). Yet the community's worship at Pothi Amman's gravesite inverts this calculus. As Dharman observes: "Is it possible to live, after earning the enmity of the Jameendar? Yes, if you turn your daughter into a goddess"—deification becomes the ultimate act of resistance (209).

The novel's theological rebellion operates through spatial and ontological transformations. Places marked by caste-based violence become sacred grounds that reject caste hierarchy, while Dalit women's bodies, once oppressed, are redefined as divine. This transformation exemplifies Gopal Guru's insight that while "spaces on their own do not offer epistemological conditions leading to the development of thought," they gain meaning when "aided by some elements of experience" (78). In *Koogai*, the important elements of experience include the traumatic memory of rape and its communal remembrance. The sacred reclaiming creates a Dalit counter-theology that draws from Hindu traditions of deification to challenge the biopolitical roots of caste. Where the Manusmriti demands Dalit exclusion, *Koogai*'s bold sanctification firmly opposes it: what caste sees as killable, we make inviolable. The story of Pothi Amman reveals caste as a system controlling life and death and offers a radical alternative—honoring those cast aside. This goes beyond resistance; it reimagines Dalit existence itself, transforming bare survival into sacred sovereignty. The novel shows how deification, when claimed by the oppressed, becomes a powerful act against caste power. The deification of violated Dalit women in *Koogai* is a powerful theological and political act—a Dalit counter-theology that breaks caste oppression through sacred reimagining. Dharman's story turns sites of trauma into places of divine strength, creating what

might be called an anti-biopolitical refuge where caste's violence loses its hold. This sacred reversal works on several levels: spatially, by turning violated lands into holy ground; ontologically, by changing Dalit women from "bare life" into deities; and temporally, by keeping their stories alive as ongoing spiritual resistance (Agamben 8).

At its heart, this deification cleverly flips the idea of untouchability on its head. The very concept that once labeled Dalits as impure is reclaimed and given new meaning—these deified women are untouchable not because they are dirty, but because they are sacred. Their divine status creates a strong barrier against caste-based discrimination, turning the oppressor's logic against itself. Although their oppressors do not worship them, their sacred presence reshapes social and physical spaces, creating areas of independence within the caste system. Dharman's theological vision expresses a dual form of rebellion: it breaks down the system that treats Dalit lives as disposable, while building a new sacred order from the ground up. This is more than just resistance as Dharman shows how the oppressed can reclaim the power of holiness to redefine their place in the world. Ultimately, *Koogai* asks us to imagine a deeper form of Dalit freedom—one that doesn't just aim to fit into existing systems but calls for a complete rethinking of what the sacred means. Dharman's novel shows how fiction can be a tool for spiritual rebellion. In this way, *Koogai* points toward a Dalit postmodern sacred—a flexible, rebellious spirituality that rises from below to challenge all forms of hierarchical oppression.

Conclusion

Cho Dharman's *Koogai* presents a powerful form of non-violent protest against caste oppression by portraying the transformation of violated bodies of Dalit women into divine figures. His reimagining of spaces of traumatic experiences as sacred spaces inverts social hierarchy as once "polluted" bodies become divine. It makes the oppressor powerless as he can no longer decide what is pure. This spiritual resistance reclaims holiness itself as a tool, making Dalit goddesses truly untouchable: beyond defilement. Dharman associates impurity with the cruelty of the oppressor, giving the binary of purity and pollution an entirely new meaning in the context of caste. His story shows how rethinking spirituality can dismantle oppression without physical fights. The act of deification results in a collective identity through sacred memories. This way of resisting—where trauma turns into sacred power—offers a model for oppressed groups everywhere to take back control through cultural and spiritual change. By redefining divinity from the ground up, *Koogai* shows that the strongest revolutions sometimes start not with weapons, but with new ideas of gods.

Notes

¹In her book, *Writing Resistance*, Laura R. Brueck studies the aesthetics of the oppressed population and positions Hindi Dalit writings as an alternative discourse which, despite its diversity, expresses a unified oppositional voice against the mainstream casteist public sphere in India.

²Manusmriti, also called the Laws of Manu, is an ancient Hindu legal and ethical text. It is attributed to the mythical sage Manu but was likely composed over several centuries. It is regarded as one of the most authoritative texts in Hinduism.

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