

Aesthetics of Refusal in Contemporary Literary Worlds

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Abstract. This article develops a data-driven reading of aesthetic resistance in contemporary literary culture through a curated 37-record corpus of works and literary formations coded for theme, aesthetic principle, resistance form, cultural context, and inferred agency. Rather than treating aesthetics as beauty detached from politics, the study asks how form becomes a medium of refusal when literature confronts caste, patriarchy, ecological devastation, partition memory, spiritual egalitarianism, and cultural survival. The analysis combines documentary corpus auditing, qualitative content analysis, agency scoring, field-regime mapping, and close interpretive synthesis. Results show that ecological crisis and more-than-human vulnerability constitute the largest resistance field (15 records), followed by anti-caste and subaltern dignity (12), while Dalit/insurgent realism and eco-aesthetic/Anthropocene writing form the strongest aesthetic regimes. Agency is high but uneven: texts of Dalit refusal and classical ethical reorientation display strong explicit agency, whereas gendered trauma and partition memory often stage agency as constrained, delayed, or wounded. The article proposes an “aesthetics of refusal” model in which literary value emerges through insurgent truth, ecological grief, gendered memory, and sacred-cultural reorientation.

Keywords: aesthetic resistance; contemporary literature; Dalit aesthetics; ecocriticism; gendered memory; cultural agency; postcolonial literary studies



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1. Introduction

Contemporary literary studies is increasingly shaped by a problem that older divisions between form and politics can no longer solve: how does literature make resistance perceptible when violence is normalized, dispersed, or rendered aesthetically invisible? In the present corpus, resistance is not treated as a slogan attached to literary content, but as a formal and affective operation through which texts reorganize what can be sensed, remembered, mourned, and judged. This distinction matters because contemporary literature often works under conditions in which domination is not always spectacular: caste humiliation may be routinized as social common sense, ecological damage may unfold as slow violence, gendered trauma may survive through silence, and classical or sacred forms may be redeployed to contest rather than merely preserve authority. The article therefore uses the phrase aesthetics of refusal to name the point at which literary form converts social pressure into cultural intelligibility. The argument extends debates

on aesthetic resistance by showing that refusal can appear through witness, allegory, damaged ecology, embodied memory, insurgent realism, and sacred reorientation, rather than through direct protest alone (Moten 2018; Rancière 2004; Bleiker 2009; Seppälä, Sarantou, and Miettinen 2023).

The article builds this argument from a curated workbook entitled *Analisis Estetika dan Resistensi dalam Sastra Kontemporer*, which contains 37 coded records of literary works and literary formations. Each record identifies a work or formation, author, major theme, aesthetic principle, form of resistance, cultural context, inferred agency, and source. The dataset is modest in size but unusually productive because it brings together anti-caste writing, ecological fiction, Partition and gendered trauma, classical Indic poetics, spiritual-democratic ethics, and transnational modern drama. Rather than using the workbook as a list of examples, the study treats it as a structured cultural dataset that requires audit, recoding, and interpretive modeling. The methodological intervention is important: literary-cultural criticism often relies on powerful single examples, while corpus-based work may flatten texts into countable labels. This article moves between those limits by using qualitative content analysis, field mapping, agency grading, and conceptual synthesis so that the final interpretation remains accountable to the data without reducing literature to numerical display (Krippendorff 2018; Saldaña 2021; Kljajevic 2025).

The strongest pressure point in the corpus is South Asian literary modernity, especially where caste, gender, ecology, and memory intersect. Dalit aesthetics is central because it rejects the assumption that literary value must be purified of social wound. In this tradition, the broken body, the insulted name, the remembered stigma, and the claim to dignity are not sociological ornaments added to art; they are part of the conditions under which art becomes ethically necessary (Limbale 2004; Guru 2016; Gajarawala 2013; Rao 2022). Ecological writing provides a second axis by making environmental damage legible as cultural and political crisis rather than as scenery. The corpus includes texts in which rivers, animals, poisoned landscapes, disrupted lifeworlds, and apocalyptic environments do not merely surround human action; they expose the limits of anthropocentric agency and connect survival to more-than-human vulnerability (Nixon 2011; Huggan and Tiffin 2015; Chakrabarty 2021; Banerjee 2025). Read together, these clusters show that refusal may emerge as an insistence on dignity, but also as grief before damaged worlds that can no longer be narrated as passive background.

A third axis of the corpus concerns gendered memory, trauma, and postcolonial belonging. Partition fiction and feminist literary worlds show that resistance is not always performed by triumphant characters; sometimes it survives as testimony, delay, irony, bodily memory, or refusal to let violated experience disappear into official history. This is why the agency score used in the study is interpretive rather than celebratory: low agency may indicate structural capture, while high agency may still unfold inside unbearable constraint. Contemporary theory helps clarify this ambivalence. Posthuman and planetary humanities unsettle the bounded sovereign subject; trauma and affect studies show how silence and vulnerability can carry historical force; postcolonial and cultural theory explain how voice, representation, hybridity, and ideological formation shape the legibility of

resistance across unequal worlds (Braidotti 2019; Ghosh 2016; Mbembe 2019; Nayar 2022; DeLoughrey 2022; Butler 2020; Ahmed 2014; Caruth 1996; Balaev 2018; Spivak 1988; Said 1978; Bhabha 1994; Hall 1997). The corpus is therefore not organized by a single politics of empowerment, but by a more difficult question: what happens aesthetically when social harm becomes narratable but not fully repairable?

The study addresses three research questions. First, what resistance fields and aesthetic regimes structure the curated corpus? Second, how does inferred agency vary across those fields, and what does that variation reveal about the difference between resistance, survival, and triumph? Third, what conceptual model of aesthetics of refusal emerges when quantitative structure is read together with interpretive evidence from the corpus? The contribution is threefold. Empirically, the article offers a transparent reading of a 37-record dataset rather than an impressionistic selection of famous works. Methodologically, it demonstrates how literary analysis can use restrained visual analytics without turning cultural interpretation into a dashboard. Theoretically, it argues that contemporary literary resistance is best understood as a relational field in which social harm passes through form, affect, embodiment, memory, and more-than-human vulnerability. In doing so, the article connects Dalit aesthetics, ecological humanities, gendered memory, and postcolonial cultural critique into one model of literary refusal that is both data-grounded and conceptually portable (Limbale 2004; Rao 2022; Rawat and Satyanarayana 2016; Brueck 2014; Mukherjee 2010; Chakrabarty 2021; DeLoughrey 2022; Banerjee 2025).

2. Method

The study used a documentary-corpus design with qualitative content analysis and interpretive visual analytics. The primary dataset was an Excel workbook with two sheets: a main table containing 37 literary records and a reference-source sheet listing nine source clusters. Each record in the main table contained eight fields: literary work, author, main theme, aesthetic principle, form of resistance, cultural context, inferred agency level, and source index. The analytic unit was the record rather than the full literary text. This means that the study analyzes the curated metadata and interpretive summaries provided in the workbook, then uses selected literary examples to produce conceptual synthesis. The article therefore does not claim to replace close reading of the complete primary texts. It uses the dataset to map aesthetic-resistance patterns and to identify where close reading becomes theoretically consequential.

The dataset was audited before interpretation. All 37 records were retained because each contained a usable title or literary formation, an author or authorship note, a theme, an aesthetic principle, a resistance description, a cultural context, and an inferred agency statement. Some records refer to individual literary works, while others refer to clusters such as contemporary Indian English women's writing, Hindi poems, Bengali essays, Tamil short stories, Malayalam short stories, and Dalit Marathi writing. Rather than treating this mixed structure as a defect, the analysis treats it as a feature of the corpus: resistance circulates not only through singular canonical works but also through genres, regional traditions, and critical formations.

However, this also requires caution. Cluster records are not counted as equivalent to exhaustive corpora; they are counted as curated evidence of an aesthetic tendency.

Three layers of coding were applied. The first layer classified each record by resistance field: ecological crisis and more-than-human vulnerability; anti-caste and subaltern dignity; gender and patriarchal critique; Partition memory and gendered trauma; spiritual-democratic ethics; and cultural memory or classical heritage. The second layer classified aesthetic regime: eco-aesthetic/Anthropocene writing; Dalit or insurgent realism; classical Indic poetics; memory-trauma aesthetics; feminist/postcolonial critique; and hybridity/diaspora aesthetics. The third layer converted the workbook's agency descriptions into a five-point interpretive scale: very low = 1, low = 2, low-to-medium = 2.5, medium = 3, medium-to-high = 3.5, high = 4, and very high = 5. This scoring is not a psychometric measure. It is a transparent interpretive index that allows comparison of how the corpus imagines capacity to act under structural pressure.

Qualitative content analysis guided the coding process because the study asks not only how many records fall into a category but how those categories produce cultural meaning. Content analysis is appropriate when textual data must be transformed into transparent, reproducible categories without abandoning interpretive depth (Hsieh and Shannon 2005; Elo and Kyngäs 2008; Schreier 2012; Krippendorff 2018). The reliability challenge in this study is not mechanical agreement among multiple coders but auditability: readers must be able to see why a record was classified as ecological, Dalit, memory-trauma, or feminist. For that reason, the results report examples, counts, and interpretive logic together. This follows the broader qualitative standard that trustworthiness is built through thick description, reflexive transparency, and clear movement from evidence to claim (Braun and Clarke 2006; Nowell et al. 2017; Saldaña 2021; O'Connor and Joffe 2020).

The visual strategy was deliberately restrained. The article uses three figures, not a dashboard. Figure 1 maps the relationship between resistance fields and aesthetic regimes; Figure 2 visualizes agency as a gradient across resistance fields; Figure 3 synthesizes the conceptual model of aesthetic refusal. These figures do not function as decorative proof. They organize interpretive movement. Figure 1 prevents the article from implying that each field has only one aesthetic form. Figure 2 prevents agency from being discussed impressionistically. Figure 3 turns the findings into a reusable theoretical model. In each case, the figure is followed by prose analysis so that visual evidence becomes part of the argument rather than an isolated quantitative display.

The study has three limitations. First, the dataset is curated and relatively small; therefore, the analysis produces a strong conceptual model rather than statistical generalization. Second, several entries summarize literary formations rather than single texts, which means that their evidentiary status differs from individual works such as *The Road* or *Tomb of Sand*. Third, the agency score is inferred from the workbook's descriptions; it should be read as an interpretive signal, not as an objective measure of character autonomy. These limitations are not hidden. They are built into the analytic design. The article's claim is that even a

compact corpus can produce high-quality cultural interpretation when its categories, distributions, and conceptual stakes are made explicit.

Table 1. Corpus audit and coding architecture

Analytic layer	Operational decision	Corpus implication
Corpus base	Thirty-seven records from the main workbook sheet were retained because all contained interpretable literary, thematic, aesthetic, resistance, context, and agency fields.	The study works with a compact but complete curated corpus rather than an incomplete source list.
Resistance fields	Each record was assigned to one dominant field: ecological crisis, anti-caste dignity, gender critique, Partition trauma, spiritual-democratic ethics, or cultural/classical memory.	The coding reveals which social pressures organize the corpus.
Aesthetic regimes	Each record was assigned to one dominant aesthetic regime: eco-aesthetic, Dalit/insurgent realism, classical Indic poetics, memory-trauma, feminist/postcolonial critique, or hybridity.	The analysis distinguishes what literature resists from how resistance becomes aesthetically organized.
Agency index	Workbook descriptions were converted into a five-point interpretive scale from very low to very high agency.	The scoring permits comparison while preserving the interpretive nature of agency.
Interpretive synthesis	Counts, mappings, selected examples, and conceptual reading were combined.	The article avoids both anecdotal close reading and flat quantification.

Table 1 clarifies that the article does not treat the workbook as raw evidence waiting to be quoted. It treats the workbook as a structured cultural dataset whose categories must be stabilized before interpretation. This is important because aesthetic resistance is a relational concept: the meaning of a work changes depending on whether one reads it as ecological protest, caste refusal, gendered testimony, spiritual reorientation, or cultural memory. The table therefore establishes the methodological basis for the results section, where every subsection moves from coded pattern to literary-cultural interpretation.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. The corpus as a compact archive of aesthetic resistance

The corpus contains 37 records distributed across nine source clusters. The source pattern is uneven but analytically revealing. The two largest clusters are Source 7 and Source 8, each contributing seven records. Source 7 is dominated by Dalit aesthetic and anti-caste resistance, including *Hunger*, *Caves*, *Blood-Wave*, *The Sky with its Eyes Closed*, *To Be or Not to Be Born*, *Light Melted in Darkness*, and *The Stains of Blood*. Source 8 is dominated by regional ecological literature, including Hindi poems, Bengali essays, Tamil short stories, Dalit Marathi writing, Hindi short fiction, Malayalam short stories, and Tagore's ecological vision.

Together these two clusters account for 14 of 37 records, or 37.8% of the corpus. This matters because the dataset's strongest center is not elite cosmopolitan modernism but subaltern and ecological pressure.

At the level of resistance field, ecological crisis and more-than-human vulnerability form the largest category with 15 records. Anti-caste and subaltern dignity follows with 12 records. Gender/patriarchal critique and Partition memory/gendered trauma each contribute three records, while spiritual-democratic ethics and cultural/classical heritage each contribute two. The numerical pattern suggests that the corpus is not simply about contemporary identity politics in a narrow sense. It is organized by two dominant crises: the crisis of social hierarchy and the crisis of ecological habitability. Gender and memory function as sharper but smaller sub-fields, not because they are marginal to the material but because they often appear inside broader caste, ecological, or postcolonial structures. The *God of Small Things*, for example, is coded as ecological crisis in the field map but contains caste and gender at its core. This overlap is one reason the article uses interpretive fields rather than rigid mutually exclusive thematic boxes.

The geographical-cultural profile reinforces the same conclusion. Twenty-six of the 37 records are anchored in South Asian or Indian contexts, including ancient Sanskritic traditions, Partition fiction, Indian English fiction, Dalit writing, and regional Indian ecological literature. The remaining records expand the comparison toward Chinese family tragedy, North American frontier and Puritan tragedy, global Anglophone apocalypse, and Tai epic heritage. This distribution justifies a South Asian-centered but transnational reading. The article does not claim that the corpus represents world literature as a total field. It claims that the corpus uses world-literary comparison to show how the aesthetics of refusal travel across different historical formations. The South Asian density gives the article its strongest cultural anchor; the non-South Asian entries prevent the argument from collapsing into a single national frame.

The corpus also shows that aesthetic resistance often appears where literary form handles contradiction rather than resolution. The *Road* and *Lajwanti* have low agency because their worlds restrict possible action; this does not make them politically weak. Instead, they show the violence of conditions in which action has already been narrowed. Dalit poems often show higher agency because the poetic voice confronts humiliation directly; this does not mean the social world is less oppressive. It means the aesthetic form converts injury into declaration. Classical Indic works show high or very high agency because their traditions frame emotion, dharma, and devotion as ethically meaningful action. These differences demonstrate why agency must be interpreted with genre, history, and form in mind.

Table 2. Resistance fields and representative corpus evidence

Resistance field	Records	Representative evidence
Ecological crisis / more-than-human	15	The Revenant, Good Omens, The Road, Snowpiercer
Anti-caste / subaltern dignity	12	The God of Small Things, Śikṣāṣṭaka, Sastra Feminis Dalit (Inferred dari diskusi tematik), Hunger
Gender / patriarchal	3	Thunderstorm, Desire Under the Elms, Lajwanti (1951)

Resistance field	Records	Representative evidence
critique		
Partition memory / gendered trauma	3	Tomb of Sand (2022), The Parted Earth (2021), What the Body Remembers (1999)
Cultural memory / classical heritage	2	Thao Hung or Cheuang, The Stains of Blood
Spiritual-democratic ethics	2	Geetagovindam (Raasa Lila), Ramayana

Table 2 shows that the corpus is organized by a few dense fields rather than by a scattered list of unrelated topics. The ecological field is largest because it includes both global apocalyptic works and regional South Asian ecological texts. The anti-caste field is almost as large, but it is more aesthetically concentrated: its records repeatedly define pain, hunger, blood, darkness, and humiliation as artistic material. The smaller fields remain analytically important because they name pressure points that are often absorbed into the larger fields. Partition memory, for instance, is numerically smaller than ecological crisis, but it supplies the corpus with a theory of silence, gendered testimony, and historical afterlife.

3.2. Aesthetic regimes do not mirror resistance fields one-to-one

The second result is that resistance field and aesthetic regime are related but not identical. Ecological crisis is the largest field, but eco-aesthetic/Anthropocene writing accounts for only 11 records because some ecological entries are coded through memory-trauma, feminist/postcolonial critique, hybridity, or classical poetics. Anti-caste resistance is more tightly connected to Dalit/insurgent realism: 10 of the 12 anti-caste records fall into that aesthetic regime. This contrast is one of the most important findings of the study. Ecological literature in the corpus is formally plural; Dalit literature is formally concentrated around a counter-aesthetic of truth, pain, and revolt. The difference does not imply that one field is more complex than the other. It shows that different historical pressures generate different aesthetic structures.

Figure 1 visualizes this relationship as a field map. The strongest links are the connection between ecological crisis and eco-aesthetic/Anthropocene writing, and the connection between anti-caste/subaltern dignity and Dalit/insurgent realism. The weaker cross-links are equally important because they show that resistance is not formally sealed. Ecological crisis can become memory-trauma; cultural heritage can intersect with classical poetics and Dalit realism; spiritual-democratic ethics can work through classical Indic forms. The figure therefore supports a non-reductive interpretation: resistance fields identify social pressure, while aesthetic regimes identify the formal grammar through which that pressure becomes readable.

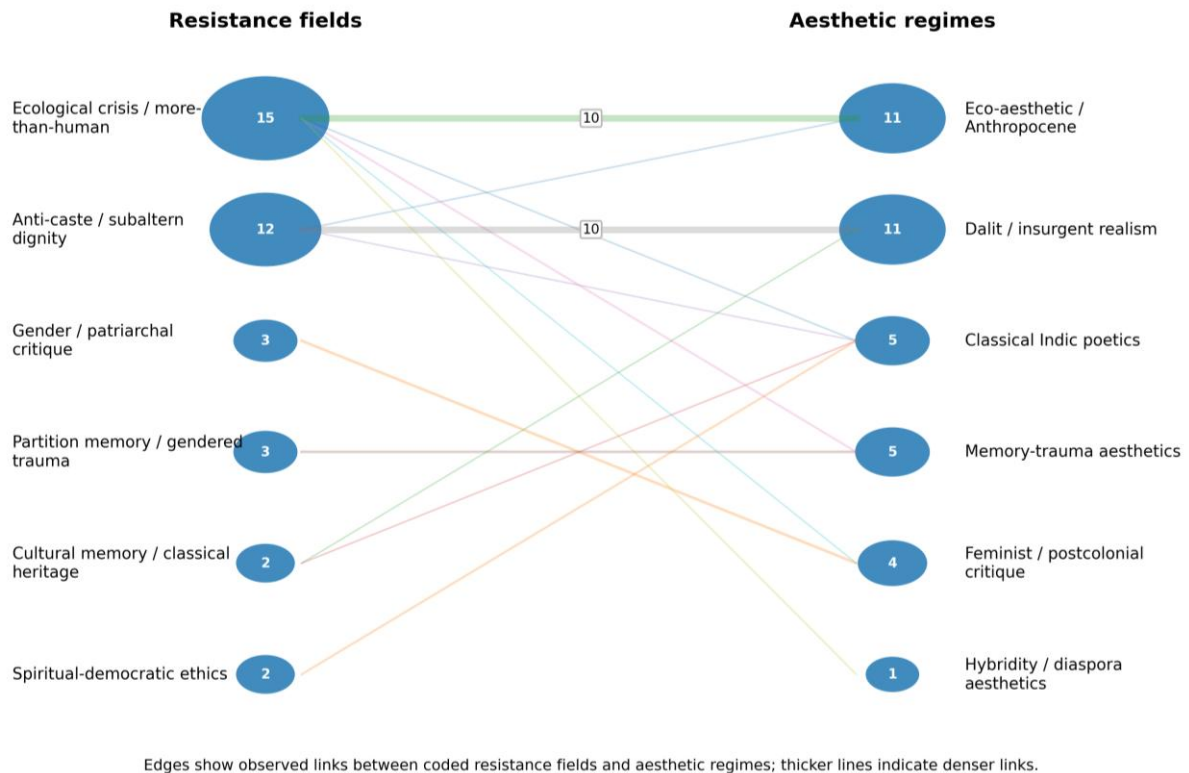


Figure 1. Aesthetic-resistance field map of the curated corpus.

Figure 1 shows that the corpus is structured by two dominant field-regime axes: ecological crisis through eco-aesthetic/Anthropocene writing, and anti-caste dignity through Dalit/insurgent realism. However, the thinner cross-links prevent a simplified reading. Ecological crisis is not only an environmental topic; it becomes a memory problem in *The Road*, a mythic problem in *Good Omens*, a capitalist problem in *Snowpiercer* and *Mad Max*, and a caste-gender problem in *The God of Small Things*. Similarly, anti-caste resistance is not merely sociological content; it becomes an aesthetic challenge to inherited standards of beauty. Hunger, caves, blood, darkness, and stigma are not symbols added to politics; they are the material through which the poems and stories redefine what literary value can be. This finding aligns with recent work on aesthetic resistance, which emphasizes that art changes politics not only by stating claims but by reorganizing visibility, sensation, and affective relation (Wulia 2023; Ahern 2024).

The field map also complicates postcolonial literary interpretation. In a conventional thematic reading, one might separate caste literature, ecological fiction, feminist literature, and Partition fiction. The corpus suggests a more dynamic model: these fields share techniques of refusal. They expose the violence of social normality, use wounded bodies as archives, and challenge the idea that social harmony is achieved by forgetting damage. Postcolonial ecofeminist readings of Roy's novel, for example, are productive precisely because they refuse to isolate caste, gender, and ecology into different analytical compartments (Saha 2024; Álvarez Sánchez 2025).

3.3. Agency under pressure: high agency is not the same as triumph

The third result concerns inferred agency. The mean agency score for the whole corpus is 3.39 on a five-point scale. Seventeen records are coded as high agency, one as very high, four as medium-to-high, nine as medium, four as low, one as low-to-medium, and one as very low. At first glance this might suggest that the corpus is mainly optimistic. Such a conclusion would be misleading. High agency in resistance literature rarely means uncomplicated empowerment. It often means that a text gives a character, narrator, or poetic voice enough force to confront a world that remains violent. In Dalit poems, agency is frequently located in voice rather than social mobility. In eco-apocalyptic fiction, agency may be restricted to survival or refusal of extinction. In Partition fiction, agency may appear belatedly through testimony, border-crossing, or the recovery of silenced memory.

Figure 2 compares average agency across resistance fields. Cultural memory/classical heritage has the highest mean score, but it contains only two records, so it should be read cautiously. Anti-caste/subaltern dignity has the strongest large-field agency profile, with a mean of 3.75 across 12 records. Spiritual-democratic ethics averages 3.50, ecological crisis 3.20, Partition memory/gendered trauma 3.00, and gender/patriarchal critique 2.83. The pattern suggests that the corpus gives the most explicit oppositional voice to anti-caste writing, while gendered and Partition texts often dramatize conditions in which agency is obstructed, delayed, or socially punished. This is a substantive finding, not merely a descriptive statistic.

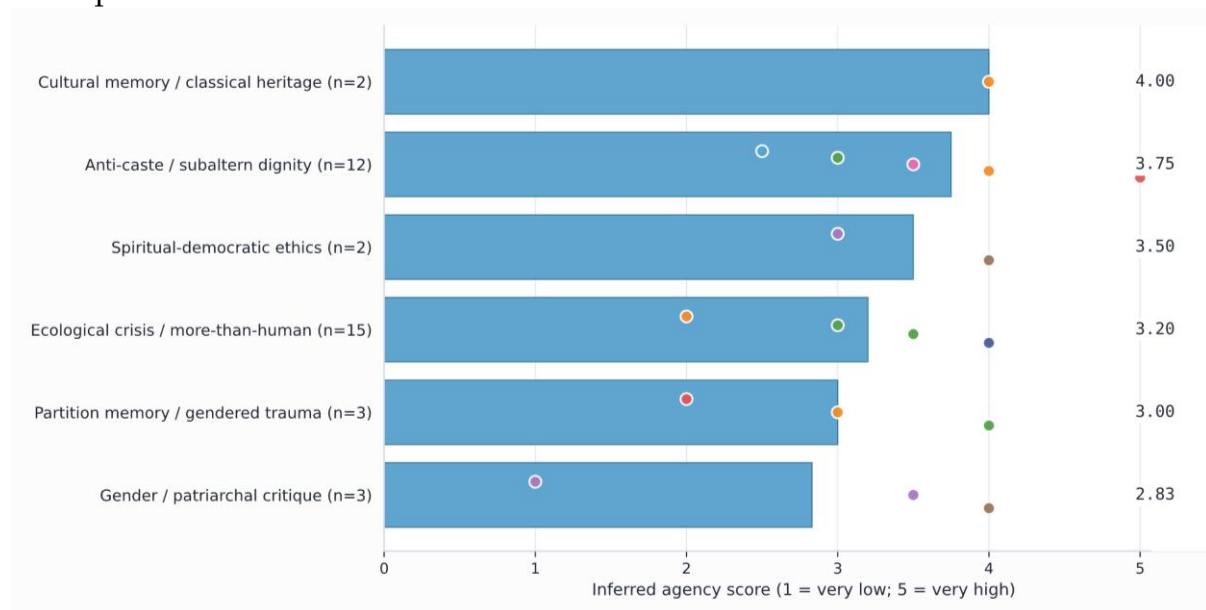


Figure 2. Agency under pressure across resistance fields.

Figure 2 helps distinguish agency from success. The anti-caste cluster is high because poems and stories such as *Hunger*, *To Be or Not to Be Born*, *The Stains of Blood*, and *When I Hid My Caste Stories* transform injury into speech. Their agency is rhetorical, ethical, and insurgent. It does not erase the violence of caste; it refuses the aesthetic codes that once made that violence invisible. By contrast, the gender/patriarchal and Partition fields include works where characters are

overwhelmed by domestic authority, communal violence, sexual stigma, or social rehabilitation regimes. Lajwanti is very low in agency because the character becomes a moral object within a patriarchal society that claims to restore her while refusing to hear her. This low score is not evidence of weak resistance. It is evidence that the text exposes a structure in which resistance itself has been made difficult.

The agency pattern confirms why an aesthetics of refusal must be more flexible than an empowerment narrative. Feminist and trauma studies have long warned that testimony, silence, and damaged embodiment cannot always be measured by visible heroic action (Caruth 1996; LaCapra 2001; Butler 2004; Ahmed 2014). In the dataset, wounded agency is often the most ethically demanding form. When *What the Body Remembers* or *Ice-Candy Man* represents women's bodies as sites of national and communal violence, the work of resistance lies partly in making readers confront the social conditions that reduced agency in the first place. The same applies to *The Road*, where the low agency of characters trapped in ecological ruin becomes an indictment of a world after irreversible damage.

Table 3. Modes of agency under structural pressure

Agency mode	Representative evidence	Analytical meaning
High insurgent agency	Dalit poems and stories; <i>The Stains of Blood</i> ; <i>To Be or Not to Be Born</i> ; <i>When I Hid My Caste Stories</i>	Voice becomes a weapon against caste humiliation; pain is converted into counter-aesthetic truth.
Constrained traumatic agency	<i>Lajwanti</i> ; <i>Ice-Candy Man</i> ; <i>What the Body Remembers</i> ; <i>Tomb of Sand</i>	Agency appears through silence, return, testimony, border crossing, or belated memory rather than immediate liberation.
Survival agency	<i>The Road</i> ; <i>The Revenant</i> ; <i>Snowpiercer</i> ; <i>Mad Max</i>	Action is possible, but the world is structured by ecological damage, scarcity, and system-level violence.
Ethical-spiritual agency	<i>Śikṣāṣṭaka</i> ; <i>Ramayana</i> ; <i>Geetagovindam</i> ; <i>Abhijnana Shakuntalam</i>	Agency is framed through devotion, dharma, rasa, longing, and moral emotion rather than modern individual autonomy.
Relational feminist agency	<i>The God of Small Things</i> ; <i>Thunderstorm</i> ; <i>Desire Under the Elms</i>	Resistance emerges through forbidden love, domestic rebellion, bodily desire, or critique of patriarchal property logic.

Table 3 shows why the agency index should be interpreted as a cultural-pragmatic signal rather than a hierarchy of political worth. High agency and low agency are both analytically meaningful. High agency identifies where a text gives characters or voices explicit capacity to name injury and confront domination. Low agency identifies where the text dramatizes conditions that block, absorb, or punish resistance. The strongest interpretation is therefore not that literature becomes resistant only when characters act heroically. It becomes resistant when form makes the limits of action perceptible.

3.4. Four scenes of refusal: caste, ecology, gendered memory, and sacred reorientation

The fourth result is qualitative: the corpus organizes aesthetic resistance through four recurrent scenes of refusal. The first is subaltern truth. In the Dalit cluster, aesthetics is built from the refusal of polished distance. *Hunger*, *Blood-Wave*, *Light Melted in Darkness*, and *The Stains of Blood* do not ask readers to admire suffering from afar. They force the materiality of caste injury into the aesthetic field. This is consistent with Limbale's argument that Dalit literature must be judged by criteria adequate to Dalit experience rather than by classical or elite standards that convert suffering into decorum (Limbale 2004). The data show that this counter-aesthetic is not incidental: 10 records connect anti-caste resistance directly to Dalit/insurgent realism. The corpus therefore supports a strong claim: in this field, resistance is not only thematic but criterial. It changes what counts as form, truth, beauty, and literary legitimacy.

The second scene is ecological grief. In the ecological cluster, resistance appears through damaged environments, apocalyptic structures, and more-than-human vulnerability. *The God of Small Things* connects polluted rivers and social contamination to caste-gender violence; *The Revenant* exposes human fragility before an environment entangled with extraction; *Good Omens* displaces pestilence with pollution; *The Road* stages environmental ruin as ethical deprivation; *Snowpiercer* and *Mad Max* transform climate breakdown into closed systems of hierarchy and violence; regional Indian works connect deforestation, wetland degradation, river pollution, land dispossession, and local ecological knowledge. The important point is that ecological resistance in the corpus is not merely conservationist. It is anti-capitalist, anti-anthropocentric, and often anti-caste or feminist. This aligns with the environmental humanities' insistence that ecological crisis is unevenly distributed through colonial history, class, caste, gender, and geography (Nixon 2011; Ghosh 2016; DeLoughrey 2019; Chakrabarty 2021; Mahendra 2025).

The third scene is gendered memory. Partition and gendered trauma records show that the body becomes an archive when official history fails to account for violation. *Tomb of Sand* reimagines the border not merely as a political line but as a scene of late-life movement, bodily transformation, and historical return. *The Parted Earth* ties intergenerational search to the incompleteness of family memory. What the Body Remembers and *Ice-Candy Man* expose how women's bodies are made to bear the violence of nation, religion, and community. *Lajwanti* is especially important because the character's low agency reveals the cruelty of social rehabilitation without listening. The text does not give the survivor full voice; instead, it indicts a moral order that claims to restore honor while keeping the woman silent. This is why memory-trauma aesthetics cannot be evaluated only by narrative action. Its work lies in exposing the ethics of erasure (Halbwachs 1992; Assmann 2011; Kabir 2005; Abidi 2023; Middy 2025; Mirza 2026).

The fourth scene is sacred-cultural reorientation. Classical Indic and devotional records might seem distant from contemporary resistance, but the corpus suggests otherwise. *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*, *Geetagoindam*, *Ramayana*, *Thao*

Hung or Cheuang, and Śikṣāṣṭaka show that inherited aesthetic systems can be mobilized as ethical structures. Rasa, dhvani, alaṅkāra, dharma, bhakti, and heroic diction are not merely formal categories. They shape how emotion, obligation, devotion, and collective memory become meaningful. In Śikṣāṣṭaka, devotional practice is coded as egalitarian resistance because saṅkīrtanam is interpreted as a spiritual mode available beyond caste discrimination. In Ramayana, dharma becomes an aestheticized ethical horizon. The result is not a conservative return to tradition. It is an argument that tradition itself contains aesthetic resources for rethinking agency, obligation, and collective feeling.

The interaction among the four scenes is what makes the corpus theoretically rich. Subaltern truth supplies the strongest critique of aesthetic purity. Ecological grief expands agency beyond the human. Gendered memory shows how silence and wounded embodiment carry historical force. Sacred-cultural reorientation shows that inherited forms can be used to imagine ethical order rather than merely preserve hierarchy. Together these scenes form a model of aesthetic refusal that is not tied to one genre, period, or nation. It travels across poems, epics, novels, films, stories, and regional literary formations.

Table 4. Four scenes of the aesthetics of refusal

Scene	Dominant aesthetic material	Form of refusal	Representative evidence
Subaltern truth	Pain, hunger, blood, stigma, raw diction	Refuses elite beauty by making humiliation the ground of literary knowledge	Dalit poems; Baburao Bagul; Limbale-oriented aesthetics
Ecological grief	Ruin, scarcity, polluted rivers, broken climate systems	Refuses human mastery and exposes extraction as cultural violence	The Road; Good Omens; Snowpiercer; Mad Max; regional eco-literature
Gendered memory	Silence, abduction, return, body, border, intergenerational search	Refuses official history by making private wounds historically legible	Tomb of Sand; The Parted Earth; What the Body Remembers; Ice-Candy Man; Lajwanti
Sacred-cultural reorientation	Rasa, dhvani, dharma, bhakti, epic dignity	Refuses the separation of aesthetics from ethical life	Śikṣāṣṭaka; Ramayana; Geetagovindam; Abhijnana Shakuntalam

Table 4 is not a typology of fixed genres; it is a model of recurring operations. A single work may participate in more than one scene. The God of Small Things, for example, belongs simultaneously to ecological grief, gendered injury, and caste critique. Tomb of Sand belongs to gendered memory but also to border-crossing humor and late-life vitality. Dalit ecological records connect subaltern truth to more-than-human vulnerability. The value of the table is therefore synthetic: it identifies how different aesthetic materials perform the same larger operation of refusal.

3.5. Toward a model of the aesthetics of refusal

The final result is the conceptual model presented in Figure 3. The model proposes that aesthetic refusal is generated when literary form converts social

pressure into one of four kinds of cultural intelligibility: subaltern truth, ecological grief, gendered memory, and sacred-cultural reorientation. These forms are not decorative layers on political content. They are the means through which resistance becomes available to feeling, judgment, and memory. This is why the article uses the phrase aesthetics of refusal rather than literature of protest. Protest names explicit opposition; refusal names a deeper aesthetic operation. A text may refuse by speaking loudly, but it may also refuse by withholding closure, preserving silence, exposing bodily damage, contaminating beauty with pain, or making environmental collapse impossible to treat as background.

The model also explains why contemporary literary culture has become a central site for debates about identity, justice, and planetary crisis. Literature is uniquely able to hold together forms of harm that policy language often separates. Caste humiliation is legal, religious, affective, linguistic, and aesthetic. Climate breakdown is scientific, political, intimate, and narrative. Partition trauma is historical, gendered, familial, and bodily. Spiritual and classical traditions are aesthetic, ethical, and institutional. The corpus shows that literary texts do not merely represent these entanglements. They teach readers how to inhabit them perceptually. This is consistent with theories of affect and public feeling, where cultural forms do political work by shaping what can be felt as injury, shame, dignity, attachment, or responsibility (Berlant 2011; Ahmed 2014; Ahern 2024).

Aesthetics of Refusal: a corpus-derived model

Literary form converts social harm into culturally legible resistance.

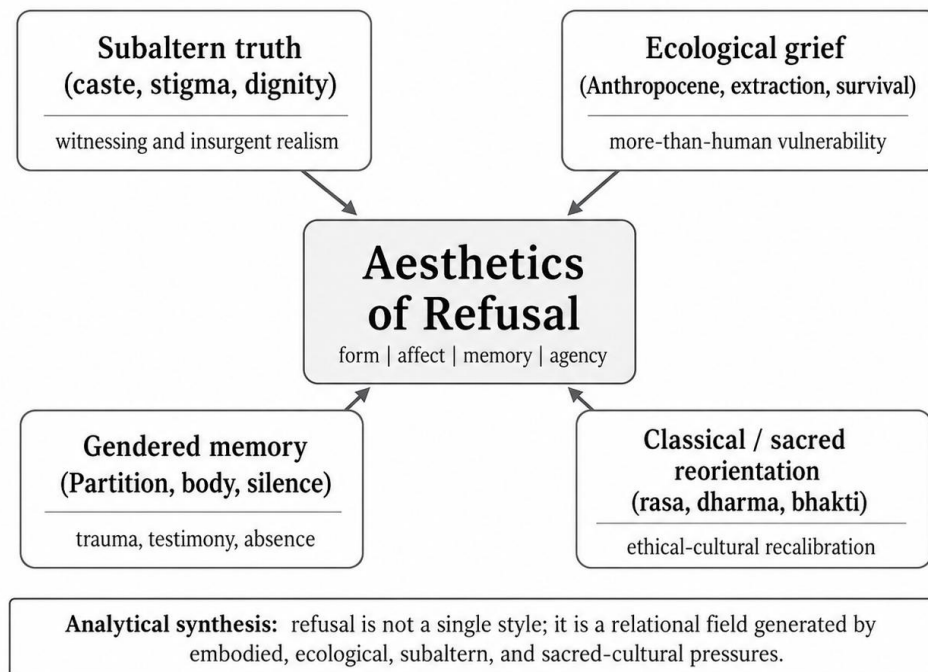


Figure 3. A conceptual model of the aesthetics of refusal.

Figure 3 condenses the article's main argument. Aesthetics of refusal is not a single style but a relational field in which form mediates between social harm and cultural intelligibility. The four nodes are not equal in frequency: ecological grief and

subaltern truth dominate the corpus, while gendered memory and sacred-cultural reorientation are smaller but conceptually decisive. Their interaction is what gives the model force. Ecological grief without subaltern truth risks becoming abstract planetary melancholy. Subaltern truth without ecological grief risks remaining human-centered. Gendered memory without sacred-cultural reorientation can become trauma without ethical horizon. Sacred-cultural reorientation without gendered and caste critique risks becoming a return to tradition without accountability. The corpus is strongest because it keeps these tensions alive.

This model contributes to current debates in language, literature, and cultural dynamics in two ways. First, it shows that literary resistance is semiotic as much as thematic. A work resists not only through what it says but through how it organizes symbol, silence, genre, affect, and agency. Second, it shows that contemporary cultural analysis must move beyond the old opposition between aesthetic form and social justice content. The dataset demonstrates that in resistance literature, form is one of the ways justice becomes thinkable. The literary image of hunger, the polluted river, the partitioned body, the closed sky, the sacred song, and the broken climate system are not illustrations. They are epistemic forms. They carry knowledge that conventional discourse often cannot bear.

The pedagogical implication is also significant. A corpus such as this can be used in literature classrooms to teach students that resistance is not a simple message attached to a text. Students can compare how the same pressure—such as caste, patriarchy, ecological extraction, or historical trauma—requires different aesthetic strategies. They can ask why some texts foreground agency while others foreground paralysis, why some use mythic or sacred form while others use raw realism, and why some make nature speak while others show the impossibility of speech. This makes the article relevant not only to literary theory but also to cultural literacy, comparative pedagogy, and decolonial humanities education (Freire 1970; hooks 1994; Nayar 2015).

Finally, the model is scalable. A future study could expand the corpus to 300 or more records, include full-text analysis, and test whether the four scenes recur across other languages and literary regions. Another study could focus specifically on Dalit ecological writing, Partition trauma, eco-apocalyptic cinema, or classical poetics as ethical resistance. What matters for the present article is that the compact corpus has already demonstrated the value of a hybrid method: data audit provides evidentiary discipline; visual mapping provides structural clarity; close reading provides cultural depth; and conceptual modeling produces a theoretical contribution that can travel beyond the dataset.

4. Conclusion

This article has argued that the curated corpus of 37 literary records is best understood through an aesthetics of refusal. The evidence shows that resistance in contemporary literary worlds is not only thematic but formal, affective, and epistemic. Ecological crisis and more-than-human vulnerability form the largest resistance field, while anti-caste/subaltern dignity forms the second largest and the most aesthetically concentrated field. Dalit/insurgent realism and eco-

aesthetic/Anthropocene writing emerge as the strongest aesthetic regimes. The agency analysis shows that high agency is concentrated in subaltern and classical ethical formations, while gendered and Partition trauma often stage agency as constrained or wounded. These patterns support a model in which literature resists by making hidden damage perceptible, converting pain into cultural knowledge, and transforming memory into ethical demand.

The article contributes to literary and cultural studies by combining dataset-based transparency with interpretive argument. It avoids treating texts as isolated examples, but it also avoids reducing literature to a quantitative table. The proposed model—subaltern truth, ecological grief, gendered memory, and sacred-cultural reorientation—offers a creative but evidence-based way to understand how aesthetics becomes resistance. Future research should expand the dataset, include multilingual full-text analysis, verify source-level metadata, and involve scholars from the literary communities represented in the corpus. The strongest conclusion is not that all resistance literature works in the same way. It is that the cultural force of resistance becomes visible when aesthetics is read as the medium through which wounded worlds demand to be seen, felt, remembered, and transformed.

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Author Contributions

Priyadarshini Rajendran: conceptualization, corpus auditing, Dalit aesthetics coding, formal analysis, and writing-original draft. Shalini Pathayad: ecocritical interpretation, extractivist-literature mapping, visual validation, and writing-review and editing. Revathy Krishnan: memory-studies interpretation, trauma/life-writing analysis, methodological review, and final manuscript approval. All proposed authors must review the complete manuscript, verify their contributions, and approve the final version before submission.

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Data Availability Statement

The data analyzed in this study were derived from an author-provided workbook entitled Analisis Estetika dan Resistensi dalam Sastra Kontemporer. The coded derivative table and figures can be supplied as supplementary material upon request.

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence support was used in a limited capacity for language refinement, structural organization, formatting assistance, and readability improvement. The AI tool was not used to fabricate data, alter the workbook

evidence, or make independent scholarly decisions. All analytical decisions, interpretation, and final manuscript approval remain the responsibility of the authors.

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