Native literature reveals the depth and status of the Native culture, expresses Native wisdom and points of view familiar to other Natives. It reveals the beauty and the wisdom of the Native world, beauty rarely recognized by non-Native writers. It emphasizes communal living and portrays mingling and sharing; elders wait to teach Indian ways to the young who may be floundering amidst the white culture that questions the Native ways.

Colonialism, the resulting oppressions and their effects on Native people provide the background for Native literature. John Coulter and George Ryga reveal in their plays the injustices that the Canadian White civilization has inflicted on their own natives. Rita Joe in Ryga’s *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* critiques the act of judging the members of one culture by the standards of another. Ryga says that the white society considers the first nations outsiders and intruders into their framework of culture. The whites coming and occupying the lands of the Native feel that the Natives lack the civilization and moral and social codes.

The term “Native Literature” is understood to refer only to texts produced by persons of Native descent, Indian, Inuit and Métis and not to texts about Indians, Métis or Eskimo. Hartmut Lutz divides Native literature based on genres:

1. the oral tradition
2. autobiographies,
3. poetry,
4. prose narratives, and
5. drama.

Of the many texts available, two in particular may serve as examples for the directions the oral tradition can take in written English: Alexander Wolfe’s *Eleven Elder Stories* (1988) and Maria Campbell’s anthology *Achimoona* (1985).

Alexander Wolfe’s book contains eleven stories that were originally given to him by his grandfathers in the Saulteaux original. In a holistic manner, encompassing the material and spiritual aspects of life in past, present and future, the story recounts the history of the Anishinaybak people, the Pinayzitt family in particular and the adventures and historical events that mark their collective and individual heritage.

In Campbell’s autobiography *Halfbreed* dedicated to “my Cheechym’s children”; the Introduction says, “I write this for all of you, to tell you what it is like to be a Halfbreed woman in our country” (Introduction *Halfbreed*). It soon becomes evident that Campbell is not writing for other Métis; she is preoccupied with telling the non–Natives what it is like to be a Halfbreed.

A close friend of mine said, ‘Maria make it a happy book. It couldn’t have been so bad. We know we are guilty, so don’t be too harsh’. I am not bitter. I have passed that stage. I only want to
say: this is what it was like; this is what it is still like. (Introduction to Halfbreed) 

This book is the story of Maria’s life as a Métis child in northern Saskatchewan and of her life as a young woman in the city. Some of the literary qualities are immediately obvious to the readers – the very brief retelling of history, humour, irony and understatement. The oral tradition, apparent in the writer’s style, assumes that the listener comes from the same background as the storyteller.

In Halfbreed it is obvious that the author aimed at much more than just the individual autobiography by one person alone. It is also a document of the general situation of Métis women in Canada, and like other Métis texts, it establishes identity by going back into the past and the years before Batoche. The book has set a standard against which all later autobiographies by Native women are to be measured, and for non-Native readers; it documents the effects of the triple oppression of economic deprivation, sexism and racism on minority women. Beatrice Culleton’s In Search Of April Raintree is a catharsis so that she could finally come to terms with her personal history. Through her book she comes to understand her mother’s alcoholism (though she still finds it hard to forgive a mother who prefers drink to her children). Non – Native people played a role in Culleton’s life (and hence in April Raintree’s) by making life more difficult, but Culleton’s real sorrow is caused by her own people. In the wake of alcoholism came child neglect, foster homes,
incompetent and uncaring social workers. In the novel In Search Of April Raintree, April is placed with a particularly heartless foster mother. Other scenes, too, insist on the brutality of real experience, as in the incident when April Raintree is raped and, as she fights back, her assailant laughs, “Yeah, you little savages like it rough, eh?” (16).

In In Search of April Raintree the plot continues logically since the aftermath of the rape plays a prominent role in April’s subsequent actions. Readers owe Culleton a considerable debt for dispassionately and competently handling a topic that is too often romanticized by writers. Though the book is popular in Canadian as well as European markets, it is rarely referred to as “Canadian literature”; at best it is called “Native literature”. The style is, admittedly, very simple. Beatrice Culleton writes as she, and many people like her, speak.

Next to the oral tradition, autobiography is the most frequently used form of literary self-expression and self-definition by Native peoples. Of all the autobiographies written and published by Native individuals in Canada, Campbell’s is probably internationally the best-known, and it has served as a model for later Native authors who were encouraged to follow the example set by Campbell. Beatrice Culleton’s, In search of April Raintree has followed along the tradition begun by Campbell, and her book seems to have moved a long way on to becoming equally famous.
At least two autobiographies by male authors, one Inuit (Thrasher) and one Métis (Tyman), bear witness to how racist surroundings steer Native individuals almost inescapably into a criminal career on skid row.

Moving on to a similar socio-literary scenario in India, Dalit literature is people’s literature. It is liberation-literature like Black literature, the feminist literature and the communist-socialist literature. Each type of liberation-literature has its won version of literature. The primary motive of Dalit literature is the liberation of dalits. Dalit struggle against casteist tradition has a long history. For example, in Kannada, it goes back to the first Vachana poet of the 11th century, Chennaiah, the cobbler. The 12th century Dalit saint Kalavve challenged the upper castes in the following words:

Those who eat goats, foul and tiny fish:

Such, they call caste people.

Those who eat the Sacred Cow

That showers frothing milk for Shiva:

Such, they call out-castes.

In modern times, because of the legacy of Mahatama Phule and Babarao Ambedkar, Dalit literature got impetus in Maharashtra. But before the name came into being in the 1960s, such people as Baburao Bagul, Bandhu Madhav, Shankarrao Kharat were already creating Dalit literature.
In its formal form Dalit literature sprouted out of a progressive movement called Little Magazine which was a kind of rebellious manifestation of the educated youth of those days against the establishment. These Dalit youths found inspiration in the movement of the blacks in the distant land of North America; their black literature and Black Panther became the role models for them. This protest gained its first expression in the form of a new literature called Dalit Literature.

Poems, short stories, novels and autobiographies written by Dalit writers provided useful insights on the question of Dalit identity. Now the subaltern communities found a new name by coming together with the perspective, ‘Dalit is dignified’, thereby rejecting the sub-human status imposed on them by the Hindu social order. The important writers whose writings find a place are Mahasweta Devi, Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Sachi Rautray, Rabi Singh, Basudev Sunani, Bama, Abhimani, Poomani Imayam, Marku, Mangal Rathod, Neerave Patel, Perumal Murugan, Palamali, Suhdhakar, D. Gopi and others.

Dalit literature is precisely that literature which portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty suffered by the Dalits. In this literature there is a lofty image of grief. That every human being must find liberty, honour, security, and freedom from intimidation by the powerful elements of society, is its motto. It is
thoroughly saturated with humanity’s joys and sorrows. It regards human beings as supreme, and leads them towards total revolution.

The experience articulated in Dalit literature has not yet been expressed in any other literature. They are the experiences of a particular community. Such experiences conveyed in Dalit literature have several characteristics. They constitute an engagement in self-search to achieve self-respect; and the rejection of traditions and a religion that are opposed to such self-respect. They mark a rebellion against overbearing religion and tradition, as well as hypocrisy masquerading under seductive names such as freedom or democracy. They demonstrate respect for the Buddhist value of treating humans as human. And they nurture the feeling of unending gratitude towards Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar and Mahatma Phule.

Dalit writers write out of social responsibility. Their writing expresses the emotion and commitment of an activist. That society may change and understand its problems; their writing articulated their endurance with intensity. Dalit writers are activist–artists who write while engaged in movements. They regard their literature to be a movement. Their commitment is to the Dalit and the exploited classes.

Dalit literature has been criticized as being propagandist. It has been alleged that this literature lacks artistic finesse. If Dalit literature appears to be propagandist, it is because it presents the Dalit writers’ anguish and their questions. Since Dalit writers see their writing as a means of human liberation, expressing emotion is integral to the literature
they produce. Intense lived and felt experiences cannot be called propagandist. A unique feature of Dalit literature is its collective aspect. The experience described in Dalit literature is social, hence it is articulated as collective in character. This has also been accused of being resentful. In fact, to the Dalit writer, this resentment does not appear to be resentment; it strikes then as suppressed irritation piled are many years. Emerging Dalit writers established their won literary organizations and brought out their own magazines.

Dual oppression of Dalit women on grounds of caste and gender forms an important issue of concern in Tamil Dalit literature. This self-reflexivity of Dalit discourse stands out as a distinct mark of Tamil Dalit literature. Poets, playwrights, short-story writers and novelists repeatedly foreground the gender – caste intersection in Dalit lives. Representation of Dalit women is an integral aspect of Tamil Dalit literature in terms of space and voice granted to Dalit women characters. Dalit women characters are portrayed as lively, vibrant, earthy, witty, hard-working women who have inner strength to face crisis and work tirelessly at home and outside. Their songs, dances and community-cooking at weddings bring out their innate talent. Dalit women characters often outnumber Dalit male characters even in plays despite the fact that women’s presence in theatre has been traditionally far less noticeable.

A playwright like Inquilab presents a Dalit woman character as a Sutradar in one of his plays Meetchi (2003). Gunasekaran’s play Bali
Aadugal (1999) takes up the question of interlocking of gender and caste concerns most forcefully. The play depicts the conspiracy of priests and upper castes to offer a human sacrifice to appease the village deity. The proposed sacrifice is interrupted as the man whom they have assigned for the sacrifice manages to run away from the site. The elders then lay their hands on a Dalit and decide to offer him as sacrifice. The Dalit man, Uduman turns around to plead with the village elders to release him and accept his wife as an offer of sacrifice. His proposal is accepted and the Dalit woman (simply called “Uduman’s wife”) is sacrificed. The play shows the co-opting of Dalit males to patriarchal ideology. Dalit men treat their wives as Dalits are treated by the upper castes – unjustly, violently and arrogantly. By not being given a name to the Dalit women, these women are not allowed to have an independent individual identity and are perceived as wives, daughters, sisters, mothers. Dalit patriarchy allows Dalit women’s subjugation and perpetuates hierarchical relations within Dalit community.

Unjai Rajan’s short stories depict how Dalit women get beaten by their husbands at home. After a day of hard labour in the fields, tending to the cattle and cooking for a large family, the tired woman refuses to have sex with her drunken husband who thrashes her severely. Sexual exploitation of Dalit women workers at workplace and sexual violence at the hands of husbands at home forms a subject of concern in many Dalit short-stories. Abimani’s short stories bring out the gender pressures over
Dalit women and caste hegemony over women at large. In one of his stories, Abimani depicts a Dalit male’s appropriation of an upper caste woman’s body on the strength of his gender although he is restrained by his lower caste status in matters other than sexual. Dalit writers in Tamil thus offer thought-provoking subtexts to gender-caste traffic in Dalit lives. Abimani’s stories point out that the upper caste women are oppressed as well, in a patriarchal society, just as Dalit women are oppressed by caste hegemony and Dalit patriarchy.

**Pazhiyana Kazhidalum** is the first Dalit Tamil novel written by a woman Dalit writer, Sivakami. It was published in 1989. It was translated into English under the title *The Gripe of Change* in 2006. It speaks of the most serious issues of the Dalits. *The Gripe of Change* narrates the story of a Dalit family drawn into the struggle for justice when a woman of their caste is beaten up by the relatives of her upper caste employer and lover. Sivakami published her second novel *Anandhayee* in 1992. It extensively unravels the miseries of the peasant women in a feminist perspective. The novel focuses on violent exploitation of woman’s body and points out how the family as an institution is embedded in patriarchal, oppressed system that is blatantly unjust to women. Dalit women’s sexuality (whether daughter’s wife’s or beloved’s) is violently constrained and repressed. Sivakami was one of the Dalit victims dually oppressed on account of gender and caste, at the hands of the upper caste men as well as Dalit men. Her personal experience goes to mould her novel.
The present Ph.D. dissertation is thus a study that addresses the concerns of the Canadian Native and Indian Dalit women writers. The point of contact between the North American and Indian marginalized women is discrimination on grounds of race and gender. Of course, their divergence is seen when they adhere to their own cultures. A study of the Native writers such as Maria Campbell, Beatrice Culleton and Jeannette Armstrong with Bama and Sivakami has been greatly rewarding as it surfaces the miseries of women, West or East. A research project of the other Native women writers like Lee Maracle and Ruby Slipperjack, in the background of the works of other Dalit women writers like Kutti Revathy and others, may be relevant. An investigation throwing light on a Native female such as Agnes Grant and Janice Accose and Dalit male like Imayam and Poomani may tell us where gender cuts across their writings and perceptions. Thus avenues of research in this area are several and still untrodden. A journey on this road may bring the investigator to enchanting destinations.