
Dalit Feminism and Literary Voice: Caste, Gender, and Intersectionality in Indian English Writings

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of gender and caste in Dalit Indian English literature, focusing on how Dalit authors articulate resistance, trauma, and identity from the margins. Dalit feminism in Indian English writing is a movement and literary tradition that addresses the dual oppressions of caste and gender, using literature as a tool for resistance and empowerment. Using the lens of intersectionality, the research analyzes how caste and patriarchy intertwine to create layered oppression for Dalit women, particularly in a postcolonial society. The study examines the works of writers such as Meena Kandasamy, Bama (in translation), and Yashica Dutt, highlighting the unique voices and experiences of Dalit women. Drawing on Dalit feminism, Ambedkarite ideology, and critical caste theory, the paper argues that Dalit English literature is not merely representational but also a radical site of social critique and resistance. The research contributes to an expanding discourse on Indian identity politics, literary activism, and subaltern studies.

Keywords: Dalit Feminism, Intersectionality, Literary Voice, Indian English Writing, Caste, Gender, Resistance

Introduction:

Dalit feminism has emerged as a powerful and distinct voice in Indian literature and feminist discourse, highlighting the unique struggles faced by Dalit women at the intersection of caste, gender, and class. Unlike mainstream feminism, which often ignores caste, and Dalit politics, which tends to side line gender, Dalit feminism challenges both, offering a radical rethinking of social justice. In India, caste remains a pervasive axis of social stratification. Despite legal reforms and social reform movements, structures of caste inequality continue to inform

socio-economic, cultural, and political life. Feminist movements in India have often focused on gender, sometimes neglecting or under-theorizing caste; Dalit feminism arises from precisely this need to foreground the multiplicative (rather than additive) effects of caste and gender oppression.

Literary writing has been one important domain where Dalit authors themselves from historically oppressed castes narrate life, suffering, resistance, identity, and agency. In particular, Dalit women authors writing in or translated into English have offered powerful testimonial and narrative voices. Such voices challenge dominant narratives in Indian English literature which often reflect upper-caste, male, normative positions.

Theoretical Framework

Key theoretical concepts used in this paper:

1. **Dalit Feminism:** A framework that understands oppression situated at the intersection of caste, gender, class, region, etc., not reducible to any single category. Dalit feminism critiques mainstream (often upper-caste) feminism for its inability to fully reckon with caste, and the internal patriarchy within Dalit communities. (cf. Sharmila Rege, *We Also Made History*, etc.)
2. **Intersectionality:** As developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw and adapted to Indian contexts, the idea that social identities (gender, caste, class, region, language) intersect to produce specific kinds of disadvantage or oppression. In the Indian context, caste is a major axis alongside gender.
3. **Life Writing / Testimonial Literature:** Many Dalit women's voices appear in autobiographical, testimonial, or memoir literature. Life writing is not just aesthetic but political, as it enables claim of subjectivity, identity, and truth.
4. **Literary Voice & Language:** How the choice of language (English, translation from regional language, dialect or register), narrative style, vantage point, etc., enable or limit the articulation of caste-gendered experiences.

Research Methodology and Text Selection

This study undertakes close textual reading and comparative analysis of the following works:

Karukku by Bama (translated into English) life writing by a Dalit woman. The Grip of Change by P. Sivakami, offering feminist perspectives within Dalit experience. The Prisons We Broke by Baby Kamble an autobiographical work that centers class, caste, gender intersections. Ants Amongst Elephants by Sujatha Gidla a more recent narrative by a Dalit woman, which includes intra-caste, region, language, and gender dimensions. The analysis focuses on narrative voice, linguistic strategies, representations of oppression and resistance, and how gendered subjectivity and masculinity are articulated.

Analysis

1. Dalit Women's Voices: Visibility, Silencing, and Subjectivity

Life writing as resistance: In Karukku, Bama's narrative voice is raw, intimate, and deeply embedded in lived experience. She uses personal experience to narrate not only her own life but also communal caste oppression, gendered violence, and the cultural traditions that silence Dalit women. The voice is testimonial: an insistence on being heard, naming what is often suppressed. The narrative resists the erasure common in mainstream Indian literature.

Intersection of caste, gender, class: Works like The Prisons We Broke by Baby Kamble highlight how caste oppression is compounded by class (poverty, landlessness) and gender (patriarchal norms, sexual violence, domestic abuse). Through her autobiography, Kamble exposes how Dalit women are oppressed both within Dalit community structures and by upper-caste society.

Selfhood and agency: In Ants Amongst Elephants, Gidla's voice includes not just recounting injustice but reflection, memory, and an emerging claim to subjectivity. The narration navigates language differences, regional identities, and intra-caste hierarchies. Voice becomes also a claim: "I exist, I remember, I tell." This is a critical dimension of Dalit feminist expression.

2. Dalit Masculinities: Marginalization, Expectations, and Internal Conflict

While much of Dalit feminist scholarship focuses on Dalit women, representation of Dalit men is also important. Dalit men, although privileged in gender relative to women, are deeply marginalized by caste. Their masculine identity is often shaped by resisting caste stigma, striving for education, public recognition, and intellectual authority. At the same time, internalized patriarchal and caste norms may lead to reproducing gender inequalities in Dalit communities.

Some works by Dalit men include *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki (though originally life writing in Hindi translated into English), where the male voice displays vulnerability, shame, anger, and the tension of wanting dignity in a society that denies it. The masculine voice is, in many narratives, under pressure: to perform resistance, to succeed in English or in “modern” spheres, but also to conform to masculine expectations within community.

3. The Role of English, Translation, and Literary Voice

English is a double-edged medium. On one hand, writing in or translating into English allows Dalit voices access to broader readerships (national, global), better chances of critical recognition, inclusion in curricula, etc. It amplifies voices often excluded in regional literatures when those literatures are not translated.

On the other hand, translation or writing in English can flatten certain caste-specific registers, dialectal speech, idiomatic expressions that encode caste or region; can remove or sanitize details that make upper-caste readers uncomfortable; can transform lived pain into palatable narratives. Literary voice must negotiate these tensions.

Another factor is audience: writing in English often implies an audience that may not share lived experience of caste oppression; so authors must (implicitly or explicitly) mediate, explain, or shift narrative strategies: using footnotes, explanations, mixing regional languages etc.

Scope of the Study

This study examines the complex intersection between caste and gender through a close reading of selected Dalit women's narratives: Urmila Pawar's *The Wave of My Life*, *Ants Among*

Elephants by Sujatha Gidla, and The Grip of Change by P. Sivakami. The focus within these texts is on the fact that these narratives recount the lived experiences of find expression either through face-to-face contact if individuals navigate patriarchal oppression; systemic casteism; and perhaps most damaging of all, internalized social hierarchies. This also includes studying how those in the null categories derive meaning from literature "safekeeping" it as a space of resistance and self-articulation for Dalit women: people doubly marginalized. Thus, drawing on literary analysis and feminist theory, especially Dalit feminism and intersectionality, locates the works within a much larger sociopolitical and historical macro-discourse. Furthermore, it also draws on some selected references from secondary sources like critical essays, autobiographies, and scholarly works from the likes of Sharmila Rege, Gopal Guru, Bama, and others who have played significant roles in Dalit and gender studies.

However, the discourse is limited to those narratives of Indian Dalit women that have been either penned or translated in English with a special focus on the post-independence era. Although representative, enough of the multi-faceted lives that Dalit women live across regions and faiths, this study narrows down primarily to Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu for the purposes of drawing regional and ideological correlations.

Objectives of the Study

To analyze how the narratives of the Dalit women portray the intersection of caste and gender: The study unravels the peculiar ways in which caste-based patriarchy shapes the lives of Dalit women and how these authors elaborate the phenomena of resistance, trauma, and survival in a society deeply embedded in hierarchies.

To foreground literature as an act of resistance and social documentation: The inquiry into autobiographical and fictitious narratives proves how writing is a political act for Dalit women-in turning against the popular discourse while reclaiming their agency.

To delve within Dalit communities into internal critique of patriarchal institutions: The study investigates how Dalit women resist the caste hierarchies imposed by savarna society while at

the same time confronting tremendous, gendered oppression within their own communities and political movements.

To investigate personal memory, lived experience and oral tradition as epistemological tools: Under the lens of a Dalit feminist, the texts assess how they constitute counter-knowledge systems that contest the hegemonic academic and literary discourses.

To underline and highlight the contributions of Dalit women to Indian feminism and subaltern discourse: The narratives are placed on the larger canvas of Indian feminist thought and subaltern historiography, hence marginalized in the debates crucial to reshaping critical debates regarding identity, justice, and resistance.

Discussion

Intersectionality as analytic necessity: The texts studied make clear that you cannot separate caste from gender. Gendered violence is caste-inflected; caste status, class, and region condition gendered subjectivity. Mainstream feminist frameworks that neglect caste misunderstand these experiences or erase them.

Literary voice and resistance: Voice is central. Dalit feminist literary voice is a form of resistance: resisting silence, resisting invisibility, resisting normative expectations, resisting internalized shame. It is also sometimes risky: the reclamation of voice can attract backlash, marginalization from literary prize circuits, etc.

Tensions of translation and medium: English provides visibility but brings potential loss. Authors and translators often use mixed registers (regional languages, dialects) or retain untranslated words to preserve authenticity. In addition, life writing often uses “testimonios” style—direct, unvarnished, challenging aesthetic conventions.

Dalit masculinity imperfectly addressed: While Dalit women narratives richly articulate their struggles and resistances; Dalit masculinities remain less explored in scholarship. Where they are present, they tend to emphasize public sphere resistance, education, political assertion. But there

is less self-critique of patriarchal behaviors, less exploration of how Dalit men may also perpetuate gendered oppression within Dalit communities.

Recognition and appropriation issues: Dalit literatures (especially those written in regional languages) often suffer from lack of recognition, delays in translation, or mis-interpretation by upper-caste critics. There is also risk of appropriation: upper-caste or non-Dalit scholars or publishers commodifying Dalit voice without adequately acknowledging power dynamics.

Case Studies (Select Textual Passages)

Karukku is an elegy to the community Bama grew up in. She writes of life there in all its vibrancy and colour, never making it seem like a place defined by a singular caste identity, yet a place that never forgets, and is never allowed to forget its caste identity. She writes simultaneously of humorous incidents she remembers from her childhood, the games she used to play with her friends, good meals with her family and the oppression of her community by the police, upper-castes, and the convent. In this manner, she presents the pervasiveness of caste oppression how it not only punctuates everyday life, but also is an integral part of it, even in the memory of a community.

As Ambedkar writes, “Caste is not just a division of labour; it is a division of labourers.” Bama’s work speaks to this statement as she describes the servitude with which her family members were bound to the upper-caste families they worked for, including the beseeching obedience they had to show to them. “All the time I went to work for the Naickers [upper-caste] I knew I should not touch their goods or chattels; I should never come close to where they were. I should always stand away to one side. These were their rules. I often felt pained and ashamed. But there was nothing that I could do,” she writes, of her experience working for a Naicker household in high school. “To this day, in my village, both men and women can survive only through hard and incessant labour,” she notes.

In Karukku, Bama writes with a bluntness about her own body, her sufferings, her experiences of shame and indignity. The narrative voice shifts between personal memory and communal

memory—her individual voice becomes collective. This helps create what many Dalit feminist scholars call “standpoint” from which truth claims are made.

The Prisons We Broke is the English translation of Baby Kamble's socio-biography that serves as a testimony for the suffering of Dalit women in the Mahar community, detailing their triple marginalization due to caste, class, and gender. The book, translated by Maya Pandit, offers a Dalit feminist perspective on the harsh realities of untouchability, caste oppression by upper castes, and patriarchal domination within the community. Kamble's narrative is a powerful, honest account of the multi-layered violence and discrimination faced by these women, highlighting both external oppression and internal patriarchal structures.

In The Prisons We Broke, Kamble's writing uses repetition, detail of daily life, sensory descriptions of material deprivation, and the overlapping oppressions of caste and gender – e.g. being unable to fetch water, or pasture cattle, being subject to sexual harassment both in private and public. The voice is that of one who has survived, but also claims witness and justice.

Ants Among Elephants by Sujatha Gidla is a non-fiction book that tells the story of the author's Dalit family and their struggles with the Indian caste system, poverty, and social injustice from British colonial times through the mid-20th century. It provides a personal and political history of modern India from the perspective of the marginalized, detailing the lives of Gidla's mother and uncle Satyam, who became a famous Naxalite leader. The book is a vital work of Dalit literature, offering a brutally honest and often horrifying look at the lived experiences of caste and gender oppression that challenge mainstream historical narratives.

In Ants Amongst Elephants, Gidla's narration includes reflections on privilege, comparative caste status, regional and linguistic identity. She reflects how Dalit status intersects with being non-native English speaker, being peripheral in dominant narrative spaces, etc. This helps broaden the idea of intersectionality beyond just two axes.

Conclusion

Indian English writing by Dalit authors—especially Dalit women—offers powerful explorations of the intersections of caste, gender, class, region, and language. Literary voice in these works functions not simply as aesthetic expression, but as political testimony, as witnessing, as reclaiming subjectivity. Dalit feminism demands not just inclusion of women in feminist discourse but inclusion of caste as central analytic category.

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