

Embodied Resistance: Dalit Women, Subaltern Politics, and the Quest for Justice

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Abstract:

*This paper explores the multifaceted ways in which Dalit women embody resistance against caste and gender oppression, situating their struggles within the broader framework of subaltern politics. By examining everyday practices, literature, and collective mobilization, it highlights how Dalit women transform marginality into political subjectivity. Labor, cultural expression, and testimony against sexual violence emerge as crucial arenas where resistance is enacted and sustained. Autobiographical writings such as Bama's *Karukku*, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* demonstrate how lived experiences become counter-histories, challenging both Brahmanical patriarchy and elite feminist discourses. Furthermore, movements like the All India Dalit Women's Forum illustrate the power of collective struggle in redefining democratic spaces. While structural challenges persist, Dalit women's quest for justice reveals a radical reimagining of democracy rooted in intersectionality, resilience, and the assertion of embodied voice.*

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Introduction:

The oppression of Dalit women in India must be understood through the triple marginalization they experience—by caste, gender, and class. While mainstream feminism in India often centered around the concerns of upper-caste, middle-class women, and Dalit political movements largely foregrounded men's experiences, Dalit women's voices were silenced within both (Rege, 1998). Their stories of violence, labor exploitation, sexual assault, and denial of dignity illustrate how their bodies become sites of both oppression and resistance.

The concept of embodied resistance emphasizes how lived experience itself becomes political: from the struggles in fields, factories, and households to their assertion in public protests, Dalit women resist structural domination not only through speech but also through the physical and cultural presence of their bodies in spaces that historically excluded them. This resistance, deeply grounded in subaltern politics, situates Dalit women's quest for justice as both personal and collective, disrupting traditional power structures and reframing the discourse of Indian democracy.

Historical Context: Silence, Erasure, and the Legacy of Subalternity

Historically, Dalit women have been subjected to systemic invisibility. Ancient Hindu scriptures and later caste-based social structures defined them as untouchables, reinforcing hierarchies that denied them education, property rights, and bodily autonomy (Omvedt, 1994). During the colonial era, reformist discourse often spoke about “uplifting women” but rarely acknowledged Dalit women’s condition, while nationalist movements foregrounded upper-caste women as symbols of purity and sacrifice (Chakravarti, 1993).

Subaltern Studies scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously asked, “Can the subaltern speak?” (1988), pointing to the silencing of marginalized voices. In the case of Dalit women, this silencing is compounded: they are muted within caste-based patriarchal oppression and excluded from elite feminist narratives. The absence of their narratives from early feminist historiography reflects structural erasure. Yet, in oral traditions, folklore, and everyday practices, Dalit women preserved resistant knowledge, which later became foundational to Dalit feminist movements.

Dalit Feminism: Intersections and Divergences

The emergence of Dalit feminism marked a critical intervention into both Indian feminist discourse and Dalit politics. Unlike mainstream feminism, which often universalized women’s oppression without acknowledging caste, Dalit feminism foregrounds the intersectionality of caste and gender (Rege, 1998; Paik, 2014). Unlike Dalit male-centric movements, it insists that liberation from caste oppression cannot be complete without addressing patriarchal structures that disproportionately target women.

Dalit women activists and scholars argue that the embodied vulnerability of Dalit women—visible in their disproportionate exposure to sexual violence, bonded labor, and domestic servitude—is simultaneously the site of their agency. For example, women’s participation in anti-caste struggles, protests against atrocities such as the Khairlanji massacre, and movements for land and labor rights illustrates how they transform suffering into political assertion (Gopal Guru, 1995). Their embodied resistance lies in reclaiming public spaces, articulating self-representations in literature, and demanding recognition as political subjects.

Embodied Resistance in Everyday Life:

Resistance for Dalit women is not always spectacular; it is deeply embedded in everyday practices that redefine dignity, survival, and political agency. This resistance is not confined to organized movements but emerges from embodied acts that contest the structures of caste and patriarchy.

1. Labor as Resistance: Dalit women’s contributions to agricultural labor, domestic service, and urban informal economies are often undervalued, yet their sheer economic presence disrupts caste-based restrictions that historically sought to confine them. Omvedt (1993) points out that Dalit women’s agricultural labor has long been essential for the rural economy, though rendered invisible by upper-caste narratives. Performing labor with dignity becomes a political act of reclaiming visibility. Baby Kamble, in *The Prisons We Broke* (1986), recalls how Dalit women bore the double burden of caste-based humiliation and exploitative work, yet their perseverance ensured community survival. In such testimonies, labor is not just survival—it becomes resistance against both economic and social exclusion.

2. Assertion Against Sexual Violence: Dalit women are disproportionately subjected to caste-based sexual violence, often deployed as a tool of community humiliation (Kapur, 2012). Their responses—through testimonies, legal petitions, and protests—transform their bodies from sites of victimhood into sites of resistance. For instance, Bama’s *Karukku* (1992) powerfully describes how casteist and gendered violence marked Dalit women’s lives, yet also fueled her decision to narrate and resist through literature. Similarly,

incidents like the Khairlanji massacre (2006), where Dalit women were brutally targeted, ignited protests led by Dalit women activists, forcing the nation to confront the nexus of caste, gender, and state violence (Teltumbde, 2008). In this sense, asserting justice becomes both a collective and embodied act, challenging the silence surrounding sexual violence.

3. Cultural Practices: Dalit women have also transformed cultural practices into sites of resistance. Singing protest songs, participating in Ambedkarite festivals, and reclaiming religious spaces create what Pandian (2006) calls “cultural politics”—a rewriting of tradition to assert marginalized presence. Autobiographical works also play a role here: Urmila Pawar’s *The Weave of My Life* (2003) blends personal memory with collective experience, showing how everyday rituals, weaving, and storytelling can resist dominant narratives. By reinterpreting culture, Dalit women inscribe their agency into spaces that once excluded them, creating alternative cultural imaginaries rooted in dignity and justice.

Literature as Embodied Voice:

Literature provides one of the most visible and impactful forms of Dalit women’s resistance, functioning not only as a medium of personal expression but also as a political act of reclaiming silenced histories. Autobiographies like Bama’s *Karukku* (1992), Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* (1986), and Urmila Pawar’s *The Weave of My Life* (2003) are not simply individual life stories but collective testimonies of caste oppression, resilience, and survival. They document how the private lives of Dalit women—marked by hunger, humiliation, and labor—intersect with broader structures of caste and patriarchy. As Rege (2006) argues, such narratives challenge both Brahmanical patriarchy and elite feminist discourses by placing caste at the center of feminist analysis, thereby insisting on an intersectional reading of women’s oppression.

These texts present the Dalit woman’s body as a site of memory and resistance. Hunger, exhaustion from endless labor, and the scars of caste-based humiliation are etched into the body, but through narration, these wounds become transformed into testimonies of strength. Bama’s *Karukku*, for example, reclaims the lived experiences of Dalit Christian women in Tamil Nadu, foregrounding the persistence of caste oppression even within religious institutions that claim universality and equality. Similarly, Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* exposes the systemic indignities of untouchability, narrating how Dalit women’s bodies were treated as repositories of caste pollution but also how collective resilience enabled survival. Pawar, in *The Weave of My Life*, intertwines the metaphor of weaving with life-writing, demonstrating how personal memory, cultural identity, and political assertion are inseparably woven together.

Dalit women’s literature thus extends beyond self-expression—it becomes a counter-archive. It disrupts the upper-caste hegemony over literary traditions and redefines the scope of feminist literature by highlighting the unique and intersectional nature of Dalit women’s struggles. In transforming silence into voice, and marginality into subjectivity, these writings embody what Spivak (1988) calls the “subaltern speaking.” Literature becomes a political vehicle for embodied voice, one that not only records histories of oppression but actively resists them, affirming Dalit women’s political subjectivity and agency.

Subaltern Politics: Dalit Women’s Collective Struggles

Dalit women’s resistance must also be situated within the broader framework of subaltern politics. Gramsci’s notion of the subaltern—those excluded from hegemonic structures of power—applies poignantly to Dalit women, who are marginalized both by caste and by gender. Yet, their mobilization demonstrates how subalterns resist exclusion by creating alternative spaces of power.

Organizations like the All India Dalit Women’s Forum (AIDWF) and leaders such as Ruth Manorama have shown how Dalit women mobilize collectively to resist systemic oppression. Guru (1995) highlights that

Dalit women “talk differently,” insisting on the intersections of caste and gender that mainstream feminism or Dalit politics often neglect. The protests following the Khairlanji massacre illustrate this: Dalit women, by occupying streets and disrupting public life, made their bodies visible as political instruments (Teltumbde, 2008). Their participation in global platforms such as the World Conference Against Racism (2001) further reflects their ability to scale subaltern politics beyond national boundaries (Paik, 2014).

By entering electoral politics, grassroots mobilization, and transnational advocacy, Dalit women redefine subaltern politics as more than just resistance—it becomes a project of constructing new democratic imaginaries.

The Quest for Justice: Challenges and Pathways

Despite constitutional protections under Articles 15 and 17 and legal mechanisms like the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (1989), Dalit women’s quest for justice remains fraught with barriers. Police complicity, judicial apathy, and caste bias regularly undermine their access to justice (Kapur, 2012). NCRB data (2020) shows that Dalit women continue to face high levels of caste-based violence, with low conviction rates exacerbating the culture of impunity.

Even within feminist spaces, Dalit women often encounter marginalization. Rege (1998) argues that mainstream feminism’s reluctance to engage with caste has forced Dalit women to create autonomous spaces like the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW). Such organizations ensure that their struggles are not diluted by co-option from dominant political or feminist agendas.

Internationally, Dalit women have reframed their struggles as questions of universal human rights. At UN forums and global feminist conferences, activists have highlighted caste and gender violence as systemic violations (Paik, 2014). Their resilience shows that justice is not only about legal redress but also about transforming social consciousness and reimagining democracy itself.

Conclusion:

Dalit women’s struggles reveal that embodied resistance is both survival and revolution. By resisting through labor, protest, literature, and cultural expression, Dalit women challenge the intersecting oppressions of caste and patriarchy. Their subaltern politics is not passive victimhood but active transformation—asserting dignity, equality, and justice in spaces that historically denied them.

Their quest for justice is not simply about legal redress but about redefining the moral and ethical foundations of Indian democracy. By foregrounding Dalit women’s embodied resistance, we recognize not only their suffering but also their agency in shaping more inclusive futures. Dalit feminism, therefore, is not an appendage to mainstream feminism or caste politics; it is a radical political movement that redefines both.

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