

Inter Sectionality in the Indian Context: Voices from Dalit Women Writers

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Abstract:

Kimberlé Crenshaw created the idea of intersectionality, which offers a crucial framework for examining oppressive systems that overlap. The daily realities of Dalit women in India are shaped by a complex matrix of caste and gender. This essay explores the ways in which a few Dalit feminist authors—Bama, Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, Sivakami, and Gogu Shyamala—use their writing to express intersectional realities. The study makes the case that Dalit feminist writing broadens the definition of mainstream feminism by emphasizing caste as a key axis of power through an analysis of autobiographical narratives and fiction. The study emphasizes how these authors contribute to a more inclusive and grounded feminist discourse in India by challenging both internal patriarchy and upper-caste supremacy. The study uses autobiographical narratives and fiction to show how these authors critique patriarchy both inside and outside of marginalized communities while articulating the intersections of caste, gender, class, and labor. By highlighting caste as a primary axis of analysis and by stressing lived experience as a method of knowledge production, their works question the constraints of mainstream Indian feminism. The paper argues that Dalit feminist writing not only expands the scope of intersectionality in India but also redefines literary and political discourse by centering marginalized voices. Ultimately, it demonstrates that an intersectional approach is essential for understanding the complexities of social inequality and for envisioning a more inclusive and transformative feminist praxis in India.

Keywords: Dalit Feminist, Mainstream, Upper-Caste, Autobiographical, Marginalized, Communities.

Introduction:

In today's feminist debate, intersectionality has become an essential analytical tool. The idea, which was developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, describes how many oppressions interact to create distinct marginalization experiences. In India, caste is still a basic social hierarchical system that is closely linked to both gender and class. Dalit women face compounded types of discrimination since they are marginalized by both caste and patriarchy.

The upper-caste bias of mainstream Indian feminism, which ignores caste-based disparities, has frequently drawn criticism. As a result, Dalit feminism has developed into a unique political and intellectual movement that puts Dalit women's voices front and center. This article examines how Dalit women writers express intersectional experiences and subvert prevailing narratives through literature.

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Since Kimberlé Crenshaw originally introduced the idea of intersectionality, it has grown to be a crucial framework in modern feminist theory for comprehending how many forms of oppression interact to influence lived experiences. The concept is highly applicable in the Indian setting, where caste functions as a fundamental axis of social inequality, despite its original roots in Black feminist studies. In India, caste, class, religion, and geography all combine to create intricate and multifaceted forms of inequity; gender cannot be studied in a vacuum. Due to their location at the nexus of patriarchal dominance and caste-based exclusion, Dalit women in particular experience cumulative rather than individual marginalization. Because it typically reflects the viewpoints of middle-class, urban, and upper-caste women, mainstream Indian feminism has been criticized for its propensity to universalize women's experiences. Such a strategy runs the risk of ignoring the particular types of discrimination experienced by those who are at the periphery of both gender and caste hierarchies. Dalit feminism, which emphasizes the voices, histories, and struggles of Dalit women, has developed as a vital intellectual and political intervention in reaction to these constraints. Dalit feminist theory, which draws influence from B. R. Ambedkar's anti-caste philosophy, highlights the necessity of addressing gender and caste at the same time in any significant effort to achieve social justice.

The expression of these intersecting experiences has been greatly aided by literature. Dalit women authors including Bama, Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, Sivakami, and Gogu Shyamala have documented the reality of gender discrimination and caste persecution via autobiographies, short tales, and novels. By questioning prevailing narratives and reclaiming spaces of speech and identity, their works transcend representation and become actions of resistance. This paper seeks to examine how these writers engage with and expand the framework of intersectionality in the Indian context. By analyzing their literary contributions, the study aims to demonstrate how Dalit feminist writing not only critiques structures of power but also reimagines feminist discourse in more inclusive and grounded ways. Ultimately, it argues that centering Dalit women's voices is essential for a comprehensive understanding of inequality and for the development of a more equitable and transformative feminist praxis in India.

Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality in India

Despite having its roots in Black feminist theory, intersectionality is highly relevant in India's caste-based system. A single-axis paradigm is unable to comprehend the complex system of oppression that results from the junction of gender and caste. This discussion revolves around B. R. Ambedkar's thoughts. Ambedkar stressed that attaining social equality requires the eradication of caste. By adding gender analysis, Dalit feminist writers expand this paradigm and show how women experience caste oppression in distinct ways. Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality offers a crucial framework for comprehending how many oppressive and power structures function concurrently rather than separately. Intersectionality was first created to examine how racial and gender experiences overlap in the US, but it has since been modified to fit a variety of sociocultural contexts. This concept is very important in India because caste is a fundamental social hierarchy building factor.

In India, caste is a strongly ingrained structure that controls social, economic, and cultural interactions, in contrast to race, which serves as a major axis of marginalization in Western contexts. It shapes daily practices of inclusion and exclusion as well as labor divisions, social mobility, and resource access. When caste and patriarchy are coupled, Dalit women endure a unique kind of marginalization that cannot be fully explained by a caste or gender-only approach. The concepts of B. R. Ambedkar, whose criticism of caste and support for social justice continue to be fundamental to Dalit ideology, are strongly associated with the intellectual underpinnings of intersectionality in India. Ambedkar stressed that caste, which is firmly ingrained in religious and social systems, is a division of laborers rather than just a system of division of labor. By adding gender as a critical component and contending that caste oppression is intrinsically gendered, Dalit feminist academics and authors expand this criticism. Caste and patriarchy support one

another through practices like endogamy, control over women's sexuality, and caste-based work duties. In the Indian context, intersectionality also requires consideration of religion, location, and class. Dalit women frequently work in informal, stigmatized jobs and have the most vulnerable economic situations. Although their experiences varied across rural and urban environments, as well as between various religious sects, the fundamental caste and gender patterns are nonetheless ubiquitous. This multifaceted approach emphasizes how marginalization differs depending on the situation and identity. Dalit feminist theory also criticizes mainstream feminist frameworks for failing to adequately address caste. Dalit women writers subvert prevailing epistemologies that value abstract theorization over grounded realities by emphasizing lived experiences and community-based knowledge. Their work is consistent with intersectionality's focus on elevating underrepresented voices to create more accurate and inclusive forms of knowledge. Thus, intersectionality in India is not merely a theoretical import but a necessary analytical tool shaped by local histories and social structures. It enables a deeper understanding of how caste and gender interact to produce complex hierarchies of power, while also offering a framework for resistance and social transformation.

Dalit Women's writing as Resistance

In Indian literature, Dalit women's writing plays a vital role as a means of political assertion, self-representation, and resistance. These works, which come from histories of oppression and exclusion, question prevailing narratives that have long suppressed or distorted Dalit voices. Dalit feminist authors use literature into a platform for protest against patriarchal rule and caste injustice by emphasizing real experiences. Dalit women's literature is firmly grounded in everyday realities, in contrast to traditional literary traditions that frequently place an emphasis on aesthetics above experience. It documents the systemic violence ingrained in social institutions through the use of oral histories, autobiographical narratives, and community memory. By doing this, it challenges hegemonic knowledge systems that have traditionally favored viewpoints from upper castes. Writing itself becomes a way to recover agency and voice, upending Dalit women's forced invisibility. The existence of caste discrimination in ostensibly egalitarian settings is revealed by writers like Bama through personal narrative. In *Karukku*, Bama challenges the notion that caste identity can be eliminated through social mobility or conversion by exposing how caste functions in religious organizations and everyday interactions. Her focus on education and self-awareness is part of a larger resistance strategy based on collective consciousness and empowerment. In a similar vein, Urmila Pawar places resistance in the context of social struggle and labor. She criticizes the socioeconomic structures that uphold injustice and draws attention to the invisible nature of Dalit women's labor in *The Weave of My Life*. Her story, which was motivated by B. R. Ambedkar's theories, emphasizes the value of coordinated opposition and the transformational power of education.

By examining internal hierarchies within oppressed populations, Baby Kamble's essays further broaden this discourse. Kamble gives an honest depiction of the gendered oppression Dalit women experience in *The Prisons We Broke*, both from upper-caste structures and inside their own communities. Her criticism emphasizes the need to address both caste and patriarchy, highlighting the intersectional character of resistance.

Sivakami examines the intricacies of power in anti-caste movements in a similar manner. She explores how patriarchal authority can be perpetuated even among people who oppose caste injustice in her book *The Grip of Change*. By highlighting these inconsistencies, Sivakami questions oversimplified liberation narratives and advocates for a more complex conception of social justice. Gogu Shyamala, meanwhile, highlights the cultural aspects of resistance. Her narratives provide alternative frameworks that challenge prevailing narratives of progress and modernization by emphasizing oral traditions, rural life, and communal knowledge systems. Shyamala reclaims cultural identity as a source of empowerment by appreciating indigenous modes of expression. When taken as a whole, these authors show that Dalit women's writing is



transformative rather than just descriptive. It fights oppression by revealing its mechanics, resists erasure by claiming presence, and imagines new opportunities for equality and dignity. Through their efforts, literature transforms into a tool for social change, elevating underrepresented voices and reshaping feminist and literary discourse in India.

Challenging Mainstream Feminism

Dalit feminist literature offers a potent critique of mainstream Indian feminism, especially its historical propensity to ignore caste-based injustices while universalizing women's experiences. The viewpoints of urban, middle-class, and upper-caste women influenced much of the early feminist discourse in India, which frequently treated gender as a single axis of oppression. The lived experiences of women who are located at the crossroads of caste, class, and gender have not been adequately taken into consideration by this method, despite its importance in confronting patriarchal structures. By highlighting how oppressive systems are interrelated and mutually constitutive, Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality paradigm highlights these limits. In the Indian context, caste is a fundamental structure that influences social mobility, access to resources, and dignity rather than an external or secondary element. Any feminist politics that ignores caste, according to Dalit feminist thinkers, is inadequate and exclusive.

The practical circumstances of Dalit women's life, such as their participation in stigmatized and precarious labor, are frequently overlooked by upper-caste feminist narratives, as authors like Bama and Urmila Pawar point out. These authors oppose the standardization of womanhood and demand that difference be acknowledged as a crucial element of feminist analysis by focusing on common experiences of oppression. However, Dalit feminism aims to broaden and change mainstream feminism rather than just criticize it. Dalit feminist theory, which draws on B. R. Ambedkar's anti-caste philosophy, advocates for a more inclusive framework that incorporates caste, gender, and class. By highlighting the fact that genuine inclusivity necessitates addressing structural hierarchies within feminist groups itself, this strategy redefines feminist solidarity.

The criticism touches on issues of knowledge creation in addition to representation. Dalit feminist authors oppose prevailing epistemologies that place more value on theoretical abstractions than on actual experiences. They affirm the validity of underrepresented voices as sources of theory and insight by emphasizing personal narratives and community-based knowledge. This change modifies the methodological underpinnings of feminist discourse while simultaneously democratizing it.

Additionally, by addressing internal inequalities within marginalized communities, authors like Baby Kamble and Sivakami complicate feminist discourse. Their work reinforces the interdisciplinary nature of feminist struggle by highlighting the need for resistance to caste oppression to also address patriarchy within Dalit areas. In the end, Dalit feminist writing challenges conventional feminism and demands a rethinking of feminist politics in India, one that is focused on eliminating all forms of structural inequality, sensitive to diversity, and rooted in lived reality. It provides a more all-encompassing and revolutionary vision of gender justice by elevating the voices of people on the periphery.

Literary Aesthetics and Methodology

Dalit feminist literature challenges prevailing standards of knowledge creation and literary expression in India by introducing a unique literary aesthetic and methodological approach. Dalit women's literature emphasizes lived experience, immediacy, and social realism in contrast to mainstream literary traditions that frequently place a higher priority on form, abstraction, and technical refinement. This change, which aims to democratize literature and make it available to people who have traditionally been shut out of elite literary venues, is not only stylistic but also profoundly political. The use of testimonial and autobiographical

narratives is a major component of Dalit feminist aesthetics. Life writing is used by authors like Bama, Urmila Pawar, and Baby Kamble to record individual and societal history of caste-based oppression. These stories blur the lines between the political and the personal, turning personal experiences into more comprehensive criticisms of societal institutions. In this situation, autobiography turns into a methodological tool that upholds the legitimacy of lived experience as an essential and legitimate source of knowledge.

Incorporating oral traditions and community memory is another important component. For example, Gogu Shyamala preserves voices and cultural expressions that are frequently missing from recorded records by utilizing storytelling techniques that have their roots in rural Dalit communities. This emphasis on oral forms draws attention to alternate ways of information transmission and contradicts the traditional literary studies' preference for written texts. Dalit feminist technique heavily relies on language itself. In order to challenge linguistic hierarchies and keep their work rooted in local contexts, many authors opt to write in regional languages instead of English. In addition to enhancing authenticity, the use of colloquial language, idiomatic idioms, and culturally unique allusions challenges conventional ideas of literary "correctness." This linguistic decision demonstrates a dedication to accurately and unmediatedly portraying the realities of underrepresented communities.

Dalit feminist writing also disrupts linear narrative structures and conventional genres. In order to convey the intricacy of social relationships and power dynamics, works like those by Sivakami explore with many perspectives and fragmented storytelling. These formal innovations challenge oversimplified or homogenous depictions of identity, reflecting the multifaceted and fractured character of intersectional experiences. Dalit feminist writing is methodologically consistent with intersectional analysis since it emphasizes the interdependence of caste, gender, and class and centers oppressed voices. It promotes an approach where lived realities influence and create theoretical understanding, challenging prevailing academic paradigms that frequently divide theory from experience. This viewpoint is consistent with B. R. Ambedkar's larger intellectual legacy, which stressed the significance of basing social theory on the material circumstances of underprivileged populations.

Additionally, Dalit feminist technique differs from individualistic literary traditions in that it emphasizes collective experience. Even when stories are autobiographical, they frequently depict common hardships and shared experiences, which promotes a feeling of unity and shared identity. This method emphasizes literature's political role as a weapon for social transformation and mobilization. In essence, the literary aesthetics and methodology of Dalit feminist writing redefine the parameters of both literature and scholarship. By privileging authenticity, accessibility, and lived experience, these writers challenge entrenched hierarchies in literary production and knowledge systems. Their work not only expands the scope of literary studies but also contributes to a more inclusive and intersectional understanding of social reality in India.

Contemporary Relevance

In modern India, discussions about caste, gender, and social justice are still hotly debated, making the writings of Dalit feminist authors extremely relevant. Caste-based discrimination still exists in daily life, especially in rural areas and informal labor markets, despite legislative protections and affirmative action laws. Dalit women continue to be disproportionately vulnerable to economic exploitation, social exclusion, and gender-based violence because of their position at the nexus of caste and gender hierarchies. In this regard, Dalit women's literary and intellectual contributions offer both critical analysis and useful frameworks for comprehending and resolving these persistent disparities. Dalit feminist writing bridges the gap between lived reality and theory. Bama, Urmila Pawar, and Gogu Shyamala's works present stories that

emphasize collective survival methods, resilience, and agency while also shedding light on institutional oppression. These authors demonstrate how caste and gender interact in the current socio-political environment by chronicling individual and collective experiences, which highlights the need for intersectional approaches to activism, policy, and social reform. Additionally, Dalit feminist writing has become more visible because of social media, digital platforms, and online literary venues. This accessibility makes it possible for underrepresented voices to speak to larger audiences, encouraging conversations on gender and caste that question long-standing societal systems. The rise of Dalit women's voices in public debates, digital activism, and modern literature highlights the flexibility and continued significance of their work in influencing political discourse and public awareness.

Additionally, movements supporting equality, social justice, and education are still motivated by these writings. In addition to documenting injustice, Dalit women's stories emphasize the value of cultural assertion, solidarity networks, and grassroots activism as instruments for change. Scholars, activists, and legislators can better comprehend the lived realities of marginalized populations and create inclusive, socially equitable, and contextually grounded initiatives by interacting with these writings. In the end, Dalit feminist poetry is still relevant today because of its twin function as a mirror reflecting structural injustices and a road map for empowerment and resistance. Dalit women writers continue to transform the conversation about caste, gender, and social justice by elevating the perspectives and experiences of those on the periphery. They provide lessons that are essential for creating a more inclusive and equitable India.

Conclusion

In the Indian setting, caste and gender interactions are fundamental to intersectionality. Using literature as a tool for empowerment and resistance, Dalit women writers have been instrumental in expressing this reality. Their work pushes for a more inclusive definition of feminism, questions prevailing narratives, and criticizes internal hierarchies. Dalit feminist writing advances a more complex and revolutionary perspective of social justice by elevating marginalized voices. In the Indian context, Dalit women's lives are influenced concurrently by caste, gender, class, and other social systems, making intersectionality a lived reality rather than an abstract theoretical term. Dalit feminist writers like Bama, Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, Sivakami, and Gogu Shyamala show how literature can be an effective tool for social critique, self-representation, and resistance. Their writings question the patriarchal systems seen in oppressed areas as well as the dominance of upper-caste narratives, emphasizing the need to examine oppression through a variety of interrelated lenses.

Dalit feminist writing challenges traditional literary forms and epistemologies by elevating lived experience, communal knowledge, and cultural memory, prioritizing accessibility and authenticity over elitist norms. In addition to describing the realities of marginalization, these writings also provide solutions for social change, group action, and empowerment. Furthermore, the continuous battles against socioeconomic marginalization, gender-based violence, and caste prejudice demonstrate the works' continued significance today. Dalit feminist literature continues to influence public debate, action, and study by offering crucial insights for creating inclusive social structures and policies.

In conclusion, centering Dalit women's voices is essential for a comprehensive understanding of inequality in India. Their writing redefines feminism, expands the scope of intersectionality, and contributes to a more nuanced, inclusive, and transformative vision of social justice. Through their narratives, Dalit women assert agency, reclaim identity, and inspire collective action, demonstrating that literature can be both a reflection of lived realities and a catalyst for meaningful change.

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