

Dalit Feminism and Cultural Performance: Art, Folklore, and the Politics of Identity in a Globalized India

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Abstract:

This article examines Dalit feminism through the lens of cultural performance, focusing on how art, performance, and folklore function as critical sites for identity formation and representation in a globalized India. Situated within the broader context of caste-based marginalization and gendered exclusion, the study foregrounds the historical invisibility of Dalit women's voices in mainstream cultural narratives. It argues that contemporary processes of globalization—through media circulation, digital platforms, and cultural commodification—have simultaneously opened new spaces for visibility while reproducing older hierarchies of representation. The central proposition is that Dalit women strategically mobilize folk traditions, performative practices, and artistic expressions to negotiate identity, assert agency, and challenge dominant cultural discourses. Methodologically, the article adopts an interdisciplinary qualitative approach, combining textual analysis of Dalit literary and visual productions, performance studies, and critical feminist and postcolonial frameworks. It engages with selected case studies from folk performance, digital media, and community-based cultural practices to trace how local expressions are reconfigured within global circuits. The analysis demonstrates that cultural performance operates as both a site of resistance and negotiation, where authenticity, visibility, and market forces intersect. The article concludes that Dalit feminism in a globalized context cannot be understood solely through frameworks of resistance or representation; rather, it must be theorized as a dynamic process of cultural negotiation, where identity is continuously reshaped across local and global terrains, producing new forms of feminist consciousness and political articulation.

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1. Introduction

Dalit feminism in India emerges at the intersection of caste, gender, and social inequality, challenging both patriarchal and caste-based hierarchies. While mainstream feminist movements have historically centered upper-caste experiences, Dalit women's struggles highlight the compounded oppression arising from their social positioning. This article examines how art, performance, and folklore function as critical sites for

expressing Dalit feminist consciousness, constructing identity, and resisting marginalization. In the context of globalization, these cultural forms gain new visibility and reach, allowing for transnational dialogue while simultaneously raising questions of appropriation, commodification, and representation. By connecting Dalit feminist thought with cultural studies and global processes, this study foregrounds the role of performative and artistic practices as both vehicles of resistance and platforms for identity negotiation. The introduction establishes the scope of inquiry, situates the study within contemporary debates in feminist and cultural scholarship, and underscores the importance of analyzing Dalit feminism through interdisciplinary lenses that integrate historical, socio-cultural, and global perspectives.

2. Background and Context: Dalit Feminism in India

Dalit feminism arose as a critical response to the dual marginalization faced by Dalit women in India—oppressed simultaneously by caste hierarchies and patriarchal structures. Historically, Dalit women have endured social exclusion, economic deprivation, and gender-based violence, which are compounded by their position in the caste system. Early Dalit feminist voices emerged through literature, autobiographies, grassroots activism, and reform movements, highlighting the intersectional realities of caste and gender oppression. Thinkers like Bama, Urmila Pawar, and Gail Omvedt foregrounded the lived experiences of Dalit women, challenging both upper-caste feminist narratives and mainstream Dalit political movements that often sidelined gender concerns. In contemporary India, Dalit feminism continues to engage with structural inequalities, political representation, education, labor rights, and social justice initiatives, while negotiating its visibility in global feminist discourses. This background situates Dalit feminism as both a historically rooted and evolving framework that addresses systemic injustice, foregrounds the voices of the most marginalized, and seeks to transform social, cultural, and political structures.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the role of art, performance, and folklore in shaping Dalit feminist expression.
2. To analyse how identity formation and representation operate within Dalit feminist discourse.
3. To explore the impact of globalization on Dalit cultural practices and visibility.
4. To investigate how Dalit women negotiate cultural and social power through performative practices.
5. To assess the challenges of commodification and misrepresentation in global cultural spaces.
6. To contribute to interdisciplinary feminist and cultural studies through a Dalit feminist perspective.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach to examine Dalit feminism in India, integrating historical, sociological, and cultural perspectives. Primary sources include autobiographies, oral histories, literary texts, and activist writings by Dalit women, providing insight into lived experiences and personal narratives. Secondary sources consist of scholarly analyses, feminist critiques, and studies on caste, gender, and globalization to contextualize these narratives within broader social, political, and economic frameworks. Analytical methods combine **intersectional analysis**—focusing on caste, gender, class, and region—with **cultural and media studies approaches** to explore representation, identity formation, and agency. The study also applies **comparative analysis**, examining how Dalit feminist practices intersect with global feminist movements and discourses, particularly in relation to art, performance, and media. By integrating these methods, the research highlights both structural constraints and the strategic negotiations of Dalit women, emphasizing agency, resilience, and transformative potential across local and global contexts.

4. Theoretical Framework: Feminism, Cultural Studies, and Globalization

This study is grounded in **intersectional feminist theory**, emphasizing how caste, gender, class, and region intersect to shape the lived experiences of Dalit women. It draws on **Dalit feminist scholarship** (e.g., Bama, Ruth Manorama, Gogu Shyamala) to center voices historically marginalized within both mainstream feminist and caste-focused discourses. **Cultural studies frameworks** inform the analysis of art, performance, folklore, and media, examining how cultural practices mediate identity, representation, and social resistance. The study also engages with **globalization theory**, considering how transnational flows of media, cultural exchange, and feminist discourse influence Dalit feminist articulation, enabling both collaboration with and distinction from global feminist movements. This combined theoretical lens allows for a nuanced understanding of Dalit feminism as simultaneously local, culturally embedded, and globally connected, highlighting its capacity to negotiate power, visibility, and agency across multiple scales.

5. Dalit Feminism and Cultural Performance: Conceptual Understanding

This section explores how Dalit feminism conceptualizes cultural performance not merely as artistic expression but as a mode of **resistance, identity assertion, and social critique**. Drawing on Dalit women's experiences, it examines how performance—through storytelling, dance, theatre, and ritual—becomes a medium to challenge caste oppression, patriarchal norms, and historical silencing. Cultural performance is theorized as a **site of negotiation**, where marginalized women navigate societal hierarchies, reclaim agency, and assert **community visibility**, transforming traditional practices into instruments of feminist consciousness.

Performance as Resistance: Cultural performances—rituals, theatre, storytelling—act as forms of contestation against caste hierarchies and gender oppression.

Identity Assertion: Dalit women use cultural expressions to articulate personal and collective identities, challenging mainstream cultural narratives.

Negotiated Agency: Performance spaces provide avenues for strategic negotiation with social norms, allowing women to exercise agency without direct confrontation.

Community Visibility: Public performances create recognition of marginalized voices and experiences, fostering solidarity within Dalit communities.

Transforming Tradition: Traditional practices are reinterpreted through a feminist lens, converting cultural heritage into tools for empowerment and critique.

6. Art, Performance, and Folklore as Sites of Resistance

Dalit women's engagement with art, folklore, and performance functions as **resistant practice**, where historical memory, community narratives, and lived experience converge. Folklore, songs, theatrical enactments, and visual arts act as **alternative knowledge systems**, conveying stories of oppression, resilience, and aspiration. These creative spaces enable women to **contest dominant cultural narratives**, create counter-discourses, and cultivate solidarity across local and global contexts. The study analyzes specific examples of performance and art to demonstrate how these cultural practices operate as **strategic tools for social critique and feminist mobilization**, while negotiating the impact of globalization on cultural preservation and innovation.

Counter-Narratives: Folk songs, stories, and visual art highlight lived experiences of oppression and resilience, providing an alternative historical memory.

Collective Mobilization: Art and performance serve as platforms for community engagement, raising awareness and encouraging collective action.

Globalization and Cultural Translation: Local cultural practices adapt under global influences, enabling Dalit feminist ideas to reach broader audiences while negotiating cultural authenticity.

Subversion of Norms: Folklore and performance disrupt dominant social and moral hierarchies, questioning entrenched caste and gendered power structures.

Creative Knowledge Production: Artistic expression becomes a medium for producing and sharing knowledge about caste, gender, and social justice.

7. Identity Formation and Representation in Dalit Feminist Discourse

Dalit feminist discourse foregrounds the process of identity formation as a critical site of resistance against caste-based and patriarchal oppression. **Assertion of Selfhood** becomes central, as Dalit women actively define their own sense of selfhood, rejecting externally imposed identities that frame them as subaltern or subordinate. This is not merely personal but political, as self-definition challenges the social hierarchies embedded in caste and gender norms.

The **intersectionality of oppression** highlights the multiple axes of marginalization Dalit women face. Unlike mainstream feminist narratives that often center gender alone, Dalit feminism acknowledges that caste, class, religion, and regional disparities compound experiences of oppression, making identity formation both complex and context-specific.

Narrative control is exercised through literature, autobiographies, and oral traditions, providing a platform to articulate lived experiences. Dalit women writers, poets, and performers reclaim storytelling authority, countering historical erasure and ensuring that their voices are documented on their own terms. **Representation in cultural spaces**, such as theatre, folk performances, and community festivals, allows Dalit women to assert visibility and contest invisibility in public life. Finally, these cultural interventions serve as mechanisms for **subverting stereotypes**, presenting Dalit women as active agents of social change rather than passive victims, thereby reshaping collective perceptions.

8. Impact of Globalization on Dalit Cultural Expressions

Globalization has opened new avenues for the circulation of Dalit cultural expressions, influencing both content and reach. **Cross-cultural exposure** enables Dalit narratives to resonate with audiences beyond India, fostering dialogue on issues of marginalization, social justice, and feminist resistance in a global context.

At the same time, **hybridization of traditions** occurs as local art forms, performance styles, and folklore interact with global aesthetics. Dalit women artists adapt traditional motifs to contemporary mediums, creating innovative expressions that retain cultural specificity while engaging transnational audiences. **Economic opportunities** emerge through cultural entrepreneurship, where global markets and art festivals provide avenues for recognition and financial independence, reinforcing social visibility and empowerment.

However, globalization also presents risks, particularly **commodification of culture**, where the political and subversive aspects of Dalit art may be diluted for mass appeal. Despite this, globalization facilitates **transnational solidarity**, connecting Dalit feminist struggles with other marginalized feminist movements worldwide. Such linkages enhance advocacy strategies and create platforms for comparative analysis of gendered oppression under varying socio-political regimes.

9. Media, Digital Platforms, and Global Visibility

Digital and social media have revolutionized the ways Dalit women communicate their experiences and assert agency. **Amplification of voices** through blogs, online journals, YouTube channels, and social networks allows for direct communication with both local and global audiences, circumventing traditional media gatekeepers.

Digital storytelling provides innovative formats for performance, combining visual, auditory, and narrative techniques that reflect the complexities of Dalit feminist critique. Online spaces also enable **participatory engagement**, allowing communities to respond, share, and co-create narratives that reflect lived realities. Through these interactions, Dalit cultural expressions acquire collective validation and reinforce social networks of support.

Global audience reach is another transformative aspect, as issues rooted in local contexts gain international attention and contribute to broader discourses on human rights, social justice, and feminist praxis. Yet, **challenges of digital space** persist, including harassment, algorithmic bias, and surveillance, which can restrict expression or introduce new forms of vulnerability. Despite these constraints, media and digital platforms have become crucial arenas for negotiating visibility, legitimacy, and transnational recognition of Dalit feminist struggles.

10. Case Studies of Dalit Art and Folk Performance

Dalit women's art and folk performance offer powerful illustrations of how cultural expression becomes an arena of resistance and self-assertion. For example, in Tamil Nadu, the performance tradition of **Therukoothu**—historically dominated by caste narratives—has been reworked by Dalit women performers to foreground caste violence and gendered suffering, transforming public space into a site of feminist critique (see Barnett, *Confronting the Body*, 2005). Similarly, the reinterpretation of traditional folk songs in Maharashtra by Dalit women artists carries layered narratives of labor exploitation, caste discrimination, and female agency, challenging what Ashis Nandy describes as the “invisible archives of silence” (*The Intimate Enemy*, 1983). These artistic interventions are not mere aesthetic variations; they embody what Homi Bhabha calls “**the location of culture**” where subaltern subjectivities contest dominant narratives (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1994). In these performances, Dalit women refuse to be passive cultural subjects and instead ** articulate social critique through embodied practice**, rendering visible otherwise marginalized experiences. Such case studies reveal the multiplicity of strategies—mimicry, inversion, satire, and reclamation—through which art and performance mediate political expression.

Sub-pointed analysis:

- **Embodied Resistance:** Performance becomes a physical enactment of protest, not just symbolic critique.
- **Reappropriation of Tradition:** Folk forms historically linked with dominant caste narratives are reinterpreted to center Dalit women's subjectivities.
- **Public Space as Political Stage:** Street theatre and community performances invert normative power relations by bringing caste and gender critique into shared cultural arenas.
- **Narrative Disruption:** Traditional lore is creatively altered to expose social injustice, aligning with Stuart Hall's idea that “**representation is constitutive of culture**” (Hall, *Representation*, 1997).

11. Negotiating Identity: Local Traditions and Global Circulations

Dalit women's cultural identities are negotiated at the intersection of deeply rooted local traditions and the transnational currents of globalization. When Dalit women bring local folk practices into global forums—festivals, academic conferences, film festivals, or digital platforms—they engage in what Arjun Appadurai terms “**global cultural flows**” (*Modernity at Large*, 1996). In doing so, they resist being exoticized or reduced to a cultural stereotype; instead, they assert complex identities that reflect local histories and global aspirations. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's warning that subalterns are often “spoken for” rather than heard (*Can the Subaltern Speak?*, 1988) resonates here: Dalit women strategically circulate their art to **speak for themselves**, negotiating how they are heard in broader discourses. At global spaces, traditional performances are recontextualized—yet without losing their rootedness—allowing Dalit women to assert transnational identities that are simultaneously particular and universal. This negotiation complicates simplistic binaries of local versus global by showing that **globalization can be a field of creative appropriation rather than cultural erasure**.

Sub-pointed analysis:

- **Global Cultural Flows:** Dalit performance enters transnational circuits, shaping identity beyond local confines.
- **Self-Representation:** Global platforms allow Dalit women to narrate their stories on their own terms, countering Spivak's critique.
- **Hybrid Identities:** The interplay of local tradition with global exposure produces hybrid forms of expression.
- **Cultural Translation:** While global audiences may interpret performances differently, Dalit women use this translation as an opportunity to expand dialogues on caste, gender, and human rights.

12. Challenges: Commodification, Misrepresentation, and Cultural Appropriation

While globalization and media exposure offer visibility, they also bring critical challenges of **commodification, misrepresentation, and cultural appropriation**. When Dalit folk forms are consumed by market forces or repackaged for global audiences without historical or political context, what was once a critique of caste injustice risks becoming a sanitized cultural product. Arjun Appadurai cautions that cultural elements can become “**commodities in the global factory of cultural consumption**” (*Modernity at Large*, 1996), stripped of their emancipatory force. Furthermore, scholars such as Leela Gandhi (*Postcolonial Theory*, 1998) highlight how global circuits can inadvertently universalize cultural practices, erasing specificities that are vital to understanding Dalit women's lived oppression. Misrepresentation occurs when performances are framed as folklore entertainment rather than political storytelling, neutralizing their critical edge. Cultural appropriation further complicates this terrain when dominant groups adopt Dalit aesthetics without engaging with the structural inequalities that these aesthetics emerged from. Thus, the challenge is not only to gain visibility but also to ensure **contextual integrity** and political resonance in the way Dalit cultural expressions are received and interpreted.

Sub-pointed analysis:

- **Commodification Risk:** Cultural expression can be flattened into marketable products devoid of critique.
- **Misrepresentation Hazard:** Outsiders may interpret performance as exotic or quaint rather than politically charged.

- **Appropriation without Accountability:** Cultural motifs may be used without acknowledging the socio-historical oppression underlying them.
- **Preserving Context:** Ensuring that global circulation maintains historical, cultural, and political frames, resisting neutralization.

13. Discussion: Cultural Politics and Feminist Agency

The intersection of cultural politics and Dalit feminist agency highlights how women negotiate power through artistic, performative, and symbolic practices. Cultural politics, understood as the struggles over representation, norms, and meaning within society, offers Dalit women a terrain for asserting agency in ways that bypass formal legal or political structures (Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, 1983). In the context of Dalit feminism, agency is exercised not only through direct activism but also through subtle interventions in everyday cultural life—song, theatre, visual art, ritual performance, and storytelling—thereby **transforming social norms from within**. As Veena Das emphasizes, the micro-practices of everyday life are critical sites where social critique, negotiation, and resistance coalesce (*Critical Events*, 1995).

Dalit women’s cultural expressions operate as **strategic mediations** between structural oppression and personal empowerment. By embedding political critique within art, performance, and folklore, they render visible the otherwise marginalized experiences of caste and gender oppression. This aligns with Stuart Hall’s assertion that representation is a constitutive part of culture, shaping and contesting meaning (*Representation*, 1997). Simultaneously, these practices demonstrate **multi-scalar agency**—micro-level resistance within families, meso-level negotiation within institutions, and macro-level interventions in public and transnational arenas—mirroring Judith Butler’s idea that power is exercised and resisted within relational frameworks rather than from discrete loci (*Gender Trouble*, 1990).

Moreover, Dalit feminist cultural politics often negotiates between **visibility and legibility**. Women navigate public recognition while maintaining the authenticity of their narratives, ensuring that their interventions are politically intelligible and culturally grounded. The negotiation of meaning across local and global contexts reflects what Arjun Appadurai terms “**cultural flows**”, wherein diasporic, digital, and transnational networks expand the reach of subaltern voices (*Modernity at Large*, 1996). This demonstrates that feminist agency is not limited to oppositional acts; it is relational, adaptive, and contextually mediated, emphasizing negotiation as a core historical and cultural mechanism.

Sub-pointed analysis:

- **Everyday Cultural Interventions:** Folk songs, theatre, and rituals as subtle tools of social critique.
- **Multi-Scalar Agency:** Family, community, and institutional spaces used strategically to negotiate power.
- **Negotiation of Visibility vs. Legibility:** Balancing public recognition with narrative authenticity.
- **Global and Local Interplay:** Transnational circulation of cultural practices expands agency while maintaining rootedness.
- **Relational Power:** Agency emerges through continuous interaction with intersecting regimes of caste, gender, and culture.

This discussion underlines that Dalit feminist agency is **inseparable from cultural politics**. Resistance is not merely confrontational; it is **performative, negotiated, and embedded within the social fabric**, demonstrating how cultural expression functions as both a medium and measure of feminist empowerment.

14. Conclusion

Dalit feminism, when examined through the lens of cultural politics, performance, and globalization, emerges not as a linear struggle for rights or visibility but as a **historically and socially situated practice of negotiation and agency**. The preceding analysis demonstrates that Dalit women assert their identities and challenge oppression through **multi-scalar interventions**—from family and local communities to institutional and global arenas—using art, folklore, and performance as mediums for both self-expression and socio-political critique (Das, *Critical Events*, 1995; Hall, *Representation*, 1997). These cultural practices function as **strategic tools**, enabling women to navigate the overlapping structures of caste, gender, and socio-political constraints, while simultaneously producing knowledge, asserting presence, and transforming social norms.

Globalization has amplified the reach of Dalit cultural expressions, enabling subaltern voices to circulate transnationally. Yet it also introduces challenges, including **commodification, misrepresentation, and cultural appropriation**, which require careful negotiation to maintain authenticity and agency (Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 1996; Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 1993). By engaging critically with media, digital platforms, and transnational networks, Dalit feminist praxis demonstrates **adaptive and relational strategies**, where negotiation and performance become central to empowerment rather than direct confrontation alone.

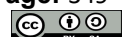
Ultimately, the study underscores that Dalit feminism cannot be understood merely as a legal or political movement; it must be approached as a **cultural, performative, and globally mediated phenomenon**, where agency is enacted through everyday practice, emotional labor, and strategic negotiation. This approach reconceptualizes feminism as **situated, relational, and processual**, emphasizing the historical and contemporary ways in which Dalit women navigate and reshape power.

Sub-pointed summary of key insights:

- **Feminism as Practice:** Agency arises through negotiation and cultural intervention rather than solely through reform or protest.
- **Multi-Scalar Negotiation:** Micro (family), meso (community and institutions), and macro (national/global) engagements are interconnected.
- **Cultural and Artistic Resistance:** Folklore, performance, and art act as mediums for visibility, critique, and identity formation.
- **Globalization as Opportunity and Challenge:** Transnational circulation amplifies voices but also risks misrepresentation and commodification.
- **Relational and Contextual Agency:** Power is negotiated relationally, through situational strategies and adaptive practices.
- **Future Implications:** Dalit feminist studies must integrate cultural, socio-political, and global perspectives to fully capture the dynamics of agency, resistance, and identity formation.

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