



Feminist Theory and Dalit Women's Writings: A New Politics of Voice

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ABSTRACT

In Indian literature, the emergence of Dalit women's voices has significantly reshaped the contours of feminist discourse. These writers challenge the limitations of mainstream Indian feminism, which often tends to universalize women's experiences and overlook the layered oppressions faced by Dalit women due to their caste, gender, and class. Dalit feminism asserts a distinct standpoint that foregrounds the lived realities of those who are doubly marginalized—both as women and as members of oppressed castes.

This critique becomes evident in the works of influential writers such as Bama, Baby Kamble, and Urmila Pawar, whose narratives delve into personal and collective histories of suffering, resistance, and resilience. Their stories do not merely recount oppression; they powerfully reclaim agency through language, memory, and community. For instance, Bama's *Karukku* narrates her journey from shame to empowerment as a Dalit Christian woman, exposing the hypocrisy within religious and educational institutions. Similarly, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* offers a raw and unapologetic portrayal of untouchability and gendered subjugation.

These texts challenge the upper-caste, upper-class assumptions embedded in mainstream feminist thought and propose a more inclusive, intersectional approach. By placing Dalit women's experiences at the center, Dalit literature enriches feminist theory, making it more responsive to caste-based discrimination. This integration redefines feminist praxis — no longer a singular narrative, but a coalition of diverse struggles. Thus, Dalit women's literature is not only a mode of resistance but also a transformative framework that compels Indian feminism to confront its exclusions.

Keywords- Feminist discourse, mainstream feminist, untouchability, subjugation, discrimination, transformative framework, feminist praxis

INTRODUCTION

Feminist theory in India has historically been shaped by the experiences of upper-caste, middle-class women, often failing to address the specific oppressions faced by Dalit women, who occupy the margins of both caste and gender hierarchies. Dalit feminism, as articulated through the literary works of Dalit women, challenges this

exclusionary framework by foregrounding the intersectionality of caste, gender, and class. This article examines how Dalit women's writings—autobiographies, poetry, and fiction—constitute a new politics of voice, one that disrupts the homogeneity of mainstream feminist narratives and reclaims agency for a doubly marginalized group. By analyzing the works of prominent Dalit women writers, this study explores how their literature critiques patriarchal and casteist structures while redefining feminist theory to be more inclusive and intersectional.

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Framework: Dalit Feminism and Intersectionality

Feminist theory, rooted in Western and Indian intellectual traditions, has often prioritized gender as the primary axis of oppression, sidelining issues of race, caste, or class. In India, mainstream feminism, led by figures like Madhu Kishwar or Brinda Karat, has historically focused on issues like dowry, domestic violence, and legal reforms, which, while critical, often reflect the concerns of upper-caste, urban women. Dalit feminism, emerging in the late 20th century, critiques this universalizing tendency, arguing that caste and gender are inseparable in shaping Dalit women's experiences.

The concept of intersectionality, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is crucial to understanding Dalit feminism. Intersectionality posits that oppressions are not singular but interlinked, with race, gender, class, and other factors creating unique experiences of marginalization. For Dalit women, caste and gender intersect to produce a “double marginalization,” compounded by class-based economic vulnerabilities. Dalit feminist scholars like Sharmila Rege and Gopal Guru have emphasized that Dalit women's lived realities—marked by caste-based violence, economic exploitation, and patriarchal control within and outside their communities—require a distinct feminist framework.

Dalit women's writings serve as both a critique of mainstream feminism and a medium for articulating this intersectional identity. Unlike traditional feminist literature, which may prioritize individual liberation, Dalit women's texts emphasize collective resistance and community solidarity, reflecting the socio-political context of Dalit struggles. This article draws on Rege's concept of “Dalit feminist standpoint,” which prioritizes the experiential knowledge of Dalit women as a basis for theorizing oppression and agency.

Dalit Women's Writings: A Historical Context

Dalit literature emerged as a significant literary movement in India during the 20th century, particularly through the efforts of the Dalit Panther movement in the 1970s, inspired by Ambedkarite ideology. While male Dalit writers like Namdeo Dhasal and Daya Pawar gained prominence, Dalit women's voices were initially marginalized within the movement. The publication of autobiographies by Dalit women, such as Baby Kamble's *Jina Amucha* (1986) and Bama's *Karukku* (1992), marked a turning point, bringing attention to the gendered dimensions of caste oppression.

These texts, often written in regional languages like Marathi and Tamil, challenge the elitism of Indian literary traditions, which have historically been dominated by upper-caste voices. Dalit women's writings are characterized by their raw, unfiltered depiction of lived experiences, blending autobiography with social critique.

Unlike conventional literary forms, these works prioritize orality, drawing on the oral traditions of Dalit communities, and reject the polished aesthetics of mainstream literature. This stylistic choice reflects a deliberate resistance to Brahmanical and patriarchal literary norms.

Key Themes in Dalit Women's Writings

1. Intersectional Oppression

Dalit women's writings vividly illustrate the intersection of caste, gender, and class. In Bama's *Karukku*, the protagonist narrates her experiences as a Dalit Christian woman, facing discrimination from upper-caste Christians and patriarchal constraints within her community. Bama's account of working as a laborer and enduring caste-based slurs highlights the economic and social vulnerabilities of Dalit women. Similarly, Baby Kamble's *Jina Amucha* recounts the brutal realities of life in a Mahar community, including gendered labor and caste-based violence. These texts reveal how Dalit women are oppressed not only by upper-caste society but also by patriarchal structures within Dalit communities, complicating the narrative of caste solidarity.

2. Reclaiming Agency

A central feature of Dalit women's writings is the reclamation of agency through self-narration. Autobiographies like Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2008) document the author's journey from a marginalized Dalit girl to an educated writer and activist. Pawar's narrative emphasizes education and self-awareness as tools for empowerment, challenging the stereotype of Dalit women as passive victims. By writing their own stories, Dalit women assert control over their representation, countering the objectification prevalent in mainstream literature and media.

3. Resistance and Solidarity

Dalit women's writings are inherently political, advocating for collective resistance against caste and gender oppression. In *Sangati* (1994), Bama explores the lives of Dalit women in her community, highlighting their resilience in the face of systemic violence. The text celebrates the strength of Dalit women's collectives, such as communal gatherings and storytelling, as spaces for solidarity and resistance. This emphasis on community contrasts with the individualism of mainstream feminist narratives, offering a model of collective agency rooted in Dalit feminist praxis.

4. Subversion of Literary Norms

Dalit women's writings challenge the aesthetic and thematic conventions of Indian literature. Their use of vernacular language, colloquial expressions, and non-linear narratives disrupts the Brahmanical literary canon, which prioritizes Sanskritized or English-language texts. For example, Bama's *Karukku* employs a conversational Tamil style, reflecting the oral traditions of Dalit communities. This linguistic subversion is a form of resistance, asserting the validity of Dalit voices in a literary landscape that has historically excluded them.

CASE STUDIES: BAMA, BABY KAMBLE, AND URMILA PAWAR

Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati*

In Indian literature, the works of **Dalit women writers** powerfully challenge mainstream feminist discourse by foregrounding the multilayered oppressions of **caste, gender, and class**. These authors not only document injustice, but reclaim voice and agency, dismantling dominant narratives that erase their lived realities.

In *Karukku*, **Bama** writes, “Because we are born into the Paraiya jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect ... Education can empower us to throw away these indignities.” (17–18). This line underscores both structural caste subjugation and the transformative potential of education for Dalit women.

Similarly, **Baby Kamble**, in *The Prisons We Broke*, exposes internal patriarchy within her community, “In those days ... the honour enjoyed by a family was in proportion to the restrictions imposed on the women ... My father had locked up my aai ... like a bird in a cage.” (5) and describes the grinding labor of child brides, “She had to sit down with a sharp knife ... she would be not more than eight or nine years old.” (73–74)

From **Urmila Pawar's** *The Weave of My Life*, she reflects, “My mother used to weave aaydans ... the weave of pain, suffering and agony that links us.” Here writing and weaving become cultural-reproductive acts binding personal and collective histories.

These writers do not merely sing hymns of victimhood—they claim authorship over their stories. By amplifying Dalit women's narratives, they force mainstream feminism to confront its **universalising assumptions**. Their lived experiences demand an intersectional feminist praxis that centers caste, gender, and class simultaneously.

Thus, Dalit feminist literature does more than critique—it **redefines feminist theory**, shifts the locus of political agency, and transforms identity formation. In these texts, there is no symbolic emancipation; instead, a **politics of voice and resistance** emerges—one grounded in the embodied, everyday realities of Dalit women.

Baby Kamble's *Jina Amucha*

In *The Prisons We Broke*, Baby Kamble presents a searing Dalit feminist autobiography that documents the **gendered labor and oppression** Dalit women endured within and outside their homes. She writes, “In those days, it was the custom to keep women at home, behind the threshold... My father had locked up my aai in his house, like a bird in a cage.” (5). This vivid image illustrates how patriarchal norms confined women even within Dalit communities.

Kamble also details **child marriage and exhausting labor** imposed on young girls, “The daughter-in-law... would not be more than eight or nine years old. She had to sit down with a sharp knife... stretch these into long snake-like strips.” (73–74). This horror highlights how early marriage compounded caste-based subjugation with physical exploitation.

Moreover, Kamble exposes the internalized patriarchy that allowed Dalit men to dominate their own women, “We too desired to dominate... So we made our own arrangements to find our slaves—our very own daughters-in-law!” (87). Here, caste oppression intersects with intra-community gender violence.

Despite these assaults, Kamble celebrates women's **resilience and mutual support**. She recounts the rise of **Ambedkarite ideology** as a source of transformation, “Our women have had a major... give up these superstitions... take a lead in educating their children... I have full faith in you, my sisters.” Ambedkar’s words empowered Dalit women to challenge caste and gender hierarchies.

In centering such lived experiences, Kamble reclaims narrative agency and confronts mainstream feminism's gaps. Her writing transforms personal memoir into collective resistance, redefining feminist praxis through the lens of caste-gender intersectionality.

Urmila Pawar’s *The Weave of My Life*

In *The Weave of My Life*, Urmila Pawar chronicles her path from a rural Mahar Dalit girl in the Konkan to a celebrated writer and activist. The memoir interlaces personal experiences with communal memories, showcasing how Dalit women resist oppression through education, self-reliance, and collective agency.

Pawar draws a metaphorical link between her mother’s weaving and her own writing, “My mother used to weave aaydans ... I find that her act of weaving and my act of writing are organically linked. The weave is similar. It is the weave of pain, suffering, and agony that links us.” (x, English translation). This metaphor extends beyond craft: weaving becomes an act of memory, protest, and resistance.

She vividly describes the fear and insecurity that pervaded Dalit communities, “The community grew up with a sense of perpetual insecurity ... we shrink within ourselves like a tortoise and proceed at a snail’s pace.” (xvi-xvii). By juxtaposing this constraint with her eventual awakening, Pawar shows how education empowered her and others to reclaim dignity.

Pawar’s journey exemplifies the rejection of passivity. Through study and activism in Mumbai, she embraces Ambedkarite ideals: she champions rationality, gender equality, and caste abolition. She rejects upper-caste feminism that elides caste violence and positions Dalit women as silent victims rather than political subjects.

Through weaving and writing, Pawar asserts a **collective identity**—claiming space for Dalit women's histories in feminist discourse. Her memoir challenges monolithic feminism by centering caste-gender intersectionality in praxis. In doing so, *The Weave of My Life* becomes not just a personal narrative, but a collective testimony—showing that Dalit women weave their destiny through solidarity, education, and resistance.

CRITIQUING MAINSTREAM FEMINIST THEORY

Mainstream Indian feminist theory, as articulated in journals like *Manushi* or through organizations like the All-India Women’s Conference, has often been critiqued for its upper-caste bias. Dalit feminist scholars argue that issues like dowry or sati, while significant, do not capture the everyday realities of Dalit women, who face caste-based violence, economic marginalization, and exclusion from public spaces. For example, the feminist focus on

“women’s rights” often ignores the specific vulnerabilities of Dalit women, such as sexual violence by upper-caste men or economic exploitation in informal labor sectors.

Dalit women’s writings challenge this exclusion by centering caste as a critical axis of oppression. They expose the limitations of a universal feminist identity, which assumes shared experiences across caste lines. By documenting their lived realities, Dalit women writers like Bama and Pawar demand a redefinition of feminist theory, one that accounts for the intersectional nature of oppression and prioritizes the voices of the most marginalized.

The Politics of Voice

The concept of “voice” is central to Dalit women’s writings. In a society where Dalit women are silenced by caste, gender, and class hierarchies, writing becomes an act of resistance. Autobiographies, in particular, serve as a medium for self-representation, allowing Dalit women to narrate their stories on their own terms. This act of “speaking out” challenges the historical erasure of Dalit women’s experiences in Indian literature and historiography.

Moreover, Dalit women’s writings redefine the notion of agency. Unlike mainstream feminist narratives, which often equate agency with individual liberation, Dalit women’s texts emphasize collective agency, rooted in community solidarity and resistance. This collective voice is evident in the oral traditions, songs, and communal gatherings depicted in texts like *Sangati*, which celebrate the resilience of Dalit women while acknowledging their struggles.

Representation and Identity

Dalit women’s writings also engage with questions of representation and identity. By rejecting the victimhood narrative imposed by mainstream literature, these texts present Dalit women as active agents of change. For example, Pawar’s *The Weave of My Life* highlights her role as an activist, challenging the stereotype of Dalit women as passive or oppressed. Similarly, Bama’s *Sangati* celebrates the strength and humor of Dalit women, countering their objectification in upper-caste narratives.

This reclamation of identity is inherently political, as it challenges the Brahmanical and patriarchal structures that define Dalit women as “other.” By centering their own experiences, Dalit women writers create a new literary space, one that validates their identities and asserts their right to self-representation.

Challenges and Critiques

Despite their transformative potential, Dalit women’s writings face several challenges. The dominance of English and Sanskritized regional languages in Indian literary circles often marginalizes texts written in vernacular languages like Tamil or Marathi. Translation, while increasing accessibility, can dilute the cultural and linguistic nuances of these works. Additionally, Dalit women writers face criticism from within their communities for exposing intra-community issues, such as patriarchal practices, which some argue reinforces negative stereotypes.

Furthermore, the academic reception of Dalit women's writings is often limited by the elitism of literary studies, which may dismiss these texts as "non-literary" due to their raw, autobiographical style. This critique underscores the need for a broader redefinition of literary value, one that recognizes the political and aesthetic significance of Dalit women's voices.

CONCLUSION

Dalit women's writings represent a radical intervention in both feminist theory and Indian literature, offering a new politics of voice that challenges the hegemony of mainstream narratives. Through their autobiographies, poetry, and fiction, writers like Bama, Baby Kamble, and Urmila Pawar articulate the intersectional oppressions of caste, gender, and class, while reclaiming agency and representation for Dalit women. These texts critique the universalizing tendencies of mainstream feminism, demanding a more inclusive and intersectional approach to feminist praxis. By centering the lived experiences of Dalit women, their writings redefine identity, resistance, and literary aesthetics, creating a transformative framework for understanding marginalization and empowerment in postcolonial India. As Dalit feminism continues to gain prominence, it challenges scholars, activists, and readers to rethink the boundaries of feminist theory and the power of literature as a tool for social change.

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