Mapping Dalit Feminism
Towards an Intersectional Standpoint

ANANDITA PAN

Foreword by J. Devika
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Foreword

J. Devika

When I see something that looks racist, I ask ‘Where is the patriarchy in this?’ When I see something sexist, I ask ‘Where is the heterosexism in this?’ When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask ‘Where are the class interests in this?’ ~ Mary Matsuda, 1991

Intersectionality is one of those unique ideas the usefulness of which seems to vary from researcher to researcher. Or, each of us has a unique reason for finding the concept useful. Much discussed as a path-breaking innovation arising from gender studies but relevant across the social sciences, poised tantalizingly between quantitative and qualitative methodologies, the idea of intersectionality refuses to condense into a concept with clear-cut meaning and significance. Perhaps the only other concept that matched the intellectual excitement it generated was Amartya Sen’s understanding of ‘capabilities’. Both concepts are of liberal provenance but seem to promise much more.

In general, the interest in the idea of intersectionality marks a time of intellectual maturity in which the limits of identity politics and the scholarship accumulating around it could no longer be ignored; but identity politics in itself could by no means be treated as irrelevant. Whatever its origins may be, or however it may be characterized (as a heuristic device, a buzzword, or analytical tool, and so on, to mention just a few), intersectionality forces us to ask ‘the other question’, as Mary Matsuda puts it.
In India too, feminist researchers have debated the idea closely. For many, the idea was merely putting a name on a practice already underway in Indian feminist research, if not in activism. They pointed to key concepts of Indian Feminism like ‘brahmanical patriarchy’ which clearly conceive Indian patriarchy as produced in the intersection of two axes of power, caste and gender. Many raised objections to this claim, pointing to intersectionality as entwined inextricably with the standpoint of Black/Dalit women. In this view, identifying such concepts as ‘brahmanical patriarchy’ as a product of intersectional analysis could potentially be an elite appropriation of the very idea. For me personally, the crucial advantage that the idea may yield, when recalibrated effectively for Indian feminist activism, is the potential it opens up for feminist maitri (in the Ambedkarite sense). That is, it could potentially work to ameliorate the rigidifying of identities which cuts off effective and non-reductive communication. As I have argued elsewhere, a framework for intersectionality ‘adequate to the spaces of feminist maitri would perhaps be a version that can be deployed as a tool of self-reflexive analysis to theorize the different experiences of all feminists who have quarrelled with their respective caste-communities of birth. In other words, we must forge it as an “unhoming tool”—that makes us feel sufficiently not-at-home in our familiar environments.’ For Pan, the intersectional standpoint is central to Dalit Feminism but is conceptualized as ‘a way of looking … concerned less with who is speaking for/as a dalit feminist … a mode of analysis of a text/issue/event from a caste-gender angle that challenges dominant readings and thereby transforms our understanding of the text and of the intersecting systems of oppression. It is in these interventionist and transformative capacities that Dalit Feminism may be seen to be operative’ (p. 209).

For those who wish to join the debate in Indian Feminism on intersectionality, the urgency of which is surely accentuated by the stifling political climate prevalent in the country now, Anandita Pan’s book is a very accessible introduction. It contextualizes
the interest in the idea within the rise of Dalit Feminism in the 1990s as a unique movement with transnational connections and echoes, which advanced a searing critique of both mainstream Indian Feminism and the Dalit movement. The critique, Pan argues, was shaped in and through the lens of the ‘intersectional standpoint’. In her chapters, Pan takes the reader through some of the most important moments in radical dalit self-actualization through cultural production, specifically, through the genre of autobiography to demonstrate the intersectional standpoint articulated in the autobiographical writings of dalit feminists; she introduces some of the most productive and significant debates in Indian Feminism, around sexuality and caste. She also shows how an intersectional reading allows us to break the victim/agent binary in understanding the everyday struggles of dalit women. In the end, Pan leaves the question open, adding an appendix which allows the reader to explore the idea by herself. Reading her, I have had many questions; and that is probably what she expects of the reader.

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REFERENCE

Preface

My engagement with Dalit Feminism began purely as an academic venture, and ended up as an adventure of sorts. I still remember the day I was introduced to Sharmila Rege’s article, ‘Dalit Women Talk Differently’ as a part of the feminist theory syllabus. It was a moment of inspiration, revelation and retrospection. I was excited to have come across a field that interested me (and continues to do so), and at the same time, I became aware of my sheer ignorance about the area. What ensued from this fortunate discovery was a feverish energy to procure every possible document/text in the area that I could access. When the time came to choose a ‘topic’ for my doctoral dissertation—a compulsory process faced by all students pursuing a doctorate degree—there began the moment of truly thinking about what and how I could contribute to the field called Dalit Feminism. This attempt at mapping the field, to give this vast area some coherence, is my answer to that. In this endeavour, my thesis supervisor, Professor Suchitra Mathur, has been my greatest support. It was due to her guidance and encouragement that I dared lay my hands on mapping a discourse. In her, I found the researcher and the teacher I always aspire to be.

A research, as I would gradually come to understand, is a collective process. Though penned by me, it has been immensely inspired by my teachers who instilled in me the spirit of a learner and the seed of critical thinking. I owe immensely to conversations with my teachers, Professor G. J. V. Prasad and Professor Saugata
Bhaduri of Jawaharlal Nehru University, and Professor Ananya Dutta Gupta of Visva-Bharati University, which enriched the research further. Special thanks to Dr. Navneet Sethi of Jawaharlal Nehru University. I will carry her ideals of dedication and love for the rest of my life.

I owe a tremendous debt to Gogu Shyamala, author and poet, and Professor. R. Azhagarasan at the University of Madras for their suggestions and comments on various aspects of this work, both creative and academic.

During the course of writing this book, discussions with my best friend and husband, Sreenath, helped me shape my ideas to a greater precision and clarity. Our mutual interest in varied areas of research has both enriched and expanded my perspective as a researcher. Sajit, with his expertise in editing and writing, constantly came at my rescue.

This book would not have materialized without Stree’s support. My gratitude also to the reviewers and the editors who gave their valuable inputs and went through several drafts of the manuscript.

This acknowledgement would be incomplete without expressing my debt to my parents who enabled me to bring this book come to life.

Bhopal, April 2020

Anandita Pan

NOTE

Introduction

The Una March in 2016 marked new directions in Dalit Politics with its call for coalition among dalits, the Left, Muslims, OBCs, and adivasis, and in its interpretation of caste as material oppression functioning through ownership of land. The dalit women leaders of the Dalit Mahila Swabhiman Yatra—a protest march held in Rajasthan from 18–28 September 2016 addressing ‘multiple levels of violence faced by Dalit Women’—who also participated in the Una and Udupi marches, however, pointed to the fact that dalit women were not included in the decision-making bodies of the dalit organization in Una. Gowri, a member of Karnataka Janashakti, emphasized in an interview that, ‘As women we have to fight to be heard, we have to yell louder in comparison to men.’ In the same interview, another dalit woman activist, Sanghapali Aruna Lohitakshi, said that in Una, ‘barely any other Dalit women were allowed to speak. At the end, Manisha Mashaal [another dalit woman activist from Haryana] tried to step up to the mic, but one of the men on stage actually grabbed her hand and tried to pull her back. She had to physically pull herself free to be able to go up and speak.’ These narratives reveal how silence is forced on dalit women in order to retain the focus exclusively on caste. Such binarism of caste and gender as envisioned and practised by Dalit Politics emphasizes the ever-increasing need to recognize intra-group division within the anti-caste struggle, its patriarchal attitude and the importance of dalit women’s voices.
More recently, the #MeToo movement that has taken the world—including India—by storm, also initiated important conversations about its constituency: women. In India, the #MeToo movement has encompassed the fields of academia and media, specifically cinema and journalism. The #MeToo movement is seen as initiating a new wave of feminist consciousness in India across different realms. In the process, however, the constituency of this movement, that is, women, and the idea of Feminism, have been contested by dalit feminists who have argued that the concept of sexual harassment in the workplace—on which the #MeToo movement is built—comes at the cost of erasing caste and promoting a savarna perspective. In this connection, dalit feminists have invoked Bhanwari Devi’s case to show that the caste-gender-based implications of violence on dalit women gets erased in the generalized interpretation of ‘sexual harassment in the workplace’ in the Vishakha guidelines. In their approach to the #MeToo movement, dalit feminists highlighted the importance of intersectionality by criticizing the shortcoming of mainstream Indian Feminism in failing to address the cause of dalit women and the issue of caste, and called for a solidarity-based Feminism which recognizes difference.

Contesting such erasure/ignorance Gopal Guru points out that dalit women need to talk ‘differently on the basis of external factors (non-dalit forces homogenizing the issue of dalit women) and internal factors (the patriarchal domination within the dalits).’ Thus, in Guru’s conceptualization, what characterizes Dalit Feminism is the emergence of dalit women’s voices. Pointing towards the necessity of recognizing ‘dalit woman’ as an identity distinct and different from ‘women’ and ‘dalits,’ Guru maintains that the retrospection should be internal. Following the casteist and classist attitude of mainstream Indian Feminism—wherein prevalence is given to issues concerning upper-class upper-caste women—Guru argues that ‘the claim for women’s solidarity at both national and global levels subsumes contradictions that exist
between high caste and dalit women…. Thus beneath the call for women’s solidarity the identity of the dalit woman as dalit gets whitewashed and allows a ‘non-dalit’ woman to speak on her behalf.” Guru’s comment problematizes the issue of representation. He speaks in favour of an identity-based articulation where dalit women, having experienced the reality of caste- and gender-based oppressions, are supposedly more authentic narrators of their experiences. Whereas, when a non-dalit speaks for dalit women there is always the danger of misrepresentation and appropriation. This claim however is not restricted only to the contradiction between feminist politics and dalit women. As Guru mentions further in the article, ‘Besides these external factors, there are certain internal factors that have prompted dalit women to organize separately vis-à-vis the dalit men.’ And here he focuses on political and cultural marginalizations of dalit women. While dalit leaders subordinate ‘independent political expression of dalit women’, in the cultural field dalit men dominate the literary scene. As such, dalit women’s discrimination by dalit men lead to the understanding that:

(i) It is not only caste and class identity but also one’s gender positioning that decides the validity of an event; (ii) dalit men are reproducing the same mechanisms against their women which their high caste adversaries had used to dominate them; (iii) the experience of dalit women shows that local resistance within the dalits is important. The whole situation compels us to defend the claim of dalit women to talk differently.

Guru establishes Dalit Feminism as a moment where dalit women speak as and for themselves. Thus, what defines Dalit Feminism in Guru’s conception is the emergence of dalit women’s voice.

While the primary constituency of Dalit Feminism are dalit women, the anxiety over who are dalit feminists also continues to persist. Central to this debate is the contradiction between identity and positionality. With respect to the term ‘dalit,’ the duality
between identity and positionality continues to pervade. While identity is preferred for its direct association with experience,\textsuperscript{17} the authenticity of experience has been challenged by envisioning ‘dalit’ as a position-based politics.\textsuperscript{18} Arjun Dangle notes that contradiction also exists in self-identification among the dalits with the majority consciously attributing ‘assertion’ to the term ‘dalit’, while a few groups such as the new Buddhists of Maharashtra preferring the term Buddhist because they find ‘dalit’ to be ‘negative and confining’.\textsuperscript{19} Writer and critic Baburao Bagul reimagines dalit as a human figure.\textsuperscript{20} Bagul provides an alternative historiography linking dait suffering to that of the Vedic culture and champions Buddhism and Western enlightenment for their contribution in dalit self-assertion. The term, ‘dalit’, for Bagul, symbolizes ‘total revolution’ against Brahmanism.\textsuperscript{21} Satyanarayana invokes this debate in the Telugu dalit literary scenario to argue that dalit is a ‘conscious identification with the untouchable community’ and that it need not be based on caste as the single denominator of dalit.\textsuperscript{22} In this context, he refers to Telugu poet, Satish Chandar, for his assertion of being a Marxist dalit. Satyanarayana argues, ‘Dalit is a position that allows some members of the Scheduled Castes to identify with the dalit identity but also draws on the legacy of Marxist, Ambedkarite and other ideologies.’\textsuperscript{23} In this sense, the definition of ‘dalit’ gets built on intersectionality, standpoint and solidarity. In challenging the exclusivity of caste in defining ‘dalit’, Satyanarayana also notes the contribution of dalit feminists and writers such as Volga who have highlighted the forced separation, erasure, and segregation of the gender question within anti-caste politics and have pointed at the patriarchal attitude latent therein.\textsuperscript{24}

How re-centering ‘caste’ through the lens of ‘caste-gender’ can provide an alternative knowledge about the caste system can be seen through the immense controversy that was raised after Rohith Vemula’s suicide in 2017.\textsuperscript{25} The debate over Vemula’s caste and the subsequent affirmation of him adopting the caste of his
mother (dalit) highlighted the obsession over the patriarchal and patrilineal caste system. Satyanarayana notes that this moment marks a doubt in the authenticity of a birth-based dalit identity. This obsession over Vemula's lineage underscores the close connection between caste and gender and his subsequence defiance of the norms. Fixation of marriage within castes, also known as endogamy, ensured the perpetuation of caste segregation. Mixed-marriages and the resultant sankara (mixed) children posed a threat to clearly determine a caste. To resolve this matter, exogamy was (and continues to be) severely punished. The caste system also thrived through gender discrimination in the form of patriliny where a child was always assigned the father's caste. Vemula, by opting for his mother's caste, defied both the norms. He was a sankara child who did not take his father's caste (which was higher than his mother's) and chose to opt for his mother's caste. In this way, Vemula can be seen as consciously choosing to become a dalit. It is for this reason that Satyanarayana views dalit as a category that can be ‘productively employed to consolidate the marginalized untouchable caste groups and its literary cultures’.

My use of the term ‘dalit’ in this book develops from identity and highlights positionality. I draw on Ambedkar’s usage of the term, that is, dalit as an agential position, to denote the untouchables (also known as shudra-atishudra, lower than the lower-caste shudra. Their experience of untouchability becomes the base where caste oppression can be observed operating most prominently. This categorization also arises from the fact that many lower castes, often classified as OBCs, practise caste-class based segregation and oppress dalits similarly like their upper-caste counterparts. At this point I would like to clarify that this classification of ‘dalit’ as an identity-based category, is not intended to remain restricted within the boundaries of narrow identity politics. Instead, I use the experience of untouchability as the starting point to explore the larger systemic implications of caste oppression. Hence, crucial to my usage of terms such as ‘Dalit Politics’, ‘dalit
historiography’ (see Chapter 5) is the recognition of an awareness of the caste system as a systemic form of oppression that devalues and dehumanizes dalits based on untouchability. In this way, my conceptualization of, for instance, a ‘dalit historian’ encompasses both dalits and non-dalits who consciously achieve awareness about caste oppression.

The contentious relation between identity and positionality has loomed large in Dalit Feminism as well. Owing to the assumption that dalit women, being the most obvious group to have experienced caste- and gender-based oppression are the most authentic speakers, men and non-dalit women are seen as incapable of representing/speaking for dalit women as they have not experienced the life of a dalit woman. This postulation about Dalit Feminism holds true if Dalit Feminism is understood as an epistemic praxis to represent authentically what it feels to be a dalit woman. However, Dalit Feminism is not about authentically recording and representing what it feels to be a dalit woman. It is a methodological praxis to identify and analyse how various modes of caste and gender-based oppression intersect with each other to oppress dalit woman. Sharmila Rege in her article, ‘Dalit Women Talk Differently’, proposes a standpoint perspective where she places emphasis on recognizing that ‘the subject of dalit feminist liberatory knowledge must also be the subject of every other liberatory project and this requires a sharp focus on the processes by which gender, race, class, caste, sexuality—all construct each other’. In other words, Rege conceptualizes Dalit Feminism as a framework that has the potential to inform and possibly work with other marginalized groups by establishing solidarity. Also notable in this article is Rege’s conceptualization of ‘dalit woman’ as a constructed category rather than an essentialist one. For Rege, attaining dalit feminist standpoint does not entail the existence of the biological factor of being a dalit woman, but rather an active struggle through which consciousness about caste- and gender-based oppression is gained. Rege challenges separatist identity-based politics and urges other
groups to ‘educate themselves’ about the struggles of dalit women.\textsuperscript{35} It is in this way that Rege aims to reinvent non-dalit feminists as dalit feminists. Hence, being a dalit feminist is not a pre-given notion that one naturally attains by being born as a dalit woman. On the contrary, the subject position of a dalit feminist is something that one attains through ‘positionality’. Closeting Dalit Feminism as a politics \textit{by} dalit women and \textit{for} dalit women runs the danger of ghettoizing it. While by no means I undermine the importance of dalit women’s voice, it is important to distinguish between a movement that is focused on \textit{dalit women} and a \textit{dalit feminist} politics. It is for this reason that I view Dalit Feminism as a position rather than an identity.

My conceptualization of Dalit Feminism addresses some of these serious concerns about identity. This book conceptualizes Dalit Feminism as a transformative interpretative framework which I term dalit feminist intersectional standpoint.\textsuperscript{36} As an intersectional standpoint, Dalit Feminism looks at how the systems of caste and gender function intersectionally. The focus on the process and functionality of systemic oppression expands our understanding of how these systems operate in other instances as well. As an intersectional standpoint, Dalit Feminism does not restrict its conceptual understanding only to dalit women. As a theoretical framework it provides a lens to reinterpret any text/event from a caste-gender angle.

Herein lies the significance of this study. It recognizes difference as the base on which Dalit Feminism establishes itself in contradistinction to mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics. However, it does not merely identify what is different, but rather investigates how Dalit Feminism is different. Conceptualized as a methodology, a lens and a way of looking, Dalit Feminism emerges as a useful method to analyse how caste and gender simultaneously influence not just dalit women but also upper-caste men and women and dalit men. This would mean recognizing that according to the brahmanical dictates of purity, upper-caste
women are kept within the house and dalit women—due to their visibility in the public—are seen as sexually available. As Uma Chakravarti writes, ‘brahmanical codes for women differ according to the status of the caste group in the hierarchy of castes with the most stringent control over sexuality reserved as a privilege for the highest castes.’ The distinction between *dalit woman* and *dalit feminist* is that while the former indicates an identity group constituting of only dalit women, the latter refers to a position that one consciously occupies in order to critically understand the various contours of caste- and gender-based oppression. A dalit feminist lens, therefore, is particularly enabling because it does not ghettoize Dalit Feminism to dalit women, and instead emerges as a transformative framework. It is for this reason that this mapping is both interventionist and transformative. The mapping highlights how Dalit Feminism intervenes into mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics by challenging the assumed homogeneity of ‘women’ and ‘dalits’. Conceptualized as a lens, Dalit Feminism also helps us to look at mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics differently by transforming our understanding of casteism as casteist sexism and sexism as sexist casteism.

**MAPPING THE FIELD**

The idea and process of mapping a field, as conceptualized in this book, is similar to that of Jane Gallop’s *Around 1981*, an example of the publication of a feminist text at an important historical juncture. For Gallop, the journey begins on a personal note when, around 1981, she comes across mainstream academic literary feminism in the United States while writing a response to the feminist issue of *Critical Inquiry* in 1981 for the Modern Languages Association (MLA). Her book explores the many travels academic feminism—which was well-established in the US by the 1990s—makes from being a theoretical framework to a historicized
feminist criticism. Gallop’s attempt differs from previous feminist histories which progressed in a chronological manner documenting the growth of Feminism according to historical times. Gallop on the other hand, presents a theoretical framework to address some major questions of feminist theory, revisiting the 1970s and 1980s Feminisms, as well as post-structuralism. In this way, she conceptualizes how knowledge is produced through different strands of feminist articulations. Commenting on the necessity of such mapping, Gallop adds that, the idea is to show how Feminism in the US, at different junctures of times, has been a collective and political effort, joined by groups with shared as well as conflicting interests.

While Gallop’s mapping focuses primarily on the institutionalization of Feminism in the U.S., Moraga and Anzaldúa’s This Bridge Called My Back question the constituency of Feminism, that is ‘woman,’ highlighting its heterogeneity. It takes a break from Feminism that focused almost exclusively ‘on relations between sexes’ instead concentrating on ‘relationships between women’. The feminist voice that they promote brings out the fissures within the category called ‘woman’. Beginning as a reaction to the ‘racism of White Feminism’, their book celebrates the culmination of solidarity among feminists of colour. Considering the voluminous work by the feminists of colour—‘from extemporaneous stream of consciousness journal entries to well thought-out theoretical statements; from intimate letters to friends to full-scale public addresses … [to] poems and transcripts, personal conversations and interviews’, one can claim that articulations of feminists of colour have reached a point where it could be mapped. Their book stands at the juncture of marginal voices to come out and collaborate. It opens new possibilities cutting across several political, theoretical, academic, as well as conceptual fields by making it truly interdisciplinary in nature, and showing that formulations about race, gender, and class, permeate through various
discourses and practices and, hence, its resistance also requires a combined view of all these factors.

*Mapping Dalit Feminism* follows a similar purpose of mapping. This book emerges at a moment when dialogues and contestations pertaining caste, gender and identity are on the rise. These conversations not only point at the hegemonic power structures, they also create a platform for counter-narratives to emerge. In such context, Dalit Feminism has emerged as a vanguard of an alternative perspective that challenges casteist sexism and shows new scopes for coalition across identities, communities, regions and religions. The time, therefore, is ripe to capture the broad contours of Dalit Feminism. This mapping is done keeping this idea in mind. I would also like to clarify that by discursive mapping I do not mean to impose any homogeneity, especially across regions. Dalit women’s movements emerged at different times in different regions and have their own histories to follow.41 What I attempt through this mapping is to chart out the dominant concepts so as to provide an introduction to the discourse called Dalit Feminism. For this reason I specifically choose the 1990s because it marks Dalit Feminism’s entry in the academia and in the global platform.

Radha Kumar’s *The History of Doing* stands as a benchmark of such kind of a mapping where she highlights the overall contours of Feminism in India within the timeline of the nineteenth century to the late 1980s.42 Her book, instead of restricting Feminism to one history, initiates many varied dialogues around and from it. It traces a long trajectory of women’s activism in India from the nineteenth century to the late twentieth century. Beginning with the liberal feminist claim of equality of sexes, Kumar shows how Indian Feminism moves toward a socialist feminist attitude. The mapping is meant to address ‘the paucity of literature available as a source, and the unevenness of the sources which were traceable’ especially on the nineteenth-century women’s movements, as well as the post-Independence period which documents collective
struggles rather than individual biographies and autobiographies. By the 1990s Indian feminist movement had already branched out in three directions: (i) activism concerning feminist issues (right over body, physical violence); (ii) activism showing huge participation of women (Tebhaga and Telengana movements); and (iii) activism where women’s issues emerge as a side issue (anti-patriarchal movements). Kumar thus seems to indicate that it is the right time to begin a conversation between Indian Feminism and struggles by other marginalized groups in order to bring issues of representation, ethnic and religious identities, and nationalism, to a broader level. These mappings, of Feminisms in India and the West, do not intend to provide a new knowledge that is radically different from what is already known about the histories of Feminism; rather these mappings mark interventionist and transformative moments in the many histories of Feminisms across the world at different times.

This book attempts a similar mapping of Dalit Feminism. Over the past two decades Dalit Feminism has been established not only at the institutional level through the publication of scholarly articles on the subject, but also through autobiographies and literary writings by dalit women (in various regional languages that have then been translated into English as well as writings originally in English) which have marked an explosion of dalit women’s voices. The range of dalit feminist discourse is also evident through cultural productions and cultural critiques. In 2002, the establishment of Kabir Kala Manch, provided a platform to voice a cultural resistance to caste- and gender-based oppression where students and young activists engaged in shaking up the cultural scene through their musical and theatrical performances in the slums and streets. Documentaries and films such as Turup (2017) have highlighted the perspectives of dalit women in showing how the intersection of caste-gender produces specific situations for them. Websites such as countercurrents.org and roundtableindia.co.in, though begun as online repositories promoting dalit voice,
have started incorporating large numbers of articles focusing on dalit women’s issues and have included a separate section on ‘patriarchy’. Dalitweb.org, also known as Savari, is a website dedicated to dalit women. Dalit Feminism, therefore, has emerged as a distinct theoretical formulation, and this became evident through the vast multi-faceted discourse of Dalit Feminism, from literary texts, scholarly articles, cultural productions and political configurations.

These recent debates show that Dalit Feminism has not only reached its peak in terms of emergence of dalit women’s voice in literary, political and scholarly spheres, but also the different conversations regarding autonomy and solidarity emphasize the need to have conversations conceptually between mainstream Indian Feminism, Dalit Politics and Dalit Feminism. However, due to its vast spectrum, discussions about and approaches towards Dalit Feminism remain sprinkled around in the fields of activism, literature and popular culture. This book analyses this vast field to extract from it the underlying ideas and concepts that tie it together as a theoretical framework. To address the discourse of Dalit Feminism the texts in this book include literary articulations, movements, scholarly writings and popular culture. I use a comparative framework in all the chapters wherein I analyse Dalit Feminism vis-à-vis mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics in order to elucidate the epistemological interventions Dalit Feminism makes and how simultaneously it transforms mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics.

At this point the question may arise as to whether this mapping is at all necessary. Considering the large textual field already available in this area, how will mapping contribute in generating a different understanding of Dalit Feminism? It is important to mention that this mapping does not intend to offer a single meaning to Dalit Feminism. The purpose here is not to give Dalit Feminism a definitive, totalizing shape. Quite contrarily, the aim of this project is to identify the underlying connections between the
scattered events and show the specific conceptual contributions of Dalit Feminism.

This mapping, therefore, becomes a praxis in challenging totalitarianism in politics and theory. Pointing at the drawback of totalitarianism in theorization, Foucault notes that,

> It is not that these global [totalitarian] theories have not provided … useful tools for local research …. I believe these tools have only been provided on the condition that the theoretical unity of these discourses was in some sense put in abeyance, or at least curtailed, divided, overthrown, caricatured, theatricalized, or what you will. In each case, the attempt to think in terms of a totality has in fact proved a hindrance to research.\textsuperscript{45}

Foucault’s observation provides an important corrective to claims of \textit{unity} both at the political and the theoretical levels. In fact, this observation also forms the core of Dalit Feminism as it challenges the ‘sisterhood’ of mainstream Indian Feminism and the centralization of caste in Dalit Politics. In Foucauldian terms, Dalit Feminism emerges as ‘a non-centralized kind of theoretical production … whose validity is not dependent on the approval of the established regimes of thought’.\textsuperscript{46} As a subjugated form of knowledge, the project of Dalit Feminism consists of recovering dalit women’s voice and reinterpreting the contours of mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics. Dalit Feminism therefore can serve as a model for other marginalized politics; ones that acknowledge the ‘local’ without imposing totalitarianism. Moreover, such a praxis reinforces the need to go beyond identity-based politics. Foucault argues that subjugated knowledge comprises of two components: ‘historical contents that have been buried and disguised in a functionalist coherence or formal systemization’ and ‘naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity.’\textsuperscript{47} In Dalit Feminism the former component is dalit women’s voice, hitherto deemed irrelevant, and the latter is the intervention Dalit Feminism
makes in mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics. Hence, the dalit feminist intersectional standpoint, in its very methodological framework, is interventionist and transformative.48

These interventionist and transformative aspects of Dalit Feminism are explored in this book in the fields of difference, identity, representation, agency and positionality. Chapter 1 Theorizing ‘Intersectional Standpoint’ elaborates on the key aspects of Dalit Feminism, its contradistinction vis-à-vis mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics in redefining the categories ‘women’ and ‘dalits,’ and the concept of dual patriarchies in revising the contours of patriarchy and Brahmanism through brahmanical patriarchy. Emphasizing on the core theoretical framework of intersectionality, it theorizes Dalit Feminism by developing a new framework called ‘intersectional standpoint.’

The concept of intersectionality, while critical of identity politics for its focus on a single axis of identity, also posits an alternative intersectional identity, which in the case of Dalit Feminism is the dalit woman. Therefore, Chapter 2 ‘Being a Dalit Woman’ explores identity constitution by dalit women themselves. Dalit women’s autobiographies (autobiographies being the most self-evident genres articulating ‘selfhood’), read in contradistinction to autobiographies canonised by mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics, not only reveal the savarnization of ‘Indian woman’ and masculinization of ‘dalit’, they also explore the complexity and specificity of dalit women’s intersectional identity through the notion of dual patriarchies: brahmanical and dalit.

However, Dalit Feminism is not limited only to the self-articulations of dalit women (which would trap it in the authenticity debate); it is also a political intervention. This is evident in how it engages with the politics of representation. Therefore, Chapter 3 ‘Representing a Dalit Woman’ and Chapter 4 ‘Exercising Agency’ explore how dalit women are perceived and what the enabling modes of dalit feminist representations are. With respect to dalit women’s representations vis-à-vis sexuality and work,
Chapter 3 explores how Dalit Feminism problematizes mainstream feminist notion of agency through choice and challenges dalit representations of dalit women as victims. Chapter 4 goes beyond the binarism of victimhood/agency and discovers newer ways of achieving agency through negotiation and solidarity.

This representational analysis shows that Dalit Feminism is an epistemological project that intervenes in how/what knowledge is produced about dalit women and who can be/become a dalit feminist which leads to Chapter 5 ‘Revisiting History.’ This chapter investigates the contribution of Dalit Feminism to the entire project of knowledge production. It probes into the relationship between power and knowledge and sees how it affects the production of knowledge. Drawing on the dalit feminist intersectional standpoint, as elaborated in Chapter 1, Chapter 5 explores how this lens can be utilized not only to read contemporary texts/events but also to contest and recreate history. History, then, is presented as events that are documented by different groups differently. Drawing on feminist standpoint theory as the theoretical framework and historiography as the realm of study, this chapter looks at how dalit feminist historiography emerges as a transformative epistemology by recovering dalit women activists/thinkers and by reinterpreting dalit leaders and events canonized in dalit and mainstream Indian feminist historiographies.

Chapter 6 ‘Becoming a Dalit Feminist: Towards a Conclusion’ summarizes the overall contours of the mapping, giving it coherence through the idea of ‘intersectional standpoint.’ By proposing the framework of ‘intersectional standpoint,’ I argue that a dalit feminist standpoint, while premised on giving primacy to dalit women’s voices and experiences, also emerges as a mode of analysis from a caste-gender angle that challenges dominant readings and transforms our understanding of intersecting systems of oppression. Chapter 6, that also concludes the book, delves into the idea of who can be/become a dalit feminist. It revisits Chapter 2 to highlight the complexities and nuances of the position of a dalit feminist.
Through analysis of texts that are neither centered on dalit women nor are written/produced by dalit women, I show that a dalit feminist standpoint is concerned less with who is speaking for/as a dalit feminist, and is more a mode of analysis of a text/issue/event from a caste-gender angle. ‘Becoming’ a dalit feminist emphasizes one is engaged in consciously identifying the intersections of caste and gender. Thus, Dalit Feminism is not just about the identity-category, ‘dalit woman,’ but is an epistemology that uses the standpoint of dalit women to intervene both in the dominant systems of oppression and the resistance politics of mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics.

NOTES

1 In response to the beating of four dalit men for skinning a dead cow in Gujarat, thousands of dalits participated in a ten-day long march from Ahmedabad to Una to protest against discrimination and demand for freedom.


3 Ananya, ‘Chalo Udupi: ‘Women Started Coming Out Only When They Saw Women Leaders In It Too’ (2016).

4 Ibid.

5 Geetha, ‘Raya Sarkar’s List of Sexual Predators Not the Problem, Allowing Harassers the Benefit of Anonymity Is’ (2017a); Thusoo, ‘From #MeToo to #HerToo’ (2018).


7 Bhanwari Devi was a Saathin in rajasthan who actively participated in preventing the marriage of a one-year old girl. As retaliation she was raped by five upper caste men in front of her husband. Predominantly represented as a case of gender violence, the Bhanwari Devi case led to the famous Vishakha judgment (1997) on women’s sexual harassment at workplace. Mainstream feminist interpretation of the issue presumed the category ‘woman’ to be a homogenized whole, wherein sexual harassment was assumed to be operative similarly for ‘all women’ with same intensity. Mainstream feminism, therefore, viewed ‘woman’ solely through the single axis of gender and erased the specificity of caste. See Patel, ‘A Brief History of Battle Against Sexual Harassment At Workplace’ (2005); Mody, 10
Judgements that Changed India (2013); Sarpotdar, ‘Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace in India’ (2014).


12 Ibid.: 2549.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.


17 Satyanarayana,’ Identification’: 2–4.

18 Popularized by B. R. Ambedkar, the term, ‘dailt,’ signifies a group/people that is oppressed or ground down. The term gained momentum in the 1970s when the Dailt Panthers used the term in a more inclusive manner referring to all those oppressed by the caste system. Instead of referring to only people of ‘untouchable’ caste, dalit is envisioned by Dalit Panthers as a political position.


20 Bagul, ‘Dalit Literature is but Human Literature’ (1992a): 293.

21 Ibid.: 293.

22 Satyanarayana, ‘Identification’: 5.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 apparasu, ‘rohith Vemula not a Dalit, Belonged to other Backward class’ (2017).

26 This idea legally persisted till 2012 when the Supreme Court recognized the right of the child to claim his/her mother’s caste in cases where the father is dead/absent. https://indiankanoon.org/doc/197038546/

27 Satyanarayana,’ Identification’: 8.

28 This aspect is explored in detail in Chapter 2 in the discussion on dalit men’s autobiographies. Moreover, my usage of the term ‘upper-caste’ is not
limited to the brahmin caste. It refers to the castes who practice casteism and are higher than dalits.

29 Similarly that of a dalit feminist.

30 This ‘awareness’ is discussed in detail through standpoint theory in Chapter 1 and Chapter 5 of this book.


33 Rege, ‘Dalit Women Talk Differently’: 45.

34 This perspective is radically different from Gopal Guru’s who in his article ‘Dalit Women Talk Differently’ (1995), argues that dalit feminist articulations should remain exclusively ‘by dalit women, for dalit women’ due do the misrepresentation they face in the writings of dalit men. Guru thus opts for an exclusivist politics, and Rege argues for a position-based approach.

35 Rege, ‘Dalit Women Talk Differently’: 45.

36 This framework is explored at length in Chapter 1 of this volume, and is elucidated with examples in later chapters.


39 Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., This Bridge Called My Back (1983).

40 Ibid.: xxiii-xxiv.

41 Such histories are explored by Pawar and Moon (2014) who collected narratives of Amebdkarite dalit women, and the Stree Shakti Sanghatana (1989) that investigated the role of dalit women in the Telangana Peasants’ Revolt and the Left Party’s attitude towards the question of gender.


43 Ibid.: 1.

44 Ibid.: 1–5.


46 Ibid.: 81.


48 It is important to note that scientificity has been challenged by feminist standpoint theorists such as Sandra Harding and Dorothy E. Smith. In the context of scientific knowledge, Harding observes that modern science enjoys epistemic supremacy by emphasizing ‘objectivity’ (Harding 1993: 49) and ‘neutrality’ (Harding 1995: 321). Both objectivity and neutrality
assume subject’s/researcher’s distance from the object of research as the ground for authenticity and impartiality in the reading/analysis of the object(s) (E. Anderson 2017). Science proves authenticity of its claims by providing statistical or experimental methods which are viewed as fair or rational in order to ‘maximize standardization, impersonality or some other quality assumed to contribute to fairness’ (Harding 1995: 332). Moreover, neutrality ‘depicts the grounds for accepting social, political and moral values as utterly detached from evidence about human potentialities and about what happens when people try to realist these values in practice’ (E. Anderson 2017). In other words, science depicts knowledge as mutually divorced from the social and the everyday experiential. Harding argues that these parameters of scientific objectivity are necessarily patriarchal in nature because the practitioners of science are also mostly male. She maintains that by attributing objectivity to ‘certain kinds of knowledge-seeking communities [such as] modern science’ (1995: 332), scientific knowledge determines who/what gets included or excluded from the field of knowledge. And this critique becomes possible by adopting a feminist standpoint. Similar analysis has been provided by Dorothy E. Smith (1974) in the context of sociology as a discipline. For a detailed reading see Sandra Harding, ‘Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is ‘Strong Objectivity?’’ (1993): 49–82; Harding, ‘Strong Objectivity: A Response to the New Objectivity Question’ (1995): 331–349; Dorothy E. Smith, ‘Women’s Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology’ (1974): 1–13; E. Anderson, ‘Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science’ (2017).
Theorizing ‘Intersectional Standpoint’

THE EMERGENCE OF DALIT FEMINISM

The 1990s is credited with the emergence of independent and autonomous dalit women’s organizations such as the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) in 1995 and the All India Dalit Women’s Forum (AIDWF) in 2006, which evolved out of a strong feeling that dalit women need to organize themselves in order to address their ‘special needs and problems.’ What this ‘special needs and problems’ signified was a difference in dalit women’s condition from that of upper-caste women and dalit men. In other words, it identified the necessity to recognize difference among ‘women’ and ‘dalits’.

Mangala Subramaniam points out that ‘assertion of the dalit women’s experience through the forum of their organizations drew the attention of mainstream feminist activists and academicians and led to a major debate on the plurality versus unity within the women’s movement’.

It is important to note that in the Indian context, the Shah Bano case in 1985 created an environment for different feminist perspectives to grow. However, they were not always perceived favourably by mainstream Feminism. Even
when communal difference among women was recognized with the Shah Bano case, caste was never brought to the analytical frame of mainstream feminist discourse. Mary E. John argues that although caste and communalism have touched the women’s movements since the early twentieth century, ‘it is a matter of historical record that women’s organizations were unable to sustain their early efforts towards a more inclusive politics’. In order to represent ‘a unique moment of liberal universalism in India’, the early twentieth-century leaders who propounded a new India boasting gender equality, came to subscribe to a politics that was effectively ‘elite, Hindu and upper caste’.

NFDW’s participation in the UN World Conference against Racism, held in Durban in 2001 marked a watershed moment for dalit women’s organizations as the ‘NFDW asserted itself as speaking for dalit women and started taking up dalit women’s issues at the international level’. Atrey notes that dalit feminists’ alignment with international forums served two purposes: to make their own voices heard and to create pressure on the Indian government through international organizations. Dalit Feminism’s visibility in the international forums helped bring out how ‘caste, class and gender discrimination prevents dalit women from enjoying their basic human rights, particularly dignity, equality and development’ and that ‘atrocities and violence against dalit women … [help] preserve the existing caste and gender disparities’. These observations highlight why it was necessary for Dalit Feminism to begin its journey in the international forum and also how caste and gender simultaneously affect dalit women. According to Mahanta, ‘The Dalit women’s movement in India made conscious attempts to align themselves with transnational advocacy networks to further the cause of their domestic struggle’. This strategy was specifically intended to challenge the disregard to the marginalized voices by the government. Alliance with transnational networks helped create pressure over the nation by instilling ‘shame’ and marring a nation’s ‘international prestige’.
Hardtmann notes that dalit women’s presence in Durban should also be seen ‘in contrast to the dominance of men in leadership positions within the Dalit movement locally/regionally in Indian and also in the Dalit diaspora’. Dalit women’s organizations unveiled the discrimination of dalit women by dalit men and the difference among women based on caste which had so far remained unrecognized by mainstream Indian Feminism. The emergence of dalit women’s organization, therefore, challenged the universality of ‘woman’ and ‘dalit’ by highlighting the specificity of the category, ‘dalit woman,’ through difference. As Vidyut Bhagat remarks: ‘The women’s movement has in its enthrallment of “sisterhood” failed to note the “caste” factor while the Dalit movement has remained patriarchal and sees the dalit women’s oppression merely as a caste oppression.’

INTERSECTIONALITY: CONCEPTUALIZING DIFFERENCE, SOLIDARITY AND DUAL PATRIARCHIES

At the core of Dalit Feminism is the understanding that ‘dalit woman’, which is its primary constituency, is located at the intersection of caste and gender. Dalit women are not monolithic entities who can be neatly categorized either as ‘women’ or ‘dalits’. In mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics, caste and gender are considered two individual and mutually exclusive categories defining ‘women’ and ‘dalits’ respectively. As a result, dalit women and their concerns get erased or subsumed. In a succinct understanding of the dalit women’s situation and its possible redressal, Urmila Pawar observes,

The Dalit movement is a movement for total human freedom. It does not however seem to pay adequate attention to the women’s question. Women’s liberation movement also should really be a part of this movement for human liberation. It is not. A myth is harboured that unlike the Brahmin woman the Dalit woman is free
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from bondage and stifling restrictions. The pain of the Devadasi, the deserted woman and the Murali is ignored in this stand…. Dalit educated women also should come out of the wrong impression that only with the help of men they can stand out in the world. These women should fight for their rights both as dalits and as women.¹⁴

Pawar’s statement here foregrounds two important analytical omissions: of gender in Dalit Politics and caste in mainstream Indian Feminism. Pawar’s statement defines Dalit Feminism as an interventionist position that seeks to address the intersectional nature of dalit women’s identity. Dalit Feminism’s difference from mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics, therefore, is articulated through the idea of intersectionality.

Intersectionality is a theoretical framework that investigates how systems of oppression operate in conjunction with each other. Intersectionality emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s from the legal academy, specifically with Kimberlé Crenshaw’s path-breaking article ‘Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color’. Its primary aim has been to develop a framework for analysing power that encompasses and connects gender, class, and race-based subordination. The notion of intersectionality arose out of the theorization by feminists of colour which focused on the triply oppressed black women. Crenshaw takes black women as an example and shows how intersectionality rejects the single-axis framework often embraced by both feminist and anti-racist scholars, analysing instead ‘the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of black women’s … experiences’.¹⁵ Intersectionality questions the homogenization of categories such as ‘woman’ and ‘black’ by recognizing that there are multiplicities and differences within these two categories.¹⁶

Intersectionality provides an enabling methodology for feminist analysis by proposing an approach that recognizes multiple-axes
of oppression affecting black women and challenges the homogeneity so far assumed by both feminist and anti-racist discourses. In this context, Leslie McCall’s theorization of intersectionality through inter-categorical and intra-categorical approaches becomes important. By inter-categorical approach, McCall refers to the recognition of ‘relations of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimension,’ while the intra-categorical approach ‘interrogates the boundary-making and boundary-defining process itself where it maintains a critical stance toward categories that are predominantly seen through a single axis of identity.’ Political formulations based on single axis of identity have been strongly criticized by theorists of intersectionality. Terming such identity politics as ‘vulgar constructivism’, Crenshaw states that the ‘problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite: that it frequently conflates or ignores intra-group differences’. She argues that in minority politics such as anti-racism and Western Feminism, black men and white women gain prominence, thereby erasing black women who face both racist and sexist oppression simultaneously. Hence, a major drawback of identity politics is the inability to perceive subjects through multiple axes of identity and understand the multi-pronged facets of oppressions. It is in this more-nuanced strategical possibility that intersectionality is seen as an enabling methodology through its acknowledgement of difference.

In Western feminist politics, the concept of difference is invoked by Black Feminism to problematize the category, ‘woman’. Conceived as a homogeneous category wherein oppression is linked to womanhood, women in general were seen as a ‘minority group’ by White Feminism. This universalization presented ‘woman’ as a unitary subject that cuts across race, class, ethnicity. Such an epistemological postulation highlights a unitary form of patriarchal oppression and a universalized experience of womanhood, resulting in the erasure of differences among women in
an attempt to homogenize feminist politics. As a result, women belonging to minority groups, such as women of colour, come to be excluded as a structural consequence of the classification of the category ‘woman’ and its subjective experience. Black feminists have pointed out that while the feminist view of sisterhood helps in constituting a collective resistance, it empowers only certain groups of women while marginalizing others.22

Moraga and Anzaldúa’s *This Bridge Called My Back* questions this constituency of Feminism, that is, ‘woman’, highlighting its heterogeneity. In her foreword to the second edition, Moraga emphasizes that this book takes a break from Feminism that focuses almost exclusively on relations between sexes, concentrating instead on ‘relationships between women’.23 The feminist voice that they promote brings out the fissures within the category called *woman*. Beginning as a reaction to the racism of White Feminism, this book celebrates the development of solidarity among feminists of colour. Thus, as Baca Zinn writes:

Many women began to argue that their lives were affected by their location in a number of different hierarchies: as African Americans, Latinas, Native Americans, or Asian Americans in the race hierarchy; as young or old in the age hierarchy; as heterosexual, lesbian, or bisexual in the sexual orientation hierarchy; and as women outside the Western industrialized nations, in subordinated geopolitical contexts. These arguments made it clear that women were not victimized by the gender alone but by the historical and systemic denial of rights and privileges based on other differences as well.24

The realization that concerns projected as universal are far removed from the realities of many women’s lives, reveals the power relations that create hierarchy among women. It then becomes evident that an exclusive and unitary focus on gender highlights the issues pertaining to a specific group of women and diverts attention from other structures and systems such as race,
which crucially contribute in perpetuating the oppression of different categories of women. Women of colour, therefore, have challenged the sisterhood notions of Western Feminism arguing it to be white middle class-centric. They argue that conceptions about gender and oppression of women categorically ignore marginalized women and the attempt to achieve a universal politics often results in privileging a single perspective. Recognizing difference therefore becomes crucial in interventionist politics such as Black Feminism in order to avoid the influences and pitfalls of dominant structural models and forge a more effective politics.

Intersectionality highlights not only the uniqueness of black women’s experiences but also difference within. This intra-categorical difference is recognized vis-à-vis white women and vis-à-vis black men. ‘The Black Feminist Statement’ by the Combahee River Collective mentions how they realized that ‘as children … we were different from boys and that we were treated different, for example, when we were told in the same breath to be quiet both for the sake of being “ladylike” and to make us less objectionable in the eyes of the white people’.25

Black Feminism, therefore, unveils the complexity and specificity of race and gender oppression of black women which both anti-racists and White Feminism failed to see. Black feminists argue that black women are either represented as victimized objects by black male writers, or are included as tokens by white feminists out of guilt.26 Moreover, As Kimberly Springer points out,

Black feminists faced the black community’s accusations of inauthentic blackness because of their gender concerns. The Sandy Springs transcript reveals that black women also needed to beware of white feminists who considered them ‘the worst kind’ of black women because of their alleged betrayal of blackness. Both black nationalist and white feminist judgments on black women’s racial authenticity assumed that a truly revolutionary black woman prioritized her racial oppression over any gender considerations. Like black men, white feminists in this particular discussion refused
to recognize the complexity of race and gender oppression. Instead, they chose to see black women as solely black, but not as women.\textsuperscript{27}

As a result, black feminists realized that ‘the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.’\textsuperscript{28}

This focus on the importance of recognizing difference in developing an understanding of oppression as well as resistance in relation to multiple structures of power makes Black Feminism similar to Dalit Feminism. While Black Feminism locates black women at the intersection of race and gender, Dalit Feminism identifies dalit women in terms of the intersection of caste and gender in formulating and informing dalit feminist politics. Similar to Black Feminism’s articulation of its politics in contradistinction to White Feminism and anti-racism, Dalit Feminism identifies its difference from mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics through intervention.

Even though the term was not coined/used in India, the practice of intersectionality, Nivedita Menon points out, has been prevalent for a long time among marginalized groups in India.\textsuperscript{29} She articulates a mistrust about using intersectionality as a theoretical framework to analyse and understand ‘the Indian experience’ because firstly, she argues, ‘theory must be located’ and secondly, the practice of validating any study on the ‘non-West’ by reading it through a ‘Western’ theory, should be challenged.\textsuperscript{30} Noting that intersectionality is a mere ‘buzzword’,\textsuperscript{31} Menon highlights that the term gained currency due to the prominence of the place of its origin, and that intersectionality is unsuitable in the Indian context because of the already existing multiple layers of identities in India.\textsuperscript{32} Menon draws specific attention to caste, community and sexuality to highlight how they continue to fracture the category ‘woman’ and destabilize the subject of feminist politics. With such methods of identifying and confronting difference already
in place in marginalized politics in India, Menon asks, ‘How does intersectionality figure in this analysis?’ She finds fault with the very discipline, that is, law, from which intersectionality originates and notes that law has been the most restrictive mechanism to bind and fix identities according to convenience. Therefore, it is futile to go to law and search for answers. Moreover, Menon notes that Crenshaw, in proposing the idea of intersection of identities, assumes that identities are a-priori.

Mary E. John revisits Menon’s article to engage with intersectionality as it gives space to all marginalized voices instead of privileging one over the other. John notes that Crenshaw and other theorists of intersectionality do not claim to invent the theory at all. In fact, they repeatedly draw on Black Feminism which goes as far back as 1851 when Sojourner Truth pronounced her now iconic speech, ‘Ain’t I a Woman?’ Intersectionality therefore, John suggests, should not be seen as a recent phenomenon even though it has become a buzzword now. John further argues that in case of Indian Feminism, despite mentioning difference, it has not always engaged with intersectional identities. With a brief exception of community, Feminism in India continues to remain caught up in difference of sexes rather than ‘unequal patriarchies’ that are responsible in creating and perpetuating hierarchies among women of different classes, castes and communities. John argues that instead of rejecting intersectionality altogether, it needs to be utilized as a method to interrogate existing identities and politics and to forge solidarity. Intersectionality, therefore, has the potential to become the starting point for initiating conversations.

Dalit Feminism highlights how dalit women are erased/ignored by mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics, and how the constructions of ‘woman’ and ‘dalit’ give prominence to savarna women and dalit men. Dalit Feminism addresses these erasures and additions by invoking intersectionality. As mentioned earlier, Dalit Feminism’s relation to the concept of difference can be
mapped in terms of identifying its constituency, ‘dalit woman,’ as intersectional and thereby distinct from ‘woman’ in mainstream Indian Feminism and ‘dalit’ in Dalit Politics. The 2009 declaration of the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) in its VIII National Convention on 26 June 2009 held in New Delhi states:

We are concerned that dalit women in India suffer from three oppressions: gender, as a result of patriarchy; class, being from the poorest and most marginalized communities; and caste, coming from the lowest caste, the ‘untouchables.’

This declaration points at three intersecting factors of gender, class and caste, and shows that inequality and difference exist not only among those in the binaries of rich/poor, upper-caste/dalit, but also leads to differences among women, and between men and women within the dalit community. In their 2008 report the Dalit Mahila Samiti writes,

The agenda of the women’s movement at the national level is still framed by middle-class women’s perspectives…. Issues of identity are difficult to incorporate into the national movement, and mainstream Indian feminists need to bring in the politics and priorities of other identities. For instance, when national women’s groups determined that the focus of Women’s Day events would be violence against women, but for the local women, the critical issue was access to water.

This marks a shift from imposing homogeneity to the acknowledgement of difference in seeing how different structures, through their intersection with gender, affect different groups of women differently. Commenting on the importance of particularity in intersectionality, Catharine MacKinnon notes that particularity does not mean considering knowledge arising from the experience of a particular group as narrow, static and restrictive. Rather particularity is invoked to provide a more nuanced understanding of
systems. MacKinnon writes, intersectionality ‘reveals the simple falsity of the standard post-Enlightenment opposition between particularity and universality not only in exposing that particularity is universal but in making a universally applicable change—including men—through embracing, not through obscuring or denying or eliding, particularity.’ Similarly, Dalit Feminism emerges as an intersectional politics because it accounts for difference within and among groups, and in the process transforms the frameworks of mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics. As the report by DMS reads,

We realize that a feminist perspective has meant dealing with a very wide range of issues, while our image of a movement is quite narrow. The ‘enemy’ (patriarchy) manifests itself in many ways, and is therefore everywhere. It is not a monolithic structure to be overcome or brought down. Hence the meaning of what is a movement needs to be expanded to integrate the whole range of activities and processes, which a feminist organization working for fundamental change has to undertake to build a movement.

This statement emphasizes on the need to integrate difference within the purview of mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics.

While autonomy has been seen as the most crucial feature of Dalit Feminism, dalit feminists have also resisted the ghettoizing of Dalit Feminism to a politics practised only by dalit women. The report by DMS elaborates that a dalit feminist movement is not separatist. The women in DMS ‘invite the men to become sathi dars, givers of support’. Ruth Manorama clarifies that even though ‘the call for a separate platform’ by dalit women’s organizations such as NFDW ‘could be interpreted as a divisive move by both dalit men and non-dalit women, the proponents of such as special forum emphasize that their initiative must not be mistaken for a separatist movement’. She adds, ‘Rather they assert that there is need for strong alliances between the dalit movement, the women’s movement and the dalit women’s movement if their
common vision of social, economic and political equality and justice for all is to be realized. This call for solidarity, in fact, does not remain restricted only to dalit men and upper-caste women joining hands with dalit women. The need for solidarity also extends across international communities as emphasized in the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 and in the World Conference Against Racism in Durban in 2001. In an interview with Meena Kandasamy, Ruth Manorama describes how her participation in a cross-cultural study comparing African-American people in the US and dalits in India in 1986 helped her understand the necessity of having conversations between dalit women and black women. Lauding the coming together of black and dalit women in the conference in Durban in 2001, Shailaja Paik argues,

Despite the seemingly vast differences in the history and contemporary politics of India and the United States … [practising solidarity] helps to rethink and revitalize feminist theory and praxis by sharply focusing on the interlocking engagements between feminist work and histories of colonialism, nationalism, law, culture, the nation-state, capital, labour relations, religion, human rights, and struggles around sexuality. It illustrates that learning about specificities and differences and making a common cause between dalit and African American women is significant for constructing solidarity, outlining certain political possibilities, and fighting different forms of Brahmanism, in India, and white supremacy, in the United States.

By highlighting the possibilities of solidarity across gender and race without erasing specificities and differences, Dalit Feminism stresses on conversation rather than opposition. And it is in this sense that understanding Dalit Feminism in terms of the idea of difference makes it possible not merely to highlight the lacunae in mainstream Indian Feminism or Dalit Politics, but also to show how understanding the intersectionality of caste and gender may
lead to more productive conceptual conversations. The concept of difference in Dalit Feminism goes beyond identifying ‘dalit women’ as different from ‘women’ and ‘dalits,’ and extends to building an affinity-based politics that recognizes the potentials of the particular.

Another major contribution of the concept of difference in Dalit Feminism is the identification of dual patriarchies: brahmanical and dalit. The recognition of brahmanical and dalit patriarchies has proved instrumental in highlighting the fact that the oppression of Indian women is not one dimensional. Uma Chakravarti defines brahmanical patriarchy as:

A set of rules and institutions in which caste and gender are linked, each shaping the other and where women are crucial in maintaining the boundaries between castes. Patriarchal codes in this structure ensure that the caste system can be reproduced without violating the hierarchical order of closed endogamous circles, each distinct from and higher and lower than others. Further, brahmanical codes for women differ according to the status of the caste group in the hierarchy of castes with the most stringent control over sexuality reserved as a privilege for the highest castes. Finally, it incorporates both an ideology of chaste wives and pativrata women who are valorised, and a structure of rules and institutions by which caste hierarchy and gender inequality are maintained through both the production of consent and the application of coercion.53

Coded in the brahmanical prescriptive texts such as the Manusmriti, the ideologies of brahmanical patriarchy are structurally integrated into the caste system, setting different sets of rules for upper-caste and dalit women in terms of sexuality, marriage and labour.54 Interpreting patriarchy in the form of brahmanical patriarchy becomes an enabling feature of dalit feminist politics because the term ‘brahmanism’ accommodates different categories of oppressive characteristics affecting different groups of women. Dalit women writers like Bama and Sivakami in their
autobiographies *Karukku* and *The Grip of Change*, respectively, show how systemic oppression of caste and gender function in simultaneity where dalit women face sexual and physical abuse not only by upper-caste people but also by dalit men.

Dalit Politics has tried to bypass every claim of such occurrence on the grounds that there is no notion called dalit patriarchy because all dalits are oppressed. Even if there are traces of patriarchal tyranny, they claim that it is brahmanical patriarchy which should be blamed for suggesting models of domination to dalit men. In *Why I Am Not a Hindu*, Kancha Ilaiah links women’s oppression to brahmanical ritualistic practices and points out that women in the dalit communities do not suffer similar kind of patriarchal control as their upper-caste counterparts. He writes,

> A Dalitbahujan woman does not have to perform *padapuja* (worshiping the husband’s feet) to her husband either in the morning or in the evening. She does not have to address her husband in the way she would address a superior. In a situation of dispute, word in response to word, and abuse for abuse is the socially visible norm. Patriarchy as a system does exist among Dalitbahujan, yet in this sense it is considerably more democratic.  

Ilaiah, while acknowledging the presence of patriarchy in dalit communities, foregrounds it as being emancipatory in comparison to upper-caste patriarchy. Thus, dalit women are mentioned solely in relation to brahmanical patriarchy to essentially highlight their difference from upper-caste women. Gopal Guru emphasizes this particular point as he writes: ‘Dalit men are reproducing the same mechanisms against their women which their high-caste adversaries had used to dominate them.’ The surprising lack of academic attention to this area also indicates the general consensus of its non-existence. On the other hand, Challapalli Swaroopa Rani maintains that the idea of dalit culture having a democratic patriarchy is false. She writes,
If we come now to the issue of patriarchy, as the proverb goes, ‘the size of the tree determines the force of the wind’, meaning that a man will oppress those who depend upon him to the extent that his power allows. As a dalit man doesn’t have in his hands the same facilities that an upper-caste landlord does, he carries out oppression within his own limits. But it is not true that democracy is present in that patriarchal system.\textsuperscript{57}

Swaroopa Rani notes that dalit women are ‘cruelly humiliated in public places’ and they ‘face domestic violence and physical problems’. She classifies dalit women’s oppression as ‘brahmanical’ and ‘patriarchal’. She challenges this ‘democratic’ rendering of dalit community by pointing that a dalit man ‘carries out the oppression within his own limits’.\textsuperscript{58} Moreover, dalit patriarchy not only exists in a powerful form, it often operates from within while keeping itself veiled under the larger notion of the \textit{dalit} as a singular, fixed category where caste becomes the only determining factor of analysis.

By conceptualizing patriarchies in their multiplicity and placing Brahmanism as the root cause, Dalit Feminism succinctly focuses on the intersection of caste and gender and the need to approach them simultaneously. Such analysis of patriarchies in its multiple form changes the understanding of feminism as well.

THE DALIT FEMINIST POSITION: THEORIZING ‘INTERSECTIONAL STANDPOINT’

While difference and dual patriarchies are the constituents of dalit feminist theorization, Dalit Feminism, as mentioned earlier, also challenges ghettoization. Hence, it becomes imperative to recognize that Dalit Feminism as a \textit{politics} is different from dalit women the \textit{persons}. This position (which I substantiate with the feminist standpoint theory) becomes vital in creating an understanding of the relationship between caste and gender through the concept
of casteist sexism. This is what formulates a dalit feminist intersectional standpoint.

Dalit feminist intersectional standpoint begins by viewing caste and gender as mutually intersecting. This intersectional perspective also makes it possible to bring in its intersectional purview other systems, such as class and community. The simultaneity and mutually constitutive intersection of these structures is used to see how knowledge about monolithic categories and concepts as developed by mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics gets transformed.

Dalit feminist standpoint uses intersectionality as a tool. As mentioned earlier, intersectionality is the study of intersections between systems of oppression. This recognition, as Crenshaw has pointed out, is crucial in social justice movements and legal systems to rectify homogenization and is a more effective solution for groups that are marginalized even within marginal groups, such as women of colour.59 Intersectionality, however, as Suzanne B. Goldberg notes, continues to be seen sceptically by critics.60 Despite the growing acceptance of intersectionality, especially with the emergence of marginality politics, the concerns regarding intersectionality as a methodology continue to be viewed as the ‘infinite regress problem’ where coherence gets lost in numerous particularities.61 This concern has been answered by Catharine MacKinnon where she points at the enabling feature of particularity in recognizing inter- and intra-categorical differences.62 This argument answers the accusation of ‘infinite regression’ by noting that intersectionality is not additive, and that by acknowledging difference within groups intersectionality can, in fact, help formulate an understanding that encompasses a larger group rather than being restricted to one particular dominant section of a marginal population. Intersectionality as a method therefore foregrounds the need to recognize difference and build solidarity, which may be accomplished through the development of a standpoint.
In her introduction to *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader* Sandra Harding elaborates that a feminist standpoint analysis may be seen to involve three processes. Firstly, a standpoint research begins from women’s lived experiences and different activities and from collective feminist discourses. Standpoint argues that those in the marginalized position tend to express a more objective view of reality than members of privileged groups. People outside the dominant power structure are forced to adapt to the dominant culture. They, therefore, know both sides of the scale; that of the oppressor and the oppressed. This, in turn, leads to the second process: recognizing that due to its more holistic perspective, the marginalized standpoint helps avoid assumptions established by dominant institutions and structures. Thirdly, standpoint understands the conceptual practices of power by ‘studying up’. The process of ‘studying up’ begins at the lower rung of hierarchy and goes ‘up’ to understand how power works in a pecking order. As a methodology, therefore, standpoint provides valuable resources to social justice movements because it explains the hierarchical and discriminatory nature of social relations which is usually ignored/silenced in dominant epistemologies.

Harding writes, ‘The remedy for the inadequate philosophies of science, epistemologies, and methodologies justifying and guiding mainstream research … [is] to start off thought and research from women’s experiences, lives, and activities (or labour) and from the emerging collective feminist discourses.’ Experience therefore becomes the primary source from which knowledge for women from women’s perspective is built. Harding points out that since ‘knowledge is based on experience’, it is through the material lived experiences of the oppressed groups that a perspective about the power relation between the dominant and the oppressed can be developed. The process of knowing themselves and their oppressor gives epistemic privilege to the oppressed to understand how power functions.
Harding, however, understands that experience is always socially and culturally mediated and conditioned by prevailing ideologies. She recognizes that taking experience as the ground of knowledge runs the risk of easily ascribing legitimacy and authenticity to oppressed voices without any investigation of the frameworks that structure these articulations. Furthermore, there is also the problem of only a certain faction of the oppressed getting to speak. Harding therefore proposes ‘political engagement’ as an epistemological tool which helps recognize that experience, too, is a product of power relations. This recognition not only helps counter the problematics of essentialism, but also prevents privileging one oppressed group’s experience over everyone else’s. In the process, Harding questions the validity of experience as linked to authenticity, making it clear instead, that a group successfully transforms its experiences into a standpoint only when it learns ‘to identify its distinctive opportunities to turn an oppressive feature of the group’s conditions into a source of critical insight about how the dominant society thinks and is structured’. Standpoint, therefore, becomes the foundation of a politicized new knowledge when it is used to understand and consciously intervene into dominant knowledge systems.

As Dorothy E. Smith postulates, ‘As a theory [standpoint] is a systematic formulation of a method of developing investigations of the social that are anchored in, although not confined by, people’s everyday working knowledge of the doing of their lives.’ Smith views standpoint’s methodology of ‘working from experience’ as a way to probe into the ‘forms of exploitation, of patriarchy, of racial subordination, of the forms of dominance’. Smith, therefore, envisions standpoint as emerging from women’s experiences to achieve a political understanding of the interconnected frameworks of patriarchy, race and knowledge with respect to women’s subordination. Hence, the agenda of feminist standpoint is not merely archiving women’s life experiences, but to understand how power structures enforce and retain hierarchies.
This is why Harding writes, ‘a standpoint cannot be thought of as an ascribed position with its different perspective that oppressed groups can claim automatically. Rather, a standpoint is an achievement, something for which the oppressed groups must struggle.’

A dalit feminist standpoint has been similarly conceptualized by Sharmila Rege. In her article, ‘Dalit Women Talk Differently,’ as mentioned earlier, Rege describes dalit feminist standpoint as a position where

The subject of its knowledge is embodied and visible (i.e., the thought begins from the lives of dalit women and these lives are present and visible in the results of the thought). It places emphasis on individual experiences within socially constructed groups and focuses on the hierarchical, multiple, changing structural power relations of caste, class, ethnicity, which construct such groups. It is obvious that the subject/agent of dalit women’s standpoint is multiple, heterogeneous—such a recognition underlines the fact that the subject of dalit feminist liberatory knowledge must also be the subject of every other liberatory project and this requires a sharp focus on the processes by which gender, race, class, caste, sexuality—all construct each other. Thus we agree that the dalit feminist standpoint itself is open to liberatory interrogations and revisions.

At the root of a dalit feminist standpoint is the awareness that its marginalized position is significant in its ability to both intervene and transform existing knowledge systems. Dalit feminist standpoint, as conceptualized by Rege, valorizes marginality as a resource and sees marginality as a politically achieved position. This is the precise reason why in Dalit Feminism, the identity-category ‘dalit woman’ becomes the constituency whose experiences of simultaneously being oppressed by structures of caste and gender becomes the starting point for achieving an intersectional standpoint. It is significant to note that intersectionality functions as the tool to formulate a dalit feminist standpoint. A dalit feminist
standpoint is a position that critically examines how intersections function in relation to dominant power structures. It is this perspectival privilege through which dalit feminist intersectional standpoint emerges as an effective tool to unravel the complexities of dominant structures and challenge them. The following chapters explore how we can utilize the intersectional standpoint framework through a close textual reading.

NOTES

2 Ibid.: 60.
5 John, ‘The Problem of Women’s Labour’: 74; Banerjee, Sen and Dhawan provide an elaborate analysis of the effects of a brahmanical nationalism on women of different castes and classes. They write, ‘[The] debates over social reform led to the imposition of marriage systems which eroded the customary rights of poor, labouring and lower-caste women. They found entry and exit into marriage more difficult. This, social reform and the shifts in marriage regimes had the opposite effect on two classes of women; the middle classes were able to defer marriage, access education and the public world of employment and politics, while poor women found themselves less able to access remunerated work, more trapped in marriages and in intensive regimes of labour within marital households. The hierarchies of class and caste overlapped; they cleaved and deepened differences between the two groups of women’ (Ibid.: 6). The nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries’ social reform movements, therefore, whitewashed the difference among women and reinforced caste hierarchy.


Crenshaw, ‘Mapping the Margins: 1297.

Ibid.: 1242.


Moraga and Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back*.


Ibid.: 37.
The term is popularised by Kathy Davis in her article, ‘Intersectionality as Buzzword’ (2008), where she observes that despite the confusion regarding its open-endedness, intersectionality is a ‘good theory’ to explore complex relations and structures.

According to Menon, intersectionality in India ‘goes back to the early twentieth century and the legacy of anti-imperialist struggles in the global South’ where multiple axes of identities have been recognized and contested. See Menon, ‘Is Feminism about “Women”?’: 37–38.

Banerjee and Ghosh (2018) argue that intersectionality as a methodology has been more prevalent in the anti-caste politics propounded by Phule, Ambedkar and Periyar who recognized the myriad ways in which caste and nation-state, caste and gender function (see Banerjee and Ghosh, ‘Introduction. Debating Intersectionalities: Challenges for a Methodological Framework’, 2018: 4–6). This recognition, however, did not prevail in later Dalit Politics. Dalit women activists have repeatedly pointed at the erasure/ignorance of gender in Dalit Politics. While Phule, Ambedkar and Periyar do invoke gender, Dalit Politics as we see it now recovers gender only in the sphere of anti-casteism. Even when Dalit historiography mentions individual dalit women, they are added as exceptions. A case in point is Dalit History Month, an online repository. It is a collective attempt to gather ‘history from Dalits around the world’ with the purpose of changing/challenging ‘the savarna narrative of our experience as one solely of atrocity into one that is of our own making … [and] continue forward by emphasizing our assertion and resistance’. Retrieved April 27, 2018, from http://www.tiki-toki.com/timeline/entry/423929/Dalit-History-Month/.


Hereafter referred to as DMS.


In identifying the pitfalls of exclusivist politics in Western Feminism and feminisms of color, Cherrie Moraga notes two tendencies. She states how on the one hand, White Feminism ignores the racism factor by claiming, ‘Well, we’re open to all women; why don’t they (women of color) come? You can only do so much…’ On the other hand, ‘women of color and working-class women often shrink from challenging white middle-class women.’ While the former strategically ignores racism latent within White feminism, the latter highlights a coping mechanism created by the oppressed group to live in fear, because as Moraga observes, ‘It is much easier to rank oppressions and set up a hierarchy, rather than take responsibility for changing our own lives.’ In both cases, then, women of color continue to get erased. Hence Moraga emphasizes on creating dialogues across feminist groups and breaking silence. She writes, ‘We women need each other. Because my/your solitary, self-asserting “go-for-the-throat-of-fear” power is not enough. The real power, as you and I well know, is collective.’ From ‘La Guera’ in Moraga and Anzaldúa eds., This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color (1983): 33–34.

Laura Brueck (2014) gives the example of Dalit Lekhak Sangh, an organization comprising of Hindi dalit writers, which perceived the issues of dalit women as ‘divisive’ and as hindrance to ‘the construction of a collective Dalit public identity’. Brueck points out that many women writers of the Dalit Lekhak Sangh felt that they were ‘marginalized within the [dalit] counterpublic discourse … [and were] frequently made to feel under attack by male writers who construe[d] feminist expression as aggression toward Dalit men and as a divisive influence on the counter public identity’. Brueck, Writing Resistance: The Rhetorical Imagination of Hindi Dalit Literature (2014): 38–39.

The Manusmriti (translated into English by Doniger and Smith as The Laws of Manu) is an ancient Sanskrit legal treatise that provides extensive dicta on laws pertaining people of each caste and gender. The casteist sexist attitude is visible in the Manusmriti through its strict dicta on endogamy. With reference to marriage among upper castes, the Manusmriti states: ‘a
twice-born man should marry a wife who is of the same class and has the right marks’ (p. 43). It further narrates that a husband’s duty is to ‘guard’ his wife by keeping her within the house (p. 198) and a wife’s duty is to be ‘worthy’ of the husband, beget children and rear them (200). Such extensive inventory of qualities of women is made by keeping upper-caste women as the parameters. Stringent rules of endogamy were imposed on upper-caste women in order to maintain purity of blood (Chakravarti, Gendering Caste, 2003: 66–68 The Manusmriti states that any deviation from these rules—in terms of exogamy—was severely punished (189–93). Even there a gradation followed according to caste. Thus, upper-caste men having sexual union with lower-caste women were punished monetarily (193), whereas lower-caste men having sexual union with upper-caste women were punished both monetarily and corporeally which ranged from dismembering to being ‘burnt up in a grass fire’ (192). The severity of punishments on lower-caste men owed to the brahmanical patriarchal fear of the mixing of blood. In a patrilineal, patriarchal society, a child born of a lower-caste man and an upper-caste woman was a problem due to his/her undetermined caste identity. Since children (sons) were progenies who also owned their fathers’ property, it was important to ensure the child’s paternity. It is for these reasons that upper-caste women were kept within the house to retain control over their sexuality. This is a clear example of brahmanical patriarchy. See Doniger and Smith eds., The Laws of Manu (1991).

58 Ibid.: 708.
59 Crenshaw, ‘Mapping the Margins’: 1242–45.
64 Ibid.: 6.
65 Ibid.: 7.
67 Ibid.: 7.
69 Ibid.: 266–68.
71 Rege, ‘Dalit Women Talk Differently: 45.
72 In the advocacy of marginalization as a valuable perspectival position, Dalit Feminism aligns with black feminist standpoint as conceptualized by Chela Sandoval in her article, ‘U.S. Third World Feminism’ (1991) and bell hooks in ‘Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness’ (2004). bell hooks sees margin as a ‘space of radical openness’ which enables black women to formulate an oppositional consciousness for survival and resistance (2004: 153).
I need a language
Still afloat in the womb
Which no one has spoken so far
Which is not conveyed through signs and gestures.
It will be open and honourable,
Not hiding in my torn underclothes.
It will contain a thousand words
Which won’t stab you in the back
As you pass by.¹

These lines are from a poem titled, ‘Infant Language’, by Sukirnharani, which opens onto the core framework of this chapter, identity. It represents the poet’s quest for an ‘infant language’ hitherto unspoken. The pursuit for a new language is a recurrent method approached by writers and scholars of non-mainstream literatures. While Cixous has popularized the concept of ‘l’écriture feminine’ in women’s writing in the West,² Marathi dalit writers like Namdeo Dhasal have used slang as a powerful tool to voice their rage and create awareness and discomfort among the readers about caste.³ What makes dalit women writers’
search for a new ‘language’ different from that of feminists and
dalit writers is their expression of their experiences of oppression
simultaneously by caste and gender. The poem quoted above is
part of Wild Words, a collection specifically catering to challenge
‘the traditional values prescribed for the ‘Good’ Tamil woman and
instead highlights ‘the opposite virtues of fearlessness, outspoken-
ness and a ceaseless questioning of prescribed rules.’ Language,
therefore, becomes the mode to challenge normative casteist
sexism and unearths voices hitherto hidden or ignored. As such,
in this poem, ‘Infant Language,’ language is used as a metaphor to
articulate the ‘self.’ In this case, a specific ‘dalit woman self’.

The ‘self’ represented in the poem marks the poet’s transition
from a scared dalit woman ‘hiding in my torn underclothes’ to a
resistant speaker whose voice is ‘open and honourable’. Her ‘torn
underclothes’ indicate violent rape; a common occurrence for
dalit women who are routinely gang raped due to the brahmanical
assumption of dalit women being impure, lustful and sexually
available for use. The poet, however, challenges this pre-given
stigma and denies to be identified only by her ‘torn underclothes’.
She asserts that her letters of her ‘alphabet’, ‘sticky with blood’,
are intended to scare those who oppressed her. In the process,
it is not only the poet’s own narrative that is framed through an
‘infant language’, but also the formulations of specific caste and
gender oppression on dalit women and dalit women’s assertion of
their own voice. The infant language challenges innocence that
is predominantly associated with infanthood and shows how
the poet’s own innocence is marred by her ‘torn underclothes’. The
poem, therefore, foregrounds the caste and gender intersection
as having specific impact on dalit women’s oppression. It is this
specificity that goes in the making of a dalit woman’s identity.

As mentioned earlier, Dalit Feminism proclaims its difference
from mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics by recog-
nizing caste and gender as intersectional, and thereby identifying
its constituency, that is, ‘dalit woman’, as different from ‘woman’
and ‘dalit’ as defined by mainstream feminism and Dalit Politics respectively. What then is the identity of ‘dalit woman’ as conceived by Dalit Feminism? The answer to this question is explored through an examination of how dalit women’s ‘selfhood,’ understood through the self-representations of their intersectional identity, challenges the single-axis identity proclaimed by mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics. This exploration is made by foregrounding the issues that emerge through this intersectional understanding of caste and gender: domesticity and sexuality, education, and emancipation, which, however, are not specific only to the self-articulations by dalit women. They also inform and formulate the identities constructed by mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics. Since this mapping is intended to highlight Dalit Feminism’s conceptualization of caste and gender in contradistinction to mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics, I opt for a comparative study to see how these issues are represented in all three theorizations.

To focus on the notion of selfhood and identity, I incorporate autobiographies for textual analysis. Associated with articulations of the self, the genre autobiography is used by various marginal groups as a powerful tool to make visible the identities of those who are repressed or unheard by/in mainstream society and literature. Expressing these voices thus entails not only the recovery and reclamation of hitherto suppressed identities, but also an intervention into dominant representations and notions of the self. This oppositional stance is visible in autobiographies canonised by mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics that challenge patriarchy and Brahmanism respectively. However, their construction of single-axis identities for ‘woman’ and ‘dalit’ largely erases dalit women. Dalit women’s autobiographies highlight the specificity of caste and gender-based intersectional oppression while also focusing on the dual forms of patriarchies: brahmanical and dalit. How do dalit women construct their identities in ways that are different from ‘Indian women’ and ‘dalit’? I explore what
kind of issues emerge through dalit women’s autobiographies that are distinct.

Let me give a brief outline of ‘selfhood’ as constructed through autobiographies and elucidate oppositional approaches propounded through autobiographies canonised by Western Feminism and Dalit Politics. I invoke black feminist theorizing of black women’s autobiographies to substantiate how intersectional identity poses a challenge to ‘woman’ and ‘black’ as conceptualized by White Feminism and Dalit Politics respectively. I then analyse autobiographies canonised by mainstream Indian Feminism, Dalit Politics, and Dalit Feminism to show the different constructions of ‘woman’, ‘dalit’ and ‘dalit woman’ in terms of the relationship between self and society. This exploration is made by foregrounding the issues that emerge through this intersectional understanding of caste and gender: domesticity and sexuality, education and emancipation. These issues are not specific only to the self-articulations by dalit women—they also inform and formulate the identities constructed by mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics. Since Dalit Feminism propounds its politics in contradistinction to mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics, it often revisits and revises the events and issues raised by the latter two. In such situations, we may find several overlaps in the concerns expressed by mainstream Indian Feminism, Dalit Politics and Dalit Feminism. I especially draw upon these overlaps because this mapping is intended to highlight how the ‘dalit woman’ that dalit women’s autobiographies create is different from the ‘woman’ and the ‘dalit’ constituted by the earlier canonised autobiographies. Thus I disentangle the problematics of caste and gender intersection in the creation of dalit woman’s identity as opposed to the predominant view of their exclusivity. I aim to explore the following questions: what kinds of knowledge emerge from all three positions of mainstream Indian Feminism, Dalit Politics and Dalit Feminism? How does the intersectional lens of caste and gender bring about a new/different understanding
of the same issues? What kinds of ‘self’ (‘woman’, ‘dalit’ and ‘dalit woman’) do we see emerging from this reading of autobiographies?

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND THE NOTION OF SELFHOOD

The importance of autobiography in representing the identity of the narrator lies in the authorial injunction. Defining autobiography as a ‘retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality’, Philippe Lejeune postulates that

by bringing up the problem of the author, autobiography brings to light phenomena that fiction leaves in doubt: in particular the fact that there can be identity of the narrator and the principal character in the case of narration ‘in the third person’. This identity, no longer being established within the text by the use of ‘I’ is established indirectly, but without any ambiguity, by the double equation: author = narrator, and author = character, from which it is deduced that narrator=character even if the narrator remains implicit.5

The major contentions of autobiographies written by male authors from the dominant sections of society are the establishment of the individual ‘self’ and its authenticity. In a specified cultural realm, autobiography thus aims to present the individual self. In a feminist critique of the postulation on autobiography as a model of separate and unique selfhood, Susan Stanford Friedman argues, ‘First, the emphasis on individualism does not take into account the importance of group identity for women and minorities. Second, the emphasis on separateness ignores the differences in socialization in the construction of male and female gender identity.’6 The idea of selfhood in Western men’s autobiographies does not take into account the role of collective identities propounded by feminists and minorities, and ignores the structural differences
that construct and shape identities based on gender, race, and other minority positions. Anglo-American women’s autobiographies celebrate femalehood as a challenge to the predominance of masculinity. As a corollary of such feminist theorization, women’s autobiographies deal with issues that specifically concern women. Due to their focus on ‘women’s lives’ women’s autobiographies have been seen as rich sites exploring negotiations and resistances that go in the making of the female self.7

Women’s autobiographies, then, emerge as a resistance to the male ‘self’ which was normative in autobiographical articulation. Women autobiographers negotiate with that normative selfhood through their own self-constitution by emphasizing women’s issues, by highlighting relationality and thereby claiming agency. Women’s autobiographies emphasize the personal and the relational in contrast to the individualized ‘self’ of men’s autobiographies. Postulating the importance of women’s autobiographies in feminist constructions of subjectivity, Smith and Watson write:

Processes of subject formation and agency occupy theorists of narrative and, indeed, of culture as never before. If feminism has revolutionized literary and social theory, the texts and theory of women’s autobiography have been pivotal for revising our concepts of women’s life issues—growing up female, coming to voice, affiliation, sexuality and textuality, the life cycle. Crucially, the writing and theorizing of women’s lives has often occurred in texts that place an emphasis on collective processes while questioning the sovereignty and universality of the solitary self.8

Two things that become important in feminist theorization of women’s autobiographies are firstly, the emphasis on the notions of women’s issues, and secondly, emphasis on relationality. The concept of relationality is propounded by Nancy Chodorow in her reformulation of the category ‘woman’ by invoking sexual difference.9 Chodorow makes a valuable contribution by analysing
‘basic sex difference in personality’ among boys and girls, and pointing out that ‘feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does…. [In other words] women are less individuated than men and have more flexible ego boundaries’. Feminine experiential self therefore is rooted in relationality as opposed to that of the male who is alienated. Self-construction through autobiographical narratives becomes a way to challenge prescribed normative identities. For marginalized groups such as women, autobiographical narratives which claim to create the self, become the tools for fashioning their identity. Harlene Anderson defines self-agency as ‘the ability to behave, feel, think, and choose in a way that is liberating’. The idea of autobiography as liberating self-creation, therefore, is linked to both a non-normative notion of selfhood (the relational idea) and the emphasis on women’s issues as distinct and worthy of attention.

This notion of articulation being linked to liberating selfhood was the reason why autobiographical narratives flourished in Black Politics as well. While a challenge to patriarchy underpins women’s autobiographies, the experience of racial discrimination informs autobiographies by black writers. According to Paul Gilroy, these autobiographies ‘express in the most powerful way a tradition of writing in which autobiography becomes an act or process of simultaneous self-creation and self-emancipation’. Kenneth Mostern defines autobiography as a ‘process’ which enables ‘an articulation based on determinate memory and recall of experience via the lens of traumatically constrained ideology, to describe the continuing racialization of politics’. Autobiographies by black writers, as Mostern elaborates, showcase ‘personal stories as a means of theorising their political positions’. Being reflective of their politics, the subjects of their autobiographies do not conform to the idea of an alienated ‘self’ (as claimed by white male autobiographers), being rooted instead in the community. To quote from Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in black autobiographies ‘the
narrated, descriptive “eye” was put into service as a literary form to posit both the individual “I” of the black author as well as the collective “I” of the race’.¹⁶

Black feminists, however, have questioned both ‘woman’ and ‘black’ as constituted in autobiographies by white women and black writers. Their emphasis on the relationality and the collective involves its own homogenization and erasure. These autobiographies create a sense of selfhood that is homogeneous, and as such, they create their own normativity that excludes the specificity of black woman’s sense of selfhood.

To counter the alienation, otherization and invisibilization of women of colour, black feminists turn to narratives by women of colour as their starting point. Barbara Smith expresses her anxiety at finding existing theories by feminism and anti-racism inadequate to understand black women’s writing ‘which goes beyond anything that either black men or white women experience and tell about in their writing’.¹⁷ Hence, Smith embarks on a mission to formulate a black feminist criticism that would be able to properly identify and substantiate intersectional selfhood. She writes, ‘A black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of black women writers is an absolute necessity.’¹⁸ According to Smith, writings by black women narrating their lives directly contribute in constructing a ‘viable, autonomous black feminist movement’ which in turn redefines and revises the goals and strategies of the feminist and anti-racist movements.¹⁹

Similarly, in the case of dalit women’s autobiographies, intersectionality of caste and gender and the notion of dual patriarchies provide a different knowledge about dalit women. This is evident through a comparative exploration of how selfhood gets articulated differently in autobiographies canonised by mainstream Indian Feminism, Dalit Politics and Dalit Feminism.
CONSTRUCTING THE ‘WOMAN’

In Anglo-American feminist theorization, women’s autobiographies are seen as an enabling mode that revises the notions about what are the issues that women face, and emphasizes the collective which cannot be subsumed within the individual which is most often male. Women’s autobiographies have also been read as rich sites exploring negotiations and resistances that go in the making of identity for the self. The autobiographical exploration of identity as socially constructed foregrounds two images of women: a dominant image dictated for women to follow, and an alternative image constructed by women themselves. As Sheila Rowbotham points out,

But always we were split in two, straddling silence, not sure where we would begin to find ourselves or one another. From this division, our material dislocation, came the experience of one part of ourselves as strange, foreign and cut off from the other which we encountered as tongue-tied paralysis about our own identity. We were never all together in one place, were always in transit, immigrants into alien territory…. The manner in which we knew ourselves was at variance with ourselves as an historical being-woman.²⁰

This contradiction creates a division amongst ‘the self as culturally defined and the self as different from cultural prescription’.²¹ Rowbotham, however, finds in this duality a potential for a ‘new consciousness’ that allows negotiation and resistance to take place. Similar to Du Bois’ conceptualization of ‘double consciousness’ for blacks living in dominant white culture, Rowbotham’s understanding of the invisibility and silencing of women in patriarchal society throws light on the alienation of marginalized identities. This awareness of alienation urges the autobiographical narratives from the margins to establish a self that is fraught with the duality of identity and that which claims agency through negotiation and/or resistance.
Exploring the ways in which the identity of ‘woman’ is constructed and contested, I look at autobiographies canonised by mainstream Indian Feminism. The bifurcation of identity, in gendered terms, arose in India during the colonial period with the social reformist agenda of fashioning the ‘new woman’ who would become the role model of modern, independent, non-Western, nationalist India. The ‘order of gender’, as J. Devika puts it, was projected to be an ideal social ordering maintained through clear demarcations between gender roles. Men were posited in the external realm of the public, political, economic, and intellectual, and women were supposed to ‘naturally assume’ the role of an efficient homemakers and true ‘partners’ of the men.\(^{22}\) In order to maintain this ‘natural’ binary, women’s education aimed to develop a modern individual who would be able to conform to the ‘idealized modern gendered subjectivities’. The modern women, ‘culled out of the traditional order’ and created to be ‘free from bondage to tradition’, were to exist ‘as the guardian[s] of the home and hearth … in a relation of complementarity with Man’.\(^{23}\)

The nineteenth century becomes an interesting starting point to examine the constitution of ‘woman’ because on the one hand tracts were being written dictating modes of behaviour for young and educated women, and on the other hand there was an upsurge of women writers narrating their life histories. The juxtaposition of the ‘official construction of femininity’ (defined in terms of chastity, obedience, and docility), with the personal narratives of women, presents more than one construction of femininity.\(^{24}\) The notion of constructed identity (as opposed to fixed, given identity) shows that ‘woman’ is not a fixed category. A reading of women’s autobiographies belonging to different times would throw light not only on the dominant constructions of ‘woman’ from the nineteenth century but also on the strategies of self-fashioning and self-reconstruction by these women.

For this purpose, the autobiographies that I have chosen are Rassundari Devi’s *Amar Jiban* (My Life) (1876) and Kamala Das’s
My Story (1977) which are considered exemplary texts in the history of Indian Feminism. The question that drives Ranjana Harish to read women’s autobiographies is ‘how did they differ from men, especially in their autobiographical writing?’ Autobiographies of women, therefore, have been seen in contrast to that of men and have reformulated the ‘I’ as relational and personal/domestic. Women’s autobiographies in India have significantly contributed in creating a feminist insight into notions of patriarchy, and the contours of femininity/masculinity, from the perspective of women. Their personal narratives reflect an emergence of political consciousness about the systemic disadvantages experienced in lived realities, thereby creating a scope to seek social justice. My reading goes beyond the examination of dominant representations of ‘woman’ and the subsequent challenges put forth by the women autobiographers, and examines the identities that get subsumed or silenced within this overarching, homogenized categorization. Identifying the identity ‘woman’ as ‘mutable’ and rooted in difference, I urge a continual revising of the Indian feminist discourses of selfhood and conceptualization of its constituency, that is, ‘woman’.

Amar Jiban (1876)

Written at the moment of the burgeoning nationalist reconstruction of the ‘new woman,’ Rassundari Devi’s autobiography, Amar Jiban, was lauded by nineteenth-century male writers and critics for staying within the prescribed boundaries of the ‘private’ and for representing the concerns about education that went into the making of a bhadramahila (gentlewoman). In the preface to Amar Jiban Jyotirindranath Tagore validates the book by saying that ‘even though it is written by a woman, it is worth reading’. In the introduction, Dinesh Chandra Sen further corroborates this statement by writing: ‘This autobiography should not be ignored as a personal narrative. It is an authentic portrait of an old
Hindu woman. Through her simple writing, she presents a picture of the society. Amar Jiban is not just about Rassaundari; it is the story of all Hindu women.' Rassundari is praised for being a true modern Hindu woman defined in terms of her qualities as a homemaker, strong religiosity, and interest in education.

The autobiography, therefore, negotiates with the nationalist construction of ‘woman’. Partha Chatterjee postulates, these nineteenth-century autobiographies focused on ‘the facts of social history and the development of new cultural norms for the collective life of the nation, rather than the exploration of individuality and the inner workings of the personality’. Inscribing the ‘individual’ within the narrative of the nation became an act of reclamation of citizenship that was denied by the colonial regime. Such reclamation entailed a restructuring of the world by dividing it into the outer material world and the inner spiritual world. The former represented the colonial rule and the latter ‘became the site for the development of an indigenous identity through the hegemonic discourse of nationalism’. Mathur goes on to explain that since ‘this nationalist ideology was inscribed primarily on the body of the woman, who was deliberately re-fashioned during this period to become the embodiment of an inviolable “Indian” identity, the notion of subjectivity in women’s autobiography was tied, even more so than in the men’s, to the life of the nation’. The over-determining presence of the nationalist question in Indian women’s life histories, however, did not always ascertain an unquestioned acceptance of patriarchal nationalisms. As Vina Mazumdar points out, although the nineteenth-century women’s autobiographies were seen to be representing the social condition of its times where women were the ‘observers’ rather than participants in social change, their writings, in fact, urged the readers ‘for a fresh look at the social ideology and gender relations of “an unequal stratified society”’. Nineteenth-century women’s autobiographies are analysed from a feminist point of
view as representing an image of ‘woman’ that is different from the dominant representations.

*Amar Jiban* has been read by feminists as foregrounding women’s issues such as marriage and education from a woman’s perspective. Malavika Karlekar explores the agential subjectivity as constructed through Rassundari Devi’s re-defining of *antahpur* or the inner world. Antahpur, or the secluded domestic realm, was a vital location which helped sustain the male world and also organized a rigid, gendered internal hierarchy. Karlekar writes, ‘A primary role of the antahpur vis-à-vis the man’s world was one of ensuring ritual purity for the family. It included strict adherence to rules of commensality, provided physical sustenance as well as sexual services.’ She further mentions that the nineteenth-century ‘antahpur was symbolic of the physical and emotional experiences of its members. It was the world of the *aturghar* or lying-in room, rituals or *bratas*, an endless repertoire of food items being prepared according to specific rules. An in-marrying woman’s identity was shaped and organized by the norms of the antahpur dictated usually by senior female affines. Rassundari Devi’s marriage at the age of twelve brought her directly into the realm of the antahpur which was so far alien to her in contrast to her mother’s house. Although Rassundari writes about her mother-in-law in loving words, she likens her married life to being in a prison: ‘People imprison birds for their own delight. My condition is the same. I was also locked within the cage for the rest of my life.’ According to Karlekar, Rassundari Devi defies the dictations of antahpur in two ways: by identifying it as a restrictive space and through her quest for God (whom she calls *Parameshwar*) that leads her to do the activities prohibited to women, namely, reading and writing.

In such troublesome conditions, the only thing that keeps her going is her undaunted faith in Parameshwar and her desire to learn how to read and write. Tanika Sarkar, in her reading
of *Amar Jiban*, argues that the invocation of God highlights ‘the social making’ of gender roles that define boundaries for women; Rassundari refers to the social order as a part of God’s design, ‘but she does, nonetheless, have a clear sense of the social making of it’. Underlying Rassundari’s repeated claim that it is God who is shaping her destiny, is her awareness that all the duties that are assigned to women are social mandates. Sarkar adds, ‘On certain issues, [Rassundari] speaks in a declamatory voice, where she describes the painful consequences of social regulations. She, clearly, is addressing a modern readership here which is already debating these matters: on women’s education, about the restrictions of old times, about the relentless pressure of domestic labour, the problems of motherhood.’ According to Sarkar, therefore, Rassundari’s autobiography reflects acute consciousness about the Indian woman as a patriarchal construct. Her experience is not an automatic process; it is a political understanding arrived at through lifelong struggle. It is this consciousness that makes her realize that men and women occupy differing and skewed positions in society and within the house.

*Amar Jiban* also challenges the idea of the individual created in male autobiographies by invoking the autobiographical subject in relational terms. In *Amar Jiban*, Rassundari’s life revolves around the people in her family. This corresponds to Chodorow’s idea that while men are encouraged to express themselves as individuals, independent from familial ties, women grow up within families, learning to relate themselves to different communities. According to Meena Sodhi, ‘A woman’s autobiography generally focuses on the various relationships like those with her parents, her siblings and later with her spouse, children and her mother-in-law. This last is a typical characteristic of an Indian woman autobiographer…. But a man’s autobiography is mainly concerned with his success story, his achievements in his life, and very rarely does he give a vivid account of his wife and children.’
What seems to dominate the feminist readings of *Amar Jiban* is the gendered re-interpretation of ‘woman’ specifically in the spheres of domesticity, marriage and education. Rassundari is seen to portray an alternative identity of ‘woman’ who is not a mute observer but has the ability to critically understand women’s oppression and defy the norms by learning to read and write. Although the act of writing an autobiography brings Rassundari’s private life out in the public, she does not necessarily challenge the public/private dichotomy. Karlekar claims that Rassundari’s agency comes when she converts the antahpur, a realm where gender hierarchies are at play, into a location to negotiate with the outer world. Rassundari however does not step out of the antahpur. Her resistance remains within the kitchen where she hides the leaves of *Chaitanya Bhagwat*. In this way, the negotiatory identity of ‘woman’, that Rassundari creates, retains the dictations of gender. This becomes visible through her invocation of God which serves a dual purpose: it validates her thirst for knowledge and retains the boundaries within which she seeks knowledge. Despite her critique of patriarchal regulations for women, Rassundari retains the gender hierarchy within her family. She repeatedly mentions that although her venture into education began as a solo journey, the ultimate success came with the guidance of her sons. She in fact erases the ‘public’ and ‘material’ aspects to education by arguing that knowledge is not just about earning money, it is about exploration of the inner being. In this way, she domesticizes education.

*Amar Jiban* problematizes the universalized images of pre-constructed and re-constructed ‘woman’ strictly defined in terms of modern nationalized ideologies. The autobiography, however, depicts the ‘woman’ as representing a single group of women in India. The ideologies of chastity, purity and obedience, that *Amar Jiban* enforces, are specific to the upper-caste and upper-class families that Rassundari belonged to. Sumanta Banerjee
points out how the central focus on women in the antahpur (which he calls andarmahal) hides the vast majority of working women: ‘either self-employed [women] like naptenis, sweepers, owners of stalls selling vegetables or fish, street singers and dancers, maid-servants, or women employed by mercantile firms dealing in seed produce, mustard, linseed, etc.’ What gets erased in Rassundari’s identification of dominant representation of ‘woman’ and her self-construction of the same is the difference among women based on class and caste. Rassundari belongs to an upper-caste upper-class landlord family who enjoys class privilege (in the sense that she does not need to provide economically for her family). She mentions that the possibility of women going out for work and earn money was considered a ‘shame’ on the entire family. In fact, the binaries of internal/external, home/world depended on marking the former as the ‘spiritual’ in which the ‘new women’ resided as opposed to the latter ‘material’ world of men. The prevalence of ‘ideal womanhood’ as equated to restricted domesticity, therefore, naturally devalued the lower-class lower-caste women, who participated in work outside their house, as ‘impure’ and ‘inferior.’ Partha Chatterjee writes,

The ‘new’ woman was quite the reverse of the ‘common’ woman who was coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, subjected to brutal physical oppression by males…. It was precisely this degenerate condition of women which nationalism claimed it would reform, and it was through these contrasts that the new woman of nationalist ideology was accorded a status of cultural superiority to the westernized women of the wealthy parvenu families spawned by the colonial connection as well as the common women of the lower classes.

Although Amar Jiban recognizes the restriction on women from going out to work as being patriarchal, the text does not question or challenge it. Moreover, Amar Jiban completely silences the
maids in Rassundari’s house who are merely mentioned in terms of the number of workers in the house.\textsuperscript{46} Such erasure of lower-class lower-caste women highlights that the ‘woman’ that \textit{Amar Jiban} constructs is implicitly an upper-caste upper-class woman.

\textit{My Story} (1977)

Kamala Das’s \textit{My Story} remains a stalwart in Indian feminist literature for providing a new representation of the ‘woman’ quite different from its nineteenth-century predecessor. In the mainstream male-dominated literary circles, Kamala Das’s autobiography was deemed unfit since, unlike the works of well-known Indian male autobiographers, it is seen to delve too much into the realm of the personal. In a review published in \textit{World Literature Today}, E. V. Ramakrishna maintains,

\begin{quote}
\textit{My Story} describes a life of frolicking in sex…. Sincerity, valuable though it is in itself, can enrich an autobiography only if it has a social and cultural frame of reference. The autobiographies of Andre Malraux, Arthur Koestler, Simone de Beauvoir and Nirad C. Chowdhuri have validity beyond that of mere sincerity because they identify themselves with ideas which are beyond the merely personal. Kamala Das studies her life in relation to itself. She has no sense of anything real beyond her own ego.\textsuperscript{47}
\end{quote}

Interestingly, these alleged limitations of this autobiography highlight the much ignored realms of the personal and the body which constitute two dominant strands in Indian Feminism. \textit{My Story} came out at a time when women’s social reformation had already taken place under the rubric of nationalism and the modernized form of gender was suited to fit newly emerging institutions such as the modern family. In this modern avatar, the ideal woman, as Devika argues, was supposed to be an amalgamation of ‘domestic woman’ and ‘aesthetic woman’. Devika writes,
While the former was the provider of progeny, the manager of material and the guardian of souls in the modern home, the aesthetic woman had a function which was almost in antipathy to this. The aesthetic woman was the provider of pleasure, she who cemented modern conjugal ties through ensuring pleasure.\textsuperscript{48}

In \textit{My Story}, Das mentions this ideal as she notes how her husband expected her to effortlessly discuss and understand Oscar Wilde and Aldous Huxley and be ready to ‘bare [her] breasts’ when he demanded.\textsuperscript{49} In the autobiography, the balance between the two kinds of women is best maintained by the wife of her grand-uncle who listened to her husband’s mockery without any qualm all through the day, thereby presenting the image of a perfect docile wife, and at night, ‘enslaved him with her voluptuous body’.\textsuperscript{50} Das writes,

I have heard my grand-uncle tell his wife that she was the most empty-headed woman he had known. She used to laugh melodiously at such comments. At night she enslaved him with her voluptuous body. So she could well afford to humour him in the day. Each night she came to our house accompanied by her maids and a lantern, looking like a bride. And, she walked up the steep staircase of the gatehouse to meet her famous husband in their lush bedroom, kept fragrant with incense and jasmine garlands…\textsuperscript{51}

In her, we see the perfect combination of a wife and a whore. In the morning, she listens to her husband’s mockery without any qualm, thereby presenting the image of a perfect docile wife, and at night she dresses up like an entertainer, but only to please the husband. By remaining within the boundaries of marriage and monogamy, the duality of the wife’s character is thus legitimized. \textit{My Story} thus underscores the influence of patriarchy that goes into the making of this ‘ideal woman’.

In her own self-construction Kamala Das questions the thin line between ‘aesthetic’ and ‘erotic’ through the perpetual spilling over of the two. Here we see the supposed ‘aesthetic woman’ revolting
by bringing in ‘the body—marginalized and de-eroticized in dominant reformist discourse—into her revision of the womanly’.

Devika adds, ‘In her open admission of her love for “female frivolity”, in her insistence on the pleasures of beautifying the (admittedly ephemeral) body, the aesthetic woman not only cuts loose, but also positions herself against domestic woman.’

Firstly, by writing, Das deliberately puts herself out in the public sphere. Autobiographical writing by a woman becomes subversive of both social norms and rules of the genre by displaying the ‘personal’ to an ‘impersonal public’.

Linda Anderson theorizes this aspect of women’s autobiographical discourse in the following manner: ‘It is necessary to take into account the fact that the woman who attempts to write herself is engaged by the very nature of that activity itself in rewriting the stories that already exist about her since by seeking to publicize herself she is violating an important cultural construction of her femininity as passive or hidden.’

Secondly, in *My Story*, women’s roles as reproducers and ‘vessels of culture’ are challenged by expressions of the bodily desires that break the norms of legitimacy, marriage and heterosexuality. The aesthetic female body loved, caressed, and kissed by a girl in the night rain, is contrasted to the ‘extreme brutality’ of the husband on the wedding night which left the rape unsuccessful but bruised her for life.

In a society where sexual union within marriage is considered consensual duty especially on the part of the wife, the possibility of rape remains ignored. By showing the homosexual union as more fulfilling than the heterosexual one, Das not only emphasizes the distinction between love and sex, she also challenges the patriarchal assumption that sexual union within marriage is always a consensual duty. *My Story* presents sexuality as a ‘political institution’ by ‘addressing sexual relations, their spheres of legitimacy and illegitimacy, through the institutions and practices, as well as the discourses and forms of representation, that have long been producing, framing, distributing and controlling the subject of “sex”.’

The ‘self’ that
My Story represents is one that breaks the boundaries of body and sexuality prescribed by patriarchy. Though it remains, like Amar Jiban, within the sphere of the domestic, My Story emphasizes different issues and also different systems that Indian women negotiate with: from marriage and education in Amar Jiban to body and sexuality in marriage in My Story. The interpretation of the domestic also differs in these two autobiographies. Rassundari describes the domestic as a space defined by women’s confinement within marital relationships which also limits their access to education (which is seen as external to the family), while Kamala Das in My Story focuses on what Sen and Dhawan call, ‘the family as a site of women’s oppression … [and] the ideological and social apparatus of patriarchal control, especially in the domain of sexuality and motherhood’. My Story represents a shift in feminist consciousness from women negotiating with their roles within the domestic sphere (as seen in Amar Jiban) to the ‘present-day feminis[t] ‘… struggle for the achievement of women’s equality, dignity and freedom of choice to control our lives and bodies within and outside the home’. Inclusion of My Story in this section therefore helps trace a trajectory of different constructions of ‘woman’ over time.

This ‘self,’ however, is an upper-class upper-caste woman. In the autobiography Das mentions that a kitchen maid at their ancestral house, Kunhukutty, was thrown out because she performed an abortion on herself. For a poor single woman like Kunkukutty, abortion was probably the only way towards survival. Although Kamala Das, throughout her autobiography, is conscious of her body and craves to reclaim it, when it comes to a similar situation in the case of a lower-class and lower-caste woman, Das is quite dismissive of it as seen in the way she briefly mentions the incident only to dismiss it as a possible accident. By emphasizing the upper-class upper-caste woman, the female autobiographer deliberately ignores this difference in its construction of the selfhood of the ‘woman’.
These texts chosen in this section shows that the constituency of mainstream Indian Feminism, that is, ‘woman’, is articulated primarily in terms of its opposition to patriarchy. In the process, these autobiographies address different issues that emerged during the times they were written and published. Thus, *Amar Jiban* foregrounds issues of marriage and education, and *My Story* focuses on the representation of ‘woman’ through notions of body and sexuality. In *Amar Jiban* and *My Story*, the autobiographical subjects are clearly defined in terms of their gendered experiences, constructing a female selfhood for ‘woman,’ which, however, remains implicitly exclusive of the working maids in the house. It is important to acknowledge that pointing out these erasures is not meant to devalue or diminish the literary, social and political importance of the autobiographies. I specifically bring out these examples to reflect on the times and places in which these women were writing often in compliance with the Hindu social order. The inclusion of these texts are intended to highlight the implicit erasure of dalit women through history.

**CONSTRUCTING THE ‘DALIT’ IDENTITY**

Autobiographical writing has also come to occupy an important position within the field of Dalit Politics. Marked as the ‘literature of revolt,’ dalit writers believe that writing is a part of their movement against the system of caste that perpetuates in Indian society. Observing on what constitutes dalit literature, Sharankumar Limbale writes, ‘Dalit writers believe that Dalit literature is a movement. They see their literature as a vehicle for their pain, sorrow, questions and problems.’ Dalit literature reflects their consciousness of oppression and becomes a platform to express their dissent. In fact, the term ‘dalit’ underlines a resistance by those who challenge the ascriptions of untouchability and formulate a new collective identity borne out of the awareness of oppression. Underlying the term is a sense of political awareness,
rejection of state created categorization, and rejection of the caste system where caste-names perform a major role in determining and perpetuating caste hierarchies. Satyanarayana and Tharu argue that dalit activists ‘contested the tendency to treat caste only as an instrument of oppression (untouchability, violence and dehumanization) and recreated it as a new identity of self-assertion and pride’.66 The shift in treating caste as ‘the subjectively effective identity of a social group’ rather than ‘an objective structure’ meant for empirical information has contributed significantly in the agential formulations of Dalit Politics.67

In dalit autobiographies the act of speaking/writing becomes crucial in their construction of identity. For dalits, writing autobiographies and narrating stories of their own lives becomes an intervention in brahmanical control over production and dissemination of knowledge. Kancha Ilaiah declares that personal experience of the marginalized is important to understand social contexts that are different from those the powerful and powerless live in. The dalit experience provides an alternative perspective of the caste system, showing that the beautiful village portrayed by upper-caste Hindi poets is not where the dalits live. As Valmiki points out, a dalit village is muck strewn where ‘the stench [is] so overpowering that one would choke within a minute’. According to Ilaiah this alternative perspective is available only because the ‘day-to-day experiences of the Dalitbahujan castes … is the only possible and indeed the most authentic way in which the deconstruction and reconstruction of history can take place’.68 Sarah Beth maintains that the emergence of dalit autobiographical narratives functions as a counter-symbol to contest traditional conceptions and representations of dalits.69 To challenge untouchability, dalit autobiographers reject and transform the markers and symbols that represented their untouchable state. Elaborating on the characteristics of dalit writing, Sharatchandra Muktibodh writes,
The Dalit point of view constitutes a clear diagnosis of a particular social reality and a sanguine hope for its desirable transformation. The Dalit sensibility shows a deep concern for the Dalit point of view and an outstanding work of Dalit literature would be born only when Dalit life would present itself from the Dalit point of view."70

What dalit writers promote through their writing is a political awareness of their oppression arising from the caste system and understanding the system not as inherent or given, but as constructed by Brahmanism to maintain a power hierarchy. In Maharashtra, dalit literature gained popularity through the writings of a group of educated dalit graduates, who, inspired by Ambedkar, set up a literary body, the Siddharth Sahitya Sangh.71 Their writings marked a tremendous struggle to establish the dalit subject and find an authentic voice that emerges out of experiences of untouchability. The new generation of writers, notably Baburao Bagul and Namdeo Dhasal, ‘wanted neither sympathy nor solidarity; they wanted agency’.72 It was a moment of creativity springing from feelings of sufferings. Dangle writes:

Dalit literature portrays the hopes and aspirations of the exploited masses. Their fight for survival, their daily problems, the insults they have to put up with, their experiences and their outlook towards all these events are portrayed in Dalit literature.73

Satyanarayana and Tharu mention that Tamil dalit literature in the 1990s coincided with several significant historical and political events that shaped the perpetuation of the caste system in modern India. These events, namely, the Mandal Commission, the rise of Hindutva politics and the Kilvenmani massacre, mark ‘the escalating violence on dalits in both the northern and southern regions of the state [Tamil Nadu]’.74 Dalit literary expression has thus continued in conjunction with dalit movements in unveiling
the different ways caste oppression pervades contemporary India. In the process, along with their critique of Brahmanism, they also reveal a dalit perception of education, class, religion and culture. Dalit literature, therefore, is an important counter-narrative.

Among the texts that have attained canonical stature for highlighting caste oppression as well as the opposition to it, I will be discussing Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan* (2003), Sharankumar Limbale’s *The Outcaste* (2003), and K. A. Gunasekaran’s *The Scar* (2009). The dalit ‘self’ that these autobiographies foreground is in opposition to Brahmanism and in alliance with the dalit community. Distinguished by languages, writing styles and social settings, these autobiographies often present similar concerns about the caste system and methods of anti-caste struggle. Arising from discontents, dalit autobiographies challenge not only the caste system, but also literary representations of dalits. Thus, these autobiographies are a mouthpiece to voice resistance, and this is what makes their literature an indispensable component of their movement.

**Joothan** (2003)

Omprakash Valmiki’s *Joothan* is one of the pioneering autobiographies in Hindi dalit literature. First published in Hindi in 1997, it was translated into English by Arun Prabha Mukherjee in 2003. As mentioned earlier, progressing parallel to dalit political movements, dalit literature, especially autobiography, has been seen as an indispensable component to reclaim a ‘dalit’ identity which is not victimized. *Joothan*, by narrating the lived experiences of caste discrimination and the author’s emancipation, portrays a liberated dalit ‘self’. As Arun Prabha Mukherjee writes in the introduction to *Joothan*, ‘Dalit autobiography ... is not just a remembering of things past, but a shaping and structuring of them in such a way as to help understand one’s life and the social order that shaped it, on the one hand, and to arouse a passion for change in the Dalit reader.’

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This characteristic has been explored at length by critics of *Joothan*. By narrating the lived experiences of caste discrimination, *Joothan* is seen as bringing into light authentic representations of dalithood. According to Laura Brueck, *Joothan*’s resistance is marked by its intervention in dominant literary representations of dalits in upper-caste writers such as Premchand who equated caste with class. Referring to Premchand’s story, ‘Kafan’, Brueck observes that although the story has been highly celebrated for its critique of how institutionalized oppression leads to dehumanization, dalit writers have criticized for its lack of awareness of caste oppression. This lack, Omprakash Valmiki states, arises from ‘a confusion between caste and class-related oppression’. Valmiki writes, ‘The characters of Ghusu and Madhav in his story “Kafan” are Chamars, but the story does not raise any issue that is related to the problems of Chamars or Dalits. There is only a detailed depiction of their idleness and heartlessness.’

Sarah Beth explores the construction of identity through communal experience in *Joothan* where the ‘I’ in dalit autobiographies is inextricably linked to the collective. Beth writes, ‘Since Dalit autobiographies are meant to be the life-story of an ordinary Dalit, to symbolically represent the experiences of every Dalit, the Dalit protagonist is established as the representative of the Dalit community and Dalit identity.’ Beth, however, does not perceive the overlapping of collective onto the individual as a complete loss of the individuality of the subject. She argues that Valmiki asserts his ‘personal agency’ through instances such as his marriage with the girl of his own choice rather than the one selected by his community. The criticisms of *Joothan* thus primarily seem to focus on reclamation and celebration of the ‘dalit’ identity wherein agency is gained by challenging passivity. My reading, however, explores the instances that get silenced in the autobiography.

*Joothan* portrays a society where dalits are treated as *joothans* or ‘leftovers.’ The hypocrisy of the caste system becomes visible in
an incident recounted by Valmiki. While visiting the house of his non-dalit teacher the author becomes thrilled at the rare and nice treatment by the teacher’s father. He not only asks the author to sit with him, but urges him to eat food together. These gestures are unthinkable in a caste-ridden society that thrives on social practices of untouchability. The author’s happiness however is short-lived once the teacher’s father comes to know of his caste. ‘Lifting a heavy stick from underneath the charpai, the elder hit Bhikhuram on his back…. Obscenities began to rain from the elder’s mouth. His eyes were fierce and his skinny body was harbouring the devil. We had dared to eat in their dishes and sit on their charpai, a crime in his eyes.’ This incident unveils the discriminatory nature of a society where people are judged solely on the basis of their caste.

Valmiki’s engagement with caste also takes the form of an internal critique of casteism by showing how dalits internalize such caste discrimination. He writes that during a wedding, the Churhas were given leftovers after all the guests had eaten their fill. After that ‘the dirty pattals or leaf-plates were put in the Churhas’ baskets, which they took home, to save the joothan sticking to them’. What makes the author angry is how the leftovers were eaten with ‘a lot of relish’. Joothan thus combines the author’s struggle with both external and internal enemies. The oppression by non-dalits as well as the internalization of brahmanical values which leads to voluntary subordination by dalits, both these aspects come under scrutiny in the autobiography.

The dalits however do not remain mere victims. We see how the author’s father breaks the tradition and insists on educating his sons; the author himself refuses to collect animal carcasses, a profession specifically meant for the Churha caste that he belonged to; and the author asks the teacher ‘How come we were never mentioned in any epic? Why didn’t an epic poet ever write a word on our lives?’ Joothan thus shows a political awareness of caste oppression and rejects it by asserting a questioning, resistant self.
Valmiki’s assertion of identity, however, is more individual than collective. Unlike what Beth claims, the autobiography progresses very much like that of the Western male individual. It narrates the life of the author who gradually detaches himself from the daily drudgeries of caste. Such distancing is visible through the author’s rejection of practices and customs marked by caste. The first instance is when Valmiki identifies caste-based professions such as skinning carcasses of animals with stigma. He writes, ‘My hands were trembling as I held the knife…. That day something broke inside me…. I felt I was drawn into the very quagmire that I had tried to escape from.’ His rejection of participating in caste-based professions and his physical distancing from his community by moving to a city is marked by a desire for class mobility. Interestingly, even though Valmiki claims that Joothan is a story of the dalit community, he seems to establish an emancipatory individual identity by moving away from the community. In this scenario, invocation of collective serves merely to draw examples of caste oppression.

The autobiography ends with Valmiki’s reclamation of dalit identity through the retaining of his dalit surname. Such awareness arises out of the political implications of identity-based assertion. Valmiki owes it to his readings of Ambedkar. He says that his participation in dalit political and cultural movements ultimately made him realize the need to have a holistic resistance to caste system. In the final section of the autobiography Valmiki writes,

Why is my caste my only identity? Many friends hint at the loudness and arrogance of my writings…. That is, my being Dalit and arriving at a point of view according to my environment and my socio-economic situation is being arrogant. Because in their eyes, I am only an SC, the one who stands outside the door.

The belief that the author had during his youth—that with class mobility caste will be erased—vanishes when, even after getting
a high-ranking job, he faces discrimination due to his caste. His awareness, therefore, is both personal and political. It is personal experience that drives him to make political assertion. Valmiki asserts his identity by retaining his caste name as his surname. This marks a celebration of ‘dalithood’ and also poses a challenge to the stigma that is attached to dalits. The ‘dalit’ self that Joothan envisions is an agential self.

But even as this ‘dalit’ agential self recognizes and resists the caste violence experienced by the dalit community, it naturalizes the patriarchal oppression of dalit women within the house. For example, Valmiki’s father fights with the upper-caste people and sends his sons to school, but no such effort is made for the daughter. Valmiki too dismisses the entire problem with one sentence: ‘There was no question of sending our sister to school.’84 This naturalizing of education as a male privilege leaves the gender hierarchy within a lower-caste family unproblematized. One incident that further reveals the naturalization of the internal oppression of dalit women by dalit men is the beating of chachi (aunt) by Valmiki’s father. The widowed chachi’s relationship with another relative, Shyamlal chacha (uncle), causes enormous furore in the family, making Valmiki’s father shower blows on chachi out of anger. Valmiki describes how his father ‘picked up a stick lying in the courtyard and struck chachi’s back with it. Chachi had doubled up under his blow’.85 Soon chachi is sent back to her house, and Shyamlal chacha is married off to another girl. The entire episode is seen by the author’s family as chachi’s fault as chacha goes unscathed. Interestingly, though the author is heavily critical of caste oppression, he accepts this violence by dalit men on a dalit woman without any question. The violence is simply accepted as punishment of the ‘pretty’ widow, chachi, who defied the norms of celibacy and had a sexual relationship with another man.86 This acceptance reveals the existence of dalit patriarchy (reflecting an internalization of brahmanical gender norms for upper-caste women) which exacts physical retribution from the
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dalit woman when she dares to step outside the prescribed role of a widow. What this incident implies is that the ‘dalit’ identity that the text constructs is in opposition to casteism wherein the caste system is seen to be operational only in the public sphere in relation with the upper castes. In the process, this ‘dalit’ identity ignores violence against dalit women, thereby defining the oppressed as well as resistant ‘dalit’ self implicitly as ‘dalit man.’

The Outcaste (2003)

In Sharankumar Limbale’s *The Outcaste* (translated from the Marathi original, *Akkarmashi*) (2003) the identity of a dalit is complicated by the author’s negotiation with dual identities. Born of an upper-caste Patil father and a dalit Mahar mother, the author portrays the hybridity of his identity as the cause of his social ostracization. Estranged and discarded by both upper- and lower-caste communities, Limbale perceives the caste system as the main cause of his oppression. *The Outcaste* shows the never-ending journey of the author’s identity as his question ‘Who am I?’ resonates throughout the autobiography.87

The reviews of the autobiography primarily focus on the factuality of caste oppression and the author’s struggle against it.88 *The Outcaste* has also been seen as a gender-sensitive autobiography for giving space to several women characters and highlighting their oppression by upper-caste men.89 On the other hand, G. N. Devy in his Introduction to *The Outcaste*, finds Limbale to be similar to a Western detached individual. Devy writes, ‘In the life narrative, one finds that whereas the narrator should be boiling with anger, he is meditating on the very fundamental issues related to social relationships and ethics.’90 The absence of ‘anger’ which Marathi dalit writers like Namdeo Dhasal expressed through their writings, appears for Devy a drawback in *The Outcaste*. Marathi dalit writings pioneered the nation-wide phenomenon of establishing a body of literature unique to their experiences. The first generation of
dalit writers such as Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar, and Baburao Bagul, contributed immensely in shaping dalit literature in complete opposition to brahmanical politics and literary practices. In the process, as mentioned earlier, they often incorporated slang and everyday languages in their writing to express their anger. But to claim, like Devy, that anger is the only authentic way to portray dalit discontent is, in my opinion, simplistic. Limbale’s contemplative style offers an equally effective resistance because the evaluation of events provides a critical perspective on the complexity of the caste system.

Central to the autobiography’s argument is the author’s negotiation with the identity of an illegitimate son. He writes, ‘It is through the Dalit movement and Dalit literature that I understood that my mother was not an adulteress but the victim of the social system.’ Limbale feels ashamed at his dalit identity and tries to hide it. He not only writes letters only to his upper-caste friends, he also hides photographs and books of Ambedkar in the trunk instead opting for novels by V. S. Khandekar (an upper-caste author), and feels ashamed of his relatives. Foregoing of ties with the past rural community seems to be the precondition of asserting an identity that is based on the new urban middle-class values. Limbale writes, ‘We were ashamed of our past. We hid ourselves as a leper hides patches of rash on his skin. They couldn’t guess my caste on the basis of my surname, so when they became suspicious they kept asking for the surname of my in-laws. I told lies. I said their name was Bhosale or Pawar or some other high-caste name instead of the real one, Kamble.’

His quest for his identity leads him to realize that his ‘hybrid’ birth will forever mark him as an outcaste. This realization leads him to understand his mother’s rape by the upper-caste landlord as a consequence of caste oppression. By forcing Ithal Kamble (Masamai’s husband) to leave Masamai (Limbale’s mother), the upper-caste landlord, Hanmanta Limbale, had procured Masamai as his concubine. The rape of Masamai is thus viewed by Limbale
as a way to assert caste supremacy by the upper-caste landlord over the dalit husband and wife. Limbale, therefore, identifies his mother’s rape as ‘caste oppression’. This interpretation leads Limbale to believe that the only way to take revenge for the rape of his mother is by raping an upper-caste girl. He writes, ‘Finally Parshya and I had dared to insult Shobhi. In fact we wanted to rape her by way of revenge. Shobhi stood before us as a symbol of the caste system. Her feet, her thighs, her arms, her face—everything was a part of the system she belonged to.’

These incidents reveal that Limbale invokes the sexual exploitation of his mother only to highlight his illegitimacy and the discriminations he faces because of it, while himself subscribing to the method of patriarchal sexual control (i.e., rape) fashioned on the upper-caste model as seen in this idea of revenge. This particular idea of revenge masculinizes dalit identity in terms of empowerment, thereby making ‘dalit’ synonymous with ‘dalit man.’ Moreover, in the autobiography, Limbale’s mother being raped becomes a problem for Limbale only as it impacts him; the specific implications for dalit women of such sexual violence as part of caste oppression is not the focus of his self-construction of ‘dalit’ identity. The ‘dalit’ self that emerges through The Outcaste is, therefore, implicitly coded as masculine with dalit women defined only in relation to this normative identity.

The Scar (2009)

The Scar by K. A. Gunasekaran is considered the first modern Tamil dalit autobiography. According to Ravikumar, The Scar emerged out of the classic autobiographical ‘yearning to create their society’s history through their individual life story’. Along with the simplicity of language, the relatability of the events and characters are considered the greatest achievements of this autobiography. Kandaswamy writes, ‘When I had first read Vadu [the Tamil original] a few years ago, I felt I was listening to my
dad’s story, to my lover’s story, to almost every other rural dalit’s story.95 This association makes the particularities of Gunasekaran’s experience universal. Therefore, even though the autobiography begins with the individual narrator, it succeeds in presenting life-histories of the collective. As a narrative of pain, The Scar has been treated as a social document that brings forth the realities of caste oppression.96

Like Joothan and The Outcaste, The Scar highlights the caste system in its internal and external forms. Its criticism of external practices of caste is explicated through the numerous prohibitions imposed on dalits in terms of accessibility to water and roads, while the internalized form of caste is shown through the dalits accepting the higher-caste Konars as their masters when they ‘proudly refer to “my master’s house” and “your master’s house” in their conversations.’97 Furthermore, the author shows how it is not just Hindu society that identifies him by his caste, but constitutional rights such as the Reservation policy (strongly supported by Dalit Politics during its implementation) also legalize caste hierarchy by branding people as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. He recounts the shame he used to feel while filling up forms for scholarship for reserved category students. During class, the clerk would ask, ‘How many in this class are Parayars? … Put up your hands! How many are Pallars? Stand up, I will count.’98 The ‘scar’ in The Scar symbolises ‘the identity mark of the times’ when he was both physically and psychologically scarred by caste oppression.99 The Scar, therefore, creates a ‘dalit’ self as constantly struggling with caste oppression.

Gunasekaran, however, refuses to align with Dalit Politics. In an interview with Bharathiraja, he mentions, ‘My writings and folk songs aim at liberating Dalits in all possible means. They are reaching all the people.’100 Therefore, what Gunasekaran emphasizes is a dalit cultural identity. Unlike Valmiki and Limbale who posit the individual in relation to the community, Gunasekaran’s resistance to caste through cultural activism makes
it a collective effort. This shows that movements are never static and there are many ways to pose political resistance. Just like Dalit Politics, cultural activism also serves as a method of resistance. Gunasekaran mentions that the purpose of writing this autobiography is to incite dalit youth to understand caste atrocities and struggle against them, and introduce to the non-dalits what caste atrocity looks like. Gunasekaran, therefore, does not limit the scope of anti-caste movement only among those who are born dalits. By making non-dalits aware of caste atrocity, Gunasekaran broadens the scope for affiliative politics.

Cultural identity also becomes a representative of liberatory dalit identity. Through the cultural activism and the valuation of oral culture, Gunasekaran reclaims dalit collective identity. He asserts that songs are one of the most popular media in dalit activism to communicate with the masses. Such modes of expression not only give visibility to the voices of dalits, but these songs, poems and dramas also create an alternative body of knowledge wherein subjugated knowledge and subjugated modes of articulation gain recognition. Furthermore, in The Scar, Gunasekaran says with pride, ‘If Tanjavur is still famous for karagattam it is because of the Parayars, who have settled down in Mettu Street …. The artists who performed the nayandimelam were all from Mettu Street. They would wash their shirts and vettis in the river and dress up smart.’ Gunasekaran also describes a karagattam performer, Seenivachagam Annan, who was so popular that he could even afford pipes ‘embellished with gold lockets’. In this way, Gunasekaran shows that cultural activity creates an avenue for dalits to rise in class and also gain respect as ‘artist[s]’. Gunasekaran, therefore, creates an agentive ‘dalit’ selfhood in the cultural realm.

This ‘dalit’ cultural identity includes dalit women. While Joothan and The Outcaste largely ignore dalit women, including them in the texts only as victims of caste oppression, The Scar does focus on dalit women and not always as victims. One such
example is the karagattam dancer, Mallika. The author narrates that Mallika, despite being a dalit woman, is an established dancer and earns a lot of money, as evident through the ‘gold on her ears and nose’. Mallika’s rise in class is seen as a challenge to the caste system and also highlights dalit assertion and agency in the cultural sphere. In the process, however, the aspect of gender remains unaddressed. The specificity of her experience as a dalit woman is not recognized. Mallika is hailed as the icon of the ‘dalit’ agential self who has overcome caste barriers through upward class mobility. Empowerment, therefore, is coded in terms of cultural agency leading to economic power, but in the process, what gets erased is the gender specificity. It is assumed that all dalits in the cultural realm, irrespective of their gender, are empowered through cultural agency resulting in economic upliftment. Hence, this ‘dalit’ identity subsumes dalit women within the general category of ‘dalit’.

These three autobiographies present different views of the caste system and different ways of dealing with it. However, the ‘dalit’ identity that these autobiographies formulate is predominantly a male identity. Even though several dalit women appear in these autobiographies, their issues are not seen as constitutive of dalit identity in specifically gendered terms. In Joothan, the agency of ‘dalit’ selfhood is linked to education which is denied to dalit women. Consequently, ‘dalit’ identity foregrounds dalit men and dalit women remain excluded from its agential purview. In The Outcaste, ‘dalit’ is identified exclusively in terms of caste. In cases when dalit women’s oppression actually comes to the fore, their experience of violence is understood in terms of how it affects dalit men as a form of caste violence. This shows how dalit identity, once again, is masculinized in terms of its assertion/agency, while dalit women remain the ‘other’ to this sense of selfhood. Unlike Joothan and The Outcaste, the ‘dalit’ identity in The Scar is not necessarily masculinized and dalit women are not always victimized (as is visible through its inclusion of dalit women like Mallika being
agentive). However, The Scar conflates men and women within the ‘dalit’ identity without recognizing any gender specificity. Once again, the focus remains on the single axis of caste.

CONSTRUCTING ‘DALIT WOMAN’: AN INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITY

Scholars have pointed out that women are fragmented into different groups not only based on caste, religion, and class, but there are also disparities of gender and class within dalit communities. Hence, to understand dalit women’s issues, caste and gender cannot be treated as two mutually exclusive categories. Dalit women’s writings are rooted in this realization that caste and gender are two interlinked systems of oppression. This intersectional understanding of identity challenges the singularity of gender and caste as the defining features of identity in mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics respectively, and emphasizes the notion of difference: both within and among groups.

The three autobiographies chosen for this section are Baby Kamble’s The Prisons We Broke (1984 [2009]), Bama’s Karukku (1992 [2000]) and Ami Keno Charal Likhi (Why I Write Charal as My Name) by Kalyani Thakur Charal (2016). These three texts together help to trace the evolution of the constituency of Dalit Feminism, that is, ‘dalit woman’, through history in different regions and different times. The Prisons We Broke (originally serialised in Marathi in 1984) speaks of the Ambedkarite movements in Maharashtra during the 1950s and 1960s and dalit women’s participation in them. Karukku (originally published in Tamil in 1992) was published during a time when dalit women and their voices, as distinct from dalit men’s, started claiming recognition, and the first national dalit women’s autonomous group, National Federation of Dalit Women (1995), was born. The primary difference in these two time periods lies in dalit women’s solidarity with dalit men.
during the Ambedkarite movements, and later on, dalit women’s claim for autonomy from dalit men.

These autobiographies reflect a transition from the faith that with the erasure of caste the condition of dalit women would improve automatically, to the realization that centralization of caste in dalit movements results in the suppression of issues concerning dalit women. The former sentiment is captured in *The Prisons We Broke* where Baby Kamble talks about the internal patriarchal oppression of dalit women and later joins the Ambedkarite movement hoping for an overall emancipation of both dalit men and women of her community. While writings by dalit women from Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu have become canonical in representing a dalit feminist voice, recent emergence of dalit writings in Bangla has introduced a new facet to the caste system, that is, the refugee issue in the caste and gender context. The inclusion of *Ami Keno Charal Likhi*, therefore, becomes crucial in highlighting the complexities of caste, gender and citizenship and also pointing at the pervasion of casteism in Bengal. Through the study of these autobiographies I intend to explore how the identity of the dalit woman is constructed in contradistinction to ‘woman’ and ‘dalit’ through a simultaneous negotiation with gender and caste dynamics.

*The Prisons We Broke* (2008)

Terming it a ‘socio-biography rather than autobiography’, Maya Pandit in the Introduction to *The Prisons We Broke* writes about its foregrounding of the collective in contrast to the individual sense of selfhood that is evident in dalit men’s writings. In her interview with Maya Pandit, Baby Kamble says,

The suffering of my community has always been more important than my own individual suffering. I have identified myself completely with my people. And therefore *Jina Amucha* was the autobiography of my entire community.
What becomes central to the selfhood envisioned by Kamble is a collective identity. Especially notable is her allusion to ‘we’ in the title of the autobiography. Furthermore, in contrast to Joothan and The Outcaste where the sole experience of caste oppression is highlighted, the ‘we’ in The Prisons We Broke emphasizes the need for solidarity among dalit men and women to achieve freedom. In the process, The Prisons We Broke refines the idea of the collective, in terms of a collective containing men and women, recognizing gender specificities and taking these differences into account while forging a solidarity.

In comparison to Joothan and The Outcaste where community is invoked as a context and extension to substantiate the struggle that the individual narrators go through, in The Prisons We Broke Kamble recognizes that the collective experience of oppression shapes her own consciousness. In her narration of collective oppression, she brings out the gradations of oppression that exist within her community:

If the Mahar community is the ‘other’ for the Brahmins, Mahar women become the ‘other’ for the Mahar men.111

Kamble thus understands the oppression of dalit woman, not only in relation to the brahmanical hegemony of the caste system, but also in relation to dalit men.

Kamble recognizes the category ‘dalit woman’ as being simultaneously oppressed by caste-gender through her identification of dual patriarchies: brahmanical and dalit. She writes that dalit women confront ‘brahmanical hegemony on the one hand and ... patriarchal domination on the other’.112 As an example of brahmanical hegemony, Kamble refers to her father who aimed to achieve social respectability and power by emulating the upper-caste practice of keeping his wife within the house;113 and to highlight dalit patriarchy, she describes the heavy physical and verbal abused experienced by dalit women at their in-laws’
Kamble’s awareness of dalit women’s oppression comes from seeing her father taking pride in keeping her mother at home. She writes,

In those days, it was the custom to keep women at home, behind the threshold. The honour enjoyed by a family was in proportion to the restrictions imposed on the women of the house. When no one could see even a nail of the woman thus confined within the four walls of the house, then this ‘honour’ became the talk of the town—a byword among the relatives and friends in the surrounding villages. Then people would tell each other, how one Pandharinath Mistry kept his wife completely hidden in the house and how even the rays of the sun did not know her.

Kamble’s father represents an internal patriarchy which emulates the upper-caste practices of keeping women within the house. Moreover, he educates his wife about the value of morality over the importance of money. About her mother’s situation Kamble writes, ‘My father had locked up my aai in his house, like a bird in a cage.’ This is reminiscent of Rassundari Devi in *Amar Jiban* who likens marriage to a prison. Rassundari Devi’s condemnations of marriage lay in the imposition of household duties and rules of morality, and the restrictions on women about getting education. Kamble recognizes this practice as a structural problem as result of brahmanical hegemony. Moreover, by showing that it is the dalit man who implements such rules on dalit women, Kamble confronts the internal patriarchy as well.

However, this internal patriarchy is not just a reflection of brahmanical patriarchy. It has its own workings of patriarchal systems. In Baby Kamble’s narrative we hear stories of girls married off at young age, becoming subject to the verbal and physical tortures of the mothers-in-law. Along with the heavy household work, the daughters-in-law have to listen to the mothers-in-law accusations: ‘Look at the bhakris this slut has prepared. She cannot even make a few bhakris properly. Oh, well, what can one
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expect of this daughter of a dunce?" In cases when daughters-in-law could not stand the suffering and ran away from house, heavy physical torture was awaiting them. Kamble writes how the mother-in-law would instigate her son by saying, ‘Dhondya, what good is such a runaway wife to you? Some bastard must have made her leave you. She must be having an affair…. Don’t let her off so easily. Dhondya, cut off the tip of her nose; only then will my mother’s heart breathe easy!’ Dhondya’s father would reinforce this even more by saying ‘You are a man. You must behave like one!…. Never mind if you have to go to prison for six months! You must chop off your wife’s nose and present it to her brother and father. They mustn’t have any respect left to sit with the members of the panch.’ The dalit patriarchy here functions at two levels: on the one hand, the assumed affair of the wife justifies her punishment, and on the other hand, it serves as a means to display the husband’s masculine prowess over the wife and the men in her family. Such claiming of masculinity, exercised through the mutilation of the dalit woman’s body-part, marks a distinctive nature of dalit patriarchy.

Kamble also goes on to show that it is not only dalit men who often imbibe brahmanical models, dalit women also internalize caste. These women’s lives are dictated by Hindu religious rituals and superstitions. One such superstition is that dalit women would be possessed by goddesses and would supposedly tell the fortune of the people and point out their faults. Kamble mentions how being possessed would leave enormous emotional and physical toll over women. Along with ‘earsplitting screams’ these women would dance ‘in frenzy till they collapsed in a heap on the floor, their jaws locked’. ‘What kind of life did these people really lead?’ Kamble asks. Kamble argues that such perpetuation of blind faith occurs due to the brahmanical control over knowledge. She writes, ‘The entire community had sunk deep in the mire of such dreadful superstitions. The upper castes had never allowed this lowly caste of ours to acquire knowledge. Generations after generations, our
people rotted and perished by following such a superstitious way of life. Yet, we kept believing in your Hindu religion and serving you faithfully.122

The dalit women in The Prisons We Broke, however, are not victims; they struggle and survive. Kamble mentions that starting from catching mice within the house123 to taking initiative to send their children to schools,124 all were done by dalit women. She argues that memories of humiliation and perpetual slavery need to be reiterated because future generations must know the fiery ordeal that the earlier generations have gone through. Threaded within the narrative are occasional recounts of dalit women’s participation in activism. In the autobiography we see people gathering to discuss about Ambedkarite movement, his conversion, and their opinions on these movements. Dalit women’s narratives thus voice protest against the exploitation by the external structures such as state, religion, and Brahmanism, as well as the internal gender hierarchies. Their writing emphasizes that their theorization grows out of their activism. Kamble believes that the Ambedkarite movement would end both caste and gender oppression on dalit women. She writes how Ambedkar’s call to dalit women as the frontiers of ‘change’ instilled hope in the women in her community that by educating their next generation, converting to Buddhism, and participating in movements, the overall condition of the dalits would improve.125

Kamble’s realization of the anti-caste movement as a key to dalit women’s liberation shows that in this construction of identity, ‘dalit woman’, while recognized in her gendered specificity, is not seen in opposition to dalit men, but as standing in solidarity while also demanding accountability. This identification is reminiscent of Alice Walker’s notion of womanism defined as commitment ‘to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female’,126 and the vision of the Combahee River Collective which states, ‘We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism.’127 Understood
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through solidarity, ‘dalit woman’ then is identified as a collective, politicized ‘self’.

Karukku (2000)

Bama’s *Karukku* focuses on caste and gender-based oppression in a Tamil dalit Christian community. Written as a bildungsroman, *Karukku* traces Bama’s journey from being a believer in God as a child, to becoming a devoted nun, to becoming a disillusioned but politically enlightened ‘dalit woman’. It is through her experiences of caste and gender-based oppression that Bama realizes that dalit women are located in completely different spheres than upper-caste men and women, as well as dalit men.

The ‘selfhood’ that Bama constructs presents a critique of ‘dalit’ identity by highlighting its patriarchal undertones, and fractures the notion of ‘woman’ by showing caste division among women. The former aspect is exemplified through the games she played as a child. In these games, the boys invariably acted ‘as if they had a lot of power over us’. The latter aspect is seen when Bama is demoted by an upper-caste nun from her post as a head teacher (despite having ten years of experience) because of her dalit identity. This difference of ‘dalit woman’ from both ‘woman’ and ‘dalit’ reinforces the notion of intersectionality of caste and gender as creating specific conditions for dalit women, and challenges the erasure or the subsuming of dalit women within the generic identities of ‘woman’ and ‘dalit’ as seen in the autobiographies, namely, *Amar Jiban, My Story, Joothan,* and *The Outcaste.*

*Karukku* also highlights the hypocrisy of Christianity that sustains caste discrimination. Tamil Nadu has had a long history of dalits’ converting into Christianity. Rupa Viswanath provides a remarkably detailed study of the conversion of dalits in the late nineteenth-century Madras Presidency. She notes that even though dalits saw Christianity as ‘an opportunity to escape’ from the oppression of their ‘landed caste masters’, they were not readily
welcomed within the ‘Christian fold’. Viswanath quotes an instance where the entry of dalit Christian children to a missionary school was met with severe opposition by high-caste parents. Moreover, ‘Separate Pariah quarters were set up in famine-relief camps in response to the fact that if Pariahs were indiscriminately mixed with the rest of the population no one but they would seek relief’. To resolve this issue even the kitchen was labelled ‘Pariah’ or ‘Caste’.

*Karukku* highlights the continuation of such discrimination against dalit Christians in Tamil Nadu. Bama says that even though nuns were taught to live in poverty and humility, they lived lavish lives looking after the children of the rich upper-caste people and neglecting the poor lower-caste kids. The hypocrisy becomes clear through Bama’s recounting of the scriptural lessons on the Devil. Bama writes how the nuns ‘told us that if we kept on committing sins, the Devil would put them all down in a long list written in a big notebook, which he would show to God…. [and] if we committed so many sins that the notebook actually filled up, then he would peel the skin off our backs and write our sins’. Bama argues that this obsession with sin deepened her sense of inferiority. She writes that the convent life had changed her so much that she ‘who had once been bold had become an extremely timid person, fearful of everything, ready to burst into tears, and without any strength’. This conceptualization of sin as perpetuation of discrimination and hindrance to knowledge differs from that of Kamala Das’s *My Story* where sin is manufactured to instil among young girls the notion of morality. By showing how the Church catered only to the needs of the upper castes, by providing them with benefits and comforts and reserving the higher posts of priest and nuns for the upper castes, and purposefully perpetuated caste hierarchy, Bama highlights the intersecting way in which caste and religion function. Bama also realizes the futility of the Church-run boarding schools, which rather than educating the dalit children and making them aware of their situation, ‘suggested that this was
the way it was meant to be for dalits; that there was no possibility of change’.136

Bama’s portrayal of education lies in identifying brahmanical control over knowledge as the root of the problem. To challenge this deliberate imposition of ignorance, Bama had decided to become a nun. Her desire to bring a change from within was not driven by assimilation or appropriation, but through intervention and reformation. Her realization that the hypocrisy of religion which interpreted ‘one God within the church and another outside’, was in fact a human construct, led her to proclaim:

We should never believe one thing and do another. We should speak up about what we believe, and act according to that. That is being true to oneself. Everything else is play-acting. I never cared to survive by acting out a role.137

This ‘dalit woman,’ however, is not a separatist identity. Bama’s self-representation as a ‘Dalit woman … [living] as an independent woman … [and working] for the liberation of Dalits’ in the last part of her autobiography, presents her identity as arising from the textured experiences of caste and gender realities and therefore aligned in solidarity with dalit men and women in the community.138 In her introduction titled ‘Ten Years Later’, Bama writes how the autobiography, which was originally meant for healing her ‘inward wounds’ became ‘a means of relieving the pain of others who were wounded’.139 Writing and publication thus not only gives the author and her voice visibility, they also create an opportunity for others to relate to the experiences of oppression. This is reminiscent of the excitement Barbara Christian expressed when, as a graduate student in 1967, she came across Paule Marshall’s autobiographical novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones*: ‘[it] was not just a text; it was an accurate and dynamic embodiment both of the possibilities and improbabilities of my own life. In it I as subject encountered myself as object…. It was crucial to a deeper
understanding of my own life.' For Bama, the writing of her autobiography becomes a political act because, as Bama claims, ‘Karukku stands as a means of strength to the multitudes whose identities have been destroyed and denied.’ Hence, like Kamble in The Prisons We Broke, she envisions a solidarity-based identity as defining the selfhood of ‘dalit women’.

Ami Keno Charal Likhi (2016)

While The Prisons We Broke represents the Ambedkarite movement and Karukku brings out the complexities of caste, gender and religion in Tamil Nadu, Ami Keno Charal Likhi makes an important contribution by focusing on caste, gender and citizenship in Bengal. This literature holds special significance in the pan-Indian spectrum of dalit literature due to its unique narration of and experience as ‘dalit refugee’.

Citizenship as dictated by the Constitution of India has been a matter of immense debate and dissent since its first drafting. The Constitutional ideas of who is a citizen and what constitutes citizenship in India have been challenged through the lenses of caste, gender and religion. Post-Partition India saw an increasing debate over the question of the rightful citizens of the nation. This discomfort resulted in incorporating the refugees within the ‘Hindu’ fold. This new nation, according to Haimanti Roy, ‘produced categories, debated within the hallowed halls of officialdom in Delhi, Calcutta, and Dacca, and given legal sanction through ordinances and laws debated and passed by parliamentary and state legislations’. The subject of Constitution and citizenship recently gained renewed attention with the Indian government’s imposition of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) in 2019. This policy has come under fire for implementing religious segregation and wasting time and money. The CAA aims to identify illegal immigrants and deport or keep them in isolation. In actuality, however, this move is also seen as catering to a unified
‘Indian’ (and Hindu) identity. India after Partition struggled to turn colonial subjects into national citizens. In this context, the identity as a ‘Hindu’ served as a means to ‘otherise’ Muslim dominated Pakistan and East-Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and unify ‘Hindu Indians’ against Islamic oppression. This new category incorporated dalit refugees within its fold. Roy further adds that these identities were produced discursively, mediated through the actions of officials located at the periphery of the nation, especially at the borders and diplomatic missions…. Implicit within these redefinitions were the attempts of each state to establish a minority citizen’s loyalty to the state.

In a detailed historical investigation of the question of caste and caste prejudice within progressive Bengali society, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay reveals that in ‘the complex interplay between social and ideological factors and political circumstances … caste was as much a potent factor in determining social relations in colonial Bengal as it was in any other region of India’. The Bengal partition is tarnished by bloodied histories of Marichjhapi, economic exclusion and struggle for survival. This strategic segregation was not only directed to resolve the ‘refugee problem,’ it also absorbed within itself the brahmanical hierarchization through caste. The detailed studies on the Marichjhapi massacre bear evidence to the mainstream erasure of caste genocide. The newly emerging scholarship on partition in Bengal and writings by Bengali dalit writers have contributed immensely in bringing out the complex interrelation between caste and citizenship.

Terming it as ‘a consolidated movement within Bangla literature’, Manohar Mouli Biswas views Bengali dalit literature as challenging the brahmanical supremacy over mainstream Bengali literature and views dalit writings in Bengali as ‘revolutionary’ activism that can ‘actually bring about social change’. Bengali dalit literature, therefore, marks a systemic and epistemological intervention. This holds special significance in the context of Bengal where the early arrival of Marxist ideology created a
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sense of political awareness among the Bengali intelligentsia who viewed oppression in terms of class and ignored/denied the existence of caste. Bengali dalit literature challenges the belief that the Bengali educated and Left-aligned community is unmarked by caste. While the status as a dalit refugee in West Bengal in India brought into focus the pervasiveness of the caste system, it would be wrong to assume that even as dalit refugees, their experiences are similar. Herein the issue of gender as a category intersectional with caste becomes important. Bengali dalit women’s writings, therefore, provide a different and new layer of understanding through an intersectional perspective and an unconventional counter-narrative.

_Ami Keno Charal Likhi_ (2016), literally meaning _Why I Write Charal as My Name_, is rooted in the construction of her identity. The author, Kalyani Thakur Charal, mentions that after their arrival in West Bengal (India), they faced caste discrimination and changed their surname to ‘Thakur’. She writes, ‘All our relatives, including my father and father’s cousins, changed their surname into “Thakur”’. They were forced to take this decision because of social pressure and with the expectation to erase caste stigma. But a change in surname does not ensure a change in one’s caste identity. Even if we replace the word, “untouchable” with “harijan” or “dalit”, the situation does not change.” The author experiences caste discrimination in school despite having a surname not indicative of her caste. That is why she decides to add ‘Charal’ to her surname. She mentions an incident on her first day at an office: ‘One by one people came and interviewed me….. Once they left, I saw the fox-like Dey babu and Bhattacharya babu whispering among themselves, “Which caste?” To this I loudly replied, “Charal”. My sudden bold proclamation shocked everyone. They were not used to a dalit openly identifying his/her caste.” Much like Baby Kamble, Thakur Charal considers the proclamation of her dalit identity as agential. This sensitivity comes from her disillusionment that a change in surname never
ensures erasure of caste. Like Bama, she gets educated, gets a job, but soon realizes that these institutions are the locations where caste gets continually implemented and reproduced.

Thakur Charal experiences a life which is thrice displaced: as a dalit, a woman, and a refugee. She mentions how dalit women refugees bore the brunt of this displacement. In relation to the impact of Partition in Bengal, academic discussions have followed the failure of ‘alienation to integration’ policy especially in the context of the Marichjhapi massacre. Displacement and the problem of citizenship, however, had specific consequence for dalit women. Thakur Charal writes, ‘It was common among poor dalit refugees to sell their girl children in exchange of money. They took my aunt’s daughter to Delhi in promise of giving work. She did not know that she was sold. Next day she sent a postcard begging uncle to bring her back. When I demanded to see that postcard, uncle angrily retorted that it was lost.’ While refugee women (especially those without the protection of men) were often subject to rapes and abductions, the specificity of dalit women refugees’ condition (as seen in case of Thakur Charal’s cousin) is a result of caste, gender and poverty. U. Sen notes,

Within the population of East Bengali refugees, those most able to actualise an alternative vision of rehabilitation were the relatively elite bhadraloks from Eastern Pakistan who had fallen upon hard times, but were far from destitute. In stark contrast, the most marginalized amongst the refugees—the Namasudra peasants of eastern Bengal—towed the line of official policy and completely internalised the hegemonic discourse of rehabilitation.

U. Sen further points that the bhadralok refugees occupied the better colonies of Calcutta, while dalit refugees were often sent to the Andaman Islands and to Dandakaranya. Sen’s argument reveals the close interlink between caste and class. The segregation of dalits in distant rehabilitation camps indicates the
perpetuation of the stigma of untouchability. Even in Calcutta, Thakur Charal mentions that upper-caste and dalit refugees lived on different sides of the street.\textsuperscript{162} Coupled with untouchability was poverty which pervaded the lives of dalit refugees. And it was dalit women who received severe consequences in the form of being sold for money. Partition, therefore, reveals specific consequences on dalit women.

Thakur Charal’s autobiography forces us to see that violence inflicted on dalit women refugees is not merely a result of their sex; it is a structural issue where dalit women’s bodies are made into sites to exercise control. The Marichjhapi massacre, in fact, began with police brutality directed towards dalit women. Some survivors recount how the police killed a few dalit women by drowning their boats, and how dalit women were taken to the police station by force and were gang raped for days.\textsuperscript{163} These events caused confrontation between the refugees and the police, the ultimate outcome of which was that massacre of Marichjhapi. Dalit women refugees became the immediate victims of the structural consequences of caste, partition, relocation and government policy. In this context, MacKinnon’s reading of the genocide in Bosnia (1995) may be useful. MacKinnon criticizes the legal representation of the issue as solely a matter of racial or ethnic discrimination and points out that,

\begin{quote}
The destruction of the women of an ethnic community through rape [should be] recognized as destroying their community. Genocide was not marginalized; instead, women were made central in its more capacious frame…. The fact that this genocide was in part conducted through gender crimes did not mean that the acts were not also ethnically and nationally and religiously destructive. It meant they were.\textsuperscript{164}
\end{quote}

MacKinnon thus provides an important corrective in the dominant understanding of rape as solely gender violence, instead reframing it through the intersectional lens. Similarly, the rapes of
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dalit women in the Marichjhapi massacre need to be re-scripted within the broader frameworks of caste and citizenship, and seen how control over a community is exercised by making gender oppression central. As Maria Mies argues, ‘Women are seen as the only property that pauperized men still possess. The rape of their women teaches poor men the lesson that their status is one of absolute powerlessness and propertylessness.’\textsuperscript{165} Rape, therefore, is utilized as a tool to oppress the marginalized community as a whole. Gender oppression within dalit refugees was also a common practice. Thakur Charal recounts innumerable incidents, including her own sister’s gang rape, pregnancy before marriage, pregnancy of widows, severe domestic violence on the girls at their in-laws’ houses, and desertion by husbands.\textsuperscript{166} This is a clear mark of dalit patriarchy bearing similarity with that in \textit{The Prisons We Broke}.

Dalit women refugees’ physical oppression is not the only content of Thakur Charal’s autobiography, she also mentions the erasure/ignorance in academia and activism. Contesting such erasures, the identity that Thakur Charal creates is a collective identity. Her autobiography is strewn with the lives of other dalit women, especially her sister, her grandmother and her mother. It was pain which made this bond stronger. Thakur Charal mentions how, throughout her life, she has lived as a caregiver for her sister who often suffered from mental illness. But her death left an enormous emptiness within the author. She writes, ‘Relatives, neighbours, everyone heaved a sigh of relief at her death. That person, who had captured a lot of my time, left me completely empty. She wanted to live so badly! For one year I could not keep even a picture of hers in the house—such was her presence.’\textsuperscript{167} This bond is not limited only to interpersonal relationships. Thakur Charal mentions that publishing the magazine, \textit{Neer}, a Bangla magazine that publishes writings on and from dalit literature, created a space for her to engage in a collective process of protest against dalit women’s oppression.\textsuperscript{168} She, in fact, views writing as activism. In the introduction of the autobiography, Thakur Charal mentions
that this book is a conscious intervention in dominant Brahmanism and patriarchy. It promotes a particular perspective to destabilize dominant ideologies. This conscious ‘self’ believes in solidarity. The ending of the book is the most reassuring and rewarding. Thakur Charal ends by documenting a workshop organized in Pondicherry in 2012 by Sparrow Women’s Archive that brought together twelve dalit women writers from six states across India. This workshop consisted not only of dalit women writers sharing their writings it also showcased drama, autobiographical accounts, narratives by dalit women activists and so on. This workshop highlighted dalit women’s organizational power and the need to build solidarity across regions, cultures and modes of articulation. The identity that Thakur Charal creates as a ‘dalit woman’, is hence, an affinity-based identity.

The Prisons We Broke, Karukku and Ami Keno Charal Likhi show how an intersectional identity, that is, ‘dalit woman’, challenges the single-axis formulation of ‘woman’ and ‘dalit’. In the process, the concept of dual patriarchies revises the mainstream feminist notion of patriarchy (understood only in terms of gender) and the anti-caste notion of the caste system as the primary source of oppression for all members of the dalit community irrespective of gender. Dalit women’s writings, therefore, highlight the specificity of gender within dalit communities and urge a recognition of difference among women. The ‘dalit woman’ that emerges through these varied constructions of selfhood in dalit women’s autobiographies is a politically aware and consciously chosen ‘self’ that is quite distinct from the ‘self’ constituted through individual experiences of the subject in autobiographies canonised by mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics.

CONCLUSION

The ‘self’ constructed in all these autobiographies present three different identities: the ‘woman’ as implicitly savarna, the ‘dalit’ as
implicitly dalit man (which includes dalit women insofar as they are considered exclusively in terms of their caste identity), and the ‘dalit woman’ as an explicitly intersectional category. Although all these autobiographies have contributed immensely in redefining the contours of gender and caste, this comparative analysis of the three sets of autobiographies points out that the exclusivity of single-axis identity in the construction of ‘woman’ and ‘dalit’ erases, or at the very least, fails to address the dalit woman in her intersectional specificity. By establishing dalit women’s identity as that which is affected by mutual and intersecting structures of caste/and gender, dalit women’s autobiographies highlight the dalit feminist identification of the constituency, that is, dalit woman, as a specific category. In the process dalit women’s autobiographies also highlight how different issues—the dichotomy between public and private, the issue of sexuality and domesticity, the liberatory potential of education, and the idea of collective emancipation—are redefined in relation to this specific intersectional identity.

Dalit women’s autobiographies challenge the mainstream feminist understanding of women’s oppression in terms of their confinement to the domestic within a strict personal/public dichotomy (as seen in *Amar Jiban* and *My Story*). For dalit women, whose work necessitates their presence in the public sphere, confinement to the domestic is not an issue. The perceived dichotomy between the public and the private is linked to sexuality. For example, in *My Story* the author narrates how, after marriage, she was expected by her mother-in-law to fulfil her ‘domestic responsibilities’ by housekeeping, sewing buttons and providing her husband with daily amenities, while also giving in to her husband’s demands of sexual union which often equalled to marital rape. Imprisonment of women within the domestic therefore served as a controlling mechanism to keep not only women’s sexuality in check, it also actively worked towards moulding young wives into ideal wives. This is indicative of patriarchy within
mainstream Indian Feminism. It is for this reason that exploration of sexuality outside the domestic marital relationship is seen by Kamala Das as liberatory. On the other hand, *Ami Keno Charal Likhi* shows the problematics of sexuality through dual patriarchies where the elder sister, due to the brahmanical assumption of dalit women’s sexual availability, is raped by her upper-caste teacher, and after her marriage her in-laws throw her out of the house blaming her for being raped. This shows that unlike upper-caste women, dalit women’s sexuality is not liberatory: it is casteist sexism that underwrites dalit women’s sexual oppression.

Dalit women’s autobiographies also reveal the inextricable link between the public and the private in the way they redefine caste oppression as caste and gender oppression. While in *Joothan, The Outcaste* and *The Scar*, the dalit male protagonists negotiate with the caste system outside their homes, on the streets, in schools and at workplaces, dalit women autobiographers focus on internal oppression such as dalit women’s confinement within the house and abuse by their husbands. For example, in *Joothan* the author feels contemptuous to see dalits eating leftovers with ‘a lot of relish’, *The Scar* scorns at how dalit people address higher castes as ‘master’. Internalization of casteism, therefore, is criticized by dalit writers to express how these specific feelings of inferiority need to be challenged through a ‘dalit’ identity-based assertion. Contrastingly, in *The Prisons We Broke*, Kamble writes that if a dalit husband suspected his young wife of adultery, he would chop her nose off as punishment and ‘present it to her brother and father’ to display his masculine prowess over the wife and the men in her family. Kamble also writes that her father wanted to achieve social respectability and power by emulating the upper-caste practice of keeping women within the house. Here we see an emulative form of dalit patriarchy which aspires to become brahmanical by imposing the brahmanical ideas of ‘honour’ on dalit women. While dalit autobiographers challenge internalization
of casteism to create opposition between upper castes and dalits, dalit women writers show that the internalization of brahmanical patriarchy by dalit men leads to specific gendered power relations within the dalit community. What dalit women’s writings reveal is the need to recognize the caste system existing not only in the public sphere, but also in conjunction with gender within the domestic.

In terms of education, dalit women’s autobiographies contest the mainstream feminist notion of education as agency (in terms of freedom from, and opposition to, patriarchy) and the dalit idea of education as economic independence, by expressing distrust about formal education. In *Karukku*, Bama is initially led to believe by her father and brother that ‘if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities’. But she is disillusioned when she joins a boarding school as a nun only to find out that the dalit students are made to do all the menial work in the school and are taught that ‘there was no possibility of change’. *Karukku*, therefore, provides a different approach to education compared to *Amar Jiban*, *The Scar* and *Joothan*. In *Amar Jiban*, Rassundari mentions that the ability to read and write gives her voice and provides a way to escape the daily drudgeries of household work. Access to education, in mainstream feminist articulation, is seen as self-assertion and defiance of patriarchy. For dalit men in texts such as *The Scar* and *Joothan*, education becomes a way to achieve liberation from caste oppression through economic independence. *Karukku* however highlights the failure of formal education as a means of liberation. Bama, in fact, transforms the notion of education to take it beyond its formal associations with literacy and economic mobility to define it in terms of achieving political awareness through experience which is articulated in a collective manner.

This emphasis on collective emancipation, rather than the liberation of the individual, makes dalit women’s autobiographies challenge the conventional autobiographical ‘self’. For example,
in *Joothan*, it is the individual’s emancipation through economic independence which gains prominence. Although *Joothan* does invoke the community, it is only to provide the necessary context of caste oppression against which the individual is seen to struggle and rise. Throughout the autobiography, it is Valmiki and his life that are central to the emancipatory aspects of the narrative. On the other hand, in *Karukku* and *Ami Keno Charal Likhi*, the authors locate themselves within the collective. In *Ami Keno Charal Likhi*, other people’s stories and lives are incorporated to show how they shape the protagonist’s outlook towards life. In the introduction to *Karukku*, Bama mentions that her writing of this autobiography has been a means to heal the pains of all those who were wounded by similar experiences of oppression. In *The Prisons We Broke*, Kamble argues that for a more effective opposition to casteism and sexism, men and women need to stand in solidarity. Dalit women’s intersectional identity and the notion of dual patriarchies therefore not only fracture the homogeneous constructions of ‘woman’ and ‘dalit,’ they also change the way caste and gender are looked at by emphasizing different perspectives on issues such as sexuality, education and the meaning of emancipation.

Through this study of autobiographies what becomes clear is that it is impossible to conceptualize identity in singular terms. Systemic hierarchies create internal divisions within categories (of women as well as dalits). This is the precise reason why Dalit Feminism claims that while analysing and formulating dalit women’s identity, it is necessary to recognize the implications of simultaneous oppression by caste and gender. Recognizing how the given structures constitute identities that vary from group to group, Dalit Feminism challenges unitary identities such as ‘woman’ and ‘dalit,’ and proceeds to intervene in these singular constructions by foregrounding the constituency ‘dalit woman’ as an intersectional identity.
NOTES

2 Following Lacanian concept of the split subject, Cixous locates ‘woman’ as forever defined through ‘dual, hierarchical oppositions’ (1997: 232). She argues that in order to resist their silencing, women need a language, an ‘écriture feminine’, to write towards their difference. Defining women’s writing as ‘a new insurgent’ that creates ‘indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history,’ Cixous points out that by writing, a woman returns to the body ‘confiscated’ from her. Writing also marks a ‘woman’s seizing the occasion to speak’, hence her shattering entry into history, which has always been based on her suppression’. Hence women’s writing signals a feminist reclamation of agency and awareness of the self. This method of women’s alternative writing style was seen as an enabling mode which, through its ‘disconnected, fragmentary’ nature, challenged the coherence propounded in male autobiographies (Jelinek 1980: 17). Their chaotic language reflected the social conditions they live in, and in terms of language, this mode of writing became an alternative site to express their desires and difference. See Cixous, ‘Sorties’ (1997): 231–35; Jelinek, Women’s Autobiography: Essays in Criticism (1980).
3 The Introduction by Arjun Dangle in his edited book, Poisoned Bread, provides a detailed study on the emergence of dalit literature in Maharashtra and its characteristics (Dangle, Poisoned Bread (2009): xxiv–xxxii. For more on Dhasal, see ibid.: xxxviii–xli).
10 Ibid.: 44.
18 Ibid.: 21.
19 Ibid.: 20.
22 Devika, Her-Self: Early Writings on Gender by Malayalee Women (2008): 139; in the Indian context, the idea of women as partners of men, or sahadharmini, contributed immensely in neatly dividing the ‘public’ and the ‘private.’ Deemed to be a dharma or a scriptural rule, women naturally internalized this position. The term saha, meaning together/along with, neutralized any sense of hierarchy and created a false notion of equality. Sahadharmini became a popular trope in the nineteenth-century reformation because it ensured that even when women became part of the progressive narrative, they never crossed the limit allowed to them. See P. Chatterjee, ‘The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question’ (1989).
23 Devika, Her-Self: Early Writings on Gender by Malayalee Women: 139.
26 Dinesh Chandra Sen (1866–1939). Vanga Sahitya Parichaya or Selections from the Bengali Literature, vol. 2 Calcutta.; All translations from Amar Jiban hereafter are mine.
30 Mazumdar, ‘Foreword’ in Voices from Within: x.
32 Ibid.: 61.
33 Ibid.: 7.
34 Rassundari writes that after her departure from her mother’s house all she used to do was cry. ‘At that time my mother-in-law used to take me on her lap and console me. I give my thanks to Parameshwar. Such a beautiful incident!’ R. Devi, Amar Jiban (1876): 24.
37 Ibid.: 220.
38 Rassundari writes: ‘At that time women did not get education. After the work in the house and lunch, the little bit of time that was left, women were
supposed to stand very humbly near the karta of the house. As if women
did not have any other work. At that time people used to treat women
like this. Especially there was a rule for wives that they will have to wear a
foot-long veil and work in the house. She was considered a very good wife if
she refrained from speaking to anybody. At that time the clothes were not
soft like now—they were thick. I used to wear such clothes and draw my
veil to my chest and work. I never used to speak to anyone else. Like the
oil-churning ox, our eyes were always covered. We could not see anything
except for our own feet. These kind of rules prevailed the entire life of the

41 Deboshruti Roychowdhury mentions that the autobiographies written by
women in the nineteenth century ‘testifying to the valour, vigour, strength,
and determination’ through which they broke free ‘from indigenous customs
such as purdah and the ban on female education’ could be accessible only
to ‘a few women of advantageous position’. She further states that this
was a specifically brahmanical paradigm where women’s apparent freedom
was continuously kept in check by keeping alive the tradition of docility
towards the husband. Roychowdhury, Gender and Caste Hierarchy in Colonial

42 Banerjee, ‘Marginalization of Women’s Popular Culture in Nineteenth
43 Such attitude of ignorance/non-engagement towards marginalized women
was a common phenomenon in Western Feminism till as late as the 1960s.
Pioneering feminist texts such as The Second Sex (1953) by Simone de
Beauvoir, the sexed/gendered body presented a specific, white, western
image of women which omitted experiences and oppressions of black
women.
45 Chatterjee, ‘The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question’: 244–45.
48 Devika, ‘Housewife, Sex Worker and Reformer: Controversies over Women
50 Ibid.: 21.
51 Ibid.
52 Devika, ‘Housewife, Sex Worker and Reformer’: 1676.
53 Ibid.: 1676.
55 Anderson, ‘At the Threshold of the Self: Women and Autobiography’

57 Das, My Story: 75; 84.

58 The phrase is borrowed from Adrienne Rich who stresses on the necessity of doing a feminist critique of compulsory heterosexuality. In her criticism of Chodorow, Rich argues that feminist theory till Chodorow, has viewed lesbianism as an ‘alternative lifestyle’ and has accepted heterosexuality as norm. Thus, the feminist critique of women’s roles as mothers, ironically presented motherhood resulting from heterosexual union as the norm. Rich argues that women’s emotional and erotic sentiments are always regulated by society. Restraining homosexual union and presenting heterosexuality as the ‘normal’ way of fulfilling desires/duties are socially dictated. It is for this reason that Rich calls heterosexuality as a ‘political institution’. Rich, ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’ (1997): 321.


60 Feminist scholarship on the question of sexuality in India have made some groundbreaking contributions. In the introduction to A Question of Silence: vii, John and Nair argue that we need to be cautious about the conspiracy of silence regarding sexuality in India. Sexuality as a feminist issue, as John and Nair point out, emerged in Indian Feminism only during the late 1990s and early 2000s. John and Nair, A Question of Silence: The Sexual Economies of Modern India (1998).


73 Ibid.: xlviii.

74 Satyanarayana and Tharu eds., No Alphabet in Sight: 21.


Valmiki, Joothan: 51.

Ibid.: 9.

Ibid.

Ibid.: 23.

Ibid.: 35.

Ibid.: 134.

Ibid.: 2.


Limble, The Outcaste: xxv.

Ibid.: ix.

Ibid.: 105. It is important to note that these Maratha surnames, though referring to higher caste, were not brahmin. This shows the existence of casteism in other castes as well.

Ibid.: 71.


Ibid.: 5.

Ibid.: 85.

Bharathiraja, ‘A Study of Social Realism in the Select Indian Dalit Autobiographies’.


Ibid.: 95.

Ibid.: 87.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.: 88.


Ibid.: xv.
The term, ‘Pariah’ is British coinage. Dalits who worked hereditarily as land labourers in the Tamil-speaking region of Madras belonged to Paraiyar, Pallar, and Chakkiliyar communities. Viswanath notes that the term, ‘Paraiyar,’ meaning ‘slave,’ was used by upper-caste people to indicate all lower-caste people. ‘By the 1890s, the caste name Paraiyar was anglicised to Pariah (whence the English term ‘pariah’) and was used as an inclusive term by officials to refer to all dalit castes, not just Paraiyars.’ What, therefore, was a region, caste, community and labour-specific term, underwent a complete transformation to signify dalit people as a whole. Resultantly, the fluidity of caste as a category and its qualitative differences were erased, and homogeneity was imposed to highlight how caste as a system affected all dalits in general. It is for this reason that ‘caste in general—understood as an India-wide system of exclusive endogamous groups that determine social interaction—was thrust to the centre of administrative practice through well-known mechanism such as the census.’ See Viswanath, *The Paraiah Problem* (2014): 3–9.

Bama, *Karukku*: x.


Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Choudhury, in explaining the extent of such appropriation, note that when the Namasudra (a dalit group in Bengal mostly consisting of dalit migrants from East Bengal) peasants fought for social justice under the Left party in 1948, ‘the state in Pakistan represented the Namasudra peasant rebels as ‘Hindu’ miscreants. This process of ‘Othering’, not only tended to exclude them from the Pakistani nationhood by imposing on them a ‘Hindu’ identity, but also helped the corresponding Hindu nationalism in India in trying to appropriate them as oppressed Hindu minority.’ See Bandyopadhyay and Basu Ray Choudhury, ‘Partition, Displacement and the Decline of the Scheduled Caste Movement in West Bengal’ (2014): 3.


Marichjhapi massacre (1979) refers to the forced eviction of dalit refugees from the island of Marichjhapi by the then ruling Left government of Bengal. This forced eviction resulted in subsequent death of thousands of dalit refugees due to police brutality, starvation and disease.


It is important to note that the two gurus of the Matua cult were known as Sri Sri Harichand and Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur and many followers who were Namasudras took that name, Thakur.


A colloquial form of ‘Chandal’ in Bengali, the term ‘Charal’ refers to a person who cremates dead bodies for a living. This work is specifically given to the untouchable communities as cremation is considered ‘polluted work.’ Associated with untouchability, this term signifies caste-based stigma. The Chandals under Sri Sri Guruchand Thakur had lobbied to have their name changed to Namasudras, which was granted by the British government a couple of decades before independence.
154 Thakur Charal, Ami Keno Charal Likhi: 82.
155 Ibid.: 45.
158 Thakur Charal, Ami Keno Charal Likhi: 35.
159 U. Sen, Citizen Refugee: 201.
160 Ibid.: 246.
161 Ibid.: 246–47.
162 Thakur Charal, Ami Keno Charal Likhi: 12–14.
163 D. Halder, Blood Island: An Oral History of the Marichjhapi Massacre,
167 Ibid.: 134.
168 Ibid.: 102.
170 Das, My Story: 92.
171 Ibid.: 84.
172 Thakur Charal, Ami Keno Charal Likhi: 56–57.
173 Valmiki, Joothan: 9.
176 Ibid.: 5.
177 Bama, Karukku: 18.
178 Ibid.: 103.
179 Ibid.: 104–06.
The concept of ‘representation’, it seems, is useful precisely because and to the extent that it can serve a mediating function between the two positions, neither foundationalist (privileging ‘reality’) nor superstructural (privileging ‘culture’), not denying the category of the real, or essentialising it as some pre-given metaphysical ground for representation.. Our understanding of the problems of ‘real’ women cannot lie outside the ‘imagined’ constructs in and through which ‘women’ emerge as subjects. Negotiating with these mediations and simulacra we seek to arrive at an understanding of the issues at stake.1

The theory of representation is suitable in delineating the contours of hegemonic epistemologies. Dominant representation helps shape knowledge about something/somebody in a particular fashion. Therefore, an analysis of popular representations unveils the complex and implicit ways in which dominant power functions. Critiques of representations both materially and metaphorically appear in feminist and black feminist theorizations.2 Representational analysis shows that the stereotypes about certain groups operational in society are results of the knowledge created by hegemonic powers. This hegemonic enterprise of representation
also functions by interpellating women to occupy their roles prescribed for them by the social order. These stereotypes not only shape our assumptions about those groups, but are also responsible for dictating the course in which those groups are made to internalize those assumptions as natural and given.

Representations are results of varied layers of mediations and discursive strategies. Therefore, engaging with representation as a domain of analysis reveals the process of representations and its implications. In the process, it also problematizes the position of the representer as a crucial determinant in the production of knowledge. Analysing the problem of representation, I focus specifically on the constituency of Dalit Feminism, that is, ‘dalit woman’. How is a dalit woman (recognized as an intersectional category) represented (i.e., in terms of victim/agent/survivor)? What are the purpose and politics of such representations? What can be termed as a dalit feminist representation?

Stuart Hall’s theory of representation, where he focuses on the constructionist approach is useful in understanding representation in terms of power relations. It recognizes the ‘public, social character of language’ and ‘acknowledges that neither things in themselves nor the individual users of language can fix meaning in language. Things don’t mean: we construct meaning, using representational systems—concepts and signs.’ This notion is important in identifying how discourse functions in close relation with the processes of representation in order to promote certain kinds of ideas and practices. The constructionist approach therefore focuses on the politics of representation and recognizes representation as a consequence of discursive formations. The approach claims that it is us, the language users, who give meaning to objects. Herein a hierarchy is also maintained as to who has the right to assign meaning. A discursive approach, to borrow Hall’s definition is ‘concerned with the effects and consequences of representation—its “politics”’. Hall, therefore, directly links representation to power. According to him, representation
is a medium or process through which meaning, associations, and values are socially constructed and reified by people in a shared culture. Asymmetries of representation indicate asymmetries of power as well. This perspective then challenges the seemingly given binaries such as self/other, man/woman, culture/nature, and shows them as constructed.

Commenting on the politics of representation as a constructed element and its contribution in shaping a feminist critique, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan maintains,

[The] central and repeated concern [here] … is the (re)constituation of female subjectivity in the interests of a feminist praxis. If my interest in gender leads primarily to reflections about female subjectivity, my cultural analysis necessarily focuses on representation as the process by which the female subject is constructed in response to a variety of ideological imperatives.6

Such analysis not only emphasizes the complexity in the process of representation where the power dynamics gets highlighted, but also the position of the representer in its effect upon the representation. The constructionist approach becomes useful to understand how representations are rooted in and reflective of the dominant power structures in society. I go on to explore how gender is seen through the lens of caste, how caste is seen through the lens of gender, and what a dalit feminist representation looks like. Using a comparative framework to elucidate dalit feminist representation of dalit women vis-à-vis mainstream Indian feminist and dalit representations of dalit women, this chapter highlights issues of sexuality and labour. It also raises the question of who can represent a dalit woman (see also Chapter 4).

My purpose here is not to invoke a value judgment regarding representations and interpretations. What I intend here is to highlight the consequences of representations in creating certain
assumptions. Representation, therefore, is viewed as an epistemic endeavour. I specifically draw on texts that have attracted differing responses from mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics because Dalit Feminism proclaims itself in contradistinction to them and thus we need to consider the issues that are given primacy, and the consequence of such interpretation. I would also like to emphasize that in their respective politics, all these different and differing perspectives have had immense impact in shaping and enhancing our ideas about caste and gender. However, mainstream Indian Feminism, Dalit Politics and Dalit Feminism are ongoing movements whose constitutions and contours are dynamic and in continuous flux. Hence, exploring different and differing debates may help direct us towards a more potent understanding of caste and gender.

GENDER THROUGH THE LENS OF CASTE

*The Dirty Picture* (2011)

In terms of mainstream popular representations of dalit woman, the film *The Dirty Picture* is an important contemporary example. Based on the life of Silk Smitha, an actress who dominated the 1980s Tamil film industry as a ‘vamp’ figure, *The Dirty Picture* portrays Reshma, who aspires to become an actress and becomes popular as a sex symbol in cinema. The film shows the journey of Reshma/Silk (played by Vidya Balan), focusing on how she utilizes the male gaze to her advantage to gain popularity, and, in the process, dismisses public opinion while choosing to live the way she wants. The director, Milan Luthria, has claimed *The Dirty Picture* to be a woman-centric film that challenges the taboos regarding women and sexuality by presenting lust as a part of life and nature. Silk’s speech in the film during an award show where she proclaims that she will keep flaunting her body and keep making dirty pictures, is showcased as an attack on patriarchy.
After its release, the film received rave reviews from film critics as well as feminists for its unabashed portrayal of female sexuality and female agency. In an interview, director Milan Luthria said that through the film he wanted to show ‘a woman who has guts and glory’. In popular newspaper reviews, the film’s praises ranged from being ‘free, sexual and female’ to ‘a seminal work that will be studied in feminist discourses’. According to these reviews, rather than remaining closeted in shame and guilt and suffer from sexual domination, Silk’s open articulation of her sexuality and her desires create a new way of looking at women. In these reviewers’ opinion, therefore, what seems to make the film feminist is its representation of women’s sexual liberation. The factor of choice in this representation of female sexuality becomes important in feminist scholarly arguments but in a more complex manner. Highlighting the film’s narrative as portraying a lone woman’s fight against a male dominated world by challenging the moral codes of society, the popular perspective celebrates the success of the film as a victory of a woman’s right over her body, her right to choose an occupation, and live the way she wants. Feminists such as C. S. Venkiteswaran, on the other hand, have defined the film as merely a ‘body show’ that ultimately victimizes Silk. Annie Zaidi adds that the only lens through which Silk is allowed agency in the film is through sexuality, which she questions. Celebrity feminist and journalist Shobhaa De raises similar concerns when she says that rather than making a statement, the film becomes purely an entertainment ‘that manages to stay a hair’s breadth away from unadulterated porn’. Such feminist readings of the film, The Dirty Picture, therefore complicate the notion of sexual agency.

The idea of sexual agency in The Dirty Picture is also problematized by Jenny Rowena through an identification of the caste factor. Rowena argues that in the film, as well as in the reviews of the film, the angle that gets sidelined is Silk’s dalit identity. And herein she links Silk the character with Silk Smitha, the Tamil actress on
whom this film is based. Rowena contextualizes the film historically by analysing caste and gender as intersectional. Tracing the origin of Silk’s hypersexual figure to the Hindu religious tradition of the devadasi system, Rowena argues that Brahmanism maintains caste purity by contrasting upper-caste and lower-caste women in terms of their sexuality. While the ‘protected/controlled’ body of the upper-caste woman becomes ‘the adored and worshiped site of caste purity’, lower-caste women are ‘repeatedly portrayed as sexually loose, hyper and “immoral”, a process that starts right from the representation of Sita and Shoorpanaka in Ramayana’.19 This imposition of immorality and impurity on the dalit woman’s body thus gives an opportunity to exercise sexual control/exploitation by upper-caste men, executed through methods like the devadasi system and public rape of dalit women. Rowena claims that The Dirty Picture represents the way in which this legacy is carried forth in cinema, a popular media wherein ‘caste differences between women has been … powerfully institutionalized’.20 In the film, Suryakant’s wife and Silk fit perfectly into this brahmanical patriarchal binary wherein the sexual purity of upper-caste women (portrayed through Suryakant’s wife) is contrasted with the impurity of dalit women (portrayed through Silk) which is seen to make them sexually accessible to upper-caste men.

By understanding caste and gender as interlinked structures oppressing the dalit women, Rowena offers an intersectional methodology to read The Dirty Picture. In her article, ‘Mapping the Margins’, Crenshaw uses the intersectional methodology to understand how black women’s oppression is caused simultaneously by race and gender. In the context of the controversy over 2 Live Crew, a black rap group prosecuted in Florida in 1990 for writing obscene lyrics, Crenshaw mentions that on the one hand, they were critiqued for writing ‘misogynistic filth’, and on the other hand they were praised for its dealing with ‘popular racist stereotypes in a comically extreme form’.21 Interestingly however, both the so-called feminist and anti-racist arguments remained confined to
Representing a ‘Dalit Woman’

white/black binarism. Crenshaw points out that, the reference to ‘misogyny’ was made in connection to an incident of white women’s rape by black men, wherein the lyrics of 2 Live Crew were blamed for endorsing such violent acts. Thus, the feminist voice got located in white society. On the other hand, the lyrics’ overtly sexual and racist language was praised by the anti-racist camp for challenging those very stereotypes the blacks were relegated to. In such anti-racist/feminist tussle what gets ignored is that the lyrics directly refer to black women. As Crenshaw writes, ‘The fact that the objects of these violent sexual images are black women becomes irrelevant in the representation of the threat in terms of the black rapist/white victim dyad.’ Moreover, the rhetoric of anti-racism provides an opportunity to defend misogyny. The ‘joke’ that seemingly challenges the stereotypes about black men, interestingly also highlights the social relations of power within black communities, whereby the black men of 2 Live Crew enjoy the liberty to represent black women through overtly sexual and obscene images. Crenshaw’s analysis shows that 2 Live Crew’s representation of black women results in ‘the reproduction of racial and gender hierarchy’ wherein ‘the devaluation of women of color’ gets linked to ‘how women of color are represented in cultural imagery’. The method of representational intersectionality thus becomes useful in including ‘both the ways in which these images are produced through a confluence of prevalent narratives of race and gender, as well as a recognition of how contemporary critiques of racist and sexist representation marginalize women of color.’

This is reminiscent of Sunder Rajan’s observation quoted in the beginning of this chapter where she argues that the study of/in representations reveals the enmeshing of the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’ in ways that they form and inform each other. Representation is a product of and in turn produces dominant cultures and ideologies. It is in this way that a study of the representation of Silk in the film The Dirty Picture becomes important in revealing the
intersection between caste and gender. An intersectional study foregrounds that Silk’s sexuality is not a matter of sexual agency (as debated in mainstream feminist reviews and analyses), but a mechanism deployed by brahmanical patriarchy to preserve the differences between the sexualized dalit woman (to be enjoyed outside the domestic) and the chaste upper-caste woman (who fulfils the demands of father/husband/son within the sacred domain of home). As Rowena explains, ‘though Silk Smitha’s image as a sex goddess grew to mythical proportions, being the embodiment of ... a “dirty”, worthless, “use-and-throw” woman, who marked the boundaries of caste and gender decency with her lustful body, this might not have actually translated into real power and privilege in her everyday life.’

According to Rowena, this false notion of agency stems from the ignoring of difference among women based on caste by mainstream Feminism. Rowena identifies *The Dirty Picture* as reproducing caste and gender hierarchy and the devaluation of dalit women’s sexuality. It is this recognition of caste and gender intersection that makes Rowena’s reading of *The Dirty Picture* dalit feminist.

**Mumbai Dance Bar Ban**

The problematic of dalit women’s representation is not limited only in creative articulations; it also exists in socio-historical events. To elucidate my point I invoke the debates amongst different groups of activists regarding the Mumbai Dance Bar Ban in 2005. The Maharashtra government proposed the ban in 2005 to end the ‘unsavoury’ activities reportedly thriving in dance bars that were allegedly corrupting the youth. What ensued was an extended political and legal battle over ‘obscenity’ in public space. In Maya Pandit’s re-articulation, ‘the ban was couched in the language of *cleansing the city of sex, sleaze and immorality*’. Feminist groups therefore responded to the issue in terms of the state’s suppression of women’s sexuality and women’s right to
work. As the Statement of Women’s Groups in Mumbai on 22 April 2005 reported, ‘Instead of creating spaces and conditions that ensure that women are not sexually exploited and their rights are respected, the state has targeted their very livelihood which might have lent their lives independence and autonomy and thereby their freedom.’ Women’s organizations such as All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA), Manushi, the Womanist Party of India led by Varsha Kale, all highlighted the ‘selective cultural policing’ wherein only bar girls are targeted through the ban, whereas film actresses depicting the same songs and dances in cabaret style are celebrated with thundering applause. They argued that for women who were battered, deserted by husband and family, bar dancing provided a means of economic independence.

The Dalit Bahujan Women’s Group based in Mumbai, on the other hand, supported the ban. In ‘Dance Bar Ban Debate: A MaFuAa Stand Point’ published by Dalit Bahujan Mahila Vichar Manch Publication, Pramilani Kunda writes,

Dalit Bahujan Marxist women from Mumbai … have supported the Maharashtra Government’s decision to ‘Ban Dance Bars’ as first step towards socio-economic cultural reform. However, they strongly oppose the ‘moralist perspective’ of pro-ban and point out the fact that the ‘dance bars’ is one of the new forms of ‘Sexual Entertainment Industry’ that has emerged as inevitable part of ‘Market Economy’ in present globalization process.

The two issues that emerge here are dalit feminists’ opposition to the ‘moral’ reason for banning bar dancing, and at the same time, the reason for their support for this ban. While the opposition is directed towards the government’s view of dance bars as promoting immorality, the support for the ban poses a challenge to mainstream Feminism’s proclamation of economic agency. Mainstream Feminism erases caste and sees dalit women only as ‘women’. Consequently, the notion of economic independence as
liberating gets imposed on all women irrespective of their caste. Even when caste is mentioned, its complexity vis-à-vis gender and class is not analysed. For example, Maya Pandit views bar dancing as a method to keep alive the tradition of folk dance (in this case, lavani, a dance form of Maharashtra) and thereby resist brahmanical acculturation. However, this claim that bar dancing is a deliberate choice exercised by dalit women to keep their folk tradition alive ignores the fact of poverty and other aspects that force these women into this profession.

A dalit feminist analysis of the position of the bar girls problematizes the issue of agency through choice. The Dalit Bahujan Marxist women contextualize the issue historically by linking bar girls to the devadasi system: an ancient religious practice where dalit girls were married to the deities but lived as prostitutes for brahmin priests. This system brings into existence the ‘informal sexual circuits of caste’ whereby dalit women are sexually exploited by upper-caste men as a matter of right. The condition of the bar girls, mostly belonging to dalit communities, can be seen as a reproduction of the devadasi system in a new economic setting. Kunda cites this being the reason why ‘The DBM [Dalit Bahujan Marxist women] welcomed the Ban on dance bars … to prevent the capitalist process that has increasingly started pulling bahujan women into the ‘sex entertainment industry’. It is necessary to prevent women from marginalized class and caste from becoming ‘Public Property’. Kunda explains that the commercialization of sex work in dance bars creates scope for public exploitation of women’s labour for sexual entertainment. This ‘vicious circle’ of sexual exploitation is further endorsed by the caste system wherein lower-caste women ‘are invariably pushed into this kind of exploitative labour market structure because they have no other option but to sell their body and sexual labour’. According to Meena Gopal, caste- and gender-based hierarchy is created among women in order to regulate their sexuality. The caste discourse that relies primarily on the notions of
impurity and untouchability, presumes the sexual availability of dalit women. Therefore, when dalit women go out for work, they are often given only those kinds of work that are deemed suitable for them due to their identity as ‘dalit women’. In this way, dalit women are re-inscribed in a casteist-sexist public space. For the bar dancers, it is therefore not a matter of choice of labour. Rather, it is the kind of labour that is made available to them due to their lower-caste origin. Sharmila Rege notes that the dance bar ban issue highlights mainstream Feminism’s ‘failure to recognize the structural violence in terms of caste-ordained linkages between sexuality and labour’. As a result, the particularity of caste that creates a unique situation for dalit women is not taken into consideration by mainstream Feminism.

Jenny Rowena points that ‘Dalit feminist and dalitbahujan political positions on the devadasi practice and other matters like sex work, bar dance, etc., emphatically identify them as oppressive traditions that exploit and subjugate lower-caste women and communities’. This recognition differs from mainstream Indian feminist perspectives that view devadasi tradition in terms of dalit women’s sexual agency as opposed to the upper-caste women who are claimed to be more strictly controlled than dalit women. In mainstream Feminism, choice (in the spheres of sexuality and labour) is represented as oppositional agency because choice is seen to go against the patriarchal control over women which restricts them to marriage and the domestic sphere. Dalit feminist analyses of The Dirty Picture and the Mumbai dance bar ban issue, on the other hand, challenge the mainstream feminist notions of sexual liberation and economic agency in their representations of dalit women. A dalit feminist reading of the representation of Silk and the bar dancers provides a nuanced understanding wherein the issue emerges not merely of economic agency per se (as mainstream feminists claim) but one that recognizes the historical practices of caste- and gender-based discrimination practised through the exploitation of dalit women’s sexuality and
work. Placing dalit woman within a historical perspective provides a different view than the universalist terms of choice/rights promoted by mainstream feminist perspectives. Choice, seen to be agential by mainstream Feminism, is heavily circumscribed in case of dalit women who are forced into casteist and sexist forms of labour (such as bar dancing) and expression of sexuality (such as a hypersexual vamp figure). Their so-called choices, therefore, are seen to be enforced by brahmanical patriarchy, and hence are not oppositional at all.

CASTE THROUGH THE LENS OF GENDER

A dalit feminist analysis of the representations of The Dirty Picture and the dance bar ban provides an intersectional understanding of dalit woman as a category defined through caste and gender intersection looked at through the lens of caste. I now look at caste through the lens of gender. To explicate this point I draw upon the representations of dalit women in the different accounts of the Khairlanji massacre as well as in literary writings by dalit writers that foreground dalit women.

Khairlanji Massacre (2006)

The notorious massacre of Khairlanji occurred on 29 September 2006 when four members of the dalit Bhotmange family, who were dalits, were killed by Kunbi men, belonging to an OBC category, in the village Khairlanji. The women in the family, Surekha and Priyanka, were paraded naked in public and raped repeatedly before being killed, and the two sons were lynched. On 28 September 2008 the District Sessions Court of Bhandara awarded death penalty to six convicts for murder. On 14 July 2010, the Nagpur bench of the High Court commuted the death penalty to rigorous imprisonment of twenty-five years for all the convicts.
The Khairlanji massacre has been represented in three different ways: by the mainstream media as revenge killing in caste terms, by dalit theorists as a caste/class dispute, and by Sabrina Buckwalter as sexual violence. The narrative of revenge killing has been used by the media in referring to the court judgment which viewed the massacre as retaliation in a land dispute. The court traced the origin of the incident back to a land dispute between Siddharth Gajbhaiye, a relative of the Bhotmanges, and Sakru Bunjeswar, a caste Hindu, following which Surekha appeared as a witness in favour of Gajbhaiye. Hence, the media’s depiction of the Khairlanji massacre as ‘a clear case of wreaking vengeance’ is related to caste feud over land.

While the media has highlighted the revenge angle with caste as a muted motivating factor, Anand Teltumbde not only foregrounds caste, but also connects it with class dynamics. He traces the origin of the dispute to seventeen years before the massacre when the economically well-off Bhotmanges defied caste rules by buying five acres of land. Teltumbde argues that the ‘upward economic mobility and … the educational achievements of the Bhotmange children’ caused ‘injury to the caste pride’ of the caste Hindus. Hence, the murder of the Bhotmanges, he states was a collective effort to take revenge. Teltumbde’s representation of the Khairlanji massacre thus links revenge with caste as it intersects with class. Thus, the media as well as the analysis by Teltumbde represent the Khairlanji massacre in terms of caste dynamics, though the latter traces it further and highlights the economic angle tied to caste.

To understand how the economy is related to caste hierarchy, we need to locate it historically. The material consequences of the caste system are elaborated by Gail Omvedt who writes, ‘Caste is a “material reality” with a “material base”; it is not only a form but a concrete material content, and it has historically shaped the very basis of Indian society and continues to have crucial economic implications even today.' Understanding caste and
class as two interlinked ‘hierarchies operative in Indian society’, Uma Chakravarti observes that caste and class relations function ‘one according to ritual purity with the brahmana on top and the “untouchables” at the bottom, the other according to the political and economic status with the landlords at the top and the landless labourers at the bottom. The first corresponds to the formal representation of society, the second to reality—together they make for the unique form of inequality that caste represents.’ 48 The caste system therefore influences class dynamics in constructing hierarchy in terms of control over resources and consequently the kinds of labour assigned to people of different castes. Thus, as Ambedkar writes, caste is not just a division of labour but also ‘a division of labourers’. 49 The caste norms of obligatory servitude and birth-based hierarchy, through which different kinds of work are assigned to different castes, ensure continued difference in economic position among different castes. In Uma Chakravarti’s opinion, class relations are closely linked to the caste system in that ‘the upper castes enjoy social power, regardless of their individual circumstances with respect to control over material resources’ while the dalits are devoid of any right to ownership. 50 The questions, therefore, of who owns the land and who does not, are deeply linked to the caste system.

The Una agitation of 2016 has seen a resurgence of the caste and class debate in terms of land ownership. Following the incident of flogging of four dalits in Una for carrying cow carcasses, the Una agitation began with the demand to stop relegating dalits to stigmatizing work such as carrying animal carcass. Foregrounding the connection between labour (in terms of livelihood) and caste, the Una agitation argued that the caste system functions by assigning dalits to certain kinds of labour that are deemed polluted. Hence, access to such economic sustenance does not ensure equality. Therefore, the core demand of the Una agitation was that dalits should be given five acres of land because it is the only way they can be free from the vicious cycle
of caste-based hereditary professions. Jignesh Mewani, the leader of this movement, said that the Una agitation is ‘pitching for an alternative model of development, based on land reforms, where productivity and wealth gains will be made by redistributing land to those who will work on it themselves, land to the tiller’. Since such control over resources is seen to be fundamental to dalits gaining respect and equality, the Una agitation has been called Dalit Pride March. Here we can see how caste and labour (in terms of means of livelihood) are interlinked and why the latter becomes a major argument in anti-caste discourse.

Such caste and class analysis is premised on an inter-categorical relation of hierarchy between the upper and lower castes. Defined as a method to understand and analyse intersections, inter-categorical analysis, as seen in McCall’s explanation in the introduction of this book, highlights the relationship of inequality ‘among’ groups. The inter-categorical approach, therefore, becomes useful in analysing a society based on caste hierarchy that perpetuates unequal class relationships between groups. Understanding how caste relations reflect class dynamics in Khairlanji and the Una agitation respectively, Teltumbde and Mewani provide such an inter-categorical interpretation.

While Teltumbde’s intersectional caste and class analysis of Khairlanji represents the rapes/murders exclusively as caste violence against the Bhotmanges, Sabrina Buckwalter makes gender her primary focus by shifting attention to the rapes of the dalit women and foregrounding the erasure of the evidence of Surekha and Priyanka’s rapes in the postmortem reports. But this highlighting of the gender angle through the focalization of sexual assault erases caste from the narrative. Gender oppression such as rape (see Chapter 2 with reference to Kalyani Thakur Charal’s autobiography Ami Keno Charal Likhi) is used by the dominant power to exercise control over community. Buckwalter’s concentration on the gendered narrative of Khairlanji, therefore, provides an important insight into the massacre. This representation, however,
views gender as the sole category of oppression and ignores the specific casteist practices such as public gang rape. Public gang rape, as Aloysius, Mangubhai and Lee observe, is a specific phenomenon often executed against dalit women as a means to suppress any display of defiance of untouchability. They further add that, ‘While in some instances the perpetrators of violence belong to one homogeneous dominant caste, there are instances where they cut across all dominant caste lines, that is, backward caste and forward caste.’

Surekh and Priyanka’s gang rapes need to be seen in conjunction with its caste implications. The dominant representations of the Khairlanji massacre either erase caste by focusing exclusively on the gender aspect of the sexual violence, or see the brutality inflicted on the two women only in terms of caste violence wherein gender becomes secondary. Hence, as Sharmila Rege puts it, the violence against dalit women in the Khairlanji massacre gets represented as either ‘caste atrocity’ or ‘sexual atrocity’.

A dalit feminist analysis of the Khairlanji massacre would intervene in the dominant caste/class/revenge narrative through the perspective of gender. It would highlight how brahmanical control over dalit people is enacted through the public rape of dalit women. At this point, it is important to mention that the local media and Teltumbde have represented the rapes and murders as punishment of the Bhotmange family for Surekha’s assumed illicit affair with her cousin, Gajbhaiye, and for owning land. Both the accusation of the affair and the later sexual assault as punishment for such alleged sexual aberration are indicative of the sexualization of dalit women; more specifically, the attribution of impurity at the sexual level to the dalit woman. In a gendered understanding of the caste system, Anupama Rao argues that caste ideologies ‘are embedded in material forms of dispossession … and they are mediated by the regulation of sexuality and gender identity through the rules of kinship and caste purity’. Following Rao’s argument, we can see how the material issue of land
ownership translates into sexual violence directed at dalit women. The specificity of gender emerges in the way the punishment is enacted; it is the dalit women who are publicly paraded naked and raped before being murdered. This is an example of brahmanical patriarchy that asserts its sexual control over dalit women’s bodies. A dalit feminist reading therefore challenges the way Dalit Politics represents caste as subsuming gender, instead highlighting the particularity of dalit women’s caste/gender identity.

With regards to the caste and gender system and ownership of land, another question arises as to who within the Bhotmange family actually owned the land. This question draws attention to dalit women’s position within the dalit community with regards to the ownership of land, making the analysis intra-categorical. In their representations of the Khairlanji massacre, both Teltumbde and the Yashada Fact Finding Report 2006 mention in passing that ‘they owned 5 acres of land’. This generic reference to ‘they’ with regards to land ownership represents the Bhotmange family exclusively in terms of their caste identity, and consequently erases gender differences within the dalit community. The importance of a gendered problematic of land ownership within the dalit community has been emphasized in the Udupi march following the Una agitation in 2016. While the Una march, as mentioned earlier, demanded land rights for dalits, in the Udupi march, dalit female activists claimed that land should be given specifically in the names of dalit women to ensure their economic independence not just from the upper castes but also from dalit men. The fact that neither the anti-caste groups nor Teltumbde consider this gender specificity of land ownership in their analysis of the Khairlanji massacre shows how gender gets erased from dominant portrayals of the issue. An intra-categorical analysis therefore intervenes in such caste- and class-specific representations by connecting the ‘symbolic economies of gender and sexuality and the material reality of dispossession of dalit women’.
An intersectional analysis of the Khairlanji massacre thus brings out the issues of sexuality and access to economic resources vis-à-vis dalit women. While in *The Dirty Picture* and the dance bar ban issue, the questions of sexuality and labour have been addressed with regards to the problematization of choice and agency with respect to dalit women, in Khairlanji the issue becomes that of violence inflicted on the dalit woman’s body to exercise caste control over land. Violence here gets defined in terms of physical violence as well as socio-economic violence implemented through the ownership of labour and land. Dalit Feminism’s analysis shows that when caste and gender are seen as intersectional, the issues of sexuality and labour not only problematize the question of agency, but also bring to the forefront the problem of sexist-casteist violence in this context.

While the representation of the Khairlanji massacre by Dalit Politics erases the specificity of dalit women, literary works by dalit writers have often focused exclusively on dalit women but have represented them predominantly as victims. Such dalit writings represent dalit women’s victimization in two ways: victimhood in terms of victim/whore dichotomy, and victimization in terms of compromised agency. The first kind of representation is exemplified by texts such as Baburao Bagul’s short story, ‘Mother’, and Limbale’s *The Outcaste* (see Chapter 2), while the second kind of representation is evident in texts such as Gautam Ali’s ‘Bazaar’.

Baburao Bagul’s short story ‘Mother’ shows the consequences caste has on the filial relationship between a son and his mother. Born of dalit parents, Pandu, the son, is a target of regular verbal and physical assault by his classmates and neighbours who taunt him by saying that his widowed mother, because of her relationship with the upper-caste overseer, is a whore. Though initially he vehemently defends his mother, gradually he starts to accept the mother/whore binary. Through the recollection of a series of events such as his mother’s absence during the nights and her extravagant lifestyle, Pandu comes to the conclusion that his
mother is indeed a whore. Pandu’s ‘new found knowledge’ of his mother’s infidelity makes him see ‘her tightly worn expensive sari, the careless confidence, the defiance in her walk’ as proof of her ‘guilt’. Blaming her for ruining his life, Pandu himself calls her a ‘whore’ at the climax of the story.

The author of the story, however, shows sympathy towards the mother. The story highlights how as a wife she suffers the suspicion of her husband, as a widow she has to deal with being called ‘slut’ by the society, and even as a mother she faces the same treatment from her son. The story thus highlights the mother’s sad state of being throughout her life. In this representation, the character of the mother remains caught within a victim/whore dichotomy. By focusing on the son and the life he leads due to the social perception of his mother, the story places Pandu as the subject of the narrative. Thus, it is through Pandu’s eyes that we see the mother. The eponymous character, that is, the nameless dalit mother, is shown completely devoid of any agency. The only choice that the mother seems to make in the story is that of taking the overseer as the lover. This act, too, is heavily circumscribed as the story establishes this choice as a desperate means of putting an end to the constant sexual advances by different men. Choosing the overseer gives her protection from men like Dagdu who always threaten to rape her. Hence, the story fixes the dalit mother in a condition of perpetual victimhood.

In other texts where dalit women are seen to be resisting such victimhood, they are shown in a negative light. In The Outcaste, Limbale’s mother, Masamai, gets raped by the upper-caste landlord. After the rape, she is seen as ‘used’, and therefore, is deserted by her husband. Upon realizing that she has been abandoned by her husband, she deliberately chooses to go and live with the upper-caste landlord (who had raped her) as a way of exacting ‘revenge’ on her husband. Her decision to do this becomes a way to challenge her double victimization, that is, by the landlord who sees her as ‘sexually available’ and by the husband who abandons
her after her rape. Limbale, however, feels uncomfortable that he is born of a dalit mother, Masamai, and an upper-caste father. He asks, ‘Why did my mother say yes to the rape which brought me into the world? Why did she put up with the fruit of this illegitimate intercourse for nine months and nine days and allow me to grow in the foetus?’ Even though the textual evidence shows that Masamai got pregnant with Limbale after she chose to go and live with the upper-caste landlord, it is interesting that Limbale interprets this relationship in terms of ‘rape’. For Limbale, therefore, his mother’s sexual choice (which may also be interpreted as a survival technique like the mother in Bagul’s ‘Mother’) is a problem. This representation can be seen in contrast to the mainstream feminist view of sexual choice as agential. When it comes to such dalit representations of dalit women, patriarchal values of morality are internalized. Even though Limbale recognizes his mother’s rape by the upper-caste man in terms of brahmanical patriarchy, the fact that he himself views his mother’s sexual choice as a problem, manifests the patriarchal standards of morality.

The second type of dalit representation of dalit women, as mentioned earlier, is that of victimhood in terms of compromised agency as exemplified by Gautam Ali’s short story, ‘Bazaar’. This story centres on a dalit woman married to an upper-caste man. Due to her poor health, the wife decides to employ a young maid. Upon noticing how her husband ‘had become chattier, and more homebound’ the wife confronts him and he acknowledges that the maid ‘has awakened my sleeping lust’. Angered, the wife fires the maid. But the husband cannot control his sexual urge and starts visiting brothels. To avoid the husband’s visits to prostitutes, the wife employs a poor dalit girl as a housemaid to fulfil the husband’s sexual demands. The story narrates how the wife ‘affectionately tidied the maid’s dishevelled look with scented soap and shampoo … dressed her in a new form and thus made her presentable’. After the night, the ‘dishevelled’ maid leaves, the wife once again starts her search for a young maid.
‘Bazaar’ has been seen by dalit critics as a story of ‘sexploitation’ where ‘underprivileged women ... become soft targets for the sexual gratification of the social elite’. The story, however, is much more than that. ‘Bazaar’ shows two kinds of dalit women: one who is married to an upper-caste man and employed in an urban white-collar job, and another who is poor and comes from a rural area to serve as a maid. Despite her economic affluence the dalit wife subscribes to patriarchy when she employs the dalit girl to fulfill her upper-caste husband’s sexual demands. The wife accepts brahmanical patriarchy in her attempt to become the ‘ideal wife’ and presumably to protect her marriage as well. Moreover, by employing a dalit girl as the maid, she reproduces casteist and sexist assumption of upper-caste men’s sexual access to dalit women. The story ultimately evokes sympathy in the readers by highlighting the victimhood of the maid whose voice is never heard, as well as the wife who remains a victim of patriarchy. In this way, the wife exemplifies constrained agency.

Dalit feminist analyses of all these texts reveal the limitations in mainstream Indian feminist and Dalit Politics’ representation of dalit women which subsume dalit women under the generic rubric of caste (as seen in Dalit Politics’ representation of the Khairlanji massacre) and focus exclusively on the victimization of dalit women (as seen in dalit writings), and define agency through the exercise of choice with no reference to caste-specific constraints (as seen in mainstream feminist representations of The Dirty Picture and the Mumbai dance bar ban issue). It is in light of these gaps in mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics’ representations of dalit women that the next section explores the contours of Dalit Feminism’s representation.

DALIT FEMINISM’S REPRESENTATION

A dalit feminist representation of dalit women recognizes the specificity of dalit women as a category distinct from both
upper-caste Indian women and dalit men. Through its focus on this specificity, such representation provides a redefinition of the mainstream feminist concept of agency in terms of negotiation rather than free choice. I analyse the documentary *Kakkoos* to explore these points.

*Kakkoos* (2017), directed by Divya Bharathi, represents the specificity of dalit women’s intersectional identity. Literally meaning toilet, *Kakkoos* captures the continuation of manual scavenging despite its legal abolition in 2013. Focusing on the dalit Arundhathiyar community in Tamil Nadu, *Kakkoos* explains how manual scavenging in the modern urban setting perpetuates caste-based stigma and untouchability by relegating dalit people to the job of manual scavengers. On its release, the documentary ‘shook’ the viewers with its blatant display of dirty toilets and septic tanks. According to Bezwada Wilson, the national convener of the Safai Karmachari Andolan and winner of Ramon Magsaysay Award, ‘This documentary is a 360-degree picturisation of the lives of sanitation workers in our country. There is no angle that has not been covered.’ The media responded to the documentary positively praising it for exposing the government’s ‘dirty untruth’ that manual scavenging does not exist.

Through a series of disturbing scenes showing septic tanks, garbage bins, dry latrines full of excreta, *Kakkoos* uses a shock element to emphasize the discrimination of dalits in urban sectors. Even though, as the documentary points out, machines have been invented to mechanically clean drains and septic tanks, the state refuses to approve their purchase due to high cost estimations. The documentary hence captures a society where money is valued more than a dalit’s life.

However, in its portrayal of the functioning of caste in contemporary society, *Kakkoos* does not represent the dalit community as a single category. Instead, the documentary represents dalit women specifically to highlight gender relations within the dalit community through the work of manual scavenging. Interestingly,
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though the popular media reviews of the documentary recognize this presence of dalit women, it is only in terms of their role as manual scavengers among other dalits. The director, Divya Bharathi, however, makes her intention to represent dalit women clear as she says, ‘We [not only]… need to explain more about caste discrimination, where it comes from and how it manifests itself…. We [also] need to understand how women are being exploited every day while being made to do this work.’ The documentary, through its recognition that dalit women’s manual scavenging experience is different from that of dalit men, exemplifies an intersectional analysis of caste-class-gender. This analysis of gendered difference within the dalit community makes Kakkoos intra-categorical in its intersectional representation.

To understand how labour is gendered in sanitation work, it is important to begin with the definition of manual scavenging. The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, defines ‘manual scavenger’ as:

A person engaged or employed … by an individual or a local authority or an agency or a contractor, for manually cleaning, carrying, disposing of, or otherwise handling in any manner, human excreta in an insanitary latrine or in an open drain or pit into which the human excreta from the insanitary latrines is disposed of, or on a railway track or in such other spaces or premises.

An ‘insanitary latrine’ is defined as ‘a latrine which requires human excreta to be cleaned or otherwise handled manually, either in situ, or in an open drain or pit into which the excreta is discharged or flushed out, before the excreta fully decomposes in such manner as may be prescribed’. This definition is riddled with legal terminological loopholes wherein ‘a person engaged or employed to clean excreta with the help of such devices and using such protective gear … shall not be deemed to be a “manual scavenger”’. The portrayal of manual scavenging in Kakkoos, however, goes beyond this legal definition to include a broad
spectrum of work ranging from cleaning garbage, to drains, railway lines, septic tanks, and dry latrines.

This expanded definition links manual scavenging to stigma and violence. According to Bezwada Wilson, the leader of Safai Karamchari Andolan, ‘The mindset of the society is such that, we’re of the opinion that no matter how degrading the job is, as long as someone’s getting paid, it shouldn’t be a matter of concern.’ Wilson emphasizes that this kind of mindset of claiming that access to paid labour is progress from untouchability, not only attempts to erase the reality of caste discrimination, but also invisibilizes the stigma attached to certain kinds of labour such as manual scavenging. With reference to stigma and labour, Mary E. John maintains that ‘a labour theory of value stands in conflict with a caste structured society wherein public labour represents stigma and humiliation’. The influence of the caste system on the division of labour (in the sense of which person belonging to which caste does what kind of labour) shows that labour cannot be understood merely in terms of its value. Owing to the notion of untouchability that pervades the stratification of labour among different castes, different kinds of work done by different castes get associated with purity or pollution. To invoke Anupama Rao, it is necessary to critique ‘labour as exploitation and caste as degradation’. In her discussion on the problems of relating caste with class, Rao, like Ambedkar, sees stigma as the reason due to which dalit labour cannot be valorized as value-producing labour. To explicate her point she refers to Ambedkar’s interpretation of caste as a ‘body history’ where he addresses the dehumanizing practices of untouchability keeping in forefront ‘the “difference” of caste, and the specificity of its social experience’. In Kakkoos, the manual scavengers argue that due to their caste identity, they are assigned only those kinds of work that are considered polluted. As a result, stigma cannot be separated from the body. Moreover, working in unsafe conditions results in failure of their health and, in a lot of cases, death. Manual scavenging therefore has to be understood
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in a complex manner vis-à-vis its relation to the body. Mary E. John further adds that this body is always sexed. She writes, ‘If there is a distinctive quality to the degradations of (male) dalit labour, this quality attains a new register when the labouring body is that of a dalit woman.’ According to John, it is the gendered experience of labour that creates the difference between dalit men and dalit women.

*Kakkoos* points out that from within the numerous kinds of sanitation work dalit women are most often given the work of collecting roadside garbage (which often includes human excreta) and cleaning dry latrines (also defined by the 2013 Act as ‘insanitary latrine’) used by both men and women. While manual scavenging remains dangerous for all manual scavengers (as we can see through the many septic tank deaths mentioned in the documentary), the specific types of scavenging work given to dalit women exposes them to different kinds of physical and sexual dangers. Dalit women in *Kakkoos* state how they are sexually harassed by upper-caste supervisors who ask them to become their mistresses. *Kakkoos* also shows that working at night and early morning in deserted areas makes dalit women easy prey to sexual assaults. Moreover, they face severe physical consequences as some of them have to undergo hysterectomies due to lifting of heavy bags full of garbage. Manual scavenging work thus exposes dalit women to severe sexual and reproductive violence. This gender-specific experience is what differentiates the condition of dalit women from dalit men employed in manual scavenging. As mentioned earlier, the idea of *difference* becomes crucial in Dalit Feminism to highlight the uniqueness of dalit women’s experience in intersectional terms. *Kakkoos* exemplifies this concept through its portrayal of the difference in dalit women’s gendered experience of caste-based labour.

This difference in the experience of labour between dalit men and dalit women is visible not only in the public space, but also in the domestic sphere. In *Kakkoos*, dalit women narrate that after
they return from work, their children do not want to touch them because of the stink and dirt. The nature of work that dalit women are involved in thus affects their interpersonal relationships within the family with its accompanying psychological consequences. The experience of woman as a mother has unique psychological implications that men do not experience. The absence of any stigmatizing experience within the family for male manual scavengers shows that this problem is experienced only by dalit women and also highlights the patriarchal setting of the family.

*Kakkoos* thus shows that violence perpetuated through caste-based labour, such as manual scavenging, is gendered. And here violence is understood in terms of its physical as well as emotional consequences. While the physical violence affects dalit women through experiences of sexual harassment and the destruction of reproductive abilities, the emotional violence permeates the domestic sphere due to gendered roles within the family. Manual scavenging therefore needs to be viewed as creating different situations for dalit men and women. In its representation of dalit women, *Kakkoos* achieves this understanding through its intra-categorical intersectional representation that focuses on gender specificity within casteist labour.

CONCLUSION

Dalit feminist representation recognizes the intersectionality of caste and gender in creating specific situations for dalit women, and problematizes the notion of agency and victimhood. The dalit feminist lens shows that ‘agency’, as understood in mainstream Indian Feminism, is not similarly applicable to dalit women. Prominent dalit representations of dalit women, on the other hand, continue to inform the identities of dalit women in terms of victimhood. What we see of ‘dalit women’ are the results of representations, which in turn create specific ideas and stereotypes about them. To recall Hall, representation reveals the complex
relation between power and knowledge. Dalit women’s representations highlight how, most often, dalit women are co-opted within the categories ‘women’ and ‘dalit’ to promote anti-patriarchal and anti-caste fronts respectively. Representations of dalit women, in this way, are often stereotyped. But does this mean that dalit women are only represented, or representable, as victims? Let us turn to the exploration of the concept of agency in Dalit Feminism in its myriad ways of understanding (Chapter 4).

NOTES

3 Hall, ‘The Work of Representation’ (1997) lists three approaches to representation: reflective or mimetic, intentional and constructionist. He defines the reflective approach to representation being similar as mimesis or mirroring wherein language claims to refer to an object as it is. This imitative quality of language claims authenticity of representation and rests, as Hall claims, completely on the representer. By naming a rose ‘a rose’, it is the representer who claims the authority over representation because the represented, viz. the rose, cannot speak for itself/verify whether it is a rose or not. He defines the intentional approach as that where ‘it is the speaker, the author, who imposes his or her unique meaning on the world through the language’ (25). This kind of approach holds that representation is completely controlled and imposed by the representer. Consequently, it leaves the reader/spectator without any freedom to interpret the object of representation. Hall negates both approaches on the grounds that both the approaches presume supreme authority—reflective approach in claiming to be authentically representing an object, and intentional approach in claiming an imposed representation to be the truest. Hall argues that language operates in a dialectical model—through the speaker and the reader/listener. Imposing hierarchy between speaker and listener therefore is seen as futile by Hall.
5 Ibid.: 6.
6 Sunder Rajan, Real and Imagined Women: 5.

Visvanathan, ‘The Dirty Picture’.


Visvanathan, ‘The Dirty Picture’.

FnF Correspondent, ‘A Feminist’s Delight’.

Banan, ‘Get the (Dirty) Picture’ (2012).

Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.: part 1 (2).

Ibid.: part 1 (2).


Ibid.: 1291.

Ibid.: 1282.

Ibid.: 1283.


Agnes, ‘Hypocritical Morality’.

Kapoor, Statement of Women’s Groups in Mumbai and from all over India (2005).


Agnes, ‘Hypocritical Morality.

Kunda, ‘Dance Bars Ban Debate’: 1.

Pandit, ‘Gendered Subaltern Sexuality and the State’: 36.


Ibid.: 2.


Rege, Against the Madness of Manu (2013): 16.


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48 Chakravarti, Gendering Caste: 12.
50 Chakravarti, Gendering Caste: 13.
51 The Hindu, ‘Material Issues’ (2016).
53 G. Aloysius, Mangubhai and Lee, ‘Dalit Women Speak Out: Violence against Dalit Women in India’ (2006): 9. They narrate an event where dominant caste perpetrators gang raped 15-year-old Kiran Rani from Kanpur district, Uttar Pradesh in 2001. When the lower caste dalit girl’s family approached the police, the Station Officer said, ‘However much I try to help you people, the Thakurs of Tilakpur have made all this [gang rape] their business and habit. They will not be stopped.’ Ibid.: 17.
54 The opposite spectrum of argument gets highlighted in the Bhanwari Devi gang rape in 1992 which led to the Vishakha judgment (1997) on women’s sexual harassment at the workplace (see Introduction, n 3). The mainstream feminist focus on gender erased the caste identity of Bhanwari Devi. A dalit feminist analysis would reveal that in a casteist society ruled by norms of Brahmanism, Bhanwari’s prevention of child marriage was seen as a daring act. Her public rape, therefore, served as a means to assert the caste supremacy of the upper-caste rapists and also the emasculation of her husband, who despite being present at the scene, could not protect his wife. The Bhanwari Devi case, therefore, becomes the classic example of mainstream feminist appropriation as ‘sexual atrocity’ at the cost of caste. See Rowena, ‘The Sexual Harassment Discourse’ (2017), and Geetha, ‘Sexual Harassment and Elusive Justice’ (2017b).
55 Rege, Against the Madness of Manu: 20.
56 Rao, Gender and Caste: 6.
58 Ananya, ‘Chalo Udupi’ (2016).
59 Rao, Gender and Caste: 5.
60 For example, short stories such as Abimani’s ‘Ailment’, A. Vincent Raj’s ‘Clutching the End of My Saree’, Madduri Nageshbabu’s ‘Pariah Mother’, Waman Nimbalkar’s ‘Mother’, C. Ayyappan’s ‘Madness’, Manoranjan Barman’s ‘Shabori’, and so on). Whether it is a portrayal of dalit women as manual scavengers (‘Ailment’), or foregrounding internal patriarchy (‘Madness’), or representing a dalit woman as a mother (‘Mother’, ‘Pariah
Mother’, ‘Shabori’, ‘Clutching the End of My Saree’), victimhood remains the parameter for dalit women’s representation in most dalit men’s literary works.

62 Ibid.: 216.
63 Ibid.: 212.
64 In her brilliant reading of Bagul’s short story, Susie Tharu points at the ‘impossibility’ of the mother in becoming a subject. She notes that when it comes to the portrayals of widows as central characters, there is a stark contrast between those belonging to upper and lower castes. Thus, Tharu reads, an upper-caste twenty-first century widow, modern and economically well-off, is seen as struggling with the puritanical values of her predecessors, while, for the lower-caste widow mother, the issues are more materialistic, raw and violent. Tharu argues that in feminist discourse, identification of caste/class based division is important as ‘agency’ is not a linear process—it functions differently for different groups of women. See Tharu, ‘The Impossible Subject’ (1996): 1314–15. Tharu’s argument, therefore, falls in line with my claim that ‘agency’ needs to be re-configured in the lines of caste (a concept that I elaborate in Chapter 4).

66 Ibid.: 37.
67 The term ‘dalit representation’ here refers specifically to those representations that foreground Dalit Politics and not dalit feminist politics.
69 Ibid.: 63.
71 Rajendran, ‘Staple Your Eyes If You Must’ (2017).
74 Kolappan, ‘The Camera Exposes a Dirty Untruth’ (2017); Rajendran, ‘Staple Your Eyes If You Must’.
75 Govindarajan, ‘Kakkoos: Documentary Reveals the Brutal Reality’.
77 Ibid.: 2.
78 Ibid.: 3.
82 Ibid.: 24.
But how did you begin to write? And when did you get time to write—you had to sit at the counter and take care of things?

Oh, that’s a long story indeed! Look, I reached the shop at nine in the morning, after which my husband would leave the shop and go to buy things that we required. He used to return only around four o’clock. That gave me plenty of time. I began to write, putting into words the suffering of my community... Writing was a difficult task. I had to take great care that nobody saw me writing...

Why did you have to hide your writing?

Firstly, because of my husband. He was a good man but like all the men of his time and generation, he considered a woman to be an inferior being... .

You started writing when you were thirty or so, but by the time you published, twenty years had gone by. Did you keep your writing hidden for twenty years?

(Smiles) Well, I had to. So I hid everything I wrote in the most ignored and dusty corners... . I used to be scared of both my son and my husband, scared of their reaction... . Then it so happened that Maxine Berntson [US research scholar on dalits] came to stay in Phaltan.... She liked
what I had written. Then she talked to Vidya Bal who was working as the editor of the women’s magazine *Stree*. And so finally, it was serially printed in *Stree*.¹

This is an extract from an interview with Baby Kamble by Maya Pandit which is added as an appendix to *The Prisons We Broke*. Here Kamble challenges dual patriarchies and asserts identity in terms of solidarity (see Chapter 2). Kamble also recognizes that collective resistance is not the only way to achieve agency. As visible in the conversation quoted above, Kamble’s own emergence as a writer was accompanied by her personal struggle against her husband’s ignorance. She had to ‘hide’ the pages from her family. In fact, she had to wait for twenty years before her writings saw the light of the day. What this conversation reveals is Kamble’s manoeuvring through the complexities of life to finally emerge victorious. Through her personal struggle we see that for a dalit woman, survival is an utmost concern. Interestingly, despite being recognized for her work within the dalit community and in her in-laws’ house,² she faces an obstacle in the form of her husband who considers her ‘inferior’. In such conditions, Kamble has to navigate her ways to survive and to keep her writings alive. Her efforts see ultimate fruition in the publication of her writings. What her experience reveals is an example of agency through negotiation. This recognition is an important component of Dalit Feminism’s intersectional standpoint.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Dalit Feminism’s theoretical framework can be theorized as an ‘intersectional standpoint’. It begins with viewing caste and gender as mutually intersecting. This intersectional perspective also makes it possible to bring in its intersectional purview other systems, such as class, community, and so on. The simultaneity and mutually constitutive intersection of these structures is used to see how knowledge about monolithic categories and concepts as developed by mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics gets transformed. As an ‘intersectional standpoint’, Dalit Feminism transforms knowledge about caste and
gender through two important conceptual interventions: negotiation as a form of agency, and solidarity as a mode of resistance.

NEGOTIATION

Dalit Feminism defines agency not only through active opposition but also through negotiation. In this way, Dalit Feminism conceptually moves out of and challenges the binary of resistance and victimhood; a binary that often constitutes the core of emancipatory politics as articulated by mainstream Indian Feminism. Negotiation helps reframe the concept of agency as survival. Dalit feminist standpoint recognizes that when intersecting systems of oppression constrict opposition, it is through negotiation that dalit women assert their agency as a means of survival. This recognition necessitates a transformation of the stereotypical representations of dalit women as victims as well as the characteristics that define such victimhood.

Dalit feminist representation problematizes representations of dalit women as victims (seen predominantly in dalit writings) and in terms of choice-based agency (proclaimed by mainstream Indian Feminism) by focusing on negotiation for survival as an important form of agency. According to Lois McNay, understanding agency as resistance to victimhood has the danger of fixing agency only as oppositional resistance. McNay claims that such opposition of victimhood and agency ‘offers only a partial account of agency because it remains within an essentially negative understanding of subject formation’ and acknowledges agency ‘mainly through the residual categories of resistance to, or the dislocation of, dominant norms’. Martha Nussbaum also questions the conceptualization of agency and victimhood in terms of binary opposition. According to Nussbaum,

Agency and victimhood are not incompatible …. In American society today … [we] encounter this contrast when social welfare
programs are debated: it is said that to give people various forms of social support is to treat them as victims of life’s ills, rather than to respect them as agents, capable of working to better their own lot.⁴

Nussbaum’s argument challenges the mutually exclusive opposition between an object (who is always victimized) and the subject (one who has the capacity to struggle and survive).

In the context of studies conducted on dalit women in Tamil Nadu, V. Geetha observes that exclusive focus on victimhood renders rejection and complete defiance as the only ways to achieve agency. She writes:

There are several campaigns that are constantly under way to encourage [dalit women to take part] … in local political life, and many stories of struggle and success have been recorded. Yet this roster of discrimination and protest, resistance and success seldom enables a discussion of how female dalit political subjectivity is constituted and played out. There are rich details to be had from particular studies of how [dalit] women experience sexual tension, abuse, how they endure humiliation, and how they work through each of these, the networks of support they build, the criss-crossing alliances that they forge, with other caste women, or with local political male leaders. But this information has not been mined for an argument about politics, caste and gender that would help feminists re-think these categories. Instead, what is continuously voiced is a register of angry lament and defiance, a voicing of experience, the rawness of which is called upon to attest to its truth.⁵

As V. Geetha points out, a dalit feminist understanding of agency would not merely reproduce instances of victimization and angry retaliations, but would examine how female ‘dalit political subjectivity is constituted and played out’. By bringing out different ways of coping with victimhood, negotiation demolishes the dichotomy between victimhood and agency.
Exercising Agency

Negotiation as a criterion to depict dalit feminist agential representation is explicated through the character of Sanichari in Mahasweta Devi’s short story, ‘Rudali’. Mostly read as a feminist text exploring economic empowerment of women, Mahasweta Devi’s ‘Rudali’ shows an understanding of how caste-gender-class operate simultaneously. ‘Rudali’ narrates the struggles of Sanichari, a dalit woman whose perpetual poverty, coupled with deaths of her family members, has literally caused her tears to dry up. The story tells how at the time of the death of her mother-in-law she is so busy making funeral arrangements that ‘there was no time to cry’. Then when her husband died, the ‘government officers didn’t give her any time to shed tears’ because they burnt the corpses too quickly fearing outbreak of epidemic; and at the time of her son’s death she was so ‘stunned’ at the turn of events that she could not cry. Added to this is her mounting debt to the landlord. The story, however, goes beyond being a mere dirge to Sanichari’s sad life to depict her emergence as a victor wherein she converts grief into a profession by becoming a rudali (professional mourner). This is where the negotiatory aspect of agency comes into focus.

Sanichari assumes mastery over the profession of rudalis as she imparts her knowledge to the young rudalis-to-be. Her agency lies in transforming her personal grief into profitable work. This becomes clear in the way the rudalis classify their work:

Just for wailing, one kind of rate. Wailing and rolling on the ground, five rupees one sikka. Wailing, rolling on the ground and beating one’s head, five rupees two sikkas. Wailing and beating one’s breast, accompanying the corpse to the cremation ground, rolling around on the ground there—for that the charge is six rupees.

Here Sanichari and her group do not actively resist the system. Rather they manipulate their position within the system to make it favourable for themselves. It is in this transformative act of
turning victimhood into a source of profit that their agency can be traced.

‘Rudali’ therefore complicates the concept of agency through oppositional choice by invoking agency through negotiation. Unlike mainstream feminist interpretation of women’s exercise of choice in oppositional terms as resistance to patriarchy with respect to labour and sex (as seen through *The Dirty Picture* and the Mumbai dance bar ban issue, see Chapter 3), in ‘Rudali,’ Mahasweta Devi clearly shows that Sanichari has no choice but to opt for this profession. Deprived of all economic and emotional support, she becomes a mourner. But it is here that negotiation becomes important. Sanichari exercises agency not through active resistance but by negotiating her way to survival. Sanichari does not remain a victim of patriarchy. She, in fact, encourages young dalit girls to leave prostitution and become rudalis. The job of a professional mourner becomes an avenue to challenge the brahmanical patriarchal practice of the devadasi system. Sanichari’s act of professionalizing mourning and thereby gaining agency through negotiation is similar to Dalwai’s interpretation of the Mumbai dance bar ban issue. In response to Pandit’s preservationist claim (see Chapter 3) Dalwai argues that in banning bar dancing, the ‘real objection was not to men accessing sexuality of these women, but to men having to *pay for it*’. She substantiates this claim by noting that even though the government used the idea of morality to ban bar dancing, it did not ban prostitution. Therefore, this ban reflected brahmanical patriarchal attitude of free access to dalit women’s sexuality. Dalwai argues that by redeploying their ‘hereditary skills’ of public dancing to suit the new market of the dance bars, the dalit bar girls, in fact, gain scope to earn money which ‘in turn, offers possibilities of freedom from poverty and sex work, a chance at a middle-class lifestyle and opportunities of education for the next generation’. Dalwai, therefore, talks about using a caste-based skill for economic independence. In the process, she recovers ‘lower-caste women’s
agency from the discourse around the dance bars that attach women-as-victims narrative to a context which allows for much more complexity and upward and outward mobility for lower-caste women’. A dalit feminist representation therefore does not limit dalit woman only to oppositional choice or complicit victimhood, but provides scope for agency through negotiation.

**SOLIDARITY**

Another concept that emerges out of the framework of Dalit Feminism’s intersectional standpoint is the notion of solidarity. Here I would like to distinguish between the idea of the collective and the concept of solidarity. The notion of collective is linked with, but not necessarily identical to, solidarity. The importance of the collective has been emphasized repeatedly by dalit women’s autobiographies as well as dalit women activists. This collective, however, remains at the level of asserting identity-based community association. Recovering these kinds of collectives becomes the initial step to bring out dalit women’s voices. But it is when this idea of the collective goes from being rooted in shared experience to a political understanding of the power dynamics that structure these experiences that the dalit feminist concept of solidarity emerges.

This notion of solidarity may be understood in terms of Black Feminism and Transnational Feminism as articulated by bell hooks and Chandra Talpade Mohanty respectively. Redefining ‘sisterhood’ in terms of solidarity, bell hooks argues that the concept of sisterhood as evoked by mainstream feminists ‘was based on the idea of common oppression’ which viewed male domination as the only category of oppression. hooks points out that imposing commonality in oppression reduces the scope of feminist endeavour in aiming for a larger social justice as this universality disguises ‘the true nature of women’s varied and complex social reality’ where women are ‘divided by sexist attitudes, racism, class
privilege, and a host of other prejudices’. Moreover, this commonality defines women as victims of patriarchy which prevents an analysis of sexist ideology that prevails among women. hooks adds, ‘Identifying as “victims” [white feminists] could abdicate responsibility for their role in the maintenance and perpetuation of sexism, racism, and classism, which they did by insisting that only men were the enemy. They did not acknowledge and confront the enemy within.’ hooks notes that ‘political solidarity among women’ needs to redefine the terms of solidarity. Thus, instead of bonding ‘on the basis of shared victimization or in response to a false sense of common enemy, we can bond on the basis of our political commitment to a feminist movement that aims to end sexist oppression’. hooks, therefore, conceptualizes sisterhood as a ‘revolutionary accomplishment’ that women ‘work and struggle to obtain’. Chandra Talpade Mohanty follows the same line of argument as she writes,

I define solidarity in terms of mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities. Rather than assuming an enforced commonality of oppression, the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have chosen to work and fight together. Diversity and difference are central values here—to be acknowledged and respected, not erased in the building of alliances.

Mohanty notes that rather than seeing Third World and Western Feminisms as oppositional in a way that precludes the possibility of solidarity between them, she believes that the particularity of the local illuminates the universal. Her position calls for an intervention in ‘White Feminism’ with the aim to build a ‘non-colonizing feminist solidarity across borders’. Solidarity politics therefore emerges as a conscious position that recognizes difference, builds alliance across these differences without erasing/
ignoring their power politics, and then collectively struggles towards a common goal.

One example of such solidarity may be seen in the way the Dalit Panthers defined the term ‘dalit’ as ‘Members of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion’. However, despite this listing of many categories, the Dalit Panthers privileged caste as the category of analysis. Dalit feminist standpoint, on the other hand, recognizes the intersection of these categories and builds solidarity without erasing the differences.

Solidarity has appeared in Dalit Feminism both as a theory and a praxis. In *We Also Made History*, writing the history of Ambedkarite movements along with the narratives of dalit women who participated in those movements provides an alternative epistemology from the perspective of dalit women. The process of gathering information from dalit women activists helps build a network of ‘affection, friendship, patience and a sense of solidarity’. With a similar agenda in mind, *We Were Making History* by Stree Shakti Sanghatana, provides a dalit feminist critique of the Telangana Peasants’ revolt. Thus we read Sugunamma writing how the Communist Party, despite allowing women’s entry, never took up women’s issues. The double standards of the Party is further revealed by Narasamamma who mentions how women were not allowed to participate in the guerrilla raids because of the assumption that they are physically inferior, and how women were continuously suspected of destroying the morale of the Party by indulging in sexual affairs. Kamalamma points that the Party was also inattentive towards preventing unwanted childbirth, as a result of which they had to often abandon the newborn children under the orders of Party leaders. *We Were Making History* provides this much needed integration of caste and gender perspective where it re-centres the focus on sexuality and reproduction, family and political life, public and private spheres. Collective
utterance and solidarity, therefore, become useful in portraying Dalit Feminism as an interventionist epistemology that also produces alternative knowledge.\(^{27}\)

The concept of solidarity gets reflected in Dalit Feminism in the way it builds affinity without erasing differences. This means, often going beyond the collective consisting of dalit women and incorporating others. This aspect of dalit feminist standpoint is evident in works such as Bama’s *Sangati* (2005) and Gogu Shyamala’s *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...* (2012). Bama’s *Sangati* has been highly appreciated for its feminist take on the ‘double oppression’ of dalit women through its identification of the patriarchy in dalit communities\(^{28}\) and recovery of dalit women as agents rather than mute victims.\(^ {29}\) This agency is seen through the formulation of dalit women’s collective. In *Sangati* this aspect is seen in an episode after the rape of Mariamma. In order to hide his attempted rape of Mariamma, the upper-caste landlord blames her for having an affair with a dalit boy, Manikkam, thereby presenting her as a ‘whore’. As a result, the panchayat, which includes dalit men, publicly humiliates Mariamma. While the men in the panchayat (including Mariamma’s father) blame her for having an affair, it is the group of dalit women who speak up in support of Mariamma.\(^ {30}\) They not only point at the injustice meted out to Mariamma, but also highlight the fact that both the upper-caste landlord and the dalit boy, Manikkam, go unscathed.\(^ {31}\) These women consciously challenge brahmanical and dalit patriarchies which respectively ascribe impurity to a dalit women and hold only the dalit woman guilty of having an affair. These women, therefore, stand in sisterhood to resist both the patriarchies. The power of this collective is mentioned by Bama in the introduction to *Sangati* where she writes that these dalit women, despite being oppressed ‘by patriarchy, government, caste, and religion’ have ‘the courage to break the shackles of authority, to propel themselves upwards, to roar (their defiance) … [and] to make fun of the class in power that oppressed them’.\(^ {32}\)
Interpreted through a dalit feminist lens, this idea of the collective exemplifies the concept of political solidarity based on an intersectional standpoint.

This, however, is not the only way in which Dalit Feminism conceptualizes the collective. While in Sangati dalit women join in solidarity based on their political understanding of how dalit women are objectified by casteist patriarchy, in Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But... solidarity is seen to be operative across genders. Gogu Shyamala’s collection of short stories has gained critical recognition for its portrayal of dalit life and culture in a small village in Andhra Pradesh. It presents a varied dalit life-world by focusing almost equally on the issues faced by both dalit men and women. Thus we see dalit men being oppressed by upper-caste landlords (‘Raw Wound’), dalit women successfully resisting sexual advances of an upper-caste landlord (‘Tataki Wins Again’), a dalit woman’s oppression by her husband (‘Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...’), dalit women resisting the taunts made by dalit men (‘Jambava’s Lineage’), dalit men supporting a dalit woman during her demand to own land (‘But Why Shouldn’t the Baindla Woman Ask for Her Land?’), the caste discrimination a dalit boy faces in school (‘Obstacle Race’), a dalit father’s efforts to save his daughter from becoming a jogini (‘Raw Wound’), and so on.

Although the book is primarily praised for a feminist take on domestic violence in the dalit community, especially in the first titular story, Shyamala argues that her intention was never to show the dalit man in poor light. For her, a dalit feminist position is not premised upon an opposition between dalit men as oppressors and dalit women as the oppressed. Rather her dalit feminist standpoint becomes evident through her representation of how caste is so enmeshed within the public and the private that it cannot be viewed as external to gender. This is evident in her stories wherein members of a dalit community, both men and women not only work together but also collectively oppose the caste system
with an awareness of its gendered aspect. As a result her stories do not present Dalit Feminism as a politics exclusive to dalit women; instead her dalit feminist standpoint creates solidarity between men and women in the fight against casteist sexism.

Politics built through a collective working towards the same agenda is also portrayed in Turup (2017), a film by Ektara Collective. The Collective mentions that their films are consciously political as they choose to stay away from scripted dramatization. Rather than the play of emotions, they want to convey their propaganda. That is why their actors and advisors belong to the groups on which these stories are based.36

The film Turup shows how people move, like pawns in a board of chess, controlled by the multiple structures caste, gender and religion. The story largely follows the relationship between a dalit girl and a Muslim man, the right-wing political party’s opposition to it, and the ultimate victory of the couple in a legal battle. Turup therefore brings forth the issue of inter-caste, inter-religious marriage and its conflict with Brahmanism. The film shows how the Hindutva party, which otherwise avoids the touch of dalits, tries to bring dalits within the ‘Hindu’ fold so as to impose brahmanical ideals of marriage on dalits and prevent the dalit girl from marrying a Muslim boy. Thus we see the Hindutva party sticking posters in dalit villages about how ‘Hindu’ girls should all be like the upper-caste goddesses, Saraswati and Lakshmi, and also manipulating a dalit boy, Deepak, into taking up the role as the patriarch and marry off his sister, Lata, who incidentally is also in love with another Muslim boy, Majid. Brahmanism therefore is shown as operating through control on dalit women’s sexuality. The film therefore recognizes the interlink between caste, gender and religion and sees brahmanical patriarchy as the specific problem.

What becomes the most memorable aspect of the film is how a group of women stand in solidarity in support of the couple. The catalyst of this collective is Monica, an elderly dalit woman
who works as a maid in an upper-caste household. Monica’s choice to live as an unmarried dalit woman living with another dalit woman, her observations on family and companionship demolishes the aura of sacrosanctity, inevitability and heteronormativity surrounding marriage and family. Monica argues that family is not relational but rather one that is created through camaraderie. And it is this realization that leads Monica to give shelter to the couple ostracized by Hindutva party. In the process she also invites, Neelima, the upper-caste landlady who used to be a journalist, to be a part of this struggle. Neelima here is seen as standing with dalit women rather than imposing her views on them. In fact, it is Monica who asks Neelima to take the interview of the dalit girl and Purnima, Monica’s partner, decides when it should be published. Neelima, therefore, is not presented as narrating an assumed narrative or taking up a patronising attitude. In the way the film shows the possibility of building solidarity based on a common goal.

The film, however, also highlights the complications that arise while forging solidarity across castes and classes. The film shows that even after solidarity is created it is not always easy to achieve the desired solution. This becomes clear in the newspaper report written by Neelima. The title of the report reads: ‘Bhopal Love Jihad “Victim” asserts herself, says, “I have come on my own will”.’ On the one hand, the allusion to Love Jihad places the issue within the Hindutva religious-sexist context and reveals that it is a specific brahmanical attempt to prevent an inter-religious marriage. On the other hand, by putting ‘victim’ within quotes, the report challenges the mainstream representation of the girl as a helpless target kidnapped by a Muslim boy (as claimed by other newspaper reports). Its use of the term ‘asserts’ shows the girl’s agency. Interestingly, however, in both cases the issue is portrayed as a community-gender issue. The factor of the girl being ‘dalit’ does not feature in the report. This failure can be seen as indicative of the complexity of caste/gender/religion and the difficulty to overcome the oppression caused by this multiplicity. Instead of
viewing the film as somewhat of a failure in this specific aspect, I value it for the problematic it highlights. The film forces us to look at the utopic conception of ‘solidarity’ with suspicion. By portraying a real-life scenario, *Turup* shows that it is a long way to build a collective wherein intra-categorical hierarchies are identified and countered. The importance of the film, then, is not in achieving a firm resolution. Rather, it is in the recognition of differences and intersections that go into building a collective opposition that the premise of the film needs to be understood.

CONCLUSION

Understood in conceptual terms, dalit feminist agency therefore may be explored in texts that are not consciously engaged with a dalit feminist politics. For example, in *The Outcaste*, Limbale’s mother, Masamai, exercises agency by choosing to live with the upper-caste landlord. Even though the autobiography is neither centred on the mother, nor does it emphasize/accept the mother’s choice, through a dalit feminist lens we can read the mother as an agential figure. However, it is important to remember that the mother’s ‘choice’ is negotiatory. After being raped by an upper-caste landlord she is deserted by her husband and left alone. The mother chooses to live with the upper-caste landlord out of survival instincts. Her negotiation can be contrasted to Limbale’s grandmother, Santamai, who lives with Dada, a Muslim man. Unlike Masamai, the issue of survival does not drive Santamai. Her relationship with Dada defies the strict rules of endogamy and defines dalit woman’s agency in terms of choice as well as freedom from male control of female sexuality. Mallika in *The Scar* is also a significant figure in this context. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Gunasekaran sees Mallika’s success as an artist as an example of ‘dalit’ liberation in cultural and economic terms. Gunasekaran, therefore, includes Mallika within the broader category ‘dalit’ wherein dalit women are subsumed and gender
specificity is unrecognized. A dalit feminist analysis of her representation in the text offers a different interpretation. Mallika rejects the dominant brahmanical notion that dalit women’s dancing is only indicative of dalit women’s sexualized availability for public consumption. Her success, both in artistic and economic terms (as argued by Dalwai in relation to the dance bar girls), marks an intervention where dalit women’s dance performance in the public arena is established as a valid form of art. Her resistance to brahmanical and patriarchal notions is further solidified when she identifies herself as a lesbian who is ‘married’ to another girl. Mallika’s homosexuality challenges the normative casteist heteronormative assumptions that a dalit woman’s sexuality is accessible only to men (dalit men in the domestic sphere and higher-caste men in the public sphere) and that marriage is necessarily heterosexual. Mallika’s agency lies in simultaneously challenging the patriarchal rules of procreative heteronormativity and the casteist notions of sexual availability.

Agency through negotiation is also visible in the representation of Kathamuthu’s two wives, Kanagavalli and Nagamani, in The Grip of Change by P. Sivakami. These two wives are interesting figures in the text because they are neither fully victimized, nor do they completely resist the system. They remain within the realm of marital domesticity, but they can be seen to negotiate their way in the household to create a space for themselves. Although neither of them are happy with the situation, they do not suffer in silence as victims. This becomes visible in the way they interrupt Kathamuthu and make sharp remarks:

‘Why do you have to spoil someone’s marriage? Is that good? You’ve hurt his family,’ Kanagavalli stressed the last part for the benefit of Nagamani who had come to the verandah with the hot water. Nagamani directed a scornful look at Kathamuthu.

Quick to take the hint, Kathamuthu rounded on Kanagavalli, ‘Are you here to pass judgement early in the morning? Go inside and get some coffee. Now!’
‘Everyone laughs at the set-up in your home, and here you are trying to teach others. You think you are such a bigshot!’ Kanagavalli went inside, muttering so that he could hear.\(^{38}\)

This shows how Kanagavalli, the elder wife, directs her criticism towards the husband. The wives also join hands in criticizing Kathamuthu. This becomes evident when Thangam comes to Kathamuthu asking for help, Kathamuthu makes a sarcastic remark about how, ‘Thangam’ (literally meaning ‘gold’) is an unsuitable name for a dalit woman who is equivalent to a broomstick.\(^{39}\) To this, Nagamani says, ‘That’s only to be expected of you … The frog asks for trouble with its own voice, doesn’t it? That proverb is one hundred per cent true in your case. Had you not always indulged in cheap jokes at others’ expense, you would have become a member of parliament by now. You never behave with the dignity appropriate for a man of stature.’\(^{40}\) When Kathamuthu retaliates with anger, Kanagavalli tells Nagamani, ‘Come on, let’s go in. We have nothing to do here.’\(^{41}\) The two wives therefore negotiate with patriarchy by creating a sense of camaraderie.

Dalit feminist representation has been exemplified not just by dalit women’s texts, but also writings by non-dalit women and dalit men writers (which are seen in this chapter) which include representations of dalit women that may be read as dalit feminist. Here I make a distinction between the value of speaking out and the politics of representation. Drawing on Stuart Hall, I maintain that the question is not just one of who represent whom, but that of the process and implication of that representation. Sharmila Rege explores this idea in terms of solidarity by emphasizing that the dalit feminist standpoint avoids ‘the narrow alley of direct experience based “authenticity” and narrow “identity politics”,’ and incorporates ‘other groups who must educate themselves about the histories, the preferred social relations and utopias and the struggles of the marginalized’.\(^{42}\) In this formulation, Dalit Feminism as a standpoint is not restricted only to dalit women.
It, in fact, becomes a political platform that creates scope for building solidarity in opposition to systems of intersectional oppression. Seen in terms of a methodology of analysis, such an understanding of dalit feminist standpoint expands the purview of its theoretical framework. Hence, rather than assuming that only dalit women can become dalit feminists, I argue that even a representation by a dalit man or a non-dalit can become dalit feminist. This differentiation between the voice of dalit women and dalit feminist politics is rooted in the politics of positionality wherein I emphasize the process of becoming a dalit woman.

NOTES
2. Ibid.: 140–43.
8. Ibid.: 73–79.
12. Ibid.: 132.
15. Ibid.: 46.
18. Ibid.: 43.
26 Ibid.: 265.
27 One such example of alternative knowledge is the recovery of Ambedkar in Dalit Feminism. Rege (2013) foregrounds Ambedkar’s interpretation of endogamy as the root of caste division and the dicta of *Manusmriti* in sanctifying it. Endogamy, i.e., the process of fixing marriages within castes, justifies the exclusivity of caste groups and ascertains the logic of birth-based origin. Rege elaborates that Ambedkar opts for a ‘feminist take on caste’ by highlighting the issue of ‘parity between marriageable units, men and women, or how to maintain it’ (*Against the Madness of Manu*: 61). And it is in recognizing such regulatory and discriminatory praxis that, Rege observes, Ambedkar’s understanding of caste as a gendered category becomes important. Another example is the reinterpretation of the Mahad Satyagraha. Unlike dalit historiography where this satyagraha is invoked as one of the very first triumphs of dalits as a collective in reclaiming public Pawar and Moon, in *We Also Made History*, emphasize how it was Ambedkar’s speech at the satyagraha that posed a challenge to caste and gender oppression on dalit women (120–23). This point is elaborated in Chapter 5. For more on dalit historiography’s representation of Mahad Satyagraha see, spaces Dangle, *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* (1992): ix–x; Guru, ‘Limits of the Organic Intellectual: a Gramscian Reading of Ambedkar’ (2013): 99.
32 Ibid.: vii.
33 These are short stories from Shyamala’s *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...*
35 Shyamala, *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...*
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now. Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome incarnate. It evoked ancient Rome the way fashion evoked costumes of the past. Fashion has a flair for the topical, no matter where it stirs in the thickets of long ago; it is a tiger’s leap into the past. This jump, however, takes place in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands. The same leap in the open air of history is the dialectical one, which is how Marx understood the revolution. – Walter Benjamin

In the previous chapters we have seen how Dalit Feminism intervenes into dominant knowledge and transforms it through an intersectional standpoint position, challenging mainstream Indian feminist portrayal of dalit women in binaries of victims/agents. It emphasizes on negotiation and solidarity as crucial strategies for dalit women’s survival and their agential assertion (see Chapters 3 and 4). Dalit Feminism, therefore, has emerged as an interventionist epistemology that also produces alternative knowledge. I now explore Dalit Feminism as an epistemology, beginning with
the critical acknowledgement of the power hierarchy latent in given knowledge while being aware that the subjects/texts chosen for analysis are also influenced by power. How is knowledge of/about caste and gender re-conceptualized by dalit feminist standpoint? I consider historiography as the realm of study and explore it in two areas: recovery and reinterpretation.

The benefit of viewing history as a text is that it opens ‘history’ to multiple interpretations. For Benjamin (as quoted above) history that we receive as ‘true’ is the history of the victors. Here Benjamin is clearly referring to the connection between knowledge and power where the information that gets disseminated as ‘knowledge’ is always formulated by the powerful. That is why he emphasizes on shifting our focus to the ‘struggling, oppressed class [which] is the depository of historical knowledge’. Benjamin challenges the idea of homogeneity in and of history. History, here, is viewed as a varied, dynamic concept that is susceptible to change based on time and groups that experience those events. In the Indian context, the Subaltern historiography has emerged as a potent method to challenge dominant history and write alternative history. Posing an epistemological challenge to the elitist narrative of India’s history of independence against British colonialism, the Subaltern theorists focus on the non-elites, such as the peasants and tribal people, as agents in the emergent political and social change. Ranajit Guha, one of the founding members of the Subaltern Studies group, sought to de-elitise the nationalist history by focusing on the Santhal rebellion of 1855. The subaltern viewpoint formulated by Guha questions the interpretation of Santhal rebellion by colonizers and the rejection/appropriation of it by mainstream nationalist discourse. Guha reflects that, while peasant insurgency got translated into an ‘administrative concern’ by colonizers, the elitist nationalism rejected such insurgency as suitable for history because such activity was seen as ‘purely spontaneous’ and without proper leadership. Guha argues,
There is nothing that historiography can do to eliminate such distortion altogether, for the latter is built into its optics. What it can do, however, is to acknowledge such distortion as parametric—as a datum which determines the form of the exercise itself, and to stop pretending that it can fully grasp a past consciousness and reconstitute it. Then and only then might the distance between the latter and the historian’s perception of it be reduced significantly enough to amount to a close approximation which is the best one could hope for.6

The Subaltern perspective, therefore, not only challenges the subject and content of dominant history but also the process of writing history. Through history, the Subaltern perspective presents an epistemological critique to dominant knowledge about nationalism. By treating history as a text, the truth, authority and absoluteness that are usually ascribed to history are challenged. History, then, is presented not as a list of ‘facts,’ irrefutable and beyond any scope of deniability, but as events that are documented by different groups differently. Such approach, termed by Rita Felski as ‘critical historicism’ identifies that ‘history is not a box—that conventional models of historicizing and contextualizing prove deficient in accounting for the transtemporal movement and affective resonance of particular texts’.7 What Benjamin’s idea facilitates is the necessity to view history through the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ wherein history is read against the grain and between the lines.8 This perspective challenges the absolutism of history which, in turn, becomes a useful text to revisit and re-question dominant ideologies and praxis.

It is for this reason that I choose historiography to explicate the relation between knowledge and power. Historiography, that is, the study of how history gets written and what gets written as history, provides a potent ground for epistemological enquiry into the process of knowledge-construction, the selection of events, and the role of the producer of knowledge. Who produces/writes history and from which location? How does the selection
of historical events influence the construction/writing of history? What kind of epistemological challenge does Dalit Feminism pose through an alternative historiography? I conceptualize history as a ‘text’ in the Barthesian context wherein it is defined in perpetual dynamicity. History, then, is opened up for ‘play’ which enables us to see an object from multiple perspectives and helps us generate new knowledge.

I look at dalit feminist historiography to specifically understand how events and issues are revisited and reinterpreted. This raises question about how and what kind of knowledge is generated by dalit, mainstream feminist and dalit feminist historiographies and what are their implications? However, since the standpoint project does not merely stop at identifying the instances of forced silencing but investigates the process of it, I also look at reinterpretations of dalit and mainstream feminist theorization from the dalit feminist standpoint. Since recovery and reinterpretation are two methods that get utilized by all oppositional historiographies, my aim here is to explore the ways in which the implementation of these two methods distinguishes dalit feminist historiography from dalit historiography and mainstream Indian feminist historiography.

As mentioned earlier, the processes of reinterpretation and recovery are inseparable parts of epistemological intervention and transformation. Thus, along with recovering dalit women, this chapter focuses on Dalit Feminism’s reinterpretation of the ideologies propounded by prominent leaders who led anti-caste movements, such as Phule, Ambedkar and Periyar. I also look at major events that have been recovered by Dalit Feminism. Since epistemological enquiry into historiography looks at who as well as what gets emphasized in the writing of history, events become an important factor. In this context, the reinterpretation of the Mahad Satyagraha by Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon in We Also Made History, and the reinterpretation of the Telangana Peoples’ Struggle in We Were Making History by Stree Shakti
Sanghatana have become central to dalit feminist historiography (see Chapter 4). The recovery of dalit women collectives in these texts provides a feminist critique of dalit historiography that undermines the latter’s exclusive focus on caste which results in the erasure of women, and highlights different issues that emerge specifically from dalit women’s experiences. At the same time, the difference between the mainstream Indian feminist and dalit feminist historiographies lies in the way gender is viewed in relation to caste and in the recognition of dual patriarchies.

DALIT FEMINIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

The point where dalit feminist historiography distinguishes itself from both mainstream Indian feminist historiography and dalit historiography is in making the intersection of caste and gender the central mode of analysis, thereby intertwining the processes of recovery and reinterpretation with respect to the other two marginal historiographies.

Savitribai Phule

A prominent figure who is recovered in the dalit feminist reinterpretation of dalit and mainstream Indian feminist historiographies is Savitribai Phule. While mainstream Indian feminist historiography emphasizes her identity as a ‘woman’,11 dalit historiography12 hails her as the icon of wifehood and motherhood who overcomes all obstacles in supporting her husband and gives her life in helping the lower castes and the poor with motherly affection. T. L. Joshi recounts the incident where, convinced by a brahmin priest, Jotirao was thrown out of the house by his father, and it was ‘Savitribai [who] stood by her husband in this period of trial’.13 Joshi also mentions how Savitribai adopted a boy born of a brahmin widow and reared him ‘like her own son’.14 Savitribai therefore is portrayed in dalit historiography as the ideal wife

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willing to share ‘sufferings with her husband’ and also as the iconic mother whose love is universal.\textsuperscript{15}

Critiquing dalit historiography’s representation of Savitribai as a supporter and nurturer, dalit feminist historiography emphasizes her autonomy. This recovery of Savitribai has highlighted her as a poet, a writer, a thinker and a teacher. In \textit{A Forgotten Liberator: The Life and Struggles of Savitribai Phule}, Braj Ranjan Mani blames the ‘casteist and sexist negligence’\textsuperscript{16} that monopolizes knowledge production in maintaining a ‘deeply biased and brahmanical’\textsuperscript{17} outlook. In his work, Mani reclaims Savitribai in her capacities as a social reformer and creative writer who is seen to act as an agent independent of her identity as Jotirao Phule’s wife. Dalit feminist historiography has also focused on events that highlight the caste and gender aspect of Savitribai’s life. One such incident is of brahmin women throwing dung at her and abusing her, ‘What is she doing, why is this happening? This is an insult to our sex and religion!’\textsuperscript{18} Dalit feminist recovery of this event highlights the intersectional aspect of Savitribai’s identity that made her a target of public assaults. Her abuse by upper-caste women highlights brahmanical control of women’s sexuality, wherein the assumption that dalit women are licentious because of their public visibility, as opposed to brahmin women whose confinement within the house preserves their purity, is brought into focus.\textsuperscript{19} Thus we can see that the verbal and physical assaults Savitribai had to face for coming out of the house and daring to teach, are specifically rooted in brahmanical patriarchal notions that created a schism between upper-and lower-caste women. In invoking this particular incident, Omvedt recognizes Savitribai’s abuse by upper-caste women as structured by brahmanical patriarchy.

The recognition of this caste-based specificity in Savitribai’s abuse also challenges her mainstream Indian feminist representation as a ‘woman’. Tharu and Lalita write,

Both Savithribai and Jotiba Phule were maligned, socially ostracised, and attacked by the orthodoxy whose authority and power
they had questioned. Yet Savitribai had special burdens to carry. Women are traditionally charged with the responsibility of preserving societal ‘purity’ and maintaining its norms. When they rebel, they are policed and punished in a thousand ways that rarely touch the men. Like the wives and co-workers of so many of the enthusiastic male reformers of that period, Savitribai bore the brunt of the attack against the Phules and the Satyashodhak Mandal even as she strained to shield her husband.20

This articulation provides a gendered understanding of Savitribai’s situation wherein only her identity as a woman, in contrast to men, is brought into focus, while caste is erased. Consequently, patriarchy also gets defined in terms of the single axis of gender as sexism. On the other hand, a dalit feminist reading of Savitribai, as shown by Omvedt earlier, reinterprets sexism as specifically casteist sexism. Therefore, the notion of ‘purity’ (mentioned in the quote by Tharu and Lalita) in a dalit feminist understanding, gets redefined as brahmanical patriarchal practice.21

Jotirao Phule

With the recovery of Savitribai as a key figure in lower-caste feminist history, it is also important to invoke her husband, Jotirao Phule, one of the earliest leaders to fight against Brahmanism to see how he may be interpreted, or re-interpreted, through a dalit feminist lens. Phule’s ideology has gained prominence in Dalit Politics and history due to his proposition of the Aryan race theory that reinterprets Brahmanism as a system of ‘power and dominance’.22 Against the birth-based logic propagated in the Vedic culture to validate the caste system, Phule argues that brahmins were part of the Aryan race that invaded the land of India and enslaved the original inhabitants.23 Depicting Brahmanism as having a historical origin, has brought about a radical reinterpretation of the caste system with the idea that since it did have an
origin, there was a possibility to end it as well. Phule writes in *Gulamgiri* (*Slavery*),

Recent researches have demonstrated beyond a shadow of doubt that the Brahmans were not the aborigines of India…. The extreme fertility of the soil of India, its rich productions, the proverbial wealth of its people, and the other innumerable gifts which this favoured land enjoys, and which have more recently tempted the cupidity of the Western nations, no doubt, attracted the Aryans, who came to India, not as simple emigrants with peaceful intentions of colonization, but as conquerors…. They originally settled on the banks of the Ganges whence they gradually spread over the whole of India. In order, however, to keep a better hold on the people they devised that weird system of mythology, the ordination of caste, and the code of cruel and inhuman laws, to which we can find no parallel amongst other nations.24

Phule’s observation had immense impact on Dalit Politics which based its position not only against Vedic Brahmanism but also against casteism in the nationalist movement. In the words of Baburao Bagul:

The national movement was turned into a form of historical, mythological movement and ancestor worship…. Those who propounded inequality and did not wish society to be democratic, started eulogizing and sublimating history, mythology and ages gone by because, in those mythological and historical ages, they were the supreme victors and leaders. The intelligentsia now harked back to and worshipped the past because of this. People such as Phule, Agarkar, Gokhale and Ranade who talked about misery and servitude of the Shudras and the Atishudras, who criticized the *varna* system and demanded social, economic and political reconstruction, were declared enemies and were attacked from all sides. The intelligentsia won; they succeeded in turning the Indian liberation struggle into a lop-sided fight, and in reducing other movements to a secondary status.25
Kancha Ilaiah in his article ‘Dalitism and Brahmanism’ sees Phule as challenging ‘Brahmanical nationalism’. By recovering Phule’s observations on the caste system, Dalit Politics not only highlights anti-caste politics’ contestation of the Brahmanism in the nationalist movement but also its challenge to the nationalist ideology of unity against British colonizers. According to Omvedt, the outcome of the counter-argument posed by Dalit Politics fractured the definition of national oppression (which brahmanical nationalism defined as oppression by British colonizers, thereby ignoring the caste-based oppression operative within) and nation (wherein it was no longer viewed as a homogeneous entity but highlighted the caste-based divisions in communities within India).

The hegemony of Brahmanism, according to Phule, was maintained by restricting knowledge within the upper castes. Hence, to step out of the brahmanical ideologies Phule propounded the necessity of education as a crucial requirement for the emancipation of the people oppressed by caste system (and he includes shudras, atishudras and women into this category). His endeavour began with educating his wife, Savitribai Phule, who actively contributed to his vision of social reformation. In 1848 Phule established the first school for girls, and proceeded to found several other schools, including night schools for working class people, and vocational education for widows.

Phule also links lack of knowledge with the poor social and economic condition of the peasants. He points out that the exploitative brahmanical system and the indifferent British authorities are responsible for the downfall of the peasants. In Phule’s conceptualization of caste oppression, knowledge and labour are understood as two intersecting factors. Control over knowledge, land and natural resources create a complex nexus of hegemonic power relations between the higher and lower castes. Recognizing the material and sexual consequences that function in overlapping ways in which Brahmanism exploits women of different castes, Phule contrasts dalit women’s labour both inside and outside the
house to the brahmin women’s situation. In *Cultivator’s Whipcord* (*Shetkaryacha Asud*) he shows that brahmin women are subject to the power of brahmin men, while the dalit women are doubly crushed as they are dominated by both upper-caste and dalit men. He also connected the oppression of widows to their economic dependency on the deceased husband’s family.29

Thus, Phule views gender and caste being intricately linked to class where economic disparity and dependence are seen as major factors underlying the subjugation of dalits and women. As a solution, Phule proposes a religious alternative in his book *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma* where he argued for a ‘noble-minded equilatarian theism … [and] a strong male-female equality’.30 This aspect, which remains predominantly subdued in dalit re-interpretation, becomes visible through a dalit feminist re-reading of Jotirao Phule.

**Muktabai**

Difference in the terms of recovery between feminist historiography and both mainstream Indian feminist as well as dalit historiography is also evident in the case of Muktabai. Cynthia Stephen explores Muktabai as an ideal student of Savitribai whose essay, ‘About the Grieves of the Mangs and Mahars’ 1855 (‘Mang Maharanchya Dukhavisath’), ‘poignantly describes the wretchedness of the so-called untouchables and lambastes the brahmanical religion and culture for degrading and dehumanizing her people’.31 Stephen represents Muktabai as an example of how education becomes a means to gain awareness about caste and speak out against it. Stephen therefore puts Muktabai within the caste framework. Muktabai and her article have also found a place in Susie Tharu and K. Lalita’s anthology *Women Writing in India*, vol.1. This anthology, with the particular aim to bring out women’s voices from a ‘feminist’ perspective, places Muktabai in this context.32 They point at her ‘intelligence and
self-confidence’ which, they write, is unthinkable ‘for an untouchable, and a woman at that’.33

Pawar and Moon refer to Muktabai for her expansive understanding of ‘brahmin domination’ as caste-gender oppression.34 Muktabai’s article is invoked by Pawar and Moon to show her remarkable awareness about graded hierarchy within castes and the difference between women in different castes. Apart from her observations on caste hierarchies among Mangs and Mahars (two dalit communities) Muktabai also incorporates dalit women’s condition to highlight why gender is an essential factor in caste oppression. Braj Ranjan Mani invokes Muktabai’s article as a recognition of the specificity of casteist patriarchal oppression of dalit women by foregrounding the latter’s experience:

When our women give birth to babies, they do not have even a roof over their houses. How they suffer in the rain and the cold! Please try to think about it from your own experience. If they get some disease while giving birth, where will they get money for the doctor or medicines? Was there ever any doctor among you who was human enough to treat people free of cost?35

This dalit feminist reading of Muktabai’s article, thus, focuses on the issue of hygiene during birthing and the consequences of caste-based segregation which affect specifically dalit women and children. Due to their untouchable status, dalit people lived on the fringes or outside the villages in harrowing conditions.36 However, as Muktabai’s article shows, the unhygienic conditions caused physical harm in gender-specific ways to dalit women. This portrayal of Muktabai by dalit feminist historiography also highlights the caste-based difference among women. The specific reference to ‘our women’ in Muktabai’s article serves as an example of the acknowledgement of such difference which challenges the unified category of ‘Indian woman’ who is the overarching subject of mainstream Indian feminist historiography.
B. R. AMBEKAR AND THE MAHAD SATYAGRAHA

B. R. Ambedkar occupies an inevitable and compulsory place in anti-caste theorizing. Dalit historiography recovers Ambedkar’s legacy in a biographical manner tracing the evolution of his political thought and by tracing his influence on later political and literary movements. Defining him as a ‘political realist’, Omvedt argues that Ambedkar’s greatest contribution in Dalit Politics has been his call for annihilation of caste and the understanding that the caste system is ‘not [just] a division of labour … [but] as a division of labourers’. Ambedkar is also revived as a contrast to Gandhi. According to Mani, Gandhian nationalism incorporated dalits as followers/persons of ‘Hari’ (Harijan), thereby whitewashing the issue of caste both in religious as well as political realms. Ambedkar, on the other hand, insisted that ‘the untouchables were a separate and legitimate social category, a subordinated one, and not part of brahmanic Hinduism’. Ambedkar emphasized the ideological and religious factors in highlighting how caste creates social division among people. Omvedt reflects that ‘Ambedkar’s longer-term strategy was to break up that majority, to dissolve Hinduism itself’. And it is for the annihilation of caste that both in his stress on Buddhism as an alternative religion and in his insistence on creating a separate electorate, rejection of Hinduism remained the major goal for Ambedkar. Kancha Ilaiah, in his article ‘Dalitism and Brahmanism’, observes that the ideological difference between Ambedkar and Gandhi is due to their experiential factors of belonging to particular caste communities. He writes:

Ambedkar was not only born in an untouchable Mahar family, but all through his life stood for the suppressed, oppressed and exploited masses. Gandhi, on the other hand, was born in a Baniya family and stood for the oppressor and exploiting upper castes; in other words, he stood for the durjan… In reality, therefore, one worked for Dalit-Bahujan nationalism from a position of
disadvantage and another for Brahmanical nationalism from a position of advantage.\textsuperscript{44}

In Ilaiah’s conception, therefore, Ambedkar’s experience of untouchability is crucial in forming his standpoint which also differentiated him from Gandhi. Ambedkar’s call for annihilation of caste has posed anti-caste politics not as a reformist movement (like that of Gandhi) but one that seeks to view the caste system inherent in socio-economic inequality.

In seeking to elucidate this aspect, the Mahad Satyagraha led by Ambedkar has gained special significance in dalit historiography. The ambedkar.org, a Dalit-Bahujan online repository on Ambedkar, mentions Mahad as an important milestone in dalit memory.\textsuperscript{45} The Mahad Satyagraha is considered one of the first autonomous dalit movements organized by a dalit leader. It was a non-violent march led by Ambedkar on 20 March 1927 demanding the implementation of the untouchables’ right to drink water from the public Chavadar Tank.\textsuperscript{46} Ambedkar and his followers faced violent opposition from the upper-caste people where twenty dalits were injured. The tank was then purified by the upper castes with prayers, cow dung, cow urine, milk, curd and ghee.\textsuperscript{47} Ambedkar held a second conference in Mahad in December 1927 where the Manusmriti was burnt on 25 December 1927. According to Guru, the Mahad Satyagraha and its opposition by the upper castes reveal the serious ‘damage’ within Indian society caused by the caste system.\textsuperscript{48} The Mahad Satyagraha is therefore hailed as ‘the first untouchable liberation movement’ which initiated an awareness among dalits about their rights and created unity among them, and also introduced Ambedkar as a powerful dalit leader.\textsuperscript{49} According to Arjun Dangle,

Through his struggle against untouchability and socio-economic inequality [Ambedkar] liberated the Dalits in India from mental slavery and abject wretchedness, thus giving them a new self-respect.\textsuperscript{50}
The importance of the Mahad Satyagraha is immense in the history of India as a movement that paved way for dalit voices to emerge as a collective. This movement has also been invoked by Dalit Feminism for its impact on dalit women. For a gendered understanding of the Ambedkarite movement, Pawar and Moon in *We Also Made History* invoke Ambedkar’s writings and speeches on sexual oppression of dalit women which led them to review the anti-caste struggle in a new light. One such example is the reinterpretation of the Mahad Satyagraha. While in dalit historiography the Mahad Satyagraha is invoked as one of the very first triumphs of dalits as a collective in reclaiming public spaces, Pawar and Moon emphasize how it was Ambedkar’s speech at the satyagraha that posed a challenge to caste and gender oppression for dalit women. During the speech at the Mahad Satyagraha, Ambedkar urged dalit women to give up markers of caste such as the way they wear saris above their knee or keep their breasts bare, and instead wear saris like brahmin women because they are as respectable as brahmin women. This had a tremendous effect on dalit women attending the conference. As Pawar and Moon note,

> After listening to Babasaheb’s speech, the women who had come for the conference turned up the next day wearing their nine-yard saris around their ankles like Brahmin women. Mrs. Chitre and Mrs. Tipnis helped them to do this.

This shows awareness about the stigma of caste being linked to gender. Thus in dalit feminist understanding, annihilation of caste calls for eradicating graded inequalities. At this point it is important to recognize that wearing clothes like upper-caste women did not signify an acceptance of brahmanical ideals. In fact, clothing has been used by several dalit leaders as a mechanism to challenge the markers of caste. Ayyankali (1863–1941) used to wear clothes like Nairs (upper castes) and ride a bullock cart through roads traditionally meant for upper-caste people. These instances continue
to be celebrated among Dalits as examples of defiance to the caste system and reclamation of public space. Similarly, Ambedkar’s critique of Dalit women’s clothing needs to be interpreted as rooted in understanding the practices of Dalit women being barebreasted and wearing clothes in a particular way to signify their caste as humiliation. Such kinds of dress code signified the sexual availability of Dalit women which was linked with their presence in the public sphere as workers. Thus, as Rege points out, we need to see Ambedkar’s statement not as imposing the brahmanical ideal of women as honour of the family and community but as reclaiming self-respect by Dalit women. Such conceptualization provides a critique of mainstream Indian feminist historiography as well where the nineteenth-century upper-caste women’s clothing, determining ‘virtue and modesty’, is seen as a restrictive factor. Dalit feminist historiography, on the other hand, points to the issue of who had, or rather, was allowed to have, access to the kinds of clothing that symbolised ‘virtue and modesty’. It shows how clothing was also dictated by brahmanical patriarchal ideologies. For Dalit women, therefore, wearing saris like upper-caste women, signified a challenge to brahmanical patriarchy.

**AMBEDKAR AND ENDOGAMY**

Sharmila Rege in *Against the Madness of Manu* (2013) reinterprets Ambedkar by highlighting his views on Brahmanism as a discriminatory practice operative not only through Brahmanism but also through gender. Rege’s centralizing of the argument on endogamy represents Ambedkar from a Dalit feminist perspective. Rege builds her explanation of brahmanical patriarchy on Ambedkar’s formulation of ‘caste as a system of graded inequalities’. Condemning the disjunction of caste and gender in Dalit Politics and mainstream Indian Feminism, Rege points out that Dalit Politics ignores the gender question by claiming that Dalit women are not restricted like their upper-caste counterparts. On the other hand,
mainstream Indian Feminism, due to its imposition of savarna sisterhood, turns a blind eye to issues concerning dalit women specifically. Both these positions are problematic because they either see patriarchy as invisible or in singular form in the case of dalit women. For this reason, Rege thinks that ‘the task is to map the ways in which woman as a category are being differently reconstituted within patriarchal relations of graded caste inequalities’.59 She recovers Ambedkar because his theoretical legacy has ‘viewed caste and gender as entangled, but never just easily equated, and move[d] beyond the binaries of sameness/difference’.60 Rege writes that mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics have created false binaries of ‘Brahman/non-Brahman, feminism/community, and caste/women’. 61 Hence, she argues that merely pluralizing the term ‘patriarchy’ is not enough. She recognizes that in such context the necessity is to take a ‘feminist turn’ to Ambedkar in order to reveal ‘how brahmanical patriarchy fashions sameness, intersection, discreteness, and interdependent differences along a gradation of ascending reverence and descending contempt … [and thereby] produces a generative structure through which an alliance between feminist and anti-caste/dalit groups with visions of liberatory politics can be engaged’.62

Rege foregrounds Ambedkar’s interpretation of endogamy as the root of caste division and the dicta of Manusmriti in sanctifying it. Endogamy, that is, the process of fixing marriages within castes, justifies the exclusivity of caste groups and ascertains the logic of birth-based origin. Rege elaborates that Ambedkar opts for a ‘feminist take on caste’ by highlighting the issue of ‘parity between marriageable units, men and women, or how to maintain it’.63 And it is in recognizing such regulatory and discriminatory praxis that Rege observes Ambedkar’s understanding of caste as a gendered category becomes important.

Ambedkar views Manu’s extensive dicta on endogamy and punishments for its violation as justification for caste gradation which gets sustained through women’s oppression. Rege writes,
'For him [Ambedkar], the strength of Manu’s approach lies in generating moral anxiety over women’s sexuality and bastardisation of groups that resisted caste hierarchy.' Ambedkar points out that according to the *chaturvarna* system as coded by Manu, in most kinds of exogamous unions the sankara child is given the father’s varna. An alteration to this patrilineal, patriarchal tradition occurs when the mother’s varna is more than one lower than the father’s, then the child is given the mother’s varna. Ambedkar views a deeply graded caste-gender hierarchy inherent in such *matrasavarna* (matrilineal) system. Interestingly, this matrilineality, instead of empowering women, actually reveals ‘the differential rules of mating and lineage for men and women of different castes … [and shows how] these rules [determined] that stringent control over sexuality becomes the reserve of the men of privileged castes while simultaneously carving spaces for their enforced cohabitation with women of the subordinated castes’. This shows how the caste system functions through control over female sexuality which affects women of different castes differently. Such recovery and reinterpretation of Ambedkar therefore re-conceptualizes caste as simultaneously a gendered oppression.

Rege’s incorporation of the debate over the Hindu Code Bill in *Against the Madness of Manu* goes on to highlight the perpetuation of brahmanical patriarchal ideals in the Congress Party, the first ruling party of independent India. The Hindu Code Bill was proposed by Ambedkar in 1948 ‘to codify the diverse systems and property practices pertaining to men and women, alter the order of succession, and design new laws of maintenance, marriage, divorce, adoption, guardianship and the minorities’. Rege sees the Hindu Code Bill as Ambedkar’s vision of an independent India free of caste and gender oppression. The extensive opposition to this Bill by Congress leaders highlighted the patriarchal discomfort about women’s rights.

Rege’s inclusion of the Bill as well as the opposition to it by upper-caste Congress leaders in *Against the Madness of Manu* marks
an important link between the personal and the political. In his introduction to *Ambedkar: Autobiographical Notes*, Ravikumar elaborates on the significance of the public in dalit thought:

The public has come to connote things and spaces which are inaccessible for the dalits. Common wells, public roads and cremation grounds are spaces denied to dalits .... The purpose of Hindu politics has been to restrict and relegate dalits to the ‘reserved’ sectors. The dalits have to defy such social strictures to enter the public sphere.  

As a result, Dalit Politics has focused on reclaiming the public space as part of their anti-caste struggle. However, as Rege’s dalit feminist reading of Ambedkar shows, practices such as endogamy, re-routes caste as a domestic issue and thereby challenges the public/private distinction. Rege’s reclamation intervenes in dominant dalit historicizing of caste as a public issue by incorporating the domestic within its political purview. Understanding marriage as a way of maintaining caste hierarchy makes caste an issue that structures the private sphere as much as it does the public. Rege’s reinterpretation of Ambedkar therefore provides an important corrective to dalit historiography as she emphasizes the need to recognize that the private is not separate from the public. This analysis also provides a crucial intervention in the way the public/private binary is articulated in mainstream Indian Feminism. Autobiographies by women (see Chapter 3) invoke the public/private dichotomy in relation to a gendered notion of the world wherein men occupy the public realm and women remain in the private. But if we extend Rege’s reinterpretation of Ambedkar (and as we also see in dalit women’s autobiographies in Chapter 3), it is not merely ‘gender’ which constructs the binary of public/private; it is also the structure of caste that functions simultaneously with gender to dictate the interaction between men and women of different castes within the private sphere.
Ambedkar’s notion of endogamy as the casteist mechanism of sexual control redefines the contours of patriarchy from being concerned only with gender to also being casteist.

CULTURAL RECLAMATION

Another aspect of Ambedkar’s recovery and reinterpretation by dalit feminist historiography is evident in Gopal Guru’s article, ‘The Interface between Ambedkar and the Dalit Cultural Movement in Maharashtra’, which brings to prominence the songs of post-Amebdkarite Buddhist dalit women singers who reclaim Ambedkar in the cultural sphere. Guru identifies these songs (known as *ovi* and *palna*) as a way to challenge the academic and political invisibility of dalit women in mainstream politics and the dalit-dominant cultural discourse. Guru recovers these dalit Buddhist women’s songs within the ambit of a feminist cultural consciousness. He notes that although in the pre-Ambedkarite period dalit women were mostly relegated to the background, in the post-Ambedkarite period they broke their ‘cultural silence and stormed into the public transcript’. The recovery of these songs therefore provides an intervention in dalit historiography which ignores these songs by dalit women. Moreover, in contrast to dalit historiography’s recovery of Ambedkar through his speeches, the recovery of the folk forms of expressions like palna (a kind of folk song sung at naming ceremonies by dalit women) and ovi (a type folk song prevalent among these women in their oral tradition) used by these dalit women singers provide a feminist methodological critique to dalit historiography.

According to Guru, these songs also serve as transformative in terms of their reinterpretation of Ambedkar in the private sphere. In the examples provided by Guru, we see that the songs about Ambedkar and his wife, Ramabai, were sung by dalit women ‘while working with the grindstone, at birth ceremonies, naming ceremonies and on harvesting occasions’. This shows a tradition
of merging the domestic with the public not only in terms of how Ambedkar is reclaimed but also in choosing the locations where the songs are being sung:

_Jati Bhed Ghalviny Sathi,
Bhimani Keli Brahmin Rani!
Gangadhrech Nirmal Pani
Mahnive Sarvani Bhimachi Gani._73

(To expel caste discrimination, Ambedkar [who is also called Bhima] married Savitabai who was a brahmin. He showed that this marriage is pure like Ganga water. Everyone sing in praise of Bhima.)74

The reference here is to Ambedkar’s marriage with Savitabai, a brahmin woman whom he married thirteen years after the death of his first wife, Ramabai. This song, therefore, reclaims Ambedkar at the domestic/personal level. In this ovi, dalit women view inter-caste marriage as a crucial step in eradicating caste. Guru notes that some of the crucial questions in discussing the recovery of such songs are, ‘What has been the social base, particularly in terms of gender and caste, of this dalit cultural assertion? And from where did it derive its critical input?’75 He draws attention to the Kalpathak76 cultural form which, along with raising issues about human dignity, exploitation of dalits by landlords, and teachings of Buddhism, also raised the issue of dalit women’s harassment by their in-laws and projected the latent militancy of the daughter-in-law who resisted such oppression. This analysis shows gender as an interlinked component of the caste system and, as Rege says, also challenges ‘the brahmanical reformist rendering of the always-victimized-woman’.77

PERIYAR AND THE SELF-RESPECT MOVEMENT

In South India Periyar E.V. Ramasami has been revived for critiquing brahmanical nationalism through his Self-Respect movement,
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as well as posing a crucial dialogue about the North-South division in Dalit Politics which has given rise to Dravidianism.78

Aloysius posits the rise of the dalit movement in South India as a fracturing of the notion of a unified nation and culture. He writes, ‘The national identity in India is ... primarily expressive of the culture and power of, as well as in terms of, the Sanskritic-brahminical, accommodating the rest to be sure, to the minimum according to contingencies and compulsions of the situation.’79

Geetha and Rajadurai mention the crucial role of the Non-Brahmin Manifesto of 1916 brought out by the Justice Party (also known as the South Indian Liberal Federation) which cemented their ideological and political difference from the nationalist movement. The manifesto observed that in caste-ridden India, it was the British who could ‘hold the scales even between creed and class and ... develop that sense of solidarity and unity without which India will continue to be a group of mutually exclusive and warring groups without common purpose and a common patriotism’.80 This proclamation, Geetha and Rajadurai observe, challenged the unification agenda of mainstream nationalist politics which aimed to incorporate dalits as Hindus in order to 'humanize' them and also attempted to stop the conversion of dalits to Christianity.81

Periyar is seen to be presenting an opposition to such Hindusi-

zation through his conceptualization of caste as a systemic and ideological oppressive structure. For Periyar, caste comprised a complex set of social relations, as well as those principles which informed, sustained and justified these relations. As a system, caste served the interests of Brahmins who were its favoured agents and existed chiefly to gratify and perpetrate their sense of their own superiority. As an ideology, caste worked to ensure that notions of 'high' and 'low' birth were accepted as given by the peoples who were marked thus.82

Geetha and Rajadurai point out that this understanding of caste becomes central in Periyar’s Self-Respect movement where he
not only demands political representation for the dalits but also calls into question ‘the phenomenon of sacred itself.’ As opposed to Brahmanism, the Self-Respecters proposed the idea of *sam-adharma*, literally meaning equal rights, but used in the context of ‘new and radical ways of imagining … social relationships [which] ought to be instituted on the basis of mutuality, self-respect and equality between and amongst all human beings.’ Emphasizing on his struggle for equality of all, Subramanian writes, ‘Periyar’s intention [was] not to reform society but to destroy it and remake it’. In this aspect Periyar is posed as a contrasting figure to Gandhi who ‘attempted to reform the social super structure without putting dynamite to the social base’. Periyar’s opposition to the caste-religion dyad is seen by Subramanian as addressing that very base which Gandhi refused to question.

Kulandaiswamy points out that Periyar’s Self-Respect movement is also rooted in building a Dravida Nadu (a land of Dravidas). Fearing the supremacy of North in post-independent India—especially with the introduction of Hindi as a compulsory subject in Madras by C. Rajagopalachari in 1938—Periyar demanded the formation of Dravida Nadu comprising of four major linguistic regions in South India. Through his anti-Hindu and anti-Hindi movement, Periyar posed a challenge to Brahmanism and the caste system as well as the regional and political supremacy claimed by the Hindi-speaking North. For Periyar, Aryan was equivalent to North-Sanskrit. As sociologist T. K. Oommen writes:

According to Periyar, Brahmans had tried to foist their language and social system on Dravidians to erase their race consciousness and, therefore, he constantly reminded the Dravidians to uphold their ‘race consciousness’. However, Periyar did not advocate the superiority of one race over the other but insisted on equality of all races. Thus the fundamental difference between Aryan Hinduism and Dravidian Hinduism is crucial: the former [is] hegemonic, but the latter is emancipatory.
For Periyar, therefore, a Dravida Nadu was a space where all hierarchies were broken. And it is in this sphere of equality that Geetha and Rajadurai place Periyar. They revive Periyar to emphasize the immediacy and relevance of his thoughts in contemporary social justice movements. According to Geetha and Rajadurai, Periyar’s call for equality may initiate dialogues, especially in the contemporary context, with issues of gender justice and class politics. In this way Periyar is invoked not merely as an interventionist (intervening into Brahmanism) but also a transformer, creating possibility for new political coalitions.

Periyar’s relevance has also been emphasized from a feminist angle. Geetha and Rajadurai claim:

Social radicalism, especially of the Self-Respect movement was argued not only in the context of the public sphere, but also required and mandated new practices of the self and community. These practices had as much to do with transforming gender relations, issues of conjugal, sexual norms and reproduction as they had to do with rewriting the rules of distance, touch, pollution and untouchability. This history, which shows the importance of making feminist and anti-caste politics speak to each other, is one that should stand us in good stead, in a context when debates around sexuality are more expansive than ever before, and yet are not quite able to engage the matter of caste and caste endogamy with that degree of sophistication or interest, which the subject requires.

Geetha argues that contemporary Tamil dalit politics, in its centralizing of caste, has deviated its attention from the women’s question that was central to Periyar’s Self-Respect movement. She writes, ‘For me, the point of arrival of an interesting and relevant legacy is the present, a present dominated by interesting debates in women’s groups—in Tamil Nadu—on the complex and fraught relationship between gender and caste on one hand, and a dalit political militancy on the other.’ S. Anandhi refers
to Periyar’s ‘radical reconstructive work … [to] destroy the traditional structures’ to argue that it was this desire for a total change that influenced Periyar’s thoughts on the women’s question. Anandhi notes,

Within the ambience of the Self-Respect Movement he was not content with taking up such conventional themes of women’s emancipation like widow-remarriage and women’s education which, even if successful, did not undermine the existing structure of patriarchy; but he raised questions relating to basic pillars of patriarchy, like the monogamous family and the norms of chastity prescribed for and enforced upon women … [and] argued, women’s education should have the aim of providing employment for women and thus making them economically independent.94

While Geetha’s interpretation intervenes into dalit historiography in terms of how Periyar has been recovered by Dalit Politics, Anandhi’s understanding of Periyar presents him as being critical of the nationalist reformulation of the women’s question which emphasized issues of widow remarriage and education of women. In this way, Periyar’s recovery by dalit feminist historiography not only challenges the centrality of caste in Dalit Politics, but also challenges the nationalist and early twentieth-century nationalist-feminist notions of female emancipation.95

Anandhi’s reinterpretation of Periyar foregrounds his views on caste and gender oppression, the issues of marriage, chastity, and motherhood. In a meeting held at Victoria Hall, Madras, in 1948, Periyar commented,

The concept of husband-wife relationship has been one of master-slave relationship. The essential philosophy of marriage has been to insist on women’s slavery… why should human beings alone keep such contract of one-man-one-woman relationship… until women are liberated from such marriages and from men, our country cannot attain independence.96
Hence, the self-respect form of marriage gave importance to choice by eschewing brahmanical rituals and denouncing the authority of the elders in formalising the marriage.

Anandhi also points out that the notion of chastity, considered to be the crucial component of monogamous family, is another subject of Periyar’s criticism of brahmanical marriage. Anandhi quotes from Periyar’s pamphlet titled ‘Why Did Women Become Enslaved?’ where Periyar notes that ‘The imposition of “patrivratha” qualities on women has destroyed their independence and free-thinking and made them unquestioning slaves—to men—who are supposed to demonstrate undue faith over chastity.’ And it is this brahmanical ideal of chastity, Geetha points out, endorsed the ideals of motherhood that Periyar challenged:

We maintain that while it is the case women possess the attribute of bearing a child in their wombs for 10 months and eventually giving birth to it, this, in itself, does not make them different from men with respect to qualities such as anger, ruling power and strength. Likewise, we think that though men do not possess the [biological] means to get pregnant, it cannot be said they possess qualities different from women, in respect of calm, love and the power of nurture. If we are to value true equality—if there exists true love between man and woman—it is certain that all responsibilities except that of bearing a child should be considered common to both.

This dalit feminist reclamation of Periyar foregrounds his challenge to the nationalist movement’s project of creating a new woman and also the casteist-sexist naturalization of motherhood.

Periyar’s devaluing of motherhood was, on the one hand, a response to the nationalist argument that women had to be liberated only to be returned as more intelligent and efficient members of their sex to the kitchen and the hearth. On the other hand, it was a
carefully articulated argument against the naturalization of the idea of motherhood in a caste Hindu society.99

Periyar’s allusion to chastity and motherhood in relation to caste ideologies also intervenes in mainstream Indian Feminism which views body and sexuality only in relation to gender.100 A dalit feminist reclamation of Periyar, therefore, provides a much more nuanced understanding of gender through the lens of caste.

Geetha and Rajadurai further add that Periyar’s perspectives on gender ‘served to re-define not merely the nationalists’ terms of discourse but also political activity and agitation’ within the Self-Respect movement as well.101 This interpretation of Periyar differs vastly from his recovery by Dalit Politics wherein his role in organizing the Vaikom Satyagraha, a temple entry movement in Kerala in 1924, is emphasized.102 By highlighting the temple entry movement—a movement that is seen as archetypal of struggle against untouchability—dalit historiography restricts Periyar to the domain of anti-casteism. Dalit feminist historiography, on the other hand, incorporates a more expansive view of Periyar by recovering his opinion on gender issues and thereby providing a gendered understanding of caste.

THE VEDIC DASI

In terms of reinterpretation vis-à-vis mainstream Indian feminist historiography, dalit feminist historiography invokes the figure of the ‘Vedic dasi.’ In her article, ‘Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?’ Uma Chakravarti provides a dalit feminist critique of the nineteenth-century construction of the ‘Indian woman’. Chakravarti notes that the ‘myth of the golden age of Indian womanhood as located in the Vedic period ... foregrounded the Aryan woman (the progenitor of the upper-caste woman) as the only object of historical concern’.103 Consequently, ‘the Vedic dasi (woman in servitude), captured, subjugated, and enslaved
by the conquering Aryans’ disappeared. Chakravarti’s essay becomes notable because it situates the nineteenth-century historiography of the women’s question in the specific brahmanical patriarchal context. This essay shows that the ideal womanhood was established on the notions of devotion to the husband and on heroic resistance to alien forces where women ‘cheerfully chose death rather than dishonour’. Chakravarti notes that in the nineteenth-century context, especially through the literary imagination of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, womanhood was constructed in terms of her role as a sahadharmini to her husband. Hence, the examples of women’s heroism in terms of their struggles alongside their husbands for the freedom of the nation, legitimized their presence in the public sphere. The anxiety over women stepping out of the private sphere and entering into the public was therefore resolved without disturbing the gender hierarchy. Chakravarti argues that this anxiety, as well as its resolution, was specifically a brahmanical concern because keeping women within the house was practised only in upper-caste families. Hence, the dominant nationalist historiography’s focus on ‘the spiritual Maitreyi, the learned Gargi, the suffering Sita, the faithful Savitri and the heroic Lakshmibai’ highlights the recovery of only upper-caste women from history. Chakravarti draws attention also to Dayananda who expressed enormous anxiety over women’s sexuality and tried to resolve the problem by fixing motherhood as the only ideal role for women. This idea is followed by a cleanliness regime prescribed by Dayananda where he emphasized the necessity of a wet nurse to help the mother in nursing and prevent her over-exertion. While a feminist reading of Dayananda would see how he restrictively defines women with respect to their faculty of reproduction, Chakravarti asks, ‘What about the wet nurse?’ This reinterpretation from a dalit feminist lens shows how dalit women are erased in dominant historiography and even in mainstream Indian feminist historiography which focuses on gender through a single idea of patriarchy. In recognizing the
caste-gender intersection and patriarchy in terms of brahmanical patriarchy, dalit feminist historiography intervenes in both dominant nationalist historiography and mainstream Indian feminist historiography.

TELANGANA PEASANTS’ REVOLT (1946–51)

The caste question has always had a problematic relation with Marxist class ideology in India. The drawback of the Marxist approach, Omvedt points out, is that it subsumes caste within class discourse.\(^{109}\) Marxist history presents the history of India broadly in terms of class struggle. As a result, caste gets translated in the Marxist approach as an occupational division of labour, thereby restricting its scope to ‘economic determinism’.\(^{110}\) In the Indian context, Omvedt notes, the Marxist perspective addresses ‘material exploitation’ and it is assumed that with the erasure of class discrimination, the caste system would also automatically be erased.\(^{111}\) The drawback of such interpretation is that, rather than providing a fruitful methodology to address caste-class as an interrelated system of oppression, it merely adds caste to class without questioning the traditional conceptualizations of stages of history or modes of production.

The need for caste-class intersection is emphasized in dalit historiography through a reinterpretation of the Telangana Peasants’ Revolt (1946–51) in Andhra Pradesh. The movement, also known as the Telangana Bonded Labour movement and Telangana Peasants’ Armed Struggle, was a peasant rebellion organized against the landlords that gradually culminated in a rebellion against the Nizam’s rule. In the princely state of Hyderabad, 40 percent land was owned by the Nizam and rest was under the government’s land revenue system. The economic crises of 1920–22 and 1930–33 heavily affected the peasants. Due to bad harvests and unfair prices for crops, they were unable
to pay taxes and had to sell their lands to the feudal landlords. This resulted in increased oppression of farmers by the landlords. Along with this issue the rebellion also questioned the *vetti* (forced labour) system which ruled that one man from each untouchable family had to do household labour for the landlords. Hence, demands were made by the peasants to ‘put an end to vetti, illegal exactions, and compulsory grain levies and … to reoccupy the lands seized earlier by the landlords and deshmukhs. The movement became one for abolishing feudal landlordism and even the Nizam’s rule.’ The Communist Party’s contribution was seen as crucial in setting the rebellion in motion, as a result of which they won the 1952 election in Andhra Pradesh.

Even though Sundarayya, a founding member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and a leader of the peasant revolt, claims that ‘in the struggle against the Government all people were forced to work and fight collectively without any distinction of caste and creed and so after this, fighting the evil of untouchability became easier’, dalit activists have criticized the Communist Party for their erasure of the caste question in the Telangana People’s Struggle. Bojja Tharakam writes that even though the Telangana peasants movement mentioned the vetti system, untouchability did not gain central attention from the Communists:

> The party ignored issues related to caste altogether, saying that they would be dealt with after classlessness has been achieved. Its trusting and credulous supporters [i.e., the lower castes] went along with the party, convinced that untouchability and caste itself would vanish once the land problem was solved. They came to believe that it was alright to live without dignity and live in the hope that some land would come their way as the struggle intensified.\(^{114}\)

Commenting on the need to address caste and class simultaneously, Tharakam writes
The abolition of caste is not about ideology alone, but also about material transformation. Caste struggle is a mental-material revolution, while the focus of a class struggle tends to be limited to materialistic considerations.\textsuperscript{115} Dalit historiography therefore points at significant lacunae in Communist politics in their exclusive focus on class. Although they talked about giving back land to the tillers, Communist party failed to address the roots that caused this hierarchy and domination.\textsuperscript{116}

The issue of caste-class vis-à-vis gender is brought forth by Stree Shakti Sanghatana in a dalit feminist reading of the Telangana Peasants’ Revolt. They challenge the representations of the Telengana struggle in Leftist historiography as well as in Dalit historiography by posing the following questions: ‘What is the relevance of the Telengana struggle to the women’s question? … Who were the women who came into the movement and why did they come? How far were they able to loosen the grip of the feudal ideology and of patriarchal norms? Was the Communist Party able to create a new image of women by articulating their problems and finding solutions in their own terms?’\textsuperscript{117} Thus, in a dalit feminist reinterpretation of the struggle, we come across issues such as gender relations within the Communist Party in terms of distribution of work, childbirth, and the life of these women after the struggle. Sugunamma writes that although the Party allowed women’s entry,

They never took up women’s issues as political or ideological issues to be discussed and analysed…. Some leaders used to dismiss these issues lightly! Perhaps there was a flaw in their thinking. Even the dowry issue was dismissed as insignificant.\textsuperscript{118}

The authors note that such experiential accounts reveal a discrepancy between the gender equality envisioned and claimed by the Party, and their actual practices. The Sanghatana points
out that even though dalit leaders such as P. Sundarayya mention instances of harassment of women within the Party, the discussion is diluted into ‘a moral problem’ where Sundarayya feels sorry for being unable to save them.\textsuperscript{119} This shows how a gender issue is presented as apolitical because it is seen as an individual moral problem and not a systemic issue. The double standards of the Party is further revealed by Narasamma who mentions how women were not allowed to participate in the guerilla raids because of the assumption, as discussed earlier, that they are physically inferior, and how women were continuously suspected of destroying the morale of the Party by indulging in sexual affairs.\textsuperscript{120} Kamalamma points out, as mentioned earlier, that the Party was also inattentive towards preventing unwanted childbirth, as a result of which they had to often abandon the new-born children under the orders of Party leaders.\textsuperscript{121}

In thus focusing on women’s experience within the Telangana movement, \textit{We Were Making History} adheres to the methodological format of oral narrative employed by mainstream Indian feminist historiography. \textit{We Were Making History}, as a dalit feminist historiography, also foregrounds the specificity of casteist patriarchy as it affects dalit women. For example, the Sanghatana notes that, ‘While women during the movement were freely allowed to enter the public sphere of production and political action, the moral code by which they were measured was still the code of the private domain—the domain of the family, household, domestic labour and reproduction.’\textsuperscript{122} These codes reflect specific brahmanical patriarchal attitude visible in the following examples. Regalla Acchamamba, the activist-cum-doctor in the Party, was wrongly accused of having an affair. She narrates how she was blamed for being a member of ‘a badmash caste’ who never admits their mistakes, and was ‘stripped and checked’ to prove her affair.\textsuperscript{123} These actions reinforce the Party’s casteist-sexist practice of public humiliation of dalit women due to the assumption of pollution and sexual promiscuity. The brahmanical patriarchal mentality of
the Party is also visible through its strict restrictions on inter-caste marriages. Here we see a clear recognition of different forms of patriarchy in the ways in which the Party dealt with women’s issues within a casteist sexist framework. *We Were Making History* provides the much needed integration of caste and gender perspective by re-centring the focus on sexuality and reproduction, family and political life, public and private spheres, keeping in the mind the specificity of caste. The task of dalit feminist historiography therefore is not just to recover dalit women in history, but to transform the knowledge about caste and gender by foregrounding intersectionality and dual patriarchies.

**CONCLUSION**

The enquiry into the relationship between power and knowledge reveals how it affects the production of knowledge. The subsequent analysis of dalit feminist historiography vis-à-vis Dalit Politics and mainstream Indian Feminism’s positions show that even within marginalized standpoints the focus on a single category of analysis often erases the differences within. The dalit feminist historiography makes an epistemic intervention into such erasure and absorption by bringing in the concept of dual patriarchies (in case of Savitribai Phule, Muktabai and *We Were Making History*) and by re-centring caste from public to private (as seen in *We Also Made History* and the songs by Ambedkarite Buddhist dalit women). This knowledge emerges through the methods of recovery and reinterpretation. However, recovery is only the first step towards an alternative epistemology. As the analysis shows, these recoveries are made not merely to make visible the hitherto invisible dalit women but to see how recovery of dalit women and their experiences transforms the dominant, as well as dalit and mainstream Indian feminist historiographies. Thus, the framework of intersectionality shows intra-categorical differences among women and among dalits, and the concept of
dual patriarchies highlights the complexity of a casteist patriarchy not only in relation to women of different castes but also vis-à-vis men of different castes. Dalit feminist historiography becomes a way to expand and build on dalit and mainstream Indian feminist historiographies through a more nuanced understanding of caste and gender and, therefore, exemplifies how dalit feminist standpoint is different from but not oppositional to dalit standpoint and mainstream Indian feminist standpoint.

This understanding of dalit feminist standpoint extends Rege’s argument where she emphasizes the necessity to go beyond the essentialism of identity and reinvent ourselves as dalit feminists by acknowledging caste in gender and gender in caste. Such acknowledgement, however, may prove to be inadequate to properly generate a dalit feminist standpoint. Mere recognition of caste does not by itself bring about a transformation of knowledge because, if the primary category of analysis remains gender, women of different castes are assumed to be oppressed by patriarchy in general. Instead, as seen in We Were Making History and ‘Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?’, a dalit feminist standpoint highlighting the existence of dual patriarchies, brahmanical patriarchy’s differential treatment of women of different castes and the unequal relation between them, intervenes into the way caste and gender are conceptualized as discrete categories. Dalit feminist standpoint shows that mere invoking of caste by Indian Feminism or including a sprinkling of dalit women in Dalit Politics does not make their politics ‘dalit feminist’ per se. In a response to her interview with Ruth Manorama, Meena Kandasamy writes, ‘She [Manorama] (and even I) would certainly want women from privileged backgrounds to tackle the question of caste. And besides, she also feels, being a dalit feminist must not mean that she should be tied down to those issues of caste alone, but she should have her say on the other things as well.’ A dalit feminist standpoint, therefore, is not about adding caste to gender and vice-versa or ghettoizing Dalit Feminism as dealing with only
the concerns of dalit women. Rather it is by recognizing the intersection of caste and gender, dual patriarchies, and to allude to Harding once again, by understanding ‘the conceptual practices of power… through which their oppression [is] designed, maintained, and made to seem natural and desirable to everyone’ that a dalit feminist standpoint emerges. It is in these aspects that dalit feminist standpoint emerges as a transformative epistemology.

NOTES

2 This perspective aligns with feminist standpoint theory which links power with knowledge in arguing how women’s knowledge faces a strategic disregard for being ‘non-objective’ and hence unreliable whereas it can become the starting point to pose an opposition to male-supremacy in knowledge. Standpoint theory’s most important concept is that an individual’s own perspectives are shaped by his or her experiences in social locations and social groups. Hence, standpoint argues that those in the marginalized position tend to express a more objective view of reality than members of privileged groups. People outside the dominant power structure are forced to adapt to/oppose the dominant culture. They, therefore, know both sides of the scale: the oppressor’s and that of the oppressed. Since privileged individuals have no need to observe the realities of inferior groups, their standpoints are usually narrow and biased by comparison. That is why knowledge from below can provide an alternative knowledge. See D. E. Smith, ‘Comment on Hekman’s Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited’ (2004); Sandra Harding ‘Introduction: Standpoint Theory as a Site of Political, Philosophic, and Scientific Debate’ (2004).
5 Ibid.: 20–21.
8 This phrase is coined by Paul Ricoeur who conceptualizes Marxian, Freudian and Nietzschean thoughts through the common ideologue of a theory of doubt which ‘is not an explication of the object but a tearing off of masks, an interpretation that reduces disguises’. Ricoeur, Freud and Philosophy (1970; 2008): 30. Rita Felski elaborates that the hermeneutics of suspicion is a ‘distinctively modern style of interpretation that circumvents
obvious or self-evident meanings in order to draw out less visible and less flattering truths’. Felski, ‘Critics and Hermeneutics of Suspicion’ (2012).

9 By differentiating ‘work’ (which Barthes deems as fixed) from ‘text’ (which, according to Barthes, is open to multiple interpretations) Barthes challenges the process of canonisation which silences the infinite possibilities of signification in a text. Barthes says, ‘I can enjoy reading and rereading Proust, Flaubert, Balzac, and even—why not?—Alexandre Dumas; but this pleasure, however intense, and even when it is released from any prejudice, remains partly (unless there has been an exceptional critical effort) a pleasure of consumption: for, if I can read these authors, I also know that I cannot rewrite them.’ (1986, ‘From Work to Text’, 63), Thus the canonical reading which prescribes a set of rules or criteria as to how to read a text restricts both the text and the reader.

10 I draw on Derrida’s essay ‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences’ for this specific concept of play. According to Derrida, so far we have been substituting one fixed centre with another, thereby negating the possibility of ‘play’. He says that the present time is marked by an ‘event’ which rejects the centre’s position as a permanent locus. Now the centre performs as ‘a function, a sort of non locus in which an infinite number of sign-situations come into play’, as opposed to functioning as an authoritative mechanism (‘Structure, Sign and Play’, 1967: 353). For Derrida, any centre is only a provisional mechanism which inevitably and incessantly needs to be replaced by other centres through what he calls ‘play’. ‘Play’ which is a resistance to any fixed referent keeps presence or signification in a state of constant flux. Derrida says, ‘Play is the disruption of presence… Play is always absence and presence, but if it is to be thought radically, play must be conceived of before the alternative of absence and presence’ (ibid: 369). By allowing the functioning of multiple centres, ‘play’ works against the totalizing forces of fixed centres such as canonical reading.


12 Keer, Mahatma Jotirao Phooley (1964); Joshi, Jotirao Phule (1992). I would like to mention that I do not restrict the term ‘dalit historiography’ only to history produced by historians who are dalits. For me, this term incorporates those histories that have become canonised as history of dalits/dalit movements. Similar to my conceptualization of a dalit feminist as an achieved standpoint rather than a birth-based identity, dalit historiography envisions awareness of and about dalit history. It is for this reason that in this chapter I incorporate many non-dalit male and female historians to substantiate dalit feminist historiography as well.


14 Ibid.: 19.

15 Keer, Mahatma Jotirao Phooley: 27.
To understand Phule’s argument it is necessary to first explore the meaning and history of Aryan race theory. The concept of Aryan race theory was popularized by in India by Max Mueller (1823–1900) who categorized the Aryans as ‘fair-complexioned Indo-European speakers who conquered the dark-skinned dasas of India’ and Brahmans being the only knowledgeable group in Vedic Sanskrit, were categorized as Aryans (Thapar, ‘The Theory of Aryan Race and India’, 1996: 5). The institution of caste further enhanced the superiority of Aryan Brahmans by putting lower castes, untouchables and tribes as descendants of Dasas. This easy slippage from language to race to caste, provided, what Omvedt (1971) calls ‘a new pseudo-scientific justification for the caste hierarchy’ (Omvedt, ‘Jotirao Phule and the Ideology of Social Revolution in India’: 1969). According to Romila Thapar (1996), ‘The theory of Aryan race became endemic to the reconstruction of Indian history and the reasons for this are varied. The pre-eminence was given to the role of the Brahmanas in the Orientalist construction of Indology was endorsed by the centrality of the Vedas. The Aryan theory also provided the colonized with status and self-esteem, arguing that they were linguistically and racially of the same stock as the colonizers’ (‘The theory’: 7). The Aryan race theory thus provided a scientific linkage between white Europeans and upper-caste Indians in terms of heredity. It also worked as a validation of the caste system, presenting the Brahmans as ‘naturally superior.’ It is at this point that Phule’s intervention marks a revolutionary change in our understanding of the caste system and ‘Indian.’ See Thapar, ‘The Theory of Aryan Race and India’ (1996); Omvedt, ‘Jotirao Phule and the Ideology of Social Revolution in India’ (1971).


Ilaiah, ‘Dalitism and Brahmanism: The Epistemological Conflict in History’ (2001) elaborates that Phule ‘was of the view that the notions of “Brahman” and “Arya” were essentially anti-Shudra. According to Phule, the brahmanical forces established such organizations [like the Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj] to modernize and anglicize themselves … [and] would establish their hegemony even after the British leave India’: 124.

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29 In Cultivator’s Whipcord, Phule critiques upper-caste people by questioning, ‘But do the women in their houses ever work like the women in the farmers’ houses? Walking behind the plough, sowing grain and things, weeding the farm along with the husband, lifting up heavy loads of ash, cowdung, waste matter, or, when in summer there is not much work, labouring as stone-breakers on roads? Instead of helping their bhat-bhikshuk husbands, the moment they wake up, they make themselves up, finish the daily chores, and sit listening to scriptures or mythological stories; at the time of marriages, they do not even touch the grinder, and wearing expensive clothes, generally parade around, making shudra women carry things, and shudra men carry umbrellas over their heads.’ See Phule, ‘Cultivator’s Whipcord’ (2002b): 166.

30 Omvedt, Understanding Caste: 27.


32 Tharu and Lalita point to the sexual politics of authorship, readership and publication as they write, ‘We began work on these volumes with the premise that critical assumptions, historical circumstances, and ideologies generally have crippled our ability to read and appreciate their work…. [The] two volumes … will illuminate the conditions in which women wrote; bring more significant women’s writing to light; help us reevaluate writers who were reasonably well known but had been misunderstood or dismissed; give us a sense of the themes and literary modes women drew on and made use of; and help us capture what is at stake in the practices of self or agency and of narrative that emerge at the contested margins of patriarchy, empire and nation’ (vol. 1:xvii).


34 Pawar and Moon, We Also Made History (2014): 70.


36 The terrible condition of such places is found in Omprakash Valmiki’s autobiography Joothan (2003): ‘There was muck strewn everywhere. The stench was so overpowering that one would choke within a minute. The pigs wandering in the narrow lanes, naked children, dogs, daily fights, this was the environment of my childhood’ (1).


40 Omvedt, Understanding Caste : 53.

41 Mani, Debrahmanising History (2005): 343.

42 Ibid.: 343.


In 1923, the Bombay Legislative Council had passed a resolution that people of depressed classes have the right to access places that were built and maintained by the government. But this law could not get implemented in Mahad due to heavy opposition by the upper castes. See Keer, *Dr Ambedkar: Life and Mission* (1990): 52–53.


Pawar and Moon, *We Also Made History* : 120–23.

Ibid.: 124.


In this context the story of Nangeli is significant. Nangeli is believed to have been a lower-caste Ezhava woman who lived in early nineteenth century Travancore and is said to have cut off her breasts to protest against *mulakkaram* or breast tax. Breast tax was a casteist fine imposed on lower-caste women who defied the law of keeping their breasts bare (only the high-caste Nairs and Namboodiri women were allowed to cover their breasts). The amount of tax was based on the size of the breast. It is believed that Nangeli, when repeatedly asked to pay the tax for covering her breasts, refused and as a means of protest chopped her breasts off and presented them to the tax collectors on a banana leaf. The story follows that she bled to death the same day and her husband committed suicide by jumping into her funeral pyre. What ensued was a series of movements (notable among them was the Channar Lahala or Channar revolt from 1813 to 1859 by lower-caste Nadar women for the right to wear upper-body clothes) and the breast tax was annulled in Travancore. Nangeli’s story has been hugely celebrated by both anti-caste and feminist groups for exemplifying courage against caste and gender oppression respectively. In the context of the campaign by women in Kerala to allow their entry into the Sabarimala temple, Nangeli was invoked as a symbol of gender equality wherein all women should be given equal rights as men. (See Sheryl...
Sebastian, ‘Kerala’s Casteist Breast Tax and the Story of Nangeli’ 2016). During the anti-caste movements after Rohith Vemula’s death, artist Orijit Sen created an art story called ‘A Travancore Tale’ and posted it on his facebook page on 15 January 2016 with the endnote, ‘A Travancore Tale is dedicated to Rohith Vemula (1989–2016) who, like Nangeli, chose death over a life of indignity’. A dalit feminist reading of this story would challenge both the feminist co-optation of Nangeli within the scope of ‘all women’ claiming ‘gender equality’, and the dalit interpretation of Nangeli as a symbol of resistance against casteism. Instead, such a reading would posit Nangeli’s choice of clothing her breasts as a resistance specifically to brahmanical patriarchy. As the recovery of Ambedkar by Pawar and Moon in the context of dalit women’s clothing reveals, specific rules regarding attire are rooted in caste and gender assumptions. The law that forced dalit women to keep their breasts bare emerges from the brahmanical notion of public access to dalit women’s sexuality. Hence, Nangeli can neither be subsumed within ‘all women’, nor can her story be restricted solely to ‘caste oppression’.

58 See Ambedkar, BAWS: vol. 1 (1987–97): 47. In her notes on graded violence as a counter argument against mainstream feminist assumption that all women face same patriarchal violence irrespective of their caste, Rege defines graded hierarchy of caste as a system that ‘also grades the forms and extent of violence practices to which women of different castes are subjected’ (Against the Madness of Manu: 143, n12). In this way, Rege reinterprets caste as a gendered division.

59 Rege, Against the Madness of Manu: 20.
60 Ibid.: 20.
61 Ibid.: 18.
63 Ibid.: 61.
64 Ibid.: 144.
65 A case in point is Sharankumar Limbale’s autobiography The Outcaste where he mentions that his father being an upper-caste man and mother dalit, he was given his mother’s surname. For him, therefore, taking up his father’s surname was a challenge to such casteist norms. In recent time, Rohith Vemula’s death has undergone such problems with naming. While his death became the central factor that triggered nation-wide criticism to caste system (especially in the academia), the right wing, as a reaction, pointed to his father’s upper caste status and termed him as OBC and not a dalit (his mother’s caste). These two events show how lineage is a crucial aspect of the caste system. See Limbale, The Outcaste (2003), and Apparasu, ‘Rohith Vemula not a Dalit’ (2017).
66 Rege, Against the Madness of Manu: 145.
67 Ibid.: 193.
The Bill caused an enormous uproar amongst the upper-caste political leaders who saw it as ‘conspiracy against religion.’ For a detailed reading see Sinha, *Debating Patriarchy* (2012).


Ibid.: 182.

Ibid.: 182.

Ibid.: 184.

My translation.


Guru defines it as ‘a sort of folk musical theatre which involves the director who is also a lyricist and the chorus who are required to play small roles in the play’ (‘The Interface between Ambedkar and the Dalit Cultural Movement in Maharashtra’: 169).


This concept of humanization was proposed by Annie Besant. Geetha and Rajadurai (2011) quote a report from *New India*, a newspaper published by Annie Besant, where Brahman reformers maintained, ‘A little sympathy with their condition, some simple medicine, a little knowledge of the love and affection of the white man’s God, a studied comparative statement of his state and the state of the higher classes in the same town or village, the peculiar freedom of access to a civilized important white Dorai and the semi-contemptuous behaviour of the aristocrats of their own religion—these are the things by which missionaries succeed’ (Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: 19). They point that the Brahman reformers blamed the attitudes of orthodox Hindus for the harrowing rate of conversion of dalits into Christianity.

Geetha and Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium*: 335.

Ibid.: 492.

Ibid.: 336.


Ibid.: 43.


C. Rajagopalachari (1878–1972) was elected Premier of Madras Presidency in 1937. He garnered major criticisms for introducing Hindi as a compulsory language to be studied at the elementary level.
Geetha and Rajadurai (2011) write about the relevance of the endeavour of writing this history: ‘Political Non-Brahminism, both of the Justice Party and the Self-Respect movement … showed, for instance, that economic status and class privilege do not automatically translate into social capital and hegemony. … These arguments appear pertinent even a century later, when the question of reservation and rights appear unsettled and as prone to dismissive criticism. They appear apposite for another reason as well—the political assertion of dalits and the other so-called lower castes is understood mostly in terms of parties and leaders from these communities attaining political power. This rather truncated political imagination has no use for utopian or millenarian thought, which was a staple of all anti-caste discourses in the modern period, or for the rich histories that produced them.’ (Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: 504)


In this context we may recall Amar Jiban by Rassundari Devi which does challenge the confinement to the private, but does not explore the caste implications of the access to the public.

Quoted. in Anandhi, ‘Women’s Question in the Dravidian Movement’: 25.


Geetha and Rajadurai, Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: 387.

With reference to the issue of class in Dalit Politics, the Dalit Panthers manifesto is an important document. The widely reproduced Dalit Panthers' Manifesto is iconic in its definition of dalit as ‘members of scheduled castes and tribes, neo-buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion’ (Satyanarayana and Tharu, The Exercise of Freedom: 62). The Panthers’ association with ‘workers of the leftist movements in rural areas’ introduced an interesting caste/class dialogue which continues to prevail in contemporary Dalit Politics (Dangle, Poisoned Bread: xl). The intersectional approach to caste/class by the Panthers is elaborated by Omvedt. She writes that the intersectional approach does not begin with class. ‘In the strict sense, classes come into existence only with capitalism and then only in the capitalist “core” areas of factory production; peasantries, tribal communities, etc., are “class-like” but their relations of exploitation are interwoven with community/tribal/kinship features in pre-capitalist systems … [even if] these are linked to capital accumulation in a capitalist world-system; thus their fight against exploitation takes place through communities, tribes, castes and kinship groups’ (Omvedt, Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: 29). The biggest contribution of the Panthers has been understanding ‘labour as exploitation and caste as degradation’ (Rao, ‘Stigma and Labour’ (2012): 23). And in this way the Dalit Panthers have emphasized the need to see class not in its exclusivity but in intersection with caste. Dalit historiography is thus developed by keeping caste at the centre while simultaneously referring to class as an intertwined structure of oppression and also exploring instances of dalit agency.
Becoming a Dalit Feminist
Towards a Conclusion

The question of who is/can be a dalit feminist has prevailed from the very beginning of the dalit feminist discourse. As elaborated in the Introduction, the issue of experiential authenticity has become a winning point for those claiming ‘dalit women’ as the sole contenders of being dalit feminists. Contrastingly, experience is viewed doubtfully with reference to transparency, and birth-based collective is viewed to be restrictive and ghettoized. This book, then, makes a journey—from being a dalit woman to becoming a dalit feminist. As a mapping, this book begins with the identity of a dalit woman and progresses to analyse the positionality of/as a dalit feminist. In this way, this book simultaneously maps the major theoretical contours of Dalit Feminism while also addressing its core constituency. What this mapping indicates is a theorization of Dalit Feminism that is continuous and ever evolving.

The title of the conclusion has a political purpose. The ontological interpretation of being and becoming in almost binary terms is reconstructed here as an epistemological frame. Dalit Feminism is seen to be constituted by the ontological category, ‘dalit woman’,
while also simultaneously encompassing a position which high-
lights the politics of casteist sexism and its consequences at the 
structural level. From looking at ‘dalit women’, we then transition 
to the framework of dalit feminist intersectional standpoint. As 
an epistemological tool, this framework becomes useful in produc-
ing alternative knowledge about caste and gender. This frame-
work is also enabling because it goes beyond the constrictions of 
dalit women as inevitable components of its politics and looks at 
casteist-sexism that exists implicitly (in texts/issues that do not 
evidently feature dalit women per se).

Through this analysis of Dalit Feminism as an epistemological 
framework, this mapping also revisits and reforms the idea of the 
‘dalit woman’ as its primary constituency. Indeed, dalit women and 
their experiences are the foundation on which Dalit Feminism is 
built. However, as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, the presence 
of dalit women,¹ or articulations by dalit women,² do not neces-
sarily make a text/event dalit feminist per se. It is the method of 
reinterpretation that becomes vital in creating an understanding 
of the relationship between caste and gender which transforms 
the knowledge based on these two as discrete systems through the 
concept of casteist sexism. And this is what formulates a dalit fem-
inist intersectional standpoint.

This mapping, therefore, concludes by proposing that Dalit 
Feminism is a position and not restricted only to identity. Hence, 
by extension, we can use dalit feminist intersectional standpoint as 
a lens to look at any text (and not only those that exclusively focus 
on dalit women characters) to highlight the underlying casteist, 
sexist narratives.

AS A LENS

Sharmila Rege elaborates on the idea of speaking as a dalit femi-
nist by emphasizing that the dalit feminist standpoint avoids ‘the 
narrow alley of direct experience based “authenticity” and narrow
“identity” politics, and incorporates “other groups who must educate themselves about the histories, the preferred social relations and utopias and the struggles of the marginalised.” In this formulation, Dalit Feminism as a standpoint is not restricted to dalit women only. It, in fact, becomes a political platform that creates scope for building a solidarity in opposition to systems of intersectional oppression. Seen in terms of a methodology of analysis, such an understanding of dalit feminist standpoint expands the purview of its theoretical framework.

Since dalit feminist epistemology is based on the tasks of recovery and reinterpretation, the focus of Dalit Feminism is simultaneously on dalit women’s articulations (as evident in their autobiographies), and also on unravelling the complexities of caste and gender in texts and issues that are viewed predominantly through the lens of caste or gender. In such instances, caste-gender intersection remains implicit. As a standpoint, Dalit Feminism provides an important lens to view any text, whether or not they include representations of dalit women, thereby leading to new ways of seeing that foreground the intersectionality of caste and gender. To explicate this point I present a dalit feminist analysis of the films *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2017) and *Sairat* (2016), which, while recognized as important feminist and dalit texts respectively, are not directly concerned with the figure of the dalit woman.

*Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2017) narrates the stories of four women living in the same neighbourhood whose dual lives reveal their oppression by patriarchy and their resistance to this oppression. Their ‘real’ and socially-recognized lives are shown to be governed by patriarchy as the elderly woman, Usha Parmar, takes on the garb of the asexual ‘buaji’, Shirin Aslam is subjected to her husband’s sexual aggression, Rehana Abidi’s behaviour is governed by her parents, and Leela is headed for an arranged marriage. At the same time, these women also have their fantasy lives where their dreams are represented through the narrative of Rosy, the heroine of an erotic pulp fiction novel that Usha
loves to read in secret. This novel portrays their hidden hopes of falling in love, expressing sexual desires, fulfilling their goals, which are partly enacted through their secret second lives as a woman involved in phone-sex, a salesperson, a teen rebel, and an aspiring entrepreneur. At the end of the film, the four women, after being rejected/reprimanded by their families and society, are seen to experience a sense of sisterhood based on their shared experiences of patriarchal oppression as well as a shared moment of resistance.

The mainstream analysis of this film as a feminist text has foregrounded its articulation of female sexual desire, the duality in women’s lives, and its proclamation of agency. Even reviews that find the film’s ‘feminism’ compromised by its ending laud its ‘inclusiveness’ in terms of age and religion, as well as for its ‘cautionary notes’ that prevent any easy resolution of the complex questions related to women’s desire that it raises. It is this idea of inclusiveness and its representation of female desire that get redefined when analysed from the dalit feminist intersectional standpoint.

From this standpoint, two characters—Leela and her mother—become especially significant. In the film, these two characters are defined more nebulously than the others. Since neither of them wear a burkha in public, this sartorial difference from Shirin and Rehana appears to mark them as Hindu. However, unlike the other three main female characters in the film, Leela is never given a surname. This absence assumes particular significance in light of the fact that surnames are usually indicative of caste and community identity. This suppression of caste identity with respect to Leela assumes greater significance in light of the film’s silence about her mother’s married status; whether she is a widow, or whether her husband left her. The film shows the mother, who earns her livelihood by modelling nude for art students, admonishing her daughter Leela by saying that the only alternative to marriage is to become a prostitute or to opt for a
profession like herself, that is, a nude model. Seen from a dalit feminist intersectional standpoint, this connection between body and profession may be understood in terms of the brahmanical sexualization of dalit women’s bodies as a result of which dalit women, considered inherently impure and lustful, often remain confined to certain kinds of jobs that perpetuate their sexualization. The limited choice that her mother offers Leela—marriage or prostitution/sexualized use of the body in the public sphere—then assumes a caste-specific significance which does not allow for any real agential exercise of choice. Interestingly, in the film, it is Leela who is shown to exercise her sexual agency to the optimum by not only initiating sex with her boyfriend a number of times, but also filming the act in one instance, and later kissing her fiancé in front of her boyfriend to make the latter jealous. So while, on the one hand, the film’s foregrounding of gender-religion and the dichotomy between sexual liberation and sexual oppression appears to erase caste as an intersectional category of analysis, it also simultaneously makes use of the brahmanical sexualization of the dalit woman’s body in its representation of both Leela and her mother. Thus, a dalit feminist reading of the film foregrounds the intersection of caste and gender that remains implicit in the film and is ignored in mainstream feminism’s analysis of the film.

While Lipstick Under My Burkha ignores caste, Sairat (2016) puts it centre stage. This Marathi film, which has received both commercial and critical success, exposes the brutality of the caste system as exemplified by its strictures against exogamy. In the film, a dalit boy named Parshya, and an upper-caste girl (belonging to the landlord Patil caste), Archie, fall in love, are caught, flee and marry, and then are hacked to death by the girl’s relatives. Sairat has been lauded for bringing forward the ‘disturbing’ reality of caste, and also for portraying a strong female character, Archie, who ‘challenges established gender roles’ by riding a Royal Enfield Bullet and standing up for Parshya against her brother. The film
therefore is praised for taking up caste on the one hand and gender
on the other. Caste and gender, however, are seen as two distinct
categories confronted respectively by Parshya and Archie. While
Parshya is seen to represent dalit people’s oppression by the upper-
caste Patils, Archie struggles with patriarchy as represented by her
family, especially her father and brother.

From a dalit feminist intersectional standpoint, however, it
is the intersection of caste and gender that becomes the central
concern. Seen from this perspective, the film may be seen to
implicitly reinforce rather than challenge certain casteist patri-
archal ideologies. This film is seen as a classic dalit representa-
tion that invokes the Ambedkarite notion of inter-caste marriage
(exogamy) which is explored through the union of a dalit boy and
an upper-caste girl. The primary subject of the film, therefore,
becomes the dalit boy, with the first section of the film focusing on
his pursuit of the upper-caste girl who is the object of his desire.
This narrative trajectory implicitly associates dalit empowerment
with the concept of dalit masculinity. The film, in fact, establishes
Parshya’s masculinity not only through his excellence in sports,
but also through a juxtaposition of his strong physique against
his bow-legged friend who, unlike Parshya, is unable to get the
girl he desires. This implicit association between dalit masculin-
ity and dalit empowerment is further strengthened by the near
erasure of dalit women from the film. Though Parshya’s mother
and sister are shown in the film, they remain in the background.
While Parshya is sent to study, his sister remains at home, and
the film does not show any awareness about this gender discrim-
ination within the family. The only instance where Parshya’s
mother and sister are seen to be speaking in the film is during
their conversation with Archie where they appear deeply con-
scious of the latter’s upper-caste identity (as is visible through
their servile attitude while speaking to Archie). This brief com-
munication, therefore, does nothing to break the caste barrier
between women.
This near invisibilization of dalit women is a telling contrast to the representation of Archie as a strong confident woman. Seen from this perspective, Archie’s caste identity becomes central to understanding the agency she displays in the film. For example, when Archie visits the big well and teases the dalit boys bathing there, her actions reflect a form of caste agency that, in a harsher form, characterizes the verbal and physical assault of dalit men by upper-caste men.\textsuperscript{14} Verbal assault of dalit men signifies caste supremacy coded as assertive masculinity of upper-caste men. In teasing the dalit boys, Archie appropriates this masculinist casteist agency. A dalit feminist reading thus challenges the dominant interpretation of Archie’s pride as exclusively feminist,\textsuperscript{15} instead highlighting the caste privilege underlying the sense of superiority that marks her agency in relation to the dalit boys including Parshya. The way in which caste and gender intersect in the representation of Archie is further evident in the second half of the film when she and Parshya flee to a new city, away from their caste-ridden village. In this new social setting, Archie does not immediately have access to her caste power in the public sphere which makes her vulnerable to sexual predators. But even in the city, it is Archie who is seen to move relatively quickly to a supervisory position, while Parshya is shown to remain a mechanic, a low-paid, menial job. Their workplaces therefore replicate the casteist pattern of presuming an upper-caste person (albeit a woman) as more valuable than a dalit person. At the same time, however, within the domestic sphere, it is Archie who is seen to be handling childcare and cooking, while Parshya purchases the necessary supplies and brings them home, thus reaffirming the patriarchal division between the private and the public. Re-centring the focus on caste-gender intersection, instead of caste and gender in their exclusivity, therefore gives a different perspective on \textit{Sairat}. It provides a more nuanced understanding of how patriarchy underlies the representation of not just dalit women, but also upper-caste women and dalit men.
CONCLUDING REMARKS

The detailed analyses of these texts show that a dalit feminist intersectional standpoint intervenes and redefines the categories ‘woman’ and ‘dalit’ as conceptualized respectively by mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics, by seeing caste-gender as intersectional. Dalit Feminism initiates a paradigmatic shift by challenging the basic conceptual frameworks of caste and gender, thereby creating a new body of knowledge. Stacey and Thorne in ‘The Missing Feminist’ write,

The process of paradigm shifting, by which we mean changes in the orienting assumptions and conceptual frameworks which are basic to discipline, involves two separable dimensions: (i) the transformation of existing conceptual frameworks; and (ii) the acceptance of those transformations by others in the field.16

This book began by highlighting Dalit Feminism’s proclamation of difference from mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics and the transformation of the idea of how caste-gender function intersectionally.17 Progressing from this observation, the conclusion shows how Dalit Feminism may be used as a lens to analyse any text through the intersection of caste-gender. This mapping of Dalit Feminism, therefore, challenges its conceptualization as a ghettoized politics relevant only to dalit women, asserting instead its value as a standpoint that fundamentally transforms the fields of mainstream Indian Feminism and Dalit Politics. Sharmila Rege, in Writing Caste/Writing Gender, points out the limitations of ghettoizing Dalit Feminism. She writes that mainstream Indian Feminism often does not engage with Dalit Feminism because it is either ‘frozen in guilt’ (what can ‘we’ say now, let ‘them’ speak) or resolves the issue of erasure by ‘adding’ dalit women to the existing framework.18 Dalit Feminism therefore gets branded as a separate politics, or becomes the victim of tokenism. It is these practices of separatism and addition that are challenged by the dalit feminist
intersectional standpoint. As a remedy to such ghettoization, Rege and Patil propose ‘a transformation from ‘their’ cause to ‘our’ cause’\(^9\) wherein solidarity is ‘achieved… rather than ascribed’.\(^{20}\)

As an intersectional standpoint, Dalit Feminism looks at how the systems of caste and gender function intersectionally. The focus on the process and functionality of systemic oppression expands our understanding of how these systems operate in other instances as well. As a standpoint, Dalit Feminism, while based on the knowledge of caste-gender intersection that emerges out of the experiences of dalit women, does not restrict its conceptual understanding only to dalit women.\(^{21}\) As a theoretical framework, exemplified above through the analyses of *Lipstick Under my Burkha* and *Sairat*, it provides a lens to reinterpret any text/event from a caste-gender angle.

This conceptualization of dalit feminist intersectional standpoint as a transformative interpretative framework marks a departure from Sharmila Rege’s iconic theorization of Dalit Feminism. Rege challenges separatist identity-based politics and urges other groups to ‘educate themselves’ about the struggles of dalit women.\(^{22}\) It is in this way that Rege aims to reinvent non-dalit feminists as dalit feminists. While this claim paves way for building political solidarity across caste divisions, concern has also been raised as to whether it is possible for a non-dalit to really understand the condition of dalit women.\(^{23}\) My conceptualization of Dalit Feminism as an intersectional standpoint moves away from such debates regarding identity politics. Conceptualized as a way of looking, dalit feminist intersectional standpoint is shown to be concerned less with who is speaking for/as a dalit feminist, and more as a mode of analysis of a text/issue/event from a caste-gender angle that challenges dominant readings and thereby transforms our understanding of the text and of the intersecting systems of oppression. It is in these interventionist and transformative capacities that Dalit Feminism may be seen to be operative. This book, therefore, simultaneously deals with difference while making a difference.
1 An example of this claim is Baburao Bagul’s short story, ‘Mother’ (see Chapter 4). The analysis shows that even though the story is focused on a dalit mother, the titular character is victimised and silenced. The perspective the story adopts is that of the son Pandu who blames his mother for being a whore. This story therefore is a classic example of how a text, despite its apparent focus on a dalit women, does not become dalit feminist.

2 This point can be exemplified through Sujatha Gidla’s Ants Among Elephants (2017), which looks into caste vis-à-vis the Leftist movement in Andhra Pradesh, but does not foreground the gender politics in either the Left or Dalit Politics. As such, even though Gidla is writing as a dalit woman, her autobiography does not necessarily embody a dalit feminist standpoint. Similarly, Meena Kandasamy’s identity as a dalit woman does not identify all of her writings as dalit feminist. Notably her autobiographical novel, When I Hit You (2017), throws light on gender violence within the domestic sphere but does not invoke caste.


7 R. Banerji, Lipstick Under My Burkha is Bold but Not Feminist 2017; Vetticad, ‘Lipstick Under My Burkha movie review: It’s clear why censors were unnerved by this brave, fun film’ (2017).

8 Although Leela’s mother mentions that her alcoholic husband has left them a huge debt, it is not clear whether he is alive or dead.

9 Similar inference can be drawn from the Mumbai dance bar ban issue (Chapter 3).

10 Majumdar, ‘Into the Wild’ (2016); Rangan, ‘Sairat… An Epic Reimagining of the Typical Love Story Touches (and Crushes) the Heart’ 2016.


12 Ibid.; Mazumder, ‘Sairat is a Reminder of How Delusional We Indians Really Are’ (2016).

13 Similar instance can be found in Omprakash Valmiki’s autobiography Joothan where he remains oblivious to the fact that all his brothers go to school while his sister remains at home. See Chapter 2, this volume.

14 Seen repeatedly in dalit men’s autobiographies such as Joothan, The Scar, as well as in Gogu Shyamala’s short story, ‘Raw Wound.’

15 Bhasme, ‘The Marathi Blockbuster’; Mazumder, ‘Sairat is a Reminder’.


Rege, ‘Dalit Women Talk Differently’: 45.

Patil, ‘Revitalising Dalit Feminism’ (2013): 42.


Appendix

This book proposes a framework, ‘intersectional standpoint’, to define the dalit feminist lens. As elaborated in the first chapter of the book, intersectional standpoint utilizes intersectionality as a tool to create a standpoint. The contribution of intersectional standpoint in Dalit Feminism to identify the simultaneity of caste and gender has been explored extensively in the consecutive chapters. Following are some analytical readings on intersectionality and standpoint theory to elucidate further the concepts of intersectionality and standpoint theory with an annotated bibliography focusing on some of the earliest and most well-known positions on these frameworks. It is hoped that this appendix will be especially helpful for students and researchers of gender, feminism and women’s studies.

INTERSECTIONALITY

What Is Intersectionality?

Intersectionality is the study of intersections between forms or systems of oppression, domination or discrimination. It is a methodology of studying the relationships among multiple dimensions and the modalities of social relationships and subject formations. Intersectionality emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s from legal academy with a view to develop a single framework for analysing power that encompasses and connects gender, class, and
race-based subordination. The notion of intersectionality arose out of the criticism of feminists of colour which focused on ‘triply oppressed’ (as blacks, as women, and as a working-class person): black women. As legal theorist, Kimberlé Crenshaw argues, intersectionality rejects the single-axis framework often embraced by both feminist and anti-racist scholars, instead analysing ‘the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women’s … experiences’. Intersectionality criticizes the abstraction of the object of knowledge and begins discussion from the experience of the object of knowledge. In this way it questions the homogenization of categories such as ‘woman’, instead recognizing that there are multiplicities and differences among ‘women’ and the best way to understand that is to start from the experience of the ‘women’. A major inference is that both the non-privileged as well as the privileged groups can become beginning points of intersectional analysis to investigate the interlinked axes of oppression and domination.

Methodology

Intersectionality presents a valid and lucrative methodology for feminist analysis by proposing multiplicity of approach and by challenging the homogeneity so far assumed by either feminist or anti-racist discourses. Firstly, it subverts race/gender binary by putting the subjects and their experiences at the centre of the overlapping margins of race and gender discourses, which further complicates the theorization of identity. Secondly, unlike identity politics, intersectionality approaches intra-group differences by exposing differences within the broad categories of ‘women’ and ‘blacks’. Intersectionality critiques conventional Feminism’s emphasis on either creating sisterhood among ‘all’ women and speaking for them, or differentiating and ignoring distinctions based on race, ethnicity and class. And thirdly, intersectionality provides a unique opportunity for the scholars to investigate
multiple marginalized subjects by juxtaposing apparently mutually exclusive frameworks. Through such methods, intersectionality attempts to theorize identity and oppression.

Leslie McCall delineates three approaches that are prevalent in intersectional analyses, namely, anti-categorical approach, inter-categorical approach and intra-categorical approach. She identifies the anti-categorical approach as complete rejection of categories. Though the fixity of categories is increasingly being viewed sceptically, it is also a fact that categories do continue to exist. The challenge, therefore, is to explore the complexities of existing categories. For this reason, the inter- and intra-categorical approaches bear value in intersectional methodological approach. By inter-categorical approach, McCall refers to the recognition of ‘relations of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimension’, while the intra-categorical approach ‘interrogates the boundary-making and boundary-defining process itself’ where it maintains a critical stance toward categories that are predominantly seen through a single axis of identity.²

**Why Is It Not Additive?**

Commenting on how, for black women, both exclusion and addition are detrimental, Crenshaw writes,

Racism as experienced by people of color who are of a particular gender—male—tends to determine the parameters of antiracist strategies, just as sexism as experienced by women who are of a particular race—white—tends to ground the women’s movement. The problem is not simply that both discourses fail women of color by not acknowledging the ‘additional’ issue of race or of patriarchy but that the discourses are often inadequate even to the discrete tasks of articulating the full dimensions of racism and sexism. Because women of color experience racism in ways not always the same as those experienced by men of color and sexism in ways
not always parallel to experiences of white women, anti-racism and feminism are limited, even on their own terms.  

The failure of anti-racist and feminist discourses to address the intersections of race and gender is the fact that by choosing one, another gets automatically erased. When a black woman is put under the category of ‘people of colour’, anti-racism may fail to interrogate patriarchy that acts in the subordination of women; and when it is put in the category of ‘woman’, Feminism may often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of colour.  

In the additive model, each identity marker is analysed as an individual characteristic. It ignores the effect of the interconnection of these markers. To give an example, if we take the figure of ‘dalit woman’ as an additive model, we will see the concerns a ‘dalit woman’ faces for being a ‘dalit’ and a ‘woman’. Her concern as a ‘dalit woman’ is not taken into account. Crenshaw notes that ‘race, gender, and other identity categories are most often treated in mainstream liberal discourse as vestiges of bias or domination, that is, as intrinsically negative frameworks in which social power works to exclude or marginalize those who are different…. The problem with identity politics is that it frequently conflates or ignores intra-group differences.’ For example, if caste is the focus in identifying a dalit woman, the criticism gets directed towards mainstream Indian Feminism for being upper-class and upper-caste and not taking into consideration the differences among ‘women’. This position does not highlight the distinctions among the ‘dalits’ (male and females). On the other hand, if a dalit woman’s identity as a ‘woman’ is emphasized, it often ascribes to the sisterhood policy of all women being equal and will only question the differences among dalits. In the process, what is forgotten is the inter-distinction among women (upper-class upper-caste and dalit) and intra-distinctions among dalits (dalit men and dalit women). By assuming that all ‘dalits’ are equally affected by the question of caste and all ‘women’ are affected by patriarchal domination, this model assumes a generalization of the term called ‘dalit woman’.
If we take the issue of violence, we see that both dalit and non-dalit women face domestic and sexual violence. An additive model would simply add dalit women’s factor of being a dalit and a woman as the reason for being sexually dominated. On the other hand, intersectionality would approach the issue by invoking brahmanical patriarchy which controls both the caste system and sexuality of women through endogamy and the concept of purity and pollution. For example, with reference to the Khairlanji massacre (see Chapter 3), the sexual assault on dalit women has been used by brahmanical patriarchy to undermine the manhood of the dalit men and justify the ‘impurity’ of dalit women. Further as we see in case of Mariamma, brahmanical patriarchy assumes the accessibility of sexuality of dalit women because of their participation in social labour (see Chapter 4). Their public sexual assault also marks the inability of dalit men to protect their women. In brahmanical patriarchy protectionism (executed by confining women within the four walls of the house) is deemed as one of the major ways to preserve caste purity and prove masculinist and caste supremacy,6 the public rape of dalit women serves as a means to emasculate dalit men. An intersectional analysis, therefore, unfolds how gender ideology legitimizes not only structures of patriarchy but also the system of caste.

In the context of public rape of dalit women, we can invoke Catharine McKinnon’s intersectional reading of the genocide in Bosnia. In her reading, MacKinnon criticizes the legal representation of the issue as solely a matter of racial or ethnic discrimination and points out that ‘the destruction of the women of an ethnic community through rape was recognized as destroying their community as such. Genocide was not marginalized; instead, women were made central in its more capacious frame’ (see Chapter 5).7 This intersectional reading not only offers a different analysis of the issue, but also underlines how the dominant interpretation compartmentalizes this issue as a racial atrocity. Intersectionality is not about privileging gender over race and ethnicity. As MacKinnon points out, ‘The fact that this genocide
was in part conducted through gender crimes did not mean that the acts were not also ethnically and nationally and religiously destructive. It meant they were. This process is termed by Mari Matsuda as asking the ‘other question’ wherein one learns to probe into the factors that otherwise do not appear prominently.

II

STANDPOINT THEORY

What Is Standpoint Theory?

Standpoint theory is a method for analysing the complex relation between power and knowledge. It aims to challenge the hegemony and neutrality claimed by philosophies of science, epistemologies, and methodologies, and is presented as a way to empower the oppressed groups, value their experiences, and develop an oppositional consciousness. This theory concerns the authority generated by people’s knowledge and the power such authority has to shape people’s opinion in daily life. All formulations of standpoint theory contend that a standpoint arises when an individual recognizes and challenges cultural values and power relations that contribute to subordinate or oppress particular groups.

Standpoint begins its analysis from the experiences of the object group because knowledge starts from material lived reality. Standpoint theory’s most important concept is that an individual’s own perspectives are shaped by his or her experiences in social locations and social groups. Standpoints always involve more than one factor. Since people generally belong to multiple social groups, it is possible for one person to possess several standpoints at once. Moreover, formulating a standpoint is a conscious, active process. To obtain a standpoint, a person must recognize and evaluate their experiences and social position. Differences in standpoints arise from social inequalities. Hence, standpoint argues that those in the marginalized position tend to express a more objective view of
reality than members of privileged groups. People ‘outside’ the dom-
inant power structure are forced to adapt to the dominant culture. 
They, therefore, know both sides of the scale: the oppressor’s and 
that of the oppressed. Standpoint argues that the point of view of 
the oppressed is more advantageous because the oppressed sees 
both the oppressor’s position and his own position. Through this 
knowledge, every dominated group can turn an oppressive feature 
of the group’s condition into a source of critical insight. Thus 
standpoint theory shows that a disadvantage can be turned into an 
epistemological, scientific, and political advantage. But this process 
includes active participation in the cause of the oppressed to raise 
a voice for the collective in order to gain emancipation through 
struggle. This is the reason why standpoint is not an ascribed posi-
tion. It is an achievement. The empowerment of the oppressed 
requires a distinctive kind of knowledge which can emerge only 
through awareness.

Methodology

In Feminism, standpoint theory has an immense effect because it 
provides a methodology for research that connects the political with 
the scientific knowledge. It provides logical ground for Feminism 
to argue that feminist issues are not merely about ‘women’, but 
have the potential to inform theoretical, methodological, and 
political thought in general because feminist concerns arise not 
only from social and political issues but are ‘focused on every 
aspect of natural and social orders, including the very standards 
for what counts as knowledge, objectivity, rationality, and good 
scientific method’.  

Sandra Harding points out that the standpoint methodology 
should be carried out in three ways: firstly, by starting research from 
women’s experiences, lives, and activities and from the emerging 
collective feminist discourses; secondly, by avoiding assumptions 
posed by already available frameworks provided by institutions; and
thirdly, by understanding the conceptual practices of power through ‘studying up’. As a methodology, it provides valuable resources to social justice movements because it explains the nature and social relations otherwise inaccessible. By using standpoint method, one can produce oppositional and shared consciousness, to create oppressed peoples as collective subjects of research rather than object of other’s observation.

According to standpoint theory the viewpoint of the dominant groups fails to interrogate their advantageous situation in a systematic and critical manner which leaves their social situation scientifically and epistemologically a disadvantaged one for generating knowledge. Being in the lowest rung of the society, the oppressed group has the knowledge of how power functions through those who dominate and those who are dominated. Through this knowledge, every dominated group can turn an oppressive feature of the group’s condition into a source of critical insight. Thus standpoint theory shows that a disadvantage can be turned into an epistemological, scientific, and political advantage. But this process includes active participation in the cause of the oppressed to raise a voice for the collective in order to gain emancipation through struggle. This is the reason why standpoint is not an ascribed position. It is an achievement. The empowerment of the oppressed requires a distinctive kind of knowledge which can emerge only through political processes.

Furthermore, standpoint proposes a re-visioning of the position of the researcher which helps to avoid the narrow alley of direct experience based ‘authenticity’ and narrow identity politics. Standpoint is, therefore, an affiliative politics where not only women belonging to a particular group speak for themselves, but people from all categories ‘learn’ about the women’s position and contribute in the construction of a systematic alternative to the dominant worldview from the standpoint of women.

Standpoint’s focus on the object groups’ experience to unfold the relation between power and knowledge, as well as to revise the
position of the researcher/subject, stands in stark contrast to the notion of ‘objectivity’ practised by dominant philosophies, epistemologies and methodologies. These methods argue that in order to provide a ‘bias-free’ judgment, the subject/researcher should remain outside his/her individual biases, interpretations, feelings, and imaginations. Hence, central to this argument is the desire to establish rationality (in the sense of non-emotion) and singularity of truth.

Contrastingly, Harding proposes the method of ‘strong objectivity’ in standpoint analysis which delinks the neutrality ideal from objectivity. Harding suggests that starting research from the lives of women actually strengthens standards of objectivity. As Harding points out, ‘political engagement, rather than dispassionate neutrality, was necessary to gain access to the means to do such research’ in the actualities of women’s everyday lives and in the conceptual practices of powerful social institutions. For example, as Black Feminism and Third World Feminism have often argued, an ‘objective’ analysis of black and Third World women by white feminists often ascribes to essentialist notions of their ‘subjects’. Hence, an engagement into the knowledge produced by the experiences of the black and Third World women become fundamental in grasping the gaps within Feminism.

How Does It Define Experience?

Now the question arises, is this experience ‘authentic’? In other words, should we take these experiences (of the objects) to be ‘true’?

Harding provides an answer to this by arguing that standpoint’s focus is never on truth-claim. In other words, believing that all knowledge is socially situated, standpoint acknowledges that all experiences are partial. Hence, a way to gain ‘less false’ accounts is to begin with the reality of the life experiences of the object, to invoke a comparison within the experiences of the objects. Standpoint theory’s reliance on experience of the object germinates
from the notion of ‘strong objectivity’ which argues that perspectives of groups outside the dominant groups are more useful because these remain ‘outside’ the dominant and hence have a more objective account of the dominant as well as the dominated. For example, the Third World women’s standpoint is scientifically less partial because their lives begin from outside the eurocentric conceptual frameworks in which white Western feminist studies have been largely organized. And more importantly, these experiences are not taken at their face value. The ‘moment of critical insight’ comes only through conscious collective political struggle. Thus, a view, or a position, needs a conscious effort to get transformed into a standpoint.

III

HOW ARE STANDPOINT THEORY AND INTERSECTIONALITY RELATED?

Standpoint analysis entails an intersectional methodology in its approach to understand experience of the object group as challenging the abstractions and homogenizations maintained by the dominant power structures. Beginning with knowledge generated from material lived reality both these methods argue for a collective political consciousness to challenge the axes of oppression. Standpoint theory uses intersectional method to analyse how the experiences of particular groups are affected by and generate from multiple sources. For example, a black feminist standpoint analysis would see the intersecting factors of race, gender, class, and so on, as affecting the ‘black woman’. As Harding puts it, an intersectional approach uses resources to bring about the differences within ‘women’ to highlight the fissures in the otherwise predominant homogeneity. In this sense, both standpoint theory and intersectionality believe that the viewpoint of the oppressed is the most advantageous one because it remains ‘outside’ the domain of dominant power structures and hence may provide a better
view of how power functions in people’s daily lives moulding their knowledge and opinions. The point where intersectionality differs from standpoint is that it does not take into consideration the position of the researcher which becomes pivotal in standpoint analysis. Thus, while in intersectionality the speaker continues to speak ‘for’ the object group, in standpoint the speaker speaks ‘as the object group’ because a standpoint contains a rigorous ‘learning’ of the object group’s position and knowledge base.

Another commonality between intersectionality and standpoint theory is their emphasis on group-based experiences. Patricia Hill Collins argues that the notion of standpoint refers to groups having shared histories based on their shared location in relations of power.13 This ‘shared history’ is the location where hierarchical power relations converge and affect the groups. An individual, being a part of it, automatically gets affected by it. For example, the standpoint of the collective called ‘black women’ would emerge from a long standing history of shared experiences. This focus on ‘group experience’ creates scope for different groups to come together and create a coalition on the basis of a similar goal. To give an instance, connections have often been made between black women and dalit women on the grounds that both groups are oppressed by multiple structures of caste/race, class, gender, religion, and so on. Hence, a standpoint analysis that draws on both these groups would lead to a broader, more comprehensive understanding of the axes of oppression. This would also give scope for affiliative politics (in the literal sense of relating to the formation of social and emotional bonds with others or the desire to create such bonds). Despite such group coalition, the question remains as to how to address the differences within a group. Postmodern Feminism accuses standpoint for this non-acknowledgement of ‘differences’ within object groups. However, as an answer to that, Harding argues that standpoint perceives material lived reality as an ongoing process. Hence, by adopting a standpoint we get a ‘less partial’ point of view which does not lead to ‘truth’, but which
involves in an ongoing dialectic process of constantly redefining knowledge and reconceptualizing social relations.

IV

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Below is a brief study of texts, some of the earliest theorizations of/on feminist standpoint and intersectionality, which constitute the foundations of intersectionality and feminist standpoint theory. Both the theoretical frameworks have been expanded, contested and contextualized immensely (see Chapter 1). The return here to some of the oldest texts is intended to explore the origins of those discussions and debates and ponder on them vis-à-vis contemporary postulations. It is hoped that this brief study would provide a base for further researches to follow.

Texts


In her article Crenshaw defines intersectionality as a methodology used to analyse how multiple networks of power operate in an intersecting fashion in order to continue domination on a group of people. Intersectionality questions identity politics which views categories as homogeneous and mutually exclusive, that is, ‘woman’, ‘blacks’, and claims that one needs to recognize the differences within and among categories. This challenges the homogeneity claimed by categories. Drawing specific attention to domestic violence and rape, Crenshaw explores the simultaneity of race- and gender-based violence on women of colour.

Crenshaw charts three forms of intersectionality: structural intersectionality, political intersectionality and representational intersectionality. Structural intersectionality refers to the creation
and operation of particular systems and structures in society that preserve privilege for some groups or individuals while restricting the rights and privileges of others. Structural intersectionality includes political, economic, and institutional forms of discrimination. Crenshaw exemplifies structural intersectionality through a survey of battered women’s shelters in the US. She points out that the social service groups do not reach out to them and they do not get legal recognition of their issues because white women do not face these challenges in the same way or to the same degree. Crenshaw identifies structural intersectionality as the ways in which race, class and immigration status, not just gender, intersect to affect the care and intervention battered women of colour receive. Crenshaw also points out that when violence against women and domestic abuse do receive political attention, battered white women are pointed to as the exception to the rule because battering is seen a problem located in the family of the ‘other’, namely, poor and/or minority families. This assumption normalizes domestic violence within communities of colour and other minority communities. Crenshaw’s critique therefore is directed simultaneously to White Feminism and anti-racism which structurally ignore the condition of the women of colour and to dominant institutions that perpetually reproduce the stereotypical assumptions about women of colour, thereby, depriving them of any justice.

In her explanation of political intersectionality, Crenshaw highlights the impact of political activism by showing how various race, class and immigration-status identities intersect to affect political organizing against violence against women, highlighted by the fact that women of colour are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas. This is best illustrated by the often disparate discourses between feminist and anti-racist organizations. Anti-racist groups focus on unifying the people solely based on race. The attempt here is to remove the stereotypes about ‘black’ people. This focus,
however, comes at the cost of ignoring the question of gender within black communities. The violence that these women face is oftentimes silenced due to attempts to maintain the integrity of black and minority communities also fighting racism and other modes of oppression. Similarly, when it comes to mainstream Feminism, the legal redressals demanded are mostly catered to challenging patriarchy as it affects white women. The problem with such approach is that it homogenizes all ‘women’ and ignores the specificity of race. Mainstream Feminism challenges patriarchy’s view of non-virgin women’s rape as something women ‘ask for’ (consensual) with an aim to create policies that prevent voyeurism of women’s bodies. What comes to focus here is the white woman and her body. When it comes to black women, rape becomes a way to emasculate entire black communities. It is the public-ness of rape/making rape visible to all in order to dominate the community that is completely ignored by both feminist and anti-racist groups.

Representational intersectionality focuses on the representations and misrepresentation of groups or individuals through media, texts and language, and explores the complex ways the dominant ideologies permeate them. Crenshaw exemplifies the ways in which the representation of race and gender serves to devalue women of colour within popular culture. According to her, representational intersectionality purports that race and gender converge so that the concerns of minority women fall into the void between concerns about women’s issues and concerns about racism. Debates over representation continually elide the intersection of race and gender in the popular culture’s construction of images of women of colour. Accordingly, an analysis of what may be termed representational intersectionality would include both the ways in which these images are produced through a confluence of prevalent narratives of race and gender, as well as a recognition of how contemporary critiques of racist and sexist representations marginalize women of colour.
In summary, an intersectional analysis, as proposed by Crenshaw, argues that: (i) racial and sexual subordination are mutually reinforcing; (ii) black women are commonly marginalized by a politics of race alone or gender alone; and (iii) a political response to each form of subordination must at the same time be a political response to both.


In this article MacKinnon provides intersectionality as a method that analyses social order from the perspective of the oppressed group by taking into account their experiences of lived reality. Intersectionality investigates spaces where ‘vectors of inequalities intersect’. It focuses on the particular, rather than universalizing a knowledge (i.e., an experience being common to all). Thus, intersectionality recognizes that experiences of oppression will be different among black and white women due to the intersecting factors of race and gender. However, this particularity does not mean considering a knowledge arising from the experience of a particular group as narrow, static and restrictive. Rather, MacKinnon talks about how that particularity gives a more holistic perspective of the universal. In this sense, intersectionality challenges the universality which claims homogeneity. It claims to begin research at the micro level from the lives of the subject group. In the process, intersectionality not only intervenes into dominant discourses, it also challenges classifications of categories as mutually exclusive. Thus, ‘women’ and ‘gender’ are not seen as mutually exclusive but as intersectional.

MacKinnon also notes that intersectionality investigates both the results of the problem (what happens) and the process of it (how it happens). Hence, intersectionality is a process-oriented methodology that treats identities not as given but as socially
constructed. MacKinnon adds that the process-orientedness becomes a non-relative and non-postmodern approach because it aims to unfold how power relations operate in daily lives to subordinate people. Intersectionality ‘attempts to unveil the processes of subordination and the various ways those processes are experienced by people who are subordinated and people who are privileged by them’.14 Thus, even if there are differences within subject groups, intersectionality assumes that observations can be made across groups which would enable a better understanding of power relations.


In this iconic introduction, Harding maps feminist standpoint theory by using it as an intervention in the disciplinary paradigm of scientific epistemology. She views feminist standpoint theory as an epistemological intervention that aims to analyse how power relations structure knowledge. It challenges traditional epistemological assumption that a general, universal, and abstract account of knowledge and scientific enquiry is possible. Since all epistemologies are constructed through power relations, standpoint claims that all perceptions are necessarily biased. In fact, the scientific discourses are established and maintained through ascertaining the hegemony and hierarchies of power. The established epistemologies are not only biased but also partial. Standpoint intervenes into the mainstream epistemological frames and redefines these bodies of knowledge. Hence, Harding notes, beginning research from the lives of oppressed groups (such as women) provides a better understanding of broader relations and networks of power. In this way, standpoint formulates a ‘more holistic’ view of the structures of oppression in order to achieve a collective political oppositional stance aspiring for liberation.
Harding challenges scientific discourses that claim Feminism’s invalidity to produce scientific knowledge due to its political and subjective inclination. She notes that the standpoint of women is more liberatory because it knows the conditions of both domi-nator and dominated. This subjugated knowledge arises from the ‘local’ and the experience of ‘material lived reality.’ Standpoint examines the process of how things are seen/perceived/represented. Standpoint is about recognizing how, by applying certain practices, different structures put the object group(s) in an inferior position. This realization is arrived at by transforming experience into sources of knowledge, and by transforming that knowledge into sources of critical insights about how power relations function.

In Harding’s conceptualization the importance of experience in standpoint theory lies in understanding that people’s experiences are shaped by social and political forces. Treating experience as an important tool to generate knowledge challenges scientific discourse’s claim that experience, especially that of women, is ‘subjective’, ‘invalid’, and ‘unfit’ to become source of knowledge. Borrowing from Marxist theory, feminist standpoint theory claims that the work that women do, shapes their knowledge and behaviour. Activities of daily life reflect how institutionalized power structures function. Standpoint argues that the understanding of broader power structures can be achieved when one takes experience of the oppressed as a tool to deconstruct oppression. Standpoint’s analysis of experience reveals that daily activities are structured by dominant systems. And the struggle against both repressive and ideological state apparatuses is at the material level. Experience, therefore, is not an isolated phenomenon. Experience here is understood as that of a collective and is structured by systemic modes of power. While reading standpoint’s treatment of experience the questions we need to ask are: (i) Is experience articulated as being dictated by structures of oppression (where the objects are always represented as victims)? (ii) Is experience represented as negotiating with the structures (dialectical method—as
survival strategy)? (iii) Is experience taking an oppositional stance to these structures (resistance—search for an alternative)? In other words, can we understand experience vis-à-vis relations of power as linear/dialectical, deterministic/oppositional?

One of the most important features of feminist standpoint theory, as pointed out by Harding, is that it is not merely a viewpoint, one needs to continuously struggle to achieve a standpoint. For example, assertive women are labelled as ‘bitches’. This understanding is shaped by seeing women who act assertively as bitches. This is a notion provided by the dominant patriarchal structure. A person who holds a feminist standpoint realizes that society expects women to be nice and docile. A transgression or rejection of these expectations and assertion of agency often earns them the title ‘bitches’, whereas assertive men are valued for their leadership qualities. A feminist standpoint therefore is an achievement that reflects political consciousness about the power relations that shape women’s position as subordinate to that of men.


In this article Smith presents a feminist standpoint critique of the discipline, Sociology. Arguing that sociological research promotes ‘relations of ruling’, that is, the way institutions uphold the white male perspective and seek to marginalize women, Smith argues for the standpoint of women which can unfold this relation of ruling. For this purpose, Smith reflects that it is important to begin research from the lives of women at the micro level as it helps enhance our understanding of how institutions function at a macro level. Smith argues that women’s perspective is more liberatory in understanding the power structures because they see how both the dominant system works (which they are forced to adopt)
and how their experiences often contradict it. By ‘consciousness’ Smith means ‘perspective’; she says that there are two kinds of spaces: one is the local and material, and another is abstract and conceptual. While men inhabit the conceptual world, women are supposed to remain in the material world. Women’s work (the activity they do in order to survive) is aimed to provide comfort to men so that they can inhabit the conceptual world without participating in the material. The society, therefore, is structured in a way that men can afford to be alienated from the material realm. As a result, men perceive the world from a single dominant perspective.

When it comes to women, there is a bifurcation of consciousness or perspective. This bifurcation occurs from the two different worlds that women experience. In order to fit in the conceptual order inhabited by men, women have to suspend their knowledge and adopt a body of knowledge that keeps them outside its mode of discussion or in a subordinate relation. The way women perceive the world, therefore, is through a split. Women learn to adopt the dominant hegemonic culture in order to survive, but they also develop a consciousness that remains inconsistent to what the dominant culture propounds. Bifurcation of consciousness occurs as women attempt to negotiate with the two mismatched worlds. Women, therefore, know the world in two ways: one is in the material realm where they reside physically, and another is at the conceptual level where they separate themselves from the knowledge gained through lived experience and are forced to adopt something external. According to Smith, women’s perspective is ‘more complete’ because they are aware of both the worlds. Hence research should begin from women’s lived experiences, the material world where they are situated, rather than the abstract external world. Smith, thus, acknowledges the situatedness of knowledge and proposes a standpoint that is more holistic. Her article seeks to examine the relationship between women’s activities and experiences and larger institutional imperatives.
For Smith, feminist standpoint theory enables a position for investigating relations of power and knowledge in the institutional sectors and everyday life from women’s point of view.


In this article Collins proposes a black feminist intersectional standpoint to show that black women’s ‘outsider within’ position is valuable to create an alternative methodology to the study of sociology. The term ‘outsider within’ refers to the physical space that black women as domestic workers occupy within the white households but remain ‘outsiders’, and as groups who are kept outside of (or completely ignored by) the dominant sociological paradigms. The ‘outsider within’ position, therefore, seeks to challenge the hegemony of white male-centrism and the homogenization/sisterhood of White Feminism, and seeks to correct biases and stereotypes while aiming to intervene and redefine the mainstream epistemological frames and provide political empowerment to the object group and similar groups in concern. Collins, thus, aims for a solidarity-based collective.

In Collins’ postulation, the three points that emerge out of black feminist standpoint are: (i) meaning of self-definition and self-valuation; (ii) the interlocking nature of oppression; and (iii) the importance of African American women’s culture. Her first point refers to the stereotypes about black women representing externally created controlling images which dehumanize them. This leads to self-devaluation, or psychological oppression. Collins claims that by defining and valuing assertiveness and other ‘unfeminine’ qualities as necessary and functional attributes for African American women, these stereotypes can be challenged
and corrected. To define the interlocking nature of oppression Collins opts for intersectionality as methodology to delineate that black women are oppressed by intersecting structures of race and gender. By locating black women at this intersection, Collins identifies the category ‘black women’ in contradistinction to ‘white women’ and ‘black men’.17 Black feminist standpoint reveals that the simultaneity of race and gender as structures of oppression is the crux of black female understanding of material reality.

Collins also emphasizes the importance of African American women’s culture. She argues that the concept of culture is derived from the collective. Culture is not seen as static, fixed form. Rather it is a fluid entity that is subject to change depending on socio-political situations. Hence, one cannot essentialize ‘black woman’ as an identity-based category fixed in time and space. The notion of fluidity of culture (where culture is formed out of the collective) gives greater scope to form affiliations based on similar political goals and a greater scope for political empowerment. This culture is constituted of two things: black women’s experience and their creativity. The collective is formed on the basis of shared experiences which black women share as workers and as mothers. The survival strategy they employ then gets carried over to their children. Shared experience therefore becomes an important to formulate knowledge about black women survival and self-assertion. Their creative articulations also become significant as coping mechanism to cope with simultaneous oppressions.

The ‘outsider within’ position therefore intervenes into specific knowledge generation and validation processes. Collins claims that as an alternative standpoint, this position challenges the hegemony of the white male patriarchal trend in sociology. This standpoint, therefore, is politically enabling for communities simultaneously oppressed by race and gender, and also serves as a corrective for the existing systems.
NOTES

3 Crenshaw, ‘Mapping the Margins’: 1252.
4 An example of the former is provided by Crenshaw (ibid.) with reference to 2 Live Crew, a popular Black rap group, whose lyrics, though challenging racist stereotypes, reproduced sexism against black women (see Chapter 3). The latter aspect, i.e., White Feminism reproducing racism against black women, is made visible when white feminists actively resist any responsibility to address racism by denouncing it as ‘their problem’ (see Chapter 1, n.46). In Dalit Feminism, similar analysis has been made with reference to the Khairlanji massacre (see Chapter 3).
5 Crenshaw, ‘Mapping the Margins’: 1242.
8 Ibid.: 1027.
10 For more on Feminism’s critique of science and its claimed objectivity, see Sumi Krishna and Gita Chadha eds., Feminists and Science, vols. 1 and 2 (2015; 2017).
14 Crenshaw, ‘Mapping the Margins’: 1297.
15 ‘Women’ is defined as category oppressed by structures of androcentrism, eurocentrism, and heterosexism. By defining women thus, Harding creates scope for formulating collective depending on similar political aims. This awareness challenges essentialist identity politics based on pre-defined categories such as women, blacks, and makes coalition with diverse categories of oppressed groups possible in order to achieve liberation. This identification, therefore, is a conscious political choice.
16 Feminist standpoint theory challenges the white male-centric sociology and scientific study, whereas the ‘outsider within’ position as mentioned and elaborated by Patricia Hill Collins (described in this appendix) intervenes into feminist epistemological understanding of ‘homogeneity’ and seeks to redefine it taking into consideration the ‘differences within.’
17 This may serve as an example of how standpoint intersectionality is a tool. It is also important to note that all standpoints may not be intersectional.
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