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### The Double Burden of Caste and Gender in Dalit Women's Writing

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**Abstract:** Dalit women's writing has emerged as a powerful literary and political intervention within Indian literature, foregrounding the intersecting structures of caste and patriarchy that shape the lived experiences of marginalized women. Unlike mainstream feminist discourse, which has often privileged upper-caste perspectives, Dalit women's narratives expose the unique forms of oppression resulting from the simultaneous operation of caste-based discrimination and gender inequality. This "double burden" subjects Dalit women to social exclusion, economic exploitation, sexual violence, and systemic denial of dignity and agency. Drawing upon the theoretical framework of intersectionality, this study examines how Dalit women writers articulate experiences of marginalization and resistance through autobiographies, memoirs, short stories, and poetry. By analyzing selected works of writers such as Bama, Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, and P. Sivakami, the paper explores the ways in which personal narratives challenge dominant literary canons and contest the silencing of Dalit women's voices. These texts not only document the realities of caste and gender oppression but also reclaim identity, assert agency, and envision possibilities for social transformation.

The study argues that Dalit women's writing transcends conventional categories of literature by functioning as a form of testimony, resistance, and collective memory. Through their narratives, Dalit women writers redefine the discourse of feminism and contribute significantly to postcolonial and subaltern studies by foregrounding the complexities of multiple and intersecting identities.

**Keywords:** Dalit women's writing; caste oppression; gender discrimination; intersectionality; Dalit feminism; subaltern studies; identity; resistance.

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No voices bear the weight of a double erasure as deeply as those of Dalit women writers in Indian English literature. Dalit women occupy a position that has been consistently ignored by both the mainstream feminist movement and the male-dominated Dalit literary tradition. They stand at the convergence of two deeply embedded axes of oppression: caste and gender. Their experience constitutes something genuinely distinct — a third space of suffering and resistance



that demands its own critical vocabulary and a rightful place within the Indian literary canon, irreducible to the mere sum of its parts.

The "double erasure" these writers endure is more than a theoretical construct. It manifests in the fields, where Dalit women perform caste-mandated labour, and within their homes, where patriarchal domination compounds that exploitation. Although Dalit women have long written, organized, and resisted, the autobiographical tradition within the Dalit literary canon has been overwhelmingly shaped by male voices. It is equally evident in feminist literary scholarship, where the term "Indian woman" too frequently signifies upper-caste Hindu women — erasing Dalit women through the very language that claims to speak for all.

This paper argues that Dalit women writers occupy a distinct and under-theorized position in Indian English literature — not as passive victims documenting their misery, but as active intellectuals who theorize their own experiences and interrogate the caste-patriarchal structures that produced them. Writers like Bama, Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, and Meena Kandasamy write with a clarity forged from living at the intersection of caste humiliation and gendered silencing — a vantage point that produces knowledge unavailable to those who have experienced only one axis of oppression. Their writings exceed the boundaries of the literary — they are simultaneously acts of resistance, archives of collective memory, and interventions in the urgent, unresolved debates about justice, identity, and belonging that define contemporary India.

### **Theoretical Structure: Dalit Feminist Perspective and Intersectionality**

Before turning to the texts themselves, it is necessary to interrogate the theoretical frameworks through which Dalit women's writing has — and has not — been read. The frameworks most frequently deployed in Indian feminist literary criticism — postcolonial feminism, liberal feminism, and even certain strands of Marxist feminism — have consistently failed to account for the full complexity of Dalit women's lived experience. This inadequacy is not accidental. It is a consequence of the structural dominance of upper-caste perspectives within Indian academic feminism — a dominance so deeply entrenched that it has gone largely unexamined even within scholarly traditions that consider themselves progressive.

The most productive theoretical framework for addressing this gap is Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, first articulated in her foundational 1989 essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex." Crenshaw's central insight was that oppressions are multiplicative rather than additive — that a Black woman's experience is not simply "race + gender" but something qualitatively distinct from either racism or sexism experienced in isolation. Transposed to the Indian context, intersectionality illuminates how a Dalit woman's encounter with violence is produced at the precise convergence of casteism and patriarchy — a violence that neither framework alone can fully name. The rape of Dalit women, for instance, cannot be reduced to caste violence or sexual violence in isolation — it is a technology of both simultaneously, deployed to enforce the social and sexual order that caste hierarchy demands.



Yet intersectionality, developed within the specific context of American racial politics, requires careful adaptation before it can be transposed to the Indian caste system — where the axes of oppression, their historical formations, and their lived textures differ significantly from those Crenshaw theorized. It is here that Sharmila Rege's groundbreaking work offers an indispensable corrective. In *Writing Caste / Writing Gender* (2006), Rege contends that Dalit women "talk differently" — that their standpoint, forged through economic marginalization, sexual exploitation, and caste-based servitude, constitutes a distinct epistemology that exceeds and challenges both mainstream feminist and Dalit male frameworks. Rege specifically critiques Indian feminism's tendency to construct "woman" as an undifferentiated category, arguing that this universalization consistently reproduces upper-caste norms as the unmarked default of feminist thought. For Rege, the Dalit woman is not a variation of the Indian woman — she is an altogether different theoretical subject whose ways of knowing fundamentally unsettle the premises on which Indian feminist theory has been built.

This theoretical ground, however, was anticipated decades earlier by B.R. Ambedkar, who offered one of the earliest sustained analyses of Dalit women's structural vulnerability within the caste system. In *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), Ambedkar argued that the caste system perpetuates itself through the control of women's sexuality, identifying women as the "gateways" through which caste endogamy is enforced and reproduced. It follows that Dalit women occupy the most exposed position within this system — those most subjected to the violence through which caste-based sexual control is exercised and maintained. Rooted in the specific material and social conditions of the Indian subcontinent, Ambedkar's analysis independently arrives at an intersectional understanding of oppression — one that precedes Crenshaw's framework by several decades and emerges from an entirely different intellectual tradition. The structure of domination that Ambedkar theorized in political and philosophical terms finds its literary expression in Dalit women's writing — where bodily violation, labour exploitation, and social invisibility are not separate grievances but interlocking dimensions of the same caste-patriarchal order.

By utilizing these three theoretical pillars—Crenshaw's intersectionality, Rege's Dalit feminist standpoint, and Ambedkar's structural critique—it is feasible to interpret Dalit women's literary works as representations of a "doubly marginalized" consciousness that simultaneously rejects both of its marginalizations. According to Gopal Guru, these works are the result of humiliation—the actual experience of being viewed as less than human due to both gender and caste—and they serve as the foundation for literary and political expression. The writing itself becomes an act of double resistance: against the caste order that denies Dalit women full humanity, and against the patriarchal order within the Dalit community that denies them full voice.

## **Autobiographies of Dalit Women as a Counter-Narrative and Political Act**



Autobiography is the predominant literary form through which Dalit women have entered into Indian English literature; this choice is neither coincidental nor merely traditional. The autobiographical tradition in Dalit literature has served as the primary means of articulating Dalit subjectivity against a social order that denied Dalit people the status of full subjects. It was largely initiated by Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (1997) and subsequently enriched by a range of regional-language texts translated into English. The stakes of this autobiographical mode are even higher for Dalit women, who write not only against caste-based erasure but also against gendered forms of suppression that have persisted within Dalit political and literary spheres.

According to several critics, the Dalit woman's autobiography functions as a form of testimonio, a mode of witness literature in which the individual life is presented as representative evidence of a collective condition rather than as a singular exception. This formal dimension is effectively captured by Sharmila Rege's concept of "Dalit women's testimonios": works in which the personal is inherently political, and the narrative of a single life becomes a critique of a broader social structure. This is what distinguishes Dalit women's autobiographies from the confessional mode often found in upper-caste women's writing: the Dalit woman writer does not narrate a private self but a social position, and does not offer interiority for its own sake but as evidence of systemic violence.

The formal choices in these autobiographies carry significant political weight. The use of the first person, whether singular or a collective "we," as in Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, serves as an assertion of subjectivity in the face of a social structure that has historically denied it. The documentary precision with which these writers record the details of daily life—the labour, the hunger, the rituals of pollution and purity, and the textures of humiliation—is not merely realism but testimony: an accumulation of evidence against a system that has thrived in part because its victims were not expected to speak. Furthermore, writing in or translating into English—the language of power and education—affirms that Dalit women's experiences merit both sustained scholarly attention and a wide readership.

These autobiographies also serve an important theoretical function by challenging the conventional division between experience and knowledge that has characterized much academic discourse. By grounding their critiques of caste and gender in lived experience, Dalit women writers implicitly argue that the most rigorous analysis of these structures emerges from those who have been most deeply subjected to them, rather than from a position of sociological distance. This is as much an epistemological claim as it is a literary one: it asserts that experiential knowledge is not a barrier but a prerequisite for a genuine understanding of how caste and patriarchy operate.

### **The Double Exclusion of Dalit Women Writers in the Literary Canon**

However, Dalit women's writing is still not widely acknowledged within Indian English literary studies as representing a distinct and significant literary legacy. An examination of the



critical apparatus surrounding Indian English literature reveals a recurring pattern of double exclusion—from both the Dalit literary canon and the feminist canon—which mirrors the social double marginalization that these authors themselves document at the level of lived experience and scholarly representation.

The category of “women’s writing” in mainstream Indian feminist literary criticism has been disproportionately shaped by English-educated, upper-caste, and often urban women whose experiences, while important, are far from representative of Indian women’s lives in general. Even the immense anthology *Women Writing in India* (1991–1993), edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, which made a significant effort to include Dalit women’s voices, tended to subsume these voices within a broader feminist narrative that overlooked caste-specific realities. The result was a form of inclusion that also functioned as erasure: although Dalit women were present, the anthology’s overarching feminist framework frequently disregarded the specifically Dalit critique embedded in their writing. In this sense, inclusion without epistemic transformation becomes another form of appropriation.

There has been only limited progress within Dalit literary criticism as well. Drawing on Sharankumar Limbale’s seminal work on Dalit aesthetics, the debates of the Dalit Panther movement, and the revival of B. R. Ambedkar’s literary and philosophical legacy, the critical framework that developed around Dalit literature has largely centered on male authors and male experiences. When Dalit women writers have been discussed, it has often been in ways that prioritize caste over gender, thereby reproducing within Dalit criticism the same marginalization that the broader literary establishment enacts along caste lines. The underlying assumption—that gender can be deferred while caste remains the primary concern—has been consistently and forcefully challenged by Dalit women writers.

This double exclusion extends beyond questions of representation or anthology politics. The failure to recognize that Dalit women’s writing offers a distinct epistemological standpoint—a mode of knowing and narrating the world shaped by conditions of double marginalization—signals a deeper theoretical limitation. Precisely because of this positionality, such writing is capable of illuminating aspects of Indian social life that neither mainstream feminist discourse nor male-centered Dalit perspectives can fully apprehend. To fully integrate Dalit women’s writing into the canon is therefore not merely to expand a list of authors, but to allow it to reshape the critical frameworks through which Indian English literature as a whole is understood.

## **A Pathway to Dalit Feminist Literary Analysis**

A critical framework suitable for Dalit women’s writing must be developed in order to acknowledge it as a sovereign genre. This framework should be a Dalit feminist literary criticism that is grounded in the unique literary and social contexts of Indian Dalit women’s writing while drawing on the theoretical resources covered in this paper. In numerous



significant ways, this kind of criticism would be different from both mainstream Dalit literary criticism and mainstream Indian feminist criticism.

First, it would consider intersectionality as a framework that Indian Dalit women's experience has, in many respects, anticipated and enhanced rather than as a concept borrowed from the West. The perspectives of Bama, Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, Meena Kandasamy, and others make up a body of theorizing about the intersection of gender and caste that is not only illustrative of Crenshaw's framework but also complicates and deepens it in ways unique to the Indian social formation. This theorizing would be taken seriously by a Dalit feminist literary criticism, which would approach the literary texts as theoretical interventions rather than as objects of external theoretical analysis.

Second, the formal innovations of these works would be seriously addressed by such a critique. Collective autobiographies, testimonies, confessions as political acts, and the use of oral tradition and local dialect in literary works are all intentional tactics that implement a politics of resistance rather than just narrate it. In order to read Dalit women's writing effectively, one must pay attention to both the writing style and the substance, as well as the manner in which form and content are combined to support a political and moral endeavor.

Third, rather than being only an additive intervention, a Dalit feminist literary criticism would be a truly transformational one in the field of Indian English literary studies. It would not content itself with finding a "place" for Dalit women writers within existing critical frameworks but would insist that the inclusion of these writers requires a rethinking of the frameworks themselves — of what counts as literary merit, of what experiences are considered worthy of literary representation, of whose lives are assumed to be legible as literature. In this way, Dalit feminist literary criticism challenges the fundamental presumptions of Indian English literary studies rather than a critical framework suitable for Dalit women's writing must be developed in order to acknowledge it as a sovereign genre. This framework should be a Dalit feminist literary criticism that is grounded in the unique literary and social contexts of Indian Dalit women's writing while drawing on the theoretical resources covered in this paper. In numerous significant ways, this kind of criticism would be different from both mainstream Dalit literary criticism and mainstream Indian feminist criticism.

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## Conclusion

For many years, Dalit women authors have been creating a corpus of literary works that is both collective history and personal narrative, autobiography and critique, and testimony and philosophy. They have done so in the face of a twofold marginalization that mimics and reproduces, at the level of cultural representation, the socioeconomic double burden that their texts so forcefully portray. They are excluded from the feminist canon by caste and from the Dalit canon by gender. The fact that they have done so with such formal sophistication, political clarity, and literary power is itself a testament to the tenacity and inventiveness that have defined Dalit women's struggle throughout history.

The argument of this paper has been that Dalit women's writing is not a footnote to either Dalit literature or Indian women's literature, but a distinct genre with its own epistemological standpoint, its own formal traditions, and its own theoretical implications. This work, which is based on the intersectional framework of Crenshaw, enhanced by Sharmila Rege's Dalit feminist perspective, and grounded in Ambedkar's structural critique of caste, offers what neither male Dalit discourse nor mainstream feminism can: a perspective from the most demanding intersection of Indian social life, portrayed by those who have survived it and transformed it into literature.

Indian English Literature, if it is to be a genuinely critical and inclusive field, cannot afford to continue treating Dalit women's writing as supplementary or secondary. These voices—doubly marginalized and doubly resistant—are not incidental to the narrative of Indian literary modernity; rather, they are among its most vital, truthful, and essential narrators. Dalit women's writing must be treated as extra or secondary if Indian English literature is to be a truly critical and inclusive profession. These voices—doubly marginalized and doubly resistant—are not incidental to the narrative of Indian literary modernity; rather, they are among its most vital,



truthful, and essential narrators. Placing them at the center of the canon is an act of intellectual integrity rather than charity, acknowledging that a society's literature is best understood with the help of the voices of those it has tried hardest to silence.

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