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Dalit Feminist Critique of Patriarchy: A Standpoint-Based Intervention

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Abstract

This article undertakes a critical exploration of Indian patriarchy through the lens of Dalit feminist standpoint theory, centering the voices and lived realities of Dalit women as both epistemic and political interventions. It foregrounds the necessity of rethinking feminism in India by interrogating the dominance of upper-caste savarna feminism and the masculinist thrust of Dalit political discourse—both of which have historically marginalized Dalit women's unique experiences of caste, gender, and class-based violence. Drawing on foundational works by Sharmila Rege, Sunaina Arya, Anandita Pan, and others, the paper elucidates the conceptual framework of brahmanical patriarchy and highlights B.R. Ambedkar's critical role in shaping a radical feminist imaginary. Through engagement with intersectionality, testimonial literature, and the politics of self-representation, the essay advances a reconstructive model of feminist praxis rooted in Dalit standpoint epistemology. In doing so, it argues that Dalit feminism is not an appendage but a transformative and necessary paradigm for theorizing justice, resistance, and gender in India today.

Keywords: Dalit Feminism, Brahmanical Patriarchy, Standpoint Epistemology, Intersectionality, Caste and Gender, Self-Representation

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Dalit feminism in India is not merely a sub-branch of feminist thought; it is a radical, insurgent epistemology rooted in the lived experiences of Dalit women—experiences shaped by the simultaneous operations of caste, class, and gender-based oppressions. The mainstream Indian feminist movement, largely steered by upper-caste women, has often failed to include Dalit women's specific forms of subjugation in its agenda. As Sharmila Rege poignantly asserts, "Dalit women talk differently," not because they are essentially different, but because their material conditions compel them to speak from a different positionality (Rege, "Dalit Women Talk Differently" 2549). This paper explores the critique of patriarchy offered by Dalit feminism, focusing on its key themes: intersectionality, brahmanical patriarchy, standpoint theory, and the politics of representation and resistance.

Dalit women occupy a unique and doubly marginalized position in Indian society. Bhushan Sharma and K.A. Geetha emphasize that their lived experience cannot be understood solely through the lens of caste or gender, as these identities are interlocked and mutually reinforcing (Sharma and Geetha 1). Feminist theory, if it limits itself to gender alone, often erases this simultaneity. Drawing from Kimberlé Crenshaw's seminal idea of intersectionality, Dalit feminism demands that caste be central to any analysis of gender-based violence and exploitation.

Ruchi Tomar, in her study of Dalit women's rejection of both patriarchal and brahmanical norms, notes that Dalit women "are perceived as 'Other' even among women," and are subjected to structural and sexual violence both inside and outside their communities (Tomar 1). In fact, Dalit women represent the most visible faces of the intersectional margins—they are economically impoverished, socially ostracized, and sexually violated. This multi-layered marginalization becomes particularly visible in their narratives of trauma, resistance, and labor.

Dalit feminist scholars argue that the principal framework of gendered oppression in India is not just "patriarchy" in the abstract but specifically brahmanical patriarchy—a system that legitimizes control over women's sexuality and labor through caste hierarchies. Sunaina Arya argues that the emergence of the term "Dalit patriarchy" in some circles is both empirically and conceptually flawed. She critiques this move as a misdiagnosis, noting that such terms obscure the structural role played by brahmanism in shaping all forms of gendered oppression (Arya 217–218). Arya insists that we must maintain clarity in naming our structures of analysis to avoid ideological dilution.

This insistence on precision is echoed in the writings of Sharmila Rege and Susie Tharu, who challenge the erasure of caste in mainstream feminist scholarship. The concept of brahmanical patriarchy, as developed by Rege and Uma Chakravarti, is crucial in understanding how caste purity is preserved through the control of women's sexuality and mobility. Thus, caste is not an adjunct to gender but its constitutive structure. This has direct implications for feminist politics, pedagogy, and methodology.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, an early feminist philosopher in the Indian context, anticipated this critique. In his speeches and writings, he emphasized that the control of women's sexuality was central to the maintenance of caste. His call for Dalit women to reject prostitution, often a caste-based occupation forced upon them, was not moralistic but aimed at dismantling this structural coercion (Arya and Rathore 3). As Rege explains, "Caste determines the division of labour, the sexual division of labour, and the division of sexual labour" (*Writing Caste, Writing Gender* 106). Ambedkar's legacy, therefore, is foundational to Dalit feminist thinking and must be read not merely as a social reform agenda but as a radical critique of gender and caste.

Dalit feminism offers not just a critique of dominant ideologies but also a reconstructive theoretical approach grounded in standpoint epistemology. Anandita Pan insists that both

Indian feminism and Dalit politics have failed to account for the lived realities of Dalit women. She calls for a "standpoint praxis" that integrates emotion, experience, and historical awareness into theory-making (Pan 36). This model of theory resists the Western dichotomy between the emotional and the rational, emphasizing that affect and embodiment are valid sources of knowledge.

Pan, echoing Patricia Hill Collins, asserts that the epistemic authority of marginalized communities must be fore grounded, not simply acknowledged. This argument challenges liberal multiculturalism, which often tokenizes difference without altering the fundamental hierarchies of knowledge production. Dalit feminist standpoint theory thus becomes a radical act of reclaiming intellectual space.

Gopal Guru similarly critiques the appropriation of Dalit women's experiences by non-Dalit scholars and activists, arguing that such co-option reproduces hierarchies of knowledge production: "Our energies have been co-opted to working out the visions of dominant others" (Tomar 2). Dalit feminist thought insists that women must be theorists of their own liberation. This demand is not merely political but epistemological—it questions who gets to produce knowledge and on whose terms.

Dalit women's invisibility in both mainstream feminist and Dalit political discourse is a form of epistemic violence. Gayatri Spivak's question—"Can the Subaltern Speak?"—resonates deeply here. Dalit women have been spoken for, spoken about, but rarely given the space to speak from their own experiences (Spivak 4). This representational paradox has profound implications for activism, academia, and policy.

Sharmila Rege asserts that the dominant feminist frameworks treat Dalit women as "objects of pity or symbols of suffering" rather than as political subjects (Rege, "Dalit Women Talk Differently" 2548). The autobiographies of Dalit women—like those of Urmila Pawar and Baby Kamble—serve as "testimonios" that challenge historical silences and make visible the intertwined operations of caste and gender. These texts do not merely narrate suffering; they articulate critique, resistance, and alternative imaginaries.

Rege urges that we "move from sympathy to solidarity," allowing Dalit women's self-representations to guide feminist praxis (*Writing Caste, Writing Gender* 94). This move from representation to self-representation is transformative, not only because it centers voice but because it challenges the frameworks that previously structured that voice. It redefines agency in terms not dictated by dominant ideologies.

The future of feminist thought in India must be radically inclusive, intersectional, and self-reflexive. Susie Tharu underscores that gender must be seen not in isolation but in relation to culture, class, and history. She states: "The concept of gender is a critical tool in engineering the conceptual shift from biology to history" (Tharu and Niranjana 494). This reconceptualization is only possible when caste is integrated into the feminist analysis—not as an add-on but as a constitutive structure.

Dalit feminist praxis, therefore, is not a fragment but a foundational mode of thinking gender and justice in India. It demands a radical shift from homogenizing frameworks to historically situated, community-driven, and experience-based epistemologies. The intersectional oppression experienced by Dalit women exposes the fault lines of both caste-based movements and gender-based politics, forcing a reevaluation of both.

In conclusion, Dalit feminism is not just an academic intervention but a lived and living politics. It is rooted in protest, survival, and the assertion of dignity. It critiques the erasures of both savarna feminism and Dalit patriarchy while constructing a framework that is accountable, situated, and revolutionary. As such, Dalit feminist critique is not merely a corrective to dominant discourses but a radical reimagining of what it means to theorize from the margins. As a standpoint-based politics, Dalit feminism unsettles conventional modes of knowledge

production by demanding that theory emerge from the embodied and affective realities of the most oppressed.

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