

From Margin to Manifesto:

Intersectional Ostracism and Female Solidarity in Women's Protest Narratives

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Abstract—This research paper analyses the alteration of oppressed women's voices into a proclamation of resistance in Indian protest literature, focusing on the lived realities of Dalit women who encounter intersectional oppression through ethnicity, class, and gender, in the writings of Meena Kandasamy and Kausalya Baisantriy. The study investigates how these women writers move from positions of quietness and persecution towards powerful critiques of systemic injustice through literature, creating a platform for political intervention and social consciousness. This research not only aims to foreground the political agency of oppressed women in literature but also enhances the definition of protest beyond organized movements through a detailed study of selected narratives to include literary articulation as activism. Memoirs written by Dalit women assert the individual and collective identities, which have been historically suppressed or misrepresented.

Keywords—marginalization, protest, feminism, exclusion.

I. INTRODUCTION

Dalit feminism in India has emerged as a powerful movement led by Dalit women to encounter both patriarchal impositions and the biased caste system rooted in Indian society. The history of the Dalit feminism movement has been described and studied by several scholars over time. The primary difference between mainstream feminism and Dalit feminism lies in the fact that mainstream feminism is single-layered in nature, whereas Dalit feminism deals with the intersection of caste, class, and gender. Therefore, it is multi-layered. In Indian society, oppression is layered in nature, especially for women belonging to the marginalized caste and class, where these three layers intersect with each other, creating a unique identity crisis for these women. Life is more challenging for Dalit women whose struggles have been highlighted by meritorious authors representing these communities. However, most of the time, Indian protest literature fails to include certain writers who need reclamation and attention within larger debates. The exclusive nature of protest literature demands more scholarly works and research in Indian academia. Dalit women's narratives began to emerge as a powerful counter discourse in this context, giving voice to their unique struggles and challenging the erasure of their experiences in feminist and anti-caste discourses.

Dalit literature can be called the protest literature, which raises concern among the masses regarding the age-old discrimination, persecution, and exploitation which the Dalits have been facing even in the 21st century. They are known as 'Untouchables' or those who cannot be touched. Since there are four ladders in the Hindu caste system, the Brahmins have been occupying the uppermost position in our society, followed by the Kshatriya, the Vaishya, and the Sudra, but the Dalits do not find any place in the ladder. Gradually, a new genre in literature developed when Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* was published in 2003 as the first Dalit autobiography, through which Valmiki expressed his lived experiences born into the Dalit community. His autobiography plays an instrumental role in raising Dalit consciousness and has made society hear the unheard and hidden voices of the marginalized groups.

II. DISCUSSION

Dalit women writers from different parts of India have forced the readers to look into the real functioning of society through their writings. Dalit literature makes them feel the aesthetic realm through a lens of protest. However, the female writers who belong to the Dalit community discuss not only about racial discrimination but also on gender disparity. Being a woman, that too from the Dalit community, is like a curse for these women. Hence, Dalit female writers attempt to catch the attention of the society towards their miserable condition through autobiographies, poetry, and short stories. Marginalized women emerged as powerful female agents to overcome constant oppression both by upper castes and patriarchy, and through their narratives, one can see the underlying evils of Dalit communities. Historically, squelched in mainstream literary canons and feminist discourse, their voices have recently started receiving appreciation and recognition. But their literary expressions still remain underexplored. Some of the writers whose works explore the theme of intersectional marginalization or simply triple marginalization are Meena Kandasamy and Kausalya Baisantriy, whose autobiographical and semi-autobiographical works focus on feminist thought, exclusion, the miseries of poor Dalit women representing certain remote regions of India and also show the rebellious nature of their works, challenging intersectional ostracism. Intersectional ostracism can be referred to the multiple, overlapping forms of exclusion where individuals belong to more than one oppressed group. This theme is prominent in the works of these two authors. Baisantriy does not solely write about Dalit oppression; rather, she tries to portray how Dalit women face exclusion and harassment not only from the upper castes but also within their own communities, the state, religion, and personal ties. Feminist writings, somewhere, fail to show inclusivity towards Dalit female writers. The struggles of Dalit women differ from those of upper caste women because Dalit women face miseries due to three factors— caste, class, and gender. Therefore, their writings highly focus on resistance and protest overcoming the sole concept of victimization. Intersectionality as a theoretical framework offers valuable insight into the experiences of Dalit women, particularly as they face the dual/triple oppressions by caste and gender. This framework underscores the importance of acknowledging these overlapping identities, which complicates the call for universal female solidarity. Intersectionality provides a broader landscape in Dalit feminism which helps in understanding the hardships of Dalit women and their lived experiences that differ from those of upper-caste women and Dalit men, signifying the contrasting nature of their situation. A Dalit woman's experience is not simply that of a

common woman or a Dalit being but a combined effect of both, which leads to unique vulnerabilities and resistance. This concept empowers collective resistance by fostering solidarities across marginalized groups—tribal women, queer Dalit individuals, etc.—thus moving beyond a single-axis struggle. It inspires grassroots activism that is more holistic and transformative.

Meena Kandasamy is a distinguished scholar and Tamil Dalit writer born in Chennai in 1984. Most of her notable works—*When I Hit You*, *Touch*, and *The Gypsy Goddess*, etc. are based on gender discrimination and marginalization of the untouchables, leading to intersectional oppression. *When I Hit You* is a novel based on the story of an unsuccessful marriage, containing autobiographical elements about the author's own life and written with a first-person narrative. Here, the protagonist is a young wife who constantly faces subjugation not only by her husband, rather by the society due to her lower-caste background and poverty. This novel can be considered as a social critique focusing on triple marginalization faced by a woman. The narrator expresses her state of helplessness and utmost disgust because of her unsuccessful marriage. The novel portrays how does patriarchal setup justifies violence under the guise of marriage. Although caste is not the central theme in this work, but one can clearly witness the underlying violence done to a woman by the people of higher caste; the narrator faces triple-layered discrimination, being a woman, and that too from the Dalit community. Kandasamy strongly criticizes the societal notion of forcing a woman into a marriage even when she is not happy and how she is expected to perform her duties for the sake of marital honor. The narrator in *When I Hit You* describes all the restrictions imposed upon by her husband while writing and pursuing her dreams. Yet she insists upon showing intellectual power despite her husband's rigorous attempts to silence her voice. Dalit consciousness is implicitly visible in this work because of political resistance and revolt not only by a single woman, but also by the entire community of Dalit women. *The Gypsy Goddess* is another notable work by Meena Kandasamy highlighting Dalit agrarian oppression, rooted in Kilvenmani massacre of 1968. Here, Dalit women appear as agricultural workers who become the victims of exploitative landowners and the feudal system. They are economically dependent upon the Zamindars, finally leading to physical, mental, and emotional abuse. In this novel, Kandasamy employs a non-linear narrative technique and breaks the conventional norms of Dalit writing for the first time. The narrator has also been portrayed as a gypsy woman who is known to be the goddess of the common people and comes to save them from their existing plight.

Kausalya Baisantriy is another Dalit woman writer and activist primarily known for her autobiographical work *Dohra Abhishaap* (The Double Curse). It uses Hindi to connect with a broader audience, exposing how caste-based exclusion and nationalistic views affect Dalit women and advocating for affirmative action policies that account for the dual marginalization experienced by this intersection. Baisantriy's narrative reflects the wider need for gender and caste-sensitive support in education and social mobility areas. Intersectionality as a theoretical framework, therefore, helps in bringing reforms in the literary discourses where experiences differ based on caste and gender. She faced constant violence from the part of her husband who merely treated her as a 'commodity' and never gave the due respect of a wife. Being a Dalit woman, she faced discrimination in the household and outside home as well. Through this life narrative, she questions the patriarchal norms along with the dominant caste system which never let the women from lower castes to come out of the prevalent condition.

III. CONCLUSION

To conclude, Meena Kandasamy and Kausalya Baisantriy's works are grounded in intersectional oppression, where the pain and miseries associated with the female characters have been wisely turned into protest and resistance. The narrative style and technique, characterization, and political motifs used in their works have been a powerful critique of the narratives which only discuss about Dalit women's sufferings, portray their weaknesses rather than strength, and show them as socially inactive. However, both writers represent different generations, and the socio-economic atmosphere of their times differ from each other, but their voices and reclamation of agency as Dalit women remain the same. Female solidarity has a thematic significance in these works defying all kinds of oppression, exploitation, poverty, abuse, etc., because Dalit women still share a common feeling of belongingness, and due to this, they search for a unique platform to raise their voice against the patriarchal setup and caste hierarchy. From the margins of society to writing memoirs, Dalit women have discovered their place within the literary canon, that resists all the bias and counters the dominant narratives. Marginalization, in one way, has become a site of protest for these women whose stories are similar to each other. These authors, representing their own times, showcase the way how they stood fearless and resilient. There seems to be a generational difference between Kandasamy and Baisantriy but their thoughts, ideas, and values are much alike which can be witnessed through these works.

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