

## VOICES FROM THE MARGINS: NARRATIVES OF DALIT WOMEN WRITERS FROM SOUTH INDIA

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores the powerful and transformative narratives of Dalit women writers from South India, whose literary works challenge entrenched systems of caste, gender, and patriarchy. Emerging from the socio-political margins, these writers articulate the specific and intersectional oppressions faced by Dalit women that often ignored by both mainstream Indian literature and male-centric Dalit discourse. Through autobiographies, poetry, and theoretical interventions, authors such as Bama, P. Sivakami, Meena Kandasamy, Gogu Shyamala, and others confront caste-based violence, gender inequality, and economic deprivation while asserting their agency and identity. Focusing on autobiographical texts like Karukku, Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha, Aidan, and We Also Made History, the paper highlights how Dalit women use literature as a form of resistance and reclamation. These narratives not only expose the patriarchal structures within Dalit communities but also critique the exclusionary tendencies of dominant feminist and Dalit movements. The study situates these works within the frameworks of Dalit feminism and subaltern theory, emphasizing their regional, linguistic, and cultural specificities. By analyzing the thematic, stylistic, and political dimensions of these writings, this paper underscores the significance of intersectionality in understanding the layered realities of caste and gender oppression. The literary contributions of Dalit women from South India are presented not merely as personal testimonials but as revolutionary acts that demand recognition, inclusivity, and systemic change in contemporary Indian society.*

**Keywords:** *Autobiography, Dalit Women Writers, South Indian Literature, Feminism, Caste and Gender*

### **Introduction**

The narratives of Dalit women writers from South India constitute a powerful and distinct body of literature that challenges hegemonic structures of caste, gender, and patriarchy. These voices emerge from the margins of both mainstream Indian literature and dominant Dalit discourse, foregrounding experiences that are often silenced or rendered invisible. Through autobiographies, short stories, poetry, and essays, Dalit women writers from the southern states—Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, and Kerala—articulate the multifaceted realities of oppression, resistance, and identity.

While the broader Dalit literary movement has been pivotal in confronting caste-based injustices, it has frequently mirrored patriarchal biases, sidelining the specific concerns of Dalit women. In this context, the writings of authors such as Bama, P. Sivakami, Meena Kandasamy, Gogu Shyamala, and others mark a crucial intervention. Their works not only critique caste hierarchies but also interrogate the gendered dimensions of social exclusion, domestic violence, access to education, and sexual exploitation within and outside the Dalit community.

This paper seeks to explore the thematic contours, stylistic strategies, and political underpinnings of Dalit women's narratives from South India. It aims

to situate these texts within the larger framework of Dalit feminism and subaltern discourse, while also paying attention to the regional and linguistic specificities that shape their articulation. By engaging with these narratives, the paper underscores the necessity of recognizing intersectionality in the study of caste and gender, and the vital role of Dalit women's literature in redefining the contours of Indian literary and socio-political thought.

### **Narratives of Dalit Women Writers from South India**

Dalit literature is deeply rooted in the lived experiences of individuals from the Dalit community—historically marginalized groups once labeled as “untouchables” and positioned at the lowest rung of the caste hierarchy. These communities have long endured systemic oppression and social exclusion, not only on the basis of caste but also through layered forms of discrimination related to gender and class. Within this broader literary movement, Dalit women writers have carved a distinct space, using literature as a medium of resistance and self-expression. Despite formidable barriers—including poverty, illiteracy, patriarchal domination, and exclusion from mainstream publishing—they have articulated their lived realities with remarkable strength and clarity.

Writers such as Bama, P. Sivakami, Shantabai Kamble, and Urmila Pawar have played a pivotal role in bringing the voices of Dalit women to the forefront of Indian literature. Writing in Tamil, Marathi, and other regional languages, their narratives expose the intersecting oppressions faced by Dalit women and reflect a deep concern for their communities, lives, and human dignity. Their works confront and challenge dominant narratives that have historically ignored or distorted the experiences of Dalit women, foregrounding issues of gender inequality, caste violence, and economic deprivation.

Dalit women are often referred to as the “Dalits among Dalits,” a phrase that underscores the multiple layers of marginalization they endure. In addition to caste-based exclusion, they face gendered subjugation within both the broader society and their own communities. Subjected to patriarchal control by fathers, brothers, husbands, and religious authorities, Dalit women are frequently denied autonomy in matters such as education, marriage, love, and religious practice. Their lives are often marked by poverty, vulnerability, and systemic neglect. Historically, their voices were silenced, and their suffering remained unacknowledged—not only by dominant caste writers but also by male Dalit writers, who rarely centered women's specific experiences in their narratives.

The emergence of Dalit feminist consciousness and the rise of movements advocating for marginalized voices have created new spaces for Dalit women to articulate their stories. Yet, these writers continue to confront a literary landscape that is hesitant to recognize their contributions fully. The exploitation they face is not singular but multifaceted—ranging from physical and sexual violence to intellectual dismissal and emotional trauma. As a result, the literature produced by Dalit women is not only an act of narration but an act of survival, resistance, and reclamation.

A revolutionary moment in Dalit literature emerged when Dalit women writers began to boldly articulate the struggles and lived realities of oppressed women. These writers critically examined the root causes of discrimination, suppression, and inequality, rejecting dominant ideologies that claimed to be ideal or universal. They challenged the deeply entrenched social order that had historically imposed dominance and humiliation upon them, instead exposing the longstanding injustices embedded in caste and gender hierarchies. With remarkable literary skill, they used their writing to bear witness to their personal and collective experiences. The marginalization they faced due to oppressive

customs and cultural practices is vividly reflected across their literary works.

Dalit women's writings make it clear that their realities were often misrepresented or completely ignored by mainstream writers. Their literature confronts both the physical violence inflicted by the upper castes and the patriarchal oppression within and outside their own communities. In this context, feminist literary theories introduce the term “double burden,” which refers to the dual oppression experienced by women who are simultaneously engaged in paid labor and unpaid domestic responsibilities. This concept emphasizes that women's oppression often begins within the private sphere of the household and intensifies when extended into the public domain.

Dalit women, in particular, suffer an added burden due to the intersection of caste and gender. Their very existence as human beings has historically been denied by societal structures that devalue them. In this struggle, reformers like Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, Periyar, and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar played a critical role. They dedicated their lives to eradicating caste-based oppression and building a just society. Savitribai and Jyotiba Phule, especially, recognized the transformative power of education in challenging both patriarchy and caste dominance.

Dalit women writers have also questioned patriarchal structures within their own communities. Centuries of socio-economic deprivation have confined Dalit women to positions of vulnerability and victimhood. However, through the power of literature, many Dalit women have reclaimed their voices, resisting both internal and external forms of violence. Despite this, numerous talented writers have remained in the shadows due to the pervasive influence of patriarchy in society.

Writers such as Shantabai Kamble, Kumud Pawde, and Urmila Pawar stand out as pioneers who used literature to resist both caste and gender oppression. Their works not only document personal struggles but also highlight the significant—yet often unrecognized—contributions of Dalit women to the Ambedkarite movement. These writers reject the notion that Dalit families are less patriarchal and consistently critique mainstream feminist discourse for sidelining Dalit women's voices.

Their tone is unapologetically revolutionary. The language, values, and narratives found in their works emerge directly from lived experience. Among them, Baby Kamble stands as a powerful voice. Her seminal autobiography *Jine Amuche (The Prisons We Broke)* vividly portrays the multifaceted patriarchal violence within Dalit communities. Through her account of the Mahar community in the pre-Ambedkarite era and the

transformative influence of Ambedkar's ideology, Kamble captures the resilience and resistance of Dalit women. Her work is a vital document that chronicles both the condition of Dalit women and their crucial participation in the Ambedkarite movement.

The genre of autobiography powerfully captures the lived experiences of Dalit women, revealing the harsh realities of their lives—marked by servitude within families, hunger, lack of medical care, and systemic deprivation. Shantabai Kamble's *Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha* (The Kaleidoscopic Story of My Life) is widely recognized as the first autobiography written by a Dalit woman. As both the author and protagonist, Kamble narrates the life of Naja, a character modeled on her own experiences. The narrative traces Naja's journey through childhood, marriage, hunger, and labor, ultimately depicting her struggle for dignity and the recognition she achieves despite overwhelming social oppression based on caste, class, and gender.

Urmila Pawar, a prominent Marathi Dalit writer, presents her powerful life narrative in *Aaidan* (*The Weave of My Life*, 2008), originally written in Marathi. In this autobiography, she critiques the existing educational system, which is rooted in upper-caste values, language, and cultural norms—systems that further marginalize Dalit students. Pawar also lays bare the internal patriarchy within Dalit communities, exposing how Dalit women are subjected to physical abuse and economic exploitation by Dalit men. Her work is particularly critical of the Dalit movement's failure to engage with gender issues, pointing out how the movement tends to generalize all women as victims of untouchability without acknowledging the specific and compounded oppressions faced by Dalit women.

In *We Also Made History* (2008), co-authored by Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon, the authors attempt a feminist historiography by rewriting the male-dominated history of the Ambedkarite movement. This theoretical work documents the significant yet underrecognized contributions of Dalit women to the movement, while also highlighting how they were marginalized within it. The book brings to light instances of domestic violence and questions the erasure of women's voices in movements supposedly aimed at liberation.

In Tamil Dalit literature, autobiographies offer a distinct lens into the regional and cultural dimensions of Dalit life. Bama's *Karukku* (1992), considered the first Dalit women's autobiography in Tamil, is a landmark work. The term *Karukku* refers to the double-edged palmyra leaves, symbolizing the sharp, cutting nature of her

narrative that seeks to challenge caste oppression and injustice. Set in the 1960s and 70s, *Karukku* details the life of Dalit Christians in Tamil Nadu and critically interrogates questions such as: *Can religious conversion resolve caste issues?* and *Are non-Hindu religions in India free from caste hierarchies?* Drawing inspiration from Dr. Ambedkar's ideology of mass conversions, Bama questions the continued presence of caste discrimination even within the Catholic Church.

Her narrative exposes both the overt violence experienced by Dalits in village life and the symbolic violence they encounter in educational institutions. While *Karukku* offers limited direct engagement with patriarchy within Dalit families, it nonetheless acknowledges the sexual and economic exploitation faced by Dalit women. The autobiography is significant not only for its content but also for the way it redefines literary expression, using sharp, emotive language to portray the layered oppression faced by Dalit women.

### Conclusion

Dalit women continue to face the compounded burden of caste-based discrimination and gender-based oppression, shaped by entrenched hierarchies of caste, class, and patriarchy in Indian society. Their socio-economic marginalization and lack of political representation, coupled with the intersecting vulnerabilities of being both Dalit and female, significantly increase their exposure to systemic violence and social exclusion. These intersecting forms of oppression obstruct their fundamental rights to dignity, equality, and self-actualization.

The poetry of contemporary Dalit feminist writers such as Meena Kandasamy, Aruna Gogulamandaand, Sukirtharani offers a powerful counter-narrative to dominant discourses. Their verses serve as a poignant anthology of lived pain—sometimes heard, often silenced, and frequently endured. Through sharp critique, fearless language, and a defiant literary style, these poets confront the intersections of power, caste, and gender, while simultaneously imagining and articulating possibilities for emancipation and collective liberation.

Engaging with the voices of these marginalized women enriches our understanding of the complex interplay between gender and caste in India. Their writings are not only testimonies of resistance but also urgent calls for inclusivity, equity, and transformative social justice in contemporary Indian society.

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