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THE INTERSECTION OF CASTE AND GENDER IN THE LIVES OF DALIT WOMEN: AN ANALYSIS OF BAMA'S *KARUKKU*

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ABSTRACT

Mainstream Indian feminism has always been critiqued for glossing over caste marginalization. This paper analyses the "double oppression" of Dalit women through an intersectional framework. Dalit women experience dual marginalization based on both caste and gender. In India, a Dalit woman's existence exemplifies dual oppression, as she contends with a patriarchal culture while enduring the oppressive burden of caste. Centered on Bama's *Karukku,* the analysis shows how Dalit women's bodies become sites where Brahmanical patriarchy is maintained and challenged. Her inventive capacity constructs a picture of the multilayered form of oppression that Dalit women face. Dalit feminism emerges as a distinct standpoint rooted in lived experience that challenges both patriarchal caste hierarchy and gender marginalization. The conclusion emphasizes that any conception of gender justice in India is incomplete and unrealistic without the eradication of caste.

Keywords: Caste, Dalit feminism, intersectionality, gender, patriarchy and so on.

The term Dalit comes from the Sanskrit dalita, meaning “broken, crushed, or oppressed.” It broadly refers to communities in India that have historically faced social exclusion and dominance. Traditionally, they were placed outside the four-fold varna system—below Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. In earlier times, they were called Chandala or Avarna, and later terms like Untouchable or Harijan were used. Historian J.H. Hutton described them as “Exterior Castes.” In official Indian documents, these groups are listed as Scheduled Castes.

The Dalit Movement fights against caste prejudice and persecution. The untouchable writes Dalit literature to fight back against the higher caste people. Every facet of their lives is hard for Dalits. A woman from the Dalit community experiences two forms of oppression in her life. They are "doubly abused," first because they are women and second because they are untouchables. This load that overlaps is clear in everyday life. For example, a lady from the upper caste (Savarna) may have to deal with sexist curfews or glass ceilings. A Dalit woman, on the other hand, could be assaulted for drawing water from a "higher-caste" well or for sitting next to a Savarna on a public bus. These differences show why intersectionality is not just a buzzword here, but a technique that must be used. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" to describe how several factors, such race and gender, affect the lives of Dalit women.

Dalit feminism is not merely a subset of Indian feminism; it represents a unique epistemic perspective. Sharmila Rege notes that past women's groups frequently "collapsed caste into sisterhood," so failing to confront Brahmanical biases (Rege 41). The voices of Dalit women express a type of feminism that not only incorporates caste into gender analysis but also fundamentally redefines feminist philosophy based on the lived experiences of people on the periphery. This paper contends that feminist theory and activism in India can only effectively confront the interconnected oppressions of caste and gender by prioritizing the perspective of Dalit women.

Any examination of the oppression of Dalit women must engage with the theoretical constructs of intersectionality and what Indian feminists refer to as "Brahmanical patriarchy." Crenshaw's theory of

intersectionality serves as a foundational reference that demonstrates how women of colour encounter overlapping racial and gender oppressions and it cannot be represented by a singular-axis framework. When applied to India, this idea shows that Dalit women are at the crossroads of caste and gender systems. Nonetheless, it is imperative to evaluate the constraints of applying intersectionality in its entirety to the Indian context.

Crenshaw herself said that intersectionality was never supposed to be a "new, totalizing theory of identity" but rather a temporary way to look at things. In India, that tool needs to be polished with knowledge of caste. For instance, violence against Dalit women cannot be only attributed to gender or poverty; it is facilitated by caste supremacy. Therefore, although intersectionality is essential, it must be rooted in caste realities to prevent what Rege refers to as “depoliticized difference” (Rege 40).

Uma Chakravarti's concept of "Brahmanical patriarchy" elucidates the dual marginalization of Dalit women based on caste and gender. Dalit feminist discourse interrogates not only the dominance of Indian feminism but also the authority of Dalit men to represent Dalit women. Uma Chakravarti emphasizes that Dalit feminists have examined this as the triadic oppression of Dalit women. First, they are oppressed by the upper castes because of their caste. Second, as workers they are oppressed by their class, who are the majority of landowners. Thirdly, as women they are subjected to patriarchal domination by all men, including those of their own caste.

B.R. Ambedkar famously said that "women are the gateways to the caste system," and he also said that caste only lasts through strict endogamy which is enforced by controlling women's movement and sexuality (qtd. in Rege 42). Consequently, intersectionality in India must navigate a patriarchal caste system because gender is inherently caste-coded. Dalit women experience structural intersectionality, as their exploitation is inherent to both the economic system and the ceremonial hierarchy. Feminist theories that neglect the "interlocking" of Brahmanism and patriarchy will not comprehend the systematic targeting of Dalit women for sexual abuse in caste disputes. To put it concisely, integrating Crenshaw’s framework with the insights

of Rege and Chakravarti reveals that the marginalization of Dalit women arises at the intersection of caste and gender.

Dalit women's writing functions as testimonio—a tale of shared suffering and resistance—and it compellingly demonstrates the physical manifestations of caste and gender oppression. *Karukku* by Bama is a groundbreaking autobiography that shows this through powerful sequences where the Dalit woman's body is used to maintain caste and then revolt. *Karukku*, which came out in 1992, is the first autobiography by a Tamil Dalit lady named Bama.

The term itself has a lot of meaning. "Karukku" means "the serrated edge of the palmyra leaf," which is double-edged. It is a tool for work (used by Dalits), a source of pain (it slashes the skin), and a weapon for defense. Bama uses this metaphor to talk about her life: it has a lot of cuts and wounds, but it is also sharp and strong. In *Karukku*, Bama tells the story of her life as a Tamil Dalit Christian lady, showing how caste made her life humiliating every day. In one shocking scene, she talks about how even being in public becomes a degrading ritual:

It was shameful to see them do this. Even the way they were given their drinking water was disquieting to watch. The Naicker women would pour out the water from a height of four feet, while Paatti and the others received and drank it with cupped hands held to their mouths. I always felt terrible when I watched this. My other Paatti was the same. As soon as dawn broke, she would go to the Naicker houses, sweep out the cowshed, collect up the dung and dirt, and then bring home the left-over rice and curry from the previous evening. And for some reason she would behave as if she had been handed the nectar of the gods. (Bama 16)

Here, the Dalit female body is seen as dirty and physically untouchable, and people turn their backs on it like it's a disease. Bama's use of first-person narration breaks down the line between the individual and the group; "we suffer blows" condemns an entire social structure. The body bears the weight of caste; whether

denied a bus seat or regarded with disdain, the Dalit woman's corporeal existence symbolizes filth. Bama says:

They spoke as if they didn't even consider low-caste people as human beings. They did not know that I was a low caste nun. I was filled with anger towards them, yet I did not have the courage to retort sharply that I too was a low-caste woman. I swallowed the very words that came into my mouth; never said anything out aloud but battled within myself. (Bama 25)

In one scene, when caste violence breaks out in her community, police beat both men and women of the Dalit caste. This shows how the state, which was supposed to protect people, became a tool of violence. These kinds of things reveal how Dalit women's bodies are stuck in a double bind: they are subjugated by social norms that say they can't touch anyone and by state brutality that often keeps things the way they are. But *Karukku* isn't just a list of those who have been hurt. Writing in a Dalit woman's voice, utilizing her original Tamil vernacular instead of a "sanskritized" one, is a form of literary resistance. Bama breaks the rules of Indian English literature by using Tamil idioms and Dalit Christian folk phrases in her writing. This is because Indian English literature traditionally favours upper-caste voices. Bama subverts language hierarchies by keeping the phrases and rhythms of her community's dialect. This linguistic tactic is intentional rejecting the imposition of upper-caste legitimacy. In *Karukku*, ordinary language is used as a political instrument to express Dalit identity and "write back" against a literary canon that had marginalized women like Bama.

Bama fundamentally reconfigures the genre of autobiography into a group story. Her speech's authenticity is a way for her to affirm her identity: it reminds people that Dalit women talk differently, which goes against the dominant story told by upper-caste patriarchal society. Gayatri Spivak argues that the voices of the subalterns are inadequately acknowledged. She states:

It is not so much that subaltern women did not speak, but rather that others did not know how to listen, how to enter into a transaction between speaker and listener. The subaltern cannot because their words cannot be properly interpreted. Hence, the silence of the female as subaltern is the result of failure of interpretation

and not a failure of articulation (Spivak 195).

Dalit women are not only oppressed in their own lives or in their own communities; this oppression is built into the system and often shows up as violent sexual and physical abuse that involves the state itself. Caste-based sexual abuse in India has a long and disturbing history. It has often been used as a way to punish people as a group and keep them in line. Dalit women's bodies become battlegrounds where caste "honour" and power are forcefully written. The abuse against Dalit women is different from other types of violence against women because it is so cruel and there are no consequences for the people who do it. For example, they are paraded naked in villages as punishment or raped while in custody. She writes:

In the past, there used to be a man in our parts, called Uudan, blower. I don't know what his real name was. There wasn't a single person in the village who didn't know him. Because every day he'd drag his wife by the hair to the community hall and beat her up as if she were an animal, with his belt. Everyone came to watch. But nobody could go near and separate them. Every day, for some reason or another, there would be a quarrel between them. It always came to blows. (Bama 61)

During this examination, it can be perceived Dalit women not merely as voiceless victims but as catalysts for change. They criticize mainstream Indian feminism for its "casteless" perspective while also critiquing Dalit politics for its patriarchal deficiencies. The literature illustrates Dalit women cultivating unity via collective narratives and restoring dignity through language to demand accountability. All of these things point to a future where the freedom of Dalit women is redefined by their own actions. Dalit women are no longer just recipients of feminist or anti-caste activity; they are the theorists and leaders of a battle that others must learn from.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's prescient statement that "the annihilation of caste" is necessary for any democratic progress in India comes to mind while thinking about the future. This is especially true when it comes to gender justice. As long as caste exists, women's freedom, especially that of Dalit women, will remain a distant ideal. The caste system's ongoing presence ensures that certain women will perpetually be "less

equal" than their counterparts, and that sexual abuse will be applied and overlooked in a selective manner. Consequently, the struggle for women's rights in India must not be caste-neutral. It has to actively join the struggle against the caste system. Dalit women have already been fighting together in this way, whether by educating their kids to challenge caste, writing about their own lives, or spearheading protests in the streets. Their feminist practice embodies solidarity, community, and radical egalitarianism, akin to the vision of Ambedkar and Savitribai Phule—a society in which the distinction between caste and gender-based harm is obliterated.

To sum up, it can be said that India can't have real gender equity until caste is broken down. This is not an exaggeration; it is a fact shown by everything from job data to rape statistics to stories in books. It is also true that caste cannot be destroyed without focusing on the experiences of Dalit women. The fight ahead is going to be hard but the lives and words of Dalit women show the way. They have taken on the roles of writers of their own lives and builders of a fairer society by moving beyond being victims. Their perspective not only contests the underpinnings of Brahmanical patriarchy but also enhances the universal principles of equality and human decency. The strength of Dalit women, who are rising, getting educated, writing, organizing and speaking up sends a powerful message that society can only be free if it listens to the most oppressed. By claiming their own power Dalit women are finding a way out of the prisons of caste and gender and toward a future of freedom for everyone. Dalits in Indian society have struggled for a transformation in their social status and identity. Bama has fought hard to find her individuality via her writing. She states:

Those of us who are sleeping need to wake up and look around. We can't just accept the unfairness of being enslaved by telling ourselves it's our fate, as if we don't really care. We have to be brave enough to fight for change. We must destroy all of these groups that utilize caste to force us to obey, and show that there is no one who is better or worse than anybody else. (Bama 28)

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