



The Voice of Dalit Women in Indian Literature: A Struggle for Self-Representation

Kethana Arthi N

Assistant Professor

Department of English

DVS College of Arts and Science, Shimoga

Mail- kethanaarthi@gmail.com

Dr. Bhuvana Ramachandran

Professor

Department of English

Srinivas University, Mukka, Mangalore

Abstract

This paper explores the emergence and significance of Dalit women's voices in Indian literature, focusing on how their narratives challenge dominant structures of caste and patriarchy. Through the examination of key writers such as Bama, Urmila Pawar, P. Sivakami, and Meena Kandasamy, the study highlights how Dalit women use autobiographical writing, fiction, and poetry to reclaim agency and articulate lived experiences of marginalization. Employing intersectional analysis, the paper discusses the historical silencing of Dalit women, their linguistic resistance through vernacular expression, and the socio-political critique embedded in their literature. It also addresses the challenges they face within mainstream publishing and feminist discourse. Ultimately, the study argues that Dalit women's literature is not merely testimonial but a radical form of literary and political resistance that demands greater recognition in academic and cultural spaces.

Keywords: Dalit women, Indian literature, caste, patriarchy, intersectionality, Bama, Urmila Pawar, Meena Kandasamy, literary resistance, autobiographical writing, feminist critique, vernacular language.

Introduction

Caste and gender are among the most deeply entrenched systems of oppression in India, often operating simultaneously to marginalize Dalit women. Historically denied access to education, political voice, and literary expression, Dalit women have been doubly silenced—first by the patriarchy of their own communities, and then by the caste-blind feminism of upper-caste women. In recent decades, however, Dalit women's voices have begun to emerge powerfully in Indian literature, offering profound critiques of not only caste hierarchies but also the patriarchal structures within and outside their communities. This article argues that Dalit women's writing challenges dominant literary narratives by foregrounding lived experience, subverting literary forms, and creating a new language of resistance rooted in intersectionality.

The Historical Silencing of Dalit Women

For centuries, Dalit women remained absent from India's literary canon. As members of the lowest rungs of the caste hierarchy, they were historically denied literacy, education, and the privilege of authorship. Even within Dalit reform movements led by men such as Jyotirao Phule or B.R. Ambedkar, women's voices often remained in the background. In upper-caste feminist discourse too, the specific oppression faced by Dalit women due to caste was often overlooked.

This exclusion was not merely a matter of access but of ideological silencing. Dalit women's bodies were sites of violence and exploitation, and their stories were considered unworthy of literary reflection. When their experiences did appear, it was often through the voices of others—upper-caste reformers, journalists, or Dalit men—filtering their lives through alien perspectives. The literary silence was thus an extension of the social and political invisibility imposed upon them.

Emergence of Dalit Women's Voices

The 1990s marked a turning point with the emergence of a strong body of Dalit women's writing in India, particularly in the form of autobiographies and poetry. This wave was deeply connected to the rise of Ambedkarite movements, feminist activism, and growing access to education. Women began to reclaim their narratives, writing in their own voices about experiences of caste, gender, labor, violence, and spirituality.

These autobiographies were not just personal recollections—they were political acts. As Sharmila Rege argues in *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*, Dalit women’s autobiographies constitute a counter-archive that challenges the erasures of mainstream history. Works like Bama’s *Karukku*, Urmila Pawar’s *The Weave of My Life*, and Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* expose the layered violence inflicted by both upper-caste society and intra-caste patriarchy.

Language played a crucial role in this emergence. Many of these authors wrote in regional languages—Tamil, Marathi, Telugu—breaking away from the linguistic elitism of English or Sanskritized Hindi. The texture of local idioms, oral traditions, and colloquial speech gave their works an authenticity and immediacy that defied literary conventions.

Key Writers and Major Themes

Bama: Religion, Body, and Resistance

Bama’s *Karukku* (1992) is a landmark in Dalit Christian literature. Written in Tamil and later translated into English, the text explores the contradictions of caste discrimination within the Christian community. As a Dalit woman and a former nun, Bama exposes how even religion—a supposed space of equality—reproduces caste hierarchies. Her use of fragmented narrative, colloquial Tamil, and references to everyday experiences makes the book a radical departure from conventional autobiography. The body, especially the female body, becomes a site of suffering and resistance in her work.

Urmila Pawar: Intersectionality and Self-Assertion

In *Aaidan (The Weave of My Life)*, Marathi writer Urmila Pawar explores the entanglements of caste, gender, and family through personal history. She documents her journey from the chawls of Mumbai to academic spaces, never letting the reader forget the weight of her Dalit identity. Pawar interrogates both the caste-blindness of mainstream feminism and the patriarchy of Dalit male leadership. Her writing is calm yet sharp, weaving memory with cultural critique. She highlights how literature becomes a tool not just for expression but for self-assertion.

P. Sivakami: Fiction as Political Tool

P. Sivakami’s novel *The Grip of Change (Pazhiyin Kanavu)* presents a powerful critique of patriarchy within the Dalit community. The novel’s protagonist, Thangam, is a widow who seeks justice after being sexually assaulted by upper-caste men. However, it is the hypocrisy of Dalit male

leaders that becomes the real focus. Sivakami, herself an IAS officer and political activist, uses fiction to challenge the assumption that caste reform alone is sufficient for liberation. Her work insists on feminist transformation within Dalit politics.

Meena Kandasamy: Poetry of Rage and Defiance

Meena Kandasamy represents a younger generation of Dalit women writers who use poetry and performance to express anger, pain, and political clarity. Her collections like *Touch* and *Ms Militancy* combine sensuality with militancy. Her writing is unapologetically confrontational, using English as a tool of subversion rather than assimilation. Kandasamy's work links caste violence to patriarchy, capitalism, and nationalism, creating an intersectional politics that resonates globally.

Language and Literary Resistance

One of the most revolutionary aspects of Dalit women's writing is their transformation of language itself. They reject the aesthetics of purity and refinement upheld by upper-caste literary traditions. Instead, their writing incorporates the vernacular, the oral, and the everyday—what mainstream literature often excludes. This literary choice is not merely stylistic; it is ideological.

In using dialects and local idioms, Dalit women writers assert the legitimacy of their cultural world. Their narratives often reflect the rhythms of speech rather than polished prose. Moreover, testimonial writing—whether autobiography or oral history—blurs the line between literature and life. It collapses the distance between author and audience, replacing abstraction with experience.

This literary strategy also resists commodification. While mainstream publishers and critics may seek to package Dalit women's voices in marketable formats, the rawness and directness of their language resist such co-option. They write not for aesthetic pleasure, but for social transformation.

Challenges in Reception and Representation

Despite their growing visibility, Dalit women writers continue to face structural barriers in the literary world. Publishing remains dominated by upper-caste editors and critics, leading to tokenism or the exoticization of Dalit experiences. Translations are often inadequate, flattening the cultural texture of the original text. There is also the risk of Dalit women's writing being reduced to trauma narratives, ignoring their intellectual and artistic complexity.

Moreover, within the academic and feminist discourse, Dalit women still struggle for space. While

intersectionality has become a buzzword, its application often remains superficial. Dalit women's writing forces a reckoning with privilege—something that many academic spaces are reluctant to do.

Yet, the resilience of these writers lies in their refusal to be silenced. Whether through self-publishing, small presses, or digital platforms, they continue to speak, write, and resist.

Conclusion

Dalit women's literature in India represents one of the most powerful and transformative developments in contemporary South Asian literature. It challenges centuries of silencing and marginalization through bold narratives rooted in lived experience. By writing in their own voices, Dalit women not only document oppression but imagine liberation. Their literature dismantles the binaries of caste and gender, private and political, aesthetics and activism.

These voices are not mere additions to Indian literature—they are a radical rewriting of it. They call upon readers, scholars, and feminists to listen, to learn, and above all, to stand in solidarity. As Dalit women continue to assert their presence in literature and society, their words remind us that storytelling is a form of survival—and resistance.

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