



Reclaiming Voices: Identity Formation and Agency in Dalit Women's Autobiographical Literature

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Abstract

This paper investigates the intersection of education literature and identity among Dalit women in India, highlighting their historical and contemporary struggles against caste-based discrimination and gender inequality. It examines the evolving access to education for Dalits, noting persistent gaps despite policy changes. The study critically analyzes how Dalit women have been portrayed in colonial literature and by Dalit men, revealing a recurring double marginalization and stereotypical depictions that underscore patriarchal and caste oppressions. Contrastingly, the rise of Dalit women's autobiographical literature marks a significant departure, asserting their agency and challenging prevailing narratives. This literature not only voices the unique challenges faced by Dalit women but also reclaims their narrative space, contributing profoundly to the discourse on Dalit identity and feminism. The paper underscores the need to acknowledge these intersectional experiences to advance justice and equality in Indian society.

Keywords: Dalit Women, Caste, Gender, Autobiography, Identity

1. Introduction

The transformation of Indian society in the 19th century, though limited, raised the aspirations of Dalits and other oppressed castes, initiating what is known as the Dalit Renaissance. This movement is symbolized by figures like Jyotirao Govindrao Phule, a social activist, writer, and anti-caste advocate from Maharashtra, who worked tirelessly to abolish caste and untouchability. Phule believed that both men and women were entitled to equal rights and that it was a sin to discriminate against human beings based on sex (Mugali & Amadihal, 2008). However, have these ideas been fully translated into practice, particularly in the context of the Dalit caste? Have gender-based discriminations been eradicated?

Since the 1980s, the women's movement in India (Khullar, 2005) has resulted in the emergence of a strong feminist perspective within the social sciences, especially as articulated by female scholars. This movement also inspired a wave of female creativity, leading to the establishment of a distinct category of women writers. However, it took nearly a decade for caste issues to come to the forefront in the 1980s and early 1990s (Rege, 1998), particularly during the Mandal

agitation, which urban India perceived as a rise of identity politics challenging the supposed unity promoted by the left.

The emergence of intersectionality as a theoretical framework offers valuable insight into the experiences of Dalit women, particularly as they face the dual oppressions of caste and gender. This framework underscores the importance of acknowledging these overlapping identities, which complicates the call for universal female solidarity. In this paper, intersectionality is central to the analysis, guiding the exploration of how Dalit women's struggles differ not only from those of upper-caste women but also from Dalit men. The paper highlights how intersectionality informs the understanding of Dalit women's unique experiences of marginalization, both in historical and contemporary contexts. By consistently applying this framework throughout, the paper emphasizes the necessity of examining caste and gender in tandem, revealing how these women's narratives disrupt patriarchal and caste-based structures. This deeper engagement with intersectionality allows for a more nuanced and cohesive analysis of Dalit women's autobiographical literature and their fight for agency.

The languages and genres in which women have written are diverse. Collections of short stories, novellas, and poems published by feminist publishing houses have circulated widely and have even been incorporated into university courses, particularly in literature. Given women writers' heterogeneous social and regional backgrounds in India, their audience varies significantly. Translations into English and other languages play a crucial role in broadening the reach of these writings (Prasad, 2007).

Dalit feminist writing provides valuable insight into this dual oppression, particularly through autobiographies that challenge the boundaries set by both male Dalit autobiographies and patriarchal, caste-based structures. Unlike their male counterparts, Dalit women focus on the realities of sexism and patriarchy within their communities, including the Ambedkarite movement (Wankhede, 2008). These works often highlight the body as a site of oppression, disrupting patriarchal narratives that present male experiences as universal (Smith, 1998).

In colonial texts, Dalit women were objectified, sexualized, and denied personal agency. Intersectionality shows how these texts reinforced both caste and patriarchal control by reducing the female body to a mere symbol of sex (Grabham et al., 2008). In response, Dalit women have turned to autobiography to reclaim their bodies and identities, asserting new symbols and narratives that challenge their historical silencing (Naik, 2016).

This paper analyzes how Dalit women writers regain control over their identity and subjectivity by using intersectionality to examine how caste and gender shape their unique experiences of marginalization. The study begins by exploring the historical context of Dalits' access to education and moves into a literary analysis. It examines how Dalit women were portrayed during colonial times, particularly by male authors, and how Dalit women authors assert a collective voice, often emphasizing "We" over "I." Despite this inclusiveness, intersectionality reveals that Dalit women often remain the most marginalized group within an already marginalized community.

2. Methods

This paper adopts a qualitative analysis approach, examining historical and contemporary literature related to Dalit women in India. The research specifically focuses on autobiographical works by Dalit women, as well as colonial and Dalit male literature that portrays Dalit women across different periods. The selection of sources is based on their relevance to themes of caste-based discrimination, gender inequality, and the agency of Dalit women. This approach seeks to ensure that a wide range of perspectives is considered, providing a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

The methodology primarily employs thematic analysis. This involves identifying and organizing recurring themes within the literature, such as how Dalit women are portrayed in colonial literature, the rise of Dalit feminist consciousness, and the difficulties of representation in literature written by Dalit men. This thematic analysis facilitates a deep exploration of how these narratives have developed and contributed to the broader discourse on Dalit identity and feminism.

Additionally, the paper uses critical discourse analysis to investigate the language and narratives in colonial and male-authored Dalit literature. This analysis examines how these texts have shaped public perceptions, reinforcing or challenging existing social hierarchies. By analyzing the language and symbols in these works, the research uncovers underlying power dynamics and examines how Dalit women have resisted and redefined their identities through their own writings.

This combination of thematic and critical discourse analysis allows for a detailed examination of the intersections of caste, gender, and identity. The framework provides valuable insights into the ongoing struggles and resilience of Dalit women in reclaiming and asserting their narrative within the broader socio-political context.

2.1 Dalit's Education Struggle

The history of education for Dalits in India is characterized by long-standing exclusion and discrimination. The Hindu caste system relegated Dalits, or so-called "untouchables," to the lowest position in the social hierarchy, subjecting them to stringent restrictions and rigid social taboos that labeled them as "outcastes" (Charsley, 1996). Concepts of purity and pollution reinforced the caste hierarchy and justified the exclusion of "impure" Dalits (Tashneem, 2021). Although the terms "Untouchables" and "Dalits" are frequently used interchangeably, they are not identical. The untouchables represent "the subordinated sections of the Indian people... who have been historically disadvantaged in the caste system" (Jodhka, 2012, pp. 54-55). While stringent social taboos dictated their behavior, severe restrictions hindered their access to knowledge (Judge, 2012).

The advent of British rule in India significantly disrupted the established occupational structure and traditional caste-based practices. The Act of 1813 made education a responsibility of the colonial state, diminishing the traditional monopoly of Brahmans over education. Early British education initiatives on the subcontinent were primarily led by philanthropic and missionary organizations, such as the British and Foreign School Society (Tschurenev, 2019). The caste system was subject to criticism by Christian missionaries, who aimed to spread their ideas and reform Indian society (Bayly, 1985). In his influential "Minutes on Education," Thomas Macaulay encapsulated the perspective of British critics of Indian society in 1835, declaring that "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia" and that education should reflect the "intrinsic superiority" of Western knowledge. It was also envisioned that the elite would receive education in the English language and would evolve into "a class of persons Indian in blood and color, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, and intellect" (Macaulay, 1863), thereby serving as intermediaries between the colonial rulers and the general population. The trajectory of education in India from 1800 to 1950 followed a relatively straightforward path, marked by the gradual progression of colonial education through phases of intense activity and increased funding.

The early nineteenth century witnessed an expansion of this "imperial network of educational reform," wherein schooling was extended to the laboring classes, particularly in mission stations like Serampore and the port cities of Madras, Bombay, and Calcutta. However, this expansion was underpinned by a "colonial grammar of difference" (Tschurenev, 2019), which

reinforced social hierarchies based on race, caste, and gender, thus justifying colonial rule. Macaulay's Minute of 1835 has come to symbolize the controversies surrounding the language of instruction and the transition from funding education in Sanskrit and Arabic to the institutionalization of English-language education by the colonial government. This transition epitomized British colonial dominance and their disregard for indigenous knowledge and learning traditions. Primary schools were established in rural areas, targeting the most disadvantaged communities, including the Dalits. These schools provided education in vernacular languages, making it more accessible to local populations (Sharp, 1920). The British administration also encouraged Dalit students to pursue higher education by introducing scholarships and financial support, enabling many Dalit students to attend colleges and universities—opportunities that would have otherwise been inaccessible due to financial constraints (Ghurye, 1969).

The British educational policy also included vocational training for Dalits to help them acquire practical skills and secure better employment opportunities. The objective was to ensure that Dalits could achieve economic independence and improved living standards (Sharp, 1920). Moreover, the British administration implemented a reservation policy to ensure that a specific percentage of seats in educational institutions were reserved for marginalized communities (Ghurye, 1969). The first special schools for Untouchables were established in the 1840s, supported by both missionaries and the British administration (Keer, 1971). By 1882, there were sixteen special schools for Dalits in Bombay Province, with 564 pupils. However, only 2,862 low-caste pupils (0.87 percent) were attending primary schools, and none were in high schools or colleges. Toward the end of the century, the number of Dalit students began to rise as significant numbers of Dalits, along with some non-Brahman groups, fought for Dalit education (Nurullah and Naik, 1951).

Despite these advancements, many Dalits during the colonial period continued to work in low-status occupations such as railway workers, landless migrant laborers, urban sweepers, stone cutters, and servants (Zelliot, 1970). However, some Dalits were able to join the army of the East India Company, and certain groups like the Mahars even managed to attain the status of a wealthy and assertive elite (Zelliot, 1970). By the 1920s, a section of Dalits began to view modern developments and institutions—such as schools, colleges, print and publishing, public and political bodies, courts, and railways—as opportunities for greater social, political, and economic mobility (Rao, 2009). Urbanization also contributed to the emergence of Dalit populations, which revealed a pre-existing heterogeneity in terms of gender, sexuality, class, and immigrant status among Dalits (Lynch, 1969). During this period, Dalit group spokespersons emerged within the vernacular reading public (Lynch, 1969), forcefully asserting their "rights" and "identity."

2.2 Dalit Women's Access to Education

"Since our community women are not educated, they keep their children at home, to attend to their work. They also do not know how to take good care of their children, and hence their children suffer immensely. Due to all this, we face many difficulties. Even upper-caste women push us dur dur [Hindi for far far] away because we are not educated like them. Hence, along with male education, female education is very significant and there should be boarding houses for girls in every district."

Mooknayak newspaper¹, 5 June 1920.

¹ Mooknayak, meaning "leader of the voiceless," was the first Marathi fortnightly newspaper established by B. R. Ambedkar in 1920 to advocate for the rights and concerns of marginalized communities.

The history of Dalit women's education in India is characterized by ongoing struggles against caste-based discrimination, gender inequality, and socio-economic challenges. Jyotirao Phule, together with his wife Savitribai Phule, was instrumental in advancing women's education in India.

In 1848, they took a groundbreaking step by founding the first school for girls, at a time when educating women was largely discouraged (O'Hanlon, 2002). In his book *Gulamgiri* (Slavery), published in 1873, Jyotirao Phule critically examined the societal structures that sustained the oppression of lower castes and women in Indian society. He highlighted how women faced dual oppression under the Brahmanical social order, being marginalized by both caste and gender (Phule, 1873). Phule strongly advocated for women's education as an essential pathway to their liberation. His work offered a significant critique of the orthodox Hindu social order and the religious texts that upheld it.

Despite resistance from Brahman communities, the movement for women's education saw substantial growth between 1860 and 1920. Efforts by revivalist groups to prevent women and non-Brahmans from accessing education largely failed, yet progress for Dalit women remained gradual. During the Bombay Presidency, there was a noticeable increase in the number of girls enrolling in educational institutions, with a rise of approximately 30 percent—from 52,941 in 1886-1887 to 187,265 by 1921-1922 (Richey, 1923). However, this increase still represented only a small portion of the millions of Indian women who remained without education.

After India gained independence, educational inequalities between men and women within the Dalit community persisted due to a range of social, economic, and cultural factors. The highest level of education typically attainable for a Dalit woman was high school. For instance, in Pune, among 2,395 high school students, only fourteen Dalit girls were enrolled in high school, and merely four attended middle school (Gadgil, 1952). Dalit women often faced exclusion not only from the broader society but also from other women.

Historically, upper-caste women, who held prejudice against lower castes, continued to shun and marginalize Dalit women, reinforcing their superiority by positioning Dalit women as "others." The political strategy of upper-caste, and middle-class groups, which involved homogenizing gender roles, further contributed to the exclusion and invisibility of Dalit women (Paik, 2014). Traditionally, upper-caste men and women emphasized conventional roles for women, promoting education that reinforced domestic responsibilities—such as preparation for marriage, motherhood, and household management (Nambissan & Rao, 2019). In contrast, the agenda for Dalit education was distinct. Instead of seeking to become better homemakers, Dalit women pursued education to enhance their self-respect and dignity. For them, education was seen as a vital tool for uplifting their community and strengthening the nation (Paik, 2014).

2.3 Further Steps in Education

Progress has been made in recent years, but the gender gap in literacy and enrolment remains significant, especially in rural areas (Kumar, 2016). The literacy rates and enrolment in educational institutions have generally been lower for Dalit women compared to Dalit men.

Dalit girls are more likely to drop out of school compared to Dalit boys, attributed to factors such as early marriage, household responsibilities, lack of family support, and concerns related to safety and security (Nambissan, 2012). They face additional challenges in accessing quality education due to gender stereotypes, discrimination, and cultural norms that prioritize the education of boys. In some cases, there may be a preference for sending boys to better-quality schools, leaving girls to attend schools with inadequate resources and infrastructure (Desai et al., 2010).

Dalit women are often underrepresented in higher education, particularly in professional and technical courses due to gendered expectations and stereotypes, which may restrict their subject choices and educational aspirations (Thorat & Newman, 2010). Like for male Dalits, poverty is a significant barrier to education for both, but it disproportionately affects women. Dalit girls are often expected to work in domestic or agricultural labour to support their families. (Jeffrey et al., 2008). For Dalit girls, safety concerns related to gender-based violence, harassment, and discrimination may deter their families from sending them to school or force them to drop out. The lack of proper sanitation facilities in schools, particularly in rural areas, can also pose additional challenges for Dalit girls (Kumar, 2016).

Kumar (2016) notes the significant challenges that continue to face Dalit girls in accessing education. Unfortunately, despite some progress, Dalit women remain marginalized within an already marginalized caste. In recent years, while there has been a gradual improvement in the enrollment and literacy rates of Dalit women, substantial disparities persist when compared to other social groups and genders (Desai et al., 2010; Kumar, 2016).

Efforts by activists, NGOs, and progressive government policies continue to work towards overcoming the numerous barriers that Dalit women encounter in accessing education (Nambissan, 2012; Thorat & Newman, 2010). These ongoing efforts focus on challenging entrenched social norms, advocating for gender equality, and ensuring that the necessary resources and support are provided to empower Dalit women (Kumar, 2016).

3. Literature Review

3.1 Colonial Literature and the Image of Dalit Women

In colonial India, the concept of manhood became a central focus in the national discourse (Gupta, 2010). Colonial powers reinforced their dominance by promoting masculine imagery, and nationalism adapted these ideas, transforming individual concerns into collective anxieties regarding the roles and definitions of masculinity and femininity (Nandy, 2010). During the colonial period, the idealized vision of the upper-caste Hindu woman was primarily cultivated within the home, with the domestic sphere being considered the heart of the nation, particularly for the upper-caste. Hindu culture and the role of the upper-caste Hindu woman were seen as the spiritual essence of the household, which was increasingly viewed as a vital symbol of "cultural identity" (Chatterjee, 1993).

Publications such as journals, primers, and guidebooks promoted a masculinist perspective on women's roles, portraying the ideal woman as one devoid of independence, economic power, and subservient to the male-dominated world. These upper-caste, middle-class women were expected to embody the role of *pativrata*²—loyal, religious, and skilled in household duties.

The literature of the time consistently emphasized that women should not be involved in earning money or supporting themselves economically (Gupta, 2008). But what about the portrayal of lower-caste women? Dalit, poor, and lower-caste women were often marginalized or excluded entirely from these narratives, rarely appearing as active participants. However, this exclusion is noteworthy because it highlights how Dalit women were rendered almost invisible and voiceless. In contrast, upper-caste women were depicted as their polar opposites. In these texts, Dalit women were predominantly portrayed in a negative light. They were often characterized as vulgar, using explicit language, and their perceived inferiority was evident in

² Sanskrit term that refers to a woman who is devoted and loyal to her husband. In traditional Hindu culture, a *pativrata* is often idealized as a woman who embodies the virtues of chastity, obedience, and subservience to her husband.

their frequent expressions of anger during disputes with other women, which were depicted as common and violent events within the Dalit community (Chakravarti, 2004).

Another critical theme in this literature was the association of Dalit women with dirt and impurity. For instance, the *dai*³, typically a Chamar⁴ woman, was depicted as unclean, morally debased, and polluted. The negative portrayal of the *dai* was used to establish hierarchical distinctions across gender, caste, and class, underscored by a shifting balance of power and knowledge (Gupta, 2008). These portrayals involved deeply symbolic values, where the concept of 'cleanliness' was equated with moral purity. As a result, Dalit women were often depicted as *kutnis*⁵—aggressive, intimidating figures to be feared and shunned by upper-caste women. This negative portrayal contributed to their alienation from mainstream upper-caste culture, serving as a metaphorical violation of Dalit women, through the persistent degradation of their community. Such literature perpetuated a narrative heavily reliant on harmful stereotypes.

3.2 Dalit Men's Literature: Inclusion that Leads to Exclusion

"Choo-o, choo-o, na chee! O je chandalini'r jhi! Noshto hobe je doi, she kotha jaano na ki?"

Don't touch her, don't touch her, ugh! She's the daughter of a Dalit woman! Your yogurt will get spoiled, don't you know?

Song from Rabindranath Tagore's Bengali dance drama *Chandalika*

In colonial literature, Dalit men were often denied a voice, especially in the context of masculinity (Gupta, 2010). Unlike women, they were often portrayed as desexualized, weak, and prone to violence. However, the 1960s marked a pivotal moment in Dalit literature, particularly as the movement gained renewed vigor in the Hindi-speaking regions of North India. During this time, a new generation of writers began to emerge, reflecting the harsh realities of caste-based discrimination.

With the rise of the Dalit Panthers in the 1970s, radical resistance poetry became a prominent feature of the Indian literary landscape (Bruek, 2017). Many Dalit writers began to engage with autobiography as a powerful medium to explore and express their narratives within this evolving discourse of power (Contursi, 1993). Despite valid concerns regarding the appropriation of this revolutionary new literary voice, there has been limited critical and scholarly attention on these autobiographies, and by extension, Dalit literature as a whole. Ironically, this has led to the characterization of Dalit literature itself as "untouchable." Key figures like Ambedkar, along with the broader Dalit community, imposed strict norms of propriety and respectability on Dalit women (Mugali and Amadihal, 2008). In their efforts to

³ Traditional midwives in India, often from a lower caste, assist with childbirth. Historically, dais were women who provided essential healthcare services in rural and urban communities, especially where access to formal medical care was limited.

⁴ The Chamar is a Dalit community traditionally associated with leather work and other forms of manual labor considered "impure" by the higher castes. The passage refers to the Chamar community when discussing the *dai*, emphasizing how these women were negatively portrayed in colonial literature, which contributed to the broader stigmatization of the entire community.

⁵ The term "*kutnis*" is a derogatory label used to describe a woman who is perceived as aggressive, quarrelsome, or immoral. It is often used to demean women, particularly those from lower castes.

Dalit women were labeled as "*kutnis*" in colonial literature, depicting them as intimidating and unworthy of respect. This negative characterization served to alienate them from the upper-caste women and reinforce social hierarchies based on caste and gender.

promote modernity and modesty, these men sought to regulate Dalit women's social and sexual identities (Bruek, 2017).

As the movement progressed, uncertainties, anxieties, and ambiguities posed challenges to the radicalism within Dalit literature at various points (Paik, 2014). While the critique of the Dalit autobiographical genre is still in its early stages, it is important to be cautious not to replicate the same essentializing processes of differentiation seen in other cultural and linguistic life writings. This differentiation often manifests as portraying men's and women's Dalit life narratives as either ego-driven, individualistic paths toward political awakening or as collective, community-based, politically intentional acts of "witnessing" (Hunt, 2014).

However, focusing on individuality in these narratives can risk overlooking the broader social context that shapes them. In many men's Dalit autobiographies, Dalit women are almost entirely absent or depicted without agency (Beth, 2007). For example, Omprakash Valmiki's wife, Chanda, appears briefly in his narrative, notably during his marriage proposal and later when he criticizes her for concealing her caste identity by refusing to adopt the surname 'Valmiki.' Valmiki interprets her actions as submission or weakness but does not offer insights into her perspective or her struggles against caste discrimination, which may differ significantly from his own (Beth, 2007).

In some cases, women appear in autobiographies almost as peripheral figures in the broader narrative. Significant aspects of women's lives—such as menstruation, sexual desire, and experiences of gendered violence—are frequently omitted from men's autobiographies. This exclusion reflects both the male-centered nature of these narratives and a broader societal reluctance to engage with women's sexuality (Friedan, 2001). The Dalit feminist movement recognized the progressive nature of Dalit literature and poetry but also highlighted the need to strengthen Dalit-feminist connections. Women within the movement objected to the patriarchal and derogatory language found in some poems, especially the use of offensive terms related to women's bodies within Dalit culture (Tharu, 2014). While upper-caste cultures often stigmatized these terms, there was a growing debate over whether a new language could be developed—one that expresses anger and defiance without demeaning women. Dalit men, while perceiving women as either transgressive or invisible, also imposed moral expectations on them, emphasizing modesty, cleanliness, and respectable behavior (Paik, 2014). As a result, Dalit women were often marginalized and excluded from the literary sphere.

3.3 New Image Reappropriations in Dalit Women's Literature

*Pūtra, bhāī, pati: sab mujh par nārāz ho sakte haiṃ, parantu mujhe bhī to svatantratā chāhiye
ki maiṃ apnī bāt samāj ke sāmne rakh sakūṃ.*

*"My son, brother, and husband may all be angry with me, but I too should have the freedom
to tell my own story to the world"*

Dohra Abhiśāp ("Twice Cursed", 1999)

Western feminist critiques of women's life writing have often suggested that male narratives have been presented as universal, leading to a "traditional" view of men's stories as focused on individual achievement and personal trials. In contrast, women's life stories, which often emphasize themes of domesticity, kinship, and community, are frequently marginalized and labeled as "relational." Mary Mason (1980) has argued that women's autobiographies, compared to those of men, are typically less centered on the individual and more likely to place the self within a broader network of relationships, reflecting women's societal roles in maintaining family bonds within patriarchal structures.

Dalit women, however, resist erasing their "polluted" gendered bodies from their narratives. Instead of conforming to traditional ideals of womanhood that demand the repression of the body, including sexual desire and individual identity, Dalit women assert their identities by including these "polluted" bodies in their texts. This inclusion directly challenges claims of rationality and universality that exclude Dalit women by characterizing them as polluted or impure. In this way, the genre of autobiography becomes a powerful tool for asserting collective identity and recognizing the cultural significance of these marginalized experiences (Anderson, 2001).

Analyses of Dalit autobiographical literature often highlight how these narratives disrupt the focus on the individual that is typical in more elite forms of autobiography. Dalit testimonies, as Sharmila Rege points out in her book *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* (2006), do not simply erase the "I" in favor of the collective, but they also bring to the forefront the lived experiences of Dalit communities, challenging the concept of individual control over the self (Rege, 2006). Rege characterizes Dalit women's life narratives as *testimonio*—a form that replaces the Western bourgeois narrative centered on the individual with a collective subjectivity. This narrative form emphasizes direct testimony and experiential authority, often foregoing conventional literary aspirations in favor of a more immediate and impactful mode of storytelling. As Bharti (2011) notes, Dalit women's autobiographies navigate both individual and societal dimensions. The shift from "I" to "We" in these narratives reflects a collective desire for liberation, not just within the Dalit community but also in a feminist context (Brueck, 2019). As Brueck further elaborates, after more than two decades of emphasizing how "Dalit women talk differently," Guru (1994) continues to assert that a deep understanding of Dalit life—marked by deprivation and marginalization—is essential for exposing the contradictions within Indian social life.

While autobiography traditionally claims to represent truth, Dalit writers engage in a form of autobiography that seeks to authentically represent the Dalit experience. Paik (2018) argues that Dalit women, through their autobiographical writings, connect their representations of the female body to broader themes of truth and sexual identity, asserting that the body provides compelling evidence of sex, gender, and ultimately, unique identity. In examining the intersection of patriarchy and imperialism, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) discusses how women's bodies have often been the sole means by which they can present themselves to the world. Spivak's assertion that "the subaltern cannot speak" reflects the limited platforms available to women for representation, a problem that persists despite ongoing struggles for visibility. This limitation extends to Dalit women's autobiographies, which challenge the distorted identities assigned to them within Hinduism, as the stigmatizing roles linked to pollution in Hinduism reappear in these narratives (Brueck, 2019).

Dalit women experience the burden of pollution in a dual sense: both through their caste status and their female bodies. As Dalits, their caste identity, determined at birth, is marked by untouchability due to their association with "polluting" occupations. As women, their bodies, also defined at birth, are seen as polluted due to biological functions such as menstruation and childbirth. This double burden of untouchability renders Dalit women both physically and socially invisible in much of male-dominated literature.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal how Dalit women writers have not only reclaimed their voices but also transformed both the literary and social landscapes in which their narratives are situated. While deeply personal, their autobiographies serve as powerful political tools that challenge dominant narratives long used to silence their experiences. By confronting both caste-based oppression and patriarchal structures, these writings redefine the agency of Dalit

women, disrupting traditional portrayals and reshaping the discourse around identity and resistance.

Through the lens of intersectionality, this study highlights the dual oppression Dalit women face at the intersections of caste and gender. Neither caste nor gender alone can fully capture the complexity of their marginalization, and these autobiographies underscore the need for frameworks that address both. The intersectional approach to understanding their experiences offers a critical perspective often overlooked by mainstream feminist movements and male-dominated Dalit literature. For example, Kausalya Baisantri⁶'s *Dohrā Abhiśāp* (The Double Curse, 1999) uses Hindi to connect with a broader audience, exposing how caste-based exclusion and nationalistic views affect Dalit women uniquely and advocating for affirmative action policies that account for the dual marginalization experienced by this intersection (Browarczyk, 2013). Baisantri's narrative reflects the wider need for gender and caste-sensitive support in education and social mobility areas.

By reclaiming their narrative space, Dalit women writers challenge exclusionary practices within these movements and highlight the urgency for intersectional approaches to activism and literature. Such writings push back against patriarchal norms in their communities and caste-blind perspectives in feminist discourse, forcing a reexamination of how caste and gender coalesce to shape identity and resistance.

The significance of these voices has also been recognized by prominent Indian writers like Arundhati Roy⁷, who has become an influential ally in the fight for Dalit rights. In her writings and public advocacy, Roy highlights the intersectional struggles faced by Dalit communities, drawing connections between caste-based oppression and broader systems of social and economic injustice in India. Her book *The Doctor and the Saint* (2017) brings attention to B.R. Ambedkar's critique of the caste system, emphasizing the continued relevance of his work to contemporary social justice issues. Roy's engagement with Dalit issues amplifies these voices and bridges the gap between Dalit and mainstream literary and social justice discourses. Her support has helped to bring Dalit literature, particularly that of Dalit women, into the national and international spotlight, reinforcing the urgent need for inclusive, caste-aware feminism.

Dalit women's narratives are sharing light on pressing issues in education, healthcare, and political representation, emphasizing that traditional policies often fail to meet the complex needs of marginalized groups, even in the most recent years. In South India, Bama⁸'s novel *Karukku*⁹ (1992) brings the experience of Dalit Christian women to the fore, using Tamil dialects and cultural specificity to explore the struggles of Dalit women and advocate for more localized, inclusive social policies. Her characters navigate caste and gender oppression with

⁶ Kausalya Baisantri (1926-2009) was a Dalit writer and active member of the Ambedkar movement. She wrote her testimony with a sense of obligation to her community, recounting her experiences through the metaphor of a "double curse" — the dual burdens of being both a Dalit and a woman. Although originally a Marathi speaker, Baisantri chose to write her autobiography in Hindi, as no earlier testimony by a Dalit woman existed in this language.

⁷ Arundhati Roy is an Indian author, best known for her novel *The God of Small Things*, which won the Booker Prize in 1997. In addition to her fiction, Roy is an activist and essayist, frequently writing on issues related to social justice, human rights, and environmental causes.

⁸ Faustina Bama a Tamil Dalit Christian woman (b. 1958), (stands as one of the most important voices in contemporary Dalit literature in India. Her groundbreaking work, *Karukku* (1992), marked a major milestone in Tamil literature as the first narrative in which a Dalit woman spoke in her own voice about the lived experience of being Dalit. Through a deeply personal lens, *Karukku* explored the intertwined dimensions of caste, religion, and Tamil identity, breaking new ground in literary representation. Its publication sparked varied reactions within Tamil literary circles, drawing both praise and sharp criticism

unique forms of resistance, reminding us that regional inclusivity in policy design is essential for effectively addressing such multilayered discrimination.

In the current Indian political climate, Dalit women face layered challenges that complicate this struggle for inclusion and representation. Rising caste-based violence, discriminatory access to resources, and a climate of heightened social division often exclude Dalit communities—especially Dalit women—from meaningful participation in political and economic life. Policy efforts frequently overlook the specific needs of Dalit women, reinforcing historical exclusions rather than addressing their unique intersecting oppressions. Meanwhile, Dalit women's activism and literature continue to push back against these systemic barriers, advocating for a redefined political space where their voices can be heard.

Dalit women's literature stands as both a critique of and a challenge to these exclusionary structures, calling on policymakers and activists alike to recognize and confront the persistent marginalization that Dalit women endure. In doing so, it not only empowers Dalit women but also expands the reach of global intersectional movements that advocate for social justice. This literature is, therefore, not just a cultural or historical artifact; it is an urgent reminder of the ongoing struggles for equality and an invitation to reimagine a future where caste, gender, and economic disparities no longer dictate social and political boundaries.

5. Conclusion

Several factors converge when Dalit writers engage with the issues that define their lives and assert their political identity. These issues encompass land, water, housing, access to bank loans, education, political leadership, family dynamics, domestic violence, sexuality, history, literature, food, play, friendship, and many other aspects. The approaches that these writers develop—for instance, in addressing domestic violence, suicide, or sexuality—offer a more holistic understanding than those provided by what is now increasingly recognized as upper-caste feminism. By critically examining patriarchy as inherently linked to upper-caste structures and addressing the specific challenges that Dalit women writers highlight, there emerges a potential for renewing both the discourse on women's issues and the broader Dalit question. Dalit women today are actively working to leverage these narratives in diverse and empowering ways (Gupta, 2007).

In contrast to the often stereotypical depictions of Dalit women in colonial literature and within the male-dominated Dalit literary space, Dalit women have robustly asserted their own identity and vocabulary. This literature has contributed to the reinforcement of myths about Dalit women rooted in upper-caste perspectives. However, these representations have been reshaped and reinterpreted over time to align with the realities of Dalit women, providing a lens through which to explore themes of chaos and order, as well as desire and fear. Scholarly analysis of this literature reveals a deep division along caste and class lines, codifying stereotypes about Dalit women.

The contrasting depictions of upper-caste and Dalit women have had significant and far-reaching effects on both groups, highlighting the duality within the same gender. Dalit women, in particular, have been symbolically split into polarized identities, often depicted as embodiments of evil, impurity, sexuality, and danger. These portrayals reinforce both caste and gender hierarchies, creating divisions between upper-caste women and Dalits that are social and cultural (Morrison, 1993). The ongoing attempt to include Dalit women often paradoxically results in their further exclusion, yet it has sparked an important literary movement.

The portrayal of Dalit women in literature is not just a matter of representation but also a key to understanding broader social dynamics. Issues like Dalit micro-politics, hypermasculinity, and the marginalization of women must be seen within the wider context of historical struggles—struggles marked by resistance, affirmation, and the fight against both social and sexual stigmatization. These complexities and contradictions, along with the pressures they face, need to be unpacked to develop inclusive and effective political strategies. Dalit women navigate multiple identities, and while they challenge the sexism they encounter from within their communities, they also stand united with Dalit men in their shared fight against caste-based oppression.

To build on this, to translate Dalit women's literature into English and other languages becomes both essential and complex. Authentic translations are vital to preserving personal stories, allowing Dalit women's literature to contribute meaningfully to global conversations on intersectionality, justice, and solidarity among marginalized communities worldwide (Browarczyk, 2013). Ensuring that these voices are represented accurately in translation can enhance understanding and foster connections that transcend linguistic and cultural barriers.

Future research on Dalit women's issues should continue to center on community-led frameworks, drawing on the insights of Dalit scholars, writers, and activists to address underexplored topics such as mental health, environmental justice, and economic autonomy. Rather than imposing research agendas, researchers should work alongside Dalit communities, allowing their priorities to guide the study's focus. Comparative studies that place Dalit feminism in conversation with other marginalized feminist movements, such as Black and Indigenous feminisms, offer a chance for mutual solidarity and shared understanding. Such dialogues approached respectfully, have the potential to foster connections across movements without erasing the unique experiences of each community.

In considering the broader policy impacts, the role of outside allies should be that of facilitators rather than directors. Policies that aim to empower Dalit women should focus on supporting Dalit-led organizations and cooperatives that address issues such as domestic violence, economic independence, and educational access. Providing resources to initiatives led by Dalit women allows for self-advocacy, sustainable development, and growth rooted in the experiences of those directly impacted. In this way, policy frameworks can support rather than dictate solutions, recognizing that meaningful change stems from community-driven approaches.

Further, policies should aim to diversify educational curricula by including Dalit authors and histories, especially as curated by Dalit educators, to challenge entrenched caste and gender biases. Such reforms would provide students with diverse perspectives on history and society, reducing stigma tied to caste and celebrating Dalit women's contributions to a more inclusive national narrative. Community-based health and mental health services, designed with input from Dalit health advocates, would also provide vital support systems that are sensitive to the cultural and economic realities of Dalit communities.

In the realm of political representation, empowering Dalit women as stakeholders in policy-making is essential. Supporting mentorship programs, leadership training, and resources for Dalit women candidates in local elections could strengthen their voice in governance and ensure that policies reflect the realities of caste and gender discrimination. By facilitating these pathways, Dalit women's perspectives can be brought to the forefront, enabling governance that is genuinely responsive to the unique needs of their communities.

To conclude, supporting Dalit women's efforts involves amplifying their voices and providing structural backing—not imposing direction. Recognizing the importance of Dalit women's

leadership in guiding research, policy, and cultural translation is key to building a future grounded in self-determination and genuine inclusion. These recommendations, while provisional, are presented with humility and respect for Dalit women's autonomy, honoring their protagonist role in shaping narratives and policies that resonate with the needs of their communities and contribute to a global conversation on justice and equality.

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