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# Dalit Women and Their Journey towards Self-Emancipation

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**Abstract--** Because Dalit women's writing expresses the interlocking realities of caste, gender, class, and social marginalisation, it has a prominent role in modern Indian literature. By highlighting the unique experiences of Dalit women, Dalit feminist discourse challenged both male-centered Dalit politics and mainstream feminism. This essay explores how the writings and activities of Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, Bama, Viramma, Sadalakshmi, Joopaka Subhadra, Meena Kandasamy, P. Shivakami, Gogu Shyamala, and Sujatha Gidla depict the path of self-emancipation. The study investigates how these authors use literature as a platform for social intervention and resistance by drawing on Dalit feminist theory, autobiographical accounts, political writings, fiction, and oral histories. The study makes the case that literary expression, political engagement, education, cultural memory, and group solidarity serve as essential tools for self-emancipation. The study shows how Dalit women's narratives question prevailing power systems while generating alternative frameworks of identity and empowerment through an examination of autobiographical testimony, feminist assertion, and political activism.

**Keywords:** Dalit women's writing, self-emancipation, intersectionality, resistance, identity, literary activism, caste, gender, social transformation

## I. INTRODUCTION

The histories of social exclusion, economic exploitation, gender discrimination, and caste oppression are all intricately linked to the history of Dalit women in India. Dalit women, who live at the nexus of caste and patriarchy, face many forms of marginalisation that set them apart from both Dalit men and upper-caste women. Because upper-caste viewpoints dominated dominant literary, historical, and scholarly narratives for centuries, their voices were mostly ignored. A major turning point was the rise of Dalit writing in the 20th century, which gave Dalit women a forum to express their own experiences, challenges, and goals.

Caste and gender are intertwined oppressive institutions that cannot be comprehended apart, according to Dalit feminist thinkers. Gopal Guru made a significant contribution to this topic by stating that "Dalit women talk differently," which highlighted the importance of acknowledging the distinct social position and perspective of Dalit women.

According to Guru, Dalit women's experiences provide unique kinds of knowledge that contradict prevailing feminist and caste narratives. As a result, their stories serve as potent political interventions that reveal systems of injustice, exclusion, and silence in addition to being literary works.

Using this framework as a foundation, Sharmila Rege created the idea of a Dalit feminist perspective, emphasising the significance of Dalit women's stories in transforming feminist ideas in India. Individual life experiences are inextricably linked to collective histories of oppression and resistance, according to Rege, who saw these narratives as "testimonios." Dalit women's life writings emphasise community experiences, shared pain, collective memory, and social struggle, in contrast to traditional autobiographies that frequently highlight personal accomplishments and individual success. Personal experiences are used to challenge prevailing historical narratives and capture larger societal realities through these tales.

The development of Dalit women's writing has greatly broadened the scope of feminist debate and Indian literature. Autobiographical literature became a potent tool of societal critique and resistance thanks to authors like Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, and Bama. While concurrently claiming dignity, self-respect, and agency, their paintings powerfully depict poverty, humiliation, exclusion, and prejudice based on caste. These stories show how awareness, knowledge, and group effort become crucial instruments for empowerment. By examining the intersections of caste, gender, class, and political power through creative literary forms and critical viewpoints, contemporary authors like Meena Kandasamy, P. Shivakami, Gogu Shyamala, and Sujatha Gidla have significantly enhanced Dalit feminist writing.

The study "Dalit Women and Their Journey towards Self-Emancipation" emphasises how education, activism, community support, and literary expression have a transformational effect on Dalit women's life. It shows that self-emancipation is a community path based on social awareness, resistance, and solidarity rather than just an individual process of overcoming adversity. The life stories of Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, Bama, and Viramma show how individual experiences can become potent political declarations against repressive societal systems and support larger social justice movements.



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This tradition is further extended by political activists like Sadalakshmi and Joopaka Subhadra, who link literary expression to social mobilisation and grassroots engagement. Their contributions highlight the significance of social movements, community organization, and political engagement in combating structural injustices. Together, these authors and activists are an essential component of the Dalit feminist movement, which aims to reform society via equality, justice, and human dignity in addition to visibility and representation.

The contributions of these authors and activists to the conversation on self-emancipation are examined in this essay. The study investigates how Dalit women's narratives produce alternative visions of empowerment and social transformation by examining themes like resistance, identity formation, education, communal solidarity, political consciousness, and literary activism. It contends that while picturing a more inclusive and fair society, these narratives function as significant venues of knowledge production that challenge prevailing power structures.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In his seminal essay "Dalit Women Talk Differently," Gopal Guru (1995) argues that caste and gender discrimination have moulded Dalit women's unique social position, laying the theoretical groundwork for Dalit feminist discourse. He highlights the inadequacy of mainstream feminist or Dalit political frameworks in representing their realities.

Rege, Sharmila's "Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference' and towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint" (1998) explores Dalit women's autobiographies as collective testimonies that subvert prevailing historical narratives in *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios*. She contends that these stories generate alternative knowledge systems and offer a Dalit feminist perspective that emphasises caste and gender lived realities.

The development of Dalit feminism as a critical reaction to both caste oppression and patriarchal dominance is examined in Shoma Sen's "The village and the city: Dalit feminism in the autobiographies of Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar." (2019) which is an analysis of the autobiographies of Urmila Pawar and Baby Kamble. Sen draws attention to the ways in which these accounts convert individual experiences into political interventions that subvert conventional feminist presumptions.

The autobiographical narratives of Dalit women are analysed by Bijaya Kumar Sethi, and Amarjeet Nayak in "Speaking and Speaking Differently: Language as Resistance, Liberation and Celebration in Dalit Women's Autobiographical Narratives" (2020) as potent acts of freedom, resistance, and identity building. Their research shows how language may be used as an empowering tool to help Dalit women writers recover their agency and confront prevailing depictions of marginalisation.

Arya, Sunaina's "Dalit or Brahmanical Patriarchy? Rethinking Indian Feminism" (2020) is a vigorous research on Brahmanical patriarchy that offers a crucial foundation for comprehending how caste and gender oppression are intertwined. She contends that caste elimination is essential to feminist freedom since patriarchal control over women's labour, sexuality, and mobility sustains caste hierarchy.

The paper "Raising the Voice Against the Atrocities: A Critical Study of P. Sivakami's Taming of Women" by Raj et al (2020) explores how caste and patriarchy harm Dalit women. The writers skilfully draw attention to Anandhayi's pain and defiance while highlighting social injustice and gender inequality. The study provides insightful information about Dalit feminist issues and Sivakami's depiction of the hardships faced by marginalised women.

Tejaa and Dasari's "Caste and Gender in Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess*" provides an insightful examination of the ways in which patriarchy and caste oppression interact in Kandasamy's book. The writers do a good job of highlighting Dalit women's hardships, tenacity, and opposition to societal injustice. The work makes a significant contribution to Dalit feminist and gender studies by fusing literary and sociopolitical viewpoints.

In "Modernity of Caste: Reading Sujatha Gidla's *Ants among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India*" (2021), Abhijith B. critically analyses how caste prejudice still exists in contemporary India. The essay deftly examines Gidla's autobiographical story, demonstrating how caste systems persist in the face of social advancement. The work makes a substantial contribution to conversations on caste, identity, modernity, and social justice through perceptive analysis.

"Resilient Narratives: Exploring Gogu Shyamala's Portraits of Dalit Women in *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...*" (2024) by Haripriya and Ravichandran provides an engaging examination of the resiliency and agency of Dalit women.



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Shyamala's complex depiction of oppression, survival, and strength is highlighted in the essay. The study makes a significant contribution to Dalit feminist discourse and modern literary criticism by elevating marginalised voices.

### III. OBJECTIVES

To investigate Dalit women's literary and activist self-empowerment

To examine how gender and caste intertwine in the stories of Dalit women

To research how education contributes to the emancipation of Dalit women

To look at literary involvement as a kind of protest

To investigate the role that community solidarity plays in the development of identity

To evaluate the contributions of particular Dalit women writers and activists

### IV. METHODOLOGY

The study uses an interdisciplinary, qualitative technique based on intersectional criticism, Dalit feminist theory, and textual analysis. In addition to pertinent secondary sources on Dalit feminism, caste studies, gender studies, autobiographical narratives, and social movements, it analyses primary texts authored by particular Dalit women writers and activists. The study examines issues of resistance, identity formation, communal solidarity, education, empowerment, and self-emancipation through critical interpretation and close reading. This method makes it possible to comprehend how Dalit women's stories express lived realities, question established power systems, and add to larger conversations about social justice, equality, and human dignity.

### V. DISCUSSION

#### A. Intersectionality and Dalit Feminism

Dissatisfaction with both male-dominated Dalit politics and mainstream Indian feminism gave rise to Dalit feminism. The mainstream feminist discourse frequently ignored the importance of caste in influencing women's experiences while treating women as a homogenous group. Dalit feminists contend that gender and caste work together to create kinds of oppression that are incomprehensible when viewed in isolation. According to Gopal Guru's seminal work "Dalit Women Talk Differently," Dalit women have a distinctive social position that gives them a different political voice and point of view.

Guru claims that because Dalit women are influenced by both caste-based exclusion and patriarchal dominance, their experiences are very different from those of upper-caste women (Guru 2548).

SharmilaRege expanded on this viewpoint by introducing the idea of a Dalit feminist worldview. According to Rege, the autobiographies of Dalit women serve as testimonies that contest prevailing knowledge production and historiography. These stories expose patriarchal norms within marginalised communities while also illuminating how caste functions through routine behaviours. According to Rege, Dalit women's narratives are alternate kinds of knowledge creation based on lived experience rather than only autobiographical accounts (Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* 13).

In her critique of Brahmanical patriarchy, Sunaina Arya highlights the interdependence between gender control and caste hierarchy as mechanisms that uphold social inequity. Caste boundaries are upheld by the control of women's sexuality, labour, and migration. As a result, Dalit feminist theory aims to eradicate caste-based oppression in addition to gender justice (Arya 220).

#### B. Self-Emancipation of Dalit Women in the Uploaded Chapter

The autobiographies of Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, Bama, and Viramma show how resistance, political awareness, education, and communal cooperation lead to self-emancipation. These authors record the reality of caste and gender oppression by turning individual experiences into group testimonials.

Urmila Pawar shows how activism and education can be instruments of empowerment in *The Weave of My Life*. She challenges social exclusion and regains agency through her involvement in feminist and Ambedkarite activities. According to Pawar, joining the movement was about finding her own voice and strength as well as fighting for others (Pawar 102). According to ShomaSen, Pawar's story demonstrates the transformational potential of political activism by moving from silence to articulation (Sen 8).

The *Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble emphasises the Dalit community's collective awakening. In order to combat caste injustice, Kamble stresses social awareness and education. Her story shows that emancipation is a group process based on common struggle rather than an individual accomplishment. Sethi and Nayak claim that by emphasising resiliency, resistance, and communal awareness, Dalit women's autobiographies subvert victimisation norms (142).

In a similar vein, Bama's Karukku portrays religious identity and education as tools of resistance. Bama shows the transformational power of education and self-awareness while also exposing the ways in which caste inequality persists even in Christian institutions. Her decision to embrace her Dalit Christian identity turns into a protest against social marginalisation (Bama 85).

Viramma's story demonstrates how oral histories, cultural customs, and communal memory serve as sources of empowerment. Viramma creates an identity based on resiliency rather than victimisation through storytelling and communal togetherness. According to Rege (Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* 21), such narratives convert individual recollections into communal political evidence.

### *C. Social Change and Political Activism*

A significant turning point in the history of Dalit women's involvement in public life is represented by Sadalakshmi's political career. She came from a background of gender discrimination and caste exclusion, and she actively participated in politics to subvert established systems. Her life serves as an example of how political engagement may serve as a means of self-emancipation, allowing marginalised people to have an impact on institutions that have traditionally been under the control of dominant groups.

Ambedkar's belief that structural change and political representation are necessary for social transformation is exemplified by Sadalakshmi's activity. She upended existing hierarchies and affirmed the validity of Dalit women's voices in public discourse by occupying political spaces. According to Rege (Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* 42), her life illustrates the shift from social invisibility to political agency.

In a similar vein, JoopakaSubhadra blends grassroots engagement with literary expression. Her articles highlight issues of gender inequality, economic exploitation, and caste discrimination while highlighting working Dalit women. Subhadra develops a vocabulary of resistance via poetry and action that questions prevailing narratives and upholds marginalised identities.

According to Arya, caste and patriarchy are interrelated structures that call for group political action rather than just personal growth (223). Sadalakshmi and Subhadra's activism serves as an example of how Dalit women turn their own experiences into larger movements for democratic inclusion and social justice.

### *D. Literary Opposition and Feminist Declaration*

P. Shivakami and Meena Kandasamy are prime examples of how literature may serve as a platform for feminist struggle. Their writings highlight marginalised situations while challenging prevailing assumptions.

The *Gipsy Goddess* by Kandasamy explores the connection between caste violence and class exploitation by revisiting the Kilvenmani tragedy. The book questions official histories and resurrects marginalised voices by focusing on the experiences of Dalit farm labourers. According to academics, Kandasamy's narrative technique purposefully subverts traditional literary structures to oppose hegemonic historical representations (Dutta 67).

Kandasamy explores patriarchal authority, emotional abuse, and domestic violence in *When I Hit You*. Dalit feminist issues about women's agency and bodily integrity are exemplified by the protagonist's fight for autonomy. The book illustrates how the act of recounting stories themselves turns into a form of resistance (Dutta 73).

The *Grip of Change* by P. Shivakami provides a critical analysis of gender and caste relations. The book shows that even in underprivileged groups, patriarchal behaviours still exist. Therefore, by emphasising women's experiences and viewpoints, Shivakami challenges male-centered paradigms of Dalit politics.

Together, Kandasamy and Shivakami show that literature serves as both political intervention and representation. By challenging power systems and envisioning different avenues for justice and equality, their writings broaden the breadth of Dalit feminist discourse.

### *E. Cultural Assertion and Community Memory*

In the fight for self-emancipation, Gogu Shyamala and Sujatha Gidla stress the value of memory, storytelling, and cultural preservation.

Through stories based on oral traditions and collective memory, Shyamala's *Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But...* highlights the struggles of rural Dalit women. Her tales highlight resiliency, inventiveness, and group power, challenging stereotypes of Dalits as helpless victims. Shyamala preserves types of knowledge that have traditionally been removed from mainstream literary culture through the use of regional idioms and oral storytelling techniques.

In a similar vein, Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* blends social insight, family history, and narrative. Gidla reveals the continued existence of caste prejudice in contemporary India by chronicling her family's experiences over several generations.

Her research shows how firsthand recollections can refute official accounts and advance knowledge of the past (Gidla 213).

Memory is transformed into resistance by both authors. Sethi and Nayak contend that Dalit women's narratives use language as a means of emancipation and identity creation, allowing authors to recover agency through narrative (145).

#### *F. Comparative Evaluation: Recurring Themes*

A number of related themes appear in the works of Pawar, Kamble, Bama, Viramma, Sadalakshmi, Subhadra, Kandasamy, Shivakami, Shyamala, and Gidla.

The most prevalent subject is still caste persecution. Each of these authors reveals how caste systems affect people's access to work, education, mobility, and dignity. Guru contends that because Dalit women face a unique kind of marginalisation, caste oppression cannot be understood in isolation from gender (2549).

Caste and gender discrimination combine to create distinct forms of exclusion. Rege's Dalit feminist perspective emphasises how these experiences contradict prevailing feminist narratives (Rege 18).

Education is frequently mentioned as a means of achieving empowerment. Education promotes social mobility and critical consciousness, whether in Pawar, Bama, or Gidla. This emphasis on education as liberation is still heavily influenced by Ambedkarite philosophy.

Political action, literary expression, cultural preservation, and community organization are just a few of the ways that resistance manifests itself. Community solidarity serves as an essential source of support, demonstrating that group struggle rather than individual success alone leads to societal progress.

In the end, the main subject that unites all of these books is self-emancipation. According to Arya, emancipation necessitates simultaneously challenging patriarchal dominance and caste hierarchy (224). These authors show that self-emancipation is a continuous process that calls for awareness, resistance, and group effort.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

India's intellectual environment has changed as a result of Dalit women's activism and literature. Literature serves as a potent instrument of resistance, identity creation, and social transformation, as demonstrated by the works of Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, Bama, Viramma, Sadalakshmi, Joopaka Subhadra, Meena Kandasamy, P. Shivakami, Gogu Shyamala, and Sujatha Gidla.

Their stories celebrate dignity, agency, and group empowerment while opposing caste discrimination and patriarchal dominance. These women reinterpret self-emancipation as an ongoing fight for justice and equality through their autobiographical testimonies, political activity, and creative writing.

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