

Intersectional Resistance: Reading Dalit Women's Autobiographies Through Caste, Gender, and Identity

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Abstract

Despite their enormous contribution to resistance literature, Dalit women's autobiographies have been received in a manner that often falls victim to a caste-centred approach that simply ignores the issues of gender or a feminist approach that simply ignores caste. This paper suggests that such texts cannot be understood adequately without adopting an intersectional lens of the multiple components of caste, gender, class and religious identity as interconstitutive. With reference to the fundamental Dalit feminist critiques, the study builds three arguments by reading Bama's *Karukku*, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*. It first demonstrates, based on the theory of intersectionality proposed by Crenshaw and the account of brahmanical patriarchy proposed by Chakravarti, that the Dalit woman is located at a point which is not divisible into various axes of oppression. Secondly, as also Rege and Nayar do, it reads these life-narratives as evidence, as testimonios from a collective 'I' that speaks for a collective. Third, it points to a set of formal and thematic patterns (the labouring body, double patriarchy, education, religious disobedience, and vernacular voice) in which resistance is performed in the form of the narrative itself. The paper integrates these insights into an integrative model of intersectional resistance. It ends with a prospectus of research directions that may be helpful for the future of comparative and digital studies and pedagogical research. It introduces a synthesis which attempts to consider Dalit women's life-writing not just as data for other frameworks but as a theory of its own.

Keywords: Dalit literature; women's autobiography; intersectionality; caste and gender; testimonio; brahmanical patriarchy; Dalit feminism

1. Introduction

The rise of Dalit autobiography is a literary event of great significance in postcolonial India. These life-narratives written by the people who have been marked as 'untouchable' in the past challenge the aesthetic norms of the upper-caste literary establishment and demand that the humiliations of caste be written as history and not forgotten as private misfortune (Rege, 2006). This is a larger movement, and the Dalit women's autobiographies are doubly marginal in it. They speak from a place that is subordinate in caste order by savarna society, in gender order by patriarchy, and crucially in Dalit order by the patriarchal norms of Dalit men (Guru, 1995). Reading these texts adequately means reading at the intersection of several structures at once. The big challenge is that usually dominant interpretive traditions have emphasized one axis at the expense of the others. Protest against caste has too often obscured and joined the Dalit woman with a genderless concept of the oppressed caste subject. At the same time, mainstream Indian feminism has too often universalised 'woman' while being silent about the upper-caste experience (Rege, 1998). This problem was explicitly identified by Gopal Guru's powerful statement that Dalit women talk differently, which is based on two factors: the community's historically internal opposition and the external opposition of non-Dalit forces that have sought to speak for Dalit women as if they knew what they were talking about (Guru, 1995). The job of criticism is not to pick and choose between caste and gender, but to theorise their entanglements.

The little-magazine culture of Maharashtra and the Dalit Panthers of the Marathi language emerged in the 1970s as a conscious movement for Dalits, a movement inspired by B. R. Ambedkar's radical demand to "abolish" caste instead of "reform" it (Ambedkar, 2014; Rao, 2009). When it came to the genre, the writing of an individual stigmatised life was the most effective way to condemn an entire social order rather than abstract argument; thus, quickly the genre of autobiography and life-writing became the hallmark of the movement. However, the articulation of Dalit women's voices remained postponed and disputed; early Dalit writing was the domain of men and the articulation of the 'woman question' remained postponed until the 1980s and 1990s due to their caste oppression, a patriarchy that oppressed women, and a movement that often deferred the articulation of the 'woman question' (Guru, 1995; Rege, 2006). The texts studied here are of that hard-won arrival time; they bear two burdens: they are representative of a community, and they challenge the silences in that community. It is this that this paper will do, in the framework of intersectionality. The term was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 1991) to explain how racial and gender systems intersect in such a way that the experience of Black women cannot be summed up as 'race' plus 'gender'; this also applies to the Dalit woman at the intersection of caste and gender, and of caste and class, with local variation. The intersectionality, when juxtaposed with Uma Chakravarti's (2003) description of brahmanical patriarchy, the system through which the sexual regulation of women maintains caste purity, can give us a clearer understanding of why, in the Indian context, caste and gender are literally co-twins.

The paper aims at three goals. First, it develops an intersectional theoretical approach suitable for Dalit women's life-writing that combines the concepts of intersectionality, brahmanical patriarchy and testimonio. Second, it provides a close, thematic analysis of three iconic texts: Bama's *Karukku* (2000), Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2009) in order to demonstrate the way resistance is performed, not only in content but also in the manner of its delivery. Third, it integrates these readings into a model and outlines a promising research agenda. In all the autobiographies, the central argument is that they are theory; they are not just providing raw experiences for the academic frameworks but creating a Dalit feminist standpoint (Rege, 1998; Arya & Rathore, 2020).

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Intersectionality and the Dalit feminist standpoint

Crenshaw's (1989) intervention was aimed at the 'single-axis' thinking of antidiscrimination law, which required claimants to be 'raced' rather than 'gendered' and 'gendered' rather than 'raced'. Her subsequent elaboration separated the structural intersectionality, which is how overlapping systems create lived experience, from political intersectionality, which is how single-axis movements exclude those who live in the intersection (Crenshaw, 1991). In India, the framework brings to light the ways an anti-caste politics reads the sexual violence as caste violence, and a feminist politics reads it as a gender one. In India, the framework reveals how an anti-caste politics reads the sexual violence as caste violence, and a feminist politics reads it as a gender one. The Dalit feminist standpoint, as Rege (1998) suggests, arises from this double erasure, but rather than being an essentialist standpoint, it is an epistemological standpoint; it starts the analysis from the most subjugated position and thus presents a less partial picture of the whole social order. This perspective should not be confused with a 'naive' identity politics. Knowledge is never 'pure' or 'genuine' as Standpoint theory suggests; it is always 'situated', and starting from the perspective of those who are most marginalized by the social order reveals what cannot be structurally seen from the dominant position (Rege, 1998). A Dalit woman's testimony on rape is an example of the kind of analysis that remains unachievable with a caste-based or upper-caste feminist agenda, or with a caste-based or upper-caste anti-caste agenda. This is one of the arguments for calling these autobiographies theory since the situated knowledge is epistemically privileged on the questions that the mainstream is less likely to ask (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012).

The scholarship has also been growing in recent years to understand Dalit women's autobiographical writing as a place of transformation, struggle, and epistemological intervention. Comparative studies show that Dalit women's stories are not just about oppression but also about their agency, where caste, gender and social mobility converge to subvert the patriarchal and caste-based hegemony (Runa, 2022). Recent literary criticism also suggests that the genres of autobiography and life narrative offer another form of knowledge, challenge the dominant histories, and prioritise the bodies and the collective memory (Alam, 2025). Recent research has also attempted to extend intersectional analysis beyond traditional autobiographical texts to explore the narratives of disability, illness, digital self-representation and new ways in which Dalit feminist expression is being shaped and produced in response to new forms of structural exclusion and social change (Amrutha & Christie, 2025). In

sum, these studies show that Dalit women's autobiographies are not only spaces of testimony of oppression, but also spaces of theoretic production, of cultural resistance, also of decolonial knowledge production which can supplement and enrich the ongoing feminist, post-colonial and literary studies.

2.2 Brahmanical patriarchy and graded inequality

Intersectionality provides the analytic, while Chakravarti (2003) provides the historical mechanism. Her idea of brahmanical patriarchy is the idea that the caste system reproduces itself through the control of women's sexuality: the caste purity is based on the requirement of endogamy, that is, having sex with people from the same caste. Patriarchy is not homogenous and has been different in its norms of seclusion and chastity for women of upper castes than for Dalit women, who have been subjected to the public nature of their labour, and to their bodies being exposed to the sexual coercion of their upper-caste counterparts, historically (Chakravarti, 2013). This gradation can be seen in Dalit women's narratives, particularly that the same body that is considered too polluted for them to touch is also made available for exploitation. Anupama Rao (2009) continues this critique by demonstrating how the modern politics of caste have been performed through Dalit women's bodies, and how the Dalit woman has been at once a symbol of atrocity and a subject of a new politics. Honor and shame are reframed as well. For women outside the protective fiction accorded to women in the upper castes, the logic of brahmanical honour is quite different: it leads to greater exposure than it does for upper-caste women, thus making them targets of brahmanical punishment (Chakravarti, 2003; Rao, 2009). This imbalance is highlighted painfully in the autobiographies, which document the seclusion of the upper-caste woman and the justification given for the abuse of the Dalit woman. Caste, in other words, cannot be separated from gender for a moment: the two are fused at the body-level, at the level of the regulation of the body.

In recent years, much research has been done that has reaffirmed the ongoing importance of brahmanical patriarchy as an important lens through which to view caste and gender inequalities in contemporary India. Researchers have claimed that reforms in the laws and their interpretation, and in the ways that women are registered in the government's official records, have opened up more opportunities for Dalit women in the fields of education and employment, but caste-based patriarchal norms still constrain the mobility, sexuality, and access to social resources of Dalit women both formally and informally through institutions (Chakravarti, 2022). Thereafter, Dalit feminist scholars have shown that caste violence is not necessarily understood through a gender or class lens, as the regulation of Dalit women's bodies is always a very important aspect of maintaining the caste hierarchy and social supremacy of the dominant castes (Arya, 2023). The importance of Brahmanical patriarchy, which has shifted to new socio-economic spaces, such as education, work, the digital sphere, and representation, is also highlighted in recent analysis, and literary analysis of autobiographical stories must pay attention to the presence of these as artefacts of the new forms of caste-gender oppression and resistance today (Paik, 2024). This process, in turn, continues to validate the claim that Dalit women's writings of the self remain effective in revealing the everyday experiences of multiple layers of structural inequalities while also generating alternate feminist epistemologies that may question and contest the prevailing social and literary discourses.

2.3 Autobiography as testimonio

The third one is genre. Autobiography is the story of a single, self-made person, as described in European conventions. Dalit women's life-writing does not fit this template; critics have suggested that it should instead be classified as *testimonio*, the genre of Latin American writing that seeks to tell the story of a writer and to engage the reader to act (Beverley, 1989). Nayar (2006) reads Bama in just these terms, and this is the point that the text does not close in individualist ends. Its focus on collective suffering makes it a testimonial text instead of a confessional one. Rege (2006) summarises the point: Dalit women's stories challenge the 'official forgetting' of the oppression of caste and create a dialectic through which the individual voice speaks for the collective and against the communitarian voice and control of the self. This generic reframing has direct consequences for the interpretation of the pronoun 'I' in these works (Smith & Watson, 2010), explored below. To acknowledge these texts as texts of the *testimonio* does not eliminate the literariness. Instead, it focuses on the art of making raw experience into witness by choosing episodes, controlling address, and pacing between the individual and the collective (Smith & Watson, 2010). The genre label is not judgmental, but rather descriptive; it indicates a way of speaking and a way of relating to the reader, and allows plenty of space for the creative work that each artist produces in this mode of speaking, in this way of relating. It is not to demean Karukku as something other than literature but to define the nature of its literary and political performance.

2.4 Voice, the subaltern, and the ethics of reading

The question of voice must ultimately be addressed within a framework for these texts. Spivak's (1988) provocation, which speaks of the subaltern and the subaltern woman not being able to 'speak' the language of the dominant order without distortion, has been overshadowing the reception of Dalit writing. This should come as no surprise: Dalit women's autobiographies empirically respond: Here are subaltern women speaking, in print, at length. However, their answer is not easy, because they can only be read by most readers through the mediation of a translation of the vernacular, a selection of editors, an academic frame, and a literary market that can make their suffering palatable and profitable to people (Rege, 2006; Ganguly, 2005). To read with a moral attitude is thus to focus on these mediations, not on the "authentic voice," without judgment. It is also to resist what Rege (2006) speaks of as the 'denpoliticisation' of these testimonios such that they are reduced to stories of suffering, devoid of politics; the function of the genre is not to appeal for pity but to call for solidarity and to condemn a system (Beverly, 1989). The reading practice used here accordingly does not focus on the texts as onlookers of suffering, but as political and theoretical interventions.

3. Corpus and method

The study is conducted using close reading and the framework outlined above. The analysis is supported by three primary texts, selected to cover various regions, languages, generations, and religious settings, and for their belonging to the genre of the autobiographical testimonio. Bama (1992) tells the story of a Tamil Dalit Christian woman's experience of caste in the Catholic church, translated by Lakshmi Holmström (2000). The Prisons We Broke (Marathi, Jina Amucha; translated into English by Maya Pandit, 2008) is a book about the life of the Mahar community in early-twentieth-century Maharashtra, in the shadow of their untouchability and the awakening of the Ambedkarite movement. The Weave of My Life (Marathi, Aaydan; translated by Maya Pandit, 2009) is a story of a Dalit woman who goes from a Konkan village to becoming a literary and political voice. We Also Made History (2008) by Pawar & Moon and Sangati (2005) are Bama's companion texts to draw upon as support materials.

The interpretative approach is not quantitative. These texts were read for the working of caste and gender together, for the particular mechanisms of brahmanical and intra-community patriarchy and for the narrative strategies which turn experience into resistance. In the context of translations, the analysis focuses on the intermediary nature of the translator and on the process of losses and gains in articulating vernacular Dalit idiom into English (Kumar, 2010). This is a methodology of reading primary texts as primary theory and reading criticism (Guru, Rege, Chakravarti, Nayar) with them. Table 1 summarises the corpus. Some exposition about terminology and positionality is required. The word 'Dalit' is also a self-definition used by the group rather than one imposed on them or used for them (ground down or broken), and its use here also suggests that the texts display political agency (Rao, 2009). The analysis does not presume that three writers can speak for the great heterogeneity of Dalit women across different regions, religions and sub-castes in India. Rather, it treats them as articulations that resonate with each other in a common structural situation. The intention is not to bring down difference to a single 'Dalit woman', but to illustrate how an intersectional reading can hold difference and commonality together in a way that does not engulf either.

Table 1. Primary corpus of Dalit women's autobiographies analysed

Author & text	Original language/year	Translator/year	Community & region	Axis foregrounded
Bama, Karukku	Tamil, (1992).	L. Holmström, 2000	Paraiyar (Dalit Christian), Tamil Nadu	Caste within religion; self vs. community
Baby Kamble, The Prisons We Broke	Marathi, c. 1986	M. Pandit, 2008	Mahar, Maharashtra	Community history; double patriarchy
Urmila Pawar, The Weave of My Life	Marathi, 2003	M. Pandit, 2009	Mahar (Buddhist convert), Konkan	Labour, education, feminist awakening
Bama, Sangati (support)	Tamil, 1994	L. Holmström, 2005	Paraiyar, Tamil Nadu	Collective women's voice

Note. Dates refer to first publication in the original language and to the English translation used here.

4. Intersectional resistance: A thematic reading

The themes of intersectional resistance are present five interconnectedly throughout the Corpus. The space from where these texts are speaking the convergence of caste, gender, and class is made visible and question-worthy in the subsections that follow, which trace the space from where these are speaking in terms of religion. They are analytically distinct but experientially undivided: a mother who has returned from stigmatised labour to a house that she remains responsible for, a girl who is denied entry to a schoolroom. This convert emerges from the church; these are the kinds of things that tend to trigger multiple themes. The following reading segments (one per theme) are isolated for readability but are also emphasized as being interpenetrated; the integrative model (Section 5) brings them all together once again to form a single system.

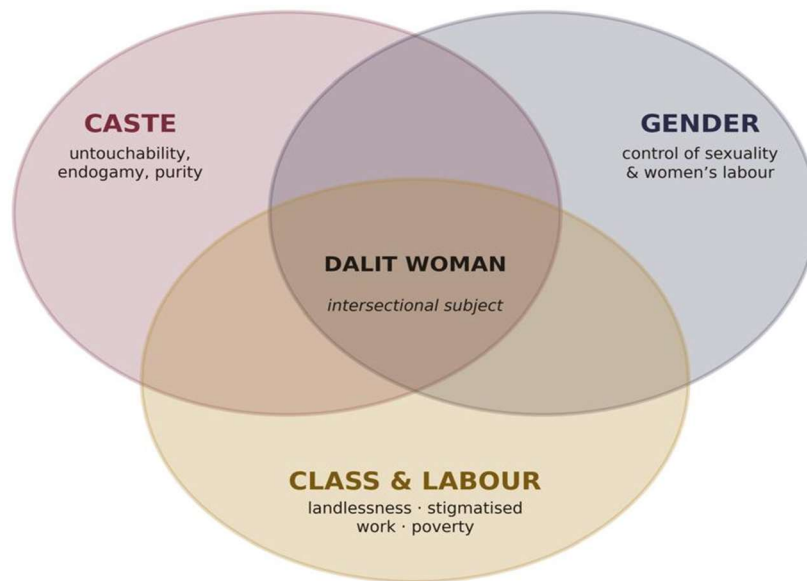


Figure 1. The intersectional location of the Dalit woman subject, at the convergence of caste, gender, and class. Religious and ritual order (Hindu or convert) cuts across all three axes.

4.1 The labouring body and the political economy of caste

Labour is a particularly prominent theme in the autobiographies of Dalit women. In Pawar's memoir, the woven cane baskets her mother created serve as a metaphor for the interweaving of caste labour, female labour and storytelling (Pawar, 2009). Kamble also describes the grinding poverty of the Mahar life: the disreputable work, the need to do it and the contempt it evoked among the savarna households, which were the ones that had to provide for the Mahars' needs and who hated their work (Kamble, 2008). These seem to be read "intersectionally," that is, caste is not only a ritual hierarchy but a material system, in which the Dalit woman carries out both the stigmatised public work of her caste and the unpaid domestic work of her sex. Pollution is not something that the upper caste can touch, and their labour sustains the economy of the village, as the narratives reveal with quiet precision (Rao, 2009). The resistance is in the very process of documentation: the naming of labour as exploitation and not destiny in the texts is an act of political claim.

This focus on labour also shifts the focus of the genre from the introspection that is valued in canonical autobiography. The classic form tells the story of the development of a singular consciousness. In contrast, these texts tell the story of the reproduction of the community's material life, to which the individual belongs and in which the individual is not exceptional (Smith & Watson, 2010). The end effect is a unique style that involves cooking, gleaning, weaving, and scavenging right in the heart of the story. The writers' work is an aesthetic challenge and counter-hierarchy to the representability of Dalit women's work that was perceived as not worthy of art, which is deeply political (Brueck, 2014).

4.2 Double patriarchy: violence outside and within

The most theoretically significant aspect of these texts is that they reject the notion of the Dalit community as one place of solidarity. Kamble is not holding back on describing the internal patriarchy in Mahar society,

including incarceration, early marriage and domestic violence faced by Dalit women at the hands of Dalit men, and the internal patriarchy of older women towards younger women. This is exactly the 'talking differently' that Guru (1995) has described as the brahmanical patriarchy of the dominant order, and the community patriarchy that would seek to 'forget' her critique in the name of unity. Building on this analysis, Bama's Sangati illustrates women's experience of receiving caste humiliation from outsiders and gendered violence from within, but also of creating a resilient, frequently ribald collective culture from this position. The texts bring together simultaneously both the patriarchies, thereby complying with the awareness of intersectionality which demands that solidarity along one line cannot be achieved at the cost of silence along the other line (Crenshaw, 1991; Chakravarti, 2003).

Most importantly, this internal critique is given without any disloyalty to the struggle of the community. As Kamble and her successors raise the banner of critique against the patriarchal constraints of this "Ambedkarite" tradition, they model a critique that deepens and does not undermine collective politics (Pawar & Moon, 2008). It is the careful balancing act that Dalit feminism has had to master to speak out against intra-community patriarchy without giving ammunition to a savarna society which is ready to label Dalit men as intra-community oppressors and to demand gender justice without treating a mainstream feminism that does not address caste (Rege, 1998; Arya & Rathore, 2020). The autobiographies do this balance, not in the form of a choice but as a unity and critique, in the narrative.

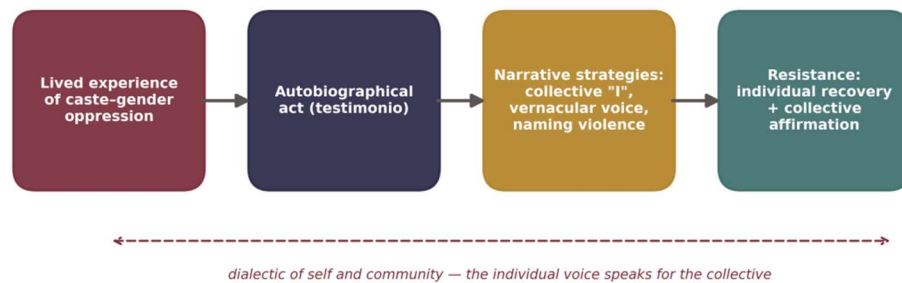


Figure 2. The testimonio process. Lived experience is transformed, through the autobiographical act and its narrative strategies, into individual recovery and collective resistance, with the self and the community held in constant dialectical relation.

4.3 Education, literacy, and the making of a resistant subject

Education is a pivot that the resistant subject revolves around. Language is a transgression in and of itself for a community that was previously banned from learning to read, and Ambedkar's 'educate, agitate, organise' lingers within these stories (Ambedkar, 2014). Pawar's memoir explores the slow process of coming to understand that schooling can lead to escape from caste-bound roles, despite the presence of caste in the classroom and the workplace. Even though this is a space where caste follows her, the painful, incremental process of schooling is a pathway out of caste roles. (Pawar, 2009) However, education has also left a double-edged sword for the writer, as it can also separate her from her own community and subject her to new humiliations by her savarna peers who are offended by her presence (Paik, 2014). The autobiographical act is the completion of the process of education, which starts with the object of the caste discourse becoming a speaking subject, and which ends with the subject of the discourse writing herself. In this aspect, literacy and life-writing are continuous: Both are 'tools of self-assertion' used against a social system of Dalit voicelessness (Spivak, 1988).

The genderisation of education is particularly pronounced. While it was sometimes reluctantly allowed for a Dalit boy as an investment, education for a Dalit girl was more often considered a double luxury; educating a girl was a waste of women's labour, and, in some instances, a danger (Paik, 2014). The literacy these stories are about is a triumph over this layered opposition, and that the stories are, at their heart, primarily about achieving it makes the final product an "autobiography" that is perhaps an emblem of the struggle itself. The reader's book is the substance of a struggle for the alphabet.

4.4 Religion, ritual order, and spiritual disobedience

Resistance is also carried out in the name of religion. The Catholic Church teaches that all are equal yet instills caste hierarchy in its convents and schools; Bama's exit from such orders is an act of spiritual disobedience against a faith that enables her to be humiliated (Bama, 2000; Nayar, 2006). In contrast, for Kamble and Pawar, the conversion of the Ambedkarites to Buddhism is a collective rejection of the ritual order of Hindus, which had legitimized the concept of untouchability (Kamble, 2008; Pawar, 2009). Religion is not oppressive or liberating but a battleground where the Dalit woman is asserting her right to choose her own relationship to the sacred, in both the trajectory of exiting a caste-compromised Christianity and conversion from caste Hinduism. The ability to transcend axes is reflected in Figure 1, in which religion is represented as a band cutting across all axes.

Any critique of religion in these texts always transcends the level of the doctrine, becoming gendered and embodied. This double bind of Dalit women, welcomed as worshipers and then segregated; the promise of equality and then the assignment of menial tasks, is what reveals the difference between what a religion professes and its practice (Bama, 2000; Chakravarti, 2003). Conversion and exit in all this, then, is not a surrender of faith but a declaration of a self that will not be made subservient to holy purposes. The Dalit woman assumes the power of judgement over the institutions which have assumed the power of judgement on her.

4.5 Language, form, and the collective voice

Finally, resistance is enacted at the level of form. The use of the stigmatised vernacular (the dialect of the community as opposed to the sanitised norm) is a deliberate aesthetic and political choice in these texts, which are chosen because the medium refuses savarna literary norms (Kumar, 2010; Brueck, 2014). They often lack a linear, linear-episodic, classic Bildungsroman structure. Not least, the autobiographical 'I' is permeable; it is constantly expanded into a 'we' of the collective, and the life of the narrator becomes the life of the collective (Rege, 2006; Beverley, 1989). The formal signature on the testimonio is the document's main thesis: that the practice of autobiographical writing is always to witness for others in the case of Dalit women. In Table 2, all these themes are summarised, and the interactions between caste and gender are detailed regarding each mode of resistance.

In an 'I', the communal 'I' also reconfigures the ethics of reading. The reader is invited to see the narrator as one of a group of readers, rather than a voyeur of the individual misfortune, but a witness called to witness the collective injustice, and consequently to do something (Beverley, 1989; Nayar, 2006). The grammar of the testimonio turns private reading into public reckoning, as is the case here. This is also why the translation of these texts into English and their dissemination in classrooms and anthologies outside of their context is an opportunity for solidarity as well as a danger of appropriation, which criticism must be aware of, but not solve prematurely (Kumar, 2010).

Table 2. Thematic matrix of intersectional resistance

Theme	How caste operates	How gender operates	Mode of resistance
Labouring body	Stigmatised, landless, ritually polluting work	Unpaid domestic labour doubles the burden	Naming labour as exploitation; documentation
Double patriarchy	Brahmanical control of purity & sexuality	Community patriarchy silences women's critique	Refusing to trade gender silence for caste unity
Education	Historic denial of literacy to 'untouchables'	Girls' schooling doubly discouraged	Literacy and life-writing as self-assertion
Religion	Caste reproduced inside church & temple	Women's piety policed and instrumentalised	Spiritual disobedience; conversion; exit
Language & form	Vernacular devalued by savarna canon	Women's speech dismissed as gossip	Communal 'I'; testimonio; vernacular idiom

5. Toward a model of intersectional resistance

There are five themes; these are not steps to follow or a checklist. The argument is summarized in Figure 3, an integrative model that traces the process from a site of oppression to how experience is translated into testimony, to the modes of resistance produced through the processes of making testimony. The premise of the

model is that each column is articulated by intersectionality, that is, that none of the elements of labour, patriarchy, literacy or ritual is articulated along one axis. The same applies to how these elements are introduced in the narrative: the communal voice, the vernacular, the naming of the body, and the act of witness. Resistance is plural in nature: it involves the private recuperation of dignity, the development of a counter-history to savarna feminism, a Dalit feminist standpoint, and the organization of political solidarity (Rege, 1998; Arya & Rathore, 2020).

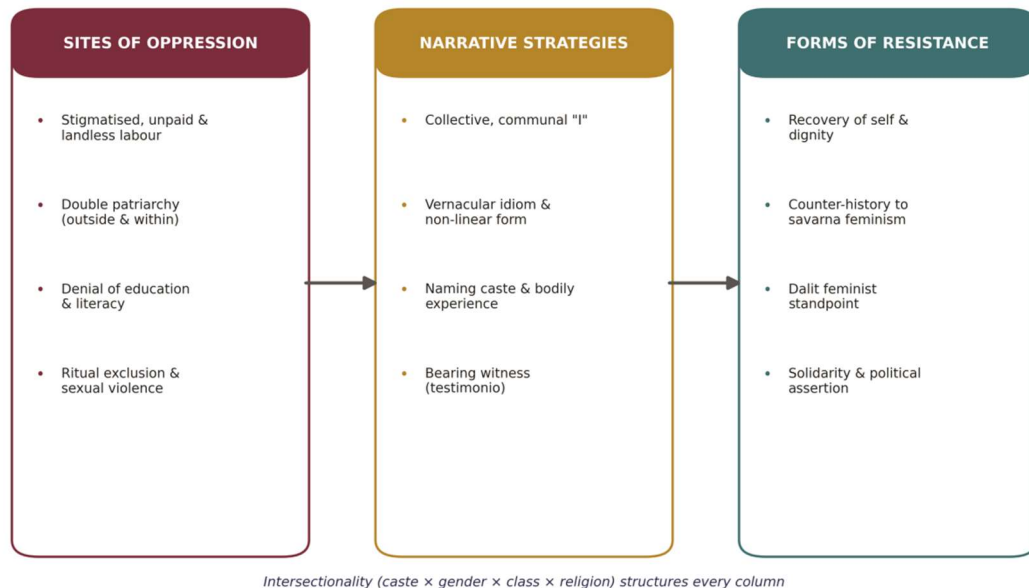


Figure 3. An integrative model of intersectional resistance in Dalit women's autobiography. Sites of oppression are transformed through narrative strategies into forms of resistance, with intersectionality structuring every stage.

The two characteristics of the model should be highlighted. First, it finds resistance in form and content and corrects readings that see these texts only as evidence of suffering in the social sphere. The use of the collective 'I' and the vernacular register, as well as the non-linear structure, are themselves resistance acts, rather than neutral media for some message (Nayar, 2006; Brueck, 2014). Second, the model requires the productivity of the standpoint, that is, beginning from the most subordinate standpoint not only records oppression but creates knowledge that is not possible from more privileged standpoints (Rege, 1998). Dalit women's autobiographies are thus not just literary works, but also social theories that provide a situational critique of caste society as well as mainstream feminism (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012).

The model also explains the failure of single-axis readings. Without the intersections of oppression, these sites cannot be described as texts; without the narrative strategies, these texts can be reduced to sociology; and without the structures they respond to, the narratives can be aestheticised into mere style; without the forms of resistance, the structures and the narrative strategies are the erasures that the texts were written to contest (Crenshaw, 1991; Guru, 1995). What is good about the model is that it keeps all three columns and the logic that connects them in view at once, so that no one element is overwhelmed by the others, and no one is lost.

6. Discussion and future research agenda

These intersectional autobiographies recenter several enduring debates. It presents a challenge to the common tendency to see Dalit women in caste studies or the translated Dalit women in gender studies as monolithic, and to place translated Dalit women's writing as a space of theory as opposed to testimony-as-data (Rege, 2006; Kumar, 2010). It also presents the Spivakian problem of the 'speakability' of the subaltern, as these texts make their speech claims, but a speech that is 'translated', edited, 'framed' by a literary market that consumes Dalit 'pain' (Spivak, 1988; Ganguly, 2005). If criticism is not to recreate what it examines, that is, the hierarchies, attending to that mediation is essential.

Further, there is a methodological lesson for literary studies. Here, the metropolis-to-local transfer of theory in the North American academy inverts the one and the other; intersectionality. However, a term used in the North American academy is arguably being enacted more fully in the non-Western context of Dalit women's writing than in its original juridical context, while Indian formulations such as brahmanical patriarchy and the Dalit feminist standpoint travel back to enrich the general theory (Rege, 1998; Chakravarti, 2003). The autobiographies are therefore not about theory, but are a place where theory is produced. It was important to realise this reciprocity, which is part of the decolonisation of literary method increasingly demanded by the field (Mohanty, 2003; Ganguly, 2005).

There are still several directions which have not been fully explored. Comparative work reading Dalit women's life-writing with African American and other minoritised women's autobiography will help to nuance the theory of intersection across contexts and prevent false equivalence (Mohanty, 2003). The politics and poetics of translation "what goes and what comes" when vernacular Dalit idiom is brought to the global English is worthy of sustained exploration (Kumar, 2010). Recent works of Dalit women's self-narration in newer modes of print and digital writing and new trends of Dalit literature beyond Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu demand new mappings. Lastly, the pedagogical issue of how such texts are taught, and whether or not the curricula reinforce or challenge the "theoretical brahmin, empirical shudra" separation outlined by Rege (2006) deserves critical consideration. These directions are included in Table 3 with guiding questions and approaches.

Table 3. A future research agenda for Dalit women's life-writing

Direction	Guiding questions	Suggested approaches
Comparative intersectional poetics	How do Dalit and other minoritised women's autobiographies converge and diverge in their resistance strategies?	Cross-cultural close reading; transnational feminist theory
Translation & mediation	What is transformed when vernacular Dalit idiom is rendered into global English?	Translation studies; comparison of source and target texts
Digital & new-media narration	How is Dalit women's self-narration reshaped on social and digital platforms?	Digital humanities; discourse and platform analysis
Regional expansion of the archive	How does the genre operate beyond Marathi and Tamil canons?	Multilingual archival recovery; regional literary history
Pedagogy & reception	How are these texts taught, canonised, and consumed?	Reception study; critical pedagogy; classroom ethnography

7. Conclusion

Dalit women's autobiographies cannot be read with only a caste perspective or a gender perspective because their lives are lived in an intermingling of class and religious identity. This paper has contended that an intersectional approach, which synthesizes Crenshaw's analytical approach, the concept of brahmanical patriarchy as developed by Chakravarti, and the testimonio genre theory, is not a forced fit but rather a formalization of the perspective that is already voiced in these texts. The three authors, Bama, Kamble, and Pawar, have a common repertoire of resistance: documenting stigmatised labour, naming double patriarchy, seizing the use of literacy, practicing spiritual disobedience, and establishing a communal voice. As proposed in the integrative model, these are conceptualized as one system where oppression is shifted to resistance, personal and collective, via a narrative strategy. An ability to read these autobiographies well is, therefore, an ability to recognise them as theory: an orientation to knowledge that is located, pointing critically at caste society as well as mainstream feminism, and that continues to call its readers to action. Their summons does not stop at the time of their writing. The archive explored here continues to grow, and new generations of Dalit women have picked up the pen, the keyboard, and the camera. At the same time, caste remains as structuring an influence on life and death in contemporary India, and critique of it is just as urgent.

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