

Reclaiming Identity: A Feminist Reading of Dalit Women Writers

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Abstract

This paper investigates how Dalit women writers reclaim and reconstruct their identities through literary expression, particularly from a feminist perspective. By focusing on texts by Bama, Urmila Pawar, and Baby Kamble, this research examines the representation of resistance, voice, and autonomy amidst systemic caste and gender oppression. Utilizing feminist literary criticism and intersectional theory, the paper foregrounds how literature becomes a site of resistance and reclamation. These narratives not only challenge caste and patriarchy but also redefine the scope of feminist discourse in India.

Keywords: Dalit feminism, identity, intersectionality, caste oppression, women's resistance, Indian literature .

Introduction

In the socio-political structure of India, caste and gender are not just categories of identity but instruments of systemic oppression. Dalit women, situated at the bottom of this hierarchy, face compounded forms of marginalization. While feminist movements have largely been led by upper-caste women, and Dalit discourse by men, the voices of Dalit women have often remained at the periphery. This paper seeks to analyze how Dalit women writers have employed literature as a powerful tool for reclaiming their identity, challenging patriarchy and caste simultaneously. Through an in-depth textual analysis of autobiographical and fictional works by Bama, Urmila Pawar, and Baby Kamble, the study focuses on the

transformative potential of Dalit women's narratives within feminist theory and literary criticism.

Literature

Review Dalit feminism emerged as a necessary response to the exclusion of Dalit women's experiences in both mainstream feminism and Dalit discourse. Sharmila Rege (2006) emphasized the need for writing that acknowledges caste as a lived experience, especially through Dalit women's testimonios. Gopal Guru (1995) famously articulated how Dalit women "talk differently" due to their unique positioning. Susie Tharu and K. Satyanarayana's edited volumes on Dalit writing highlight the pluralities within Dalit expression but acknowledge the underrepresentation of women authors. Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality offers a vital theoretical framework for understanding how caste and gender interlock to produce specific forms of marginalization. Yet, many academic discussions remain abstract or theoretical, missing the emotional and lived realities embedded in Dalit women's literature. This paper bridges that gap through literary analysis grounded in feminist critique.

Methodology

This research uses a qualitative literary analysis methodology based on feminist and intersectional theoretical frameworks. It involves close textual reading of three major works: Bama's *Karukku*, Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*, and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*. The study examines how these writers narrate personal and collective experiences to reclaim agency and identity. Key themes analyzed include silence and voice, education and empowerment, body politics, and the assertion of Ambedkarite ideology.

Analysis and Discussion

1. Reclaiming the Body and Voice in Bama's *Karukku***

Karukku is a landmark autobiographical narrative that reveals the complexities of caste and religion through Bama's experiences as a Christian Dalit woman. The body in Karukku is both a site of pain and resistance. Bama's descriptions of manual labor, school discrimination, and social stigma are vivid and disturbing. However, her decision to leave the convent and become a writer marks a moment of reclamation. Through narrative self-fashioning, Bama transforms her marginalized status into a position of assertion. Her style—fragmented, oral, and emotive—challenges the aesthetic norms of mainstream literature and reclaims voice from the margins.

2. Collective Memory and Female Solidarity in Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life***

Pawar's memoir is unique for weaving individual life stories with collective political consciousness. Her intersectional identity—as a Dalit, a woman, and an activist—guides her narrative. She critiques both patriarchal oppression within her family and casteism within broader society. Education, activism, and Ambedkarite philosophy serve as liberating forces. One key narrative strategy Pawar employs is the blending of autobiography with oral histories of other Dalit women, creating a space for collective memory and solidarity. Her narrative destabilizes individualism and highlights that reclaiming identity is not a solitary but a communal process.

3. Internal Critique and Resistance in Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke***

Baby Kamble's work is a rare document of an entire Dalit community told from a woman's perspective. The memoir critiques not only caste oppression but also patriarchal practices within the Dalit community. Kamble describes child marriage, domestic violence, and sexual exploitation with brutal honesty. Her Ambedkarite lens allows her to critique both

savarna (upper-caste) oppression and internalized patriarchy. The title itself, *The Prisons We Broke*, signals resistance and liberation. Kamble's writing dismantles the notion of Dalit women as passive victims; instead, it positions them as agents of social transformation.

Conclusion

The writings of Bama, Urmila Pawar, and Baby Kamble demonstrate the subversive power of Dalit women's literature. These authors engage with personal histories and political ideologies to assert their right to dignity, autonomy, and identity. Their literature becomes a battleground where they challenge silence, expose systemic injustices, and reclaim a narrative space historically denied to them. This paper argues that 2 Dalit women's literature is essential not only for feminist scholarship but also for rethinking Indian literary canon. Reclaiming identity in these works is not just personal—it is radically political.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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Declaration

I, Mansi Singh, hereby declare that the research paper entitled “Reclaiming Identity: A Feminist Reading of Dalit Women Writers” is my original and unpublished work. The contents of this manuscript have not been submitted to or published in any other journal or platform.

I further declare that I have acknowledged and cited all sources used and that the work is free from plagiarism.

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Date: July 2025