Intersections of Caste and Gender in Indian English Writing: A Dalit Feminist Perspective

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ABSTRACT:

The study examines how Indian English literature reflects the lived realities of Dalit women, whose experiences are shaped by the combined forces of caste and gender oppression. In India, caste hierarchies and patriarchal structures deeply influence social relations, often marginalizing Dalit women doubly—first as members of oppressed castes and then as women within both their communities and the larger society. This research explores how Dalit feminist writers use literature not only as a space for storytelling but also as a powerful tool of resistance, identity assertion, and social transformation.

Focusing on P. Sivakami's landmark novel The Grip of Change, the paper analyzes how Dalit feminist narratives confront entrenched systems of caste violence, patriarchal authority, and economic marginalization. Sivakami's choice to self-translate her Tamil novel into English highlights the deliberate attempt to extend Dalit voices to a global readership and challenge dominant literary discourses that have historically excluded marginalized communities.

The study situates Dalit feminism as distinct from mainstream Indian feminism, arguing that upper-caste feminist discourse often overlooks the intersection of caste with gender, thereby silencing Dalit women's narratives. By adopting a Dalit feminist theoretical lens, the research emphasizes the importance of intersectionality, representation, and authenticity in literary studies.

KEYWORDS:

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INTRODUCTION:

Indian English literature has always reflected the social, cultural, and political realities of the country. From its colonial beginnings to its postcolonial growth, Indian English writing has moved beyond elite voices to include the struggles and aspirations of marginalized communities. Among these voices, Dalit literature stands out as a powerful form of resistance and identity assertion. Dalit writing, originally developed in regional languages, has gradually found expression in English, giving visibility to communities historically silenced by caste hierarchies.

In India, caste is one of the most rigid and deeply rooted systems of social division, shaping people's lives, opportunities, and identities for centuries. When caste is combined with gender, Dalit women face a unique and severe form of oppression. They suffer not only from caste discrimination but also from gender-based violence, exploitation, and systemic exclusion. This intersection of caste and gender creates a reality that is often invisible in mainstream Indian literature, which has traditionally been dominated by upper-caste, urban voices.

Dalit feminism emerged as a response to this invisibility. It differs from mainstream Indian feminism, which often focuses on gender inequality without addressing caste. Dalit feminism recognizes that caste and gender cannot be separated and argues for a more inclusive feminist discourse that highlights Dalit women's experiences of oppression. Literature has played a central role in this movement, serving as a platform to assert Dalit identity, ques-

tion oppressive structures, and imagine a just and equal society.

This paper studies these intersections through Indian English literature, with a special focus on P. Sivakami's writings, particularly The Grip of Change. Sivakami is a pioneering Dalit feminist author who writes with authenticity about the struggles of Dalit women. Her works depict not only the violence and exploitation faced by Dalit women but also their resilience and resistance. By translating her Tamil works into English, Sivakami bridges the gap between regional and global literary audiences, ensuring that Dalit voices are heard beyond linguistic and cultural boundaries.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

The study of Indian English literature has expanded over the years to include voices and narratives from marginalized communities. Early critical works primarily focused on Indian English literature's evolution under colonial influence, its nationalist role, and its use of English as a literary medium (Naik, 1982; Mehrotra, 1992).

Dalit literature as a movement emerged powerfully in regional languages, particularly Marathi, in the mid-20th century, influenced by B.R. Ambedkar's writings and social activism. Scholars like Limbale (2004) in Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature emphasized that Dalit writing is not just literature but a form of protest against caste oppression. Dalit autobiographies, such as Omprakash Valmiki's Joothan (1997) and Bama's Karukku (1992), marked a shift towards personal narratives that challenge the silence imposed on Dalit experiences. These works illustrate how literature becomes a space for self-expression and resistance, serving as a record of caste-based violence and systemic marginalization.

In recent decades, Dalit literature has moved into Indian English writing, making Dalit voices accessible to a wider audience.

Authors like Arundhati Roy have highlighted caste issues in novels such as The God of Small Things (1997), but scholars note that authentic Dalit representation is more deeply rooted in works written or translated by Dalit authors themselves (Rao, 2010). This shift has encouraged more research into translation studies, with scholars examining how regional Dalit narratives gain global recognition through English translations.

FINDINGS:

This study highlights several significant findings about the intersections of caste and gender in Indian English writing, with a particular focus on Dalit feminist narratives and P. Sivakami's contributions:

Dalit English writing, especially by authors like P. Sivakami, demonstrates that literature is not merely a form of artistic expression but an active tool for resistance and reform. Sivakami's The Grip of Change explicitly challenges dominant-caste hegemony and patriarchal norms within Dalit communities. The act of self-translation into English also shows a conscious effort to amplify Dalit women's struggles globally, breaking linguistic barriers that once limited Dalit narratives to regional audiences.

Findings indicate that Dalit feminism is not just a branch of Indian feminism but a counter-discourse that critiques both casteist patriarchy and upper-caste feminism. Unlike mainstream feminist texts that often overlook caste, Dalit feminist narratives expose the deeply intertwined structures of social hierarchy, emphasizing that caste-based violence and sexual exploitation are central themes in Dalit women's experiences.

This research shows that authentic representation of Dalit realities is most powerfully expressed when Dalit authors write or translate their own works. Sivakami's novels resist romanticization

and offer stark, realistic depictions of rural Dalit life. This authenticity challenges stereotypes of Dalit characters created by dominant-caste authors and expands the scope of Indian English literature to include grassroots narratives.

The comparative study of Sivakami's The Grip of Change and Gloria Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place reveals striking parallels between caste oppression in India and racial oppression in the United States. Both Dalit and African American women's writings highlight systemic discrimination, sexual exploitation, and community struggles, while also portraying women's resilience and solidarity. This shows that literature can bridge global experiences of oppression, making Indian English writing part of a broader discourse on intersectionality and justice.

The research establishes that Indian English literature serves as a bridge between local and global audiences. Dalit feminist voices in English not only document lived experiences but also invite international dialogue on social inequality. English, once a colonial language, is now used as a tool to challenge oppressive structures, demonstrating literature's transformative potential.

A key finding is that Dalit feminist literature is still marginalized within Indian English literary studies. Despite its rich narratives and theoretical depth, Dalit women's writing remains underrepresented in curricula, anthologies, and mainstream scholarship. This gap emphasizes the need for a more inclusive literary canon that reflects India's social diversity.

Overall, this research shows that Dalit feminist writing in Indian English is a critical site of resistance where caste and gender oppression are examined through an intersectional lens. P. Sivakami's works challenge dominant narratives, give agency to Dalit women, and illustrate how literature functions as a powerful means

of social critique and empowerment. By linking Dalit feminist nar‑
ratives with African American women's writing, the study positions
Indian English literature as part of a global movement for justice,
representation, and equity.

DISCUSSION:

The findings of this study demonstrate that Dalit feminist
narratives in Indian English writing are not only literary expressions
but also political acts of resistance. The act of writing itself be‑
comes a way to challenge social hierarchies and reclaim spaces
traditionally denied to Dalit women. By analyzing P. Sivakami's
The Grip of Change, this research highlights how Dalit literature
questions both external oppression (dominant‑caste exploitation)
and internal oppression (patriarchy within Dalit communities). This
dual critique is one of the defining features of Dalit feminist thought,
emphasizing the complexity of oppression faced by Dalit women.

This research reinforces that intersectionality is central to un‑
derstanding Dalit women's realities. Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of
intersectionality, although developed in the context of African
American women, resonates strongly in the Indian context. Dalit
women do not experience caste and gender oppression separately;
instead, their lives are shaped by a fusion of casteist and patriarchal
systems that make their struggles unique. This validates the argu‑
ments of scholars like Sharmila Rege (1998) and Gopal Guru
(1995), who assert that Dalit feminism must be treated as a distinct
discourse rather than an extension of mainstream feminism.

The discussion confirms that Indian English literature has
evolved beyond its colonial origins to become a platform for mar‑
ginalized voices. Dalit feminist writers use literature to assert iden‑
tity and resist erasure. Sivakami's decision to self‑translate The
Grip of Change reflects a conscious effort to control the narrative

and prevent misrepresentation of Dalit realities by dominant–caste translators. Her English translation also shows that literature can transcend linguistic and cultural boundaries, giving local struggles global visibility.

Historically, Dalits have been portrayed through the lens of dominant–caste writers, often depicted as passive victims or symbols of poverty. Dalit authors like Sivakami break this pattern by writing from within the community, offering a counter–narrative that is authentic and unapologetic. Her portrayal of Kathamuthu, a Dalit leader who exploits women, demonstrates a refusal to idealize Dalit men or portray Dalit communities as monolithic victims. This nuanced portrayal shows that Dalit feminist literature is not only about suffering but also about self–reflection, critique, and empowerment.

The findings emphasize the urgent need to de–center the literary canon in Indian English studies. Despite significant contributions by Dalit women, their works remain marginalized in university syllabi, anthologies, and literary criticism. Dalit feminist narratives challenge the elitism of Indian English literature, insisting on a literature that is socially engaged and representative of India's diversity. Recognizing and integrating these voices is essential for developing a more equitable and holistic literary tradition.

CONCLUSION:

This study shows how Indian English writing gives a strong voice to Dalit women and their struggles with both caste and gender discrimination. By reading works from Dalit feminist writers, we understand that their stories are not only about personal suffering but also about the larger social structures that oppress them. The writers challenge caste–based hierarchies and patriarchy, exposing the pain of untouchability, poverty, and exclusion while also cele-

brating resilience, self–respect, and resistance.

The research highlights that Indian English literature plays an important role in bringing these voices to a wider audience, both within India and globally. Dalit women writers use literature to claim their identity, break silence, and demand equality. Their works encourage readers to see the intersection of caste and gender as a key factor in Indian society, which is often ignored in mainstream narratives.

In conclusion, Dalit feminist writing is not just literature but also a tool for social change. It educates readers, questions tradi–tional systems, and creates space for empowerment. This perspec–tive adds depth to Indian English literature by making it more in–clusive and socially aware. Future research can explore more Dalit women's narratives, regional writings, and the role of translation in bringing these voices forward.

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