



# Voices Of Resistance: Exploring Caste And Gender In Selected Dalit Narratives

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**Abstract:** This study, *Voices of Resistance: Exploring Caste and Gender in Selected Dalit Narratives*, examines the lived experiences of Dalit women through three key texts: Urmila Pawar's *The Wave of My Life*, Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants*, and P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*. These works reveal the intersectional oppression of caste and gender, highlighting the double marginalization of Dalit women within both caste-based and patriarchal structures. Using frameworks by Gopal Guru, Sharmila Rege, and Bama, the paper critiques savarna-feminism and male-dominated Dalit narratives to foreground Dalit women's agency and resistance. The narratives challenge dominant discourses, offering a counter-epistemology rooted in dignity, memory, and selfhood. They also expand the scope of Indian literature and social thought by reclaiming narrative space and confronting the enduring realities of caste injustice.

**Index Terms** - Dalit women, caste, gender, intersectionality, resistance, autobiography, feminist critique, Indian literature, social justice, narrative agency.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Dalit women's literature has emerged as a powerful site of resistance, challenging both caste-based patriarchy and the erasure of Dalit voices in mainstream feminist and Dalit discourses. This paper examines three seminal texts—Urmila Pawar's *The Wave of My Life*, Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants*, and P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*—to foreground the complex, intersectional realities of Dalit womanhood. These narratives are not just testimonies of suffering but political acts that confront structural violence and reclaim agency.

Drawing on intersectionality (Crenshaw), subaltern theory (Spivak), and Dalit feminist thought (Rege, Guru), the study argues that these texts serve as counter-narratives to both savarna feminism and male-dominated Dalit politics. Pawar reconstructs identity through education and Ambedkarite thought; Gidla exposes caste's persistence in Christianity and Leftist politics; Sivakami critiques the gendered exclusions within Dalit movements.

These works embody lived resistance and redefine the literary as a space of dissent, not conformity. They demand a reimagining of justice, dignity, and representation from the standpoint of those historically silenced—Dalit women.

## II. Literature Review

This literature review explores the intersection of caste and gender through Dalit feminist thought, focusing on three key texts: *The Wave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar, *Ants Among Elephants* by Sujatha Gidla, and *The Grip of Change* by P. Sivakami. Dalit women's writings complicate both Dalit and feminist discourses by exposing internal patriarchy and caste-blind feminism. Scholars like Sharmila Rege, Gopal Guru, and Kimberlé Crenshaw offer critical frameworks for understanding these narratives not just as personal stories but as political interventions.

Pawar's memoir, deeply rooted in Ambedkarite thought, critiques caste and patriarchy through lived experience. Gidla, a Dalit Christian, dismantles the myth of caste-neutral religion and critiques Leftist movements for their caste blindness. Sivakami's novel exposes gender hierarchies within Dalit politics, showing how women's trauma is often politicized but not addressed.

These texts are key contributions to Dalit feminist literature—foregrounding experience as theory and resistance. They challenge dominant narratives and push for a more intersectional understanding of oppression, justice, and representation in Indian society.

## III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This methodology takes a qualitative and analytical approach in which literary criticism, Dalit studies, and feminist theory mutually inform one another. The research is, therefore, interpretive and interdisciplinary, predominantly grounded in close textual analysis of three major narratives by Dalit women: Urmila Pawar's *The Wave of My Life*, Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants*, and P. Sivakami's *The Grip of Change*. These texts were selected for their regional, stylistic, and ideological divergence, providing a standpoint that may approach with nuance the caste-gender matrix operating in Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu, respectively, while interrogating the intersecting modes and experiences of oppression, resistance, and identity formation toward which caste patriarchies, class hierarchies, and religious relegation converge. The work will further draw on intersectional feminist theorization, particularly the works of experts such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Sharmila Rege, to consider the ways in which social identities intertwine and create variable forms of violence and silencing suffered by Dalit women. Further developments from Dalit feminist perspectives would critically challenge both mainstream savarna feminism and patriarchy of Dalit politics, elevating these narratives as counter-discourses that demand consideration in both literary and political spheres. Subaltern studies and the theory of testimonial literature place the autobiographical and fictional texts into memory and resistance, where the marginalized voices claim agency by reclaiming the language and authorship. Analysis builds upon close reading and thematic interpretation of recurring motifs of gendered violence, intra-caste patriarchy, Ambedkarite consciousness, significance of education, memory politics, and identity. Secondary sources would include not just critical essays, academic journals, and feminist anthologies but also Dalit autobiographical works by Bama, Gopal Guru, and Susie Tharu, which, in their own way, complement the analysis and contextualize these narratives within a larger sphere. Such texts help interpret the primary works in relation to broader sociopolitical movements, the embedded regional histories of Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra, and the pertinent ongoing struggle over Dalit women's representation and justice. Thus, the methodological approach interrogates not just what has been written but also interrogates the ways in which narrative structures, voices, and memories have been employed as means of resistance against stubbornly entrenched systems of exclusion.

From there, a suggested chapter structure emerges. In all five chapters, an overarching theme common to all three narratives—*Wave of My Life*, *Ants Among Elephants*, and *The Grip of Change*—will be used as a framework. Such a thematic approach will allow for some comparative work and draw out their shared struggles and modes of resistance among these narratives.

## IV. Scope of the Study

This study examines the complex intersection between caste and gender through a close reading of selected Dalit women's narratives: Urmila Pawar's *The Wave of My Life*, *Ants Among Elephants* by Sujatha Gidla, and *The Grip of Change* by P. Sivakami. The focus within these texts is on the fact that these narratives recount the lived experiences of find expression either through faceto-face contact if individuals navigate patriarchal oppression; systemic casteism; and perhaps most damaging of all, internalized social hierarchies. This also includes studying how those in the null categories derive meaning from literature "safekeeping" it as a space of resistance and self-articulation for Dalit women: people doubly marginalized. Thus, drawing on literary analysis and feminist theory, especially Dalit feminism and intersectionality, locates the works within a much larger sociopolitical and historical macro-discourse. Furthermore, it also draws on some selected references from secondary sources like critical essays, autobiographies, and scholarly works from the likes of Sharmila Rege, Gopal Guru, Bama, and others who have played significant roles in Dalit and gender studies.

However, the discourse is limited to those narratives of Indian Dalit women that have been either penned or translated in English with a special focus on the post-independence era. Although representative enough of the multi-faceted lives that Dalit women live across regions and faiths, this study narrows down primarily to Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu for the purposes of drawing regional and ideological correlations.

### 4.1 Objectives of the Study

- To analyze how the narratives of the Dalit women portray the intersection of caste and gender: The study unravels the peculiar ways in which caste-based patriarchy shapes the lives of Dalit women and how these authors elaborate the phenomena of resistance, trauma, and survival in a society deeply embedded in hierarchies.
- To foreground literature as an act of resistance and social documentation: The inquiry into autobiographical and fictitious narratives proves how writing is a political for Dalit women-in turning against the popular discourse while reclaiming their agency.
- To delve within Dalit communities into internal critique of patriarchal institutions: The study investigates how Dalit women resist the caste hierarchies imposed by savarna society while at the same time confronting tremendous, gendered oppression within their own communities and political movements.
- To investigate personal memory, lived experience, and oral tradition as epistemological tools: Under the lens of a Dalit feminist, the texts assess how they constitute counter-knowledge systems that contest the hegemonic academic and literary discourses.
- To underline and highlight the contributions of Dalit women to Indian feminism and subaltern discourse: The narratives are placed on the larger canvas of Indian feminist thought and subaltern historiography, hence marginalized in the debates crucial to reshaping critical debates regarding identity, justice, and resistance.

## V. Caste and the Female Body: Sites of Violence and Control

The body becomes a site of repeated and horrific caste and gender violence in the lived realities of Dalit women. The female body is an active site in *The Wave of My Life*, *Ants Among Elephants*, and *The Grip of Change*, which demonstrates still larger social hierarchies: a space of contestation rather than just passively receiving violence. The Dalit woman at the confluence of caste, class, and gender is doubly marginalized. Consequently, her body is hyper-visible and politically erased. The chapter investigates from these three perspectives how the body serves as a symbol of institutional violence, social discipline, and means of asserting resistance.

Urmila Pawar's *The Wave of My Life* is a self-engaged memoir exposing the lived oppressions on the body that Dalit women go through daily. The female body in a Konkan village, where Pawar grew up, came to be under all kinds of regulations, moral policing, and labor exploitation. Being just a woman means that the social weight of caste comes along with it. For example, her descriptions of menstruation, childbirth, and domestic work are tied up with shame and silence. Even in her family context, rules, proscriptions, and internalized fear engender a policing of the body in terms of "pollution." Much of the internalization of the upper caste gaze is penetrating even within the Dalit households, thus exposing how deeply caste violence cuts into the private bodily space of women. Pawar writes about occasions when her mother or other women were forced to accept even severe humiliation with grace during upper-caste rites, where Dalit women were required to take the low labor yet not seen as human.

Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* narrates a different context still, but similarly vivid in the attention given to how Dalit women's bodies are nullified and violated in both familial and institutional sites. Even so, in Gidla's account, caste plays not just at the level of the purity of rituals, but via state-sanctioned and economic violence. Manjula, her aunt, is married off at a tender age, suffers marital violence, which is part and parcel of being a Dalit girl in rural Andhra Pradesh. Gidla exposes how such violence forms not an exception but a structure, embedded into the socio-economic fabric of an India that has now grown independent. Even Christianity fails to protect Dalit women from their daily humiliations and sins since it was once assumed as a safety heaven into which the family converted for equality. Her elaborate description of lives of lower-caste women underscores how in all spaces, private domains such as marriage and family as well as public domains such as education, labor, and religion, the female body becomes a currency of control. Gidla reveals how state, community, and family conspire in making Dalit women both laborers and victims, thus perpetuating the cycle of intergenerational untouchability trauma.

P. Sivakami tackles bodily violence more directly in the fictional realm through *The Grip of Change* in the plot of Thangam--a Dalit widow assaulted by her upper-caste landlord. Unlike the first two texts, this one centers the happenings on violence and challenges the reader to stand witness to the internal and external degradation meted out on the bodies of Dalit women. The narrative starts with ostracizing Thangam for demanding justice--mostly by her own kin. The point becomes naked: sometime, if not most of the time, Dalit women suffer more for speaking than for being victimized. Sivakami not only talks about external violence by upper castes but also sheds light on how Dalit men do that under the tenets of protecting caste honor. The body here becomes both evidence of caste atrocities and a burden of collective shame. Sivakami is a Dalit woman and a bureaucrat herself, therefore draws from her lived experience to depict an extremely disturbing portrait of how caste patriarchy operates both in progressive and conservative spaces. Further, this novel points out how women's bodies are held for political gain, such as men like Kathamuthu using this case of Thangam as a political tool to advance social mobility while disregarding her public agency.

A running theme in these narratives is that there was an absence of control over their bodies as Dalit women. Through state structures, caste rituals, religious institutions, or community politics, any approach to their body has fallen into one of these: to contain, batter, or exploit it. This sort of control exercised is usually in defense of protection, tradition, or justice; strangely enough, it is manifested in subtle and overt forms in denial of education and health care, forced labor, early marriage, and sexual assault. What marks off the narratives of Pawar, Gidla, and Sivakami is not just the recording of these violences, but their conscious effort to narrativize the pain to make the invisible visible. Their readings confront the reader with an unflinching account of what it means to live in a body marked by both caste and gender.

At the same time, these female authors reclaim the body as a site of resistance. In writing their bodies, they impact the points from which they are viewed, remembered, and understood. Activism finds evidence of change in Pawar's body. In opposition history, Gidla's memory serves. Fictionalized voices of Sivakami may provide patriarchal justice and empowerment perspectives. These people's lines are meant to call into the open rather than scream admiration. They emphasize the violence against Dalit women as being collective, systemic, and deliberate through power structures existing on silence rather than just an individual issue. They give voice to the brutalized body, which rewrites the script of victimhood into one of assertion, resilience, and rebellion.

## VI. Education and Emancipation - The Struggle to Learn and Lead

For the Dalit women, education is not merely an instrument for literacy or academic pursuit. It is radical resistance in a survival strategy, as well as a vehicle for social mobility. The Wave of My Life, Ants Among Elephants, and The Grip of Change exemplify how education can be transformed into an opposite symbol of reclamation and change by challenging the deep-seated structures of caste and patriarchy. Dalit women in these stories must fight obstacles—poverty, gender discrimination, domestic expectations, systemic exclusion, and violence—on their way to education. Education remakes a new self, dignity, and a place in this world, regardless of all these barriers.

Urmila Pawar's autobiography *The Wave of My Life* presents education as a form of freedom from intergenerational marginalization. Pawar narrates how despite being illiterate, her mother was keen on educating her daughters. Their movement to Bombay was only partly prompted by the quest for economic sustenance; the family was also eager to go where education was not available in their Konkan village. Pawar's narrative shows that education was a collective dream rather than just individual empowerment; the dream of dignity, respect, and place in the Ambedkarite political thought. As she moved from school to college to a government job, Pawar constantly meditated on how education made her possible in activism and literature. Yet education is a burden accompanying Dalit girls: prove one's worth, bear the aspirations of the entire community, and always know 'where one is'. Through this account, Pawar shows how education becomes much more than upward mobility; it is also resistance against dehumanization and invisibility.

In *Ants Among Elephants*, Sujatha Gidla presented an even more complex and cynical picture of education, both as a means and ends of subterfuge. Gidla's uncle, Satyam, is the most educated family member and a committed Communist, perceiving education as a tool for initiating a revolution. Even so, she does not shy away from portraying the contradictory features of education in casteist society. During her elite high school days, she eventually made her first move towards the U.S. because of the culture shocks that happened along with being educative for the Dalit. Her education brings her information but does not guarantee her belonging. Teachers humiliate her background; they exclude her peers, and her courses make no reflection of her history. On the other hand, Gidla uses education as a weapon against modernity within the Indian narrative, which fails to consider the Dalit voice. The memoir as such, well-researched and rich in history, is about such education, and serves to put the family's experience in perspective and critical inquiry into who gets to write history against that education. Education for Gidla is, on the one hand, empowering; on the other hand, it alienated him from community knowledge, becoming a source of education that often does not translate into social inclusion.

Education became a part of the struggle in P. Sivakami's novel *The Grip of Change*. Kathamuthu's daughter Gowri is born highly educated; she captures the new Dalit woman, while being educated, who refuses to remain passive spectators in the act of injustice. Gowri's education gives her the capacity to challenge both caste oppression and patriarchal control in the Dalit movement. Unlike Thangam, who suffers physical and social violence, Gowri uses her intellectual tools to subvert male authority. She takes a stand against her father's hypocrisy; condemns opportunism among the Dalit male leaders; and asserts that she would like to represent her own experiences and interpretations. Sivakami's portrayal of Gowri signals a shift in terms of how educated Dalit women are envisaged—not as symbols of progress but rather active agents at both political and intellectual levels. Education is not the end goal here but a weapon for rewriting power relations, within and without the community.

These narratives connect through the understanding that education is never neutral or apolitical. For them, education becomes a battleground: a scheme of forces where caste, gender, class, tongue, and location come into conflict. Education becomes a battleground where Dalit women are expected to negotiate their identities: perform resilience, repress anger, and often carry the emotional burden of being "the first" in unwelcoming spaces. They will have to live with many contradictions of being both-a community that prizes their achievements but resents their departure from traditional roles.

Structural barriers notwithstanding, these narratives do not depict the Dalit woman as a passive victim. Quite the opposite: they emphasize the extent to which education puts the Dalit woman into new roles as a thinker, writer, leader, and disruptor of dominant discourse. If it's Pawar publishing her stories in Marathi journals, Gidla becoming the first Indian woman conductor in New York City while penning a globally recognized memoir, or Gowri stepping into the role of leadership in her community, for what counts is for the educated Dalit woman to have become: a metaphor of uprising. She is challenging Brahminical structure and patriarchal codes within her own community, reconceptualizing what it means to be both Dalit and woman in today's India.

Education in these texts is quite complex, layered. It liberates, isolates, empowers, and burdens all simultaneously. Most importantly, it allows the Dalit women to generate new narratives, new communities of resistance, and new schemas for justice. Their stories show that the classroom is not merely an instructive space, but rather a battlefield of sorts where identities are forged, histories reclaimed, and futures imagined.

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