



Dalit Women's challenges traditional notions of 'difference', advocating for a unique feminist standpoint position

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ABSTRACT

Dalit women challenge traditional notions of "difference" by boldly advocating for a unique feminist standpoint position that highlights their experiences and struggles. In doing so, they seek to redefine and reshape societal perspectives on gender equality and social justice. These courageous women are at the forefront of a Dalit women movement that aims to dismantle systems of oppression and discrimination that have long marginalized them. By amplifying their voices and narratives, Dalit women are not only reclaiming their power and agency but also sparking crucial conversations and driving essential change within their communities and beyond. Through their perseverance and resilience, they are breaking barriers and paving way for more inclusive and equitable society where all individuals are valued and respected.

Keywords: Communities, Dalit women, discrimination, societal perspectives

Women have been standing at the crossroads for centuries, their presence largely relegated to the peripheries of society. Throughout history, they have been consistently viewed as the 'other,' and their survival often reliant on men. This unequal dynamic has perpetuated a lack of shared identity between the genders in every aspect of life. Women have historically only advanced to the extent that men have been willing to allow, leading to a system where neglect, suppression, violence, and animosity have been the norm. The burden of inferiority imposed on women has led to enduring mental anguish and suffering, compounded by instances of physical and emotional exploitation.

For generations, women have endured systematic suffering rooted in factors such as race, caste, culture, religion, and gender discrimination. This dual oppression stems from entrenched social norms that are both orthodox and dogmatic. The resulting gender disparities, influenced by the prevailing patriarchal structures, have eroded the very essence of a woman's identity. Consequently, they have been stripped of their fundamental rights, unable to fully realize autonomy and agency in their lives. This sobering reality is echoed in the words of Jasbir Jain, underscoring the ongoing challenges faced by women in navigating a world that has systematically undervalued and marginalized their contributions,

"In childhood, a female must be subject to her father, in youth, to her husband, when her lord is dead, to her sons; a woman must never be independent." (Jasbir Jain 210).

Women face multifaceted challenges in various aspects of life, not only encountering marginalization in cultural beliefs but also enduring oppression and exploitation through political, economic, social, and physical power dynamics. For instance, in contemporary India, alarming rates of abduction, rape, and kidnapping of women are distressingly high, with reports to the police flooding in every hour. Similarly, recent data from Australia's first national survey on sexual harassment reveals a stark reality; more than one in four women has encountered harassment in their workplace, indicating a pervasive issue that needs urgent attention.

Furthermore, women often find themselves navigating the demands and frustrations stemming from their husbands and children, as societal norms often expect them to bear these burdens without voicing their own needs and desires. This societal pressure extends to the lack of recognition of married women's individual identities, both internally and externally, leading to a sense of invisibility and erasure. Compounding these issues, many women find themselves financially dependent on their husbands' families, limiting their autonomy and exacerbating their vulnerabilities.

Moreover, despite global advancements in literacy rates, a significant gender disparity persists, with a majority of the world's illiterate population comprising women. Regions like Africa and Asia notably grapple with high illiteracy rates, highlighting systemic barriers that hinder women's access to education and economic opportunities. This educational disadvantage further intersects with economic disparities, as women across the world continue to face unequal pay compared to their male counterparts, perpetuating cycles of financial insecurity and limited career prospects.

These structural inequalities not only confine women to traditional roles in domestic labor and caregiving but also strip them of opportunities for political representation and decision-making power. Coupled with physical, emotional, and sexual abuses that women endure, ranging from verbal harassment to rape and domestic violence, the urgency to address and dismantle these systemic injustices becomes increasingly apparent. By recognizing and challenging these ingrained power imbalances, societies can strive towards a more equitable and just future for all individuals, regardless of gender.

I find my own Small Person A standing of self against the world an equality of wills I finally understand
(Walker 17-22)

In the lines above, Alice Walker eloquently conveys a powerful sense of self-respect and a firm stance against inequality and injustice faced by women. Her words resonate with a deep-seated conviction, serving as a source of inspiration for those advocating for gender equality and social justice.

If we delve into the annals of world history, it becomes evident that women, in general, have often found themselves relegated to a subaltern position. However, when we specifically focus on the plight of Black and Dalit women, it becomes painfully clear that they have borne the brunt of some of the most egregious atrocities. The systematic subjugation and exploitation faced by African-American women can be traced back to the deeply entrenched roots of racism and slavery. The harrowing saga of the Black community in America can be traced back to the tumultuous seventeenth century, marked by the coerced migration of countless Africans from the hinterlands of the west coast of Africa. Once in European colonies, these enslaved Africans were treated as commodities and auctioned off to the highest bidder. The Black population in America was brought over primarily to serve the interests of their White masters, leading to a stark reality of illiteracy, abject poverty, and exploitation. For the White oppressors, this was an opportune moment to exercise control and dominance over a marginalized community.

During this dark epoch, Black women bore an exceptionally heavy burden, facing a myriad of challenges and indignities. They were dehumanized, objectified, and subjected to unfathomable brutality, often being bought and sold for backbreaking field labor. Even today, the Black female experience remains marred by various forms of repression, perpetuated by a toxic blend of sexism, classism, and racism. Not only were these women oppressed by their White masters, but they also faced subjugation at the hands of their own male counterparts, further complicating their struggle for autonomy and recognition as human beings.

Post the formal abolition of the slavery system, Black women were relegated to the status of domestic servants in the households of their former oppressors. Denied adequate medical care and relegated to menial tasks, they were treated as expendable entities, devoid of basic human rights and dignity. Their physical strength was exploited to operate heavy machinery in the fields and factories, akin to mere beasts of burden. Discrimination continued to plague their lives, manifesting in unequal access to employment opportunities, education, housing, and essential amenities needed for dignified living. Thus, the persistent narrative of injustice and inequality persisted, casting a long shadow over the lives of Black women in America. According to Hill Collins, *"Black women generally perform the same work as the men which was physically demanding, economically exploitative and intellectually deadening"*. (Collins 60)

The Whites exploited them sexually despite their hate for them on the ground of their colour. Despite significant progress globally, a considerable portion of Black women continue to face severe mistreatment from their male counterparts. Tragically, they do not find solace even within the confines of their homes or with close kin, often enduring the grim realities of rape, molestation, physical abuse, and profound emotional distress as recurrent aspects of their existence. Adding to their plight, these women witness their own men showing a preference for white women, intensifying their feelings of neglect and betrayal.

Similarly, akin to the struggles of Black women in America, Dalit women in India grapple with similar hardships. The deeply ingrained patriarchy and pervasive caste discrimination prevalent within Dalit communities serve as constant themes in Dalit feminist narratives. The term 'Dalit,' originating from Sanskrit, denotes feelings of being subjugated, oppressed, shattered, or crushed.

During ancient times, the Indian social structure was ordered into a fourfold caste system consisting of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras to facilitate societal functionality. Over time, this caste structure

evolved into a rigid and hierarchical system, with the Shudras positioned at the bottom tier. Within this framework, the Shudras were further subdivided into the touchables and untouchables, with the Dalits occupying the lowest societal position, often relegated to menial tasks such as forest clearance, waste disposal, and the disposal of animal remains. The term 'Dalit' was initially coined by Joyti Rao Phule in the nineteenth century to refer to marginalized sections of society, primarily the Shudras, based on their caste identity. Presently, 'Dalit' encompasses the untouchables, Pariahs, and outcastes, symbolizing the ongoing struggle against societal marginalization and oppression.

Expanding on this, it is crucial to recognize the interconnectedness between the historical oppression faced by Black women and Dalit women. Both communities have endured generations of systemic discrimination and violence, perpetuated by structures designed to subjugate and marginalize them. The resilience displayed by these women in the face of such adversity is a testament to their unwavering strength and determination. Despite the different geographical locations and cultural contexts, the underlying themes of gender-based violence and caste discrimination unite these women in their shared struggle for equality and justice. As we delve deeper into the complexities of their experiences, we unravel the layers of injustice woven into the fabric of society, calling for a concerted effort to dismantle oppressive systems and build a more equitable world for all marginalized individuals.

The plight of Dalit women is starkly evident as they face exploitation not only from high caste men but also within their own community. Trapped in the web of triple oppression based on class, caste, and gender, they are stripped of their fundamental rights, with even basic tasks like fetching water from wells being denied to them. Excluded from temple premises, Dalit women endure a life marred by constant shadow of discrimination and mistreatment. They endure a harrowing existence where they are subjected to sexual harassment by upper caste men and subjected to neglect and abuse even at the hands of men from their own community. This systematic oppression leads to regular occurrences of domestic and social violence, both physical and psychological, where they face verbal and sexual abuse, and are often victimized through rape at the hands of their own family members.

To make matters worse, many Dalit women are coerced into prostitution as a desperate means to support their families, further perpetuating the cycle of exploitation. Their daughters, victims of early marriages, suffer a multitude of health-related issues due to this practice. However, in the realm of literature, particularly through the lens of fiction, the voices of the oppressed have found a powerful platform for expression. Numerous writers, social activists, and political thinkers have rallied against various forms of oppression, mirroring the plight of Dalit women in their works.

Drawing parallels with the struggles faced by Black women in America, Afro-American women writers like Zora Neal Hurston, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Margaret Walker have fearlessly shed light on the afflictions and exploitation endured by Black women in society. Similarly, Dalit Literature stands as a testament to the narratives of the oppressed class, delving deep into the intricate layers of social, economic, political, cultural, and religious dynamics that shape the Dalit community.

Through the compelling narratives of Dalit female and male writers, the consciousness of Dalit women has been vividly portrayed in works such as Urmila Pawar's 'Aaydan' (2003) and Baby Kamble's 'Jeena Amucha' (1990), acting as a reflection of the patriarchal challenges faced by Dalit women within their own community and in the broader societal context. Notable works like Baburao Bagul's 'Murali' (Devadasi) further expose the exploitation and struggles faced by marginalized women, painting a poignant picture of the pervasive inequalities that plague society.

Gayl Jones, an esteemed African American author originating from Lexington, Kentucky, is highly regarded for her significant literary works, notably the novels *Corregidora* (1975), *Eva's Man* (1976), and *The Healing* (1998). Jones has made a profound impact within the literary world by shedding light on the intricacies of sexual and racial violence specifically experienced by Black women. In her renowned novel *Corregidora*, the audience is introduced to the agonizing tale of Ursa Corregidora, who endures the horrors of being raped and enslaved by a malevolent slave owner in the heart of Brazil, while facing domestic turmoil sparked by the mistreatment inflicted by her own husband.

In *Eva's Man*, Gayl Jones delves into the gripping narrative of Eva Medina Canada, a character haunted by relentless sexual abuse and unjustly imprisoned for taking the life of her lover, Davis Carter. Switching focus to a different cultural landscape, we encounter Bama, the trailblazing first Tamil Dalit female novelist, whose birth in 1958 marked the genesis of Dalit Feminism. Renowned for her literary prowess, Bama has penned three compelling novels – *Karukku* (1992), *Sangati* (1994), and *Vanmam* (2002) – alongside two collections of poignant short stories, *Kusumbukaran* (1996) and *Oru Tattvum- Erumaiyum* (2003).

Amongst her impactful literary contributions, Bama propelled into the limelight with her highly acclaimed autobiographical novel *Karukku*, which secured the prestigious Crossword Book Award in 2000. Furthermore, she laid the cornerstone for a groundbreaking Dalit school in Uttiramerur, underscoring her commitment to uplifting her community. *Karukku* vividly paints a vivid portrait of the harsh realities, contempt, and deplorable conditions that encapsulate the lives of women plagued by sexual harassment and systemic oppression.

In the narrative spectrum of *Sangati Events* by Bama, we are confronted with the stark portrayal of the harrowing plight of Dalit women ensnared in the suffocating web of caste-based discrimination and patriarchal dominance. Through the focal lens of the protagonist, Pathima, the narrative intricately navigates the intricate intersections of caste and gender biases, laying bare the manifold injustices heaped upon women in such oppressive societal structures.

Palanimuthu Sivakami, a celebrated Tamil Dalit woman writer born in 1957, emerges as a poignant voice elucidating the poignant realities faced by Dalit women, who endure the brunt of systemic injustices rooted in both gender and caste biases. In notable literary endeavors, such as *Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum*, *Anandayee*, and *Karukkuvettu*, Sivakami diligently unearths the myriad forms of suffering encountered by Dalit women, shedding light on their resilience amidst suffocating adversities.

The abysmal portrayal of mistreatment faced by women from marginalized communities, including Black and Dalit women, underscores a disturbing narrative of political, social, and economic disenfranchisement catalyzed by entrenched issues of gender, race, and caste. These underserved populations endure a spectrum of sufferings, encompassing acts of molestation, endemic sexual harassment, and pervasive gender biases. Mirroring the commitment to amplifying the voices of marginalized women, Bama and Sivakami display remarkable parallels in their focused advocacy for Dalit women's empowerment, advocated through compelling literary contributions and dedicated social activism. Noteworthy authors like Toni Morrison and Gayl Jones mirror these themes in their works, articulating the enduring plight of women subjected to subjugation and repression in various contexts.

Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, Bama, P. Sivakami, the selected authors for the proposed study, exhibit diverse backgrounds, hailing from distinct geographical regions and cultures, yet share a common thread in their works. While Toni Morrison and Gayl Jones convey their narratives in English, Bama and Sivakami craft their stories in Tamil, showcasing a rich tapestry of feminine sensibility in representing marginalized women. Delving into Toni Morrison's background, she was born in 1931 in Lorain, Ohio to Ramah (Nee Willis) and George Wofford. As a prominent Afro-American novelist, Morrison is revered for her intricate character analysis, profound themes, and compelling dialogues. Noteworthy works include "The Bluest Eye," "Song of Solomon," "Beloved," and "Sula." Her literary prowess was acknowledged with accolades such as the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for "Beloved" in 1988, followed by the Nobel Prize in 1993. Through her writing, Morrison fearlessly sheds light on the struggles faced by the African American community.

In "The Bluest Eye," Morrison illuminates the hardships endured by Black women in America, particularly through the heart-wrenching story of Pecola Breedlove. Abandoned and marginalized by her parents, Pecola grapples with an alienating sense of otherness exacerbated by racial prejudice due to her black skin. Furthermore, her own father's heinous actions further alienate her, leading to a fracturing of both familial and societal bonds. This alienation perpetuates a cycle of self-deprecation, inherited through generations, as exemplified by her mother Pauline's own feelings of unworthiness. Forced to work in a white household, Pecola becomes a tragic symbol of oppression and internalized inferiority.

In "Beloved," Morrison delves into the traumatic legacy of slavery, particularly its harrowing impact on black women who are subject to systemic racism, exploitation, and violence. Sethe, the novel's protagonist, is haunted by the past horrors of slavery, culminating in her desperate act of infanticide to protect her child from the same fate. Her profound sacrifice underscores the desperate lengths to which marginalized individuals go in their fight for freedom and dignity. Sethe's struggle for acceptance upon her return further emphasizes the lasting scars of slavery on both the individual and collective psyche.

These authors' literary contributions serve as powerful testimonials to the enduring struggles and resilience of marginalized women, bridging linguistic divides to illuminate shared experiences of oppression and survival. In her role as an IAS officer, Sivakami draws strength from her field work experiences, which enrich her writings by providing a nuanced perspective on the plight of Dalit women. Through her compelling novels, she skillfully portrays the deeply entrenched issues surrounding the sexual objectification and domination faced by Dalit women in society. Conversely, Morrison's literary works vividly illustrate the harrowing realities and adverse circumstances endured by African-Americans. By delving into the traumatic conditions under which African-Americans existed, Morrison sheds light on the hardships faced by Black women who suffered both physically and mentally at the hands of both white oppressors and members of their own community.

Similar to the impactful narratives of Sivakami and Morrison, Gayl Jones authentically captures the essence of Black women's lives in her exceptional works. By eloquently depicting the struggles of Black women grappling with the lasting scars of slavery, sexual exploitation, and enduring traditional abuses, Jones brings to light the deep-rooted psychological impact of systemic oppression. These literary luminaries from India and the United States have excelled in conveying the profound oppression faced by women in their respective societies through their thought-provoking storytelling.

The collective voices of these esteemed authors continue to resonate, as they persist in shedding light on the ongoing struggles of women through both their literary creations and active social engagement. By immersing ourselves in the profound narratives crafted by Indian and Afro-American novelists that intricately detail the suppression of women, we are presented with an opportunity to embark on new avenues of research that hold the promise of enriching our understanding of these complex social dynamics. Therefore, the objectives of the study are as follows: first and foremost, to conduct a detailed and in-depth analysis of the contemporary socio-political milieus prevalent in the respective countries under scrutiny. Secondly, the research aims to delve into the various factors that have contributed to the unfortunate plight faced by both Dalit and Black women, shedding light on their unique challenges and struggles. Additionally, the study will also focus on closely examining the socio-political environments that have significantly influenced the authors' perspectives and thematic choices, providing insights into how their surroundings have shaped their literary works. Moreover, a critical evaluation will be undertaken to explore the overarching theme of the suffering and predicament experienced by women in the selected novels penned by the four writers in question. Furthermore, a comprehensive linguistic analysis will be carried out to decipher the language and expressions of oppression employed towards women in the aforementioned novels. Lastly, a comparative study will be conducted to juxtapose and contrast the works of the four writers, specifically in relation to the depiction of exploitation and the hardships endured by female characters within the narratives they have created.

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