

STUDYING GENDER THROUGH CASTE LENSES IN SHARANKUMAR LIMBALE'S THE DALIT BRAHMIN AND OTHER STORIES

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ABSTRACT

Dalit literature in India has been playing a very important role in acquainting readers with Dalits' world of suffering, oppression, and resistance. This research paper explores the complex interplay of gender and caste in the selected short stories from Sharankumar Limbale's short story collection, *The Dalit Brahmins and Other Stories* (2018). The paper focuses on short stories, "Ratna", "Madhavi", "Soni" and "Niloo". Through a comparative analysis of these narratives, the paper highlights how the characters' experiences are shaped by their caste identities and societal roles. Ratna and Soni, representing lower-caste Dalit women, have to live a life of oppression, violence, and societal neglect, while Madhavi and Niloo, as upper-caste women, embody privilege yet remain complicit in perpetuating caste hierarchies. The stories illustrate the clear contrasts in their lived realities, revealing how caste influences their bodies, autonomy, and relationships. The paper critically examines the 'lived experiences' of these women, whose bodies become contested terrains in a socio-cultural landscape rife with systemic inequalities. The paper explores the symbolism of the female body as a site of cultural meaning, where upper-caste women are often idealised and protected, while Dalit women face objectification and exploitation. By examining Limbale's heart-rending storytelling, the paper contributes to the discourse on gender equality and social justice, highlighting the urgent need to address the systemic oppression faced by women in a casteist society. Through this analysis, the paper aims to illuminate the broader implications of caste-based discrimination and its impact on gender dynamics in contemporary India.

Keywords: Caste, Gender, Dalit Literature, Oppression, Intersectionality, Patriarchy

1. INTRODUCTION

Caste and gender are deeply interconnected social constructs in India that play crucial roles in shaping the 'lived experiences' of individuals. In this paper, I explore how Sharankumar Limbale's short stories, specifically "Madhavi", "Niloo", "Soni", and "Ratna", depict the intersection of these two forces. The selected stories bring to light the lives of upper-caste and Dalit women, emphasising the compounded struggles of caste and gender-based oppression. By comparing the experiences of upper-caste women like Madhavi and Niloo with those of Dalit women such as Soni, Ratna, Shalan, and Girija, the stories expose the strong contrasts in their lived realities, societal expectations, and vulnerabilities. These women's bodies become sites of casteist and patriarchal oppression, where social hierarchies are inscribed and enforced through both systemic violence and cultural norms. This research builds on existing scholarship in intersectionality, particularly through Dalit feminist perspectives, to analyse the layers of oppression these women face and their responses to them. This paper aims to not only shed light on the brutal realities of caste and gender oppression but also celebrate the strength and agency of these marginalised women in resisting such structures. In order to fully

comprehend the intersection of caste and gender in the selected short stories, it is essential to understand the foundational discourse of Dalit literature and its engagement with the body and caste. Dalit literature serves as a vital framework for this analysis, offering critical insights into the 'lived experiences' of Dalits and their struggles. The paper is structured into five major sections: Introduction, Debating Intersectionality: Body and Caste, Brief Overview of the Short Stories, Bodies as Sites of Casteist and Patriarchal Oppression, and Conclusion.

Understanding 'What is Dalit literature?' is crucial. R. G. Jadhav describes it as "a literature of social awareness" (Jadhav, 2009, p. 305). Dr Dharmveer asserts that "the literature written by Dalits is Dalit literature" (qtd. in Singh, 2012, p. 69). Alok Mukherjee refers to it as "literature of commitment" (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 9), while Sharatchandra Muktibodh views it as "the literature produced by Dalit consciousness" (Muktibodh, 2009, p. 270). Eleanor Zelliot sees it as both "a school" and "a self-conscious movement" (Gajrawala, 2013, p. 2). Arjun Dangle provides a comprehensive definition: "Dalit literature acquaints people with the caste system and untouchability in India and reflects the experiences, joys, and struggles of those at the bottom of society." (Dangle, 1994, p. lii). The 'spirit of revolt', 'modernism' and 'rationalism' are major characteristics of Dalit literature (Omvedt, 2011, p. x). Sharankumar Limbale adds another perspective and defines Dalit literature to be "writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with Dalit consciousness; its form and purpose are to inform Dalit society of its oppression and narrate its pain to upper-caste Hindus" (Limbale, 2004, p. 19). These definitions form the backdrop against which Limbale's short stories explore the intricate relationship between caste and gender, making the discussion of Dalit literature integral to understanding the narratives under analysis.

Shrankumar Limbale is a very strong voice in Marathi Dalit literature and India at large. He has produced a vast body of writing that acquaints the readers with the world of Dalits, which remained at the periphery, unnoticed for centuries. Some of his well-known works include his autobiography *Akkarmashi* (1984), a short story collection *Dalit Brahman*, a poetry collection *Dalit Premkavita*, a novel *Zund* (2009), and prose-writing *Dalit Sahityache Soundaryashastra* (1996), and *Dalit Panther* (1989), etc.

2. DEBATING INTERSECTIONALITY: BODY AND CASTE

Caste in India is a complex and deeply entrenched social hierarchy that assigns individuals to specific groups based on their birth. This system not only determines social interaction and occupational roles but also intersects with gender to create unique patterns of oppression and discrimination. Within this framework, women's bodies often become sites of control and representation, reflecting the values and expectations of their caste background. The intersection of caste and gender in India has been thoroughly explored in contemporary scholarship, with numerous authors illuminating the layered oppression faced by women in general and Dalit women in particular. The collective works of some of the scholars on gender help us construct a robust framework for understanding how bodies become sites of conflict and negotiation in the face of pervasive violence and discrimination. This section engages in discussing various scholarly contributions that articulate the intersections of caste and gender, delineating how these identities inform the violence and subjugation faced by Dalit women.

At the heart of this discourse is the notion that Dalit women inhabit a unique social position where the confluence of caste and patriarchy creates a distinctive form of oppression. Gopal Guru, in "Dalit Women Talk Differently," emphasizes the potential of Dalit women to articulate their experiences through a lens that is fundamentally different from mainstream feminist narratives, which often overlook their specific realities (Guru, 1995, p. 2548). While mainstream feminism tends to focus on gender, Dalit women's narratives draw attention to the critical interplay between caste and gender, thus challenging the universality often assumed in feminist discourse. This distinction is essential for understanding Dalit women's experiences as it highlights the necessity of a 'Dalit feminist standpoint', as advocated by Sharmila Rege, who critiques the notion of 'difference' from a perspective that seeks to empower marginalized voices within the feminist movement (Rege, 1998, p. WS36). The body, as a central motif in the oppression of Dalit women, is explored by Cynthia Stephen, who notes that Dalit women's bodies become battlegrounds where casteist and patriarchal violence is enacted (Stephen 2021). The corporeal experiences of these women are marked not just by physicality but also by a social narrative of oppression that denies them agency and dignity. Anupama Rao suggests paying serious attention to the "multiple and changing manifestations of caste in Indian society if we are to understand the particular forms in which gender inequality and sexed subordination are produced" (Rao, 2005, p. 5). Rao's emphasis on the body as a social and political site underscores the importance of physical autonomy and rights for Dalit women, who often face unbridled intrusions into their bodies by both caste and patriarchal authorities. Kancha Ilaiah provides a provocative critique of how both caste and gender norms within Hindu philosophy contribute to the ongoing marginalization of Dalit

bodies. He calls patriarchy in Dalit households “considerably more democratic” (Ilaiah, 2005, p. 88). Thenmozhi Soundararajan articulates how systemic violence against Dalit women is often interwoven with the societal normalization of caste-based oppression. This normalization manifests not only in physical violence but also in psychological trauma, creating a cycle of oppression that is difficult to break. This global perspective allows for an understanding of caste-based violence as part of larger patterns of human rights violations, affirming the need for solidarity across different movements seeking to address and abolish systemic inequalities (Soundararajan 2022).

Understanding and acknowledging the specific trajectories of Dalit women is vital for any attempts at redress, as their narratives hold the keys to dismantling the entrenched systems of oppression that continue to thrive. The bodies of Dalit women have historically been, and continue to be, sites of both casteist and patriarchal oppression. These bodies are policed, violated, and marginalized to maintain social hierarchies, yet they also become sites of resistance, agency, and subversion of those very structures. Dalit women’s embodied experiences of violence highlight the need for a more intersectional feminist analysis that recognizes the specificities of caste and gender, moving beyond the monolithic constructions of ‘womanhood’ to account for the multiplicity of oppressions experienced by Dalit women in India. This intersectionality not only frames the theoretical underpinnings of oppression but also finds concrete expression in the lives of the characters Limbale portrays, as discussed in the short stories introduced below.

3. BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE SHORT STORIES

Before discussing how bodies can be the sites of casteist and patriarchal oppression, it is requisite to know and understand the gist of the selected short stories. The short story “Madhavi” is a heart-rending and powerful narrative that rakes through the themes of caste, gender, violence, and love. Through the protagonist’s reflections on his love for Madhavi and the brutal destruction of his home and community, the story captures the deeply entrenched social hierarchies and prejudices that govern rural Indian life. The story is told from the perspective of a young Dalit man who is in love with Madhavi, a girl from the upper caste. The narrative is filled with his memories of their relationship, their shared love for art, and their subtle yet strong emotional connection. Despite their differences in caste, they share a deep bond. However, their love is not accepted by the village community, particularly by the upper-caste Patils who dominate the village. The caste system serves as an invisible yet powerful barrier that separates them. This opposition becomes violent when the protagonist, in an effort to assert his dignity, builds a house in the village, which the upper-caste people see as a challenge to the established social order. The story unfolds in the shadow of caste-based violence. An upper-caste mob destroys the protagonist’s house, and Shalan, a close friend of both Madhavi and the protagonist, is brutally assaulted. Genu, Shalan’s elderly father, is beaten to death, symbolizing the brutal subjugation of the Dalit community. Despite the intense love the protagonist feels for Madhavi, he realizes that the caste divisions between them are too strong to overcome. Madhavi is eventually married off to a man from the same caste in Delhi, symbolizing the social reality that love cannot transcend caste in their world. The story ends with the protagonist mourning not only the loss of Madhavi but also the loss of his community’s dignity and safety. The violence and oppression continue, and the upper-caste attackers are released without consequence. The protagonist’s hope for a better future is shattered, yet there remains a resilient sense of identity and resistance against the forces of caste oppression (Limbale, 2018, p. 55-61).

The short story “Niloo” too, presents Indian society in the light of caste, love, and gender. The narrator, Bhimrao (also called Bhimya), is a Dalit man from Bhimnagar who falls in love with Niloo, a girl from an upper-caste and privileged background. Despite their connection and mutual affection, the fundamental societal divide between their castes and socio-economic status shapes the trajectory of their relationship, ultimately leading to separation. The story highlights the interplay between caste discrimination, emotional turmoil, and social isolation, all while examining how love is affected by rigid societal structures. The story opens with Bhimrao reflecting on his painful separation from Niloo, a woman he loves deeply. Niloo and Bhimrao’s relationship begins through shared games and moments of joy, but it’s clear from the beginning that Bhimrao is conscious of his lower-caste identity. Niloo, on the other hand, remains ignorant of this reality for much of their relationship. As Bhimrao returns to his home in Bhimnagar, the narrative shifts to reveal his internal struggles. He lives in a Dalit neighbourhood, and his mother works as a sweeper in the upper-caste Saraswati Colony, where Niloo resides. Bhimrao’s growing awareness of his caste and the contrast between his world and Niloo’s privileged life in Saraswati Colony become stark. He avoids revealing his home to Niloo, afraid that it would expose his Dalit identity and ruin their relationship. He describes how Niloo unknowingly looks down upon his people, referring to them as ‘dirty’, which further deepens his pain. Despite their connection, Bhimrao is painfully aware that his caste prevents him from ever truly being with Niloo. His dreams of marrying her are shattered when she marries someone

from her own caste. The wedding procession becomes a cruel spectacle for Bhimrao, symbolizing the unbridgeable gap between them. As he watches Niloo's wedding from afar, his despair is compounded when his mother dies in a tragic accident, symbolizing the systemic oppression faced by Dalits. His mother's death, the fire that consumes her, and the simultaneous joy of Niloo's wedding procession illustrate the story's heartbreaking duality—the joy of one world and the suffering of another, both entwined with caste (Limbale, 2018, p. 68-72).

The short story "Soni" revolves around a Dalit woman named Soni, trapped in a life of prostitution. Set against the backdrop of urban India, the story details Soni's experiences as she goes on the city streets at night to find clients, often interacting with various characters such as paan sellers, customers, police officers, and the narrator, who seems to be her companion. Soni's life has been shaped by a series of traumatic events, from being forced into an early marriage to an abusive husband to facing physical and emotional abuse. Her marriage was not her escape; it only deepened her misery as she was repeatedly violated by her much older and alcoholic husband, Babu. Eventually, Soni escapes, but her fate worsens as she turns to prostitution to support herself and her aging mother, Girija, who was abandoned by her husband because she couldn't bear a son. The narrator, who is closely involved in Soni's life, helps her undergo an abortion and navigates her complex relationships with her clients, family, and the police. As the story unfolds, Girija dies, and Soni is left with the narrator, who ultimately tries to intervene when a client approaches her. The police arrest them both, mistaking the narrator for a client, and the story ends with a haunting image of the narrator in jail, beaten and humiliated (Limbale, 2018, p. 86-93).

The story "Ratna" takes place in a *Maharwada*, a Dalit (formerly untouchable) settlement in a village near a river. The narrator, whose name is not mentioned in the story, and Ratna, who have grown up together, are in love. However, their relationship is fraught with challenges, as societal norms and their families' histories stand in the way. The narrator's father had drowned in the river years ago, and Ratna's father is in the army. A family feud lingers due to a past incident involving the narrator's great-grandfather eloping with a woman from Ratna's family. This feud, along with caste and community scrutiny, prevents the lovers from openly expressing their relationship. Ratna's beauty draws unwanted attention from men like Gana, an upper-caste violent and intimidating figure in the village. He harasses Ratna and her family, and despite her mother's initial opposition to Ratna's relationship with the narrator, she is powerless against Gana's threats. The story climaxes when Ratna and the narrator decide to elope together. However, as they meet by the river to leave the village, they encounter Gana. The narrator, in a fit of rage, kills Gana and throws his body into the river, allowing the corpse to drift away. Ratna's mother, witnessing this, accepts their love, telling them to live happily together. The story ends with the couple united, but the memory of Gana's death and the flowing river lingers in the narrator's mind (Limbale, 2018, p. 94-99).

Having introduced the primary narratives, we now turn to how these women's bodies are positioned as battlegrounds for caste and patriarchal domination in the respective stories.

4. BODIES AS SITES OF CASTEIST AND PATRIARCHAL OPPRESSION

The bodies of these women become sites of casteist and patriarchal oppression, where social hierarchies are inscribed and enforced through both systemic violence and cultural norms. Upper-caste women, though constrained by patriarchal norms, enjoy the protection and privilege that comes with their caste status. They are not seen as available for exploitation in the same way that Dalit women are. Notions of purity and honour regulate their bodies, but these very notions offer them protection from the kind of violence that Dalit women face daily. It presents that Dalit women are systematically dehumanised. Their bodies are imbued with casteist meanings; they are seen as inferior and impure. Their gendered oppression is exacerbated by their caste, making them vulnerable to sexual violence, exploitation, and social exclusion. The caste system, in this way, extends its control over Dalit women's bodies, reducing them to symbols of labour, sexuality, and subordination within both the domestic and public spheres. The experiences of Madhavi and Niloo, compared to those of Soni, Ratna, Shalan, and Girija, reveal a stark contrast in how caste and gender intersect to shape women's lives in India.

Madhavi, as an upper-caste woman, is constrained by the societal expectations placed upon her gender, but she enjoys a degree of security and protection that Dalit women do not. Her body, while subjected to patriarchal control, is not racialised or sexualized in the same way as Dalit women's bodies. Her role is prescribed within the bounds of respectability, and though she faces oppression as a woman, she has access to a more respected and secure social space. The caste privilege Madhavi enjoys manifests in her social interactions. She is not at the mercy of men from other castes

or subjected to public scrutiny in the same way as Dalit women like Soni and Ratna. Her body is protected by her caste; she is not objectified by the larger society in a way that dehumanises her. In short, while Madhavi's gender limits her autonomy, her caste insulates her from the multiple layers of oppression faced by Dalit women.

Niloo, similarly, comes from an upper-caste background, and though she too bears the constraints of patriarchy, her life is shaped by caste-based privilege. Niloo's beauty, desires, and decisions are weighed within the upper-caste framework, where norms around purity, chastity, and marriage are paramount. Her body is a symbol of caste purity, and any transgressions are seen as a violation of not only gender but caste honour. However, this focus on caste honour also affords her some degree of protection. Both Madhavi and Niloo, therefore, embody a gendered oppression that is mediated and, in some ways, mitigated by their caste privilege. Their struggles are confined within the structures of patriarchy, but caste insulates them from the compounded forms of violence that Dalit women like Soni, Ratna, Shalan, and Girija face.

Different from the above characters, Dalit women like Soni, Ratna, Shalan, and Girija experience the convergence of caste and gender oppression, making their struggles more acute. The intersectionality of their identities makes them vulnerable to violence, exploitation, and dehumanisation in ways that upper-caste women are not. Their bodies are perceived as accessible, vulnerable, and often subject to the worst forms of casteist and patriarchal violence. In "Soni", the embodiment of a Dalit woman who faces multiple layers of marginalisation is seen. As a Dalit woman, Soni is constantly at risk of sexual violence from upper-caste men, who see her body as inherently inferior and available for exploitation. Her caste background not only denies her the dignity afforded to upper-caste women but also subjects her to systemic abuse. In this context, her body becomes a symbol of caste oppression, marked as a site of both labour and sexual servitude. The violence inflicted upon her is a means of reinforcing her subordination within the caste hierarchy. Soni's experience of gendered violence is not just a reflection of her sex but is deeply linked to her caste. Her body is perceived as a tool for maintaining the upper-caste social order, where sexual exploitation of Dalit women is normalised and unchallenged. Unlike Madhavi or Niloo, Soni cannot escape the casteist implications attached to her body, which is objectified and dehumanised within a patriarchal caste system.

Ratna's story further explores the vulnerability of Dalit women's bodies within a casteist, patriarchal society. Ratna's relationship with the narrator is laden with complications due to caste prejudices, and her beauty makes her a target of upper-caste men like Gana, who feel entitled to her body. Gana's obsession with Ratna reflects his sexual desire for a Dalit woman's body. The harassment and violence she faces underscore the ways in which both caste and gender dynamics constantly undermine Dalit women's autonomy. Ratna's body becomes a site of conflict, not only between herself and Gana but also within the larger community. While upper-caste men see her as an object of desire, her relationship with the narrator challenges caste boundaries, making her body a symbol of defiance against both caste and patriarchal norms. The violence inflicted upon her reflects the larger societal desire to keep Dalit women subjugated and under control, reinforcing caste hierarchies through gendered violence.

Shalan in "Madhavi" and Girija in "Nillo", like Soni and Ratna, are also subjected to intersecting forms of oppression. They are burdened by the expectations of both their gender and caste. In Limbale's narratives, their lives are marked by constant surveillance and control, both within their homes and in the larger community. Their bodies are not their own; they are commodities to be used for labour, objects of desire, and vessels for maintaining the caste order. Their bodies are treated as extensions of their caste status, subject to exploitation by men from higher castes and even their own communities. This objectification highlights the way in which Dalit women are doubly marginalized by caste and by gender.

5. CONCLUSION

Thus, these narratives reveal that while all women in Limbale's stories are subject to patriarchal constraints, Dalit women are doubly burdened by the dehumanization imposed by their caste status. Their bodies become contested spaces, shaped by violence, yet also capable of resisting the forces that seek to control them. The stories serve as a critique of societal structures that continue to reinforce these hierarchies while also celebrating the strength and agency of Dalit women in their resistance. The analysis helps us understand the hollowness of the larger notion of 'sisterhood' as a universal phenomenon to address the gender issues across caste, class, race and region. Through this examination, the paper reiterates the importance of understanding gender and caste together, rather than in isolation, to fully comprehend the complex dynamics of oppression in Indian society.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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