The Other Dimensions of Dalit Oppression: Tracing Intersectionality through Ants among Elephants

By Arundhati Sen

Abstract

This paper demonstrates how gender abuse is not merely restricted to hierarchical gender oppression but also operates within an intersectional framework where gender is intertwined with hierarchical caste exploitation. While revisiting White bourgeois feminism, bell hooks emphasizes the incorporation of different marginal perspectives to make feminism an all-encompassing radical movement, accessible to everyone. Inspired by the lens that hooks uses to interpret Black feminism and the Indian scholars who approach Dalit feminism from an intersectional standpoint, I analyze Sujatha Gidla’s autobiography Ants among Elephants (2017), a family story of a lower-middle-class rural South Indian Dalit woman. I argue for the need to bring different axes of oppression—such as inter-caste and intra-caste dimensions along with linguistic and regional hierarchies—into conversation with each other. The primary focus of my analysis of the autobiography are three topics—the narrative voice, the author’s personal experience, and the intersectional aspect of domination in Dalit women’s experience as recounted in the text. My paper highlights the literary aspect of the text by tracing Dalit rage in the narratorial voice that undercuts the mostly objective family narrative, following hooks’ reconceptualization of Black rage. Dalit representation is shaped and informed by the psychological consequence of internalized inferiority as a result of looking at themselves and being looked at by others only in terms of absence. Bearing in mind that every strand in the interlocked webs of oppression critically informs the other, ignoring any one strand at the cost of another might render the task of liberation truncated and incomplete. This study, therefore, brings to the fore the need to address interlocking strands of oppression if a struggle for the liberation of any marginalized group can have a real impact on society.

Keywords: Dalits, Caste, Class, Gender, Intersectionality, Narrative voice, Rage, bell hooks, Sujatha Gidla

Introduction

In her path-breaking work Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center, bell hooks attempts a comprehensive discussion of feminism wherein she pinpoints the flaws that plague mainstream feminism in the US in the late 20th century. To make feminism a holistic radical movement capable of bringing about impactful social transformation, hooks not only focuses her criticism on gender but also on interlocking webs of oppression and structures of domination. She highlights the role of liberalism which favors and in turn is facilitated by the discourse of White bourgeois feminism some years before Kimberle Crenshaw came up with the term “intersectionality” to define the

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interlinked axes of oppression in 1989. hooks stresses how Black women have to face oppression from both White people and Black men, whereas White upper-class and middle-class women have the privilege of looking down upon Black people, and Black men, in turn, subjugate Black women in order to continue this vicious cycle of oppression (hooks, Feminist Theory 15). hooks’ argument is important not just in dissecting the threads of subjugation that culminate in the various forms of sexist oppression but in her call for diversity of women’s experiences to be included in the larger discourse. She urges Black women to “recognize the special vantage point our marginality gives us” and believes that it is indispensable to include their perspective to criticize the dominant, racist, classist, sexist hegemony and to envision a counter-hegemony (Feminist Theory 15). Her conception of “border crossing” which entails looking at the points of view of other races and cultures through “new eyes” is essential in reformulating feminist discourse as well (Outlaw Culture 5). Although “border crossing” was conceptualized as an invitation to cultural critics to look across the border of high culture, the term can also be usefully applied to feminism where elimination of sexism in all walks of life is the goal. It is imperative to incorporate the perspectives of different marginalities to make feminism an all-encompassing radical movement that will be accessible to everyone.

Similar to the ways hooks reads the double marginalization of Black working-class women, Gopal Guru’s essay, “Dalit Women Talk Differently” attempts to draw attention to the plight of India’s historically marginalized Dalit women who are doubly silenced as they are denied a voice both in male-dominated Dalit politics and in mainstream Indian feminism which is concerned with the issues of upper-caste, upper and middle class, university-educated women. In light of double marginalization, Guru foregrounds the need to recognize Dalit women’s “talking differently” as “genuinely representative” and thus “automatically valid” (2549). Guru’s claim of authenticity is contested by Sharmila Rege in her essay “Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of ‘Difference’ and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position.” Rege identifies this dual oppression as a result of “Masculinization of Dalithood and Savarnization of Womanhood” (WS-42) and offers an alternative Dalit feminist standpoint position with liberatory and revisionist potential, capable of avoiding the narrow alley of direct experience-based “authenticity” and “identity politics” (WS-45). Furthermore, the need to focus on the intersectional aspect of Dalit Feminism is stressed by Anandita Pan in Mapping Dalit Feminism: Towards an Intersectional Standpoint, as reducing Dalit feminism to mere identity politics of Dalit women, which is not a homogenous category, risks ghettoizing the issue (7). When reading Dalit feminism in its overlapping dimensions of domination, I draw upon Leslie McCall’s essay “The Complexity of Intersectionality” and her emphasis on intercategorical and intracategorical approaches. McCall defines the “intercategorical” approach as a recognition of “relations of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimensions” (1773). She defines the “intracategorical” approach as an interrogation of “the boundary-making and boundary-defining process itself” and a maintaining of a critical stance toward categories that are predominantly seen through a single axis of identity (1773).

2 Dalit comes from the Marathi language and literally means the “downtrodden” or “oppressed.” Earlier they were referred to as “untouchables” and in recent years have come to be known as the Dalits. However, “Scheduled Caste” is the notified word as per Article 341 of the Indian Constitution to denote this specific group of people and hence they are referred to as such in official documents. They have been traditionally assigned the lowest rung in the social ladder of hierarchical Hindu society. Those assigned a high position in the caste system were called upper-castes and were recently referred to as Caste Hindus or Savarnas.
Informed by the lens that bell hooks uses to interpret Black feminism and the Indian scholars who read Dalit feminism from an intersectional standpoint, in this paper I analyze Sujatha Gidla’s *Ants among Elephants*, an autobiographical family story of a rural South Indian Dalit woman, in order to argue for the need to bring different axes of oppression in conversation with each other so the struggle for the liberation of any marginalized group can have a real impact. The text explores the interconnected nature of oppression that a lower-middle-class Dalit woman growing up in rural India faces along with several generations of her family, and it addresses the need to approach any kind of marginality from an intersectional lens of oppression.

I intend to focus on three aspects of the text: the literary genre and the narrative voice, the life of the author, and the intersectional aspect of domination in Dalit women’s experience as recounted in the text. I draw upon interviews with the author, Sujatha Gidla, to further illustrate my argument. Following hooks’ reconceptualization of “Black rage” (12) in *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, my paper highlights the literary aspect of the text by tracing Dalit rage in the narratorial voice that undercuts the mostly objective and thoroughly “unsentimental” family narrative (Kakutani). “Black rage,” which is the manifest discontent that characterizes the racially oppressed, has been conceived by hooks as leading “to constructive empowerment” and hence a response “against injustice, against systems of domination” (*Killing Rage* 29). I consider the psychological consequence of internalized inferiority as a result of Dalit women looking at themselves and being looked at by others in terms of absence. Moreover, I emphasize the other dimensions of social hierarchies like linguistic and regional differences that contribute to the overarching structure of domination. Furthermore, this analysis traces the inter-caste and intra-caste elements along with the complexity of caste and gender to provide a holistic image of oppression which cannot be compartmentalized within the victim/oppressor binary.

**Structures of Domination**

The root of the rage in the narratorial voice that interrupts the otherwise calm and collected narration can be traced back to the lived experience of the Dalit, and it opens up a subtext for critiquing the structures of domination. Gidla highlights the story of her mother, Mary Manjulabai (nicknamed Manjula), and how Manjula’s university life at Banaras was characterized by institutional casteism coupled with linguistic and regional discrimination. At Banaras Hindu University, the Head of the Department, Professor Tripathi “was revolted by the sight of Manjula” as one look at her convinced him of her poverty and her untouchable identity, and finally, he satisfied his Brahmanical ego by meddling with Manjula’s final results (Gidla, *Ants among Elephants* 190). To her utter shock and dismay, Manjula, who stood second in her class at the end of the first year and was described by Professor Pathak “as the most brilliant student in his class,” (193) barely managed a second class result. After delving deep into what could have gone wrong, she came to realize that “she had made top marks in all the papers except for those that were graded by Tripathi” (194). Her position is further complicated as regional and linguistic hierarchy attributes a lower position to South Indians: “North Indians bullied South Indians and never mingled with Manjula’s final results (Gidla, *Ants among Elephants* 190). To her utter shock and dismay, Manjula, who stood second in her class at the end of the first year and was described by Professor Pathak “as the most brilliant student in his class,” (193) barely managed a second class result. After delving deep into what could have gone wrong, she came to realize that “she had made top marks in all the papers except for those that were graded by Tripathi” (194). Her position is further complicated as regional and linguistic hierarchy attributes a lower position to South Indians: “North Indians bullied South Indians and never mingled with them. There were separate messes for north and south. North Indians wouldn’t go to the south-Indian mess while south Indians wouldn’t dare set foot in the north-Indian one” (187). Linguistically, “[t]here was also the problem of English. … her lack of fluency was a shame on this cosmopolitan campus where English was the lingua franca” (188). Here, it is not just her Dalit identity that contributes to the discriminatory attitude toward her, but her class, the region where she hails from, and the language that she speaks; together, all of these dimensions amplify her marginalization.
The interwoven nature of caste and gender oppression necessitates an intersectional reading of the Dalit family narrative involving three siblings, Manjula and her two brothers, Satyam and Carey. In the text, the inter-caste rivalry is vividly portrayed, centering the issue of protecting their respective womenfolk. The harassment of nonkamma (those who do not belong to the kamma caste) girls by kamma boys on campus immediately spark a conflict between two castes, namely kammans and kapus. The caste dimension takes over the gender dimension of the harassment as readers encounter Kusuma: “Kusuma, a dazzlingly beautiful kapu girl, was a special target. The boys would challenge each other to cycle past her and snatch the jasmine blossoms from her hair” (158). Satyam, Manjula’s elder brother, smelling an opportunity for political gains for his student wing, SFI, took it upon himself “to defend the girls against these attacks” (158). He knew the kammans dominated the Congress panel; hence by defending the honor of the kapus girls, the manhood of the kapus could be protected, and they could be recruited for his SFI panel (158). The text draws special attention to the idea of protectionism; the failure to protect women results in the emasculation of Dalit men. Surya Samajists or the members of Surya Samajam, a youth club for high-caste high-school dropouts, had a special excuse to want to murder Carey, another of the three siblings. Besides being a better sportsman than any of them, Carey also “led a group of his friends—all fearless mala sons of bitches like himself—in protecting the honor of untouchable girls in town from caste boys who see them as cheap and easy” (138, my emphasis). I point out here how protectionism functions only to serve the interests of conventional manhood in any particular caste. It is interesting to note how Carey, who himself abused an upper-caste girl (119), became the protector of untouchable girls which reinforces the idea that a woman’s honor is a man’s property. Women need to be protected, exploited, and avenged only because of caste, class or personal jealousy, not to protect a woman’s dignity as an individual. This is evident in two instances. First, to protect the kapu women, the kapus were not hesitant to take help from the Dalits like Satyam. Second, the high-castes, like Surya Samajists, in their pursuit to attack Carey, who is in charge of protecting untouchable girls, did not hesitate to help Aseervadam, a lower-caste boy. When Aseervadam approached Manjula at night, mistakenly assuming that she was into him, Manjula not only chased him away but also involved her brothers unintentionally in the matter. Satyam threatened Aseervadam and got him beaten up by his men. Aseervadam then turned to Surya Samajists for help and got Manjula’s house vandalized to avenge his humiliation (136).

The episode of attacking and being counter-attacked by Aseervadam for approaching Manjula at night exemplifies these ideals of protectionism inherent in patriarchy in general and “Brahmanical patriarchy” in particular, as conceptualized by Uma Chakravarti (579). Pan’s analysis of caste-gender dynamics is also relevant here. Following Rege, Pan emphasizes in Mapping Dalit Feminism that an intersectional analysis is capable of demonstrating how gender ideology legitimizes not only structures of patriarchy but also the system of caste (216). Pan outlines how sexual assaults on Dalit women have been used by Brahmanical patriarchy to undermine the manhood of Dalit men or to emasculate Dalit men and justify the supposed impurity of Dalit women. With reference to recent instances, she proves that “their public sexual assault

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3 Kamma is a Hindu caste predominantly settled in the southern parts of India.
4 Kapu is another caste in the Hindu community based in the Andhra-Telangana region of India.
5 SFI is the abbreviation of the Students’ Federation of India. It is the left-wing student body, aligned with the political views and ideology of the Communist Party of India.
6 Congress is another right-wing student organization, affiliated with Indian National Congress.
7 Samajists refer to the members of a particular association named Surya Samajam as described in the text.
8 Samajam, which literally translates to society, refers to a particular organization featured in the novel.
also marks the inability of dalit men to protect their women. In brahmanical patriarchy protectionism (executed by confining women within the four walls of the house) is deemed as one of the major ways to preserve caste purity and prove masculinist and caste supremacy” (Pan 217). Before elaborating on this notion of caste purity, it is important to discuss Dalit representation, often internalized by the Dalits themselves, as it is tied intricately with the notion of caste purity.

I argue that the representation of Dalit women, in particular, is deeply connected to the caste hierarchy; this is evident in the portrayal of Rajeswari at Andhra University in the text. Rajeswari, “the embodiment of a popular stereotype of untouchable Christian girls” as portrayed in Telugu movies and novels, used eyeliner and lipstick and wore high heels, short-sleeved blouses, see-through saris, and a brassiere, which was considered “shocking” and vulgar during Manjula’s college days (183). Besides drawing attention to the representation of the untouchable Christians and the Brahmins, they encounter differential treatment, which is shown here:

Rajeswari was friends with the only other modern girl in the hostel, who to everyone’s shock was not an untouchable but a brahmin. Manjula often wondered what was wrong with this girl. While many untouchable Christians liked to be stylish in this way, brahmans typically reveled in looking old-fashioned. But the boys would never harass a brahmin girl, however provocatively she dressed or behaved. (183)

The representation of the untouchable Christian as a sexually promiscuous and impure woman who is “usually a nurse or a secretary …[and] is vulgar in her dress and behavior and constantly throws herself at men” (183) is pitted against the Brahmin girls’ contentment in looking old-fashioned, a marker of their purity. Hence Rajeswari’s desire to be stylish in this way is not as shocking as that of the Brahmin girl. These stereotypes give the upper-caste boys justification for their views of lower-caste women as “cheap” and “easy” (138).

But again, the differential treatment of women of different castes by men shows that it is not gender identity that creates conflict but rather caste identity. Rege elaborates on the conflicting caste-gender dynamics that contribute to women’s oppression:

In the brahmanical social order, caste-based division of labour and sexual divisions of labour are intermeshed such that elevation in caste status is preceded by the withdrawal of women of that caste from productive processes outside the private sphere. Such a linkage derives from presumptions about the accessibility of sexuality of lower caste women because of their participation in social labour. Brahminism in turn locates this as the failure of lower caste men to control the sexuality of their women and underlines this as a justification of their impurity. (WS-44)

Men’s control over women’s sexuality and lives in general is evident in the case of Manjula who is a victim of dual patriarchies both within her family and in the higher education space. As Gidla suggests about Manjula in her narrative, “[w]ith his help [Manjula’s father] she could have gone far indeed” (95), as her father was the most famous math teacher in the area, but I argue that her gender identity got in her way. To protect her chastity, her father, the well-educated Prasanna Rao who “believed that girls are born to debauchery,” ignored his daughter’s interest in composite maths and thus hampered her prospect of becoming a doctor, engineer, physicist or chemist (95). He ensured that “when he taught private classes in composite maths at home,” in the front room full of boys, Manjula “was never under any circumstances allowed to enter that front room while a class was going on” (95). Later, when Manjula’s classmates wondered why she didn’t major in
science, and often told her “you could have become a doctor,” the narratorial voice is quick to retort, “[b]ut with no composite maths in high school, science was not an option for Manjula” (123). In sharp contrast to Manjula, who “won gold medals for maths, science, and English, and silver medals for Telugu and social studies,” Carey, even after failing multiple times, had the privilege of studying maths and economics by dint of being born male (119).

It is important to note how the men of her family were the ones to decide which subjects she would study in school, just like her choice of clothes, husband, and reproductive health:

Since she had to sit in classrooms with boys, her family made sure she looked as unattractive as possible. One weekend when Prasanna Rao came to visit, he and his sons and mother-in-law…decided that Manjula ought no longer to wear half saris…her father bought a bolt of coarse white cloth without a spot of color….Even brahmin widows dressed better than sixteen-year-old Manjula….The decision about Manjula’s dress had been made right in front of her, but no one asked her what she thought of it. (123-124)

The strict control that the men of the family—including her brothers—exert over Manjula’s life before and after her marriage is seen as a respectable upbringing. While Carey resorted to physical violence whenever “he thought she was straying, Satyam never treated her that way” (124). Instead, Satyam preferred other ways by which she could be self-disciplined into not becoming like those “bad girls” (124), whom Satyam and his friend Nancharaya made fun of in her presence. Both methods worked well as readers encounter a Manjula who is even scared to breathe in the presence of Carey. Satyam’s method was also successful in instilling in her the fear that “Oh, I should never do that thing” to “avoid being talked of in this way” (124). As a consequence, Gidla shows how Manjula grew up always worrying about inadvertently doing something which might displease her brothers.

In addition, control over Manjula’s finances earlier by her family members and then by her husband Prabhakar Rao illustrates how earning a livelihood does not ensure a life of economic independence for a woman. Her “polite” husband Prabhakar Rao is a victim of patriarchy himself as he is compelled to exhibit his manliness in the presence of his mother, Rathnamma, or his other relatives by resorting to wife-beating to avoid being labeled as an “emasculated bugger” (229) who does his wife’s bidding. Like all other decisions including education and marriage, after her delivery of a third child, decisions about her reproductive health were made by her brother Satyam on her behalf. In absence of her callous husband, who “once she left Anantapur, never wrote, never phoned” and whose signed permission was mandatory to perform a tubectomy on her, Satyam committed forgery by signing as her husband (245). Here, I identify an example of institutional patriarchy playing its role when the same doctor who insisted on an immediate tubectomy returned in a few minutes only to insist that “[w]e need a signed permission from her husband” (245).

While gender hierarchy affects Dalit women’s subjectivity, internalized negative perceptions about Dalit looks perpetuate inferiority among the entire community irrespective of gender. I argue that the representation and perception of Dalit complexion and features—how they are perceived and how they perceive themselves—marks an important thematic concern of the text. In terms of looks, they are made to feel inferior to the caste Hindus. In a physical description of Flora’s beauty from the perspective of Satyam, this internalized inferiority is manifest: “She had all high-caste features. Her skin was fair. Her nose, he saw now, was a caste nose, not like the typical snub noses of his people. It was definitely a caste nose. But Satyam was most struck by how healthy she looked. She was healthier than any kamma girl, even” (65). This perception of Dalits as lacking is deeply rooted in self-hatred and the internalization of caste hierarchy. Again, the general
perception of the untouchables is revealed, as the narrator points out: “Everyone thinks all untouchables are dark, but many of them, especially madigas, are as light-skinned as brahmins” (63). The keenness to erase the untouchable identity is pertinent in the text as Chandra Leela criticizes Manjula on her choice of friends. Similar to what bell hooks notices among her students of color who “had tried to attain whiteness…by talking a certain way, wearing certain clothing and even choosing specific groups of white friends” (Black Looks 10), Chandra Leela’s observations cannot be dismissed as childish jealousy. On the last day of their B.A. program, Chandra Leela lashed out at Manjula with “pent-up righteous fury” when saying, “You know Manjula, I’ve always wanted to be your friend, but you only care to have caste friends, you don’t care for your own kind! You really have mental problems. You hurt me and I wanted to let you know it” (162). Manjula’s “mental problems” could be attributed to her internalized inferiority which might silently urge her to erase her identity by embracing higher caste friendships. During Satyam’s marriage too, the serving of upper-caste flour-based foods such as appadams9 and ladoos10 along with vegetables marks a similar erasure of untouchable food habits. Contrary to his people, “now the very thought of beef was revolting to” Prasanna Rao (150). The shame that Satyam associates with his own culture and food habits is vividly described in the wedding episode where he leaves Rama Rao, a high kamma and his close friend, out of the list of invitees, citing his Communist principles. But the narrator indicates how Satyam conceals the real reason behind the garb of Communist principles: “Satyam told him, like a good communist, ‘The cost of the feast will go up if you come.’ Not: ‘There will be pork, there will be tribal dancing. I wouldn’t want you to see how my folks live’” (154). I claim that Satyam’s association of eating pork with impurity and inferior culture, following his upper-caste friends, shows the extent of his internalized hatred toward Dalit cultural identity. It pains Satyam to see the difference between his people and his upper-caste friends, and his identification with them means erasing his own selfhood (150). While the erasure of Dalit selfhood marks Dalit subjectivity on one hand, rage also shapes Dalit subjectivity on the other.

Confronting Dalit Rage

My focus here is on the rage that undercuts the personal narrative with a political critique of institutional casteism and other forms of oppression that plague the country. Speaking on rage, bell hooks demonstrates how Black psychiatrists William Grier and Prince Cobbs explain rage as pathological and merely as a sign of powerlessness in their book Black Rage (hell, Killing Rage 12). She subtly criticizes them for failing to appreciate it as a “potentially healthy” response in the face of oppression (Killing Rage 12). Gidla’s writing of her family’s stories can also be seen as a healing response that would not have been available to her if she had not moved to a new country, as she repeatedly noted in several of her interviews. In an interview at the Times Litfest Bangalore 2018, Gidla makes it clear that “I don’t think I could ever publish this book in India … as for threats if I were in India, I don’t think I would have ever written this book as especially from the point of view of a Dalit” (“Sujatha Gidla Times of India”). Until settling in the US at the age of twenty-six, she never had the opportunity to reflect on the abhorrence of Dalit oppression because it was so normalized. It was only after her emigration that she realized, “My stories, my family’s stories, were not stories in India. They were just life. When I left and made new friends in a new country, only then did the things that happened to my family, the things we had done, become

9 Appadams are flour-based food items.
10 Ladoos are spherical sweets made of sugar, ghee, and gram flour which is a very popular Indian delicacy.
stories. Stories worth telling, stories worth writing down” (Gidla, *Ants* 1). I consider her autobiographical family story as an effective way to express the rage that she felt for internalizing the oppression that had been naturalized for so long.

Likewise, in the fight scene at the hospital between Maniamma and a *paki* woman after Manjula’s delivery of her third child, the narrator points out how long bouts of psychological oppression result in the rudeness and indifference of *Paki* women. In Gidla’s words, “Perhaps out of some psychological reaction to their own horrible oppression, the pakis working as janitors in government hospitals often behave cruelly toward patients who are poor” (*Ants* 245). The “long bouts of psychological oppression” are not just intrinsic to the lived experience of *paki* women, the most oppressed among the Dalits, but also take a toll on the narrator and her mother alike.

The text is replete with not only rage but also irony, satire, and scorn in the voice of the narrator concerning the experiences that she recounts. The irony can be traced in passages describing the *Paki* colony: “One good thing for pakis in Gudivada was that enough shit was produced in the town every day to give every able-bodied man, woman, and child among them paying work” (114). Gilda offers a thorough critique of India’s transition to modernity by pointing out the flaws that afflict the modern Indian State:

The caste whose occupation is the most degrading, the most indecent, the most inhuman of all, is known in coastal Andhra as pakis. In print, they are called manual scavengers or, more euphemistically still, porters of night soil. In plain language, they carry away human shit. They empty the “dry” latrines still widely used throughout India, and they do it by hand. Their tools are nothing but a small broom and a tin plate. With these, they fill their palm-leaf baskets with excrement and carry it off on their heads five, six miles to some place on the outskirts of town where they’re allowed to dispose of it. Some modernized areas have replaced these baskets with pushcarts (this being thought of as progress in India) but even today the traditional “head-loading” method prevails across the country. Nearly all of these workers are women. (112)

The idea of “progress” is harshly criticized through the mockery in her tone. The passage is loaded with just criticism of independent India’s failure to address these issues or its complacency in perpetuating this age-old tradition of caste-based oppression. In recounting Manjula’s life at Benaras, similar criticism of the government can be discerned for not disbursing “her scholarship, one of the many ways in which benefits owed to untouchables are undermined” (192), even at the end of a two-year masters’ program.

The rage that the text exposes regarding the oppression of Dalits can be seen in Manjula’s unconscious hatred toward the Hindus, the exploiters of Dalits for ages. This is manifested in Manjula’s negative perception of the holiest of Hindu land:

When they got to the temples along the river, Durga Kumari almost fainted from emotion. The force of the divine that infused every element there—the air, the water, the sand, the fire—consumed her Brahmin soul. Manjula, on the other hand, almost fainted from disgust. The filth, the stink, the slime, and the revolting activities going around them, overwhelmed her….Manjula had seen many untouchable colonies, including those of madigas. But she had never imagined a filthier place on earth. (191)

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11 *Pakis* are the lowest caste among the Dalits whose assigned caste duty is to clean human excrement.
Gidla juxtaposes “[t]he force of the divine that infused every element there—the air” with her mother’s reaction: “She knew if she took one whiff of that air into her lungs, she would drop dead on the spot” (191). Furthermore, the narratorial voice compares Manjula’s refusal to enter the holiest of temples, the Kashi Vishwanath, and her wish to visit Sarnath. Sarnath, one of the Buddhist pilgrimage destinations where Lord Buddha is believed to have delivered his first sermon, was described by the narrator as a “clean, peaceful place” “[i]n utter contrast to the Hindu temples” (192). Thus, this moment in the text shows that Dalit rage is not only a healing response but also has the potential to offer resistance as seen in Manjula’s refusal to enter the Hindu temple.

**Conclusion: The Importance of an Intersectional Framework**

As a concluding analysis, I return to my primary goal of introducing an intersectional framework to this Dalit family narrative which offers a wide spectrum of caste, class, linguistic and regional dimensions that together contribute to gender oppression. I illustrate how hierarchy exists even among the untouchables: “Mala see themselves as superior to other untouchable communities such as the madigas. To the caste Hindus, though, they’re all untouchable, all despicable” (21). Even Satyam noticed that “that untouchable buffaloes were not allowed to graze in the same meadows as the caste buffaloes” (20). The social hierarchy among the malas\(^\text{12}\) and the madigas,\(^\text{13}\) although both are untouchables, is the result of intra-community hierarchies, whereas the caste Hindus finding all untouchables despicable and separating the meadows\(^\text{14}\) is a result of inter-community hierarchies. Thus, the oppressive social structure means that one’s position is always in flux, depending on who that person is being compared to.

In an interview with Mike Gardner of *Medium*, on being asked “Was becoming a writer unimaginable to you because you grew up in rural India? Because you are a woman? Because you are Dalit [‘untouchables’]?” Gidla replied, “All three. The reason India produces so many engineers is people want to study what they will definitely earn income from. Doctors first, and engineers next, and everything else is kind of trash. Unless you’re upper caste, upper class, and very urban elite, you don’t pursue literature” (“How Sujatha Gidla Paid the Bills”). Her response is illustrative of how being rural and belonging to a certain economic status along with gender and caste can regulate one’s choice of profession. Such caste, class, and regional identities are predicated on an intercategorical relation of hierarchy between the upper and lower castes, as highlighted by McCall in the introduction of this paper.

My reading of Dalit feminism through the lens of Black feminism and an intersectional standpoint is echoed by the author’s views. Reading caste oppression through the lens of racial oppression has become a common move, as the author explains to her fellow US citizens: “caste is like racism against blacks here” (Gidla, *Ants* 2). In another interview with The *New Indian Express*, while equating caste and race, she also argues in favor of extending caste politics beyond identity politics by saying, “I always look at this caste and race thing, like if I can’t find answers regarding one issue I will look at the other: how does it work? So if you look at the race issue, there are so many white people involved in anti-racist struggles and they are genuinely anti-racist … So why should it not be possible for people to participate in anti-caste Dalit struggles?”

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\(^\text{12}\) Mala is a Hindu caste group from Andhra Pradesh and Telangana who are usually Telugu speakers.

\(^\text{13}\) Madiga is a lower caste group in the Hindu community primarily settled in the southern states of India.

\(^\text{14}\) Meadows are pastureland, which is again divided based on the community that rears their cattle. Like human beings, animals are separated into castes where buffaloes of one community are separated from that of the other by separating their grasslands.
While stressing the importance of an all-pervasive Dalit struggle, Gidla explains in the same interview:

…because the Dalit problem is not just the Dalit problem. It is the problem of the entire society not just in a rhetorical sense but caste is a central thing in India and its maintenance causes all kinds of different evils in India. You know, the women question is very much linked with caste. So the Dalit struggle is not just their struggle; it is the struggle of all oppressed people in India, all who are denied equal rights. They must participate in it. ("Sujatha Gidla, Author")

Her emphasis on the “different evils” shows the urgency of intersectionality to interpret categories of oppression. The urge to participate in an all-pervasive movement capable of bringing change in the lives of every oppressed person reiterates my argument that a conversation among people of different kinds of marginalities is the need of the hour. The caste issue, therefore, cannot be addressed by ignoring women’s oppression within it, and vice versa.

To conclude, the multidimensional axes of oppression, be they linguistic or regional, inter-categorical or intra-categorical, need to be adequately addressed in order to realize the full potential of Dalit feminism. Through Sujatha Gidla’s lived experience and her family narrative, it becomes evident that as every strand in the web of oppression is interlocked with others, eradication of any single strand while ignoring others might render the task of liberation a truncated and incomplete one.

Works Cited

