After Violence: Dalit Women’s Narratives and the Possibilities of Resistance

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By Anandita Pan

Abstract

The history of feminist criticism has undergone a long trajectory where it gets written in terms of difference and sameness. Such anxieties get written in the Indian scenario with reference to the “caste” question. The predominant constructions of “woman” and “Dalit” give prominence to *savarna* women and Dalit men. As such, the mutuality of caste and gender is unaddressed. The intersectional identity of Dalit women, simultaneously affected by caste and patriarchy, has challenged this homogeneity claimed by mainstream Indian feminism and Dalit politics. Dalit feminism provides a critique of Brahmanism implicit in mainstream feminism, and the reproduction of patriarchal norms in Dalit communities. One of the major contributions of Dalit feminism in feminist discourse has been to identify Brahmanical patriarchy as the source of their oppression. Coded in the brahmanical prescriptive texts such as the *Manusmriti*, the ideologies of brahmanical patriarchy are structurally integrated into the caste system, setting different sets of rules for upper-caste and Dalit women in terms of sexuality, marriage, and labour. Dalit politics has tried to bypass every claim of such an occurrence on the grounds that there is no notion called Dalit patriarchy because all Dalits are oppressed. Even if there are traces of patriarchal tyranny, Dalit men claim that it is brahmanical patriarchy which should be blamed for suggesting models of domination to Dalit men. However, as Dalit feminists such as Challapalli Swaroopa Rani have noted, “it is not true that democracy is present in that patriarchal system.” women are “cruelly humiliated in public places” and they “face domestic violence and physical problems at home.” This article analyses the complexities of dual patriarchies in causing specific kinds of violence on Dalit women resulting from the interlocking structures of gender and caste, through Bama’s *Sangati* and P. Sivakami’s *The Grip of Change*. Using feminist intersectionality as my methodology, I argue that violence, in the case of Dalit women, creates opportunities for resistance as well.

Keywords: Dalit feminism, Intersectionality, Women, Patriarchy, Violence, Resistance

Introduction: The Intersection of Caste and Gender

On September 29, 2006, four members of the Bhotmange family were killed by upper-caste men in Khairlanji. The women were paraded naked in public, gang-raped and killed, and the two sons were lynched. Popularly known as the Khairlanji massacre, it received tremendous attention at that time. The representation of the massacre took three directions: caste revenge, land dispute (with caste-class intersection coming in), and sexual violence (solely in terms of gender). The court perceived the incident as a land dispute due to a quarrel between a relative of the Bhotmanges and an upper-caste man, where Surekha had appeared as a witness in favour of the Bhotmanges. The perpetration of violence was�� caused by caste, class, and gender. However, the official response to the violence was to blame the assumed perpetrators for the violence. The court failed to address the systemic violence that Dalit women face due to their intersectional identity. The violence against Dalit women is not just a result of caste, but also a result of gender and patriarchy.

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of her relative. After this verdict, the media depicted the Khairlanji massacre as “a clear case of wreaking vengeance” (The Hindu, 2010). A similar perception of caste vengeance due to class/land disputes became central to the Dalit representation as well. Dalit activists who had gathered in the neighboring region of Nagpur to celebrate the commemoration of Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism were seemingly unaffected by such a massive massacre (Teltumbde, 2010, p. 139).

While the mainstream media highlighted the revenge angle with caste as a muted motivating factor, Teltumbde connected caste with class dynamics. Teltumbde highlighted how the dispute originated due to the economically well-off Bhotmanges’ apparent defiance of caste rules when they bought five acres of land (2010, pp. 92-96). Teltumbde (2007) opines,

Structurally speaking, in examining a caste atrocity one has to take cognisance of the existing social relational disequilibria between caste Hindus and Dalits, as well as the protective mechanism in favour of the Dalits, which is mandated in the Constitution, should these disequilibria precipitate into injustice. The disequilibria in social relations is intrinsic to caste society, and can only be contained so long as Dalits submit to the humiliating demands of the caste Hindus or the latter are so enlightened as to treat Dalits as equals, which however is only a hypothetical possibility. (p. 1019)

According to Teltumbde, the “upward economic mobility and […] the educational achievements of the Bhotmange children” caused “injury to the caste pride” of the caste Hindus (2007, p. 1019). The specificity of the massacre as gender violence was pointed out by Sabrina Buckwalter (2006), whose analysis showed the strategic erasure of the evidence of the rapes in the post mortem reports. It is important to mention that, in giving primacy to this angle, caste becomes secondary in the narrative. The sole focus of Buckwalter centered on representing the Khairlanji massacre as a case of sexual rampage. Such representations of the Khairlanji massacre, therefore, either erase caste by focusing exclusively on the gender aspect of the sexual violence, or see the brutality inflicted on the two women only in terms of caste violence, wherein gender becomes secondary.² In the absence of adequate focus on the links between caste and gender, the Khairlanji case remains closeted within “sexual atrocity” or “caste atrocity” (Rege, 2013, p. 20). The assumed uniform standards of perspective adopted by the mainstream media and Dalit politics fail to see that different situations demand different priorities. Dalit women’s gang-rape, in fact, cannot be understood in its complexity if it remains as an added dimension to caste problem or a “gender issue.” Instead, we need to recognize that Dalit women are differently situated in social worlds, and the violence inflicted on their bodies specifically arises from the intersecting structures of caste and gender.

Conceptualising ‘difference’ through Dual Patriarchies

The history of feminism and anti-caste politics in India has undergone a long trajectory where it gets written in terms of difference and sameness. The predominant constructions of “woman” and “Dalit” give prominence to savarna women and Dalit men.³ As such, the

² The opposite spectrum of argument gets highlighted in the Bhanwari Devi gang rape in 1992, which led to the Vishakha judgment (1997) on women’s sexual harassment at the workplace. The mainstream feminist focalization on gender erased the caste identity of Bhanwari Devi. A Dalit feminist analysis would reveal that in a casteist society ruled by norms of brahmanism, Bhanwari’s prevention of child marriage was seen as a daring act. Her public rape, therefore, served as a means to assert the caste supremacy of the upper-caste rapists and also the emasculation of her husband, who, despite being present at the scene, could not protect his wife. The Bhanwari Devi case, therefore, becomes the classic example of mainstream feminist appropriation as “sexual atrocity” at the cost of caste. See Rowena, 2017; Geetha, 2017.

³ The persistence of gender and caste as the sole categories of analysis in mainstream Indian feminism and Dalit politics respectively, was especially visible during the Una March and the #MeToo movement. While the former
mutuality of caste and gender is unaddressed. Herein lies the importance of intersectionality. In an interview with Karmakar (2022) Jennifer C. Nash postulates that “intersectionality as a theory, method, practice, and politics emerging from black feminist theory that is primarily concerned with the experiences of the multiply-marginalized, particularly black women” (p. 390). Intersectionality’s relevance, thus, lies in privileging the positionality of the multiply-marginalised, thereby valuing experiential authority and solidarity. As Nash goes on to add, “there is a collective sense that the term performs work on behalf of the multiply-marginalized, theorising their experiences, identities, and collective capacity to see how structures of domination operate” (Karmakar, 2022, p. 390). The intersectional identity of Dalit women, simultaneously affected by caste and patriarchy, challenges this homogeneity claimed by mainstream Indian feminism and Dalit politics. Dalit feminism provides a critique of brahmanism implicit in mainstream feminism, and the reproduction of patriarchal norms in Dalit communities.

The identification of dual patriarchies – brahmanical and Dalit – is a significant contribution to the concept of difference in Dalit Feminism. The recognition of brahmanical and Dalit patriarchies has proved instrumental in highlighting the fact that the oppression of Indian women is not one-dimensional. Uma Chakravarti (2003) defines brahmanical patriarchy as:

A set of rules and institutions in which caste and gender are linked, each shaping the other and where women are crucial in maintaining the boundaries between castes. Patriarchal codes in this structure ensure that the caste system can be reproduced without violating the hierarchical order of closed endogamous circles, each distinct from and higher and lower than others. Further, brahmanical codes for women differ according to the status of the caste group in the hierarchy of castes with the most stringent control over sexuality reserved as a privilege for the highest castes. Finally, it incorporates both an ideology of chaste wives and pativrata women who are valorised, and a structure of rules and institutions by which caste hierarchy and gender inequality are maintained through both the production of consent and the application of coercion. (p. 34)

Coded in the brahmanical prescriptive texts such as the Manusmriti, the ideologies of brahmanical patriarchy are structurally integrated into the caste system, setting different sets of rules for savarna and Dalit women in terms of sexuality, marriage, and labour.4 Interpreting

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4The Manusmriti is an ancient Sanskrit legal treatise that provides extensive dicta on laws pertaining to people of each caste and gender. The casteist, sexist attitude is visible in the Manusmriti through its strict dicta on endogamy. With reference to marriage among upper-castes, the Manusmriti states: “a twice-born man should marry a wife who is of the same class and has the right marks” (Doniger and Smith, 1991, p. 43). It further narrates that a husband’s duty is to guard his wife by keeping her within the house, and a wife’s duty is to be “worthy” of the husband, beget children, and rear them (Doniger and Smith, 1991, pp. 198-200). Such an extensive inventory of the qualities of women is made by keeping upper-caste women as the parameters. Stringent rules of endogamy were imposed on upper-caste women in order to maintain purity of blood (Chakravarti, 2003, pp. 66-68). The Manusmriti states that any deviation from these rules—in terms of exogamy—was severely punished (Doniger and Smith, 1991, pp. 189-193). Even there, a gradation is followed according to caste. Thus, upper-caste men who had sexual relations with lower-caste women were punished monetarily (Doniger and Smith, 1991, p. 193), whereas lower-caste men who had sexual relations with upper-caste women were punished both monetarily and corporeally, with punishments ranging from dismemberment to being “burnt up in a grass fire” (Doniger and Smith, 1991, p. 192). The severity of punishments on lower-caste men testify to the brahmanical patriarchal fear of the mixing of blood. In a patrilineal, patriarchal society, a child born of a lower-caste man and an upper-caste woman was a problem due to his or her undetermined caste
patriarchy in the form of brahmanical patriarchy brings about a revolutionary change in reframing the contours of patriarchy because the term “brahmanism” accommodates different categories of oppressive characteristics affecting different groups of women.

Dalit politics’ predominant take on Dalit patriarchy has depended on emphasising its emulative format. They argue that there is no such notion as Dalit patriarchy because all Dalits are oppressed. Even if there are traces of patriarchal tyranny, it is brahmanical patriarchy that should be blamed for suggesting models of domination to Dalit men. Such postulations view the patriarchal dimensions in Dalit communities almost as a result of “Sanskritization.” M. N. Srinivas defines “Sanskritization” as a phenomenon:

a low caste was able […] to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by Sanskritizing its ritual and pantheon. In short, it took over, as far as possible, the customs, rites and beliefs of the Brahmins, and the adoption of the Brahminic way of life by a low caste seems to have been frequent, though theoretically forbidden. (p. 30)

Kancha Ilaiah, while acknowledging the presence of patriarchy in Dalit communities, foregrounds it as being emancipatory in comparison to upper-caste patriarchy. Thus, Dalit women are mentioned solely in relation to brahmanical patriarchy to essentially highlight their difference from upper-caste women. Gopal Guru emphasizes this particular point as he writes, “Dalit men are reproducing the same mechanisms against their women which their high-caste adversaries had used to dominate them” (1995, p. 2549). The surprising lack of academic attention to this area also indicates the general consensus of its non-existence. The question, however, remains, whether Dalit patriarchy is solely an emulative form of oppression. Hence, to understand Dalit patriarchy, it is important to recognise how it performs within the dominant brahmanical patriarchy, whether it exists as a reflection of or a reaction to brahmanical patriarchy, or whether there exists a third dimension of Dalit patriarchy that does not take models from brahmanical patriarchy but suffices on its own. Challapalli Swaroopa Rani (2013) maintains that the idea of Dalit culture having a democratic patriarchy is false. She writes,

If we come now to the issue of patriarchy, as the proverb goes, ‘the size of the tree determines the force of the wind’, meaning that a man will oppress those who depend upon him to the extent that his power allows. As a Dalit man doesn’t have in his hands the same facilities that an upper-caste landlord does, he carries out oppression within his own limits. But it is not true that democracy is present in that patriarchal system. (pp. 707-708)

Swaroopa Rani notes that Dalit women are “cruelly humiliated in public places” and they “face domestic violence and physical problems” (2013, p. 707) She classifies Dalit women’s oppression as both brahmanical and patriarchal. She challenges this so-called democratic rendering of the Dalit community by pointing out that a Dalit man “carries out the oppression within his own limits” (2013, p. 708). Moreover, Dalit patriarchy not only exists in a powerful identity. Since children (sons) were progeny who also owned their fathers’ property, it was important to ensure the child’s paternity. For these reasons, upper-caste women were kept within the house to retain control over their sexuality. This is an ideal example of brahmanical patriarchy.

Ilaiah links women’s oppression to Brahmanical ritualistic practices and points out that women in the Dalit communities do not suffer similar kind of patriarchal control. He gives instances where “a Dalitbahujan woman does not have to perform padapuja (worshipping the husband’s feet) to her husband either in the morning or in the evening. […] Patriarchy as a system does exist among Dalitbahujan, yet in this sense it is considerably more democratic” (1996, p. 34).
form, it often operates from within while keeping itself veiled under the larger notion of the Dalit as a singular, fixed category where caste becomes the only determining factor of analysis. By conceptualizing patriarchies in their multiplicity and placing Brahmanism as the root cause, the focus is redirected to the intersection of caste and gender and the need to approach them simultaneously. This article analyses the complexities of dual patriarchies in causing specific kinds of violence on Dalit women resulting from the interlocking structures of gender and caste, through Bama’s *Sangati* and P. Sivakami’s *The Grip of Change*.

Specificities of Oppression: Violence on Dalit Women

Patriarchy in the Dalit community functions at several levels. In Bama’s *Sangati*, the narrator, as a young girl of twelve, learns that boys have different roles to play than girls through the gendered games that they are made to play as children. While *kabadi* and marbles are meant for boys, girls are supposed to play domestic roles of cooking, getting married, homekeeping, and so on. If we consider games as creating boundaries between masculine and feminine attributes, then here is a patriarchal system at work which neither aspires to become the brahmanical patriarchy, nor opposes it, but exists as a third axis of domination which has an independent operative system. In *Sangati* (2013), the narrator asks:

> Why can’t we be the same as boys? We aren’t allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily; even when we sleep we can’t stretch out on our backs nor lie face down on our bellies. We always have to walk with our heads down, gazing at our toes […] even when our stomachs are screaming with hunger, we mustn’t eat first. We are allowed to eat only after the men in the family have finished and gone. What, Paatti, aren’t we also human beings? (p. 29)

But she is immediately reprimanded by Paatti, who says that in the long run, it is the boys who become the breadwinners of the families. This is a unique example of how patriarchy works with women as their agents. They not only teach young girls how to behave, but they also play important roles in the early development of masculinity in boys. Even religion is no different. While brahmanical scriptures define the ultimate form of oppression towards the Dalits in Hindu religion, Christianity does the same. The white nuns in their village, Paatti tells the narrator, “made a big effort” to teach Dalit women how to become ideal wives. Hence, patriarchy forms an alliance with religion and uses women as its powerful agents (Bama, 2013, p. 30).

*Sangati* also reveals the devaluation of Dalit women’s economic liberty. Poverty necessitates Dalit women to cross the boundaries of home and earn money. However, they bear the entire responsibility of the family and face physical abuse on a daily basis from the men in their families. As Paatti surmises the situation of women in her community: “We have to labour in the fields as hard as men do, and then or top of that, struggle to bear and raise our children. As for the men, their work ends when they’ve finished in the fields. If you are born into this world, it is best you were born a man. Born as women, what good do we get? We only toil in the fields and in the home until our vaginas shrivel” (Bama, 2013, pp. 6-7). Here we have an example of how Dalit patriarchy subjugates the Dalit women, not being instigated by the upper-caste men, but by making it into an everyday practice.

In an overview report on violence against Dalit women, Irudayam et al (2014) categorize the types of violence (verbal abuse, physical assault, forced prostitution, child sexual abuse, sexual harassment, rape, kidnapping, etc.), the locations of violence (public space, within the home, workplace, perpetrator’s home, government’s space, etc.), and provide actual evidence on how both brahmanical and Dalit patriarchies act hand-in-hand to ensure the domination of Dalit women. However, they confine themselves to the notion that gender
discrimination within the Dalit community arises mostly as an offshoot of reactive patriarchy, where the Dalit man exposes his anger towards the upper-caste people towards the Dalit woman at home by verbally and physically abusing her.

An intersectional analysis of Mariamma’s case in Sangati, however, underscores how brahmanical and Dalit patriarchies work for their mutual interest by keeping the Dalit woman at the receiving end of oppression. Mariamma, a Dalit woman, is assaulted by Kumarasamy, an upper-caste landlord. In order to hide this incident, Kumarasamy goes to the village court and complains that Mariamma is having an affair with a Dalit boy, Manikkam. In the end, Mariamma is proven by the Paraya court to be a ‘loose’ woman for having an affair. She is forced to pay a fine and is beaten up by her father. Following the brahmanical codes of chastity for women, the village court not only brands her a whore, but believes that an upper-caste man would never desire a Dalit woman due to the fear of pollution. The dispute is settled with money, but the humiliation Mariamma faces haunts her through the rest of her life. Interestingly, the beating she gets at the hands of her father arises out of the sense of helplessness and anger on the part of the Dalit man, who loses control over the woman at the hands of the upper-caste man, and now, being unable to save his male pride, ventures to re-establish his authority on the only available weak person, i.e., the woman. Mariamma’s body thus becomes the site where intersecting structures of caste and gender enact their oppression. Manikkam, on the other hand, is left free with a minimum fine and is accepted in the society because a man can do whatever he wants. As Arokkyam says, “Whatever the man does, in the end the blame falls on the woman” (Bama, 2013, p. 26).

In an interesting twist, both the brahmanical patriarchy and the Dalit patriarchy depend on the brahmanical idea of pollution when it comes to endogamy and marriage between castes. As soon as a girl comes of age, the Dalit communities “tell [them] all these stories, take away [their] freedom, and control [their] movement” (Bama, 2013, p. 58). A menstruating Dalit woman who goes outside to work is a threat to her society because she raises the possibility of an inter-caste marriage. This is where the marriage system, which otherwise supports procreative heteronormative marriage, breaks down (Menon, 2012). An inter-caste marriage threatens to demolish all caste boundaries and also provides the woman with the possibility to choose her legal sexual partner from another caste. The very fact that Dalit men tell women about how the pey, or the ghost, never attacks the brahmin women because they stay inside the house, shows the aspirational aspect of the Dalit men, who now want to reflect the brahmanical practice of “purity” among women by confining them within the limits of the house.

Such a reflective aspect of Dalit patriarchy, in a form akin to “sanskritization,” is most visible in Kathamuthu in The Grip of Change. Even though Kathamuthu lives with two women and everyone laughs at this set-up, he is highly valued in the Dalit community. He is deeply steeped into imitating the brahmanical practices such as chanting mantram after bathing, “a practice he had picked up from Vakil Venkatakrishnan, a Brahmin lawyer” (Sivakami, 2013, p. 15). Later on, even Chandran, the leader of the Union—an organization which emerged as a reflection of Dalit Panthers—who otherwise demands equality both within and outside castes, adopts a similar stance of reflecting brahmanical patriarchy when he keeps his wife home after getting married, thereby creating an image of a perfect upper-caste housewife.

We see Thangam, a Dalit widow, being subjected to public assault by the brahmins (where Dalit men remain merely as bystanders) and deprived by her brothers-in-law of all

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6 According to Rege (1998), such actions are a direct result of the Brahmational assumption of Dalit women’s sexual availability.

7 According to Ambedkar, endogamy, i.e., the process of fixing marriages within castes, justifies the exclusivity of caste groups and ascertains the logic of birth-based origin. By focalizing on endogamy as the root of the caste system, Ambedkar reorients casteism from a single-axis system to one that is impacted simultaneously by gender (Ambedkar, 1979, p. 8).
property rights of her deceased husband “as [she] didn’t have any children” (Sivakami, 2013, p. 6). Moreover, she is thrown out of the house when she refuses to fulfill the sexual demands of her in-laws. Even when she complains to Kathamuthu, his focus is hardly on the assaults she has faced. Rather, he continually tries to divert the attention from the violence to the idea that she “chose that upper-caste fellow” over Dalit men (Sivakami, 2013, p. 7). Here is a masculine tension at work where the Dalit man reprimands the Dalit woman because he feels that he has lost control over her. It is interesting how Kathamuthu and Thangam’s brothers-in-law, though unrelated otherwise, agree unanimously that it is Thangam who should be punished because she chose the upper-caste Udayar over Dalit men. Here she faces violence because she exercises her right to choose the man she wants to be with. By selecting the upper-caste man, Thangam challenges the authority of her brothers-in-law, proving that she now has a more powerful man to depend on and gives prevalence to her own sexual desires. Hence, it becomes important for the brothers-in-law to exercise a highly sexualized control over Thangam in order to regain their masculine prowess over the Dalit women and prove their ownership over her because she belongs to their family through marriage.

Although she goes to Kathamuthu seeking help, she is forced to forget her assault as Kathamuthu tries to organize a protest centering on caste while maintaining a personal “respect” towards the upper-caste people (Sivakami, 2013, p. 23). Later on, when there is a fire in the village, everyone forgets the original cause of it (i.e., Thangam’s assault and her complaint to the police) and demands a pay rise from the upper-caste men. This is a classic example of how a question of sexual violence is turned into one of caste discrimination. Thangam’s helplessness, like that of the other women in Kathamuthu’s house, is triggered even more when her apparent savior turns into a rapist. Hence, although she says, “You are like a brother to me [… a brother […]” (Sivakami, 2013, p. 93), she has no other option but to succumb to Kathamuthu’s demands because the Dalit community has already rejected her and she has nowhere else to go.

Such conscious ignorance of sexual violence is another example of the way in which Dalit patriarchy is operational. More evidence of this is visible when Kathamuthu and other Dalit men try to drive women against each other. The first instance of this is visible within Kathamuthu’s household, where he repeatedly tries to initiate a quarrel between his two wives, Kanagavalli and Nagamani, so that he can enjoy favours from both. The second instance is the giving of relief funds after the fire in the Paraya village. This is an example of how the state, the upper-caste men, and the Dalit men join hands to create a divide between the women regarding the distribution of relief. They use the old woman Kannamma’s short-sightedness to create confusion about the real culprit and forcefully shut down Rasendran’s protests by saying “He is just a young boy” (Sivakami, 2013, p. 69). Moreover, they give more money to a woman whose house has suffered less damage than Kannamma’s, which immediately initiates a rift between the two women. The use of a divide-and-rule policy on women, as well as the feminization of young men, places the baton in the hands of a small group of men.

As mentioned earlier, although reflective and reactive forms contribute to constituting and sustaining Dalit patriarchy, it has traditionally been disregarded on the grounds that it is the brahmanical patriarchy which suggests models for them to follow. And since it is assumed that all Dalits are uniformly dominated because of caste discrimination, Dalit men’s anger rises from the humiliation they face by upper-caste people. However, as we see in the two novels, Dalit men such as Kathamuthu and Mariamma’s father not only demonstrate the reflective and reactive aspects of Dalit patriarchy by aspiring to be like Brahmin men and physically abusing Dalit women to regain their masculine pride, but they also demonstrate an already existing possibility of an independent oppressive mechanism that works through their daily lives. Understanding Dalit patriarchy as a system of control, one can see how it functions and contributes to the active oppression of Dalit women. The analysis challenges the simplistic
anti-casteist assumptions that only upper-caste men dominate Dalit men and women, instead showing that multiple patriarchies work together to ensure Dalit women’s oppression. Because of this, it is very important to recognize the existence of double patriarchies so that oppression can be understood more fully and ways can be found to fight it.

Possibilities of Agency and Assertion

While elaborating on the specificities of violence against Dalit women, Sangati and The Grip of Change also provide instances of Dalit women’s resistance. It is important to note that resistance need not appear as a direct opposition. In these novels, we see Dalit women navigating their ways towards assertion through various means. In Sangati, Dalit women seek agency through the use of language. According to Raj Gauthaman (1995), “Dalits who have for so long been treated as commodities owned by others must shout out their selfhood, their ‘I,’ when they rise up” (p. 97). Using languages exactly spoken by the Dalit people, their writings appear with an unmistakable sense of anger, which has taken the form of protest against injustice. Such language has been used for various purposes. While in Dalit male writing, such usage is directed towards the upper-caste men who have kept them in slavery and ignorance, Dalit women often use it against their own husbands in order to save themselves from being beaten up. In Sangati, the narrator writes about an incident she witnessed between Pakkiaraj and his wife Raakkamma. Pakkiaraj was abusing her in a vile and vulgar way and was just about to hit her. Raakkamma was replying in equally abusive language in order to save herself from being beaten up. “Even before his hand could fall on her, she screamed and shrieked, ‘Ayyayyo, he’s killing me. Vile man, you’ll die, you’ll be carried out as a corpse, you low-life, you bastard, you this you that’ […]” (Bama, 2013, p. 61).

Negotiatory agency is visible in The Grip of Change through the representations of Kanagavalli and Nagamani, Kathamuthu’s two wives. They are neither fully victimised (like Thangam), nor do they completely resist the system (they remain within the realm of marital domesticity). However, they can be seen as negotiating their way into the household to create a space for themselves. Although neither of them is happy with the situation, they do not suffer in silence. This instance becomes visible in the way they interrupt Kathamuthu and make sharp remarks: “‘Everyone laughs at the set-up in your home, and here you are trying to teach others. You think you are such a bigshot!’ Kanagavalli went inside, muttering so that he could hear” (Sivakami, 2013, p. 7). This shows how Kanagavalli, the elder wife, directs her criticism towards the husband. Their joint criticism of Kathamuthu is evident when Thangam arrives asking for help. When Kathamuthu makes a sarcastic remark about how “thangam” (literally meaning ‘gold’) is an unsuitable name for a Dalit woman who is equivalent to a broomstick, Nagamani retorts, “That’s only to be expected of you […]. You never behave with the dignity appropriate for a man of stature” (Sivakami, 2013, p. 9). When Kathamuthu retaliates with anger, Kanagavalli tells Nagamani, “Come on, let’s go in. We have nothing to do here” (Sivakami, 2013, p. 9). The two wives, therefore, can be seen as negotiating with patriarchy by creating a sense of camaraderie.8

Conclusion

Sangati and The Grip of Change challenge the predominant assumptions regarding “women’s issues” and “caste problems.” In mainstream feminist postulations, the predominant theme has been the impact of the domestic sphere as a restrictive space on women. For Dalit women, however, whose work necessitates their presence in the public sphere, confinement to

8 I explain the concept of collective solidarity as a mode of Dalit feminist assertion elsewhere (Pan, 2020) to argue how the knowledge and acceptance of the difference among women can lead to fruitful ways of forging solidarity.
the domestic is not an issue per se. In fact, imprisonment of women within the domestic sphere serves as a controlling mechanism to keep not only women’s sexuality in check but also to ensure the proper maintenance of endogamous rules. *The Grip of Change* depicts sexuality issues through dual patriarchies in the case of Thangam, who is sexually available to upper-castes while her widowhood makes her an easy prey for Dalit men who want to make her their “whore” (Sivakami, 2013, p. 7). This shows that, unlike upper-caste women, Dalit women’s sexuality is not confined to the domestic/private realm. It is public in its specifically casteist formulation, where upper-caste men are seen to have access to Dalit women, who are seen to be impure because of their presence in the public sphere of work. *Sangati* and *The Grip of Change* show how the intersectional identity of “Dalit woman” challenges the single-axis formulation of “Indian woman” and “Dalit,” and how the concept of dual patriarchies revises the mainstream feminist notion of patriarchy (understood only in terms of gender) and the anti-caste notion of caste system (as the primary source of oppression for all members of the Dalit community irrespective of gender). Dalit women’s writings, therefore, highlight the specificity of gender within Dalit communities and urge a recognition of difference among women.

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