May 2024

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Recommended Citation
Moni, Sujatha and George, Miruna (2024) "Dalit Feminist Literature from South India: New Models and Perspectives," Journal of International Women's Studies: Vol. 26: Iss. 3, Article 3.
Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol26/iss3/3

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Dalit Feminist Literature from South India: New Models and Perspectives

By Sujatha Moni¹ and Miruna George²

Abstract

Twenty-first century Indian literature has been enriched overall by Dalit feminist literature written originally in regional languages and available in English translation. What are the contributions of South Indian Dalit women’s writings to literature and to feminism? How is the representation of women in South Indian Dalit literature redefining the images of women in contemporary literature? These questions are answered through an analysis of Bama’s *Karukku*, select short stories by Gogu Shyamala and Joopa Subhadra, and select poems by Swaroopa Rani, Sukirtharani, and Vijila Chirappad. Using Dalit feminist theory, we examine how the texts analyzed here represent the standpoints of women living through the reality of intersectional oppressions. Borrowing the metaphor of the sharp double-edged palm frond invoked in the title of Bama’s *Karukku*, we argue that the sufferings endured by Dalit women on one hand, and their strength and resistance on the other, transcend simplistic narratives of heroes and victims. By showing remarkable courage, persistence, and clever use of traditions in the face of patriarchal caste oppression, the characters encountered in these texts are contributing to new models and images of women. This argument is established through an examination of two recurrent themes in these writings: Dalit women’s response to sexual violence and their defiance of traditional gender norms.

*Keywords:* Dalit, Feminism, South India, Literature, Intersectionality, Standpoint theory

Introduction

You may frame me, like a picture,  
and hang me on your wall;  
I will pour down, away past you,  
like a river in sudden flood.  
I myself will become  
earth  
fire  
sky  
wind  
water.  
The more you confine me, the more I will spill over.

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Twenty-first century Indian literature is dominated by regional writings published in their original languages and in translation. Increasingly within academia as well as social justice activism, writings by women belonging to indigenous, Dalit, and religious minority communities are gaining prominence (Agnihotri and Mazumdar; Tharu and Sathyaranarayana). Starting with the Marathi autobiographies of the 1980s, to current writings by Meena Kandasamy, Kalyani Thakur Charal, and Sujatha Gidla, Dalit women’s literature has contributed to a rich variety and body of writings exploring caste, class, gender, religious and socio-cultural oppression. As Bama explains in the preface to Karukku, “During the past ten years, Karukku has journeyed widely. Many universities and colleges have used it as a textbook for different subjects….Dalit writing has flourished. A new generation of artists and writers has enriched Dalit Literature” (x). While representing the diversity of women’s experiences, these writings challenge patriarchal structures both within and outside Dalit communities and advance feminist struggles for social justice.

In this article, we claim that Dalit feminist literature has contributed new models and images of women to twenty-first century Indian literature. We develop this argument through an intersectional analysis of the representation of women in a cross-section of South Indian Dalit feminist writings including Bama’s ground-breaking classic, Karukku (2000), Gogu Shyamala’s Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket but… (2012, hereafter referred to as Father May Be), Joopaka Subhadra’s How Are You Veg? (2013), select short stories by B.T. Jahnvi and Du Saraswathi, and select poems by Swaroopa Rani, Sukirtharani, and Vijila Chirappad. We borrow Bama’s metaphor of the karukku or sharp double-edged palm frond which is a symbol of both Dalit oppression and resistance. As M.S.S. Pandian explains, “Karukku signifies both the oppressive present and the struggle against it, a metaphor which connects the present with the future” (133). Connecting Bama’s classic to contemporary Dalit literature, we argue that the writings discussed in this paper transcend traditional narratives of heroes and victims. They present characters who persist in the face of adversity, assert their sexual longings despite threats of sexual assault, cleverly appropriate traditions despite being exploited by them, and display great acts of bravery despite severe hardships. These characters defy traditional norms of gender representation in mainstream literature and contribute to the emergence of new models and images of women. The poem “Nature’s Fountainhead” by Tamil poet Sukirtharani quoted at the beginning of this paper symbolizes this double-edged aspect of South Indian Dalit literature. While the first two lines of the poem describe how patriarchy has framed and confined women, the last two lines show women defying and transcending these oppressive structures. The stories and poems discussed here present such images of women who boldly challenge upper-caste patriarchal authority.

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See, for example, Pawde’s Anthaspot (Thoughtful Outburst); Shantabai Kamble’s Majhya Jalmachi Chittarkatha (The Kaleidoscopic Story of My Life); and Pawar’s Aidan (Weave of My Life).

Written originally in Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu and Kannada, these texts come from the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka.

Though there is a larger body of Dalit South Indian writings, and while some of them, such as P. Sivakami’s novels, address intersectional issues, we selected a few texts available in English translation that shared common themes.
Dalit Feminist Theory

Throughout this paper we use Dalit feminist perspectives on intersectionality and standpoint theory to examine South Indian Dalit women’s writings and their contribution to literature and feminism. As critics argue, Dalit women are historically “triply burdened subjects whose issues can thus only adequately be understood within an intersectional framework” (Gopal, qtd. in Arya and Rathore 7). The concept of intersectionality, which was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe the experiences of Black women and women of color in the United States, has been effectively applied by authors of Dalit feminism to describe the simultaneous oppressions encountered by Dalit women, offering it as “a corrective to the commonly deployed notion of multiple identities” (John 73). The contributions of intersectional scholars to feminism are “catalytic in making the invisible visible, and the forgotten, ignored, and erased voices known and heard” (Govinda 74).

Although application of intersectionality to Indian contexts has been criticized as a universalizing Western imposition (Menon), this notion has been challenged as a false particularism by Mary John who argues that in important policies, “Gender and poverty ought to be considered in their intersections with other axes of inequality and discrimination, so that issues of disability, caste, minority status, and so on would not get left out” (John 75). In fact, intersectionality has been suggested as an effective tool for theorizing Indian feminism through its creation of possibilities for alliance among the different concerns represented by Dalit feminism and other feminist movements in India (Arya and Rathore 13).

Dalit women’s writings have also been viewed as “different” from other feminist writings, because they have shaken up the literary world and “occasioned much anxiety and rage among the gatekeepers of the literary establishment” (Pandian 129). Dalit women “talking differently,” as argued by Gopal Guru, “makes the claim of Dalit woman to speak on behalf of Dalit women automatically valid. In so doing, the phenomenon of ‘talking differently’ foregrounds the identity of Dalit women” (Guru 2549) and represents their standpoint. As discussed below, while Guru’s claim regarding the automatic validity of Dalit women’s writings has been critiqued for its underlying essentialism and failure to recognize class differences and problems of authority within Dalit communities (Rege, Writing Caste/Writing Gender 4-5), Guru’s contribution lies in theorizing Dalit feminist standpoints and their marked difference from literature and feminism of the privileged classes.

Like intersectionality, standpoint theory has also become an important tool of Dalit feminist analysis and was first introduced by Western scholars such as Harding and Collins. The collective experiences of Dalit women documented in the stories and poems discussed in this paper represent the Dalit feminist standpoint. This paper adds to the existing scholarship on Dalit feminist standpoint theory, which was developed by scholars like Guru and Sharmila Rege.

Using feminist standpoint theory as a methodology has two advantages. Firstly, as Bhushan Sharma explains in regard to Collins’s theories, a group’s collective experiences lead to their standpoint which is considered essential for informed political action (Sharma 25). Dalit women who are living the reality and sharing the intersectional experiences of caste, gender, and class oppression, are the ones who are uniquely positioned to describe these experiences. When these individuals speak, they are not merely sharing their personal experiences, but also those of the group or collective to which they belong. As Sukirtharani explains in an interview:

In most of my poems, there is a powerful sense of ‘I’, a strong subjectivity. I strongly feel the need to bring my sense of self into the picture... But the ‘I’ which I use does not stand
for Sukirtharani alone, it represents several women like Sukirtharani. This representative ‘I’ is an integral part of my poems and so I must use it. (“A Dalit Poet’s Explorations”)

Sukirtharani’s poem describes her own experiences of gender, race, and class oppression, and those of the group or community she identifies with. Her writings therefore represent the Dalit feminist standpoint. There is a similar transgressive quality to the self in Bama’s Karukku which cannot be narrowly confined to the canon of autobiography: “Bama’s narrative, even as it verbalizes her own life story, depletes rather effortlessly the autobiographical ‘I’… and displaces it with the collectivity of the Dalit community. Her story… refuses to be her own but that of others too” (Pandian 130). As explained by Nayar, Karukku is a testimonio where the author bears witness to a trauma which moves from the individual to the collective through the narration of the experience (85). Writers like Sukirtharani and Bama who have undergone and understand their people’s oppression represent their community’s standpoint.

Secondly, Dalit women experience a similar marginalization to that of Black US women, which is described by bell hooks as a double vision of living on the edge and “looking both from the outside in and inside out” (hooks vii). Living on the margins, they can share their personal experiences of oppression as well as their perceptions regarding the life of the privileged. The Dalit feminist standpoint, as Guru explains, “maintains that the less powerful members of a society have a more encompassing view of social reality than others because their disadvantaged position grants them a certain epistemic privilege over others” (2549).

The writers discussed in this paper, while offering insights into the mechanisms of power operating between Dalit women and the groups who oppress them, also use their texts to explore creative ways of challenging or overturning the system. We see this demonstrated in the poem “The Faint Smell of Meat,” where Sukirtharani first describes her community from the perspective of the dominant group. But the last line shifts the focus to her standpoint which transforms her community’s location from “the extreme end of town” to the “forefront”:

   In their minds
   I, who smell faintly of meat
   my house where bones hang
   and my street where young men
   wander without restraint
   making loud music from coconut shells
   strung with skin
   are all at the extreme end of our town
   But I keep assuring them
   We stand at the forefront. (80)

Using Guru’s argument above, the Dalit community’s location at the extreme end of town, “grants them an epistemic privilege over others” who are their oppressors. This peculiar advantage or double vision transports marginalized Dalit women to “the forefront.” Rege adds a further nuance to Guru’s theory of Dalit women “talking differently” by suggesting:

What we need instead is a shift of focus from ‘difference’ and multiple voices to the social relations which convert difference into oppression. This requires the working out of the cultural and material dimensions of the interactions and interphases between the different
hierarchies of class, gender, race and so on. In other words, this means transforming ‘difference’ into a standpoint. (Rege, “Dalit Women Talk Differently” 40-41)

Instead of focusing on the difference that produces Dalit identity, the theoretical lens should shift to the hierarchical relations that produce these differences.

Based on this argument, the acknowledgment of caste, gender, or class difference should be accompanied by the need to analyze their underlying structures of power. To illustrate, the Malayali poet Vijila Chirappad’s poem “She Who Flew Ahead” demonstrates in simple language the power structure that binds Dalit and upper-caste women together under the patriarchal class/caste system:

In our home
there is no TV
no fridge
neither mixer
nor grinder
no LPG
not even an iron-box.

yet my mother knew
how to operate these
much before i did.

because
like in Madhavikutty’s stories
and the novels of MT
she is Janu –
the servant.

Dalit women’s entry into the kitchens of privileged castes as domestic workers gives them access to the lives of the upper castes, albeit as outsiders. The kitchen, where women toil every day, is also a hierarchical space where upper-caste and upper-class women exercise control over the lower-caste women who serve them and relieve them of household responsibilities. Poor women’s access to consumer goods or other symbols of class privilege, such as a TV and fridge, comes only through their domestic labor. The poem describes these women as occupying fringe roles in the writings of acclaimed Malayali authors Madhavikutty and M.T. Vasudevan Nair. Delegating household responsibilities to Dalit women frees up time for upper-caste women to engage in activities that reinforce their own caste/class/cultural position. Feminist efforts to build coalitions between these two groups must reckon with the exploitative power structure informing their relationship, which contributes to each group’s standpoint.

Having laid the theoretical framework for this analysis, we now turn to an examination of the relationship of South Indian Dalit women’s writings to mainstream Indian literature and to feminism. We argue, through examples from the readings, that the focus on intersectional oppression in Dalit feminist writings forces literature to be interdisciplinary. This will be followed by an analysis of Dalit protagonists resisting sexual violence, breaking down gender stereotypes, and contributing to new images of women in contemporary literature.


**Literature and Dalit Perspectives**

The writings discussed in this paper represent a heterogeneous body of works covering different languages, cultures, and themes. They center women navigating class, religious, caste, and gender-based violence in their quest for social justice. This focus is ignored by both mainstream literature and Dalit literature. The former is dominated by privileged religious castes/classes, and the latter by Dalit males. According to Bagul, currently, “modern Indian literary culture…is not only Hindu in the sense that it is produced by Hindu writers, but also the subjects of this literature are the elite Hindu varnas [color/castes]. The subordinated castes are entirely invisible in this literary culture” (Bagul, qtd. in Satyanarayana 14). Writings identified with minority religions, castes, or sub-cultures have been further marginalized in recent times due to the rise of Hindu nationalism and increased State interference in education.6

The writings analyzed here depict stories and poems with strong women-headed households. Jahnavi’s “Mother’s Cauldron” is a classic example of a short story describing the life journey of Shivamma, a rural laborer who endures hard physical work and beatings by her alcoholic husband as she struggles to educate her children. Such stories of women-headed households in rural areas with women as primary providers and decision-makers are common tropes of Dalit feminist literature. These plots connect to the statistic that 62% of women in the least developed villages of India are working compared to only 15% of working women in metropolitan cities, according to the Indian Human Development Survey (Desai et al.). Similarly, in Saraswathi’s short story “Tip, we meet Anjunamma, who works as a sweeper, leads the workers union and is also the head of her household. Shyamala’s title story, “Father May Be” and Bama’s *Karukku* also describe women working and taking on leading roles in the family.

In addition to their variety and strong women characters, the intersectional Dalit texts discussed here also markedly differ in style and content from privileged caste or popular literature. As Chakravarti argues, “Dalit women experience patriarchy in a unique way” (qtd. in Arya and Rathore 13). The writings analyzed here foreground intersectional experiences of people living on the “extreme end of town” (Sukirtharani, “The Faint Smell of Meat”) while providing unique insights into the lives of the oppressors.

Due to their ideological focus on social change, Dalit writings are often considered political rather than aesthetic. For example, in many stories in Shyamala’s *Father May Be*, there is an underlying urgency in the narration and an avoidance of literary embellishments. Kannada writer/activist Saraswathi makes a similar statement: “Critics have charged me with not revising what I write. To revise and adorn one’s writing, one needs detachment; that is difficult for me... I am not a student of literature. I want my writing to be truthful, not beautiful” (“Tip” 334). Since the primary use of literature is raising awareness of Dalits’ suffering with the goal of social transformation, some critics have argued that we cannot apply traditional aesthetic standards to these writings (Limbale), and others have claimed that this type of literature can be more appropriately classified as testimonios7 (Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*) whose purpose is communication rather than literature (Sharma 28). According to Limbale, “The literature of those who are untouchable, those who are downtrodden, cannot be measured with the artistic values of Shakespeare…. Ambedkarite thought is the aesthetics of Dalit literature…this literature cannot be evaluated on the basis of either Sanskrit aesthetics or western aesthetics” (146). Similarly, Sharma

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6 In 2021 Bama, Sukirtharani and Mahasweta Devi’s texts were removed from Delhi University’s syllabus due to State interference. For details, see Shradha Chettri, “Delhi University Drops Dalit Writers from English Syllabus.”

7 A Spanish term used to describe a genre of writing which represents an individual’s narrative of their own and their group’s experience of suffering.
explains, “these writers do not write for art’s sake, but their narratives claim an agency” (27). However, given the sheer volume and variety of texts and genres published across India in the last twenty years, this may not be applicable to the entire body of Dalit literature today.

Even if the purpose is not aesthetics, Dalit writers effectively use the novel, poetry, and literary devices like metaphors and symbolism to communicate their struggles. Saraswathi, who claims not to be a student of literature, uses complex symbols and mythological figures such as Sita from the Ramayana in plays dealing with caste-based gender discrimination. Despite their variety and aesthetic value, social pressures also force Dalit writers to pursue narrow political goals. According to Tamil writer Imayam:

> When academicians and media persons interview a writer, they ask them to comment on the role and function of literature, and the writer’s vision of life and literature. But in the case of a Dalit writer, questions are asked about their primary education, family, and the suffering they’ve faced in their life. This forces the Dalit writers to adopt the autobiographical mode of narration. (13)

Such attitudes continue to confine Dalit writers to the margins and their works restricted to the genre of autobiography. Reacting to such narrow confinements, editors Satyanarayana and Tharu describe South Indian Dalit literature as breaking away from tradition and representing “a treasure trove of fiction, poetry, oral and written memoirs and oratory” (52). They further explain, “They do not follow the protocols of social science writing but take their cue from literature’s more direct and promiscuous involvement with life... [W]hen Dalit intellectuals... discuss the Dalit question, they bring to the table an extraordinary range of new settings and new issues” (Satyanarayana and Tharu 52). While communicating oppression and struggles for self-affirmation, Dalit literature is also rich in creativity. Doing justice to these writings requires a broadening of traditional savarna or upper-caste literary aesthetics, and for this we need an approach to literary criticism beyond current literary conventions. Offering extraordinary accounts of life in the wada (colony), Dalit literature provides ethnographic details on the cultural and economic structures controlling social relations in the community. Literary criticism can benefit from interdisciplinary socio-cultural and psychological approaches. Further, Dalit women writers focusing on intersectional oppressions also highlight the hypocrisy of Dalit men who focus on caste and class oppression in their writing but are blind to the subjugation of women and transgender people within their own families and communities.

**Dalit Writings and Feminism**

Historical events such as the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations in 1990, the recent surge of Hindu nationalism (Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* 4), and Dalit women’s caste, class, gender, and religious oppression have been largely ignored by the mainstream feminist movement (Guru 1995; Rege, “Caste and Gender”; Satyanarayana and Tharu; John; Chakravarti; and Arya and Rathore). As Rege writes of this blindness of mainstream feminism:

> This lack of engagement cannot be dismissed easily; either by the savarna [brahmin caste] feminist justification of being ‘frozen in guilt’ (what can ‘we’ say now, let ‘them’ speak) or by a resigned dalit feminist position…. The former assumes that caste is solely the concern of dalit women and bypasses the need for all women to critically interrogate the
complex histories of caste and gender oppression. (Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* 4-5)

While privileging Dalit feminist standpoints, Rege, unlike Guru, argues that the burden of interrogating “the complex histories of caste and gender oppression” should not fall squarely on Dalit women. The current article is one such attempt to share the responsibility of advancing the significance of Dalit feminist literature.

Like most feminist writings, Dalit women’s literature is both personal and political, contributing to the collective struggle for justice. Influenced by historical movements such as those led by Ambedkar and Periyar,8 these writings argue for transitioning from feminism’s preoccupation with middle-class domestic issues to the re-visioned intersectional feminist politics of the 1990s. In response to Menon’s critique questioning the relevance of intersectionality to Indian feminism, John argues that, “It is a matter of historical record,” that women’s organizations at the beginning of the twentieth Century “were unable to sustain their early efforts towards a more inclusive politics” (74). John further suggests that “instead of dismissing intersectionality, we might be better off engaging with it” (72). As Rao explains, Dalit feminism’s sustained engagement with class, caste and gender politics contributes to the “re-examination of gender relations as fundamental to the broader ideologies of caste” (6). Activist-writers like Saraswathy, Subhadra, and Sukirtharani are forcing mainstream feminists to include caste politics, bonded labor, untouchability, access to education, socio-cultural-religious segregation, and sexual violence experienced by Dalits as important feminist issues.

Even as Dalit women write about these issues, they are ignored by brahminical or metropolitan feminists. As Subhadra argues, “The Dalit literary movement that questioned caste oppression and the Seemandhra9 women’s movement that opposed gender oppression merely continues the unutterable Hindu caste antagonism against Dalit women’s identities” (*How Are You Veg?* xii). Additionally, there is also North Indian hegemony and a failure to recognize rural women’s activism by a movement that is focused on urban issues. According to Chakravarti, “The (dominant) histories tend to focus on just Delhi and Mumbai…. The anti-arrack movement [in Andhra Pradesh] was far more successful and yet, fails to get the academic and media attention it deserves” (58). This reflects the failure to recognize the issues raised by rural or South Indian women as feminist issues.

**Major Themes in South Indian Dalit Feminist Literature**

The diversity of voices, identities and heterogenous experiences represented in this literature makes the project of a Dalit feminist epistemology challenging. Intersectional feminist perspectives, however, make it possible to narrow down the choice to texts dealing with simultaneous caste/class/gender oppressions. The texts discussed here belong to the five states of South India covering different genres and linguistic traditions.10 Set in urban and rural locales, they describe women’s journeys through caste ostracization, economic exploitation, domestic

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8 For a detailed history, see Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*; Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu, *Steel Nibs Are Sprouting*; and Tharu and Satyanarayana, *No Alphabet in Sight*.

9 The regions of Rayalaseema and Andhra

10 These states are mainly divided along lines of linguistic differences. Tamil, Malayalam, and Kannada are the official languages of the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Karnataka respectively. Telugu is the official language of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. The works discussed here were originally written in the languages of the author’s respective states of origin.
violence, and sexual assault. Telugu poet Swaroopa Rani’s poem, “Vegu Chukka” or “Planet Venus” describes the status of a Dalit domestic worker: “Although each corner / of the house sparkles / from her touch / To her fellow humans/ she is untouchable” (23). As analyzed earlier in Chirappad’s poem, a recurring theme in these writings is that upper-class/caste women can maintain their clean and sparkling homes and lifestyles only through the dirty work done by Dalit women who continue to be ostracized by society. Other common themes include celebration of women’s dreams, assertions of sexual freedom, the value of rituals in establishing status in the community, and the sheer joy of life. The voices emerging from these texts are testimonies to Dalit women’s sufferings as much as they are sources of courage, pleasure, and inspiration.

Resisting Sexual Violence

In addition to common oppressions endured by all Dalits, Dalit women are also frequently subjected to sexual assaults. Swaroopa Rani documents this shameful history of sexual violence in the poem “Nishidda Charitha” or “Forbidden History”:

My fame is that I
was recognized as a whore
even as a new born babe
my story that should bring
the head of the civilisation
low into the depths of hell
In which chapter of the volumes
of famous history of your country
do you intend to write it? (22)

Historically, casteism working in conjunction with patriarchy and religious traditions has assigned some Dalit women to sex work even before their birth, thereby turning their lives into “raw wounds.” This theme of the sexual abuse of young girls is also addressed in the short story “Raw Wounds,” by Shyamala which narrates a family’s torment when the upper cast patel (landlord) decides to dedicate a young girl to the temple as a jogini. The child’s grandmother laments: “It seems someone in the past laid a rule for our family. And we have to follow it – like a rule of god. Curse that god! Does he not have children? A lineage? What sin have we committed? They have come like Yama12 himself to spoil our child’s life” (138). Being in no position to challenge the patel, the family sacrifices community and livelihood by fleeing from the village rather than jeopardizing the child’s education and future. The traditional jogini and devadasi systems reveal the hypocrisy of the caste system which on one hand blatantly practices untouchability (othering of Dalits), while on the other hand, gives upper-caste men free access to Dalit women’s bodies. Given the pervasiveness of sex work in Dalit and other marginalized communities due to historical caste and socioeconomic oppression, Dalit feminists have demanded the end of sex work and rehabilitation of Dalit sex workers (Arya and Rathore 3). However, the lack of viable economic alternatives, linked to structural unemployment, has only pushed more

11 A subcaste of Dalit women dedicated from an early age to temple service as priestesses, soothsayers, and entertainers. These girls are also expected to provide sexual services to upper-caste men.

12 God of death in Hinduism

13 Temple dancers and courtesans who belong to Dalit and Scheduled Castes, who are also required to provide sexual services to upper-caste men.
Dalit and lower-caste women into sex work which contributes to ostracism, sexual exploitation, and lack of legal protections.

There are also other ways upper-caste landlords use sexual violence as a tool to punish Dalit women and arrest their progress. In another short story by Shyamala “Tataki Wins Again” a happy and enterprising child, Balamma is attacked in the wee hours of the morning by the karnam (tax collector) who owned the land adjacent to her family’s. As the child is watering her field, he pulls her hand, shouting:

“Tataki! You bloody witch! You are a small girl, are you? What makes you come here like a man and water the groundnut fields? In our houses, girls like you don’t step into the field. You mala and madiga (Dalit castes) don’t even know that girls have to be kept at home!” .... Cursing her, he thrusts his hand into her blouse. (Shyamala 97)

This passage reflects the upper caste karnam’s use of both sexual violence and gender segregation as tools for bullying the lower-caste girl into submission. By consciously invoking Tataki, a character from the Ramayana who is portrayed as a “monster” slain by Rama to protect sages, the author chooses the Dalit interpretation which subverts the mythology by its portrayal of Tataki as an indigenous woman who was protecting her forest from intruders (Nitin). Contrary to the class and gender system prevailing in Savarna communities where women’s labor is confined to the domestic sphere, Dalit women’s socio-economic conditions do not allow the maintenance of such gender norms. Unlike in the previous story where the family ran away, here the young child, who was initially baffled by the man touching her despite being upper caste, showed presence of mind and “took aim and kicked him as hard as she could on the groin with both her legs” (Shyamala 98). This act of bravery symbolizes the child’s resistance and bold transgression of gender, caste, and age boundaries. The story ends with women from the mala and madiga sub-castes giggling through their sari ends as they share the news (Shyamala 98), thereby transforming this individual girl’s act of resistance into the collective act of shaming the upper-caste landlord.

The story is significant given the historical use of rape and Dalit women’s bodies as mechanisms of social control. Frustrated by the frequent incidents of rape of Dalit girls in recent times, activist Ruth Manorama states in a 2020 interview, “Dalit women are like fodder in all kinds of atrocities. They violate Dalit women’s dignity in order to shame the whole community. If you want to shame the community, shame the women. They rape and kill them. And we can’t do anything. They terrorise the community.” Intersectional oppression makes Dalit women’s bodies and their physical labor the property of all men. Expressing similar concerns in a 2017 interview, Sukirtharani makes clear the Dalit feminist standpoint regarding the centrality of the female body in this oppression:

For me, caste identity and the female body are closely intertwined…problems of Dalit women are different from the women of other castes… Dalit women’s bodies are especially subjected to routine violence… Compared to the pain upper caste women undergo, in my opinion, Dalit women go through worse.

No account of Dalit oppression will be complete without acknowledging the trauma of sexual assault undergone by Dalit women, whose experiences are also vastly different from those of women belonging to other castes. What is remarkable, though, is the transformation of that pain
into a politics of freedom, which Sukirtharani expresses in the poem “Viduthalayin Pathaakai” or “The Flag of Freedom,” written after a brutal gang rape and massacre:\(^{14}\):

those drunk on hegemony’s black fluids dig a pit in my vagina
and erect a fat pole in it.
A dance of caste frenzy gets under way as I howl in pain….
In a country not yet free
of the mantle of deafness
and the sleep of the blind…
At the top of the pole planted in my vagina,
the flag of our freedom shall fly,
painted in the colour of blood.

The violent imagery of the flagpole planted in a woman’s vagina through her brutal rape symbolizes the association of the male sex organ with Indian nationalism and casteist misogyny. Any country refusing to reckon with this violence is “not yet free,” as Sukirtharani claims in the poem. Despite this brutal attack, the poem also symbolizes Dalits’ remarkable resistance and determination to fight for freedom from oppression. The wounded vagina which is a symbol of the upper caste’s frenzied assault against Dalits has thus been transformed into a motivating image of their revolutionary struggle. Commenting on this poem, Sukirtharani stated in a 2017 interview, “The flag will continue to fly. I can never be hushed, I will still rise. I want that hope in my poetry” (“A Dalit Poet’s Explorations”). Hope for freedom from oppression, and refusal to surrender despite casteist attacks on women’s bodies, are thus hallmarks of Dalit feminist literature. By making this argument, we neither wish to pathologize Dalit women’s suffering nor glorify their resilience, yet suffering, struggles for survival, and hope are existential realities of Dalit women’s writing and constitute their standpoints.

Attesting to the power of Dalit feminist resiliency and fierce self-affirmation, frequent threats of rape and sexual assault have not stopped Dalit feminists from expressing sexual longings. Describing the sexual stirrings that arise in her as the “Iravu Mirugam” or “Night Beast,” Sukirtharani explains in the poem by the same name how being physically drawn to a man’s body leads to her own self-pleasuring:

Light rays from my eyes
settled on the loose folds
of the man’s clothes
as he slept in the front room.
As one drunk on wine cup
Brimming,
my body swam
and rose to the surface.
While I was absorbed
in pleasing myself, muttering
obscenities in a low moan,

\(^{14}\) For details, see Shivangi Gupta, “The Khairlanji Massacre Still Continues to Haunt the Brahminical State.”
hearing the rustle of bird wings,
the night beast fled, returning me to myself.

Such candid representations of sexual arousal also contribute to challenging the stereotype of Dalit women as victims of sexual assault. They also contribute to breaking the silence in mainstream literature by affirming Dalit women’s sexual desire.

**Resisting Traditional Gender Roles**

Despite the representation of suffering, Dalit poems and stories are also dominated by images of powerful *joginis*, working women, and strong mothers. These texts are a contrast to middle class stories of men-headed households with economically dependent wives.¹⁵ Such images of powerful Dalit women bear similarities to the representation of African American women in Black feminist literature. In the U.S. context, images of strong and economically independent Black women are transformed into racist and sexist stereotypes of aggressive and unfeminine women. As Collins explains, “Black matriarchs allegedly emasculated their lovers and husbands” (75). In the Indian context, however, these strong women characters representing Dalit feminist standpoints are neither stereotyped nor celebrated. They are simply ignored and rendered invisible in popular culture and literature.

In most lower-caste/class households, “it is the women’s income that goes towards the survival of the family since the husband’s income is spent on arrack [alcohol] or bigamy” (Rege, “Caste and Gender” 11). In Shyamala’s title story “Father May Be,” the mother and grandmother manage the household alone by working in the fields and taking care of the children. When he finally returns, the father beats the mother nearly to death because she failed to give him money for liquor. The story takes an ironic turn when the mother’s help is urgently needed after her daughter prematurely delivers a baby. The cycle of women’s dependence on each other and the continuation of their lineage leaves the father completely useless while the mother’s role is established as indispensable. Similarly, in Bama’s *Karukku*, which also describes a women-headed household, on one occasion after the police round up and take away all the men in the village, the women do a great job of organizing, working to feed their families, and pooling resources to bring the men back home.

In other instances, we see the power of Dalit women’s anger as it wreaks havoc on the oppressive system. In the short story “Stumped,” Susheela, a widowed garbage collector, rushes to the hospital upon hearing news of her son’s accident. But by the time she gathers money for his surgery it is too late, and the greedy doctor amputates her son’s leg. Susheela curses the hospital saying: “May these private hospitals drown! May these be set on fire! Dust on them!” (Subhadra, *How are You Veg?* 139). Susheela curses non-stop, beating her head and rolling all over the hospital floor, paying scant regard to etiquette. Those around who were watching were moved by her behavior and “broke not only the chairs and glass panes, but also the doctor’s face!” (139). Instead of accepting her fate, Susheela’s angry outburst transforms into a collective rage resulting in the destruction of the hospital.

Another story of a woman’s rage against the patriarchal upper-caste/class establishment is Shyamala’s “But Why Shouldn’t the Baindla Woman Ask for her Land.” Sayamma is the *jogini* (seer) who officiates at temple festivals in the Dalit madiga community. When summoned by the upper-caste elders to perform rituals at the temple festival, Sayamma takes advantage of the situation to demand back the land which was seized from her by the *dora*’s (chief’s) cousin.

¹⁵ In 2021 women’s labor force participation in India hit a 10-year low with only 23% of women employed.
Shocked by her brazenness, the dora offers Sayamma a wage instead. She “pound[s] the table in front of the dora with her fist” (Shyamala 63), glares in anger, and retorts, “Dora, don’t pay me coolie [laborer] wages. Just give your daughter away as a jogini. Tell her to do the soothsaying during the festival. I will pay her the wages” (emphasis original, 63). Saayamma’s fierce demeanor and ultimate insult demanding an upper-caste child be made a jogini shocks the assembled men whose eyes pop out and mouths fall open, and they are all rendered speechless. As she continues to rage, “a thunderous look appeared in Saayamma’s eyes. She looked like a cheetah walking on burning embers and everyone standing around thought ‘surely she must be possessed by Ooradamma [the deity] herself!’…As if unconsciously, all the patel paid obeisance to her, their palms joined in salutation” (Shyamala 64).

As argued previously in the section on Dalit feminist theory, Dalit women’s location at the margins enables them to see the world based on their own experiences and to have unique insights into the groups above who are oppressing them. Sayamma’s insights regarding the upper-caste men’s religious faith and fears of offending the deity give her the power as a jogini who becomes possessed by the goddess and rages in anger against the landlords. The strategy worked, as it subverted the power structure and made the upper-caste landlords fall at her feet in obeisance. This victory is reinforced in the end when the upper-caste men scream in frustration at the village elders who could not control Sayamma, “Are you men, or do you wear bangles?” (Shyamala 68). Given what just transpired, those words seem hollowed out of their symbolic association of bangles with women’s lack of courage. Thus, we see the creative ways in which Shyamala uses prevailing social arrangements, Dalit women’s traditional roles as soothsayers, and the community’s religious beliefs to challenge the upper-caste patriarchy.

We argue that the characters we encounter in stories such as these contribute new models for literary analysis. The young girls in Sukurtarani’s poems who fearlessly assert their sexual rights, hoisting the flag of freedom on their bleeding vaginas; the little “Tataki” who kicks the abusive Karnam in the groin; the screaming Susheela who rolls on the hospital floor raging; Ellamma, the girl who bravely rides a buffalo into the water to save a drowning Brahmin boy in Shyamala’s story “A Beauteous Light;” and Sayamma the jogini possessed by a raging goddess —these are all new models and images of women who enrich contemporary Indian literature.

Such images of women are not what we typically encounter in Savarna literature. Having nothing to begin with, these women have nothing to lose. While motherly love and women’s sacrifice are common themes in literature, the Dalit mothers described in these stories transcend traditional expectations of motherhood by performing physically challenging labor and shouldering economic responsibilities. Often as single mothers, these women dare to stand up to the establishment. The long history of Dalit oppression and the activist aspirations of the writers analyzed here make their characters active agents alternately pleading, negotiating, and raging against their oppressors, rather than resigning to their fates.

**Conclusion**

In this paper we used Dalit feminist perspectives to analyze intersectional Dalit stories, poems, and testimonios from South India and discuss their contributions to feminist literature. Focusing on two recurring themes in this literature—sexual violence and Dalit women’s transgression of traditional expectations of gender—we argue that the protagonists of these writings contribute new models and images of women to Indian literature. They represent Dalit feminist standpoints which are both unique, based on individual experiences, and representative of the shared vision of the communities to which they belong. Further, Dalit literature’s creative
engagement with sociological and political issues, instead of leading to literary critics’ questioning of the place of Dalit writings in literature, should broaden the field of literature, making it more interdisciplinary and less preoccupied with aesthetic conventions. Similarly, given the significance of intersectionality to feminism and the growing international recognition of caste as an important category of systemic oppression (Yengde; Dutta; Wilkerson; Soundararajan), it is high time the contributions of Dalit feminists moved out of the margins and into the center of feminist analysis.

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