



Research Paper

## Female Dalit Voice and Intersectionality: A Study of Kalyani Thakur Charal's Autobiography *Ami Keno Charal Likhi*

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**Abstracts:** *The term 'intersectionality' as coined and developed by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw refers to an image of the oppressed bearing multiple marginal identities. Dalit feminist scholar Sharmila Rege has argued in her 1998 article titled "Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference' and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position" that "the category Dalit woman is not homogenous – such a recognition underlines the fact that the subject of Dalit feminist liberatory knowledge must also be the subject of every other liberatory project and this requires a sharp focus on the process by which gender, race, class, caste, sexuality - all construct each other" (Rege 45). This paper is an attempt to study the autobiography of Kalyani Thakur Charal as a "literary project" through the lens of intersectionality and Dalit feminism.*

*Dalit feminism developed as a reaction of the shortcomings of both Indian mainstream feminist movement and Dalit movement's ignorance in conveying the issues of Dalit women that emerged out of the intersection of caste and gender oppression. Dalit feminist narratives have become important for the female Dalit writers to protest against the caste and gender segregation in Indian society. They question the prevalent caste and gender practices in Indian society through their writing. This very process of writing becomes their agency in their attempt to show the ground reality of socio-cultural segregation in the name of caste and gender.*

**Keywords:** *Intersectionality, Dalit Autobiography, Dalit feminism, Caste, Gender, Agency*

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Two of the major social movements that fought for gender and caste oppression in the post-independence Indian society are perhaps the mainstream Indian Feminist Movement and the Dalit Movement. However, both of these movements excluded the voice of the Dalit women. Consequently, there was a radical shift in Indian feminism in 1990s when the Dalit women started questioning the existing social norms from their point of views. The National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW) was established in 1995 and the year 2006 saw the emergence of All India Dalit Women's Forum (AIDWF) with the aim to address these issues and needs of the Dalit women. These organisations also explored the nature and extent of suppression of the Dalit women and aims to chart how the Dalit women and their struggles are actually different from the mainstream upper caste women. Thus, Dalit feminism reinterrogates the notion of the term 'women' and 'Dalit' in general and attempts to argue how it is entirely different from other women's issues. Being a Dalit Woman consists the intersectional experiences of being a female and a Dalit. The mainstream Indian Feminist Movement and the Dalit Movement considered gender and caste as two different categories of identity. While the feminist movement was fighting for equality in terms of gender, the Dalit movement was fighting for the equality in terms of caste and other forms of oppressions which is prevalent in Indian society. Dalit Feminism breaks this compartmentalised notion of caste and gender as two different categories but considers them as intertwined and interwoven categories of identity. Unveiling the lived oppression of the Dalit women from the intersectional

experiences of caste and gender. Dalit Feminism differentiated itself from the mainstream Indian Feminism as well as from the mainstream Dalit Movement.

The term 'intersectionality' as a theoretical framework emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s and it refers to an image of the oppressed bearing multiple marginal identities. This idea of intersectionality first took shape in the discipline of law, mainly from Black feminist movement and related critique of the movement. The term was coined and developed by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw who used it "to contrast the multidimensionality of black women's experiences with the single axis analysis that distorts these experiences" (Crenshaw 139). In her analysis of the Black women, Crenshaw shows how intersectionality rejects this 'single-axis framework' that is celebrated by both feminist as well as anti-racist movement. In the same way, Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge also defines the term 'intersectionality' as:

"Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analysing the complexity in the world in people and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverge and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organisation of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves" (Collins and Bilge 2).

So, intersectionality breaks the idea of the homogenization of the marginal identities based on 'gender' and 'race'. It helps to analyse the oppression coming out of the overlapping marginal identities of caste, gender, class, race etc. and it plays an important role in case of anti-caste politics and legal activities.

This paper is an attempt to analyse Dalit Feminist autobiographies with special focus on Kalyani Thakur Charal with the theoretical framework of intersectionality. The emphasis is on the lived experiences of the Dalit women which critically stands at the intersection of caste, colour, gender, religion, patriarchy and the hierarchy in the job sector and how her writing acts as a "liberatory project" that signifies her agency achieved through her writing. Gail Omvedt's popular expression to describe a Dalit woman "Dalit among the Dalit or downtrodden amongst the downtrodden" (Omvedt 773) which she coined in 1979 to refer to the multiple oppression of the Dalit women has a very close resemblance with the idea of intersectionality. Dalit feminism argues that caste and gender are interlocking systems and it produces some unique experience of oppression which are entirely different from the single axis oppression of gender or that of caste. Gopal Guru in his article "Dalit women Talk Differently" argued for a unique and distinct woman voice that "delineate both the internal and external factors that have bearing on this [of being a woman] phenomenon" (Guru 2548). He precisely has given due emphasis on the positionality of a Dalit woman in society and criticises "the representation of Dalit women's issues by non-dalit women" (Guru 2548) and brands such representation as "less valid and less authentic" (Guru 2548). Guru further criticises so called "women solidarity at both national and international levels" (Guru 2549) and argued that "Dalit women define the concept of Dalit strictly in caste terms refuting the claim of upper caste women to Dalithood" (Guru 2549). Therefore, Guru clearly points out a kind of departure from the conventional women solidarity and distinguishes Dalit women's position as "Dalithood" which as he opines, different from womanhood. What he tries to suggest is, perhaps, it is much more than the position of women and their struggle, but it is loaded with the idea of being Dalit women. The very positionality refers to multiple perspectives that intersects each other. In the same line of argument Rajni Kothari also pointed out the importance of distinct Dalit women's voice and presumes the voice as 'discourse of descent' (as quoted in Guru 2548).

Whereas, Sharmila Rege on the other hand, argued in her 1998 article "Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference' and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position" that "recent feminist scholarship in adopting the Saidian framework not only falls into the above mentioned traps, but ends up with a frame that completely overlooks the contributions and interventions of women in the non-brahman movement. The invisibility of this lineage, has led scholars to conceive the recent autonomous assertion by Dalit women – as 'a different voice'" (Rege 39). The "invisibility" pointed out by Rege needs critical attention as a homogenous identity neglecting different issues of oppression factors. She argued that the category of 'women' in feminist movement should be more conscious about the heterogeneity within the category and should be more inclusive. She upholds the opinion that "such critiques have the potential of translating the discourse of sexual politics from individual narratives to collective contestations of hierarchies (Rege 43-44). She comes to the conclusion that:

“The category Dalit woman is not homogenous – such a recognition underlines the fact that the subject of Dalit feminist liberatory knowledge must also be the subject of every other liberatory project and this requires a sharp focus on the process by which gender, race, class, caste, sexuality - all construct each other. Thus, we agree that the dalit feminist standpoint itself is open to liberatory interrogations and revisions” (Rege 45).

‘A different voice’ (Rege 39) that the female Dalit writers have adequately portrayed contains the multiple form of oppression that they face in the society. Through the medium of their autobiographical writings which can be treated as a *testimonio*, female Dalit writers negate the hierarchical order of the society and these autobiographies can be seen as “discourse of descent”. In Indian literary tradition, the autobiographical form of writing is not a popular literary genre; but from the nineteenth century onwards such forms of writing gained importance as it narrates real life experiences of the writer. As a literary genre, autobiography enables a writer to share his or her experiences with the readers without any precondition of the genre concerned and stylistic limitation. It is the writer’s own life story. Interestingly, a large portion of the writings of Dalit literature is in autobiographical form written by both male and female Dalit writers. But when we consider Dalit autobiographies written by Dalit women, intersectionality plays a vital role. The lens of intersectionality provides a clear picture of the Dalit women’s experiences which is quite different as it encapsulates different forms of heterogeneity- how they are different in terms of caste, class, gender etc. Therefore, all these perspectives overlap with each other. Hence the lens of intersectionality becomes important to understand the multiple axis of Dalit women’s sufferings and struggle. These autobiographies also perform an act of resistance – “a liberatory project” as argued by Rege – the agency and the “discourse of dissent” that these writing carries has unlimited potential.

Since 1980s, texts have been found that narrate the lived experiences of the everyday life of the Dalit women from India. This autobiographical form of literature is closely related with the social reality and acted as a representation of the people of the author’s community, as opined by Arjun Dangle-

“These autobiographies became famous for several reasons. An autobiography was not restricted to the life of a Dalit writer. It was a delineation of the social system, communalism, injustice, exploitation and of the lives of people who had been subjected to these evils” (Dangle xlii).

The earliest example of female Dalit autobiographies to name a few, are – *Antasphot* (1981) written by Kumud Pawde, Baby Kamble’s *Jina Amucha* (1986) translated into English as *The Prisons We Broke* (2008), Urmila Pawar *Aaidan* (1988), translated as *Weave of My Life* (2008), Bama’s *Kurukku* (1991). Interestingly, the autobiographies have been written in their regional languages and it shows the writer’s need to raise voice against the oppression and project her not only as single dimensional Dalit – but a combination of multiple marginal identities that encapsulates caste, gender and other issues like economic and educational status, socio political positioning of self, familial as well as societal obligations and many more. Autobiographies of woman Dalit writers portray an entirely new world of the experience of suffering, oppression and humiliation that had existed in Indian culture for thousands of years but had never found adequate expression. It is also a significant part of the individual urges of the female Dalit writer to share the worst intersectional segregation that they go through. These autobiographies of the Dalit writers help to mobilize resistance and while referring to this act of writing, Raj Kumar argues that–

“Writing an autobiography is a special act for the members of this group who use the genre to achieve a sense of identity and mobilise resistance against different forms of oppression” (Kumar 5).

The image that we get in Dalit women’s autobiographies undoubtedly is not a singular voice of their own; rather the singular voice turns out to be a collective voice of their community. Thus, women Dalit writers are taking the medium of writing as agency to show the reality of social injustices done towards them in the name of caste, class, gender, colour, religion and patriarchy.

However, it is only in recent times that the women Dalit writers from Bengal have started expressing themselves through the means of their writings. Though not many in numbers, but the voice of women Dalit writers that is emerging from Bengal are very significant. One of the most vocal female Dalit writers in Bangla is Kalyani Thakur Charal. She has four books of poetry in her credit, a collection of short stories, a collection of

essays and an autobiography. Without any support from any publishers, Kalyani Thakur has published all her books on her own from *Chaturtha Duniya*, Stall number 22 in College Street which is presently run ardently by Kalyani Thakur Charal and Manohar Mouli Biswas. *Chaturtha Duniya*- which can be literally translated as “The Fourth World” plays a very meaningful role for the growth and development of Bangla Dalit writings.

Born in 1965 in a small village named *Bagula* of Nadia district, West Bengal, her autobiography is titled *Ami Keno Charal Likhi* (2016) (Why Do I write Charal). Her autobiography includes her childhood spent in *Bagula*, then her transition in life when she had to travel to Kolkata at the age of fifteen, her life in a hostel of Kolkata and finally her experience as an employee of Indian Railway. The very title of the autobiography draws our critical attention as it interrogates the tradition and further forms a question in favour of writing ‘Charal’ as part of her name and surname in Indian context has immense importance; the entire group of outcastes once named as *Harijan* by M.K. Gandhi, was part of this politics. The term *Harijan* implies ‘a child of God’ connotes the same Dalit identity but in a softer way. In the same line of action “Chandals” literally mean the lowest of the lowest in the caste system or outside the caste system mentioned as “Charal” – softer version of “Chandals” but bearing the same stigmatized hierarchical position. With the passage of time, such names have been omitted by people in favour of choosing surnames of higher caste people to hide their lower caste identity. Kalyani Thakur breaks this barrier and boasts off her lower caste identity by using the word “Charal” as part of her surname and thus negates the tradition of hiding the caste identity.

The autobiography portrays the intersectional experiences of oppression that she had to go through since her childhood. She points out the bitter experiences of caste system and its effect in the society. She narrates the time after partition when her relatives including her parents came to India and how they changed their surname to “Thakur” which is generally the title of a Brahmin that is considered to be an upper caste as per the Hindu caste hierarchy is concerned, to avoid the oppression which was committed towards the lower caste people. Kalyani’s family belonged to the Namasudra community who were treated as *Pancham Varna* or outside the four-fold of caste hierarchy, implying outcaste of the society. However, a mere change of the surname was not enough. As Kalyani Thakur Charal recalls:

“All our relatives including my father and father’s cousins, all changed their surname and became Thakur. It was also a way to get rid of social pressure and racial inferiority. But the mere change of the surname, does not change the position. It has a different way. Untouchable remains untouchable, even if we use Harijan or Dalit, the change of position does not happen like this. Even they also know who are engaged in the play of changing the nomenclature” (Charal 45) (Translation Authors).

During her stay at hostel, she was asked if she is a Thakur (Brahmin), however, she had clearly mentioned that she belongs to Scheduled Caste community. In her autobiography, she clearly hinted at the politics of nomenclature that has been pointed out earlier in the article. The statement “engaged in the play of changing the nomenclature” (Charal 45) is her criticism of Dalit politics of naming a community. Such criticism distinguishes her voice from contemporary Dalit voices which is predominantly male dominated – possibly because of being a woman Dalit writer who possessed rare sensibility, better endurance power and honest confessional tendency than the male Dalit writers.

“Even Harichand-Gurchand did not have the title Thakur and there is disagreement about Harichand-Gurchand’s caste also. They have been called Maithili Brahmins. Again, it is written in another place – ‘Be low and do the rescue of the bottom’. The researchers will do research on this issue. However, regarding Guruchand Thakur’s conversion of the Chandal caste to Namashudras, I will say about the source of the positional change, ‘not a change of name’” (Charal 45) (Translation Authors).

Interestingly, she incorporates the positionality of the subject in her discussion and differentiates between change of nomenclature and change of social position. Along with personal efforts and with the utilization of power and facilities given by Indian Constitution, a large group of people belong to the Scheduled Caste community enjoys better life and thus occupies a better social position in terms of finance. They are not engaged in the traditional work that were once thwarted upon them; they are mostly in service sector or in some other sector of works.

“Ramchandra Dom certainly does not cremate dead bodies now, nor does Mayawati, ‘Chamar ki Beti’ in the words of Anandabazar Patrika, do leather work” (Charal 45) (Translation Authors).

Eventually she, came to the opinion that-

“Therefore, in the ignorance of people's identity, social change has not occurred in the political game. For that they also import new doctrines and devise tricks to deceive people” (Charal 45) (Translation Authors).

Because of the title Thakur, she even had to toil harder to get the stipend form of fellowship for Scheduled Caste while studying in school. She writes, “I had to sweat profusely to collect the form for withdrawing the stipend money in the school” (Charal 68) (Translation Authors). She realized early on that education was the only way to beat the casteism and she continued her studies at Calcutta University to do her M.Com. attending classes in the evening. She realised that in order to continue her education she must earn money. In the second year she got to secure the job of Indian Railways Group C's clerical post and her office was in Sealdah. So, the multidimensional oppressions like Casteism, economical oppressions, social oppressions have been clearly visible through the events in her autobiography.

Furthermore, multidimensional oppression apart from the single axis oppression of being a lower caste; the oppression of gender, colour, religion, hierarchy in her railway office is also evident while she points out how her colleagues in the office used to comment on her dress as well as on her skin colour. She was asked not to wear orange saree as the colour of the saree doesn't match her skin colour. The way the other people from her office looked at her and commented on her skin colour was not just because she was a Dalit, rather she was a woman as well as a lower caste. She narrates how even the office space was dominated by higher caste male and male gaze that sometimes restricts and criticizes her dressing sense, office dress and hair style. The hierarchy in the job sector equally played a major role behind such intersectional oppressions and through her autobiography she explicitly speaks of these experiences.

“I was the first to enter this office wearing Salwar kameez. This is a very difficult task. Sometimes those who took the lease to maintain the dignity of the whole office, they used to say about wearing sarees. I was so reckless I would come in the same outfit the next day. One day, De-Babu came with a topknot and said - 'Don't tie your hair like this'”(Charal 82) (Translation Authors).

Her autobiography is not limited only on the life events but widens its vista to her understanding of Dalit situation and her realization of life. She narrates incidents where other Dalit members of her group had not helped her to edit and publish a book that encapsulates all the memorial lectures delivered in memory of her father.

“Even today none of them have submitted the writing. As a result, the important work has not been published yet. It should not be in the Matua Religion to come down from a speech using a platform and slurring words”(Charal 111) (Translation Authors).

She also shows her concern about the history in general and literary history of the Namashudra community in particular.

“Matua literary and lyrical poets are so unfortunate that even today no one knows their names except a few Namashudra Matuas. In the history of Bengal literature, those who gave the gift of a document of a time, those who wrote the history of the rise of a people, Bengalis were not so ashamed to deny them. From Niharranjan Roy to literary historian Asit Banerjee, Sukumar Sen who had an open hand, no one said about these one or two copies of books. Among which is the story of an untouchable people of rural Bengal trying hard to rise from the water jungle, fighting with socio-economic adversities” (Charal 111) (Translation Authors).

She concludes her autobiography with the observation that-



“I saw that the people below did not move but there was a lot of noise above. Because the picture of deprivation that I have seen in my workplace is that there is no Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe at the bottom” (Charal 136)(Translation Authors).

The title of her autobiography focuses on a question – “why do I write Charal?” and every incident as well as the whole autobiography possibly offers an explanation to that question. The explanation goes beyond female Dalit voice – it offers us the intersectional aspects of Dalit identity of a woman. She had to prove her worth to the people who looked down upon her because of her caste, colour or gender. She explained to her colleagues even in her office that the title Thakur in her name is not Brahmin, rather they belong to the Namasudra community. When there were too many questions regarding her surname and her caste in her workplace, she decided to keep her community’s name as her surname and started to call herself Kalyani Thakur Charal. She proudly owns the title Charal and points it out in her autobiography that when she loudly proclaimed the word charal, it left her oppressors stunned in the railway office, because “before this they used to hear the term charal as an insult” (Charal 82). She has made it clear to the readers that she decided to add the word *Charal* to her name as a protest against the casteist mindset of the society and to show little she cares for it. She equally emphasizes that she is not at all shamed for using the title Charal. She is not ashamed of being a Dalit, rather upholds her identity as Dalit.

To conclude, the intersectional oppression that is reflected in the autobiography of Kalyani Thakur Charal shows how the Dalit woman have been equally facing the discrimination not only because of their caste but also because of colour, gender, hierarchy in the job sectors and in the society that largely resembles patriarchy. Interestingly, Kalyani Thakur Charal’s writings provide her an identity of a Dalit feminist and her autobiography serves as a significant narrative of the female Dalits in contemporary Bengal as well as in Indian Dalit literature. Such multiple axis oppression that once segregated her, now compels her to speak against her oppressors which she is continuously doing through pen, taking the mode of writing as her agency.

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