

# CasteGender Intersectionality and the Limits of Indian Feminist Universalism: Toward a Caste-Anchored Feminist Literary Discourse

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper critiques the limits of feminist universalism in India by arguing that feminist discourse is rendered ethically incoherent once gender is divorced from caste. While mainstream feminist frameworks frequently represent patriarchy as a common and invariant structure, Indian social reality makes women's oppression variably produced through caste hierarchies shaping labors, vulnerabilities, sexualities, and social visibilities. The study proposes a caste-anchored model of feminist literary discourse in which caste is not merely contextual but constitutive of gendered experience and subjectivity. Drawing on intersectional theory, Dalit feminist critique, and feminist narrative ethics, it examines how caste generates forms of violence that cannot be fully captured through universal categories of "womanhood." The paper also asserts dominant feminist representation can reproduce elite ethical assumptions by underwriting narratives of respectable victimhood, domestic oppression, and middle-class subject positions by marginally silencing caste-based humiliation, coerced labor, and intensified sexual vulnerability. By foregrounding Dalit feminist epistemologies, this study challenges liberal empowerment models within Indian feminist literary studies and insists that gender justice remains incomplete without caste justice.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Caste patriarchy, intersectionality, Dalit feminism, Feminist universalism, Indian feminist discourse, Representation, Feminist ethics.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Indian feminist debate has frequently been framed in terms of a language of collective gender oppression, articulating patriarchy as a universal system which generates a similar experience of women's repression across different social locales. On one hand, this universal language has enabled a collective feminist solidarity in India; on the other hand, it has created several critical limitations in understanding gender in this country. Caste does not merely add layer to women's oppression; it structures the very meaning of female vulnerability, labour, sexuality, mobility, and social recognition. When feminism abstracts gender from caste, it produces a moral and political blindness that weakens both feminist ethics and feminist representation.

This paper argues that feminist universalism in India remains incomplete unless feminist discourse becomes caste-anchored. By caste-anchored feminism, this study does not mean the inclusion of caste as a supplementary factor. Rather, it means recognizing caste as constitutive of gender itself. The oppression of women does not remain one-dimensional but gets stratified. The oppression of the upper castes may remain associated with respectability, domestic control, and purity, but in the

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case of Dalits and marginalized sections, women's oppression gets conceptualized in terms of humiliation, forced labor, and sexual vulnerability. These are no way marginal differences but remain grounded in the construct of caste patriarchy.

The paper further argues that literature and feminist criticism often reproduce universal categories of womanhood by privileging narratives of domestic confinement and middle-class emotional crisis while sidelining caste-based bodily and social violence. Such representative imbalance shapes what counts as feminist suffering and what becomes legible as feminist resistance.

The paper develops a theory-driven critique of feminist universalism and offers an intersectional model for Indian feminist literary discourse—one that recognizes caste as foundational for feminist ethics, narrative legitimacy, and critical interpretation.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Feminist theory in India has produced rich debates on patriarchy, domesticity, sexuality, and women's agency, especially through analyses of marriage, family, nationalism, and middle-class respectability. Feminist literary criticism has frequently examined how women negotiate silence, compromise, and survival within patriarchal institutions, positioning the household as a central site of gendered discipline. These contributions remain crucial for understanding women's oppression within cultural frameworks.

However, critical interventions from Dalit feminists and scholars of caste have repeatedly exposed the limitations of mainstream feminist frameworks that treat "woman" as a stable and universal category. Dalit feminist critiques argue that the lived realities of caste cannot be added as an afterthought, because caste hierarchies shape women's access to dignity, bodily integrity, labour rights, and social space. Caste patriarchy structures the distribution of risk: some women are protected through respectability and symbolic purity, while others are made structurally vulnerable through caste-based humiliation and sexual violence.

Intersectionality as a theoretical framework has provided tools for recognizing how multiple structures of power operate simultaneously. Yet in Indian feminist discourse, intersectionality often remains under-applied at the level of representation: caste enters analysis as context rather than foundation. Similarly, literary scholarship sometimes foregrounds female suffering in ways that align with elite moral frames—domestic oppression, emotional deprivation, while treating caste-based violence as exceptional or peripheral.

This study addresses these gaps by synthesizing intersectional critique, Dalit feminist epistemologies, and feminist narrative ethics to argue that feminist universalism risks producing representational injustice. It proposes caste-anchored feminist reading as a necessary corrective—one that reorients feminist discourse toward structural inequality and insists that feminist theory must be accountable to caste as lived reality, not abstract category.

## 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The article relies on concepts such as intersectionality, Dalit feminist critique, and feminist narrative ethics to critique feminist universalism and construct caste-referential feminist discourse. While working as an intersectionality paradigm, it is asserted that instead of being based on single-

axis constructions, experiences of oppression are rooted in the intersection of gender and other factors such as caste and class. In the Indian setting, caste is not only an identity but also a means of stratification regarding issues like labor, sexuality, space, and dignity. Intersectionality therefore becomes essential for feminist analysis that seeks ethical and political accuracy.

Dalit feminist critique further deepens this framework by arguing that mainstream feminism often reproduces caste privilege by treating upper-caste women's experience as representative. Dalit feminist epistemology insists that caste patriarchy produces unique forms of gendered violence: the caste-marked body is not simply oppressed but made socially available to humiliation and coercion. This critique also exposes how "respectability" functions unevenly, protecting some women while excluding others from moral recognition.

Feminist narrative ethics informs the study's concern with representation and interpretive judgment. Feminist narrative ethics resists moralizing women's choices and instead attends to constrained agency and structural limitation. However, applying this to the discussion at hand, it enables the critical viewpoint that feminist universalism tends to pre-judgment what will amount to agency, suffering, or resistance. These frameworks, together, provide a way to move Indian feminist discourse from claims about universality and women's oppression to ones based within caste that acknowledge imbalances within womanhood itself. Feminist justice, the paper argues, remains ethically incomplete without caste justice.

#### **4. The Problem of Feminist Universalism: When "Woman" Becomes a Stable Category**

Feminist universalism becomes problematic when it assumes that "woman" functions as a coherent and stable category across social contexts. In Indian feminist discourse, universalism often emerges as a political necessity: collective struggle requires shared language. Yet the same shared language risks erasing unequal conditions within womanhood. By positing a monolithic form of patriarchy, feminism may end up subordinating the issue of caste to it, leading to an incomplete description of gendered oppression.

Universal feminism tends to privilege those experiences that are intelligible in middle-class terms, domestic imprisonment, wifely silence, emotional estrangement, respectability politics, for instance. Such experiences do take place under patriarchy, but they are not coterminous with it. Dalit women, for instance, experience patriarchy not only in terms of domestic oppression or gender discrimination but in ways that get defined by caste, forced labor, humiliation in public, denial of social dignity, greater vulnerability to sexual exploitation. Such experiences cannot quite be thought in universal terms of, say, "domestic oppression."

The danger of universal feminism lies in representational hierarchy. Some women's suffering becomes central and narratable, while others' pain becomes marginal or excessive. Feminist discourse may unintentionally reproduce caste privilege by centring "respectable" suffering and avoiding caste as a structural critique.

Moreover, universalism often frames empowerment through individual agency, education, self-expression, mobility, without recognizing that caste structures access to these resources. What appears as a universal feminist solution may function as elite privilege.

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Thus, universal feminism risks becoming ethically insufficient. It may claim to speak for women while failing to account for how caste produces unequal womanhood. A caste-anchored feminist discourse becomes necessary not to fragment feminism, but to make it structurally accurate and ethically accountable.

### **5. Caste Patriarchy as Structure: Purity, Labour, and Sexual Vulnerability**

The patriarchy in castes is based upon a Double Logic of Purity and Labour. The femininity of the upper caste is State-Controlled through Purity, Sexuality, Mobility, and Moral Regulation. The State-Controlled imposition is Repressive, but it also serves as Protective in terms of caste hierarchy, as it is through this woman of the higher caste that caste purity is mediated. Her body is controlled to preserve caste boundaries.

Dalit and marginalized women, however, are not regulated primarily through purity. They are often positioned through labour and social availability. Their bodies have been historically marked for work, service, and vulnerability to exploitation. This is how caste patriarchy generates uneven gendered violence; some women are regulated by respectability, while others are rendered visible because of their vulnerability. Sexual violence against women of lower castes like Dalits can often have a double marker, of gender violence and punishment for caste transgression.

Labour becomes a feminist question here. Domestic labour in middle-class contexts is often invisible and unrecognized, but Dalit women's labour is frequently both visible and coerced, tied to caste location. Their work is demanded as social obligation, not chosen as employment. This distinction reshapes feminist analysis of work and care.

Caste patriarchy, therefore, cannot be reduced to "patriarchy plus caste." It is a specific structure in which gender is produced through caste hierarchy. The feminist discourse needs to understand that the definitions of sexuality, movement, and labor undergo a radical change from one caste to another. A feminist critique grounded in the concept of caste is essential to avoid the universalization of oppressions and to deal with the issue of "caste patriarchy" as a basic system of power.

### **6. Representation and Feminist Legibility: Whose Pain Counts As Feminist Discourse?**

The important question for feminist literary studies, then, is not simply what is represented, but whose experience can translate into feminist truth. The representational is not an issue of neutrality but of hierarchies of visibility. In feminist studies in India, for instance, narratives of middle-class oppression might get examined in feminist circles, but caste violence is then deemed to be of sociology, not feminist importance; political, not intimate; or excessive, not relatable. This represents a crisis of feminist legibility.

Caste-anchored feminist discourse insists that Dalit women's experiences are not supplementary but central to feminism in India. However, mainstream feminist frameworks sometimes approach caste violence through sympathy rather than structural critique. This converts Dalit suffering into a moral spectacle rather than a feminist epistemology. When Dalit pain is read as tragedy rather than political knowledge, feminist discourse risks reproducing hierarchy.

The problem is compounded by respectability politics. Feminist representation often privileges “respectable victimhood”, women who suffer within morally legible frameworks. Dalit women’s suffering, tied to public humiliation and structural coercion, disrupts respectability-based feminism. It demands a feminist ethics that can hold discomfort, anger, and structural accusation.

"Feminist narrative ethics argues that reading practices must be nonjudgmental in moral terms and focus instead on context." What this means is that in applying a feminist critique, there is a need to examine how its own practices of interpretation function in terms of forms of suffering which are acknowledged, which are diminished, and which become invisible. Accordingly, it can be said that the anchored feminist discourse on caste transforms the act of feminist reading by attempting to redefine the roles of agency, suffering, and resistance.

### ***7. Feminist Resistance Beyond Empowerment: Survival, Refusal, and Collective Agency***

Mainstream feminist discourse often collapses resistance into empowerment-self-expression, autonomy, visibility, and individual liberation. These aspirations are important but run the risk of exclusion when universalized as measures of feminist success. Caste-anchored feminism, however, unravels the fact that such resistances take different forms under structural conditions of vulnerability. To begin with, survival itself may be an act of resistance, while refusal may be far more feasible than visible rebellion.

The Dalit feminist discourse thus operates more with collective agencies rather than that of individual achievement. The acts of resistance work out through the communal struggle, naming caste violence, and denying the moral grammar which naturalizes humiliation. In many contexts, however, speaking to an individualist empowerment is unrealistic or ethnically insufficient due to the denial of social consequences implicated for women from marginalised backgrounds who resist. Enduring and surviving thus need to be acknowledged as politically meaningful by feminism.

Refusal becomes eminently important. It could be a refusal to bear shame, a refusal of silence, a refusal of compulsory labour, or a refusal of the moral imperative to stay grateful. These refusals contest caste patriarchy at the level of the ordinary. They do not necessarily yield freedom, but they reveal structural violence.

A caste-anchored framework also redefines feminist ethics of care. Care cannot be idealized without recognition of the ways in which caste structures who gives care and who receives it. The exploitation embedded in the care economies is something that feminist discourse has to come up against.

By stretching resistance beyond empowerment, caste-anchored feminist discourse negotiates a truer feminism—one that acknowledges unequal risks and resists moralizing women's constrained choices. Feminist resistance becomes not one path but a spectrum of strategies shaped by caste, class, and historical inequality.

### ***8. Toward a Caste-Anchored Feminist Literary Method: Conceptual and Critical Shifts***

To develop caste-anchored feminist literary discourse, feminist criticism must undergo certain conceptual shifts. First, caste must be treated as constitutive of gendered experience rather than contextual. This means reading women’s subjectivity through caste structures of labour, space,

dignity, and violence. Feminist analysis must recognise that womanhood is not uniform but stratified.

Second, feminist criticism must revise its models of agency. Agency cannot be reduced to empowerment or self-expression. Under caste patriarchy, agency may appear as refusal, survival, endurance, or collective struggle. Feminist reading must therefore recognise agency in non-liberal forms, forms that operate within structural constraint.

Third, feminist interpretation must examine its own ethics of representation. Whose voices are centred? Whose pain is treated as narrative? Whose suffering is treated as a social problem rather than a feminist truth? Caste-anchored discourse demands that Dalit women's experiences be recognised as epistemology, not only as objects of sympathy.

Finally, caste-anchored feminism challenges the moral economy of respectability that shapes feminist discourse. It insists that feminist justice cannot be built on respectable frameworks that protect privilege. It must confront caste directly, even when uncomfortable.

Thus, the caste-anchored feminist literary method is not only about thematic inclusion; it is about the ethical transformation of feminist reading. It positions caste justice as foundational for feminist discourse and insists that Indian feminism must be structurally accountable to the inequalities within womanhood itself.

### ***9. Feminist Agency Without Triumph: Ethical Endurance Under Caste Patriarchy***

A feminist discourse anchored in caste can easily identify with feminist realism because it is not interested in triumphalist narratives. Resisting is not enough to ensure liberation but can be an opportunity for violence, exclusion, or exposure to danger. Agency in feminism is still costly and structurally constrained for these reasons. It is not a flaw in feminist discourse but its integrity.

Under caste patriarchy, women may resist without necessarily winning. They may speak without necessarily being heard. They may refuse without necessarily being protected. Feminist realism argues that partial resistance is significant because it unmasks the system that negates freedom. Feminist discourse ought to embrace refusal as a form of resistance.

This is problematic for liberal feminist stories that identify progress with empowerment. Caste-rooted feminism asserts that transformation at the structural level is imperative; transformation on the individual level is not enough. It also rejects feminist stories of resilience that overlook the structural conditions of resilience.

Agency with a note of affirmation but without triumph in mind means that a caste-immanent feminism prevents feminism from becoming a comfort ideology in the following way: It allows feminist criticism to be structurally centered on its target and maintains its ethical seriousness. Instead of a completed resistance, a struggle is produced that is defined by an asymmetrical power relation.

Therefore, feminist agency in the context of caste patriarchy is survival as an ethical act. It is not always manifest, it is not always winning, but it is politically important. This is important because it allows feminist literary criticism in the Indian context to stay grounded in reality while also building a feminist discourse that is inclusive, not through rhetoric but through structural truth.

## 10. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that Indian feminist universalism is both ethically and politically limited when it abstracts gender from caste. Caste is not an afterthought that one adds on to feminist analysis as if the latter were a pre-existing whole, complete and coherent unto itself. Rather, caste is one of its constitutive structures, shaping both the way in which patriarchy is lived and resisted, and how it is represented, both in language and through icons and symbols. A theoretically animated intersectional critique, here, has established that apparently universal categories of womanhood often elaborate middle-class, upper-caste fantasies of respectability and domestic oppression at the expense of caste-based humiliation, coerced labour, and sexual vulnerability.

The paper has foregrounded the Dalit feminist critique and feminist narrative ethics to stress the point that feminist discourse has to become caste-anchored if it is to be structurally accurate. Feminist representation and feminist reading practices have to interrogate whose pain becomes legible as feminist truth, and whose suffering is rendered peripheral. The study further contends that resistance under caste patriarchy often assumes the form of endurance, refusal, survival, and collective agency rather than triumph.

Ultimately, the article asserts that in India, feminist justice is not complete without caste justice. Indian feminist discourse, therefore, must address caste patriarchy as a power system, not a backdrop. An approach to Indian feminism that is grounded in the caste system provides a morally sound tool for reading women's stories in India. This is a reading that is morally uncomfortable, disrupts the hierarchy of the representational system, and demands accountability. This is the only reading framework that helps Indian feminist discourse to retain its commitment to gender justice.

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