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**INTERSECTIONAL PERSECUTION OF DALIT WOMEN IN THE  
SELECTED DALIT AUTOBIOGRAPHIES**

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**Abstract**

In Indian society, women occupy a peripheral position. Being not allowed to take part in any formal decisions on her own, she becomes a passive follower of male member's conclusions. In an androcentric society, a girl can never be independent self since her childhood. She depends on her father even for her basic needs, and then her father gives his burden (daughter) to another man (husband). When a girl reaches the age of superannuation, she depends on her son, so women can never be emancipated beings. Generally, women have become the victims of gender inequality. Especially Dalit women experience a threefold assault of race, sex, and class. *A Life Less Ordinary (2002)* and *A Grip of Change (2006)* are autobiographical literary narratives that gracefully fuse the experiences of Baby Halder and P. Sivakami with the incidents of larger Dalit groups pertaining to their class and gender. These writers foreground multifaceted oppression against Dalit women and how that violence becomes institutionalized by family, state, and upper-caste human beings. The paper shall focus on how the concept of intersectionality theory describes different discriminations regarding race, gender, identity, color, etc., meet at one point and affect the lives of multitudes by creating oppression with respect to the selected Dalit autobiographies.

**Keywords:** Subaltern, intersectionality, emancipation, oppression, gender.

**Introduction:**

Literature reflects the aspects of life. It is the vehicle of ideas and views that takes the shape of immortality and is accepted universally. Human society is a complex organization where human beings interact with each other according to the roles assigned to them by society. Great literature not only provides an overview of discrimination, class exploitation, gender inequality, and injustice but also reveals the intricacy of the journey that depicts society's reality. Dalit literature is a genre of life.

Dalit literature is considered an outlet for experiences full of atrocities that Dalits have faced for ages. According to the varna system, Dalits in India have tolerated a lot of humiliation on account of belonging to the so-called low communities. Even though there is a huge treasure of Dalit literature available in India, its presence has not yet gained the recognition that it deserves. However, it has often been observed that social justice cannot be achieved unless gender justice is attained in society. In Indian society, scheduled caste women, compared to men, face more traumatic experiences due to their gender (being a woman) and rigid caste system. Dalit women are considered as physically impure and untouchable. The feeling of aversion towards them sanctions exploitation and social exclusion at every level of life. They face exploitation by the upper caste women, the upper caste men, and their own caste male members. Dalit literature digs deep into the socially underprivileged people and puts emphasis on the socio-political status of the downtrodden and the browbeaten beings. The autobiographies written by females depict the contemporaneous plight of the dependency of women in society. Since the genesis of human civilization, there has been an agenda concerning male dominance and female suppression. The Almighty has created both male and female (boy and girl) with the same five basic elements: Earth, Water, Fire, Air, and Space. They are categorized based on their biological differences.

In other words, literature represents the mirror of society, which is in the oral and written form of records in different forms. There is mainstream literature in the form of poetry, short stories, and novels; apart from that, there exists Dalit literature, which is the literature of the suppressed people. Writers make this genre to examine the follies and foibles of society all around the world. The world of literature involves imagery and real stories. The progress of literary works gives birth to the production of regional writings. These writings are in the form of regional languages. Translation plays an important role in accessing the history of different regions written in any language. One such genre being highly translated is Dalit literature. Biographies and autobiographies are used in these writings. In the late 1950s, writing on Dalits started in Maharashtra. Dalit autobiographies portray a true picture of the self-pride of the Dalits and their journey toward freedom, which the writings of non-Dalit writers lack.

The paper deals with the issues of marginalization of women, their lack of voice, and subjectivity as reflected in the Dalit literature. This oppressed group has historically been exploited in Indian society. The analysis of the selected texts, namely *A Life Less Ordinary (2006)* by Baby Halder and *The Grip of Change (2002)* by P. Sivakami, indicates that along with caste lines, gender too plays a havoc role in mankind. "One is not born a woman; rather, one becomes a woman" (Beauvoir 295). If one can see women give birth to men, it is men who decide and conclude the living style of women who can be their daughter, sister, wife, or mother. This system shrewdly traps the gender roles under the cage. The position of women is that they bear everything but do nothing and do everything but can utter nothing. They are considered as the periphery of the center not because of their number but due to the

pre-existed notion of inferiority deeply rooted in the minds of people regarding the Dalit community. The illiteracy rate among Dalits is very high because they are devoid of exposure and hardly interested in getting out of their ghettos or shells and are likely to be subjugated in the fields of social, economic, physical, and psychological aspects. Few Dalits get new strength, which emerges in the form of many movements and writings. It has started challenging and giving a new era to their identity and power, which they already possess.

The term subaltern (refers to woman) depicts the condition of servitude in social, religious, economic, racial, linguistic, political, and cultural dominance. It refers to the people who are socially, geographically situated outside the hegemonic power structure that is framed by the high-class people. The feeble voice of the subaltern is lost in the cacophony of the world's disturbance.

A woman faces discrimination from her very birth. In her parents' house, she was given a secondary position and treated as less important than boys in the home. A boy child is served and cared for first because it is believed that only a male is supposed to become an heir of the family, and it is he who would cater to his parents and support them in their old age. The life of a Dalit woman is trapped under hunger and poverty. Even a dead animal is a symbol of opportunities and a feast for the whole Dalit community. The children and male members got a share of thighs and liver, whereas females got a portion only to satisfy their hunger without any likes. Their job in the house is tougher than man's; they have to bring firewood for home, take care of their children, get ready for the hard toil in fields, and perform all household chores at home but get the least chunks of leftover food at the very last.

The present paper explores the quest for the identity of Dalit female writers who presume themselves to be caged birds whose wings have been trimmed but still desire to live meaningful lives. The Dalit writers P. Sivakami and Baby Halder believe that for the survival of women, it is necessary to abolish the existence of untouchability and patriarchy that prevail in society. It is important to empower women with knowledge and education and create a wide scope of platforms by giving them the identity and respect that they deserve.

The paper attempts to suggest ways to ameliorate the condition of scheduled caste females in India. A thorough study of the novels *The Grip of Change (2006)* and *A Life Less Ordinary (2002)* presents a realistic picture of the socio-economic situation of the past, making today's generation acclimatize with the life and the times of the ancient generation and to enhance the sense of respect for the gendered subaltern in their areas and treat them with equality. These two texts are good examples of the struggle and vocalization of Dalit women's experiences.

Ved Vyas, in his scripture *The Mahabharata*, Denotes the downfall of Kauravas because the humiliation of Draupadi is one of the reasons for the downfall of Kauravas. In ancient India, the status of women was good even in the four Vedas, and other sutras granted women equal positions to worship the lord. Women enjoyed

such dignity that before their names, Devis were prefixed. But as time passed, pandits and sadhus imposed restrictions on women. These limitations barred women from entering temples or worshipping sacred places during their monthly cycle. All these obstacles took their way to orthodox customs in the Hindu society, which surely resulted in the delayed development of our nation.

Many Dalit writers have taken steps to come in front and have enunciated the aspirations, apprehensions, uncertainties, and hopes for the betterment of Dalit women in the present and future society. In the writings of female Dalit writers one can find the detailed study of the lives of Dalit women, their intellect, their creativity, their humour, their resilience, and their hard work to work inside and outside the home.

Baby Halder, being born a Dalit girl, struggles at every step of her life. Baby is not able to spend her childhood happily because her father left her mother and Baby at their native place. The miserable condition of Baby is illustrated in her following words.

Ma found it very difficult to make do: how could she not? Ma asked Baba's friends for help, but none of them was in a position to take on the burden of another family. Ma also thought of getting a job, but that would have meant going out of the house, which she had never done. And, after all, what work could she do? Another of her worries was what people would say. (Halder 1-2).

Baby Halder's mother was annoyed by her husband's ill behavior, and she left her house to get a job. Baby Halder writes

Suddenly, it all became too much for her, and one day, with grief in her heart and my little brother in her arms, she just walked away from the house (Halder 3).

The struggle of a Dalit woman (Baby's mother) becomes a dominant theme in P. Thomas's article "Marriages in Indian Society: From Tradition to Modernity," which elucidates.

A woman who is illiterate and does not know what her rights are and who is not allowed to move about without her husband's permission is not likely to take the initiative (Thomas, 142).

Baby Halder demonstrates the emotional stress a mother feels in order to protect her children from her bad-tempered husband, while McGee feels that leaving is the only way for mothers to save their kids from the terrible effects of witnessing the cruelty of fathers. McGee, in his research article "Childhood Experiencing of Domestic Violence," writes.

Mothers are also concerned about the impact of domestic violence on their children, and for many of the mothers, this is the trigger that led to their leaving. (McGee, 69).

When Baby's mother (Ganga) left her home, she felt disconnected from her family members. She feels more comfortable in school rather than at home. When Baby's friend came to her home to pick her up for school and asked Baby to give her something to eat, Baby revealed to her that there was no food at home. The father of Baby heard those words and hit Baby mercilessly. Baby writes

That day, when I came home from school, he beat me so badly that it was three days before I could get up and many more before I felt able to go back to school again (Baby 5)

The attitude of Baby's stepmother is very rude. Baby's life becomes more pathetic after her father's remarriage. It is evidence of how women become enemies of the same gender. Baby expresses her emotions in the following words,

My stepmother never listened to anything Baba said. She never fed us on time, she often beat us without reason, and she'd cook up tales about us and tell Baba and we'd get beaten by him as well. Baba was not willing to listen to anything we had to say, and there were times when he would refuse even to look at us. (Halder5).

Baby states that her father tried to impose restrictions on her when she became a grown-up girl. She presents how he suppressed her childhood desires. Baby writes,

Baba did not allow me to wear bangles; I wasn't allowed to talk to anyone, to play with anyone, and often not even allowed out of the house. I was so scared of being beaten that I would look for opportunities to go out and play only when I knew he was not around to stop me. (Halder 12).

The baby was not aware of the term marriage. She thought that marriage was all about celebration, serving dishes to the guests, and having fun. She doesn't know that marriage is another game of slavery for a woman where she must become a marionette at the hands of another man (husband). Baby asserts

I heard him talking to my new Ma. They were talking about my marriage. I had no idea what marriage was. All I knew was that it was an occasion for song and dance, that often lots of people went to marriages and had lots of fun. (Halder 14).

The man was known to Baby's stepmother's brother. Baby's father fixed her marriage to that man. Baby is twelve years old, and her would-be husband is sixteen years older than her. Baby becomes the victim of marital rape because she is not aware of what happens after marriage. She vividly explains,

Suddenly, one night, he caught hold of me and pulled me roughly toward him. He put his hand on my breast and told me in a gentle voice that he did not like living like this, and he no longer wanted to do so. And so, saying, he began to press his body against mine. I started to cry out in fear. But then, I thought, what's the

point? I'll just wake everyone by shouting like this, so I shut my eyes and mouth tightly and let him do what he wanted. I just endured everything. (Halder 39).

Gupta, in her research article "Feminine, Criminal or Manly: Imaging Dalit Masculinity in Colonial North India," writes.

Dalit men were also seen as wife beaters and drunkards, repeatedly unleashing violence against their women. (Gupta 322).

When Baby gets to know about her sister's (Sushila) death that happened because her husband strangled her, she is heartbroken and argues that most Dalit women suffer either because of their in-laws or of their husbands. Pradeep, in the article "Violence Against Dalit Women," says,

In most cases where a Dalit husband is concerned, the violence takes on a strong patriarchal dimension: women are tortured within the home for not bringing enough dowry, for not bearing male children, or allegedly unfaithful, for talking back to her husband, etc. Alcoholism among Dalit husbands is also a strong contributing factor to this domestic violence. Domestic violence resulted in some women being deserted by their husbands or being forced to leave their marital homes. For the majority of women, however, the social norms and pressures of married life and the duties of wives to their husbands ensure that they continue to endure this violence. (Pradeep, 2).

The author reveals one more example where a Dalit woman was burnt alive with no fault of hers. This is an incident in which Panna's wife wants to watch television at her neighbor's house. In Baby Halder's novel, when Panna comes to the house, he is completely drunk and does not see his wife at home. He became furious and threw acid on her body. Just like Sushila when she was burned alive by her husband, no one came to rescue her from assault. Halder writes,

He took the matchbox, lit a match, and threw it on her. She burst into blame, her clothes burning off her skin, her skin becoming pale... she was naked ...she was still alive when Lata, a neighbor, saw her slumped against the wall in their house and heard her whimpering in pain. She shouted out, calling for help, and lots of people came rushing to their house. We also went there. I saw that she was half-standing against the wall, and her skin was blistered with burns...she was unlucky enough to still be alive. (Halder 96).

The same incident happened with Baby, too, when she went to her neighbor's house (Shakti) to watch television, which made Shankar furious. She writes,

Suddenly, I felt a tug at my hair. I ignored it and continued to pray. But then suddenly someone caught hold of my hair and pulled it so hard that I fell to the ground...I turned and saw that it was my husband. He shouted at me. Come on, you bitch! Get yourself back home! (Halder 108).

After a lot of persecution, Baby decided to shift to Delhi in search of opportunities with her three children. There, too, she underwent different faces of people. Finally, she got her destination at Munshi Premchand's grandson Prabodh Kumar's house. Urvashi Butalia explains abusive childhood of Halder and writes,

Prepared to be more or less invisible, Baby was surprised when her employer actually spoke to her about her life and treated her like a human being. As the days passed, Prabodh Kumar noticed that Baby paid extra attention to his bookshelves, dusting and cleaning the books with care, looking at them with longing. And that was his signal for encouraging her, first to read and then to write. The result was the book you have in front of you, *A Life Less Ordinary* (2002). (Butalia, VII).

Prabodh noticed her curiosity for reading and learning and encouraged her to write about her life in her native (Bengali) language. Baby Halder is an embodiment of women's empowerment who depicts courage and fortitude that helps women to break shackles on their path to success.

In *Pazhaiyana Kazhithalumis* a Tamil novel that was self-translated *The Grip of Change* (2006) by Palanimuthu Sivakami. Sivakami translated her Tamil novel in English herself. The main theme of the novel moves around the two types of women (Thangam and Gowri) one who maintains silence and never raise her voice another who condemns the inhuman treatment of patriarchy in the society and raise her voice against her own father too.

This novel is a story of Thangam, a low-caste Pariyar woman who faced multiple jeopardy, gender subordination, economic crisis, and a victim of lust. After the death of Thangam's husband, she works in the Paramjothi Udayar field to meet her basic needs. Thangam's body symbolizes a toy that serves pleasure to his master. Her body is considered an infertile land that fails to reproduce any child. Her infertility is linked to her struggle to inherit her husband's share of land because if a woman does not have a child, she has no right to receive the husband's property. Thangam is not only sexually assaulted by Udayar, but her brothers-in-law demand sex from her, and when she refuses to fulfill their desires, they spread rumors that Thangam has become Udayar's concubine. When Udayar's wife hears this, she and her brothers beat Thangam mercilessly. With her impaired body, Thangam reaches Kathamuthu (a respected Dalit ex-panchayat member). He also gets aroused by her body and is ready to keep Thangam in his home as his third wife. Finally, Thangam becomes helpless and accepts whatever comes to her life, even without her wish.

On the other hand, Gowri shouts when Kathamuthu tries to rape helpless Thangam. Gowri says, "Dogs! Dogs! In the house! Shameless as dogs! (93). Gowri symbolizes the change that stirs Dalit consciousness and stands for equality, awareness, and growth among Dalits. She avoids early marriage and works hard to get admission to the city college. When Gowri steps out of her home. She feels now she can mingle in the outside world, which is full of opportunities; now, there is no one to build barriers of caste, class, and patriarchy. She beautifully conveys the

following words: "During floods, waters from overflowing wells mingle with the waters of huge water bodies, transgressing their boundaries. (95) Gowri's ideologies really help to remove discrimination from the social fabric. Gowri provokes her mother, Kangawali, and her stepmother, Nagamani, to fight for liberation. Gowri feels bad for such atrocities done to women. She feels uncertain about her own destiny after her marriage because, in her house, she has seen torture done on three ladies (Thangam et al.) by her own father, Kathamuthu. In her soliloquy, she expresses,

I belong to the same caste as that woman (Thangam). How can I be sure that I won't be beaten black and blue like her? I have seen things like this happening in the cinema. This is real; terror is sleeping on a mat in my house. She felt revulsion for the society where such things could happen. (Sivakami 14).

Moreover, Bama, in her work *Sangati* (1994) and *Karruku* (1992), witnessed the physical violence like flogging, canning, and slaying of women where, even along with their husbands, their fathers, and brothers. Too behave brutally with them. For example, in *Sangati's* (1994) *Events*, Bama writes.

They dragged her out of the cart, and without even caring that she was a full-term pregnant woman with one sweep of a sword, they separated her head from the body. They sliced open her stomach, took out the baby, twisted its neck, and killed it. (59)

Esakki's brothers butcher her brutally. This insecurity and psychological trauma mute her and disempower her.

Thus, violence and trauma have a long-lasting effect on the psychology of women. Bama presents one more issue in the life of Dalit women. After the hard work done in the field and at home (in taking care of children and husband), they cannot get a sound sleep even in their beds until dawn. For general people, night symbolizes rest and peace, but for Dalit women, nightstands for another torture on them. Bama says (*Sangati*)

From the moment they wake up, they set to work both in their homes and in the fields. At home, they are pestered by their husbands and their children; in the fields, there is back-breaking work besides the harassment of the landlord. When they come home in the evening, there is no time even to draw breath. Once they have collected water and firewood, cooked a kanji, and fed their hungry husbands and children, even then, they can't go to bed in peace and sleep until dawn. (59)

In Bama's life, education plays a significant role in making teachers friendly with her and forming her own peer group, which transforms her life positively. With the enlightenment in her life, she competes with whatever comes into her life with a



high head. Her confidence to speak up for herself becomes stronger with her exposure to the outside world. She describes in her novel (*Karukku* (1992))

On that day, I wasn't embarrassed to be singled out as Harijan, as the Harijan child who had gained the best marks. I felt a certain pride then, a desire to prove that we could study just as well as others and to make progress. (21).

According to Cathy Caruth, Bama's *Karukku* (1992) is not about the ill effects of the destruction of a single human being, but it is "an enigma of survival" (58)

Jaggar, in his work *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (1983), defines motherhood as an alienating experience for a Dalit woman. In a capitalist society, work becomes a dehumanizing activity; when a mother delivers her child, she is dependent on other women around her, and after that, even if the father's name goes with the child, it is like a worker who is alienated from what he produces. Dalit women are stronger than other women in society because they can give birth to fifteen children from their bodies and bear their labor pain at the time of delivery.

The theory of psychoanalytic feminism deals with the oppression that affirms that men have ingrained psychological needs to suppress women. The woman's nature of acceptance and the male's impulse to subjugate woman digs deep into human psychology. From the very beginning, females are ta

You ought to be docile and introverted, and you should have the ability to repress emotions. With this psychology, a female trains her mind to listen to males' opinions. She never questions their decision; after doing this, men become stronger in imposing their judgments on women. Later, it becomes the culture, and they must bear whatever comes to their path. Urmila Pawar, in *The Weave of My Life* (2008), writes, "What do women have to do with education? Ultimately, she would be blowing on the stove." (20). The generalized notion of gender roles that women are meant for household work, and men are designed for work outside the home is entrenched in the minds of all people, whether they are males, mothers, mothers-in-law, brothers, brothers-in-law, fathers, fathers-in-law, elder sisters or sisters-in-law. If one talks about the destiny of Dalit women and upper-class women, there is a huge difference because the upper-class people's perception of things is broader and more positive (due to their high standard of living and good wealth) than the lower-class people, which indirectly makes hell the life of Dalit females more than the Dalit males. This notion in Dalit women that they are good for none makes them leave their education, which results in no scope of exposure from outside the world. Due to lack of exposure, Dalit women never question the domination that Dalit men impose on them. They consider suppression as a part of their fate. Pawar, in *The Weave of My Life* (2008), writes, "The creator of the world established the practice of making women dependent on men. Men have, therefore, dominated ever since." (102.)

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The other aspect of intersectionality signifies how an individual can face multiple threats of unfairness where their identities overlap several characteristics such as gender, age, ethnicity, race issues, etc. This theory was given by Kimberle Crenshaw in her essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" (1989). This theory presents that one's social position is affected by the interplay of various factors like gender, race, sexuality, and class. Intersectional is a term used to describe how different discriminations based on height, weight, gender, race, caste, class, sex, color, and identity meet at one point and affect the lives of people. It creates multiple identities that intersect to initiate oppression. The theory of intersectionality provides a framework for how an individual's multiple identities amalgamate and build two groups of suppressed and privileged. It examines the experience of prejudice that human beings face during their interaction within society. The theory outlines how human beings face overlapping discrimination that they need to face depending on their age, ethnicity, gender, race, class, and physical ability. It creates different lines that intersect at one meeting point and form a focal point, which is known as social oppression. An example of intersectional theory is a black man who has to face racial prejudice, whereas a black woman faces gender and racial discrimination. Likewise, Dalit women face discrimination based on gender, low caste, and class, whereas Dalit men face oppression because of their low class and gender only. This leads to the conclusion that Dalit women face triple jeopardy for their being female(sex), race, and low class.

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