

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**



Volume 7, Issue 6, June 2019

www.ijellh.com

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Making differences visible: An Intersectional Feminist analysis of Dalit women characters in
Cho. Dharman's novel *Koogai: the Owl*

Abstract

This paper will deal with intersectionality as an important theoretical tool for feminist analysis. This will be followed by an application of the same to analyse the lived realities of Dalit women characters as has been portrayed in the novel *Koogai: the Owl*. The paper will offer a critique of the liberal humanist framework which has impacted the theorisation of feminism in the West and will explore the contradictions inherent within the homogeneous categorisation of women.

The origins of intersectional feminist analysis can be traced to the 1980s when the question of difference in a supposedly universal definition of the category 'woman' was being put forward. The intersectional analysis first came to be employed in issues pertaining to race and showed how Black women were oppressed by multiple and overlapping modes of race, class and gender. It makes visible the multiple positionalities of women across the world (as well as within a society) in opposition to an essentialist understanding of women implicit within the modernist epistemology of western philosophy and science.

Taking the scope of that analysis further, this paper will examine the issues pertaining to Dalit women in India; placed at the intersection of caste, class and gender. For this the

novel *Koogai: the Owl* will be analysed. This novel is representative of a more mature phase in Dalit literature in India. It is the phase when Dalit writers moved away from narrating their experiences of oppression through autobiographies and used narrative fiction for this purpose. The novel employs the usage of local Tamil folklore and discards the narrative conventions of the modern, western novel and employs its own narrative strategy.

Keywords: Dalit women, caste, intersectionality, gender, *Koogai: the Owl*, Cho. Dharman, Dalit literature.

Introduction

The western liberal humanist framework creates a human subject that precedes its historical and social aspects. This human subject on whom the question of rights and the idea of citizenship is marked is placed outside the realms of various distinct historical, cultural and social inequalities that might be a part of its lived realities. This framework has not only informed the conceptualisation of democracy and secularism but has also significantly impacted the theorisation of feminism in the west. (Tharu and Niranjana 1994: 95 and 96).

The paper will begin with a critique of the universalist assumptions made by western feminists which are underpinned by the liberal humanist framework. This will be followed by a discussion of the concept of intersectionality and how it reveals the multiple positionalities of women across the world as well as within their societies. Then the paper will present an account of the novel *Koogai: the Owl* and contextualise it within the history of Dalit literature. The final part of the paper will use the intersectional framework to discuss the oppression of Dalit women as has been portrayed in the novel..

The rationale of the paper is that the simplistic binaries of male vs female do not adequately help in explaining the material realities of oppression of women placed in non-western

societies. The paper also contends that while Black, LGBT and third world feminists have dismantled the universal assumptions made by western feminists, they have at the same time been seeking ways to build solidarities across feminist movements across the world without erasing the question of their difference which reflects the effective utilisation of their political agency.

The production of the homogeneous female subject in Western Feminism

Western feminism while certainly not being a monolithic corpus of knowledge has a traceable feature of using the experiences of White, western women as the universal experience for women across the world. In the process, this knowledge produces hegemonic representations of the third world women This process which Mohanty (2003:18) describes as ‘discursive colonisation’, represents the third world woman in terms of her poverty, tradition and ignorance as opposed to the western woman who is educated, modern and free-and presents the western woman’s position as a normative one to which all women should aspire to.

This feminist framework assumes women as a coherent, homogeneous social category with similar politics and interests who are universally subjected to a similar form of patriarchy. Thus, they create a dichotomy of the powerful male oppressor and the powerless female victim upon whom patriarchal oppression is perpetuated, (Mohanty 2003: 21 and 31) thereby not only erasing the specific material realities of the third world women but also portraying them as ahistorical objects who are subjected to patriarchal oppression.

This mode of knowledge which places women outside the sphere of their specific historical and material realities, underpinned by the liberal humanist framework, characterises them solely based on their gender which automatically forms the ground for universal sisterhood, ignoring the multiple positionalities of women in the third world countries and the

intersectional forms of oppression that they are subjected to (Mohanty 2003: 31, 110 and 111).

Theorising Intersectionality

It is in response to such universalising assumptions made by western feminism and the privileging of the experience of western women, that Black, LGBT and third world women began to articulate the specific material realities of their lives which forms the basis of the notion of intersectionality and the idea of difference against a coherent idea of women.

The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw and it expresses the 'multidimensionality of marginalised subjects' lived experiences' (Crenshaw 1989: 139 cited in Nash 2008: 2). Emerging in the late 1980s, intersectionality delineates the multiple subject positions of Black, LGBT and third world women, by showing how their lives are affected by multiple and intersecting modes of oppression such as race, caste, class and sexuality.

Intersectionality dismantles the homogeneous categorisation of women by exposing the conflicts and contradictions inherent within this category and in the process, negates the universalist assumptions made by western feminism. By questioning the privileging of a single dimension of experience in women's lives, intersectionality shows that these lives are impacted by diverse and interconnected forms of horizontal inequalities, and therefore the experiences pertaining to gender is just one part of the lives of women and not its whole (Brah and Phoenix 2004:78).

Intersectionality, therefore, due to its ambiguity and open-endedness enables women across the world in diverse cultural settings to articulate their distinct material realities and the interlocking forms of oppression that is generated due to it. It prevents the privileging of a set of experiences and reveals the previously obscured forms of exclusion that exist in women's lives (Davis 2008: 77).

Using Intersectionality to analyse caste

The arguments pertaining to the discursive colonisation of knowledge in western feminism can be extended to analyse non-western societies also, where the more privileged urban upper/ middle class or upper caste feminists can use the experiences of these women as the universal norm for women's experiences in these societies. Therefore, the argument regarding universalising one set of experiences is not a culturalist one, rather, it can be used to analyse universalising tendencies in any society, where the privileged groups use their experiences as a point of reference (Mohanty 2003: 18, 21).

This section of the paper will begin with a description of the institution of caste and the location of the lower caste women in them. This will be followed by a description of how upper caste women in India in various feminist movements have used their experiences as the referent for women's experiences in India, thereby erasing the distinct material realities of the lower caste women.

Caste; a defining feature of the Indian society, is an endogamous social institution which organises the society into four hierarchical occupational groups based on the Hindu scriptures: Brahmins (the priestly class), Kshatriyas (the warrior class), Vaishyas (the merchant class) and Shudras (farmers and cultivating class). Lying outside the framework of this four-fold system are the Dalits¹ who are the outcasts, and prior to the enactment of the Constitution of India, were considered untouchables, because their task was to carry out the 'impure' jobs such as burning the dead, tending to animal carcasses, and washing clothes, especially those that were soaked with menstrual blood.

¹ This is a Marathi word which means 'broken-people'. This term came to be employed after the independence of India when the hitherto untouchable people used this word to assert themselves politically. The legal and constitutional term for Dalits is Scheduled Castes (SC). Untouchability is a criminal offence under the Indian Constitution and is prohibited by law.

The caste framework further refers to women as fickle, whose chastity and sexuality must be controlled by the men of their respective castes. Apart from the occupational hierarchy, this attainment of masculinity by upper caste men, by regulating the sexuality of their female counterparts also forms the logic of their elevated caste status (Kannabiran 2004: 273- 308).

The additional requirement for Dalit women, however, extends to sexual slavery, where sexual labour would be a part of their physical labour provided by them which would be “appropriated by their upper caste (male) owner/master”. The attainment of ‘manhood’ by upper caste men is not only done by ensuring the sexual passivity of women of their caste, but also by subjecting lower caste women to sexual subordination (Kannabiran and Kannabiran 1991 cited in Kannabiran 2006: 65).

This leads to the creation of a dichotomy where the upper caste women are described in terms of their respectability and chastity and the lower caste women are defined by their ‘licentiousness’. This justifies the sexual abuse of lower caste women by upper caste men, both in terms of the prevalent ‘custom’ as well as because they are promiscuous women who have no authority over their bodies (Tharu and Niranjana 1994: 101).

The theoretical underpinnings of liberal humanism can also be seen informing the feminist movement in post-independence India. Such theorisations fail to locate the fragmented subject position of Dalit women owing to their subordination by caste (Rege 1998, Tharu and Niranjana 1994: 100). The liberal humanist self marks the identity of the Indian woman as the upper caste, middle-class woman. She is defined as morally pure, and an embodiment of the nation itself. Her experiences and her political interests therefore, ultimately becomes the point of reference for Indian women (Tharu and Niranjana 1994: 99). This universalisation of the upper-caste women’s experience, therefore, has led to the erasure of the ‘dalit’ identity of

the Dalit woman and has led an upper caste woman to speak on her behalf (Guru 1995: 2549).

The exclusion of the complexity of the female Dalit subject has impacted women's movements in India as can be seen in the formulation of the anti-dowry laws which do not consider the caste question. These laws fail to comprehend that while the upper-caste women are subjected to frequent dowry deaths and regulation of their sexuality and mobility; Dalit women, owing to their caste position are subjected to even greater forms of oppression apart from these, which include the "collective and public threat of rape, sexual assault and physical violence..." (Rege 1994 cited in Rege 1998).

Having presented a theoretical definition of intersectionality and an account of caste, this novel will present an analysis of the novel *Koogai: the Owl*. This will be followed by an application of the intersectional framework to analyse the intersection of caste and gender-based oppression of Dalit women as has been presented in this novel.

Using Myth as a Tale of Resistance: Reading Cho Dharman's *Koogai: The Owl*

The socialist realism² mode of writing was adopted by several upper-caste Indian writers who were inspired by Marxism. The foremost among them is the famous Hindi writer Premchand who used this narrative medium to talk about 'peasants, workers, women and the lower castes' (Satyanarayana 2017: 11).

However, this representative mode of writing has been critiqued by Dalit writers and critics for its focus on upper-caste characters, the portrayal of Dalits as mere victims and most importantly for refusing to engage with the question of caste in these writings (Gajarawala 2013: 189). Thus, the socialist realism mode was rejected by the Dalit writers for more innovative writing patterns. This rejection also appeared in a certain historical context.

² The term referred to literary and artistic works that accurately portrayed the existing realities of the society and upheld the Marxist idea of the conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, which eventually would lead to the formation of a classless, communist society (Abrams and Harpham 2012: 368)

Socialist realism was encouraged mostly by the Communist regime of the Soviet Union. However, after the fall of the Soviet Union, this mode of writing gradually lost its steam. During this time, Latin American writers were employing magic-realism as more innovative methods of narrating tales of oppression, suffering and resistance (Satyanarayana 2015). Thus, departing from the socialist realism style, Dalit writers began to portray assertive Dalit characters and critically engaged with the question of caste in their writings. They also 'improvised' and altered this mode of writing by incorporating local myths and folklore in their writings (Satyanarayana 2017: 11 and 14).

The novel *Koogai: The Owl* that is to be analysed in this section of the paper, can be located within this tradition of Dalit writing. Texts such as *Koogai* also belong to a more mature phase of Dalit literature, where writers have moved beyond life narratives and autobiographies, and make use of innovative narrative mediums to enunciate complex characters and present a more complicated portrayal of caste and societal relations which have emerged due to the changing socio-economic conditions of India.

In *Koogai* Dharman has used the mythical figure of *Koogai*, the owl god and has deployed it as a metaphor for the Dalit condition. Dharman states in the introductory essay of his novel: "The notes I made enabled me to shape *koogai* into a symbol of the Dalit condition. Its weird, almost-human face sets it apart from other birds. Come to think of it, one could say that a Dalit's life is in no way better than that of an owl" (Dharman 2005 [2015]: XI).

An owl is usually considered a bad omen and is driven away if it appears during the day. Therefore, it must lay low and can only come out in the night to hunt for its prey. Similarly, the Dalit is considered polluting whose touch and sometimes even the sight can render the upper-caste people impure. Therefore, just like the owl, Dalits' access to the 'open spaces' is limited, and they are subjected to everybody else's scorn just like the owl is (Dharman 2005 [2015]: XI).

The novel is written in the local Tamil dialect of the Karisal region of Tamil Nadu, a place to which the author belongs. The narrative of the story fuses dreams and fantasy with reality. The sections in the novel which are either dream sequences or expressions of fantasy are italicized.

To maintain some amount of authenticity towards the original Tamil text, its English translation has reproduced some of the grammatically incorrect words that are uttered by some of the characters in the novel. Such as: '*poliss*' (police), *poliss tayshun* (police station), *undrayer* (underwear) and *jameen* (zamindar).

The tales of the Dalits narrated in this novel oscillates between resistance to caste oppression and oppression because of it. Thereby, mirroring the life of *koogai*, the owl god which moves between a display of its prowess during the night and an absolute surrender during the day.

At the beginning of the novel two Dalit men called Muthukkaruppan and Mookkan are flogged for daring to wear nice and new clothes and having their food while sitting on the bench of a hotel (instead of sitting on the floor). Their only way out of this predicament is when Seeni (a central character of the novel) can strike a compromise with the upper-caste people.

Along with the depiction of these incidents of oppression, Dharman also presents certain instances of resistance by the Dalits which are worth mentioning here. For instance, the Pallars (a Dalit caste) refuse to dig the grave (their traditional occupation) when an upper-caste villager called Pandi Mama passes away.

In another instance, Seeni stands up to the zamindar refusing to work on his fields for free. Here, of course, Seeni is aided by the fact that a progressive Brahmin character called Nataraja Iyer had distributed his land among the Dalits before migrating to the city. Thus,

Seeni and the people of his community would like to work on their own fields and refuse to do the zamindar's work for meagre or no wages.

There are certain points in the novel where Dharman makes use of fantasy and in it uses *koogai* to save the characters from their predicaments. Through the employment of *koogai* as a *Deus ex machina*³, Dharman presents a utopian idea about the Dalit condition. In this Dalit utopia, the Dalits would be empowered to such an extent that they would be able to resist caste oppression and emancipate themselves out of it, without being subjected to repression because of it.

This point can be better illustrated by mentioning a certain instance in the novel. A Dalit labourer called Ammaachi was given the task of looking after the goats of the zamindar. Since his wife was pregnant Ammaachi had given the responsibility to his son and went to find a midwife for her. He returned only to find that the goats had perished because they had consumed poisoned grass. Eager to save his son from the punishment of the zamindar, Ammaachi hid him in a sluice hole and took the blows of the zamindar's men upon himself. As the zamindar's men eventually approached the sluice hole (after Ammaachi tells them where he hid him unable to bear their torture), a divine intervention of *koogai* takes place which not only sets Ammaachi and his son free but also brings the dead goats to life.

An analysis of the representation of Dalit women in *Koogai: The Owl*

Any analysis of caste-based oppression remains incomplete without separate analysis of the oppression of the Dalit women. They have been described as the 'dalits of the dalits'. Using an intersectional framework enables us to see the double and at times triple layers of oppression a dalit woman faces. Like upper-caste women, she faces oppression due to her gender identity. But, unlike upper-caste women, Dalit women also face the burden of their

³ Literally, 'a god from a machine'. It refers to the practice of Greek playwrights who in their plays would make gods descend to the stage and resolve seemingly unresolvable conflicts of the characters (Abrams and Harpham (2012: 85).

caste identity. A poor Dalit woman faces the worst forms of oppression; oppression due to her gender, caste and class identity.

This double and triple levels of oppression of Dalit women cannot be subsumed within either mainstream feminist analysis or an analysis of Dalit issues. Special attention must be paid to the analysis of the oppression of Dalit women to bring out the targeted violence that they face. This special attention can be given by making an intersectional feminist analysis of the Dalit women's lives. An attempt to do it has been made in this paper through the analysis of the Dalit women characters in the novel *Koogai: the Owl*.

Muthaiya Pandian is the watchman of the village that serves as the backdrop of this novel. He asserts his authority by stamping his walking stick on the ground as he goes around the village. At the beginning of the novel, we find him beating up two young Dalit men called Muthukkaruppan and Mookan for daring to attend a funeral ceremony in new clothes, and then eating at a hotel sitting on a bench like the upper-caste people. We see him exercising an 'unquestionable authority' over the bodies of Dalit women, as he regularly visits the house of a Dalit called Shanmugam, to have sex with his daughter Vellaiamma, against her will. Fed up by such repetitive predicaments, on one such occasion, Shanmugam's wife pleads to him:

"Let's just quietly go away to some other place. It's shameless living like this" (Dharman 2015: 16).

Shanmugam angrily retorts to this by saying:

"What can we do, 'mma? No woman in any Pallar, Paraiyar, or Chakkiliyan household has been left untouched by the loincloth strings of these scoundrels. They are the real outcasts... Chandaalas" (Dharman 2015: 16).

These lines uttered by Shanmugam present a very strong indictment of the caste system and brings out the hypocrisies of the upper-castes. The touch of a Dalit is considered 'impure' and 'defiling' to an upper-caste individual since Dalits perform supposedly 'impure' tasks which render them into being untouchables. However, this logic of untouchability does not apply when it comes to Dalit women. In their case, their bodies become 'objects' which are to be used for the purpose of sexual gratification of upper-caste men.

The word 'chandaalas' used in this quote refers to the offspring who is born of parents who share different castes. Shanmugam here is suggesting that Muthaiya Pandian is born through his father consummating his sexual relationship with a Dalit woman, and hence he is a 'chaandala'. He also refers to people like Pandian as 'the real outcastes'. He says so out of anger because the Dalits of the village abide by the injunctions of the caste-system, and hence do not touch their upper-caste masters to whom they are 'impure'. However, people like Pandian themselves break down the rules of the caste system that they otherwise seem so eager to uphold, by touching and getting into non-consensual sexual relations with Dalit women. This, according to Shanmugam, these acts should render these upper-caste people as 'outcastes'.

There is another aspect of pertaining to Dalit women that have been presented in the novel that must be analysed. In a certain part of the novel, we see some women drawing water from a well while seven to eight other women wait for their turns. In this situation the following conversation takes place among the women when a Dalit woman addresses the upper-caste woman who was drawing water from the well:

“Saami-yOv... pour just one bucketful here, 'nga, saami, how long to stand here? Legs are aching, thaayi...’

‘Adee yei! So, daughter of Maadathi, you’ve become so swollen with pride? You dare to ask “How long to stand there?” Are you some big lord’s daughter that water has to be drawn and

poured for you as soon as you come?’ retorted one woman, as she poured water into the mud pot from a height of two armlenghts above.

‘Saami-yOv... please pour two buckets here, saami, I’ve left my newborn baby crying’.

‘Oho look! Here’s a rare creature in this world- a woman with a newborn baby!’ They poured the waiting women a pailful each, along with curses”. (Dharman 2015: 18).

Two aspects must be paid attention to in this conversation mentioned above. One is the fact that the women pour water on the pitcher of the women asking for water, from a distance, so that their utensils do not touch each other. This is to avoid ‘defilement’ through the touch of the untouchables. The second aspect is that even though the woman pleads that she has a newborn baby whom she needs to take care of, it does not generate much sympathy from the upper-caste women. The upper-caste woman mocks the Dalit woman for daring to ask for water out of her turn. She further mocks her saying that she is not the first person who has a newborn baby to look after. The humiliation caused to the Dalit women, is similar to the one caused to Dalit men by upper-caste men, whenever they perceive that the Dalits have ‘crossed their line’. This shows that caste-based oppression is perpetuated not just by upper-caste men, but also by upper-caste women on the Dalit women. Even though upper-caste women are also victims of patriarchal oppression, however, as far as looking at oppression through the caste framework is concerned, they emerge as oppressors.

Conclusion

This understanding presented above has an important bearing upon the theorisation of feminism in the Indian context. It is only through an intersectional reading of the plight of Dalit women can their special circumstances of oppression be foregrounded. It also helps in ensuring that their issues do not get subsumed within the homogeneous category called ‘woman’, which by default, caters to the issues of upper-caste women. Sisterhood is a very

important aspect of feminist thought through which women forge solidarities to fight against patriarchal oppression. However, in the case of Dalit women, this sisterhood cannot come at the cost of erasing their distinct realities of caste-based oppression. It can only be forged on the conditions of Dalit women, and by taking into account their issues and concerns.

Locating a cross-cultural presence of patriarchy and assuming that it impacts every woman in a similar manner, and thereby considering gender as the only basis for 'sisterhood' cannot be an effective way of ensuring gender justice (White 1997:19). The notion of 'sisterhood' can only be forged through solidarity; a political strategy that involves the effective utilisation of the agency of diverse groups of women without erasing their historic location. Mohanty (2003: 24 and 122) further argues for a 'politics of engagement' that practice solidarity without transcending the question of difference in the female subject.

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