

‘Dalit Feminist Theory: A Reader’

Editors:

Sunaina Arya and Aakash Singh Rathore

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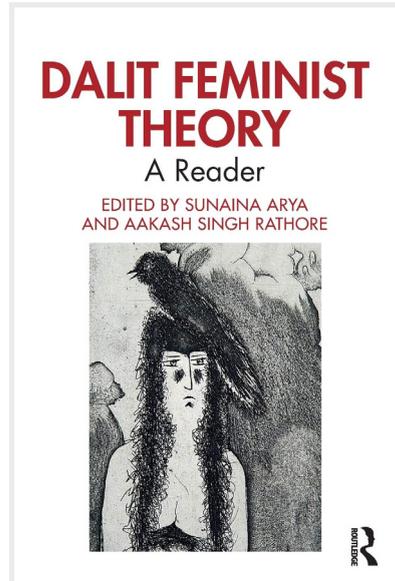
Reviewer:

Preeti

PhD Scholar, School of Education Studies

Dr. B.R.Ambedkar University, Delhi

Email: preeti.19@stu.aud.ac.in



This reader is a compilation of eighteen essays written by academics, feminists and scholar-activists from a Dalit Feminist Perspective. The editors, Sunaina Arya and Aakash Singh Rathore introduce the book by theorizing Dalit feminism underpinning its ontology and epistemology. Critiquing the academic discourse of feminism which predominantly questions gender inequality on a single axis as a fight against patriarchy, Arya and Rathore pose the important question, ‘*Why Dalit Feminist Theory?*’. Although the dialogue on Dalit Feminist standpoints started during the 1990s, the core of the book lies in attempting to legitimize Dalit Feminist Theory due to the ubiquity of the caste question in Indian society, which cannot be overlooked in any circumstances. Thus, the book revisits the Indian Feminist discourse for feminists to critique the gatekeeping that ‘upper caste’ privileged feminists did to represent the issues of all women by homogenising the category of a woman based on a few percentages of upper caste women, leaving out Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi and minority women who form a much larger percentage in comparison. The book is an important read due to its critical engagement and initiation of a dialogue with Indian feminists to argue the need for Dalit Feminist Theory in reshaping Indian feminist discourse.

The book is divided into six parts tracing the history of the feminist movement to contemporary times, reflecting on the understanding of Indian Feminist discourse from the Dalit feminist standpoint. It lays out the foundation for a Dalit feminist theory, re-examining and critiquing the Indian feminist discourse which often erased the voices of women from marginalised communities.

Part I contextualises the debates between Indian feminism and Dalit feminism. In the first essay, Menon argues that intersectionality as a concept is less important in the Indian context. For example, Menon emphasizes how a profession like sex work deserves respect as they choose to do this work. At the same time, the authors question the very aspect of choice and argue that Dalit women would choose another job over sex work if they could maintain their dignity while earning comparable pay. John and Gopal later in the book also criticised Menon on an understanding of the intersectional analysis in Indian feminism. They emphasize the immediate need for attending to the feminist issues in India from an intersectional framework, as it has been disregarded by mainstream feminist Nivedita Menon earlier. For example, one of the arguments that Nivedita Menon asserts in refuting the concept of intersectionality is by claiming that a person carries one significant identity at a given point in time. Hence, intersectionality is itself an 'empty location'. Such an argument discredits the theorisation of the concept, which has been countered by Gopal and John, that once again, Menon is looking at the categories of caste and gender in isolation; hence, there is no such thing as a single identity to a person.

Chapter 2 problematizes the contemporary theory of gender, and it argues that a woman is not a homogenous category. It further explains the linkages between caste, gender, class and community through specific events of history and the role of 'women' in them as feminist subjects. The authors contend that the events represented in the mainstream media obscure the whole caste, class and gender linkage so much that the categories of Dalits and women comprise only male and upper caste, respectively. Chapter 3 presents the excerpts on the category of 'Dalit patriarchy' by scholars such as Gopal Guru, Uma Chakravarti and V.Geetha which are critiqued by the editors who believe that such categories only misdirect the whole feminist movement and strengthen the already present divisions among each other. Arya (2020) critically analyses the formulation of the term Dalit patriarchy and explains that the coinage of the very term is vague. No caste group is devoid of patriarchy, but coining the terms for them differently will only further the divisions as it discredits the role that Brahmanical patriarchy plays in it. There's no denying that patriarchy affects Dalit women equally, but Brahmanical patriarchy should be questioned and critiqued.

Part II of the book historicises and contextualizes the concept of Dalit feminism. Paik (Chapter 4) reviews the position of Dalit women and tries to resolve Dalit women's questions, claiming that Dalit women don't simply comply or resist. Instead, they exercise agency in their ways according to their present contexts. She exemplifies her position by providing instances where Dalit women usually exercise agency via negotiating with the power structures. The article concludes by discussing the aspects of Dalit women's activism, including the origin, participation, forming alliances and

networks, issues they raised and negotiating between public-private while engaging in activism. The political engagement of Dr Ambedkar has been discussed throughout the chapter in detail which had a powerful impact on Dalit women. Sonalkar (Chapter 5) discusses Dalit women's politics by examining the category of 'Ambedkarite women', precisely the women who participated in the Ambedkar movement. Thus, it can be analyzed in the post-Ambedkar era when Dalit women started to produce and contribute to Dalit literature as much as Dalit men; they acknowledged the efforts of Ambedkar in these testimonies of freedom and liberation. Similarly, Rege in Chapter 9, analyses that Dalit women have been powerful agents of social reforms and contributed to Phule-Ambedkarite politics, schooling, literature, and academic realms of life as opposed to the dominant narrative which only see them as victims of power structures. Rege (Chapter 6) extends the political aspects of Dr Ambedkar's life and delves into aspects of his personal life. Mainstream feminism observes Dr Ambedkar as not 'feminist enough' in his personal life on the account that his wife Ramabai was not encouraged to engage in the politics of freedom movements he was leading. Thus, Rege critiques these arguments by historicizing and bringing out the truly personal accounts of Babasaheb's life and how he had an equal relationship with Ramabai.

Part III delves into the aspects of Dalit women's lived experience and contextualises Dalit 'difference'. Rege (Chapter 7) analyses how violence is a persistent concern for Dalit women due to their particularly vulnerable position which lies at the intersection of caste, class and gender as they have to work in the public realm for everyday survival. Rege further emphasizes the flaw of Indian feminism, which contributes to feminist theory on a single-axis framework and fails to recognize this intersectional difference. Bharti exhibits several instances from Hindu epics and analyses how Dalit women are represented in a demeaning manner with no respect and humanity as they are not considered pure and expected to bring misfortune (Chapter 8). Y.S. Alone also brings a different perspective by bringing the idea of aesthetics that has been challenged through art within contemporary artistic practises and responding to the demeaning representations of Dalit women as portrayed in the dominant narrative (Chapter 8).

Part IV historicizes and traces the idea of intersectionality, where it originated first, and how it adds to the theorization of feminist discourse. This part problematizes the academic engagement on feminism which originated from the perspective of most privileged white women in the West. Due to the lack and neglect of these First World Feminists, Black feminist thought emerged, which established the realities and struggles of Black women who are marginalized based on both gender and race in their daily lives. Crenshaw developed the idea of intersectionality based on Black women's "difference" from white women who have a racial advantage, filling the gap in First World feminism discourse that had neglected to address the problems of all women (Chapter 10). Similar to how American feminism developed, Indian feminism was influenced by caste-privileged women who failed to understand Dalit women's experiences and further marginalized them. Guru contends that the socio-economic and political deprivation of Dalit women over a long time has resulted in differences

in how they speak and live (Chapter 11). Rege (Chapter 12) issues a disciplinary challenge to Indian feminism by claiming that the inclusion of Dalit diversity is a prerequisite for establishing “real feminism”.

Part V contextualizes the concept of intersectionality and the need for the same in India. Aloysius et al. argue that dominant caste feminists often disregard the caste-based exploitation of women that poses greater risks to Dalit women due to their caste location in the *varna* system. Therefore, Dalit feminists argue for a multiple-axis framework to understand the difference in the position of women due to the different locations occupied by women of different castes in this structure (Chapter 13). Tharu (Chapter 14) theorizes that gender and caste are linked, which is further complicated by class structure. Hence, the burdens multiply, rendering Dalit women at the lowest pedestal and marginalizes them to an extent that further invisibilised them in the society including scholars and intellectuals.

Part VI consolidates the book by arguing the need for a legitimate theory from a Dalit Feminist standpoint, which will require a close look at the contemporary feminist discourse, questioning its flaws and re-defining the issues of feminist politics from the vantage point of Third World women. A critique of modern feminist writings in India is provided by Julie Stephens, who contends that the term “non-Western women” is a fabrication insofar as it avoids a true engagement with its own “past” while fighting against Western hegemony (Chapter 16). Stephens also draws attention to how mainstream feminists have misappropriated the term “experience” in Third World feminism. Smita M. Patil uses categories from Marx, Mignolo, and Oyewumi to make the case that Dalit feminist thought poses a challenge to the veracity of knowledge and offers an epistemic turn for feminist thinking that must be acknowledged and adopted to advance the effectiveness of Indian feminist discourse (Chapter 17). Kanchana Mahadevan critiques the experience-theory dichotomy, which also presents a perceptive alternative that advocates theorizing by the collective shared experience of individuals who live, share, and communicate experience in a scholarly manner (Chapter 18). That is, a real theorization can only be made when the subjects and the objects of feminist inquiry are the same.

Dalit Feminist theory claims to address the gap in Third World Feminism by attending to the absent linkages of caste and gender-based experiences of women. However, it falls short of providing Third World feminism’s different discourses due consideration. Mohanty (2015), analyses that the category of ‘third world woman’ is not monolithic but it has a geographic, historical, and cultural basis. The term ‘third world women’ entails many classifications on the intersection of caste, class, gender, religion, sexuality, region, culture, etc. The book is missing a perspective on current feminist politics based on religion and queer theory. Nonetheless, the book engages seriously with the feminist discourse, analyzes its pitfalls and suggests measures to the privileged ‘upper-caste’ feminists who engaged earlier. The book especially calls on

young feminists to correct the wrongdoings of the past by rethinking and revisiting the ground realities and lived experiences of Dalit women.

References

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