

RETHINKING ECOFEMINISM THROUGH DALIT WOMEN'S WRITING

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ABSTRACT:

This article investigates how the experiences of Dalit women are shaped by a combination of caste, gender and ecology as expressed in their autobiographies, which provide insight into the impact of eco-caste marginalization on their lives. By considering the works of Bama (*Karukku*), Baby Kamble (*The Prisons We Broke*) and Baby Halder (*A Life Less Ordinary*), this analysis uses their narratives as a way of highlighting the ways in which nature, land and the female body have been exploited and resisted. The socio-ecological crisis that impacts Dalit communities more than any other group, especially Dalit women is directly linked to centuries of disconnecting individuals from land, labour, and resources as a result of caste-based oppression. Drawing from eco-feminist scholars such as Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies, this article frames the experiences of Dalit women in the broader context of feminist resistance and environmental justice

KEYWORDS:

Dalit women, ecofeminism, autobiographies, environmental justice, socio-ecological crisis, resistance, marginalized communities.

INTRODUCTION:

The connection between women and nature has been understood and represented through metaphors of fertility, nurturing and sacrifice. The Earth itself has been referred to as Mother Earth, a life-sustaining and nurturing body. However, such figurative respect for nature and the Earth has been accompanied by systems of exploitation of both nature and women. Ecofeminism was a response

to the connection between the exploitation of nature and the exploitation of women.

However, in the Indian milieu, gender cannot be understood in isolation from caste, which impacts access to land, labour, water, sanitation, dignity and an individual. Dalit women hold a very distinct place in the juncture of caste, gender, and class suppression. The ecological experiences of Dalit women are not idealized encounters with the Earth but actual experiences of landlessness, labour exploitation, habitat degradation and physical isolation. The autobiographies of Dalit women can be seen as a rich source of what can be termed as -eco-caste realities.

In this article, an attempt is made to explore this intersection through an engagement with Dalit women's autobiographical narratives such as *Karukku* by Bama, *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble, *The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar and *A Life Less Ordinary* by Baby Halder, wherein land, labour, and the female body are presented as sites of intersection between ecological exploitation and caste patriarchy.

WOMAN-NATURE CONNECTION:

There are many ways women are connected to the environment. Many authors argue that the domination of women and of nature is derived from the dominator's use of male dominated conceptual systems to formulate both women and nature. A second view also has a conceptual basis based upon gender differences; that women have particular personal experiences such as becoming mothers and raising children that give them a different relationship with nature than men, rather than their biological characteristics.

Language, which is sexist and naturalistic and its associations, that is, the way that women and non-human nature are internalised through women's naturalisation and nature's feminisation, is a central area of focus for many theorists. The ways in which women are often referred to in ways that involve animal metaphors such as cows, foxes, chicks, serpents, bitches, beavers, old bats, pussy-cats, cats -

and nature is often referred to with female and sexual terms: nature is raped, mastered, conquered, controlled and exploited.

The argument is that there are cultural similarities between the ways - women's-naturalising and nature's-feminising - language accounts for, describes and establishes the domination and inferiorisation of both by the fact that the double domination of women and nature is not recognised through language. Therefore, to develop feminist theory and environmental philosophy that does not continue to support the sexist naturalistic linguistic reinforcement and the systems of domination they support, is an aim of eco-feminism.

ECOFEMINISM: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS:

Ecofeminism emerged in the 1970s as a response to the relationship between feminist and ecological movements. The first time this term appears in literature was in the work of Françoise d'Eaubonne, where she advocated that the liberation of women and the survival of the earth go hand in hand. Following her, scholars like Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies established how capitalist patriarchy makes hierarchically decided binary oppositions, such as man versus woman, culture versus nature and reason versus emotion, which place both women and the earth on the lesser lateral of these relationships. Through ecofeminist theory, we can thus critique all exploitation and language that is symbolic. Ecofeminist thinkers argue that the two, women and nature, relate in the same way the disciplining of the bodies of women in modernity relates to the discipline of the earth.

Mainstream ecofeminism has often taken a universal approach to the experiences of women. In the context of India, caste determines who has access to land, who works the land, who gets water, and who lives in polluted spaces. Therefore, the ecological experiences of Dalit women will be significantly different to those of upper caste women and ecofeminism needs to adopt an intersectional approach by incorporating an understanding of the insights gained from Dalit feminist scholarship and theories of systematic inequality.

As an important form of memory-related knowledge production, epistemic intervention, Dalit women's testimony, conferring to scholar Sharmila Rege, serves an important function for those groups who are making their struggles visible in history. In this regard, the idea of intersectionality (Kimberlé Crenshaw) validates how caste, as well as gender and class, work together to produce different forms of oppression; thus, environmental vulnerability has been shaped throughout history by the caste system, which creates unequal access to resources and poise due to alterations in caste.

CASTE AND ECOLOGICAL DISPOSSESSION:

Ecological sustainability and caste authority both depend on land. Traditionally, Dalits did not possess land; instead, they worked in humiliating, often inferior, jobs. Their settlements were established on the fringes of the village, close to areas where waste was discarded and environmental degradation befell. This spatial separation ensured social and ecological exclusion.

Bama brings to life the brutal lives of Dalit women labouring for upper-caste landowners in the agricultural segment in her book *Karukku*; they are exposed to horrible working conditions, have no rights associated with the labour and do not own the land they nurture. While their labour is the foundation of the agrarian economy, they too are legitimately homeless. The land they work on is; therefore, both a cause of life; as well as; a site of oppression.

Like in *The Prisons We Broke*, the denial of land and sanitation is architecturally entrenched throughout this world. According to Baby Kamble, Dalit settlements are characterized by poverty and lack of potable water, with no proper sanitation, which mirrors the racial stratification of society in their curbs are validated by their bodily surroundings, where, just like that of the pure, the impenetrable areas will only be inhabited by the untouchable.

While urban migration is often presumed to decrease ecological vulnerability, no indication suggests it does so; for example, as seen through *The Weave of My Life*, Urmila Pawar describes living in

slum houses in Mumbai with contaminated water supplies, poorly constructed housing and poor sanitation facilities. In these urban circumstances the promises made to people of modernity have not been met and the structural marginalization lingers. In none of these accounts of ecological deficiency can caste discrimination be unglued. The existence of environmental injustices is not an accident but rather a construct of the structure.

LABOUR, SURVIVAL AND ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE :

Unlike other women in India, who romance with nature, Dalit women approach nature through labour. The work they do in agriculture, collecting wood, carrying water and cleaning up spaces contributes to their physical connection with the earth. This physical connection is still mediated by the exploitation of those same women.

The rural women of the mainstream ecofeminist movement have received praise for their knowledge regarding the environment. Dalit women also have extensive and detailed knowledge about nature (such as crops, medicinal plants, and the seasonal changes), but their lives are characterized by hardship. They work extremely long hours at physically demanding jobs and earn very little money. Their bodies are affected negatively by the ecological instability caused by the world around them.

Women in Kamble's story get up early in the morning to work in the fields and come back to take care of the family while dealing with very little food and other resources. Similarly, Pawar shows that women do the same work in cities. They work for wages outside of their homes but also have to clean the house every day and deal with toxic environments. In her memoir, Baby Halder shows how women working in domestic settings in urban areas experience an intersection of class and caste disparities, which contribute to their body exploitation and their spatial inequalities.

Within formal environmental movements, Dalit women's ecological knowledge is often overlooked. However, the lived

experience of Dalit women sheds light on sustainability, resource management, and community resilience. Their storylines also show how caste patriarchal systems try to render them invisible.

THE FEMALE BODY AS A SITE OF VIOLENCE AND RESISTANCE:

In deliberations of eco-caste, the Dalit woman's body is an acute space and is characterized by caste-related stigma, gender-based violence, and ecological destruction. The agricultural work that a Dalit woman does, poor sanitation and a polluted environment negatively impact one's health; in addition, the repeated threat of being sexually subjugated by men of the higher castes is ever-present.

Bama describes how disgrace and verbal abuse go hand-in-hand with physical work in her book, *Karukku*. In *The Prisons We Broke*, Kamble narrates how the bodies of Dalit women are seen as tarnished, providing a rationale for their isolation and violence. Pawar's account shows that women's bodies are engraved with poverty and urban apathy through physical illnesses and exhaustion. The body becomes a site of resistance to hegemonic powers through autobiography. In documenting their bodily experiences Dalit women are proclaiming their authority and writing is thus an act of self-assertion.

SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL CRISIS AND CASTE VULNERABILITY:

Narratives from Dalit women provide details on how ecological disasters are upsetting marginalised societies. Drought, pollution and lack of water have worsened caste discrimination. Access to public wells, sanitation and agricultural land is dependent upon social status. Bama describes Dalit women who travel from far to get water and are exposed to disgrace when they access public sources of water. Kamble describes the total lack of sanitary facilities in certain settlements. Pawar describes urban slums that are subject to flooding

and collapse because of insufficient infrastructure. Environmental disasters worsen the inequalities that exist prior to a disaster.

The impact of climate change makes these vulnerabilities worse. There is an augmented level of risk for community members who rely on physical labour and natural resources. However, caste disparities are more often than not taken into account when establishing environmental policy. Dalit women's autobiographies have also specified that social justice must be a part of an environmental solution for these - ecological misery is not distributive; it is based on one's caste association.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS POLITICAL INTERVENTION:

The Dalit women's autobiographies tell their stories, create an identity for themselves in society, create a community among Dalit women and make a political declaration by stimulating the caste system and the ways it has omitted them from the literary and political biospheres.

Bama's writing in *Karukku* is a challenge to the religious authority and the caste system, and Kamble's writing describes the awakening of the Dalit community and the organisation of that community to create a political force. Pawar debates how women experience a sense of cohesion as they steer an urban life as outcasts in their community. Halder's life story speaks to the self-respect of the Dalit woman despite the domestic and economic exploitation she endures.

Through their account of ecofeminism and ecological threat through experience of Dalits in caste structure, the narratives challenge conventional ecofeminism, which tends to romanticize, by centering in lived experience-a critical perspective toward ecology. Writing is thus a form of reclamation-of land, body and voice.

Dalit autobiographies embody an act of resistance to oppression in the Indian context as well as social and political protest against the oppression of the caste system. They provide a medium for Dalit

authors to reclaim their name; to articulate their skills and retort to oppression. These autobiographies demonstrate how individual experiences can be transformed into commanding testimonies to counter oppression, demonstrating the social discrimination and stigmatisation of Dalits.

Dalit women assert their right to tell their stories and also make new narratives for their lives-narratives that mirror the existence of the world they created and to which they are now very evidently detached from as a consequence of systemic violence against them. When Dalit women reaffirm their narratives, they are also attempting to reassert their worlds. For example, many of the stories told by Bama contain themes of joy, strength and solidarity, all based on everyday relationships with land and labour. The stories that Kamble and Halder record indicate that women also support each other, resist and make strong emotional ties to their environment, even when their physical existence has been systematically disregarded.

Autobiography	Key Eco feminist Themes	Citation
<i>Karukku</i> by Bama	Explores the intersection of caste, gender, and environmental exploitation.	(Kumar, 2022) (Thenmozhi, 2024)
<i>The Prisons We Broke</i> by Baby Kamble	Highlights the daily struggles of Dalit women in harsh environmental conditions.	(Runa & Rahman, 2023) (Cherechés, 2022)
<i>The Weave of My Life</i> by Urmila Pawar	Emphasizes the role of Dalit women in sustaining their families and communities.	(Das & Adhikary, 2024) (Saini & Rathee, 2024)
<i>A Life Less Ordinary</i> by Baby Halder	Portrays Dalit women's bodies as strong and resilient in the face of systemic oppression.	(Emmadi, 2021) (Sharma & Kumar, 2020)

Table 1: Key Eco feminist Themes in Dalit Autobiographies

THE FEMALE BODY AS A SITE OF EXPLOITATION AND RESISTANCE:

The autobiographies by Dalit women give a clear image of how Dalit women's bodies epitomise both exploitation and resistance; providing a detailed understanding of the realities of living in an ecologically and socially marginal life. The bodies of Dalit women in books like Bama's *Karukku*, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* bear the marks of exhaustion, humiliation and violence. There is a continuing risk of economic abuse of these women attached with the pervasive threat of sexual violence. Therefore, the female body is not only an individual space but is also a social space which has been created over centuries as a consequence of methodical oppression.

However, the same body also serves as a resistant terrain. Dalit women take back their bodies through their own narratives, by asserting the right to express, remember, and be treated with dignity. Bama's departure from the church and her decision to write in *Karukku* serve as both body and authorial resistances- Bama is not permitting her gender and caste background to dictate how or whether or not she expresses herself. Pawar's writing about menstruation, motherhood, and sexuality provides a voice for Dalit women, allowing them to assert their ownership of their bodies despite the social taboos surrounding these topics.

Autobiographies describe the historical anguish of Dalit womanhood recorded on the body; however, they are also the source of narrative power and thus the historical inscription upon women's bodies through bodily work, suffering and durability allows them to stake a claim to be able to tell, author and reject. While being subject to environment degradation and experiences of social hostility, women's bodies are also the locus for testimony and for displaying work and care and are resilient to the hostility of environment degradation.

Through their positioning of their bodies as being used as battlegrounds and sites for the reclamation of dignity, Dalit women

rearticulate bodily agency within an ecological formation characterised by patriarchy and caste. They contest the dominant feminist constructions which frequently erase caste from the feminist construction, as well as the dominant eco-feminist narratives which romanticise women's relations to nature and the material exploitation of Dalit bodies. In their textual representations, Dalit women declare that their bodies not only suffer from systematic vectors but also are agents of survival, resistance and alteration.

TOWARD AN ECO-CASTE FEMINIST FRAMEWORK:

Eco-feminist representations need to expand their perspective to comprise caste, labour, and spatial segregation in relation to Dalit women's autobiographical narratives. The association between environmental degradation and the historical elimination of Dalit women from land and resources has shaped a cycle of violence against them due to lack of access to sanitation and clean drinking water, as well as decorous work and wages.

An eco-caste feminist structure will put Dalit women's knowledge systems, ways of persisting and political supremacy at its hub while also providing critiques of both patriarchal capitalism and caste systems. This fresh eco-caste feminist outline will connect the brawls for environmental justice with the necessity for societal transformation.

CONCLUSION:

Karukku, The Prisons We Broke, The Weave of My Life and *A Life Less Ordinary* are four instances of autobiography from Dalit women that help us comprehend the way caste; gender and ecology interconnect in the modern Indian context. All four of these autobiographical texts irradiate how land, labour and the female body function as sites of exploitation and resistance.

These texts advance the concept of ecological susceptibility that is based on caste as well as test universal ecofeminism. They validate that environmental degradation is as socially structured as it is

planetary. Dalit women create narrative authority in the public scope through converting private memory into political testimony and demanding justice for their experiences.

To generate an inclusive ecological world, we must pay regard to these voices. Eco-feminism needs to go outside just being a symbolic association with caste and instead involve with the material authenticities of caste. It is only through doing so that we can work together in an impactful way as both women and nature, acknowledging that the fight for land, respect and sustenance cannot be disconnected from the fight for ecological justice.

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