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## Understanding The Conceptual Framework Of Dalit Feminism In The Light Of Selected Works By Prominent Theorists Of Dalit Literature

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### Abstract:

Dalit literature has evolved in the past few decades as an effective voice of those marginalized people who have suffered for centuries the atrocities and discriminations from the hegemonic classes in India. The Dalit women in particular, have suffered subjugation not only on the basis of being considered to be of an inferior gender but also because of their belonging to a class that was considered lowly, untouchable and too much inferior in comparison to the mainstream society. In the recent years, Dalit feminism has emerged and evolved in India since several female Dalit writers started documenting their own stories and the traumatic experiences of other Dalit women like themselves. This article makes an attempt to discuss and explore the multiple dimensions of Dalit feminism. In doing so, it focuses upon some prominent theorists of Dalit literature.

**Keywords:** Dalit literature, Dalit feminism, Dalit women, Literary theory, Fundamental concept.

**Introduction:** Dalit women are mainly the under privileged and impoverished fragment in the Indian society. Social stratification that dominates, maintains superiority on account of which Dalit women bear not just gender biasness and economic destitution but also are the targets of being marked off and unsuited with respect to caste. Moreover, Dalit women have been tolerating disparity and unfair treatment not only by the advantaged upper-class society but by Dalit men as well. Dalit feminism materialized to revolt against the hegemony of Indian feminism and the supremacy of Dalit men. In point of fact, Dalit feminism has developed to express their own problems and matter with the objective that they can gain fair treatment and justness.

Dalits in India have been mistreated and exploited since long time and Dalit women were the once who suffered the most. They were treated badly, their feelings, point of view and opinions were unreleased. They were well deserved to be lamented and sympathized. They were regarded as inefficient and their self-identity was wrecked. The patriarchy system and the dominance of the privileged class were the two major factors responsible in the suppression and eradication of Dalit women. Indian feminism which majorly focused on the issues of gender equality, literacy for all and basic privileges for women were some of the concerns proposed by Indian women, but in the process of doing so, Dalit women and their issues were ignored. This led to the feeling of insecurity amongst the women of lower strata i.e., Dalit women. This elimination of Dalit women served the cause of the formation of the separate feminism which they called as Dalit feminism. A movement which was framed with the purpose of uplifting the Dalit women or the women of the lower class. Dalit women found no place in the Indian feminism which they realized soon, keeping this in mind, now the Dalit women wanted to act for themselves and speak for one another bringing into the limelight the causes behind their pain and sufferings. Dalit women's problems were viewed as similar to the problems raised by mainstream Indian feminists. Dalit women had to face hardships because of the caste system that prevailed in the Hindu Indian society, secondly, their gender being women was another reason for their repression and thirdly the class to which they belonged i.e., the lower class. These reasons mentioned above were not taken up in the Indian Dalit movement due to which Dalit women raised their voice against such a movement as it was the movement of a selected few i.e., the people of upper-class Hindu society. It was a movement which was distorted and believed in favoritism without viewing the existence of Dalit women too in the movement. Dalit women could not create their place in the movement of the aristocratic class. They were put aside and their presence was never felt and recognized. Even in the Dalit movement they were given less importance and they could not make their existence sensed amongst the men of their community who led the movement giving the least priority to their women. Dalit women were completely ignored by mainstream feminism, could not create proper place in the Dalit literature as there also Dalit men were in the forefront and Dalit women also underwent miserable and pathetic life in their family as no recognition was given to them neither by their men nor by their family members. These women who were ill-treated from every side and were discriminated, now wanted to have their own position with their self-identity and self-respect. They wanted to live on their own terms and conditions, making their presence felt with the fulfillment of their basic rights. These women who were triple marginalized because of caste, class and sex, wanted to shift their position from margin to center. Their exploitation because of prejudice, biasness and favoritism had made them to think on such grounds. Dalit women in search of self-identity and recognition stepped forward and walked hand in hand in solidarity to work together for a single cause of earning respect, getting their demands fulfilled and to be treated as human beings and not as lifeless objects. Thus, in the words of Pragati Kulkarni, the origination of separate

movement with the name Dalit feminism was the result of the “exclusion of Dalit women’s experiences from the mainstream women’s movement and the Dalit movement”.

Sharmila Rege is a prominent feminist writer. Her book *Writing Caste/ Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women’s Testimonios* is an assemblage of eight Dalit women’s testimonios. The passages taken from the life stories of Dalit women are quite extensive which provide ample of information about the issues concerning to racism, education, exploitation, and brutality etc. Their scuffle against dominance is one of the chief attributes found in the writings. The testimonios discussed serve as evidence to how the gender has been an important component of caste and status analysis. Real picture of Dalit women is reflected in the life narratives of Dalit women. These women in the book through their life stories depicted the oppressed life which they were forced to live as they were nothing but the objects in the hands of everybody. To become literate was not meant for them. They were born only to deliver children, work for the family with no expectations in return. Whatever they earned outside the house by performing hard labor, they had no right over it. Everything was taken away by their husbands and these women had to survive under poverty and pitiful conditions. Birth of a girl child in the family was no less than a curse. A girl child in the family, by the time she grew up, prepared herself that the life would not be easy for her as she was born only to suffer. Dalit women suffered both inside and outside the family. Babasaheb said “that the dalit woman in your homes is the most dalit of all” (Rege 150). Inside the family she had to deal with male ego which was always to be respected sidelining her hopes and desires. Outside the family also she suffered because she was a Dalit and in addition to, she was a woman. Dalit women were exploited and humiliated both by upper caste men and women. Dalit women had no identity of hers and was supposed to remain silent in every situation. What is important to note here is ultimately the main culprit behind is the Dalit women who is blamed for everything and her devotion towards work and her family is not at all appreciated.

Gopal guru, a political scientist and an author of several books, is a Dalit writer. The book, *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian debate on Experience and Theory* is written by him. The book comprises eight essays in the form of dialogue between Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai. Gopal Guru in his book talks about equal rights and freedom for all. He is of the view that there should exist no discrimination and why it is so that the upper caste society is authenticated to do mental ability work and not the people who belong to lower caste. He does not favor this kind of discrimination. People of lower class were even “denied access to the larger teaching community” (Guru 112). He also raises a point which discusses about that why is it so that anybody can theorize Dalit experience even if he is not a Dalit. According to Guru, Dalit who has experienced such a life has the right to theorize because he knows what it means to be a Dalit which a non-Dalit will not understand because he has not lived that experience. Thus, to Guru lived experience plays a vital role in theorizing. Discrimination always prevailed in the lives of Dalits and every now and then it was seen that the “constant flow of opportunities” (Guru 19) was there only for the upper caste Hindu society. This practice blocked the overall development of

the Dalits. To acquire knowledge was only the right of the privileged class. This is why Dalits were supposed to perform the jobs which were considered to be dirty and filthy.

Another important point discussed in the book is about the relevance of “space” in one one’s life. By space he means the place that one has in the society. The space designated to a person defines his class or caste. Talking about Dalits, they were assigned the space where in their houses and villages were segregated in such a way that they were to keep distance from the upper caste Hindu society because Dalits were considered as outsiders and their indulgence in any of the activities which would pollute the upper caste society was forbidden. They were to remain inside their houses throughout and were to come out only at nights because their touch also if by any chance it happened was like a mistake which could not be forgiven. Their (Dalits) shadow also was considered to be dirty. Dalit women’s lives were more humiliating. The devadasi system which prevailed made the lives of these women undignified. These women were confined to the Hindu shrines held by gods by means of holy matrimony. They were married to deities and to all intents and purposes they were accessible to the native lords. Dalit women always had to keep silent and their voices were given no importance. It can be understood that Dalits had to suffer the most and above all Dalit women were the most oppressed.

Sharankumar Limbale, a Dalit writer and an activist in his book *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations* discusses about Dalits and the type of life they had to lead. He talks about the humiliation Dalit community experienced. He also has talked about Dalit literature which according to him is by Dalits and for Dalits. He is of the view that Dalit literature cannot be written by a non-Dalit as he does not know and will not understand the pain that Dalit undergoes. Only the one who has experienced such a life will be able to give vent to his emotions and feelings in an appropriate manner. Dalit literature is the literature which depicts the pain of Dalits who are never accepted by the upper caste Hindu society and are discriminated in every possible manner. Limbale mentions that “Dalit literature is unique and distinct” (16). They are suppressed to such an extent that they doubt whether their existence is really there or not. They live in poverty with no food to eat and feed on dead animals and rotten food and are abused by the upper caste Hindu society. Main reason behind introducing this literature is to spread awareness about their dreadful life, atrocities, humiliation and exploitation which the Dalit community undergoes. According to Limbale, it is not reasonable to demand delight and enjoyment from a Dalit work which has essentially been written for social change. Dalit literature, he says is not be examined on the so far standard procedure administering the concept of beauty but demands its own criterion for measuring the attractiveness of Dalit literature. Dalits never found any place in the mainstream literature. In physical world also their existence was neglected. Limbale has mentioned one thing which is quite prominent in Dalit literature and that is one should speak for oneself and should become confident in life and this confidence is clearly seen because now the Dalits have understood the importance of education this is why they are able to express their feelings with the help of their writings. Dalit literature which has the

beauty of its own and its beauty lies in depicting the true life of Dalit people who are dominated by the upper castes. Dalit women's survival under such pitiable conditions is something so terrible that one cannot even think of or imagine. Destiny had always been very harsh to the community of Dalit women.

In view of above-mentioned books by three different theorists it is noted that they share a common vision and aim which is to have a separate and identified place for their literature and their people who have always been neglected by the people who have reputed position and an important place to occupy in the society. Dalit community which has always been struggling to have its own place and space as they too are the people who have the right to live and above all live with respect and dignity. Their life was full of struggle and had to face problems in every field. Knowledge was not meant for them. They were to remain illiterate as knowledge was something which was only for the elite class i.e., the upper caste Hindu society. The books also focus on the pathetic condition of Dalit women. They were the sufferers because they were Dalits and above all not be forgotten that they were women who were considered to have no identity. They were born only to endure pain and serve both the upper caste men, women and Dalit men. Dalit women were expected to remain silent. They were viewed no less than a commodity. The three books also talk about the terrible condition of the Dalit community as a whole and this why a new literature evolved i.e., Dalit literature which is a literature of its own kind focusing on the lived experience of Dalits written by Dalits and for Dalits. Dalit literature also known as "identity literature" (Manohar 242) because the self-identity of the Dalits which has been crushed, through this type of literature efforts are being made to regain the lost identity.

**Conclusion:** In the light of the books on the theoretical dimensions of Dalit feminism by Sarmila Rege, Gopal Guru and Sharankumar Limbale it can thus be inferred that Dalit feminism is fundamentally about rebelling against the dominance of hegemonic castes and oppressive male gender, struggling for equal opportunities and asserting their basic human rights to live with human dignity. All these theorists commonly assert the relevance of education as a most effective tool for empowerment and emancipation of Dalit women because only through education it can be possible for Dalit women to realize that they are in no way inferior to the other gender or the other castes. Dalit feminism becomes synonymous with confronting stereotypical negative images that have been forcefully implanted on Dalit women and reinventing their identities as an efficient human being who are as capable of achieving things in life as any other human being, notwithstanding their gender and caste.

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**4218 | Nishu Chawla    Understanding The Conceptual Framework Of Dalit Feminism In The Light Of Selected Works By Prominent Theorists Of Dalit Literature**

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