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Intersectionality of Caste, Class, and Gender: A Comparative Study of Urmila Pawar and Shashi Deshpande

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Abstract

This study explores the intersection of caste, class, and gender in Indian feminist literature through a comparative analysis of the works of Urmila Pawar and Shashi Deshpande. Grounded in the theoretical framework of intersectionality, the paper examines how multiple axes of identity shape women's lived experiences and narratives. While Pawar's writings foreground the structural realities of caste-based oppression intertwined with gender and economic marginalization, Deshpande's works primarily focus on gender dynamics within an urban, middle-class context. The study highlights significant differences in their thematic concerns, narrative styles, and forms of resistance, revealing the limitations of a singular feminist framework. By integrating perspectives from Dalit feminism, poststructuralist feminism, and standpoint theory, the research emphasizes the need for a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of women's experiences in India. The findings demonstrate that intersectionality is essential for capturing the complexity of social inequalities and for expanding the scope of feminist literary criticism.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Dalit Feminism, Feminist Literary Criticism, Identity and Resistance

Introduction

The discourse of feminist literature in India has evolved significantly over the past few decades, reflecting diverse experiences shaped by social hierarchies such as caste, class, and gender. While early feminist writings primarily focused on gender-based oppression within patriarchal structures, contemporary scholarship emphasizes the need to examine how multiple identities intersect to produce layered forms of marginalization. The concept of intersectionality, first articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, highlights how systems of power such as caste, class, and gender do not operate independently but interact to shape complex lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1989). In the Indian context, intersectionality acquires particular significance due to the deeply entrenched caste system, which continues to influence social, economic, and cultural relations. Dalit feminist scholars argue that mainstream Indian feminism has often overlooked caste as a critical axis of oppression, thereby marginalizing the voices of Dalit women (Rege, 1998). Dalit women experience what is often described as "triple marginalization," where caste, class, and gender intersect to create unique forms of exclusion and discrimination (Paik, 2014). Literature, in this regard, serves as a powerful medium for articulating these marginalized voices and challenging dominant narratives.

The works of Urmila Pawar and Shashi Deshpande offer a compelling ground for exploring intersectionality within Indian feminist writing. Pawar, a prominent Dalit feminist writer, vividly portrays the harsh realities of caste oppression intertwined with gender and economic struggles in her autobiographical work *The Weave of My Life*. Her narrative foregrounds lived experiences of untouchability, poverty, and systemic discrimination, thereby contributing to the discourse of Dalit feminism. In contrast, Deshpande's writings, situated largely within the urban middle-class milieu, focus on women's struggles with identity, autonomy, and patriarchy, often without explicitly foregrounding caste as a central concern.

This divergence between Dalit and mainstream feminist narratives highlights the necessity of a comparative analysis. While Deshpande addresses issues of gender inequality within familial and societal structures, Pawar's work exposes deeper structural inequalities rooted in caste hierarchies. Such a comparison not only reveals the limitations of a singular feminist framework but also underscores the importance of incorporating intersectional perspectives to understand the varied realities of women in India.

Therefore, this study seeks to examine the intersection of caste, class, and gender in the works of Pawar and Deshpande through a comparative lens. By employing intersectionality as a theoretical framework, the paper aims to analyze how different social locations shape women's experiences, identities, and forms of resistance. The study contributes to the broader discourse of feminist literary criticism by emphasizing the need for a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of women's narratives in the Indian context.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and comparative research design to analyze the literary works of Urmila Pawar and Shashi Deshpande. It follows an interpretive and analytical approach, focusing on textual analysis of narratives. The research is based on secondary data, including primary texts, scholarly articles, books, and critical essays on feminist theory and Dalit literature. A comparative textual analysis is employed to examine the representation of caste, class, and gender, with particular attention to themes such as identity formation, patriarchy, economic conditions, and resistance. The study is guided by intersectionality, Dalit feminism, poststructuralist feminism, and standpoint theory, while thematic analysis is used to identify patterns, similarities, and differences, enabling a deeper understanding of intersectional experiences.

Review of Literature

The intersection of caste, class, and gender has emerged as a critical area of inquiry in Indian feminist scholarship, particularly with the growing recognition that women's experiences cannot be understood through a singular axis of identity. Early feminist writings in India largely emphasized patriarchy as a universal structure of oppression; however, later critiques highlighted the limitations of such an approach in addressing the lived realities of marginalized women, especially those from Dalit communities.

Scholars such as Gopal Guru argue that Dalit women's experiences are qualitatively different from those of upper-caste women due to the combined effects of caste-based discrimination and gender subordination. Guru (1995) emphasizes that mainstream feminism often fails to capture the

specificity of Dalit women's oppression, thereby necessitating a distinct Dalit feminist perspective. Similarly, Sharmila Rege expands this argument by advocating for a "Dalit feminist standpoint," which centers the voices and experiences of Dalit women as epistemologically significant in understanding social inequalities (Rege, 2006). Literary studies have increasingly explored Dalit autobiographies as powerful narratives of resistance and identity formation. Eleanor Zelliot highlights that Dalit life writing serves not only as personal testimony but also as a collective political assertion against caste oppression (Zelliot, 2001). In this context, Urmila Pawar's autobiographical work has received significant scholarly attention for its vivid depiction of intersectional marginalization. Studies suggest that Pawar's narrative articulates the everyday struggles of Dalit women, including labor exploitation, social exclusion, and the quest for dignity, thereby contributing to a broader discourse of resistance literature.

On the other hand, feminist literary criticism of Shashi Deshpande has primarily focused on themes of identity, autonomy, and psychological conflict within the domestic sphere. Critics note that Deshpande's protagonists often grapple with issues such as marital discord, selfhood, and societal expectations, reflecting the concerns of urban, educated, middle-class women (Jain, 1998). While her works provide valuable insights into gender-based oppression, scholars argue that they do not sufficiently engage with caste as a structural determinant of inequality, thereby limiting their intersectional scope. The concept of class has also been examined in relation to women's experiences in Indian literature. Nivedita Menon contends that class intersects with gender in complex ways, influencing access to education, employment, and social mobility (Menon, 2012). In Dalit narratives, class is often inseparable from caste, as economic deprivation is closely tied to caste-based exclusion. This contrasts with mainstream feminist texts, where class is frequently depicted in terms of middle-class aspirations and constraints rather than structural deprivation.

Furthermore, postcolonial feminist scholars have emphasized the importance of contextualizing women's experiences within broader socio-cultural and historical frameworks. Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiques the homogenization of "Third World women" and calls for a more nuanced understanding of differences based on race, class, and culture (Mohanty, 2003). This perspective is particularly relevant in comparative studies, as it underscores the need to recognize diversity within feminist discourse rather than assuming a universal female experience. Despite the growing body of literature on Dalit feminism and mainstream feminist writing, there

remains a notable gap in comparative studies that systematically analyze the intersection of caste, class, and gender across different literary traditions. While individual analyses of Pawar and Deshpande exist, limited research has been conducted to juxtapose their works within an intersectional framework. This study seeks to address this gap by offering a comparative analysis that highlights both convergences and divergences in their representation of women's experiences.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a multidimensional theoretical framework to analyze the intersection of caste, class, and gender in the selected literary works. By integrating intersectionality, Dalit feminism, poststructuralist feminism, and standpoint theory, the framework enables a comprehensive understanding of how layered identities and power structures shape women's experiences and narratives.

1. Intersectionality and the Matrix of Domination

Intersectionality serves as the central analytical lens for this study, emphasizing that social categories such as caste, class, and gender are interconnected and mutually constitutive. Rather than functioning independently, these structures interact to produce complex and overlapping forms of oppression. Patricia Hill Collins conceptualizes this dynamic as a "matrix of domination," where individuals simultaneously experience privilege and marginalization depending on their social location (Collins, 2000). In the Indian context, this framework is particularly significant as caste operates alongside class and gender to structure social hierarchies. Applying intersectionality allows this study to move beyond a single-axis analysis and instead examine how multiple forms of inequality converge in shaping the lived realities of women in both Dalit and mainstream narratives.

2. Dalit Feminism and Structural Marginalization

Dalit feminism provides a critical lens to foreground the specific experiences of Dalit women, who face compounded oppression due to caste-based discrimination and patriarchy. This framework challenges the universality of mainstream feminist discourse by emphasizing the socio-historical realities of caste exclusion. Ruth Manorama argues that Dalit women occupy a distinct position within the social hierarchy, experiencing systemic marginalization that cannot be adequately explained through gender alone (Manorama, 2010). Dalit feminist thought thus highlights issues such as social exclusion, economic

deprivation, and violence, which are deeply embedded in caste structures. In this study, Dalit feminism is particularly relevant for analyzing Urmila Pawar's work, where narratives of oppression are rooted in both caste identity and gendered experiences, offering a critique of dominant social structures.

3. Poststructuralist Feminism and Identity Construction

Poststructuralist feminism contributes to this study by questioning essentialist notions of identity and emphasizing the fluid and socially constructed nature of gender. Judith Butler introduces the concept of gender performativity, suggesting that gender is not an innate attribute but a repeated performance shaped by cultural norms and discursive practices (Butler, 1990). This perspective is particularly useful in analyzing the works of Shashi Deshpande, where female characters often negotiate their identities within the constraints of societal expectations. It enables an exploration of how gender roles are constructed, internalized, and resisted, thereby highlighting the dynamic nature of identity formation.

4. Standpoint Theory and Marginalized Knowledge

Standpoint theory offers an epistemological foundation for privileging the voices of marginalized groups in the production of knowledge. Sandra Harding argues that knowledge emerging from marginalized experiences provides a more critical and comprehensive understanding of social realities (Harding, 1991). This framework is particularly relevant for analyzing autobiographical and experiential narratives, such as those of Dalit women writers. By centering lived experiences, standpoint theory challenges dominant narratives and reveals hidden dimensions of social inequality. In this study, it supports the analysis of how marginalized voices articulate resistance and agency through literature.

5. Integrative Framework for Comparative Analysis

The integration of these theoretical perspectives allows for a holistic analysis of the selected texts. Intersectionality and Dalit feminism provide insights into structural inequalities, while poststructuralist feminism and standpoint theory facilitate an understanding of identity formation and experiential knowledge. Together, these frameworks enable a comparative examination of how caste, class, and gender intersect differently in the works of Urmila Pawar and Shashi Deshpande. This integrative approach

not only highlights the diversity of women's experiences but also underscores the need for a more inclusive and context-sensitive feminist literary criticism.

Analysis & Discussion

This section presents a comparative analysis of the selected works of Urmila Pawar and Shashi Deshpande, focusing on the intersection of caste, class, and gender. The discussion highlights how each author constructs women's experiences within distinct socio-cultural contexts, revealing both convergences and divergences in their feminist perspectives.

1. Representation of Caste

Caste emerges as a central and defining element in Pawar's narrative, shaping every aspect of social existence. Her autobiographical writing vividly documents experiences of untouchability, social exclusion, and institutional discrimination. Caste is not merely a background condition but a pervasive force that determines access to resources, dignity, and opportunities. Pawar's narrative voice reflects a collective experience, emphasizing how caste-based oppression is deeply embedded in everyday life. In contrast, caste remains largely implicit or peripheral in Deshpande's works. Her narratives are situated within an urban, middle-class milieu where caste does not appear as an overt determinant of identity or conflict. Instead, social hierarchies are often subsumed under broader concerns of gender and family dynamics. This absence or subtle treatment of caste reflects the limitations of mainstream feminist discourse, which tends to universalize women's experiences without adequately addressing caste-based inequalities. Thus, while Pawar foregrounds caste as a structural reality, Deshpande's relative silence on the issue highlights a significant divergence in their thematic concerns and socio-political positioning.

2. Class and Economic Conditions

Class plays a crucial role in shaping the lived experiences of women in both authors' works, though it operates differently within their narratives. In Pawar's writing, class is inseparable from caste, with economic deprivation closely linked to social exclusion. Her depiction of poverty, labor-intensive work, and limited access to education underscores the material dimensions of marginalization. Economic struggles are not portrayed as individual hardships but as systemic conditions rooted in caste hierarchies. On the other hand, Deshpande's works reflect the concerns of the urban middle class, where economic stability is relatively assured. Her characters often grapple

with issues such as career choices, domestic responsibilities, and emotional fulfillment rather than survival. Class, in this context, shapes aspirations and constraints within a framework of relative privilege. The contrast between the two authors illustrates how class intersects with caste to produce varying degrees of vulnerability and agency, thereby reinforcing the need for an intersectional analysis.

3. Gender and Patriarchy

Both Pawar and Deshpande critically engage with patriarchy, yet their representations differ significantly in scope and intensity. Pawar portrays patriarchy as intertwined with caste oppression, resulting in a dual or even triple burden on Dalit women. Gender-based violence, restricted mobility, and limited autonomy are compounded by caste-based discrimination, creating a more oppressive social environment. Deshpande, in contrast, focuses on the subtler manifestations of patriarchy within familial and marital relationships. Her narratives explore themes of emotional neglect, identity crisis, and the struggle for self-expression. Patriarchy is depicted as a pervasive but often invisible force that shapes women's roles and expectations within the domestic sphere. While both authors critique patriarchal structures, Pawar's work highlights structural and systemic oppression, whereas Deshpande's narratives emphasize psychological and interpersonal dimensions of gender inequality.

4. Intersectionality and Identity Formation

The intersection of caste, class, and gender plays a crucial role in shaping identity formation in both authors' works. In Pawar's narrative, identity is collective and politically charged, rooted in shared experiences of marginalization and resistance. Her writing reflects a strong sense of community and solidarity, where personal experiences are inseparable from broader social struggles. In contrast, Deshpande's characters often engage in introspective journeys of self-discovery, negotiating their identities within the constraints of societal expectations. Identity is portrayed as fluid and evolving, shaped by personal choices and emotional conflicts rather than collective social positioning. This divergence highlights two distinct modes of identity formation: one grounded in collective resistance and social activism, and the other centered on individual self-realization and autonomy.

5. Resistance and Agency

Resistance emerges as a key theme in both authors' works, though it takes different forms. In Pawar's narrative, resistance is explicit,

collective, and often linked to social movements and political consciousness. Education, activism, and community engagement are portrayed as tools for challenging caste and gender oppression. Her writing embodies a transformative vision aimed at social change and empowerment. Deshpande's portrayal of resistance, on the other hand, is more subtle and individualized. Her characters often resist patriarchal norms through personal decisions, emotional resilience, and acts of self-assertion. Rather than overt rebellion, resistance is depicted as a process of negotiation and self-awareness within existing social structures. The contrast between collective and individual forms of resistance underscores the influence of social

location on the possibilities and expressions of agency.

Comparative Analysis

The comparative analysis of the works of Urmila Pawar and Shashi Deshpande reveals significant differences in their thematic focus, ideological positioning, and representation of women's experiences. While both authors contribute to feminist discourse, their narratives emerge from distinct socio-cultural locations, shaping their treatment of caste, class, and gender. To provide a clearer and more structured understanding of these differences and similarities, the key dimensions of comparison are summarized in the table below.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Feminist Perspectives in the Works of Urmila Pawar and Shashi Deshpande

Dimension	Urmila Pawar	Shashi Deshpande
Feminist Perspective	Rooted in Dalit feminism; emphasizes intersection of caste, class, and gender	Aligned with mainstream feminism; primarily focuses on gender issues
Ideological Positioning	Politically engaged; challenges structural inequalities	Reformist and introspective; critiques patriarchy within social norms
Centrality of Caste	Caste is central and explicitly addressed as a system of oppression	Caste is largely implicit or absent in narratives
Class Representation	Depicts poverty, labor, and economic marginalization linked with caste	Focuses on urban middle-class life with relative economic stability
Material Conditions	Highlights survival struggles, lack of access to resources, and systemic deprivation	Emphasizes emotional and psychological challenges rather than economic hardship
Gender and Patriarchy	Gender oppression intertwined with caste; reflects multiple layers of marginalization	Focuses on domestic patriarchy, identity crisis, and gender roles
Nature of Oppression	Structural, systemic, and collective	Personal, relational, and psychological
Identity Formation	Collective identity rooted in shared experiences of marginalization	Individual identity shaped by personal reflection and self-discovery
Voice and Narrative Style	Testimonial, experiential, and community-oriented	Introspective, narrative-driven, and character-focused
Resistance and Agency	Collective resistance through activism, education, and social movements	Individual resistance through personal choices and self-assertion
Scope of Feminist Discourse	Broad and intersectional; includes caste, class, and gender	Relatively narrow; primarily centered on gender
Overall Contribution	Expands feminist discourse by incorporating marginalized voices and structural critique	Enriches feminist literature through exploration of psychological and emotional dimensions

The above table highlights the fundamental contrasts between the two authors, particularly in their engagement with intersectionality. Urmila Pawar presents a more comprehensive and structurally grounded analysis of oppression, where caste, class, and gender are deeply interconnected. Her work reflects collective experiences and emphasizes resistance through social awareness and activism. In contrast, Shashi Deshpande focuses primarily on gender within a middle-class context, emphasizing individual struggles related to identity, autonomy, and emotional conflict. While her narratives provide valuable insights into the

psychological dimensions of patriarchy, they do not fully address the structural inequalities associated with caste.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the works of Urmila Pawar and Shashi Deshpande highlights the diverse realities of women shaped by their social locations. The study reveals that while Deshpande's narratives provide valuable insights into gender-based oppression within a middle-class framework, they do not fully address the structural dimensions of caste. In contrast, Pawar's writings

offer a more comprehensive and intersectional perspective by foregrounding the interconnected nature of caste, class, and gender. The findings underscore that feminist discourse in India cannot be understood through a single-axis framework. Instead, an intersectional approach is essential to capture the complexity of women's experiences, particularly those of marginalized communities. The study contributes to feminist literary criticism by advocating for the inclusion of diverse voices and emphasizing the importance of structural analysis alongside individual experiences. Ultimately, it calls for a more inclusive and context-sensitive feminist framework that acknowledges and addresses multiple forms of oppression.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper

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