Alisama’s Curse

For you
It may be surprising
Ridiculous
Irritating
But
I am a new question

(Vijayasree qtd. in Bharathi 217) ¹

Madduri Vijaysree’s bold proclamation of her ‘self’ through these above-quoted lines marks the fearless endeavour of Dalit women to assert their identity. Despite her exclusion from the Dalit liberation struggle and the mainstream women’s movement, Dalit woman who is described by Ruth Manorama as “‘the thrice alienated’, by class, patriarchy and caste” (Dietrich 69) ² emerges as a rebel to write her history of resistance. My attempt in this chapter is to capture this spirit of defiance shown by these women by interpreting Dalit women’s literature- especially their life-
narratives from a feminist point of view. The task certainly requires an intense theoretical engagement with the precepts of feminism which should be analyzed from the angle of standpoint theory as well as from the perspectives of the African-American and the Third world women. Here, I would specifically focus on the nature of Afro-American feminist criticism as it will be extremely relevant to understand the significance of formulating a Dalit feminist aesthetic tradition. I will also discuss standpoint theory and the tenets of Third World Feminism which are crucial to comprehend Dalit feminism and its claim for creating a separate space of its own.

We must remember that the purpose of Dalit women’s literature is not to evoke pity from the readers. This literary endeavour does not draw a miserable picture of Dalit community in order to make readers (mostly upper-caste readers) sympathize with Dalit cause; nor it wants to receive favors bestowed upon them from a distance. Dalit women’s writings are not just sepia-toned annals of mute suffering. They are, rather, imbued with feminist fervor and are pregnant with the potentiality of initiating a new genre of resistance literature within Indian literary milieu. In my previous chapter, I have already discussed how Dalit women’s issues remain largely unrepresented in the social discourse as no social movement (be it Peasant Movement, Dalit Liberation Struggle or Women’s Movement) bothers to launch campaigns around the problems of Dalit women who stand at the intersection of caste, class and gender. However, Dalit women’s organizations as well as the literary writings produced by Dalit women pose a challenge to this ‘amnesia’ of the leaders of these so-called alternative movements. Dalit women’s literature which is chiefly subversive in nature shows why it can be aptly termed as the critique of the critique. It not only lashes its vitriolic rhetoric against the practice of caste discrimination and gender exploitation, but also directs its attack on Dalit patriarchy with equal vehemence. Challapalli Swaroopa Rani questions a Dalit woman’s fate of double subordination while in the poem *Mankena Flower* she asks:
Caught in the brambles
I am a struggling palapitta
Whichever way I move
all the thorns prick me alone…
These are not thorns of today…
They are shackles of slavery
Placed around me from generations…
Between the devil and the deep sea
danger always hisses about me
When have I really lived
my life as myself…?

(Rani/ Uma and Sridhar 93-97)

The angst voiced by Rani is echoed in the form of a sharp resistance in Urmila Pawar’s autobiography- The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman’s Memoirs. Pawar narrates how her mother confronted her upper-caste Guruji (Teacher) for his ill treatment towards little Urmila. In Pawar’s words:

Aaye sprang up like a female cobra. Then patting the pleats of her sari straight, she called out from the courtyard, ‘Hey you, Guruji, wait a moment!’… ‘My girl studies in your class, Guruji! What did she do today that you beat her up so much?’ … ‘…Guruji, you are so educated and yet you speak so foolishly? Look, I am a widow; my life is ruined. Yet I sit here, under this tree and work. Why? Because I want education for my children so that their future will be better. And you treat my girl like this? How dare you?’… ‘Let me see you laying even a finger on my girl again and I’ll show you! Let me see how you can pass this road if you do so.’

(Pawar 68-69)
The courage to challenge what is hitherto deemed as sacrosanct makes Urmila’s mother stand apart from the host of tear-swept, sacrificing mother-figures usually portrayed by most of the non-Dalit writers as well as Dalit male authors. While the above-quoted passage exhibits a strong note of resistance, the subsequent reflection by Urmila Pawar marks the inception of a new consciousness that spurs Dalit women to believe in their own worth. In three sentences, Pawar brilliantly captures the firm determination of Dalit women to assert their identity as she writes:

Guruji did not beat me again. I started going to school on time. And most important of all, I started considering my mother a great support. (Pawar 69)

Interestingly enough, this loud voice of protest remains equally strong when it comes to denounce the politics of Dalit patriarchy. Literature produced by Dalit women writers performs a valiant task by vividly recording the trauma inflicted by the men of their own community. What is important is that these writers instead of being overpowered with fear and shame openly criticize the patriarchal practices within their own homes that have relegated them to an inferior status. Eminent writer Pradnya Lokhande, in an interview, exposes the fundamental structure of male domination that exists in Dalit households. Lokhande says:

Today, the Dalit man’s perception of, and attitude towards, women is much the same as any other man’s. He may be involved in a social struggle for his caste, but I do know that Dalit women who have gained any prominence in any field today face a lot of oppression in their own homes from their own men…if these women cannot move beyond a certain position it is because most of their energies are expended in their homes and for their families…

(Salvi 186)
She cites the example of her own family where her worth is usually measured in terms of her feminine roles prescribed by patriarchy. She candidly reveals in her interview,

…after having achieved a certain prominence in the literary world, little accusations have begun—such as, I don’t give enough time and attention to my home and child. For instance, if my little son doesn’t do well enough in school it’s because I had to attend a particular seminar or conference when I should have been helping him with his studies! It’s very difficult for families to understand the totality of a woman—especially a woman writer—and appreciate the coexistence of a variety of dimensions to her life with which she is eternally struggling.

(Salvi 186) 

A similar note is heard in Urmila Pawar’s autobiography where Pawar describes the anger and frustration of her husband. His attitude, in her words, was “full of contradictions.”(Pawar 246) She writes:

On the one hand, he was proud of my writing; he admitted as much to his friends and relatives. But on the other, he immensely resented my being recognized as a writer, my speaking in public programmes and my emerging as a figure in the public domain.

(Pawar 246)

Her words bring out the precarious position of an educated Dalit woman who despite her attempts to perform domestic duties, is often accused of not being an ideal wife and a good mother. This becomes explicit in the behavior of her husband as Urmila narrates the situation of her household.

I was ready to do anything he wanted, just to make him happy….But he accused me, ‘Leave alone being an ideal wife, you are not even a
good one!’ Later on he began saying that I was far from being a good mother as well! I failed to understand what exactly he wanted from me and became miserable. Gradually it became clear to me that everything that gave me an independent identity—my writing, which was getting published, my education, my participation in public programmes—irritated Mr. Pawar no end. Gradually, he began to be full of resentment.

(Pawar 246) 11

It is not difficult to understand the impact that this image of ‘ideal’ woman creates within Dalit households in a rural setting. In her autobiography, Urmila Pawar delineates the daily chores of a rural Dalit woman who is expected to perform a series of ‘natural’ tasks as part of her feminine roles.

In an apparently matter-of-fact tone she narrates:

The day began very early for women, at four o’clock in the morning. …they had to fetch water from the well for everybody in the house…Then they cleaned the pots and plates used the previous night and cooked for the whole house. They breakfasted with their men folk and went with them to work in the fields….After lunch they worked in the fields once again and returned home in the evening, just half an hour earlier than their men. They lit the stove under an earthen pot, which they had filled up in the morning, to keep the hot bath water ready for their men, returning from the fields. After heating the bath water, they began preparations for the evening meals. The spices had to be pounded and grains ground. …Even as they worked ceaselessly on these tasks, the men arrived, bathed and sat smoking leisurely in the verandah; some of them drinking liquor….After everybody in the house had eaten, they ate a few morsels from the leftovers. …The work was still not over. After the children went to sleep, they sat down and massaged the heads and feet of their husbands with oil. By the time they lay down in bed, their backs would be bent like a bow
because of the hard work. ….This was not an isolated picture of an unusual household. It was representative of the way things were in most of our households. …In addition, the woman had to behave as if she were a deaf and dumb creature.

(Pawar 247)  

However, the most noteworthy aspect of such a long and detailed narration of the usual ordeal of Dalit women is that it does not merely depict the pain, but also at the same time questions the very image of ideal femininity carefully constructed by this patriarchal social structure. Pawar informs how her association with women’s organizations helped her understand the nature of politics that is being played to keep women in perpetual subjugation. Her courage and confidence are reflected through her words as she asserts:

The women’s movement had given me great strength to perceive every man and woman as an equal individual. It had taught me to relate to them freely, without any prejudice whatsoever!

(Pawar 248)  

Such a spirit of resistance to patriarchal ideology is also noticed in Pradnya Lokhande’s voice as she says:

What never fails to astonish me is that men get married with the very clear idea that they want their wives to be different, not run of the mill housewives, but once married, they find it difficult to accept the very qualities that make their wives different.

(Salvi 186-7)  

This fearless spirit of Dalit women that openly denounces the domination of the men of their own communities is observed also in the life-narratives of Baby Kamble and Shantabai Krishnaji Kamble.
In her autobiography, Baby Kamble narrated the harrowing experience of torture that Dalit women were subjected to endure within their homes. Despite their freedom to work outside, these Dalit women’s movements were severely monitored by the men of their communities. The proof of this is found in Baby Kamble’s words as she unequivocally says, “My father had caged my mother like a maina bird while he wasted in charity the wealth that he had earned.” (Rege 196) Shantabai Krishnaji Kamble’s autobiography *Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha* which was written in Marathi and first serialized in Purva magazine in 1983 not only documents the ordeal of their entire Dalit community but also raises the issue of Dalit women’s multiple subordinations. What is worth mentioning here is that this life-narrative does not fail to record the tone of defiance uttered by such illiterate Dalit woman as Shantabai’s mother who stood by her daughters while they were not treated well in their in-laws’ places. The incident of Shantabai’s niece Gomi who had to come back to her parents’ home proves this fact. Shantabai’s mother firmly supported Gomi and “…refused to send her, saying that her daughter looked terrible and harassed and whatever the consequences they would not send her back. Her husband returned with a few men of his village but the mother was adamant.” (Rege 159) This incidence shows the resoluteness of Dalit women whose emotional strength often remains unrecognized by the dominant discourse as well as the ‘mainstream’ Dalit movement. Bama in an interview with Mangai focuses on this indomitable nature of Dalit women which she feels she must enunciate in her writings. “I really feel”, she tells Mangai, “that I should underline their resistance rather than their victimhood…” (Mangai 117) However, we should not jump to an abrupt conclusion about the rebellious nature of all Dalit women since several instances of regressive attitude prevalent amongst the women folk of Dalit communities can be cited to nullify such a tall claim. In my previous chapter, I have already quoted excerpts from life-narratives that show how a large number of Dalit women who has internalized patriarchal ideologies turns to be the agents for perpetuating the principles of male domination. Another reference to Janabai Kachru Girhe’s life-
narrative *Marankala* (written in Marathi and published in 1992) further supports this view. Janabai was the only child of her parents and hence she and her family had to be humiliated by the people of their community. “People in the pala looked down upon Janabai and her mother; calling them ill-fated and inauspicious for there was no male child in their family.” (Rege 310-311) The nomadic Gopal community to which Janabai belonged was severely critical of her father’s decision to enroll her in a school. They believed that an educated girl would bring shame to the community. Even Janabai’s mother and grandmother initially stood against her education though her father firmly resisted all such attempts of preventing the girl from getting educated. But on the mundane level of daily existence, Janabai had to put up with plenty of material obstacles and psychological torture. She recalls:

> The gopal women often sang dirty songs when I was on my way to school. They also passed rude comments…they would sing,

> O friend, I’ve a daughter, the grace of my home  
> Or is it a *kolhateen* 19, standing in the market?  
> O friend, see my house, it’s so fragrant  
> Or is it the mang women, the bitches so vagrant  
> A daughter is born; in a casket you should keep her  
> But never, O friend never, let her breathe the open air.  
> (Rege 312) 20

However, fortunately, Janabai decided to continue with her education despite such harsh criticism. She confesses, “When I heard them singing like this, I felt terribly hurt. But I walked on resolutely.” (Rege 312) This determination to move forward is a result of the awareness of the emancipating potential of education—an ideal which was chiefly propagated by Mahatma Jotiba Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. It is this realization that has inspired many Dalit women to fight against
untouchability, poverty, patriarchy and such other oppressive social categories that keep them perpetually trapped within multiple layers of subordination. A distinct manifestation of Dalit women’s oppositional consciousness is found in Kumud Pawde’s life-narrative Antasphot as she says:

And if the attitude is to oppress, it has to be resisted. It may be displayed through class or through caste. There is no alternative but to resist it. If we ourselves are oppressing and exploiting somebody, our being dalits does not justify it. That will also have to be resisted.

(Rege 233) 22

While resistance is the key word, nothing is spared from the virulent attack of Dalit women activists and writers. It is, therefore, justly expected that the discriminatory practices of upper caste women are also severely criticized by them. Though untouchability in general is a major issue in Dalit literature, yet the women authors especially those who wrote life-narratives have made a more nuanced discussion of the problem by referring to experiences of segregation in the hands of their upper caste counterparts. Shantabai Krishnaji Kamble, in her autobiography, narrates the incidence of building a successful resistance to the glass- bangle seller Sita Kasarin (woman of Kasar caste) who used to change into sackcloth before sliding the bangles into the hands of a lower caste woman. After having endured this humiliation, Shantabai spread the news in her community which resulted in a steady decrease in Sita’s clientele. What followed subsequently was nothing less than a revolution. An excerpt from Shantabai’s autobiography makes it clearer:

“Bai, why don’t you come to us for bangles?”

I said to her, “You get polluted by our touch so you wear sackcloth before sliding bangles onto our hands so we don’t come to you.”
Then Sita said, “Bai, please do not keep these things in mind. Henceforth I will not wear sackcloth while dealing with women from your samaj.”

She had to do this to keep her customers.”

(Rege 190)

A violent and stronger note of resistance is heard in Baby Kamble’s voice as she narrates in her autobiography the traumatic experiences of discrimination that she and other Dalit girls had to undergo in schools. The upper caste girls used to hurl abusive words, throw stones and mud at them and obstruct their path to the water-tap. But interestingly enough, Baby Kamble and her friends did not accept this silently. They, in return used to beat up the savarna (high caste) girls until they ran for their lives. (Rege 222)

Similarly, a bold denial of the sneering attitude of upper caste women is heard in Kumud Pawde’s words as she narrates her experience of attending a thread ceremony of a friend’s brother. While one of the women at the gathering taunted her by saying that she “would not be able to make sense of these chants and that she had better just take a laddu (sweet) and leave the place”, she fired back, “Yuck, do you take me to be a beggar that you are giving me this laddu? Is my being here and watching the ceremony harming anyone?” (Rege 243)

These and such other instances of resistance prove the amount of self-respect that Dalit women have for themselves though on many occasions they extend their sympathy towards high caste women who are forced to live a miserable life within their houses because of the restrictive regulations imposed by Brahmanical patriarchy. A good example of this camaraderie is found in Bama’s Sangati: Events where the apparently rustic, illiterate Dalit women characters feel sorry for the upper caste women who are also ill-treated by their men folk. The remark, “One way or another, it’s all the same. We suffer in one way, they suffer in another” (Bama 111) hints at the overarching presence of patriarchy in the lives of both Dalit and non-Dalit women.
I have already discussed the inadequacy of the Dalit Liberation Struggle and the Women’s Movement in addressing the problems of Dalit women whose social and cultural locations demand a far greater nuanced approach than the ones adopted by these two movements to fight against the authority of the mainstream ideology. Urmila Pawar in her life-narrative has criticized the attitude of the leaders of the Dalit movement of her time since despite their allegiance to the spirit of rebellion against the dominant power structures; these leaders were replicating the same Brahmanical tradition of hegemonic oppression by silencing and/or ignoring the demands of Dalit women. Pawar cited many instances to show that Dalit women’s issues had no place on the agenda of the Dalit struggle. (Pawar 260)  

She referred to her experiences of being humiliated and sidelined by male Dalit leaders with whom she shared same podiums in different programmes. On one occasion, while she went as an invited guest to attend a programme organized by a group of Dalit activists, she found herself in an embarrassing situation since the organizers got so busy with an MP that they almost forgot her presence there. She recounts the incidence:

But there was nobody to receive me there except the man whose loudspeaker was hired. So I quietly sat down on a bench outside. For a long time, nobody came and I was bored to death. Then a huge crowd of men arrived with some Member of Parliament, whom they ushered into the hall with great fanfare, with many garlands and flowers. ….I was about to get up and leave when somebody remembered me. …Finally I spoke something on Phule and Ambedkar and left, saying I was getting late. But nobody took any notice of that either.

(Pawar 235)  

According to Urmila, the women activists in the Dalit movement are treated as inferior beings and are shown a similar kind of discriminatory attitude as is often shown to them by their husbands and
other male members in their households. (Pawar 235) 29 Feminist theoretician Chhhaya Datar in her book *The Struggle against Violence* (1993) reveals the initial reluctance of the members of the Republican Party of India (Prakash Ambedkar Group) to start a separate wing for women. However, the male leadership, according to Datar, was forced to accept the significance of women’s power as “a separate power block” when thirty thousand women assembled at the rally at Bhusaval in 1987. (Datar 36) 30 The segregationist behavior of Dalit male leaders has also been pointed out by activist Neelam Gorhe who in spite of being a Brahmin, dedicated herself to the cause of the Dalit and other underprivileged women. According to Gorhe:

> It is significant that Dalit leadership has condemned Hindu religious scripts, particularly *Manusmriti* which justified untouchability, but they never thought of condemning the same text for its perspective on the women’s subordinate position in society.

(Gorhe qtd.in Datar 36-37) 31

Such reflections as these on the hypocrisy of Dalit male leadership lead Datar to conclude that “…on the one hand, there is a tremendous participation of women in the Dalit movement; on the other hand, at the level of leadership there is none.” (Datar 37) 32 As already mentioned in the previous chapter, a similar argument has been professed by Dalit writer-activist Prof. Vimal Thorat who points out at the invisibility of Dalit women in the policy-making committees and questions in an unambiguous manner the nature of gender equality maintained in the Dalit movement. (Thorat, Web)33

Dalit women feel a sense of estrangement not only in the Dalit struggle but also in the mainstream Women’s Movement which is primarily led by upper caste, middle-class, urban educated women. The Women’s Movement in India which curved a distinct niche of its own during
late 1970s and early 80s was chiefly driven by its action-plan of staging protests against the prevalence of violence against women. However, despite launching some inspiring campaigns that focused on issues of rape, dowry and other sexist forms of repression, these movements have largely ignored such significant social categories as caste and religion. The ideological position that inspired the Women’s Movement in India has led it to consider ‘woman’ as a homogenous category and hence it has charted out the course of the movement on the basis of the “collective state of women being oppressed by the fact of their womanhood.” (Rege, “A Dalit Feminist Standpoint” 90) 34 But such a generalization of women’s experiences invariably overlooks some specific issues of Dalit women who in spite of their involvement are, therefore, forced to remain as ‘outsiders’ within the movement. Sharmila Rege voices the anxiety that Urmila Pawar feels over the conspicuous absence of Dalit women in the Indian women’s collective struggle against patriarchy. In her ‘Afterword’ to Pawar’s autobiography, Rege writes:

Women seem to be everywhere and yet the question that troubles her is ‘where is the dalit woman’? Even as the voices of some educated, employed dalit women are just coming to be inscribed in the public sphere, she is anxious that the spectre of globalization has put a question mark on the direction and lines of progress.

(Rege 324) 35

Rege further elaborates on the indifference shown towards Dalit women by upper caste feminist activists who seem reluctant to call informal mixed-group meetings to assess the question of caste. They also appear to be unwilling to learn about the histories of the ‘other’. (Pawar 327) 36 Moreover, the question of caste-prejudice has also complicated the notion of ‘sisterhood’ that is supposed to exist between Dalit and non-Dalit women. Examples of incidents involving caste-based discrimination within the Women’s Movement can be found in the life-narrative written by Baby
Kamble. But what is interesting to note, here, is that despite their vulnerable location within a complex, hierarchical social structure, Dalit women exhibit their agency and build a strong resistance against the practice of segregation. Recalling those days when Dalit women participated in the Ambedkarite Movement and were also allowed to join the women’s organization, Baby Kamble writes:

Rani Lakshmibai had established the first women’s club, Mahila Mandal, in Phaltan….It was only Brahmin women who occupied all the positions in the mandal. The rani sahiba decided to allow Mahar women into this mandal.

(Kamble 132) 37

However, a little later Kamble openly derides the discriminatory attitude of the upper caste women in the organization and praises the courageous efforts of a non-descript Mahar woman Thakubai who stepped forward to challenge the domination of the high caste. Addressing the Rani Sahiba, Thakubai said,

Your women are not allowing our women to sit on the chairs. Our Ambedkar has told us to demand our rights. I am going to forcefully remove your women from the chairs and seat my women there.

(Kamble 133)38

Thakubai’s resistance underscores the fact that Ambedkar’s philosophy certainly instilled enthusiasm among Dalit women and made them conscious of their rights and privileges. This tradition of resistance resurfaced in the 1980s and 90s and this time it refused to be overshadowed by any wider struggle against oppression. It is a matter of irony and shame that Dalit women’s voices were
silenced during 1970s- a time when two major anti-establishment movements namely the Dalit Liberation Struggle and the Women’s Movement were strengthening the foundation of a counter-hegemonic discourse in India by propagating the rhetoric of subaltern resistance. Invariably, critic like Sharmila Rege questions this silence of Dalit women and asks “‘Why is this different voice of the dalit women’ inaudible in the two major new social movements of the 1970s, namely the dalit movement and the women’s?’” (Rege, “Dalit Women Talk Differently” 42) 39 The answer to this question may be found in the priorities and the characteristics of these two movements. While Dalit Panthers leadership despite their progressive ideology confined Dalit women in the roles of ‘mother’ and ‘victimized sexual being’ (Rege, “Dalit Women Talk Differently” 42) 40; the Women’s Movement insisting upon the issues of violence on women and work related exploitation, conveniently overlooked the problems encountered by a woman because of her low caste identity. As a result, the exclusion of Dalit women from the two major political and cultural movements of the 70s led to the complete erasure of their presence from the social discourse of the time. Neither the Dalit struggle nor the ‘mainstream’ Indian feminist movement focused on the impact of multiple layers of oppression that Dalit women are ‘destined’ to suffer because of their seemingly unalterable caste and gender identities. Moreover, the politics of categorizing Dalits and women as two distinctly separate homogenous groups rendered Dalit women invisible and resulted in the propagation of such assumptions that all Dalits are male and all women are savarna (high caste). (Rege, “Dalit Women Talk Differently” 42) 41 Interestingly enough, a similar notion is also found in the discourse of black feminism where the process of homogenizing such categories as race and gender relegate black women to the periphery.

However, having realized the precariousness of being located at the intersection of two pioneering anti-establishment movements of 1970s, Dalit feminists in the following decades started
demanding a place of their own. They understood the importance of raising their own voices instead of allowing others (Dalit men and upper caste women and men) to speak on their behalf. According to scholar Pranjali Bandhu, Dalit women at this juncture were determined to put into action Dr. Ambedkar’s dictum, “(M)any people like to be our bosses, we don’t anymore like to be slaves.” (Bandhu 113) 42

The notion that the myriad aspects of Dalit women’s oppression cannot be explained merely by implementing fundamental principles of gender discrimination started gaining prominence in the discourse of Dalit feminism. An apt reflection of it is found in the arguments enunciated in the manifesto of the Alisamma Women’s Collective. Emphasizing on the importance of ‘difference’, the writers of this manifesto write:

We, dalit women, therefore request you to recognize that it is not just male domination but casteist patriarchy which is at work in India. We ask you to rethink. We want you to acknowledge the political importance of ‘difference’ (i.e. heterogeneity) that exists among Indian women. That you are made, whereas we are mutilated. You are put on a pedestal, whereas we are thrown into fields to work day and night. You are made Satis, we are made harlots…Recognition of difference is fundamental to any democratic politics. Our subordinate positions are constituted and represented differently according to our differential locations within casteist patriarchal relations of power.

(Raman, et al. Web) 43

The idea of ‘difference’ propelled by the heterogeneity of the category called ‘woman’ reinforces the necessity for developing a separate set of analytical tools to understand the perspectives of Dalit women. A similar argument is heard in Vidyut Bhagwat’s voice as she says:

…those women born in Dalit castes will also have to produce their own critical interpretations of the issues prioratised(sic) by the other feminists in India like securing control over body, sexuality, fertility
and labour and the need to practice the slogan of ‘personal is political.’

(Bhagwat 6)

Bhagwat reminds us of the shortcomings of following a Brahmanical feminist method of analysis to understand the institutions of marriage and family as patriarchal structures. According to her, “women from Devdasi or Kolhati castes might find marriage and the legitimacy that is granted through it as a liberating space from their trapped situation.” (Bhagwat 6) This adds an interesting dimension to the discussion of Dalit women’s agency vis-à-vis the subject of heterogeneity. The creation of Dalit feminism as an alternative world-view and its systematic implementation through ideological as well as socio-political practices can enable Dalit women to assert their distinct identity and help their separate existence be recognized. Otherwise, as Bhagwat warns, “‘all women’ coming together will end in privileging and empowering high-caste Hindu women and degrading women from dalit, muslim and other minority communities.” (Bhagwat 7) Her belief that the new consciousness of Dalit women will take the entire Indian society to a new direction is explicitly stated as she says:

By using the term Dalit women we are trying to say that if women from dalit castes and of dalit consciousness create a space for themselves for fearless expression i.e. if they become subjects or agents or self, they will provide a new leadership to Indian society, in general and to feminist and dalit movements in particular.

(Bhagwat 2)
The assertion of Dalit women’s identity became distinctly visible in 1990s as several autonomous Dalit women’s organizations came into existence. However, critic Sharmila Rege mentions that the revolutionary agenda of Shramik Mukti Sangathan, Satyashodhak Communist Party, Yuvak Kranti Dal and such other organizations that emerged in 1970s and early 80s “…did not limit the dalit women to a token inclusion.” (Rege 91) They, instead, accorded a central role to Dalit women in different ways. (Rege 91) But a deep impact of Dalit women’s self-assertion was immensely felt with the foundation of National Federation of Dalit Women and the All India Dalit Women’s Forum in 1990s. In 1994, the women’s wing of the Bharatiya Republican Party and the Bahujan Mahila Sangh founded the Bahujan Mahila Parishad. Dalitbahujan feminists strongly criticized the incomplete and exclusionary framework of Indian feminism and emphasized on the necessity for rethinking its genealogy “…in order to engage meaningfully with dalit women’s ‘difference’ from the ideal subjects of feminist politics.” (Rao 2) In 1996, a proposal was taken by Vikas Vanchit Dalit Mahila Parishad to observe 25th December as Bharatiya Stree Mukti Divas. Christi Mahila Sangharsh Sangathana which was an organization of Dalit-Christian women was founded in 1997. All these organizations raised many political and theoretical questions apart from criticizing the Brahmanism of the feminist movement and the patriarchal practices of Dalit politics. They ignited the fire of an ongoing debate which was set rolling by eminent critic Gopal Guru’s essay, “Dalit Women Talk Differently” (1995). Guru who praised the formation of the National Federation of Dalit Women to counteract the tradition of Brahmanical feminism also stressed on the significant role played by the autonomous Dalit women’s organizations in criticizing the “reproduction of patriarchal norms within dalit communities.” (Rao 2) According to Guru, Dalit women’s need to talk differently was dependent on both internal and external factors. While on the one hand, he criticizes the multiple layers of patriarchal oppression that strongly prevail within Dalit community; on the other, he denounces the tendency of non-Dalit organizations to exclude the issue.
of caste from their discussions. Moreover, he also points out that the demand for solidarity among women at the national and international levels blurs the “contradictions that exist between high caste and dalit women.” (Guru 82) 

In his opinion, the representation of Dalit women’s issues by non-Dalit women is less authentic since he believes that the perception of reality is determined by social location. (Guru 81) The claim that the reality of Dalit women’s lives can never be captured by non-Dalit women who speak from a different experiential location is reinforced by the 12-point agenda adopted by the National Federation of Dalit Women. It was also endorsed by different scholarly writings presented at the Maharashtra Dalit Women’s Conference held in Pune in May 1995. Guru, explaining this position of the Dalit feminists, writes:

Dalit women define the concept of dalit strictly in caste terms, refuting the claim of upper caste women to dalithood. Dalit women activists quote Phule and Ambedkar to invalidate the attempt of a non-dalit woman to don dalit identity.

(Guru 83)

All these factors invariably lead to a logical conclusion that supports Dalit women’s claim to have a separate space of their own. This attempt of self-assertion by Dalit women contains a “positive emancipatory potential” (Guru 83) and it also offers an “epistemological standpoint” (Guru 84) that allows Dalit women to have “a more encompassing view of social reality than others because their disadvantaged position grants them a certain epistemic privilege over others.” (Guru 84) To understand Guru’s argument, it is necessary that I should provide here an explanation of the theory of standpoint feminism.
Chapter: Four Resistance through Literature: A Theoretical Approach to Dalit Feminism

The genealogy of the feminist standpoint theory can be traced back to Hegel’s account of the master-slave relationship which subsequently inspired Marx, Engels and later Lukacs to develop the theory of the standpoint of the proletariat. Drawing on the Hegelian interpretation of the conflict between master and slave which gives rise to the notion that oppression can be understood better from the perspective of the slave, this Marxian theory suggests that the double vision obtained by the proletariat who experience social relations from a position of marginality can under certain circumstances offer them epistemic advantage. (Bowell, Web)\textsuperscript{59} Since the standpoint theory prioritizes the perspectives of the marginalized, the feminist standpoint epistemology which started making its presence felt since 1970s proposes to make women’s experiences instead of men’s, the point of departure. Feminist scholars such as Dorothy Smith, Nancy Hartsock, Hilary Rose, Sandra Harding, Patricia Hill Collins, Alison Jaggar and Donna Haraway have explained the need for considering the material experiences of women as the starting point for a scientific enquiry. The socio-political positions occupied by women can provide insights not only about the lives of women but also that of men who are otherwise located in the realm of social and political privileges. Sandra Harding makes it clear as she says: “Starting off research from women’s lives will generate less partial and distorted accounts not only of women’s lives but also of men’s lives and of the whole social order.” (Harding 56)\textsuperscript{60} Again, the fact that the location of marginality offers epistemic advantage becomes evident in the words of Afro-American feminist bell hooks. hooks writes: “Living as we did- on the edge- we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out…we understood both.” (hooks vii)\textsuperscript{61} Such a statement reinforces the claim made by feminist standpoint theory that certain peripheral locations can turn out to be epistemically more valuable than the dominant position since they provide accounts of ‘truth’ that are hitherto suppressed or negated. Thus in Harding’s words, standpoint theories “…map how a social and political disadvantage can be turned into an epistemic, scientific and political advantage.”
However, we must remember that the term standpoint does not denote perspective. According to feminist standpoint theorists, perspective can easily be obtained by dint of being a woman whereas a standpoint has to be earned through the experience of collective political struggle. Thus a feminist standpoint is not something that one can get simply by claiming to be a woman. It is rather a political achievement of those whose social location accounts for its emergence. In fact, the standpoint emerges when the marginalized group that remains relatively invisible from the mainstream discourse starts becoming conscious of its oppressive social situation and begins to find a voice. This formation of standpoint is in turn connected with the process of achieving knowledge which leads to social change. The principles of feminist standpoint inform that the questions that arise out of the lived experiences of women create space for research which may subsequently be responsible for bringing changes in the society through policy reforms. A reference to the discussion initiated by Patricia Hill-Collins regarding the Mammy stereotype helps us understand how a distorted view of reality provided by male ideology can be exposed and challenged by a feminist standpoint which is though mediated by politicized consciousness of its epistemic subjects yet often initially starts from the material conditions of women’s lives. This particular stereotype generated by racially and sexually dominant group portrays African American women as faithful and obedient domestic servants who are dedicated to the care of White families. Such an image which controls everyone’s perception (including an Afro-American woman’s perception about herself) becomes an oppressive one since it presents a distorted picture and restricts the possibility of having a better understanding of the lives of African-American women. However, a feminist standpoint propagated by these women reveals the politics behind the creation of such a stereotype and enables these women to “…gain an element of power and control over knowledge about their lives. In becoming occupants of a standpoint, they also become knowing subjects in their own right, rather than merely objects that are known by others.” (Bowell, Web)
Dalit women’s increasing awareness of their social and cultural subordination and the establishment of their own independent organizations mark undeniably the creation of a Dalit feminist standpoint. This position of epistemic advantage arising out of their experiences of disadvantaged life-conditions enables them to produce a more holistic knowledge about the politics of social relations mediated by caste, class and gender. Besides, the creation of a Dalit feminist standpoint affirms the agency of Dalit women. The significance of earning this agency, otherwise, gets diluted if the emergence of Dalit feminist practice is viewed merely as an outcome of the exclusionary attitude of the Dalit Liberation Struggles and the Women’s Movement. (Rege 387)  

However, the consequences of the creation of situated knowledge within the framework of standpoint theory fuel the debate over the politics of identity. Sharmila Rege who speaks from the location of a non-low-caste feminist opposes Guru’s opinion that a non-Dalit woman’s interpretation of Dalit women’s situation will be less valid and less authentic. According to Rege, Guru’s argument while relevant to a great extent is also partial at the same time because the act of considering experiential knowledge as the sole authentic source of information can result in narrow identity politics which may severely limit the emancipatory potential of Dalit women’s organizations and their epistemological standpoint. (Rege, “A Dalit Feminist Standpoint” 96)  

Rege opines that Dalit women’s movement should not be restricted to the act of naming the “difference” of Dalit women. It should, rather, develop a Dalit feminist standpoint which instead of remaining confined within the narrow specificities of a static identity must encourage constant interrogations and revisions. Rege’s opinion can be understood better if it is explained with reference to the arguments offered by other theorists of standpoint feminism. As a theory, standpoint feminism seeks to go beyond the analysis of a particular social location to facilitate the process of structuring knowledge. The problems that arise out of women’s lives become “objectivity maximizing questions” (Bowell, Web)  as they force us to “examine the beliefs, prejudices and biases of the dominant groups in society” and thus lead us to
have “more complete, less partial, and more objective knowledge.” (Bowell, Web) Moreover, feminist standpoint theory does not support the idea of a ‘natural’ attainment of epistemic privilege which one tends to claim simply because of one’s marginalized location. As mentioned earlier, the feminist standpoint is rather to be achieved through physical and/or intellectual involvement in a collective struggle against patriarchy. Therefore, the allegation that this theory propagates a false universalism can be easily refuted. Similarly, the charge that a single, monolithic feminist standpoint is advocated through this theory cannot be leveled against its propagators since they do not commit themselves to formulating a homogenous women’s or feminist standpoint. (Bowell, Web)

The recognition of the heterogeneity of the category ‘woman’ alleviates to a great extent the anxiety that Guru expressed when he discussed the subject of Dalit women’s representation in the context of Beijing conference. According to him, a section of Dalit women would be rendered anonymous since only a group of educated Dalit women would be given the chance to represent at the conference. (Guru 84) However, he praised the attempts of the National Federation of Dalit Women in underscoring the need for associating with grassroots Dalit women. He also referred to the incidents at Bodh Gaya and Maharashtra where Dalit women, especially those from grassroots level had proved their agency by protesting against state-mediated Dalit patriarchy and by exhibiting their solidarity across caste and region against the violence perpetrated by Hindutva forces. These efforts, according to Guru, show Dalit feminist standpoint’s ability to prevent “ghettoisation of dalithood” (Guru 84-85). Dalit feminists seem to be aware of the fact that ‘Dalit woman’ is not a homogenous category and hence Dalit feminist standpoint endeavors to refrain from promoting a static ideological position. Interestingly, it is this willingness to accept heterogeneity that can broaden the scope of Dalit feminist ideology and prevent it from getting enmeshed with narrow identity politics. This notion can be further explained by referring to the argument of strong objectivity proposed by Sandra Harding. According to Harding,
…standpoint theory imposes a rigorous logic of discovery involving a strong demand for ongoing reflection and self-critique from within a standpoint, enabling the justification of socially-situated knowledge claims. This critical approach…results in a stronger notion of objectivity than that achieved by traditional approaches to enquiry.

(Bowell, Web) 71

One can understand from the above discussion that the plurality of feminist standpoints generated by diverse experiences of women located at the intersections of several oppressive social structures and a concurrent practice of self-critiquing render this theoretical terrain an open ground for constant revision and reinterpretations. Hence, Dalit feminist standpoint which is equally capable of adopting the method of self-critiquing enquiry to pursue its organizational practices can go beyond the politics of difference and thus nullify the claim that a non-Dalit woman’s discussion of Dalit women’s issues from a Dalit feminist standpoint is partial or less reliable. Critic Sharmila Rege endorses this view and also underscores at the same time the potential of Dalit feminism in transforming “upper caste feminists’ understanding of gender and feminism.” (Rao 4) 72 A critical reading of feminist standpoint theory informs us that the biological and social identity of a non-Dalit woman can not restrict her from participating in the discourse of Dalit feminism as long as she exhibits the capacity for understanding and enunciating the standpoint of a Dalit feminist. To me, this is an important subject of critical enquiry since my birth and upbringing in a middle-class, urban, traditional Brahmin household in West Bengal coupled with my subsequent exposure to Marxist and feminist ideologies have rendered my engagement with Dalit women’s experiences of subordination a ‘problematic’ issue. The ‘validity’ of my opinions is repeatedly questioned resulting in an obvious sense of alienation. But is one’s social identity marked by her/his caste and/ gender status sufficient enough to ensure her/ his ‘dalit consciousness’- a criterion which is deemed necessary to show one’s ideological and material disengagement with the hegemonic power structure? In that case, how can
Dalit men’s interpretations of the sexual oppression of Dalit women under multiple patriarchies be accepted as authentic and valid? How can we trace feminist standpoint(s) among those Dalit women who in spite of their biological and social locations are not only ignorant about their sexual oppression but are also unconscious perpetrators of patriarchal ideologies? Will not the demand for prohibiting the participation of non-Dalit women in Dalit feminist struggles lead to the creation of a hegemonic power-structure based on segregationist politics? Wouldn’t it produce a facsimile of the oppressive, hierarchical social order that has been prevalent in our country for centuries? Such questions keep problematizing my academic endeavor. However, feminist standpoint theory’s denunciation of the notion that epistemic privilege can be obtained merely because of one’s biologically determined identity and its concomitant insistence on adopting a continually self-critiquing position within the framework of feminist standpoint help me find some answers to my questions. I agree with Sharmila Rege on this aspect as she affirms:

For many of us whose journey into feminism began with unmarked feminist theories and practices, a dalit feminist standpoint offers an opportunity for more emancipatory modernity. It rejects more completely the relations of rule (brahmanism, middle class fractured modernity) in which we participated and in which our oppression as gateways of the caste system is inherent. Adopting a dalit feminist standpoint means sometimes losing, sometimes revisioning, the ‘voice’ that we had as unmarked feminists. Non-dalit feminists cannot ‘speak as’or ‘for’ dalit women but they can ‘reinvent themselves’ as dalit feminists. A transformation from ‘their cause’ to ‘our cause’ is possible for subjectivities can be transformed. The process, I believe, is one of transforming individual feminists into oppositional and collective subjects of common democratic struggles.

(Rege 388) 73
Rege’s comment renders the ‘authority of experience’ problematic. However, one cannot deny the fact that excessive reliance upon the ‘veracity’ of experiential knowledge can make the soil fertile for the emergence of an identity-based politics. Parochial rhetoric of segregation will stifle the voice of resistance if the ‘experience’ of being born as a Dalit woman is considered to be the sole criterion for determining one’s ‘eligibility’ for being a part of the Dalit feminist movement. Renae Bredin in “So Far From the Bridge” raises a similar argument while she says that experience is “…not enough to make solidarity among women/feminists of color possible. We must oppose those practices that construct experience in monolithic, essentialist ways…” (Cervenak 349) A similar echo is heard in the article written by Dalit feminist writer Challapalli Swaroopa Rani. In her article “Dalit Women’s Writing in Telugu”, Rani opines:

Writing by dalits that is based on dalit consciousness will reflect the painful lived experiences of dalit people. The fact of being born a dalit alone is not enough to write dalit poetry. Dalit consciousness is a critical factor in dalit writing.

(Rani 21)

However, before proceeding to the next section of my discussion, I must make my stand clear. I strongly believe that Dalit feminist movement should not fall into the trap of an identity-based politics. Moreover, non-Dalit women who are adequately equipped with Dalit feminist consciousness should be able to participate in Dalit women’s struggles against oppression. There is no denying of the fact that the apprehension of being subsumed and rendered ‘faceless’ in the crowds of broader social movements often propels Dalit feminist activists to keep their movement confined within the boundary of their caste-identity. In fact, the fear of having their voices usurped by ‘others’ is distinctly echoed in the words of a Dalit feminist scholar Swathy Margaret as she says, “if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use and to our detriment.”
However, this is neither an utterance of baseless anxiety; nor a plea for encouraging narrow identity-politics. The overarching presence of the Dalit Liberation Struggle and the Women’s Movement truly necessitates the creation of a separate forum for Dalit women through which they can fight for their rights, address specific issues and forge their identities as Dalits as well as women. Such an endeavor, in my opinion, should not be deemed disruptive and segregationist as long as this Dalit feminist forum adopts a self-critiquing stance in setting its agenda and also welcomes heterogeneity of opinions with regard to such issues as caste, class, gender, religion and so on. It will rather strengthen the demand for building firm alliances with women’s movement and Dalit liberation struggles. Establishment of such a movement which has the potentiality to question, challenge and alter the power-politics prevalent within ‘counter-hegemonic’ movements renews hope for the development of a successful resistance against the repressive, dominant forces of our society.

In Swathy Margaret’s words,

> It is only by retaining our unique voice within these movements that we can contribute meaningfully to these movements and benefit from them. Giving ourselves a separate space does not mean we want a complete break with these movements.

(Margaret,Web) 77

This willingness of a Dalit feminist to blend her voice with the oppositional consciousness of other subaltern voices while retaining her unique identity as a Dalit woman inspires a non-Dalit feminist like me who also attempts to build resistance against all forms of discrimination and violence.
The alienation often experienced by Dalit feminists within the Women’s Movement that claims to nurture ‘sisterhood’ among Indian women reminds us of the intellectual debate that led to the emergence of the Third world/postcolonial/Black feminism. According to critic Chandra Talpade Maohanty,

Any discussion of the intellectual and political construction of ‘third world feminisms’ must address itself to two simultaneous projects: the internal critique of hegemonic ‘Western’ feminisms, and the formulation of autonomous, geographically, historically, and culturally grounded feminist concerns and strategies.”

(Mohanty 172)  

Western feminism views women as a homogenous group (the oppressed) and hence by ignoring the material, historical and cultural diversities that exist among women in the third world, it creates a “composite, singular ‘third world woman’” (Mohanty 174) for the discursive convenience and to posit western feminists as ‘authentic’ source of knowledge on third world/colored women. Mohanty mentions five specific ways by which the image of the third world woman is constructed. Citing Fran Hosken’s discussion on the relation between human rights and female genital mutilation in Africa and the Middle East, Mohanty suggests that one common practice among western feminists is to portray third world women as sexually oppressed beings, as victims of male control. While agreeing to the fact that a woman’s life is significantly marked by male violence, Mohanty criticizes the universalizing stance of western feminists which prevents a better understanding of the nature of male violence. (Mohanty 178) Similarly, western feminists’ perception of third world women as a group identified by their shared dependencies overlooks heterogeneity not only among different nations of the third world but also at different levels within a nation. Mohanty cites feminist sociologist Maria Rosa Cutrufelli’s statements that suggest “(A)ll African women are dependent.
Prostitution is the only work option for African women as a group.” (Mohanty 178)  

Needless to say that such generalization makes specific, context-based analyses impossible. Again, the assumption that married women in postcolonial states suffer due to process of colonization is another partial perception that reinstates the ‘victimhood’ of third world women. Furthermore, the patriarchal family structure and religious ideologies are held responsible for the oppression of women without scrutinizing local contexts. Mohanty sharply criticizes Juliette Mince’s observation that patriarchal family is the basis for “‘an almost identical vision of women’ that Arab and Muslim societies have” (Mohanty 181)  

It is problematic and dangerous to portray such a superficial image without addressing the specificities of Muslim societies which are spread in twenty different countries. Another apt example of the universalizing tendency of White western feminism is its belief in the arithmetic proposition that “the greater the number of women wear the veil, the more universal is the sexual segregation and control of women.” (Mohanty 185)  

An assumption such as this lacks depth of understanding which can only be had by respecting the cultural and historical peculiarities of all the countries where veils are worn. Moreover, this assumption solely focuses on the repressive nature of veil which in White western feminist discourse is often synonymous with sexual control of women. But the fact that veil can also be used for subversive purposes is often ruled out. Mohanty refers to the decision of the middle-class Iranian women to wear veils during the 1979 revolution as they wanted to show their solidarity with the veiled working class women. Such an act, however, stands in stark contrast in contemporary Iran where wearing veil has become mandatory by the Islamic law. These context-specific socio-political and cultural nuances are lost when a set of universal images of third world women (such as the veiled woman, the chaste virgin, the obedient wife, the powerful mother etc) is constructed by the White western feminists in order to define and maintain the balance of power between the first and the third world. In Mohanty’s opinion: “Without the ‘third world woman’, the particular self-presentation of Western women …would be
problematical.” (Mohanty 192) Her argument that the constitutive complexities of the women of the third world are colonized by the White western feminists finds resonance in the words of feminist Trin T. Minh-ha who expresses her concern over the fact that the construction of a universal generic category called ‘woman’ not only effaces the differences within itself but also frequently asserts the priorities of White women. This same logic can be applied in the Indian context where the Women’s Movement often foregrounds the concerns of middle-class, upper-caste, urban women. Only in few rare cases, issues of marginalization enforced by caste, class and religion are brought to the fore. Mathura’s Rape was one such exceptional incident. At the same time, we should not forget the fact that feminist campaigns against Mathura’s rape underscored the issue of violence against women. The question of caste was not given any importance and hence the vicious relation between caste and gender could not be analyzed. Hence the Women’s Movement in India which from a western perspective is viewed as a homogeneous group of ‘oppressed’ third world women echoes the same rhetoric of objectification and domination as propagated by the White western feminist discourse by overlooking the heterogeneity that exists among ‘Indian’ women. It denies them an opportunity to exhibit their agency by presenting them as homogeneous groups and thus it robs them of their socio-economic and cultural pluralities. But as voices against White western feminism’s politics of objectification have been raised from within the Third World Women’s Movements, so also the slogans for creating a niche of their own are being heard from the organizations of Indian Dalit feminists. They have adopted a two-pronged approach in order to combat monopolization of women’s issues by upper-caste women. On the one hand, they defy the Brahmanical hegemony of the Indian Women’s Movement and on the other, they define their own identities by constructing “…autonomous, geographically, historically and culturally grounded feminist concerns and strategies.” (Mohanty 172) I think this simultaneous occurrence of two seemingly antithetical processes can prevent Dalit feminism from being appropriated by the Inidan feminist movement.
However, as it is mentioned earlier, this is not a disruptive act. On the contrary, the refusal of Dalit feminists to be restricted within the domain of either caste or gender provides them with an opportunity to be placed within the context of trans-national feminisms which subsequently enable them to form alliances with other revolutionary Third World Women’s Movements. Therefore, understanding the socio-political and economic lives of Dalit women in the context of the African-American women’s liberation struggle or the Latin American women’s movement does not mean prioritizing one movement over another; nor it tends to overlook the concerns of a local issue because of global attention. It rather widens the scope of a local movement which is adequately equipped to develop a bond of mutual trust with equally oppositional women’s struggles across the world without disrespecting the contradictions and heterogeneity entrenched in these movements.

Here, I would like to specifically mention the Afro-American women’s struggles against racism and sexism since the trajectory of their struggle brings it close to the course of the Dalit women’s movement. The primary reason, however, for citing it as an example is the success attained by the Black feminists in curving a distinct space of their own in the dominant social discourse of the United States. Afro-American women, like their Dalit counterparts, suffer from continual conflict between loyalties and priorities. They are forced to endure multiple layers of oppression as they are tortured not only by the racial-sexual violence of White men but also by the sexism of Black men and the racism of White women. They are “de mule uh de world” (Bell 134) whose vulnerability as the members of the Black community and as women is never addressed by the Black Liberation Movement as well as by the mainstream Women’s Movement in America. While the former emphasized on waging solely an anti-racist struggle, the latter concentrated on gender politics ignoring the problems involving race. In fact, the ‘mainstream’ feminism in America, for a long time, presented the experiences of White, middle-class women
as the experiences of all women. This attempt certainly excludes the experiences of Black American and Third World women whose socio-political and historical locations make them understand the ineffectuality of a universal women’s movement in addressing their specific issues. The growing dissatisfaction with the practice of sidelining the issues of Black women led to the emergence of Afro-American feminism in the US. The voice of protest against the politics of exclusion was heard as early as 1850s when the Black woman activist Sojourner Truth in her landmark speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” revealed how the concepts of race and gender problematize the identity of a Black woman. Sojourner Truth, as bell hooks informs us, was opposed by White feminists while she stood before the second annual convention of the women’s rights movement in Akron, Ohio in 1852. “Don’t let her speak!” was their reaction since the White feminists thought that a Black woman would be unfit to speak on a public platform. (hooks 266) Interestingly enough, her womanhood was also questioned and hence during an anti-slavery rally in Indiana she bared her breasts to prove that she was indeed a woman. (hooks 266) Such an act, perhaps, was made inevitable because of the dominant notion of womanhood which in America has always been constructed after the image of a White, urban, middle-class woman. Needless to say that such a construction renders Black women invisible. The feminist movement of the 60s in the US showed an exclusionary attitude as it in its attempt to represent the ‘universal’ women’s experience glossed over the concerns of not only the Black and the Third world women but also the problems of White women hailing from poor economic background. The heterogeneity of Black women’s experiences was overlooked and a handful of reputed Black women writers’ works was treated as the representative of the lives of all Black women. In academia, Black women’s history was not given specific attention while a disproportionate representation of Black and Third world teachers in the faculty of Women’s Studies raised serious questions about the integrity of ‘sisterhood’ advocated so widely. The
most frustrating thing, however, was the reluctance of White feminists in acknowledging the fact that the oppressed can also turn out to be an oppressor. Initially, the White women were hardly ready to accept that racism was prevalent in their movement, too. Instead, they believed that their experiences of patriarchal subjugation were adequate enough to make them allies (rather than enemies) of the women of the Black and other ethnic communities. The popularity of such a notion eclipses the stark reality that the ‘mainstream’ women’s movements in the US were built upon the foundation of a racist ideology. While the temperance movement and the anti-slavery movement were dedicated to the moral upliftment and the fortification of the White society; the women’s suffrage movement was solely driven by the interests of the White suffragists. (The Thistle, Web) 89 This resulted in a wide-spread disillusionment for many Black women. According to bell hooks,

They had supported woman suffrage only to find their interests betrayed, only to find that “woman suffrage” would be used as a weapon to strengthen White oppression of black people.

(hooks 277) 90

The growing disappointment with the women’s movement coupled with the mounting tension resulted from the implementation of Jim Crow racial apartheid system compelled Black women to divert their attention from women’s issues and focus more on building resistance against racism. However, there was also reluctance among Black civil rights leaders to foreground the issues of Black women. To quote hooks again:

In the forty years from the mid-1920s to mid-1960s black female leaders no longer advocated women’s rights. The struggle for black liberation and the struggle for women’s liberation were seen as inimical largely because black civil rights leaders did not want the
White American public to see their demands for full citizenship as synonymous with a radical demand for equality of the sexes.

(hooks 278-79)\(^91\)

An equally discriminatory attitude is also observed in the course of the Black Liberation Movement which ignores the gendered identity of Black women and imposes patriarchal injunctions upon them. Such aggression by Black men towards their own women was no doubt reinforced more because of the 1965 report of Daniel P. Moynihan which was prepared for the United States Department of Labor. This report- “Negro Family: The Case for National Action” argues that the problems of poverty, educational failure, crime, juvenile delinquency, drug addiction are triggered by an unstable Black family structure weakened by illegitimacy, separation, desertion and divorce. According to Moynihan, “…at the center of this family disorganization among the black lower class is allegedly black female-headed families or black emasculating matriarchs.” (Bell 135)\(^92\) This racist-sexist myth perpetuated by Moynihan left a deep impact upon Black men and its influence was also reflected in the Black struggles against oppression. As a consequence, Black male activists during the Civil Rights movement and the Black Power movement publicly told Black women “that they should take care of household needs and breed warriors for the revolution.” (Bell 134)\(^93\) The disregard for the question of Black women’s equality was more pronounced when Amiri Baraka stated,

We do not believe in the 'equality' of men and women. We cannot understand what the devils and the devilishly influenced mean when they say equality for women. We could never be equals...
Nature has not provided thus.

(The Thistle, Web)\(^94\)
A deeply-entrenched misogynist attitude of men who participated in the Black Liberation Movements manifests itself in the most shocking term as Eldridge Cleaver said:

I became a rapist. To refine my technique and modus operandi, I started out by practicing on black girls in the ghetto—in the black ghetto where vicious and dark deeds appear not as aberrations or deviations from the norm, but as part of the sufficiency of the Evil of a day—and when I considered myself smooth enough, I crossed the tracks and sought out White prey.

(The Thistle, Web) 95

Cleaver’s comment lays bare the racism and sexism prevalent in American society. It underscores the fact that crimes committed against Black women are deemed less serious though the same crimes against a White woman carry enough weight to call for serious attention. It also reveals the disinclination of a Black-men-driven, anti-racist movement to acknowledge the immediacy of gender issues which remaining unaddressed rendered Black women ‘outsiders’ within their own community.

Pitted against such a sexist and racist backdrop, the only option that was left to Black women to make their lives better was to build a feminist movement which would struggle against such repressive forces as race, class and gender and also at the same time enable Black women to assert their own identity. The fact that this issue of self-determination was always at the core of Black feminist consciousness was reflected in a 1983 interview where Tony Cade Bambara clearly stated:

We are more inclined to trust our own traditions, whatever name we gave and now give those impulses, those groups, those agendas, and are less inclined to think we have to sound like, build
like, noncolored groups that identify themselves as feminists or as women’s rights groups, or so it seems to me.

(Bell 136)

This is not merely a call for advocating difference. It, rather, in a profound sense implies an indomitable urge that a community feels to proclaim its identity on its own terms. Perhaps it is this desperation to find a distinct voice of one’s own that prompted Alice Walker to go back to Black folk expressions and borrow the term ‘womanist’ to describe a Black feminist or woman of color “who among other things, is audaciously committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.” (Bell 136) Saying that "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender” , Walker gives a detailed definition as she writes:

Womanist 1.

From womanish. (opp. of "girlish," i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious). A black feminist or feminist of color...Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one... Responsible. In charge. Serious.

2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength...Committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not separatist, except periodically, for health.

(The Thistle, Web)

This is no doubt a holistic definition to understand Black feminism. However, the task of building a feminist movement based on the idea of celebrating Black women’s distinct identity
was not at all an easy task. Black feminists had to fight hard against few misconceptions prevalent in American society about Black women. Just as the myth about the economic independence of low-caste women in India wrongly portrays them as ‘liberated’ beings, so also Black women are misrepresented as ‘empowered agents’ owing to their ability to earn and run their families singlehandedly. Besides, other misconceptions that held Black women back from participating in a Black feminist movement were such beliefs that feminists were lesbians and women’s issues were just some narrow apolitical issues not worthy of serious persuasion. Hence, the prevailing notion was that Black women, instead of supporting feminism, should focus their attention on racist oppression. It is a matter of little wonder that such a system of continual denial compelled Black women to start a new movement –a movement which was based on Black feminist consciousness and which was instrumental in connecting the Afro-American feminist movement with larger political groups by addressing racist, sexist and classist oppressions suffered by Black women. Two most significant early associations that emerged to propagate the principles of Black feminism were National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) and Black Women Organized for Action (BWAO). However, an immense impact in this regard was left by the Combahee River Collective- “a loose-knit group of black feminists who organized African-American women, drafted political statements, protested injustices, and engaged in consciousness-raising sessions.” (Ostrom and Macey 317) Established in 1974 in Boston, this group made a noteworthy contribution to the development of Black feminist thought by insisting on African-American women’s necessity to speak for them. This urge to assert their identity is glaringly visible in “A Black Feminist Statement”- the manifesto of the group. The manifesto explains:

Above all else, our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a
necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else’s but because of our need as human persons for autonomy.

(Ostrom and Macey 319) 100

A new era of feminism commenced as the Statement despite its demand for autonomous assertion of the identity of Black women, advocated a “coalitional politics” (Ostrom and Macey 319) 101 and criticized separatist tendencies. It makes its stand clear as it says:

Although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that White women who are separatists demand.

(Ostrom and Macey 319) 102

Many of the principles propagated by the Collective were echoed in Barbara Smith’s literary essay “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” (1977). The Collective’s efforts coupled with the publications of some phenomenal literary works such as Tony Cade Bambara’s The Black Woman (1970) and Barbara Christian’s Black Women Novelist: The Development of a Tradition (1980) played a significant role in debating the issue of representation of African-American women in the ideological as well as in the political sphere.

An eerie silence loomed large over the vast terrain of Black women’s writings till 1970s as the dominant American literature hardly cared to know about the lives of Black women who were regarded as the ‘double non-entities’. While it was only expected that the ‘mainstream’ White critics would not be interested in Black women’s writings, it was little surprising that White feminists and Black male writers who shared some common areas of interest with Black women also ignored them. What was more disturbing was the fact that some Black women critics despite their awareness of the nuances of Black women’s writings, seldom employed a
feminist analytical perspective or wrote about Black lesbian literature. However, the visibility of Afro-American women became more pronounced in 1970s as a result of the conjuncture of the Black Arts movement and the women’s movement. According to Black feminist critic Barbara Christian, a remarkable change was noticed in the August 1974 issue of *Black World* where alongside Mary Helen Washington’s essay “Black Women Image Makers” were also three other bold articles by June Jordan, Ellease Southerland and Alvin Ramsey. Marked by their uncompromising tone, these essays not merely recorded the presence of Black women authors; but also opened a space for critical discussion about the identity and contributions of Afro-American writers. While psychologist Ramsey’s short piece on the television version of Ernest Gaines’s *The Autobiography of Jane Pittman* criticized the White commercial media’s misrepresentation of facts depicted in Gaines’s novel, poet Southerland’s essay “The Novelist/Anthropologist/Life Work” strongly suggested the existence of noteworthy Afro-American women writers in the past. Jordan’s essay, “On Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston: Notes Towards a Balancing of Love and Hate” provided a unique angle of vision by placing Hurston, “a relatively unknown Afro-American woman writer, alongside Richard Wright, who is probably the best known of Afro-American writers” (Christian 6) 103 This juxtaposition was essential to illuminate the fact that these two “apparently antithetical worldviews were both necessary ways of viewing the complexity of Afro-American life” which according to Jordan “was not monolithic.” (Christian 6) 104 An equally vehement outburst of rage is observed in Smith who in her essay “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism”(1977) cited responses of various critics to prove that the absence of a Black feminist approach not only led to the misrepresentation of Black women characters; but also to the destruction of these texts in the process. She referred to the prejudice of White male critics like Jerry H. Bryant and Robert Bone while the sexist attitude of such Black male critics as Darwin Turner and Ismaheel Reed was also criticized. She
vehemently condemned Turner for his insensitivity to the “sexual political dynamics of Hurston’s life and writing” (Smith, Web)\textsuperscript{105} and for his description of Zora Neale Hurston and her work as “artful”, “coy”, “irrational”, “superficial” and “shallow” (Smith, Web)\textsuperscript{106} in his book \textit{In a Minor Chord: Three Afro-American Writers and Their Search for Identity}. Furthermore, an instance of misogyny prevalent among Black male critics can be understood from a comment made by Ismaeel Reed who explaining the low sale of one of his novels once said:

…but the book only sold 8000 copies…Maybe if I was one of those young female Afro-American writers that are so hot now, I’d sell more. You know, fill my books with ghetto women who can do no wrong…But come on, I think I could have sold 8000 copies by myself.

\textit{(Smith, Web)}\textsuperscript{107}

These references cited above may lead us to make this interesting observation that both Black and White male critics converged on the point of their inherent sexism. They considered that Black women writers were intellectually incapable of thinking in terms of wider frame of reference and they also believed that the reason behind the literary recognition enjoyed by Black women writers was not due to their creative potential but for their commoditized status as sex-objects. Alice Walker who in her essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” exposed how slavery and racism impeded the creative lives of Black women, tried to find answer to the question as to why a condescending treatment was meted out to Black women writers. According to her:

There are two reasons why the black woman writer is not taken seriously as the black male writer. One is that she’s a woman. Critics seem unusually ill-equipped to intelligently discuss and analyze the works of black women. Generally, they do not even
make the attempt; they prefer, rather, to talk about the lives of black women writers, not about what they write…

(Smith, Web) 108

However, while the gendered identity of Black women writers pushed them into the recesses of oblivion, the attitude of White feminist critics was also not encouraging enough. Smith mentioned the works of such significant feminist critics as Elaine Showalter, Ellen Moers and Patricia Meyer Spacks who excluded or made passing remarks on Afro-American women writers despite their commitment to upholding universally-acclaimed feminist ideals. Their complete silence about the Third World women and the lesbian writers of color negates the agenda of ‘global sisterhood’ that the White Anglo-American feminist school is keen to establish.

Hence, reclaiming their own voices by retrieving the supposedly ‘lost’ trajectory of literary writings by Black women authors was what could have been done to prevent a life of anonymity. We must also remember that such an act was impossible without the ideological framework provided by Black feminist criticism. The significance of criticism in rendering a body of literature recognizable to its readers is understood as Barbara Smith suggests:

A Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers is an absolute necessity. Until a Black feminist criticism exists we will not even know what these writers mean.

(Smith, Web) 109
The truth of this statement is well comprehended while we follow Smith’s analysis of Toni Morrison’s *Sula*. This novel while viewed through the lens of a Black feminist critic reveals an entirely new perspective about women-bonding and the question of Black women’s autonomy. This is not a lesbian novel in the everyday sense of the term. Yet the profound companionship between Sula and Nel not merely raises questions about “…heterosexual institutions of male-female relationships, marriage, and the family” (Smith, Web) \(^{110}\) but also redefines the nature of relationship among Black women. Smith writes:

*Sula* is an exceedingly lesbian novel in the emotions expressed, in the definition of female character, and in the way that the politics of heterosexuality are portrayed. The very meaning of lesbianism is being expanded in literature, just as it is being redefined through politics.”

(Smith, Web) \(^{111}\)

This revolutionary aspect of Morrison’s writing was explored because of the implementation of Black feminist critical principles which underscore the centrality of Black women characters and the theme of self-assertion. A close analysis of texts with the help of this perspective reveals that most of the Black women’s literary works are marked by the impact of interlocking structures of race, sex and class as well as by their “spiritual journeys from victimization to the realization of personal autonomy or creativity.” (Bell 137) \(^{112}\) A “sharp focus on personal relationships in the family and community” with an emphasis on “centrality of female bonding or networking” (Bell 137) \(^{113}\) provides an analytical tool to understand and appreciate Black women’s literature. Other “signs and structures” that are used to read this literature are “detailed exploration and validation of the epistemological power of the emotions, iconography of women’s clothing and black female language.” (Bell 137) \(^{114}\) It is because of these critical apparatuses that the layered
depictions of Black female characters become politically and socially meaningful to readers. For example, a strong rebellious statement against the sexism of Black males can be made based on the portrayal of Janie—the Black female protagonist of Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Janie’s confinement within the store, her despair at not being able to participate in the spiritual storytelling sessions at the front porch because her husband Joe had forbidden her to do so (Hubbard 55) demand a feminist analysis of the sexual politics present in Black households. Concept such as ‘double burden’ becomes meaningful as Janie is likened to Matt Bonner’s tired mule that works in passive obedience and silence. (Hubbard 56)

However, again, it is the implementation of the same feminist critical perspective that makes readers aware of Hurston’s defiant self as Janie (unlike the mule) chooses to rebel against her servile existence. The trend of replacing the stereotypical images with realistic portrayals of Black women was lauded in Mary Helen Washington’s introduction to *Black Eyed Susans* and also in Barbara Christian’s critical work—*Black Women Novelists*.

Black feminist critics, in fact, followed a two-pronged approach when they decided to interpret Black women’s literature through a feminist lens. On the one hand, they engaged themselves in an act of reconstructing their past by retrieving the writings of unknown Black women authors whose voices were lost in the abyss of oblivion while on the other, they employed their critical tools to expose those myriad structures of violence that compel Black women to live in a state of subjugation. Literary and critical writings of bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Barbara Smith, Barbara Christian, Patricia Hill Collins and many other writers and activists contributed to the development of this creatively rebellious approach. A brilliant example of this process of building a literary tradition with a critical eye concomitantly turned to the forms of oppression is seen in Alice Walker’s 1983 collection of essays “In Search of Our Mothers’
Gardens: Womanist Prose.” In the essay “Looking for Zora”, Walker’s discovery of Zora Neale Hurston—“a genius of the South”—points at her crucial attempt to capture the voices of many unsung heroines whose creative minds were thwarted by racist and sexist politics of the time. Addressing them as mothers and foremothers, Walker reveals how Black women in the 19th century America had to suffer the ignominy of being robbed of their own selves. Their silence becomes eloquent through Walker’s words as she says:

> Or was she required to bake biscuits for a lazy backwater tramp, when she cried out in her soul to paint watercolors of sunsets, or the rain falling on the green and peaceful pasturelands? Or was her body broken and forced to bear children.  

(Walker 233)  

Walker regrets the loss of many talented minds as Black women during that time were wracked by slavery and domestic responsibilities. She cites the example of her mother who was always so preoccupied with her household chores of raising children, cooking and cleaning that she hardly had any moment of her own. According to Walker, her mother’s simple but appreciable acts of gardening and quilting were perhaps her ways of expressing that “muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit” (Walker 238) which is handed down as ancestral gift from all Black mothers to their daughters. Hence, the accounts of struggle and survival depicted by contemporary Black women writers are not just isolated expressions of individual experiences; but parts of a grand tale of suffering, neglect and defiance manifested in the poems of Phyllis Wheatley or through the mosaic of colors of the quilts woven by many unknown foremothers. Every Black woman writer, therefore, should “know and assimilate the experiences of earlier black women writers” (Walker 9) in order to understand her place—her ‘rootedness’—in the great Black literary tradition of which she is a part. It is necessary to mention here that this
awareness of belonging to a rich tradition which was made extinct by the politics of the dominant discourse is possible only through the critical interventions of Black feminist ideals. But at the same time, Smith warns that a Black feminist critic should “…think and write out of her own identity and not try to graft the ideas or methodology of White/male literary thought upon the precious materials of Black women’s art.” (Smith) 120 Advocating for the necessity of building a Black feminist critical theory, then, became essential since such a theory based on the everyday experiences of ordinary Black women was not only useful in revealing the points of intersection between racism and sexism in Black women’s lives but was also instrumental in providing the White men as well as the black men and White women critics with a framework for analyzing and responding to the works produced by Black American women authors. However, we must also remember that the flowering of a Black feminist-literary consciousness would not have been possible without the growth of a Black feminist movement. Emphasizing on the direct, intimate relation that exists between Black women’s literature and the politics of feminism Barbara Smith writes:

A viable, autonomous Black feminist movement in this country would open up the space needed for the exploration of Black women’s lives and the creation of consciously Black woman-identified art.”

(Smith)121

This trajectory of the growth and development of a feminist critical tradition in African-American context reminds us of the emergence of Dalit feminist consciousness in India which not only motivated the activities of Dalit feminist organizations but was also considerably influenced by the dynamics of Dalit activism.
The seeds of Black feminist criticism which were sprouted in the US during 1970s with the publication of such essays as Smith’s “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” (1977) and Mary Helen Washington’s “Black Women Image Makers” (1974) took deep roots in American society in the following two decades. A mature feminist consciousness that invigorated the Black critical thought was manifest through the responses generated by Michele Wallace’s *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979) – a critique of sexism in the Civil Rights Movement and also through the reactions directed towards sociologist Robert Staple’s critical response to Ntozake Shange’s play, *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*. Staple’s comment that Black feminists were being promoted by the White media sparked an intense debate among the Afro-American women and men. However, this very debate proved the significant impact that Black American women’s literature had been able to create upon Afro-American intellectual circle. The confidence of being self-sufficient and self-assertive oozed out as Audre Lorde said: “black feminists speak as women and do not need others to speak for us.” (Lorde qtd. in Christian 12) Deborah McDowell in her essay, “New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism” (1980) harped on the necessity for clear definitions and methodologies and also suggested that a critic should engage herself/himself in both textual and contextual analyses to interpret an Afro-American text since one should understand not only the linguistic nuances but also the text’s historical and cultural background and the women’s situation within it. Barbara Johnson’s essay “Black Feminist Criticism” (1983-84) focuses on a critic’s functions and comments that critics should expose their personal points of view instead of taking an objective stance. Another powerful critic Patricia Hill Collins in her work *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990) emphasizes on the role of Black feminist thought in demonstrating the emergence of Black women as agents of knowledge. According to Hill-Collins, Black feminist thought’s analysis of race, class and gender as interlocking systems of oppression restructures the social relation of domination.
and resistance. It also creates possibilities for other modes of oppression such as age, sexual orientation, religion and ethnicity to be included within the discourse of power relation. This notion implies a paradigmatic shift as it goes beyond the popular additive models of oppression located in the either/or dichotomous pattern of Eurocentric, masculinist thought. (Collins 221, 225) Moreover, the ‘both/and’ conceptual stance (as opposed to ‘either/or’ stance) derived from the placement of Afro-American women and other oppressed groups at the centre of analysis makes room for all the groups to have privilege and penalty in varying degrees. Collins explains:

In this system, for example, White women are penalized by their gender but privileged by their race. Depending on the context, an individual may be an oppressor, a member of an oppressed group, or simultaneously oppressor and oppressed.

(Collins 225)

It is needless to say here that these notions which lead to an analysis of relation between knowledge and the empowerment of subordinate groups are intricate enough to generate a critically nuanced epistemological debate. Again, as in Dalit feminist criticism, the question/claim of the authenticity of the author’s experience is also raised in the domain of Black feminist criticism. While McDowell took up this issue and widened the sphere of critical discussions by asking whether or not Black feminist criticism could be practised by Black men, White women and White men, Michele Wallace in “Who Owns Zora Neale Hurston: Critics Carve up the Legend” (1988) cautions against the possibility of misrepresentations which according to her rendered Hurston nothing but a commodity. All these debates, however, point at the fact that Black feminist criticism is a dynamic body of thought which keeps its horizon ever expanding through self-criticisms and constant reinventions. Barbara Christian’s comment ‘what do we want to do anyway and for whom do we think we’re doing it?’ (Christian 19) explains why Black feminist criticism has been successful in establishing
itself as an important critical ideology within the domains of mainstream literatures and culture studies. The conviction that this subversive ideological tool would be able to generate stimulating discussions in the field of feminist-literary criticisms becomes evident when Christian proudly utters “we might wonder…whether one might want to predict the day when other literatures will reflect the currents of the black American women’s writing community.” (Christian19)126

African-American feminism has made a distinct space of its own in the contemporary literary and critical discourses. It has no doubt set itself as an inspiring force for all subaltern communities who are denied representation. Dalit women who are maimed by similar experiences of torture and rejection at multiple levels of Indian society find in the victory of Afro-American women’s struggles a hope for their liberation. But despite their unceasing battles against caste and patriarchies Dalit women’s movement still remains in the shadow of some larger socio-cultural issues. Similarly, Dalit women’s writings though have come a long way from those initial days of suppression, yet lack a strong foundation upon which they can build a Dalit feminist critical tradition. Dalit women’s literature still does not possess a well-structured, widely-accepted feminist critical framework which may help non-Dalit male and female readers as well as Dalit male readers to understand the precarious location of Dalit women which is evolved out of the interlocking nature of such oppressive structures as caste, class and gender. In spite of some evidence that prove the existence of literary foremothers, there is hardly any historical trajectory that can trace the development of Dalit feminist literature. However, all is not lost. In a multi-lingual country like India, reaching out to readers of different linguistic and cultural communities is not an easy task without the help of a common language. Interestingly, many publishing houses, these days, are showing their eagerness in publishing English translations of novels, autobiographies and poems written by Dalit authors. As a result, literary works of many Dalit women writers such as Bama, Shivakami, and Challapalli
Swaroopa Rani are being published by prestigious publishing companies and are thus creating an intellectual space for Dalit feminist issues to be discussed and debated. This attempt is really commendable since it has enabled Dalit women’s voices to be heard at the national and global levels. Though the absence of a feminist critical framework is still a major hindrance, yet the issue of Dalit feminism is fast capturing the attention of the litterateurs and academicians. In my next chapter, I will focus on the necessity for developing a Dalit feminist aesthetic framework which would enable us to understand specific problems of a Dalit woman by taking into account the multiple perspectives of a diversely marginalized being. My opinions will be substantiated with a detailed analysis of Bama’s *Sangati: Events.*
Chapter: Four  Resistance through Literature: A Theoretical Approach to Dalit Feminism

Endnotes:


3 Palapitta: A White bird.


6 Ibid.


8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.


16 Ibid.


19 Kolhateen: A Kolhateen is a woman from the Kolhati caste derided for what is said to be her easy virtue.


21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.


28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.


Chapter: Four  Resistance through Literature: A Theoretical Approach to Dalit Feminism

36 Ibid.


38 Ibid.


40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.


45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.


49 Ibid.


51 Bharatiya Stree Mukti Divas: Dr.B.R. Ambedkar set fire to *Manusmriti* on 25th December,1927 during the Mahad Satyagraha. This is considered to be an important milestone in Dalit struggle against Brahmansim. The rationale behind celebrating this day as women’s liberation day seems to have sprung from the fact that *Manusmriti* encourages not only caste discrimination but also gender-inequality and violence on women.
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54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.


67 Ibid.

68 Ibid.

Chapter: Four  Resistance through Literature: A Theoretical Approach to Dalit Feminism

70 Ibid.


77 Ibid.


79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid.


Chapter: Four  Resistance through Literature: A Theoretical Approach to Dalit Feminism

88 Ibid.


91 Ibid.


93 Ibid.


95 Ibid.


97 Ibid.


100 Ibid.

101 Ibid.

102 Ibid.


104 Ibid.

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106 Ibid.

107 Ibid.

108 Ibid.

109 Ibid.

110 Ibid.

111 Ibid.


113 Ibid.

114 Ibid.


116 Ibid.


118 Ibid.

119 Ibid.


121 Ibid.


124 Ibid.

125 Christian, Barbara. “But What Do We Think We’re Doing Anyway: The State of Black Feminist Criticism(s) or My Version of a Little Bit of History.” *New Black Feminist Criticism,
Chapter: Four  Resistance through Literature: A Theoretical Approach to Dalit Feminism


126 Ibid.