

Intersectionality in Contemporary Indian Women's Poetry: Exploring the Complexity of Identity and Experience

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Abstract

Recent poetry written by Indian women has begun to focus on the ways in which categories like race, class, caste, gender and sexual orientation come together to affect the individual realities of women. The paper explores how Indian women poets employ poetry to examine the intricacies of identity and redefine the conventional discourse of feminism. The paper explores how race, gender, class, sexuality and caste intersect in the work of modern Indian women poets, thus transforming notions of feminism in the country. It is argued that the use of methods like free verse, spoken word and performance poetry enables contemporary Indian women poets to explore intersections of identity and articulate them in ways attuned to the dynamic changes taking place in India. Six notable poets are featured in the study whose poems explore these intersections and expand perspectives on identity and social justice in India.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Race, Caste, Class, Sexuality, Gender.

Introduction

The poetry of Indian women today is characterized by an intimate examination of identity as poets draw on the concept of intersectionality to interpret their varied and sometimes contradictory realities. Intersectionality, identified by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, provides a way to understand how various social identities combine to shape both advantages and disadvantages in people's lives. In India, where gender is tightly bound up with issues such as caste, class and religion, intersectionality offers valuable insights into the varied ways that women are shaped by these interlocking social forces. Traditionally, Indian feminist discourse has focused primarily on the views and struggles of middle-class, urban, upper-caste women and writing that explores feminist perspectives has been accused of marginalizing the stories and perspectives of Dalit women, women from disadvantaged backgrounds and lesbian, bisexual and transgender women. Recently, women poets in India have been using

an intersectional approach in their poetry to offer more diverse portrayals of what it means to be a woman. Poetry allows women to convey the depth and multiplicity of their experiences as they reveal the intersecting dimensions of oppression that modes such as caste, class and gender exert on their lives.

Indian women poets such as Meena Kandasamy, Kamala Das, Tishani Doshi and Rukmini Bhaya Nair have consistently challenged and broadened the scope of feminist thought in Indian literature. Meena Kandasamy's writings, including *The Gypsy Goddess* and *Ms. Militancy*, represent the stories and struggles of Dalit women, who face compounded discrimination based on their caste and gender. The writings of Kandasamy challenge both the oppressive systems of caste and patriarchy, thereby forming a crucial centrepiece of Dalit feminist literature. Kamala Das's *An Introduction* stands out for its bold exploration of women's bodies and sexuality, as well as the ways in which power, class and gender shape the experiences of women in India's middle class. Both Tishani Doshi and Rukmini Bhaya Nair address issues such as race, social expectations and the way language is used to perpetuate gender stereotypes and discriminate against women. They have played a crucial role in broadening the discussion on intersectionality in Indian poetry and have created texts that breathe new life into feminism and the ways in which women are represented in Indian society. These poets address the intersections of gender, class, caste and sexuality and also champion causes such as social justice, gender equality and the rights of marginalized communities. Intersectionality is realized by these poets as a means for personal and social change, thus placing Indian women's poetry at the center of recent feminist conversations in the region.

Concept of Intersectionality

Intersectionality studies how the different aspects of a person's identity, including gender, race, class, religion, caste and sexuality, may overlap and influence their access to power, privileges and forms of discrimination. Her early scholarship demonstrated that the discrimination faced by Black women could not be explained simply by looking at race or gender alone. This approach becomes especially relevant in India, where caste, gender and class have long influenced individual lives in ways that greatly overlap. The intersection of caste, class, gender, religion and sexuality in Indian society produces unique and varied experiences of oppression that cannot be seen as the result of any one source of discrimination. As such, Indian literature and poetry written by contemporary women offer economic impetus for understanding how various forms of oppression coalesce to shape the experiences of women across social strata.

Indian feminist movements have typically been concerned with gender discrimination, but have frequently only addressed the situations of relatively privileged women. Scholars have highlighted how this emphasis limits our understanding of how caste, class and other social problems influence women's everyday realities. Recent Indian women's poetry is increasingly demonstrating the importance of considering the complex ways in which various dimensions of identity overlap. The work of poets like Meena Kandasamy, notably within her poetry collections *The Gypsy Goddess* (2012) and *Ms. Militancy* (2010), highlight the ways in which both caste and gender combine to shape the harsh repression endured by Dalit women in India. Kandasamy's poetry exposes the erasure of Dalit women's experiences in mainstream women's movements and highlights the ways in which they are simultaneously and multiplicatively marginalized. Other poets such as Kamala Das and Tishani Doshi, have explored the interrelation between gender, class and sexuality, challenging underlying assumptions and shedding light on the ways in which these identities influence the lives of women in India. These women poets use their art to promote a feminism that recognizes the complexity of identity and the need to go beyond merely focusing on gender. Their poetry emphasizes the need to account for how different types of marginalization intersect so as to more accurately capture the daily lives of oppressed women in Indian society.

Impact on Contemporary Poetry

Indian women's poetry today frequently explores multiple dimensions of identity, moving beyond traditional feminist concerns. Contemporary poets address issues of caste, class, sexuality and faith to expand the range of feminist perspectives. Contemporary Indian women poets are increasingly incorporating the idea of intersectionality, outlined by Crenshaw (1989) and challenging the predominant feminist focus on upper-caste and middle-class women's perspectives. This development opens up opportunities for women of various marginalized communities such as Dalit women, queer women and those from poor socioeconomic backgrounds (Rege, 2006). These poets employ a range of styles like free verse and performance poetry to express their multifaceted identities while acting as voices for change and promoting more inclusive environments in literature and culture.

Intersectional Themes in Contemporary Indian Poetry

Intersectionality recognizes the influences of multiple social identities on the lives of people. Women and marginalized writers are exploring these complicated interconnections in modern Indian poetry. Modern poets address topics such as gender identity, caste discrimination, religious battles and language struggles while questioning the dominant perspective of elite, middle-class Indian women within existing feminist discourse. These poets demonstrate how intersectionality pervades modern Indian poetry.

Kamala Das: Gender, Sexuality, and the Personal Struggles of Women

Kamala Das's confessional poetry openly examines gender, sexuality and the constraints placed on women by society. Das is often credited with redefining Indian English poetry and exploring themes that challenge the traditional values dictated by patriarchal culture. Das's poem *An Introduction* examines the limitations and demands placed on women by patriarchal norms. The poem opens by revealing the highly personal quality of Das's writing, as well as her challenge to both societal norms and the conventions of language (Kumar, 1995).

Her poetry stands out for its unflinching examination of female sexuality and personal freedom which are rarely addressed in Indian literature. The poem explores how women can find fulfillment through both love and their own bodies, despite societal disapproval. These explorations of women's bodies and feelings subvert traditional gender roles in ways that parallel how feminist writers call for women to have control over both their personal identities and emotions (Tharu & Lalita, 1991). The poem *My Grandmother's House* explores how women are constrained in their homes and how this leads to feelings of being trapped and without fulfillment. Her poetry challenges the restrictive morality of the upper classes which silences women's voices, making a case for feminist innovation within Indian literature.

Das's works simultaneously explain how gender oppression intersects with class discrimination. Her poetry shows how women's experiences are shaped by and exacerbated by economic and social oppression. In *The Old Playhouse*, she attacks the notion that marriage restricts women, forces them to relinquish their individuality and demands they subordinate to their husbands, promoting both social and gender discrimination. Her memoir, *My Story*, broadens these themes even further, vividly sharing her personal experiences which broke down cultural taboos surrounding what Indian women should and should not speak about.

Her extensive body of literary works can be seen as an important feminist contribution to postcolonial Indian literature, highlighting how gender, sexuality and class influence and shape women's lives. Her poetry and prose highlight the emotional and psychological struggles of women within a strictly patriarchal milieu and thus continue to stimulate feminist interpretations and shape critical discussions about gender and identity in South Asia.

Meena Kandasamy: Dalit Feminism and Caste-Based Oppression

Meena Kandasamy has become an influential poet in recent years, exploring the intersecting experiences of caste, gender and institutionalized oppression. She often uses Dalit feminist poetry to expose how Dalit women face exclusion from both feminism and caste society. Her writings are influenced by the methods of resistance used by Dalit communities throughout history and Ambedkar's ideas, challenging elitist forms of feminism and emphasizing the power of Dalit women to resist forms of oppression. Her scholarship connects with the perspective of Dalit feminist scholars like Sharmila Rege, who emphasize how mainstream feminism tends to ignore caste as a crucial dimension of oppression and asserts Brahminical patriarchy (Rege, 1998).

Kandasamy uses idiomatic language and a militant approach to upend the caste-patriarchal system and take a leading role in shaping modern anti-caste literature. Her work unveils the various forms of violence directed towards Dalit women and reconceptualizes myths to advance a Dalit feminist perspective as illustrated in *Ms. Militancy*. Kannagi emerges as an icon of frustration and rebellion in her recounting of events depicting Kannagi's uprising against caste-based inequality through the cultural lens of the ancient Tamil epic *Silappadikaram*. Kandasamy's writings embody an intersectional stance that views gender and caste as intertwined forms of oppression. This highlights the importance of a feminism that takes caste explicitly into account.

Tishani Doshi: Class, Race, and Feminist Identity

Tishani Doshi is an internationally renowned writer whose work explores the interconnections between gender, class and race in relation to globalization. *The Girls Are Coming Out of the Woods* (2017) is a powerful collection that explores the effects of gender-based violence and addresses issues of violence as a shared experience across communities. The poem "The Day I Saw God" explores the ways in which class inequality limits people's ability to control their lives, a topic that is central to postcolonial feminist scholarship (Mukherjee, 2019). Her approach resonates with the scholarship of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who challenges the homogenization of feminism and urges scholars to study oppression by considering factors such as race, class and history (Mohanty, 2003). Doshi's poetry showcases the interconnections between global and local issues surrounding oppression.

Doshi uses evocative language in *The Marriage of the Sea* to show how gender roles, class and culture intersect in ways that highlight the struggle between tradition and modernity. Her work considers the impact of colonialism and global economic systems on the lives of women beyond borders and nation-states. Her accessible verse echoes bell hooks' arguments about how colonialism and cultural difference influence the makeup of feminism in non-Western societies. Her analyses of how women's lives are affected by social structures on national and international levels distinguish her work as an indispensable voice in contemporary feminist conversations.

Rukmini Bhaya Nair: Language, Gender, and Social Identity

Rukmini Bhaya Nair's work analyses the interplay between language and gender, highlighting how linguistic patterns affect the lives of women. Nair maintains in *The Feminine Imperative* that language plays a significant part in creating and sustaining gender disparities and frequently constrains women's autonomy through well-entrenched linguistic trends. Her argument aligns closely with the ideas put forth by feminist linguists, including Deborah Cameron, who highlights the ways in which language reinforces and upholds unequal relations between the sexes. Nair's work identifies understated linguistic patterns that perpetuate gender inequalities in the language we use.

Nair's poetry aligns with feminist linguistic studies by highlighting how gender identity is shaped by language and reflecting Spivak's claim that marginalized groups such as women, are commonly either ignored or distorted in mainstream discourse (Spivak, 1988). Nair's work draws attention to the ways in which language influences how women are understood in society, demonstrating that the words used in literature, media or in people's daily communication can shape expectations about gender. Many of her poems use fresh imaginings to disrupt age-old representations of womanhood, depicting women with power and independence. Nair's work emphasizes the connections between language and gender, arguing that transforming the way we use words can help further advance equality for all genders.

Together, their poetry showcases how contemporary Indian poetry acts as a medium for engaging with issues from an intersectional perspective. The poetry of these poets disrupts the single-faceted perspectives of feminism and social justice by addressing intersectional concerns. Their work gives platform to those who may be unheard and encourages a literature and society that values diversity. Their voices play a vital role in shaping the discourse around identity and forms of oppression in modern India.

Intersectionality in Contemporary Indian Poetry

The rising attention to intersectionality is transforming the way Indian women poets approach feminist issues. Crenshaw (1989) introduced the idea that social identities (e.g., caste, gender, class, race and sexuality) simultaneously influence how an individual experiences subordination or advantage. Indian feminist poets, especially those who write from positions of marginalization, explore the ways that women experience oppression because of multiple social factors acting together. However, they highlight the ways in which interlocking forms of inequality shape women's lives every day.

Kamala Das' first collection, *An Introduction*, sheds light on the ways societal expectations and patriarchal norms define feminine identities among the middle class. Meena Kandasamy's *Ms. Militancy* (2010) highlights how Dalit women are doubly oppressed by both caste discrimination and gender inequality (Guru, 1995). Contemporary poets explore multiple forms of oppression and thereby contribute to wider social movements and activism. They challenge dominant gender discourses by reflecting diverse experiences and constructions of identity across the country (Nair, 2002).

Conclusion

Indian women's poetry of today plays an important role in exploring the complex ways in which gender, caste, class and sexuality interact to influence women's lived realities. Kamala Das questions the limits placed on female desire and autonomy in her candid poetic work such as *My Story* (1976), in which she uncovers the impact of patriarchal control in women's lives. Kandasamy, too, revisits ancient tales in *Ms. Militancy* (2010) to underscore the intersections of oppression experienced by Dalit women in South Asia. Through their subversion of dominant narratives, these poets open up literary spaces that amplify the voices of the marginalized. This approach resonates with the understanding put forth by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) that disparate forms of oppression are mutually reinforcing and must be studied together.

These authors also demonstrate how South Asian feminism is shaped by transnational networks of power and oppression. *The Girls Are Coming Out of the Woods* (Doshi, 2017) weaves personal experiences with larger social issues to highlight the common experiences of women from varying walks of life. Nair's poetry explores how language can entrench and perpetuate gender inequalities, reflecting Spivak's (1988) claim that subordinated groups struggle to be heard over those in

positions of authority. Contemporary Indian women's poetry breaks down categories of identity while promoting an intersectional feminism that influences social change, inviting individuals to reflect on the ways in which gender and other forms of oppression intersect.

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