



# Breaking the Caste Ceiling: Dalit Feminism in Bollywood

Jyoti Mehta<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Anil Adagale<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, MA English, Symbiosis College of Arts and Commerce, S B Road, Pune, Maharashtra, India

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, Department of English, Symbiosis College of Arts and Commerce, S.B Road, Pune, Maharashtra, India

Received: 18 Apr 2023; Received in revised form: 12 May 2023; Accepted: 19 May 2023; Available online: 26 May 2023

©2023 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**"Dalits are not a problem to be solved, but they are a people to be embraced." - Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, " Kancha Illiah**

**Abstract**— Given that the use of Dalit feminist theory in Bollywood films is a relatively new area of study, an article on this topic may have significant implications for both academics and the Indian film industry. Growing the intersectionality dialogue: Intersectionality, which recognises how many forms of oppression, such as caste, gender, class, and race, interact and have an impact on people's lives, is a central concept in feminist theory. By utilising Dalit feminist theory in Bollywood films, it may be possible to better understand caste and gender intersections in the Indian setting and how they emerge in the film business. This research could deepen feminist theory and broaden the intersectionality debate. It is important to highlight that Dalits are disproportionately underrepresented in both on-screen and behind-the-scenes professions in the film industry.

**Keywords**— Dalit, Feminism, Dalit Feminism, Dalit Feminist Theory, Exploitation, Bollywood feminism and Dalit Bollywood

## I. INTRODUCTION

The caste system in India constitutes one among oldest and tightest social stratification systems in the world, and it has resulted in the marginalization and subjugation of some groups of people, mainly Dalits. The aim of Dalit feminism is to combat caste and gender intersectionality, as well as the difficulties Dalit women face in a patriarchal and casteist culture. Dalit Feminism, a theoretical framework intended to combat caste- and gender-based oppression in India, has emerged as a result of the feminist theory's application to Dalit realities.

This research examines how Dalit feminist theory may be applied to Bollywood films, with an emphasis on how Dalit women are portrayed. The project will examine how Dalit women are portrayed and explore how they are portrayed in relation to the junction of caste and gender in a few recent Bollywood films. The study aims to advance our knowledge of how Bollywood films uphold or subvert repressive standards through this methodology. The article aims to contribute to the body of information currently accessible on the topic by providing a critical analysis of how Dalit

feminism is depicted in Bollywood films. An outline of Dalit feminist theory and its applicability to the Indian context will be presented at the start of the article . After that, a brief history of Bollywood and its influence on Indian culture will be given.

*Masaan, Gulaal, Sadgati, Parched, and Article 15* are among the five Bollywood films examined in this article for their use of Dalit feminist ideology. In both rural and urban settings, the experiences of Dalit women are shown in each of these films. This article examines how the use of Dalit feminist theory might lead to a more complex and inclusive depiction of Dalit women in Bollywood through a thorough examination of these films. The connection of caste, gender, and class is highlighted by feminism, and Dalit women's particular experiences in Indian society are acknowledged.

## II. CENTRAL ANALYSIS

An article on this subject might have important ramifications for both academics and the Indian film industry because Dalit feminist theory use in Bollywood films is a relatively new field of research. The following are

some possible implications of this study: Developing the intersectionality conversation: A key idea in feminist theory is intersectionality, which acknowledges how several types of oppression, including caste, gender, class, and race, interact and influence people's lives. Caste and gender intersections in the Indian setting and how they appear in the film industry may be better understood by using Dalit feminist theory in Bollywood films. This study may expand the conversation on intersectionality and strengthen feminist theory.

In conclusion, article on how Dalit feminist philosophy is applied in Bollywood films may have huge ramifications for both Indian academics and the film business. This study might promote the conversation on intersectionality, address the underrepresentation of Dalits in the film business, draw attention to Bollywood's influence on public image, help Dalit feminism gain ground, and offer useful advice for the film industry.

## INTRODUCTION

### A DALIT DEVI - MASAAN

A highly praised Bollywood film called "*Masaan*" examines how caste, gender, and sexuality connect in modern India. Two ladies from different caste origins who experience prejudice and persecution in various ways are shown in the movie. Through the lens of Dalit feminist theory, which focuses on the experiences of Dalit women and emphasizes the interconnectedness of caste and gender in their lives, the movie may be examined. Here are a few instances where the film employs Dalit feminist theory:

1. Intersectionality of caste, gender, and sexuality: The film emphasizes how Dalit women experience particular types of oppression as a result of the confluence of caste, gender, and sexuality. Devi, a young woman from a low-caste household, for instance, experiences prejudice. And stigma as a result of her marriage to an upper-caste man. She is made to go through an embarrassing questioning and is the target of moral policing by the police and the general public.

Representation of Dalit women as complex and empowered individuals: The film challenges the widespread perception of Dalit women as helpless victims of oppression by portraying them as sophisticated, independent people. The movie's female protagonists are shown as unique people with agency and the capacity to challenge tyranny in their own ways. For instance, Shalu, a young woman from a low-caste household, defies the expectations of her family and society by going to school and following her dreams of a better life.

Importance of allyship and solidarity: The movie places a strong emphasis on the need of cooperation and camaraderie in the struggle against oppression. It is depicted that Devi

and Shalu's friends and family members understand their problems and stand by them in their battle for justice, giving Devi and Shalu's characters encouragement and support.

Critique of dominant cultural narratives: Analysis of the prevailing cultural narratives

The film criticizes the prevalent gender and caste tropes in culture that uphold Dalit systematic injustice. The film, for instance, demonstrates how upper-caste males participate in caste violence and how the police force likewise participates by ignoring or covering up such violence. In conclusion, "*Masaan*" utilizes Dalit feminist theory by stressing the interconnectedness of

caste, gender, and sexuality, criticizing prevalent stereotypes about Dalit women, emphasizing the significance of allyship and solidarity, and opposing caste- and gender-specific prevailing cultural narratives.

### GULAAL, NOT A COLOR OF HAPPINESS FOR ALL- GULAAL

Anurag Kashyap's "*Gulaal*" is a Bollywood film that examines caste, politics, and power in contemporary India. Although there isn't a major female character in the film, Dalit feminist theory may be used to examine it since it emphasizes how caste and gender are intertwined in the lives of Dalit women. Here are a few instances where the film employs Dalit feminist theory:

1. Intersectionality of caste and gender: The film emphasizes how Dalit women experience particular types of oppression as a result of the intersection of caste and gender. For example, the Dalit girl Kiran is raped by an upper-caste guy who exploits his position and authority to avoid punishment. When she tries to pursue justice, she is also the target of more abuse and humiliation.

Critique of dominant cultural narratives:

The film criticizes the caste and power-based dominant cultural narratives that uphold Dalit systematic inequality. The film, for instance, depicts how individuals from the upper caste manipulate and take advantage of those from the lower castes, which results in murder and violence.

Importance of allyship and solidarity: The movie places a strong emphasis on the value of unity and allyship in the struggle against injustice. A student leader named Prithvi advocates for the rights of marginalized groups like Dalits, and he gains backing and solidarity from other like-minded people.

Representation of Dalit women as complex individuals: Although there isn't a dominant female character in the film, the female characters are presented as multidimensional people who have their own goals and agencies. One such

example is the portrayal of Kiran's mother as a strong, resolute lady who strives for justice for her daughter.

In conclusion, "Gulaal" implements Dalit feminist theory by emphasizing the intersections of caste and gender, challenging prevalent cultural narratives of power and caste, underlining the significance of allyship and solidarity, and portraying female characters as multifaceted people. The film depicts the intricate realities of politics and power in contemporary India and demonstrates how these realities impact various groups in various ways.

#### **DUKHI DALIT WIFE'S LAST RITES - SADGATI**

The Satyajit Ray-directed movie "Sadgati" explores issues of caste and class discrimination in rural India. Dalit feminist theory, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of caste, class, and gender in the lives of Dalit women, may be used to analyze the movie. Here are a few instances where the film employs Dalit feminist theory:

**Intersectionality of caste, class, and gender:** In the lives of Dalit women, caste, class, and gender are all intertwined. Due to her caste, gender, and socioeconomic standing, the Dalit lady who plays the role of Dukhi experiences several sorts of discrimination. Her husband is portrayed as a harsh and domineering person, and she is used as slave labor by the upper caste people.

**Representation of Dalit women as complex individuals:** The film shows Dalit women as complicated people with independent wills and goals. Dukhi is shown as someone who is working to better her situation and secure a better future for her children despite the hard reality of her existence.

**Critique of dominant cultural narratives:** Movie critique of dominant cultural narratives: The film criticizes the caste and class-based dominant cultural narratives that uphold Dalit systematic inequality. The upper-caste villagers are shown to be exploitative and hypocritical, utilizing their position of authority and influence to uphold the status quo.

**Importance of solidarity and resistance:** Solidarity and resistance are important in the face of persecution, and this is something that the film emphasizes. A loving Brahmin priest learns of Dukhi's suffering and attempts to assist her in his own manner. But in the end, it is Dukhi who takes charge and makes an impactful and surprising claim about her autonomy.

**Critique of patriarchy:** The film also criticizes patriarchy, which is another kind of discrimination experienced by Dalit women. The husband of Dukhi is portrayed as a patriarchal man who mistreats his wife and kids. It is demonstrated that the larger cultural and societal systems that promote patriarchal norms are what led to his toxic masculinity.

In conclusion, "Sadgati" implements Dalit feminist theory by emphasizing the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender, portraying Dalit women as complex individuals, challenging prevailing cultural narratives of power and caste, highlighting the significance of solidarity and resistance, and criticizing patriarchy. The film depicts the difficult realities of life for Dalit women in rural India and demonstrates how these realities are influenced by several overlapping types of oppression

#### **A STORY OF A DALIT SEX WORKER(BIJLI) AND A DALIT YOUNG BRIDE(RANI) - PARCHED**

The subject matter of Leena Yadav's film "Parched" concerns caste, gender, and sexual persecution in rural India. Dalit feminist theory, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of caste, class, and gender in the lives of Dalit women, may be used to analyze the film. Here are a few instances where the film employs Dalit feminist theory:

**Intersectionality of caste, class, and gender:** In the lives of Dalit women, the interplay of caste, class, and gender is depicted in the film. Due to their gender and caste, the characters of Rani, Lajjo, and Bijli, who come from various castes, experience various sorts of discrimination. They are denied access to fundamental human rights and subjected to sexual assault and discrimination.

**Representation of Dalit women as complex individuals:** The film shows Dalit women as complicated people with independent wills and goals. Rani, Lajjo, and Bijli are depicted as women who, despite the terrible reality of their existence, are working to change their situation and express their agency in a patriarchal culture.

**Critique of dominant cultural narratives:** The film criticizes the gender and caste stereotypes that continue to systematize oppression against Dalits. The characters are depicted facing their own biases and prejudices as well as challenging the societal standards that restrict their autonomy.

**Importance of solidarity and resistance:** Solidarity and resistance are important in the face of persecution, and this is something that the film emphasizes. The three women unite to oppose the current quo and fight for their rights, forging a close relationship and mutual support network.

**Critique of patriarchy:** The film also criticizes patriarchy, which is another kind of discrimination experienced by Dalit women. The male characters in the film are portrayed as abusive patriarchal individuals who support violence and prejudice against women. These conventions are depicted as being resisted and challenged by the women, who also affirm their own autonomy and agency.

The film also criticizes patriarchy, which is another kind of discrimination experienced by Dalit women. The male

characters in the film are portrayed as abusive patriarchal individuals who support violence and prejudice against women. These conventions are depicted as being resisted and challenged by the women, who also affirm their own autonomy and agency.

### **SEXUAL EXPLOITATION? BUT THEY BELONGED TO DALIT CASTE -ARTICLE 15**

The Bollywood film "Article 15" received high marks for its complex portrayal of caste and its links with gender, class, and other oppressions. The film follows a young IPS officer when he is sent to a rural area in Uttar Pradesh, where he is confronted with the reality of caste discrimination and brutality against Dalit women. Here are a few instances where the film employs Dalit feminist theory:

**Intersectionality of caste and gender:** The film emphasizes how Dalit women experience particular types of oppression as a result of the intersection of caste and gender. For instance, the Dalit laborer Jyoti is depicted as being mistreated not only because of her caste but also because she is a woman. Her spouse is powerless to defend her due to his low caste standing as her male boss harasses her sexually.

**Representation of Dalit women as complex and empowered individuals:** The film challenges the widespread perception of Dalit women as helpless victims of oppression by portraying them as sophisticated, independent people. The movie's female protagonists are shown as unique people with agency and the capacity to challenge tyranny in their own ways. Gaura, a Dalit girl who is raped and killed, for example, is not just a victim but also a representation of resistance to caste violence.

**Importance of allyship and solidarity:** The movie places a strong emphasis on the value of unity and allyship in the struggle against injustice. Ayushman Khurrana portrays the lead character, an upper caste man who at first has a limited awareness of the systemic prejudice experienced by Dalits. However, he learns the value of allyship and unity in the battle against oppression from his experiences with the Dalit characters in the movie.

**Critique of dominant cultural narratives:** The film criticizes the gender and caste stereotypes that continue to systematize oppression against Dalits. The film, for instance, demonstrates how upper-caste males participate in caste violence and how the police force likewise participates by ignoring or covering up such violence.

The "Article 15" summarizes Dalit feminist ideology. In conclusion, "Article 15" employs Dalit feminist theory by emphasizing the experiences of Dalit women, underlining the interconnectedness of caste and gender, highlighting the

significance of allyship and solidarity, and challenging prevalent cultural narratives of caste and gender.

### **III. CONCLUSION**

A greater understanding of the intersections of caste and gender in India has been made possible by the application of Dalit feminist theory to the analysis of Bollywood films. "Masaan," "Gulaal," "Parched," "Sadgati," and "Article 15," which are among the films this article has examined, have brought to light the ways in which Dalit women are frequently the targets of violence and persecution because of their caste and gender identities. The films have also shown the fortitude and tenacity of Dalit women, who still struggle against prejudice and ostracism.

It is evident from the examination of these films that the caste system supports violence and injustice against Dalit women. The films have shown the terrible reality of caste prejudice and how it affects Dalits' daily lives. Dalit Feminist theory has offered a lens through which to evaluate Dalit women's experiences, stressing the ways in which they are frequently denied access to positions of authority, are sexually assaulted and exploited, and are compelled to do physical labour. The films have also shown the manner in which caste and patriarchy interact to perpetuate oppression and violence against Dalit men and women. Patriarchal standards limit women's agency, access to resources, and ability to make decisions. This is especially clear in the movie "Parched," which shows the challenges of caste- and patriarchy-bound women in rural Rajasthan. While the films have emphasized the brutal realities of caste- and gender-based violence, they have also shown the Dalit women's tenacity and power. For instance, Devi's character in "Masaan" finally takes charge of her life and pursues justice. Similar to this, the ladies in "Parched" band together to support one another and resist sexism. These depictions of tenacity and toughness are crucial in displacing the victimization narrative frequently attached to Dalit women.

Overall, a greater knowledge of the interconnectedness of caste and gender in India has resulted from the application of Dalit feminist theory to the examination of Bollywood films. In addition to highlighting the ways that the caste system supports violence and discrimination against Dalit women

In conclusion, this research examined how Dalit feminist theory can be applied in relation to Bollywood films. It has been shown that Dalit feminist theory offers a helpful framework for comprehending the ways in which gender, caste, and class interact in Indian society and the ways in which these intersections are mirrored in popular culture through a critical examination of a number of films. According to the research, Bollywood movies frequently

mimic dominant caste and gender narratives, reinforcing stereotypes and repressive institutions. There are, however, other films that contradict these stories and depict different images of Dalit women. We may better comprehend the complexity of caste and gender dynamics by analyzing these films through the prism of Dalit feminist theory.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Ghaywan, Neeraj, director. *Masaan*. Netflix, 2015, [www.netflix.com/in/title/80059331](http://www.netflix.com/in/title/80059331).
- [2] Kashyap, Anurag, director. *Gulaal*. YouTube, Zee Studios, 2009, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCRjpslHfng&ab\\_channel=CrimemasterGOGO](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KCRjpslHfng&ab_channel=CrimemasterGOGO).
- [3] Sinha, Anubhav, director. *Article 15*. Netflix, Zee Studios, 2019, 1981, Yadav, Leena, director. *Parched*. Amazon Prime 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRpaPV3QayY&ab\\_channel=PrasarBharatiArchives](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRpaPV3QayY&ab_channel=PrasarBharatiArchives). [www.netflix.com/in/title/81154455](http://www.netflix.com/in/title/81154455).
- [4] Ray, Satyajit, director. *Sadgati*. YouTube, [www.primevideo.com/detail/Parched/0HX3D3LEJK2NO46F31M9RZBSWC](http://www.primevideo.com/detail/Parched/0HX3D3LEJK2NO46F31M9RZBSWC).
- [5] Arya, Sunaina, and Aakash Singh Rathore, editors. *Dalit Feminist Theory: A Reader*. Routledge, 2020. Accessed 19 March 2023.
- [6] Deshpande, Anirudh. "Indian Cinema and the Bourgeois Nation State." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 42, 2007, pp. 95-103.
- [7] Gopal Guru. "Dalit Women Talk Differently." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 30, no. 41/42, 1995, pp. 2548-50. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4403327>. Accessed 24 Apr. 2023.
- [8] K.N., roopa. "Politics of identity formation, a case study of Dr Rajkumar's movies." 2015. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/92014>.
- [9] Raghavendra, M. K. *The Politics of Hindi Cinema in the New Millennium: Bollywood and the Anglophone Indian Nation*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2014. Accessed 19 March 2023.
- [10] Shaji, Jeena. "Being and Becoming Women: A study of Select Bollywood Movies by Women Directors." 2019. <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/448268>.
- [11] Sundar, Pavitra. "Meri Awaaz Suno: Women, Vocality, and Nation in Hindi Cinema." vol. Vol. 8, No. 1, *Representin': Women, Hip-Hop, and Popular Music* (2008), pp. 144-179.