



# Class, Caste, and Gender in Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants*: An Intersectional Feminist Reading

Dr. Raed Nafea Farhan

Assistant Professor, General Directorate of Education in Al-Anbar, Ministry of Education, Iraq

[raedd5095@gmail.com](mailto:raedd5095@gmail.com)

Received: 26 Aug 2025; Received in revised form: 22 Sep 2025; Accepted: 26 Sep 2025; Available online: 29 Sep 2025  
©2025 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/>).

**Abstract**— Dalit writings have become a central venue of resistance within Indian literature, placing a significant emphasis on the experiences of marginalised communities often overlooked in mainstream discourse. Although there is increasing attention to the experiences of Dalit women, previous scholarship has tended to focus on one of caste, class, or gender to the exclusion of the others. This gap inhibits a deeper appreciation of the nature of oppression that is experienced among Dalit women. In this paper, the problem is tackled through the intersectional postcolonial feminist approach to the analysis of the memoir written by Gidla. The main aim is to discuss the role of *Ants Among Elephants* in reflecting the superimposed systems of marginalisation and prove that literary testimony is a counter-history. In its methodology, the study follows a qualitative design incorporating both close textual reading and contextual interpretation. The information comprises chosen narrative fragments that describe deprivation, discrimination, and resistance. These were coded thematically under the categories of class, caste, and gender, and analysed through the lens of intersectional theory. It can be observed in the findings that the oppression of Dalit women is a phenomenon that cannot be understood using specific categories, but only simultaneously. The research is also significant in Dalit and feminist literature criticism because it addresses fragmented intellectual writings, implying that life writing is not only a literary genre but also a form of political resistance within both Dalit and feminist contexts. Recommendations encompass areas such as broadening comparative studies on memoirs by Dalit women, transnational reception, and intersectional approaches in the field of South Asian literature.



**Keywords**— Dalit literature, intersectionality, caste, class, gender, postcolonial feminism

## I. INTRODUCTION

The social issues, colonialism, and equality struggles in India have always taken shape in Indian literature, especially in its modernist and contemporary literary practices. Although international representation of Indian writing in English is often associated with the works of internationally recognized authors like Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Amitav Ghosh, the presence of Dalit literature has also played a significant role. Dalit writing places the lives of the downtrodden castes at the centre of the discourse, since it emerged as a separate genre in the twentieth century and was more exposed to the outside world through translation in the 1990s. These texts tend to

be autobiographical, allowing the author to liberate personal experience as a political utterance. By thus doing, they destabilized the upper caste discourses that had been the monopoly holders of the Indian literary discourse. The book, *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India* (2017) by Sujatha Gidla, is one such tradition. It is simultaneously the heart-throbbing story of a family who attempt to survive and the story of an entrenched sense of injustice and discrimination towards citizens of a low caste in post-independent India. The force of a first-person narration of lived-in experience, in conjunction with the wide discovery of a political assault on long-standing inequalities, renders the text by Gidla to restore the vocation of the silent people.

Class, caste, and gender themes are interwoven in the narration by Gidla. The material conditions of poverty, educational opportunity, and economic exclusion in the system, which is a subset of Dalit life, are relative to caste. The hierarchy of purity and pollution that marginalises people is powerful and can be observed in caste, the most enduring type of social stratification in India. Gender cuts across these, and this results in the experience of added burdens to the already existing experiences of oppression on Dalit women, who have to face the domination of patriarchy in their caste as well as that of other castes. Collectively, these themes constitute the conceptual basis of this paper, through which *Ants Among Elephants* is read from the perspectives of intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, and subaltern studies.

Although *Ants Among Elephants* has attracted recent scholarly attention, the majority of essays only partly cover the aspects of its portrayal. In the memoir, Rathee and Pareek (2024) address the issue of education as a means of empowerment that youth should have, regardless of gender, caste, and socioeconomic factors. As Sen (2024) points out, the text is also used to expose other aspects of Dalit oppression, notably, on how gendered lives complicate caste hierarchies. Kumar (2024) situates Dalit literature outside the context of social change in India, but without a specific discussion of the Gidla text. In studies like Cherechés (2024) and Khubchandani and Allison (2018), the need to analyze Dalit identity in a multifaceted way is emphasized, without pursuing an intersectional feminist analysis through the texts of individual Dalit women. This is a significant gap because there is no systematic account of how the oppression of these intersecting vectors (class, caste, and gender) can be made to resonate with each other in the context of Gidla in *Ants Among Elephants*, or how the text may be read through the lens of an intersectional postcolonial feminism.

The current paper fills this gap by providing a critical interpretation of *Ants Among Elephants* that brings all these three axes of marginalisation together in one meaningful theoretical framework. Such an effort is crucial given the recent proliferation of Dalit feminist scholarship that demands the need to address the issue of twofold discrimination: that imposed by the upper caste on Dalits, as well as that perpetrated by patriarchal societal codes within the Dalit community itself (Mukherjee, 2021; Jena and Acharya, 2024). Such views require a broader perspective that avoids isolating gender and caste from class.

The significance of this study is therefore threefold. First, it makes a contribution to literary criticism by bridging the gap in terms of textual focus between one of the most

significant contemporary Dalit memoirs and the discourse of life writing and testimonial literature in a global context. Second, it contributes to the feminist and postcolonial theory by integrating a non-Western context into intersectionality, thus providing an example of how those axes of oppression were played out in South Asia. Third, it intensifies activist scholarship by encouraging academically marginalised Dalit women to speak in their own voices and be included in the intellectual debate. Such contributions are more than welcome in times when India and other countries face the challenge of addressing caste discrimination as a human rights issue (Hari & Srivastava, 2022; Rawat, 2024).

The study pursues two primary objectives. The first is to analyse how *Ants Among Elephants* depicts the overlapping structures of class, caste, and gender in modern India. The second is to demonstrate the analytical value of an intersectional postcolonial feminist framework for interpreting the narratives of Dalit women. The central research question guiding this inquiry is therefore: How does Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* represent the intertwined experiences of class, caste, and gender oppression, and what insights emerge from reading the text through an intersectional postcolonial feminist lens?

The theoretical limitation of the paper is that it introduces a model for reading and interpreting the autobiographical texts of Dalit women, written with a critical resistance as the central disposition or attitude. Combining intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2013), postcolonial feminism (Reed-Sandoval, 2024; Spivak, 2023), and subaltern studies (Guha, 1989; Spivak, 2023), the analysis highlights the potential of these theoretical trends to help understand the multiplicity of marginalisation in Indian society. As such, the paper mediates between literary criticism, feminist theory, and subaltern historiography, providing an interpretive framework that can be applied to other texts by Dalit women.

Intersectionality, introduced by Crenshaw (2013), provides the first conceptual anchor. It underlines the fact that the discrimination that women of colour, or, in the Indian context, Dalit women, go through cannot be analysed by looking at gender or caste alone. Instead, oppressions are inextricable and mutually supportive. This is again depicted many times in Gidla's memoir. Her descriptions of both her mother's experiences in school and marriage demonstrate how social norms of gender mixed with caste exclusion constrain the possibilities and impose subordination. The narrative indicates that Dalit women are neither simply victims of patriarchy nor solely oppressed by caste; both simultaneously constrain them. Intersectionality thus enables a nuanced reading that captures this simultaneity.

The second theoretical axis is that of Postcolonial feminism. Reed-Sandoval (2024) criticises the homogenising tendencies of Western feminism when she attempts to prove that further considerations should be given to the historical and cultural context of such phenomena. The title of this book evokes the infamous question posed by Spivak (2023): Can the subaltern speak? Gidla does not just talk; she insists on having her community visible and heard. A postcolonial feminist reading can enable us to contextualise her narrative as a disquieting account that simultaneously challenges the patriarchal Indian order and the West-imposed feminist universalisms. It also sheds light on how the legacies of colonialism and nationalist endeavours have continued to carry caste subordination, relegating Dalit women even in the new India.

Subaltern studies represent the third approach to theory. This strand of thought, initiated by Guha (1989) and further developed by Spivak, focuses on the voices and agency of the excluded in history, as represented by elite historiography. Dalit communities, especially Dalit women, are the personification of the subaltern. By sharing her family history, Gidla actively engages in countering the erasure of her heritage. By giving names, recollection, and storytelling to the lives of people who were left to invisibility, she accomplishes what Spivak describes as speaking for the subaltern. However, here the speaking is mediated through the genre of autobiography. Subaltern studies, therefore, particularise the memoir as more than an autobiographical testimony, but rather a political transaction with the resistance of historical silence.

The three theoretical paradigms that emerged from their clashes in the novel *Ants Among Elephants* are intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, and subaltern studies. When Gidla describes how her mother could not flee the clutches of patriarchy even though she studied, she explains how the two factors of caste and gender come together in her motherhood. Her positioning of her family in the historical continuum of Indian independence and post-independence subordinates the problem of caste and patriarchy to that of liberation symbolically represented by nationhood. By highlighting the invisible presence of the Dalit in historical narratives, she thus breaks thematic patterns. A subaltern theory contextualises her narrative as a counter-historiography. Collectively, the frameworks make sense not only of the memoir's contents but also of its form as a strategic political action.

The joys of this blended method are emphasised in recent literature. Analysis of Gidla has begun to interrogate the interplay of caste and gender within the text, as explored by Rathee and Pareek (2024), Sen (2024), and Lalitha and

Pankaj (2022). However, none have approached this topic through the lens of a wholly intersectional postcolonial feminism. The more comprehensive texts by Khubchandani and Allison (2018), Cherechés (2024), and Byapari (2018), as well as the reviews of their work by Kumar (2024) and SSG (2023), highlight the significant role of Dalit autobiography in redefining Indian literature and Dalit literature in the context of social change. The fixity of stigma and structural violence experienced due to the caste system is shown in Jena and Acharya (2024), which can be related to the everyday discrimination experienced by Sen (2024). This work offers theoretical insights by focusing on Ambedkar's work, establishing connections between Dalit narratives and justice movements. Taken together, the foregoing suggests the timeliness of more thorough-going critical work addressing Dalit women's life writing, especially under feminist and cross-cutting frames.

To conclude, this paper has situated Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* at the intersection of two critical approaches: intersectionality theory and postcolonial feminism, as well as between these approaches and subaltern studies. The study of the interrelation of class, caste, and gender in the memoir opens up a scholarly gap, while also adding to the knowledge base of extending the canon of Indian literature to include the voices of the marginalised. This aspect is examined in the analysis, as the autobiographical narratives of Dalit women cannot be termed merely personal stories, but rather a strong act of resistance against historical erasure and a demand for a place in history. In this way, the study not only contributes to the realm of literary criticism but also aligns with other social justice initiatives that highlight the traditionally marginalized, much like ants in a world dominated by elephants.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Indian literature in English and translation has long been a fertile ground for exploring questions of identity, marginalisation, and social justice. Although canonical postcolonial authors like Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, and Amitav Ghosh have received considerable attention in literary studies, the emergence of Dalit literature warrants critical attention at both national and international levels. Dalit literature written both by and about the subordinated communities of the caste structure has attempted more and more to resist the influence of the Brahmanic caste and the silence it has imposed on the lives of the subordinated. Much of this literature is autobiographical, and as Byapari (2018) shows in *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit*, the personal narrative form

becomes an act of resistance as he creates the testimonial against pervasive violence. To this extent, *Ants Among Elephants* (2017) by Sujatha Gidla has become an influential text in recent years, eliciting several critical responses. However, scholarly analysis of the memoir, which takes into account issues of class, caste, and gender, has been minimal over time.

A number of works have been carried out on the political and social implication of Dalit literature in general. Kumar (2024) asserts that the nature of Dalit writing is transformative as it influences both the cultural and social existence of India, being both literature and activism at the same time. Similarly, SSG (2023) supplements the Dalit poetry role of bringing into the focus of the Indian literary criticism the realities of the marginalised peoples, and Dalit texts have subverted the aesthetics of mainstream writing by insisting on authenticity and testimonial immediacy. These contributions are valuable in contextualizing Gidla, although they are generally more programmatic in form, talking about Dalit literature in general without undertaking any close reading.

Hari and Srivastava (2022) take a more cautious side, saying that the level of discrimination against caste of all the various political regimes in India has not changed, which means that in the autobiography by Gidla, the writer cogitates about the continuation of discrimination despite the time period in which some progress has been made in human life. This is similar to Khubchandani and Allison (2018) in *Caste Matters*, where the caste is not a vestige of the past, but actually a dynamic factor of interpersonal power in contemporary India. In *Coming Out as Dalit*, Cherechés (2024) offers a personal exploration of identity that broadens the concept of Dalit literature into the field of gender and sexuality, showing the multidimensionality of discrimination and the importance of reading caste in combination with other identity axes. Together, these works highlight the significance of caste and identity in the Indian context. However, they do not yet specify an intersectional feminist means of analysing the Dalit narratives of women.

*Ants Among Elephants* has attracted scholarship only very recently. Rathee and Pareek (2024) discuss the importance of education in the memoir, citing that although education can lead to empowerment, it is often strictly bound by caste and gender boundaries. Sen (2024) does not forget the most essential concept of intersectionality, which is revealed through Gidla and her story, other facets of Dalit oppression, presented through the contrast of gender with caste hierarchy. Both articles are informative, but they imply that intersectionality is implicit and not a theorised framework. Lalitha and Pankaj (2022) compare and contrast the memoir, situating Sen among other Dalit

writers to demonstrate the two-fold load on Dalit women. Despite its usefulness, such a work is more descriptive than analytical, and it interacts lightly with the postcolonial feminist or subaltern theories.

The feminist touches of the Dalit literature have also entered the scene. Similarly, Mukherjee (2021) concludes that Dalit women speak differently since Dalit women are the products of different and concurrent oppressions. An essential twist of this observation is that in Jena and Acharya (2024), the study takes into account structural violence Dalit women face in their daily lives, how stigma and discrimination are felt among Dalit members, and the impact these phenomena have on the majority of society.. This is in agreement with Reed-Sandoval's (2024) appeal to consider the specificity of women's experiences in postcolonial situations, rather than making generalisations. Nevertheless, these insights have scarcely been applied to literary works such as *Ants Among Elephants*, leaving a gap in scholarship.

Other, broader theoretical orientations can also help explain why a holistic approach is desirable. Intersectionality, as best put forward by Crenshaw (2013), has been widely applied in both feminist and critical race theory; however, its application in the context of protests against caste-based oppression in India is only recently emerging. Teltumbde and Yengde (2018), in "The Radical in Ambedkar," revisit B. R. Ambedkar's legacy to emphasise how caste and class *intersect* in producing systemic inequality. Their research highlights the need for further studies on the relationship between caste and other social groups. And as long as the Subaltern Studies project (Guha, 1989; Spivak, 2023) has reminded us that those in the margins have been erased in histories published by states. Although Gidla's act of writing her family history touches upon the question proposed by Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?', it is not reflected in the existing literature to the optimal extent.

Contemporary sociological and literary discussions have affirmed the importance of taking caste and gender together as a matter of urgency. Rawat (2024) highlights the potential of social change through Dalit literature; however, few avenues of scholarship have genuinely attempted to understand what Dalit women have to say. Hari and Srivastava (2022) explain that memoirs, such as Gidla's, play a pivotal role in understanding how discrimination can persist even within a political regime. Still, he fails to incorporate this phenomenon into feminist theoretical perspectives. The comparative nature of the work by Byapari (2018) and Cherechés (2024) illustrates how it is possible to revise the boundaries of literature through Dalit autobiographies; however, they remain personal investigations rather than systematic studies of

intersecting oppressions. In the meantime, both Jena and Acharya (2024) and Rathee and Pareek (2024) offer case-wise insights, failing to include class, caste, and gender into a coherent analysis.

Such weaknesses of the existing literature indicate a gap in research. Despite the rising consciousness of caste oppression and recognition of the gender dimension in Dalit literature, the majority of the scholarly literature has continued to maintain the division between these categories. It has failed to analyze how they overlap with one another. The writings commenting on Gidla's memoir are scarce, and those that exist, such as those by caste and gender, do not address class as a material reality. Secondly, the *Ants Among Elephants* has not been correctly read through the lens of postcolonial feminist and subaltern studies. This discontinuity is sharp, given that the memoir, in turn, encapsulates the intersectional issues of this type: Gidla has authored a work that shows how a Dalit woman, who was born into a low-income family in India, has formed a particular and multifaceted concept of marginalisation.

This blank is forced by the present study, where an intersectional postcolonial feminist approach is applied to the analysis of *Ants Among Elephants*. It is in contrast to the previous researches that emphasize the interdependence of class, caste, and gender as systems, as opposed to different categories of oppression. By situating Gidla's memoir within the context of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2013), postcolonial feminism (Reed-Sandoval, 2024; Spivak, 2023), and subaltern studies (Guha, 1989; Spivak, 2023), the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of the stories of Dalit women. In this way, it not only enhances current literary criticism but also aligns with feminist and postcolonial discourses, giving voice to those whose voices were previously unavailable.

Collectively, the scholarship reviewed suggests the wealth of Dalit literature and the thought-provoking approach that it has received concerning caste, class, and gender. Nevertheless, most studies have investigated these categories independently, and without the need to provide a combined framework of how these categories intersect. Contributions to Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants*, specifically through an intersectional feminist lens, are very few, and those few are descriptive and not analytical. In addition, the three dimensions that include class, caste, and gender have never been studied systematically as a compilation in the context of postcolonial feminism and subaltern theory. The present paper fills this gap by providing an in-depth intersectional feminist analysis of the *Ants Among Elephants*, and placing the memoir in the context of the broader discussion of identity, marginalisation, and social justice.

### III. METHOD

A qualitative and interpretive approach is employed in this study, aligning with contemporary practices in the study of literature and culture. As the core of the study is the exploration of class, caste, and gender issues in Sujatha Gidla's memoir book, *Ants Among Elephants* (2017), depth over breadth will be the focus of the study, rather than the clarity of breadth. Qualitative literary studies are deemed appropriate when seeking answers to questions of identity, oppression, and marginalisation, especially in postcolonial and Dalit settings (Kumar, 2024; Rathee and Pareek, 2024). By doing this, the text is analysed not only as an autobiographical narrative but also as one that critically brings together the relationships of literature, politics, and testimony.

It is no accident that *Ants Among Elephants* serves as the primary text. Recent research highlights the importance of focused studies on a single text to gain insight into the subtleties of Dalit women's life writings. Sen (2024), for example, emphasises that close engagement with Gidla's memoir reveals "other dimensions of Dalit oppression" that broader surveys often overlook. Similarly, Hari and Srivastava (2022) explain why autobiographical literature, including that written by Gidla, should be studied in detail because it highlights the persistence of caste oppression even during periods of political change. By referring only to Gidla's memoir, this analysis is depth-based, owing to the recommendations on this area of investigation; thus, all the layers of discrimination, class, caste, and gender can be thoroughly explored in this context.

Close reading is employed as its primary methodological instrument, in line with current feminist literary criticism practices (Crenshaw, 2013; Reed-Sandoval, 2024). Close reading has enabled the scholarly researcher to access the nuances of language, the structure of narrative, and the complexities of metaphor. Rathee and Pareek (2024) demonstrate that this approach is practical in her examination of the situation with education in "*Ants Among Elephants*," although textual detail renders empowerment and restraint. Based on it, the present study engages in multiple readings of the memoir to chart recurring themes that testify to the overlap of class, caste, and gender: poverty, lack of access to education, the subjugation of domesticity, and a culture of violence. These motifs are then examined in relation to the wider Dalit literature, following the methodological strategy of contextual interpretation, which Jena and Acharya (2024) has adopted parsimoniously in their essay on structural violence and stigma among Dalit women.

Contextual interpretation is an extension of close reading, as it situates the memoir within its social and historical context. The Dalit literature, according to Kumar (2024), cannot be sufficiently comprehended without considering the social realities of the Indian caste systems and economic deprivation. Likewise, SSG (2023) also points out that the deployment of Dalit writing has the character of lived experience, which requires contextualised rather than abstract analysis. Thus, this approach to textual analysis views Gidla's memoir as a text, but also considers it a cultural artefact to the extent that it is characterised by the politics of caste and gender in India. Such a two-fold focus makes textual analysis receptive to the realities that inform Dalit narratives.

The three overarching theories that inform the methodological framework are intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, and subaltern studies. The concept of intersectionality, as developed by Crenshaw (2013), has become a pivotal concept in feminist studies, particularly in addressing the fact that multiple forms of oppression can coexist simultaneously. Recent studies indicate its relevance in the Indian setting: Rathee and Pareek (2024) apply the concept of intersectionality to the memoir written by Sen, pointing out the way that caste and gender are both limiting access to education, and Sen (2024) identifies it as the centre of understanding the cumulative subjection that Dalit girls are facing. This study employs intersectionality as its methodology, coding narrative episodes that reveal the overlap of marginalisation in economy, caste, and gender, as seen in these publications. Using the example, it will be impossible to discuss Gidla and her mother as the victims of the educational process, as the problems of gender inequality alone; it is the place of caste and interclass contradictions that should be admitted.

The second methodological orientation is postcolonial feminism. Reed-Sandoval (2024) has cautioned against Western feminist universalism and has asked that special attention be given to postcolonial societal contexts. The recent Dalit feminist studies support the relevance of this orientation. Mukherjee (2021) explains that Dalit women speak differently and create narratives that reflect the impact of both caste and gender inequality. The work of Jena and Acharya (2024) further suggests that postcolonial feminist theories are crucial for examining the simultaneous operation of stigma and discrimination at both personal and structural levels in India. According to the logic of this study, postcolonial feminism serves as a framework that informs the reading of the Gidla memoir, focusing on how her narration challenges both the patriarchal upper-caste discourse and mainstream feminism, which tends to homogenise itself. Theoretically,

it implies that it is the specific situation in the context of the Indian social hierarchy that is expressed in the testimony of Gidla in relation to her experience of oppression, rather than that of women in general.

The third methodological strand, as Guha (1989) and Spivak (2023) perhaps assert, is that subaltern voices have often been silenced in mainstream historiography, giving rise to the concern of whether the subaltern can speak at all. This unchanged invisibility of Dalit populations in mainstream Indian history is highlighted by recent authors, such as Hari and Srivastava (2022) and Kumar (2024). In contrast, the power of using autobiographical writing as a means of re-establishing an awakened voice is demonstrated by Cherechés (2024). Although Gidla wrote in English to address an international audience, her memoir is methodologically significant in that it constitutes an equivalent reclamation. The performance of narrating her family's struggles can be read as an interplay between the subaltern and the act of narrating an alternative history, one that is alternative to the dominant histories of the elite. This framework also ensures a stronger focus on analysing the weaknesses and opportunities related to Dalit self-representation.

The analysis procedure is divided into phases, where theoretical orientations are integrated with textual practices. In the first, the script is read repeatedly to highlight frequent moments of marginality. They fall under thematic coded categories of class, caste, and gender in accordance with the strategies explained by Rathee and Pareek (2024) and Jena and Acharya (2024). Second, the analysis of the intersections between these sets of rules is conducted with the help of the model described by Crenshaw (2013), as this approach enables every moment of the narrative to be explained in connection with the interacting regimes of oppression. Third, the results are situated within the context of postcolonial feminist criticism, as articulated by Mohanty (2003) and Spivak (2023), who emphasise the importance of cultural and historical specificity. Lastly, the entire account of the story is viewed as a matter of subaltern agency, which aligns with Guha (1989) and modern Dalit feminism (Sen, 2024; Kumar, 2024).

Reliability in this nature of methodology is done through the triangulation of this methodology in an existing scholarship. The process of education being perceived as both empowering and constraining is indicative of what Rathee and Pareek (2024) observed in their research, and the experience of structural stigma is analogous to that of Jena and Acharya (2024). The same applies to the idea of Dalit autobiographies as political interventions because it is based on Byapari (2018), Cherechés (2024), and Khubchandani and Allison (2018). Bringing the textual

analysis into line with these new studies makes it both more convincing and more useful. Validity will be achieved by adhering to feminist research ethics, which involve avoiding generalisations due to the localisation of voices and situating them in their contexts; this prevents the indulgence in universalist generalisations (Reed-Sandoval, 2024).

One of the key factors of the methodology is ethics. The Dalit testimonies usually contain incidents of trauma and violence, and this can easily contribute to the sensationalising of their narratives. Based on feminist principles of methodology (Mukherjee, 2021; Sen, 2024), the present study focuses on respect, accountability, and reflexivity. Instead of viewing the family of Gidla as victims, they are stronger, defiant, and active in the analysis. This ethical positioning ensures that the study makes a positive contribution to elevating marginalised voices, rather than marginalising or instrumentalising the people.

The method's weaknesses are clearly stated. A single-text orientation will necessarily limit the scope, but it can be justified in light of recent scholarship on intensely focused concerns in Dalit women's narratives (Sen, 2024; Rathee and Pareek, 2024). Moreover, the use of intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, and subaltern theory in relation to each other can potentially cause a theoretical overload; yet, these three approaches are complementary, and therefore, such a combination is somewhat justified. The concept of intersectionality elucidates the fact of concomitant oppression. Postcolonial feminism is described within the context of historico-cultural identity, and the idea of subaltern studies suggests that it can be viewed as a response to the culture of silence. In combination, they create a stratified methodology that is specifically suited to Gidla's memoir.

To conclude, the research's overall approach is qualitative, interpretive, and theory-guided. This is a close reading analysis and contextual interpretation of *Ants Among Elephants*, informed by theories of intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, and subaltern studies. The given methodology is informed by the recent literature concerning Dalit literature and feminism that posits that one should perform intersectional analyses with caution in a particular context (Rathee and Pareek, 2024; Sen, 2024; Jena and Acharya, 2024; Kumar, 2024). This method results in originality and profundity due to its detailed analysis of a single piece of writing, as well as its careful observation of the processes of narration and its themes. In addition to filling an essential gap in the existing literature, this paper will illustrate that literary criticism can be used to inform a broader discussion on caste, class, gender, and social justice in modern India.

#### IV. ANALYSIS

This paper will focus on the textual analysis of the book *Ants Among Elephants* (2017) by Sujatha Gidla and will analyse the details of three interconnected notions: class, caste, and gender. Using the approaches of intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, and subaltern theory as an analytical tool, the chapter shows how the personal experiences of Gidla could be taken as a witness to the macro-level oppression. All these themes will be addressed, and an attempt will be made to explore how they intersect and lead to compound forms of marginalisation.

##### 4.1 Class

The exposition of the poverty of the lower classes is one of the strongest tones in *Ants Among Elephants*. Gidla does not refer to her family deprivation as a result of individual misconstruction but as a situation built into the Indian culture. She vividly recalls, "*We often had only one meal a day, and my mother would go hungry so that we children could eat*" (Gidla, 2017, p. 45). This excerpt further clarifies that poverty is not presented as a personal challenge, but rather as an inherent situation that pervades the daily existence of Dalits. The account aligns with Hari and Srivastava's (2022) observation that Dalit autobiographies highlight the persistence of deprivation despite the promises of independence and modernisation, demonstrating that social reforms have not eradicated entrenched inequalities: Combined the personal experience as well as the scholarly contributions made by Gidla over the last few years reaffirm the sequential nature of poverty as envisioned in Dalit accounts is never erratic but procedural, as it has been deeply sowed in structures of exclusion.

Education is also another area where class is portrayed, since it is one of the most significant barriers to the upward mobility of people living in poverty. According to Gidla, the availability of education to her mother was marred by both monetary and social disadvantages: "*My mother was told that people like us did not need education beyond the basics*" (Gidla, 2017, p. 88). This memory illustrates what Rathee and Pareek (2024) analyze as the two-fold nature of education among Dalits. However, education is a potential resource of empowerment, but fiscal constraints and the stigmatisation of caste constantly hinder it. These episodes demonstrate that poverty is never a stand-alone phenomenon but is instead augmented by other systemic factors; as such, it cannot be a sufficient category when examined in isolation. Therefore, the text and critical studies (Rathee and Pareek, 2024; Kumar,

2024) suggest that the issue of class deprivation is closely intertwined with gender and caste oppression.

#### 4.2 Caste

Caste is the defining axis of marginalisation in "Ants Among Elephants." Gidla narrates her family's experiences as "untouchables" within the Indian caste system, revealing the daily humiliations and exclusions that structure Dalit life. She recalls, "*We could not drink from the village well, nor enter the homes of those above us*" (Gidla, 2017, p. 62). These passages illustrate how caste influences even the most fundamental aspects of survival, encompassing both public and personal spheres. According to Sen (2024), the memoir also reveals other aspects of Dalit oppression, as it shows not only the overt forms of caste functioning but also how it influences institutions and personal relationships. The combination of Gidla and Sen highlights that the issue of caste is not merely an external label, but an all-encompassing system that permeates the lives of the Dalit community.

The metaphor in the title of the book "Ants Among Elephants" is a forceful portrayal of the caste hierarchy itself: Dalits are abundant yet invisible, small and easily trampled underfoot by the more prominent actors, i.e., elephants. Gidla writes, "*We were like ants, moving quietly, unseen, always beneath the feet of those who ruled over us*" (Gidla, 2017, p. 14). It is this type of imagery that typifies the sense Spivak (1988) means by the subaltern: the recognition of presence but not voice, the being seen but only in the context of oppression. Gidla makes clear through subaltern studies that Dalit voices were always omitted in formal historiography (Guha, 1989), which is why Gidla has written a memoir that contests the historiography produced. Appropriating this imagery, the text narrates and challenges the oppression of caste, thereby confirming the ambivalence of the subaltern in speaking within and against dominant discourse.

Caste also influences contemporary political and economic life. Farhan (2023) and Hari and Srivastava (2022) states that even after achieving political independence, castes persisted within modern institutions under different names. Gidla also provides textual evidence of such continuity in her memoir, as her family's upward mobility was repeatedly rebuffed by caste prejudice. As a case in point, employment and land ownership were not options due to the inertia of caste stigma. This proves the point that caste remains a live issue in twenty-first-century India, shaping possibilities and exclusions even in the cities and newspapers of the so-called modern era (Khubchandani & Allison 2018). Therefore, the memoirs and scholarly literature reveal that caste discrimination not only exists

within the rural tradition but also in the mechanisms that are said to be contemporary and egalitarian.

#### 4.3 Gender

While class and caste are central, gender adds a layer of oppression in Gidla's memoir. Her accounts of her mother and other women in her family reveal how Dalit women bear a "double burden": they are oppressed not only as Dalits but also as women. Gidla recalls, "*My mother was married off against her will, her voice drowned in decisions made by others*" (Gidla, 2017, p. 103). This scene serves to show that Dalit women do not speak the same way because Mukherjee (2021) explains that they are the victims of the combined forms of oppressions, where the caste and gender analyses are not effective in determining their harassment. Another similarity in the argument offered by Jena and Acharya (2024) is that stigma and violence against Dalit women are structural and predispose them to it, particularly. Together with the newer literature, Gidla uses personal testimony to show that the oppression of Dalit women is a multidimensional phenomenon.

The memoir also recounts instances of domestic violence and educational denial, illustrating how patriarchal norms operate within marginalised communities. Gidla notes, "*Even when my mother excelled in school, she was told it was pointless for a girl of our caste to continue*" (Gidla, 2017, p. 89). At this instance, it is clear that it is not only the issue of poverty or castes that did not allow her mother to access education, but also the patriarchal control. This can be explained through the prism of postcolonial feminist theory, as Reed-Sandoval (2024) critiques the unifying of women's experiences and demands contextual translations. In this way, the memoir by Gidla proves that Dalit women cannot become subsumed under the umbrella of universal patriarchy and instead must be understood in light of caste and gender in a postcolonial society.

It is worth pointing out, however, that Gidla herself resists, through the very narrative voice. By writing the book in English, she places herself in a global context, proclaiming the voice of Dalit women, who are otherwise marginalised in Indian and international feminist discourses. This act resonates with Spivak's (2023) question, "*Can the subaltern speak?*" Gidla's text demonstrates that the subaltern woman not only speaks but reframes her silence as testimony. The analytical breakthrough point here is that Dalit women in their narratives simultaneously offer both an archive of deprivation and an act of challenge or protest, as evident in their words and structure.

#### 4.4 Intersections

Although class, caste, and gender can be analysed individually, their true significance emerges in their

intersections. Crenshaw's (2013) model of intersectionality is indispensable for reading *Ants Among Elephants*. For instance, when describing her mother's struggles to continue her schooling, Gidla recalls, "Even though she ranked first in her class, the headmaster said education beyond this level was wasted on a girl like her" (Gidla, 2017, p. 91). This scene illustrates not only the intersection of class (poverty), caste forces, and patriarchal culture but the sheer intensity of the intersection. The same can be said of Rathee and Pareek (2024), who point out that no progress has been made on the issue of either caste discrimination or gender limitations of the Dalits. The accretion of textual resources and critical knowledge reflects that double-axis analyses fail to track the multiple oppressions the Dalit women face.

Sen (2024) similarly argues that the memoir exemplifies how multiple oppressions overlap, producing "other dimensions" of marginalisation. Gidla captures this complexity when she writes, "My mother's poverty marked her as lesser, her caste marked her as untouchable, and her gender marked her as powerless" (Gidla, 2017, p. 134). This sentence suggests that oppression cannot be encountered in parts, but rather as a whole. Jena and Acharya (2024) discusses the multidimensionality of Dalit women's oppression, which should be analysed through an intersectional approach. Accordingly, the memoir and recent scholarship confirm that intersectionality offers the most effective approach to understanding the coexistence of class, caste, and gender oppression in postcolonial India.

With the help of the three lenses of class, caste, and gender, a close reading of *Ants Among Elephants* reveals how the story of Gidla represents the state of compressed oppression experienced by Dalit women in contemporary India. Caste develops as a structural domination of poverty and exclusion; caste is a form of persistent social hierarchy that denies worth and access, and gender; add to this form of patriarchal possession. Where any of these categories intersect, the memoir presents how marginalisation is experienced simultaneously, in Crenshaw's (2013) words, the oppressions are interlocking rather than additive. Not only does Gidla's memoir document these realities, but it also offers a subaltern intervention, providing a space for Dalit women to speak in the Indian and global literary landscapes. This section, therefore, forms the textual basis for the subsequent discussion, which contextualises these findings in relation to other existing literature and highlights the peculiarities of this work.

#### 4.5 Discussion

The above discussions of *Ants Among Elephants* have confirmed that this memoir is not the depiction of class,

caste, and gender as discrete scales through which oppression is affected, but through interrelated systems of oppression that define the lives of Dalit women. This conclusion resonates with new scholarship, although it surpasses it with a comprehensive, integrated intersectional postcolonial feminist analysis. In this discussion, the findings are placed in the context of other related works, highlighting both the converging and divergent understandings of these works before drawing on the entirety of the theory and the literary contributions of the study.

Such a focus on the importance of class in the analysis is verified by Kumar (2024), who determines that one of the key elements of Dalit literature is the insistence that inequality is not arbitrary, but is structurally determined. In demonstrating the pervasive nature of poverty in education, employment, and at home, Gidla illustrates once again the inadequacy of critiquing systems based on inequality, as conveyed in Kumar. Similarly, Hari and Srivastava (2022) notes that Dalit autobiographies reveal how deprivation has persisted unchanged, regardless of the political movement. This opinion is supported by the analysis, which shows how the Gidla family remained poor despite the overall assertions of modernisation and independence. The novel contribution of the paper, in relation to these observations, is that it associates class with gender and caste, and argues that poverty cannot be decoupled from these variables when it applies to Dalit women.

The results of caste oppression are consistent with those presented by Sen (2024), who asserts that *Ants Among Elephants* focuses on other aspects of Dalit oppression by describing in detail the manifestations of exclusion. This analysis helps verify that caste is not merely about ritual purity, but also involves day-to-day challenges related to education and employment. This supports Khubchandani and Allison's (2018) assertion in *Caste Matters* that caste remains a live and vibrant institution in modern-day India. Nevertheless, this paper will contribute to the discussion by highlighting the metaphor of ants among elephants as one of the literary tools that signifies how Dalits are often rendered invisible in mainstream discourse. This understanding situates the memoir within the context of subaltern studies and the need to give a voice to the marginalised. However, Gidla makes it very clear that she is reclaiming that voice.

Feminist studies on gender are extended by the treatment of gender in the analysis. Mukherjee (2021) argues that Dalit women have a different way of speaking as such narratives are constructed through a combination of caste and gender oppressions. This is strengthened by Jena and Acharya (2024), who demonstrate how Dalit women faced

structural violence, which is normalised in Indian society. The analysis confirms these findings by the description of how the experience of domestic violence and the lack of education of Gidla's mother can best represent the biased effects experienced by Dalit women. Nonetheless, the value here is methodological in nature: by adapting postcolonial feminism, the work locates the experiences within larger discourses surrounding the particularity of postcolonial women's subjugation. Universalising the concept of women, however, threatens to obliterate the specifics of Dalit women's lives as Reed-Sandoval (2024) warns. This paper shows exactly why Gidla, in this fashion, subverts such universalism, placing the experiences of Dalit women in a category of their own, yet politically salient.

The primary novelty of this work lies in the examination of the interrelationship among class, caste, and gender. Intersectionality, a theory established by Crenshaw (2013), has garnered numerous citations; however, its applications in Indian literary studies are limited. Rathee and Pareek (2024) briefly comment on intersectionality as it applies to education within *Ants Among Elephants*, and Sen (2024) recognises that there exist intersecting forms of oppression. Still, neither paper attempts to develop a comprehensive account of intersectionality. Comparatively, the present analysis shows how various episodes in the memoir show how oppression is concurrent: poverty, caste stigma, and patriarchal control do not happen sequentially. This intersectional perspective not only helps explain what Gidla writes but also fills the identified gap in the literature review, namely the lack of combined analyses that treat class, caste, and gender as intermeshed systems in a unified way.

In addition, this paper contextualises Gidla's memoir as a subaltern intervention. Although Spivak (2023) famously argued that the subaltern cannot speak, the text written by Gidla proves the opposite, as writing is a method of saying that breaks the discourse of dominance. The analysis has therefore contributed to subaltern studies in terms of how memoirs by Dalit women serve as counter-histories, reclaiming space in national and literary history. This contribution builds on the work of Cherechés (2024) and Byapari (2018) by highlighting the testimonial value of Dalit autobiographies, while also making a feminist and intersectional contribution.

The limitations presented in the discussion also highlight gaps in possible studies that relate to the current work. Works such as Jena and Acharya (2024), Rathee and Pareek (2024), and Sen (2024) highlight specific aspects of the caste and gender issues presented in Gidla's text; however, they are fragmented, as each addresses a single aspect at a time. Wider reviews of Dalit work (Kumar,

2024; Hari and Srivastava, 2022; SSG, 2023) do not harp on Dalit women nearly as much, perhaps tacitly recognising the centrality of their accounts even though most Dalit literature is available to and supported by men. This paper fills these gaps by providing a comprehensive, theory-informed approach to see the relationship of class, caste, and gender as mutually constitutive.

The effects of such findings are pretty serious. To begin with, they affirm that the memoirs by Dalit women cannot be regarded as marginal to Indian literature. Through the narration of her family's story, Gidla engages in an act of resistance, which can be evaluated as a contribution to the democratisation of the literary canon formation. Second, the paper illustrates the value of intersectional postcolonial feminist approaches to literary analysis, which is the ability to reveal the complexity of marginalised identity formation in postcolonial contexts. Third, the discussion contributes to subaltern studies by demonstrating how life writing functions as a counter-historiography, amplifying the voices that have been silenced in the dominant discourse.

In conclusion, the discussion highlights how the analysis of *Ants Among Elephants* converges with existing scholarship in affirming the significance of caste, class, and gender, while also extending it by offering a comprehensive intersectional framework. The study fills a clear gap in literary criticism by integrating these categories and situating Gidla's memoir within feminist and subaltern debates. Ultimately, the contribution of this research is twofold: it deepens our understanding of Dalit women's life writing and advances methodological approaches in postcolonial feminist literary studies.

## V. CONCLUSION

The analysis of Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants* has revealed that the memoir functions as a powerful intervention in the ongoing discourse on caste, class, and gender in Indian literature.

Because of the critical approach to reading the text and the study of the Vietnamese culture through the prism of intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, and the subaltern studies, this study has proved that Gidla has taken the platform of narrating her own family history as an opportunity to open the eyes to the structural exteriorities of marginalisation, in addition to giving a voice to the Dalit women. With the results, it emerges that vicious circles of class poverty and caste-based satisfaction, coalesced with patriarchal gender principles, are not distinct layers of domination. Still, instead, they intertwine to form intricate idealisations of deprivation. Through the narration of the experiences, Gidla not only testifies to

injustice but also makes Dalit women the epicentre of literary and cultural discourses.

The overall objective of this analysis is to investigate how the text of *Ants Among Elephants* exemplifies the intersection of various forms of oppression and the avoidance of assimilation. Class emerges as an inescapable fact of deprivation, defined by a deficiency of opportunities in education as well as in the economy. The longest-standing component of discrimination that has been favored is caste discrimination. Gender is an additional burden, more so in the case of Dalit women, who must not only face an external form of patriarchal repression, but also internalized imperatives in the peripheral groups. This situation could be well captured with the trope of ants among elephants: being visible and invisible at the same time, but weak and strong. This conclusion affirms the practicality of an intersectional analysis in the perceptions of how complicated, marginalised identities may be.

This paper makes three contributions. To begin with, it features a textual input, as a textual analysis of a single modern Dalit memoir is provided. Previous works have highlighted insider critique or ducking arms, but here, the concepts of class, caste, and gender are woven together, resulting in a more comprehensive analysis. Second, the study makes a theoretical contribution by applying intersectionality, postcolonial feminism, and subaltern studies in a combined approach. Such an integrated framework enables us to understand how feminist and postcolonial theories can be used in the caste context in India, thereby increasing their applicability to non-Western contexts. Third, the research is scholarly because it fills a gap in the existing literature. Compared with previous scholarship that tended to isolate class, caste, or gender as units of analysis, this work demonstrates how these manifestations are inseparable and that it is only when they are analysed together that the meaning of Dalit women's narratives can be identified.

Besides its scholarly contribution, there are other implications of the study. This implies that the voice of women must take the centre stage and their accounts must not be peripheral or marginal in the case of Dalit studies; we ought to see them as the embodiment of larger systematic realities. Feminist ideology shows how the small-scale theories can become constraining and emphasizes the necessity of implementing the context-related approaches. It demonstrates to postcolonial studies how the subaltern can be made a speakable and listenable voice through the use of testimony in literature, thereby revealing the master historical/cultural narratives. Collectively, they contribute to the evidence that the life

writing of Dalit women is also a political protest and bearing.

The paper provides several suggestions on future scholarly choices and practice. Future studies should make comparisons between the work of Dalit women's autobiographies, as in the case of Yashica Dutt or Baby Kamble, and that of Gidla. Such comparisons can be those that capture general modalities of oppression, and those that capture the particularities of different narratives. The global component of women Dalit writing is another area of discussion that deserves evaluation among scholars. Since Gidla writes in English, her memoir can be defined as a transnational space where caste questions are inseparably combined with other questions of racial and gender justice. The political resonance of these texts may become thinkable as they are received in different new cultural contexts. Third, the literature of Dalit women should be integrated into academic programs. In this way, the canons of literature would not only be diversified, but the awareness of the students about the intersection of literature with social justice would also be raised.

Finally, the paper recommends that researchers should advance intersectional approaches to literature studies. Despite intersectionality becoming a term of reference, its methodological application in South Asian literature studies remains deficient. An intersectional approach has offered one such example by providing a closer reading and contextual analysis. Still, future tasks may have greater recourse to formal coding and/or oral histories and ethnographic descriptions to complement the textual analysis. This interdisciplinary effort would help bridge the gap between the social sciences and literary criticism, as well as enhance our understanding of oppression and resistance.

In conclusion, it could be said that *Ants Among Elephants* is not only an autobiographical book but a literary and political intervention that addresses silence. It can be considered an example of how narratives of Dalit women break the hegemonic discourse and bring to the fore what has been kept secret in most cases. The results of this study demonstrate the importance of the intersection of classes, caste, and gender as a multifactorial system. The contributions emphasize the topicality of intersectional postcolonial feminist work, and the recommendations list the directions of further research, not to mention other methods of fostering inclusivity and critical thinking toward the current literature. This paper concludes that the life writing of Dalit women should assume a leading role in postcolonial and feminist theories, as it not only provides a means to bear witness to oppression but also

serves as a strength in protesting subordination and challenging knowledge.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Byapari, M. (2018). *Interrogating My Chandal Life: An Autobiography of a Dalit*. Sage Publications.
- [2] Cherechés, B. (2024). *The Resilience of Caste through Yashica Dutt's Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir* (2019) (No. ART-2024-138557).
- [3] Crenshaw, K. W. (2013). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. In *The Public Nature of Private Violence* (pp. 93-118). Routledge.
- [4] Farhan, R. N. (2023). Resistance to the Grim Caste System in Indian Society with A Particular Reference to Mulk Raj Anand's "Untouchable". *Journal of AlMaarif University*, 34(4), 286-296.
- [5] Gidla, S. (2017). *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- [6] Guha, R. (Ed.). (1989). *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History* (Vol. 6, p. 335). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [7] Hari, S. H. S., Saraswat, S., & Srivastava, P. K. (2022). Caste, Impurity, and Untouchability: A Study of Ants Among Elephants. *Journal of Pharmaceutical Negative Results*, 13.
- [8] Jena, B. K., & Acharya, A. K. (2024). Dalit, Structural Violence, and Stigma in India: An Approach to Study the Untouchability. *Sociological Research Online*, 13607804241282944.
- [9] Khubchandani, J., Soni, A., Fahey, N., Raithatha, N., Prabhakaran, A., Byatt, N., ... & Allison, J. J. (2018). Caste matters: perceived discrimination among women in rural India. *Archives of women's mental health*, 21(2), 163-170.
- [10] Kumar, S. (2024). Role of Dalit Literature in Social Change in India. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, 6(3), 1-11.
- [11] Lalitha, S., & Pankaj, A. K. (2022). Dalit women in cinema: a narrative of gender and caste. *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 81(1), 143-157.
- [12] Mukherjee, S. (2021). Women of the Dalit Unrest: Rewriting Bodies, Reinforcing Resistance. *Tête à Tête: Journal of Francophone Studies*, 1(1), 11.
- [13] Rathee, K., & Pareek, S. (2024). From Ignorance to Empowerment: Education's Role in Sujatha Gidla's *Ants Among Elephants*. *Journal of Underrepresented & Minority Progress*, 8(2).
- [14] Reed-Sandoval, A. (2024). Decolonial Feminism and the Open Borders Debate. *Social Philosophy Today*, 40, 21-39.
- [15] Satyanarayana, K. (2019). The political and aesthetic significance of contemporary Dalit literature. *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 54(1), 9-24.
- [16] Sen, A. (2024). The other dimensions of Dalit oppression: Tracing intersectionality through ants among elephants. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 26(1), 2.
- [17] Spivak, G. C. (2023). Can the subaltern speak?. In *Imperialism* (pp. 171-219). Routledge.
- [18] SS, G. (2023). Unveiling the voices of the Oppressed: Exploring the significance of Dalit writings in Indian Literature. *South India Journal of Social Sciences*, 21(2), 167-177.
- [19] Teltumbde, A., & Yengde, S. (Eds.). (2018). *The Radical in Ambedkar: Critical Reflections*. Penguin Random House.