Dalit Literature is an important genre in 21st-century South Asian Literature. But much of the literature and research is about the Dalit community and its struggle. Feminist perspectives are largely overlooked. *The Outsiders Within: A Dalit Feminist Standpoint in the Life Narratives of Dalit Women,* is a significant scholarly contribution to the literary and academic work that broadens the perspective of Feminist theory. The impressive depth and breadth of the research conducted for this book trace the need for a standpoint in response to the Muted Group Theory. People at the bottom of social hierarchies are often ignored but their marginalized locations actually make it easier for them to define important research questions and explain social and natural problems (Harding: 2004).

The author builds a strong background for the study. The foundational work of numerous feminist standpoint theorists and critical thinkers, namely Sandra G. Harding, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Dorothy E. Smith, Uma Narayan, Silvia Federici, Kathi Weeks, and many more, offer a solid theoretical and methodological grounding to this book. The book also uses relevant scholarly sources from several disciplines and theorists on Dalit studies such as Gopal Guru, Sharmila Rege, Anupama Rao, and others to clarify the role of nature and the function of politics and history in constructing the caste- and gender-based hierarchal social structure. It also addresses the creation of binaries that systemically empower one group and marginalize the other. Referencing the ideas of Sandra G. Harding, the main canonizing force behind Feminist standpoint theory, *The Outsiders Within* argues that people at the bottom of social hierarchies have a unique standpoint that is a better starting point for scholarship because those at the top of social hierarchies are not able to see the real human relations and comprehend the true nature of social reality and, as a result, miss critical questions about the social and natural world in their academic pursuits. Hence, starting off research from women’s perceptsives produces less partial and more accurate accounts of Dalit women’s lives and a casteist society as a whole.

The book has been organized into five chapters, including “Introduction” and “Conclusion.” Chapter 1, “Introduction,” considers why feminism rejects silence and supports the voice of women through a discussion of the Muted Group Theory and its response. The chapter elaborates on the origin and the need for Standpoint and the Feminist standpoint theory, its controversies, and the benefits of debates. Harding supports controversies and dissent in feminism. As women do not form a homogenous category, the author also asserts

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it would be rather misleading to represent Feminist standpoint theory as a single monolithic set of epistemological undertakings (p. 31).

The chapter provides numerous rationales for developing a Dalit Feminist Standpoint, prime among them Dalit women’s marginalization, subjectivity, and lack of voice as reflected in the Dalit Movement, Dalit Literature, Indian feminism, and their everyday lives. Hence, it becomes the moral duty of women who are ridden with Dalit consciousness and feminine sensibility to represent their perspectives on life and situate their standpoint (p. 38).

The study traces the development of Dalit feminist writings, which are autobiographical in nature: “The upsurge of Dalit women’s autobiographies in the 1990s also points to the social intentionality which made many researchers, namely Pandian, Rege, and Nayar import the terminology ‘testimonios’ for their life narratives where in ‘the intention is not of literariness but of communicating the situation of a group’s oppression, imprisonment and struggle’” (pp. 59–60). The exploration vindicates lived experiences as the final validation for the Feminist standpoint theory, which makes the autobiographies of Dalit women legitimate tools to understand society. The narratives of Dalit women are not merely “sob stories” but a political awakening of the community. The perspectives of Dalit women pave the way for the development of a Dalit Feminist Standpoint (p. 6) that represents their collective voice and creates a new epistemology resulting from their unique social location of being a Dalit and a woman. The study situates a Dalit Feminist Standpoint by exploring the lived experiences of Dalit women writers represented in their select life narratives: Bama’s Karukku and Sangati Events, P. Sivakami’s The Grip of Change, Baby Kamble’s The Prisoner’s We Broke, Urmila Pawar’s The Weave of My Life, and Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon’s We Also Made History. The chapter also reviews feminist and Dalit feminist literature and finally discusses the research methodology. Although there are various methods for creating a standpoint, the present research limits its scope to the exposition of how learning from Dalit women’s outsider-within status and the representations of their performed labor help writers to situate the Dalit Feminist Standpoint (p. 60).

Chapter 2, “The ‘Outsider Within’: New Sociological Import through Tamil Dalit Women’s Life Narratives,” discusses how women make artistic use of their marginality and the learning from “Outsider-within” status to represent their perspectives on life. The painful memory is used as a stratagem to embody unique social relations, the interlocking nature of caste, class, and gender-based oppression, and also the endurance and resilience of Dalit women. The study of the select narratives correspondingly reflects the growth of the writers, their development from childhood to adulthood, and the successive transformation to fully conscious grown-ups. Their odyssey from the marginal space to the dominant society confers on them the status of “outsider within,” bestowing them with the epistemic advantage, the result of bestriding both sides of a dichotomous social divide (p. 67). Thus, the exploration of Dalit women’s life narratives reveals different writing, which discusses their idiosyncratically different suffering, explicates the factors that bring this “difference” into existence, and challenges the dominant viewpoint of the mainstream that has been marginalizing and suppressing these voices (p. 98). The standpoint of Dalit women allows the feminist voice to dismantle the exclusive community of dominant ideology and patriarchal critical discourse.

Chapter 3, “Representations of Labor: Developing a Dalit Feminist Standpoint in the Life Narratives of Marathi Dalit Women,” underlines and elaborates on uncomprehended and unacknowledged labor performed by the women of the community. Different forms of labor performed by Dalit women—household labor, survival activities, emotional and caregiving labor, social reproduction, the labor of
biological reproduction, and above all their intellectual and political labor—are discussed in detail by exploring select literary texts. Their representations prove to be the vital source of informative knowledge claims not only about the women of the Dalit community but also about the nature of the social relations which echo Haraway’s phrase that the knowledge produced is always socially situated and subjugated standpoints promise adequate, sustained, unprejudiced, transforming accounts of the world: “Dalit women’s laboring practices produce for them ontology from which to execute political and social change” (p. 143).

Chapter 4, “Interlocutions: Voices of the Authority,” explores the question, “Does caste affect women’s labor or day-to-day activities?” (p. 147). The author conducts interlocutions with Dalit women to analyze their live viewpoints on caste and gender and to illustrate the change brought into their lives with time and space. The researcher (author) attempts to provide some answers through interviews conducted in two different regions (Nagpur and Jammu). Documentation reveals, “People who are educated and economically well can fill the forms... face competition and get jobs. The poor lack resources... and they are left behind... poor remain poor” (p. 147). Chapter 5, “Conclusion,” summarizes all the research and also presents the effect of the creative potential of the marginalized narratives and the discursive space of a Dalit Feminist Standpoint which has found its way into the formation of acts, policies, and schemes for transforming the lives of Dalit women and deprived groups.

The Outsiders Within creates new knowledge about social relations, marks the awakening of consciousness among readers and Dalits regarding the endurance of Dalit women, outlines an approach to social change, and promotes Dalit women’s activism and empowerment. Also, the impressive depth and breadth of the research conducted for this book lead to the production of new knowledge in sociology, which is influential in broadening the cause of the Dalit Movement, Dalit literature, and Feminist theory. Well written and formatted, the book makes complex theoretical concepts accessible, skillfully includes quoted material, and is careful and accurate in its documentation. The study is a significant work and provides fresh interpretations of facts and opinions that will inspire other researchers to take up studies on marginalized groups. As Dalit literature is going global, the book is of great help to students, researchers, and anthropologists and also provides varied inferences for scholars in comprehending the creative potential of narratives and cultural biographies.

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