



Research Paper

## Voices from the Margins: Dalit Feminism in West Bengal and the Poetic Resistance of Kalyani Thakur Charal.

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the intersection of Dalit feminism and literature in West Bengal, with a particular focus on the poetic contributions of Kalyani Thakur Charal. While Dalit feminism has gained significant attention in various parts of India, the specific struggles of Dalit women in Bengal remain underrepresented in both mainstream feminist discourse and Dalit literary traditions. Through an examination of Charal's poetry, this paper investigates how her work critiques the dual oppression of caste and gender faced by Dalit women in the state. Charal's writings, particularly her celebrated collection *DhorlaiJuddhoSunishit*, offer a potent critique of the caste system and patriarchy, presenting the experiences of Dalit women as both a source of suffering and a wellspring of resistance. The paper situates Charal's poetic voice within the larger context of Dalit feminism in West Bengal, highlighting her role in giving voice to marginalized communities and advocating for social justice. By analysing her themes of resistance, identity, and empowerment, this research seeks to contribute to the growing body of Dalit feminist scholarship, offering insights into the transformative potential of literature as a tool for social change.

**Key Words:** Dalit, Dalit feminism, resistance, identity, caste, gender, patriarchy, women empowerment.

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### Dalit Feminism in India

Dalit feminism in India is a unique intersectional approach that examines the experiences of Dalit women who face multiple layers of oppression—based not only on their gender but also on their caste. Dalit women occupy a marginalized position within Indian society, as they are doubly oppressed: once by their caste (being part of the Dalit or "untouchable" community) and once by their gender (as women in a patriarchal society).

Dalit feminism seeks to address these dual struggles and challenges the traditional feminist discourse that has often been dominated by upper-caste women. This strand of feminism critiques both patriarchy and caste-based discrimination, advocating for the rights, dignity, and social empowerment of Dalit women.

### Dalit Feminism in West Bengal

Dalit feminism in West Bengal, like in other states, is a unique and important movement that addresses the intersection of caste-based oppression and gender discrimination within the socio-political and cultural context of the state. Although Dalit feminism as a distinct discourse has its roots in various regions of India, West Bengal has its own history and challenges that shape the experiences of Dalit women.

### Historical and Social Context of Dalit Women in West Bengal

**Caste and Class Hierarchies in West Bengal:** West Bengal, like many other parts of India, has a rigid caste structure, though it may not be as visibly entrenched in some parts as it is in rural areas of the north or central India. Dalit communities in Bengal often face discrimination, marginalization, and economic deprivation. In urban and rural settings alike, Dalit women are doubly oppressed, facing caste-based violence, exploitation, and gender-based discrimination. Dalit women in rural areas of the state who work as agricultural labourers or engage in menial jobs, where they are at the bottom of the caste hierarchy are often subjected to physical and sexual violence. Their physical labour is undervalued and exploited, which keeps them economically marginalized. This economic dependence, combined with the additional burden of gender discrimination, exacerbates their vulnerability, and limits their opportunities for social mobility and access to resources like education and healthcare. Compared to the rural Dalit women, urban Dalit women enjoy

opportunity for mobility. Yet their plight is not without any discrimination. As subjected to caste hierarchies, they still face systematic exclusions, particularly in employment opportunities, education, and social spaces.

### **Key Themes of Dalit Feminism in West Bengal**

**Caste-Based and Gendered Violence:** Dalit women in West Bengal experience multiple forms of violence—sexual, physical, and psychological—primarily because of caste discrimination. Dalit feminism in West Bengal seeks to address this violence, both physical and institutional, and calls for legal and social accountability for perpetrators, along with measures for the protection and empowerment of Dalit women.

In West Bengal, Dalit feminism faces the challenge of being heard within both the larger feminist and Dalit movements. While mainstream feminism often overlooks caste-based oppression, the Dalit movement sometimes fails to highlight the specific struggles of Dalit women. In West Bengal, this is further complicated by the state's political history, where leftist ideologies and movements have sometimes disregarded or failed to address the lived realities of Dalit women. Hence, Dalit women in West Bengal have increasingly used literature, poetry, and art to voice their struggles. Though not as widely recognized as their counterparts in Tamil Nadu or Maharashtra, the contributions of Dalit writers and poets are growing. Writers like Suchitra Sen, Madhusree Mistry, and Meghali Chakraborty (through their personal and collective works) have provided critical reflections on the intersection of caste, gender, and class in Bengal's socio-cultural fabric.

Dalit feminists in West Bengal are increasingly highlighting the need for an intersectional approach that does not separate caste, class, and gender but rather recognizes their interconnectedness. They push for a feminist movement that is truly inclusive and addresses the specific issues of Dalit women, rather than a "one-size-fits-all" approach. Writers like Mahasweta Devi, Kalyani Thakur Charal, Namita Das are a few writers who are using their pen to express the lived experiences of the marginalized women, living at the intersectional point of Caste and Gender, these women have taken the crusade of exposing the Dalit exploitation and oppression in the state.

### **Key Figures and Movements in Dalit Feminism in West Bengal**

Kalyani Thakur Charal is a prominent Dalit feminist poet from West Bengal whose works challenge caste-based oppression and gender inequality. As a Dalit feminist poet, her writings focus on the unique struggles faced by Dalit women in a patriarchal and casteist society. Through her poetry, Charal engages with issues of identity, marginalization, resistance, and empowerment, offering a powerful voice to the Dalit community, particularly Dalit women.

### **Major Works of Kalyani Thakur Charal**

Kalyani Thakur Charal is a prominent voice in Dalit literature, particularly in Bengali poetry. Her work reflects the struggles, resilience, and identity of Dalit communities, centring on the double marginalization faced by Dalit women. Through her poetry, Thakur Charal challenges the dominant caste narratives and portrays the lived experiences of oppression and resistance, reflecting on the struggles and resilience of Dalit communities. Her most recognised poem, "Why I write Charal" (Ami Keno Charal Likhi) is a powerful declaration of Dalit identity and pride. Thakur Charal reclaims the term "Charal" (a marginalized caste name) as a symbol of resistance, rejecting the societal stigma attached to it. The poem challenges upper-caste hegemony and celebrates Dalit culture and heritage very openly as she writes:

"I write as Charal,  
because this identity holds my history,  
my language, my pain, my resilience.  
I write as Charal to remind you,  
that I am not ashamed of what you call filth—  
it is your shame, not mine."

This poem celebrates Dalit identity and heritage, reclaiming the dignity denied to Dalits by caste-based hierarchies. Like many other poems written by her this poem too is her assertion of the pride and history of Dalit communities, countering the narratives of erasure imposed by dominant castes. In this anthology "Ami Keno Charal Likhi" (Why I Write as Charal), she unapologetically embraces the identity of "Charal" (a historically marginalized caste), transforming it into a badge of honor.

Her another very distinctive poem, "Hunger" (Khuda) vividly captures the daily struggles of Dalit labourers who fight against hunger and poverty. Thakur Charal's use of stark imagery to depict caste oppression, systemic inequality and the physical and emotional toll of caste-based exploitation is evident in the following lines as she describes the pangs of hunger:

"Hunger gnaws at our bellies,  
yet you ask for our silence,  
as if starvation is our heritage."

Kalyani's another exemplary poem, "Dalit Woman" (Dalit Nari) explores the unique struggles of Dalit women who face both caste-based and patriarchal oppression. Encompassing such themes as Intersectionality, gender oppression, resilience, this poem highlights the resilience of Dalit women while criticizing the society that devalues them.

"They call me untouchable,  
but I hold the world together,  
with my labor, my blood, my tears."

"The Wound" (Ghahra) is another famous poem of Kalyani Charal that uses the metaphor of a wound to symbolize the generational trauma inflicted by caste oppression. The need for collective healing and resistance is evident as she writes:

"This wound is not mine alone,  
it festers in every Charal,  
but it will not kill us;  
it will remind us to fight."

The poem, "The Village Well" (Gram-er Kua), is a poignant critique of caste-based exclusion, this poem revolves around the well as a symbol of privilege and denial. Thakur Charal depicts the pain of Dalits forbidden from accessing public resources due to untouchability. The following lines highlight not only the themes of caste discrimination and exclusion but also of systemic injustice.

"The well stands tall,  
its waters clear,  
yet my thirst is condemned—  
my touch, they say, pollutes."

"Broken Chains" (Bhanga Shikol), is yet another poem of hope and empowerment. It celebrates the breaking free from caste and societal constraints. It envisions a future where Dalits claim their rightful place with pride and dignity.

"These chains that bound us for centuries,  
are breaking, link by link,  
and we rise, unbound, unbroken."

A masterpiece creation of Kalyani, "The Language of Pain" (Byathar Bhasha), explores the silence imposed on Dalits and their pain. In this poem she gives voice to the unspoken struggles, emphasizing the importance of reclaiming one's narrative. Themes: Silence, voice, reclamation of identity.

"You taught me to swallow pain,  
but today, my voice rises,  
loud enough to shatter your peace."

Kalyani's poems are rich in imagery, often drawing on the lived realities of Dalit life—manual labour, hunger, violence, and survival. By juxtaposing suffering and strength as a hallmark of her poetic style, she subverts Brahminical myths, traditions, and norms that uphold caste hierarchies. She reclaims language and narratives traditionally used to demean Dalits, using them as tools of empowerment and critique.

Kalyani Thakur Charal's collection of poems, like "DhorlaiJuddhoSunishit" ("The Sure War of Strength"), reflects a deeply insightful exploration of internal and external conflicts, social issues, and the resilience of human spirit. The central theme of "DhorlaiJuddhoSunishit" revolves around the concept of struggle, both internal (psychological, emotional) and external (social, political). As the title itself hints, this anthology depicts the ongoing battle for justice and strength, and poignantly critiques both casteism and patriarchy, exploring themes of resistance, identity and empowerment. The poems in this collection convey not only the despair that comes with hardship but also the resilience required to face and overcome them. Themes of endurance, the power of the human will, and hope in times of despair are woven throughout the collection, suggesting that war is not just an end but a path toward survival and change. This collection of poems is her commentary on the societal and political climate. By using the metaphor of war, Charal comments on the battle for justice, equality, or against oppression.

Charal's obsession with the struggles faced by marginalized communities, the consequences of political turmoil and their battle for social reforms is reflected in her usage of language and imagery. Her poetic styles include strong imagery and symbolism. The metaphors of war, conflict, and strength are used to emphasize the emotional intensity of the subjects discussed. Descriptions of battles—whether physical or emotional—invoke powerful visual and sensory experiences that bring the reader into the heart of the struggle.

"DhorlaiJuddhoSunishit" provides an existential reflection on the nature of life and death, the meaning of suffering, and the fight for personal identity or freedom. It explores how individuals find their purpose in a world filled with conflict, and what it means to fight for one's beliefs and values. This collection also gives a psychological dimension to the poems where Charal explores how individuals cope with conflict—whether through endurance, denial, or confrontation. This creates a deeply personal connection between the reader and the poet, as the internal struggle becomes just as important as the external battles faced in the world.

In conclusion, "DhorlaiJuddhoSunishit" by Kalyani Thakur Charal is a powerful exploration of human struggles, resilience, and the fight for justice. The collection combines personal reflection with broader social and political themes, offering a poignant commentary on both individual and collective conflicts. The collection emphasises on the idea of reclaiming dignity and self-worth. Her poems in this collection depict Dalit women as individuals who refuse to accept their marginalized position in society. They fight for their right to identity, self-expression, and social equality. By addressing the issue of untouchability, economic exploitation, and social exclusion, her poems encourage Dalit women to rise above their circumstances and demand equality. The use of metaphor, imagery, and philosophical musings enhances the depth of the work, making it a multifaceted literary experience.

Charal's poetry contributes to the broader tradition of Dalit feminist poetics, a genre that critiques the traditional feminist movement for overlooking caste discrimination. By focusing on the unique challenges of Dalit women, her poems highlight how caste and gender intersect in ways that are often ignored by mainstream feminist discourse.

Her work thus helps to build a feminist framework that is more inclusive, one that specifically addresses the challenges faced by women at the margins—those who experience both patriarchy and the brutal realities of the caste system. Her poems have deep political overtones as well, critiquing the failures of Indian society and its institutions to address caste inequality. In a way her poems question the complicity of progressive movements and feminism in sidelining Dalit issues. She calls out the erasure of Dalit voices in broader social and political struggles.

## II. Conclusion

Kalyani Thakur Charal stands as a significant Dalit feminist poet in West Bengal who uses her poetry to speak out against caste-based and gendered oppression. Through her exploration of intersectionality, resistance, and empowerment, Charal offers a unique voice to Dalit women, capturing their struggles, desires, and resilience. Her work is a powerful critique of both caste and patriarchy and contributes to the larger conversation about social justice and equality in India. By reclaiming language and articulating the collective experiences of Dalit women, Charal's poetry not only highlights the oppression they face but also inspires them to fight for a better, more equal society.

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