

Comparative Analysis of Dalit Feminism and Western Feminism in Context to Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*

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Abstract

The discourse of feminist literary analysis provides a sophisticated investigation of overlapping identities and socio-political situations through the contrast of Dalit feminism and Western feminism. A contrast of this kind is examined in this abstract with reference to Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*. This research explores how female characters are portrayed in Indian society and their fights against patriarchal norms through a comparative lens. Dalit feminism addresses both gender inequality and caste oppression. It is based on the experiences of Dalit women who encounter prejudice grounded on their caste. Conversely, gender inequality is mostly addressed by Western feminism within a paradigm that is influenced by Western socio-political forces. *Lights Out* offers a rich environment for contrasting different viewpoints as it examines the experiences of underprivileged women battling structural injustices. This research clarifies the ways in which Dalit feminism and Western feminism differ and overlap in their approaches to empowerment and liberation through an examination of character agency, socio-economic determinants, and power relations. The analysis delves into the novel's handling of gender, caste, and class intricacies, highlighting the ways in which feminist movements are intertwined throughout many cultural and geographic settings. At the end of the day, this comparative research advances our knowledge of the complex worldwide terrain of feminist discourse.

Keywords: Dalit Feminism, Western Feminism, Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*, Empowerment.

Feminist discourse has broadened over the past several decades to encompass a wide range of viewpoints from different cultural and sociopolitical contexts, shedding light on the many experiences and problems faced by women throughout the world. Among them, Dalit feminism stands out as a critical voice that uses feminist theory and activity to challenge the interconnections of gender, class, and caste

(Hasan, 1999). Through the lenses of Dalit and Western feminist theories, this paper compares and contrasts the feminisms of Dalit and Western authors within the context of Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*. The study examines the complex ways in which gender dynamics, power dynamics, and resistance tactics are portrayed in Padmanabhan's work. The study looks at how Dalit women's agency and struggles

in a patriarchal society are portrayed in the literature in order to identify similarities and differences between Dalit feminist practice and the mainstream Western feminism frameworks (Devi, 2011).

In light of the increasing acknowledgement of Dalit feminism as a unique and essential element of feminist discourse, comparing it to Western feminist viewpoints provides a deeper comprehension of the intricacies present in feminist movements across other cultural settings. The research aims to contribute to wider conversations within feminist theory and action by shedding light on the common objectives, differing approaches, and possible synergies between Dalit feminism and its Western equivalents (Rai, 2006).

1.1 Evolution of Feminist Thought

- **Western Feminism:** With groups like suffragism fighting for women's political rights in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Western feminism has a long history. Different waves of feminism, each with its own goals and focus, arose over time. For instance, the main goals of first-wave feminism were political and legal equality, with a particular emphasis on topics like property rights and suffrage (Sharma, 2006). The 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of second-wave feminism, which broadened its focus to address problems of sexuality, reproductive rights, and discrimination at work. Beginning in the 1990s, third-wave feminism embraced intersectionality and diversity, questioning essentialist ideas of what it meant to be a woman and fighting for the rights of underrepresented groups within the feminist movement.
- **Dalit Feminism:** In the framework of Indian society, the junction of caste, class, and gender oppression is represented by dalit feminism. Dalit feminism, which has its roots in the Dalit liberation struggle headed by leaders like B.R. Ambedkar, opposes caste-based hierarchies as well as patriarchal systems that support systematic violence and

discrimination against Dalit women. Dalit feminism, which mostly emerged in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, emphasizes the particular experiences and hardships faced by Dalit women, who are marginalized in many ways because of their caste, gender, and economic standing (Aston, 1995). Dalit feminists push for a more inclusive and integrative approach to feminist activity, criticizing mainstream feminism for failing to confront caste-based oppression.

1.2 Key Concepts and Principles

- **Intersectionality:** Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Black feminist academic, was an early proponent of the notion of intersectionality, which highlights the interrelatedness of racial, class, gender, sexual orientation, and disability oppressions. A key tenet of intersectional feminism is the idea that a web of privilege and injustice that shapes their lives impacts people. This theoretical framework is fundamental to Dalit and Western feminisms because it allows us to see the interconnected webs of power that impact women's lives (Curb, 1985).
- **Agency and Empowerment:** An individual's agency is their ability to take charge of their own life by acting autonomously and making decisions that impact it. Conversely, empowerment is about acquiring the information, abilities, and support systems that allow one to take charge of one's own life and fight against oppressive systems. Despite their differences, women's emancipation is a central tenet of both Western and Dalit feminism. In order to combat structural oppression and strengthen communities, Dalit feminism stresses social action and solidarity, in contrast to Western feminism's emphasis on individual autonomy and self-actualization.
- **Representation and Voice:** Feminist theories center on the ways in which representation and voice affect the ways in which women are perceived and acknowledged in different societal, political, and cultural settings. For a

long time, Western feminism has been fighting for more portrayal of women and their varied experiences in the media, literature, and politics (Joshipur, 2013). Just as mainstream discourses have long ignored and neglected Dalit women, Dalit feminism aims to do the same. Aiming to express their agency and demand social justice and equality, Dalit feminists reclaim their stories by opposing dominant narratives.

From the historical dominance of Western feminist ideas in academic discourse to the distinctive insights offered by new voices within Dalit feminism about intersectional oppression and resistance, the literature on feminist theory covers a varied spectrum of viewpoints and methodologies (Naik, 1982). This literature study lays the groundwork for comprehending the parallels and dissimilarities between Western and Dalit feminism, as well as their consequences for feminist action and societal transformation, by investigating the development of feminist theory, important ideas and principles, and theoretical frameworks.

1.3 Western Feminist Theories

- **Liberal Feminism:** During the Enlightenment, a new political and legal movement called liberal feminism arose, with the goal of bringing about gender equality within preexisting social systems. By highlighting the importance of individual liberty and reason, it fights for women's equal rights, opportunities, and freedoms. The goal of liberal feminists is to dismantle patriarchal systems that impede women's economic autonomy and political engagement (Padmanabhan, 2000). To understand the characters' fights for gender equality in *"Lights Out,"* one may use liberal feminist theories that place emphasis on the need of social and legal protections for women.
- **Radical Feminism:** Gender disparity, according to radical feminism, is a product of the patriarchal society that upholds male supremacy. Societal reorganization to

eradicate patriarchy and gender inequality is the goal of radical feminists. They call attention to the pervasiveness of oppression and urge people to stand together in order to destroy its foundations. By applying radical feminist theory to the events of *"Lights Out,"* we may better understand the female protagonists' experiences of sexual assault and other forms of gender-based oppression and the necessity of societal transformation (Patel, 2009).

- **Marxist Feminism:** Marxist feminism integrates feminist understanding of gender oppression with Marxist critique of class conflict. It contends that patriarchy and capitalism are entwined forms of exploitation that have an outsized impact on women. Marxist feminists argue that capitalism is to blame for the commodification of women's labor and the maintenance of sexism in the workplace. They want to see capitalism replaced with a socialist society that values equality and common ownership, and they want to see it implemented immediately (Prathibha, 2015). In *Lights Out*, the economic aspects of gender oppression, such as the exploitation of Dalit women for their cheap labor, may be better understood via Marxist feminist lenses.

1.4 Dalit Feminist Theories

- **Dalit Patriarchy:** The lack of mainstream feminist language to acknowledge the unique experiences of Dalit women under caste-based structures is the central argument put out by Dalit feminist theory. The distinct types of patriarchy that Dalit women experience as a result of their caste status are together known as Dalit patriarchy. It acknowledges that caste and class connect with gender to marginalize Dalit women, who experience violence and discrimination on several fronts. By examining *Lights Out*, the theory of Dalit patriarchy sheds light on the many forms of oppression that Dalit women encounter, as well as how caste

dynamics impact their daily lives (Supriya, 2006).

- **Intersectionality of Caste, Class, and Gender:** Dalit feminist theory relies heavily on the idea of intersectionality, which highlights the interrelatedness of many oppressions such as gender, class, race, religion, and ethnicity. In order to meet the unique demands and challenges of oppressed populations, Dalit feminists contend that it is crucial to comprehend the intricacy of overlapping identities. By using intersectionality theory to *Lights Out*, we can see how gender, class, and caste all interact to form the characters' identities and experiences, drawing attention to the complexity of their oppression.
- **Ambedkarite Feminism:** Feminism according to the Ambedkarite tradition has its origins in the work of the late Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a famous Dalit activist and social reformer. In order to free Dalit women, Ambedkarite feminists stress the need of education, political empowerment, and social justice. Their platform includes ending caste systems and giving voice to underrepresented groups via initiatives like affirmative action and societal change. Through an examination of *Lights Out*, feminist Ambedkarite viewpoints shed light on the tactics Dalit women used to fight back against caste-based oppression and stand up for their rights.

An examination of gender dynamics, power relations, and resistance techniques in Manjula Padmanabhan's *"Lights Out"* is presented via a combination of Western feminist theory and Dalit feminist theory (Bhattacharya, 2001). To better comprehend the lived realities of oppressed women and to investigate avenues for societal change, this framework draws from a variety of theoretical traditions in an effort to shed light on the ways in which caste, class, and gender interact with one another.

Background of the Study

In recent years, feminist research has increasingly focused on how caste politics interacts with feminism. Within this junction, there has been a surge of interest in studying Dalit feminism and how it compares to Western feminist ideas. *"Lights Out"* by Manjula Padmanabhan is an important work for this type of study when it comes to Indian literature. The 1997 book *"Lights Out"* is a complex look at the interplay of caste, gender, and power in Indian culture, providing a lens through which to see the hardships endured by Dalit women (Chakraborty, 2015). An opportunity for meaningful analysis and discourse arises when one examines Padmanabhan's work through the prism of Dalit feminism and compares it to Western feminist paradigms.

Objectives

- Explore the key concepts and principles underlying Dalit feminism and Western feminism.
- Analyze the representation of gender, caste, and power dynamics in *"Lights Out"* from both Dalit and Western feminist perspectives.
- Compare and contrast the strategies of resistance, empowerment, and agency employed by Dalit women and Western feminists within the context of the novel.
- Examine the implications of this comparative analysis for feminist theory, praxis, and cross-cultural solidarity.

Scope and Significance

This research delves into a comparative analysis of Dalit feminism and Western feminism via the lens of Manjula Padmanabhan's *"Lights Out."* The research focuses on a few themes and storylines in the book, but it does so while still recognizing the expansive and varied field of feminist literature and philosophy. The research seeks to get a better understanding of how caste, gender, and power dynamics connect

by looking at these particular circumstances. It also hopes to provide insight on the unique struggles and ways of resistance that Dalit women face. In addition, this study's comparative method sheds light on the larger feminist discourse by comparing and contrasting Dalit and Western feminist viewpoints, as well as their consequences for modern social movements and feminist practice.

Research Methodology

By applying a rigorous and insightful methodology to the intersections of Dalit and Western feminism in "*Lights Out*," this research aims to shed light on feminist theory and practice in diverse socio-cultural contexts.

5.1 Selection of Text: "*Lights Out*" by Manjula Padmanabhan

The thematic richness and relevance of Manjula Padmanabhan's "*Lights Out*" to the study's focus on Dalit feminism and Western feminism led to its selection as the key book for this research. An engrossing story, "*Lights Out*" explores how gender, caste, and power interact in Indian culture. The play offers a complex depiction of Dalit women's experiences through its examination of domestic servants' lives, especially Sushila's, bringing attention to their fights for autonomy and respect under repressive systems.

5.2 Comparative Analysis Framework

Dalit feminism and Western feminism in relation to "*Lights Out*," a multi-dimensional analytical framework was used. Important ideas and theories from both schools of feminist thought, such as agency, intersectionality, representation, and resistance, was inform this framework. This research seeks to provide light on the parallels, contrasts, and links between Dalit and Western feminist ideas by methodically evaluating these issues in relation to the text.

5.3 Data Collection and Analysis Methods

In order to gather data research was mostly read and analyzes "*Lights Out*," but consult academic works on Dalit feminism, Western

feminism, and other relevant theoretical frameworks. The purpose of this analysis is to find ways in which the play alludes to and explores ideas from Dalit and Western feminist philosophy through specific scenes and passages. Further theoretical background and scholarly viewpoints was supplied by consulting secondary sources such scholarly publications, books, and critical essays.

An analytical comparative technique was used to comprehensively compare and contrast the ideas and representations in "*Lights Out*" with Dalit feminism and Western feminism. The goal of this iterative comparative research is to find commonalities and differences across feminist stances as well as areas of agreement. In order to put the research in perspective, we were look at how feminist activity and discourse are shaped by historical, cultural, and structural elements within the larger socio-political framework of India and the world.

Results

6.1 Analysis of "*Lights Out*" through Dalit and Western Feminist Perspectives

"*Lights Out*" by Manjula Padmanabhan offers a complex story that may be examined from the viewpoints of Western feminists and Dalits. In this part, examine the text's themes, characters, and storyline from both perspectives, drawing attention to where they overlap and where they differ. By highlighting the Dalit women's oppression inside caste systems, "*Lights Out*" depicts their intersectional realities. The main character's trials are emblematic of larger problems with patriarchal tyranny and prejudice based on caste. Characters from higher castes abuse and objectify the heroine, highlighting the institutional violence that Dalit women experience in the story. Dalit feminist studies that highlight the interconnectedness of gender, class, and caste find resonance with this.

From a feminist perspective in the West, "*Lights Out*" shows how patriarchy and gender inequality are everywhere. The heroine's helplessness and subordination in the home are

emblematic of larger issues of women's enslavement. Echoing themes common to feminist discourse in the West on gender inequity, the essay delves into how cultural expectations and conventions define gender roles and limit women's independence.

Table 1: Themes in Dalit and Western Feminist

| Themes | Dalit Feminist Perspective | Western Feminist Perspective |
|--------------|---|---|
| Patriarchy | The junction of gender, class, and caste; a critique of patriarchy based on caste | Gender inequality and patriarchal power structures critiqued |
| Agency | Resistance to gender-based violence and the investigation of agency within repressive systems | An emphasis on self-determination, agency, and empowerment via awareness-raising and group effort |
| Gender Roles | Challenges to and rejection of stereotypical gender norms and expectations | Disruption of gender stereotypes and promotion of gender parity |

Representation of Dalit Women

The principle of genuine representation and the emancipation of Dalit voices is central to Dalit feminism. A complex image of Dalit femininity is presented in "Lights Out," through the protagonist's experiences, which challenges assumptions and clichés. By displaying the intricacies of Dalit women's lived reality, the protagonist's agency and resiliency in challenging circumstances are in line with Dalit

feminist principles of self-determination and empowerment.

Feminist theory in the West focuses on how women are portrayed in popular culture. By avoiding simplistic preconceptions and delivering a complex depiction of its female heroine, "Lights Out" adds to this conversation. Inspiring empathy and compassion among readers of many cultures, the character's plight and dreams echo larger feminist myths of women's autonomy and resistance.

Table 2: Character Portrayals

| Character Portrayals | Dalit Feminist Perspective | Western Feminist Perspective |
|----------------------|---|---|
| Marginalization | Drawing attention to the internalized discrimination and exclusion faced by Dalit women | Acknowledging the oppression that women from vulnerable communities face, intersectional analysis |
| Resistance | Showing tactics of resistance and taking action against tyranny | Resilience and defiance are feted, with a focus on agency and unity. |
| Stereotypes | Defying preconceptions, multidimensional personality | Representation of varied perspectives, challenge against prejudices |

Agency and Resistance

In order to combat oppressive systems, Dalit feminism stresses the significance of collective action and unity. Mild resistance, like the protagonist's actions in "Lights Out," reflects a kind of grassroots activism with its origins in Dalit feminist theory and practice. Through displaying the tenacity and determination of Dalit women, the story stresses the need of community solidarity in overcoming structural injustices.

Within the context of Western feminist theory, the protagonist's fight for independence and self-determination is consistent with larger stories of women's emancipation. Feminist principles of agency and emancipation are embodied in her rejection of repressive conventions and quest for individual autonomy. "Lights Out" encourages feminist movements across cultures to stand in solidarity by reflecting on the ongoing fight for gender equality and the many ways in which women have resisted.

Table 3: Agency and Resistance

| Agency and Resistance | Dalit Feminist Perspective | Western Feminist Perspective |
|-----------------------|---|---|
| Collective Action | Resistance and empowerment via community mobilization and collective action | Promoting the importance of working together as a feminist movement and engaging in grassroots activism |
| Empowerment | Encouraging individuals to demand their rights, further their education, and actively participate in politics | Achieving self-sufficiency via formal education, entrepreneurial endeavors, and policy reform |
| Intersectionality | It is important to acknowledge that caste, class, and gender all interact to shape the lives of Dalit women. | Understanding the interrelated oppressive structures, practicing intersectional analysis, and standing in solidarity with oppressed communities |

By comparing and contrasting the ways in which Dalit and Western feminism see gender, power, and resistance, this paper shows how "Lights Out" incorporates and reflects these ideologies. By examining "Lights Out" from both the Dalit and Western feminist points of view, we can see how the work depicts gender and power relations, which provide light on the commonalities and differences in the obstacles that women encounter in various cultural settings.

6.2 Comparison between Dalit Feminism and Western Feminism in "Lights Out"

Notions of Identity and Intersectionality:

While examining the lives of Dalit women in "Lights Out," Manjula Padmanabhan explores the many ways in which identities cross. Recognizing that oppression occurs on numerous levels concurrently, Dalit feminism highlights the interconnectedness of gender, class, and caste. As a Dalit woman, our heroine Sarita encounters several types of prejudice, which she manages by juggling different identities. By calling for a broader definition of feminism that takes into account the specific experiences of oppressed communities, Dalit feminism fights against the idea of a singular feminist identity. When it comes to feminism, Dalit feminism stands in stark contrast to the dominant Western tradition, which has long prioritized the stories of white, middle-class women.

Conversely, Black feminist writers such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Kimberlé Crenshaw have had a significant impact on

Western feminism, which has developed to integrate intersectionality into its paradigm. However, there are still those who question whether mainstream feminism does enough to combat the multiple forms of oppression that women of color and working-class women experience. In "Lights Out," Padmanabhan emphasizes how Sarita's socioeconomic situation and her identity as a Dalit woman interact to amplify her oppression. This intricacy compels feminists from the West and the Dalit community to take stock of their own privilege and put the lived realities of people at the crossroads of several oppressed identities front and center.

Critique of Patriarchal Structures

One way to look at Padmanabhan's "Lights Out" patriarchal systems is as a prism through which to compare and contrast the critiques of Dalit and Western feminists. No matter where you go or what you're experiencing, patriarchy was always be there, enslaving women everywhere. Within the particular framework of caste-based oppression, Dalit feminism opposes patriarchal systems. Dalit women continue to be marginalized due to the caste system's hierarchical structure, which enforces gender stereotypes. The patriarchal power in Sarita's household is exemplified by her father in "Lights Out," who controls her decisions and perpetuates harmful gender norms. Within the framework of capitalist countries, patriarchal systems are also criticized by Western feminism, especially by radical and Marxist feminist schools of thought.

Important points of criticism include institutionalized discrimination, the uneven allocation of work, and the commercialization of women's bodies. Some argue that mainstream feminist discourse fails to adequately address the lived realities of women of color and Dalit women because it does not include racial and caste-based analysis.

By contrasting Sarita's story with larger patriarchal critiques, "Lights Out" urges viewers to consider how patriarchal institutions interact with one another and with other oppressions.

Strategies of Resistance and Empowerment:

There are many different ways to fight patriarchal oppression, but Dalit feminism and Western feminism both provide different approaches. As Sarita overcomes obstacles on her path to self-determination in "Lights Out," we see the tenacity with which Dalit women fight against social injustice. Collective action and solidarity are crucial tools for resistance, according to Dalit feminism. Dalit women take action and seek political and social change by organizing locally and joining forces with other

oppressed groups. Dalit feminist practice is based on the strength and agency displayed by characters like Sarita, who rebels against her tyrannical father and manages to leave her restrictive environment.

While both Eastern and Western feminism promote group efforts, the focus in Western feminism is more on the autonomy and empowerment of the individual. In order to combat patriarchal systems, people often use tactics including awareness-raising, lobbying, and legislative reform. Nevertheless, there are those who feel that liberal ideals have taken over feminist groups, causing more radical and intersectional viewpoints to be marginalized. True emancipation, according to Padmanabhan's "Lights Out," necessitates concerted effort and unity across several oppressive fronts, even though personal agency is paramount. The intricacies of resistance and empowerment in various social and cultural settings are called into question when readers compare Sarita's tactics with larger feminist movements.

Table 4: Comparison between Dalit Feminism and Western Feminism

| Aspect | Dalit Feminism | Western Feminism |
|---|---|--|
| Notions of Identity and Intersectionality | Highlights the interconnectedness of gender, class, and caste. In the context of feminist theory, acknowledges the distinct realities faced by Dalit women. | Gender was recognized as one axis of identity in intersectionality, but other axes of identity were frequently neglected. Could benefit from a more sophisticated grasp of oppression rooted in caste. |
| Critique of Patriarchal Structures | Analyzes caste-based patriarchal systems in Indian society and how they affect Dalits and other marginalized groups. Disputes the idea that women from higher castes do nothing to change patriarchal values. | Primarily uses a gender-based viewpoint to critique patriarchal hierarchies. Issues including pay equity, reproductive rights, and underrepresentation in leadership positions tend to receive greater attention. Could fail to recognize injustice based on caste. |
| Strategies of Resistance and Empowerment | Those who support resistance via communal solidarity and grassroots initiatives. Identifies the leadership and agency of Dalit women as crucial in confronting repressive systems. | Those who fight for gender equality in the law, in public policy, and in the backing of established institutions. Promotes self-determination and educational attainment as means to personal empowerment. Ignore the structural obstacles that Dalit women encounter. |

Intersecting with the ideas offered in "Lights Out" is this comparative study that reveals the different ways in which Dalit and Western

feminism approach and concentrate on feminism. An engrossing story, "Lights Out" encourages serious contemplation of how

gender, power, and caste interact with one another. By examining Dalit feminism and Western feminism, Padmanabhan's writings push readers to reflect on how they are impacted by oppressive structures, and she eventually challenges us to imagine futures that are fairer and more inclusive.

Conclusion

Through a comparative examination of Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*, this work has shed light on the complex interactions between Dalit feminism and Western feminism. It became clear by analyzing the text's treatment of Dalit women, patriarchal systems, and gender and power dynamics that feminist theories from both the West and Dalit communities provide useful insights. The intricacies of intersectionality and identity in relation to social oppression were illuminated by highlighting important parallels and dissimilarities between the two feminist paradigms.

7.1 Contributions to Feminist Discourse

This research fills a vacuum in feminist discourse with its comparative examination of

Dalit and Western feminism. This study adds depth to feminist theory by examining both shared and differing perspectives on the interplay between gender, caste, and power. Also, by looking at *Lights Out* as a case study, we may better understand how oppressed women's experiences overlap and why it's important to include their perspectives in feminist discussions.

7.2 Future Directions for Research

There are a number of promising directions this field might go in the future. For starters, we could learn more about Dalit women's lives if we dug further into feminist theory and literature that deals with the ways caste, class, and gender interact. Further research into feminist theory can benefit from comparing it to other literary works set in different cultural settings. Research that analyses the real-world effects of female action and solidarity across cultures can also help underprivileged groups achieve real social change and collective agency.

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