

Anandita Pan. *Mapping Dalit Feminism: Towards an Intersectional Standpoint*. New Delhi: SAGE and Stree Samya 2020.—Reviewed by Pooja Kalita (South Asian University, New Delhi)

Anandita Pan’s book is an ambitious work on ‘mapping’ an ideological and theoretical stance that is still rarely acknowledged and scarcely discussed in the dominant mainstream Indian feminism or feminism broadly. Writing this book, the author fills the much felt lacuna in two areas—firstly, in the feminist scholarship on the ‘third’ world women still perceived as a group of homogenous passive female victims; secondly, in the arena of Dalit activism and scholarship that has looked into the experiences of dalit women as being solely impacted by their marginalized caste status.¹ However, narratives by dalit women stand testimony to the fact that they face layered discrimination in addition to that based on their caste. Homogenous and hegemonic narratives on Dalit politics “(...) reveal how silence is forced on dalit women in order to retain the focus exclusively on caste. Such binarism of caste and gender as envisioned and practised by Dalit politics emphasizes the ever increasing need to recognize intra-group division within the anti-caste struggle, its patriarchal attitude and the importance of dalit

¹ Anandita Pan uses the upper case in the word Dalit when she refers to the discourse/epistemology. For example, Dalit Feminism or Dalit activism. While referring to the identity group, she uses the lower case in the word dalit, for example, dalit women.

women's voices" (p. 1). Similar to Sharmila Rege, a pioneer in the field of Dalit feminist standpoint, for Pan too, "attaining dalit feminist standpoint does not entail the existence of the biological factor of being a dalit woman, but rather an active struggle through which consciousness about caste- and gender-based oppression is gained" (p. 6). The book aims to make the Dalit feminist intersectional standpoint a valid lens for not only dalit women to critically examine their experiences but rather encompass all experiences that have their location at the intersection of caste and gender. "As an intersectional standpoint, Dalit Feminism does not restrict its conceptual understanding only to dalit women. As a theoretical framework, it provides a lens to reinterpret any text/event from a caste-gender angle" (p. 7).

In a number of several carefully crafted chapters the book deals with the crucial aspects of being a dalit woman, the concerns and anxieties related to representation and the textured history of Dalit activism and/with feminism. One of the most fascinating aspects of the book has been the author's engagement with some popular literature and films. It is through the Dalit feminist intersectional standpoint that she is able to bring out certain overlooked nuances in these texts. In Chapter 2, Pan mentions women's writings such as Rasasundari Devi's well known autobiography in Bengali, *Amar Jiban* (1876), written in the era of the 19th century anti-colonial movement, the very time when the 'construction' of the 'new woman' was taking place in India. *My Story* (1977) by Kamala Das, is also regarded as a ground-breaking text on Indian feminism. Both these texts have overlooked experiences of marginalized women mostly defined by their caste and class status. Even though both Devi and Das deal with the often muted issues such as women's sexuality, yet, the implicit and probably an unintended erasure of Dalit women from these texts cannot be overlooked.

While discussing Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (2003), originally in Hindi; Sharan Kumar Limbale's *The Outcaste* (2003), originally in Marathi; and K. A. Gunasekaran's *The Scar* (2009), originally in Tamil, Pan points out that although these texts have been canonical in Dalit literature and politics, nonetheless, they kept the issues of gender,

specifically as related to dalit women, in the periphery of their gaze. She also takes into account three autobiographies by dalit women—Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* (1984 [2009]), originally in Marathi; Bama’s *Karukku* (1992 [2000]), originally in Tamil; and *Ami Keno Charal Likhi (Why I Write Charal as My Name)* by Kalyani Thakur Charal (2016), originally in Bengali. “These autobiographies reflect a transition from the faith that with the erasure of caste the condition of dalit women would improve automatically, to the realization that centralization of caste in dalit movements results in the suppression of issues concerning dalit women” (p. 82).

An in-depth analysis of two critically acclaimed movies such as the Marathi film, *Sairat* (2016) and the Bollywood’s, *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2017), makes the reader aware of the gaps in these works. While *Sairat* focuses on the issue of caste discrimination and atrocities, it does fall back on the usual trope of the male protagonist being the typical hero, with stereotypical masculine traits. As for *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2017), although it does talk about sexual oppression and liberation of four different women, it leaves out the intertwined experiences of caste and gender are.

Throughout her book, Pan makes an appeal that Dalit Feminism and particularly Dalit feminist intersectional standpoint should not be a victim to either ghettoization or tokenism. The Dalit feminist intersectional standpoint challenges exactly such isolation and paves a way for a greater solidarity that is inclusive but is not dependent solely on any ascriptive markers. Her use of lucid language throughout the text in bringing forth a much more complex issue of the intersectionality of caste and gender is remarkable. She has achieved a rare feat in this regard. However, Pan does not aim to provide easy answers or solutions to all the concerns that are being raised in the book. As J. Devika, in her forward to the book, writes, “Reading her, I have had many questions; and that is probably what she expects of the reader” (p. xi). Chapter 6 stands true to the title—“Becoming a Dalit Feminist: Towards a Conclusion.” “As a mapping, this book begins with the identity of a dalit woman and progresses to analyse the positionality of/as a dalit feminist”

(p. 201). The author surely leaves us with much to ponder regarding this journey, along with the obstacles as well as the hopes that it offers. The Annotated Bibliography (p. 224) towards the end of the book is definitely going to be of much help both to the beginners in this field of study and the general readers.

To say that this book is a significant contribution for only those interested in the area of Dalit Feminism viewed from an intersectional lens would be limiting its scope. As our lives stand at various intersections of castes, gender, and class and so on, this book is meant for all; to reflect, introspect and interrogate.