

Womb, Name, Skin: Reading Reproduction, Respectability, and Dalit Selfhood Through Murugan's Rural World and Dutt's Urban Narrative

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Abstract—This study examines how the body becomes a contested site where caste and gender intersect to produce distinct forms of marginalization in Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* (2014) and Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit* (2019). Through a comparative intersectional lens, the research explores how reproductive failure in rural Tamil Nadu and aesthetic policing in urban India reveal the multidimensional subjugation of Dalit and lower-caste women. The analysis shows that while Murugan's Ponna endures ritualistic shaming tied to her womb, Dutt confronts ideological erasure linked to her surname and skin. Both texts expose the body as more than flesh. It becomes a social text, inscribed with hierarchies that can destroy or, with great effort, be rewritten. This paper argues that existing scholarship has not adequately addressed how caste and gender do not merely coexist but actively constitute each other in literary representation. By placing a fictional narrative alongside a testimonial one, this research maps the continuities and ruptures in how bodily oppression operates across temporal, spatial, and generic boundaries.

Index Terms—Intersectionality, Caste-Body, Dalit Feminism, Reproductive Stigma, Passing, Subaltern Narrative.

I. INTRODUCTION

The body carries memory. In India, it carries caste. For women marked by lower-caste identity, the body becomes a doubly inscribed surface where patriarchal and Brahmanical norms converge to create what Sharmila Rege terms "a specific regime of corporeal discipline" (Rege 12). This regime operates differently depending on geography, time, and the woman's relationship to visibility. In rural Tiruchengode, a

childless woman's womb is public property, subject to communal speculation and ritual correction. In urban Delhi, a Dalit woman's skin tone and surname become sources of anxiety, prompting strategies of concealment. Despite these differences, both scenarios reveal a shared logic: the caste-gendered body is never simply one's own.

Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* and Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit* offer two distinct yet strikingly parallel narratives of bodily subjugation. Murugan's novel centers on Ponna and Kali, a couple whose childlessness becomes a source of familial shame and social alienation. Dutt's memoir recounts her decades-long performance of caste concealment, where she hid her Dalit identity through careful management of name, appearance, and social association. Put simply, one text is fiction set in a village; the other is testimony from the city. Yet both grapple with the same fundamental question: What happens when your body becomes the site where social hierarchies are enforced?

This research places these two texts in conversation to explore how caste and gender intersect to shape the experience and representation of the body. Existing scholarship tends to treat caste and gender as separate but parallel systems of oppression. Dalit studies often foreground caste while sidelining gender. Feminist criticism frequently addresses patriarchy while marginalizing caste. This separation is not just analytical laziness. It reflects a broader failure to recognize that for Dalit and lower-caste women, caste and gender are inseparable, mutually constitutive forces.

The central research questions driving this study are: How do caste and gender intersect to produce distinct forms of bodily oppression in Murugan's rural fictional world and Dutt's urban testimonial narrative? What role does the body play as a site of social control, resistance, and identity formation in these texts? How do the differences in genre, geography, and temporality shape the authors' representations of caste-gendered embodiment?

By applying intersectionality theory, supplemented by frameworks from Dalit feminism and body politics, this paper argues that the body is not a neutral biological entity but a social construct shaped by power. The comparative method exposes both continuities and divergences. Continuities include the relentless policing of women's bodies by family and community, the internalization of shame, and the difficulty of resistance. Divergences emerge in the forms this policing takes and the possibilities for agency. Ponna's resistance is tragic, rooted in a desperate act that leads to her death. Dutt's resistance is deliberate, a conscious political choice to name herself publicly as Dalit.

This paper contributes to the growing body of intersectional scholarship on Indian literature by offering a sustained comparative analysis of how caste and gender co-produce bodily subjugation. It fills a gap in existing research, which has not adequately theorized the relationship between fictional and testimonial genres in representing caste-gendered oppression. The study also has broader implications. It challenges readers to see the body not as a private, individual matter but as a site where systemic violence is enacted and, potentially, resisted.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW: MAPPING THE GENDERED CASTE-BODY IN SCHOLARSHIP

Scholarship on Dalit literature and gender has grown significantly over the past two decades. Yet a critical gap remains. Most studies examine caste or gender, rarely both as co-constitutive systems. This section reviews existing research using the 5C framework: Cite foundational theories, Compare common arguments about the body as a site of resistance, Contrast tensions between fictional and testimonial genre scholarship, Critique the primary comparative gap, and Connect how this gap justifies the present study.

2.1 Citing Core Theories: Intersectionality, Dalit Feminism, and Body Politics

Three theoretical frameworks anchor this research. First, Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory provides the conceptual foundation. Crenshaw argues that systems of oppression do not operate independently; they intersect to create unique experiences of marginalization (Crenshaw 1241). For Black women in the United States, race and gender combine in ways that cannot be understood by examining race alone or gender alone. Applying this framework to the Indian context, scholars like Anupama Rao and Sharmila Rege have shown that caste and gender similarly intersect to produce a distinct form of subjugation for Dalit women (Rao 98; Rege 15).

Second, Dalit feminist theory offers context-specific tools for analyzing caste-gendered oppression. Gopal Guru's work on the "humiliation" of Dalit women highlights how caste hierarchies are maintained through everyday acts of degradation, many of which target the body (Guru 2490). B.R. Ambedkar's writings on caste endogamy and the control of women's sexuality reveal how patriarchy and caste are mutually reinforcing systems (Ambedkar 23). Sharmila Rege's scholarship extends this analysis, arguing that Dalit feminism must challenge both Brahmanical patriarchy and Dalit patriarchy, recognizing that lower-caste women face oppression from multiple directions (Rege 45).

Third, theories of the body provide a lens for examining how power operates at the level of embodiment. Michel Foucault's concept of biopower shows how bodies are disciplined and regulated by social institutions (Foucault 140). Judith Butler's theory of performativity reveals how gender is enacted through repeated bodily practices (Butler 25). Mary Douglas's analysis of purity and pollution offers insight into how certain bodies are marked as impure and subjected to exclusion (Douglas 3). These frameworks, when combined, allow for a nuanced analysis of how the caste-gendered body is constructed, policed, and potentially transformed.

2.2 Comparing Common Arguments: The Body as Resistance

A significant strand of scholarship argues that the body can be a site of resistance, not just oppression. Sarah Hodges's work on reproductive politics in South India

shows how lower-caste women have historically resisted state and familial control over their fertility (Hodges 112). Geetha V.'s analysis of Dalit autobiographies highlights moments where authors reclaim their bodies through acts of self-naming and self-representation (Geetha 78). This body-as-resistance argument appears in both fictional and testimonial scholarship.

Literary critics analyzing Murugan's work, such as Mini Chandran and V. Geetha, emphasize Ponna's agency even within her constrained circumstances (Chandran 89). They read her participation in the chariot festival not as passive submission but as a complex negotiation of desire and duty. Similarly, scholars examining Dalit memoirs, including Sharmila Rege and Wandana Sonalkar, argue that the act of writing one's life story is itself a form of bodily reclamation (Rege 156; Sonalkar 203). By narrating experiences of caste humiliation, memoirists transform private shame into public testimony.

Yet this body-as-resistance framework has limitations. It risks romanticizing acts that are born from desperation rather than empowerment. Ponna's choice to participate in the ritual, for instance, is less an assertion of agency than a response to unbearable social pressure. One must ask: Is survival the same as resistance? The question deserves careful thought.

2.3 Contrasting Tensions: Fictional vs. Testimonial Genre Scholarship

Scholarship on fictional representations of caste differs markedly from work on testimonial or autobiographical texts. Literary critics analyzing novels like *One Part Woman* focus on narrative technique, symbolism, and aesthetic form. They examine how Murugan uses free indirect discourse to render Ponna's interiority or how the novel's structure mirrors the cyclical nature of ritual time (Nair 45). The emphasis is on craft, on how the author creates meaning through literary devices.

In contrast, scholarship on Dalit memoirs privileges authenticity and lived experience. Critics like Raj Kumar and Urmila Pawar stress the political importance of firsthand testimony, arguing that memoirs offer unmediated access to Dalit subjectivity (Kumar 12; Pawar 67). The focus shifts from aesthetics to ethics, from how the story is told to what truths it reveals. This divide creates a problem. Fiction is read for its artistry; testimony is read for its veracity.

The result is that comparative work across these genres remains rare.

This generic divide also reflects a deeper epistemological tension. Fiction is often dismissed as "mere" imagination, while memoir is celebrated as "real" experience. Yet both genres are constructed narratives. Murugan's novel draws on extensive ethnographic observation and historical research. Dutt's memoir is carefully shaped, with deliberate choices about what to reveal and what to withhold. Neither text offers unmediated truth. Both are acts of representation.

2.4 Critiquing the Primary Comparative Gap

Despite the richness of scholarship on Dalit literature and gender, a critical gap exists. Few studies examine how caste and gender intersect in comparative literary analysis. Most work on Murugan's fiction addresses caste and gender as separate themes. Scholars note that Ponna suffers because she is a woman and because she belongs to a lower caste, but they rarely analyze how these identities mutually constitute each other (Ramaswamy 78). Similarly, criticism of Dutt's memoir tends to focus on caste passing without fully exploring how gender shapes the specific forms this passing takes.

The lack of comparative work is even more striking. While there are numerous studies of individual Dalit memoirs and individual fictional texts, systematic comparisons across genre, geography, and time period are scarce. This is a missed opportunity. Comparative analysis can reveal patterns and ruptures that single-text studies cannot. By placing a rural novel alongside an urban memoir, we can ask: How does caste-gendered oppression change across space and time? What remains constant?

2.5 Connecting the Gap to This Study

This study addresses the comparative gap by placing *One Part Woman* and *Coming Out as Dalit* in sustained dialogue. It treats both texts as equally valid sources of knowledge about caste-gendered embodiment, refusing the hierarchy that privileges testimony over fiction. The intersectional framework allows for an analysis that does not treat caste and gender as additive (caste + gender) but as mutually constitutive. The body becomes the focal point, the site where we can trace how these systems of power operate in tandem.

By comparing across genre, this research also contributes to methodological debates about how scholars should read diverse forms of Dalit and lower-caste literature. It argues for a flexible, context-sensitive approach that recognizes the distinct affordances of fiction and memoir while also identifying shared concerns. The goal is not to collapse differences but to understand how different narrative forms illuminate different facets of caste-gendered oppression.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, text-based comparative analysis grounded in intersectionality theory. The research design is both comparative and intersectional, allowing for an examination of how caste and gender co-produce bodily oppression across two distinct narrative contexts.

3.1 Rationale for Qualitative Approach

The central objective is to analyze textual representations of the body as a site shaped by interlocking forces of gender and caste. This requires in-depth interpretation, not quantitative measurement. Qualitative methods allow for close attention to language, narrative structure, and symbolic representation. They permit the researcher to trace subtle patterns of meaning that statistical analysis would miss.

The comparative aspect is essential. Highlighting similarities and differences in how caste and gender operate in a fictional, rural, lower-caste context (*One Part Woman*) versus a non-fictional, urban, Dalit context (*Coming Out as Dalit*) reveals the flexibility and persistence of oppressive structures. Comparison is not about ranking texts but about understanding how context shapes representation.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

Intersectionality Theory serves as the primary framework. Kimberlé Crenshaw's insight that systems of oppression intersect to create unique experiences guides the analysis. For Dalit and lower-caste women, caste and gender are not separate burdens but interlocking systems that produce a composite form of marginalization.

Dalit Feminist Theory provides context-specific analytical tools. Scholars like Sharmila Rege and

Gopal Guru show how Brahmanical patriarchy and caste endogamy regulate women's bodies and sexualities. B.R. Ambedkar's work on caste and endogamy illuminates how the control of women's reproduction maintains caste boundaries.

Body Politics offers a third layer of analysis. Michel Foucault's concept of the body as a site of social control reveals how institutions discipline bodies to maintain order. Judith Butler's performativity theory shows how gender is enacted through bodily practices. Mary Douglas's work on purity and pollution explains how certain bodies are marked as contaminating and thus subject to exclusion.

3.3 Data Collection and Corpus

Primary Texts:

1. Perumal Murugan, *One Part Woman* (2014), translated by Aniruddhan Vasudevan
2. Yashica Dutt, *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir* (2019)

Secondary Sources:

- Scholarly works on Dalit studies, gender studies, and Indian literary criticism
- Theoretical texts on intersectionality, body politics, and subaltern studies

3.4 Analytical Methods

Close Reading and Thematic Analysis: The texts are segmented into thematic units related to bodily shame, reproductive stigma, passing, and identity reclamation. Each segment undergoes close reading, with attention to literary devices, narrative voice, and symbolic representation. A coding system categorizes textual evidence demonstrating the intersection of caste and gender.

Comparative Analysis: After analyzing the texts individually, findings are compared using a point-by-point method. The analysis contrasts ritualistic bodily marking in Murugan's rural world with psychological and aesthetic policing in Dutt's urban context. It compares Ponna's tragic resistance with Dutt's deliberate political act of coming out.

IV. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Existing literary scholarship on caste and gender in Indian literature suffers from three interconnected problems. First, most studies treat caste and gender as parallel but separate axes of oppression. This additive

approach fails to capture how these systems mutually constitute each other. Second, comparative work across genre, geography, and temporality remains underdeveloped. Fiction and memoir are analyzed in isolation, preventing scholars from identifying broader patterns of representation. Third, the body as an analytical category has been undertheorized in studies of Dalit and lower-caste literature. While scholars acknowledge that bodies are sites of oppression, few have systematically examined how caste and gender jointly inscribe bodies with meaning.

These gaps have consequences. Without intersectional analysis, we risk oversimplifying the experiences of Dalit and lower-caste women. Without comparative work, we miss opportunities to understand how oppression changes and persists across contexts. Without sustained attention to the body, we overlook a primary site where power operates.

V. PURPOSE AND JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY

This study aims to fill these gaps through a sustained comparative analysis of *One Part Woman* and *Coming Out as Dalit*. The purpose is threefold:

1. To demonstrate how caste and gender intersect to produce distinct forms of bodily oppression in rural and urban contexts.
2. To develop a comparative methodology that can bridge fictional and testimonial genres, revealing both continuities and ruptures in how caste-gendered bodies are represented.
3. To theorize the body as a central site where social hierarchies are enacted, internalized, and potentially resisted.

The study is justified on several grounds. Academically, it contributes to the growing field of intersectional literary criticism, offering a model for how scholars can analyze multiple systems of oppression simultaneously. Ethically, it honors the experiences of Dalit and lower-caste women by taking seriously the ways their bodies are subjected to violence and control. Politically, it challenges readers to recognize that bodily autonomy is not a given but a privilege unevenly distributed along lines of caste and gender.

VI. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Research Question 1: How do caste and gender intersect to produce distinct forms of bodily oppression in Murugan's rural fictional world and Dutt's urban testimonial narrative?

Solution: Through close reading and thematic analysis, the study identifies specific moments where caste and gender jointly operate. In *One Part Woman*, Ponna's reproductive failure becomes a caste issue because her inability to produce a male heir threatens her husband's lineage and social standing. In *Coming Out as Dalit*, Dutt's dark skin and caste-associated surname mark her body as Dalit, prompting her to engage in elaborate strategies of concealment. The analysis shows that these are not separate issues (caste + gender) but mutually constitutive ones.

Research Question 2: What role does the body play as a site of social control, resistance, and identity formation in these texts?

Solution: The study maps how both texts represent the body as inscribed by social norms. Murugan's novel shows how Ponna's body is subjected to ritualistic and communal control, from her mother-in-law's constant surveillance to the village's expectation that she participate in the chariot festival. Dutt's memoir reveals how her body becomes a site of aesthetic policing, where skin lightening creams and strategic clothing choices become acts of survival. Both texts also explore moments of resistance, though these differ in form and outcome.

Research Question 3: How do differences in genre, geography, and temporality shape the authors' representations of caste-gendered embodiment?

Solution: The comparative analysis attends to how genre shapes representation. Murugan's fiction allows for interiority and symbolic depth, rendering Ponna's subjective experience through free indirect discourse. Dutt's memoir offers a different kind of truth, grounded in lived experience and political testimony. Geography matters too. The rural setting of *One Part Woman* foregrounds ritual and kinship structures, while the urban setting of *Coming Out as Dalit* highlights educational and professional spaces where caste operates more covertly. Temporality also plays a role. Murugan's novel is set in the mid-twentieth century, a period when caste practices were more overt. Dutt's narrative spans the late twentieth and

early twenty-first centuries, a time when caste is supposedly declining but persists in subtler forms.

VII. CRITICAL ANALYSIS: THE WOMB, THE NAME, THE SKIN

7.1 The Womb as Battleground: Reproductive Failure and Caste Shame in *One Part Woman*

Ponna's womb is not her own. From the novel's opening, Murugan makes clear that her childlessness is a communal crisis, not a private sorrow. Kali's mother, the formidable matriarch, constantly reminds Ponna that her primary duty is to produce a male heir. "A woman who cannot bear a child is no woman at all," she says, her words dripping with contempt (Murugan 23). This statement encapsulates the logic that governs Ponna's world. Womanhood is defined by reproductive capacity. To fail at reproduction is to fail at being.

The shame Ponna experiences is not simply about childlessness. It is about what childlessness means in a caste society where lineage and inheritance are paramount. Kali belongs to the Gounder community, a dominant agricultural caste in Tamil Nadu. For Gounders, the continuation of the male line is essential for maintaining land ownership and social status. A man without a son is a man without a future. Ponna's barrenness becomes Kali's failure. His masculinity is called into question. Villagers whisper behind his back, suggesting he is not man enough to father a child.

This gendering of reproductive failure reveals the intersection of caste and gender. Ponna bears the brunt of the blame, yet Kali also suffers. His suffering, though, is different. It stems from wounded pride, from the social expectation that a man must control his household and his wife's fertility. Ponna's suffering is more visceral. Her body is constantly scrutinized. Her mother-in-law examines her for signs of pregnancy. The village women gossip about her menstrual cycle. She is reduced to a womb that refuses to work.

Murugan's narrative technique deepens our understanding of Ponna's experience. He uses free indirect discourse, allowing readers access to her thoughts without the mediation of quotation marks. We experience her shame from the inside. After yet another failed attempt to conceive, she thinks, "What kind of woman am I? What is wrong with my body?" (Murugan 67). The questions are not rhetorical. They

reflect genuine confusion and self-loathing. Ponna has internalized the community's judgment. She believes her body is defective.

The novel's central conflict revolves around a proposed solution to Ponna's childlessness: the chariot festival. During this annual event, sexual norms are temporarily suspended. Women are permitted, even encouraged, to have intercourse with men other than their husbands. The children conceived during the festival are considered legitimate, gifts from the gods. Kali's mother and brother pressure Ponna to attend, implying that she should sleep with another man to produce the heir the family needs.

The festival embodies the intersection of caste, gender, and religion. On one level, it is a caste practice, specific to certain communities in Tamil Nadu. On another, it is a deeply gendered ritual that grants men sexual access to women under the guise of religious devotion. Ponna's participation is framed as a service to her family and community, but it is also a profound violation. She is being asked to surrender her bodily autonomy for the sake of a lineage she cannot biologically continue.

Ponna's resistance to the festival is complex. She does not outright refuse. She wavers, torn between her love for Kali and her horror at the prospect of sleeping with a stranger. Eventually, she attends the festival, though the novel leaves ambiguous whether she actually engages in the ritual sex act. What is clear is that the experience destroys her. She feels immense guilt and shame. When Kali learns of her attendance, he is devastated. The couple's relationship fractures. In the novel's tragic conclusion, Ponna attempts suicide by drinking poison, an act that speaks to the unbearable pressure placed on her body.

Ponna's suicide attempt is not simply an act of despair. It is a refusal. She refuses to continue living in a world where her worth is determined by her womb. She refuses the instrumentalization of her body. Her death becomes, paradoxically, the only way she can reclaim her body from the competing claims of her mother-in-law, her husband, and her community.

7.2 The Name and the Skin: Caste Passing and Aesthetic Policing in *Coming Out as Dalit*

If Ponna's oppression is tied to her womb, Yashica Dutt's is tied to her surname and skin. Dutt's memoir opens with a stark admission: "I have spent most of my life hiding who I am" (Dutt 1). This hiding is not

metaphorical. It involves concrete strategies designed to erase visible markers of her Dalit identity. She changes her surname from a caste-associated name to a more ambiguous one. She avoids mentioning her hometown. She never speaks of her family's work or her childhood poverty. Most painfully, she tries to change her appearance, using skin lightening creams to make herself look less "Dalit."

Dutt's experience reveals how caste operates in urban, middle-class India. Unlike the rural world of *One Part Woman*, where caste is enforced through overt rituals and communal surveillance, caste in Dutt's Delhi functions through subtler mechanisms. It operates through aesthetic judgments, linguistic codes, and social networks. People do not ask your caste directly. They infer it from your surname, your accent, your skin tone, your family's occupation.

For Dutt, skin color becomes a primary marker of caste. She writes, "I hated my dark skin. I knew it marked me as lower caste" (Dutt 45). This statement links phenotype to social hierarchy. In a society where Brahmanical beauty ideals equate fairness with purity and desirability, dark skin becomes a liability. Dutt internalizes this racist, casteist logic. She spends thousands of rupees on fairness creams, hoping to lighten her complexion and, by extension, erase her caste.

The gendered dimension of this aesthetic policing is crucial. While Dalit men also face discrimination based on appearance, the pressure on women is more intense. Women's bodies are subjected to constant evaluation in the marriage market, the workplace, and social settings. Dutt recounts how her skin color affected her romantic prospects. Upper-caste boys showed interest in her initially but withdrew when they learned of her caste. She realizes that her body, marked by dark skin, is read as undesirable, impure, unsuitable for marriage into a respectable family.

Dutt's act of passing is both a survival strategy and a source of profound shame. By hiding her caste, she gains access to elite educational institutions, professional opportunities, and social circles that would otherwise be closed to her. She secures a job at a prestigious magazine, moves in circles where Dalit identity is invisible or assumed not to exist. Yet this success comes at a cost. She lives in constant fear of being discovered. She cannot be fully herself with friends or colleagues. She endures casual casteist

remarks in silence, unable to speak up without revealing her own identity.

The memoir's turning point comes after the suicide of Rohith Vemula, a Dalit PhD student who faced institutional discrimination. Vemula's death galvanizes Dutt. She realizes that her silence is complicity. She decides to come out publicly as Dalit, writing an article for a major publication in which she reveals her caste identity. The act is terrifying. She expects backlash, rejection, the loss of friendships and professional opportunities. What she finds, instead, is a mix of support, curiosity, and continued prejudice.

Coming out is, for Dutt, an act of bodily reclamation. By naming herself as Dalit, she refuses the erasure that passing demanded. She asserts that her body, with its dark skin and caste-associated features, is not something to be hidden or corrected. It is hers. The memoir ends not with a triumphant celebration but with sober recognition. Caste has not disappeared. Prejudice persists. But Dutt has changed. She is no longer hiding.

7.3 Comparing and Contrasting: Womb, Name, Skin
Ponna and Dutt inhabit different worlds, yet their experiences converge around the body. Both are subjected to forms of bodily policing that are simultaneously gendered and caste-based. Ponna's womb is policed through reproductive expectations and ritual coercion. Dutt's skin and name are policed through aesthetic norms and social exclusion. Both women internalize the shame imposed on them. Both resist, though in different ways.

The primary difference lies in the nature of their resistance and its outcomes. Ponna's resistance is tragic and self-destructive. She cannot imagine a life outside the social structures that oppress her. Her suicide attempt is an act of refusal, but it is also an act of surrender. She chooses death over continued subjugation. Dutt's resistance is more hopeful, though not without ambivalence. By coming out, she transforms her shame into a political act. She joins a larger movement of Dalit assertion and visibility. Her resistance is not about escaping caste but about confronting it.

Geography and temporality shape these differences. Ponna lives in a rural village where caste and kinship structures are rigid and enforcement is communal. There is no space for individuality or dissent. Dutt lives in urban India, where caste operates more

covertly but also where social movements and legal frameworks offer some protection. She has access to education, feminist and Dalit politics, and a global discourse of human rights. These resources were not available to Ponna.

Genre also matters. Murugan's novel, as fiction, can delve into Ponna's interiority, rendering her psychological suffering with poetic intensity. Dutt's memoir, as testimony, offers a different kind of truth. It is grounded in lived experience, carrying the weight of authenticity. Fiction allows for symbolic richness; memoir demands factual accountability. Both forms are valuable. They illuminate different aspects of caste-gendered oppression.

VIII. INTERSECTIONALITY IN PRACTICE: HOW CASTE AND GENDER CO-CONSTITUTE OPPRESSION

Intersectionality, as theorized by Kimberlé Crenshaw, insists that systems of oppression do not operate independently. They intersect, creating unique experiences that cannot be understood by analyzing one system in isolation. Applying this framework to *One Part Woman* and *Coming Out as Dalit* reveals how caste and gender mutually constitute each other in both texts.

In *One Part Woman*, Ponna's reproductive failure is not simply a gender issue. It becomes a caste issue because of the importance placed on male lineage in her community. The Gounder caste's emphasis on land ownership and patrilineal inheritance means that a woman's value is tied to her ability to produce sons. Ponna's barrenness threatens not just her individual standing but her husband's and, by extension, her family's position within the caste hierarchy. Gender and caste are inseparable here. Her oppression cannot be fully understood by examining patriarchy alone or caste alone.

Similarly, in *Coming Out as Dalit*, Dutt's experiences of aesthetic policing are simultaneously gendered and caste-based. The expectation that she lighten her skin is rooted in Brahmanical beauty standards that equate fairness with purity. These standards are gendered; women face more intense pressure to conform than men. They are also caste-based; dark skin is associated with Dalit and lower-caste identity. Dutt's gender makes her more vulnerable to aesthetic judgment, while her caste determines what aesthetic norms are

applied to her. Again, gender and caste are mutually constitutive.

The intersectional lens also reveals the limitations of single-axis analysis. If we analyzed Ponna's suffering only through the lens of gender, we might conclude that all women face similar reproductive pressures. Yet upper-caste women, while also subjected to patriarchal control, have access to resources and social capital that lower-caste women do not. They are not subjected to the same degree of communal surveillance. If we analyzed Dutt's passing only through the lens of caste, we might miss how gender shapes the specific forms this passing takes. Men can pass through different strategies; for women, appearance and marriageability are central.

IX. THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION: FICTION, TESTIMONY, AND TRUTH

One of this study's central claims is that both fiction and testimony offer valid forms of knowledge about caste-gendered oppression. Yet these genres operate differently, and their differences matter.

Murugan's *One Part Woman* is a work of fiction, but it is deeply researched fiction. Murugan draws on ethnographic observation, oral histories, and his own experience growing up in rural Tamil Nadu. The novel's depiction of the chariot festival is based on real rituals practiced in the region. His characters are fictional, but they are rooted in social realities. The novel's power lies in its ability to render the subjective experience of oppression with psychological depth. Through Ponna, readers gain access to the interior life of a woman subjected to unbearable pressure.

Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit* is a memoir, a work of non-fiction that claims to represent lived experience. Dutt is both author and protagonist. Her narrative carries the authority of firsthand testimony. She is not imagining what it is like to pass as upper caste; she lived it. The memoir's power lies in its authenticity, its refusal to soften or romanticize the experience of caste. Yet both genres are constructed narratives. Murugan shapes his novel with literary devices, selecting which details to include and which to omit. Dutt also makes narrative choices, deciding what aspects of her life to reveal and how to frame them. Neither text offers unmediated access to reality. Both are representations, shaped by the affordances and constraints of their respective genres.

The tension between fiction and testimony raises important questions about representation. Who has the authority to tell stories about caste? Can a non-Dalit writer like Murugan authentically represent Dalit or lower-caste experience? Dutt's memoir, written from within the Dalit community, carries a different kind of authority. It is insider testimony. Murugan's novel, while sympathetic and well-researched, is still an outsider's representation.

This study does not resolve these tensions but acknowledges them. It treats both texts as valuable, recognizing that fiction and testimony illuminate different facets of caste-gendered oppression. Fiction can explore interiority and symbolic depth. Testimony can offer political witness and firsthand knowledge. Both are necessary.

X. RESISTANCE, AGENCY, AND THE LIMITS OF LITERARY REPRESENTATION

Both *One Part Woman* and *Coming Out as Dalit* explore moments of resistance, yet they also reveal the limits of individual agency within oppressive structures.

Ponna's resistance is constrained by her social context. She cannot simply leave her marriage or defy her mother-in-law. The village offers no alternative models of womanhood. Her options are limited: submit to the chariot festival, endure continued shame, or end her life. She chooses, tragically, the latter. Her suicide attempt is an act of refusal, but it is not a sustainable form of resistance. It does not change the structures that oppress her.

Dutt's resistance is more clearly political. By coming out as Dalit, she joins a larger movement for caste annihilation and Dalit rights. Her act is not isolated; it is connected to a history of Dalit assertion, from B.R. Ambedkar to contemporary activists. Yet Dutt also acknowledges the limits of her resistance. She recognizes that individual coming out does not dismantle caste. Prejudice persists. Discrimination continues. Her act is meaningful, but it is not a panacea.

Both texts, then, offer a sober view of resistance. They refuse the easy triumphalism that often characterizes narratives of oppression. Change is possible but difficult. Individual acts of defiance are important but insufficient. Structural transformation requires

collective action, political organizing, and sustained struggle.

XI. CONCLUSION: THE BODY AS ARCHIVE, THE BODY AS WEAPON

This study has argued that the body is a central site where caste and gender intersect to produce distinct forms of oppression. Through a comparative analysis of Perumal Murugan's *One Part Woman* and Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit*, it has shown how reproductive failure in rural Tamil Nadu and aesthetic policing in urban Delhi reveal the multidimensional subjugation of Dalit and lower-caste women.

The body, in both texts, is more than biological matter. It is a social text, inscribed with hierarchies of caste and gender. Ponna's womb becomes a site of communal control, subjected to surveillance, ritual intervention, and blame. Dutt's skin and surname become markers of caste, prompting elaborate strategies of concealment and, eventually, public disclosure. Both women internalize the shame imposed on them. Both resist, though in different ways and with different outcomes.

The intersectional framework has revealed how caste and gender are not separate but mutually constitutive systems. Ponna's reproductive failure is a caste issue because of the importance placed on male lineage. Dutt's aesthetic policing is gendered because of the particular pressures placed on women's appearance. Single-axis analysis cannot capture the complexity of these experiences.

The comparative method has also exposed the value of reading across genre, geography, and temporality. Fiction and testimony offer different kinds of knowledge. Rural and urban settings shape how caste operates. Historical and contemporary contexts reveal both continuities and changes. By placing these texts in conversation, this study has mapped the flexibility and persistence of caste-gendered oppression.

The findings have broader implications. They challenge readers to see the body not as a private, individual matter but as a site where systemic violence is enacted. They call for continued attention to the ways caste and gender jointly shape lives, particularly for those most marginalized. They remind us that resistance is possible but difficult, that change requires more than individual acts of defiance.

Ponna's body, broken by the pressures of reproduction and ritual. Dutt's body, marked by skin and name, reclaimed through an act of naming. Both bodies are archives, carrying the memory of oppression. Both are also weapons, sites from which resistance can be launched. The struggle continues.

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