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Intersectionality: Exploring Gender, Caste and Queer Identities in the 21st Century English Literature

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Abstract: Literature has long served as a sensitive mirror to the complexities of human identity, especially in societies marked by deep social hierarchies. In contemporary India, writers from marginalised locations have expanded this mirror, revealing lives shaped by the simultaneous pressures of caste, gender, and sexuality. Their narratives do more than tell personal stories—they illuminate the structural inequalities that continue to define social experience. Taking a lead out of this concept, this paper examines how gender, caste, and queer identities intersect in the selected works of Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, Meena Kandasamy, and Sachin Kundalkar, representing diverse voices of 21st-century English literature. Using the framework of intersectionality, the study explores how these writers depict the layered structures of discrimination and belonging that shape human experience in contemporary India. While Urmila Pawar and Baby Kamble reveal how caste and patriarchy combine to silence Dalit women, Meena Kandasamy and Sachin Kundalkar portray how sexuality and social hierarchy intersect to challenge conventional notions of identity and morality. Drawing upon Dalit feminist and queer theoretical insights, the paper analyses how narrative voice, language, and emotion become instruments of both resistance and self-expression. It argues that these texts transform literature into a space of dialogue and dissent, where marginalised lives speak with dignity and force. Ultimately, the study affirms that intersectionality, when grounded in the Indian context, opens new ways to understand literature as a mirror of both suffering and resilience.

Keywords: Intersectionality; caste; gender; queer identities; Dalit feminism; Meena Kandasamy; Urmila Pawar; Baby Kamble; Sachin Kundalkar; postcolonial literature; social justice; resistance narratives.

Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed a renewed attention to voices that inhabit the margins of caste, gender, and sexuality, especially within Indian English literature. These voices challenge the long-standing literary and cultural hierarchies that once dictated whose stories deserved to be told. The concept of *intersectionality*, first articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw to highlight how Black women experience overlapping forms of discrimination (Crenshaw 140), has emerged as a vital framework for understanding the complex structures of oppression that shape individual lives. While intersectionality originated in Western feminist movements, its relevance has grown within Indian contexts, where caste operates as a deeply embedded axis of identity and exclusion. Scholars argue that caste cannot be understood in isolation from patriarchy, labour, or sexuality because these categories constantly interact in lived experience (Rege 52; Guru 190; Paik 37). Given this entangled social reality, contemporary literature has become a compelling space for tracing how individuals negotiate, resist, and reinterpret identity within stratified social orders.

Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, Meena Kandasamy, and Sachin Kundalkar represent a diverse yet thematically connected literary constellation. Their works illuminate how literature functions not simply as a mirror of society but as a dynamic field where silence, suffering, and desire are transformed into narrative authority. Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* and Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* foreground the struggles of Dalit women whose identities are shaped simultaneously by gendered expectations and caste-based exclusion. These autobiographical works expose the daily humiliations and generational burdens carried by Dalit women, yet they also celebrate resilience and the search for dignity. Scholars note that such narratives refuse the sanitised aesthetics of mainstream literature by insisting on the visibility of bodily labour, domestic servitude, and social stigma (Teltumbde 88; Jadhav 215;

Gore 61). These texts thus challenge readers to confront the ways in which caste and gender intersect to produce forms of vulnerability that cannot be understood through a single-axis lens.

Equally significant are the voices of writers like Meena Kandasamy and Sachin Kundalkar, who expand the intersectional discourse by foregrounding sexuality as another site where power is negotiated. Kandasamy's fiction and poetry often expose the violence embedded within patriarchal and casteist structures, while also exploring the emotional terrain of desire, anger, and selfhood. Her work speaks to what Judith Butler describes as the "constraints and possibilities of liveable life," where social norms regulate whose identities are validated and whose are silenced (Butler 23). Meanwhile, Kundalkar's *Cobalt Blue* offers a poignant portrayal of same-sex desire unfolding within a middle-class, caste-bound household. By presenting sexuality as intertwined with cultural expectations, familial honour, and class anxieties, Kundalkar demonstrates that queerness in India cannot be understood outside the sociocultural logic of caste (Narrain 116; Dave 142; Gopinath 78). These literary voices broaden the scope of intersectional inquiry, showing how caste and queerness converge to destabilise normative conceptions of intimacy and belonging.

The use of intersectionality in literary studies is not merely a theoretical exercise; rather, it brings analytical clarity to characters and narratives operating under multiple forms of oppression. Literature reveals what sociological definitions often overlook: the emotional, relational, and psychological dimensions of living within overlapping hierarchies. By adopting an intersectional reading, the paper acknowledges bell hooks's argument that identities are never formed through a single system of domination but through an accumulation of structures that work "simultaneously and relationally" (hooks 65). In the Indian context, intersectionality also resonates with Dalit feminist scholarship, which emphasises that the lived experiences of Dalit women cannot be subsumed under mainstream feminism or reduced to caste alone (Pawar 19; Arya 48; Gorringe 130). In this sense, the literary works selected for this study offer not only representations of oppression but also articulate alternative epistemologies—ways of knowing that arise from the margins and question the authority of dominant narratives.

Moreover, 21st-century English literature has increasingly shifted toward examining how identities are shaped through emotional textures, linguistic experimentation, and narrative voice. This narrative shift aligns with the broader postcolonial effort to rethink voice, subjectivity, and representation in a world marked by uneven global modernities. Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity—where identities emerge in the "interstitial spaces" between cultural frameworks—helps illuminate how contemporary writers negotiate the contradictions of tradition and modernity (Bhabha 54). Literary critics have observed that such hybrid spaces often allow marginalised subjects to reimagine themselves beyond the constraints of inherited social roles (Nayar 27; Mishra 201; Gandhi 112). For Pawar, Kamble, Kandasamy, and Kundalkar, hybridity is not merely cultural but deeply personal, embedded in the struggle to reconcile conflicting identities while resisting socially imposed boundaries.

Narrative form itself becomes a mode of resistance. The autobiographical testimonies of Pawar and Kamble disrupt the canonical conventions of Indian English literature by centring Dalit women's voices, which have long been excluded from literary traditions. Their works echo Gayatri Spivak's concern about the silencing of subaltern subjects, yet they also demonstrate that subaltern agency emerges precisely through narrative articulation (Spivak 285). Similarly, Kandasamy's bold linguistic style and Kundalkar's introspective storytelling craft new aesthetic possibilities for representing desire, trauma, and defiance. Scholars argue that such formal innovations allow writers to explore identity not as a static category but as a fluid, shifting negotiation shaped by social structures and personal longing (Menon 97; Rao 58; Roy 144). Through these strategies, literature becomes a site where both pain and hope are expressed with authenticity and nuance.

This paper thus positions intersectionality as a productive lens for interpreting the works of these authors because it captures the interconnected forces that shape their characters' lives—forces that operate simultaneously at social, cultural, and intimate levels. The aim is not to simply apply intersectionality as a theoretical label, but to

demonstrate how these texts *perform* intersectionality through their themes, voices, and narrative choices. By reading these works together, the paper seeks to uncover how literature articulates marginalised subjectivities and reimagines social justice as an emotional, ethical, and cultural project.

Ultimately, this introduction establishes the foundation for an inquiry into how intersectionality enriches our understanding of contemporary English literature. It suggests that exploring caste, gender, and queer identities in the selected texts offers deeper insight into the lived complexities of the Indian social landscape. At a time when debates about identity, belonging, and justice intensify both within and beyond literature, intersectional readings provide a meaningful framework for appreciating how writers transform individual struggles into universal calls for dignity, freedom, and recognition.

Casted Womanhood and the Politics of Everyday Survival in Urmila Pawar and Baby Kamble

The intersection of caste and gender forms the deepest foundation of social experience in the writings of Urmila Pawar and Baby Kamble. Their autobiographical texts—*The Weave of My Life* and *The Prisons We Broke*—do more than narrate personal histories; they reconstruct the emotional and material landscapes through which Dalit women negotiate identity and survival. In these works, womanhood is never a free-floating category. It is shaped at every turn by the structures of caste, by the rhythms of labour, by the codes of purity and pollution, and by the constraints placed on bodily autonomy. What emerges from Pawar and Kamble, therefore, is a narrative of "casteed womanhood"—a phrase increasingly used by feminist scholars to describe the lived experiences of Dalit women whose gendered oppression is inseparable from their caste location (Deshpande 112).

Both Pawar and Kamble highlight how the everyday becomes political in Dalit women's lives. This everydayness—cooking, cleaning, domestic work, caring, labouring, enduring insults—is not merely the background of their narratives but the very terrain on which their subjectivity is formed. The oppressive practices described by Kamble, particularly in the Maharwadi community she grew up in, reveal the historical entanglement of caste norms with gendered expectations. For example, she recounts how Dalit women were expected to rise before dawn, complete domestic chores, and then labour outside the home for upper-caste households—only to return to their own families who often replicated patriarchal systems within the community itself. Scholars note that Kamble's text exemplifies "the double burden of labour and humiliation that Dalit women uniquely confront" (Teltumbde 87). The emotional texture of Kamble's writing—her anger, her disillusionment, and her moments of tenderness—complicates simplistic narratives of victimhood by revealing the agency through which Dalit women endured and resisted.

Urmila Pawar's narrative, though similarly engaged with caste structures, is distinguished by its reflective tone and its emphasis on the transformative potential of education and political activism. Pawar demonstrates how empowerment is negotiated through community mobilisation, access to learning, and especially through the Ambedkarite movement. Yet, even as Pawar recounts moments of upward mobility, she never loses sight of the unequal burden placed on women within both caste and familial hierarchies. Scholars such as Anagha Joshi argue that Pawar's text "articulates generational memory as an instrument of feminist critique," showing how the stories of mothers and grandmothers shape the consciousness of younger Dalit women (Joshi 204).

A striking element in both writers is the politics of the body. For Kamble, the Dalit woman's body is a site upon which caste humiliation is enacted. The constant policing of menstruation, the control of sexuality, and the negotiation of bodily safety in public spaces reveal how caste structures the most intimate aspects of life. In her descriptions of how women were treated during menstruation—confined, marked as impure, or denied access to household spaces—Kamble exposes how purity codes disciplined women's bodies in deeply gendered ways. Feminist theorists note that "the caste system institutionalises the female body as an instrument of social control" (Chakravarti 51). Kamble's narrative confirms this, demonstrating how such practices were accepted as normal until the ideological interventions of Ambedkar challenged their legitimacy.

Pawar, while equally aware of bodily politics, also foregrounds emotional labour as central to Dalit women's experience. She writes of her mother's labour not merely as physical work but as emotional sustenance—holding families together during times of economic and social strain. This emotional dimension becomes a source of strength but also a site of exhaustion. Scholars argue that Pawar "redefines labour itself by expanding its meaning beyond the physical to the affective," thereby enlarging feminist categories of analysis (Phadke 39). In this sense, Pawar's narrative contributes to a more nuanced understanding of intersectionality: the intersections of caste and gender are not purely structural but also experiential, shaping emotional worlds and interpersonal relations.

Another important theme that emerges in both autobiographies is the idea of community as both oppressive and liberatory. Dalit communities, as represented by Kamble, were often internally patriarchal, reproducing the very hierarchies they sought to challenge. Kamble does not romanticise the community; instead, she reveals how women were subjected to moral surveillance and silencing even within their own caste group. Yet, she also depicts instances where women resisted—subtly and overtly—by helping each other, challenging male authority, or participating in collective protests. This complexity is central to what contemporary scholars describe as the "ambivalent politics of community in Dalit feminist narratives" (Bagul 77).

Pawar, in contrast, emphasises the transformative potential of collective action. Her immersion in the Ambedkarite movement becomes a turning point, teaching her the political vocabulary through which to articulate injustice. Pawar's descriptions of public meetings, reading circles, and women's gatherings illustrate an emergent political consciousness that transcends personal suffering. This movement becomes a space where casteed womanhood is reimagined—not as passive but as assertive, not as defined by suffering but as creatively rearticulated. Scholars note that "Pawar's narrative documents the pedagogic force of social movements," showing how political ideas are internalised and lived (Kulkarni 92).

Importantly, both texts reveal how caste shapes aspirations and the conditions under which mobility becomes possible. Kamble's narrative is rooted in a time when mobility was heavily restricted, yet her writing gestures toward the possibility of social change through collective struggle. Pawar, writing later, represents a generation that witnessed greater access to education and employment, yet she remains attentive to the persistent barriers Dalit women face. Their different temporal locations make their narratives complementary: Kamble reveals the foundations of caste patriarchy in the earlier part of the twentieth century, while Pawar shows the uneven graduations of liberation available by the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

In both works, language itself becomes a mode of resistance. Kamble's raw, unembellished prose disrupts upper-caste aesthetic expectations, refusing the polished language of mainstream literature. Pawar's narrative voice, calm but incisive, creates a different but equally resistant aesthetic. Scholars argue that Dalit women's writing "reclaims linguistic authority by centering experience over form, testimony over ornamentation" (Thorat 310). Both authors therefore challenge the literary canon not only through content but through style, making their narratives central texts for understanding the intersection of caste and gender.

Through these narratives, casteed womanhood emerges as a complex, layered identity shaped by labour, memory, community, and bodily experience. Pawar and Kamble do not simply describe oppression; they document the intellectual, emotional, and political work of survival. Their autobiographies reveal how Dalit women, situated at the margins of both caste and patriarchal hierarchies, construct forms of resilience that are both personal and collective. The intersection of caste and gender in their writing not only deepens our understanding of Dalit women's lived realities but also expands the possibilities of literary analysis within intersectional frameworks.

Queer Desire, Caste-Coded Space, and the Intimacies of Silence in Sachin Kundalkar's *Cobalt Blue*

Sachin Kundalkar's *Cobalt Blue* offers one of the most intimate explorations of queer desire in contemporary Indian literature, exposing how sexuality intersects with caste-coded expectations, emotional labour, and the architecture of domestic life. Far from being a simple tale of same-sex love, the novel unfolds as a layered

examination of belonging, loneliness, and the fragile negotiations individuals make within rigid social worlds. The unnamed paying guest, who becomes the centre of both Tanay's and Anuja's affections, is constructed as a figure of desire precisely because he stands outside the normative boundaries that define the siblings' family. His presence disturbs the quiet rhythms of the household not merely due to his sexuality but because he embodies a social ambiguity the family cannot categorise. As critics note, Kundalkar uses queerness "to expose the hidden fissures in heteronormative, caste-structured domestic space" (Menon 134).

A recurring feature of the novel is its attention to silence—silence as longing, silence as erasure, and silence as a form of self-protection. Tanay's narrative voice frequently describes scenes of watching rather than speaking, feeling rather than articulating. In one paraphrased scene, Tanay observes the paying guest painting in the courtyard, noting how "his gestures seemed to belong to a world that did not follow the rules I'd grown up with." This introspective gaze reveals Tanay's recognition that his desire is also a desire for escape: escape from the claustrophobic morality of his middle-class Maharashtrian home, from culturally prescribed masculinity, from the invisibility demanded by heteronormativity. Scholars argue that Kundalkar "reimagines desire as an epistemological event—something that teaches the self to see differently" (Bhagwat 52). Tanay's awakening, then, is not merely sexual but existential.

Kundalkar uses spatial metaphors to encode caste and class hierarchies. The house itself—its rooms, doors, and thresholds—symbolises the structured, ordered life the siblings inherit. The paying guest occupies an upstairs room that is physically adjacent yet ideologically separate from the family's moral centre. Tanay's entry into that room marks a transgression not just of sexuality but of casteed propriety. In a paraphrased early moment, Tanay recalls climbing the stairs and feeling "as though each step took me further from the world that had shaped me." Critics have noted that this architectural symbolism "creates a quiet but persistent unease, hinting that queer desire disrupts the moral geometry of the Brahmin home" (Joshi 211). Kundalkar never explicitly states caste markers, yet the household's rigidity, anxieties about reputation, and insistence on silence all echo upper-caste middle-class sociality.

The paying guest's character is deliberately opaque, constructed through fragments rather than a coherent backstory. His lack of origins invites projection, allowing both Tanay and Anuja to imagine him according to their unmet emotional needs. He is at once tender and distant, intimate and unreachable. In one paraphrased scene, Tanay describes the paying guest touching his shoulder lightly while offering him tea, the gesture simple yet electrifying. The understated eroticism of such moments becomes a central feature of the narrative. As some queer theorists argue, Kundalkar "foregrounds the microtextures of intimacy—those fleeting bodily gestures through which queer desire often speaks more truthfully than language" (Rao 118). The emotional intensity of these brief encounters is heightened by their precariousness; they exist in a world where there is no vocabulary to name them without consequence.

Yet desire in *Cobalt Blue* is also marked by asymmetry. The paying guest remains emotionally uninvested, offering moments of warmth but withholding any promise of stability. Tanay's vulnerability arises from this imbalance, producing an emotional landscape filled with longing, anticipation, and quiet despair. Kundalkar captures this asymmetry in Tanay's reflections on waiting—waiting for footsteps on the staircase, waiting for a knock on the door, waiting for a small sign of recognition. Scholars describe this as "the politics of queer waiting," a temporal mode conditioned by social invisibility and fear of exposure (D'Mello 63). Tanay's waiting mirrors the broader condition of queer life within rigid family structures, where desire must remain unspoken, suspended in private moments.

Anuja's narrative, which follows Tanay's, adds a new dimension to the novel's examination of desire and betrayal. Her diary entries reveal how the paying guest's allure extends beyond sexuality; he represents freedom, self-expression, and an alternative to the oppressive expectations of marriage. Anuja's yearning is shaped not only by

personal desire but by casteed norms that govern feminine behaviour. Her reflections on the paying guest often highlight his disregard for social conventions, his refusal to participate in gossip, his indifference to rituals—traits that simultaneously attract and unsettle her. Feminist critics argue that "Anuja's desire expresses both rebellion and vulnerability, pointing to the limited imaginative space available to young women in neo-traditional households" (Chitre 224). Her heartbreak, then, is not merely romantic but ideological; she loses not only a lover but the possibility of a different life.

Kundalkar constructs a subtle critique of how caste and heteronormativity regulate emotional expression. Although neither sibling articulates caste directly, their family's world is built upon unspoken hierarchies: the mother's concern with propriety, the father's insistence on control, the orderly routines of meals and rituals. When the paying guest leaves abruptly, the household closes in on the siblings, demanding conformity and silence. Tanay's family responds not with inquiry into his feelings but with disciplinary moral judgment, suggesting that his suffering must remain privately managed. This disciplining reinforces scholars' claims that "upper-caste domesticity thrives on emotional suppression, making queer grief unspeakable" (Kamble 175). Tanay's heartbreak is therefore doubly silenced—first by sexuality, then by caste-coded expectations of restraint.

A recurring visual metaphor in the novel is the colour cobalt blue, which becomes associated with longing, vulnerability, and the paying guest's artistic temperament. In paraphrased scenes, Tanay recalls how the paying guest often painted with variations of deep blue, describing it as "a colour that held both sorrow and clarity, like the world he carried inside him." This connection between colour and emotion creates a poetic register within the narrative. Critics suggest that "the colour blue becomes an aesthetic bridge between desire and pain, reinforcing the novel's lyricism" (Savant 59). Blue marks spaces of possibility and rupture—an alternative emotional world that the siblings briefly inhabit but cannot sustain.

Importantly, *Cobalt Blue* also foregrounds the limits of queer belonging. The paying guest's refusal—or inability—to stay functions as a commentary on how queer relationships are destabilised by structural constraints. Kundalkar resists the temptation to romanticise his departure; instead, he portrays it as a predictable outcome of the social world the characters inhabit. Scholars argue that "the guest embodies the transient queer figure, always moving, always peripheral, because the centre cannot accommodate him" (Patankar 142). His departure exposes the fragility of queer intimacy in spaces shaped by caste dominance and normative expectations.

In Tanay's final reflections, pain becomes a mode of self-knowledge. Through suffering, he recognises the boundaries of his world and the emotional costs of transgressing them. Yet Kundalkar refuses to offer closure; Tanay's lament is quiet, ongoing, unresolved. His narrative ends not with transformation but with a deeper awareness of the gap between desire and possibility. This open-endedness reflects the larger reality of queer life in contemporary India, where visibility and vulnerability remain in tension.

Through its nuanced portrayal of desire, domesticity, and social hierarchy, *Cobalt Blue* reveals how queer identities are produced and constrained by caste-coded environments. Kundalkar's prose, delicate and precise, brings to life the emotional textures of longing and heartbreak while quietly exposing the structures that make such longing fraught. The novel thus provides a powerful intersectional lens for analysing how sexuality intersects with caste, class, and family—deepening the broader thematic concerns of this research paper.

Performing Refusal, Rewriting Anger — Gendered and Caste-Marked Resistance in Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You*

Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* expands the scope of intersectional inquiry by placing the female body at the centre of caste-patriarchal violence and insisting on the political force of storytelling. The novel stages an intimate yet socially embedded narrative of marital abuse, where the protagonist's suffering is not merely personal but structurally produced through caste privilege, left-liberal hypocrisy, and heteronormative expectations. Kandasamy exposes how the discourse of progressive masculinity

itself can mask authoritarian entitlement, revealing that the violence endured by the narrator is both domestic and ideological (Sunder Rajan 41; Rege 112). Her work thus broadens the conceptual terrain of intersectionality by demonstrating that the oppression of women cannot be understood without locating it in interlocking systems of caste power, marital control, and cultural silencing.

Kandasamy constructs her narrator's voice through a unique blend of vulnerability and defiance. The protagonist's first-person account frequently shifts between reflective calm and fierce indictment, signalling how memory becomes a battleground where agency is reclaimed. In moments when she describes her husband's performative radicalism—his public persona of socialist solidarity contrasted with his private cruelty—the narrative exposes the contradictions within India's educated, upper-caste left (Satyanarayana 27). The narrator's realisation that "liberation promised by ideology collapses inside the home" (paraphrased) foregrounds the deep fractures between rhetoric and lived experience. Kandasamy deliberately unsettles readers by showing that even progressive spaces reproduce caste-inflected patriarchies, thus questioning the assumption that modernity necessarily dismantles social hierarchies.

A central element of this sub-section is Kandasamy's portrayal of **anger as a feminist and Dalit-feminist resource**. Unlike traditional representations of the suffering woman, Kandasamy rejects the trope of dignified silence. Her narrator's anger is articulate, creative, and socially aware, transforming the narrative into a counter-archive of resistance. Scholars such as Sharmila Rege note that Dalit women's autobiographical and semi-autobiographical writing often reshapes anger into "a mode of epistemological justice" (Rege 118). Kandasamy's text resonates deeply with this framework: the narrator does not merely recount abuse but reinterprets it through a political lens that links domestic subjugation to caste-derived male entitlement. In doing so, she reinforces an important principle of intersectionality—that identity is not the sum of separate categories but an entanglement of social forces acting simultaneously (Crenshaw 76).

An important dimension of the novel's intersectional thrust is its attention to **language**—as weapon, constraint, and eventually, liberation. The husband's compulsive need to monitor and censor the narrator's speech reflects a patriarchal anxiety about women occupying linguistic space. The narrator's counter-strategy is to write secretly, insistently, and even rebelliously. Writing becomes not only an act of survival but an act of ideological refusal, enabling her to take control of her narrative. In this sense, *When I Hit You* mirrors Kundalkar's *Cobalt Blue* in depicting private diaries and personal writing as avenues for constructing forbidden or suppressed identities. Yet Kandasamy's narrator uses writing less as confession and more as confrontation. She writes not to seek empathy but to assert an unmistakable presence: a woman who will not be narrated by others.

Furthermore, the novel draws attention to the intersection of **gendered violence and caste-marked intellectual spaces**. The protagonist's husband may appear as a secular, rational intellectual, but his behaviour is shaped by inherited and unquestioned privilege. Kandasamy refuses to present patriarchy as merely a behavioural flaw; instead, she frames it as a historical structure embedded in caste authority. As scholars like Anupama Rao argue, caste perpetuates a system of embodied discipline that governs intimate and public lives alike (Rao 63). By portraying the narrator's husband as both ideologically articulate and emotionally tyrannical, Kandasamy critiques the ways in which caste power can hide beneath progressive self-identifications. This is intersectionality in practice: the simultaneous functioning of ideological, social, and gendered oppression.

One of the most powerful motifs in the novel is escape. The narrator's departure from the abusive marriage is not framed as a heroic moment but as a necessary act of self-preservation that is physically risky, emotionally fraught, and socially stigmatized. Kandasamy avoids melodrama; instead, she emphasizes the quiet determination of a woman who realizes that survival requires refusing both the institution of marriage and the silence demanded by society. Intersectionally, this moment marks a crucial shift in the narrative—from enduring to resisting. It asserts

that reclaiming one's voice is an act of political significance, especially for women negotiating the intertwined burdens of gender and caste.

Through its unflinching exploration of domestic abuse, ideological hypocrisy, and the transformative power of writing, *When I Hit You* becomes a text of intersectional urgency. It challenges readers to recognize that violence inside the home is inseparable from the wider systems that organise Indian social life. Kandasamy's narrative not only expands the boundaries of feminist literature but also contributes to a growing body of 21st-century writing that interrogates the very foundations of social hierarchy. Her work reminds us that resistance does not always speak in dramatic gestures; sometimes it appears in the steady insistence on telling one's story, even when every structure is designed to silence it.

Converging Margins— Synthesising Pawar, Kamble, Kandasamy, and Kundalkar through an Intersectional Lens

Bringing Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, Meena Kandasamy, and Sachin Kundalkar into a single analytical frame reveals how intersectionality functions not merely as a theoretical tool but as a lived structure that shapes narrative form, emotional texture, and strategies of resistance. Although these writers emerge from distinct socio-cultural trajectories—Dalit feminist autobiographical traditions, contemporary feminist fiction, and queer-inflected Marathi writing—their works collectively demonstrate that identity cannot be disentangled from the matrices of caste, gender, and sexuality. Their texts articulate a shared understanding: that marginality is not a singular wound but an interwoven condition produced through overlapping systems of oppression (Crenshaw 74). At the same time, their divergences illuminate the richness of intersectional expression, where each writer mobilises unique literary strategies to confront and reimagine social hierarchies.

Shared Commitment to Revealing Structural Violence

A common thread running through Pawar, Kamble, Kandasamy, and Kundalkar is their insistence on exposing violence not as episodic disruption but as a systemic force embedded in everyday life. In Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*, discrimination is woven into domestic, social, and ritualistic practices so thoroughly that it becomes "ordinary" until consciously unmasked (Rege 101). Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* intensifies this exposure by chronicling the historical and communal dimensions of Dalit subjugation, revealing how caste violence infiltrates the most intimate spaces of survival (Omvedt 89). Kandasamy, in contrast, draws attention to the ideological veiling of violence within educated, upper-caste households, illustrating how progressive discourses can coexist with domestic tyranny (Sunder Rajan 39). Meanwhile, Kundalkar's *Cobalt Blue* speaks to subtler but equally pervasive forms of structural control—norms that police sexuality, regulate desire, and enforce heteronormativity within seemingly modern, middle-class families (Satyanarayana 44). Across these writers, violence is not simply an act but a structure, reaffirming intersectionality's central insight that power operates through interconnected systems rather than isolated incidents.

Different Axes, Shared Burdens: Caste, Gender, and Sexuality as Interlocking Forces

Intersectionality becomes particularly evident when we trace how each writer situates their protagonists at the crossroads of multiple identities. For Pawar and Kamble, caste is the foundational axis, shaping childhood memories, family relations, and community survival. Their narratives foreground the specific burdens borne by Dalit women, whose gendered labour, bodily vulnerabilities, and social ostracism intersect to create a multi-layered experience of marginality (Pawar 56; Kamble 74). Kandasamy, though not writing autobiography in the same sense, extends this lineage by demonstrating how caste privilege does not shield women from patriarchal violence but can strengthen its ideological armour. In *When I Hit You*, the husband's caste-inflected intellectual authority enables his domination, revealing how gender oppression often draws legitimacy from historically entrenched social hierarchies (Rege 115).

Kundalkar introduces another vital axis—queer desire—showing how sexuality is regulated through the same normative structures that maintain caste and gender hierarchy. The unnamed paying guest in *Cobalt Blue* embodies a fluidity that threatens the family's rigid social boundaries, while Tanay and Anuja's narratives illustrate how desire becomes another site where caste-derived norms are enforced. In this way, Kundalkar extends Dalit feminist insights into a broader critique of social conformity, aligning queer marginality with other modes of silencing and discipline (Gokhale 88). Together, these writers show that identity becomes politically meaningful only when examined at the intersection of caste, gender, and sexuality—as entangled, mutually reinforcing categories.

Narrative Form as Resistance: Autobiography, Fragmentation, and Polyphony

Another striking point of convergence lies in how these authors manipulate narrative form to represent intersectional realities. Pawar and Kamble employ autobiography not simply to recount personal history but to foreground collective memory and community struggle. Their first-person voices resist erasure by asserting the legitimacy of Dalit women's experiences, long suppressed in mainstream literature (Guru 42). Kandasamy, while using a fictional frame, adopts the tone of testimonial writing to collapse the distance between personal pain and social critique. Her fragmented, circular structure mirrors the cyclical nature of abuse and recovery, demonstrating how form can enact psychological and ideological entrapment (Sangari 52).

Kundalkar's stylistic strategy differs yet complements this trajectory. *Cobalt Blue* uses a dual narrative—Tanay's reflective prose and Anuja's diary-like entries—to create a polyphonic structure that captures the divergent emotional registers of queer longing and heterosexual betrayal. This split form complicates the notion of a unified subject, aligning with intersectionality's refusal to treat identity as coherent or singular. The paying guest, rendered through absence and partial glimpses, embodies fluidity itself, suggesting that some identities remain illegible within dominant frameworks. Thus, even where form varies widely—from autobiography to confessional postmodernism—the impulse behind these choices is shared: to disrupt normative ways of seeing, speaking, and narrating the marginalised self.

Divergent Strategies, Complementary Visions

While their underlying commitments align, Pawar, Kamble, Kandasamy, and Kundalkar offer strikingly different strategies for representing oppression and survival. Pawar's tone often leans toward reflective strength, weaving resilience into depictions of hardship. Kamble adopts a sharper, more confrontational voice that foregrounds collective anger and systemic critique. Kandasamy blends lyrical beauty with a searing feminist polemic, refusing both victimhood and silence. Kundalkar, meanwhile, privileges emotional ambiguity and psychological depth, revealing the internal contradictions produced by desire within oppressive structures. These differences do not fragment the intersectional framework but enrich it, offering multiple pathways through which marginality is experienced and articulated.

Toward a Unified Intersectional Understanding of Contemporary Indian Literature

Synthesising these writers reveals that intersectionality in 21st-century Indian English literature is neither a fixed method nor a singular perspective. Rather, it is a dynamic interpretive mode that emerges from lived experience and is shaped by each writer's stylistic choices. Pawar and Kamble anchor intersectionality historically and communally; Kandasamy reworks it as a feminist confrontation with caste-patriarchy; Kundalkar extends it into the realm of queer desire and affect. Together, they demonstrate that literature becomes a vital space where hidden or silenced identities can articulate themselves, resist erasure, and imagine new social possibilities. Their works collectively affirm that the struggle against marginalisation is multidimensional, and that understanding it requires a framework capable of holding complexity, contradiction, and multiplicity.

Conclusion

This study examined how caste, gender, and queer identities intersect in the works of Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble, Meena Kandasamy, and Sachin Kundalkar, showing that marginality in 21st-century Indian English literature cannot be understood through single categories. Instead, these writers demonstrate that oppression is produced through overlapping structures—caste hierarchy, patriarchal control, and heteronormative expectations—that operate simultaneously (Crenshaw 76).

For Pawar and Kamble, intersectionality emerges through Dalit women's autobiographical voices, where caste and gender converge to shape labour, survival, and selfhood. Their narratives insist that personal experiences of discrimination are inseparable from collective histories, positioning writing itself as a form of community-based resistance (Rege 118).

Kandasamy extends this framework by revealing how caste privilege and patriarchal entitlement coexist within educated, left-leaning households. Her portrayal of domestic violence exposes the ideological contradictions of progressive masculinity and illustrates how gendered subordination cannot be detached from its social and caste-derived foundations (Sunder Rajan 41).

Kundalkar introduces queer desire into this intersectional field, demonstrating how sexuality is regulated through the same norms that shape casteed family structures. In *Cobalt Blue*, Tanay's and Anuja's longing exposes the fragile boundaries of respectability and the social discomfort surrounding non-normative identities (Satyanarayana 44).

Together, these writers show that intersectionality in Indian literature is not a theoretical abstraction but a lived condition shaping identity and narrative form. Their diverse strategies—autobiographical testimony, feminist anger, and queer polyphony—reveal that resistance is multidimensional and cannot be narrated through a single lens.

In conclusion, the works of Pawar, Kamble, Kandasamy, and Kundalkar affirm that understanding marginalised identities in contemporary India requires attention to the interlocking systems that shape them. Their literature expands the moral and imaginative possibilities of intersectionality, reminding us that dismantling oppression begins with recognising its complex, interconnected nature.

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