

Invisible on Screen, Visible in Struggle: Dalit Feminism between Media Representation and Grassroots Politics

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Abstract:

This study is situated within the historical context of colonial and imperial legacies in India, which have significantly shaped knowledge systems, media representations, and political structures through entrenched caste and gender hierarchies. Despite the expansion of democratic and cultural spaces, Dalit women continue to face systemic marginalization, particularly in cinema, media narratives, and political participation. Addressing this gap, the study adopts Dalit feminist epistemology as its central analytical framework to critically examine how power operates across cultural and institutional domains.

Methodologically, the paper employs a qualitative and critical analytical approach, drawing on theoretical insights from Dalit feminism, intersectionality, and decolonial studies. It analyses patterns of representation in cinema and media, alongside the role of Dalit women in grassroots political movements and activism, to understand both exclusionary mechanisms and forms of resistance.

The findings reveal that dominant media and cultural industries largely reproduce stereotypes, invisibility, and narrative control, reinforcing epistemic inequality and limiting the agency of Dalit women. Simultaneously, the study highlights that Dalit women's participation in social and political movements generates alternative discourses that challenge hegemonic knowledge systems and assert their role as active knowledge producers.

The study concludes that addressing these inequalities requires a decolonial and intersectional rethinking of representation, knowledge, and power. It emphasizes the need for inclusive media practices, equitable political engagement, and the recognition of marginalized voices as central to achieving epistemic justice.

Keywords: Dalit Feminism; Colonialism; Imperialism; Media Representation; Cinema Studies; Political Movements; Intersectionality; Epistemic Inequality; Caste and Gender; Epistemic Justice.

1. Introduction

Dalit feminism has emerged as a critical framework that examines the intersection of caste and gender, highlighting the specific forms of oppression experienced by Dalit women in Indian society. Unlike mainstream feminist approaches, which have often overlooked caste-based inequalities, Dalit feminism foregrounds the lived experiences, voices, and knowledge systems of Dalit women as central to understanding structures of power and marginalization. It not only critiques Brahminical patriarchy but also challenges dominant epistemologies that exclude subaltern perspectives.

Within this framework, media representation and political activism become important areas of analysis. In the context of Indian cinema and visual culture, Dalit women are frequently absent, stereotyped, or misrepresented. Their identities are often shaped by dominant narratives controlled by upper-caste perspectives, which either silence their voices or portray them in limited and marginalized roles. In contrast, the sphere of politics and grassroots movements reveals a different reality, where Dalit women actively participate in resistance, leadership, and community mobilization, challenging both caste and gender hierarchies.

This contrast creates a significant problem: while Dalit women remain largely invisible or distorted in visual media, they are highly visible as agents of change in social and political movements. This gap raises critical questions about power, representation, and the control over knowledge production. It reflects how dominant structures determine whose stories are told and whose contributions are recognized.

The present study focuses on analysing this contradiction by linking representation, power, and knowledge. It seeks to understand how media and political spaces differently construct the visibility of Dalit women and how Dalit feminist perspectives can help in rethinking these dynamics toward more inclusive and equitable frameworks.

Historical Significance

The historical significance of this study lies in its engagement with the long-standing processes through which caste, gender, and knowledge have been shaped in India. The marginalization of Dalit women in both representation and power structures cannot be understood without examining the historical foundations of Brahminical patriarchy and the colonial reorganization of knowledge systems. Traditionally, access to education, authorship, and cultural production was restricted along caste lines, systematically excluding Dalit communities, particularly women, from recognized spaces of knowledge and visibility.

During the colonial period, these hierarchies were not dismantled but rather restructured through new institutional frameworks such as modern education, print culture, and administrative systems. Colonial knowledge production often privileged upper-caste intermediaries, reinforcing existing social inequalities while presenting Western epistemologies as universal. As a result, Dalit voices remained largely absent from both indigenous and colonial narratives.

In the postcolonial period, although democratic institutions and media expanded, the legacy of these exclusions continued. Mainstream cinema and media inherited dominant cultural norms, leading to the continued invisibility or misrepresentation of Dalit women. At the same time, the twentieth century witnessed the emergence of Dalit movements and leaders such as B. R. Ambedkar, which laid the foundation for asserting Dalit identity, rights, and knowledge. Dalit women, in particular, began to articulate their experiences through activism, literature, and grassroots politics, challenging both caste oppression and gender discrimination.

Thus, the historical trajectory reveals a persistent gap between representation and reality: while dominant systems have excluded Dalit women from cultural narratives, they have actively participated in shaping social and political resistance. This study situates itself within this historical continuum, emphasizing that contemporary issues of media invisibility and political visibility are deeply rooted in these long-standing structures of power and exclusion.

Objectives

1. To examine the historical and structural exclusion of Dalit women in cinema and media representation.
2. To analyse how visual culture reinforces caste–gender hierarchies and produces epistemic violence.
3. To apply a Dalit feminist framework to critique dominant narratives and knowledge systems.
4. To investigate the role of Dalit women in grassroots political movements and resistance.
5. To explore the contrast between media invisibility and political visibility of Dalit women.
6. To highlight lived experiences of Dalit women as sources of alternative knowledge and representation.
7. To assess the relationship between media, power, and knowledge production.
8. To propose the need for inclusive, ethical, and representative media practices.
9. To contribute to broader discussions on epistemic justice, representation, and social transformation.

Methodology of the Study

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and critical research methodology to examine the intersections of Dalit feminism, media representation, and grassroots political movements in India. Grounded in an interdisciplinary approach, it draws upon Dalit feminist epistemology, intersectionality, and postcolonial/decolonial theory, engaging with the works of scholars such as Sharmila Rege, Gopal Guru, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The research is primarily based on secondary sources, including academic texts, journal articles, Dalit feminist writings, autobiographies, and media studies, alongside selected examples from cinema and visual culture for interpretive analysis. Methodologically, the study employs textual and discourse analysis to examine patterns of representation, stereotyping, and invisibility of Dalit women in media, while also using critical and comparative analysis to contrast these portrayals with their active participation in grassroots political movements. The focus remains on understanding how caste, gender, and power shape knowledge production and representation. Overall, the methodology aims to foreground marginalized voices and critically analyse structures of exclusion and resistance, contributing to broader debates on epistemic justice and inclusive knowledge systems.

2. Colonial and Postcolonial Legacy of Representation

2.1 Impact of Colonial Knowledge Systems on Cultural and Visual Narratives

The patterns of representation in India are deeply shaped by colonial knowledge systems. During the colonial period, British administrators, scholars, and missionaries produced texts and visual narratives that categorized Indian society through rigid hierarchies of caste and gender. These representations were not neutral; rather, they functioned as instruments of power and control. Marginalized communities, particularly Dalits, were often portrayed as backward, inferior, or uncivilized, which justified their exclusion from mainstream cultural and intellectual spaces. As Edward Said (1978) argues, representation is closely linked to power, and those who control

knowledge production also shape how others are perceived. In this context, colonial discourse constructed enduring images and stereotypes that continue to influence visual culture in India.

2.2 Continuities of Caste and Gender Hierarchies in Postcolonial Media

Despite the end of colonial rule, many of these representational patterns have persisted in postcolonial media. Indian cinema, television, and other forms of visual culture have largely reproduced upper-caste and patriarchal perspectives. Dalit women, in particular, are either absent from mainstream narratives or represented in limited and stereotypical roles that emphasize victimhood, marginality, or social deviance.

This continuity reflects what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) highlights through her assertion that “the subaltern cannot speak,” indicating that marginalized voices remain mediated or silenced within dominant discourses. The persistence of such representations reveals that formal political independence did not necessarily lead to epistemic or cultural transformation.

2.3 Historical Exclusion of Dalit Voices from Dominant Discourse

The exclusion of Dalit voices from cultural and intellectual spaces is historically rooted in caste-based restrictions on education, authorship, and knowledge production. Control over media institutions and narrative frameworks has largely remained with socially dominant groups, resulting in the systematic marginalization of Dalit perspectives.

Dalit women, in particular, have faced multiple layers of exclusion due to the intersection of caste and gender. Their experiences have often been ignored, misrepresented, or appropriated without acknowledgment. As Sharmila Rege (2006) emphasizes, such exclusions are structurally embedded within caste and patriarchal systems that determine whose knowledge is considered legitimate.

Together, these factors demonstrate that the colonial and postcolonial legacy of representation continues to shape contemporary media, reinforcing hierarchies of visibility and voice while limiting the scope for inclusive and equitable cultural narratives.

3. Dalit Feminist Framework: Theoretical Foundations

3.1 Intersection of Caste, Gender, and Power in Knowledge Production

Dalit feminist theory emphasizes that caste and gender are deeply interconnected structures that shape both lived experiences and systems of knowledge production. Dalit women occupy a unique social position where multiple forms of marginalization intersect, influencing not only their access to education and resources but also the recognition of their knowledge. This framework challenges the idea that knowledge is neutral or universal by showing how it is produced within power relations. As Kimberlé Crenshaw notes, intersectionality reveals how “multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves,” highlighting the complexity of Dalit women’s epistemic marginalization.

3.2 Critique of Mainstream Feminism and Upper-Caste Dominance

Dalit feminism critically interrogates mainstream feminist discourse for its historical neglect of caste as a central axis of oppression. Many dominant feminist narratives in India have been shaped by upper-caste perspectives, often overlooking the specific realities of Dalit women. This critique extends to broader knowledge systems that privilege upper-caste and Western viewpoints while marginalizing subaltern voices. As Sharmila Rege argues, “Dalit women’s perspectives transform the terms and conditions of feminist knowledge itself,” underscoring the need to reconstruct feminist theory through marginalized experiences.

3.3 Dalit Women’s Standpoint as Alternative Epistemology

A key contribution of Dalit feminism is the assertion that Dalit women’s lived experiences constitute a valid and critical source of knowledge. Their everyday struggles, labour, and resistance

practices provide insights into structures of oppression that are often invisible within dominant frameworks. This standpoint challenges traditional hierarchies that privilege abstract, institutional knowledge over experiential understanding. As Gopal Guru emphasizes, “experience is not merely experiential but a source of theorization,” reinforcing the epistemic significance of marginalized voices in developing more inclusive and transformative knowledge systems.

4. Representation of Dalit Women in Cinema and Media

4.1 Absence and Invisibility

Dalit women remain largely absent from mainstream Indian cinema and media, reflecting a broader pattern of exclusion within cultural production. Their stories, experiences, and contributions are rarely represented, and when they are, they often occupy marginal or background roles. This absence is not accidental but rooted in structural inequalities that determine who gets visibility in public discourse. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) suggests, the subaltern is often denied the space to “speak” within dominant representational systems, resulting in systematic invisibility.

4.2 Stereotyping and Misrepresentation

When Dalit women do appear in films and media, they are frequently portrayed through narrow and stereotypical lenses. They are often reduced to images of suffering, victimhood, or social backwardness, lacking agency and complexity. Such representations reinforce existing caste and gender hierarchies by presenting Dalit women as passive subjects rather than active agents. This process limits the scope of their identity and erases the diversity of their lived experiences, thereby contributing to epistemic inequality.

4.3 Narrative Control and Upper-Caste Dominance

A key factor shaping these patterns of representation is the control over narrative production, which largely remains in the hands of upper-caste and socially dominant groups. Filmmakers, writers, and media institutions often frame stories from their own perspectives, marginalizing or appropriating Dalit voices. As a result, Dalit women are rarely able to represent themselves or influence how their stories are told. This reflects what Edward Said (1978) describes as the power to represent others, where dominant groups define the identities of marginalized communities, reinforcing hierarchical structures of knowledge and culture.

5. Epistemic Violence in Visual Culture

5.1 Silencing and Distortion of Dalit Women’s Experiences

Epistemic violence in visual culture operates through the systematic silencing and distortion of Dalit women’s lived realities. Their voices are either excluded altogether or mediated through dominant perspectives that misrepresent their experiences. Instead of allowing Dalit women to articulate their own narratives, cinema and media often construct simplified or altered versions of their lives, thereby erasing complexity and agency. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) argues, the subaltern is often prevented from speaking within dominant frameworks, highlighting how representation itself can become a form of violence.

5.2 Media as a Site of Knowledge Production Reinforcing Hierarchies

Media is not merely a platform of entertainment but a powerful site of knowledge production that shapes public understanding and social reality. In this context, visual culture frequently reinforces existing caste and gender hierarchies by privileging dominant perspectives and marginalizing subaltern knowledge. The repeated circulation of selective narratives normalizes inequality and legitimizes exclusion. As Michel Foucault emphasizes, power and knowledge are deeply interconnected, and those who control discourse also control what is accepted as truth. Thus, media plays a central role in sustaining epistemic inequality.

5.3 Denial of Agency and Voice in Representation

A significant aspect of epistemic violence is the denial of agency to Dalit women within representational spaces. They are often depicted as passive subjects rather than active participants in their own lives and struggles. This lack of agency not only limits their representation but also prevents them from being recognized as legitimate knowledge producers. As Sharmila Rege (2006) notes, dominant knowledge systems systematically exclude Dalit women's perspectives, thereby reinforcing structures of power that silence marginalized voices. Such denial of voice perpetuates both cultural and epistemic marginalization.

6. Grassroots Politics and Dalit Women's Activism

6.1 Role of Dalit Women in Social Movements and Local Resistance

Dalit women have played a crucial role in grassroots political movements and local forms of resistance across India. Despite systemic marginalization, they have actively participated in struggles against caste oppression, gender discrimination, and social exclusion. Their involvement is often rooted in everyday experiences of injustice, which motivates collective action at the community level. These movements challenge dominant power structures and create alternative spaces where marginalized voices can be heard. As Gopal Guru emphasizes, marginalized communities transform lived experiences into sites of resistance and critical knowledge.

6.2 Engagement in Issues of Land, Labour, Education, and Rights

Dalit women's activism is closely connected to material and social issues such as land rights, labour exploitation, access to education, and basic human rights. They have been at the forefront of movements addressing bonded labour, wage inequality, caste-based violence, and denial of educational opportunities. Their participation highlights how caste and gender intersect in shaping socio-economic conditions. This engagement demonstrates that political activism is not separate from daily life but emerges from it, linking survival with resistance and rights-based struggles.

6.3 Assertion of Identity and Voice in Political Spaces

Through grassroots activism, Dalit women assert their identity and claim visibility in political spaces that have historically excluded them. They challenge both state power and societal hierarchies by demanding recognition, representation, and justice. This assertion of voice disrupts dominant narratives that portray them as passive or invisible. As Sharmila Rege (2006) notes, Dalit women's articulation of their experiences reshapes the terms of political and epistemic discourse, establishing them as active agents in knowledge production and social transformation.

7. Intersection of Media and Politics

7.1 Contrast between Invisibility in Media and Visibility in Activism

A striking contradiction emerges when comparing the representation of Dalit women in media with their presence in political activism. While mainstream cinema and media largely render them invisible or marginal, grassroots political movements reveal Dalit women as active participants and leaders. This contrast highlights a gap between cultural representation and social reality, where dominant narratives fail to capture the extent of their political engagement. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) suggests, the subaltern's voice is often excluded from dominant discourse, even when it is actively expressed in real social contexts.

7.2 Media's Role in Shaping Public Perception of Dalit Struggles

Media plays a significant role in constructing public understanding of social issues, including caste-based struggles. The selective representation or omission of Dalit women's activism influences how these movements are perceived by wider audiences. When media fails to adequately represent their contributions, it reinforces ignorance and perpetuates stereotypes. As Stuart Hall (1997) argues,

representation is central to the production of meaning, and media narratives shape how social realities are interpreted and understood. Thus, the absence or distortion of Dalit women's political roles limits broader recognition of their agency.

7.3 Emergence of Alternative Media and Counter-Narratives

In response to mainstream exclusion, alternative media platforms have emerged as important spaces for Dalit voices and counter-narratives. Digital platforms, independent journalism, and community-based media enable Dalit women to represent their own experiences and challenge dominant portrayals. These spaces facilitate the production of knowledge from marginalized perspectives and contribute to more inclusive discourse. As Walter D. Mignolo emphasizes, "border thinking" allows marginalized communities to create alternative frameworks of knowledge that resist dominant epistemologies, thereby opening new possibilities for representation and political engagement.

8. Reclaiming Voice and Representation

8.1 Importance of Self-Representation and Narrative Ownership

Reclaiming voice involves asserting the right of Dalit women to represent themselves and control their own narratives. Self-representation challenges the long-standing dominance of upper-caste perspectives in media and knowledge production. When marginalized communities speak for themselves, it disrupts imposed identities and enables more authentic and complex portrayals. As bell hooks (1992) argues, representation is a site of struggle where marginalized groups contest and redefine dominant images.

8.2 Dalit Women as Producers of Knowledge and Cultural Expression

Dalit women are not merely subjects of representation but active producers of knowledge and cultural expression. Through literature, oral narratives, activism, and alternative media, they articulate their experiences and perspectives, contributing to the creation of alternative epistemologies. Their work expands the boundaries of knowledge by integrating lived experience with critical reflection. As Sharmila Rege (2006) emphasizes, Dalit women's narratives transform the terms of knowledge by foregrounding marginalized standpoints.

8.3 Challenging Dominant Discourse through Lived Experience

The lived experiences of Dalit women serve as powerful tools for challenging dominant discourse. By bringing everyday realities of caste and gender oppression into public visibility, they question the validity of hegemonic narratives that claim neutrality or universality. This process not only exposes structural inequalities but also redefines knowledge as situated and relational. As Gopal Guru notes, experience itself becomes a source of theorization, enabling resistance against epistemic domination.

9. Towards Inclusive Media and Political Justice

9.1 Need for Ethical and Inclusive Representation in Cinema and Media

Achieving justice in representation requires a shift towards ethical and inclusive practices in cinema and media. This involves moving beyond tokenism and stereotypes to ensure that marginalized communities are portrayed with dignity, complexity, and agency. Inclusive representation also requires structural changes in media institutions, including greater diversity among creators, writers, and decision-makers.

9.2 Recognition of Marginalized Voices in Public Discourse

For a more equitable society, it is essential to recognize and legitimize the voices of marginalized communities within public discourse. Dalit women's perspectives must be included not only as subjects but as authoritative contributors to debates on culture, politics, and knowledge. As Gayatri

Chakravorty Spivak (1988) highlights, enabling the subaltern to speak requires dismantling the structures that silence them.

9.3 Linking Representation with Social and Epistemic Justice

Representation is closely connected to broader goals of social and epistemic justice. Inclusive media practices can contribute to challenging caste and gender hierarchies by reshaping public understanding and promoting equality. This linkage underscores that cultural visibility is not merely symbolic but has material and political implications. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues, the struggle for social justice is inseparable from the struggle for cognitive justice, reinforcing the need for transformative approaches to representation and knowledge systems.

10. Conclusion

The study has examined the complex relationship between representation and resistance by analysing the marginalization of Dalit women in cinema and media alongside their active presence in grassroots political movements. It has demonstrated that while dominant visual culture often renders Dalit women invisible or misrepresents them through limiting stereotypes, they continue to assert agency and voice through social and political activism. This contrast highlights the role of power in shaping knowledge, visibility, and narrative control, revealing how media functions as a site of epistemic inequality.

The analysis reaffirms Dalit feminism as a transformative and critical framework that challenges both caste-based and gendered hierarchies within cultural and political domains. By centering the lived experiences of Dalit women, it redefines knowledge production, questions dominant epistemologies, and foregrounds marginalized voices as legitimate and necessary contributors to discourse. In doing so, Dalit feminism not only critiques existing structures but also opens possibilities for more inclusive and equitable frameworks of representation and understanding.

Looking ahead, the study underscores the need for more inclusive media practices that enable self-representation and diverse storytelling, as well as greater recognition of Dalit women's contributions in political and public spheres. It calls for sustained efforts to dismantle structural barriers within media institutions and governance systems, while encouraging the growth of alternative platforms and participatory spaces. Such directions are essential for linking representation with broader goals of social and epistemic justice, ensuring that marginalized voices are not only visible but also influential in shaping future narratives and policies.

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