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Abstract

This thesis explores the everyday realities of Indian women and the gender politics that currently exist in Indian society from the perspective of an upper caste middle class female audience. The aim of this research is to understand and explore the gender politics at the level of the everyday realities of women, and the attitude of the upper caste audience towards lower caste issues in Indian society using different genres of Indian literature as a framework.

The main research questions that are being addressed are: what has been the representation of female characters in Indian postmodern, popular and Dalit literature since the 1980s; are the characters in the selected novels and their constructions relevant to the lives of the women that form a part of the audience for this research; what has the chosen literature taught us about the gender politics of Indian society; and what has the chosen literature taught us about the attitudes of the upper caste women in relation to lower caste issues. The key research methods that are used are thematic analysis, and in-depth interviews. The findings of the thematic analysis helped guide the interview process and determine the key conversations that were had with the participants. The audience for this thesis comprises 24 Indian women living in the UK between the ages of 20 and 50 who hail from an upper caste, middle class background and spent their formative years growing up in the heartland of India. The key theoretical frameworks that have been used as the basis of this thesis are intersectionality and decoloniality.

The research findings indicate that upper caste women strongly relate to the selected texts, as the novels reflect their own experiences, with characters and events resonating with them on a personal level, often reminding them of their social roles both inside and outside their homes. The use of the encoding/decoding model highlights that while there is significant engagement with postmodern and popular genre novels, there is minimal interaction with the characters and narratives in Dalit literature. The silence of the upper caste audience regarding Dalit issues is notably apparent, suggesting that in interpreting Indian novels, the women are influenced by their habitus and caste, but one can also argue that the issue runs deeper. Indeed this thesis argues that there is a much more deep-rooted conditioning at the ideological level than the audience would like to admit; there are larger forces at play than just political agenda pushing.

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Chapter 1
Introduction

Media outputs in any country have a significant role to play in the way habitants of that society make meaning of their everyday lives and consider socio-economic and political issues. Media is central to the process of education, deliberation and social integration; it can be viewed as a primary supplier of information not just about current events but also long-standing issues (Croteau and Hoynes, 2006). The media landscape in India is wide and varied, with literature and literary narratives being at the forefront of change since pre-independence times[1]. The interwoven relationship between power structures, gender politics, and socio-cultural identities has been an essential theme in literary narratives worldwide, and in the context of Indian literature, the process of exploring these themes becomes particularly essential due to the intangible relationships between historical legacies, cultural diversity and social hierarchies. The societal structure of India is far from simple, and to understand it requires an in-depth knowledge of its cultural histories, its patriarchal traditions, and its constantly in-flux caste system.

The aim of this research is to understand and explore the gender politics at the level of the everyday realities of women, and the attitude of the upper caste audience towards lower caste issues in Indian society using different genres of Indian literature as a framework. Literature forms are an essential part of popular culture and raises questions of race, caste, gender, ideology, and the everyday, making it a rich area of study. There is great relevance to literature even in the digital landscape of today, as it serves as the origin point of the stories that are told through different media (film, television, OTT content etc.). The importance and relevance of literature as a medium is expressed clearly through the work of John Storey who observed that literature, along with films, television fiction, pop songs etc. constitute popular culture which is deeply tied to the concept of ideology. He explored the concepts put forth by Stuart Hall and Roland Barthes and spoke of how ideology operates at the level of connotations, and the level of the unconscious wherein meaning is produced by texts and practices (2018). The word 'text' also here refers to novels, because literature or fictional writing is very much a part of media and cultural studies (2018). Leavis observed that literature could and should confer a sense of significance to our routine existence and to question our habitual judgement. He made it clear that good literature is one that is embedded in ordinary, social life and literature is essential to highlight our understanding of social and political life. Leavis, when referring to the work of Jane Austen, who he considers to be one of the great English writers observes she has "an intense

[1] Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) is considered the first Indian novel written in English.

moral interest of her own in life that is in the first place preoccupation with certain problems that life compels on her as personal ones. Without her intense moral preoccupation she wouldn't have been a great novelist" (1948, p.7). Leavis's belief was that literature should be closely related to the criticism of life, that great novelists show an intense moral interest in life, and that this moral interest determines the nature of their form in fiction. Literature reflects the realities of the world we live in, and the close reading of any text reveals layers upon layers of everyday experiences embedded within each other, waiting to be revealed and explored. As a medium, literature is intensely revealing in recounting lived experiences, making it a fascinating medium to study.

Some of the key questions that this research aims to address are: what has been the representation of female characters in Indian postmodern, popular and Dalit literature since the 1980s; are the characters in the selected novels and their constructions relevant to the lives of the women that form a part of the audience for this research; what has the chosen literature taught us about the gender politics of Indian society; and what has the chosen literature taught us about the attitudes of the upper caste women in relation to lower caste issues. The research covers three different genres of Indian literature: postmodern writings, popular writings and Dalit writings. Two novels from each genre have been selected from each genre for ease of understanding. The selected audience comprises of middle class Indian women living in the UK between the ages of 20 and 50. Reading through the literature on Indian audiences of literature as a medium it became apparent that middle class Indian women's reader responses have not been studied for any genre, except the romance genre[2]. It was also found through this research that novels have generally not been studied from the point of view of a diverse readership, and they are usually studied from the point of view of the researcher, or even the writer himself/herself. Women's everyday realities have certainly not been explored in such a specific manner, as is the aim of this research. Upper caste attitudes towards lower caste issues has not been studied against the context of Dalit literature, and lower caste issues are usually approached from the vantage point of the oppressed communities specifically, which while valid, does not always bring to light the deep-rooted societally conditioned responses that lead to the minimisation of lower caste issues. This research aims to study and provide context within these identifiable gaps using theories of intersectionality, and postcolonial feminist studies within the Indian context, using reader-responses as evidence. Intersectionality, and specifically representational intersectionality in tandem with decolonial theory are the key

[2] Jyoti Puri came close with her work in 1997 about Indian women's reading habits, specifically within the romance genre of fiction. This will be discussed in detail in the Methodology chapter. Her work was built on Janice Radway's reader-response criticism conducted in 1984 around the romance readers in a small town in the United States of America.

structural frameworks for this research. They go hand in hand in helping understand the middle class female audience in India, and how the oppression of women stands at the intersection of their class, gender, and caste. The dominant culture in India favours one gender over the other, and the upper caste over the lower caste. Scot (2022) explains:

> "a group of people who have the ability to hold power over public institutions and to influence all public beliefs and practices is considered to be powerful. The ruling culture, or cultural foundation, is established in society by a group of people who govern the ruling ideas, values, and beliefs that become the dominant worldview of society […] The ruling culture uses the media and laws to spread their ideas".

This idea of a dominant culture must be then viewed through the lens of Foucault's theory of power/knowledge and the concept of the dispositif. "A dispositif is an intellectual network assembling different thoughts together in a way making a certain understanding/action possible" (Callewaert, 2017, p.30). Essentially, it is any of the various institutional, physical and administrative mechanisms and knowledge structures which enhance and maintain the exercise of power within the social body. In the context of India, the dominant culture would refer to the right wing agenda which favours men over women, ostracises lower castes in favour of the upper castes and uplifts the upper classes and elites economically, but does not do much for the middle classes. This discourse is very reflective of the right wing government in India that has tried to enforce the Hindutva ideology through policy and practice (this will be further explored in the 'Discussion' chapter). This dominant culture is an omnipresent discourse that can be, and has been, perpetuated through popular culture either by being driven forward by the elites or being used satirically by the middle classes. In one form or the other, the discourse and culture stays the same; women are oppressed, the lower caste communities are ostracised, and there is no socio-economic upward mobility for either section.

My research strongly argues that the position of women in Indian society is still considered inferior, at least at the level of the everyday in the domestic sphere. There is an obvious domestication of values and a reproduction of fixed gender roles so as to maintain the status quo that has existed in Indian society since pre-Vedic times. The gender politics of Indian society reinforces traditional gender roles, thus reproducing the status quo to ensure that women stay within the boundaries that have been created for them and been perpetuated as a result of rampant patriarchy: a system that is designed for one gender to succeed over the other. As the empirical research will show in this study, there is an engagement on the part of the audience with issues of gender parity at the social and cultural level, but not at a political or economic level. This research also argues that the upper caste women, despite having an education and

sufficient awareness[3] and critical thinking skills, dismiss and minimise the issues faced by lower caste women because caste issues are not a part of their lived experiences. This audience study found an immediate disconnect and disengagement on their part from the subject matter of caste based injustices as depicted in Dalit literature. They reproduce the caste based socio-economic status quo through their quietness, acts of ignorance and minimisation, which is indicative of the fact that caste, much like gender parity, is a long way from being completely eradicated in the Indian context.

To begin with, it is essential to understand the aims of this research, what is being studied, and why, along with the original contribution that this makes to the existing literature in the field; this has been outlined in Chapter 1 ('Introduction'). Chapter 2 explores the key themes and debates, and the existing literature in the field of gender politics, the Indian feminist movement, the caste system in India, how caste is racialised through socio-economic structures, the position of Dalits in modern India, the need for Dalit feminism movements and how it differs from mainstream Indian feminist movements, the rise of Dalit literature as a tool of advocacy and change, how it compares to mainstream Indian literature and its relevance in a postmodern globalised society, and why an intersectional and decolonised approach to audience study is required when studying literature and audience against the context of Indian society. This chapter weaves an argumentation around feminism, literature and popular culture in an attempt to show that they are inextricably linked to each other within the framework of Indian society, which has been and continues to be deeply patriarchal.

Chapter 3 focuses on the theoretical frameworks of intersectionality and decolonial theory that have been used for this research. The chapter recounts the origin of intersectionality by looking at Savitribai Phule's work in India in the 19th century, and how the term 'intersectionality' was only coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989. The need for a decolonial approach comes into play due to the fact that even though intersectionality as a concept existed in India previously, it only came to the front due to work that was done in the West in the late 1980s. The chapter also sheds light on the relationship between intersectionality and decoloniality and how they are deeply intertwined with each other. The chapter also brings forward the original contribution that my research makes not just in the field of intersectional and decolonial studies, but also audience research within the Indian context, as it observes and explores the experiences of a female middle class audience. Chapter 4 explores the qualitative research methods that will be used for this research, and a rationale for using their use. The chosen research methods are

[3] Sufficient awareness here refers to the ability of the women interviewed to identify that their daily lives and realities are affected by a patriarchal structure, and is a deep-rooted problem.

thematic analysis and qualitative interviewing, wherein the data from the thematic analysis of the selected novels guides the questions asked to the selected audience during the qualitative interviewing process. Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model is explored and applied in detail. The selected audience which comprises middle class Indian women living in the UK between the ages of 20 and 50 is looked at in detail: the reason for their selection, the actual recruitment process, and the specific demographic they belong to. The relevance of conducting interviews is also explained in great detail, along with how the data collected from the interviews would add value to the themes that emerge from the thematic analysis of the novels. The empirical Chapters 5 and 6 engage with the main themes emerging from a close reading of the selected novels and lend credibility to the notion that literature provides an in-depth view into societal structures and hierarchies when contextualised against the backdrop of research that has already been conducted. For the purpose of this research, the novels that have been selected are *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (2008), *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy (1997), *The Zoya Factor* by Anuja Chauhan (2008), *100 Shades of White* by Preethi Nair (2003), *Sangati* by Bama (2004), and *Coming out as Dalit: A Memoir* by Yashica Dutt (2019). For ease of understanding, the novels have been categorised into the genres of postmodern literature, popular literature, and Dalit literature. The reasons for these categorisations, and the differences in the genres is discussed in Chapter 5. This chapter also explores the various levels at which the subjugation and oppression of Indian women operates and manifests in society: the themes analysed in this chapter are patriarchy, violence against women, and the commodification of women. Patriarchy is a result of the commodification of women, which comes about due to the gendered nature of violence against women, which stems from a patriarchal mindset. The three are so inextricably linked that it is impossible to understand one without the other. They manifest in Indian society in a cyclical manner, making it nearly impossible to speak of one without referring to the other. With this view, Chapter 6 then further delves into how social norms, economic disparity, and the question of caste play an active role in propagating the oppression of women in India as reflected in the novels. These themes, while not mutually exclusive, are also so closely interwoven that together, they represent the full extent of women's reality in modern India on a social, economic and cultural level. Social norms, often deeply ingrained in cultural and historical contexts, dictate acceptable behaviours, values and expectations within a society. These norms can serve as barriers to progress and social justice. In the context of Indian society, social norms have played a significant role in perpetuating caste based injustices and reinforcing economic disparities.

Having established the main themes emerging from the analysis of the chosen novels, Chapters 7 and 8 contextualise these themes against the backdrop of the qualitative interviews conducted

during the research, and the subsequent material collected from them. The notion of everyday materialities serves as a cornerstone in Chapter 6, acknowledging the tangible elements that contribute to the construction of women's realities. Whether it be gendered roles in the personal and public space, the social and cultural norms that must be adhered to, gendered economic disparity or the treatment of women as commodities, these materialities form the backdrop against which the fictional narratives, and women's everyday lived experiences play out. Women's experiences exist at the intersection of these materialities; one feeds into the other. Gendered domestic roles exist, and so women cannot enter into the workplace or are unable to perform the same as their male counterparts, leading to an economic disparity between the genders, which is also a result of social and cultural norms that place women as the keepers of tradition and culture. The economic disparity also leads to a commodification of women. Chapter 7 offers a critical understanding of the complexities that define the female experience in the diverse landscape of India, albeit from an upper caste perspective.

With the upper caste sentiments firmly in place, Chapter 8 delves into the attitude that the upper caste audience has towards issues faced by Dalit women through the representations in the selected novels of *Sangati* and *Coming out as Dalit: A Memoir*. The dominant discourse of India is one that favours the upper caste over the lower caste and almost negates their experiences and subversions by maintaining that their situation had vastly improved through reservation policies over the years, following the abolishment of the whole system as per the Indian Constitution in 1950. As such, Chapter 8 delves into the issues of caste, its pervasive nature in Indian society, and argues that upper caste women operate from a place of privilege and have minimised the nature and seriousness of the oppressions faced by women from lower castes, despite having an awareness and understanding of the issues that are prevalent in society. The focus in this chapter is on how latent bias and a privileged view influence social interactions and access to equal opportunities, in the great divide between the upper caste and the lower caste.

With the themes from the thematic analysis, and the material collected from the interviews in place, Chapter 9 discusses the relationship between literary narratives, and their representations against the wider issues that exist in Indian society today. This chapter focusses on the moral seriousness of literature, and on how it serves a greater purpose than mere entertainment or aesthetic value. This chapter contextualises the material collected from the interviews, against the themes that emerged from a close reading of the novels, and assesses how these findings contribute towards the existing literature and research in the area of gender politics at the level of the everyday in India. Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model is used to

determine that upper caste women find a great degree of relevance with the selected texts as the novels represent their realities, and the characters and/or incidents speak to them on a personal level, reminding them of their own position within and outside their homes. The same model also reveals that while there is intense engagement with novels in the postmodern and popular genres, there is little to no engagement with the narratives or characters in Dalit literature. The quietness of the upper caste audience about the Dalit situation comes through in a very visible manner, making it apparent that in the process of decoding the Indian novel as a text the women are influenced by their habitus and caste -- but one can also argue that the issue runs deeper. One could argue that there is much more deep-rooted conditioning at the ideological level than the audience would like to admit; there are larger forces at play than just political agenda pushing. Additionally, this chapter also addresses the methodological limitations of this research.

Chapter 10, which serves as the conclusion for this research, ties up the loose ends so to speak, and highlights the contributions made through the course of this research. There is a recount of the main themes covered throughout. The chapter ends with future avenues of research using the material collected during this research as a backdrop and framework.

Chapter 2
Literature Review

The complex interplay between gender dynamics, power structures and socio-cultural identities has been a central theme in literary discourse across the globe. In the context of India, a nation with a rich and diverse literary tradition, exploring these themes becomes particularly compelling due to the complicated interweaving of historical legacies, cultural diversity and social hierarchies. In a world where women are leading the charge on every front, whether economic, political, financial, or social, it is an unfortunate reality that gender parity does not exist. The issues faced by women have been a large part of the gender debate on a global scale and have also become an inescapable part of the media landscape when taken into consideration from the view of reception and audience study. There have been several academic approaches to feminism and feminist issues and their representations in an effort to draw correlations between power structures and the patriarchal nature of the socio-political structures of society. However, there has been very limited research, if at all, undertaken from an audience perspective. This research aims to weave an argumentation through feminism, literature, and popular culture in an attempt to show that they are inextricably linked to each other within the framework of Indian society, which has been and continues to be deeply patriarchal. That is not to say that women's situation in India has not improved since colonial rule ended, or indeed in the time since, but it can be said with absolute certainty that Indian society still has a long way to go to guarantee complete equality for women in all spheres. Further it is essential to take a decolonised approach to this research when it comes specifically to women's questions specifically, because Indian society is very different from the West, and this difference needs to be kept in mind. This research aims to map out the positionality and realities of Indian women through fictional representations in different types of Indian literature, including Dalit literature, solely from an audience's point of view. Through this research, there is an attempt to explore and understand the current gender politics prevalent in Indian society, and the relevance of the notion of caste when viewed through the lens of an upper caste readership.

To begin with, it is essential to acknowledge and be aware of the global discourse on gender and power. Across cultures and continents, narratives of gender inequality, patriarchal norms and power imbalances have been pervasive, transcending geographical boundaries. Section 1 begins with exploring the idea of gender and power on a global scale. There is a stark difference between economic and power distributions between the Global North and Global South due to the processes of colonisation and the legacies that remain behind as a result of it. In the context of gender, women's position in the Global North communities has moved leaps and bounds

when compared to women's position in the Global South communities. The feminist movement in a country like India focused on women's liberation, not just in the economic sphere but also in the social and cultural ones. Section 1 then goes on to examine the nature of Indian society, which has been deeply patriarchal since before colonisation, and which is a society where women have always been relegated to the domestic sphere as the gatekeepers of culture and tradition. The section then explores the three waves of feminism in India, their key markers, and the feminist literature that arose during these periods. There is a recap of the current socio-cultural situation of women in India and the kind of violence they are facing as a result of a largely conservative, right-wing government in the country. The different waves of Indian feminism deal primarily with issues faced by upper caste women and tend to leave the lower caste women out of the conversation. But before I engage with the intersectionality of the oppression faced by lower caste women, it is essential to historicise the caste setting in India.

Section 2 of the literature review starts by addressing the caste situation in India and its origins. The four *varnas* of the caste system (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra) determine the economic and social status of the people belonging to those castes. The oppressed castes, or Scheduled Castes, or the Dalits[4] are placed at the lowest rung of the Indian societal ladder, simply due to a purity/pollution principle. The section determines that while there are sections of Indian scholars who disagree, caste and race are indeed the same and operate at the same level of exclusion of certain members of society. Caste, much like race, is fluid and keeps getting defined and redefined based on the changing socio-economic climate of the country. The Dalit position in Indian society is explored, and it is determined that despite affirmative action, the Dalits still face social exclusion that must be addressed.

Keeping in mind the position of women and the Dalit community in Indian society, there have been several arguments made to explain and justify that Dalit women would be placed even lower than the men of their community in the social hierarchy of India. Section 3 explores the intersectional structures that lead to the oppression and exploitation faced by Dalit women in Indian society. They are oppressed as a result of their gender, their economic status, and their low caste status. The Dalit woman is a minority within a minority. The need for Dalit feminism arose out of the uniqueness of the marginalisation that occurs at the intersection of various discriminatory practices, which could not be addressed by mainstream Indian feminism. The section recounts the current situation of Dalit women in India based on statistics and figures on crimes (sexual and other) against Dalit women as reported by the National Crime Records

[4] The word 'Dalit' is used interchangeably with lower caste communities in this research, whereas 'oppressed castes', 'Scheduled Castes' and 'Other Backward Classes' are the terms used in the Indian Constitution.

Bureau of India. It is noted that one of the most significant ways in which Dalit women were able to communicate the reality of their lives with the masses and raise awareness about the intersectional nature of their marginalisation and oppression was through literature written by Dalit women writers (hereafter referred to as Dalit literature).

The history of Dalit literature and its importance in the present media landscape of India is explored in Section 4. Dalit literature came about due to the sheer need of the community to rectify how they were being represented in the dominant discourse of the country and to shed light on the reality of the community accurately. Mainstream upper caste writers tended to portray Dalit characters as victims who were 'lesser' than the other characters, who were always oppressed, and who did not have the agency to raise their voices against the injustice being levied on them. Many writers, such as Mulk Raj Anand and Premchand, addressed the Dalit condition, but even then, portrayed Dalit women as victims. Dalit women have had to constantly face persecution at the hands of not just the upper caste Hindus but also at the hands of the men within the Dalit community. They have been consistently left out of narratives written by Dalit men. When they are mentioned, they are entirely misrepresented or have stereotypical characteristics associated with them. So, writers such as Urmila Pawar, Bama, Yashica Dutt, and Gunasekhran had to take charge of telling their own stories, in their own voice, from their own perspective in order to fight for their right to have access to spaces that should not have been denied to them in the first place. Section 4 also details the selected texts from Dalit literature (*Sangati* by Bama and *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir* by Yashica Dutt) and the reason for this selection.

After starting from a broad, overarching view of power and gender on a global scale and zooming in down to power structures in India, the feminist movements, caste within gender, the situation of Dalit women, and the importance of Dalit literature, Section 5 zooms out and surveys the landscape of Indian literature as a whole. For this research, the two types of Indian literature that have been identified and are being studied are 'postmodern' and 'popular literature'. Postmodern literature includes novels written by award-winning writers that are Indian but were not written for a middle class audience; this is a highbrow type of literature (critical writers being Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni). Section 5 also briefly delves into some details about the selected texts for this research from the genre of postmodern literature and the reason for this selection (*The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy). Postmodern literature differs from popular literature in that the latter is written for a middle class, urban audience and discusses issues that are pertinent to them in a more casual style, one

indicative of their generation. One of the most significant differences between popular and postmodern literature is the resonance with the type of audience they were written for. Another difference is the style and use of language in the narratives. Since popular literature is written to represent the middle class and the burgeoning youth of India, the use of language reflects that attitude. Popular literature is written colloquially and in a manner that is easy to read solely because of the kind of audience it caters to (critical writers being Chetan Bhagat, Anuja Chauhan, Amish Tripathi). The section also rationalises the selection of texts from the genre of popular literature (*The Zoya Factor* by Anuja Chauhan and *100 Shades of White* by Preethi Nair). The distinction between postmodern and popular literature is explored in further detail in Section 5 with a focus on the reasoning behind this qualification.

2.1 Gender and Power

Construction of gender on a global scale

The disparity between genders and the global gender ratio has existed for many years, and has significantly reduced in recent years, but has also stagnated and slowed down, as is evidenced by the World Economic Forums reports.

> "The 2024 Global Gender Gap Index shows that while no country has achieved full gender parity, 97% of the economies included in this edition have closed more than 60% of their gap, compared to 85% in 2006. The lack of meaningful, widespread change since the last edition effectively slows down the rate of progress to attain parity. Based on current data, it will take 134 years to reach full parity – roughly five generations beyond the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal target" (Pal, Piaget & Zahidi, 2024).

The inequality between men and women does not just exist in numbers but also in the type of freedoms that are available to them, and the relative ease of access to economic resources. Historically, men have been in an advantaged position over women. The inequalities between genders exist on multidimensional levels including, but not limited to, political, economic arrangements, cultural, sociological, and interpersonal relationships (Connell, 2005).

Societies and cultures are never homogeneous in nature, and to assume they would be is troubling. The oppression and subjugation of a section of society, for instance, of women within a specific society, may not be the same as those of women from another society and/or culture. In terms of gender and culture studies, the most evident divide is the one between the Global North and South.

> "The phrase 'Global South' refers broadly to the regions of Latin America, Asia, Africa and Oceania. It is one of a family of terms, including 'Third World' and 'Periphery', that

> denote regions outside Europe and North America, mostly (though not all) low-income and often politically or culturally marginalised. The use of the phrase Global South marks a shift from a central focus on development or cultural difference towards an emphasis on geopolitical relations of power" (Dados & Connell, 2012, p.12).

The term 'Global South' does not simply work as an allegory for underdevelopment but instead represents an entire history of colonialism, neo-imperialism, and economic and social inequalities in living standards through which inequalities are maintained, and hegemony thrives. "From the perspective of the inhabitants, the 'Global South' is the location where new visions of the future are emerging and where the global political and decolonial society is at work" (Levander and Mignolo, 2011, p.3). The Global South[5] represents the underprivileged economic and social conditions of large sections of society, especially women, since historically, they have been subjected to severe persecution.

Within the realm of gender studies and analysis, it is essential to take histories of imperialism and neo-colonial global power relations into consideration when referring to constructions of gender in the Global South since these have been highly gendered processes from the onset (Connell, 2014). History proves that, globally, the hegemonic discourse has been one wherein women have been relegated to the private sphere, with little to no access to the public sphere, which will be explored later in this thesis. In countries and societies where women were allowed to access the public sphere through means of employment they were forced to face rampant economic inequalities. Lobato and Rundell (2013, p.206) state, "Gender-based economic inequality is not specific to Latin America; it is also found in the United States, Canada and European countries. Certain prejudices have also affected pay levels. The most significant and lasting of these presents maternity as a woman's vocation; her labour is seen as fundamentally temporary and, as such, subordinate and complimentary to that of men". It has been observed that feminists in the Global South often fall back on theories that originated in the Global North but view them from a postcolonial lens to drive home the significant differences between feminist issues in the North and South. It is imperative to remember that the experiences of women in the West cannot be compared to the experiences of women from the Global South simply due to the difference in societal constructs and a range of other factors.

The feminist movement and construction of gender in India

Globally, feminist movements arose as a direct result of the subjugation and oppression that women were facing at the hands of a society that was inherently patriarchal in nature. There

[5] It also refers to societies that have impacted by colonial powers and are still finding their way out of the damage inflicted by years of being oppressed under imperial powers, and so they have different societal structures when compared to the Global North.

have been several feminist movements that advocate for a more egalitarian world, with a focus on empowering women and giving them the rights that they have long been denied. Byerly and Ross (2006) explain that feminism is a social movement that has allowed women to fight for the same rights as men but also allowed them to enter the public domain for issues pertaining to their legal rights and citizenship, among others. Freedman (2001, p.1) states,

> "Feminists concern themselves with women's inferior position in society and with discrimination encountered by women because of their sex. All feminists call for changes in the social, economic, political or cultural order".

Feminist movements can be broadly categorised into first, second, and third wave feminisms. Feminist movements within the context of Indian society have also followed a similar pattern and have been influenced by Western feminist movements while staying inherently Indian. The experiences of oppression and subjugation by women worldwide are not the same and are dependent on the structure of the society in terms of culture, economics, politics, and even traditionally accepted social customs. As mentioned, in the case of the Global South, it is essential to take colonialism as a contributing factor to the regressive position women hold in society.

> "The level of gendered violence in postcolonial societies is now a central issue in global feminism, from international policy forums to local research and action agendas - illustrated by the emphasis on gender violence in the women's studies programmes in Costa Rica" (Connell, 2014, p.521).

Indian society as a whole has always had very different cultural norms and traditions when compared to the West. Indian women's oppression is an intersection of oppression based on their gender, their roles in society in which they are confined to the private sphere, and the deeply patriarchal nature of the society at large. The next section will focus on the construction of gender in India and how Indian mainstream feminism has advocated for issues that are inherently Indian and would not necessarily find relevance in other parts of the world, especially in what constitutes the Global North.

India is the second largest populated country in the world, closely behind China. As per World Population Review (2022), India's population in 2022 was close to 1.4 billion, and accounted for 18.05% of the global population[6]. According to the World Bank Data (2020), females accounted for 48.036% of the Indian population. The 2011 Census of India was one of the largest that was

[6] While there is no official data to confirm this due to the delayed census in India, according to UN estimates, India's population has reached 1,425,775,850 people, surpassing the number of people in mainland China.

undertaken, and the 2021 Census results are expected to be released in 2023 due to delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic[7]. When the history of Indian society is taken into consideration as a whole, it is evident that women inexplicably have been positioned as the 'weaker' sex, and this will be further evidenced in this section. Women's position in India has been dependent not just on their economic status but more so on the patriarchal structure of their homes and, by extension, the society; a structure that, if the religious and mythological texts are to be believed, predates India's colonisation by the British Empire. Indian society and culture have traditionally been rooted in Hindu mythology and ancient scriptures, which were at one point considered the law. One such example of this is the *Manusmriti*, which "managed the obligations of a ruler, the mixed castes, the principles of occupation in relation to caste, occupations in the midst of pain, reparation of sins, and the tenets administering particular types of resurrection. *Manusmriti* also managed the items of common sense of life and was generally a coursebook of human conduct […] The *Manusmriti* is the definitive work on Hindu law" (Jaishankar & Halder, 2020, pp.97-98). The *Manusmriti* was considered to be the first legal text in India that dictated appropriate behaviour for men and women of different castes at different stages of life. It can also be viewed as the text that led to women's inferior position in a post-Vedic society, and is also considered the origin of the caste system in India. The text makes extreme statements about women's position in society and what is expected of them in the context of the way they live their lives. Some examples of this are: "Even in their own homes, a female – whether she is a child, a young woman, or an old lady – should never carry out any task independently" (Manusmriti, 2005: 5:147). "As a child, she must remain under her father's control; as a young woman, under her husband's; and when her husband is dead, under her son's. She must never seek to live independently" (Manusmriti, 2005: 5:148). The text also has specific dictates of how a woman is meant to conduct herself and what her duties towards her husband entail. "The man to whom her father, or with her father's consent, her brother gives her away – she should obey him when he is alive and not be unfaithful to him when he is dead" (Manusmriti, 2005: 5:151). The text goes on to state that "Though he may be bereft of virtue, given to lust, and totally devoid of good qualities, a good woman should always worship her husband like a god" (Manusmriti, 2005: 5:152). And "For women, there is no independent sacrifice, vow, or fast; a woman will be exalted in heaven by the mere fact that she has obediently served her husband" (Manusmriti, 2005: 5:153). The *Manusmriti* defines a good woman as someone who "controls her mind, speech, and body, and is never unfaithful to her husband" (2005: 5:165), and has precise instructions on how and when a husband can denounce his wife. "A barren wife may be superseded in the eighth

[7] As of 2024, it is still unclear when the census data will be released.

year; a wife whose children die, in the tenth; a wife who bears girls, in the eleventh; but a foul mouthed wife, at once" (Manusmriti, 2005: 9:81).

The aforementioned excerpts from the *Manusmriti* make it very clear that women were placed well beneath men and expected to be obedient, subservient, and devoid of independent thought; a notion that is shared by several scholars. Ghosh (2002, p.73) explains,

> "Manu has not accepted the autonomy of the ladies. According to him, a lady can never be independent (svātantryam) because during the whole life she has to depend on others. A woman is protected by her parents in her childhood, by her husband in youth and by her sons in the old age. From this he concludes that a lady does not have the independence during her whole life. This view, I think, is not proper".

They were expected never to remarry or have a life outside the home. The freedom to leave their spouse was granted only to men, while women were expected to remain faithful to their husbands even upon their death. Manu speaks a lot about the traits of a good and respectable women, and of how a woman is allowed entry into heaven on the basis of how obediently she has served her husband. Kurundkar is strongly opposed to Manu's thoughts, and is a staunch condemner of such scriptures. He states

> "Some people claim that the censure in Manusmriti only indicates Manu's opposition to promiscuity in the society and was intended to upload moral standards for the mankind. They are nothing if not irresponsible defenders of slavery of half of the human race. Having demeaned womanhood and advocated for women's slavery, Manu went on to also write some words of praise for them. He wrote that gods did not reside in homes where women were not respected. But how does a woman become respectable? Only if she voluntarily and wholeheartedly accepts slavery" (Kurundkar, 1993, p.64).

One of the defenders of the *Manusmriti* seems to be Dr Pushpa Nagar who has attempted to explain away some of the more questionable comments made in the text regarding women. The defence, according to Nagar is that,

> "even today, we find that the safety of girls is very important. It has become difficult for women to keep themselves safe in a respectful manner in the society. Today's woman is career minded and she has to move in the society. Therefore, if she accompanies her father, husband or son it is for their safety. Here, we can say Manu made this arrangement for the safety of women" (Nagar, 2011, p.145).

This attempt to make Manu's clearly biased comments about the safety of a woman is one of the key reasons for the current patriarchal dynamic prevalent in Indian society. People with an attitude that perpetuates the patriarchy are the ones who subscribe to the idea that it is a woman's responsibility to keep herself safe; a man is free to sexually violate or assault but it is her responsibility to stay safe.

The *Manusmriti* might seem like an outdated text now, but it would do us well to maintain an awareness that several of the social and cultural practices, including a patriarchal hegemony in India, have found their point of origin from this text and this is a mindset that is still present in the country and Indian society at large. The current right-wing political party in government, the BJP, has deep ties with the RSS, which is the most prominent Hindu nationalist paramilitary volunteer organisation in India, of which the current Prime Minister of India was a member. The scale and magnitude of patriarchal thought might perhaps not be as stringent and exacting as dictated by the *Manusmriti*, but some of these antiquated notions have found their way into modern India and have impacted the manner in which the idea of a 'good woman' is constructed, which will be discussed in further detail in later chapters.

The Indian feminism movement

The feminist movement in India has been part of the societal fabric since colonial times and originated in the 1800s during British rule. Much like Western feminist movements, the Indian feminist movement can also be broadly categorised into three waves.

The first wave of feminism, during the pre-independence period, saw first-generation English-educated women speaking out for issues such as voting rights for women, child marriage, widow burning, and female infanticide. The focus at the time was mainly on creating agencies and organisations that could help safeguard women's rights and mobilise public opinion (Patel & Khajuria, 2017). However, it is essential to remember that only educated women had access to resources for knowledge creation, which led to them having their own opinion about their rights and agency. The common, everyday woman with limited access to resources and virtually no access to education continued to struggle within a system that had been subverting her rights for years. As Pande put it:

> "Even the women's institutions and organisations that sprang up during this period did not have an independent ideology but only took off from what the men were stating. Even when women were speaking for themselves, they were speaking only the language of the men, defined by male parameter" (Pande, 2018, p.4).

The issues raised by the women's groups as those that required reform were the ones that had been pointed out to them by the British as potential causes for the denigration of Indian society. There were no attempts to change the existing power structure of society, or to ensure that there was a balance in the positioning of men and women. The late 19th and early 20th century saw the creation of pioneering women's organisations such as All-India Women's Conference (AIWC), Young Women's Christian Association (YMCA), and Anjuman-I-Islam (Patel & Khajuria, 2017). The women's groups were the markers of the first wave of feminism in India, they but might not have been entirely autonomous. As mentioned, only the issues 'approved' by the

British were brought to the surface, such as Sati, child marriage, and female infanticide, among others (Desai, 1977). From a nationalist perspective, the main focus of first wave feminism in India was to include women in the struggle for freedom against British rule, but only as far as the men allowed it; they only allowed women's issues to be included in the personal sphere and not in the political one. As Chatterjee (1990, p.117) states:

> "The relative unimportance of women's question in the last decades of the 19th century is to be explained not by the fact that it had been censored out of the reform agenda or overtaken by the more pressing and emotive issues of political struggle. The reason lies in nationalism's success in situating the 'women's question' in an inner domain of sovereignty, far removed from the arena of political contest with the colonial side. This inner domain of national culture was constituted in the light of the discovery of 'tradition'".

Women were very much confined to the home, despite some of them being given access to education in an attempt to create clear distinctions between acceptable roles for them. While they were being educated, women were also being taught how to be the perfect housewife the perfect daughter – roles that would keep them out of the public sphere and reinforce their position as gatekeepers and protectors of tradition. Singh (1998, p.58) states,

> "Woman is a homemaker and as such supports the edifice of the family like a pillar. Her job is to rear children while inculcating in them correct values. The bond of motherhood is looked upon as a cause of thanksgiving and not as an evidence of oppression. She performs her moral duty to enrich the human community by shaping right kinds of citizens".

As we will see in later chapters, the situation has not entirely changed over the years, and despite the leaps and bounds Indian society has made, there is still a distinction between the public and private spheres that may or may not allow for the entry of women. That is not to say there was no support from the male national leaders for women's struggle. There was, as Bathla observed, support for women's suffrage because it allowed the national leaders to prove that they were more progressive than the British and were capable of self-rule, but on matters of personal law reform, many men did not accept the principle of sexual equality" (Bathla, 2000, p.185). Any support the women's movement received from the national leaders at the time was entirely self-serving and focused more on ending colonialism, while having little to do with actual equality. However, what is important to note about this period is that once India had gained independence from colonial rule, the women's movements tapered off as they believed that they would have access to equal rights as was mandated by the newly minted Constitution of the country. Forbes (1982, p.532) states, with "the coming of independence and the subsequent completion of the constitution, first wave feminism gradually subsided. The Indian

Constitution promised women complete equality. The new legal codes abolished social restrictions, and the new bureaucratic structure included institutions designed to improve women's status". The reality of the situation was, of course, quite different. Bathla (2000) states that Indian women did achieve the status of political citizens as a result of post-independence reforms and were granted legal, political, and economic rights that put them on the same level as men, but the position of women in India remains one of powerlessness and subordination[8]. This became even more evident when, almost two decades after independence, women's issues came to the forefront again in what is now called the second wave of feminism due to the Emergency of 1975.

Patel and Khajuria (2017, p.2) explain the subsequent shift into second wave feminism in the 1970s, elaborating that in this period,

> "Educated middle class women were actively involved in different social movements of students, youth, workers, peasants, tribals, Dalits and civil liberties, and played a central role. They abhorred paternalism of benevolent males and upper class women's 'charitable' and 'philanthropic' social work and declared themselves as fighters for women's rights".

Second wave feminists believed economic independence was the minimum condition required to free women from the oppressive society that positioned them entirely within the home. They were of the opinion that patriarchy needed to be challenged at every level possible - the political and the personal - within the home and outside the home, and that women's issues needed to be addressed at the most fundamental levels and in the everyday politics of life, on a day-to-day basis. Women's rights only came to the forefront following the Emergency in 1975, a time of extreme political turbulence in India[9]. This led to a deferral of civil liberties and rights in the country. The feminist groups that emerged in the wake of the Emergency focused solely on the violent horrors faced by women, initiated by the state and police, both within and outside the home.

> "Nationally, the emergence of feminism in the 1970s has been attributed to an expansion of education and employment opportunities for women, disillusionment with existing political structures owing to the perceived excess of the Emergency, and a feeling of disillusionment with the mainstream left-wing parties, which seemed to accord a low priority to what were called 'women__'s issues'" (Gangoli, 2007, p.15).

[8] A post-independence India was more focused on communal riots and findings its way out from the clutches of imperialism than it was about the rights of women.
[9] This refers to the 21-month period from 1975 to 1977 when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a state of national emergency citing internal and external threats, allowing her the authority to rule by decree.

The Emergency and the low status of women in society, along with the violence inflicted upon them that was brought to light as a result of the Emergency, was the foundation of the early stages of second wave feminism. Women in Indian society have been placed within the domestic sphere since colonial times, a trend that has continued well into present-day India. As Rassendren outlines:

> "The perceptions that characterised the 'inside' of Indian culture were borne by women, who were tasked with preserving, sustaining and transacting its purity and authenticity, while the 'outside' of modern economy, development, individuality, reason and public life, in general, remained significantly in the hands of the men of that society" (Rassendren, 2014, p.29).

Traditionally, women were placed within the home and had to don the role of homemakers and caretakers. Women were seen as the keepers of the culture of ethnic, religious, and tribal groups. While men began to don suits and move into the public modern space, women were expected to carry the cultural markers and make the home the traditional space where ethnicity and symbols of identity were nurtured and passed onto future generations (Coomaraswamy, 2002). Butler's explanation (1990) that gender comes to be constructed due to the intersection of politics, culture, and society holds true in the case of India and the construction of the hierarchy of men and women, wherein one gender has historically been more privileged than the other and continues to be more entitled than the other. As has been mentioned earlier, women's subjugation during first wave feminism included their confinement to the private sphere with restricted movements within the public sphere, and as is evident, that did not change even in during the 1970s and 80s. The declaration of 1975-1985 as the international decade for women contributed to bringing women's issues to the forefront. In India, the response to this was to commission a special report on the status of women in the country in what is known as *Towards Equality: Report of The Committee on the Status of Women in India,* which was commissioned in 1974. The report found that "the inequalities inherent in the traditional social structure, based on caste, community and class have a very significant influence on the status of women in different spheres" (Guha et al., 1974, p.20). The report shed light on the low literacy levels amongst women (as per the 1971 census, only 18.7% of the female population at the time was literate) and rampant discrimination against women based on religion, caste, and class.

Barathi and Babu (2019) believe that despite being a patriarchal country, India has a deep regard for women, from their role in religion to their participation in various activities of the country. These so-called activities are never truly clarified by the authors of the paper *Feminism in India: An Eastern Perspective*. They firmly believe that Indian society has had a high level of

respect for women and has always sought to be inclusive of both genders since the Vedic period. Keeping this in mind, it must also be noted that it was only in 1961 that dowry as a social custom was legally abolished in India. The institution of dowry refers to the goods and property bestowed upon the groom and his family by the bride's family at the time of the marriage (Rao, 1993). Dowry, as a practice, had been rampant in India long before the British colonisation and was only abolished in 1961[10]. It was widely regarded as a social custom, but at the heart of it, it was almost an issue of bride sale. This once again positions women as the weaker sex in society, almost implying that a man must be paid to marry a woman. Patriarchy, religion, caste, and class have all given birth to specific forms of oppression, and dowry is an example of this (Jaising, 2005). Ownership of property and its inheritance upon the death of a parent was a luxury awarded only to the male heirs of the family until 1956. The Hindu Succession Act of 1956 broadly enforced the division of property between male and female heirs of the family. However, Section 6 of the act only allowed male descendants to be co-parceners and capable of inheriting and owning ancestral property. Women were not given equal rights over the inheritance of property, making the act discriminatory in nature. It was only in 2005 that an amendment was made wherein it was made clear that upon the death of a person, any property owned or inherited by them would pass onto class I heirs, regardless of gender, and would be equally distributed amongst them (Menon, 2020). It was a change that came 49 years after the original act of 1956, proving that women have always struggled to get what was rightfully theirs[11]. This clearly indicates that until recently, women did not have equal rights, and the rage expressed by Indian feminists at the discriminatory legal practices rampant in the country was widely justified.

According to the National Commission for Women (2021), several laws came into effect as recently as 30 years ago, such as The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act of 1986, Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act of 2005, The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act of 2013 and The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act of 2013 which tries to safeguard the rights of acid attack victims. The emerging middle class of the 1970s consisted of women who were educated and who were being forced into the workforce in order to support their families; while economic independence was not necessarily being encouraged, at the very least, they were able to question their rights and give voice to their opinions. These women were the defining characteristic of the second

[10] Although the practice of dowry has been abolished, it has been renamed as 'gift-giving' and still runs rampant in India.
[11] Again, while legally women can inherit property, socially, they are considered 'bad daughters' if they are not willing to give up their share for their brothers or other men in the family.

wave of feminism; they asked for legislative reform and did not shy away from creating and joining women's groups that asked for real change to be brought into society.

This period also saw the emergence of original feminist literature being published. *Kali for Women*, India's first feminist publishing house, was set up in 1984 by Urvashi Butalia and Ritu Menon and focused on bringing women's voices to the forefront in a male-dominated literary environment. *Zubaan Books* was set up in 2011 as an imprint of *Kali* and continues to print books by and for women in South Asia (Sundus, 2018). The other notable literary magazine that must be mentioned is *Manushi*, founded in 1978 by Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita; it is a journal about women and society dedicated to gender activism and studies. As an organisation, *Manushi* also provided legal aid to women who were victims of domestic violence and other exploitative structures and advocated for women's rights and legal reforms through participation in campaigns and protests (Manushi, 2021). Several noteworthy female writers emerged as part of the second wave of feminism that contributed to Indian literature in an extremely significant way, such as Anita Desai, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and Arundhati Roy, among others. It can also be said that it was in this time period that the Indian novel in English saw a transformation, which will be discussed in the later sections of this chapter.

The current stage of feminism in India is known as third wave feminism. It originated in the mid-90s, and the belief system of the third wave is tied deeply to the post-structuralist interpretation of gender and sexuality. Feminists now have the view that constructions of male and female are artificial and put into place to favour one gender over the other to maintain the existing hegemonic discourse (Patel & Khajuria, 2017). Third wave feminism has found a new outlet to express the views of the masses when it pertains to the truth about the subjugation of women: the internet. The digital arm of feminism has emerged in recent years, and if the past few years are to be taken as evidence, it will only continue to grow in strength. Women in India have now found a new way to raise their voices and tell their truth in a way that does not limit them to spatial or physical boundaries.

> "Today, in spite of being up against a state formation that is the most hostile to gender equality and social justice in the history of modern India, or perhaps precisely because of it, there is a renewed urgency to speak up from identifiably feminist perspectives. Thus, feminist voices have been speaking out, whether it be against growing militarisation, the ravages of neo-liberal development, the hierarchies of caste, the disenfranchisement of minorities, the exclusions of disability, or queer subjectivities" (John, 2020, p.138).

One of the most significant movements in the digital age has been the #MeToo Movement, which started in the West and found its way to India in October 2018, where women all over the country took to social media to share their stories of harassment and abuse in the workplace, both verbal and physical, at the hands of men, and in one case, another woman. The list of accused that were called out for obnoxious behaviour in the workplace included politicians, prominent journalists, film directors, stand-up comedians, writers, and other artists (Roy, 2019). The internet allowed women to share their stories anonymously if they wished to protect their identity, and it gave rise to a shared sense of community, which allowed several victims to come forward when they realised they were not alone. The aftermath of the movement might not have resulted in concrete action since not a lot of the accused men were held accountable for their actions in their workplace or from a legal standpoint, but the fact that sexual harassment in the workplace has become a part of the dominant public discourse in India has been monumental to the women's movement. However, one of the criticisms of the #MeToo movement has been that it has, perhaps, not been inclusive enough of complaints from people of marginalised communities, such as Dalits, queer, disabled, trans people, and other non-binary persons (Deutsche Welle, 2021). The internet enabled women to have access on a scale much larger than anything that had been available to them in the past. This is one of the reasons women were actively involved in the protests against the Citizenship Act in 2020 and the farmers protests in 2020 and 2021. The varying personal and public laws might safeguard the rights of some women but might also exclude women from the Muslim or Dalit communities, which are considered minority communities in India. Upper caste Hindu women face subjugation at the hands of a patriarchal society, and it makes one wonder what kind of oppression faced women of the Dalit community. However, to truly understand this, we must first explore how the caste system operates within the Indian societal framework. The kind of marginalisation and oppression the women of minority communities in India face are as relevant today as they were in 1947. The subjugation of the Dalit community, focusing on the multi-layered nature of their oppression will be discussed in the next section.

2.2 Caste Racism in India and the Dalit situation

The word 'Dalit' has found its way into mainstream media in recent years, owing largely to the stories being told about the community through popular forms of media such as film and television. It is essential to understand who the Dalit community is, how they came to be, what makes them different from the upper caste communities of Indian society, and why is that their subversion has gone unnoticed or ignored for as long as it has. This section discusses the history

of the caste system in India, affirmative action, the position of the Dalit community in Indian society, and whether caste and race are the same or two completely different concepts.

History of the caste system in India

Dumont (1980) has described caste as a hierarchical system that is ranked on the basis of a purity/pollution principle of human nature and that it is accepted by all. The caste system has been enforced in India since Vedic times on the basis of the Rig Veda, an age-old Hindu scripture that outline and narrates the creation of the human race from the primal man Purusha, which also defines the place and role of each individual in society. From his head rose the Brahmin, the caste of the priests who were entitled to read the holy scriptures and perform religious ceremonies, and who were considered the highest caste. From the arms of the man sprang the Kshatriyas, or the warrior tribes, who were capable of being kings; from his thighs, the Vaishyas or merchants and traders. And finally, from the feet, came the Shudras, the servants and labourers, and the Ati Shudras, the Untouchables, who later went on to be called the Dalits – the lowest caste in the hierarchy, who were only ever meant to perform degrading menial jobs (Srinivas, 1957).

The caste system also makes an appearance in the *Manusmriti*, which was discussed in the previous section. The caste system is said to have originated from the laws of Manu that dictated the hierarchical structure of Indian society.

> "For the protection of this whole creation, the One of dazzling brilliance assigned separate activities for those born from the mouth, arms, thighs, and feet" (Manusmriti, 2005: 1:87).
>
> "A single activity did the Lord allot to the Sudra, however: the ungrudging service of those very social classes" (Manusmriti, 2005: 1:91).
>
> "Because he arose from the loftiest part of the body, because he is the eldest, and because he retains the Veda, the Brahmin is by law the lord of this whole creation" (Manusmriti, 2005: 1:93).

It can be seen from the selected excerpts of the scriptures that from the very onset of creation, society was structured in a way where the Brahmins were treated like lords and were placed at the highest rung of the ladder, while the Shudras were placed at the bottom. It becomes pronounced that one social class was favoured over the other for no reason beyond a purity/pollution principle. It is alleged by scholars that the *Manusmriti* only put forth the idea of a varna system - a system of categorisation based on occupation, and this was then adapted into the caste system. The reason for this clarification is that excerpts in the *Manusmriti* speak of the 'twice borns', which refers to members of a lower caste ascending to a higher caste. Nagar states:

> "individuals were allowed to change their varna and ascend in social status by undergoing necessary disciplines. In hard times individuals were allowed to maintain themselves through accepting occupations of other classes" (2011, p.132).

This idea of people being able to ascend into another caste does not hold true based on Manu's own statement that anyone who is born into a lower caste (like a Kshatriya, Vaishya or Shudra) is paying for their sins of a previous life. As Kurundkar describes:

> "Manu believed that society is and ought to be made up of unequals. Any challenge to the inherently unequal social structure is an offense and even a thought against the divine unequal structure constituted a sin. He constantly referred to the rights of the twice-born in general and of the Brahmins in particular. He did not subscribe to the notion of the rights of individuals because he believed that rights did not vest in individuals. They belonged to their Varna. As a result, the two groups of women and Shudras were left without any rights or privileges […] According to Manu, ordinary people like Shudras had no rights and there could be no equality. That was his notion of justice. He also explained that those who were poor, unhappy and unprivileged in this life were paying for their sins in the previous life" (1993, p.27).

According to Dr B. R. Ambedkar, who was the chief architect of the constitution of an independent India but who was also considered a pioneer of the Dalit movement, the caste system had no religious basis and had been replaced by an unspoken 'class system' in which the changing socio-economic climate of the country was the reason for the constantly evolving definition of the caste system (Das, 2014). Dr Ambedkar's work was monumental in uplifting the oppressed classes, as he coined the term 'Dalit' to be used in lieu of 'Untouchables'. His work in the realm of social and economic reform for the lower caste communities and for women was seminal in theoretically setting India on the path to equality and inclusion. His observation that the caste system is more social in nature than religious is also supported by Deshpande's (2005, p.2) claim that though the caste system is conventionally associated with Hinduism, all religions in India, including Christianity and Islam, display inter-group disparity akin to a caste system - leading to the hypothesis that perhaps caste was a system of social stratification in pre-modern India.

The Dalit community belongs to the Scheduled Caste category along with other historically disadvantaged caste groups, and the Scheduled Tribes category comprises geographically isolated communities (Das, 2014). What this tells us is that the Dalit community, who used to be referred to as the 'Untouchables', have always been placed at the lowest rung in the hierarchy of Indian society; a bias that might have begun in Vedic times, but one that has found its way well into modern India in the 21st century; a reality that might not be readily accepted by the dominant upper castes of the country. The current right-wing agenda of the Indian government

pushes for a Brahmanical Hinduism ideology, and while this is not a new occurrence in Indian society, it has come to the front now more than ever. There has been a lot of discourse on caste and its socio-political implications, and Ilaiah's work (1996) has made a significant contribution in this by challenging the hegemony of the Brahmanical ideology and advocating for the valorisation and recognition of Dalit culture and identity. His work provides a framework that critiques the dominant cultural narratives and highlights the lived experiences of the Dalit community. This is also evident in Omvedt's work which argues that the anti-caste movement has played a significant role in challenging the dominant narrative of Indian history and culture, which is deeply rooted in Brahmanical tradition (2006).

Are caste and race the same?

One of the most pertinent questions that comes to the surface when studying castes in India is whether caste and race are the same. This question was brought to the forefront even more when the Dalit community decided to address the issue of caste based oppression in India at the UN World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, and Xenophobia (WCAR) held in Durban in 2001. This was met with resistance from the Indian government and the flag bearers of the country's dominant discourse because the belief was that caste is an internal matter, and within the Indian context, caste is not the same as race. However, that is not necessarily true. Several Indian scholars firmly believe that race and caste are not the same and cannot be held in comparison with each other. Gupta for example clarifies this line of thought:

> "To be sure, both caste and race are hereditary. Unlike race, however, a caste formation is not determined by biological characteristics such as the colour of one's skin. It is a function of a complex socio-historical structure within which a social group is assigned to a ritual status specifying a degree of purity or pollution attached to it, an occupation, and a specific range, within which its members can forge matrimonial alliances. Racism, on the other hand, is a form of social and political discrimination based on biologically manifest inter-group differences" (Gupta, 2004, p.87).

While there is some truth to this, since caste is based on the purity pollution principle, skin colour is more often than not a key marker in identifying one caste from the other, based on the Aryan-Dravidian divide. However, one need only take a brief look back at the Vedas to realise that each caste has been associated with a specific colour, falling in line with the notion that it is only the upper caste that is light skinned – as Panini (2001, p.177) observes,

> "The Brahmin, occupying the highest status are associated with the colour white, which is taken to represent the *'satva' guna* (truth or pure quality). As one moves down the hierarchy, one descends to the darkness implied in the '*tamas' guna* (dark or impure quality) where darkness and ignorance are represented by the colour black, associated with the Shudras".

Caste is also very much maintained through endogamy, the practice of discouraging marriage between castes as to maintain purity within the caste[12]. One of the most prominent arguments scholars use to maintain the position that caste and race are not the same is that race is biological, and caste is social (Das, 2014). The basis for race might be valid, but to say that caste in India is merely social would be an oversimplification of a very complex issue. Caste in India is very fluid in nature and is continually defined and redefined based on the changing socio-economic climate of the country. Just as race is determined by the family and community one is born into, caste is also determined by the family and community one is born into. The fact that scholars choose to reduce an issue as complex as race to the question of skin colour proves their reluctance to consider how race, much like caste, is fluid in nature, changes with social contexts and has little to do with biology (Das, 2014). When the dominant discourse of the country favours the upper castes, it is no wonder that there is a refusal to see the similarity between caste and race. Within the Indian context, race lives through caste in a process that can be referred to as racial Indianisation. Das (2014, p.278) states,

> "Not only is the Indian nation racialised through the extant naturalisation of upper caste rules via subordination of lower castes and Dalits, but government officials and scholars also play a role on racialisation through the dominant discourses of rejection of any association between race and caste".

Goldberg (2002) believes that caste practices are racist not just due to their racist intentionality in terms of structure, but also in the kind of effect they have. They create and aggravate subservience and segregation, which are markers of a population that is supposedly 'racially' different. The dominant discourse of India favours the upper caste over the lower caste, much like how social and political practices in the West favour the Whites over the Blacks. It would be very easy for scholars and researchers to largely ignore the lower castes in favour of the upper castes and claim that race does not exist in India and that caste and race have nothing to do with each other. But to do so would be to become an enabler and a perpetrator of caste racism in India, much like the current right-wing government.

Dalit position in Indian society and affirmative action

As mentioned, history is proof that the Dalit community or the 'Scheduled Castes'[13] have been placed at the lowest position in the Indian social order, and this is a situation that does not seem to be getting better with time. It would have been natural to assume that with globalisation

[12] Endogamy, as a practice, is still highly encouraged in India, especially within the arranged marriage concept and will be discussed in later chapters.

[13] There are several sub castes under the umbrella of the word 'Dalit' but for ease of understanding, they will not be referred to individually through this research.

finding its way into Indian society, there would be a change for the better for the Dalit community, but that was not the case. Dalits do not have free access to economic and cultural resources and do not have the right to live as individuals who are independent (Satyanarayana, 2019). This is backed by Das (2014) who states that despite affirmative action through stipulations in the Indian constitution that allow for reservation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, there has been some mobility, but the country is far from complete independence from caste based discrimination. The Dalit community faces more exclusion than any other lower caste, and there is a tendency for the dominant discourse of India to turn a blind eye to claims made by them about discriminatory and oppressive practices[14]. In a country like India, social status is just as crucial as economic status, and while affirmative action and reservation policies try for the inclusion of the Dalit community in the workforce, they are not accepted into the social sphere as equals to the upper caste community. Reservation, in reality, makes them more identifiable as a 'lower caste', which in turn leads to the Dalit community being further confined to the bounds of their caste. The dominant discourse of the country chooses to paint affirmative action as a positive, but that might not necessarily be the case (Das, 2014) simply due to its exclusionary nature. Hall (1992) states that the dominant discourse of the country is hegemonic in its view towards the 'upper castes'; the power exerted by such groups that are put in leadership positions in several fields of activity, including social, political, and economic, allows for an ascendancy of command that is so widespread that it appears natural and inevitable. The reservation policies set in place for the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes[15] seem to have weakened in the recent past with the introduction of a constitutional amendment bill in 2019 that allows for 10% reservation in jobs and higher education for economically backward sections in the general category, meaning the upper castes. This would take the total reservation quota up to 60%, with 50% reservation for the SCs, STs and OBCs (The Economic Times, 2019). The issue was widely debated when the amendment was proposed by the Modi government three months ahead of the general elections and was seen by many as a move to mobilise and garner support from the upper castes for the right-wing government. The need for reservation policies for economically backward sections of the upper caste came about as a result of high levels of unemployment among the middle classes. While the move is beneficial for the economically challenged classes, it does take away from the impact reservation has on the lives of the SCs, STs and OBCs.

[14] This will be explored further in the Discussions chapter.
[15] This refers to the categorisation as per the Indian Constitution

Dalits in modern India

The Dalit situation in modern India is no better than it was when Dr B. R. Ambedkar drafted the Indian constitution. As per the National Crime Records Bureau reports, in 2020, amidst the COVID-19 global pandemic, crime against Scheduled Castes saw a total of 50, 291 cases being officially registered, with an increase in the crime rate from 22.8 in 2019 to 25.0 in 2020 in the State and Union Territories. Even at the time of writing this, the Dalit community in India faces horrors and an unprecedented level of violence by the upper caste Hindus that is unthinkable in this day and age.

The atrocities against the Dalit community do not seem to have diminished. A news item that was of particular interest recently was the abduction and gang rape of a 13-year-old Dalit girl in Lalitpur, Uttar Pradesh; one of the six accused in the case is a policeman (Ghosh, 2022). If the people who are meant to be the gatekeepers of peace in society are the ones inflicting violence against the marginalised communities, then the blame cannot be placed just on the general public. The month of April in India is celebrated as Dalit History Month in an attempt to raise awareness for the community and because it happens to be the month that marks the birth and death anniversaries of significant Dalit leaders and social reformers such as Dr B. R. Ambedkar, Jyotirao Phule and Mangu Ram Mugowalia. However, as of April 2023, the violence against the Dalit community has not diminished. CJP (2023) states, “the situation has deteriorated to the point where every day serves as a reminder of how caste oppression is systemic and woven into the fabric of Indian society, some of which is exacerbated by government negligence or even complicity, given that state and law enforcement structures are heavily influenced by a bias towards more privileged sections”.

Another news story that perhaps sheds light on the true nature of atrocities faced by the Dalit community is the story of the nine-year-old boy from the Dalit community who died after being beaten by his teacher for drinking water from a pot meant for upper caste teachers. The boy’s family was pressurised by the village and the police officials to not file a complaint, with the police claiming that there was no caste bias in the situation, while not offering any further explanations about the circumstances surrounding the violence that led to the death of the child (Chowdhury, 2022). This is indicative of a very harsh reality about Indian society that, perhaps, not all would be willing to accept: for all its talk of modernisation and becoming a globalised economy, in addition to being one of the most populous democracies in the world with a population of almost 1.4 billion, there is still rampant discrimination against the Dalit community, if ever acknowledged, veiled under the disguise of societal norms.

What about gender within caste?

The different forms of patriarchy that exist in India today are influenced by Brahmanical patriarchy, which was a term coined by Dr B. R. Ambedkar. It explains the subjugation of women based on a hierarchical society that is organised on the basis of caste. It is a form of society that is extremely niche and unique to India. As per Arya & Rathore (2020), Brahmanical patriarchy does not necessarily mean subjugation or oppression at the hands of male brahmins, instead, it refers to any patriarchy practised by any individual which has a basis in caste, gender, or any discriminatory practices and beliefs. It did stem from the age-old notion of Brahmins being the purest of all castes and having autonomy, with the Dalit community being placed at the very bottom of the social order.

However, it should be remembered that the structure of society in India has always been deeply entrenched in patriarchy. As has been mentioned in the previous section, men have been placed above women, whether it be inside or outside the home. But what happens when the basis of discrimination is not gender alone? What happens when caste is included as an underlying cause of oppression? The nature of mainstream Indian feminism, which focuses solely on the problems faced by upper caste Hindu women and leaves Dalit women (or women from other minorities) out of the conversation, is not equipped to answer these questions. For this reason, it becomes imperative to study the intersectional nature of this oppression from the Dalit perspective, as will be done in the next section.

2.3 Dalit Feminism

As we have seen in the previous sections, the Dalit community has been placed at the lowest position in the hierarchy of the Indian social order. We have also seen that women have traditionally been oppressed since pre-colonial times (Patel & Khajuria, 2017; Chatterjee, 1990; Singh & Singh, 1998). It is then only natural to assume that Dalit women's position within the social order would be the lowest amongst the lowest; they would be placed lower than Dalit men. The dominant discourse of the country might have you believe that Dalit women are not worse off and there have been movements to empower and uplift them, but a conversation with women in the Dalit community will tell you that their reality is far different from what is generally represented by the dominant discourse. The exclusionary nature of the dominant discourse of the country makes it difficult for minority communities to raise their voices about the issues that plague them, thus further separating them in the societal framework. Dalit women, by virtue of their gender and the caste they are born into, are essentially a subaltern (Spivak, 2010) they are marginalised within a community that has been marginalised since

before colonial times and continues to be marginalised. It is important to note that the experiences of a Dalit woman and an upper caste Hindu woman will never be the same and should, consequently, never be compared. The experience of a Dalit woman simply cannot be explained by the patriarchy or by caste oppression alone; it is, in fact, an intersection of caste and gender-based subjugation. As Arya put it:

> "Violent force, or social ostracism were applied as main instruments to keep in place caste related rules, including gender rules that have been going on for centuries. The Dalit women who were at the bottom of the caste hierarchy suffered doubly – not only denial of rights (economic and educational) and individual freedom as 'untouchables', but also as 'lower' caste women. This vertical structure of caste and the horizontal strata of patriarchy render Dalit women fall lowest in the class hierarchy. Thus, they face intersectional violence" (Arya, 2020, p.xi).

Arya and Rathore (2020) elucidate this through the example of the gang rape of Bhanwari Devi in 1992. Devi, a social activist at the grass-root level, was campaigning against the marriage of a one-year-old girl, after which she was gang raped by five upper caste men, who were all related to each other, in the presence of her husband. The justification provided by the rapists was that she was interfering in the household matters of the family where child marriage was considered acceptable (child marriage was abolished in India in 1929, as per the Ministry of Woman and Child Development). If Devi had been a male activist, she might have had to face other kinds of violence, but she would not have been raped, and if she had been an upper caste woman, she would not have been treated as easily sexually available by the men.

Why is Dalit feminism essential?

Mainstream feminism does not necessarily address the uniqueness of the marginalisation that occurs at the intersection of different discriminatory practices. As Rege (2000, p.494) asserted,

> "From Mathura to Bhanwari, the Indian women's movement has addressed the issues and cases of women of Dalit, tribal and minority communities, but it is one thing to address their issues and another to revision politics to centre around the issues of the most marginalised of women".

Dalit women state that the basis of their conversations being different from that of upper caste Hindu women is due to external factors, such as non-Dalit forces trying to homogenise issues faced by them, and internal factors, such as Dalit patriarchy. According to Guru (1995), the social location which determines the perception of reality is a significant factor and makes the representation of Dalit women's issues by non-Dalit women less valid and less authentic.

> "Clubbing all the women's voices indiscriminately left the Dalit women's voices buried beneath the mounds of hierarchical and patriarchal intersections of Indian society. The three-fold discrimination of caste, class, and patriarchy faced by Dalit women could not be addressed by bringing the Dalit women's voice within the fold of women's universal voice" (Sarvesh, Singh & Alam, 2021, p.98).

Dalit women can almost be considered as the 'Other' on the basis of their exclusion from mainstream feminist movements and the inability of non-Dalit spokespeople to consider their issues and subjugation at a political level and ask for change. Tomar (2013, p.1) claims,

> "It is a widely held perception that Dalit woman considered as 'Other' and it is the impact of the centuries-long alienation and loneliness created by patriarchal and Brahmanical values at all levels in society, which in turn causes the high level of exclusion, structured and domestic violence which every Dalit woman experiences throughout her life. Thus, even among women, she is perceived as 'Other'. She belongs to the 'lowest' category manifested in her condition of social, physical, economic, and political vulnerability".

If the history of Dalit women's treatment is viewed, it can be observed that they have been excluded from society and oppressed by the upper castes, as well as by the men of their own caste, due to their low economic position, among other reasons (Festino, 2015). As mentioned, the oppression faced by Dalit women is unique as they are discriminated against not just based on their gender but also their caste, class, and, in so many cases, religion. The work done by Indian feminist scholars, and specifically Dalit feminist scholars such as Guru, Kandasamy, Tomar, and Rege, builds on the work done by Crenshaw (1989) in the realm of intersectionality to understand how different forms of discrimination overlap and intersect and the need for anti-racist frameworks that examine and understand the uniqueness of the oppression faced by women of colour. Rege (1998) stresses on the importance of recognising that Dalit women's oppression lies at the intersection of caste, class, and gender and cannot simply be limited to one realm. She observes (1998, p.51)

> "It is obvious that the subject/agent of Dalit women's standpoint is multiple, heterogenous and even contradictory, i.e. the category of 'dalit woman' is not homogenous. Such a recognition underlines the fact that the subject of dalit feminist's liberatory knowledge must also be the subject of every other liberatory project and this requires a sharp focus on the processes by which gender, race, class, caste, and sexuality all construct each other".

The oppression of Dalit women exists at the axes of gender, class, and caste; the three are so deeply intertwined that it becomes difficult for mainstream Indian feminism to explain away their neglect of caste as a legitimate axis of oppression and subversion.

Dalit women in modern India

Simply explained; Dalit women are born into a lower caste and denied access to education, which leaves them no choice except to take low-paying menial labour work, further separating them from upper caste Hindu women. They are then considered more sexually vulnerable and available to men of higher castes as well as their own caste, which leads to an increased number of acts of sexual violence against them. According to the National Crime Records Bureau of India (NCRB), there was an increase of 7.3% in crimes against women in 2019 when compared to 2018, wherein a total of 4,05,861 cases were officially registered. Moreover, there was also an increase of 7.3% in crimes against Scheduled Castes in 2019 when compared to 2018, wherein a total of 45,935 cases were officially registered. On average, ten daily cases of rape of Dalit women were reported in 2019 in India, with Rajasthan reporting the highest number at 554 cases (Kumar, 2020).

Even the COVID-19 pandemic has had seemingly no impact in reducing the amount of violence against the Dalit community; if anything, the crime rate against this community has seen an increase during the pandemic. Crimes against Dalits recorded a 9.4% increase in 2020 – from 45,961 to 50,291 cases being reported officially. The number of assaults on Dalit women rose by an average of 3% in India (Hussain, 2022). This was mainly due to the forced migration of labour workers from cities to villages, owing to the loss of employment and access to living spaces during the peak of the pandemic. But these numbers are not entirely accurate - as they do not depict the whole truth. The fact of the matter is that numerous cases of crime against the Dalit community, especially Dalit women, go unreported.

There are several instances when cases of domestic and sexual violence against Dalit women do not get reported or are not registered by the local authorities. Manisha Mashaal, founder of Swabhiman Society, an organisation founded in 2012 that is led by and comprises Dalit women that aims to end caste based oppression in the state of Haryana at the grassroots level, stated in an interview (Paul, 2020):

> "Almost 80% of Dalit women who are raped do not report the crime because of political and social pressure as the women and their families are usually threatened by the perpetrators. Besides, a majority of the sexual and gender-based violence survivors are minor Dalit girls, while NCRB data for child rape survivors does not differentiate according to caste".

In an annual report published by Swabhiman Society (2019), it is stated that despite the fact that it is a criminal offence for police officers to refuse to register an FIR (First Incident Report) in cases of rape (this is a stipulation as per Section 166A, Code of Criminal Procedure 1973, as

inserted by the Criminal Law Amendment Act, 2013), survivors of sexual violence, especially Dalit women and girls have to endure difficulties to ensure the authorities register their complaints. They are often pressured by the authorities to drop the complaint or delay registration. It should come as no surprise that the men in these positions who refuse to register complaints are, more often than not, from a higher caste.

Even in the present day and age, where India portrays itself as part of the progressive world, as mentioned, the crimes against Dalit women have not reduced in 2020; if anything, the brutality of the crimes has only increased. A case that caught public attention in September 2020 was the Hathras case, wherein a 19-year-old Dalit girl was gang raped by four upper caste men in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh (a state with the highest number of cases of violence against women). The local police refused to file an FIR when she approached them with her family, and did not even call for an ambulance to take her to the hospital, despite the fact that she was in an extremely precarious condition. After two weeks in a hospital in Delhi, the young girl succumbed to her injuries and died. Upon her death, police and administration officials cremated her body in the middle of the night without consent from her family. Since her death, the state government and officials have denied the rape allegations and stated that she was not raped. Despite the victim naming the four perpetrators by name, the families of the accused deny all allegations and claim that the rape did not happen. The case has been handed over to the federal government amidst political unrest following massive protests against the state government's handling of the case (Pandey, 2020). Despite widespread protests and social media campaigns, there is not much that has been done to bring justice to a family that was wronged on the basis of their caste. These cases make it clear that the oppression and subjugation of Dalit women is three-fold: on the basis of caste, class, and gender. There has been some work done within the context of Dalit communities to understand their position and the reality of their everyday experiences. The result of this has been that sections of the Dalit community have found space on the internet to share their perspectives and connect with other individuals across the country that have had similar experiences to them; however, this has also made them more vulnerable and exposed to anti-caste hate (Shanugavelan, 2021).

Dalit rights, and especially the rights of Dalit women, have been of importance to autonomous Dalit women's organisations and fronts since the 1970s. According to Muthukkaruppan (2014), the most notable organisation that made the term 'Dalit' popular were the Dalit Panthers, which were formed in 1972. They were a radical political movement that challenged the hegemony of the Hindus and the power they wielded in the realm of culture and politics. This was followed by the creation of several groups in the 1980s and 1990s, such as Shramik Mukti Sanghatana,

Satyashodhak Communist Party, Shramik Mukti Dal, Yuvak Kranti Dal none of whom limited the Dalit women to a token inclusion - their revolutionary agenda, in different ways, afforded them a central place. Savitribai Phule, Baby Kamble, Bama, Urmila Pawar, Sharmila Rege, Yashica Dutt, Meena Kandasamy and Abirami Jotheeswaran are some of the notable figures in the Dalit feminist movement who have continuously sought to uplift and empower Dalit women and bring to light the reality of the true horrors experienced by the women within their community. One of the most significant ways in which Dalit women have attempted to communicate the truth of their lives and their situation to the masses has been through literature. Much like Dalit feminism, Dalit literature has a unique nature and purpose and is radically different from mainstream Indian literature, which will be explored in further detail in the next section.

2.4 Dalit Literature

Importance of Dalit literature

One of the most prominent ways for Dalit groups and activists to call out the hegemonic discourse and put forth the true extent of the subjugation faced by their community was through writings, both fiction and non-fiction. Literary narratives tend to humanise the 'other', making the audience sympathise with their suffering - even if it has to do with situations that are alien to the audience and that cause them to question their own internal belief system (Festino, 2015). In the case of the Dalit community, it is essential to have Dalit writers tell the stories of their people in an effort to not only raise awareness about the true extent of their subjugation but also to demand social change and reform.

Dalit literature, very simply put, is the literature of the oppressed and of liberation. Bama and Vijayalakshmi (1999, p.192) thus stress the vital importance of Dalit literature:

> "The primary motive of Dalit literature is the liberation of the Dalits in particular and the liberation of the oppressed in general. It is people's literature. It is liberation literature, like black literature, the feminist literature and the communist-socialist literature".

Indeed Dalit literature brings chaos into the hierarchical relationships that exist between those who are dominated and those who dominate. Dalit literature's point of origin can be traced to the 1960s when educated Dalits were first able to articulate their experiences and came to the realisation that their education and employment status had no impact on the type of prejudice they still had to face (Zelliot, 2003). Dalit literature also arose out of the sheer need of the community to rectify the manner in which they were being represented in the dominant

discourse; they were either viewed as the 'lesser' caste or as victims who were only oppressed and incapable of making their voices heard. While the history of Dalit literature can be traced back over 2000 years, modern Dalit literature was a by-product of the Dalit Panther Movement of the 1970s and was inspired by the African American writings of the West and was representative of a fighting spirit, pride, and sophisticated creativity (Kandasamy, 2009).

According to Kavitha (2014, p.239),

> "Dalit literature is one of the most important movements to emerge in post-independence India. The transformation of the stigmatised identity of these so called 'untouchables' to a self-chosen identity as Dalit is a story of the collective struggle waged over a century".

It was the one avenue that the Dalit community used to make their stories heard, either through the use of fiction or non-fiction. Dalit writing also tended to favour the 'life narrative' genre, where the focus was not on the individual but on the subjugation of the community as a whole, and it was about revolt and not passivity, about progress, not backwardness. If the novels that have been selected for this research from the postmodern/classic and popular genres are taken into consideration, which will be discussed in the next sections, it can be seen that none of them gives the Dalit community the space they are entitled to within the literary narrative sphere. It can be argued that there are only a handful of narratives written by non-Dalits that deign to address the subjugation faced by the community, and even then, they tend to represent the community - especially Dalit women as victims. Even progressive writers such as Mulk Raj Anand and Premchand, among others, have Dalit women being raped or molested by upper caste men in their narratives; by doing so, the writers manage to gain sympathy for the plight of the Dalits, but they also ignore the fact that Dalit women can resist and fight back like any other victims of social oppression and attempt to guard their dignity (Tomar, 2013).

Satyanarayana (2019, p.13) articulates the limited dimensions of this form of narrative representation:

> "Modern Indian literature was appearing in the public sphere following the model of English literature that portrayed the lives of the poor and the weakest. The modern poets and writers depicted the life of Indian women (mostly upper caste) subjugated in the Indian cultural tradition. But these writers, who were committed to social reforms and enlightenment, denied the Shudras and Ati Shudras a place in literature".

As has been mentioned, one of the main aims of Dalit literature has been to change the representation of the community. The other has been to try to bring about some social reform, in which case, Dalit literature can be seen almost as a movement that tries to bring about a new

perspective and a new way of critical thinking. Central to the emergence of such critical perspectives is the capacity for the literature to enable and generate agency, as Dutt (2013, p.52) has likewise observed:

> "In order that literature is an engine for social change, it is necessary that agency is given to Dalits represented in literature, scripting the oppressed as subjects rather than objects of inequality and injustice. Such Dalit writings do not glorify victimhood; they enable agency for the subaltern resistance. In doing so, this form of writing transcends the seeking of compassion to being literature of liberation".

Dalit writing sees influences from Ambedkar, Phule, Periyar, Buddha, and the Dalit Panther movement, which, as mentioned, was inspired by the Black Panther movement and other West-based movements that called for justice at a social and political level. What sets Dalit literature apart from canonical Indian literature is the fact that the language used by Dalit writers discards artistic presentation, which assures pleasure to the reader (Kapoor & Kumari, 2021). Instead, the language brings to light the reality of the horrors faced by the community, whether it be social or communal violence, lack of civil rights or social exclusion. The language in Dalit literature, as will be seen in the analysis section later, is often hoarse and crude. The language has no basis in aesthetics because the realities of the Dalit community have no basis in aesthetics, and their literature reflects this accurately.

Limbale (2004, p.20) points out the uniqueness of the experiences that are expressed through Dalit literature, stating:

> "Experiences conveyed in Dalit literature mark a rebellion against overbearing religion and tradition, as well as hypocrisy masquerading under seductive names such as freedom or democracy. They express the pain of human beings who are not treated as human".

Some of the critical Dalit writers whose work has been noteworthy and revolutionary are Om Prakash Valmiki, Arjun Dangle, Perumal Murugan, Bama, Urmila Pawar, Baburao Bagul, Yashica Dutt, and Babytai Kamble, among others. Most of these writers chose to write in their native language, and their works have gone on to be translated making them more accessible to a wider audience. However, the importance of writing in their regional vernacular should not be taken lightly and must be given its due value.

Key works and translations

As mentioned, the regional and vernacular language used by Dalit writers is fundamental in how they bring forward the narratives of their community, which in turn sheds light on some of the

more significant issues of oppression and subjugation they face. The reality of the lives of the Dalit community can be best described in the language of the people since it is the literature of the people. The language used by the upper caste community and the Dalits is very different; in some cases, the language itself is different, and in some, the way the language is spoken is different. Even without the use of colourful language, the language used in Dalit literature is able to capture the audience's attention and looks at the depth of the discrimination faced by the community and the lengths they go to, to fight for their dignity in all spaces (Kaushalya, 2015).

> "The Tamil prose written by Bama does not use standard Tamil but the sociolect of the minority she belongs to. It thoroughly disorients Tamil readers and obliges them to understand the different conditions of her community by virtue of the different linguistic experiences they undergo" (Ganapathy-Doré, 2011, p.30).

Some of the more famous Dalit writings that have been translated are *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* by Urmila Pawar (published originally in 1988 in Marathi and translated by Maya Pandit), *Poisoned Bread* edited by Arjun Dangle (the anthology was published originally in 1992 and translated by Arjun Dangle), *Karukku* by Bama (published originally in 1992 in Tamil and later translated in 2000 by Lakshmi Holmstrom) and *Pyre* by Perumal Murugan (published originally in 2013 in Tamil and later translated in 2016 by Aniruddhan Vasudevan). While language is essential, the availability of Dalit writings translated into English has allowed for the work to reach a wider audience than was maybe initially intended by the writers. Kapoor and Kumari (2021, p.5) state that,

> "When translations become available, a better understanding of India through the lens of not only the dominant but also the dominated became possible, thus, making the society dialogical".

Translations allow for perspectives besides the dominant hegemonic discourse to be available to global audiences. They allow for Brahmanical hegemony to be questioned and challenged and bring forward the fact that the power structure in India is still very much built in a way that favours the upper caste Hindus while consistently humiliating the Dalit community. However, even the act of translating work comes with its pitfalls. Kandasamy (2012) outlines the limitations of translations produced without direct consultation:

> "Most of the translations of Dalits works are done by non-Dalits, which is hugely problematic. It is not merely the translation that is problematic but the complete absence of Dalits in the production process. Even the brilliant author is not consulted. How could this process actually happen outside the author?"

Her view is different from those who believe translation allows for a bridge to be built between the original work and a global audience. Sadana (2012, p.21) observes, "In the realm of Dalit (what used to be called 'untouchables' or *harijan*) and Dalit-*bahujan* (which includes a wider group of lower castes) politics, access to the English language has come to symbolise a new political consciousness. In fact, some see language as the most feasible and direct method of social empowerment. They are less concerned with the so-called linguistic authenticity of the bhashas since the 'culture' (and specifically, religion) associated with the authenticity is one from which they are already excluded".

Ganapathy-Doré (2011, p.56) also states,

> "For Dalit writers, the choice of the language remains crucial. Dalit literature uses regional languages and relies on the oral tradition and theatre. As writing is subordinated to self-affirmation in their case, we frequently encounter autobiographies written by women. Perhaps their drive comes from the fact they are twice oppressed (as untouchables and as women)".

It is for this reason that the novels that have been selected for the purpose of this research are the English translations of *Sangati* by Bama and *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir* by Yashica Dutt. The reason for this choice is that women Dalit writers have a keener understanding of the reality of the oppression faced by the women of their community. Even within the sphere of Dalit literature, Dalit women have been largely ignored or misrepresented by male Dalit writers, and it was essential for them to assert themselves and their identity through their writings.

Dalit literature by women and life narratives

As mentioned, Dalit women have always had to face more subversion when compared to the upper caste women or even the men within the Dalit community, whether it be in the realm of social standing or representation in literary works. Outside the Dalit community and even within it, male writers tend to misrepresent Dalit women as victims of the lust of higher caste men. They are never represented as rebels who fight against the injustices perpetuated upon them (Tomar, 2013). It is here that the contribution of Dalit women writers becomes imperative. Writers such as Bama, Urmila Pawar, and Gunasekhran, among others, have become instrumental in ensuring that the experiences of humiliation of Dalit women are articulated and recorded with utmost accuracy.

> "The upsurge of Dalit women's life narratives in the 1980s, such as Janabai Kachru Girhe's *Marankala*, Kumud Pawade's *Antasphot*, Shanta Bai Kamble's *Majya Jalmachi Chitrakatha*, P. Sivakami's *Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum*, Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati*, Kaushlaya Baisentri's *Dohra Abhishaap*, and Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan* suggest to their

> social intentionality. Thus, these writers do not write for art's sake, but their narratives claim an agency" (Sharma, 2021, p.27).

The autobiographical or life narrative genre of writing allows for the creation of a new kind of consciousness that makes room for a call for social change and reform, since the Dalit identity is most decidedly a social and political construct and can undoubtedly be changed.
Festino (2013, p.36) states,

> "Dalit life narratives are a differentiated kind of literature that breaks many of elite literatures' laws because they call for a new kind of experience; they are openly political and communal because they pressure the boundaries of what is considered as being 'literary' in order to fight against unfair and degrading social customs".

The position of the Dalit community within the socio-political sphere of Indian society is a construction and, hence, can absolutely be changed, and the life narrative genre of writing is one that can call for this change at a social and political level.

Kalyani (2023, pp.57-60) observes,

> "The Dalit women's writings need to be seen as more than merely a piece of information. It must be understood within its sociopolitical-cultural contours […] The Dalit women's writings have their unique aesthetic sensibility, which has added to the epistemological significance of Dalit discourse. The aesthetic sensibility of these writings has largely emanated from the experiential reality that Dalit women have faced in their everyday life. Their writings have come from their everyday experience, which might appear banal and mundane but it is a powerful trope to capture Dalit women's struggle".

A Dalit woman's everyday experience can only be accurately represented in Dalit women's writing, and could potentially lose authenticity and the true extent of the oppression faced by her when described from the perspective of a male, even a Dalit male.

As mentioned, Dalit women have had to constantly face persecution at the hands of not just the upper caste Hindus, but also at the hands of the men within the Dalit community. They have been consistently left out of narratives written by Dalit men, and when they are mentioned, they are entirely misrepresented or have stereotypical characteristics associated. However Arya (2017, p.5) describes the conditions of this narrative absence as more than pure omission or oversight,

> "The subordinate status of women and their complete marginalisation is clearly reflected in the writings of Dalit men. In rare cases when the women are actually given a voice or representation in Dalit men's autobiographies, the narrative is based on conventional stereotypes. Women's contributions to the running of the family and their

> efforts at earning a livelihood are completely absent. This selective amnesia by Dalit males shows that men are not ready to acknowledge Dalit women's contribution to the family, the community, and the Dalit movement at large. The absence of these women in the men's narratives is not only deliberate but also calculated. These men refuse to accord their women equality even in literary representation".

This description of a palpable, carefully maintained absence in narrative is further deepened by Singh's observation that Dalit men are not ready to acknowledge the contributions made by Dalit women at home, in the community or even in the widespread Dalit movement. Dalit women's autobiographies are raw and speak of the very real issues they face such as domestic and sexual violence, whereas Dalit men's autobiographies do not view these as issues of concern and if anything, advocate for domestic violence against women (2014, pp.40-42). It is for these reasons that Dalit women have had to take charge of telling their own stories, in their own voice, from their own perspective, in order to fight for their right to have access to spaces that should not have been denied to them in the first place.

Selected texts for the research and relevance

The selected texts belong to the 'life narrative' or biography genre, which makes them that much more powerful in their narration of the realistic atrocities faced by Dalit women as a community. As mentioned, the works that have been selected for the purpose of this research are *Sangati* by Bama and *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir* by Yashica Dutta. *Sangati* by Bama was originally written in 1994 in Tamil and was later translated into English by Laxmi Holmstrom. The narrative is divided into 12 chapters and focuses on the lives of several generations of Dalit women living in the same community. It does carry an autobiographical element in the narrative, but is focused on the collective community and not an individual (Kumar & Sabeetha, 2017). *Sangati* is a celebration of the Dalit female identity and was written with the purpose of bringing attention to the fact that Dalit women need not always be portrayed as victims; instead, they should be seen for who they are: empowered women who are capable of raising their voice against injustice and demanding their due in society.

Coming out as Dalit: A Memoir by Yashica Dutta, published in 2019, as the name suggests, is an autobiographical memoir based on the life of journalist Yashica Dutta, who, since her childhood, had been compelled to hide her Dalit identity. The narrative focuses on her experiences, along with those of others within her community, and how issues of caste need to be confronted head-on. The book is very much about Dutta's experience of having to hide her Dalit identity as she aspired for a life that had been ingrained in her as one that could only belong to someone from an upper caste. It is a deeply personal story of coming to terms with one's identity that also calls for social change while trying to raise awareness about the Dalit community and their

oppression and subversion. A close reading and textual analysis of *Sangati* and *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir*, along with the other selected novels from the classic/postmodern and popular genre of literature, will be done in the upcoming chapters.

2.5 Mainstream Indian Literature

Why is literature important, and why should it be studied in a digital age?

Literature, as a part of the media landscape and as a means of communication, has existed in society for a very long time. It has long existed as a means of disseminating information to people and as a reflection and mirror of society and the issues that prevail within it.

> "As a medium of writing, literature gives presence to what otherwise would remain unavailable. It has gained prominence as a mirror of human plasticity at the moment when many of its former functions have been taken over by other media. The literary text is a mixture of reality and fictions, and as such it brings about an interaction between the given and the imagined" (Iser, 1993, p.20).

Literature sheds light on realities that exist within society but are often overlooked or remain unrepresented. It reformulates realities that have already been formulated by representing them through fiction. However, in recent times, with technological advancements and the move to digital means of communication, literature and the written word, by extension, have lost much of their relevance. With the onset of streaming, OTT platforms, and social media, there is an avalanche of voices and information, which can leave the receivers confused. Alternative forms of media that are used for communication do not take away from how relevant literature still is as a medium. It must do us well to remember that the best way to influence audiences and call for social change is by telling them stories that engage them, and there is no better way to do it than through literary narratives. The stories told in the digital spaces are still stories at the end of it, and the medium becomes irrelevant without content.

The Indian novel in English and its transformation

The anglophone Indian novel or the Indian novel written in English has existed since the British Raj but has seen an immense evolution in its form and nature since then. It can also be referred to as the Indo-Anglian novel and should not be confused with Anglo-Indian novels; the latter refers to works by an Englishman that uses India as a background, while the former refers to Indian writing in English (Mathuramani & Rajkumar, 2016). Several of these changes came about as a direct result of India's independence from colonial rule in 1947, but the Indian novel as a whole category has made massive leaps and bounds since Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, which was released in 1981. Gopal (2009) believes that the anglophone Indian novel is

part of a heterogeneous corpus in which certain dominant trends, shared concerns, and recurrent themes are discernible. This claim can also be substantiated by the vast literature that was published in the years following independence, which was written in English and made use of regional vernacular, or bhasha, to make it more Indian. Indians who wrote in English did not do so only because they had been educated in it but also because English had become an intrinsic part of the social fabric of India. Even in modern-day India, English is the primary language of higher education and governmental agencies and is used widely in the literary sphere. As per the Nielsen Report of 2015, India is the second largest English-language print book market in the world, with over 9,000 publishers producing 90,000 books annually (IPA, 2018). Subha & Jayasudha (2014) explain that 1980 marked a significant shift in Indian writing in English and propelled it into a post-modernist era with Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Post-1980 is described as the postmodern period in India, where the country was starting to see itself as a multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and post-colonial nation. The postmodern Indian novel in English gave rise to writers who explored Indian life in India and abroad and wrote about themes such as social realism, mythical realism, historical romances, and magical realism, among others. It also led to Indian diasporic writers coming to the forefront, such as Anita Desai, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, VS Naipaul, Amitav Ghosh, Rohinton Mistry, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Uma Vasudeva, and Vikram Chandra, among others.

Postmodern literature

As has been stated, the advent of postmodern literature in India can be marked by Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, which was published in 1981 by Jonathan Cape, a British publisher. It told the story of India's independence from the British by using elements of magical realism and won the Booker Prize the year it was published. It was a classic example of Indian writing in English, which, according to K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, "should feel like Indian literature for an Indian reader and should feel like English for an English reader" (1994, p.4). The novel showed that English could be transformed in multiple ways by its dissemination but also questioned the manner in which the history of India was written, all the while reaffirming that writing history was as important as ever (Gopal, 2009). An interesting point to make here is that for the purpose of this research, this kind of writing is being referred to as belonging to the postmodern genre of literature when, in reality, it is actually elitist literature that was written for the classes and not the masses. It cannot be referred to as popular literature because it does not cater to the masses and does not have the qualities that define the genre of popular literature, which will be explored later in this section. This kind of literature came about after the 1980s and still had feudal sensibilities and remnants of the post-partition era in India

embedded within the narratives. Mee (2009, pp.359 - 361) foregrounds the enduring historical connotations of the English language itself in the reception and analyses of such works,

> "some critics believe that India's writers in English have taken advantage of the trend to retreat into a metropolitan or cosmopolitan elite which produces a literature intended only for the English-reading privileged classes within India […] the English language has a privileged place in Indian culture. It is the language of the former coloniser and remains an elite language, the language of getting on, the language of business, and the language identifiable, above all, with modernity".

The characters and storylines spoke of an India that had not yet been modernised or globalised. English as a medium of instruction was not readily accessible to the middle classes in this time period, and so novels in the postmodern genre could only be consumed by the upper class that had a certain degree of fluency with the language. The types of novels that have been selected for this genre were written by award-winning writers and are very Indian, but they were also not written with middle class Indian readers in mind. As mentioned, they are very elitist in nature due to their writing style.

Singh (2013, p.5) believes,

> "The only caution needed for the Indian English writers is to avoid indulgence in counter-cultural ways of looking at things so that their vision remains rooted in the soil and they do not suffer from ignorance of the past, particularly when handling the vital issue of cultural conflict or cultural synthesis".

This is evidenced in the type of narratives that were being written in India after 1980. Novels published in the postmodern period used techniques of social realism to draw attention to issues of women's oppression and caste based injustice. Deshmukh and Ugale (2016, pp. 20-21) state

> "Postmodernist often celebrate to employ metafiction to undermine the authors' univocation. It is often employed to undermine the authority of the author, for his narrative shift to the advance of the story […] Since postmodernism represent a decentered concept of the universe, individual's works are not isolated creations. In postmodernism, intertextuality is relation between one text and another text within the fabric of literary history."

Postmodern literature in India often follows a non linear plot, embraces fragmented storytelling techniques and blends genres. There is a great acceptance and representation of ambiguity within the narratives as there is usually an open ending with multiple possible interpretations based on the reader's thought process (Vemuri & Jayaprada, 2014; Sakuntala & Suresh, 2024).

Since many of the writers of this period were from the upper caste, they tended to empathise with the lower strata of society; the representation of the lower castes by these writers, however, is another thing and will be discussed later in the next section. Several novels from this period also engaged with the nationalist sentiments of people since a majority of the population was still dealing with the horrors of the partition of 1947, and there was a need to express the reality of that time. While all of India had to face the brutalities of the partition, the most affected were women, children, and minority groups, and the literature of the time reflected this quite effectively. The most prominent themes that emerged from the postmodern period were social reality and Indian mythology; rather, the retelling of the original mythologies from a fresh perspective, and mostly the female perspective, since Indian mythological texts had a proclivity to portray the male perspective and treat the women as supporting characters. As has been mentioned, some of the critical writers of this period included Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Vikram Seth, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kiran Desai, VS Naipaul, and Rohinton Mistry, among others. Some of the key titles of this genre are, of course, *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie, *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, *Inheritance of Loss* by Kiran Desai, *A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth, *Train to Pakistan* by Khushwant Singh, *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry, *Sea of Poppies* by Amitav Ghosh, and *White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga among others. Several of these titles were mostly published by international publishing houses, such as Wishart Books, a left-wing British publisher (*Untouchables* by Mulk Raj Anand), Harper Collins, a British publisher (*The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy and *A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth), and DoubleDay Publishing, an American publisher that is part of Random House (*The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni). Despite the content being written by Indians for an apparently Indian audience, the publishers were mostly international, proving that colonial rule was influential even after independence. The lack of homegrown Indian publishers is an issue that seems to have improved slightly in the years since then, but not by much.

For the purpose of this research, the two novels that have been selected from the category of postmodern literature are *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy (1997) and *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (2008). The selected novels are from different genres and set in different time periods but have one thing in common: they were written for an elite audience and happen to have narratives structured around the lives of their female protagonists or heroines. In the case of *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, which is set in the 1960s in Kerala, the narrative centres around the life of twins Rahel and Estha, their mother, Ammu, and her lover, Velutha. The narrative is set against the Marxist protests in Kerala at the time, and the story jumps back and forth in time and is partially told from the perspective of Rahel as she traverses back and forth. The central theme that emerges in the novel is the caste discrimination

faced by Velutha and the oppression of the women of the Ipe household, whether it be Ammu, her mother, Mammachi or Ammu's aunt, Baby Kochamma. The novel, in many ways, reflects the Indian practice of endogamy and the consequences faced by the people who dare to go against societal norms by falling in love or having a romantic relationship with someone from a different caste, specifically, a lower caste.

The Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, which has its roots in Indian mythology, is an attempt to retell the Mahabharata, one of the great Indian epics, from the point of view of Draupadi, the woman who is often not given due importance in the original tale. The narrative starts with Draupadi's birth and follows her life as she meets the Pandavas and the years that follow, leading up to and beyond the actual war of Kurukshetra. It is fascinating to see Divakaruni's take on Draupadi's perspective in the retelling of this massive epic, seeing as Draupadi, or Panchaali, was the driving force behind one of the biggest and most vicious wars fought in Indian mythology in the name of righteousness. It could be said that Draupadi was caught in the crosshairs between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, and the bad blood that pre-existed between them and that she was simply a victim of her situation and circumstance; that might be largely true, but it does not take away from the fact that the great war of Kurukshetra was fought due to Draupadi's husbands' inability protect her honour as was expected of them, among other reasons. The main reason for the selection of these novels is that they shed light on women's questions in very unique ways. They are almost representative of some of the more significant issues that women face: having to live as per the mandate of a masculine hegemony and having to depend on male authority figures for protection and justice, as depicted in *The Palace of Illusions*, or paying the price of defying the Love Laws set by the society with your life as seen in *The God of Small Things.* These novels and the audience's reaction to these will be discussed in the next few chapters of this research.

Popular Literature

There are several definitions of popular culture. Fiske's definition is the closest to the context of this research. As he observed,

> "Popular culture is made from within and below, not imposed from without or above. There is always an element of popular culture that lies outside social control, that escapes or opposes hegemonic forces. Popular culture is always a culture of conflict, it always involves the struggle to make social meanings that are in the interests of the subordinate and that are not those preferred by the dominant ideology" (2011, p.2).

Popular culture includes literature, film, TV, radio, and, of course, in recent years, technological outputs such as content made for OTT platforms and streaming services. Popular literature or

popular fiction within the context of Indian literature refers to a very specific type of writing. Mickunas (2017, p.4) believes that "popular was and is regarded to be a general 'taste' of the lower and middle classes, in contrast to the sophisticated upper class, whose 'taste' provides a standard for 'official culture'". By this very definition, popular literature and postmodern or classic literature in India differ based on the audiences they represent and appeal to. Narratives in the popular fiction genre mostly revolve around middle class youth who are trying to find their place in the modern world while holding on to their Indian traditions. As Pratihar (2017, p.48) succinctly describes,

> "This genre beginning from the late 1980s to 2000s, constantly reflects on the contemporary middle class issues and conflicts as well as provide adequate space for the young India to express their sentiments, system of belief and their aesthetic sense which is completely different from the earlier popular Indian writing in English".

While this genre has existed within the realm of Indian writing for some time, it was brought to the forefront in 2004 with *Five Point Someone* by Chetan Bhagat. Following the success of his first book, Bhagat has gone on to write nine books in total, five of which have been adapted into popular Hindi films. Writers such as Chetan Bhagat are not concerned with literary fiction or re-imagining the empire, but instead, they are focused on the lives and loves in urban Indian centres. The number of sales suggests that the characters and concerns of popular novels resonate with the readership both linguistically and situationally (Mongia, 2014). As mentioned, one of the most significant differences between popular literature and postmodern literature is the resonance with the type of audience they were written for. Additionally, the narratives in this type of literature reflected an India that had entered the era of globalisation and was on its way to becoming a slightly more modern society. Another difference is the style and use of language in the narratives. Since popular literature is written to represent the middle class and the burgeoning youth of India, the use of language reflects that attitude. Popular literature is written colloquially and in a manner that is easy to read solely because of the kind of audience it caters to. Pratihar, when referring to the work done by Chetan Bhagat and Upamanyu Chatterjee in the genre of popular literature explains

> "the ordinary writing style of the novel could be read, as the suitable aesthetic articulation meant for the young Indians and a deliberate strategy to expose those unwritten truths of young Indian contemporary lives which may not be possible to create with more 'sophisticated' and fashionable literary styles […] at a close textual study of the novel, it gets revealed that Chetan Bhagat makes his book a fun reading for his fans by using the language of the young generation as well as gives a solution to the young generation to handle the tension that occurs between tradition and contemporary social change prompted by globalisation" (2017, pp.52-55).

Chakravarty also (2013, p.102) observes,

> "The main impact of the novels under discussion [Bhagat's novels] is their deliberate and conscious use of colloquial language. At times, the use of language appears unimaginative and mundane, but then, to the benefit of the author, where is the role of creativity and imagination in modern urban life where everyone is consumed by the passion of being part of the maddening rat race? The realism is stark, and at times, the reality is difficult to fathom and believe".

Most of the popular fiction works represent the realities of modern-day middle class lives in India, where the concern of the general populace does not seem to be to bring about a social reform of any kind; instead, the focus seems to be on survival within the confines of the daily monotonies of life. Popular culture novels also do not just place women within the domestic sphere; instead, the novels have their female protagonists employed in positions of power or depict a rags-to-riches story, indicating that they are more than capable of supporting themselves financially. Popular fiction novels represent a more globalised and modern India through the use of language and spaces and in the manner in which the characters are constructed. The main distinction between postmodern and popular Indian literature is not just the language used, but also the ways the narratives are constructed. Popular literature follows a linear storytelling process, focuses on engaging with the reader by entertaining them through the use of humor, provides a satisfying end (which is usually an absolute resolution or a happily ever after) and avoids ambiguity, and has commercial appeal as it caters to the masses (Anjaria and Nerlekar, 2024).

Some of the critical writers of this genre are Chetan Bhagat, Varsha Dixit, Durjoy Datta, Amish Tripathi, Anuja Chauhan, Ashwin Sanghi, Ravinder Singh, and Sudha Nair, among others. While the typical audience for popular novels is most definitely the urban middle class, which includes the youth as well as the older generation, what really works in favour of this genre is the leaps and bounds made by the publishing industry in terms of marketing. Several authors choose to self-publish and put up their own money into the marketing of their novels to ensure that enough of a buzz is created. They also choose to promote their novels through avenues that were not necessarily available before, such as social media, literature festivals, TV appearances, and so on. Authors such as Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy are among the elitist book writers whose popularity is a direct result of their books reaching international success (Sharma, 2018). However, authors such as Bhagat and Sanghi are aware of the importance of being involved in the promotion and marketing process of their books and the implications a wider global audience has for their sales.

Cursory research into the titles of these genres shows that the publishing houses that produce these titles are more often than not Indian counterparts of international names, such as Penguin Random House, Hachette Publishers, and Harper Collins Publishers, among others. Local publishing houses are very limited, and the best among those are Rupa Publications and Juggernaut Books. Much like with postmodern literature, there seems to be a lack of homegrown Indian publishers in the current day and age, which goes to show that globalisation has had a significant impact on the structure of the business model in India and has enabled regional offices of international publishers to take root in India, instead of allowing for the growth of local homegrown publishers. Popular fiction writers tend to portray their female characters as more than just the supporting cast. While narratives have been structured around women and women's issues in the past as well, this kind of writing really brought home the different types of issues that the middle class, urban woman has to face on a daily basis in her personal and professional life. Several noteworthy writers have portrayed their female characters as strong and determined while fighting for their cause, albeit not on a national or international level, but a more personal and domestic one. But that is one of the defining characteristics of the middle class woman: she is busy achieving professional success as well as potentially running her home or trying to have a personal life, and she does not have the luxury of being able to fight for anything other than her own survival.

For the purpose of this research, the novels that have been selected from the popular literature genre are *The Zoya Factor* by Anuja Chauhan and *100 Shades of White* by Preethi Nair. Both novels have been written by female writers and have strong female protagonists around whom the central narrative revolves, but they have different narrative structures and are from different sub-genres. *The Zoya Factor* by Anuja Chauhan is inherently Indian - it combines India's love for cricket with its love for drama as the narrative follows the journey of young Zoya Solanki, an advertising executive, who is considered to be the lucky mascot for the Indian cricket team and the struggle that comes with that title. Set against the backdrop of the Cricket World Cup, *The Zoya Factor* traces Zoya's journey from a regular advertising executive to becoming the lucky mascot for the Indian cricket team due to the timing of her birth (she was born the day India won the last world cup in 1983). The narrative also focuses on a potential romance brewing between Zoya and Nikhil Khoda, the skipper of the Indian cricket team who does not believe in luck and, most certainly, does not believe Zoya to be their lucky mascot. As mentioned, the novel is inherently Indian, and North Indian, to be specific, due to the use of language and characterisations of the main protagonists. The use of space (New Delhi as the primary backdrop) and the language used by the characters all speak to an urbanised, young, and modern Indian society despite the undertones of superstition and belief. Chauhan touches on

the imbalance between tradition and modernity in Indian society through some of the older characters in the narrative, such as Zoya's father, a retired army colonel. *100 Shades of White* by Preethi Nair, while taking on a different tone and style, also depicts the struggle of a strong woman, Nalini, and her daughter, Maya, as they try to build a life in England after being forced to leave India suddenly. The story covers the life of three generations of strong women (Nalini, her mother Ammu, and Nalini's daughter, Maya) who are forced to learn the meaning of identity, family, and staying in touch with their roots. If *The Zoya Factor* is inherently North Indian, then *100 Shades of White* is inherently South Indian. From the way the characters address each other to the use of food and spices as a medium of expression, the novel is representative of the rich and vibrant culture of South India. This is also, of course, represented in the use of language and space, along with the focus on the matriarchal nature of the family that Ammu, Nalini, and Maya belong to. The selected novels will be analysed in further detail in the later chapters of this research, along with a study of how audiences read these texts. It must be pointed out here that all the novels from the classic/postmodern and popular genres that have been selected for the purpose of this research have already either been adapted into TV shows or movies or are in the process of being adapted for the big screen. *The Zoya Factor*, the film, is available on Netflix, while *The Palace of Illusions* has been optioned and is being adapted into a movie, and *100 Shades of White* has been bought by the BBC to be adapted into a TV series. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, stories are moving into a more digital medium, but the point of origin of these still stems from literary narratives and good writing.

The next chapter sets out the theoretical frameworks of intersectionality and decolonial theory, against which this research will be conducted, and the basis for the data analysis. The section explores the intersection of intersectionality and decolonial theory within the Indian context, highlighting how these frameworks are crucial for understanding the layered forms of oppression in Indian society. Intersectionality, which examines how identities like caste, gender, class and religion intersect to shape individual experiences is used to analyse the complexities of social hierarchies in India, especially for a female audience. Decolonial theory, which critiques the lingering effects of colonialism on modern structures of power, is applied in an effort to decentre colonial legacies and Western theories of feminism. This has been done by paying significant attention to Indian theories of feminism, and the experiences of the otherwise marginalised members of Indian society. In addition, the notion of the middle class has been explored in some detail in how it differs in societies of the Global South when compared to the Global North. The relevance of understanding the 'Indian middle class' has also been discussed.

Chapter 3
Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality and Decolonial Theory

In the contemporary landscape of critical theory, intersectionality and decoloniality have emerged as vital frameworks for understanding and challenging structures of power, oppression, and marginalisation that permeate societies globally. While these frameworks have distinct origins and primary focuses, they intersect in their shared aim of deconstructing hegemonic power structures and advocating for the voices and experiences of historically silenced communities and groups. The interplay between intersectionality and decoloniality in the Indian context provides a space to understand the complexities of identity, power, and resistance. Intersectionality's emphasis on multiple identities intersects with decoloniality's focus on resisting colonial power dynamics, creating a potent framework for analysing and challenging the multiple layers of oppression and discrimination that exist in post-colonial India. For instance, consider the Dalit feminist movement in India that has been discussed in previous sections. Dalit women marginalised by caste and gender have used the lens of intersectionality to highlight their unique experiences at multiple axes; at the intersection of caste based and gender-based discrimination (Arya, 2020; Rege, 2000; Tomar, 2013; Rege, 1998; Guru,1995). Simultaneously, they have employed decolonial strategies to challenge and resist the oppressive power structures of caste and patriarchy, deeply rooted in colonial history.

Intersectional theory, developed primarily within feminist scholarship, examines how various social identities – such as race, gender, caste, class, sexuality – intersect to create unique experiences of discrimination and privilege. The term 'intersectionality' was brought forward in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her work *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex*. Her argument was that

> "black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double discrimination – the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race and on the basis of sex" (Crenshaw, 1989, p.1245).

That is to say, they experience discrimination on the basis of being 'black', 'women' and 'Black women', but are often only looked at as the sum of their gender and race instead of those being viewed as distinct, intersectional categories. Her main argument was that black women were excluded from the feminist movement by white feminists through the setting of an agenda that was predominantly white and middle class, and that simultaneously black women were not given a space within the anti-racist movement due to a male bias (Carbin & Edenheim, 2013). Crenshaw's work was taken forward by Hill Collins in 1990 who observed that intersectionality,

> "presented the distinct standpoint of the Black women related to their political and economic status. Collins believed that the Black women have a peculiar set of experiences, which is different from the experiences of the other groups. The distinguishing Black feminist consciousness is an outcome of the concerned experiences and material reality. Collins further generalised this view that the experiences and the interpretation of a subordinate group is distinctively different from the experiences and the interpretation of the dominant groups. This idea gave traction to the standpoint theory" (Pandey, 2022, p.98S).

Standpoint theory is a useful framework in this context as it examines how individuals' unique perspectives, shaped by their social and political experiences, influence their understanding of the world. The main purpose of intersectionality has been to challenge the single-axis thinking of feminist consciousness. Crenshaw divided the scope of intersectionality into structural, political, and representational intersectionality. Her view was that if structural intersectionality was the way in which the location of women at the intersection of race and gender made their experiences of rape, domestic violence and redress different from that of white women, then political intersectionality explains how women of colour were situated within two categories with diametrically opposed agendas; for instance, racism does not take into account sexism, and vice versa. Representational intersectionality, on the other hand, refers to the cultural constructions of women of colour, which could produce further intersectional disempowerment through skewed representations (Crenshaw, 1991). For the purpose of this research, the focus is going to be on representational intersectionality and its relevance in the Indian landscape. It is imperative to view minority issues through the lens of intersectionality as it demands that "we see rather than merely look at the many vectors of difference that shape our lives. The feeling of being looked at is not to be conflated with that of being seen" (Prasad & Raghavan, 2022, p.231). The intersections of the representations of traditionally marginalised groups, such as women in India, and especially Dalit women in India will be explored in this research.

Within the Indian context, intersectionality was used as a theoretical concept around the early 19th century when it was brought to the front by Savitribai Phule and her husband, Jyotirao Phule; they were staunch advocates of an anti-caste ideology and women's rights. Not only did they endorse an anti-caste ideology, but also spoke against Muslim and Adivasi oppression.

> "Savitribai was probable one of the first published women in modern India, and she was able to develop her own voice and agency at a time when women of all classes were ruthlessly suppressed and lived a subhuman existence […] She along with her husband realised that the Indian woman is not a monolithic identity, and the issues of caste and gender are interrelated. Her thoughts show the sensitivity and understanding of the existing diversity of patriarchies in terms of castes in India with varying degrees of women exploitation therein" (Pandey, 2019, pp.98-100).

Savitribai is considered to have established the first school for girls in India in 1848; her efforts extended to educating women from all castes. She, along with her husband Jyotirao Phule worked tirelessly to break down social barriers and founded the Satyashodhak Samaj in 1873, which was a social reform society (Desai & Roy, 2022). Savitribai's work was monumental in influencing the next wave of Dalit feminists such as Rege and Guru, who constantly advocated the need for a space for Dalit women's oppression that fell outside mainstream Indian feminism, as they had largely been left out of the conversation by Indian feminists.

Caste and gender issues will be viewed in this section through the lens of representational intersectionality due to the complex and diverse nature of India's social structure. The cultural construction of identity in media and societal narratives within the Indian context bring to light not just issues of gender-based discrimination, but also caste based discrimination and most importantly, caste based gender discrimination and vice versa. The intersection of multiple identities significantly influences an individual's life experiences and access to opportunities. A person born into a lower caste may experience systemic oppression and discrimination, which is further compounded if they are also a woman or belong to a religious minority, or from a lower socioeconomic class. The intersection of caste, gender, class, and religion creates a unique axis of discrimination that is not adequately represented in societal narratives or media portrayals (whether that be through mainstream news, literature, film, television or any form of popular culture). Collins and Bilge expound on the idea that mass media spectacles produce social inequalities. "Mass media spectacles and associated events also present important scripts of gender, race, and nation that work together and influence one another. Mass media spectacles may appear to be mere entertainment, yet they serve political ends" (Collins & Bilge, 2020, p.11). Mass media spectacles are not limited to reality television or sporting events, but can also include other forms of popular culture such as stand-up comedy, and of course, literature.

Representational intersectionality in Indian literature has evolved significantly over time reflecting the changing socio-political landscape of the country. In the early 20th century, Indian literature was primarily dominated by upper caste male authors; the narratives often revolved around their experiences and perspectives, with limited representation of other social identities. Intersectionality, as a concept, was largely absent in these works. The works of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Krishna Punt and Toru Dutt fell within the realm of 'modernism' and was an attempt on their part to imitate British literature. However, in the post-independence era, there was a gradual shift. The rise of Dalit and feminist literature brought the experiences of marginalised communities to the forefront. The intersection of caste and class slowly started to gain visibility in the works of authors such as Arundhati Roy, Mulk Raj Anand, Salman Rushdie, Ruth Parwar

Jabwala, Kamala Markandaya; but once again, this was done from an upper caste perspective (see previous section on 'Mainstream Indian Literature) (Subha & Jayasudha, 2014). However, the intersection of caste and gender was best represented by female Dalit authors such as Baby Kamble, Bama, Urmila Pawar, and Meena Kandasamy (see previous section on 'Dalit Literature'). In recent decades, representational intersectionality in Indian literature has evolved from being a largely ignored concept to a critical tool for analysing and understanding the complexities of the societal structure. It continues to shape narratives in Indian literature, making them more inclusive and reflective of the diverse realities of the country. The novels selected for the purpose of this research focus on the realities of women at the intersection of multiple axes. In *The Palace of Illusions*, the narrative depicts oppression at the intersection of gender and socioeconomic class, in *The God of Small Things*, it is caste and gender based, in *100 Shades of White*, it is based on gender and socioeconomic status, in *The Zoya Factor*, it is gender based, and in *Sangati* and *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir,* it is at the intersection of caste, class, and gender. These novels will be analysed in further detail in the next few chapters. Intersectionality and decolonial theory go hand in hand and add value and credibility to each other in more than one way. But before delving into how the two theoretical frameworks contribute to one another, it is essential to engage with decolonial theory, and how it relates to this research with respect to audiences. Decoloniality is rooted in the critique of colonialism and its enduring legacies, particularly in the global South. It emphasises the importance of dismantling the colonial matrix of power – a system of domination that persists in contemporary global and local structures, from economic and political systems to cultural and knowledge production. Decoloniality calls for the recognition of marginalised knowledge systems that have been suppressed or delegitimised by colonial forces. Mignolo (2007, pp. 457- 459) describes decoloniality as a process, a 'working towards' that necessarily includes both psyche and society,

> "decoloniality turns the plate around and shifts the ethics and politics of knowledge […] It then, means working towards a vision of human life that is not dependent upon or structured by the forced imposition of one ideal of society over those that differ, which is what modernity/coloniality does and, hence, where decolonisation of the mind should begin".

The main intention of decoloniality is to recognise the importance of recognising and legitimising non-Western knowledge systems and perspectives that have been historically marginalised - especially within the global South. It critiques the 'modern/colonial' binary that positions Western societies as progressive and colonised societies as backward. It exposes coloniality as a global system with enduring structures of power, exploitation and, cultural domination (Scauso, 2020; Mignolo and Walsh, 2018). Decolonialism shares similarities with

postcolonialism in that both engage with global experiences, structures, and discourses of colonial discrimination. Gallien (2020, p.30) observes

> "decolonialism shares with postcolonial theory this space of the margin; but perhaps, in addition to what postcolonialism has already done in analysing processes of disenfranchisement and oppression, decolonialism uncovers the alternative epistemologies and thereby alternative cosmovisions these marginal spaces contain".

It is in this critical space that intersectionality becomes a relevant addition to ensure that alternative perspectives and epistemologies are available to understand the intricacies of how differently societies in the global South function as compared to the global North societal structures.

Audiences are heterogeneous and complex in nature, and how they interpret meanings in media texts depends on factors such as gender, positionality, culture, and socio-economic conditions of the society in which they are based. The target audience of this research is the middle class female Indian population in the UK. The uniqueness of the audience selected for this research (see the 'Methodology' chapter) is that it comprises women who technically do not fit into the conventional definition of diaspora and might be considered migrants (they have moved to the UK from India in the past ten years). The selected audience for this research comprises 24 women of Indian origin between the ages of 20 and 50. All of the participants are a part of the workforce in one form or another and make financial contributions towards the household expenses (bills, mortgage payments, childcare, etc.); in addition to this, more than half the participants are married and include childcare responsibilities as part of their daily routine. They are quintessential members of the Indian middle class; the significance of their inclusion in the specifically categorised 'Indian middle class' will be discussed later in this section. Procter (2021, p.261) observes, "reception study provides a productive context for thinking over this discrepancy (between the diasporic discourses of dislocation and the locations of diasporic discourse) because it is fundamentally resistant to the idea that meaning resides in one place". Meaning, in fact, does not reside in one place, and the audience selected for this research is indicative of that. Willems and Mano (2017, p.7) explain "examining media culture is not merely a goal in itself but also a mean to understand how people make sense of their identity, relate to others in society, or engage with the nation-state on an everyday basis". In the Indian context, the way female audiences make meaning of the media texts they consume, whether that be television or film or literature, is dependent on the socio-economic and cultural frameworks specific to their class, caste, or even sub-culture. The process of making meaning is entirely dependent on the cultural and social context of the society that is being studied. Morley (1992,

p.71) illuminates the necessity of being alert to the relationships between meanings and their shifting, multiple contexts,

> "we experience a multiplicity of discourses, and the space in which we exist is crossed by a number of different discourses, some of which support each other, are in alignment with each other, some of which contradict each other, some of which we relate to positively, some negatively. But the basic point to bear in mind is that in the process of decoding and interpreting the messages of the media, other messages, other discourses are always involved, whether or not we are explicitly conscious of it […] we have to understand how one message relates to the other sets of representations, images, stereotypes that the audience is familiar with".

The middle class Indian woman, when reading a novel, is influenced not just by the intended message in the narrative, but also the messaging that she has exposed to as an Indian, as a woman, as a member of the middle class, as a middle class Indian woman, and most importantly, as an upper caste middle class Indian woman. Middle class, Indian, woman, and upper caste are all distinct categories, and it is at the intersection of these axes that the reading and interpretation of a novel occurs.

In Section 1 (see 'Gender and Power'), I briefly engaged with the ways in which the global North and global South differ; it is not just nomenclature that distinguishes one from the other, but it is, in fact, the experiences, power structures, economic and political structures that set them apart. Colonial powers historically imposed their cultural norms and values on colonised societies, shaping their media landscapes in the process. The legacy of cultural imperialism has had a lasting impact on media consumption patterns as audiences in former colonies continue to grapple with the influence of Western media narratives and representations. This hegemonic imposition undermines the authenticity of audience experiences, making it imperative to decolonise research frameworks. The issue of misrepresentation of minority groups, such as women (since they are considered the inferior gender), and in the case of this research, the Dalit community, can attempt to be rectified through the process of decolonising audience research. Much of the literature written in India, even in a post-partition era, was influenced and shaped by colonial legacies and tended to position women and the lower castes in an inferior position (See 'Dalit Literature'). This led to contributing towards the way these sections placed themselves within the hierarchy of the Indian societal structure. A decolonised approach to studying the audience for the purpose of this research would empower the individuals to acknowledge their agency, not just in the way they consume texts but also in the way they think about their own position in society.

The construction of the chosen narratives for this research can also be viewed through a decolonial lens, in the sense that while they represent the hegemonic discourse to a certain extent, the characters and incidents are constructed in a way that questions this 'widely accepted discourse'[16]. Rooney (2007, p.6) states,

> "for Barthes, works of art are like commodities in that they appear mysteriously on the stage and appear to speak all by themselves owing nothing to productive processes outside them such as the labour of their historical authors. Barthes fails to address the difference between the author as a creative practitioner and authority figures. With this, he does not take into account the fact that creative writers have often written to contest the dogmas of authority and tradition".

For the purpose of this research, the chosen texts have been written by female authors and place women (one or more) as their central characters (see 'Methodology'). This representation requires an audience that is aware of the intersectional nature of the exploitation of Indian women, especially Dalit women, and understands what it means to be a woman in an Indian society (which is deeply patriarchal). There is a recognition that colonial legacies and conditioning might have informed the participants' perception of certain things, but a reflexive approach enables open conversation to unpack those viewpoints and determine if they are indeed a result of conditioning. My own Indianness and its entanglement with my positionality as the researcher during the process of conducting the thematic analysis cannot be ignored; the ways in which I contextualise the texts is influenced by my own Indian social and cultural background; while I am able to maintain a sense of 'caste' distance, my middle class background plays a conscious role in how I engage with the texts, and the even the audiences. While the value of Western theories of feminism is not being negated, there is a conscious effort to decentre those approaches and, in fact, focus on the works of Indian scholars and how they lend credibility and authenticity to the texts and audiences that are being studied. The selected audience, the reason for such a selection, and the recruitment process are explored in great detail in the Methodology chapter.

An area of focus also happens to be the notion of class and the way it differs in different countries. The middle class in the UK is not the same as the middle class in India, and for this purpose, it is essential to adopt a decolonised approach to audience study. The middle class is one that falls in the middle of the social hierarchy and socio-economically inhabits a space between the upper class and the working class. What makes the middle class in a country depends on purchasing power, educational levels, and perceptions of wealth, among other factors (Roy, 2018). For instance, traditionally, the middle class in the UK includes people with

[16] The definition of this 'widely accepted discourse' has been discussed in the previous sections.

superior educational qualifications, social closure in the profession of their choice, access to intergenerational capital, etc (Saini, 2023). Meanwhile, the middle class in India includes families where the parents have a basic level of education, and their children have access to higher education opportunities and basic amenities necessary for a reasonably comfortable standard of living (Paul & Ahalya, 2017). Assumptions about the homogenous nature of the middle class across countries cannot be made, as that would not only be reductive but also counterproductive, as the Global South and Global North are not singular entities[17]. Although they represent a small percentage of the overall population, the Indian middle class, in absolute numbers, surpasses the total population of numerous developed Western nations. This group forms a substantial market and cultural sphere, offering a profitable foundation for global capital to thrive in India (Jodhka & Prakash, 2011). They are not merely a flat income category, but also need to be understood in terms of their role in relation to the state, market, and the civil society. "It represents certain values and produces hegemonic discourses. As a sociological category, it is bound to reflect the vertical and horizontal diversities of a given society. As India developed, the diversity of its middle classes also grew, with sections from historically marginalised groups joining the ranks" (Jodhka & Prakash, 2011, p.54). Akin to caste, social class can also be performative embedded in a social setting that is shaped in the context of interactions, political narratives, and socioeconomic relations. The way class is understood and perceived in the West is very different when compared to the social classes in India. In an effort to approach this research from a decolonised view, it was essential to ensure that I did not internalise the concept of social classes in India, and truly understood what it means to belong to the middle class in India. Historically, there has not been much, if any, research done around the reading habits of middle class Indian women (barring Jyoti Puri's work, which will be explored in the next chapter), as the middle classes are usually ignored in favour of studying audiences from the lower or upper classes, and they are almost always studied from an economic perspective, and not a socio-cultural one which is what I aim to do with my research.

This research adopts a decolonised view in relation to media and cultural studies in general and not just audience research. A decolonised approach is crucial for fostering a more inclusive, equitable, and critical understanding of the multi-layered relationship between media, culture and society. This includes challenging the dominance of Western-centric perspectives and power structures in the creation and dissemination of media content. Said (2003) believed that we must work to abolish systems of representations that wield oppressive power by disregarding or preventing interventions from those being represented. The requirement is to amplify

[17] The middle class in India is a separate entity and cannot be compared to the middle class in any part of the global North.

marginalised voices and critically examine the ways in which certain cultures and identities are portrayed. This includes but is not limited to challenging stereotypes, tropes, and harmful narratives that perpetuate and reinforce power imbalances (Curran and Park, 2000; Santos, 2015). A decolonised view of media and cultural studies calls for nuanced representations that reflect the diversity and complexity of human experiences, along with acknowledging and addressing the historical legacies of colonialism, imperialism, and systemic oppression. As it is suggested by Wallerstein (1999), it is not possible to encapsulate the significant differences in social experiences within a generalised theory or view of the world. The issues of modernity, colonialism, knowledge production and power must be asked when trying to de-westernise media and communication studies (Sabry, 2009; Zhao, 2009; Mano and Milton, 2022; Chen, 2010). The dominant discourse of countries in the global South differs significantly when compared to the global North; we have seen that the dominant discourse in India is not only deeply patriarchal in nature, but also supports the right wing agenda of the upper castes that oppresses the lower caste communities. A caste based hierarchy is notably absent in countries in the global North. Without a decolonial view, it would be difficult to understand the 'Indian experience' of caste based, or even gender based, oppression.

At its core, utilizing decoloniality as a methodology includes critiquing the dominance of Eurocentric knowledge systems and their claim to universality. It recognizes that Western ways of knowing have been instrumental in justifying and perpetuating colonial domination, marginalizing and silencing alternative perspectives. Decoloniality calls for a move away from extractive research practices, where researchers parachute in, gather data, and leave without any meaningful engagement with the communities they study. Instead, it advocates for methodologies that center the voices and experiences of marginalized communities, prioritizing their knowledge systems and ways of knowing (Medrado and Rega, 2023; Chakrabarty, 2000). Within the context of my research, it refers to centering the voices of middle class Indian women living in the UK and shedding light, not just on their everyday experiences, but also their biases and perspectives as upper caste women in relation to lower caste issues. Additionally, decoloniality is not just a theoretical framework; it is also a practice. It requires that I, as the researcher, critically reflect on my own positionality and bias (this is discussed in the next chapter), while acknowledging how my social location, background, value system and experiences might shape this research. This reflexivity is crucial to understand how power dynamics operate within the research process and to mitigate any potential issues. It necessitates moving beyond informed consent to building genuine relationships of trust reciprocity with the communities, which in this case is the 24 women who form my core audience. Decoloniality offers a powerful framework for reimagining research. It challenges us

to move beyond traditional methodologies and embrace approaches that are grounded in critical reflexivity, ethical engagement, and a commitment to social justice.

The integration of intersectionality and decoloniality offers a comprehensive approach to understanding and addressing complex forms of oppression. By emphasizing the multiplicity of identities, intersectionality ensures that the nuances of gender, sexuality, class, race, caste, and other identities are not overlooked in decoloniality. For instance, Dalit women experience colonial oppression very differently from Dalit men due to the gendered aspects of coloniality. Decolonial theory, in turn, provides intersectional theorists with a historical and global perspective that highlights the colonial roots of many contemporary forms of oppression. It helps contextualise how intersecting identities have been shaped by centuries of colonialism and offers a critique of the Western-centric biases that can sometimes be present in intersectional analyses. My research is the first to combine audience research and thematic analysis to explore the current gender politics in contemporary India. The data collected through the process of the thematic analysis and audience research adds to representational intersectionality and the cultural constructions of Indian women by demonstrating how the domestication of values and the reproduction of fixed gender roles in India is a highly contested phenomenon. The qualitative interviews have highlighted upper caste women's compliance and participation in reproducing the caste system's structures. Unlike previous studies using intersectionality and decoloniality as a framework of analysis, my research focuses on middle class, upper caste women's reading of the fictional text. It showed how despite having a good education, upper caste women lacked a coherent social critique, and tended, in the main, to dismiss and trivialise struggles faced by lower caste women in India.

In an attempt to decolonise media audiences theory, I sought to re-articulate the question of class from a global South, and specifically, Indian perspective. The audience used for this research is middle class, which within the Indian context refers to a class of society that belongs to a certain economic bracket, which is very different from the middle class in the UK that is often considered 'elite'. The middle class in India is often referred to as 'the common everyday man' indicating that a large portion of the Indian population is either middle class or lower class. The reading habits of the Indian middle class, especially the female Indian middle class has also not been studied previously. Jyoti Puri came close with her work in 1997 on women's reading habits in India, but her study was only confined to the romance genre, and her findings concluded that there was still a certain sense of stigma around Indian women reading content that might not be in line the traditional values of the Indian family. Her work also excluded any genre expect romance novels, and so my intention was to explore other genres of Indian

literature and how postmodern, popular and Dalit genres represent the everyday realities of Indian women regardless of the time period the novels are set in, how that leads to discussions about the wider gender politics that exists in Indian society, and how that ties to the upper caste attitude towards lower caste issues. This research in itself stands at the intersection of caste, class, and gender in Indian society.

The next chapter will explore the research that has been done around fiction in India, and the methodological approaches that will be adopted for this research. The audience for this research will also be defined, and their recruitment process will be explained, along with a focus on the interview process while providing some sample questions for the same.

Chapter 4
Methodology

Media and cultural studies that attempt to study the relationship between ideology and identity are sociological in nature. This is evidenced by Wolff's (1999, n.p.) claim that media and "cultural studies at its best is sociological", and the scope and nature of this research call for qualitative research methods that will enable a deeper understanding of the relationships we are attempting to analyse. When it comes to fictional narratives, extensive scholarly research has been conducted about narrative structures and how storytelling decisions represent power relations in society (Chatterjee 1993; Spivak 2010). Within the context of Indian literature, there is substantial research on mainstream titles, starting from Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* all the way through to *Sangati* by Bama. The focus of these analyses has, however, always been the narrative itself, and they have been conducted from the point of view of the writer or the researcher, which are both credible ways of conducting the analysis of a chosen text. However, the area that is most often neglected, and remains largely under examined, is the audience's reading of the text - specifically the middle class audience's perspective. The reader has never truly been made the focus of study when conducting research about literature in India. Jyoti Puri came very close with her research in the late 1990s on women's reading habits in the genre of romance novels. Her research findings demonstrated that while members of their families disapproved of their reading habits, the Indian women who were a part of the study continued to engage with romance harlequin novels, almost as a symbol of resistance. Puri concluded that "the readers' interpretations are indeed cultural critiques of a certain form of patriarchy. Yet, the critique is only implicit**"** (1997, pp.429-550). However, there was a twofold exclusion in that study: an exclusion of every other genre besides romance and an exclusion of minority communities. Not to mention that Indian society, overall, has seen a tremendous amount of change since the 90s, with the rise of social media, the emerging middle class and India's political position in the global sphere being cemented through economic reforms. The intersectional nature of Indian women's position and reality was also notably absent.

Moreover, literature written by women has not been given due credit unless it has been the works of the likes of Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Arundhati Roy or Kiran Desai. Several writers of the popular genre are often ignored, or their work is not given the same kind of relevance due to the nature of their writing; their works are often thought to be for 'the masses', but what is often overlooked in academic research is the fact that the masses make up much of the population in India - their lived experiences are very different from that of the 'elites', and that they therefore need to be understood from their perspective. Dalit female writers have also largely either been ignored or not given enough importance in terms of the kind of influence their work has on

society when it pertains to raising awareness about the reality of the Dalit community in India. With a country as large as India, there is a vast amount of literature published every year, and while it is not possible to conduct an in-depth study of every title, it is possible to bring forward some of the lesser-known texts in the realm of popular culture and Dalit literature. As mentioned, the one area that is most often under-examined is audience research, whether it be for classic/postmodern, popular or Dalit literature, and more importantly, the audiences' perception of the narratives, and not just the researchers. Literature for and by women is an essential facet of gender and media studies, but how these texts are received and interpreted by audiences is equally crucial and the most often overlooked. This research aims to address this gap between the researchers' perception of a literary text and the audiences' perception of it.

The research for this project is going to be within the Indian context, whether it be the selection of texts or the audience being recruited, and, hence, it is essential that for the purpose of this research, a decolonised approach is adopted in the methodological practices. Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021, p.3) state, "theories of decolonisation carry undeniable potential to disrupt taken for granted assumptions and perspectives that order the world". In order to do so, the framework against which the selected texts are being read or the selected audiences are being studied needs to be inherently Indian. The socio-political and cultural frameworks that inform and drive the research questions need to be specific to the Indian context, and should have relevance to the way societal hierarchy is structured, to how gender is constructed specifically in India, and in assessing the levels at which gender politics exists in Indian society.

The nature of this research allows for a more flexible methodological approach to be taken to ensure that the data being generated through the fieldwork is rich and varied, and most importantly, one that does not gloss over the issues faced by the women being studied, especially when it comes to the question of caste. The research attempts to create the space for an open dialog, which is best explained by Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021, p.3) as "our efforts to share power with participants, and to create spaces which are safe for mutual exchange and honest dialog". The different questions that have emerged through the course of this research require the utilisation of different methods to find appropriate data to answer them. As it stands, the research questions focus on what has been the representation of female characters in Indian postmodern, popular and Dalit literature; are the characters and their constructions relevant to the lives of the women who make up the audience for this research; what has the chosen literature taught us about the gender politics of Indian society; and what has the audience response taught us about the attitudes of upper caste women in relation to lower caste issues.

When the methodological approach for this research question was being determined initially, I had assumed that a critical discourse analysis of the selected novels would be conducted to determine the power structures in the narrative and how they were representative of the issues rampant in contemporary Indian society. However, after careful reflection it was determined that a thematic analysis would be the ideal approach for an in-depth study into how female protagonists are represented in the novels and how the narratives represent several issues that exist in the Indian socio-political landscape and are potentially representative of the regressive patriarchal attitude prevalent in Indian society. The major themes of the novels will be identified, analysed, and critically engaged with based on the literature that exists within the field. Once this has been successfully completed, an ethnographic approach will be adopted to understand the audience's perspective regarding the themes that have emerged from the thematic analysis through semi-structured interviews.

4.1 Thematic Analysis

The novels that have been selected for the purpose of this research are *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy and *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in the classic/postmodern genre; *The Zoya Factor* by Anuja Chauhan and *100 Shades of White* by Preethi Nair in the popular genre; and *Sangati* by Bama *and Coming out as Dalit: A Memoir* by Yashica Dutt in the Dalit genre of literature. The selected texts are fiction novels, with the exception of *Sangati* and *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir*, which are life narratives or autobiographical testimonies. All selected texts have been written by female writers and, with no exception, have the main narrative structured around female characters who are an embodiment of the socio-cultural and political nature of the time period in which the novels are set. It was determined that a thematic analysis of the selected novels would be ideal in being able to truly understand the way in which female characters and the issues they face have been represented because of the nature of the method. Clarke and Braun (2017, p.297) describe this thematic approach as one rooted in a wider social framework within lived experience,

> "it is a method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ("themes") within qualitative data. Themes provide a framework for organising and reporting the researcher's analytic observations. Thematic analysis can be used to identify patterns within and across data in relation to participant's lived experiences, views, and experiences, and behaviour and practices; 'experiential' research seems to understand what participants think, feel, and do".

Conducting a thematic analysis is not just beneficial to identify, understand, and analyse the main themes of the novels that have been selected, but it will also help guide the interview

process and assist in identifying the themes and patterns that emerge from the experiences shared by the participants. A thematic analysis involves a critical close reading of the texts and the construction of characters against socio-cultural, economic, or political backdrops. Gill (2000, p.5) states,

> "the notion of construction emphasises the fact that we deal with the world in terms of constructions, not in a somehow 'direct' unmediated way; in a very real sense, texts of various kinds construct our world. The constructive use of language is a taken-for-granted aspect of social life".

It lends validity to the assumption that society is constructed in several different ways and that texts can have multiple meanings based on the various socio-political and cultural constructions. The way language is used to either agree or disagree with the dominant discourse can be analysed effectively by conducting a thematic analysis, and it would enable me to critically examine how meaning is being produced within the context of Indian society and its positioning of women in modern day India. Doing such an analysis of the selected novels will enable drawing parallels between the power structures that are portrayed in the novels and those that exist in Indian society today, while analysing whether they support or contradict each other. It allows for a better understanding of the hegemonic practices prevalent in the country.

> "Hegemony can only be maintained so long as the dominant classes 'succeed in framing all complete definitions within their range' (Hall, 1977)**,** so that subordinate groups are, if not controlled; then at least contained within an ideological space which does not seem at all 'ideological'" (Hebdige,2002, p.16).

Thematic analysis becomes an efficient way of reorganising the codes embedded within a text and how they might potentially be in line with the dominant discourse. Some of the critical issues that come across through the narrative of the novels, which will be explored and analysed in detail, are women's emancipation, the patriarchal nature of Indian society, the commodification of women, caste discrimination, and violence against women, among others. Conducting a thematic analysis of the selected novels, as opposed to a discourse analysis, allowed for the opportunity to delve deeper into the nuances of the incidents in the texts that were representative of the broader issues prevalent in Indian society. Thematic analysis is well-suited for exploring the experiences, emotions, and perceptions of participants. It provides a platform for capturing and interpreting rich narratives, which was highly beneficial when conducting the qualitative interviews and their subsequent analysis. Clarke & Braun (2016, p.81) note the critical flexibility and intellectual generosity of such an approach,

> "thematic analysis can be an essentialist or realist method, which reports experiences, meanings and the reality of participants, or it can be a constructionist method, which examines the ways in which events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society. Thematic analysis can be a method that works both to reflect reality and to pack or unravel the surface of 'reality'".

Within the context of this research, the thematic analysis of the novels was conducted to unravel the realities portrayed in the novels and explore their relationship to the reality and lived experiences of the participants that were interviewed and formed the core audience (See Chapters 4-7).

Selected novels

The novels that have been selected for the purpose of this research are categorised as Indian novels in English. The reason for the choice of language to be English, and not any of the other 122 major Indian regional languages, is that English has been an intrinsic part of the social fabric of India since colonial times. Even in modern-day India, English is the primary language of higher education and governmental agencies and is used widely in the literary sphere. As per the Nielsen Report of 2015, India is the second largest English language print book market in the world, with over 9,000 publishers producing 90,000 books annually (IPA, 2018). It is still considered to be the language of the educated in India and is considered to be a marker of high levels of literacy.

> "Even within English, the language of fiction has been changing in recent years. While earlier postcolonial fiction incorporated italicised words from Indian languages sparingly (and often with supplementary glossaries), many writers in the post-2000 generation of Indian English fiction use a version of English that is much closer to the version of Indian English spoken in contemporary India – with a frequency intense sprinkling of terms and ideas from Indian languages that are presented matter-of-factly and without annotation" (Singh, 2018, pp.3-4).

It is this change that also features in the selection process of the novels. As has been mentioned in the Introduction and Literature Review (Chapter 1 and 2), the novels that have been selected for the purpose of the research have been broadly categorised into postmodern, popular literature, and Dalit literature[18].

[18] It stands to reason that Dalit literature can possibly be added to the categorisations of postmodern or popular. However, in doing so, I would be adding to the very systemic oppressions that Dalit literature aims to address. The reason Dalit literature is specified as a separate genre is to ensure that the collective voices of the writers in this genre do not get lost in the mainstream consciousness of Indian literature, and that Dalit issues are treated with the same level of importance as upper caste issues. Additionally, Dalit women's oppression stands at the intersection of their caste, class and gender; these attributes are not given sufficient recognition in postmodern or popular literature, and it becomes imperative to hear Dalit women's voices in their most authentic form.

Postmodern literature refers to the novels that were published in the postmodern period wherein the narratives started to show hints of intersectionality by drawing attention to caste based oppressions and women's issues. The style of writing of such novels was formal, and was meant for the elites, not necessarily for the middle classes. The types of novels that have been selected for this genre were written by award-winning writers and are very Indian, but they were also not written with middle class Indian readers in mind. Popular literature is, on the other hand, literature that is written for the masses and that resonates with a different kind of audience as compared to postmodern literature. Since popular literature is written to represent the middle class and the burgeoning youth of India, the use of language reflects that attitude. Popular literature is written colloquially and in a manner that is easy to read, solely because of the kind of audience it caters to. Most of the popular fiction works represent the realities of the modern-day middle class lives in India, where the concern of the general populace does not seem to be to bring about a social reform of any kind; instead, the focus seems to be on survival within the confines of the daily monotonies of life. Popular culture novels also do not just place women within the domestic sphere; instead, the novels have their female protagonists employed in positions of power or depict a rags-to-riches story, indicating that they are more than capable of supporting themselves financially (See 'Mainstream Indian Literature'). On the other hand, Dalit literature arose out of the sheer need of the community to rectify the manner in which they were being represented in the dominant discourse; they were either viewed as the 'lesser' caste or as victims who were only oppressed and incapable of making their voices heard. While the history of Dalit literature can be traced back over 2000 years, modern Dalit literature was a by-product of the Dalit Panther Movement of the 1970s and was inspired by the African-American writings of the West and was representative of a fighting spirit, pride, and sophisticated creativity (Kandasamy, 2009). Dalit women have had to constantly face persecution at the hands of not just the upper caste Hindus but also at the hands of the men within the Dalit community. They have been consistently left out of narratives written by Dalit men, and when they are mentioned, they are entirely misrepresented or have stereotypical characteristics associated (See Chapter 2 'Literature Review'). It is for this reason that the chosen novels have all been written by female authors and feature women in prominent roles, primarily as main protagonists, or as strong female 'side' characters. The selection process of the novels involved very conscious choices about authorship, representation, and potential readership.

The novels were read closely, the texts were coded, and key main themes were identified. These were then analysed in great detail through the language of the texts against the socio-political, cultural and economic backdrop of India. The representation of female characters was studied and analysed in depth. Some of the themes that emerged from the analysis gave rise to

interesting questions that were modified for the audience during the interview stage of this project. The thematic analysis identified the main themes and engaged with them in the context of the narratives and the literature that currently exists within the field. These themes were used to guide the interview process, which led to further exploration of themes that were not previously considered based on the experiences and perspectives shared by the participants. The specific audience for this research, the recruitment process, and the interview process will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

4.2 Audience study

Why is audience study important?

Audiences are complex and dynamic; they are fluid and constantly evolving. The way in which audiences are affected by media messages depends on several factors, such as culture, hierarchical structure, economy, and politics of the society they inhabit, hence leading to the need for a decolonised approach since globally societal structures are not uniform. Another factor that influences the reading of any text is gender, and we will see later how a feminine reading of a text might be very different from a masculine reading.

To begin with, it is essential to understand and identify why the audience is not referred to as readers. If we are to explore Moores' work on interpreting audiences (2000), it becomes evident that he recognizes the active role individuals play in making sense of media by advocating for a more ethnographic approach where individuals are understood as audiences. Audiences are seen as active interpreters who bring their own experiences, values, and social positions to their media consumption. They negotiate meanings, resist dominant interpretations and have a reflexive view that allows for negotiations and resistances, whereas informants are seen as passive recipients of media messages, and their responses are often interpreted with pre-defined frameworks. Moores' work encourages a shift from viewing media consumers as passive recipients of information to recognizing them as active participants in the construction of meaning, or an 'active audience'. The distinction is important since informants have a very limited view of media and how they consume it, whereas audiences play a very active role in the meaning making process. The women interviewed for this research (whose backgrounds will be discussed later in this section) engage with the selected novels not only by reading them but also through discussions in both digital and physical spaces within their book club. These conversations focus on themes, narratives, and representations, and reflect on how these elements resonate with them in their daily lives.

The manner in which texts are interpreted also depends on the way the text itself is constructed. Morley (1992, p.20) states,

> "Audiences do not only see what they want to see since a message (or programme) is not simply a window on the world, but a construction. While the message is not an object with one real meaning, there are within it signifying mechanisms which promote certain meanings, even one privileged meaning and suppresses others: these are the discursive closures encoded in the message. The message is capable of different interpretations depending on the context of association".

The construction of texts can be done in a way that gives prominence to one voice over another; in most cases, the dominant discourse is placed over the discourse of the marginalised and the oppressed. In this way, audiences read texts based on the knowledge that the dominant discourse is more widely accepted and that has the potential to shape their understanding in the meaning-making process. It is for this reason ethnography is detrimental when studying audiences so as to get a holistic view of how audiences might interpret texts and what meanings they could potentially construct. Ethnographic fieldwork allows the researcher to gain access and insight into the way audiences think and perceive information that is presented to them. It is even more essential to study audiences in the Global South from a decolonised perspective, as it is high time that their voice is heard and given due consideration. Phillipov (2013, p.212) expounds,

> "Ethnographic approaches explore both the everyday practice of participation in popular culture and the contexts in which meanings arise, prioritising the perspective and experiences of the research subjects rather than those of the researcher".

Critical literary theory tends to focus on the representative elements of the writings: how the narrative is structured and how it represents the power relations in society, along with the hierarchical nature of Indian society. Novels are analysed to understand how characters represent a particular ideology or, how the structure of the narrative is representative of the time the novel is set in, or even how the dominant discourse of society undermines the wants and needs of the marginalised. If we take a step back and consider the global landscape, it can be observed that the field of reader-response criticism has been explored to a certain degree but still has a long way to go. Readers approach a text, any text, but the novel in this case, from a personal ideological perspective even if they are unaware of it, and construct meanings on the basis of what they read to often make explicit arguments about these meanings (DeVault, 1990; Eco, 1981). The need is to turn attention towards the reader and examine how the reading of a particular text is representative in a way of their social and economic position and what that interpretation says about their intellect. Freund (2003, p.5) points out,

> "By refocusing attention on the reader, reader-response criticism attempts to grapple questions generally ignored by schools of criticism, which teaches us how to read; questions such as why do we read and what are the deepest sources of our engagement with literature? What does reading have to do with the life of the psyche, or the imagination, or our linguistic habits?"

Furthermore, as Culler argued; "a theory of reading is an attempt to come to terms with the single most salient and puzzling fact about literature: that a literary work can have a range of meanings, but not just any meaning" (Culler, 2007, p.50). As discussed in the Literature Review chapter, when it comes to fiction, a single text can have multiple meanings that are open to interpretation based on the background of the reader and the position they hold in their socio-economic structure, among other things. When studying a female audience, it is imperative to take into consideration the work done by Janice Radway, wherein she analysed the romance genre and the reading habits of the women in a small town in America, specifically within the romance genre. The women who read romance novels claimed they did so because, for them, reading connoted a free space where they felt liberated from the need to perform duties they otherwise willingly accept as their own. Reading, for them, is an act of rebellion against the position accorded to them by the dominant patriarchal discourse (Radway, 1991). The romance genre was considered frivolous and unimportant in terms of academic study until the results of Radway's ethnographic fieldwork were studied.

A similar study was done within the context of Indian society, where Jyoti Puri examined the role of Harlequin and Mills and Boon romance novels in the lives of single, middle class women in urban India.

> "In the Indian context, the romance novels emerge as class and gender-specific implements of cultural resistance and ideal notions of romantic love, sexuality and marital relations. Young middle class women interpret romance novels in ways that bear a striking, but not exact resemblance to the language of romantic love and sexual intimacy in the United States" (Puri, 1997, p.450).

The reason for this difference is that the patriarchal nature of society manifests in different ways in India than it does in the West. Patriarchy is not static and constantly evolves in conjunction with changing class and caste ideologies. As has been mentioned, the subjugation of women in India and the oppression they face is an intersection of several contributing factors such as gender, caste and class, which brings us to the question: what about Dalit women and their reading experiences**?** Festino (2015) and Tomar (2013) refer to the manner in which Dalit women are represented in Dalit literature and how Dalit women might potentially be reading these texts. However, there has not been any definitive study of Dalit female audiences.

Griswold (1987, p.1079) states,

> "In order to understand what a cultural object means to a group of people; one must be able to investigate both the socially and culturally constructed percipience of the group and the ability of the cultural object to carry multiple meanings".

It becomes essential to study a female reading of texts and how meaning is constructed for them in order to delve deeper into the social and cultural positioning of women in society. The study conducted by Puri in 1997 was representative of the Indian literary landscape at the time, but it excluded all genres except the romance genre and was conducted over two decades ago. The feminist movement in India and women's questions in India have changed drastically since then. Now, further audience study is needed within the context of the current socio-political climate of India, which is what this research aims to do. Not to mention that Indian society as a whole has seen a tremendous amount of change since the 90s, with the rise of social media, the emerging middle class and India's political position in the global sphere being cemented.

Within the sphere of fiction, romance is the only genre that has been studied in the Indian context to some extent, and even then, Dalit women have, once again, been excluded from the conversation by being excluded from the readership of that genre; it is almost as if caste is not taken into consideration even within this framework. Novels that do not fall within the romance genre have been excluded from the reader-response critical theory landscape, and the audiences of those novels have been side-lined. Romance fiction is arguably one of the most popular genres amongst female audiences; however, it cannot be the sole focus of study. Genres like historical fiction, mythological retellings, and even emotional dramas are gaining popularity and should very much be studied. Just as gender has been made a monumental part of the conversation when it comes to audience study, caste also needs to be included and taken into consideration.

Within the context of this research, in Indian society, the male voice is very much the driving force of the dominant discourse of the country and women's voices are placed on the other end of the spectrum. Generally speaking, in the Indian context, women have largely been left out of the conversation, whether it be about political or socio-economic structures, and even when they are included, their voices and opinions have been side-lined and not been accorded their due importance. Currently, the political landscape of India leans towards the right, which is not the need of the hour. In the case of the Dalit community, the upper caste Hindu male voice is the definitive hegemonic discourse of the country within the cultural and socio-political sphere. Women have largely been left out of the conversation, and even when they are included, their voices and opinions have been side-lined and not been accorded their due importance.

One of the main questions this research is attempting to answer is if and how the representation of female characters in Indian novels in English is relevant to the lives of Indian women when it comes to their everyday realities. The scope of this question is vast and requires analysis and critical engagement with audiences to grasp a better understanding of their ideology. Hebdige (1988, p.11) states, "ideology by definition thrives beneath consciousness. It is here, at the level of 'normal common sense', that ideological frames of reference are most firmly sedimented and the most effective, because it is here that their ideological nature is most effectively concealed". In order to understand the level at which ideology operates for an Indian female audience, it is essential to engage with the audience critically. A serviceable definition of phenomenology within the context of anthropology is "an investigation of how humans perceive, experience, and comprehend the sociable, materially assembled world that they inherit at infancy and in which they dwell" (Ram & Houston, 2015, p.1)**.** This research will utilise ethnography which will include in-depth interviews to help answer the second research question.

Encoding/Decoding Model

It is possible that a text may contain codes with messages that might be perceived as 'natural' by some audiences and 'unnatural' or 'out of the ordinary' by others. Stuart Hall's encoding and decoding model will be utilised to argue that the audience is not merely a passive recipient; instead, they actively decode the meaning within a text. The decoded message might not be the same as the encoded meaning put forth by the producer, and so the meaning of the text could change based on the decoder's personal biases and habitus. As Hall argued: "producing meaning depends on the practice of interpretation, and interpretation is sustained by us actively using the code – encoding, putting things into the code – and by the person at the other end interpreting or decoding the meaning" (Hall, 1992, p.45). The encoded text may represent a hegemonic viewpoint, but the audience does not always decode it as such.

> "The definition of a hegemonic viewpoint is (a) that it defines within its terms the mental horizon, the universe, of possible meanings, of a whole sector of relations in a society or culture; and (b) that it carries with it the stamp of legitimacy – it appears coterminous with what is 'natural', 'inevitable', 'taken for granted' about the social order" (Hall, Evans & Nixon, 2013, p.27).

At initial glance, it may seem as though the selected texts are anti-hegemonic in nature, and while that is accurate to a large extent, there are incidents and representations in the selected novels that are indicative of the dominant, hegemonic discourse, which are then challenged by the female characters. Interviewing the selected audience regarding the selected texts will enable for connections to be made between the encoded and decoded messages of the novels in

question and analyse how different or similar the meanings are when looked at from the other perspective.

Ethnographic Interviewing

Gendered anthropology is a field of study that lends relevance to this research, and the work done by anthropologists such as Leela Dube will be used as a reference point to guide this research**.** Dube's (2008, p.11) comment that "the process of growing up female in the patrilineal, patrivirilocal milieu of Indian society has received inadequate attention from social scientists" is an interesting point to start from in the context of this research. She asks questions such as what it means to be a girl in Indian society and talks about how "gender differences that are culturally produced are, almost invariably, interpreted as being rooted in biology, as part of the natural order of things" (Dube, 2008, p.11). Through this research, the aim is to attempt to understand how women construct their own gender and position in present day Indian society on the basis of the different types of literature that have emerged out of the country in the recent past.

The aim of ethnographic interviewing is to build on everyday experiences of asking questions, observing, and listening. It involves asking questions of social actors within the context of their everyday practices, which becomes a part of participant observation. Interviewing can also be used as an alternative to participant observation (Coffey, 2018). Within the context of this research, interviewing will most definitely be used as an alternative to participant observation since the text being studied is fiction. It would then be more appropriate to interview selected audiences about their reading of the selected novels. Ethnography has the potential to tap into stories and histories that might have been overlooked in the past, not just because it focuses on the lives of the communities being studied, but also because of its self-reflexive nature**.** Dube (2000, p.4037) describes the developing respect for an interest in the widespread potentials of this approach,

> "It has been increasingly realised that an ethnographer's looking back towards her/his experiences, interactions, reactions and honest autobiographical explorations can prove to be truly eloquent: they have the capacity to effectively communicate the experiential flavour of ethnography. More than men, women seem to have made use of such self-reflexive personal narratives much more effectively".

When a female reading of a text is taken into consideration, it can be said that there is a divergence in the meaning-making process, and the interpretive meanings that emerge are very different from the ones that arise from a male reading. Reading as one who is located outside the dominant cultural frame is a process that can challenge claims of universal meaning. It is a

process of putting forward an understanding of a text that relies on a particular stock of cultural knowledge and experience, and it reveals predispositions that underlie ostensibly universal accounts (DeVault, 1990). There is an added layer of interpretation that needs to be taken into account; if we view Gadamer's work on hermeneutics (2006), it is evident that there is a fusion of horizons, a sort of relationship between the interpreter and the text, which is shaped by the interpreter's background and preconceived notions and ideas, and the historical and cultural context of the text itself. Using ethnographic fieldwork to engage with a female audience would bring this relationship to the forefront through the manner in which the participants interpret the narrative of the selected texts in line with their own personal thinking, biases, and more.

Who is the audience?

For the purpose of this research, it was determined that the target participant audience would comprise of professional, working, Indian women between the ages of 20 and 50, located in the UK, with a college level education. The aim was to recruit women who have moved to the UK from India within the last ten years, thus making them migrants and almost diasporic in nature, even though being a part of a diaspora is not something they identify with. Engagement with such an audience would result in data that would reflect changes in patterns and behaviours, if any, as a direct result of migratory flows. The target audience evolved from simply Indian women in the UK to Indian women between the ages of 20 and 50 based in the UK, which would serve as a better and richer audience due to the change in patterns and behaviours as a direct result of migration.

Diasporas are traditionally communities that have been dispersed or forced out of the homeland into foreign lands, that believe that they might never be accepted by the host society they are situated in, and they should continue to maintain support for their homeland (Safran, 1991). This definition was taken forward by Cohen (1997) who proposed that the parameters of what constitutes a diaspora be adjusted to take into account the necessity for a sufficient time period before any community can be described as a diaspora, and there should be indications of a transnational community's strong links to the past that thwart assimilations in the present as well as the future. "At the core of the concept of diaspora lies the image of a remembered home that stands at a distance both temporally and spatially" (Stock, 2010, p.24). The concept of diaspora links to the 'homeland' and the idea of home as a defined identity, when in fact, it is a much more complex and nuanced idea, as it goes beyond the premise of nostalgia. The idea of home as explained by Brah (1996, p.192) must be considered,

> "What is home? On the one hand, 'home' is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of return, even it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of 'origin'. On the other hand, home is

> also a lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, sombre grey skies in the middle of the day… all this, as mediated by the historically specific of everyday social relations. In other words, the varying experiences of pain and pleasures, the terrors and contentments, or the highs and humdrum of everyday lived culture that marks how, for example, a cold winter night might be differently experienced sitting by a crackling fireside in a mansion compared with standing huddled around a makeshift fire on the streets of nineteenth century England".

The idea of home as perceived by the diasporic community is just that: a perception. It is not a fixed idea and can, and will most definitively evolve and change with time, essentially leading to the idea that there is no 'home', and there is no 'going back to the home'. Whereas displacement used to be a major influential factor in the creation of diasporic communities, in a globalised and modern world, "global migration trends have produced transnational diasporic groups related by culture, ethnicity, language, and religion, not only in the sense of 'transnational dispersal' but also in terms of intense and constant interaction at a transnational level" (Tsagarousianou, 2004, p.60). She also argues that,

> "a displaced and dispersed population cannot automatically be identified as a diaspora as it is not sufficient for it, as for any social formation for that matter, objectively to fulfill the material conditions prescribed by a category, such as diaspora in our case. The crucial element that makes the concept meaningful and legitimate to use is their self-mobilization around their awareness of themselves as a diaspora. In other words, it is their ability to imagine themselves as such, to imagine and construct the relevant transnational linkages and to construct the appropriate discourses. It follows that this self-awareness and the process of self-imagination as a diaspora, if they are to be sustained over time, require diasporic institutions, which construct and sustain a diasporic space of communication and exchange where definitions of the diaspora are elaborated and reproduced" (Tsagarousianou, 2004, p.63).

There has been widespread migration of South Asians to the UK since 1947, largely due to greater access to economic opportunities.

> "South Asian diaspora comprise of diasporic people who have originated from the subcontinent that commenced centuries ago as a result of various factors such as economic, social, and political. Starting from the migration of traders from the regions of South Asia in the past to the contemporary migration of highly skilled specialist, semi-skilled and unskilled workers, political refugees, asylum seekers, students, dependents and so on, the South Asian diaspora has been existing as a diverse and heterogenous group, yet they share similar characteristics that bind them together in the diaspora" (Sahoo & Shome, 2021, p.99).

As per the 2021 census, the total population of England and Wales was recorded at 59.6 million. People from Asian ethnic groups made up the second largest percentage of the population (9.3%), out of which 3.1% identified as parts of the Indian ethnic group (Population of England

and Wales, 2021). It was discovered after the recruitment process that the target audience largely comprised women who had migrated to the United Kingdom from 2010 to 2022. As per the aforementioned point, the aim was to have a target audience of middle class women with a college level education to ensure that they would be able to engage with the content of the novels, the added layer of migrant experiences has added dimension and depth to the type of data will be produced. The women selected for the purpose of this research, did not identify with the term 'diaspora' and were more comfortable with the use of 'migrant' to describe themselves and their move from India to the United Kingdom. They are employed, or in full time education, and have assimilated to the host society to the best of their ability and exist in the space they have created for themselves outside the 'homeland'.

The relatively high literacy level, along with the economic condition of being a working middle class woman, would ensure that the urban English-speaking audience could engage with the selected texts and provide insightful feedback about the way in which female protagonists are represented in said texts. The audience was also able to assess and reflect on whether they resonated with the representations they saw or if there was a difference in the way the characters were written versus how they perceived themselves. They were also able to provide insight into whether the texts have shaped the way they see the rest of their gender against the current socio-cultural climate of India. Cohen (1997, p.148) describes the multiple perspectives members of diasporic communities can occupy,

> "many members of diasporic communities are bi- or multilingual. They can spot 'what is missing' in the societies they visit or in which they settle. Often, they are better able to discern what their own group shares with other groups and when its cultural norms and social practices threaten majority groups".

The Indianness of the participants, when situated in the cultural climate of a 'home' that is not entirely their own allows them to see things differently and in a unique perspective. It is also for this reason that language has a significant role to play in the context of this research. Duff (2015, p.59) states,

> "Mobility may lead to the retention of prior languages primarily or the expansion of linguistic repertoires by learning new languages or other varieties of the languages they already know. Alternatively, it can lead to language shift to new languages, and possibly, through that process, as one scenario to cosmopolitan, multifaceted, and multilingual or syncretic (hybrid) identities".

As has been mentioned, the selected novels are written in English but are inherently Indian (see 'Literature Review'), and the interviews with the participants were conducted largely in English.

However, the use of Hindi as a medium of communication in this process was not ignored. If anything, in some instances, it was given precedence over English because, at a socio-cultural level, there are some Indian experiences that cannot be expressed in a language that is 'foreign'. It is also for this reason that when direct quotes from the interviews are used in this research, the language has not been changed, and they have been written in Hindi with English translations. Bartky (1990, p.25) states,

> "a culture has a global character: hence, the limits of my culture are the limits of my world. The subordination of women, then, because it is so pervasive a feature of culture will (if uncontested) appear to be natural – and because it is natural, unalterable".

It is within this framework there is an attempt to understand how much of the behaviours exhibited in Indian society, outside of the homeland but within the cultural context, are naturalised and, if they are indeed, unalterable.

The selected audience for this research comprises 24 women (the recruitment process will be discussed in the next section of this chapter) of Indian origin, between the ages of 20 and 50. All of the participants are a part of the workforce in one form or the other and make financial contributions towards the household expenses (bills, mortgage payments, childcare, etc.); in addition to this, more than half the participants are married and include childcare responsibilities as part of their daily routine. We have observed in the previous section on 'Gender and Power', in great detail, that traditionally, the Indian societal structure places women within the home, and there are patriarchal structures in place to ensure that even if women were to enter the workforce and become members of the 'public domain', the home is still considered to be their primary space. The question, however, is, do gender roles remain the same when an element of migration is included in the narrative of peoples' lives? There has been research done about diaspora and Indian women in the diaspora, which states that Asian immigrant women in their daily lives are cast in traditional roles and encouraged (or forced) to become the 'cultural torch bearers', emblems of what constitutes authentic 'Indianness' in diaspora (Bhattacharjee 1992; Hegde 2000). However, there is also research which suggests that through the process of migration, women are able to achieve a degree of autonomy and power in their households (Pessar, 2003). The idea of women having autonomy due to migration is undoubtedly an interesting notion and is one that was explored during the interview process with the participants and will be discussed at length in the analysis chapters of this research. The educational qualifications of the participants were set in place with the intention of having a literate audience engage with the Dalit literature texts since the hypothesis at the onset of this research was that a certain section of society (referred to as the urban/modern/educated) are able to understand the reality of the Dalit situation and

empathise with it, if not more. The intention was to have participants who possessed the knowledge and emotional quotient to understand the reality of women of the Dalit community and, perhaps, engage in meaningful discourse about how they can potentially be uplifted. However, this hypothesis is not entirely accurate and will be explored in further detail in the qualitative interview analysis chapters of this research.

Audience recruitment process

The participant recruitment process began with in-depth research about book clubs, reading groups, Indian women's associations, and working Indian women's groups across the UK, and there was an attempt to investigate if there was an overlap between the two; to have women who read and engage with fiction on a regular basis and are of Indian origin. This was done primarily in the digital space, via email, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Duff (2015, p.73) states,

> "Digital technologies also provide the means and spaces for exploring and representing linguistic, cultural, and transnational identities and hybridity. They also provide mechanisms for forging a sense of belonging and affinity with others in similar diasporic, transnational, and multilingual situations. Participants' online practices, tools, and spaces, and their relationships with like-minded others in those same spaces, allow them to construct new communities, forms of knowledge, and often playful, syncretic, or blended multilingual textual practices".

In a post-pandemic world, exploring digital communities and digital forms of engagement with traditional textual outputs seemed to be apropos. I discovered the Indian Women in London Book Club, Reading Indian Women Society, and a few other groups while attempting to locate Indian women's associations in London. After emailing and sending direct messages via social media to over five groups, I was able to make contact with Lovina Shenoy, the founder of Indian Women in London Book Club. A phone conversation with Lovina, in between her childcare responsibilities, led to the discovery that not only did we live in the same neighbourhood in London, but that we also hail from the same city in India. An instant connection was formed that made her more receptive to the idea of a researcher joining their reading group and speaking to its members. She was able to add me to the WhatsApp group, and I was able to speak to over 250 Indian women at once via text. Over six weeks, I was able to recruit 18 women from the book club, all of whom were Indian and based in the United Kingdom and had an interest in reading and engaging with Indian literature in English. The women ranged from the age of 20 to 50, as was intended in the initial planning stages of the project. I was able to recruit three women from a book launch event who were enthusiastic at the prospect of having the opportunity to engage with novels they had never read before, discuss them, and share their points of view. I was able to recruit six other women through word of mouth by sending a

registration of interest form to acquaintances and friends. Since the intent was to have 24 female participants, having additional participants only ensures that the data set is rich and varied.

The aim of the chosen method is to combine elements of ethnography and phenomenology in order to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of the participants and engage with them critically in the cultural context of what it means to be an Indian woman and, more importantly, what it means to be an Indian woman living away from the homeland, thus, making it a migrant experience. As has been mentioned in the earlier section, purposeful sampling was utilised during the recruitment process, and the number of participants was capped at 24 since their relation to the reading of Indian fiction, age, and ethnicity were the key considerations. The recruitment process and the subsequent interview process (which will be discussed in the next section) was also reflexive in nature. I was able to maintain a daily log of the positives and negatives of the entire process. After extensive research, it was observed that the Indian diasporic woman has rarely, if ever, been questioned about her perspectives on the representation she sees in forms of literature beyond diasporic Indian literature**,** thus making this research unique in its approach to different types of Indian literature, and not a singular view.

But who is the audience?

24 Indian women living in the UK between the ages of 20-50 were recruited through different avenues for the purpose of this research. The commonality between them was of course, that they were of Indian origin, had spent their formative years in India before moving to the UK in the last 10-15 years. They also shared a deep love of literature and welcomed the opportunity to discuss and share their perspectives with a virtual stranger. It would be remiss to not bring forward the differences between these women. While they all originated from India, they grew up in different cities in India, with a mix of Tier 1 and Tier 2 cities. "Tier 1 cities in India are the largest and most developed cities, including places like Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Kolkata. Tier 2 cities are the next level of urban centres, which are also fairly developed and include cities like Pune, Jaipur, Lucknow, and Chandigarh" (Sonawane, 2023). Out of 24 women, 10 originated from Tier 2 cities, and 14 from Tier 1 cities.

Since one of the focus points for this research has been the divide between the upper caste and lower caste, it is essential to point out that not one of the 24 women hails from a lower caste background. All 24 of the women identified as being Hindu, and out of the 24 women, 18 admitted to being from an upper caste, Brahmin family, three did not know what caste they

belonged to, and three did not wish to disclose their caste since they believed that they did not consider themselves to be a part of the caste system and saw no merit in discussing it. What was fascinating to observe with the women who admitted to being Brahmins was the use of the phrase "We're technically Brahmins, but we're not because our specific subcaste is higher than the Brahmins". The statement made me, as the researcher, wonder if I had been misinformed about the varna system in India, and that perhaps a caste higher than the Brahmins did exist. However, it soon became apparent that much like the very man-made varna system, the subcaste categorisation which is extremely convoluted and intricate is also man-made, designed to place certain sections of society in a 'superior' position when compared to other castes or subcastes[19]. The caste of the audience was not addressed directly but instead teased out through questions about their last name, the languages they spoke growing up, the food they had growing up, and the specific religious holidays they celebrated. It was more of an attempt to see if the audience would admit to their caste without being asked or prompted too much, which in the case of majority of the women, did happen.

For this research, there was an intentional approach with ensuring that the participants being recruited belonged to the middle class, which while not a unique concept by any means, differs slightly in the Indian context. Paul and Ahalya (2017, p.2) observe,

> "economic security alone is not what makes a household belong to a middle class. There are other social and cultural aspects characteristic of the middle class. The middle class are supposed to possess at least some benchmark level of human development standards. For example, the parents of children belonging to a middle class family possess at least some minimum educational attainment which entitles the child with access to better education and social networks for further upward mobility. Similarly, a middle class household has some basic household amenities necessary for enjoying a reasonably comfortable standard of living".

Within this definition, all 24 women hail from a family where at least one, if not both parents possess a university degree. Out of 24, 22 women had at least a postgraduate degree (out of the 22, two were PhD holders) while two were towards the end of their undergraduate degrees. All 24 women were capable of conversing in English naturally but chose to switch to Hindi when discussing issues or situations that are so inherently Indian that they could not be translated into any other language. The purpose of ensuring their familiarity with English was due to the selected novels.

[19] My own sub-caste as a Hindu does not exist in the varna system because the origin of my ancestors can be traced back to the early Indus Valley civilisation, which makes the process even more convoluted, with my grandparents being born and raised in Pakistan in a pre-partition era and migrating to India in 1947, leaving their homeland behind.

Limitations of the audience recruitment process

The audience recruitment process was not without its challenges; at the onset of this research, it was determined that the fieldwork be placed in Mumbai, and the intention was to interview women in the state of Maharashtra. The aim was to carry out the fieldwork in collaboration with the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in Deonar so as to ensure access to women from upper caste and lower caste communities. However, after a lot of back and forth and some rather apparent ideological differences with the advisor appointed by TISS, it became very clear that I would have to change the scope of the fieldwork, and I decided to conduct the research with Indian women living in the UK. The research process to locate book clubs in the UK that were specifically for Indian women was relatively simple, but out of the five groups that I reached out to, Indian Women in London Book Club was the only one I was able to contact to recruit my audience. The aim was to try and locate not just upper caste women, but also Dalit women living in the UK as well, to provide a more robust and holistic understanding of the issues that were being discussed through the framework of the selected novels. After extensive online research, I was able to find the contact information for the Anti Caste Discrimination Alliance (ACDA), Voices of Dalit International (VODI), and Dalit Solidarity Network (DSN); all organisations based in the UK that advocate for caste inclusivity, and made repeated attempts to get in contact with them to try and find a way to work together or speak to some of their members about the research. However, I was met with a stone wall and was told quite clearly by ACDA that there would be no conversations facilitated with members and received no response from VODI. All attempts to reach out via email or telephone were futile, and I eventually had to give up my efforts and focus on the book clubs that were providing me access to upper caste Indian women who were more than willing to engage with the selected novels and discuss their perspectives and opinions. The lack of female Dalit voices was a point of concern initially, but it does present as an area of further study and research for the future. It is due to the lack of female Dalit voices that the research and findings are able to focus on the upper caste attitudes towards lower caste issues through the lens of Dalit literature; an area that would have been severely underdeveloped otherwise.

I, also, cannot ignore my own positionality as a middle class Indian woman with a deep love for literature as I embarked on this journey of interviewing my selected audience. My middle-class upbringing and Indian values shaped my reading of novels, thematic analysis, and preparation for discussions. My Indian social and cultural background also influenced how I contextualize the texts, and my middle-class status consciously affected my engagement with both the texts and the audiences, while my distance from my caste status allowed me some level of unbiasedness through this process as I engaged with Dalit literature. This does not come from a

place of privilege, but instead, from a space of wanting to educate myself about issues that I did not have sufficient knowledge about as it was not something I had been exposed to previously.

Interviews

The interviews conducted were semi-structured in nature, and the questions for the participants were not just focused on the actual narrative of the texts but also based on the experiences of the participants growing up in an Indian societal structure and their perspectives on the representation of female characters as well as the more significant issues represented in the narratives and whether they have any merit in modern day India. There were a set of pre-defined questions that were referred to as a guide. The semi-structured nature of the interview allowed me to be responsive to the experiences being shared by my participants while also keeping the larger picture of the research in mind. The interviews were conducted primarily in English, with some amounts of Hindi being used as a medium of communication by myself and the participants. The importance of the use of Hindi has been stated previously, and it was found that some of the sentiments expressed by the participants could not be communicated in English, and their true meaning only comes to the forefront in Hindi.

Some of the interview questions were:

- Do you think there is a certain mindset in India that still places women as the property of men? Why do you think that is?
- What did you think of Draupadi's swayamvar?
- Draupadi was treated as property and lost in a bet – do Indian men tend to think of their women as disposable property?
- Rahel talks a lot about Love Laws – are there any Love Laws you're aware of?
- Have you experienced patriarchy at home on a daily basis?
- Are domestic roles still gendered? If so, how? And why do you think that might be?
- What do you think of Zoya's inner monologues? Is there any sense of relatability?
- What do you think about Nikhil and his attitude towards Zoya?
- Is cricket a big deal in your house? Is there any sense of national pride associated with it?
- Do you think Nalini should have told Maya the truth about her father?
- What do you think is the similarity between Nalini and Maya, and even Ammu?
- What do you think of Maya's life choices? Were they different from her mother's?
- *Sangati* must have been a surprising read – what was your main take away from it?
- What did you think of Mariamma's story?

- What was your immediate reaction to *Coming out as Dalit?* Was there any introspection?
- Is caste visible outside India in your opinion?

These are some of the questions that were asked and used as a framework to guide the conversation. There were several themes and points of conversation that came to the surface during the interview process and will be explored and discussed further in the analysis section of this research. Over half the interviews were conducted online in line with the convenience of the participants and to allow them to manage their daily schedules without too much interruption. Some of the behaviours that were exhibited during the online interview process would not have occurred in a face-to-face setting, and vice versa. Adams and Skop (2008, p.118) assert the necessity of considering participants' digital personas:

> "people's ability to act through the Internet, or rather through a range of different computer network applications (email, chat rooms, blogs, ordinary websites, sites supporting shopping and money transfer, sites supporting the search for a marriage partner, etc) helps define who and what they are, and therefore becomes a part of their 'personal' identities".

This notion of performativity on the Internet as a reflection of personal identities will be explored in the qualitative interview analysis of this research at a later stage.
The next two chapters will explore the themes that emerge from a close reading of the novels. For ease of understanding, the themes have been merged where appropriate to provide a holistic, and overarching view of the situations that are deemed relevant to modern day Indian society.

Chapter 5
Thematic Analysis - Unveiling the layers: examining patriarchy, gendered violence, and commodification of women in India

The Indian novel in English has long existed since precolonial times but saw a massive shift in narrative structure, impact, and representation in the 1980s following Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. The origin of the classic or postmodern novel in English in India can be traced back to the beginning of the 1980s, which is described as the post-modern era, where the nation began to position itself as more multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-lingual. Narratives in this genre still had references to feudal times and post-partition sensibilities and spoke of an India that was finding its way out of the clutches of elitism but was still a while away from globalisation and modernisation. This type of literature was written for the Indian elite that had a great degree of ease with the English language (see 'Mainstream Indian Literature'). Popular literature, or popular fiction within the Indian context refers to the type of writing that appeals to the masses. It is intrinsically a part and parcel of popular culture and is very different from classic literature based on the kind of audience it caters to, the use of language, and the representation of socio-political issues in the narrative structures. Popular fiction novels in India revolve around middle class urban youth trying to navigate their personal and professional lives, while dealing with very urban and modern issues. The type of fiction arose in a globalised India after the 1990s but gained immense popularity after the release of Chetan Bhagat's *Five Point Someone* in 2004. For the purpose of this research, Dalit literature has also been selected as area of study to ensure there is a robust and well-rounded understanding of the issues faced by Indian women, at various economic, cultural, and social levels. Dalit literature is the literature of oppression and resistance, but it is also the literature of liberation. Dalit literature's point of origin can be traced to the 1960s as educated Dalits were able to articulate their experiences and came to the realisation that their education and employment status had no impact on the type of prejudice they still had to face (Zelliot, 2003). Dalit literature also arose out of the sheer need of the community to rectify the way they were being represented in the dominant discourse; they were either viewed as the 'lesser' caste or as victims who were only oppressed and incapable of making their voices heard. While the history of Dalit literature can be traced back over 2000 years, modern Dalit literature was a by-product of the Dalit Panther Movement of the 1970s and was inspired by the African American writings of the west and was representative of a fighting spirit, pride, and sophisticated creativity (Kandasamy, 2009). The aim of this chapter is to conduct a rigorous and critical thematic analysis of the six selected novels across the different genres that have been identified.

The analysis will be conducted in a linear manner, based on specific themes that have emerged upon multiple readings of the novels as opposed to breaking down the themes in each novel genre-wise. There is an attempt to tell a story through this type of approach to the analysis; the story being that there are several issues which form an inherent part of Indian society that are gendered and need to be addressed from the perspective of the gender most affected by this disparity. The novels that have been selected for the purpose of this research are *The God of Small Things, The Palace of Illusions, 100 Shades of White, The Zoya Factor, Sangati*, and *Coming out as Dalit: A Memoir.*

The Palace of Illusions was written in 2008 by novelist and poet, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, and was published by DoubleDay Publishing, an American publisher that is a part of Random House. The novel is Divakaruni's attempt to re-tell the Mahabharata, one of the greatest epics in Indian mythology from the point of view of Draupadi, one of the central female characters of the narrative who has not been given her due importance in the original. Indian mythology is a myriad of life lessons that take shape in the form of stories and narratives. The Mahabharata more often than not becomes about the Great War of Kurukshetra fought by paternal first cousins of the same family, the Kauravas and the Pandavas and their attempt at upholding their kshatriya dharma (their 'warrior dharma'). The Mahabharata, while being mythological, holds great relevance in the political landscape of India, and is anchored in real human beings. Published in 1997 and winner of The Booker Prize, *The God of Small Things* written by Arundhati Roy is the perfect example of a novel that falls under the category of classic or postmodern literature. The novel is set in Kerala, India in 1969 against the backdrop of the Marxist protests in Kerala, and is the story of fraternal twins, Rahel and Estha whose lives get uprooted due to a series of events that include betrayal and revenge (Dizayi, 2021). Rahel and Estha live with their mother Ammu in Ayemenem, Kerala, in the home of their maternal grandparents, Pappachi and Mammachi. After the accidental death of their cousin, Sophie Mol, the twins are separated, and Estha is sent away to live with their alcoholic father. The relationship between Estha and Rahel is somewhat like the relationship between Draupadi and Dhrishtadyumna explored in the earlier section; they had a connection that went beyond the relationship normally shared by siblings. But in the case of Rahel and Estha, they are physically incapable of moving forward in their lives without the other, whereas Draupadi and Dhrishtadyumna knew from the onset of their birth that they were both destined for great, but separate things. There are several characters around which the narrative revolves, but at the heart of the story are the twins, Rahel and Estha, their mother Ammu, and her lover, Velutha the Untouchable. The novel is essentially about the Love Laws that govern the social sphere of the Syrian Christian community in Kerala, where there is a distinct differentiation between

Touchables and Untouchables. Velutha the Paravan is an Untouchable, while Ammu and her children are, for all intents and purposes, the Touchables.

The Zoya Factor written by Anuja Chauhan was published in 2008 by HarperCollins India and truly encompasses what it means to be Indian. The narrative, which will be analysed in detail in this section, focuses on the life of young Zoya Solanki, a junior advertising executive who ends up becoming, through a hilarious twist of fate, the lucky mascot for the Indian cricket team, firmly against the wishes of the Indian skipper, as they make their way to the World Cup. The novel very firmly falls within the popular genre of literature, and more specifically within what is often referred to as the 'chick-lit' genre. *100 Shades of White* written by Preethi Nair was published in 2003 by HarperCollins UK and is a sound example of diasporic fiction within the category of popular literature. It is the story of three generations of Indian women originally from Kerala in the southern peninsula of the country and follows their journey as they learn the true meaning of forgiveness, embracing one's roots and family. Narrated from alternating points of view, it focuses on the lives of Nalini and her daughter Maya, with Nalini's mother, Ammu, being the force in their lives that does not speak much but guides and nurtures her daughter and granddaughter through her stories and wisdom about food, love, and life. The story takes the reader through various geographical spaces, right from Mumbai to Kerala to the East End of London, and even Spain.

Sangati was written by Bama in 1994 and was originally published in Bama's native language, Tamil. It was later translated into English in 2004 by Laxmi Holmstrom, with a preface written by Bama and was published in India by Oxford University Press. The novel is autobiographical in the sense that it is told from the perspective of Bama, who is a Dalit Christian from Tamil Nadu, and focuses on the lives of other Dalit women in her community, such as her grandmother and neighbours. *Sangati* falls under the genre of Dalit literature within the scope of this research, but more accurately, it falls in the life writing genre. The narrative is broken down into 12 chapters that narrate different events, or 'sangat', thus, explaining the title, about the lives of different women in the Paraiyar community and the kind of oppression they must face daily. *Sangati* is a life narrative as it brings to light the experiences of an entire community and not just an individual, which also happens to be one of the characteristic features of Dalit literature. "Sangati is perhaps the autobiography of a community. Sangati is uniquely placed in contributing both to the Dalit movement and to the women's movement. It disobeys received notions of what a novel should be" (Latha, 2017, p.122). Published in 2019, Yashica Dutt's *Coming out as Dalit: A Memoir*, is as the name suggests, an autobiographical narrative of Dutt's life, growing up as a Dalit in Rajasthan, and the lengths she and her mother went to, to hide her

Chamar caste status. The narrative of her life is interspersed with a history lesson of sorts, shedding light on the true conditions of Dalits in Indian society right from the inception of the caste system all the way through to modern-day India. While the book does focus on the collective consciousness of the Dalit community, it uses Dutt's life and her personal struggles as points of reference around which the community issues are disseminated. It is a deeply personal story of coming to term with one's identity that also calls for social change. In essence, the narrative is largely centred around Dutt's efforts to hide her caste identity all through her childhood and a significant portion of her adulthood. Veroneka and Vijayalakshmi (2022, p.4) best describe it, "Yashica Dutt describes her life incidents through this memoir which throws light on the identity crisis, and deserted condition of a Dalit when they camouflage in society". Dutt writes of her "persistent pretence of being from a superior caste, and her wilful denial. She writes of the incredible sense of confidence she felt when she stood up for herself and her community, shrugging off the fake upper caste identity she had created for herself" (Veroneka and Vijayalakshmi, 2022, p.4). The narrative structure of Coming out as Dalit is very different from that of Sangati, as it follows a linear and chronological order and "stories of her…[Dutt's]…life are chronologically narrated and interspersed with tales of the contemporary plight of Dalits" (Browarczyk, 2022, p.328).

The next two chapters are going to explore the themes that arose from a close reading and analysis of the chosen texts and contextualise them against the literature that exists in the field and current Indian society. Some of the themes that are going to be explored are: patriarchal structure of Indian society, violence against women, commodification of women, superstitious nature of Indian society, the use of language as markers, modernity in the face of tradition, and women's autonomy. The aim of this chapter is to understand and explore the various levels at which the subjugation and oppression of Indian women operates and manifests in society: the themes being analysed are patriarchy, violence against women, and commodification of women. Patriarchy is a result of the commodification of women, which comes about due to the gendered nature of violence against women, which stems from a patriarchal mindset; the three are so inextricably linked that is impossible to understand one without the other. They manifest in Indian society in a cyclical manner making it nearly impossible to speak of one without referring to the other.

5.1 Indian society and Patriarchy

One of the most significant themes in *The Palace of Illusions* is the patriarchal nature of Indian society and women's inferior status and position within that society. Even though she was fated

to change the course of history, Draupadi was treated as if she were an inferior being to her brother. Divakaruni flips the way in which Draupadi has been portrayed, and for a change allows her to be a woman who is aware of her own strengths and unwilling to accept anything less than what she is meant for. Singh (2015) is of a similar opinion as she observes that from the onset of the novel there is a sense of importance tied to the relationship between identity, gender, and names. Draupadi is jealous of the autonomy and power that is reflected in her brother's name, while hers is simply a symbol of patriarchy. The reflexive nature of the narrative allows the reader an opportunity to understand that Draupadi does not see herself as any different from her brother and wishes to embrace her fate and destiny even at the cost of breaking societal conventions that are imposed on her. It speaks to the issue of gender parity which will be explored in detail in the analysis of the interviews conducted in later chapters.

Another form in which patriarchy manifests in *The Palace of Illusions* is the way in which women are placed in society in the context of the roles they are meant to perform; there are defined gender roles. King Drupad does not believe that Panchaali should have a similar kind of education as Dhrishtadyumna as it would go against the norm. He makes allowances for her to attend some of Dhri's lessons upon the insistence of Krishna; it is allowed only when another man pushes for it and asks for it to happen. Additionally, Dhrishtadyumna who is Panchaali's most ardent supporter also does not necessarily agree with the need for her to be taught anything other than the conventional skills that women need to have.

> "At first, no matter how much I begged, King Drupad had balked at the thought of me studying with my brother. A girl being taught what a boy was supposed to learn? Such a thing had never been heard of in the royal family of Panchaal!" (Divakaruni, 2008, p.23). "Dhri, too, sometimes wondered if I wasn't learning the wrong things, ideas that would only confuse me as I took up a woman's life with its prescribed, restrictive laws. But I hungered to know about the amazing, mysterious world that extended past what I could imagine, the world of the senses and of that which lay beyond them. And so, I refused to give up the lessons, no matter who disapproved" (Divakaruni, 2008, p.23).

The chosen text is representative of two different things: one being Dhri's reluctance to let his sister learn the same things as him as he thought they would get in the way of her living what was meant to be a woman's life. The second, and the most important thing is Panchaali's desire for more; her desire to learn more, be more, and never settle for the kind of life that convention and society dictated. She had strong notions of what was right for her, and they differed from what society had decided on her behalf, and she displayed the strength to fight for it. Such a disparity manifests in modern India as well, with girls having significantly lesser access to education as compared to boys. "Gender disparity is evident in India's childhood literacy rates. 82% of boys are literate and only 65% of girls can read and write, according to the 2011 Census

of India" (Nagar, 2021). There is research to prove that one of the reasons for this disparity is economic challenges. Fors & Lindskog (2023, p.1433) explain "economic development appears to reduce preferential treatment of boys. When families become richer, they can afford to invest (equally) in all their children". Even though India has seen significant movement towards some semblance of gender parity, there is still a long way to go; a sentiment that has been echoed time and time again during the interview process for this research, and will be discussed in further detail.

It is a comment made by Dhri's tutor that truly brings to light how women were perceived in society. According to the tutor, "a kshatriya woman's highest purpose in life is to support the warriors in her life: her father, brother, husbands, and sons. If they should be called to war, she must be happy that they have the opportunity to fulfil a heroic destiny. Instead of praying for their safe return, she must pray that they die with glory on the battlefield" (Divakaruni, 2008, p.26). The roles in the narrative are very gendered, and in a great sense, a reflection of Indian society even in modern times. One of the defining characteristics of the first and second wave of feminism in India was allowing women entry into the public sphere instead of being simply relegated to the private sphere; a cry to break away from the conventional gendered roles. Chatterjee (1990, pp.238-239) explained it best in his examination of the nationalist struggle in India during colonial times, and how the inside and outside spheres were separated.

> "The world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents our inner spiritual self, our true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world – and woman is its representation. And so, we get an identification of social roles by gender to correspond with the separation of the social space into ghar and bahir".

This is an accurate representation of the society described in *The Palace of Illusions*; the outside world is filled with hate, revenge, anger, treachery and war, and is only meant for the kshatriyas, the men. The idea of 'ghar' (home, signifying the inside) and 'bahir' (outside) will be explored in further detail in the qualitative interview analysis chapter of this research. The inside is representative of tradition, culture and all things spiritual and is meant to be safeguarded and upheld by the women, thus confirming the social roles that have been assigned to the different genders in India since Vedic times. As Chakravarti (2018, p.70) argues, this lack of autonomy is the very fabric of women's social existence,

> "Both in terms of economic autonomy, through a denial of control over productive resources, and autonomy in law, women were made appendages of men. Indeed, women

> themselves were the property, both in terms of their reproductive and their productive labour, of men. Even in terms of the performance of the major domestic rituals women did not have autonomy – they were part of the domestic rituals but could not perform rituals by themselves or for themselves".

Patriarchy and men's control over women is also brought forward through Panchaali's swayamvar. Swayamvar is the process through which a bride chooses a groom from a group of eligible men that have been invited by her parents to participate in the ceremony. Traditionally, the bride would make her choice by putting a garland over the man she wished to wed. In mythology, the choice is an illusion. In the case of Panchaali, it was a political ploy by King Drupad to secure his future. The only stipulation of Panchaali's swayamvar was that the man who would win an impossible physical test would ultimately win Panchaali's hand in marriage; a condition that was set since the only person who could accomplish the task would be Arjun, the Pandava prince who also happened to be Drona's student. The political implications of a marriage between Panchaali and Arjun would serve in the best interests of King Drupad and no one else. Panchaali sees her father's manipulation for what it is and is resentful about being used in one of his games. "We're nothing but pawns for King Drupad to sacrifice when it's most to his advantage. At least I'm just going to be married off. You – he's willing to push you to your death just so he can have his revenge" (Divakaruni, 2008, p.58). Panchaali is well aware of her fate as well as her brothers' and knows that her fate is ultimately controlled by the decisions the men in her life make. The entire incident with Panchaali's swayamvar is indicative of the true extent of patriarchy in Indian society and aligns with the excerpts from the *Manusmriti* that refer to women having to live under the control of the men in their lives.

> "As a child, she must remain under her father's control; as a young woman, under her husband's; and when her husband is dead, under her son's. She must never seek to live independently" (Manusmriti, 2005: 5:148).

This kind of a swayamvar falls within the realm of an arranged marriage wherein the parents of the bride or groom arrange the marriage of their child with a person of their choosing. The boundaries of arranged marriage have changed to a certain extent in the past few years, but we are still very far away from complete choice for women. Rakshit (2023) observes that marriages have been a means of maintaining caste endogamy with their design being one that curbs women's sexuality through notions of purity. The main aim of an arranged marriage is endogamy which is usually hidden under the garb of discipline, honour and of course, tradition.

Draupadi's arranged marriage was not relegated to Vedic times, but has in fact, found its way into modern India, and as stated, the boundaries and rituals may have shifted but the practice is

very much alive, and does not favour women; this is explored in detail in the qualitative interview analysis chapters of this research. The definition of a good woman, as per the *Manusmriti*, is someone who "controls her mind, speech, and body, and is never unfaithful to her husband" (2005: 5:165). Divakaruni defies this definition and paints her Panchaali as someone who is not always good-natured. Divakaruni's Panchaali is more three-dimensional than the original because she is someone who does not hesitate in expressing anger and ire, and in some cases, not obeying her husbands' wishes. In a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2019-2020 in a pre-pandemic India, it was found that nine out of 10 Indians agree with the idea that a wife should always obey her husband (Ramesh, 2022). It is evident that the mindset around what constitutes a 'good wife' in the Indian context has not made too much progress since Vedic times. It could also be said that the women interviewed for this research do not constitute as 'good women' as they speak their mind freely, without fear of any kind.

The main female characters in *The God of Small Things* novel that suffer under a patriarchal societal structure are Mammachi (Rahel's grandmother), Baby Kochamma (Rahel's great aunt), Ammu and Rahel. The other female characters in the novel that are of paramount importance are Margaret Kochamma (Chacko's wife), and Sophie Mol (Chacko's daughter), who are never outright discriminated against but suffer just as much as the rest of the women, if not more. All the women face oppression and subjugation in one manner or the other, for no reason other than the fact that they are women, and at the mercy of the men around them. Their oppression is unique to them and so they will be examined individually.

Mammachi

Soshamma Ipe, or Mammachi, Rahel and Estha's maternal grandmother was oppressed and abused by her husband right from the start of their marriage. Roy refers to Mammachi's abuse as something that was a part of their lives for as long as they could remember. John Ipe, or Pappachi as he was known, did not like the fact that his wife had started her own business after his retirement. He was resentful of her independence.

> "He had always been a jealous man, so he greatly resented the attention his wife was suddenly getting[..] Every night he beat her with a brass flower vase. The beatings weren't new. What was new was only the frequency with which they took place. One night Pappachi broke the bow of Mammachi's violin and threw it in the river" (Roy, 1997, p.22).

Pappachi was resentful of the success Mammachi was having with her pickle business and wasted no opportunity to make this known to her. The extent to which he would go to humiliate and oppress her without physically harming her can be viewed as petty and almost childish.

> "In the evenings, when he knew visitors were expected, he would sit on the verandah and sew buttons that weren't missing onto his shirts, to create the impression that Mammachi neglected him. To some degree he did succeed in further corroding Ayemenem's view of working wives" (Roy, 1997, p.22).

In response, Mammachi repressed her anger at her husband and unleashed it on anyone who dared to defy societal laws that she deemed acceptable. She favoured her son over her daughter, half-British Sophie Mol over half-Hindu Rahel and Estha. She tolerated the untouchable Paravans if they were of use to her, but the moment she finds out that one of them is having an affair with her divorced daughter, she turns against them. Pawar (2014) remarks that Mammachi would only project her repressed anger onto people she considered inferior to her, like Ammu or her children, but in front of people like husband, she would be submissive. She would hide her oppressive nature under the guise of being a good Christian or of being a liberal, but the fact of the matter is that she truly believed the untouchables were inferior to her and she was rooted at the epicentre of the caste system hierarchy. This will be explained further in the next sections through the lens of sexual exploitation of women, and caste discrimination.

Baby Kochamma

Navomi Ipe, or Baby Kochamma, Rahel and Estha's grand aunt is for all intents and purposes, the grand villain in *The God of Small Things*. However, she is also an extremely oppressed character who gets subjugated from a young age onwards, which leads her to becoming bitter and resentful towards anyone who tries to exhibit their individual identity and desire. In her youth, Baby Kochamma had fallen in love with Father Mulligan, an Irish monk and in an attempt to gain his favour, she converted and became a Roman Catholic much to the displeasure of her Syrian-Christian father. However, Father Mulligan, despite being extremely attracted to Baby Kochamma, did not return her advances. It is this inability to acquire what she truly desired that leads Baby Kochamma to become the villain she ends up as. Pawar (2014, p.562) states that Baby Kochamma was jealous people like Ammu and pitied herself. She would constantly remind Ammu and her children that a daughter who is divorced has no right to be in her parents' house. Baby Kochamma was a rebel in her youth and she opposed traditions such as an arranged marriage, and even went against her father to convert her religion to Catholicism. It is only when she accepts her lot in life of being a 'man-less' woman that she adopts a hard stance and condemns people who break the rules. Roy describes this pattern of behaviour quite succinctly. "She's living her life backwards, Rahel thought. It was a curiously apt observation. Baby Kochamma had lived her life backwards. As a young woman she had renounced the material world, and now, as an old one, she seemed to embrace it. She hugged it and it hugged her back" (Roy, 1997, p.11).

As a young woman, Baby Kochamma was quite a rule-breaker and can almost be seen as Ammu's predecessor when it comes to indulging in forbidden relationships that are against the Love Laws. Al-Quaderi and Islam (2011, p.70) observe,

> "While it is true that Baby Kochamma does not emblematise any kind of rebellion against the social order, her love for Father Mulligan does not lead to definite changes in her life, many of which are subversion of the established social order. For example, despite her verbal and actual conformity, she transgresses the borders of religion, community and caste. Her conversion to Roman Catholicism is not just a change of denomination but implies a rejection of her own history".

Despite this rebellious youth, Baby Kochamma is the perfect example of someone who cannot stand it when other women try to express their desires since hers were left unfulfilled. Much like Mammachi, Baby Kochamma was also oppressed, and in turns, ends up becoming an oppressor herself.

Ammu

Rahel and Estha's mother, Ammu is possibly one of the most oppressed women in *The God of Small Things*, on every level possible, by every person in her life, with the exception of her lover, Velutha, who himself is oppressed due to his caste status. When Ammu is young, she is denied education because her father thinks it would be a waste, while her brother, Chacko is a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford. "Ammu finished her schooling the same year that her father retired from his job in Delhi and moved to Ayemenem. Pappachi insisted that a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl, so Ammu had no choice but to leave Delhi and move with them" (Roy, 1997, p.18). This representation aligns with Panchaali's, and the aforementioned point of boys being given easier and more access to education in India when compared to girls. In a country like India, money spent on a boy's education is considered an investment, and a waste when it is spent on a girl's education; a notion that will be discussed in the interview analysis chapters. Ammu chose to marry a Hindu man, despite knowing that her parents would not approve because she truly did not believe that she had any other option and needed a way to escape her life in Ayemenem. She later discovered that her husband was an alcoholic and divorced him when he attempted to barter Ammu with his boss in exchange for keeping his job at the tea estate he worked at. When she returned home with the twins, she was unwelcome. "Pappachi would not believe her story – not because he thought well of her husband, but simply because he didn't believe that an Englishman, any Englishman, would covet another's wife" (Roy, 1997, p.20). Pappachi would believe in the honour of a man he had never met, rather than placing his belief in his own daughter, simply because of the colour of his skin. The Ipe family, and Pappachi especially, had a very Anglicised view of the world.

Ammu works alongside Chacko in the pickle factory owned by Mammachi but has no right to inherit the property due to the outdated inheritance laws of India (see 'Gender and Power'), a fact that she is always reminded by her brother. As Pawar (2014, p.563) reflects

> "Ammu's marginalisation is also quite obvious; she is a divorced woman with two children to take care of. Ammu's brother reminds her children that their mother has no 'Locus standi', no legal rights to inherit the factory or the house for instance. She is also cornered by the other family members and her being treated as an outcast in her own family clearly defines her position in the family and society".

This aligns with the research mentioned earlier that it was only in 2005 that amendments were made to the law to allow women to have a share in the inheritance of family property (Menon, 2020). She is further discriminated against when her affair with Velutha is discovered. Her open defiance against the Love Laws of the Syrian Christian society stipulate that she be harshly punished. Once Mammachi and Baby Kochamma find out about Ammu and Velutha's affair, they waste no time in dolling out punishment by locking Ammu in a room while they weave their web of lies to portray Velutha as a corrupt murderer.

> "The bedroom with blue curtains and yellow wasps that worried the windowpanes. The bedroom whose walls would soon learn their harrowing secrets. The bedroom into which Ammu would first be locked and then lock herself. Whose door Chacko, crazed by grief, four days after Sophie Mol's funeral would batter down. "Get out of my house before I break every bone in your body!" My house. My pineapples. My pickle" (Roy, 1997, p.105).

Ammu's ultimate punishment for daring to defy the 'Love Laws' is a lonely and pitiful death, in a strange hotel room without her children.

Within the Paraiyar community in *Sangati*, gender discrimination begins from birth and marks its way all through a Dalit woman's life. From the time of birth, girl babies are paid less attention to than boy babies. They are treated with a sense of indifference even as infants, and this distinction becomes even more obvious and pronounced as they grow up.

> "When they are infants in arms, they never let the boy babies cry. If a boy baby cries, he is instantly picked up and given milk. It is not so with girls. Even with breast-feeding, it is the same story; a boy is breast-fed longer. With girls, they wean them quickly, making them forget the breast. If the boys catch an illness or a fever, they will run around and nurse them with the greatest care. If it's a girl, they'll do it half-heartedly" (Bama, 2004, p.7).
>
> "It's the same when the children are a bit older, as well. Boys are given more respect. They'll eat as much as they wish and run off to play. As for the girls, they must stay at home and keep on working all the time, cleaning vessels, drawing water, sweeping the house, gathering firewood, washing clothes, and so on" (Bama, 2004, p.7).

Bama also then goes on to refer to the difference in games played by the boys and girls. Boys would be allowed to run around and play with marbles, while the girls would have to play cooking or getting married games. She also discusses the segregation in her house and not just in the community. “My Paatti was no exception in all this. She cared for her grandsons much more than she cared for us. If she brought anything home when she returned from work, it was always the grandsons she called first” (Bama, 2004, p.7).

During the Mariamma incident, which will be analysed later, Bama discusses women’s role in the village council meetings; the role being non-existent. She discusses how the men did not even want the women to be present and hear the proceedings. "'Will you she-donkeys get out of here or do we have to stamp on you? The more we drive the wretches away, the more they come back and make trouble’. Once again, the women were silenced” (Bama, 2004, p.23). It is the use of coarse and foul language that brings attention to the fact that Dalit women are socially excluded by men, even within their own community. There is a clear divide in the way the Dalit men and women are treated not just by the upper castes, but also by each other. Within the women, there is a sense of camaraderie since they do not get any form of respect from the men in their community.

5.2 Violence Against Women

India has long grappled with issues of violence against women, including but not limited to domestic violence, sexual violence, and dowry-related crimes, among others. In a report published in 2022, the BBC mined the data published by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) of India and discovered that of the six million crimes that were recorded in India in the year 2021, 428,278 were crimes against women, which is a rise of 26.35% over six years (between 2016 and 2021). The police recorded 31,878 rape cases in 2021, which is an increase from the 28,153 cases reported the previous year. Violence inside the home, which is defined as cruelty by the husband, or his relatives, has consistently been the highest reported violent crime against women in India. The report also goes on to illustrate that in a government survey, more than 40% women and 38% men believed that it was acceptable for a man to beat his wife if she neglected her home, refused sex, did not cook properly for her husband or if she showed any disrespect to her in-laws (Pandey, 2022). Historically, Indian society has had a significantly negative reputation for the way it treats women, and an extensive number of fictional narratives have also been written which represent this mindset of treating women as objects that can be violated at the whims of men.

While there are no direct mentions of physical or sexual violence against most upper caste women in *The Palace of Illusions*, the same, unfortunately, cannot be said for Draupadi. There are several incidents that allude to emotional manipulation, there is one central incident which is the defining moment of the narrative that can very easily be categorised as sexual assault: the 'cheerharan' or the disrobing of Draupadi in the middle of the Kaurava court. Due to circumstances out of her control, Draupadi was wagered and lost in a game of dice by her husband, Yudhisthir. She was dragged to the court and disrobed of her clothes in a power play by Dussasan as per Karna's orders. "I found myself in court, a hundred male eyes burning through me. Gathering my disrobed sari around me, I demanded help from my husbands. They sent me tortured glances but sat paralysed" (Divakaruni, 2008, p.191). There is an implication here that even in the worst moment of a woman's life, she cannot depend on her husband to protect her. But if the situation were reversed, it would be expected that the woman throw herself in the line of fire to save and protect herself. There has been extensive research done to prove this, especially within the Indian context and this will be explored in the analysis of the qualitative interviews conducted. In this instance, Draupadi saves herself and emerges as the saviour and hero-figure.

> "In the climactic moment of her life, when she is disrobed in the Kaurava Sabha, Divakaruni problematises all the stereotypes associated with gender construction by her discreet manoeuvrings. Despite being victimised, it is Draupadi who asserts herself, voicing her innermost anxiety and subdued rage in impassioned anger while her husbands display stoic endurance of their humiliation" (Gupta, 2016, p.56).

Draupadi's subsequent curse becomes the reason her husbands need to fight for their kingdom and familial rights. They do so under the guise of avenging their wife's honour but in reality, their reasons are entirely self-serving.

The God of Small Things has a myriad of incidents that shed light on the sexual violence faced by women in Indian society. We have seen the case of Mammachi's beatings at the hands of her jealous husband who resented her talent. But we have not examined the sexual violence against Ammu, or the sexual harassment of the factory workers in Ayemenem at the hands of Chacko, the prodigal son of the Ipe household who claimed he was a Marxist at heart, but in reality, was taken in by the trappings of a feudal lifestyle. Rahel and Estha's mother, Ammu, married her alcoholic husband to escape her oppressive father. When her husband started beating her and trying to sexually exchange her for secure employment, she moved back to her parents' home in Ayemenem where she was once again, oppressed by her brother, Chacko. Being a divorcee in India is possibly one of the worst fates that can befall a woman; as Jha (2014) asserts of the resulting stigma,

> "If being single can sometimes relegate a woman to the background, divorce can be traumatic. Social stigma surrounding divorce still hangs heavy over women, usually housewives, who are dependent on their husbands".

In Ammu's case, and in the case of divorced women in India, she is treated like a pariah and has no legal standing in inheriting her family's property. Ammu is even sexually objectified when she decides to speak up against the vicious lies told by Baby Kochamma which led to Velutha's arrest. The police inspector views Ammu as an object and even treats her as such.

> "He spoke the coarse Kottayam dialect of Malayalam. He stared at Ammu's breasts as he spoke. He said the police knew all they needed to know and that the Kottayam Police didn't take statements from veshyas or their illegitimate children […] Then he tapped her breasts with his baton. Gently. Tap tap. As though he was choosing mangoes from a basket. Inspector Thomas Mathew seemed to know whom he could pick on and whom he couldn't. Policemen have that instinct" (Roy, 1997, p.5).

Lutz (2009, p.57) explains "Ammu's encounter with Police Inspector Thomas Mathew establishes a repeated pattern in the narrative whereby the brutal violence underpinning the social and economic structure of patriarchy and capitalism is displaced onto seemingly innocuous trademark images, icons of popular culture, or objects for mass consumption". Ammu, in this case, is representative of the women in India who attempt to ask for justice, and in turn get sexually objectified and exploited by the systems that are put in place to protect them.

The main form of sexual exploitation of women exhibited in *The God of Small Things*, comes in the form of Chacko's behaviour. A Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, he claims to be a Marxist at heart, but when he takes over the operations of Paradise Pickles, he does everything to ensure that the workers do not unionise. He also makes it known to the lower caste women workers that their opportunity to earn extra money comes in the form of granting him sexual favours. His apparent Marxist mindset is replaced by a capitalist mindset when it is convenient to him. Navarro-Tejero (2006, p.106) states

> "There is a major concern in the factory to keep every individual in their communal position, that is, women workers are paid less for their work and offered the possibility to get extra money though 'forced' sexual relations. By payment, they are kept in the position that society considers appropriate for them".

This is also representative of the oppressed often oppressing those they consider 'beneath' them. Chacko exercises his 'rights as a man' but it is Mammachi who enables the behaviour. Alphonso Mary and Peruvalluthi (2016, p.758) state "sometimes the people who are subjugated quite often plot against the oppression of people who are weaker than they are. For instance,

Mammachi, who herself is the victim of patriarchal domination, exhibits great snobbery when it comes to the class question".

This falls in line with Paolo Freire's vision as first outlines in his 1986 publication The Pedagogy of the Oppressed, which states that oppressed people internalise the image of the oppressor and adopt his guidelines, thus becoming fearful of change (2005). Mammachi and Baby Kochamma are representative of this, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, as they too, become fearful of change when Ammu's affair comes to light. This is also represented in the mindset of Indian women who oppress other women; a notion which will be explored in detail in the qualitative interview analysis chapter. On the other hand, Chacko exercises his feudal rights on female labourers in the factory by demanding their bodies at night. This is explained in the excerpt from *The God of Small Things* below:

> "Neither Mammachi nor Baby Kochamma saw any contradiction between Chacko's Marxist mid and his feudal libido. Mammachi had a separate entrance built for Chacko's room, which was at the eastern end of the house, so that the objects of his 'needs' wouldn't have to go traipsing through the house. She secretly slipped them money to keep them happy. They took it because they needed it. They had young children and old parents. Or husbands who spent all their earnings in toddy bars. The arrangement suited Mammachi, because in her mind, a fee clarified things. Disjuncted sex from love. Needs from Feelings" (Roy, 1997, p.78).

It is this line of reasoning that is used when Ammu's affair with Velutha is discovered; it is when the true extent of Mammachi and Baby Kochamma's, and by extension, the patriarchal society's hypocrisy is exposed when it comes to equality between the genders.

- <u>Violence against lower caste women</u>

We have seen in the Literature Review chapter, that according to the National Crime Records Bureau of India (NCRB), there was an increase of 7.3% in crimes against women in 2019 when compared to 2018 wherein a total of 4,05,861 cases were officially registered. Moreover, there was also an increase of 7.3% in crimes against Scheduled Castes in 2019 when compared to 2018, wherein a total of 45,935 cases were officially registered. On average, 10 daily cases of rape of Dalit women were reported in 2019 in India, with Rajasthan reporting the highest number at 554 cases (Kumar, 2020). The Literature Review chapter briefly explained the Hathras rape case, wherein a 19-year-old Dalit girl was gang raped by upper caste men. As of March 2023, the charges against the three assailants have been dismissed by the court, largely because the men belong to the upper caste of Thakurs. Chowdhury (2023) reports that "Dalit women are considered 'easy prey' by upper caste men, who harass them with impunity with no fear of reprisals. The law enforcement machinery, which is usually staffed by upper caste men,

turns a blind eye to such atrocities committed against Dalit women". There has been rampant caste discrimination since Vedic times, but to see such cases of violent atrocities against Dalit women in modern India speaks volumes about the right-wing government's agenda of promoting upper caste hegemony and patriarchal and casteist bias.

The depiction of violence against Dalit women in the narration of *Sangati* is two-pronged; one at the hands of the upper caste men, and the second is at the hands of the Dalit men. These will be treated as separate because there is a clear distinction in the way they manifest in the lives of the women of the Pariayar community.

- *Violence by upper caste men*

In *Sangati*, this is brought forward by the incident that occurred with Bama's cousin sister, Mariamma. After escaping sexual assault by an upper caste man on her way home from work, Mariamma is advised not to report the incident. "If you try to tell people what actually happened, you'll find that it is you who will get the blame; it's you who will be called a whore" (Bama, 2004, p.20). The upper caste man, fearing that his reputation would be ruined, instead complained to the head of the Dalit village about Mariamma and how she was 'behaving in a very dirty way' (Bama, 2004) with another boy. When Mariamma tries to defend herself in the council meeting, she is publicly shamed and beaten by her father, while the men of the village defame her. The women of the village acknowledge that injustice is being meted out against Mariamma but do not say anything because they know that their words will fall on deaf ears (Bama, 2004). This incident makes it very evident that in the case of conflict between men and women, the women always get blamed and side-lined. Even though other women are aware of the truth, they are not allowed to speak by the men in their community, who often take to beating women when they dare to voice their opinion.

Nayar (2011, pp.370-371) observes the discrepancy between the values accorded to each caste's narratives,

> "Patriarchal and casteist narratives are appropriated by Bama to show how a social condition is created. The narrative of the upper caste culprit is valued over that of the lower caste victim. It is this differential evaluation of truth in a narrative that constructs the Dalits' cultural centre: their narratives will never attain the level of validity or legitimacy of the socially powerful upper castes".

In the case of the Dalit women, the incident with Mariamma depicts the intersectionality of their oppression based on their gender, caste as well as on their social position within their community. It is an example of Brahmanical patriarchy that is rampant in current Indian society, especially when it comes to the question of Dalit women and their rights, or lack thereof. Arya

and Rathore (2020) have said that Brahmanical patriarchy does not necessarily mean oppression or subversion at the hands of male brahmins, but it refers to any form of patriarchy exerted by a person that has a basis in gender, caste or any other practice or belief that is discriminatory in nature. In the case of Dalit women, they are oppressed not just by the men of the upper caste and their own community, but also by women of the upper caste. It has been mentioned before that in a country like India, social status is just as important as economic status, and the Dalit have neither economic nor social equality of any kind. Tomar (2013, p.1) states,

> "It is a widely held perception that Dalit woman considered as 'Other' and it is the impact of the centuries long alienation and loneliness created by patriarchal and Brahmanical values at all levels in society, which in turn causes the high level of exclusion, structured and domestic violence which every Dalit woman experiences throughout her life, thus, even among women, she is perceived as 'Other'. She belongs to the 'lowest' category manifested in her condition of social, physical, economic, and political vulnerability".

An example of this in *Sangati* is when Bama's grandmother, Paatti who is a midwife is not called to deliver babies of upper caste women. Paatti would deliver all the babies of the Pariayar community but would never be to called to an upper caste woman's house to render her services as a midwife. This kind of subversion makes the need for Dalit feminist discourse even more apparent since homogenising women's issues does not seem to consider the intersectionality of a Dalit woman's oppression, which occurs at a level much deeper than just their gender.

- *Violence by Dalit men*

One of the most shocking incidents narrated through *Sangati* is the level of domestic violence and sexual abuse Dalit women face at the hands of the men of their community i.e., their husbands, brothers, fathers etc. *Sangati* is littered with several episodic events where the women of the Paraiyar community are publicly beaten in the street by their husband or their father for no reason, other than the fact that they are easy targets. Moreover, this violence perpetrated by the men becomes a topic of conversation amongst the women shedding light on how normalised domestic violence is within the Dalit community. As mentioned earlier, there is a stark difference in the way Dalit women are treated by each other, and by the men of their own community.

Bama mentions the circumstances surrounding the death of Periamma, her mother's sister and the conversation she has with her Paatti about it.

> "Because that man was crazy with lust. Because he wanted her every single day. How could she agree to his frenzy after she worked all hours of the day and night, inside the house and out? He is an animal, that fellow. When she refused, he practically broke her in half. Once in my very presence he hit her with a rice-pounder. When a man is hitting out like that, can a woman go and pull him away? And was she born alongside four or five brothers who could have helped her? There was not a soul to support her or speak up for her. Not even her own father. Even if the bystanders had tried to stop him, he would have shouted at all of them, 'She is my wife, I can beat her or even kill her if I want'" (Bama, 2004, p.10).

The insinuation that a man is free to beat up or even kill his wife if he so wishes speaks volumes about the extent of violence perpetrated on women in Indian society, specifically within the Dalit community in this context. Women are reduced to inanimate objects that can be possessed and owned by another human being, in this case, the husband. A report published in 2006 by the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights states that:

> "In most cases where a Dalit husband is concerned, the violence takes on a strong patriarchal dimension: women are tortured within the home for not bringing enough dowry, for not bearing male children, for being supposedly ugly, or too beautiful, or allegedly unfaithful, for talking back to their husband, etc. Alcoholism among Dalit husbands is also a strong contributing factor to this domestic violence" (Irudayam et.al, 2006, p.5).

Bama also narrates the time she bore witness to the extent of domestic violence against women in her community when she came across Thaayi of West Street being beaten up by her husband in the middle of the street. When a neighbour tried to intervene, the husband got even more infuriated. "'She's my wife, I can beat her or kill her if I wish. You go and mind your own business'. Then he abused Thaayi some more. "You common whore, you, any passing loafer will come in support of you, you mother fucker's daughter. You'll go with ten men!" He began abusing her and beating her even more violently" (Bama, 2004, p.43). The same man, in a separate incident, cuts off Thaayi's hair and hangs it on the doorpost of their house to 'put down her pride' as people would question it and spit in her face. This treatment of Thaayi is worse than how a man would treat an animal. The women are ill-treated by their employers, the upper caste landowners, their husbands, and even the priest in the church.

> "The position of women is both pitiful and humiliating, really. In the fields they have to escape from upper caste men's molestations. At church they must lick the priests' shoes and be his slaves while he threatens them with tales of God, Heaven, and Hell. Even when they go to their own homes, before they have had a chance to cook some kanji or lie down and rest a little, they have to submit themselves to their husbands' torment" (Bama, 2004, p.35).

Somewhere in the episodic accounts of *Sangati*, Bama explains that one reason for this kind of violence is that the Dalit men have no other outlet for their frustration. Most of them happen to be employed in the labour force by the upper caste landowners where they are treated like the scum of society based on their caste, and while this fills them with anger, they do not have the freedom or courage to speak out against the upper caste. This leads to them coming home and beating up their wife or children in an attempt to get rid of some of that anger. This reasoning, which is not justified in the slightest, once again, brings attention to the intersectional nature of oppression faced by Dalit women: they are persecuted based on their caste, as well as their gender. As Tomar (2013) has mentioned, they can truly be viewed as the subaltern within the subaltern.

One of the primary issues with Dalit literature written by men that has been discussed before (see 'Literature Review) is the portrayal and depiction of Dalit women as downtrodden victims who do not have a voice or any sense of agency. Ingole (2020, p.100) claims that

> "caste patriarchy, which is brahmanical in nature, works in all institutionalised mechanisms. For example, Dalit men do not take 'serious' note of the literary output of Dalit women; instead, they become dismissive of their contribution. Hence, Dalit women's resistance also remains invisible".

Coming out as Dalit: A Memoir, much like *Sangati* takes a sharp turn from that line of thinking. Dutt writes her women (whether it be her mother, Shashi or even herself) as ones who have had violence inflicted upon them but also as ones who do not give up and constantly strive for better opportunities. Dutt's mother, Shashi was a victim of domestic violence at the hands of her husband that led her to try to commit suicide when she was pregnant with Dutt.

> "He would start drinking early in the evening and by the time Mum had cooked and served dinner and finished cleaning up, he would be intoxicated…She testified that he would drag her from the makeshift kitchen at the back of the house to their room, beating her all the while. One evening when he slapped her, the impact punctured her eardrum…Seeing no way out of the situation, she did what good Indian daughters-in-law in her position do: she decided to kill herself. Seven months pregnant, she jumped from the roof of her house and shattered her left ankle, damaging it permanently. The pregnancy was declared complicated and the doctors doubted the chances of my survival" (Dutt, 2019, p.6).

Despite such trying circumstances, Dutt's mother never gave up hope of a better life for her children, and thus, began the lifelong performance of passing as upper caste for Dutt and her siblings. Even though Dutt's mother had to acquiesce with the reality of her life, she encouraged and almost pushed for her children to want a better life than the one she had. Browarczyk (2022, p.331) states

> "The women are portrayed not merely as victims or survivors, but also as active participants in the movement for nondiscrimination and dignity. Their mothers [Dutt and Gidla's] have been repeatedly beaten into submission by their husbands, with their educational, professional, and personal ambitions dwarfed by repressive social rules - in their own families, communities, and Indian society at large - and by economic circumstances. Yet they both continue to extern themselves to secure better lives for their children".

The way Dutt has portrayed her mother is a testament to the kind of strength Dalit women possess when they decide to make a change in their lives and uplift themselves; an observation that has been made repeatedly in the 'Literature Review' chapter.

5.3 Commodification of Women

The patriarchal nature of Indian society has been referred to multiple times through this research, but it should also be kept in mind that this patriarchal base is built on the exchange and commodification of women. Luce Irigaray (1985) hypothesizes that society is based on the exchange of women, and much like commodities that ensure the smooth economic functioning of society, the consumption, circulation, and usage of women's bodies ensures social and cultural life. If this is viewed in the Indian context, this exchange and commodification is what holds up the patriarchal status quo (Haridas, 2023).

Women in *The Palace of Illusions* universe are expendable, and not meant to have any kind of independent thought. While Divakaruni's Panchaali is certainly vocal about wanting what she deserves, she too must bow down to pressure in the form of her five husbands. Her marriage to Arjun resulted in a strange arrangement that had been unheard of: she was to wed all five Pandava brothers, or not be wed to any one of them as was dictated by their mother, Kunti. In the game of the Pandava family loyalty, Panchaali ended up being the pawn, and the one who suffered the most. Even when her father King Drupad protests the decision, he does it not because he worries about his daughter, but because he is worried about what would happen to his reputation. Decisions were made, solutions were found to circumvent chastity issues, and yet no one asked Panchaali what her wish was.

> "I was surprised at how angry it made me feel – and how helpless. Though Dhai Ma tried to console me by saying that finally I had the freedom men had had for centuries, my situation was very different from that of a man with several wives. Unlike him, I had no choice as to whom I slept with, and when. Like a communal drinking cup, I would be passed from hand to hand whether I wanted it or not" (Divakaruni, 2008, p.120).

Panchaali sees herself being used as an instrument of control by her mother-in-law, like a communal object to be shared between brothers to ensure they stay bound forever, but she does not have the freedom or space to make her displeasure at this unknown. What is interesting to note here is that Panchaali is treated in this way not just by the men she is married to, but also by her mother-in-law. When Arjun brings Panchaali home after winning her hand in the swayamvar, Kunti, the Pandavas mother insists that all the brothers 'share' her, and claims that if Panchaali does not marry the other four brothers, then she cannot remain married to Arjun. This goes back to the aforementioned point about how people who are oppressed become fearful of change and often end up oppressing those that might be in a weaker position than them. Divorce as a concept in India is still considered taboo in this modern age but was practically unheard of in Vedic times. Things come to a head later in the narrative when one of her husbands' puts her at stake in a game of dice, as if she were cattle to be traded, and loses her. Even at this moment, Panchaali does not have the power to go against the confines of the society she is a part of.

> "I can't be gambled away like a bag of coins or be summoned to court like a dancing girl. But then I remembered what I'd read long ago in a book, never imagining that quaint law could ever have any power over me. The wife is the property of the husband, no less so than a cow or a slave" (Divakaruni, 2008, p.190).

The wife, in this case, has been compared quite literally to an animal and a slave. This is very much in line with excerpts from the *Manusmriti* that were mentioned earlier about how women were never meant to think independently and were expected to remain under the control of their father, brother, husband, or son; this line of thought still has significant presence in present day India. A study titled *Masculinity, Intimate Partner Violence and Son Preference in India* conducted in 2014 by the United Nations Population Fund and the International Centre for Research on Women, found that out of the 9,205 men interviewed, most of them believed that masculinity was about acting tough, and freely exercising their privilege to control the women in their lives. Two of five men in states like Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Maharashtra believed in the idea of rigid masculinity and that women should neither be seen nor heard (Nanda et al., 2014). Historically, Indian men have wanted to exercise control over the women in their lives, and it seems this trend has not died in modern times. This notion will be explored in the analysis section of the qualitative interviews conducted for the purpose of this research.

When Panchaali is humiliated in the Kaurava court, in a reversal of roles, it is she who saves her husbands and vows to exact revenge. Gupta (2016, p.57) observes,

> "It is she who vows to bathe her hair in Kaurava blood, choosing to surrender a part of her traditional femininity for revenge, challenging feminine boundaries (without invoking spirits to unsex her) even before her warrior husbands swear to avenge her insult. Here, extreme binaries are juxtaposed as the same woman who is the victim is transformed to the saviour who overshadows and overpowers her valiant husbands, whose destiny depends on her as the victor of this war fought within the domestic sphere".

The narrative of *The God of Small Things* has two incidents that aligns with the idea of commodification of women in India. The first instance is when Ammu's husband entertains the idea of 'selling' her to his white boss in exchange for job security; it is an idea that Ammu rejects instantly leading to bouts of physical and verbal abuse by her drunk husband, which consequently leads to their divorce. Ammu's husband's attempt to sell her is no different from Panchaali's plight of being used as a pawn in a game of dice, and ultimately power between the Pandava and Kaurava brothers. As per Bartky (1990) sexual objectification occurs whenever a woman's body, body parts, or sexual functions are separated out from her person, reduced to the status of mere instruments, or regarded as if they were capable of representing her. Historically, in India, sexual objectification of women, which is another form of commodification has been a part of the social fabric since the colonial rule and is one that still exists in modern India. Vinay (2022, p.181) reflects "the British legally colonised South Asia during the Victorian age under Queen Victoria after two centuries of prior economic subjugation of the region through the East India Company (Metcalf and Metcalf), and it was when the British had the legal powers to enact laws could they regulate Victorian Puritanism into Indian society". The sexual objectification of women started during this period and has found its way well into modern Indian society. In a case from 2021, it was reported that a 17-year-old teen sold his wife to a 55-year-old man in another state in order to buy a smartphone, and later stated that his wife had deserted him (DNA Web Team, 2021). There are several news reports such as this where men in more rural areas of India have sold their wives, or their organs to pay off alcohol and gambling debts, or simply because their wives did not bring in sufficient dowry.

This chapter has delved into the nuances of patriarchy, violence against women, and the commodification of women in Indian society through the lens of the novels selected for the purpose of this research. We have observed an intricate interplay of these social phenomena and understood the various levels at which they operate and manifest, not just for upper caste women, but also Dalit women, whose oppression occurs at levels not considered by the upper castes. The selected novels, through their narrative structures have helped shed light on the stealthy nature of patriarchy, its deep-rooted influence on Indian society, and the myriads of ways in which it perpetuates gender disparity. The novels have also vividly depicted the brutal nature of violence faced by women, especially Dalit women, thus highlighting the true nature of

women's subjugation and the need for comprehensive enforcement of social and legal reforms to ensure women's safety. Furthermore, the commodification of women emerged as a recurring theme, as a result of the patriarchal mindset, which perpetuates the objectification and dehumanisation of women. While these novels provide a sobering representation of the challenges faced by women in India, they also serve as powerful tools of advocacy and change. In a digital world, it is easy to disengage with literature and literary narratives by claiming that they no longer serve a purpose as they are irrelevant, but literature does very much hold up a mirror to society and reflects the lived reality and experiences of the people. The novels provide a meaningful insight into the politics of life in India and what it truly means to be a woman in a society where the political, economic, and social structures are designed to perpetuate the oppression and subjugation of a specific gender. These sobering representations also manifest in the lives of modern Indian women at the level of their everyday lives and realities; an idea that will be explored in great detail in the interview analysis sections of this research. The next chapter will now focus on the themes of social and cultural norms, economic disparity, and the question of caste, and how they are tied deeply together.

Chapter 6
Thematic Analysis - Social Norms, Economic Disparity, and the Question of Caste

In the previous chapter, we explored how women's oppression and subjugation in Indian society is manifested through patriarchy, gendered violence, and the commodification of women. It was observed that the three phenomena are interwoven to such a degree that each cannot be understood or analysed independently. This was done through the analysis of the three specific themes that emerged from a reading of the selected novels for this research. However, they were not the only themes that emerged. The other themes that emerged contribute to the knowledge that women's subjugation in India is intersectional, and has layers embedded within social phenomena. In this chapter, I am going to attempt to explain how social norms, economic disparity, and the question of caste play an active role in propagating the oppression of women in India as reflected in the novels selected for the purpose of this research. These themes, while not mutually exclusive, are intricately interwoven in a way that together, they represent the full extent of women's reality in modern India on a social, economic and cultural level. Social norms, often deeply ingrained in cultural and historical contexts, dictate acceptable behaviours, values, and expectations within a society. These norms can serve as barriers to progress and social justice. In the context of Indian society, social norms have played a significant role in perpetuating caste based discrimination and reinforcing economic disparities. Through the analysis of the selected novels, this chapter will delve into the ways in which characters navigate, challenge, or conform to these, highlighting the tensions between tradition and change.

6.1 Social and Cultural Norms

We have observed in the Literature Review chapter that historically, in Indian society, women have been relegated to the domestic sphere and have been viewed as the flagbearers and keepers of culture and tradition. This is largely due to the cultural and social norms that have been set in place since ancient times. Chawla (2021, p.221) observes "in this tradition bound society, women have been socially, physically, psychologically, economically, and sexually exploited from time immemorial, sometimes in the name of religion, sometimes with the pretext of writings in scriptures and sometimes by social sanctions". Women have been kept within the home under the guise of maintaining tradition and dignity as a way of subverting their agency and not allowing them to have autonomy within the public sphere. India as a country has held onto its traditions and social customs with a ferocity rarely seen in other societies. This section attempts to peel back the layers and examine the traditional Indian mindset in contrast to the modern mindset, and how markers, such as language and food are used to preserve a sense of social identity.

Before going into the selected novels and the way traditions and modernity is represented in the narrative texts, it is essential to understand what the terms mean in an Indian context. The traditional mindset in India is one that is stepped in history and culture; it places strong emphasis on family values, community, and religious beliefs, such as respect for elders, joint family structures, arranged marriage, and adherence to cultural rituals and customs. In the traditional thought process, gender roles tend to be more defined, with a focus on maintaining family honor and social norms, such as women not being a part of the workforce and being married off at a young age (as young as 18). The modern, urban mindset is one that has been impacted by the rapid globalisation in India as people have moved to cities for better economic opportunities. It is characterised by a departure from traditional norms and practices and allows people to place their careers and self-growth over traditional systems of marriage at a young age (Pandey, 2022). Individuals with a modern mindset tend to place great importance on education, career, personal growth and self-expression. In the qualitative interviews it became quite clear what age the traditional thinking stops, and the modern thinking begins, and in what specific areas it overlaps and coincides.

The narrative of *The Zoya Factor* blends Indian tradition with the modern thinking of India's youth. Chauhan manages to bring forward two opposing views of thought quite seamlessly, albeit with a great sense of humour. This idea of discussion topical and relevant issues with a sense of levity will be discussed in the qualitative interview analysis chapters. Zoya's maid, Eppa, who is over the age of fifty represents the old school of traditional thinking. She believes that men and women have certain roles assigned to them and certain practices, which are frowned upon now, should be adhered to. For instance, when she is watching a violent movie late at night and trying to explain the plot to Zoya, she casually mentions that the hero's sister in the film had been 'spoiled' by the heroine's brother and now she would have no choice but to kill herself. When questioned as to why by Zoya, Eppa insists that it is what she 'has to do'.

> "'She have to! That is the only way…Spoilt girls have to kill themselves. Or become nun. They can take badla on him first if they want.'
> 'Revenge?' I asked. 'You mean they should kill him or something? Why can't she file a case, win it, then meet some nice man and marry him?'
> Eppa shook her head vigorously. 'That is not the way, Zoya Moya! She havtu die!' She looked at my appalled expression and added charitably, 'And go to heaven, of course.'" (Chauhan, 2008, p.18).

Eppa's words may have a tone of levity, but they represent a much serious line of thinking; her words represent the social stigma around rape culture and gender based violence. In a society as traditional as India, women's honour is tied to their body and there is an intense amount of

stigma associated with women who have been raped. In many cases, victims of rape commit suicide, are ostracised from society or made to suffer extreme humiliation by being made to think it was their fault (Danish, 2012). As Eppa says, it is something she 'has to do', almost as if it is a mandate and there is no other way to live.

Zoya's father is also in a sense representative of the old school of thought (which would have had him marry Zoya off at a young age, instead of encouraging her to pursue a career), although he does manage to strike the balance between tradition and modernity in the sense that he does not differentiate between Zoya and Zoravar. This is in contrast to the dominant mindset in India where people still prefer to have sons over daughters, and thus treat them differently (Barcellos, Carvalho & Lleras-Muney, 2014). This preferential treatment of one gender over the other within the confines of a family will be explored in the qualitative interview analysis chapters. Zoya's father does not question her decisions, but the narrative also sheds light on how there are some limits to his 'broad-mindedness'. Case in point: Zoya reflects on the fact that she would put her father in a very difficult position if her picture were to appear in the newspaper as she was kissing a cricketer. Another instance when Zoya's father's 'Indian dad syndrome' shows is when he insists that someone chaperone Zoya's trip to Australia with the cricket team, so Zoya's friend Monita, and Zoya's paternal aunt Rinku Chachi are chosen to accompany her on the trip.

> "My father likes to believe he's 'broad-minded'. He's kept the same standards for Zoravar and me right through school and college. He's cool with the fact that I'm still not married. He's proud that I'm working. I think he knows I've had boyfriends and stuff, and the policy we've been following since I was about seventeen is that he doesn't ask me about it and I don't tell him about it […] But it's hard to play that game if your daughter's picture is in the paper, kissing some cricketer on the mouth" (Chauhan, 2008, pp.104-105).

The traditional Indian school of thought, as has been defined earlier, would have made Zoya's father get her married off at a young age, but the fact that he is 'cool' with her not being married shows a slight shift in mindset towards modernity. One of the defining characteristics of the chick-lit genre of writing is that it is representative of the dichotomy of Indian society, where the line between modernity and tradition is almost blurred and sensibilities overlap with each other based on the situation and need of the hour. This idea is reflected in the novel as well when Zoya's boss Sanks observes that Zoya is caught between two Indias; the one which is progressive and forward thinking, and the other which is still deeply rooted in tradition and superstition. Singh and Kaushik (2021, p.372) believe that "modern Indian women were and are still struggling in the grip of traditional and religious beliefs and practices which do not provide any tangible means of self-fulfilment".

Another instance of extremely conservative and traditional thinking comes to the surface at the point where Zoya meets Kattu through an arranged marriage proposal. Traditionally, within the context of the arranged marriage process, the bride should ideally be a virgin and not be 'sexually compromised' or else she is considered to be of loose morals. However, this mindset has changed to a certain extent in a country like India; it is still considered taboo for a girl to engage in pre-marital sex, but there has been some easing of the judgement that is usually reigned down upon her. *The Zoya Factor* is set in the year 2011 and is the story of a very urban girl, living a very modern life in a major metro city in India. However, when Zoya meets Kattu, he talks about his dream of meeting an 'unspoiled girl', a 'shy, unopened bud' whom he can then 'slowly turn into a flower' (Chauhan, 2008). The use of these phrases is indicative of the regressive thinking that is still prevalent in India and continues to be problematic. This entire incident makes it evident that even in 2011, in Indian society, it is considered acceptable for men to comment on women's sexuality and bodies and try and manipulate their behaviour if it benefits them in specific ways. Being able to pass comments and judgement on the lives and decisions of other people, especially the younger generation, is an inherent trait of the older generation in India. Gossip, which can be vicious, is never considered to be harmful when directed by someone older than you, and this is also brought forward in *The Zoya Factor*. When Zoya gets 'rejected' by Kattu and is accidentally forced to attend his engagement ceremony to another girl, there is the implication and insinuation that she was rejected by Kattu through the arranged marriage set up, due to her lucky charm status for the Indian cricket team, but it comes in the form of a comment from Kattu's mother. She claims that Zoya has become the Indian team's Draupadi (Chauhan, 2008), which as we know from our analysis of *The Palace of Illusions* implies that she, too, is being shared by eleven men, and is a piece of property that can be traded between people. While this may seem like a harmless comment, the implication goes a lot further than that. It might feel like a bit of stretch to compare young, urban, and independent Zoya with the Draupadi of Vedic times, but their situations do not differ very much when the layers of their backgrounds are removed. This idea of community-based judgment of a woman's actions and life choices when she does something 'different' will be discussed in detail in the qualitative interview analysis chapter of this research.

Social identity can be maintained and expressed in a myriad of ways such as through the use of regional or colloquial language, or through the other means as a way of holding onto social norms. One of the most distinguishing characteristics of *The Zoya Factor* is the language, and style of writing. The narrative structure is generally humorous and light-hearted, but the language in which it is written is informal and colloquial. It is a mix of Hindi and English, thus once again, blending tradition with modernity. The boundaries of language are very fluid in this

novel with characters switching between languages, and liberally using Hindi idioms, and English words in an Indian accent. The manner in which the text is written mimics how someone with an Indian accent from certain parts of India would speak. Words like 'sikority' (security), 'shapper-own' (chaperone), 'bajaoed' (to get whooped), 'kaali-peeli' (black yellow taxi), 'patli galli-ing' (to escape), 'bacha' (child), 'gobar' (cow dung), yeh toh bada toiinng hai' (this man is very fine) are used to identify the manner in which Hindi and English have been merged to create Hinglish, the usage of which, is very common in India.

Sethi (2022, p.96) states, "code-switching and Hinglish are very popular in advertising slogans and both the writer, Chauhan and the protagonist, Zoya share advertising backgrounds and express their deepest emotions through Hinglish ad slogans and movie lyrics". For instance, when Zoya sees Nikhil for the first time, and subsequently every time after that, she constantly compares the colour of his eyes to that of Boost powder (Boost is the Indian equivalent of BournVita and was a big part of every Indian's childhood). There is a consistent reference to very Indian things which might not be identifiable by non-Indians, whether it be Bollywood, IIT-JEE exams, black-yellow taxis, the baba who is the spiritual leader of the Indian cricket board, Indian beauty pageants, Karol Bagh, or even the food for that matter.

The writing is very Indian, as is the humour utilised by Chauhan throughout the narrative. As per Chakravarty (2013, p.98),

> "With the democratisation of education and the enthusiastic spread of English learning, the language has shed its colonial hangover and has gained in its Indian flavour. The urban, modern, globalised young India not only emotes in this language but also dreams in it and, perhaps, the time is not too far when the emerging rural populace will also embrace this language for it is perfectly suited to express the angst of young India".

The language used in *The Zoya Factor* is indicative of this sweeping trend of urban India adapting the English language to represent its Indianness to its truest extent. There is also the use of exaggeration by Chauhan when writing Zoya's inner monologues and thought processes for comedic effect, especially when it comes to issues of superstition, race, and national violence. One of the reasons for the choice of language to be such in the narrative is the sense of relatability it would have with the masses, which is one of the defining traits of popular literature. The use of Hindi along with English is very common among the growing urban population of India and its importance and relevance in communication cannot be stated enough and will be discussed in detail in the qualitative interview analysis chapter of this research.

On the other hand, the language used by Bama in *Sangati* is coarse and does not fit within the conventions of what is acceptable for literature. But that is precisely where Dalit literature differs from popular and postmodern literature. Dalit literature reflects the reality of the lives of the Dalit community and *Sangati* is an honest, no holds barred account of the depth of torture and humiliation faced by the women of the Paraiyar community. Bama's choice to write the original in her native language, Tamil, and later, the choice to not dress up the narrative in fancy language is indicative of her decision, to be as honest as possible through the course of the narration. Kothari (2013, pp.61-62) argues,

> "A literature that redefines the aesthetic by making its readers confront the unpleasant, Dalit writers very often take risks. Engaged in writing about their lives, the writers very often do so to the chagrin of those around them, and this includes not only the upper castes (whose hypocrisy they reveal), but also the humiliation of the entire community they belong to. They reveal, to the discomfort of their fellow community members, the internalisation of caste hegemony".

This is reflected in Bama's narrative when she is chastised by Paatti and other elder women of the community for having a different viewpoint about the treatment of Mariamma. Paatti mocks Bama for thinking she knows more just because she might have read a few books and gained a bit of an education. Dalit literature does not adhere to the aesthetic conventions of mainstream Indian literature in any shape or form, and this is done through the use of crude language that is meant to shock and horrify.

We have discussed in some detail the importance that is given to English as one of the primary languages of communication in India (see 'Mainstream Indian Literature'). As we have seen English, despite having colonial roots, has become an intrinsic part of the fabric of Indian society, and is still considered to be the language of the elites. It is still the primary language of higher education and governmental agencies and is used widely within the literary sphere. In the case of Dalit literature, the use of English serves as a marker on two fronts.

- *English as a marker of the upper castes*

One of the biggest markers that sets apart an upper caste person from a Dalit person is the knowledge and excellent use of English. In *Coming out as Dalit: A Memoir,* Dutt draws on her own experiences and stresses the importance of speaking flawless English as one of the most significant ways of passing as 'upper caste'. Her father spoke decent English, while her mother, who had a bachelor's degree in English literature, could write papers on English authors but did not have the confidence to speak the language.

> "Fashion and lifestyle choices were a significant but ultimately smaller part of that performance of upper caste ness. The toughest act was speaking perfect English… Being able to talk in perfect English with no trace of a regional accent remains the mark of wealth, pedigree, class and even intelligence in modern India. A failure to master fluency in the language can often indicate the failure of a person overall. Most Dalits and several non-Dalits, particularly in northern and western India, struggle with speaking that kind of English" (Dutt, 2019, pp.20-21).

Dutt refers to this as a 'colonial hangover', an opinion that is not hers alone and is one that is shared by several thousands of Indians. This idea of Indians living with a 'colonial hangover' will be discussed in the qualitative interview analysis chapter. The British might have left Indian in 1947 but their imprint on Indian society lingers on in several ways, one of them being the directly proportional relationship between knowing English and being an accomplished, polished, upper caste person.

> "Mum shared that veneration for English with the rest of the country, and with good reason…She also knew that anyone – event a Dalit – who spoke 'good' English would be treated with instant respect. So she decided that I would speak the language fluently – it would gain me the respect and acceptance that she had not" (Dutt, 2019, p.22).

She talks of the immense pride her mother, Shashi, felt when Dutt communicated with the people around her in perfect English from a young age onwards.

> "A child growing up in the urban middle class India of the eighties and nineties might find it surprising that this was an achievement to be proud of. But for a Dalit family living in Ajmer, it was aspirational. Even at five, I would sense that people reacted to my ease of expression with a combination of mild annoyance, jealousy, and grudging respect" (Dutt, 2019, p.22).

Veroneka and Vijayalakshmi (2022, p.3) state "Dutt related 'Dalitness' with English, where she sees English as a means of escape from the chains of trouble, insults, and disrespect that Dalits face irrespective of intelligence and talent, but there was a hesitation and a question in her mind whether could English be a means of escape from her identity as a Dalit". In India, English is considered to be a marker of upward social mobility, growth, progress, and globalisation, but it is entirely from the view of the upper caste s. Upper caste, middle class families can afford to send their children to English medium schools where they learn the language, and thus gain fluency. However, most Dalit families do not have the financial means to enrol their children in such schools, and so they are denied the same opportunities that are so easily available to children of upper caste families, thus widening the already large chasm between the upper castes and the Dalits. Whether or not the upper caste agrees with this assessment is a whole

other question, and one that was brought up in the qualitative interviews conducted and will be explored in the analysis chapter.

Dhanaraju (2014, p.6) states “the first-generation Dalits in higher education have been struggling in the universities because of English language. They have not been able to cope up with the knowledge system where the upper caste elites dominate over the Dalits in the classroom”. Dutt observes something similar during her time working in a call centre. She notes that some Dalits, like her, who were able to attend English-medium schools could communicate in Indian languages, as well as English. "In the 'new' India, speaking good English was the mark of the new upper caste. But this did not mean that those of the lower caste would necessarily have a chance to improve their lives because those who were already upper caste were the ones speaking good English and could access these jobs" (Dutt, 2019, p.65). In this case, Dutt is referring to the jobs at call centres that paid a substantial amount of money simply for speaking on the phone in reasonably 'good English'.

- *English as a marker for audiences*

As has been mentioned earlier, Dalit writers use regional and vernacular language to bring forward the narratives of their community, which in turn shed light on some of the larger issues of oppression and subjugation faced by the community (see ‘Dalit Literature’). The use of regional language has been seen as being vital to the authentic storytelling aspect of the true oppression faced by the Dalit community.

However, there are several texts that have also been translated in English to allow for the work to reach a wider audience than was initially intended by the writers. This allows for the issues faced by the Dalit community to be discussed at a global level. However, there are also novels such as *Coming out as Dalit: A Memoir* that were originally written in English and did not require subsequent translation. Veroneka and Vijayalakshmi (2022, p.3) state “the Dalit text in English is meant for comfortability, accessibility, and availability and for its ultimate goal of reaching the globe about the struggle, oppression, discrimination ad voice and need for their rights and resistance to be recognised. Only a few Dalit writers use the English language in writing their text, the rest were being translated. The translated works also make a greater impact in the minds of the reader”.

In the case of *Coming out as Dalit: A Memoir*, the fact that the narrative is written in English is due to Dutt’s comfort with writing in the English language, as is evident in the trajectory of her education and career. But it could also potentially be to ensure that there is a wider, more global

audience for the story that Dutt is trying to tell about the daily life struggles of someone who is Dalit and the effort it takes to 'hide' their caste so as to avoid ostracisation from the rest of the upper caste Indian society.

6.2 Economic Disparity

We have seen in Chapter 2 that much of the focus of the second wave of feminism was on women's economic independence. The second wave might have been in the 1970's, but the issue at hand has not changed; even in modern times, there is a massive disparity between men and women in India when the question of economy and access to equal pay is raised. Srivastava (2003, pp.123-124) states

> "women are in the forefront in social movements and civil society organisations. Despite this, women's lives continue to be circumscribed by poverty and prejudice, discrimination and despair. Women shoulder a disproportionate share of the burden of deprivation and still face discrimination in their access to a whole range of opportunities that enhance the quality of life".

The Global Gender Gap Report of 2021 by the World Economic Forum places India amongst countries with the largest gender gap in economic participation and opportunity due to a declining trend from 27% in 2010 to 22% in 2020 in the participation of the female labour force (Arora, 2022). There is an added layer to this disparity when Dalit women are taken into consideration. As Srivastava (2003, p.131) explains

> "Dalit women face special problems. They suffer from oppression on three counts. As women, they are vulnerable to sexual harassment. As workers, they are exploited. And as a Dalit, she is considered untouchable and an outcast and subject to caste humiliation on a daily basis. Dalit men and women are made to perform the most menial, abhorrent tasks at abysmal wages. Poverty pushes more women from the marginalised castes into the workforce to work at pittance wages in very degrading conditions".

In *The Palace of Illusions*, Divakaruni places her Panchaali in the centre of the Great War of Kurukshetra, wherein she is allowed to view the events of the battle from afar. It once again places her in the centre of the action, instead of being side-lined as a passive receiver of information from other eyewitnesses. At the end of the war, it is Panchaali who takes the reins in establishing a new Hastinapur where women could be free from harassment and have their own agency, instead of having to rely on men. However, this does bring to light another issue: at the end of the war, when the men on the losing side are no longer alive to protect, and provide for their women, what happens? Since the basis of a patriarchal society, as is in the

Mahabharata and *The Palace of Illusions*, women are expected to be confined to the domestic sphere and rely on protection from the male figures in their lives. But war brings with it change.

> "Hastinapur after the war was largely a city of women, widows who had never dreamed that the survival of their families would depend on them. The poorer ones were used to working, but now that they were without male protection, they found themselves exploited. Affluent women, pampered and sheltered until now, were the easiest victim" (Divakaruni, 2008, p.322).

Divakaruni has her Panchaali see this problem and address it. She gives her female characters the power to change the lives of the women they see undergoing harassment and destitution.

> "In time the women's market became a flourishing centre of trade in the city, for the new proprietors took pride in their goods and were canny but fair in their dealings. We trained those who showed interest in learning to become tutors for young girls and young boys. And even in the later years, Hastinapur remained one of the few cities in the world where women could go about their daily lives without harassment" (Divakaruni, 2008, pp.324-325).

If this particular chain of events described in *The Palace of Illusions* is analysed on a larger scale, it can be said that it is almost indicative of the need for feminist discourse and feminist movements in India since Vedic times. Lloyd (2007, p.45) states "feminism reifies certain views of what it is to be female, with the net result that it actually regulates women in a manner contrary to its goal of democratic inclusivity". If this is considered in the case of *The Palace of lllusions*, at the onset of the narrative women were expected to exist in their pre-defined spaces and were expected to perform roles that were prescribed to their gender by social conventions. But by the end of the narrative, in a stark difference from the original text, Divakaruni has her Draupadi lead a feminist revolution for the women of Hastinapur, thereby, changing the very discourse of the society she lived in, allowing women to enter the public sphere and have the same access to economic resources as the men of their society. The need for feminist discourse and having women in a position of power has found its way into modern India with India having recently appointed Droupadi Mumu, a tribal politician as the President of the country.

One of the most significant themes that emerges from *100 Shades Of White* besides themes of identity and culture is the need for women's economic independence. This is reflected through the lives of Nalini, and her mother Ammu, but also through the life of Nalini's friend and landlady, Maggie. For Ammu, it comes when she is abandoned by her husband, and she is left to take care of Nalini all by herself. Circumstances force her to pack up her child and move to another village where she offers her and Nalini's services as a cook in the Kathi household. For Nalini, it comes in a similar fashion, when Raul abandons her, Maya and Satchin and she is forced to move out of their house and look for employment in a garment factory as a worker, simply so

she can keep a roof over her children's' head. For Maggie, it comes when she is forced to flee Ireland with her son Tom after bearing the violence and tyranny inflicted on her by her drunk father. Maggie works in a garment factory initially but takes to the streets to earn extra money for Tom when she realises that her earnings from the factory are not sufficient to provide her son with a good life. The common thread between all these situations is that given the time period they were set in, the 1950s to 1980s, women were economically independent, or rather, were forced to be. Ammu, Nalini and Maggie were all dependent on the men in their lives (Maggie was financially independent to a large extent but was under the control of her father), and were forced to rely on their skills alone, as they were not educated, to try and find employment to look after their young children (in the case of Maggie, she had to resort to choices that no woman should have to make).

Economic stability and independence emerge as recurring themes in the course of the narrative, especially in Nalini's case. She starts by working as a factory worker, then goes onto start a small business selling pickles, manages to open her own store and has some financial independence despite her marriage to Ravi, but is forced to give it all up when her first husband, Raul makes an appearance once again. He forces Nalini to pay him if she wishes for him to stay away from the children who believe him to be dead. Nalini is forced to sell her business, the dream that she had finally achieved after immense hard work, all because of a man who was no longer a part of her life. It is very interesting to note that the novel is set from the 1950's onwards, marking a time when the feminist groups in India and globally even were advocating for women's economic independence (a marker of the second wave of feminism in India). Feminists in this time period believed that the minimum condition that was needed to free women from the oppressive society they were placed in was economic independence, which would only come about through access to equal education opportunities (Gangoli, 2007).

The stories depicted in *100 Shades of White* certainly lend validity to the importance of giving women access to education and subsequently respectable employment, so they do not have to struggle against a system that is essentially designed for them to fail. If the stories of Ammu, Nalini and Maggie are taken into consideration, it can be observed that their poor economic condition was due to lack of education, whereas Maya who had access to appropriate educational opportunities did not struggle from an economic standpoint, and certainly did not lack choices, only motivation. This common theme of economic independence and financial stability and what that means for women at the level of their everyday reality, is one that resonated deeply with the women who were interviewed and will be explored in detail in the interview analysis chapters.

In *Sangati*, on the other hand, gender discrimination finds its way well into adulthood through economy, where women are paid significantly lesser than men for the same work done (an issue that has found its way into modern India as well). Bama (2004) points out how the boys always got five or six rupees more, even if it was for typing up firewood bundles, and if the girls tied up the bundles but the boys sold them, they would get a better price. This kind of gender discrimination, while told through the Paraiyar community is true of the Dalit community in general. Mandal (2013, p.124) states,

> "In India today the dalit woman has no voice and face; she is like cattle or property that is owned. In fact, the emergence of patriarchal and Brahmanical values and its caste system in India institutionalised the oppression and exploitation of the dalits and this had a harmful effect on dalit women particularly. In India they live in a precarious existence combining abject poverty with griding labour in fields and workplace and they are abused and used, powerless and exploited both in the home and outside home. This is most clearly evident in their struggles for fundamental needs".

Mandal's words ring true when considered in conjunction with Bama's portrayal of the horrors faced the women of the Pariayar community on a daily basis. Bama even mentions that women are expected to work in the fields all day or take on menial labour work in order to run their household and meet daily expenses because the men spend all they earn on feeding their drinking habits and do not contribute to bearing the financial burden of the home. Sharma and Kumar (2020, p.29) observe,

> "Bama's Sangati is an illustration of how patriarchy works in the case of Dalit women. The foremost question is economic inequality. Women presented in Sangati are wage earners working as agricultural and building site-labourers but earning less than men do. Yet the money that men earn is their own to spend as they please, whereas women bear the financial burden of running the family, often on their own".

In addition to the economic inequalities, girls from the community are also sent into the workforce at a very young age, either as daily wage earners or as a part of a factory workforce. Bama refers to Maikkanni, the 11-year-old girl who lived in the house next to her.

> "Whenever her mother has a baby, Maikkanni goes off to our neighbouring town to work in the match factory because her mother cannot go to work in the fields then. At that time, they managed entirely on what Maikkanni earned. I used to feel sorry for that child because she worked in the factory all day, and then came home and did all the housework as well. But do you know, she used to say, 'Who does my mother have, except me? My father has left us, I must see to everything.' So responsible was she.
> […]
> Somehow, she managed to earn forty or fifty rupees a week. Every Saturday she brought her wages home and handed it to her mother" (Bama, 2004, p.70).

This event is indicative of the pressure that the girls in the Paraiyar community have to work or help take care of younger siblings and do housework from a very early age. Bama states that despite having to work so far, and often getting beaten up by her employers at work, or other boys in the factory, Maikkanni was always smiling and laughing and singing, which speaks volumes about her inner strength. This is indicative of Bama's desire to represent women of the Dalit community as more than just victims.

Bama talks about how the women of the Paraiyar community retaliate against the domestic violence they are subjected to. Some of the women bring their domestic disputes out into the street and do not hesitate in either cursing their husband or maybe even using physical violence as a way of getting back at them. She talks of the fights between Raakkamma and her husband Paakkiaraj. When Paakkiaraj goes to beat his wife, she turns around and starts hurling abuses at him. The more her husband threatens to beat her if she doesn't keep quiet, the more she abuses him.

> "She shouted obscenities, she scooped out the earth and flung it about. 'How dare you kick me, you low life? Your hand will get leprosy! How dare you pull my hair? Disgusting man, only fit to drink a woman's farts! Instead of drinking toddy every day, why don't you drink your son's urine? Why don't you drink my monthly blood?' And she lifted up her sari in front of the entire crowd gathered there. That was when Paakkiaraj walked off, still shouting" (Bama, 2004, p.61).

This behaviour forces Paakkiaraj to retreat and remove himself from the situation. In this manner, by bringing this quarrel out in the public for everyone to see, and by not giving in, but instead, fighting back, Raakkamma takes ownership of her body and honour. By uncovering it in public, she attempts to offend him, and by repeatedly referring to her private parts, she indicates that the use of the blunt and sexually explicit language has a significant role to play in redefining Dalit women's resistance.

Through *Sangati*, Bama attempts to shed light on the plight of a community as opposed to just an individual, which makes her writing very different from the conventional autobiographical genre. She ends on an optimistic note, "women can make and women can break" (Bama, 2004, p.123) in the hopes that someday Dalit women might not be in as vulnerable a position as they are today. Even when Bama talks about peys possessing women, she makes a claim that they do not need to fear anyone because she is hopeful in her confidence. Prasad and Gaijan (2007) explain that there is a certain fluidity about female characters in Dalit literature. They are not fixed and as such, they have the capability to fight for themselves and end "the journey of deep darkness and behold dreams of sunrise". Female characters in Dalit literature have protect their self-identity by revolting and their revolt is always centred around the collective and never the

individual. It is for this reason that they are not represented as hollow identities by Dalit writers. Female Dalit writers have led this charge in being truthful about Dalit women's representation and portraying them as three-dimensional characters who refuse to be defined by their victim status, and Bama's work has been monumental in doing just that.

Economic independence for Dalit women does not come out as an apparent theme in *Coming out as Dalit: A Memoir* but is woven effortlessly into the narrative. Dutt constantly refers back to the struggles her mother had to go through to fund her education, along with her siblings, and she used to do so by selling off jewellery and property. If Dutt's mother had been awarded the opportunity to work (which she eventually does) or further her education, their situation, perhaps might have been different. Even when Dutt speaks of her struggle during her university days in New Delhi, she constantly goes back to the role her mother played in ensuring her well-being.

> "When Mum visited me a few months into my first year, I had gained several kilos from eating plain butter when there was nothing else to eat. She instantly knew something was wrong and pulled me out of that makeshift hostel…Soon after I moved to this hostel, Mum came to check on me again, and she dd so frequently through my college years. She would travel all night in the general compartment (which was cheaper than the second-class) of the train from Ajmer to Delhi and sleep on a thin sheet spread on the floor" (Dutt, 2019. pp.62-63).

Dutt refers to the many jobs she herself took on to make ends meet, the small luxuries she would indulge in sometimes, and the guilt that accompanied those indulgences, despite knowing how hard she had worked to reach that point. She does not refer to her struggle to elicit a sense of sympathy from the reader; she does it to show the difference in the power held by the upper castes and the lower castes. Dutt does not talk about her struggle to showcase herself as the victim, instead, she does it to shed light on the hardships that Dalits have to face on a daily basis that are overlooked or not even taken into consideration by the upper castes. There is a need now more than ever to take Dalit women's voice into consideration and to ensure that they are heard on every socio-political and cultural level of Indian society and Dalit literature is a means of doing just that. It allows a discussion to be facilitated about the level of awareness within the dominant Indian society about the Dalit situation. This idea is going to be explored at length in the qualitative interview analysis chapter of this research.

6.3 The Question of Caste

Although caste discrimination has been outlawed by the Indian Constitution in 1950, and affirmative action policies have been put in place to safeguard the rights of the Scheduled

Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes, as they are referred to in the Indian Constitution (the idea of reservation was introduced in 1882 but only put into effect in 1932), caste still continues to play a significant role in driving political and economic decisions in India. People from lower castes often have limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities (Thapa, van Teijlingen, Regmi and Heaslip, 2021). This contributes to a cycle of intergenerational poverty and prevents upward mobility. Instances of caste based violence, ranging from physical attacks to social boycotts, continue to occur. Many cases go unreported or unresolved due to social and political pressures, and several of these have been discussed throughout this research.

While caste has always been around since pre-modern India the extent to which it manifested in everyday life during feudal times has been largely under-examined. Bhatnagar (1999, p.96) observes that in this time period, people from lower castes were bonded as servants or labourers to upper caste households. They were allowed to live on the land on the master's discretion and were evicted if they displeased them at all. The bonded labourers were not allowed entry and access to public marketplaces or temples. Men or women were not allowed to wear blouses, shirts or any clothes to cover their bodies above the waist. It is against this backdrop that we will now look at the caste issues as they are articulated in *The God of Small Things*. Velutha, the Paravan, also known as Velutha, the Untouchable, was a skilled carpenter who Iived with his father, Vellya Paapen, and brother, Kuttappan. Their livelihood depended on the Ipe family; Vellya Paapen and Velutha were employed by the family to do odd jobs in and around the house and factory. Velutha was skilled at his trade, and so while the family did not particularly like him, he was tolerated by Mammachi because he was useful to her. He was a tool she used to make herself feel like a 'good Christian'.

> "In Mammachi's time, Paravans, like other Untouchables, were not allowed to walk on public roads, not allowed to cover their upper bodies, not allowed to carry umbrellas. They had to put their hands over their mouth when they spoke, to divert their polluted breath away from those whom they addressed" (Roy, 1997, p.34).

Baby Kochamma, on the other hand, did nothing to hide her dislike of the Untouchables, especially Velutha. "She said (among other things), How could she stand the smell? Haven't you noticed they have a particular smell, these Paravans! And she shuddered theatrically, like a child being force-fed spinach. She preferred an Irish-Jesuit smell to a particular Paravan smell" (Roy, 1997, p.36). Even though Baby Kochamma herself had found herself drawn to an Irish monk and broken the 'Love Laws', she was hypocritical when it came to the Paravans because she

considered herself to be superior to them, keeping in line with the purity pollution principle that is the foundational structure of the caste system.

But the real reason that the 'Touchables' like Chacko, Mammachi, Comrade Pillai and Baby Kochamma do not like Velutha is that he does not conform to the society's expectation of how 'Untouchables' should behave. "Vellya Paapen feared for his younger son. He couldn't say what it was that frightened him. Perhaps it was just a lack of hesitation. An unwarranted assurance. In the way he walked. The way he held his head. The quiet way he offered suggestions without being asked. Or the quiet way in which he disregarded suggestions without appearing to rebel" (Roy, 1997, p.35). The situation only becomes worse when it is discovered that Velutha is having an affair with Ammu; something that is so forbidden by the 'Love Laws' that it makes Baby Kochamma's resentment flare up in the form of vile lies and treachery. Dwivedi (2010, p.390) explains this as

> "Paapen is an old Paravan and therefore does not disturb the social hierarchy as he is fully cognisant of the harsh treatment meted out to persons who attempt to transgress the rigid social order. Velutha, on the other hand, is a young man who fails to understand all these nonsensical rules and regulations for untouchables. He is adept in his mechanisms of carpentry and unsuccessfully tries to represent the changing face of India – an India which is marching on the road of progress, but all the same the India where untouchability is still practised".

Velutha ultimately dies while in jail as a result of police brutality; a fate that has befallen several Dalit men in India even in this day and age, for no reason, besides their low-caste status.

Endogamy is one of the ways in which the upper caste in India hold onto their notion of caste purity, by ensuring that there is no inter-caste marriage, and this is usually done through the practice of arranged marriage. As mentioned, Ammu was condemned for her relationship with Velutha because of their different caste statuses, and they were both punished for defying the 'love laws' that did not look too favourably upon inter-caste relationships. In a similar manner, Draupadi rejects Karna's suit in her swayamvar, even though he is the victor of the challenge set forth by King Draupad, because of his low caste status, making him ineligible to participate in a kshatriya princess's swayamvar. Karna's position as King of Anga holds no relevance when it comes to the question of caste.

The question of caste cannot be addressed without turning our attention to the several examples all throughout *Sangati* that shed light on the toll on Dalit women's health because of the discrimination and segregation they face. The first example comes in the form of Mariamma and the late start to her menstrual cycle which is a direct result of her having anaemia (Bama,

2004). This goes back to the point mentioned in a previous section about girls not being given enough to eat as children as the boys always got the lion's share of the ration in the house. There is also a brief mention of most Dalit women giving birth in their homes and not going to the hospitals. One of the reasons cited for this is that women of the Paraiyar community do not have the luxury of convalescing after giving birth; they usually go back to work within 4-5 days of giving birth as their work and subsequent pay as daily wage earners have a direct impact on whether they are able to run their household.

> "Women rarely go into hospitals, but deliver their children at home in a makeshift way. Many women die at childbirth or soon after. Almost immediately the men marry a second time. As for birth control, the men won't do it. They say they'll lose their strength if they do. And women say if they are sterilised in a haphazard way by people without proper training, they will not be able to work in the fields as before. If they can't work, how will they eat? As it is, the families keep going only because of the women" (Bama, 2004, p.36).

According to reports by Oxfam India, Dalits and other members of the marginalised groups in India are falling behind the privileged sections in terms of access to healthcare. It has been noted that on average, a woman from an upper caste lives 15 years longer than a Dalit woman, and almost 60% of the Dalit children in India are anaemic, while the national average is 50% (IDSN, 2021).

In *Coming out as Dalit: A Memoir,* Dutt extensively discusses how her family hid their lower caste status by performing as an upper caste family through their actions and habits that were specific to higher castes. "Movie nights, occasional eating out, socialising with Dad's few friends were among our weekly rituals. They mimicked the upper middle class habits of the early nineties, even when our financial situation didn't. They were a curated performance designed mostly by Mum's aspiration to break out from our lower caste" (Dutt, 2019, p.20). The use of the word 'curated' tells us that Dutt's mother put tremendous amount of thought and effort into ensuring that her family, and her children especially, could not be caste identified if they performed the same kind of activities as an upper caste family, even if it meant they would have to step outside their financial comfort zone to do so.

> "Even though our family barely counted as lower middle class, I spent my first five years living the life of a coddled, upper middle class kid… By the time I was six, she was selling big-ticket items like a heavy gold set for a few months of warm clothes, uniforms and food. Her family opposed her spending habits. They didn't understand why she couldn't send me to study in a local Hindi-medium school where books an uniforms would be heavily subsidised. Or why we needed to dress in the few good clothes we had, when we couldn't afford them. But for Mum, her jewellery and personal vanity mattered a lot less than the social (upper caste) acceptance of her children" (Dutt, 2019, p.24).

This raises an interesting point: based on Dutt's testimony, caste can be viewed as being performative in nature, instead of being a marker that is assigned at birth. Gurjar & Sristhi (2022, p.11) states "Dutt's characterisation of caste as performance suggests that caste differences are predicted upon carefully curated socio-cultural performances rather than any ritually assigned position in the society". If this is considered within the realm of identity and performance as explained by Butler, it could be said that caste like gender, is performed by people due to several factors. As Somers-Willett (2005, p.55-56) suggests, "when thinking of the performativity of identity in the Butlerian sense, one must always work to consider the invisible history, repetition, and normative value of any given identifying behaviour". If caste performance is viewed in this manner, it becomes evident that upper caste behaviours are merely repetitions that have been passed down from one generation to the next, and by mimicking these behaviours, it is possible for lower castes to 'pass' as upper caste to a great extent. Dutt then goes onto recount her experience at boarding school when she had to adopt habits and behaviours similar to those of the upper caste girls so she would not accidentally disclose her low-caste status. There is a very clear attempt to shed light on the social status of the Dalits and what is the best way for them to break free. Gurjar & Sristhi (2022, p.6) observed that according to Dutt, middle class aspirations for social mobility among Dalits are essentially efforts to emulate the lifestyle of the upper caste, which she believes they should abandon in favour of returning to their cultural roots. In her work, Yashica Dutt examines the negotiations and the tensions involved in this imitation of the upper castes, ultimately revealing a rupture in this performance. Her work in *Coming out as Dalit: A Memoir*, delves into the psychological aspects of why Dalits have remained socially anonymous and explores the ways in which they can emerge from this obscurity.

This notion of caste identity being a performative act will be discussed in the qualitative interview analysis chapter of this research.

> "Living with upper caste girls was meant to train me to be like them. By picking up little details like how they spoke, braided their hair or tucked in their sheets – some of the markers of upper caste culture – I would successfully blend in with them for the rest of my life. So far I had not needed much in my armoury to convince people that I was like them – middle class and upper caste. A few 'going out' clothes, a pair of thin gold hoops and sturdy shoes made me look as middle class and upper caste as anyone I knew. But a boarding school meant that I would need to pretend I was upper caste in nearly every breathing, waking and sleeping moment – an onerous effort for most adults and nearly impossible for a seven-year-old. But living with upper caste girls as openly Dalit would shake my self-esteem and perhaps scar me forever, never allowing me to climb out of the caste cage. So the only choice was to maintain the upper caste aura. Mum feared that without the necessary trappings, my outing as a Dalit would happen in less than a week" (Dutt, 2019, p.26).

The question of caste in India is the equivalent to the question of race in the West and is one that needs addressing not just at the political level, but also at the social, economic and cultural levels since Indian society is largely driven by social norms and customs. The question of caste is one that will be explored at length in the qualitative interview analysis chapters of this research.

While examining the intricate correlations between social and cultural norms, economic disparity and its subsequent need for women's economic freedom, and caste issues in India through the lens of the novels selected for this research, we have been made aware of the complex nature of India's societal fabric, and the multiple layers of oppression women are subjected to. We have also observed the implications of entrenched social norms on the lives of women and especially, Dalit women, thus shedding light on the glaring economic disparities that persist as a result. Social norms, traditions, economic disparities are all factors that actively contribute to the intersectional nature of an Indian woman's subjugation, and define how she places her own gender, and by extension positions herself within the societal framework. In the previous chapter, we explored the idea of societal systems being designed in a way that sets one gender up for failure; and now it is safe to say that patriarchy, social norms, violence against women, the subsequent commodification of women, rampant economic disparity with the added layer of caste oppression have perpetuated the low position of women in the hierarchy of every socio-economic and political level.

With the themes of patriarchy, commodification of women, violence against women, the question of caste, social and cultural norms firmly in place, the next two chapters will provide an analysis of the data collected from the interviews conducted juxtaposed not just against the themes that have emerged from a close reading of the novels but also the current debates and literature that exists in the field.

Chapter 7
Interview Analysis: The question of everyday realities versus fiction

In the previous chapters, we have observed and explored the themes that arose from a close reading of the selected novels; the themes being patriarchal nature of Indian society, violence against women, commodification of women, social and cultural norms, economic disparity and the question of caste. We have also explored how these themes are so deeply intertwined that it becomes difficult to discuss one without referring to the other. Building on the themes explored, the next two chapters aim to juxtapose the findings from the thematic analysis against the findings of the interviews conducted as part of the research. 24 middle class Indian women living in the UK between the ages of 20 and 50 comprised the audience for this research. The interviews were conducted both in-person and online, and focused on not just the selected novels but also the reflections of said narratives in the lives of the readers and what significance that held for them within the cultural context of their everyday experiences.

Literature, with its multi-layered and multi-faceted nature forms a fundamental part of the lived realities of not just the characters depicted in the narratives, but also its audience. Within the context of Indian literature, there is a deep exploration of how women's lives unfold, which echoes the diverse and nuanced experiences embedded in the everyday materialities of their existence. By studying and analysing the narratives woven into the fabric of Indian literature, this chapter demonstrates how stories that are generally consumed for entertainment serve a greater purpose than mere aesthetics and portray the material realities and lived experiences of women in modern India.

The representation of women in literature has often been a reflection of the society in which it is created, offering a lens through which to understand the intricacies of their experiences. Iser (1980, p.x) states,

> "literary work is to be considered not as a documentary record of something that exists or has existed, but as a reformulation of an already formulated reality, which brings into the world something that did not exist before […] if fiction and reality are to be linked, it must be in terms not of opposition but of communication, for the one is not there mere opposite of the other – fiction is a means of telling us something about reality".

As this research has explored and continues to explore postmodern, popular and Dalit literature, it can be observed that the narratives encapsulate the essence of existence, portraying the struggles, aspirations, and triumphs that define the female experience in India. The notion of everyday materialities serves as a cornerstone in this chapter, acknowledging the tangible

elements that contribute to the construction of women's realities. Whether it be gendered roles in the personal and public space, the social and cultural norms that must be adhered to, gendered economic disparity or the treatment of women as commodities, these materialities form the backdrop against which the fictional narratives, and women's everyday lived experiences play out. Women's experiences exist at the intersection of these materialities; one feeds into the other. Gendered domestic roles exist, and so women cannot enter into the workplace or are unable to perform the same as their male counterparts, leading to an economic disparity between the genders, which is also a result of social and cultural norms that place women as the keepers of tradition and culture. The economic disparity also leads to a commodification of women. As such, women's realities exist at the intersection of these materialities. Much of this emerged in the previous thematic analysis chapters (see 'Unveiling the layers'), and this chapter will build on these themes, primarily from the point of view of the audience the narratives were intended for. Through the lens of interviews in conjunction with the analysis of the novels conducted in the previous chapters, the aim is to gain insight into the interplay between tradition and modernity, cultural expectations and individual aspirations that shape the lives of women in modern India, even if their home base is no longer their country of origin. The aim is to offer a nuanced understanding of the complexities that define the female experience in the diverse landscape of India, albeit it from an upper caste perspective.

7.1 Patriarchy and gendered roles

At its very core, Indian society is deeply rooted in tradition and the structures in place as part of this tradition are patriarchal and biased towards one gender over the other. Women have been positioned at the weaker sex, and their position in society has always been determined by their gender, social and economic status, and their caste, in the case of Dalit women (Coomaraswamy 2002; Rassendren, 2014; Patel & Khajuria, 2017; Gangoli, 2007; Tomar, 2013; Arya, 2020). Patriarchy and the idea of gendered roles emerged in the previous chapters in the narrative of *The Palace of Illusions* through Draupadi's character. Draupadi, or Panchaali, as narrated through a woman's perspective was in sharp contrast to her representation in the original Mahabharata which was of course, written by a man. The Mahabharata is a story that almost every child growing up in India is aware of, and has engaged with at some point, through different mediums. The readers interviewed for this research had all engaged with this mythological tale in some form or the other in their childhood.

The incidents in Draupadi's life, as described in *The Palace of Illusions* were indicative of patriarchal control, and one would imagine that since this fictional story was set in Vedic times,

it would hold little to no relevance in modern day India. The unfair treatment she had to endure at the hands of her father, her husbands, her mother-in-law, and ultimately, the men who tried to disrobe her in full court all represent different forms of patriarchy and misogyny that Draupadi had been subjected to throughout her life. In the previous chapter, through Draupadi's story, we were able to explore how traditional mindsets in Indian society do not allow women the same type of access to education as their brothers or the male figures in their lives. This reality was a major discussion point during the interviews.

> "I saw so much of my mother in Draupadi – when she was younger, she wanted to study and do her Masters but my grandfather would not let her. He claimed that if she studied too much then no one would marry her and it would go to waste, but he spent so much of his resources on his sons education, and nothing for my mother! My family is at the stage now, that my father is retired and my mother is the sole breadwinner of the family. How is her education being wasted? It's really sad to think that this is how it is or how it used to be".
> (TR, 29, London: 2023)

This falls in line with Nagar's claim that "gender parity is evident in India's childhood literacy rates. 82% of boys are literate and only 65% of girls can read and write, according to the 2011 Census of India" (2021). The phrase 'this is how it is', while seemingly innocent, is in actuality powerful enough to serve as an explanation whenever the question of why the Indian societal structure is the way it is, is brought to the fore. The particular turn of phrase was used by several readers as an explanation for the patriarchal systems and glaring gender parity issue in India. The term 'gender parity' was almost a subset of patriarchal control and was used liberally by the participants of this research.

> "Gender parity does not exist in India, even in a modern society. Women will earn more than their husbands and still say things like मुझे उनसे पूछना पड़ेगा (I will have to ask my husband). It is a mindset that is culturally indoctrinated and imbibed; the conditioning is deep because this is how it is".
> (RG, 43, London: 2023)

> "औरतों को बस बेचारा बना कर रख दिया है (Women have just been made to be helpless). Gender parity is anyway lacking in India. Look at Draupadi, she was a queen and she had so many hardships in life. Her gender was the reader for her hardship. She always put everyone else first. She never had a choice".
> (AJ, 35, London: 2023)

The idea that Draupadi suffered due to her gender was a fascinating one and deserved further investigation from an audience perspective. The result of this exploration was that largely the readers agreed that being a woman in India was extremely difficult, even in 2023. The unanimous opinion seemed to be that 'things are changing, and they are better now, but we have

such a long way to go'. The ideas of 'this is how it is' and 'society' and patriarchal control are so intertwined that it makes it difficult to separate one from the other.

> "[on gender parity] It is years of seeing what has happened and never questioning it. Never thinking the need to question it because it has been happening, so it must be okay. We've been told the Earth revolves around the Sun, so that must be the case. It is the same – it is okay to treat women like that".
> (PJ, 36, London: 2023)

> "The word society trips me up because my mum keeps saying लोग क्या कहेंगे? हम ही तो हैं society। I say , आपकी society मुझे समझ नहीं आती कैसे लोगों से बानी है। मेरी society बहुत अलग लोगों से बानी है।(My mum says what will people say? We are people, we make up the society. I said, I don't understand the kind of people who make up your society. My society is made up of different people)".
> (SC, 28, London: 2023)

For so many of the readers, the words 'what will people say?' dictated their life choices; whether it be their career choices, their choice to not get married, their choice to marry outside the caste, their choice to be homemakers, their choice to move away from home for their career, or even their choice to address their husband by his name. When basic human choices are dictated by societal norms, it reflects a systemic issue rather than a personal one.

> "The norms are by us; we are not by the norms"
> (RG, 43, London: 2023).

To deviate slightly from the argument being made here about women have inequal access to education due to economic, social, and cultural factors, a perspective was offered by another reader which was in sharp contrast to the ones that can deemed to be the majority opinion, and the relevance of this viewpoint will be discussed.

> "Maybe gender disparity happens in the small towns, but not in modern society. All kids get education to the school level. At the higher education level, if the financial situation is tight the boys get preference because a choice needs to be made. It makes sense for it to be men; men will use their education. I mean, even if women are ambitious, they don't use their education and so it seems like a waste".
> (NT, 34, London: 2023)

The views expressed by NT bring to mind TR's statement about how her mother was denied a chance at further education but chose to rise above it and function as the sole breadwinner of the family currently. From NT's words, it feels like there is a sense of internalised misogyny which is perhaps inadvertent and a result of what she has seen around her as being 'normalised'. As Stewart (2007) explains this as "affects are not so much forms of significance, or units of

knowledge, as they are expressions of ideas or problems performed as a kind of involuntary and powerful learning and participation".

One of the other themes that emerged through the interviews was that of a 'good daughter', 'good wife', or 'good mother'. Draupadi had to be a good daughter and marry the man who would politically help her father, and then she had to be a good wife and daughter-in-law by agreeing to be shared by five men like a communal cup; Ammu had to be a good daughter and give up her claim to the family inheritance for her brother, and hide her love for Velutha; Nalini had to be a good wife and mother by hiding her husbands' infidelity from her children to protect them; Zoya had to be a good daughter by not flirting with the bounds of her freedom to the extent that her actions would embarrass her father. Gupta (2021) tries to list out the qualities of a good Indian woman as defined by the traditions of the society we find ourselves in; she must be sacrificial, devoted to her husband, she must not earn, she must observe every religious ritual, she must not speak up, she should cover her body, she should not enjoy physical intimacy, she should know how to cook and keep a house, she must want children, she must marry the man chosen for her by family and society, she must not demand for her rights if they are violated. Some of these characteristics were brought up by the readers during the interview process.

> "The expectation is that if you are a good daughter, you will give up your rights for your brother, but if you are a bad daughter, you will ask for your portion of the inheritance. There is no equality in inheritance. Ammu was a bad daughter. There was no respect for women anywhere in the book. Life भी ऐसी ही है (Life is also like that)".
> (AJ, 35, London: 2023).

> "I don't want to put myself in a position where I'm fighting with my parents. I had to do it for my career, for my choice to move to London to study film. I'm not going to fight when it comes to marriage; it's tragic, but I know I'll have an arranged marriage, and I won't put up too much of a fuss. I didn't want to get married, but now I have to because my older brother says he doesn't want to get married for another two years and that puts pressure on me. I can't fight it; this is not the hill I want to die on; my career yes, marriage, no".
> (TR, 29, London: 2023).

The idea that the reader in question sees marriage as 'a hill she does not want to die on' speaks volumes about the pressure that is advertently or inadvertently placed on Indian women to confirm to social customs and norms at the cost of their personal freedoms. Ahmed (2010, p.56) states "the good woman wants to be happy and hence wants what is good. The good woman so loves what is good because this is what is loved by her parents. The parents desire not only what is good; they desire their daughter to be good. The daughter is good to give them what they desire. For her to be happy, she must be good, as being good is what makes them happy, and she

can only be happy if they are happy". It is disheartening to think that an Indian woman can only be a good daughter, wife, mother, or a good woman, if she pleases the people around her at the cost of her autonomy and independence[20].

At the onset of this chapter, it was stated that Indian society at its core is traditional and has certain structures in place that favour one gender over the other, both in the personal and public sphere. This is backed by Rassendren's observation (2014, p.29) that

> "the perceptions that characterised the 'inside' of Indian culture were borne by women, who were tasked with preserving, sustaining and transacting its purity and authenticity, while the 'outside' of modern economy, development, individuality, reason and public life, in general, remained significantly in the hands of the men of that society".

In the personal space, the bias is evident in the expectation placed upon women to be in charge of household work and domestic chores. This is evident as Sanghera (2019) observes,

> "the burden of unpaid fall disproportionately on women in India because tasks such as cooking, cleaning, fetching water and firewood are highly gendered, and patriarchal norms dictate that women also perform care work, validate men's failure to assume domestic responsibilities and thus entrench women's unequal social status. Women in India currently spend upto 352 minutes per day on domestic work, 577% more than men (52 minutes), according to Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development data".

In the public space, or in the workspace, it is evident when female employees are not paid the same as their male counterparts, and their ideas are not taken seriously, or the implication that a woman is being emotional when she is unhappy about her situation. This difference often has wider implications than are immediately evident, such as economic disparity, which on the surface might not manifest immediately, but in the long run could become an issue for women and hinder their financial independence. In the novels we have analysed, we see it in the manner Zoya is treated differently than her male colleagues, we see it in the way Draupadi was expected to stay home while her husbands and sons went off to war, or when despite being queen, she was not consulted for state matters. We see it in the way Nalini struggles to make ends meet for her and her children when her husband abandons them because she had been entirely dependent on her husband until then and had no sense of how to be financially independent. We see it in the way the girls get paid less than the boys in *Sangati* for the same amount of work,

[20] From all the interviews, it becomes apparent that there is an overwhelming sense of guilt that is associated with being a woman whose choices do not fall in line with tradition and convention. I can admit, it is a sense of guilt I feel as well.

and we see it in the preference given to boy babies over girl babies in terms of how much they are being fed.

> "How long am I supposed to prove myself? That I am a person, irrespective of my gender. We are fighting every day to break this down, but it is so slow. Men will dismiss it, they say you study, you work, what more do you want? Why are you being a feminist? Men don't understand the everyday struggles of women and just dismiss it! You see it in the workplace. If your boss is wrong, you will complain about them. But if your boss is a woman, you will bring her gender into it. You would never do that with a male boss. And if your female boss is 40 and unmarried, and she is a terrible person, people will say 'oh if she had been married and had kids, maybe she would be a nicer person'. There is no need to bring someone's personal choices into this. You would never do that with a male boss or manager".
> (NS, 28, London: 2023)

> "I used to work for an architecture firm in Bangalore and my boss was this 45-year-old man. Six months into the job, and I wasn't allowed to go for site visits. When I asked why, he said it was because I was a girl and I rode a bicycle to work. There were many ways to solve the issue but he didn't set up a conducive environment for it. I said I could drive a bike, or take the bus, or an Uber. There were other solutions besides not sending me".
> (MV, 28, London: 2023)

> "Growing up, the boys in my family were allowed to do what they wanted, and study what they wanted. They could be whoever they wanted to be. I have girl cousins who have been slapped across the face for saying they wanted to study fashion. Do I think Indian women get the same rights as other people? No, we don't. We're a tick box".
> (RS, 37, London: 2023)

> "I work part time, and I realised that the new hires at my place got paid more than I did. And of course, they were guys. I couldn't even complain about it because when I tried, my manager said if I'm not happy here, I can just go look for another job".
> (AA, 22, London: 2023).

There is a discernible pattern to the stories and experiences shared by the readers of this research through the interview process; it would seem almost logical to draw the conclusion that regardless of age, educational background, or even location (all participants originate from different regions of India, and are currently based in the UK), the experience of being overlooked in the workplace or even at home due to their gender, is a shared one.

There is of course, the age-old notion that Indian families prefer to have boys over girls and often consider a female child to be a burden. The practice of female foeticide and infanticide in India was rampant until the government passed the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PNDT) Act of 1994, which prohibited sex-selection; this was done in an effort to curb cases of female foeticide. However, while there are laws in place to prevent such heinous crimes from occurring, several parts of the country are still stuck in the conservative mindset of preferring a male child over a female child. This is for several reasons; one, being that girls are often associated with

additional financial burdens on the family, in the form of dowry that must be paid off when they get married. Another reason is that men are considered to be the carriers of the family line and name, even though women are considered to be the keepers of the honour of the family (Ahmad, 2010). This bias and preference is evident in *The Palace of Illusions* through Draupadi's birth and her father's reluctance to accept her when she emerged from the fire. It is also visible in *Sangati*, when Bama speaks of the extra attention paid to the boy babies when compared to the girl babies (they are picked up and coddled more often, they are given more to eat, and when they grow up, they are paid more for the same work as compared to the girls). While is not overtly visible in *The Zoya Factor* because Zoya's father does not differentiate between Zoya and Zorawar, it is fairly evident in the way Zoya's extended family treats her and tries to set her up for an arranged marriage. The bias is evident in *The God of Small Things* when we see that the rules are different for Ammu and Chacko; Chacko, being a man is free to sexually exploit any woman, regardless of her caste, to fulfil his desires, but when Ammu falls in love and has an affair with Velutha, a lower caste man, she is condemned and shamed for it. These representations could be indicative of the current mindset in Indian society, but the only way to truly understand if these representations are reflected in current modern-day India, in the daily lives of women, was to speak to the readers and understand their perspectives.

> "Draupadi was not valued because she was a buy one, get one free. Her father wanted a son, but when a daughter appears from a yagna, she is supposed to be revered, and I thought her and Dhri would be treated as divine – but she was not, and I don't understand why. Was it because she was a girl? Maybe you don't feel the boy preference in urban areas, but I know someone who has four daughters and is not happy about it. She says that people tell her की अच्छा होता अगर लड़का होता (it would be good if you had a boy)"
> (VE, 28, London: 2023)

> "Women are seen as the inferior gender because for years in the collective conscience, things were done a certain way. People will go running behind girls during kanya puja [a festival that venerates pre-pubescent girls as an image of the Goddess], but when a girl is born into the house, they will say 'हमें तो लड़का चाहिए था' (we wanted a boy)".
> (VS, 37, London: 2023)

> "People still have a preference, and they want to have boys. Even when it comes to adoption. They will always have a deep desire to have boys; they might not say it or vocalise it but they do have a desire for it".
> (AJ, 35, London: 2023)

> "People still want boys over girls as boys are seen as carriers of the family line while women are viewed as egg donors or child-bearing machines. People I know have gone for a second or third child just to have a son because that is what they want. Not all families are okay with having two daughters, or only daughters".
> (PS, 47, London: 2023)

> "People who have boys have some kind of a superiority complex that I will just never understand. My own mother-in-law is insufferable; according to her, her biggest achievement in life is that she birthed a son".
> (PJ, 36, London: 2023)

What is interesting to note here is that while readers AJ and PS not only had very strong opinions on the preference Indian families have for boys, and seemed to condemn this mindset quite vehemently, they themselves only had one child each: a boy, and upon further questioning did not seem forthcoming on whether they would have liked to have a girl. It does make one wonder if there this is a part of the misogyny that women seem to have internalised and inadvertently exhibit in their daily interactions. Perhaps the conditioning runs deeper than one would have thought, and this will be explored in the Discussions chapter.

7.2 Women as commodities

Another one of the bigger themes that emerged not just from the analysis of the selected novels, but also during the interview process and discussions around the novels and the narratives was the commodification of women, and the mindset that men could treat women like property. The frontrunner in this discussion was, once again, Draupadi who was shared between five brothers at the behest of her mother-in-law, and was later, gambled away in a game of dice at the discretion of her husband, Yudhisthir. The shame of being treated like an object and not a human being is one that resonated with several of the readers, who were aware of the incident in their previous encounters with the Mahabharata but had never read such a visceral description of events that transpired. Ahmed (2014, p.103) states "the very physicality of shame – how it works on and through bodies – means that shame also involves the de-forming and re-forming of bodily and social spaces, as bodies 'turn away' from the others who witness the shame. The 'turning' of shame is painful, but it involves a specific kind of pain".

> "It's simple really; her husbands didn't respect her. If they had, they would have taken a stand for her. For an Indian woman, her husband and children always come first. But for the man, he comes first, and then his wife or his family. The Pandavas were supposed to be keepers of dharma – where is the dharma in watching your wife getting disrobed and not protecting her?"
> (AM, 50, London: 2023)

> "Obviously you don't have something like the cheerharan today, but that doesn't mean that women are safe. Men might protect women when it suits them but make no mistake, it comes from a place of ownership and ego; almost as if they don't protect the woman, it reflects badly on them. It has nothing to do with the woman".
> (LK, 41, London: 2023)

> "Reading that scene was hard for me – nobody did a damn thing. People of principles did nothing for her. Forget that she was a queen or the daughter of a king, she was a woman first, but no one did anything. She stood by her husbands, but they did not stand by her. If it were me, I would have killed my husband".
> (SA, 43, London: 2023)

The prevailing view in the case of Draupadi's cheerharan seemed to be that her husbands operated from a place of ego, and should have done everything in their power, as men of principle, to protect their wife. The view shared by most of the readers was that even in modern India, women are treated like commodities whose bodies can be exploited at the whims of men, who can do with them as they choose. This falls in line with the research done in the previous chapters about the crime statistics in India and how violence against women is at an all-time high, especially when it pertains to cases of sexual and domestic violence (see Chapter 2 'Literature Review'). This is also evident in Irigaray's argument that women are not born as commodities but made into one in a capitalist system. It is the same argument that is made for institutions of marriage where women are passed on like cattle from one male owner, that is the father, to another male owner, that is the husband. They have no agency, no voice, and no individuality (1985). If this is to be considered within the context of *The Palace of Illusions*, and the perspectives of the readers, it becomes fairly evident that the treatment of women as commodities stems from patriarchy, and the supremacy of the dominant group, which in this case refers to a specific gender.

> "Maybe biologically it is just who men are. They will always want to own women as property. A woman will probably want a man to protect her but she would not treat him as property. For men though, they will look at a woman as something they own".
> (NT, 34, London: 2023)

The next figures that were discussed at length were the women represented in *Sangati* through Bama's testimony. Their commodification like every other issue faced by women of the Pariyar community was intersectional in nature, owing to their gender and low caste and economic status. In the case of Mariamma, it manifests in the way she was denied a chance at justice and not even allowed to speak in her defence when accused by an upper caste landlord.

> "That was tough to read – Dalit women are taken for granted by the dominant caste. Generally, also women are treated as property. Nobody even wanted to hear the girls side. Sadly, this happen today also because she is considered to be nothing".
> (PH, 21, London: 2023)

> "I think this sense of ownership comes from a place of power. Men were powerful and could own things. Anything they could buy with money, they did. So, they applied it to women as well, which is why trafficking and sexual violence still exists".
> (PA, 47, London: 2023)

> "The kids I speak to are aware of this. The boys living in the बस्ती (slum) see the husbands beating up their wives, and they have the awareness to say that this is wrong, and we will never do this. Will they be able to hold onto this once they grow up? I don't know. When you don't have basic securities in life, like money, they don't know how to deal with things. उन्होंने और कोई life देखि नहीं है (they have never seen another life)".
> (AB, 33, London: 2023)

The tone of voice when referring to the brutalities faced by the women as depicted in *Sangati* was indicative of the readers feelings about the exploitation and commodification of women, especially lower caste women.

> "Mariamma's case could not be proven. There was nothing anyone could do about it. Lower caste women are more freely available and are sexually exploited. No matter how liberated we are, women are not allowed to speak. Someone will always tell them to be quiet and there will be no justice. There is no freedom when someone is not allowed to get justice".
> (AV, 44, London: 2023)

It would serve us well to remember that *Sangati* was published in 2004 and described the life of women in the 60's, and yet, the relevance of the text is not lost in 2024. It was reported that the rate of crimes against women, which is the number of crimes against women per one lakh population rose from 56.3 in 2014 to 66.4 in 2022 (NCRB, 2024). What was particularly fascinating to note at this juncture was the participants somehow seemed to make the plight of Dalit women specifically, the plight of all Indian women generally; there was a refusal to acknowledge that the low caste status of Dalit women could be a contributing factor in their exploitation. This notion will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter as it bears further exploration.

The commodification of women, that is the treatment of women akin to property intersects with violence against women, in the form of domestic and sexual abuse. When the issue of domestic and sexual violence against women was raised, the readers expressed their willingness to share their experiences and perspectives on the subject matter, especially in the context of the selected novels.

> "I wasn't aware of things like domestic or sexual violence when I was growing up. Unlike Ammu [in *The God of Small Things*], I had a normal childhood. She was terrorised by her father and so she believed that fear was the only way you can control someone. It's only when I grew up that I started reading and learned to recognise the signs in people. I've heard my relatives trying to justify violence with 'अब कोई क्या कर सकता है। ठीक है घटिया इंसान है' दो चार गालियां दे दी, बस…people will go back to the life they are living ('What can

> anyone do? It's okay, he must be a horrible person'. They'll curse them a few times and people will go back to the life they are living)".
> (SC, 28, London: 2023)

> "Let's look at sexual abuse; women are not ready to talk about it even with the people they trust. Let's say you got catcalled, it's a very casual thing. It's not, but it is treated like that. If you are catcalled, you are uncomfortable, but will you discuss it with someone? No because you will dismiss it yourself because it's not a big deal. The fear is that you will not get empathy and be scrutinised. People will stop you from going outside, and there will be restrictions on you. No one will focus on shaming the person who did it in the first place".
> (NS, 28, London: 2023)

This falls in line with Magill's claim that "shame and stigma continue to discourage women from talking openly about sexual violence while intimidation and the barriers to access the justice system remain a disincentive for complaints" (2023). This is also supported by Sabri's claim that women in India do not often report cases of domestic or sexual violence because of the social and cultural stigma associated with sexual exploitation, and the mindset that women the keepers of culture and tradition; their virtue is tied to the pride and honour of the family and the household. Anything that could potentially tarnish their virtue, and extension the honour and respectability of the family must not be discussed in a public forum (2014).

> "I've been through something like that [sexual violence], and I was able to communicate it to my parents with great difficulty. I don't think they understand the intensity of it for me. If it was tough for me with a supportive upbringing, I can't even begin to imagine what it would be like for someone in a restrictive family".
> (MV, 28, London: 2023)

Tangentially it might not make sense to jump from patriarchy to commodification of women to economic disparity to domestic and sexual violence and back to social and cultural norms; but a key thing to keep in mind is that within the context of the Indian society, each of these factors is tied to the other. It is a cycle of subversion and exploitation that is non-linear and moves through society at different levels and manifests through different forms. The process is highly intersectional and its various elements cannot be separated from one another. The recognition that women's subversion in India is not confined to one axis is not a new or novel concept by any means. Kimberle Crenshaw may have coined the term in 1989, but intersectionality as a concept, and as a tool to recognise women's oppression has been used by female activists in India, such as Savitribai Phule, for a very long time. As stated by Sarma (2015), Savitribai Phule got intersectionality. She, along with her husband, Jyotirao Phule were staunch advocates of an anti-caste ideology and women's rights. They stood against women's oppression but also stood for the Adivasi and Muslim community. "Phule confronted several axes of social division, namely, caste, gender, religion and economic disadvantage or class. Her political activism encompassed

intersecting categories of social division – she didn't just pick one" (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020, p.13).

In modern India, where the socio-cultural landscape is in a constant state of flux, fiction emerges as a lens through which to comprehend the everyday materialities and nuanced layers of women's lives. The merging of the interviews and the thematic analysis reaffirms the notion that the selected novels, despite being works of fiction for the most part, are anchored in the authentic experiences of women, and speak volumes about the current gender politics of Indian society. Through the characters and the narratives, fiction becomes a conduit for empathy and understanding, bridging the gap between what is written and what is tangible. Even in modern India, despite all the growth and progress we have made as a country, societal structures are fundamentally patriarchal and biased; that is not to say that things have not changed for women, but there is more that can be done, and largely it is up to the women to bring about this change for themselves. To quote SC (one of the many readers selected for this research):

> "बगावत करने पर ही evolution होता है और हमें ही करना पड़ेगा. और कोई नहीं करेगा"
> (Revolution leads to evolution, and we will have to do it. No one else will do it)
> (SC, 28, London: 2023)

Chapter 8
Interview Analysis: the bias of caste

In the diverse landscape of Indian society, the caste system is a unique concept that has rarely been replicated in other societies and has endured the test of time, albeit not in a positive manner. This system has shaped the lives of millions of people for centuries and is rooted in ancient traditions and scriptures (see 'Caste Racism in India'), and this hierarchical social structure has left an indelible mark on the collective consciousness of the nation and its people, both within and outside its boundaries. The caste system, deeply ingrained in India's history, has evolved over millennia, shaping societal norms, relationships, and individual aspirations. We have also explored in previous chapters that caste is flexible and gets defined and redefined based on the changing socio-economic and political structures of India. The dominant discourse of India is one that favours the upper caste over the lower caste and almost negates their experiences and subversions by maintaining the position that their situation has vastly improved through reservation policies over the years, following the abolishment of the whole system as per the Indian Constitution.

However, the caste system is the perfect example of the notion of hegemony and ideology, where the entrenched power dynamics between upper caste and lower caste communities perpetuate social hierarchies and economic imbalances. Ideology becomes a part of manufactured consent through hegemony. Croteau, Hoynes, and Milan (2012, p.160) articulate

> "hegemony, though, is not simply about ideological domination, whereby the idea one group are imposed on another. Instead, the process is far subtler. Hegemony operates at the level of common sense in the assumptions we make about social life and on the terrain of things that we accept as 'natural' or 'the way things are'".

The caste system legitimises the dominance of the upper caste over the lower caste through ideological constructs that dictate social norms, religious practices, and economic opportunities. The upper caste maintains its supremacy by shaping cultural narratives that reinforce its superiority and perpetuate the inferiority of the lower castes. The manner in which this dominance is exerted is multi-layered, and intersectional in nature: it operates at the level of social and cultural norms, economic opportunities, and of course, gender. Crenshaw (1991, pp.1246-1249) explains that intersectional subordination does not have to be deliberately caused; it often results from one imposed burden interacting with existing vulnerabilities, leading to an additional layer of disempowerment. Women of colour occupy different positions in economic, social, and political spheres. When reforms aimed at helping women ignore this

reality, the needs of women of colour are less likely to be addressed compared to those of racially privileged women.

The intersectional nature of the oppression faced by Dalit women is also reflective of how the quality of their life differs from their upper caste counterparts. Shields (2008) explains "intersectionality reflects the quality of lives. The facts of our lives reveal that there is no single identity category that satisfactorily describes how we respond to our social environment or are responded to by others". The pervasive influence of caste based ideology extends beyond the individual to infiltrate societal structures, ensuring the perpetuation of an unequal status quo. As a society, we would like to believe that we have made growth and progress in how we address caste issues in the context of everyday practices in India. However, this belief might be rooted in a strong sense of elite privilege and has no actual basis in reality. The main aim of this chapter is to argue that upper caste women operate from a place of privilege and have minimised the nature and seriousness of the oppressions faced by the women from lower castes, despite having an awareness and understanding of the issues that are prevalent in society. The interviews conducted reflect the privileged view of the participants of this research and an element of latent bias; this section focuses on an examination of how this influences social interactions, access to equal opportunities, and more, in the great divide between the upper caste and the lower caste.

8.1 Social and economic privilege

Historically, the upper castes in India have enjoyed certain privileges that have not been extended to the lower castes when it pertains to social and cultural customs. Das (2014) has explained that in present India, caste is fluid, has no basis in religion and keeps getting redefined on the basis of the ever-fluctuating political structures in India, and her claim has been backed by Ghurye and Srinivas who believe that caste would not disappear from Indian society, but would instead, transform and adapt according to the changing socio-political needs of the time. She also affirms that "inclusion in the nation's workforce via reservation policy does not fulfil the promise of equal social standing because the lower caste does not get equal 'status' to Brahmins in society and hence, this situation undermines political equality implied in democratic commitments" (2014, p.275). This seems like an abstract concept in theory, but when this claim of lower castes, i.e., the Dalit community not sharing the same social and cultural privileges as the upper castes, is viewed through the lens of literary narrative and the subsequent conversations around it, the claim solidifies and is enforced through personal testimonies.

Let us take into account the social and cultural exclusion of Yashica Dutt and her family in *Coming out as Dalit: A Memoir*; we have seen in the previous chapters that Dutt's 'lower caste' status was effectively hidden by her mother through the adoption of upper caste practices, such as wearing heels or having curtains in the house, forcing her daughter to learn flawless English or even to spend money the family did not have in order to maintain the façade of being an upper caste family. These incidents are detailed painstakingly by Dutt to raise awareness about the challenges her family had to face to ensure that their caste was not outed under any circumstance. The notion that fluency in English is seen as a marker of respect, and as a marker of belonging to an 'elite' section of society has been discussed at length in previous chapters (see 'Social norms, economic disparity, and the question of caste'). This is also made evident in Browarczyk's (2022, pp. 319-320) observation,

> "For most Indians irrespective of class or caste, English is an aspirational language essential for securing success and a stable socioeconomic position; this is even more true for those from underprivileged backgrounds […] Dutt sees proficiency in English as a marker of respect, and one that ensures being treated as someone belonging to an upper echelon of society. In the context of Dalits' limited access to English and a gap between the elitist anglophone Indian writing and the regional literatures in other languages, Gidla's and Dutt's life writings represent new voices of contemporary, urban, educated women who strongly assert their identity as both underprivileged and female, and spearhead a new genre of Dalit auto/biographical narratives by Dalit women in Dalit".

However, when the same incidents are viewed from the perspective of an upper caste reader, the result is not what one would expect.

> "I didn't relate with Dutt's experiences at all because she said that having curtains in your house was an upper caste thing; it might have been a money thing. It did make me question what my privileges are, but really, the high heels thing? Even my mother never wore high heels; that doesn't make us lower caste".
> (SC, 28, London: 2023)

The reader in question hails from a Tier 2 city in India, belongs to an upper caste Brahmin family and has a Masters level education which was obtained in the United Kingdom. One could assume that this would be an isolated opinion, and not one that is shared or reiterated by other readers, but that would be an overly optimistic and false assumption to make. Another reader, who has a background in working for NGO's at the grassroots level with the oppressed classes in India, had somewhat of a similar view when it came to the question of reservation and privilege.

> "Reservation is a two way process: it is to protect backward classes and to make reparations, but they should stop making use of reservation when they have reached a

> place in life; they hold onto reservation when they should not. Yashica Dutt was so privileged. Her caste was hidden and she was from an educated family".
> (RG, 43, London: 2023)

The idea that Yashica Dutt, a writer from a Dalit family might be privileged in some way is a notion that had to be explored from the perspective of other readers as well, to understand if this was an opinion shared by others, or it was simply the result of internalised caste biases. A reader of South Indian origin who was reluctant to share her personal caste, only to later say that she placed herself outside the caste system, had a rather telling view on the incidents described in *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir*.

> "I learnt a lot from the book, but I think she made more of a fuss about it than it deserved. I don't see how she was burdened with the Dalit tag; no one really said anything to her in school or otherwise. She was from a fairly privileged background; I mean she got into Columbia University. So did I, but I know the hard work I put in for it. I didn't go to a fancy school or college in Delhi, but she did. Her educational resume was above average. With the kind of education she received, she could have participated in the general category of things, and not made use of reservation policies".
> (MV, 28, London: 2023)

The statement that Dutt made more of a fuss about her caste and the way it affected her family than it deserved is a far cry from the literature that has been studied and analysed for this research; this viewpoint is also completely contradictory to what Dutt intended when she spoke of the hardships and struggles her family had to face due to their low-caste status. The existence of caste in India is a juxtaposition; on the one hand, the upper caste women speak of equal rights and the need to empower Dalit women or the wrongness of the horrors that they are subjected to in their daily lives, but at the same time, there is a dismissal of caste as a real cause for concern by some of the upper caste readers; and this was reflected in the conversations that came about during the interview process.

> "I'm not denying the existence of caste, but I do think it's a mindset thing. To each his own experiences [when reading *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir*]. I think they get oppressed because some people cannot speak up for themselves because they don't have the confidence or don't know about their rights".
> (PK, 49, London: 2023)

> "I only realised that Dalit people get preferential treatment when I spoke to some of my friends about fees when we were in school. But these people also got some kind of leverage much like privileged sections. Then there were people in the middle who were not rich or Dalit and just went through the motions of life and were not getting special treatment, but the Dalit people were. I'm not sure how fair that is".
> (MV, 28, London: 2023)

It can be said that this viewpoint is the dominant one in the country; it is a view that believes that the Dalit situation is perhaps not as much bad as it is made to be, or to quote MV 'they are making more of a fuss about it than needed'. This mindset is the very definition of a lived hegemony which Williams describes as "a process. It is not, except analytically, a system or a structure. It is a realised complex of experiences, relationships, and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits" (1977, p.112). This mindset can also be explained as a process of socialisation that normalises the dominant ideology. Williams (1977, p.117) states

> "any process of socialisation of course includes things that all human beings have to learn, but any specific process ties this necessary learning to a selected range of meanings, values, and practices, which, in the very closeness of their association with necessary learning, constitute the real foundations of the hegemonic".

The views of the readers bring to the front the idea of the minimisation of the oppression of an entire section of people, and the notion that people, especially women from the Dalit community have similar kinds of privileges as members of the upper caste. There is a visible reduction of the differences between the upper caste and the Dalit community to lifestyle and aesthetic value. Ahmed (2000, p.96) observes "the claiming of difference as that which 'we' have involves the erasure of differences that cannot be absorbed into this 'we'. Furthermore, differences become immediately defined in terms of 'lifestyles', ways of being in the world that find easy commodification in terms of an aesthetics of appearance".

The unique ways in which people exist or express themselves, in this case, the Dalit community, is simplified into a form that enables the loss of the deeper meaning in the process. This act of reducing the difference between the upper castes and the Dalit community to having curtains in the house, or an educational resume, leads to the exclusion and almost erasure of the deeper significance of these differences since they do not necessarily fit in with the readers' view of identity; the significance being that as women from upper castes they enjoy certain social and cultural privileges that are not extended to women from the Dalit community. This can be substantiated with Arya's (2020, p.222) observation that the structure of Indian society is based on a system of graded inequality, assigning hierarchical value to individuals primarily on the basis of caste, and secondarily on the basis of gender. Within the Brahmanical system, each person is oppressed by those above them in this hierarchy: a Brahmin woman by a Brahmin man, a kshatriya man by both a Brahmin man and a Brahmin woman, a kshatriya woman by a kshatriya man, a Brahmin woman, and a Brahmin man, and so forth. By this observation, it becomes clear that because the Dalit woman is placed right at the bottom of the societal order of things, her oppression comes not just from Dalit men, but also brahmin women, brahmin men,

kshatriya men, kshatriya women, Vaishya men, and Vaishya women. When financial instability and insecurity is added an extra later, the subversion and oppression increases exponentially in magnitude. Chakravarti (2018, pp. 151-152) observes

> "women of the upper caste may experience gender-based discrimination, but they also share the material resources and the ideology of the men of their caste. At the other end of the hierarchy, Dalit women remain the most vulnerable sections of our society, with the oppressions of the Dalit women far outweighing that of their men. The existential reality of caste continues to be a phenomenon of our society, even though some of its contours may have changed".

There has been enough research done to point out that historically, English has been considered as the language of the elite, and by extension, the upper caste in India; this was also discussed briefly earlier in this section. Dutt herself refers to the 'colonial hangover' that Indians today live with, when the issue of fluency of English is brought up (see 'Social Norms, Economic Disparity, and the Question of Caste'). Aula (2014) observes that mostly children attending English private schools hail from the elite and middle classes, while the vast majority of lower class send their children to public school taught in regional languages due to the systemic discrimination. It does not need to be reiterated that as authorised by the elites, most universities and even government jobs require a certain degree of fluency in English, and this is how fluency in the language approximately determines a person's socioeconomic position in Indian society; it is almost like a modernised version of the caste system.

This aligns with Dhanaraju's claim that "first generation Dalits in higher education have been struggling in the universities because of English language. They have not been able to cope up with the knowledge system where the upper caste elites dominate over the Dalits in the classroom" (2014, p.6). When these are viewed through the lens of Dutt's experience with the English language all through her childhood, right up to her employment at the call centre, it becomes apparent that English was, and is still a marker for the elite and upper caste, but in this instance, the elite also includes the emerging middle class that could afford to send their children to English speaking schools. But once again, when this was viewed from the perspective of the upper caste readers, there were some differences.

> "I'm not sure I agree that it is a problem. Where I come from [Bangalore], English is spoken on a daily basis, and not Hindi. I think I might understand the dilemma of people in India, but I think outside India, it is accepted if your English is not that good. I have non-Indian colleagues who are not the best English speakers, and they do not feel the burden of not speaking the language properly. Maybe it's an Indian burden to bear. In India, it could be the mark of someone who is educated, but again, I don't see it".
> (MV, 28, London: 2023)

The reader in question did not whole heartedly agree with Dutt's claim of English being a marker of the upper caste or the elite in India, and had normalised the use of the language simply because it had been a part of her experience growing up. It becomes relatively easy for someone like MV to claim that language does not play an important role, since her family background affords her the cultural capital to make statements that dismiss the lived experiences of others. Threadgold (2020, p.85) states

> "the ability to use language in specific social or institutional situations is one form of embodied cultural capital that can affect whether one can enter some spaces to begin with, and then affect one's trajectory through that space: are they taken seriously because they speak with authority, or are they treated condescendingly because they misspoke or do not understand the lingo?"

The fact of the matter is that simply because this language barrier does not exist in MV's everyday experience does not mean it does not exist in someone else's everyday reality.

Stewart (2017, p.15) has explained this as,

> "ideologies happen. Power snaps into place. Structures grow entrenched. Identities take place. Ways of knowing become habitual at the drop of a hat. But it's ordinary affects that give things the quality of a something to inhabit and animate".

The use of English for the above reader is a normal part of life, that has become so due to the social structure around her that has been established and is an accepted way of being. By normalising it, there is a resistance to the notion that when the layer of caste is introduced into the equation, making the structure redundant because of its intersectional nature, the experience might be different or even exclusionary for somebody else from a different background. Once again, there is a hesitation from the reader to engage with a version of reality that might differ from their own, thus making it 'not real'.

They hesitate to engage with the question of caste repeatedly even within the context of the chosen literary texts. When the question of caste was raised in the context of Ammu and Velutha's relationship as portrayed in *The God of Small Things*, there was very little, if any, engagement with the caste aspect of the relationship. The novel talks of Love Laws and the consequences of breaking societal laws; the most important law that was broken by Ammu and Velutha was their inter-caste relationship; she was upper caste and he was lower caste (Poyner, 2018; Dizayi, 2021). When this idea of breaking love laws in terms of inter-caste marriages was raised, there was very little engagement with the context and content of the novel.

> "I didn't even clock that it was a caste issue [the reason for Velutha's death in *The God of Small Things*]. I suppose now that you say it, it does make sense. But I just didn't see it" (VS, 37, London: 2023).

> "Inter-caste marriages are forbidden for a reason. It makes sense for families to want to stay within the caste since the upbringing is so ingrained in culture. Women play such a big role in maintaining culture and tradition that if they marry into a different caste, it becomes difficult for them" (NT, 34, London: 2023). [21]

> "They had their reasons, I suppose. It was sad that Velutha died since he was actually meant to be the embodiment of the title of the book. He was literally the god of small things, but he died because that's how it was supposed to be. I don't know if caste was a thing, I think it might have been a literary choice" (SC, 28, London: 2023).

On a social level, Dalit women are at the bottom of the hierarchical ladder; a fact that has been repeated several times through this research but bears another reiteration. Their low social status has a direct impact on their economic status; they are forced to take up menial forms of labour for employment such as being domestic helpers and cleaning people's houses or manual scavenging. The aforementioned jobs do not pay nearly enough to keep their homes running, and so their economic status leads them to be socially excluded; the systemic oppression is so cyclical in nature, and so intensely intersectional that it does make one wonder: what came first, the social or economic exclusion? Srivastava illuminates the concentric forms of exploitation women navigate within these conditions of oppression:

> "Dalit women face special problems. They suffer from oppression on three counts. As women, they are vulnerable to sexual harassment. As workers, they are exploited. And as a Dalit, she is considered untouchable and an outcast and subject to caste humiliation on a daily basis. Dalit men and women are made to perform the most menial, abhorrent tasks at abysmal wages. Poverty pushes more women from the marginalised castes into the workforce to work at pittance wages in very degrading conditions" (2003, p.131).

Elements of this kind of exploitation were visible in the narrative of *Sangati*, and they did beget the question of an upper caste readers view on the matter; did they believe the treatment of Dalit women was unfair?

> "Most domestic help is from a lower caste, and the narrative with them is that they are only good for second hand things. The thinking for most people, my mother and mother-in-law included is, 'खाना बच गया है, उसको दे दो। कपडे पुराने हो गए हैं, हम नहीं पहनेंगे, उसको दे दो' (there is food left over, give it to them. The clothes have become old and we won't wear them, so give it to them). I don't think I can change that mindset for my mother, but I do not allow this in my own home. When my house help makes our daily meals, I ask her to take a serving for herself first and eat with us. Upper caste feel जो हमारी position है,

[21] It came as a surprise when it was revealed that NT herself had had an inter-caste marriage and had fought against tradition to make it happen. She claims to be happily married now.

> उससे नीचे उतर कर अगर lower caste के साथ बैठ गए तो मेरी identity पर सवाल उठेगा (Upper castes think that if I step below my position, and sit with someone from a lower caste, then people will question my identity). It will hamper my identity. Sometimes I feel that even after so many years of independence, we have the same problems we did then, and then we have new problems also. The majority in India is not the majority and our education system is not conducive to what is the actual majority. The West has at least accepted that they oppressed a race. We can't even acknowledge that we have oppressed so many castes of people".
> (AB, 33, London: 2023)

The reader in question claimed to not know her caste; she also has a professional background in ensuring that education is made more accessible to children from lower castes. Perhaps it was her work experience that influenced the way she saw women from the Dalit community, or perhaps it was the children that she worked with that led her to having a far more open minded view on the question of caste when compared to her peers. This level of candour does perhaps shed light on the fact that while there are some sections of the upper caste readers that perhaps do truly understand the extent of the oppressions of the Dalit women in everyday life, the majority of the readers while having the knowledge and awareness about the issues prevalent in the lives of Dalit women, do not accord them the importance they deserve when compared to what are considered to be issues in their own lives.

8.2 Minimisation of caste based violence

It has been detailed in the previous chapters (see 'Dalit Feminism' and 'The Question of Caste') that caste based violence against the Dalit community in India has been at an all-time high, with crimes against women, in general seeing a 12.3% increase in 2022 when compared to the previous year (National Crime Records Bureau, 2024). Crimes against Dalit women have seen an even bigger increase in recent years. Jha (2023) believes

> "discrimination against Dalits is endemic in Indian society, with regard to notions of 'impurity' and 'contamination'. It does not matter whether a Dalit is in school, at work, in temple, or at play, they are constantly reminded of their impurity and caste. The rising frequency of crimes against Dalits is a reflection of the increasing exploitation of Dalits by upper caste socials".

It can be said without a doubt that Dalit women have been placed at the lowest rung of the hierarchical ladder of Indian society due to their gender, caste, and as a result of this, their economic status. Their oppression stands at the intersection of these factors and is unique to the Dalit community in a way that is not often acknowledged by the people from upper castes.

The aim of Dalit literature is to bring about awareness and shed light on the realities of the experiences of Dalit women from a perspective that does not minimise their subversion; it is the basis of the life testimony genre of Dalit literature, especially if the narrative of *Sangati* and the violence depicted in it, is taken into consideration. Trivedi (2007, p.7) states,

> "Dalit literature is a journey from mainstream literature to marginal literature, from grand narrative to little narrative, from individual identity to group identity, from ideal to real, from vertical literature to spiral literature, from self-justification to self-affirmation. This is the 'celebration of difference'".

However, once again, when viewed from the perspective of an upper caste reader, the awareness around the everyday lived experiences of Dalit women is more often than not, reduced to mere words.

> "Women are always protecting their body regardless of who you are and where you are. It is heinous to think that even if a woman is trying to keep herself safe, she is exploited because of her caste. It is scary to think that a woman is going to be exploited because she is a Dalit, but it's not just a caste thing; it is more about the physical exploitation of a body".
> (PK, 49, London: 2023)

The reader in question refused to disclose her caste stating that she 'on a personal level, did not believe in caste'. She went on to add that while she did not have in-depth knowledge about the caste system, she was aware of the existence of the Dalit community. The quick dismissal of sexual violence against a woman having anything to do with her caste is a clear example of certain sections of the upper caste minimising the intersectional nature of the gendered violence faced by the women of the Dalit community. The question that ought to be raised here is this: is someone who is only aware of the existence of the Dalit community and not an actual member of the Scheduled castes, in any position to comment on the notion that sexual violence against Dalit women is a wider gender issue, and not influenced by caste in any way.

It is noteworthy to observe that another reader did go on to make a pertinent point about the sexual availability of lower caste women when compared to upper caste women.

> "Treatment of lower caste women is worse. Upper castes treat lower caste as slaves – women from lower caste do not have a voice and don't say anything maybe because they need the money. Lower class women are more freely available to be sexually exploited. No matter how liberated women we are, women are not allowed to speak. Someone will always tell them to keep quiet and there will be no justice. Lower caste women are slaves. I have seen maids in my house show up for work with bruises on their body, and swollen eyes. Their men do not see women as human beings".
> (PS, 47, London: 2024)

It should be noted here that for this particular reader, the concept of 'caste' and 'class' were almost interchangeable and were used alternatively without hesitation, when in fact, caste and class are two different ideas. The 'us' was interchangeable with 'we' when it came to not being allowed to speak. But justice would not be served to 'them'; it does make one wonder if upper caste readers believe that they have more of a right to justice than a woman from a lower caste, and if the bias is latent or implicit. An implicit bias, as explained by Greenwald and Banaji (1995), is often unintentional and can influence perceptions, judgments, and behaviours, even among individuals who consciously hold egalitarian beliefs. An implicit bias is ordinarily formed through exposure to cultural and societal stereotypes, media representations, and personal experiences. In the case of the upper caste and lower caste divide, it could be through caste based practices such as endogamy. But the question of a latent bias is an essential one and was observed in the testimony of several other readers, albeit slightly differently. However, the same reader does believe that while there is sufficient awareness about Dalit women's exploitation and "everyone understands, but no one tries to support when someone speaks up and the issue gets pressed down" (PS, 47, London: 2023).

> "[on the violence in *Sangati*] I cannot even imagine something like that, and people live that reality because it is the reality back in India, and especially when a guy thinks he is entitled to the money and he can drink and spend it however he wants to".
> (SC, 28, London: 2023)

The reader in question, who as mentioned previously, comes from an upper caste Brahmin background, and started to make a good point about the level of violence depicted in *Sangati* being the lived reality for a lot of women in India, but did not necessarily equate it to being a caste issue and went on to discuss what she had been told as possible explanations for domestic and sexual violence in India but did not broach the issue of domestic and sexual violence against Dalit women specifically again.

It did lead to the observation that while perhaps there was an awareness of the issues, there was not an acceptance of them necessarily. This notion of 'sufficient awareness' is debatable; on the one hand, there are some readers who say there is enough awareness about the prejudices faced by Dalit women, but on the other hand, there are also those who freely admit that they do not possess all the knowledge simply because they have never had to face the same kind of discrimination, and so it would be difficult for them to speak to the exact extent of what Dalit women go through, beyond their own observations in interactions with women from the Dalit community.

> "I'm not from an oppressed community and I was completely unaware of the caste system when I was younger. It was only when I moved to a different state for my doctorate and met people from different backgrounds that I had my first experience with caste. I realised that it is not in the past, this is happening now. I was shocked and ashamed that I was so unaware. I was ashamed that I belong to a community that did this, and so I started reading and educating myself. I understand the issues, but I need so much more knowledge".
> (NS, 28, London: 2023)

> "There is so much I don't know. If you had asked me 8-10 months back, I would have said caste does not affect me. But I work with low-income kids and it affects their lives – we have to accept that we are privileged and have oppressed the lower castes. Maybe you haven't directly, but your ancestors have, and this passes down in generations and through legacies – where I am sitting right now is a very random probability. I have done nothing to earn this privilege" (AB, 33, London: 2023).

> "One of the worst things that could happen to you in India is if you are a non-Brahmin Hindu girl. You are the real minority in that case and are going to be placed right at the bottom of the society. You are being judged for something you have no control over. You have to face the consequence of being a woman and being non-Brahmin – it's what happens to black women in the west" (SS, 35, London: 2023).

> "Caste roles are still very defined, and I feel like in India, even in education or government jobs, you have the reservation quota which was for the different castes to get a chance to come up in life. But over the years it has been so misused and now it feels like the system is wrong. The people in the upper caste are holding on to the power because they have no power anywhere else. No one is happy with anyone in society" (VE, 28, London: 2023).

We can see that this awareness in some, if not all the readers, represents a minor shift, if any at all, in social consciousness. However, there is a long way to go if the Dalit community is to find any semblance of equality within the socio-economic and cultural confines of Indian society. Soundararajan (2022, pp.3-38) explains that although untouchability has been outlawed in India since 1950, the caste system continues to exist and flourish without consequences, functioning as an existing apartheid that, on a daily basis, oppresses, maims and murders those oppressed by caste. Caste affects over 1.9 billion people in South Asia, with Dalits making up over a quarter of India's population of nearly 300 million people, while Brahmins make up less than 5% of the population. If and when the Brahmanical powers choose to acknowledge the existence of caste, classify it as a system so as to neutralise and legitimise it by suggesting that there are beneficial aspects to it. Additionally, the comparison raised by SS regarding caste issues in India being similar to race issues in the West adds value to the notion that was discussed earlier on about caste being racialised in the Indian context (see 'Literature Review'). Historically, the dominant discourse of India has claimed that race does not exist in India (Das, 2014). Race and caste are both social and biological, and a refusal to acknowledge the similarities between the two is akin to being an enabler and perpetuator of the exclusionary right-wing agenda.

Some of the readers interviewed here acknowledge their privilege within the upper caste structure and engage in introspection and reflection while recognising the unearned advantages conferred to them simply due to the circumstance of birth. This realisation and awareness can lead to a commitment to social justice, which is the case with NS and AB, perhaps even SS and VE, where they feel a burgeoning sense of responsibility to challenge and rectify the deeply entrenched caste based inequalities. However, while there are a few who possess this increasing sense of awareness, a universal acceptance from the community seems like a distant notion. The majority of the readers still lack this consciousness, and they perhaps inadvertently, perpetuate the status quo. Without a collective acknowledgement of privilege and a commitment to the dismantling of systemic injustices, the embedded hierarchies are likely to persist, even in modern day India. While nascent awareness amongst the upper caste women is promising, it highlights the need for wider societal changes, perhaps even right at the education level as suggested by AB. It is safe to say that not only is Indian society far away from reaching gender equality, but it is even further away from reaching caste equality.

The next chapter combines and juxtaposes the data collected from the thematic analysis, the interviews conducted and the debates that currently exist in the field to present a holistic overview of the realities of Indian women in modern day society, what that says about the current gender politics of the country, and how the upper caste attitude tends to dismiss and minimise the issues faced by the women of the Dalit community and what that might imply about their privilege.

Chapter 9
Discussion

Literature serves as a powerful reflection of society by shedding light on the multi-dimensional realities and struggles that people face in their day-to-day lives. Whether it be through satire, realism, or allegory, literary works, and fiction in particular, mirror the diverse facts of society, ranging from the injustices and inequalities imposed on people to their resilience and aspirations, almost as if defining and redefining the everyday materialities of their lives. Within the context of Indian society, fiction has served as a powerful tool to reflect the intricacies of the gender politics that exist on the level of the everyday, which might be taken for granted or overlooked in the overarching narrative of the gender politics of the country. Leavis (1948), in his seminal work 'The Great Tradition', posits that the study of literature should focus on the works that exhibit creative vitality and contribute to a tradition of excellence, essentially works that have a sense of moral seriousness to them. He emphasised the need for a close reading and evaluation of a text's aesthetic and moral qualities. Leavis's work has been influential in this research in understanding what literature as a medium has to contribute to the social and cultural critique of contemporary Indian society today. That is not to say that Indian scholars have not made similar correlations between literary works and the everyday materialities of society and observed that literary texts both shape and are shaped by social structures, cultural norms, and historical contexts (Srinivas, 1998; Das, 2005). Srinivas (1998) stressed the importance of recognising that Indian society and culture were made of several layers, and the links between them needed to be understood to gain a holistic view of the society, even if the elite classes tended to ignore the presence of the lower layers. He also believed that fiction was a significant source of information in sociology and anthropology to gain insight into culture and lived experiences. This is also backed by Iser's claim that literature allows for the existence of something that is otherwise unavailable, and that literature allows for interactions between what is given and what is imagined (1993). With technological advancements, various mediums have seemingly replaced literary narratives; however, stories told in the digital space are still stories at the end of it, and the medium is irrelevant without content.

To truly understand and analyse the relevance of Indian literature in contemporary society, we must look beyond its entertainment and aesthetic value and key in on the sociological seriousness embedded in the narratives (through incidents, characters, social settings and so on). By doing so, we can have a deeper understanding of the lived realities of different social groups, such as women and the oppressed communities, whose voices have been overlooked in the dominant mainstream discourse. Literature can reformulate realities already formulated in society by representing them through characters and incidents. By examining literary

representations of caste, gender, class, and other social divisions, we can not only uncover hidden narratives but also analyse how these narratives operate at the level of the everyday and contribute to the construction of identity and gender politics in Indian society. One of the most effective ways of influencing an audience and calling for social change is to engage them through narratives and stories, and literature has been a way of doing the same much before the creation of digital spaces.

We can also gain an understanding about the 'narrative' created around Dalit issues by the dominant discourse of the country when viewed from the perspective of the upper caste audience and whether it has any merit when juxtaposed against the context of Dalit literature. The key questions that emerged during the course of this research were: what has been the representation of female characters in Indian postmodern, popular and Dalit literature since the 1980s; are the characters in the selected novels and their constructions relevant to the lives of the women in this research; what has the chosen literature taught us about the gender politics of Indian society; what has the chosen literature taught us about attitudes of the upper caste women in relation to lower caste issues. Before delving into the findings and reflections on the gender politics of the current Indian society and the attitude of the upper caste audience towards lower caste issues, it is essential to understand the notion of class when it pertains to the audience. The specific audience for this research comprises of Indian middle class women living in the UK between the age of 20 and 50. It is imperative to adopt a de-westernised view to understand what constitutes an Indian middle class. For all intents and purposes, the middle class is one that falls in the middle of the social hierarchy and socio-economically inhabits a space between the upper class and the working class. What makes the middle class in a country depends on purchasing power, educational levels, and perceptions of wealth, among other factors (Roy, 2018). For instance, traditionally, the middle class in the UK includes people with superior educational qualifications, social closure in the profession of their choice, access to intergenerational capital etc (Saini, 2022).

Meanwhile, the middle class in India includes families where the parents have a basic level of education, and their children have access to higher education opportunities and basic amenities necessary for a reasonably comfortable standard of living (Paul & Ahalya, 2017). For this research, the women all hail from middle class families wherein their parents had access to basic education but pushed for the upward mobility of their children (the women), which enabled them to attain advanced degrees and a better standard of living than the one they grew up with. The use of English is also a strong marker of the middle class in India, wherein, once again, the parents might have limited knowledge of the language but push their children to be

fluent in what is considered to be the language of the upper class or the 'elite'. It was essential to ensure that the women who made the audience for this research had a certain level of comfort when engaging with content in English since the chosen novels are written in English. With this view of the middle class in mind, this chapter is going to delve into the specific findings that surfaced from the thematic analysis and interview analysis and how they add to the more significant issues that are being discussed, such as the current state of gender politics in Indian society, and the attitude of the upper caste towards lower caste issues as reflected through the selected novels for this research.

9.1 Gender politics and audience

As the current literature in the field and the research into the field of Indian feminism states, there is little to no gender parity in the social fabric of India. At the political level, the right-wing government in India is extremely aware of the gender disparity that is evident and has tried to rectify it by implementing the new gender reservation bill, which ensures that one-third of the seats in the Lok Sabha, the Delhi Legislative Assembly and state legislative assemblies will be set aside for women candidates. As progressive as this sounds for a country like India, the BJP government has stipulated that the bill will come into effect after redistricting and the data that emerges from the subsequent census. This seems to be a 'gender mainstreaming' effort on the part of the Indian government, wherein they are attempting to integrate gender equality not only in policy, but also in the functioning of government agencies. The last census of India was meant to be conducted in 2021 but was delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic (see 'Gender and Power'), and as such, the next census is expected to be in 2026, indicating that the gender reservation bill may not come into effect until after the 2029 general elections (Brechenmacher, 2023). To clarify: as per the timeline and stipulations, a bill that was passed in 2023 will not come into effect until at least 2026; in essence, women will have to wait between three to six years before they see any sort of parity for their gender on a political level. One can only imagine the challenges that are to come to the surface on a domestic level and the level of the everyday if it is this difficult to work towards gender equality on as wide a scale as the political landscape in India.

The right-wing in India, which is dominated by the BJP has, historically, had "ideological bonds with the self-proclaimed 'social organisation', the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Samaj (RSS), which pursues a Hindutva agenda and has long established a large network of affiliates, many involved in social welfare activities" (Nair, 2009). The BJP and RSS have promoted a vision of gender roles deeply rooted in traditional Hindu values; they do this by emphasizing the role of women as

caretakers in the family and upholders of cultural and religious traditions. While the gender reservation bill proposed by the government has led to the possibility of an increase in visibility of women in public roles at the political level, there is not enough being done to allow for women to claim their autonomy and agency at a social level. Their promotion of schemes like 'Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao' ('Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter') highlights a dual issue: on the one hand, they aim to promote gender parity in education, and on the other hand, they feed into and perpetuate the narrative that women's role in life is limited to being a good daughter, wife or mother[22]. The BJP and RSS promote women's participation in politics and public life, but they also endorse and encourage conservative social norms that restrict women's freedoms. This is evident in their stance on resisting the call to criminalise marital rape by arguing that it would undermine the sanctity of marriage (Sharma, 2016). Such a strong position brings forward the friction between modernisation and traditionalism in the right-wing approach to gender politics. The government's stance on women's issues and position in society lends validity to the sentiment expressed by the women being interviewed for the research when they claim that there has been change, but progress for women in India is very slow-paced and has a long way to go. While it is arrogant to assume that audiences in India are homogenous, it does bear some merit when 24 women unanimously claim that things are changing, but very slowly.

At the level of the everyday realities and the material experiences of women, there is an obvious domestication of values and a reproduction of gender roles so as to maintain the status quo that has existed in Indian society since pre-Vedic times. Through the interviews conducted for this research, it became apparent that the women, who were the audience for this project, did not engage with the question of gender parity at the political level at all. There was an air of indifference when the bounds of economic and political equality were questioned. However, there was an instantaneous engagement when the issue of social equality was brought up. By their own admission, conventional gender roles are reproduced in the lives of the women through cultural norms and expectations, wherein the women are still expected to be the keepers of tradition and cultural values, and there is an overwhelming expectation on them to give up their agency in favour of their family or their husband. The majority of the women interviewed stated that they had witnessed women around them sacrificing their pursuit of higher education or employment so as not to disturb the societal status quo as dictated by their fathers or, husbands or brothers. The word 'asset' was used to describe the sons of the family, while the word 'liability' was used to describe the daughters of the family. This notion that women are the keepers of culture and tradition and must remain within the confines of their

[22] The definition of a good daughter has been discussed in detail in previous chapters.

home was one of the driving forces of the first wave of feminism in India, wherein activists challenged this idea and called for a more inclusive space in which to discuss women's rights (Forbes 1982; Chatterjee, 1990; Bathla, 2000; Patel & Khajuria, 2017). This leads well into one of the other factors that perpetuates traditional gender roles, which is the preference Indian families have for sons over daughters; once a popular view, one would assume that this traditional mindset is now considered outdated in modern India, however, this is not the case. The National Family Health Survey conducted in 2022 revealed that nearly 80% of the people surveyed said they wanted at least one son in their lifetime because of the belief that a male child could carry the family name forward and look after the parents in their old age, whereas daughters would leave them for their matrimonial homes and cost them dowries (Bhalla, 2022). Interestingly, this preference for having sons was not just because of the evolution of patriarchal societies but also because the Brahmin community promoted customs and rituals that gave more importance to sons (Bandyopadhyay and Singh, 2003). The logical conclusion in this case is that the upper caste is largely responsible for the perpetuation of misogyny and is responsible for the patriarchal structure of Indian society. This is evident in the *Manusmriti*, which has been referenced several times during this research. It also becomes evident in the conversations with the women interviewed for this research; the ones who admitted to having sons were the loudest voices that proclaimed that there is no bias in having sons anymore; these women operated from a place of political correctness, and most likely believed that it would not reflect well if they admitted to having a gender bias when it came to their children. It then becomes essential to understand women's situation and their everyday materialities through post-colonial feminist theory, which challenges the erasure of women as subjects and agents within histories of colonialism or postcolonial development (Mohanty, 2003; Connell, 2007).

The Indian feminist movement has argued for women's equality in the social, political and economic spheres in all stages since pre independence times. The movement started with women's entry into the public space and being more than mere keepers of culture and tradition, and then eventually found its footing in the 70s when activists called for women's economic independence in their everyday lives as a precursor to total gender parity. The feminist movement in the digital age is about deconstructing the notion of gender and gendered roles on a social and cultural level (Patel & Khajuria, 2017). One of the issues with mainstream Indian feminism is that it largely ignores or dismisses the oppressions and subjugations of the minority communities such as Muslim or Dalit women. Caste, as a concept has existed in India since pre-Vedic times, and even though oppressive caste practices are illegal as per the Constitution, it is very much a part of the social and cultural fabric of India with caste based oppression occurring at multiple levels. The dominant discourse of the country would have people believe that caste

no longer exists in society due to affirmative action and reservation policies, but this could not be further from the truth (Das, 2014). The Dalit community does not have free access to economic and cultural resources and face more exclusion due to reservation policies as they are more identifiable as 'lower castes' which makes them stay confined to the bounds of their caste, and they are not allowed free movement in the social sphere (Das, 2014; Satyanarayana, 2019). Dalits in modern India have not been faring any better - if anything, the situation has only escalated and become worse. But even within the Dalit movement, there is an exclusion of Dalit women and the realities of their lives, leading to the need for a Dalit feminist movement. The nature of oppression and exclusion faced by Dalit women is intersectional in nature, and exists on the axes of caste, gender, and class. Dalit women are placed at the bottom rung of the social hierarchy in India; they are a subaltern within a subaltern; they are discriminated on the basis of their gender, their low-class status, and their low caste status (Arya & Rathore, 2020; Rege, 2000; Guru, 1995; Festino, 2015; Tomar, 2013). The intersectional nature of the oppression faced by Dalit women makes it essential for their lived experiences to be analysed and explored through the lens of Dalit literature, which came about as a means of calling out the hegemonic discourse of the country and to put forth the true extent of the subjugation faced by their community; it was a concerted effort to tell the stories of the Dalit community as authentically as possible and to rectify the manner in which they were being represented in the dominant discourse (Kandasamy, 2009; Kavitha, 2014; Limbale, 2004; Kaushalya, 2015; Ganapathy-Doré, 2011).

9.2 Encoding/Decoding and audience

The thematic analysis of the selected novels conducted in earlier sections shed light on the encoding process and the ideas, notions and themes that were embedded in the texts in line with the message the writers were trying to convey to the audiences. The themes that emerged from the analysis of the texts were around the patriarchal structure of Indian society, and social norms as the perpetuators of patriarchy, gendered violence against women and their subsequent commodification, gendered economic disparity, and the question of caste issues prevailing in Indian society. At the level of encoding, there is a clear attempt on the part of the liberal mindset to engage with anti-hegemonic perspectives and challenge them through the narratives, incidents, and female characters portrayed in the chosen novels. If we are to take the example of *The Palace of Illusions* and *The God of Small Things*, Divakaruni and Roy respectively represent Draupadi and Ammu as women who are bound by the rules of the patriarchal society of their time but are strong-willed enough to break the shackles of societal expectations to follow their own path in life. They are portrayed as empowered but only empowered to an

extent. This could be due to the time period of the novels, reflecting that in the Vedic period or the 1960s, there was only so much that women could revolt in terms of their rights and owing their agency. The view at the time was that women were the keepers of culture and tradition and had to stay confined to the domestic sphere, with no requirement to be a part of the public space, and on the rare occasion that they did venture into the public space for economic purposes, they were condemned for it (Chakravarti, 2018). Draupadi, despite being queen, led her life at the behest of her husbands, a fact that truly comes to life when she is bet and lost in a game of dice; she is treated like property, an act that is deemed acceptable by the *Manusmriti*, the age-old text that is seen as the foundation of Hindu life (Rakshit, 2023; Divakaruni, 2008; Singh, 2015).

The *Manusmriti* was used as a framework to write mythical texts where the women were expected to exhibit patience and passivity. In the original Mahabharata, Draupadi was lauded for her endurance, submission, and subservience. But in Divakaruni's version, Draupadi works arduously to be heard in a patriarchal society, and her aim is to challenge and dismantle conventional preconceptions about Indian women, but only to a certain degree (Barman, 2023, pp.46-48). It is only after the horrific events of the war that Draupadi takes charge of her future and the future of the other women of her kingdom. Even then, she does not receive any direct help from her husbands or any other man in her life, and she is forced to take on the responsibility of enlisting the assistance of other women. She is empowered, but only to the extent that it does not bruise the ego of men. Turning our view to *The God of Small Things*, we see Ammu, much like Draupadi, being chained to the patriarchal bounds of her family and society but breaking free in a way that Draupadi probably never could. She does not get access to the kind of education she desires, and despite familial objections, Ammu, being a Syrian-Christian, marries a Hindu man, making her children 'half breed'. She finds the courage to leave her husband when it becomes apparent that he is an alcoholic. Ammu does not deny her feelings for Veluthu, who is from a lower caste and embraces her relationship with him, once again defying the Love Laws that are placed upon her (Dizayi, 2021). Her rebellion leads her to die a painful and lonely death. Her choice to break free from the patriarchal bonds of her family came at a heavy cost.

There is an almost perceptible shift in the way female characters are represented in popular literature when compared to postmodern literature. If we look at the way Nalini and Zoya are portrayed in *100 Shades of White* and *The Zoya Factor*, the difference is quite apparent when compared to Draupadi or even Ammu. It could be assumed that this representation is due to a shift in sensibilities and, the time period of the novels, and the time in which they were written.

Zoya is the quintessential urban woman; she is career-driven and modern and does not shy away from romantic entanglements while maintaining a sense of propriety. She makes her own decisions and does not bow down to societal constraints of what is expected of her, such as settling for an arranged marriage. Much like Zoya, Nalini is represented as someone who takes risks, whether it be running away from home to marry her first husband, choosing to stay in London to raise her two children as a single mother after her abandonment, or her ability to allow her daughter, Maya to make her own mistakes. The novels, and more importantly, the female characters in this genre, straddle the line between tradition and modernity with a sense of ease, one that can be observed in the women who were interviewed for this research. Nalini and Zoya both represent different versions of the modern woman, but they have one thing in common: they know they have a voice and are not afraid to stand up for their rights. One of the greatest motivators in Nalini and Zoya's life is economic independence; in the case of Nalini, it stems from necessity and is a means of survival, whereas for Zoya, it is an inherent part of her life; a subconscious reality. This path to economic independence as exhibited by Nalini and Zoya is one that was paved by second wave feminists in India, in the 1970's wherein they championed for economic independence being the minimum condition required to free women from the oppressive society that positioned them entirely within the home (as we see in the case of Draupadi and Ammu) (Patel & Khajuria, 2017; Gangoli, 2007; Rassendren, 2014; Coomaraswamy, 2002; Guha et al, 1974).

The narratives of the novels in the genre of popular literature make it evident that on some level there was an engagement with the feminist discourse in India relevant to the time period the novels are set against. This lends credibility to the idea that has been at the forefront of this research, which is that literature in all its forms is representative of the reality of the society in which it is based, and often makes relations between seemingly ordinary aspects of life, which in fact, have a great degree of moral seriousness attached to them. There has been research conducted previously to understand the reading habits of Indian women in the genre of romance novels (Puri, 1999), and there has been research conducted to understand the narrative structures of *The Palace of Illusions* (Singh, 2015; Gupta, 2016; Sharma, 2016) and even *The God of Small Things* (Pawar, 2014; Lutz, 2009; Navarro-Tejero, 2006). However, these novels have not been studied in great detail from an audience perspective, like they have been through the course of this research. *The Zoya Factor* and *100 Shades of White* have been largely neglected in any form of academic study due to their alleged 'unserious' nature, which could be due to the genre of literature they come under. However, these novels have serious themes of relevance embedded in the narrative structure; whether that be economic independence for women, or an Indian woman's struggle to walk the fine line between modernity and tradition.

When we speak of modernity in India, it encompasses not just globalisation and neo-liberalism, but also cultural and social modernity (Appadurai, 1996; Uberoi, 1996). Divakaruni's reimagining of Draupadi brings a feminist perspective to ancient traditions, reflecting the ongoing struggle for gender equality in modern India (Patel & Khajuria, 2017). Roy's work critiques the persistent social inequalities, whether that be in the realm of gender or caste, questioning the true extent of India's alleged progress towards modernity (Appadurai, 1996). Nair's work addresses the experiences of the Indian diaspora, highlighting the cultural and generational conflicts that arise from globalisation and migration. Chauhan's work satirises the commercialisation of culture, and the deep-seated notion of women's honour being tied to their sexual availability by illustrating the complex blend of tradition and contemporary Indian society (Uberoi, 2006; Kapur, 2005). These novels offer a rich and varied exploration of what it means to be modern in India, emphasizing that modernity is not a monolithic concept but is a dynamic and evolving process that is shaped by historical, social and cultural contexts. Through the narratives, there is an attempt to encourage audiences to reflect on the ongoing transformations in Indian society, and the ways in which individuals navigate the challenges of modern life. The analysis of the novels, and the data collected from the interviews adds credibility to the notion that even in modern India, there is no gender parity, and that at the level of the everyday, women's realities are heavily influenced by conventional gender roles and a patriarchal mindset, only now their position might be worse than what it was. Before modernisation and globalisation, Indian women would have to stay within the confines of their homes and engage in domestic labour (keeping house, childcare etc.), but now, the modern Indian woman is expected to enter the workforce, earn a respectable income (a freedom that women have had to fight for) but also maintain their gendered position of being the keeper of the home. On the other hand, the men were always a part of the public sphere and not the private; this position has not changed over the years. The concept of equal division of labour within the space of the home has only just started to gain some traction, but it will be a long time before any sort of widespread acceptance will be observed.

In the case of Dalit literature, at the level of encoding, it is apparent that the writers valiantly try, and one would assume, succeed (if the existing literature is anything to go by), at ensuring that the 'main' female leads in the narratives are portrayed not just as victims of their circumstance, but as empowered women who are able to claim their agency and take a stand for the injustices faced by them and other women in their community. In *Sangati*, it happens to be all the women from the Pariayar community that Bama saw around her growing up, and in *Coming out as Dalit: A Memoir*, it happens to be Yashica Dutt's mother, and even Dutt herself, to a large degree. Both life testimonies shed light on the harsh reality of the oppression faced by the women of the

lower caste and the social exclusion they are forced to deal with due to their caste, class, and gender. When compared to upper caste women, their socio-economic status is far lower, and they do not have access to the same kinds of opportunities as their upper caste counterparts. Bama and Dutt depict the everyday experiences of the Dalit woman in its most raw and brutal form while also calling for social reform by drawing attention to the injustices meted out to Dalit women at a socio-economic level, whether that be through Raakkamma screaming back at her husband in the street, Dutt's mother going above and beyond to secure her family's financial future, Dutt embracing her lower caste status instead of hiding it, or even the mere act of Bama asking the questions she asks in the narrative of *Sangati* (Nayar, 2011; Tomar, 2013; Browarczyk, 2022; Veroneka and Vijayalakshmi, 2022; Prasad and Gaijan, 2007). To reiterate, at the level of encoding, the messaging that comes across in the thematic analysis is this: the liberal writers are attempting to engage the audience in a discussion about some of the larger issues prevalent in Indian society, such as the gender politics at the level of the everyday, and the question of caste based issues, which despite legal forms, is a very real part of the social fabric of India.

At the level of decoding, the data collected from the interviews demonstrated that there is a loss of meaning and engagement when there is a shift from the encoding aspect to the decoding aspect; a notion that has been explored in great detail. However, this is not the case across the different genres. Postmodern and popular literature reflect the lives and struggles of middle class, upper caste women, and so they are received by the audience exactly in the manner intended/encoded by the writers. It is a preferred reading of the text. The women who comprise the audience of this research engage with the incidents and speak of solidarity with the characters. They are affected by the narratives and the trials and tribulations faced by the female characters. Emotions do not reside solely within individuals or society; instead, they create the boundaries and appearances that distinguish individuals and society, making them seem like tangible entities (Ahmed, 2014). The female characters in the selected novels deeply resonated with the women who were interviewed for the research. They saw reflections of their own mothers in Draupadi's life when she was denied equal access to education as her brother or when she was forced to marry a man not of her choosing; there was resonance with Nalini's struggle for economic independence as a single mother in a country where she did not speak the language very well; there was a connection to Zoya's reluctance to settle for an arranged marriage with a man she barely knew; Ammu's financial situation and the inability to access her family inheritance because of her gender struck close to home for a lot of the women. Ahmed's (2014) idea that emotions are constantly in movement, even if that movement is not simply between people rings true for the women who spoke of the emotions they felt when reading the

selected texts that made them aware of the reflective nature of the narratives in their lives, and the lives of other women they know. As mentioned, the audience for this research comprised of middle class, Indian women based in the UK between the ages of 20-50. All the participants had a college-level education and were employed in professional roles either full-time or were entrepreneurs. They are a prime example of the quintessential Indian woman who tries to balance her career with domestic responsibilities, while also attempting to stay within the confines of societal roles that place the expectation on women to live their lives in a manner that serves to reproduce gender roles on a daily basis. Despite temporal and geographical disparities (not all the women interviewed hailed from the same city or even the same state in India), the themes of patriarchy, familial duty, and societal constraints remain strikingly relevant and common to contemporary women's lives. The narratives woven within the selected novels serve as a mirror reflecting the complexities of women's lived experiences, offering poignant insights into the socio-cultural contexts in which they exist. Whether grappling with the pressures of marriage and motherhood or confronting systemic injustices, the characters in the selected novels resonate with the diverse realities and challenges faced by women across generations and geographical boundaries. However, this was only the case with the novels from the genres of postmodern and popular literature, and not the case for Dalit literature.

9.3 Dalit literature and audience

When the novels from the genre of Dalit literature were discussed, there was an immediate disconnect and disengagement from the subject matter. The reading, in this case, was not preferred or negotiated even; it was an indifferent reading. There was little to no engagement with the issues faced by Dalit women as depicted in *Sangati* and *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir*. The upper caste audience, for the most part, did not relate to the narratives and incidents being depicted in Dalit literature, and there was a reluctance on their part to engage with discourse about the seriousness of the issues that were brought to the surface through the incidents in the lives of the women in these texts. Despite having access to education and information, and despite having an awareness of the lower caste issues, the upper caste women operated from a place of extreme privilege and minimised and dismissed the issues faced by the women of the Dalit community. In the rare instance that there was engagement with the larger issues of caste based inequalities and injustices, the use of specific phrases such as 'she made more of a fuss about it than was needed' is demeaning and dismissive of the experiences of an entire community of people.

I explored the notion of intersectionality in previous chapters and earlier in this chapter, and how it fits within the Indian context, when viewed through the lens of caste. The frameworks of intersectionality and decoloniality are vital tools for understanding the power structures, oppression and marginalisation in India. Earlier, we have delved into the concepts of intersectionality, developed by Kimberlé crenshaw (1989), and decoloniality, rooted in the critique of colonialism. The notion of intersectionality as examined in this research, helps understand the complexities of power, identity and resistance by focusing on the Dalit feminist movement in India, and highlighting how women have employed intersectional and decolonial strategies to challenge caste based and gender based discrimination. We also examined how representational intersectionality in Indian literature has assisted in the evolution of cultural constructions of identity over time. The research has also highlighted the importance of a decolonised approach to audience research in India. The focus has been that the complexities of the Indian societal structure requires a decolonised perspective that challenges Western centric biases and recognises marginalised knowledge systems. To reiterate, in the Indian context, Dalit women's oppression exists at the intersection of their gender, caste, and class status (Guru, 1995; Rege, 2000). For instance, a Dalit woman's experience of sexual violence cannot be separated from her caste or class status, which has a profound influence on the likelihood of the violence being reported or taken seriously by the authorities. Similarly, their economic exploitation is shaped by both their caste and gender, as they are often funnelled into the most degrading forms of labour. Due to their caste and gender, Dalit women are not given the same access to education as their upper caste counterparts, which directly leads to a low class status, and without access to education, they are forced to engage in minimum wage employment which never allows them to change their class status; it is a vicious cycle, which is so deeply intertwined at multiple axes that is becomes impossible to separate them (Dhanaraju, 2014; Tomar, 2013; Kothari, 2013). When viewed through the lens of the selected novels, it is clear that in *Sangati*, the oppression of the Pariayar women occurs due to their gender (girls are expected to work more than boys and still earn lesser than them), their caste (Mariamma was denied justice in her sexual harassment case at the hands of an upper caste landlord), and their low class status (Bama's grandmother was a midwife but was not allowed to help deliver upper caste babies). In *Coming out as Dalit: A Memoir*, Dutt speaks of the need to hide her caste status even though the socio-economic position of her family made it difficult for them to maintain the performative nature of being upper caste sometimes. When these rather vivid and accurate descriptions of the realities faced by Dalit women are read, they are meant to evoke a response; a sense of awareness, a recognition of privilege, and more than anything, a recognition of the discrimination that is still deeply embedded in the fabric of Indian society.

One would expect there to be a certain sense of accountability taken from the audience in terms of their privilege but that was not the case. While some of the women did recognise that they were more privileged than most, a majority of the women that were interviewed did not think it was necessary for them to address or engage with the oppressions and subversions faced by Dalit women simply because it was not something that impacted their daily lives. The mindset was that because their everyday reality is strife with struggles, it was not required for them to take on the burden of considering the oppressions of 'the other'. The idea of 'us vs them' was apparent in the discussions that were had with the women who made up the audience for this research; there was almost a sense of confirmation bias in their approach to the discussion around caste based exclusionary practices (Mishra, 2016). There was also an ambivalent, if not outright hostile, attitude towards affirmative action and reservation policies that have been put into place by the Constitution of India to safeguard and uplift the oppressed communities. The significant importance of reservation and its exclusionary nature has been discussed in detail in previous sections (Srinivas, 1957; Deshpande, 2005; Das, 2014; Gupta, 2004; Arya & Rathore, 2020). However, one would assume that given the awareness the women interviewed possessed, they would have a differing view on reservation and would be in favour of the idea. Their claim that reservation is unfair and is misused by people from the lower communities is not an unpopular opinion; in fact, there is a vast amount of research that lends validity to their claim (Chhibber & Verma, 2018; Ingole, 2020). The prevalent opinion, and one that is reinforced in this research as well, is that the upper caste do not like reservation policies because they do not benefit them in any way. Dutt observes in an interview with Thiagarajan (2024), that despite being barred from formal avenues of education, the Dalit community is trying to make up for this set back and is still facing enormous discrimination. She talks of a culture of resentment at play that makes the upper caste feel as if they are being given an unfair handout. She goes onto say that one of the reasons people do not talk about caste in India is that they are certain that in societies where the upper caste maintains a hegemony, they would be mocked. This is reflected in the data that emerged from the interviews, wherein confirmation bias is evident in the way lower caste issues were discussed by the women. It lends validity to the notion that just because you do not see injustices occurring in your life, it does not mean they do not exist.

There was a certain quietness of the audience that came through prominently from the data collected during the interviews. If this is to be viewed from the lens of critical theory, especially the work of Ilaiah (1996) who critiques the right-wing Hindu nationalist movement in his book Why I am not a Hindu and argues that the right-wing agenda seeks to homogenise diverse cultural practices under a Brahmanical framework, in an attempt to erase the distinct identities histories of the marginalised classes. This agenda pushing comes through in the quietness of the

audience that can be understood as a form of sociological and ideological control by the audience to maintain the current status quo in society, wherein the refusal to engage with creative content that is 'foreign' to them allows for them to maintain their privileged positions while obscuring the forces that oppress and subjugate an entire category of people. Through their indifference and reluctance to engage with texts that shed light on the reality of the oppressions of a whole section of people, the women reproduce and reinforce the notion that the privileged are willing to go to any lengths to maintain their position in society and that they are unwilling to step away from their privileged space unless their own position is undermined by the 'other'; a sentiment that was expressed directly and was also implied by the women who were interviewed during the course of the conversation. Much like it being a clear case of an indifferent reading, it is evident that the women did not hold an implicit bias, but it was, in fact, a latent bias that manifested in different ways for different people, but it was latent bias, nonetheless. The layers of bias become very clear and apparent once the data from the interviews is analysed in great detail.

Caste in India and the attitude of the upper caste cannot be discussed without looking back at the basis for this, which is the actual politics of the country that influences perceptions. In 2011, the Congress-led government was forced to conduct a country-wide caste survey when they were still in power but refused to release the results of the same. When the current BJP-led government came into power, they too refused to release the results of the caste survey and instead chose to spin the narrative of a singular Hindu identity; there is an awareness within the current government that if actual data about the caste situation in India came to light, it would be evident that their main voter base, which is the upper castes, are actually a minority in the country with the OBCs (Other Backward Classes) and SCs (Scheduled Castes/Dalits) making up the majority of the population. If the caste issue is blown wide open, the right-wing government will lose their current position (Mehrotra, 2023). To provide context; ever since the BJP government came to power in India in 2014, the agenda has been simple: to create a unified 'Hindutva' identity based on religion and caste, which is obviously catered to the upper castes and to exclude the allegedly minority communities, such as the Muslims, Dalits, and Other Backward Classes. The right-wing government has tried to reclaim and promote indigenous cultural and historical narratives; they have been vocal about the need to decolonise Indian education, arguing that colonial and Western perspectives have distorted India's past.
This has been done by altering history textbooks nationwide to remove any messaging that does not fit in with the Hindu identity and by reclaiming land to build temples and other monuments that push the religious identity forward (Ellis-Petersen, 2023; Naqvi, 2024). This systemic agenda pushed through media conglomerates, and activism ensures that this is the only

messaging that is received by the wider public, leading to the belief that perhaps a Hindu nation would not be a bad idea and that caste issues have no place in a modern, globalised India that has been put on the map at the international level by the current Prime Minister and the BJP led government. This selective decolonization can reinforce existing social hierarchies and perpetuate exclusionary practices. The upper caste attitude of pushing aside lower caste issues could be due to the fact that the dominant discourse of the country, as portrayed by the politicians and the media, tends to do the same; there is a dismissal and minimisation of lower caste issues by mainstream media in an effort to further solidify the hegemony of the upper caste because it serves in the best interest of the right-wing Hindutva obsessed government India (Ilaiah, 1996; Teltumbde, 2018; Omvedt, 2006; Yengde, 2019).

It is truly paradoxical: scholars, academics and theorists state that literature serves a purpose beyond entertainment and aesthetic value; it holds up a mirror to society and reflects the realities of what is known and unknown (Spivak, 2010; Freire, 2005; Williams, 1958; Said, 1993; Leavis, 1948). Based on the novels selected in the Dalit literature genre for this research, this claim is seen to be true. Dutt and Bama describe the very real horrors faced not just by them but also by other women from their community and the exact nature of the oppression they are forced to cope with at the level of the every day; it is their lived experience. However, at the level of the audience, the latent bias and the indifferent reading of these texts makes it apparent that upper caste women do not believe in the moral seriousness of literature and its relevance when it pertains to Dalit issues. This raises more questions than it answers: it is apparent that in the process of decoding the Indian novel as a text, the women are influenced by their habitus and caste, but one can also argue that the issue runs deeper. One could argue that there is much more deep-rooted conditioning at the ideological level than the audience would like to admit; there are perhaps larger forces at play than just political agenda pushing. Perhaps it is that the political agenda pushing is reproducing ideas and ideals that have long lived in the minds of the upper caste women, thriving just beneath their consciousness (Hebdige, 1988), and is hidden by the idea of common sense and what it is that they are meant to believe, and not what they actually believe. There is a sense of 'political correctness' that might possibly be at play here.

The paradox, however, arises when novels from the postmodern and popular literature genres are viewed from the audiences' perspective. The encoded messages are clear: the narratives, characters and incidents shed light on the fact that traditional gender roles are being reproduced, women are victims of a patriarchal and misogynistic society with high levels of violence against them, along with commodification of their gender and the very apparent economic disparity. The decoding of this messaging that comes through from the interview data

is also clear: modern Indian women of the middle class living in the UK believe that there is much more to be done to ensure complete gender parity. They believe that at the level of the everyday, their reality is represented in these novels and that characters and incidents speak volumes about the current gender politics of Indian society; that women are still expected to conform to a patriarchal structure, women are still treated as commodities to maintain power (Irigaray, 1985), domestic and sexual violence against women is at an all-time high. One cannot help but wonder: if the middle class audience is capable of receiving messages from literature as intended by the writers when it comes to their class or caste, why is there such indifference and quietness when the layer of lower caste issues is added to the mix? Why is it that the upper caste women, who are painfully aware of the issues that their gender faces, turn a blind eye and dismiss the concerns of the lower caste women even when the reality of their lives is laid out in front of them in the form of words and stories to be consumed not merely for entertainment but also for the seriousness associated with them? As mentioned, this indifference and dismissiveness raises more questions than it answers, especially when it pertains to the question of caste and its continued existence in India.

9.4 Limitations of research

It would be remiss to discuss the breadth and depth of this research without considering certain methodological limitations that unexpectedly crept up. The selection of the novels had to be strategic and was limited to texts written by female authors so as to provide a robust and authentic view into female lives and how their experiences are different from those of men. Choosing texts written by male authors would have had a significant impact on how female characters would have been represented. The injustices they face, along with the portrayal of their everyday realities, would not have been accurate, and once again, the gender would have been misrepresented. If texts by male Dalit writers had been selected, then keeping with tradition, the true nature of the oppressions faced by Dalit women would not have come to the forefront, and they would have only been represented as downtrodden victims and not the empowered women they actually happen to be.

Another limitation perhaps that might be considered is the caste of the women who were interviewed as part of the audience. As mentioned earlier, there was an attempt to recruit upper caste and lower caste women to engage with the selected novels, however, this was not possible due to the challenges faced in the recruitment process. Upper caste women were far more accessible and eventually, the scope of the research had to be adjusted, and the audience recruitment process was conducted (see ‘Methodology’). The audience was also selected on the

basis of their class and socio-economic background. It has been defined in a previous section and earlier in this chapter as well (see the 'Methodology' chapter) that the 'middle class Indian', while not a novel concept, signifies something specific; it implies a certain level of education, employment and a relatively comfortable standard of living. The participant recruitment process started off with identifying women of Indian origin living in the UK who liked literature and were willing to engage with the selected novels. This was then culled on the basis of age and education level; access to education helps provide a rough indication of the socio-economic status.

With any kind of fieldwork, there is a learning curve, and there is much to be learned through the process of conducting the fieldwork in an adaptive and reflexive way. The interviews had to be structured in ways that made the women more comfortable, whether that be in the format or style of conversation or even the language of conversation. Hindi was often used as an alternative to English, only when the participants made the switch when discussing topics that are so Indian, that no specific translation exists for some of the phrases or words. The questions and even the themes being discussed had to be adapted to the comfort level of the women, in line with the boundaries of what they were willing to discuss about their perspectives and, more importantly, their personal lives. The space to engage in these discussions had to be safe and comfortable for the women, which is why the data has been completely anonymised, as this was also an area of concern.

The findings of the research are not without their limitations as they focus on the everyday experiences and perspectives of upper caste, middle class Indian women living in the UK and do not engage with the experiences of Dalit women. It is beneficial to have the perspective of the upper caste middle class Indian woman when it pertains to Dalit issues, as without it, we would not be exposed to the quietness of the audience or the deep-rooted social conditioning that seems to be in place which makes the audience inadvertently replicate the caste based status quo. However, it would have been more beneficial to have the Dalit female perspective in tandem with the upper caste perspective. This is an area of further study and can be explored in the future.

9.5 Original contribution of research

By placing women and especially lower caste women in positions of empowerment and strength as the protagonists, the authors of the selected novels are actively contributing to decolonising media studies by challenging power structures. By analysing those novels and

interviewing middle class Indian women, I am actively contributing to decolonising media and cultural studies in the Indian context. I am also contributing to decolonising audience research because of not just the ethnicity of the chosen audience but also their class. This research in itself stands at the intersection of caste, class and gender in Indian society, while rearticulating the questions of class from an Indian perspective, also making my work decolonial. My research uniquely centers on the reading habits and interpretations of middle-class Indian women living in the UK. This demographic has been largely underrepresented in audience studies, especially in the context of Indian literature beyond the romance genre. By considering the intersection of gender, caste, and class, my work provides a nuanced understanding of how these factors influence the reading experiences and interpretations of literature. This intersectional approach is relatively novel in audience studies, which often overlook the compounded effects of these social categories.

The inclusion of popular literature highlights how contemporary Indian fiction navigates the tension between traditional values and modern lifestyles. This contributes to a broader understanding of how popular culture reflects and shapes societal norms and values and has a great degree of moral seriousness embedded within it which is not given due consideration. This research also critically examines the representation of women in postmodern, popular, and Dalit literature, highlighting how these narratives reflect and challenge societal norms. This contributes to feminist literary criticism by providing a diverse range of female perspectives and experiences. By including Dalit literature in the analysis, I bring attention to the unique struggles and resilience of Dalit women, which are often overlooked in mainstream literary studies.

My research adopts a decolonial approach by prioritizing Indian theoretical frameworks and the lived experiences of middle class Indian women. This challenges the dominance of Western-centric perspectives in academic research and contributes to the decolonization of knowledge. By critically engaging with the caste and gender dynamics in Indian literature, this research exposes the deep-rooted inequalities perpetuated by these social structures. This critique is essential for decolonizing knowledge and promoting social justice. My research highlights how literature can serve as a tool for empowerment and social change, particularly for marginalized communities. This perspective aligns with decolonial goals of recognizing and valuing indigenous knowledge systems and cultural expressions.

Chapter 10
Conclusion

At the onset of this research, the objective was to understand the gender politics that currently exist in Indian society, and the attitude of the upper caste towards lower caste issues from the view of an educated and aware audience, through the lens of different forms of Indian literature. For the ease of understanding, the six novels selected were categorised into the genres of postmodern, popular and Dalit literature, spanning different time periods, geographical and social settings to ensure a holistic overview of Indian society and women's representation at different levels. It was ensured that the novels selected were written by female Indian authors and featured a strong female protagonist central to the narrative and story; someone who was always at the centre of action. The research questions focused on what has been the representation of female characters in Indian postmodern, popular and Dalit literature; are the characters and their constructions relevant to the lives of the women who make up the audience for this research; what has the chosen literature taught up about the gender politics of Indian society; and what has the audience response taught us about the attitudes of upper caste women in relation to lower caste issues. The aforementioned questions are deeply intertwined and feed into each other, very much akin to the way issues of patriarchy, gendered violence, gendered economic disparity and commodification of women in India are tied to each other.

Literature as a medium reflects the reality of the society in which it is situated, making it an essential area of study to understand the intricacies of societal systems and how conventional structures of power often oppress and sometimes violate the rights of the minorities in specific communities, whether that be based on gender or caste, or gender and caste. The literature of the Global South more often than not reflects the realities of a post-colonial, post-modern, and globalised society. It is essential to study this literature from a decolonised and intersectional perspective to ensure that the true meaning of what is reflected in the narratives does not get lost; the Global North and Global South have different histories, and as such structures of society carry different significations. The middle class in the Global North is not the same as the middle class in the Global South; caste as an issue does not exist in the Global North, whereas caste is racialised in the Global South through socio-economic powers that are constantly in flux. For this reason, a decolonised approach was adopted not just for the audience study, but also the thematic analyses of the selected novels. Intersectionality was also adopted as a key framework to truly understand the nature of oppression faced by Indian women, whether that be caste based or gender based discrimination. The intersectional nature of Dalit women's oppression can also only be understood from a decolonised view, considering its multi-dimensional nature that allows it to exist on multiple axes.

The exploration of Indian literature, particularly through the lens of gender politics, has provided valuable insights into the lived experiences of women within contemporary Indian society. Through a thorough analysis of the postmodern, popular and Dalit literature, as well as interviews with a diverse group of middle-class Indian women living in the UK, this research has shed light on the intricate dynamics of gender relations, societal expectations, and systemic injustices that continue to shape the everyday realities of women in India. The examination of literary works by female authors has allowed for an authentic exploration of the portrayal of female characters who navigate the complexities of patriarchal norms and societal expectations. Postmodern literature, such as *The Palace of Illusions* and *The God of Small Things* represented the complexities of gender and caste in Indian society. These works depict female characters who navigate patriarchal structures and caste-based discrimination, whether that be through the representations of Ammu or Draupadi that serves to critique the entrenched patriarchal and casteist norms. The audience, comprising middle class, upper caste woman, find these narratives to resonate with their own experiences of gender discrimination, albeit from a position of relative privilege. The engagement with the texts allows the audience to reflect on their own positionality within the social hierarchy and the ways in which they perpetuate or challenge these norms. Popular literature novels, such as *The Zoya Factor* or *100 Shades of White*, represent female protagonists who navigate the tensions between tradition and modernity, balancing familial expectations with personal aspirations. These representations reflect the everyday realities of the women in the audience, who may relate to the challenges of maintaining a balance between two opposing ideas. The engagement with the novels allows the audience to see themselves in the characters, fostering a sense of solidarity and shared experience; the use of colloquial language also enhances the sense of relatability. Dalit literature texts challenge the dominant upper caste narratives and brings to light the systemic discrimination faced by marginalised communities. For the middle-class, upper caste audience, engaging with these texts is an eye-opening experience, prompting them to confront their own biases and the privileged position they hold in society.

The engagement of the audience with these representations is shaped by their own social and cultural contexts. Middle-class, upper caste women find themselves relating more to the characters in postmodern and popular literature, as these narratives reflect their own experiences and struggles. However, there is minimal, if any, engagement with Dalit literature, as addressing issues of caste based injustices includes confronting uncomfortable truths about their own privilege and position. The audience's engagement with representation as a practice involves a process of reflection and introspection. By reading and interpreting these texts, the audience is not only consuming stories but also participating in a broader dialogue about social

justice and equality. The narratives provide a platform for the audience to question and challenge the status quo, fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities of gender and caste politics in Indian society. Representation is twofold: the upper caste middle class woman sees herself represented in the texts from postmodern and popular literature but has little to no sense of connection to Dalit literature because it is not her everyday reality. She is oppressed due to the constraints of a patriarchal society, but she also has the luxury of indifference when it pertains to the plight and oppression of Dalit women due to the privilege that she has as a result of her higher caste and class status.

Whether it be Draupadi in *The Palace of Illusions*, Ammu in *The God of Small Things*, the women of the Pariayar community in *Sangati*, or Yashica Dutt's mother in *Coming out as Dalit: A Memoir*; these characters are depicted as strong-willed individuals challenging the constraints imposed upon them by traditional gender roles. However, their empowerment is more often than not limited by the patriarchal structures of their times, reflecting the historical and cultural contexts in which these narratives are set. If the different genres of literature are examined in a linear fashion, moving from postmodern to popular to Dalit literature, there is an obvious pattern and trend; circumstances and situations change, the oppressor changes, but the struggle of the oppressed remains the same. The time periods may be different, but all the stories reflect the shifting dynamics of gender roles and the complexities of navigating personal aspirations within the confines of societal norms. The examination of Dalit literature, particularly through works by female authors like Bama and Dutt, offers a poignant portrayal of the intersectional oppression faced by Dalit women. The narrative expose the harsh realities of caste based discrimination, economic marginalisation, and social exclusion experienced by Dalit women in Indian society. Despite their resilience and agency, Dalit women continue to confront systemic barriers that limit their opportunities and perpetuate their marginalisation.

The thematic analyses of the selected novels revealed that women's realities have more or less been plagued by the same issues from pre-Vedic times. The analyses enabled us to delve into the multifaceted subjugation and oppression of Indian women, explaining how these dynamics manifest within societal structures. The primary themes explored were patriarchy, violence against women, and the commodification of women. These elements are inextricably linked: patriarchy stems from the commodification of women, which arises from gendered violence rooted in patriarchal ideologies. The interdependence of these themes makes it challenging to discuss one without referencing the others, as they manifest in a cyclical manner within Indian society. The selected novels, through their narrative structures, shed light on the pervasive yet often subtle nature of patriarchy and its deep-rooted influence on Indian society. The narratives

expose the myriad ways in which patriarchy perpetuates gender disparity. Additionally, the novels graphically depict the severe and brutal violence experienced by women, particularly Dalit women, highlighting the true nature of their subjugation. This depiction underscores the urgent need for the comprehensive enforcement of social and legal reforms to ensure and safety and protection of women. Furthermore, the commodification of women emerged as a recurring theme, driven by the patriarchal mindset that objectifies and dehumanises women and perpetuates their marginalisation and exploitation. While these novels provide a sobering representation of the challenges faced by women in India, they also serve as powerful tools of advocacy and change. In a digital age where it is easy to disengage from literature and literary narratives by deeming them irrelevant, it is crucial to recognise that literature does indeed hold up a mirror to society, reflecting the lived realities and experiences of people. The selected novels offer profound insights into the politics of life in India, revealing what it truly means to be a woman in a society where political, economic, and social structures are designed to perpetuate gender oppression and subjugation.

The interviews conducted allowed for further exploration into understanding the complexities of gender politics in Indian society through real examples from the daily lives of the very women the literature aimed to represent. Though the interviews do not claim to be representative of all upper caste, middle class Indian women, they do allow for a sufficient and useful generalising perspective that edges towards the prominent dominant discourse in Indian society. The perspectives shared by middle class Indian women living in the UK shed light on the way societal expectations, and cultural norms and traditions intersect to shape women's lived experiences. The experiences of the women interviewed add credibility to the notion that women's position in Indian society is still precarious, and gender parity is far from a reality in the Indian context. They also bring light to the idea that women's everyday realities are still rooted in a patriarchal mindset, which is improving at a notably languid pace. Their realities are dependent on conventional gender roles that have not seen a marked improvement in a post-modern, globalised society. We are also able to discern that there is an obvious domestication of values and a reproduction of gender roles so as to maintain the status quo that has existed in Indian society since pre-Vedic times. There was an engagement from the women with issues of gender parity at the social and cultural level, and the economic level to some extent, but not at the political level. While there was an engagement from the women on issues faced by women in the middle class, it was found that there was little to no engagement with caste specific issues that were represented in the stories of the Dalit community. The reluctance of the women to engage with issues of caste based discrimination and oppression, and the perpetuation of privilege among upper caste women underscore the need for deeper reflection and dialogue on

intersecting forms of oppression. Their dismissal of lower caste issues and a refusal to acknowledge their existence or be held accountable for the role of the upper caste, middle class in the oppression of Dalit women also sheds light on the fact that despite being educated, and having an awareness of the issues, the women reproduce the status quo in an attempt to defend their privileged position in society (when compared to the women from lower caste communities). One can say that there is deep-rooted conditioning in effect which shapes the manner in which the upper caste, middle class women view anything that is considered foreign or 'other' to them, which comes through in their quietness, disengagement and indifferent reading of the selected texts.

This research has allowed us to understand that literature serves a higher purpose than simply entertainment and its moral seriousness in how it represents, and shapes society must be considered in the realm of academia. Literature serves a purpose beyond mere entertainment and aesthetic value; there is a sense of moral seriousness embedded within its narrative that needs to be taken into consideration when conducting audience study or attempting to understand why and how society functions the way it does. We have also been able to discern that lower caste issues cannot and must not be taken for granted; there is plenty more to be done in terms of changing traditional caste based mindsets that still refuse to turn a blind eye to the systemic injustices prevalent in Indian society against the Dalit community. The questions asked in this research could be applied to further research within the same field wherein a female Dalit audience is interviewed about the same selection of novels, and what their perspective is on the representation of Dalit issues and whether or not they share the same sentimentalities as their upper caste counterparts when the question of everyday lived realities is brought to the front.

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Appendix

Interviews conducted:

- AA, 22, London: 2023
- AB, 33, London: 2023
- AC, 42, London: 2023
- AJ, 35, London: 2023
- AM, 50, London: 2023
- AV, 44, London: 2023
- LK, 41, London: 2023
- MV, 28, London: 2023
- NS, 28, London: 2023
- NT, 34, London: 2023
- PA, 47, London: 2023
- PH, 21, London: 2023
- PJ, 36, London: 2023
- PK, 49, London: 2023
- PS, 47, London: 2023
- RG, 43, London: 2023
- RS, 37, London: 2023
- SA, 43, London: 2023
- SC, 28, London: 2023
- SL, 29, London: 2023
- SS, 35, London: 2023

- TR, 29, London: 2023
- VE, 28, London: 2023
- VS, 37, London: 2023