

Routledge Advances in Social Work

INTERSECTIONALITY IN SOCIAL WORK

ACTIVISM AND PRACTICE IN CONTEXT

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1 Textual practice as intersectional practice

Situated caste and gender knowledge in India

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Literary texts are marked with multi-layered, interdependent sensibilities that challenge binary positions of social conditioning. Literary texts, both in terms of composition and content, are intersectional. Thus, the practice of writing and reading literary text is a practice of intersectionality, opening up questions about the politics of knowledge production that correspond with unequal intersecting power relations. If, as 'social beings, women [and clients of social services] are constructed through effects of language and representation' (De Lauretis, 1984: 14), then the role of text in this construction is rudimentary to intersectionality. Using the lens of intersectionality to think about the production and analysis of literary texts in terms of social work has both an international reach and holds the specificity of diverse social work practice contexts. This analysis of intersectionality, reaching across India and the UK, intersects a diversity of disciplinary fields, including social work, Black feminism and literary textual analysis, and as such, both the content and the method are intersectional. In the spirit of the Black feminist theory of intersectionality, this transgression of geographical and disciplinary borders reflects intersectionality as a theory of the deconstruction of borders (Nayak, 2015: 101–103).

The questions being asked are: what can social work learn from the literary works of Indian women, and more specifically, Dalit and Adivasi women poets, writing about their experience of intersectional oppression in the Indian context? How might social workers and service users take up 'strategies of writing and reading [as] forms of cultural resistance' (De Lauretis, 1984: 7)? Can the example (examined in this chapter) of the Indian Adivasi activist Nirmala Putul, who uses poetry to record/transcribe her work with women and girls that have been trafficked, offer a different method of social work documentation? How can social work occupy an insider-outsider position within and through the very texts that frame the profession and practices? How might the creation of literature form social work interventions for recovery and empowerment? The subversive potential of Dalit and Adivasi women texts is that:

[n]ot only can they work to turn dominant discourses inside out (and show that it can be done), to undercut their enunciation and address, to unearth the archaeological stratifications on which they are built; but in affirming

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the historical existence of irreducible contradictions for women in discourse, they also challenge theory in its own terms, the terms of a semiotic space constructed in language, its power based on social validation and well-established modes of enunciation and address. So well established that, paradoxically, the only way to position oneself outside of that discourse is to displace oneself within it.

(De Lauretis, 1984: 7)

It is of significance to note that the meaning of the word 'text' is 'a tissue, a woven fabric' (Barthes, 1977: 159). This chapter performs an intersection or weave of apparently unconnected field of practice. It is not usual for literary textual analysis to form a core component of social work education. For example, how many social work books direct students to the work of Roland Barthes? Indeed, the situation of social work and the situation of social service users are not 'self-contained systems' but are constituted in terms of relational socio-political, historical and cultural structures/contexts that mirror intertextuality:

There are always other words in a word, other texts in a text. The concept of intertextuality requires, therefore, that we understand texts not as self-contained systems but as differential and historical, as traces and tracings of otherness, since they are shaped by the repetition and transformation of other textual structures.

(Martínez Alfaro, 1996: 268)

Social work is a prime example of a professional practice based on the relationality of texts, where no piece of documentation exists in isolation. Thus, '[m]eaning becomes something which exists between texts and all other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations. The text becomes the intertext' (Allen, 2000: 1). In accord with Crenshaw's proposition that 'intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism' (Crenshaw, 1989: 539), intertextuality as intersubjectivity 'operates in an equation whereby the sum of the parts [text(s)] is greater than the individual elements [for example, words, grammar and spaces], as in intersectionality' (Nayak, 2015: 57). Proposing the idea of intertextuality as intersubjectivity (1980), Kristeva, explains that:

each word (text) is an intersection of word (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read . . . [as] the absorption and transformation of another . . . The word as minimal textual unit thus turns out to occupy the status of mediator, linking structural models to cultural (historical) environment, as well as that of regulator.

(Kristeva, 1969: 37; parentheses and emphasis in original)

The texts of social work, including the array of documentation about service users, are mechanisms whereby the 'absorption' and, as such, the 'transformation'

of the problem of the service user is translated into words; these words link 'structural models' of socially constructed representations, positions and discourses about service users 'to cultural (historical) environment[s]'. In other words, the 'spatialized' materiality of words reflects the 'spatialized' materiality of subjects (as social workers, activists, service users and poets). Application of intertextuality as intersectionality enables scrutiny of social work's regulatory function, particularly, in regards to documentation as a 'mediator' that regulates recognition of the importance of the social contexts that produce service users. Conversely, in the tradition of Dalit and Adivasi women poets in India, perhaps the application of intertextuality as intersectionality is the revolutionary potential of social work, to enable 'new strategies, new semiotic contents and new signs . . . a habit change in readers, spectators, etc.' (De Lauretis, 1984: 186). The point is, that, the concept of 'textuality does not mean a reduction of the world to linguistic texts, books, or a tradition composed of books' (Spivak, 1998: 104).

The politics of knowledge production

The application of intertextuality as intersectionality exposes the power/knowledge relationship, whereby 'subjugated knowledges' are relegated. Foucault explains:

By 'subjugated knowledges' I mean two things. On the one hand, I am referring to historical contents that have been buried and disguised in a functional coherence or formal systemization. . . . By 'subjugated knowledges' one should understand something else . . . namely a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to the task or insufficiently elaborated; naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity.

(Foucault and Collin, 1980: 81–82)

This chapter demonstrates 'a politics of close reading practice' (Nayak, 2015: 24–50) of 'a set of knowledges' 'disqualified as inadequate' due to the intersection of caste, gender and poverty. The focus is on the work of contemporary female poets of India including Dalit and Adivasi women poets, as a feminist praxis of intersectionality 'resolutely, political, directly involved in effecting social change' (Locke Swarr and Nagar, 2010: 55). This chapter demonstrates that warranted critiques of 'the invocation of praxis as code word for an 'activist knowledge' (ibid.) are transcended by the situated knowledge of intersectional subjugation articulated in the work of contemporary Indian feminist poetry. Situated knowledge as 'activist knowledge' is feminist praxis in poetry; not a 'code word' (ibid.). It is clear that for Indian women poets including Dalit and Adivasi women poets, that:

poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more

tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. . . . And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it.

(Lorde, 1984: 37–38)

The situated knowledge of Dalit and Adivasi women poet-activists give ‘name to the nameless’ so that the particularity of gender and caste ‘can be thought’ as a production of the particularity of situated meanings:

the experience of a Dalit migrant woman accessing health services cannot be understood simply by her gender experience and her experience of being dalit. The experience of being a woman itself differs for dalits and non-dalits, i.e. gender (and prescribed norms and behaviours) can be constituted differently by cultural meanings, policies and institutional practices and aspects of historical violence and discrimination . . . In essence, the simultaneous operation of structures of oppression make the experience at the intersection of these structures qualitatively distinct.

(Kapilashrami and Ravindran, 2016: 181)

The point is that all movements, sectors, and/or services that purport to empower, support, protect and advocate for those violated by oppression must do so on a foundation of situated knowledge of situated intersectionality.

The relevance to social work of reading literary text as a practice of intersectionality

Social work involves the construction, analysis and utilisation of a diverse range of texts, including: case notes, assessment forms, files about services users, court reports, minutes of meetings and referral documentation (Ames, 1999; Kagle, 1991, 1993, 1995; Monnickendam, et al., 1994; Cormican and Cormican, 1977). The enduring importance of text as ‘a product and a process’ within social work (Fox and Gutheil, 2000) is pivotal to concepts of evidence-based practice and co-production involving multi-disciplinary working and service user participation. The production of texts to document narrative processes of phronesis through critical reflection, clinical supervision, social work education and qualitative social work research are fundamental to non-defensive human rights-based social work and social policy practice principles (Robbins, 2013).

The social work practices of life story and reminiscence work are examples of the therapeutic potential and impact of (auto) biographical memory work. Social work research and scholarship is undisputed in identifying, either explicitly or implicitly, that the therapeutic benefits of narrative textual work with service users lies in the production of the text as a process of intersecting the past with the present, the social with the psychological, discursive practices with representation of self-identity (Barnardos, 2013; Baynes, 2008; Burnell and Vaughan, 2008; Cook-Cottone and Beck, 2007; Goddard, et al., 2010; Habermas and Bluck, 2000;

Horrocks and Goddard, 2006; Humphreys and Kertesz, 2012; Murray, et al., 2008; Nelson and Fivush, 2004; Rose and Philpot, 2006; Ryan and Walker, 2007; Shotton, 2010, 2013). The question is: how can the therapeutic textual practices within social work be a force for a mutual activism of resistance between those who use social services and those who provide social services, where the therapeutic potential rests in turning 'dominant discourses inside out' (De Lauretis, 1984: 7)?

Intersectionality in the matrix of gender, caste and class within the context of India

Hindi literature has a tradition that dates back to the eighth century but women poets who have registered a significant presence are numbered to the likes of Mirabai and Mahadevi Varma. Kumkum Sangari identifies a strong streak of protest in the poetry of *bhakti poet* Mirabai (Sangari, 1990). Mahadevi Varma's collection of essays written, between 1931 and 1937 (published in 1941) and entitled *Shrankhla ki Kadiyan*, translated as *Links in the Chain* (Varma, 2003), speak for the economic independence and citizen rights of women. Mahadevi Varma highlights the necessity of women understanding their judicial rights and examines the processes of subject formation within patriarchy in relation to women's identity, representation and position. Within postcolonial Indian feminist literature, the emphasis on the assertion of feminist voice as an assertion of self-existence is evident in the work of Kirti Chaudhary, Snehmaya Chaudhary and Indu Jain (Anamika, 2015). Since the nineties there has been resurgence in women's writing owing to the spread of education and assertion of identity discourses globally, including the socio-political locale of the country. Many Indian women writers face intersectional marginalisation because of their gender and caste or class and their poems carry images of the intersectionality of women as the subject of their poetry and emphatically denounce all kinds of oppression and violence. The situated poetic knowledge of Indian women in this chapter testifies that: 'socio-spatial embeddedness of village-level activists places them in a unique position to analyse the multiple webs of power in which their everyday lives, struggle, and aspirations are inserted' (Sangtin Writers and Nagar, 2006: 151).

The writings of contemporary female poets, from the field of Hindi literature, including: Gagan Gill (2017), Katyayni (1999, 2002), Anamika (2007, 2015), Savita Singh (2013, 2017), Sushila Takbhaure (2011, 2013, 2015), Nirmala Putul (2003, 2014, 2017) and Neelesh Raghuvanshi (1997), are challenging the horizon of their poetic expression and in doing so challenge the horizon and experience of simultaneous multiple structural oppression. The challenge is of 'recasting 'women's' issues from a plurality of vantage points and an acknowledgement that gender plays out differently depending on one's many intersecting identities' (Kapilashrami and Ravindran, 2016: 178). The contextual intersectionality of caste, class and gender translate into the convergence constructions of identity that function in the subjugation of women. Kumar's (2009) analysis of

the counter-hegemonic activist practices of Indian poet-activist women to the multiple oppressions suffered by women and girls is captured in her reference to the power of Katyayni's poetry. The overtones of her poetry are immensely political. On one hand she condemns the social order that parades an activist bare bodied, to add insult to her being a woman (Katyayni, 2002). Similarly, she is upset at the communal riots in wake of the upsurge in Ayodhya (Katyayni, 1999).

[w]riting in response to an incident in which a girl-activist is paraded naked in Andhra Pradesh by the state's police, the poet [Katyayni] underlines the urgency of writing direct poetry:

Pushing great religious luminaries in the background
Should we postpone poetry? (Kya Sthagit Kar Dein Kavita)

(Kumar, 2009: 352)

It is important to note the deliberate decision to discuss these issues through the writings of contemporary female poets of India, writing in Hindi: the predominant language of an otherwise multilingual country. These are voices from the margins, speaking in a language that is located in a country positioned geo-politically on the margins; it is an intervention to contest the politics of the hierarchies of language. Thus, both the method (in terms of language and location) and the content (literature from women positioned as marginal) are co-productive as an action of feminist consciousness-raising to resist oppressive centre/margin positions.

Intersectionality: A case study of Dalit and Adivasi women poets

Though the plural texture of multicultural and multilingual Indian nation is a matter of pride for its citizens, it has also been plagued by identity conflicts resulting in divisive social structures. Caste-based hierarchies have pushed lower caste groups to peripheral positions. Dalits and Adivasis, being on the lowest rung of the ladder, are two groups who face multiple converging indignities, derision, abuse and forms of exploitation at the hands of influential upper caste groups. Thus, to say that all Indian 'women suffer the same oppression simply because [they] are women is to lose sight of the many and varied tools of patriarchy' (Lorde, 1979: 67) namely, the intersectional experience of caste.

Dalits refer to the group of people who were known as the depressed classes, prior to 1935, during British rule. After independence, they came to be known as scheduled castes. According to the 2011 census they comprise 16.6% of India's population. The Adivasis are small ethnic, tribal groups. The constitution refers to them as scheduled tribes. They are considered to be the original inhabitants of their native lands, so they assert their right on the natural resources of the area. Industrialisation and global onslaught on the economy has resulted in their massive displacement. Adivasis are spread in different parts of the country and form 7.5% of the total population in India. Even after six decades of independence, Adivasis

have not been included in mainstream national development programmes. The marginalisation of both Dalits And Adivasis has, more or less, remained constant.

The writings of Dalit and Adivasi poets represent a desire to tell their own story for 'the transformation of silence into language and action' (Lorde, 1977: 40); it is a rewriting of the history of their social existence with the corresponding complexities of Spivak's question, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988). Dalit and Adivasi poets demand an equal and just society, not only for themselves but for their entire class, insisting on equality as enshrined in the constitution, to be granted irrespective of caste, class, gender, religion, race or any such external social construction. The lens of intersectionality is extended to achieve inclusivity. More specifically, Dalit and Adivasi poets ask for an equal space for women in democratic processes; foregrounding the differential treatment meted out to women repeatedly at home and in the workplace. Although a human rights framework underlies the work of these poets, there is a clear articulation that in a patriarchy women's needs are not the same as that of men. The caution is not to fall into the trap of translating the notion of universal human rights into universal women's rights because of the diversities of women's experiences, representation and positionality at the grassroots lived level. This tension is alive in Sushila Takbhaure's poetry, fiction and autobiography (Takbhaure, 2011, 2013a, 2013b) located at the crossroads of marginalised identities; the intersection of being feminist and Dalit in the fight against multiple oppression. Takbhaure reiterates (Takbhaure, 2013b: 16) that the treatment meted out to Dalits reflect a particular cultural colonisation where upper caste parties, groups and individuals grab all the opportunities, take control over national resources and push the Dalits to the peripheries of urban centres.

Dalit literature in India seems to have discovered a new aesthetics and poetics for their writings. The main thrust of their literature is on struggle and awakening. Their entire writings are a mission to fight intersecting inequalities. In that sense Takbhaure's poetry can be termed as a cry for justice predicated on intersectionality. Thematically, most of her poems are based on the trauma of being both a Dalit and a woman, as well as the resolution to fight these oppressive systems and stand up for one's rights. Takbhaure's poetry articulates resistance as resilience to multiple oppressions through an intersectional lens. Dalit women have an arduous realisation of self; often their caste identities superseding their gender identity, placed in an impossible position of being split in their experience of the intersectionality of caste and gender. Tilak, a contemporary poet and Dalit ideologist writes:

Dalit women inhabit two worlds; in one world they stand with their brothers, husband, father, companion, friend, fighting against caste system and in the other world they find themselves being pushed to the margin in their own houses, societies and social movements. Despite this since the *dalit* consciousness is inspired by the ideology of Savitri Bai Phule, Ambedkar and Buddha, the entire *dalit* community stands against capitalism, feudalism and fascism. *Dalit* women writers have also spoken against these social evils.

In their own poetry and especially Hindi poetry at large they have touched upon the themes where they reject the distinctions of race, class, caste or gender and have worked towards realizing the vision of equitable society.

(Tilak, 2011: 91–92, trans. Sethi)

Dalit women navigate the complexity of intersectional oppression; on the one hand they navigate standing in solidarity with the Dalit men of their community to fight caste oppression. On the other hand, the subversive voices of Dalit women poets seek to alter the agenda of feminist discourses in India. Dalit women refuse to join the ranks of upper caste women sloganeering against gender alone. In her 1992 essay *Dalit Movement and the Women's Movements*, Dietrich 'criticised the mainstream women's movement's blindness to the caste dimensions of violence against Dalit women and its tendency to frame it exclusively as a gender issue' (Kapilashrami and Ravindran, 2016: 176). Dalit women's poetry articulates the crossroads of being torn apart between feminist discourses and subaltern discourses. Dietrich, observes:

The cause of *Dalit* woman can only be strengthened if we in the autonomous women's movement also make an effort to reach out to Dalit movements. This, in turn, also requires drastic rethinking in the Dalit movement on patriarchy and on the women's movement.

(Rao, 2003: 79)

Takbhaure recognises the necessity and opportunities of this 'rethinking':

I need an endless infinite skyline
Not merely a part of open sky seen from the terrace
Need sky as my roof
I need an infinite sky.

(Takbhaure, 2013a: 86; trans. Rekha Sethi)

In terms of intersectionality, 'an infinite skyline' means not being confined within the 'distorted analysis of racism and sexism because the operative conceptions of race and sex become grounded in experiences that actually represent only a subset of a much more complex phenomenon' (Crenshaw, 1989: 539). Or, translated into the Indian context, the Dalit women's movement seeks more than 'a part of open sky' represented by a women's movement, which 'treats upper caste Hinduism as the norm and treats women from minority communities as representatives of their respective groups' (Kapilashrami and Ravindran, 2016: 178). The point is that, Dalit women's experience cannot be 'subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race and gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood' (Crenshaw, 1991: 1244). Takbhaure pleads for untying a knot within (herself, within the Dalit community and within feminism itself); asserting the power of education as liberation; where every subjugated woman is a 'situated knower' (Hill-Collins, 2000: 19).

From Dalits we move to Nirmala Putul, an Adivasi activist, who raises her voice from the peripheral world of Adivasis against the plight of Adivasis. Putul primarily writes in local dialect Santhali but has been widely translated in Hindi and accepted in the plural tradition of Hindi language and literature. Of significance in Putul's poetry is the theme of 'location' and 'voice'; two significant issues in intersectionality. The intersection of, location and voice in the lives of Adivasis, including the intersections on the continuums of violence to exploitation, discrimination to oppression, unemployment to human trafficking, Adivasi pockets are generally located in the areas rich in natural resources. The development agenda of the nation is an infringement on their independence. The mesh of dams and roads, aimed to utilise the resources, is perceived as equivalent to exploitative colonial rule; resulting flood and famine situations. Putul writes, 'Globalisation is a new aggressive phase of neo-colonialism. It is the start of a new corporate politics. Their thirst for money is polluting the civilizations and cultures. Human values are fast disintegrating. In such circumstances the survival of many groups, civilizations and cultures seem unbelievable' (Putul, 2014a: 65, trans. Sethi).

Putul questions this power structure and reminds people of her clan not to fall prey to the ideas and designs of the new ruling class. Perhaps the poet warns all political activists not to fall prey, to the seductive machinations of the oppressor. The aggressive globalisation of markets is a threat to the culture and society of Adivasis who struggle for reclaiming their land, forest, water resources. The poetry of Putul explores all these areas of human suffering:

They are traders . . . Understand this . . .
Identify them dear daughter Murmu
Know them!

(Putul, 2005: 15, trans. Sethi)

Sethi's research based on the readings of Adivasis and Dalit poets, and interviews, evidences their sustained resolution to configure the impact of their gender and social realities on their poetry. In one such interview Putul accepted that at times she feels very lonely yet continues to march on with courage and confidence (Putul, 2017).

The feminism of this poet arises from the vulnerability of women in her own community, Jharkhand, who live in constant fear of the intersection of physical abuse, hunger and the vagaries of social superstitions. The superstitious belief of *dayan* constructs women as a curse of misfortune, for which they are paraded naked and abandoned. There are narratives of women being picked up by upper caste men and abused while husbands keep playing flute to cover their helplessness; of women subject to poverty, exploitation and hard labour. Endemic deprivation makes these regions prime hunting ground for human trafficking. Thousands of girls and women from these areas are trafficked to work as domestic help in Delhi and other metropolitan cities. Putul works with these girls reported missing from their homes and this field work is transcribed in her poetry:

Where are you, Maya?
Where are you?
Are you there safe and sound, or,
Has Delhi swallowed you?

Delhi is not meant for people like us.
Don't you feel it is a graveyard (?)
Where people were queued up to be buried alive;

Come back, Maya;
Wherever you are;
These jungles are calling you;
Come back!

(Putul, 2003: 31, trans. Sethi)

In her poetry collection '*Homeless Dreams*' Putul reiterates that only an intersectional assessment and assertion of self will liberate women. Putul points to the paradoxes and contradictions but relies greatly on the resilience of women themselves as the tool for empowerment. She feels the power within is the only recourse for a woman:

History has not given any space to women;
So we the women will write our own history;
We will write our own history with blood;
And not with tears . . .

(Putul, 2014b: 74; trans. Sethi)

Intersectionality exposes the complexities involved in multiple identities and helps to address them in the specificity of context. The poetic literature of Sushila Takbhaure and Nirmala Putul are located primarily in their immediate realities and background. Their feminist inheritance is complex and many-sided. They have been able to develop interlinkages between gender, caste and other inequalities. The rise of education and increased participation of women in socio-political life has given them the confidence to navigate the complex grid of ideology, reality and aesthetics. Women have probably had the longest history of oppression in all civilisations. Her choice to write is definitely seen as an expression of her freedom, an insightful analysis of a non-sectarian, non-hierarchical social structure. Anamika has examined how the Hindi writings of Indian women propose a feminist poetics as a tool of peace activism:

a transformative politics with a potential to initiate change towards a more equitable society. If it may be called an ideology in the established sense of the term, it is an ideology of support for those who are deprived and exploited by the institutionalized structures of control and operate in different forms indifferent social formations.

(Anamika, 2007: vi–vii)

Literary writings of Takbhaure and Putul do not hesitate to carve out new spaces, scoping a transformative picture of democratic rights ensuring equality; conjectures created in and through intersectionality that are realistic and assertive. Their images and narratives interweave in a lasting trace or imprint enabling the emotional component of intersectionality to breathe (Nayak, 2015: 85–117).

Conclusion

In repeated assertions these poets react against the hypocrisy of upper caste women who have hijacked the feminist movement, seated on the podium, engaged in changing power hierarchies in politics, whilst conveniently ignoring lower caste women's economic, social and political contexts. The logic of intersectionality is opposed to universalising experience: the logic of intersectionality is premised on situated experience, situation knowledge and situated standpoints. Intersectionality facilitates processes which begin with the realisation of subjugation and moves on to create negotiations between different registers of identity. In a democracy, representative institutions sometimes strengthen identity politics, while the success of intersectionality lies in helping dissolve barriers.

This chapter calls for social work engagement with textual practice as intersectional practice to achieve a:

shift prevailing practices of knowledge production – that is, shifts in dominant expectations about (a) which actors can produce knowledge, (b) the methodology and content of knowledges produced, (c) the languages, genres and forms in which knowledges are produced, and (d) the manner in which new knowledges gain relevance as they reach different audiences and enable new kinds of socio-political interventions.

(Sangtin Writers and Nagar, 2006: 150)

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