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Interrogating Intersectionality: Dalit Women, Western Classrooms, and the Politics of Feminist Knowledge Production

By Radhika Govinda¹

Abstract

Intersectionality's enormous success raises questions about its purchase as a critical methodology outside the context of its origin, as to how it has taken on meaning and use in Global South contexts. Its widespread espousal across disciplines within Western academia itself compels one to ask whether curricula – and how these are transacted in classrooms – are informed by its analytic insight, and if so, what are the challenges in enacting it as critical pedagogy. In this paper, I bring into conversation key Anglo-American and Indian feminist scholars writing about intersectionality and reflect on my own methodological and pedagogical engagements with it in India and the UK to address these questions. I demonstrate how intersectionality has given me the lens and the language to reveal how Dalit women today not only speak differently from Dalit men and upper-caste women but that differences are emerging amongst them in terms of class and level of political consciousness. I also show how intersectionality can be and needs to be used as critical pedagogy for the urgent task of decolonising feminist classrooms in the British higher education context.

Keywords: Intersectionality, Global South, Dalit women, Decolonising knowledge, Feminist classroom

Introduction

Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), 'intersectionality' was meant to render visible the experiences of women of colour otherwise falling through the cracks of feminist and anti-racist discourses in North America. Whether as a concept, theory, method, pedagogical, or heuristic device, intersectionality has been enormously successful in its appeal and reach not only within but also beyond Feminist, Women's, and Gender Studies (Collins and Bilge 2016). Its extraordinary success raises some key epistemological and ontological questions: Does intersectionality have purchase in making sense of the multidimensionality of identity and inequality outside the context of its origin? What conceptual debates arise as it travels Southward? Does intersectionality's widespread espousal by scholars across disciplines within Northern academia imply that, in the name of knowledge, what finds place of prominence on curricula – and how these are transacted in classrooms – are informed by its analytic insight? What are some of the challenges that emerge in enacting intersectionality as critical pedagogy? I address these questions in this paper by drawing and reflecting on my own methodological and pedagogical engagements with intersectionality.

Situating oneself is an important component of intersectional practice. My location as a feminist academic at the cusp of British and Indian higher education offers me a unique vantage point from which to write this paper. My doctoral research was on the feminist movement in India, and much of my subsequent research is anchored in the field of women's and gender studies. As a woman scholar from a caste-Hindu, middle class, urban, educated background, and in that sense not unlike the background of the women at the centre of the criticisms made against the feminist movement in India (Agnes 1994; Manorama 1992), I have been conscious of my positionality with regards to this research. Whilst I began my academic career as a lecturer of gender studies in Delhi, since 2012 I have been living and working in

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Edinburgh, UK, and teaching women's and gender studies courses at the university-level. Here, I identify myself as a woman of colour and as an international staff member from the Global South. I am acutely aware of both the privileges and the marginalisation that come with my class position, educational and ethnic backgrounds, and my geo-political location. My positionality influences my observations and arguments, and in several places in the paper, I make explicit how this is the case.

I begin by bringing into conversation Anglo-American and Indian feminist, women's and gender studies scholars with regards to the theoretical debates on intersectionality and identify my own position in relation to these. This forms the conceptual canvas for the reflection that follows on the use of intersectionality as critical methodology, on what happens when intersectionality travels South-ward, and on its relevance for Indian feminism, specifically for making sense of the complexity of Dalit women's identity and experience of inequality in contemporary India. Here, I re-visit findings from ethnographic research I conducted in 2004-2009 on NGO-led women's activism in rural Uttar Pradesh (UP), North India, with a focus on Dalit women. The research included 27 interviews and nine focus group discussions with activist and non-activist ex-untouchable and non-ex-untouchable women, and collection of documentation as part of a case study of a grassroots feminist women's NGO which operates in rural, southern UP, and which I refer to as Vimukt Mahila Samuh (VMS) (Liberated Women's Group). The women's and the organisation's names have been changed to ensure anonymity. Finally, I turn to the relevance and use of intersectional pedagogy for disrupting Northern hegemony in teaching and learning. This is based on auto-ethnographic research conducted in 2017-2019 on my experience of teaching women's and gender studies at the university where I am presently employed. Auto-ethnography 'seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) to understand cultural experiences (ethno)' (Ellis et al. 2010: paragraph 2). Whilst feminist auto-ethnographic research carries within it the risk of self-indulgence, I value how it enables me to engage in 'an authentic critically located exploration of a phenomenon from within the phenomenon' (Smiles 2014: 58).

My engagement with intersectionality in this paper—as critical theory, as critical methodology, and as critical pedagogy—as outlined above is informed by my conviction that we need to interrogate the extant treatment of theory-making, research, and pedagogy in silos, despite performative support to notions like 'research-led teaching' by higher education institutions globally. I argue that we need to consider and support knowledge production as a holistic exercise, wherein theory-making, conducting empirical research, and classroom teaching are understood as integral parts of knowledge production, each feeding into the other (Gilmore et al. 2015; Neumann 1992; Robertson and Bond 2001; Schapper and Mayson 2010).²

Intersectionality: A Conceptual Canvas

Intersectionality has roots going back to the 19th century. Crenshaw may have introduced the term, but by no means was she making a particularly new argument. Crenshaw herself referenced the African American abolitionist and women's rights activist, Sojourner Truth, best known for her 1851 'Ain't I a woman' speech, drawing attention to slavery's particular impact on Black women. In fact, in the Indian context, the roots of similar intersectional thinking can be traced to Savitribai Phule's writings on caste³ and gender. Widely

² Whilst the position I take here is a matter of heated debate within educational research, it is beyond the scope of this paper to unpack this debate. For more on it, see Robertson and Bond (2001) and Schapper and Mayson (2010).

³ 'Caste', in English, describes both '*jati*', meaning birth group and '*varna*', meaning 'class' in the sense of 'occupational category' (Deshpande 2002). According to the Hindu scriptures, the *varna* system involves four divisions: Brahmins (priests and spiritual preceptors), Kshatriyas (rulers, and warriors), Vaishyas

regarded as India's first woman teacher, as well as the founder of India's first girls' school, along with her husband, Jyotirao Phule, she fought patriarchy and casteism when few others did. In 1851, the same year as Truth gave her 'Ain't I a Woman?' speech at the Women's Conference in Akron, Ohio, Phule was running three schools with 150 female students, especially those from a low caste background. Her name and achievements are beginning to find a mention in the history of Indian feminism but are yet to be acknowledged in the history of global feminism (Collins and Bilge (2016) being a notable exception).

Precursors to Crenshaw's ideas had been emerging in Black feminism as well as in scholarship and literary writing by Latina, lesbian, minority ethnic, postcolonial, and Third World feminists and the campaign documents of women's and social movements in the US and in other parts of the Global North and also the Global South. These included Combahee River Collective, which articulated in its statement in 1977 the notion of 'interlocking systems of oppression' of class, race, gender, and sexuality, Chicana feminist, Gloria Anzaldua, who articulated the notion of 'borderlands of identities and experiences' in 1987, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who wrote the now iconic text, 'Under Western Eyes' (1984), British minority ethnic feminist scholars, Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, who had published in 1983 their work on 'gender, ethnic and class divisions as being mutually constitutive', and American-born Indian feminist, Gail Omvedt who reflected on Dalit (ex-untouchable) women and argued in 1979 that these women were thrice oppressed: by caste, class, and gender.

When the ideas and writing of the activists and scholars that I have discussed so far first emerged, they were catalytic in making the invisible visible, and the forgotten, ignored, and erased voices known and heard. Interlocutors like Ange-Marie Hancock have called these early multivalent, multicultural articulations 'intersectionality-like thinking' (2016: 76). Generated by the lived experiences of women of color, intersectionality-like thinking links the material and the discursive and the structural (or macropolitical) with the lived (or micropolitical) (Combahee River Collective Statement 1977; Collins 1990). Drawing on knowledge gained from marginalisation, such thinking acknowledged that 'social location and the lived body are epistemically significant' (May 2014: 96).

However, some of the articulations point to an 'additive' rather than constitutive notion of identities and oppression, which Elizabeth Martinez (1993) has critiqued as 'Oppression Olympics'. A key distinction between intersectionality-like thought and intersectionality is that intersectionality-like thought retains an idea of severability of one category of difference from another, say of race from gender, whereas intersectionality recognises that identities and social divisions are mutually constitutive, that axes of difference are not additive but intersecting. So, we are not looking at double or triple layers of oppression, but oppression at the intersection.

This brings us to the key debates on the character, content, and scope of intersectionality. My engagement with these debates is partial. My three-fold aim here is: 1) to provide a sense of the ongoing discursive debates in the emergent 'field' of intersectionality studies 2); to bring into the conversation some Indian feminists, reflecting on intersectionality especially in relation to caste-class-gender, as a discursive move to challenge the default assumption that the Global South does not participate in theory-making; and finally, 3) to locate my own stance on and within these debates. I am conscious of the fact that my engagement with these debates is partial also because most of the writing on intersectionality, whether scholarly or otherwise, that I have been able to delve into has been in English whereas there is actually a wealth of literature available on the topic in other languages.⁴

(entrepreneurial groups), and Shudras (servile toilers). Those belonging to this system are 'caste-Hindus'. Untouchable castes (like Chamars) are excluded from it.

⁴ For instance, I was able to access Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon's *Amhihi Itihaas Ghadavlaa (We Also Made History)*, which reflects on Dalit women's intersectional experience of caste-class-gender oppression,

A fundamental debate about intersectionality pertains to what it *is*. Intersectionality has been variously defined as a metaphor (Acker 2011), a demographic or descriptive device (Harnois 2013; Shields 2008), a concept (Knapp 2005), a method (Lutz 2015), a feminist theory (Davis 2008), a theoretical framework (Yuval-Davis 2015), a political orientation, epistemological practice, and an ontological framework (May 2015). Vivian May argues that it is because intersectional logics do not correspond to conventional expectations about what constitutes theory and who can legitimately theorize that not all interlocutors of intersectionality recognize it as a theory in its own right. Sirma Bilge puts it more bluntly: the theoretical significance of intersectionality is devalued because feminists of color have been instrumental in shaping it— ‘the underlying assumption being that racialised women’s structural experience cannot generate theory, it can only be a descriptive category of experience’ (2013: 412). This is a point that Indian feminist political thinker Nivedita Menon echoes.

Another important debate pertains to the issue of additive vs. constitutive interpretations of intersectionality. Whilst scholars like Hancock (2016) claim that additive interpretations have been roundly rejected by theorists, Menon claims that the term intersectionality when used in India still expresses either the familiar idea of double and triple burdens, or that the category of ‘woman’ needs to be complicated by caste, religion, class and so on. My own interpretation of intersectionality aligns with Dalit feminist standpoint theorist, Sharmila Rege’s (2000), who had identified caste, class, and gender as intersecting and constitutive rather than additive.

A third debate pertains to intersectionality’s focus on identity and structure. Scholars like Anthias (1998), Yuval-Davis (2006) and Menon (2015) claim that intersectionality has focused too much at the level of identity, overlooking structures and institutions. They (Anthias 1998; Yuval-Davis 2006) even offer revised interpretations of intersectionality to address this issue. However, other scholars like John (2015) and May (2014) dismiss the claim for being based on a narrow range and reading of extant scholarship on intersectionality. They argue that, from the beginning, intersectionality has eschewed ‘either/or’ logics in favor of a ‘both/and’ approach and ask us to recall how Crenshaw herself wrote in her very first articulation of intersectionality in 1989 about two types of intersectionality: structural and political.

A fourth debate is: how many and which lines of difference to be included in an intersectional analysis. We find Helma Lutz (2001) on one end of this debate; for her there can be 14 lines of difference including gender, sexuality, race, religion, etc. On the other end are those like Judith Butler (1990) who reject categorization altogether. Menon (2015) too sits on this end. For scholars like Butler and Menon, the endless proliferation of categories is the Achilles heel of intersectionality. Yet other scholars engage in a debate about ‘primary contradiction’, or the centrality of some lines of difference over others. In this, scholars like Gudrun-Axeli Knapp (1999) and Sirma Bilge (2013) argue that an endless proliferation of categories comes at the cost of under-theorization of ‘race, class, gender’, that one must never lose sight of intersectionality’s constitutive ties to critical race thinking, that there is need to reclaim a non-negotiable status for race in intersectional analysis. Banerjee and Ghosh (2018) make a similar argument about intersectionality being (mis)used as a shopping list of categories to deflect much needed attention from ‘caste, class, gender’ in the Indian context. Then there are scholars like Beverley Skeggs (2005) and Martha Gimenez (2001) who argue that it is class that needs to be treated as the ‘primary contradiction’. Menon (2015), for her part, expresses concern that intersectionality in the Indian context may end up resulting in a fruitless debate on whether caste or gender is the primary contradiction.

only after Wandana Sonalkar’s translation of the text was published in 2008, even though the original in Marathi had been published back in 1989.

Underlying the critiques about the endless proliferation of categories and about the primacy of race (/caste/gender) in intersectional analysis lies the politics of knowledge production, specifically to do with knowledge produced by racialized women—an issue to which the very first debate on what *is* intersectionality already signalled. A further dimension to the issue of the politics of knowledge production on intersectionality has to do with whether it has purchase beyond the context of its origin. Whilst scholarship by Jennifer Nash (2016), Jasbir Puar (2012) and Sumi Cho, Kimberle Crenshaw and Leslie McCall (2013) points out that intersectionality as critical theory can and does move, so far, the attempts to chronicle intersectionality's 'global' academic travel outside the US have been mostly limited to the manner in which intersectionality has been theorized about and deployed in the UK and Western Europe (see Davis and Zarkov 2017; Mugge et al. 2018). This is not to say that intersectionality has not travelled beyond these Northern destinations—quite the contrary; it has been taken up as far and wide as the Caribbean, Latin America, South Africa, and South Asia (Robinson 2013; Hurtado and Sinha 2016; Mollett and Faria 2013; Gouws 2017; Banerjee 2017).

The debate on whether intersectionality has anything new to offer in the Indian context really came to the fore in 2015 when Menon published her article on intersectionality in the *Economic and Political Weekly* and John wrote a response. Menon considers intersectionality's arrival from the Global North with a claim to do greater explanatory work as being problematic: 'Universal frameworks generally flow from the Global North to the Global South, that this direction of flow is not simply coincidental' (Menon 2015: 44). It is reflective of Northern hegemony in knowledge production, of the problematic assumption of generalisability by those theorising in the West on the basis of their own experiences, a luxury that those theorising in the Global South or the non-West can ill-afford. For Menon, even though intersectionality emerged in a context of marginalisation in the Global North, it does not escape the larger politics of knowledge production and must therefore be rejected.

Whilst John agrees with Menon's critique of Northern hegemony and the growing trend of neoliberal misappropriation and depoliticization of intersectionality, overall, she is critical of Menon's stance. She argues that '[intersectionality] certainly represents an advance over the more generic use of multiple axes of oppression, double and triple burdens, and so on, and is a corrective to the commonly deployed notion of multiple identities' (2015: 73). She further states that 'it is true that, given our colonial and postcolonial histories, our intellectual spaces are cluttered with false universalisms. But it is equally true that we have been trapped by false particularisms, and even false rejections of the universal' (2015: 73). For John, rejecting the relevance of intersectionality in the Indian context, in the way Menon does, constitutes a false rejection. She points to how:

Dalit feminists have also frequently found inspiration in the history of black women', making her wonder 'whether some dimension of the intersectionality problem might speak to them. It would surely be odd to reject this out of hand. (2015: 76)

Intersectionality has become a signifier of 'good feminist research' (Carbin and Edenheim 2013: 234), with scholars like McCall (2005) aiming to expand the scope of intersectionality by way of establishing it as common ground for *all* feminist research, and Rita Dhamoon (2011) calling for 'mainstreaming' intersectionality. For some interlocutors of intersectionality (e.g., Gouws 2017), this has given rise to a sixth debate on whether intersectionality should remain focused on marginalized subjectivity and oppression or whether it should also examine privilege. But if we treat intersectionality as an analysis of interlocking oppressions as Collins (1990: 229) does, there are no pure victims or oppressors, for each 'individual derives varying

amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression which frame everyone's lives'. Privilege and oppression are in this sense 'inseparable, co-dependent structural forces' and must be studied in conjunction (Case et al. 2012: 4).

It is here that a seventh debate on intersectionality becomes significant: one that is concerned with the relationship between intersectionality and neoliberalism, specifically, what has been claimed as the latter's depoliticizing effect on the former, and whether as a result we should reject intersectionality altogether. Scholars in both the Global North (Bilge 2013) and the Global South (in India, Menon 2015; John 2015) have alerted us to how intersectionality is being appropriated and employed in the service of neoliberal agendas, and as a result is becoming depoliticized. Bilge argues that "similar to other 'travelling theories' (Said 1983) that move across disciplines and geographies, intersectionality falls prey to widespread misrepresentation, tokenization, displacement, and disarticulation" (2013: 410). Like Menon (2015) and John (2015), she holds the neoliberal knowledge economy responsible for appropriating and depoliticizing intersectionality. She goes to the extent of arguing that the depoliticization of intersectionality involves its simultaneous whitening through a process whereby the roots of intersectionality are traced to white feminist scholars like Zillah Eisenstein and Alexandra Kollontai, taking the focus away from feminists of color who have been instrumental in giving it shape.

So where do I locate myself in relation to these debates among Northern and Indian interlocutors of intersectionality? Whilst taking on board cautionary arguments about the dangers of cooption, depoliticization, and erasure, I remain invested in intersectionality's radical possibilities. I subscribe to a constitutive rather than additive interpretation of intersectionality, focusing on both identity and structure, marginality, and privilege—an interpretation, which as I will show in the next part of the paper, is extremely relevant to make sense of, and sheds new light on the complexity of Indian social reality, beyond but similar in some ways to the context of its origin.

Intersectionality as Critical Methodology

Despite the enormous appeal and the discursive debates on intersectionality, there is precious little scholarship on *how* to carry out an intersectional analysis (Davis 2014). Critical race theorist Mari Matsuda introduced a heuristic device called 'ask the other question' back in 1991. To quote Matsuda (1991: 1183, 1189): "The way I try to understand the interconnection of all forms of subordination is through a method I call 'ask the other question.' When I see something that looks racist, I ask, 'Where is the patriarchy in this?' When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, 'Where is the heterosexism in this?' and so on." But asking the other question merely marks the beginning of intersectional analysis (Davis 2014: 20). Inspired by Matsuda, Kathy Davis (2014: 8) offers a five step approach to applying intersectionality as critical methodology, which involves identifying an example which seems 'about gender', describing it and exemplifying why, then proceeding to think of three additional differences relevant to the example, choosing one of these differences, and writing down how the example is about this difference, comparing and contrasting the narratives, and finally reflecting on what insights now emerge about gender.

Yuval-Davis (2006: 8) reminds us that the different social divisions—race, caste, class, gender, etc.—are always historically and contextually specific. They have different ontological bases, they are located within different structures of power, and how they intersect, and the social and political processes through which they result in the construction of political categories too are historically and contextually specific. Supurna Banerjee and Nandini Ghosh (2018) note, in their introduction to a journal special issue on caste-gender intersections in contemporary India, that 'researching and writing about multiple forms of differentiation without essentializing these categories or fragmenting the research subject, poses a significant

methodological challenge' when it comes to conducting empirical intersectional research. They propose focusing on lived experience—that is, the experience of being a subject in everyday life—to tackle this challenge. They argue that by mapping the fractured nature of the everyday, a lived-experience approach can enable us to understand the different ways in which social divisions intersect with each other in complementary and/or contradictory ways.

Scholars, activists and writers have drawn attention to how caste, class, and gender work together to oppress ex-untouchable women in their everyday life (Omvedt 1979; Dietrich 1992; Manorama 1992; Guru 1995; Rege 1998; Sivakami 2006; Pawar and Moon 2008; Paik 2014; Sharma and Geetha 2021). Important to mention in this regard is the dialogue between Gopal Guru (1995) and Sharmila Rege (1998). Guru made two crucial arguments: that 'Dalit women justify the case for talking differently on the basis of external factors (non-Dalit forces homogenising the issue of Dalit women) and internal factors (the patriarchal domination within Dalits)', and that 'the less powerful members of a society [in this case, Dalit women] have a more all-encompassing view of social reality than others because their disadvantaged position grants them a certain epistemic privilege' (1995: 2548-2549). In contrast, Rege argued that the category of 'Dalit woman' is, in fact, multiple, heterogeneous, and even contradictory. She also insisted that privileging knowledge claims based on direct experience could lead to narrow identitarian politics. Instead, she proposed a 'Dalit feminist standpoint', 'where the thought begins from the lives of Dalit women' but where subjectivities can be transformed and privilege begun to be unlearned such that non-Dalit feminists can aim to 'reinvent themselves as Dalit feminists' (1998: WS-45). My own position, as you will see below, goes beyond Guru's and aligns with Rege's in these matters.

Taking cue from Matsuda (1991), Davis (2014), and Yuval-Davis (2006), and focusing on lived experience like Banerjee and Ghosh (2018), I revisit findings from ethnographic research I conducted back in 2004-2009 on NGO-led women's activism in rural UP, with a special focus on Dalit women. As Yuval Davis (2006) notes, identity is situationally defined; different political subjects come into being in different contexts at different points of time. Such an understanding offers us an opportunity to appreciate that *positionality* need not always be conflated with *identity* (i.e., not all ex-untouchable women today would consider themselves 'thrice oppressed' because some of these women are increasingly aspiring middle class women). And *social* divisions need not map onto *political* categories (i.e., not all ex-untouchable women identify themselves as 'Dalit women'). The Dalit label is a *political* category not to be confused with a fixed, social division. In the Indian context, this understanding of identity demands that we interrogate the assumed homogeneity of 'Dalit women'. I draw inspiration from Rege's (1998) writing in this regard to empirically examine the processes by which the category of 'Dalit woman' comes into being, is embraced, questioned, and negotiated.

I provide here a glimpse of a key argument that using intersectionality as critical methodology in this way enables me to make: that different Dalit women speak differently.⁵ The argument that Dalit women talk differently from both Dalit men and upper-caste women, whilst still relevant, no longer captures the reality of all Dalit women in India today adequately and accurately. Class differences seem to be emerging between activist ex-untouchable women and ordinary ex-untouchable women in those parts of UP where VMS operates and the level of political consciousness among ex-untouchable/Dalit women too greatly varies.

I make this argument based on a case study I did of VMS, a grassroots women's NGO in UP. VMS was set up in 1993 to work with poor rural women, many of whom were ex-

⁵ Elsewhere, in REDACTED, I have discussed at length related arguments that engaging with Yuval-Davis' understanding of intersectionality and drawing inspiration from Rege's scholarship on caste and gender enables me to make.

untouchable. The NGO focused on economic empowerment, and so had set up self-help groups with these women. In the early 2000s, VMS started running workshops for its employees on caste identity and on the history of Dalit protest. By this time, several of the ex-untouchable village women it had mobilised in its early years had joined the organisation as full-time employees, often in the capacity of fieldworkers and facilitators. In 2004, VMS set up the Dalit Women's Association, bringing together 1200 of its self-help groups' members. There was also a conscious shift in discourse; the organisation went from employing the official term 'Scheduled Caste' to refer to the ex-untouchable women it mobilised to the political term 'Dalit' (field notes, 18-21 September 2006). "'Dalit'" in Sanskrit is derived from... *dal*, which means amputated... destroyed or crushed' (Narayan 2006: 34). The Dalit Panthers of India politicised the term in the Western Indian state of Maharashtra in the 1960s, inspired by the Black Panther movement in the US. The Dalit Panthers used the term to invert the symbolic markers of their oppression and to signify their pride in their Dalit self-identity. Ex-untouchables who organised themselves elsewhere in India borrowed the term too (Gorringe 2005). VMS's shift to the term 'Dalit' is influenced by this as well as the fact that since the 1990s, there has been a surge of Dalit political assertion in India, including in UP where VMS operates.

I offer here a comparative reading of two quotes from my research on the Dalit women VMS engages with. The first quote is Sunita's, a woman of Chamar caste, in her mid-30s, who was employed as a facilitator at VMS, and was living in town in 2005:

I've been working here for twelve or thirteen years... After joining [VMS], I did BA, a sewing course, and even a computer course. This year, I've passed the BEd entrance exam... When I joined VMS, I didn't know what 'Dalit' meant... and I didn't know about the history of Dalit protest. I didn't know that people [19th century social reformer] like Savitribai Phule had struggled against the age-old practice of oppressing Dalit women and had been successful. When I came to know all this, I felt that I could do this too. As a Dalit, I feel good that I'm working for my own community's women.

The second quote is Sukhdaiya's, an illiterate woman of Chamar caste, in her mid-50s, a recently elected Dalit Women's Association leader, living in a village with an important VMS presence in 2006:

What can I tell you? I'm illiterate.... I don't really like the word 'Dalit'. Initially, I used to keep saying 'Daridru' ('downtrodden') instead of 'Dalit'. It was especially embarrassing for the VMS leaders when I went on an exposure visit... *Badi didi* (read: the VMS founder-leader) told off the *didi* ('sister', read: VMS staff member) accompanying us, for not having taught us how to pronounce 'Dalit' correctly.... But if, by calling ourselves 'Dalit', we find that people offer us chairs to sit on and give us respect, then we will call ourselves 'Dalit'!

Reading these two quotes together reveals that VMS's ex-untouchable caste employees like Sunita are educated. They are on the 'staff rolls' and receive a monthly salary. They are viewed as being superior to Dalit Women's Association leaders like Sukhdaiya, who like most rural ex-untouchable women, is illiterate and works in her own village as a meagerly paid 'volunteer'. VMS's ex-untouchable women employees' self-identity as 'activist Dalit women' is based on their consciousness of the political significance of the term 'Dalit' and of their activist responsibility towards other ex-untouchable women. In contrast, ex-untouchable

women like Sukhdaiya neither like the term nor own it. Her preference for ‘SC’, and her mispronouncing of ‘Dalit’ as ‘*Daridru*’ which shows her lack of familiarity with the term, are true of ex-untouchable castes generally in contemporary UP (Chandra 2004; Ciotti 2010). The underlying instrumentalist logic in her remark that ex-untouchable women would gladly call themselves ‘Dalit’ if doing so improved how they are treated indicates that she considers both the term and the very notion of ‘Dalit’ identity to be external impositions. The material and performative aspects of VMS’s ex-untouchable women employees’ difference from rural ex-untouchable women lead me to argue that these have enabled them to gain a new *class* identity and that they have gained a new political identity. In this sense, what the two quotes reveal is that different Dalit women talk differently.

Intersectionality as Critical Pedagogy

In my university, as in many higher education institutions around the world, ‘research-led teaching’ is regarded as the preferred approach to teaching. Implicit within the concept of research-led teaching are the beliefs that there is a mutually beneficial relationship between research and teaching; that research-active academics will be engaged in teaching the material relevant to, or even about their research, and that student experience will be greatly enhanced by research-led teaching, not least because academics actively involved in research will transmit their excitement in the classroom (Centra 1983; Griggs 2005). Whilst I subscribe to this approach, I have been confronted with the practical challenge of teaching, at the undergraduate level, about my research on Dalit women, and on women’s agency and activism and the gender politics of development in contemporary India, more generally, to students with little or no exposure to the world outside the United Kingdom, or Western Europe and North America at best.⁶

How can I enable my students to see the ‘Dalit women’ or ‘Third World women’ more broadly, as anything other than worlds apart from what is known and familiar to them? How can I empower them such that they do not interpret my research (on caste and patriarchal oppression) as a study of an exotic, religio-cultural phenomenon ‘out there’ in the Global South? And how can I ensure that this research-led teaching of mine is not ‘added-and-stirred’ into courses which follow what Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) refers as the ‘feminist-as-tourist’ model, wherein a bit of the ‘other’ is added for flavour, so students know what is happening in ‘other’ cultures, or into courses which follow the ‘feminist-as-explorer’ model wherein the content is entirely focused on various ‘others’, with little or no engagement with what is considered ‘core’ to the curriculum? I have come to understand that addressing this challenge requires disrupting northern hegemony in how knowledge is produced and how it circulates in university classrooms, feminist or otherwise. This is what ‘decolonising’ knowledge production and circulation in the university classroom means to me, and it is then not a choice but a necessity for me.

Intersectionality as critical pedagogy has been quite useful to me in this process. Intersectionality may have become a buzzword today (Davis 2008), but as discussed at the outset, in its original, radical form, intersectionality was conceived as a mechanism for understanding that gender does not exist in isolation from race, caste, class, religion, and ability among others—that these identities are multiple and intersecting, and therefore the resultant power and privilege, inequalities, and exclusion cannot be understood and addressed through single axis frameworks (Crenshaw 1989). Intersectionality as critical pedagogy (Case 2017) takes this into account in terms of both what is meant to be taught but also how it is taught. If

⁶ Despite the increasing internationalisation of the student body at the undergraduate level, the number of international students is limited, and they come mostly from Western Europe and North America. There is much greater diversity at the postgraduate level, with students from both the Global North *and* the Global South.

there is precious little scholarship on how intersectionality can be used as a critical methodology for conducting research, there is even less scholarship which explicitly addresses how intersectionality can be used as critical pedagogy for teaching and learning in University classrooms. In this section of the paper, I reflect on some of my own experiences of using intersectionality as critical pedagogy for teaching on an advanced undergraduate level women's and gender studies course with the purpose of decolonising a classroom in which I am the instructor and often one of the few if not the only obvious 'other'.⁷

As a feminist of colour from the Global South, and as someone who started her career in Delhi but is now in Edinburgh, my subjectivity and sense of location in the classroom and in the academy, as such, are never too far from my thoughts. I am all too familiar with how '[t]he social norms, structures, and processes that differentially confer power and privilege upon individuals based on their social position outside of the classroom also operate within the classroom. For this reason, the classroom is not (and cannot) be constructed as a community of equals' (Barrett 2010: 6). So, if I want my students to truly understand this, and engage with the intersectionality of identity and structures and how these produce marginality and oppression, then I must begin by getting them to reflect on our intersectional privilege—theirs and mine, here and now.

The 'privilege walk' activity is a crucial part of this process. It is inspired by Peggy McIntosh's (1998) article, 'Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack', in which she reflects on some of the daily effects of privilege in her life. The activity is a staple in gender and race studies classrooms in the US (Burrows 2016). I have adapted it to suit classroom needs in the UK. I allocate identity cards to half the class, then read out a set of statements and ask the students with the cards to take a step forward if they can carry out what was there in the statement, for instance, 'I can walk anywhere in the city at any time of the day or night without feeling unsafe'. The rest of the class is given the full list of the identity cards and must guess who is who. By emphasising the significance of reflexivity in the learning process, this activity invites the students to accordingly adjust their learning expectations from the course (Spivak 2008: 226).

Including scholarship by non-Eurocentric scholars in the course materials is another necessary component of the process. But by itself, it isn't sufficient. This is because most of our students know only to read what is addressed to them. They expect course materials to 'duplicate their own identity formations' (Davis 2010: 139). As these materials push them towards a decentring of their subjectivity, they may feel disconcerted, and must be helped to recognise how their 'self' is always already entangled with the other (Heald 2004; Davis 2010). Let me give an example of how I try to do this. In the session on questions of gender, race, and caste, we discuss race politics in the US and caste politics in India from a comparative feminist perspective. We explore the intersections of race and gender, Black women's critique of the civil rights and feminist movements, the origins of autonomous Black feminist activist groups, and the rise of Black feminist scholarship, and we remind ourselves that the concept of intersectionality emerged from this body of scholarship. We also discuss the intersections of caste and gender, Dalit women's critique of the Dalit and feminist movements, the origins of autonomous Dalit women's activist groups, and the rise of Dalit feminist scholarship, and we explore whether the concept of intersectionality is useful to understand the intersections of caste, class, and gender in India.

These exploratory discussions draw on both Black feminist scholars' and Dalit feminist scholars' writings and form the basis for a course assessment wherein I ask the students to write up an imaginary conversation between Black feminist scholar-activist bell hooks and Dalit

⁷ Elsewhere, in REDACTED, I have discussed in more detail these and other experiences of mine as part of the process of doing feminisms in the academy.

feminist scholar-activist Annie Namala on the possibilities and challenges of transnational feminist praxis. In this exercise, the mirror of the course materials the students must draw on ‘emits a gaze of otherness, looking back (so to speak) in ways that alter schemes of recognition’—they are not the empowered subjects of hooks and Namala’s scholarship (Davis 2010: 151). This, as I explained earlier, can be disconcerting for the students; they do not possess the years of experience that students and faculty of colour do in engaging with a gaze that others us. In the face of this disconcertment, they are being asked to authoritatively write up a conversation that is meant to look at them ‘specifically as racialized (white) identities in a manner that challenges self-perception and identity’ (Davis 2010: 151). With a view to enhancing the students’ confidence and equipping them to reconstitute their identity as interlocutors if not purveyors of knowledge, I invite them to embed themselves into the imagined conversation as moderators; they can ask bell hooks and Namala questions of their own choosing and ascertain how these scholar-activists might respond. In this, I am guided by Mohanty (1984), Narayan (1988), and hooks’ (1994) steer on being attentive to not only the cognitive but also the emotional impact that teaching practices can have on students.

Conclusion

This paper is an attempt at offering a composite reflection on the role that intersectionality as theory-methodology-pedagogy can play in enabling us to engage in more reflexive and inclusive feminist knowledge creation and circulation. I have done this first by bringing into conversation Euro-American and Indian feminist scholars reflecting on the conceptual canvas of intersectionality. I have then discussed my engagement with intersectionality as a critical methodology. I have shown intersectionality as an analytic sensibility in doing research. Specifically, I have demonstrated that intersectionality as a critical methodology has purchase beyond the context of its origin, that it is relevant for making sense of some of the complexity of Indian social reality. It has given me the lens and the language to reveal how different Dalit women today speak differently. I have also shown how intersectionality can be and needs to be used as critical pedagogy for the task of decolonising feminist classrooms in a British higher education context. But, as with all knowledge inspired by and emerging from marginalised locations, intersectional interventions—in theory-making, empirical research, and teaching—too are far from easy, and we must remain alert to intersectionality’s co-option and de-politicisation by global neoliberal agendas increasingly governing higher education (Bilge 2013; May 2014; Menon 2015). Lastly, from interrogating intersectionality, the more meaningful takeaways are not the discursive debates on intersectionality but understanding what it can do and how we can continually engage in its radical practice for challenging Northern hegemony in feminist knowledge production! This paper is intended as a small step in that direction.

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