



Facticity, transcendence, and the double other: Existentialist Feminism and dalit women's identity in Bama and Kandasamy

Chandra Mohan Joshi¹, Dr. Ashish Kumar Gupta²

¹ Research Scholar, Department of English, Soban Singh Jeena University Almora, Uttarakhand, India

² Assistant Professor and Head, Department of English, Government Degree College Muwani, Pithoragarh, Uttarakhand, India

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Abstract

This paper argues that the existentialist feminist framework developed by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, while indispensable to the analysis of women's subordination, requires structural modification when applied to the literary representation of Dalit women's lives in contemporary Indian fiction. De Beauvoir's account of woman as "*The Other*" constituted in immanence by a social order that reserves the status of transcendent subject for men describes a single axis of domination. The Dalit woman, this paper contends, is constituted as other along two axes simultaneously: she is other to the dominant male subject through the operations of patriarchal gender ideology, and she is other to the dominant-caste subject through the operations of caste pollution ideology. These two forms of othering do not simply add together; they interlock, each lending *The Other* a force and a permanence it would not otherwise possess. Reading Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati* alongside Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* through Sartre's vocabulary of facticity and transcendence, this paper demonstrates that the literary texts themselves perform a theoretical operation: they show facticity functioning along two simultaneous and mutually reinforcing axes, and they show transcendence the refusal of the given, the assertion of a self the social order has not authorised emerging from a position that existentialist feminism, in its classical form, did not anticipate and cannot fully describe without revision. The paper concludes that Dalit women's fiction is not merely an object to which existentialist feminist theory can be applied, but a body of work that makes a contribution to that theory, exposing and correcting its limitations from within.

Keywords: Existentialism, dalit feminism, facticity, transcendence, *The Other*, intersectionality, Bama, Meena Kandasamy, caste, gender

Introduction

When Simone de Beauvoir opens *The Second Sex* with the question "what is a woman?" and answers it by way of an analysis of woman's constitution as "*The Other*," she is doing something that has proved durable enough to remain, seventy-five years later, one of the foundational gestures of feminist philosophy (de Beauvoir 3-17). The argument is, in its bare outline, simple. Human existence, in the existentialist account that de Beauvoir inherits from Sartre and reworks for her own purposes, is structured by the tension between facticity the given conditions of one's existence, the body one has, the situation one is born into, the historical and social circumstances that precede and exceed any choice and transcendence, the capacity of consciousness to go beyond the given, to project itself toward possibilities that are not yet actual. Patriarchal society, de Beauvoir argues, distributes these two dimensions of existence unevenly between the sexes. Man is permitted, indeed expected, to be a transcendent subject: a being who acts upon the world, who projects himself into the future through work, politics, and creation. Woman is confined to immanence: she is expected to be, rather than to do; to embody rather than to act; to remain identified with the given with the body, with reproduction, with the repetitive tasks of domestic maintenance rather than to reach beyond it. She becomes, in de Beauvoir's famous formulation, *The Other*: not a subject in her own right but the term against which the male subject defines himself, the screen onto which his anxieties and desires are projected,

the being whose existence is meaningful chiefly insofar as it serves his.

This paper takes de Beauvoir's framework seriously more seriously, perhaps, than is always comfortable, because taking it seriously means following it to a point at which it begins to strain, and then asking what kind of repair the strain calls for. The strain becomes visible the moment one turns from the social world that de Beauvoir was primarily describing a world structured, for all its variation, by a single dominant axis of gender hierarchy to the social world that the Tamil writers Bama Faustina Soosairaj and Meena Kandasamy have spent their literary careers documenting: a world structured simultaneously by gender hierarchy and by the hierarchy of caste. In this world, a woman is not simply other to a man. A Dalit woman is other to the man of her own community through the operations of patriarchal ideology, and she is other in a different but related sense to the upper-caste subject, male or female, through the operations of an ideology of ritual pollution that long predates and operates independently of the question of gender. She is, in a phrase this paper will develop at length, doubly othered: constituted as not-quite-subject by two systems of domination that do not simply coexist within her situation but actively reinforce and complete each other.

The argument of this paper proceeds in several stages. The first stage establishes the existentialist vocabulary facticity, transcendence, immanence, *The Other* with enough precision to make clear both what de Beauvoir's framework offers and where its limits lie when it is asked to do work it

was not originally designed for. The second stage turns to the substantial body of scholarship, much of it Indian and much of it written by Dalit feminist scholars themselves, that has already identified the structural problem this paper is concerned with, though largely in sociological rather than existentialist terms; this scholarship provides both a corrective to any naive application of de Beauvoir and the conceptual materials from which a doubled account of *The Other* can be constructed. The third and central stage of the paper turns to the primary literary texts. Reading Bama's *Karukku* (1992) and Sangati (1994), and Kandasamy's *When I Hit You* (2017), this paper argues that these texts do not simply illustrate the doubled structure of facticity that the theoretical discussion has outlined; they enact it, in their narrative form, their use of language, and their representation of the body, in ways that make the doubled structure visible with a precision that abstract theoretical statement alone cannot achieve. The final stage of the paper draws out the implications of this reading for existentialist feminist theory itself, arguing that the relationship between literature and theory here is not one of illustration but of mutual correction: the literary texts are doing theoretical work, and the theory that emerges from reading them is better more adequate to the world it describes than the theory that went into the reading.

It is worth being explicit, at the outset, about what this paper is not claiming. It is not claiming that Sartre's and de Beauvoir's categories map onto the social world of Tamil Nadu in any simple or unmediated way; the gulf between mid-twentieth-century Paris and the Paraiyar villages that Bama writes about is real, and pretending otherwise would be a form of intellectual imperialism that the existentialist tradition itself, with its emphasis on the situatedness of all thought, would have grounds to object to. Nor is this paper claiming that existentialist vocabulary is somehow necessary to understand Dalit women's experience the rich tradition of Dalit feminist sociology discussed in the second section of this paper demonstrates conclusively that it is not. What this paper does claim is narrower and, it hopes, more useful: that the existentialist vocabulary, modified in the specific way this paper proposes, illuminates a dimension of the literary texts their representation of the interior, experiential structure of domination, the phenomenology of what it is like to live as a doubly othered subject that other frameworks, valuable as they are, do not foreground in quite the same way. And it claims that this illumination runs in both directions: the texts also illuminate the theory, showing what existentialist feminism becomes when it is read alongside the literature of caste.

Facticity, Transcendence, and *The Other*: The Existentialist Vocabulary and Its Feminist Inheritance

Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943) develops the concepts of facticity and transcendence as part of a general account of human consciousness, and it is worth being precise about what each term means before considering how de Beauvoir adapts them. Facticity names everything about a person's existence that is simply given: the body one has, with its particular capacities and limitations; the historical moment and the society into which one is born; the language one first learns to think in; the family, the social position, the web of relationships that precede any act of choice on one's own part. Facticity is not, for Sartre, a minor or peripheral feature of existence it is not a constraint laid

over an otherwise free consciousness, the way a cage is laid over an animal that remains, somewhere inside, unconstrained. Facticity is constitutive. There is no consciousness that exists apart from or prior to its facticity; consciousness is always already situated, always already thrown into a particular body, a particular history, a particular set of circumstances that it did not choose and cannot simply step outside of.

And yet this is the move that gives Sartre's philosophy its distinctive shape and its considerable difficulty facticity is not the whole of existence either. Alongside facticity, and in permanent tension with it, there is transcendence: the dimension of consciousness that is always oriented beyond the given, always in the process of projecting itself toward possibilities that are not yet actual. Transcendence is not an escape from facticity into some purer or freer realm; it is, rather, a way of relating to facticity of taking up one's given situation and doing something with it, of making it the material for a project rather than simply suffering it as an unalterable fate. The tension between facticity and transcendence is, for Sartre, the basic structure of human existence, and the attempt to resolve this tension by collapsing it in either direction by pretending that one is entirely determined by one's facticity, or by pretending that one's facticity is simply irrelevant to who one is is what Sartre calls bad faith (Sartre 86-116).

De Beauvoir's contribution, in *The Second Sex*, is to ask what happens to this general structure when it is distributed unevenly between men and women by the social order when one sex is, as a matter of systematic social arrangement, permitted and even required to exercise transcendence, while *The Other* is confined to immanence: to a mode of existence defined by repetition, by the maintenance of what already exists rather than the creation of what does not yet exist, by identification with the body and its cycles rather than with the projects through which a self reaches toward an open future. "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute," de Beauvoir writes of man's position in this arrangement; "she is *The Other*" (de Beauvoir 6). The category of *The Other*, de Beauvoir is careful to note, is not unique to the relation between the sexes it is, she suggests, "as primordial as consciousness itself," a structure that appears whenever a group defines itself by opposition to another group it designates as foreign, inferior, or merely instrumental (de Beauvoir 6). What is specific to woman's position as Other, in de Beauvoir's analysis, is its totality and its permanence: unlike other historical others the foreigner, the colonised, the enslaved, all of whom de Beauvoir explicitly compares woman's situation to woman cannot simply separate herself from the group that others her, because she is bound to men by the most intimate ties of family, economy, and desire. "The drama of woman," de Beauvoir writes, "lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject who always regards the self as the essential and the demands of a situation which constitutes her as inessential" (de Beauvoir 17).

It is this account of woman as *The Other* singular, total, and produced by a single axis of domination that this paper proposes to examine critically, not in order to discard it but in order to ask what happens to it when the social world it is asked to describe is one in which gender is not the only, or even necessarily the primary, axis along which the distinction between subject and Other is drawn. De Beauvoir herself was not unaware that women occupy

different positions within the general category of woman she discusses, at various points in *The Second Sex*, the differences between bourgeois and working-class women, between married and unmarried women, between women in different historical periods. But these differences function, in her analysis, primarily as variations within a single structure: the structure of woman's othering by man. What this paper will argue is that for the Dalit woman, the structure itself is not single. She is not a woman who happens, additionally, to belong to a socially disadvantaged caste; she is a subject who is constituted as Other along two axes that operate according to different logics, that have different histories, that are enforced by different mechanisms and that nonetheless interlock so completely that neither can be properly understood in isolation from *The Other*.

The Problem of a Single Other: Intersectionality and the Limits of De Beauvoir's Framework

The recognition that a single-axis account of othering is inadequate to the experience of women who are also subject to other forms of domination did not originate with Dalit feminist theory, though Dalit feminist theory has made some of the most rigorous contributions to it. The foundational articulation, in the context most directly relevant to subsequent intersectional theory, came from Black feminist scholars in the United States, who argued in the 1980s that the category "woman," as it had been theorised by a feminist movement dominated by white, middle-class voices, silently assumed a white woman as its referent, and that this assumption rendered the specific experience of Black women an experience constituted by the intersection of racism and sexism, not by either alone invisible to the theoretical frameworks that were supposed to address it. Kimberlé Crenshaw's 1989 essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" gave this critique its most influential legal and theoretical formulation, arguing that "the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism" and that any analysis which "does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (Crenshaw 140).

The Indian reception and adaptation of this insight has its own distinct genealogy, rooted less in legal theory than in the historical sociology of caste and gender. Uma Chakravarti's concept of "Brahmanical patriarchy," developed across a series of influential essays in the 1990s, argues that the forms of patriarchy operative in Hindu caste society cannot be understood as a local variant of a more general patriarchal structure that exists, in modified forms, everywhere; rather, the specific patriarchal arrangements of caste society are themselves constitutive of caste they are part of how the caste system reproduces itself, not merely a separate system that happens to coexist with it. "The reproduction of caste purity requires the control of women's sexuality," Chakravarti writes; the chastity of upper-caste women functions as "a caste concern as much as a gender concern, because the purity of the caste line depends on the assurance that upper-caste women will only reproduce with upper-caste men" while "the sexual accessibility of Dalit women is equally a caste concern," because their bodies are treated as available to upper-caste men in a way that does not threaten caste purity precisely because Dalit women are,

in the ideology of caste, already polluted (Chakravarti 579-580).

Gopal Guru's 1995 essay "Dalit Women Talk Differently" makes a related but distinct argument, focused less on the structural interdependence of caste and patriarchy than on the question of epistemic authority: Guru argues that Dalit women occupy a standpoint from which both the caste-blindness of mainstream Indian feminism and the gender-blindness of the Dalit movement become visible, and that this standpoint constitutes a form of knowledge that neither movement, on its own, has been willing to recognise (Guru 2548-2550). Sharmila Rege's *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* (2006) develops this into a systematic argument for what she calls a "Dalit feminist standpoint" not merely a perspective that adds caste to an existing feminist analysis, but a vantage point from which the inadequacy of analyses that do not integrate caste and gender from the outset becomes apparent (Rege 11-22).

What this body of scholarship establishes, with a rigour that this paper does not attempt to replicate but builds upon, is that the Dalit woman's social position cannot be adequately described as the social position of "a woman" with an additional disadvantage layered on top. The two systems of domination caste and patriarchy are, in the specific historical formation of Hindu caste society, mutually constitutive: each requires *The Other* in order to reproduce itself, and the specific mechanisms through which Dalit women are subordinated the policing of their sexuality from within their own community, their sexual availability to upper-caste men from outside it, their exclusion from both the protections that caste affords upper-caste women and the protections that gender ideology nominally affords women as such are mechanisms that exist nowhere else in the social structure. They are not the mechanisms of patriarchy "plus" the mechanisms of caste; they are a third thing, produced by the intersection that has its own specific shape.

What this paper adds to this existing body of scholarship is an attempt to translate its insight into the existentialist vocabulary of facticity, transcendence, and *The Other* not because the existentialist vocabulary is superior to the sociological vocabulary already developed by Chakravarti, Guru, and Rege, but because that vocabulary is specifically attuned to questions of subjectivity, interiority, and the phenomenology of lived experience in ways that complement, rather than compete with, the structural analysis that sociological theory provides. The sociological analysis tells us what the structure is; the existentialist analysis, applied to the literary texts that render that structure from the inside, tells us what it is like to live within it and, crucially, what it is like to refuse it.

Toward a Doubled Other: Caste, Gender, and the Structure of Dalit Women's Facticity

If de Beauvoir's woman is Other to man defined by him, in relation to him, as the term that gives his subjecthood its meaning by contrast then the Dalit woman, this paper proposes, is Other in two directions that operate according to genuinely different logics and that cannot be collapsed into a single axis without losing what is most important about each.

The first direction is the one de Beauvoir's analysis addresses directly: the Dalit woman is Other to the men of her own community, subject to the patriarchal expectations of wifely submission, domestic labour, and sexual

availability that de Beauvoir analyses as the general condition of woman under patriarchy. This dimension of the Dalit woman's situation is not identical to the situation de Beauvoir describes it is inflected, as the sociological scholarship discussed above demonstrates, by the specific economic and social conditions of Dalit communities, by the absence of the class privileges that soften patriarchal constraint for some of the women de Beauvoir was most directly addressing but it is recognisably continuous with de Beauvoir's analysis. The Dalit woman who is expected to perform the domestic labour that sustains her household while her own labour and her own desires go unrecognised is, in this respect, occupying the position de Beauvoir calls immanence: identified with the maintenance of what exists, denied access to the kind of self-defining project that constitutes transcendence.

The second direction is one that de Beauvoir's framework, developed within a society that did not have caste as an organising category, does not directly address, and it operates according to a logic that is genuinely different from the logic of gender. The Dalit woman is Other to the upper-caste subject male or female through the operation of an ideology of ritual purity and pollution that predates, and does not derive from, the question of her sex. This othering is not about her relationship to men as such; it is about her relationship to a hierarchy of bodies, in which her body, by virtue of the community into which she was born, is classified as polluting, as a source of contamination that upper-caste bodies must be protected from through elaborate codes of avoidance, segregation, and ritual purification. This is an othering that a Dalit man shares with her he too is constituted as polluting by caste ideology and in this respect it is not a gendered othering at all. It is, in de Beauvoir's terms, a separate and independent axis of facticity: a dimension of the given conditions of her existence that has its own history, its own ideological apparatus, its own mechanisms of enforcement, and that would continue to operate even in a world from which patriarchal gender ideology had been entirely eliminated.

The crucial move of this paper's argument is the claim that these two axes do not merely coexist within the Dalit woman's situation, as two separate facts that happen to both be true of her. They interlock and the specific way in which they interlock is precisely the mechanism that the Dalit feminist scholarship discussed above has identified: the caste system requires the patriarchal control of women's sexuality in order to maintain its boundaries, and this requirement falls differently, but not separately, on upper-caste and Dalit women. For the upper-caste woman, the patriarchal control of her sexuality is in the service of caste purity: she must be chaste because her chastity guarantees the purity of the caste line. For the Dalit woman, the same system that demands her chastity within her own community simultaneously constitutes her body as available to upper-caste men precisely because her caste status means that her violation does not threaten the purity that the system exists to protect. She is, in other words, doubly bound by a system whose two bindings pull in apparently opposite directions required to be chaste, and constituted as unable to be violated in any way that matters to the system and this apparent contradiction is not a flaw in the system's logic but a precise expression of how the system actually works. The Dalit woman's facticity, on this account, is not the facticity of "woman" with caste added as an extra burden; it is a

facticity structured, from the ground up, by the simultaneous operation of two systems whose interlocking is what produces her specific situation.

What does transcendence look like what can it even mean for a subject whose facticity is structured in this doubled way? This is the question the remainder of this paper addresses through close engagement with the primary texts. The answer, as the following sections will show, is not that transcendence becomes impossible, nor that it becomes identical to the transcendence de Beauvoir describes for women in general. It is that transcendence, for the doubly othered subject, must be a refusal of both axes of facticity simultaneously or, more precisely, a refusal that operates at the point where the two axes interlock, since it is at that point of interlocking that each axis derives much of its force from *The Other*. The literary texts to which this paper now turns render this doubled structure, and the specific forms of refusal it calls for, with a precision that abstract theoretical statement struggles to match.

Facticity Doubled: Reading Karukku and Sangati

Bama's *Karukku* (1992) is, among other things, a sustained narrative of the gradual acquisition of a vocabulary for one's own facticity the slow, often painful process by which a child comes to understand the social meaning of the body she has been born into. The famous early scene of the novel, in which the young narrator watches her brother explain why their uncle carries a food packet for an upper-caste landlord at arm's length, with two fingers, his body angled so as not to touch it, is structured as a scene of pedagogy: the child is being taught the grammar of pollution, the system of bodily avoidances and spatial arrangements through which caste hierarchy is enacted in the smallest details of daily movement. What is significant, for the argument of this paper, is the narrator's response to this pedagogy a response that is not assimilation but anger, and that moves, within the space of a single passage, from anger to a specific kind of analysis:

"I was very angry. I didn't feel like laughing any more. I felt degraded, humiliated. If we couldn't touch those upper-caste people with our hands, if they couldn't eat food which we had touched, then we shouldn't work for them either. We were doing all the hard work and yet they were treating us as if we were dirt. What was the point of all this? Why should we just accept it? It seemed to me that we should throw away all this work and be free" (Bama, *Karukku* 15).

Read through the existentialist vocabulary this paper has developed, this passage performs something quite precise. The child is being presented with her facticity the fact that her body, by virtue of the community she was born into, is classified by the surrounding social world as polluting, and that this classification entails a whole system of practical consequences for how she may move, work, and be touched. What the passage records is not the child's acceptance of this facticity as simply the way things are the response that bad faith, in Sartre's sense, would counsel, since bad faith is precisely the attempt to treat one's given social position as a fact of nature rather than a historical arrangement. Instead, the passage records the emergence of what this paper has called transcendence: a movement of consciousness that takes the given "if we couldn't touch those upper-caste people with our hands... then we shouldn't work for them either" and uses it as the premise of an argument that points beyond the given, toward a future ("we should throw away

all this work and be free”) that the present social arrangement has not authorised and does not contain.

What is notable, for the specific argument of this paper, is that this early moment of transcendence is articulated entirely in terms of caste facticity the axis of othering that operates independently of gender that a Dalit boy would share with his sister. The gendered axis of the narrator's facticity emerges later in the text, and it emerges in a way that the existentialist vocabulary helps to make visible: not as a separate problem, but as a second facticity that interacts with the first in ways that compound rather than simply add to it. The narrator's account of her years in the convent the institution to which she turns, in part, as an attempted escape from the facticity of caste discovers that the convent reproduces, in its own institutional terms, exactly the structure of caste hierarchy she had hoped to leave behind: separate food, separate vessels, separate treatment for Dalit nuns. But the convent is also, and this is where the gendered axis becomes visible, an institution organised around a specific model of womanhood chastity, obedience, and self-effacement that the narrator's eventual departure from the religious order represents a refusal of in its own right. The narrator's transcendence, by the end of *Karukku*, is therefore not a single act of refusal directed at a single facticity. It is a double refusal: a refusal of the caste hierarchy that the convent reproduced, and a refusal of the specifically gendered model of selfhood self-effacing, obedient, and defined by service that the convent's vision of religious womanhood represented. The text does not present these as two separate refusals that happen to occur in the same life; it presents those as a single, if extended, act of transcendence that had to address both axes of facticity because both were operative in the specific institutional trap the convent that the narrator had to find her way out of.

If *Karukku* traces an individual movement from a doubled facticity toward a doubled transcendence, *Sangati* (1994) does something different and, for the purposes of this paper, equally important: it represents the doubled facticity of an entire community of women, and it asks what transcendence can mean when it is not the achievement of an exceptional individual a woman who becomes a writer, who leaves the religious order, who acquires the literary and intellectual resources to narrate her own life but a dimension of the daily existence of women who have none of these exceptional resources. The most discussed passage of *Sangati* for the purposes of this paper is the description of the women's nightly vigilance:

“Every night when the men came home, the women were ready. Ready with the food, ready with the water, ready with the patience they had learned through years of practice. Some nights the men came back tired and quiet and ate without speaking and fell asleep. Some nights they came back with the smell of arrack on their breath and the look in their eyes that the women had learned to read. They had learned to read every sound, every silence, as a message about what the night would bring” (Bama, *Sangati* 43-44).

This passage describes facticity in its most uncompromising form: a set of given conditions the unpredictable temper of a husband returning home, the absence of any institutional recourse, the economic dependency that forecloses departure that the women did not choose and cannot alter, and that structure their evenings with the reliability of weather. There is no transcendence visible in this passage in the sense of an act that reaches beyond the given toward a

different future; what is visible is “the patience they had learned through years of practice,” a skill developed entirely in order to survive the given more effectively, not to change it.

And yet this paper would resist the conclusion that this passage represents facticity without any trace of transcendence at all and the reason for this resistance is itself significant for the doubled framework this paper has proposed. The skill the passage describes the capacity to “read every sound, every silence, as a message” is a form of knowledge, and knowledge, even knowledge developed for the purposes of survival within an unchanged situation, is not nothing in existentialist terms. It represents what this paper would call a minimal or residual transcendence: the maintenance, within a situation that forecloses any larger project, of an active relationship to that situation a relationship of attention, of interpretation, of skill rather than a passive submersion in it. The women of this passage have not transformed their facticity, but they have not collapsed into it either; they remain, in Sartre's terms, beings-for-themselves rather than simply beings-in-themselves, even within a situation that gives them almost no room to be anything else. This minimal transcendence is not adequate the text does not present it as adequate, and neither does this paper but it is also not nothing, and the existentialist vocabulary gives us a way of naming what it is without either romanticising it as resistance or dismissing it as mere survival.

What *Sangati* adds to the picture established by *Karukku*, then, is an account of what the doubled facticity of caste and gender looks like for women who do not have access to the specific resources literacy, institutional departure, the eventual vocation of writing that enabled the narrator of *Karukku* to move toward the more thoroughgoing transcendence that text represents. And what this comparison within Bama's own work suggests is that transcendence, for the doubly othered subject, is not a single achievement but exists along a continuum from the minimal, residual transcendence of the women in *Sangati*, who maintain an active interpretive relationship to a facticity they cannot alter, to the more comprehensive transcendence of the narrator of *Karukku*, who is able, through a combination of personal courage and specific institutional access, to refuse the facticity she was born into and construct an alternative.

The Confiscation of Transcendence: Coercive Control and the Doubled Other in *When I Hit You*

Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* (2017) presents the existentialist framework developed in this paper with a different kind of test case. The narrator of the novel enters her marriage already in possession of the resources that, in the reading of *Karukku* offered above, enabled a movement toward comprehensive transcendence: she is educated, professionally established as a writer, economically independent, intellectually formed by exactly the kind of global feminist and political theory that this paper has been drawing on. The novel's central drama is the systematic confiscation of these resources and reading this confiscation through the vocabulary of facticity and transcendence makes visible something about the mechanism of coercive control that other vocabularies tend to describe in terms of loss or harm without quite capturing its structure.

The novel's opening pages announce, in terms that are themselves close to the existentialist vocabulary this paper has been using, the formal problem the narrator faces in telling her own story:

"There are only two ways to tell this story. One is to tell it from the inside, where the terror is so intimate and so total that language itself dissolves and you are left with nothing but the raw nerve of experience. *The Other* is to tell it from the outside, where the analyst's cool eye can see the structure, can name the mechanisms, can say: this is how it is done. I am going to do both things at once, because only both things together can tell the truth" (Kandasamy, When I Hit You 1).

What this paper wants to draw attention to in this passage is the way it stages, at the level of narrative method, the very tension between facticity and transcendence that Sartre's philosophy describes as the basic structure of existence. The "inside" "where the terror is so intimate and so total that language itself dissolves" is a description of pure facticity experienced without any transcendent distance: a situation so totalising that the consciousness within it cannot achieve the minimal separation from its own situation that would allow it to be described, narrated, made into the material of a project. The "outside" "the analyst's cool eye" that "can see the structure, can name the mechanisms" is a description of transcendence in something close to its purest form: the capacity to take one's own facticity as an object of analysis, to see it as a structure with a logic, rather than simply living inside it without distance. The novel's formal strategy "I am going to do both things at once" is an attempt to hold facticity and transcendence together in a single narrative voice, and this formal strategy is itself, this paper argues, the novel's most important contribution to the theoretical framework being developed here: it suggests that the recovery of transcendence, for a subject whose facticity has been as comprehensively totalising as the narrator's marriage becomes, is not a matter of escaping facticity but of finding a way to hold facticity and transcendence together to be, simultaneously, the person inside the experience and the person capable of analysing it.

The specific mechanism of coercive control that the novel documents what this paper would describe as the systematic narrowing of the gap between facticity and transcendence, the attempt to collapse the narrator entirely into her given situation operates, crucially, along both axes that this paper's doubled framework identifies, though the novel's explicit politics are organised primarily around the axis of gender. The husband's ideology, a form of left-wing political commitment that demands the subordination of individual desire to collective revolutionary purpose, constitutes the narrator's writing her vocation, the specific form her transcendence had taken before the marriage as a form of "bourgeois individualism" that must be abandoned. This is, in the vocabulary of this paper, an attempt to redefine the narrator's transcendence as itself a form of facticity to be overcome: her writing, instead of being the activity through which she reaches beyond the given, is reclassified as a symptom of a politically incorrect given self that she must transcend by abandoning it. The irony and it is an irony the novel is acutely aware of is that this reclassification is itself a form of bad faith in Sartre's sense: it is the husband's attempt to use the language of transcendence revolutionary commitment, the subordination of the individual to the

collective project in order to enforce, on his wife, the most complete immanence imaginable.

"There are days when I am not me. There are days when I watch her the woman I have become going through the motions of a life that I recognise as mine but cannot feel as mine. She cooks the food, she washes the clothes, she says the right things at the right times, and somewhere inside her, or where she used to be, I am watching and trying to remember what it was like to be the person who used to be here" (Kandasamy, When I Hit You 54).

This passage describes, with great precision, what it is like to experience the collapse of the gap between facticity and transcendence from the inside. The "I" who is "watching" is the residual transcendent consciousness the part of the self that retains the capacity to observe, to compare, to remember "what it was like to be the person who used to be here." The "she" who "cooks the food" and "washes the clothes" is the self-reduced to pure facticity, to the performance of a role with no remainder, no excess, no point from which the role could be questioned. What the passage records is not the simple absence of one of these two dimensions but their separation from each other the "I" and the "she" no longer inhabits the same space, "where she used to be" rather than where she is. This is, in the terms of this paper's argument, the experiential signature of an attempt to enforce total facticity: not the elimination of transcendence as such, since the observing "I" persists, but its exile from the situation it observes, its reduction to a kind of powerless witness.

The second axis of this paper's doubled framework the axis of caste operates in When I Hit You differently than it does in Bama's fiction, and the difference is itself instructive. Kandasamy's narrator is herself the product of an inter-caste marriage, and her own relationship to caste identity is, by her own account elsewhere in her work, complex and self-consciously chosen rather than simply inherited. What the novel demonstrates, in this respect, is that the doubled structure this paper has described is not confined to women whose caste position is straightforwardly that of the traditionally most subordinated communities; the ideological resources of caste including, in this case, the specific intellectual prestige that Brahminical intellectual culture carries even within explicitly anti-caste political movements can be redeployed by an individual abuser as part of the apparatus of coercive control, in ways that the novel registers without making into its central explicit theme. This suggests that the doubled framework this paper proposes describes not only the situation of women from the most marginalised caste communities, but a more general structure of Indian patriarchy in which caste-derived hierarchies of intellectual and social authority are available to be mobilised, by individual men, as resources for the domination of individual women a structure that operates with particular intensity for Dalit women but is not confined to them.

The novel's engagement with marital sexual coercion extends this analysis into the most intimate register the existentialist vocabulary can address the question of what it means for facticity and transcendence to be distributed, not merely across different domains of a person's life, but within the single, undivided space of the body itself:

"He did not understand that a body can be present and absent at the same time. That a woman can go through all the motions and still not be there. That compliance is not the

same thing as consent. That when everything else has been taken away, the body becomes the last territory, and the last act of resistance is to be somewhere else inside it entirely” (Kandasamy, *When I Hit You* 112).

“To be somewhere else inside it entirely” is, in this paper's vocabulary, the most minimal possible form of transcendence reduced to the bare maintenance of an interior elsewhere, a place the facticity of the situation cannot reach, even when the facticity of the situation is the body itself. This is the existentialist floor: the point beyond which transcendence cannot be further reduced without ceasing to exist altogether. That the novel locates this floor, and that it insists in the very act of being written and published that even from this floor a recovery is possible, is the basis for the final section of this paper's argument.

Writing as Transcendence: The Literary Act and the Recovery of the Doubly Othered Subject

Both *Karukku* and *When I Hit You* are, among other things, accounts of their own composition texts that include, within their narrative content, the conditions under which they themselves came to exist. This is not a coincidental feature of either text, and for the argument of this paper it is the most important feature of both. If the doubled facticity this paper has described operates, in part, by attempting to foreclose the very forms of self-narration through which a subject might come to understand her situation as a situation as something contingent, historical, and therefore in principle alterable, rather than simply the way things are then the act of writing a narrative that names this facticity, that gives it a shape and a history and therefore an outside, is not merely a report of transcendence that has already occurred elsewhere. It is itself an act of transcendence, possibly the most consequential act of transcendence either text describes.

Bama has described the aftermath of *Karukku*'s publication the seven-month period during which she was unable to return to her village, the community's anger at what it experienced as an exposure of its internal life to outside scrutiny in terms that bear directly on this paper's argument. The community's response, as Bama has characterised it, was not simply disapproval of an individual; it was a recognition that the act of narration had done something had taken a facticity that operated, in part, through its very unspokenness, its status as simply the unexamined background of life, and had made it into an object that could be seen, discussed, and judged. This is precisely the operation this paper has been calling transcendence: the conversion of facticity into something that can be taken up, examined, and potentially altered, rather than simply lived. That this conversion was experienced by the community as dangerous as a betrayal, even is not incidental to its significance; it is evidence of how much is at stake, for a system of domination, in preventing exactly this kind of conversion from occurring.

The recovery the narrator of *When I Hit You* achieves through the writing of the novel operates according to the same logic, though in a more individual register. The novel does not represent this recovery as the restoration of a self that existed, intact, before the marriage and that the marriage temporarily damaged. What it represents is the construction, through the act of narration, of a self that did not exist in quite this form before a self that includes, as part

of its own constitution, the analytical understanding of what was done to it and how. This is transcendence in the fullest existentialist sense: not the return to a prior state, but the creation, from the materials of a facticity that had been engineered to be inescapable, of a genuinely new project the project of the book itself, which exists in the world, makes claims on readers, and cannot be unwritten. The phrase from the novel that this paper has already cited “to be somewhere else inside it entirely” describes the minimal transcendence available during the marriage; the novel as a finished, published object is the same transcendence, vastly expanded, now occupying a public rather than merely an interior space.

What this paper wants to emphasise, in concluding this section, is that the specific form transcendence takes in both texts narration, the conversion of lived facticity into a told story is not incidental to the doubled structure of facticity this paper has described. Precisely because the doubled facticity of caste and gender operates, in part, through silence through the absence, as the broader literature on Dalit women's testimony has established, of a vocabulary in which certain experiences can even be articulated as harms rather than simply endured as the unremarkable texture of life the act of finding or making such a vocabulary is not a secondary or merely documentary activity. It is the primary site at which transcendence, for the doubly othered subject, becomes possible at all. This is why both texts are so insistent, in their different ways, on their own status as acts of speech. In each case, the text is not simply reporting a transcendence that happened elsewhere, at some earlier point in the story; the text is the transcendence, and its existence in the world as a published book, read, discussed, taught is the most concrete evidence this paper can offer that the doubled facticity it has described, however totalising, is not absolute.

Discussion: What Dalit Women's Fiction Contributes to Existentialist Feminist Theory?

This paper began by proposing that de Beauvoir's account of woman as *The Other* requires modification when it is applied to the situation of Dalit women, and it has argued, through close reading of Bama and Kandasamy, that the modification required is a doubling: the recognition that the Dalit woman is constituted as Other along two axes gender and caste that operate according to different logics but that interlock so thoroughly that neither can be adequately understood without *The Other*. It remains to ask what this modification means for existentialist feminist theory more generally, beyond its application to these specific texts.

The first implication is methodological. This paper has treated the literary texts not as illustrations of a theory developed independently of them, but as sources of theoretical insight in their own right as texts that, through their formal choices, make visible aspects of the doubled structure of facticity that a purely abstract theoretical discussion would be likely to miss or flatten. The minimal or residual transcendence this paper identified in the passage from *Sangati* describing the women's nightly vigilance, for example, is not a concept this paper derived from existentialist philosophy and then found exemplified in the text; it is a concept this paper was led to by the specific texture of the passage itself by the fact that “the patience they had learned through years of practice” is clearly not nothing, clearly involves an active relationship to the

situation, even though it is equally clearly not the kind of world-transforming project that transcendence, in its more familiar Sartrean examples, usually involves. The theory, in other words, had to be adjusted to fit what the text was doing, and this adjustment the recognition of a continuum of transcendence rather than a binary presence or absence is itself a contribution to existentialist theory that emerged from the literary reading.

The second implication concerns the relationship between the two axes of the doubled other this paper has proposed. This paper has argued that caste and gender interlock in the production of the Dalit woman's facticity, but it has been careful not to claim that they are simply identical or interchangeable the analysis of *When I Hit You*, in particular, showed that the gendered axis can operate with great intensity even in a context where the caste axis is present in a more attenuated or complex form. This suggests that the doubled framework this paper proposes should not be understood as a fixed formula two axes, always present in equal measure, always interlocking in the same way but as a framework for asking, in each specific case, how the two axes are configured: which is more visible, which is doing more of the work of foreclosing transcendence, and how the specific configuration shapes the specific forms that transcendence, when it occurs, can take. This is, in effect, an argument for existentialist feminist theory to become more genuinely situational more attentive to the specific configuration of facticity in each case without abandoning the general structure of facticity, transcendence, and *The Other* that gives the theory its analytical power.

The third and final implication concerns the political stakes of this kind of analysis. It might be objected that an existentialist reading of Dalit women's fiction risks aestheticising or individualising what are, in the first instance, structural and collective problems that talking about "transcendence" risks suggesting that the solution to caste and gender oppression is a matter of individual consciousness rather than collective political transformation. This paper would resist this objection, but it would also take it seriously enough to specify exactly why it does not apply to the reading offered here. The transcendence this paper has identified in *Karukku*, *Sangati*, and *When I Hit You* is never represented, in any of these texts, as sufficient. The narrator of *Karukku* achieves a personal transcendence that leaves the caste system she was born into entirely intact; the women of *Sangati* achieve only the most minimal transcendence, a skill for surviving a situation they cannot change; the narrator of *When I Hit You* recovers her voice but does not, in doing so, alter the legal and cultural conditions that made her situation possible in the first place. What the existentialist reading offers is not a substitute for structural analysis but a complement to it: an account of what structural domination feels like from the inside, and of what it means, from the inside, to refuse it even when that refusal changes nothing structurally. The value of naming this kind of refusal, this paper would argue, is precisely that it does not pretend to be more than it is. It is not liberation. It is the persistence, within domination, of something domination has not managed to extinguish and the fact that literature can name this persistence, can give it a form and make it visible to others, is itself one of the resources from which structural change, when it comes, will have to draw.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that de Beauvoir's account of woman as *The Other*, while it remains an indispensable resource for the analysis of gender domination, requires modification when applied to the situation of Dalit women as represented in the fiction of Bama and Meena Kandasamy. The modification this paper has proposed the recognition of a doubled Other, constituted simultaneously by the operations of patriarchal gender ideology and caste pollution ideology, axes that interlock rather than merely coexist is not a wholesale rejection of de Beauvoir's framework but an attempt to extend it in the direction its own internal logic points: if facticity is, as de Beauvoir and Sartre both insist, always specific and always situated, then an account of facticity that does not attend to the specific way facticity is structured in a caste society is, by the framework's own standards, incomplete.

The close readings offered in this paper have shown that this doubled structure is not merely a feature that literary texts happen to represent, in the way that a novel might happen to represent a particular historical event. It is a structure that the texts enact in the movement from anger to analysis in the opening pages of *Karukku*, in the accumulated, episodic representation of facticity without resolution in *Sangati*, in the formal alternation between immersion and analysis that structures the narrative voice of *When I Hit You*. In each case, the literary text is doing something that this paper has called theoretical work: making visible, through the specific resources of literary form, a structure of experience that abstract philosophical statement, on its own, struggles to render with the same precision.

What remains, finally, is the question of transcendence itself of what it means, and what it is worth, for a doubly othered subject to achieve even the most minimal forms of the refusal this paper has described. This paper has resisted any inflation of this question's answer: the transcendence available to the women of *Sangati*, to the narrator of *Karukku*, to the narrator of *When I Hit You*, does not dismantle the systems that produced the facticity it refuses. But it is not nothing, either and the existentialist vocabulary this paper has employed is valuable precisely because it gives us a way of saying what this "not nothing" is, without either exaggerating it into a solution or dismissing it as merely a consolation. It is the persistence of a subject, within and against a situation engineered to deny that a subject is there at all. That this persistence can be written, read, and recognised that it can become, through literature, a shared resource rather than a private fact is the modest but real claim with which this paper concludes.

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