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Dalit Feminism at Home and in the World: The Conceptual Work of “Difference” and “Similarity” in National and Transnational Activism

Purvi Mehta

Over the last thirty years, Indian feminism, already composite, richly diverse as well as ideologically complex, has seen an even greater profusion of perspectives, critiques, and orientations. Among the groups increasingly visible and vocal in Indian feminist politics are Dalit women. Despite the constitutional abolition of untouchability and caste-based discrimination, Dalits—the groups officially identified as the “Scheduled Castes” in the Indian Constitution and often glossed internationally as “ex-untouchables”—remain among the poorest and most marginalized in India. Dalit women, positioned at the lowest ranks of caste and gender-based hierarchies, are often subject to systemic discrimination, violence, and exploitation, both within their communities and in society at large. Despite their vulnerability to multiple forms of inequality and violence, the predominant feminist and anti-caste movements in India have not sufficiently addressed the issues most directly impacting Dalit women. Over the last few decades, however, activism by and on behalf of Dalit women has countered this neglect and systematically challenged identity-based and other leftist social movements in India. They have done this by calling attention to sexism in the historically male-dominated Dalit movement and caste inequality in the mainstream Indian women’s movement, and by asserting the *difference*—the unique subject position—of Dalit women from both other Indian women and Dalit men.

The use of a politics of *difference* within the nation, however, has been accompanied by an articulation of *similarity* with communities of women outside India. In a sense, the assertion of difference has provided Dalit feminists a basis for both imagined and actualized alliances across state borders. Activists have argued that Dalit women’s difference in structural position and epistemological standpoint is a phenomenon experienced by other women. The attendant exclusion and marginalization—in both society at large and in social justice movements—that accompany this difference have also been deemed similar to that experienced by women outside India. In this essay, I analyze the interplay and function of assertions of difference and similarity in the activism of Dalit feminists and, in particular, in that of the National Federation of

Dalit Women (NFDW). The NFDW was founded in 1995, on the eve of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, by Ruth Manorama, a Dalit activist from Tamil Nadu, to represent Dalit women nationally and internationally. The intellectual engagements and transnational alliances forged by the NFDW and other Dalit feminists demonstrate both a critique of feminist and anti-caste movements in India while also revealing new possibilities for transnational feminism. I explore these tensions and possibilities by first discussing the establishment of the NFDW; I then turn to the use of "difference" in the intellectual project of Dalit feminism and its critiques of Indian social justice; finally, I analyze how a claim of "difference" at home enables the discernment of similarity across borders and the projection of new forms of transnational solidarity. I suggest that the strategic use of an identitarian politics—of a politics of difference within the nation-state and of similarity across borders—points to a new relationship between the national and global in feminist activism in India.

Establishing the NFDW, and Dalit women

In 1985, Ruth Manorama participated in what she described as a "cultural exchange program" between African Americans and Dalits.¹ In an interview I had with her in 2009, Manorama explained that she had been perplexed by black women's relationship to the women's movement in the United States and had been interested in learning why, as she said, "they are called black feminists" instead of just "feminists." During the program, Manorama studied the issues affecting black women and their precarious relationship with the mainstream feminist movement in the United States. She also researched the situation of black women in South Africa and their participation in the movement against apartheid. She recalled that what she learned helped her discern a similarity in the condition and struggle with black women in the United States and South Africa: their lives, she claimed, are "so similar to the life of the Dalits." The program, she explained, helped her to recognize that the predicaments facing Dalit women—predicaments that were different from both other Indian women and Dalit men—were shared by communities of women across the world and that a global perspective, a turn outward and abroad for alliances, could aid and support Dalit women's struggles for social justice. Manorama recounted that it was after she realized this similarity in experiences with women outside of India that she first recognized the importance of asserting Dalit women's difference and of creating, as she put it, "a Dalit woman's separate platform, a separate organization" in India.²

After returning from the cultural exchange program, Manorama joined Women's Voice, a Bangalore-based NGO that worked with the urban poor. While at Women's Voice, Manorama collaborated on a circular which invited Dalit women from across India to attend a meeting in Bangalore on International Women's Day, March 8, 1987. Manorama told me that she also invited "a Black woman from America" who was "working in Geneva on a program on racism," indicating that as early as 1987, she was working to mobilize international support for Dalit women.³ The choice of date for the meeting—International Women's Day—also registered the global orientation of the movement to create solidarity among Dalit women in India. The meeting in Bangalore

was sponsored by Women's Voice and the Christian Dalit Liberation Movement, a national organization based in Tamil Nadu. The invitation to the meeting had argued that Dalit women were "triple-alienated" on account of caste, class, and gender inequality and that their experiences and concerns had not been represented in India's feminist movement. Thus, the meeting was designed to offer Dalit women a space to discuss issues particular to their situations and in the process create solidarity among Dalit women from various regional, subcaste, linguistic, and religious backgrounds.

In her discussion of the meeting, Manorama recalled that the attendees commiserated about their loss of faith in the institutions and ideologies that they had believed would deliver justice and a better quality of life. The state, they lamented, had failed to fulfill its Constitutional obligations. The Indian women's movement had neglected issues affecting Dalit women and had not given Dalits leadership roles. Anti-caste, Dalit, and Marxist movements exhibited a clear masculinist bias and had not properly addressed issues affecting women. From this recognition of the failure of the state and social justice movements to properly advocate for Dalit women, participants at the conference, according to NFDW's official account, resolved that Dalit women constituted a distinct social constituency, one that could not be assimilated into either the categories of "Indian women" or "Dalits." Participants then committed to "organize themselves in order to address their special needs and problems."⁴ Following this preliminary meeting in 1987, a national taskforce of seventeen women from different regions was created and Dalit women's groups began convening at both the state and regional levels.

The NFDW was founded to continue the work of the national taskforce and the process of concretizing the category of "Dalit women," with one significant addition: the NFDW was also to represent Dalit women internationally. The organization was founded not only to connect Dalit women from across India, but also to represent them at international venues. By the early 1990s, Manorama and other activists viewed the upcoming Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, as a "golden opportunity to mobilize, educate and disseminate information" to the global feminist community about caste and Dalit women in India. In preparation for the conference, Women's Voice and the Asian Women's Human Rights Council held a public hearing in Bangalore on crimes against Dalits, and soon after officially established the NFDW as a "secular, autonomous and democratic" organization to represent Dalit women in Beijing. In this way, the NFDW, from its very inception, has been an advocacy organization that worked simultaneously at the national and international levels.⁵

The very creation of the NFDW suggested a challenge to the representative capacity of other Indian feminist organizations at both the national and international levels. The NFDW announced itself as the organization that would represent, as both portrait and proxy, Dalit women. Early goals of the organization included the development of a national human rights commission to monitor crimes against Dalits, the establishment of state-level committees, and the creation of resources, including scholarships for Dalit women's education. From its founding, the NFDW listed "building international solidarity and linkages with other oppressed groups" as one of its central goals, and, according to Manorama, it also recognized transnational engagements as indispensable to solving the problems facing Dalit women in India.⁶

In international arenas, such as at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing and six years later at the 2001 World Conference against Racism in Durban, South Africa, Manorama and the NFDW translated and discussed caste discrimination in a manner that seemed to amplify its global resonance. They constructed equivalences and analogies with more globally recognized forms of discrimination, most notably, racism. For example, Manorama's presentation in Beijing argued that "racial discrimination on the basis of the caste system is probably the longest surviving hierarchal system in existence in the world today."⁷ Here, caste is explicitly rendered a form of racism; it loses any sense of being culturally specific to India and can thus be universally denounced as counter to notions of human rights. The NFDW evoked the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and provided examples of how Dalit women's rights to "life, liberty and security of person and property rights" were consistently denied or violently violated, often with state complicity. By framing "life, struggles, and aspirations" of Dalit women in terms of the struggle for human rights and against racial discrimination, Manorama placed the eradication of caste discrimination within the scope of global social justice movements.

Within India, the NFDW held conventions, conferences, and workshops. These events gathered Dalit women from across the country, fostered alliances across states and regions, and enabled the discernment and discussion of shared issues and concerns. The NFDW explicitly challenged the received models of organizing, censuring the "the male dominated Dalit movement and varied organizations of the oppressed castes" for "adopting the ways of functioning of the upper-caste dominated mainstream political organizations" and sought to generate new forms of leadership and coordination.⁸

In 2006, the NFDW and National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) joined efforts to convene the first national conference on violence against Dalit women. Held in New Delhi, the conference provided a forum for survivors, activists, politicians, and scholars to come together, exchange knowledge, and strategize on ways to protect and support Dalit women. The conference statement ("Delhi Declaration") was symbolically passed on International Women's Day, March 8, 2006. It detailed disparities in the prevalence of violence, poverty, and sickness between Dalit women and other populations and cited the "'worldview' of the dominant caste" as largely responsible for these disparities.⁹ By marking them as "inferior, impure, low character, easily available and accessible," this view, the NFDW argued, exposed Dalit women to a greater vulnerability to violence. This opinion of Dalit women, it added, was prevalent among "dominant caste women" who "have in some instances been found to support and encourage their men to commit crimes against Dalit women." Here, the statement reiterated one of the central arguments of the Dalit feminist critique: "Indian women" do not constitute one coherent category; some women have more access to power than others and hold power over other women. The statement maintained that because of the power relations among women of difference castes, Dalit women, as the group positioned at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, must be deemed a distinct and separate social category.

The Delhi Declaration also described and analyzed violence inflicted upon Dalit women. It identified two primary forms of violence: violence within the family and

violence that was embedded in the functioning of the larger society. Violence in the home was related to the prevalence of “patriarchal values” in Dalit communities and resulted in violence toward mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters. Alternatively, violence that was “rooted in the caste ethos” served to enforce social hierarchy; it was particularly “gruesome” and it became a “weapon for the continued caste-class-gender subjugation and exploitation of Dalit women and the community as a whole.” This was violence designed to reinforce traditional obligations and duties and was often retribution for the exercise of legitimate, state-endowed powers and rights. It was violence that not only assaulted the body, but also shamed and humiliated; it functioned to strip an individual and community of dignity and was “often a tool to perpetuate a culture of silence and crush the spirit.” In this rendering, caste creates the conditions for violence against Dalit women. A feminist response to violence against Dalit women in India could thus not neglect caste and had to address the caste-specific forms of patriarchy and sexism.¹⁰

Although staged as a national event, the Delhi Conference had an explicitly international message. The Delhi Declaration concluded with a plea to the international human rights community, in particular to women’s rights and development organizations, to recognize caste-based discrimination as a human rights violation and to “extend solidarity to Dalit women’s causes and concerns.” This was further pursued eight months after the conference when the NFDW and NCDHR joined with the Feminist Dalit Organisation of Nepal, the International Dalit Solidarity Network, Dalit Network Netherlands, and Justicia et Pax Netherlands to hold the first International Conference on the Human Rights of Dalit Women in The Hague, Netherlands. Thematically, the conference continued the focus of the New Delhi conference, namely, on how “caste, class and gender discrimination prevents Dalit women from enjoying their basic human rights” and how violence sustains “systemic discrimination.”¹¹ Like the Delhi Conference, the Hague Conference categorized violence against Dalit women in terms of violence within the family and violence committed by more dominant castes. This conference, however, took place on a global stage and was sponsored by the NFDW and several other NGOs.

Although the Hague Declaration was consistent with the NFDW’s platform, materials circulated at the conference diverge from some of its previous assessments. For example, a portfolio distributed by the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights, entitled *3,000 Years . . . How Much Longer*, put forth an analysis of violence that deviated from, and at times contradicted, that of the NFDW. The title of the portfolio itself assumed a timeless, unchanging oppression and fit easily into orientalist renderings of India. Whereas the NFDW’s previous international engagements at Beijing and Durban had cited specific historical processes underlying the contemporary predicament of Dalit women, such as the rise of Hindu nationalism in India and the global predominance of neoliberal economics, the conference at The Hague departed from the historical specificity of earlier conceptualizations and replaced it with ahistorical, and at points, sensationalistic, generalizations.

A factsheet in the portfolio stated that “the Dalit woman faces violence at home from Dalit men, who compensate for their humiliation and lack of power by venting

their frustration on their wives, daughters and mothers.”¹² While the Delhi Conference argued that “patriarchal values” motivated family violence, the factsheet from The Hague made no reference to internal patriarchy, only to the oppression of caste experienced by men, suggesting that the disempowered condition of Dalit men was the root cause of family violence. According to this logic, it was not the dismantling of patriarchy that would reduce violence against women, but rather, the empowerment of men. A similar privileging of the male Dalit experience pervaded the analysis of upper caste violence against Dalit women. The same factsheet in the portfolio stated that the Dalit woman is

routinely molested, offensively groped and gangraped by upper caste men to teach her community a lesson. To remind them of their position in society. Cases have been recorded of feudal landlords bursting into a dalit marriage to claim “the first night privilege with the bride.”

Here, “community” stands in for “men.” Whereas literature from the NFDW explained that the prevalence of “patriarchal notions of community honour residing in women” created a context in which “dominant caste violence against Dalit women . . . punish[ed] the entire Dalit community,” The Hague’s factsheet assumed the perspective of an emasculated man and failed to explain the context in which violating a Dalit woman would teach “her community” a lesson.

3000 Years . . . How Much Longer also used representations of Dalit women’s suffering that subtly, yet significantly, diverged from those of the NFDW. While depictions of suffering and humiliation provided activists a way to translate untouchability and make its experiences legible to a global audience, certain representations were so replete with lurid and gruesome detail that they bordered on the sensationalistic. For example, the back cover of the conference portfolio listed terms that provided a sketch of the experiences endured by Dalit women. Printed in a light gray ink against a dark gray background, the terms—“molestation, sexual abuse, discrimination, oppression, exclusion, outcaste, untouchable, spat upon, rape, murder, beaten, humiliated, stripped, disrobed, paraded naked, forced to eat shit and urine, kicked, tortured, burnt to death, blinded, scalded, hot oil poured”—are listed in English in a vertical column and followed by five columns of translations into Dutch, French, German, Spanish, and Italian. The cover enumerated many of the spectacular dimensions of violence against Dalit women, but in the absence of an analysis of everyday structural conditions or connection to an individual’s account, it seemed to work against the political project of Dalit feminism. Instead of portraying the “strength,” “resistance,” and “contributions” of Dalit women—as the Delhi Declaration had done—descriptions like the ones used at The Hague Conference objectified the survivor/victim of caste and gender-based crimes and exploited tropes of Third-World women’s passivity and victimhood, tropes common in transnational feminist activism. The portfolio also described the experience of Dalit women in the superlative. For example, a factsheet stated that “Women the world over suffer discrimination. But never in the history of the universe has any group faced over 4,000 years of persistent and continued oppression.”¹³ By casting Dalit women as the group that suffered the worst forms of oppression—as passive victims

oppressed by a backwards culture—this characterization placed Dalit women at the top of an economy of suffering that seemed to inform the international market in women's issues, and thereby also rendered them the most in need of international assistance. Thus, while The Hague Conference increased the visibility of Dalit women's issues and concerns, this visibility was at points contradictory to the NFDW's statement about Dalit women and their activist mission.

While an international first for Dalit feminist activism, the conference at The Hague revealed the shortcomings of global activism. Preestablished tropes of Third-World women's victimhood and suffering at the hands of culture—tropes with deep historical and political histories—seemed to interfere with both the NFDW's narrative about Dalit women and their political project. In my reading, the conference at The Hague highlights the need for a new framework and paradigm for transnational feminist activism. In the next two sections, I discuss how I see the NFDW and other Dalit feminist organizations developing the conceptual framework for an alternative mode of transnational feminist activism. This conceptual framework emerges from Dalit feminist evaluations of social justice movements within India and abroad. I first discuss this domestic context before turning to how it provides a framework for transnational activism.

Dalit feminism at home: Difference as critique

In an article that came out shortly after the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, Gopal Guru discussed the formation of autonomous Dalit women's organizations, such as the NFDW, and the rise of identity politics by Dalit women.¹⁴ He argued that Dalit women "need to talk differently" because of factors internal and external to the Dalit community: that is, they experienced political and cultural marginalization within the Dalit community and mainstream feminists were resistant to integrating caste into their analysis of gender inequality. Dalit men and non-Dalit women, he noted, thus could not represent Dalit women; only Dalit women could represent themselves. Guru celebrated this emergence of a politics of difference and suggested that it avoided many of the problems of identity-based politics. As he concluded, "Dalit women's perception while critical of the homogenization of a dominant discourse does not make a fetish of its own reality, and therefore prevents the ghettoisation of dalithood."¹⁵ Guru failed to consider, however, that the problem with identity politics extends beyond the possibility of ghettoization; it risks also exclusion and the fixing and privileging of particular identities as authentic.

Sharmila Rege contested Guru's suggestion that experience yields more authentic knowledge, an implication of his celebration of a politics of difference, and argued that his notion of difference could actually dilute the emancipatory potential of Dalit women's activism and critiques. Such a concept of difference, she cautioned, "could render Dalit women's independent assertion an exclusive politics of identity."¹⁶ Rege argued that the concept of difference had "limited political and analytical use" if not put into dialogue with other ideological positions. The mere assertion of difference, and difference in epistemological standpoint, would simply lead to a plurality of

standpoints, without interrogating upper-caste/class assumptions. She noted that an analysis of patriarchy that captured how caste hierarchy was part and parcel of gender subordination had been glaringly absent in the major feminist campaigns of the 1970s and 1980s. For the leftist women's organizations of that time, the notion of sisterhood and an undifferentiated feminist standpoint superseded caste differences; in addition, caste as a category of analysis was subsumed by class and rendered redundant.¹⁷ The establishment of autonomous Dalit women's organizations, such as the NFDW, thus heralded more than a mere assertion of difference. As Rege concluded, "It is apparent that the issues underlined by the new Dalit women's movement go beyond the naming of 'difference' of Dalit women and calls for a revolutionary epistemological shift to a Dalit feminist standpoint."¹⁸ This shift not only interrogates the biases of recent Indian feminist movements, but also offers a more critical and inclusive orientation to feminist theorizing and action.

I draw from both Guru and Rege's insights in my discussion of the function of a politics of difference in Dalit feminist organizing. I focus on the NFDW's theoretical intervention into Indian feminism and show that while "difference" points to a critique of the predominant national social justice movements, it also, as I demonstrate in the next section, conceptually enables new forms of transnational solidarity. The intellectual and political project of Dalit feminism, as conceived by the NFDW, was premised on two principles: one, that "women" or "Indian women" do not constitute a unitary social category; and two, that gender inequality cannot be assessed in isolation, but, rather, must be analyzed alongside other social variables such as class and caste status. As Manorama explained, "today, in an Indian context, when you look at women as a whole, you don't have the same or homogenous issues to relate to. We have different issues ... because we are at the lowest in the hierarchy of society." Dalit women, in Manorama's words, "share very specific discrimination" and accordingly, are different in position, perspective, and experience from other communities of women in India. "Therefore," Manorama argued, "we need to look at ourselves as a very specific category of women." Manorama claimed that this assertion of Dalit women's difference was "a scholarly intervention into feminism."¹⁹ "Difference" was a corrective to the ideology of the mainstream Indian women's movement; the claim of difference then also worked to dislodge the upper-caste and middle-class women's movement as the sole voice of "Indian feminism" in international forums.

While the term "Indian women's movement" encapsulates a diverse set of organizations, ideologies, and activism with a varied and complex history, from the perspective of the Dalit activists, the consistent neglect of the issues and concerns of Dalit women seemed to warrant collapsing the immense differences in the movement. Indian feminism that did not explicitly address caste or take on the standpoint of Dalit women was characterized as "mainstream." For example, Seema, a Dalit rights activist, explained the mainstream women's movement in India was run by "middle class and upper caste women," who "[were] only talking about the problems of women of their castes."²⁰ She added that the organizations of the mainstream movement had not addressed practices such as manual scavenging or the devadasi system as *feminist* issues and had ignored the *caste* dimensions of the violence and poverty that afflicted Dalit women.²¹ Moreover, the predominant theoretical orientation guiding

the mainstream movement seemed to dismiss the relevance of caste to the analysis of patriarchy and to feminist activism. As Seema pointed out, while gender and class were analyzed as variables affecting power and opportunity in society, “the caste perspective is not there [among feminists] ... [T]hey will think that a Dalit woman suffers inequality because she is a woman and is poor ... Mainstream feminism will say that its class, not caste.”²²

According to Manorama, for Dalit feminists, caste was “the central thing,” without which patriarchy, constructions of gender, and class inequality could not be understood. Without examining the primacy of caste in practices of privilege and discrimination, Manorama argued, even upper caste women’s “liberation is not full; their liberation is not possible.” “I think the general feminist movement did not understand this,” she added, “because they are not in a position to understand it.”²³ According to Manorama and other activists, feminists who inhabited a position of caste privilege had failed to create an ideological platform wide enough to advocate for and represent those who were, as Seema said, “at the bottom of the bottom.”²⁴

This description of the Indian women’s movement is supported by Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah’s *Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in the Contemporary Women’s Movement in India*, a text published in 1991 that documents and analyzes the Indian feminist movement in the 1970s and 1980s.²⁵ The authors, two prominent activists, visited over a score of women’s organizations across the country and framed the book as both an account of their own experiences as feminists and as an archive of the “experiences, ideas and issues” of the contemporary Indian women’s movement.²⁶

Gandhi and Shah’s account celebrated the achievements of the Indian women’s movement, claiming that it had “put forward a hope and future which *every woman* can claim and gain strength from” [emphasis mine].²⁷ Their analysis employed an undifferentiated category of “the oppressed”; rather than teasing out the work of caste, class, religion, language, and region in creating different lifeworlds, they relied mostly on a gender-based notion of oppression. In Gandhi and Shah’s narrative, “Indian women” emerged as a largely undifferentiated and natural category. Here, Indian women were fundamentally the same; this sameness then functioned to obscure key points of divergence in the experiences and interests of Indian women. The only reference to power relations among women was found in the explanation of the role of mothers-in-law in dowry-related violence; family structure, not a broader social structure, provided the context for women acting as “agents” of patriarchy. This approach consequently ignored the work of caste in differentiating among women and the particularities of Dalit women’s experiences and concerns. Gandhi and Shah’s assumption of a shared oppression and unity among women thus not only undervalued differences among women, but also proved exclusionary.

For example, in their recounting of their train travels across India, they described their confrontations with “two types of chauvinism: the ‘shall I fill up your water bottle’ type of patronage and the cruder ‘*ye hai aaj ki ladkiyan*’ (these are the women of today) ridicule.” The authors did not recognize that the constructions of gender underlying both types of chauvinism were specific to their caste and class position. A Dalit woman would not have received the “patronage” afforded to the middle-class and upper-caste authors because she deviated from the ideal of respectable femininity by virtue of her

caste identity; the chauvinism of male protection and help was specific to women who conformed to this ideal. Similarly, while the authors highlighted the "ridicule" they received for traveling without a male companion, there was no mention of lower-caste and class women who were most likely present, working, and mobile in the public spaces they travelled. Another glaring example of Gandhi and Shah's neglect of an intersectional approach to the analysis of gender relations was their discussion of sexual violence. While many of the victim/survivors of rape they discussed were from Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe communities, Gandhi and Shah did not address how caste status rendered some women more vulnerable to sexual violence than others.²⁸ Moreover, the authors conceded that the "leadership of the women's movement ha[d] remained predominantly middle-class," but maintained that the movement had been "multiclass." They made no mention, however, of the caste backgrounds of either the leadership or participants in the movement. In their discussion of the "discriminatory practices" and "social taboos" that restricted "choice in livelihood," Gandhi and Shah credited only the sexual division of labor—which theoretically would have affected all Indian women—and made no mention of caste, despite its continued impact on occupations. Manual scavenging or other work traditionally performed by Dalit women was overlooked and caste did not appear as a force that structured life options and opportunities.²⁹

Gandhi and Shah's account of the Indian feminist movement in the 1970s and 1980s substantiates the feelings of exclusion and marginalization communicated to me by Dalit women in their discussions of the "mainstream" Indian women's movement. As Manorama stated, the NFDW was created as a corrective to the mainstream movement. The organization provided the theoretical and ideological groundwork for the articulation of Dalit difference and for the construction of "Dalit women" as a separate social category. Manorama argued that the assertion of Dalit women's difference was "a scholarly intervention into feminism."³⁰ She explained that the NFDW "did not start because we wanted to be an NGO. We wanted to do something ... It's a movement for the Dalit women." The NFDW's primary goal was to create a foundation for the identity of Dalit women and for advocacy on their behalf; exposing and publicizing the "specific issues" and "specific human rights violations" affecting Dalit women was a central part of this work. The NFDW not only challenged the dominant analysis guiding the Indian women's movement, but also worked to dislodge the upper-caste and women's movement as the sole voice of "Indian feminism" in international forums.

The NFDW conceptualized Dalit women's difference not only in terms of a difference in social position and the differential burdens of gender, class, and caste, but also as a cultural difference. For example, the claim that Dalits were the "indigenous people" of India anchors the idea of difference in a past that is imagined as historically distinct from that of other groups in India. As the original inhabitants of India, the NFDW contended, the "Brahmanic caste system is alien to our history"; Dalits therefore refused to be "co-opted ... by any other history or culture."³¹ The NFDW argued the "Dalit cultural heritage" is "egalitarian" and provides a worldview not offered by traditional leftist or progressive movements. While Gandhian, Nehruvian, and Marxist ideologies were unable to analyze the effects of Hindu nationalism and liberalization on "traditional oppressive structures," the heritage of Dalit reasoning,

the NFDW claims, could. The organization suggested that revering “the traditions of Jotirao Phule, Ayyankali, Periyar and Babasaheb Ambedkar” and revitalizing their worldviews could counter the impact of Hindutva, or right-wing Hindu nationalism, and neoliberalism on both preexisting and relatively new structures of inequality.³²

The assertion of difference and the specificity of Dalit women’s interests were initially criticized by prominent feminists. Manorama recalled being accused of “dividing the women’s movement” when she started working to establish the NFDW in the late 1980s. She strongly rejected such characterizations, stating:

I said we are not dividing. In fact, we live in divided *cherries* [slums] in India. We live in divided slums . . . Why [do] we live in *cherries*? *Cherries* are full of filth, full of dirt. Why are we living in this, living in divided *cherries*, *busthies* [slums]. In India, the woman’s movement did not talk about this, did not raise these issues. Now, when we want to organize . . . [they] are saying that you are dividing the women. We live in a divided world. In our country, the Dalits are the fourth world.³³

At a time when “Third-World feminists” were arguing against the dominance of Western feminism and its claims of representing all women, Manorama employed a similar critique to counter the assumptions of prominent Indian feminists. Caste, she insisted, divided women and altered the effects of patriarchy, resulting in women’s divergent experiences of gender subordination. According to the NFDW, Dalit feminism emerged from the particularities of Dalit women’s experiences of subordination. It put the experiences of Dalit women at the center of analysis and developed its critiques and prescriptions based on these experiences. Manorama explained to me that disparities in class, gender, and caste engendered a difference in “consciousness.” She regarded this “consciousness” as a “subaltern consciousness,” one that was not only nonelite, but also radically different and independent. The assertion of this distinction in consciousness also announced that Dalit women contested ideologies of caste inequality and that their worldviews and aspirations diverged from those in more dominant social positions. As many Dalit feminists insisted, Dalit women’s worldviews and aspirations embodied a universalist and humanist spirit which enabled them to be more promising visionaries of social change. As one activist said to me:

I am from a Dalit community and I am a woman. Dalit among Dalits. I am at a place where I can see the society . . . No one can see from the upper top . . . I have faced all these hurdles . . . only a Dalit woman can see society from caste, class, and patriarchy perspective . . . Feminism is equality, equity, justice and peace for all. Dalit women are the ones who . . . have the ability to analyze [how society works].³⁴

The idea that those who are the most oppressed, those who have experienced life at the “bottom of the bottom,” are endowed with a unique perspective on the whole was echoed by other Dalit activists. Manorama suggested that Dalit women’s position in society enabled a critique that allowed for the imagining of a fuller, more complete egalitarianism. “If feminism is non-hierarchal, if feminism is ecological, if feminism is non-patriarchal,” she said, “then Dalit women know much better than anybody

else.”³⁵ Dalit women's experiences, she contended, roused a vision and desire for social justice that eluded those more privileged. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's discussion of a feminist methodology for discerning relations of power and, consequently, producing emancipatory knowledge is helpful in thinking about Manorama's comment.³⁶ Mohanty suggests that the analysis for this methodology should begin from the perspective of “the most marginalized communities of women.”³⁷ “If we pay attention to and think from the space of some of the most disenfranchised communities of women in the world,” she writes, “we are most likely to envision a just and democratic society capable of treating all its citizens fairly.” An inquiry that begins with the experiences of those most marginalized—like Dalit women in India—and places their concerns at the center of analysis discerns the work of power that is often obscured if the focus is on those more privileged. This kind of approach—that of “read[ing] up the ladder of privilege”—enables a more inclusive vision of social justice, for, as Mohanty cautions, “if we begin our analysis from, and limit it to, the space of privileged communities, our visions of justice are more likely to be exclusionary because privilege nurtures blindness to those without the same privileges.”³⁸ As Manorama suggested, “those who are very comfortable . . . they don't want change. People who want change anywhere in the world go through oppression.”³⁹

Transnational Dalit feminism: From difference to similarity

The assertion of difference—difference in structural position and epistemological standpoint—from both other Indian women and Dalit men does more than critique domestic social justice movements; it also functions to discern cross-border similarity and build transnational connections. In Dalit feminist projects, difference has created the conditions for the discernment of similarity—in particular, of similarity in struggle—with communities of women outside of India, communities deemed comparably marginalized. Activists have found that Dalit women's difference in structural position is a social phenomenon shared by other communities of women. The attendant exclusion and marginalization—in both society at large and in social justice movements—that accompany this difference have also been deemed similar to that experienced by women outside India. The claim of difference has thus enabled an assertion of similarity with communities of women across nation-state borders. This assertion of similarity does not point to an alternative identitarian politics; rather, it assumes a similarity in structural position and epistemological standpoint from which the affective and political bonds for transnational feminist activism are generated.

For example, Manorama spoke to me about the similarity in structural position between Dalit women in India and black women in the United States, and the exclusion of both groups from their home country's women's movements. “Black women are much poorer [than white women], living [in] the ghettos . . . [They have] similar lifestyles as the Dalits,” she said. “The white feminists don't address racism. It is central, crucial to the issue.” She added, “It is the same [in India] . . . We [Dalit feminists] go very much along with Black feminism.” In a published interview, Manorama spoke more about similarities between Dalit feminists and black feminists:

I was influenced by the Black women's movement in America. I was looking at why these Black women were organizing themselves differently. Why were they separate? Then, I understood the racist notions of purity and pollution that operates there. Just like our situation, the Black women don't have leadership in the mainstream women's movement. The White women were not going to solve the problems of Black women ... [Black women] not only wrote about the racist inequality, but they spoke about the class struggle, they outlined the economic oppression, the absence of land and resources. There are so many connections between the Dalits and the Blacks.⁴⁰

I suggest that the "connections" that Manorama identified constitute what Mohanty conceptualizes as "'imagined communities' of Third World oppositional struggles."⁴¹ Drawing from Benedict Anderson's discussion of the nation's creation of horizontal affective relations, Mohanty explains that her use of "imagined communities" does not suggest that these connections are not "real," but, rather, that they point to "potential alliances and collaborations across divisive boundaries ... in spite of internal hierarchies within Third World contexts."⁴² The alliances that Mohanty envisions are not based on essentialist notions of identity—biological or social—but, rather, are constructed through a shared politics. As she writes, "It is not color or sex that constructs the grounds for these struggles. Rather, it is the way we think about race, class and gender."⁴³ In my reading of the NFDW's activism, Dalit feminists and black feminists emerge, in Mohanty's terms, as "imagined communities of women with divergent histories and social locations, woven together by the political threads of opposition to forms of domination that are not only pervasive but also systemic."⁴⁴ While the particulars of the histories and relations that affect both groups diverged, Manorama and the NFDW discerned a similar configuration of structural inequality shaping the lives of black and Dalit women. She and other Dalit activists have also suggested that they share an understanding of social justice with black feminists. For Manorama and other Dalit feminists, cross-border solidarity with groups deemed similarly marginalized in their home societies served as a source of support and a resource with which to project a vision of social justice and rights, a vision that was distinct from other Indian women's movements.

This kind of transnationalism—one rooted in shared convictions and solidarity in struggle—can be found in earlier Dalit women's associations. For example, Mahila Samta Sainik Dal (MSSD) (League of Women Soldiers for Equality), a Dalit feminist group active in the 1970s, saw their struggle for equality and liberation as part of the same struggle pursued oceans away by the American activist and scholar Angela Davis.⁴⁵ The MSSD manifesto declared a "fight for equality" and announced that its members have "become soldiers in this fight" to "destroy [the caste system]" and liberate women "enslaved by the social structure."⁴⁶ The Manifesto suggested a cultural basis for both gender and caste oppression. It located gender subordination in constructions of male sexuality and desire, arguing that "men have kept women deprived of freedom and apart from knowledge and have made them slaves only for sexual pleasure."⁴⁷ In the MSSD analysis, religion, and its "ideology of natural inequality," legitimized exploitation based on both caste and gender. The Manifesto urged women to renounce the model

of "Rama, who made his pregnant wife leave the house," as an "ideal," and instead follow the models of the Buddha, Mahatma Phule, Savitribai Phule, and Babasaheb Ambedkar. Despite the specificity in constructs and ideologies subordinating women and the lower castes in India, the MSSD saw themselves in solidarity with Angela Davis and as part of the same historical struggle:

Those who rebel against slavery, the Dalits who aim for freedom, the adivasis [indigenous people] and toilers are our brothers. We are battling for equality along with men in the liberation war for human liberation called for by Dr. Ambedkar. This is history. And so we wish every success to the workers in the American women's liberation movement and to Angela Davis and to the women's liberation army.⁴⁸

In the MSSD manifesto, "history" advances toward social equality; it is marked by the dissolution of structures of oppression and the inclusion of an ever widening group of people into an egalitarian order that is free from structures of oppression. Dr. Ambedkar, the MSSD, and Angela Davis were visionaries and leaders in this historical struggle for radical and revolutionary change. Despite the differences in context, they were united by their shared goal of "human liberation." The MSSD projected a clear internationalist vision for the empowerment and emancipation of all marginalized communities. By imagining solidarity with Angela Davis and the "workers in the American women's liberation movement," the MSSD connected Dalit women in India to a larger, global community and incorporated their cause into a global and historical struggle.

The imagining of a struggle shared with women fighting from the margins of their home societies, namely, African American feminists, recurred in the recent history of Dalit feminist activism. In 2002, the Alisamma Women's Collective circulated a statement about Dalit women's difference from other Indian women that evoked the history of black women's struggle in the American feminist movement.⁴⁹ The statement was directed to the mainstream Indian women's movement and was delivered on International Women's Day at the University of Hyderabad and circulated electronically soon after. It singled out "Hindu women and non-dalit women" and demanded that they "recognize [that the] Indian female community is stratified by [a] castist patriarchal system." It argued that it was "not just male domination" but also a "castist patriarchy" that was at play in India and that the caste system made the unity of Indian women an impossibility. It stated:

We ask you to rethink. We want you to acknowledge the political importance of "difference," i.e., heterogeneity, that exists among Indian female community. *That you are made as we are mutilated. You are put on a pedestal, whereas we are thrown into fields to work day and night. You were Satis, we are made harlots.* [emphasis mine]⁵⁰

In my reading, the italicized section of the statement follows a pattern of constructing comparisons and relations found in the most publicized version of Sojourner Truth's famous speech, "Ain't I A Woman?" The section of Truth's speech that can be found

reverberating in the Collective's statement illustrates how the privileges that come with white womanhood are not extended to black women. Truth shows how racism and sexism position black and white women differently and preclude a singular agenda for social justice. For example, in her speech, she says:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

An intertextual reading of the Collective's statement—an intertextual reading that focuses on the structure of the argument—can reveal how the meanings attributed to a Dalit feminist subjectivity are derived through an analogy to Sojourner Truth's description of the predicaments of black womanhood. The Collective's statement echoes Sojourner Truth's critique of how racism stratifies women in society. Truth shows the complexities of a feminist politics in a situation where, on one hand, white women struggled against assumptions of frailty and fought for rights in the public sphere, and on the other, black women struggled against the exploitation of their labor, not receiving the comforts that come with being considered frail.

This provides a subtext to the Collective's assertion that caste inequality thwarts a singular Indian feminist perspective. While caste-Hindu women are made socially respectable, Dalit women are exploited, denied respectability, and rendered sexually available. This subtext also evokes the centrality of violence in the constitution of Dalit women's subjectivity. Through an analogy to the predicaments and structural position of black women in the United States, the Alisamma Women's Collective then exposes the entanglements of caste and patriarchy in the subordination of Dalit women and highlights how racism and castism produce disparities in privileges and different forms of subordination. This then aligns the Alisamma Women's Collective with a broader community of women—a community that shares a similar form of "difference" and marginalization—and also indicts the mainstream Indian women's movement for its failure to recognize difference and critically evaluate its emancipatory project.

Imagining new forms of feminist transnationalism

In this essay, I have tried to demonstrate the interplay of identities of difference and similarity in Dalit feminism. Within the domestic context, Dalit feminists stress an identity of difference, difference in social position and standpoint, to underscore the limitations of the major feminist campaigns of the last several decades. Difference at home—a sign of Dalit women's exclusion from these campaigns—is then

supplemented with a claim of similarity with women across nation-state borders. This strategic use of identities of difference and similarity nationally and transnationally not only exposes the social injustice that can recur in social justice movements but also suggests new modes of transnational feminist engagement.

Dalit feminism seems to be reimagining transnational feminism; instead of the historically more prevalent orientation toward saving the "Third World woman" from her culture, Dalit feminist transnationalism reaches out for partnership and solidarity with women deemed comparably marginalized in their home societies. Transnationalism in this context depends on the construction of analogies, on the discernment of similarity in both structural location and subjectivity, and on the imagining of a shared struggle and political vision. Transnational engagements by Dalit feminists recenter the traditional focus of global feminism. These engagements highlight global and local relations of power and inequality and call attention to the political, economic, and social processes that have marginalized some and privileged others. The transnational analogies at the center of the Dalit feminist engagements discussed in this essay also have pedagogical force: analogies to African American women not only make the injustice suffered by Dalit women legible to a global audience, but are also instructive for the imagining of empathy and new forms of feminist solidarity.

Notes

- 1 Ruth Manorama, interview by author, September 2009.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 NFDW, "National Federation of Dalit Women" (Bangalore, India: 1987).
- 5 "National Federation of Dalit Women" (Bangalore, India: 1987).
- 6 "National Federation of Dalit Women."
- 7 See Ruth Manorama, "Dalit Women in Struggle: Transforming Pain into Power," paper presented at the International Seminar on Dalit Women: Life, Struggles and Aspirations, held at the NGO Forum of the Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995, Beijing, China.
- 8 NFDW, "Declaration from Fifth National Convention" (Chennai, India: November 27, 2002).
- 9 NFDW and NCDHR, "Delhi Declaration: National Conference on Violence against Dalit Women" (New Delhi, India: March 8, 2006).
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 See "The Hague Declaration on the Human Rights and Dignity of Dalit Women" (The Hague, Netherlands: November 21, 2006).
- 12 NCDHR, "In Search of Justice," in *3,000 ... How Much Longer?* (Conference portfolio at The International Conference on the Human Rights of Dalit Women, The Hague, Netherlands, 2006).
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Gopal Guru, "Dalit Women Talk Differently," *Economic and Political Weekly* (October 14–21, 1995), 2548–50.
- 15 Guru, "Dalit Women Talk Differently," 2550.

- 16 See Sharmila Rege, "Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference' and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position," *Economic and Political Weekly* 33, 44 (October 31–November 6, 1998): WS39–WS46; and Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste/ Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006).
- 17 Among the leftist organizations Rege mentions are the National Federation of Indian Women and The All-India Women's Conference. See "Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of 'Difference' and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position," WS43.
- 18 Rege, "Dalit Women Talk Differently," 45.
- 19 Manorama, "Dalit Women in Struggle," 2009.
- 20 This name has been changed to protect the informant's privacy. Seema, Dalit activist, interview by author, August 2009.
- 21 Manual scavenging refers to the practice of manually removing human excreta from dry latrines and sewers. It is a caste-based occupational practice imposed mostly on the women of certain Dalit communities. Although legally abolished, the practice is still prevalent in many parts of India and women who work as manual scavengers continue face extreme poverty, social stigma, and discrimination. The devadasi system refers to a form of forced prostitution imposed on certain communities of Dalit women. The practice is found mostly in southern India.
- 22 Seema, Dalit activist, interview.
- 23 Manorama, "Dalit Women in Struggle," 2009.
- 24 Seema, Dalit activist, interview.
- 25 See Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah, *The Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in the Contemporary Women's Movement* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1991).
- 26 Gandhi and Shah, *The Issues at Stake*, 5.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 14.
- 28 "Scheduled Castes" and "Scheduled Tribes" are the official state designations for certain historically marginalized and disadvantaged communities. Scheduled Caste refers to Dalit communities, those groups included in the caste structure through their very exclusion. Scheduled Tribes is the official designation for "adivasi," which literally means indigenous people. The Scheduled Tribes are considered to have historically been outside of the Hindu caste structure.
- 29 Gandhi and Shah, *The Issues at Stake*, 22, 23.
- 30 Manorama, "Dalit Women in Struggle," 2009.
- 31 NFDW, "Fifth National Convention Declaration."
- 32 *Ibid.* Phule, Ayyankali, Ambedkar, and Periyar were anti-caste activists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
- 33 Manorama, "Dalit Women in Struggle," 2009.
- 34 Dalit activist, interview by author, September 2009.
- 35 Manorama, "Dalit Women in Struggle," 2009.
- 36 See Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practice, and Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003)
- 37 Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*, 231.
- 38 *Ibid.*
- 39 Manorama, "Dalit Women in Struggle," 2009.
- 40 "Interview with Ruth Manorama," <http://youngfeminists.wordpress.com>
- 41 Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders*, 46.
- 42 *Ibid.*
- 43 *Ibid.*

- 44 Ibid., 46–7.
- 45 See Gail Omvedt, *We Will Smash This Prison: Indian Women in Struggle* (London: Zed Press, 1980). Omvedt provides a translation from Marathi into English of the MSSD's manifesto in the appendix of *We Will Smash This Prison*.
- 46 MSSD, "Manifesto," 173, 174.
- 47 Ibid., 175.
- 48 Ibid., 176.
- 49 The Alisamma Women's Collective was named after a woman who was killed before she could testify to witnessing the murder of her son. Her testimony was critical in a trial prosecuting a Dalit massacre in which six Dalit men were killed and three Dalit women were raped. The name of the collective both honors her memory and also signals the importance of hearing Dalit women's voices.
- 50 Alisamma Women's Collective, "Statement of Dalit Women" (Hyderabad, India: March 8, 2008).