



Defiance in the Domestic: Women's Agency against Patriarchy and Caste in Anjali Kajal's *Ma Is Scared*

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Abstract:

This article examines Anjali Kajal's short story "Ma Is Scared" (2023) through feminist, Dalit feminist, and subaltern frameworks to consider how a vernacular Hindi text reimagines the domestic sphere as a site of caste-inflected, gendered resistance. Set within a Dalit basti family in northern India, the story follows a mother's anxiety over her daughter's exposure to street harassment and her unease, in turn, at the very self-defense training meant to protect her. Reading Kajal's prose against Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality, Uma Chakravarti's account of brahmanical patriarchy, and Sharmila Rege's Dalit feminist standpoint, and holding these alongside Gayatri Spivak's and Chandra Mohanty's cautions about speaking for the subaltern, the analysis argues that Kajal stages domestic resistance as incremental and ambivalent rather than triumphant. Close attention to the story's imagery, dialogue, and irony suggests that education and physical training function less as solutions than as occasions where fear and agency are renegotiated between generations. The article contributes to Indian literary criticism by extending intersectional feminist analysis to an underexamined vernacular text and by clarifying the limits of treating domestic resistance as a sufficient political response.

Keywords:

Dalit feminism;
Intersectionality;
Anjali Kajal;
domestic resistance;
subaltern agency

Introduction

India's social order remains structured by intersecting hierarchies of caste and patriarchy. Within the Brahmanical framework, caste and gender operate as mutually reinforcing principles: control over women's sexuality has long served to preserve caste purity, and any female nonconformity is read as a threat to caste boundaries themselves (Chakravarti 2003, 74). Women from marginalized castes therefore occupy a doubly subordinated position, confined by patriarchal norms to the domestic sphere while simultaneously bearing the weight of caste-based exclusion. Gayatri Spivak's (1988, 287) observation that the colonized subject is denied a legible history, and that "the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow," captures why Dalit women's interior lives have so rarely furnished the material of Indian literary fiction. Anjali Kajal's "Ma Is Scared" is notable precisely because it works against that omission, following a mother and daughter whose private fears and small defiances carry the weight of a much larger social order.

Kajal, born in 1978 in Ludhiana, Punjab, has published Hindi short fiction for over two decades, much of it in the magazine *Hans*, and her work centers Dalit and working-class women in northern India (Von Rath 2023). *Ma Is Scared and Other Stories*, translated into English by Kavita Bhanot and issued by Comma Press in 2023, is

her first collection to reach an Anglophone readership. The title story centers on a basti family: a mother, referred to only as Ma, whose daughter Jasbir cycles out each evening to tutor two boys in a neighboring village, and whose training in judo lets her meet the street's casual predation with force of her own (The Bilingual Window, n.d.). Jasbir describes the men who watch her as producing a sensation of "hundreds of tiny dirty ants crawling over my body" (The Bilingual Window, n.d.), an image that renders harassment as a kind of infestation, at once trivial in scale and impossible to shake off. Ma's anxiety, the literal meaning of the story's title, registers not only ordinary maternal worry but the specific vulnerability of a family without caste privilege or reliable police protection.

This article reads "Ma Is Scared" through feminist and Dalit feminist theory to ask how domestic space becomes, in Kajal's hands, a site of both constraint and quiet insurgency. It considers how the mother-daughter relationship dramatizes generational disagreement over what safety requires, and how ordinary domestic acts, cooking, tutoring, waiting by a window, accumulate political weight without ever becoming public protest. The analysis contributes to existing scholarship in three ways. First, it extends feminist literary criticism to a vernacular Hindi text at a moment when Indian feminist scholarship still disproportionately favors English-language and autobiographical narratives. Second, it treats caste and gender as inseparable rather than additive categories, following Rege's and Chakravarti's insistence that Brahmanical patriarchy organizes both simultaneously. Third, it reads the domestic not as the opposite of the political but as one of its primary theaters, in keeping with feminist arguments that the boundary between private and public has always been ideologically constructed rather than natural (Othman 2024, 34).

Literature Review

Scholarship specifically on Kajal remains sparse, a gap that itself reflects the marginal position Dalit and Hindi-language women writers occupy within Indian literary criticism. In the absence of academic monographs, this review draws on the critical reception the collection received on publication. Reviewers agree that Kajal's protagonists are deliberately ordinary, their struggles legible as symptoms of a wider structural injustice rather than exceptional misfortune (Mitra 2024). Kavita Bhanot, the collection's translator, has described the stories as offering perspectives that unsettle the Brahminical assumptions still embedded in much Indian feminist writing (Von Rath 2023). Yogesh Maitreya similarly observes that Kajal renders the "small, normal and tender" textures of women's domestic lives newly visible as sites shaped by caste and gender power (Comma Press 2023). Chittajit Mitra notes that the collection's protagonists are largely low-caste women from the Hindi heartland for whom independence remains "elusive" under continuing discrimination (Mitra 2024). None of these accounts, however, offers a sustained theoretical framework, which is the gap this article addresses.

Two bodies of theory inform the present reading. The first is postcolonial feminist critique of universalized womanhood. Chandra Mohanty (1984, 338) argued that Western feminist scholarship often constructs "Third World women" as a homogeneous, powerless category, abstracted from the specific histories that produce their circumstances. She cautioned that familiar analytic categories cannot explain oppression without attention to socio-historical particularity (Mohanty 1984, 349). Read in this light, Kajal's characters resist easy assimilation into a generic feminist narrative of female victimhood; their fears and strategies are legible only within the specific matrix of caste, class, and region that the story establishes. Spivak's caution about subaltern speech offers a complementary, though more skeptical, lens: if the subaltern woman's voice is structurally difficult to recover even when a text appears to represent her, then Kajal's narrative choice to center a Dalit mother's interiority is itself a claim worth scrutinizing rather than simply celebrating.

The second body of theory is Dalit feminist scholarship, which insists that caste must be treated as constitutive of, rather than incidental to, gender analysis. Sharmila Rege's foundational account of the Dalit feminist standpoint observes that Dalit women were historically excluded both from male-led anti-caste movements and from upper-caste-dominated feminist organizing, their concerns absorbed into neither (Rege 1998, WS40). Because caste endogamy depends on controlling women's sexuality and reproduction, caste preservation and patriarchal control are, in Rege's account, structurally inseparable. Chakravarti's (2003, 74) related concept of Brahmanical patriarchy names this same fusion: the surveillance of women's conduct as a mechanism for maintaining caste purity. Kajal's story dramatizes this logic concretely. Ma's fear for Jasbir is not reducible to generic anxiety about male violence; it is inflected by the family's lack of caste standing and the knowledge that redress through institutions such as the police is unlikely. Reading the hostile gazes Jasbir

encounters on her bicycle as caste-gender violence, rather than as generic street harassment, follows directly from Rege's and Chakravarti's shared insistence that the two axes cannot be disentangled.

Theoretical Framework

Rather than assembling the full range of scholars whose work touches on caste, gender, and domesticity, this article deliberately narrows its theoretical anchors to those that stand in productive tension with one another. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1991, 1244) concept of intersectionality supplies the analytical starting point: identities such as race, caste, and gender interact to produce experiences that cannot be reduced to any single axis, and attending to that interaction "disrupt[s] the tendency to see race and gender as exclusive or separable." Applied to the Indian context, this means treating gender and caste as co-constitutive rather than as separate variables to be added together, a distinction Kumar and Bakshi (2022, 50) argue is frequently lost when Indian feminist scholarship invokes intersectionality only nominally, "occlud[ing] the contingent co-construction" of caste and gender rather than examining it. Chakravarti's and Rege's work grounds this framework in the specific Indian context, showing how Brahmanical patriarchy and the Dalit feminist standpoint together explain why domestic control over women functions simultaneously as caste maintenance.

Against this affirmative frame, Spivak's and Mohanty's work introduces a necessary skepticism. Spivak's warning that subaltern speech is structurally difficult to recover, even by well-intentioned interlocutors, complicates any straightforward claim that Kajal's fiction simply gives voice to Dalit women; it asks instead what forms of mediation, translation, and narrative convention shape that voice before it reaches a reader. Mohanty's related critique of the composite, undifferentiated figure Western scholarship often makes of the non-Western woman performs a related function at the level of interpretation, cautioning against reading Jasbir and her mother as representative of Dalit women in general rather than as particular figures shaped by a specific basti, family economy, and regional context. Guru's (1995, 2549) argument that mainstream Indian feminism has often treated caste as a separate, optional concern, leaving Dalit women to theorize it themselves, links these theoretical strands back to the literary text: Kajal's decision to write from within a Dalit household, rather than about one from outside, enacts precisely the kind of self-articulation Guru and Rege call for. Held together, these five sources supply not a confirmatory chorus but a working tension between the claim that domestic resistance constitutes meaningful agency and the caution that celebrating such resistance risks understating the structural change still required.

Methodology

This article draws on the English translation of "Ma Is Scared," rendered by Kavita Bhanot in *Ma Is Scared and Other Stories* (Kajal 2023), supplemented by a translated excerpt made publicly available by the translator (The Bilingual Window, n.d.), which permits closer attention to specific phrasing than the secondary reviews alone would allow. Working from a translation necessarily introduces a layer of mediation between the analysis and Kajal's original Hindi; where the translated text is quoted directly, this limitation should be kept in view; the argument does not claim access to the stylistic texture of the Hindi original.

The method is qualitative close reading, focused on three elements: dialogue exchanges between Ma and Jasbir, particularly moments where generational disagreement surfaces explicitly; recurring imagery associated with the body and public space, such as Jasbir's simile for street harassment; and structural irony, meaning moments where the story's plotting reverses or complicates its own apparent argument. Scenes were selected according to two criteria: first, whether they stage an explicit negotiation between mother and daughter over safety, mobility, or education, since these are the moments where the story's argument about domestic resistance is most directly tested; and second, whether they contain imagery or dialogue that a purely thematic summary would flatten, since closer textual attention is best answered by scenes where language itself is doing interpretive work. This selection is necessarily partial. It privileges the title story's central relationship over its secondary characters, and it draws comparatively on "Deluge," another story in the collection, only where it illuminates a shared concern with self-defense and maternal inheritance. The analysis that follows is accordingly a case study rather than a survey of the full collection, a scope appropriate to the space available but worth stating plainly as a limitation.

Discussion

Education, Mobility, and the Grammar of Fear

Jasbir's evening bicycle rides to tutor two boys in a village near the basti condense the story's central tension into a single recurring image. The arrangement requires her parents' consent, secured only after negotiation and after the boys' father visits in person to vouch for the household's respectability (*The Bilingual Window*, n.d.). That a paid tutoring job for a young woman requires this degree of domestic diplomacy signals how thoroughly mobility itself is gendered in the story's world: Jasbir is not simply choosing to work but negotiating the terms under which her body may occupy public space at all. The irony Kajal builds around this arrangement is precise. The very economic contribution that should secure Jasbir standing within her family instead multiplies the occasions on which she is exposed to harassment, since each ride to and from the village becomes another passage through hostile streets. Education and self-defense do not resolve this bind so much as let Jasbir manage it: her judo training gives her the physical capacity to answer harassment directly, but it does nothing to shorten the distance she must travel or to alter the presence of the men who watch her.

The simile Jasbir uses to describe that watching, men's stares reduced to the crawling of countless small, dirty insects across her skin (*The Bilingual Window*, n.d.), does considerable interpretive work. Ants suggest something simultaneously trivial and unbearable: no single glance constitutes an assault, yet their cumulative effect is a form of bodily colonization, a claim laid on her skin without her consent. The image also carries a class and caste inflection easily overlooked. Ants are associated with dirt, decay, and the unregulated proximity of insect life to human habitation, conditions more visibly present in basti housing than in more affluent neighborhoods; Kajal's simile thus quietly links the indignity of the gaze to the material conditions of poverty the family already endures, without ever stating the connection outright. This is the kind of implicit, textural caste-gender fusion that Chakravarti's and Rege's frameworks anticipate but that only close attention to the story's language can locate.

Domestic Micro-Politics and the Reversal of Maternal Fear

Cavalcanti's (2018, 195) account of the home as a site of micro-politics, where routine tasks become occasions for identity negotiation rather than simple repetition, describes the texture of "Ma Is Scared" with some precision. The story's most consequential exchanges occur not in the street but in the kitchen and the doorway: Ma's questioning of Jasbir, Jasbir's insistence that she has no wish to be confined to the house, and the eventual, hesitant laughter the two share before Ma returns to preparing food. That the story resolves, however provisionally, through the resumption of a domestic routine rather than through a public confrontation with the harassers is significant. It suggests that Kajal locates the meaningful site of change not in the street where the offense occurs but, in the kitchen, where its meaning is contested and, imperfectly, metabolized between mother and daughter.

The story's central irony lies in the direction fear travels. Ma's anxiety is meant to protect Jasbir from the world, but by the story's end it has curdled into something closer to fear of her own daughter, a young woman who fights back and who therefore, in Ma's calculus, risks inviting graver retaliation. This inversion, protection producing a new object of dread, complicates any reading of judo training as straightforward empowerment. Kajal does not present Jasbir's physical confidence as a solution to the family's vulnerability; she presents it as a new variable the household must now absorb, alongside poverty, caste exclusion, and the father's precarious factory work. The domestic sphere in this story is therefore neither simply a prison, in the manner early Western feminist criticism often assumed, nor simply a refuge reclaimed through resistance. It is closer to what Cavalcanti calls an "unreal" space of belonging (2018), one where identities are continually renegotiated rather than settled, and where a mother's love and a mother's fear are, finally, difficult to separate.

Intersectionality, Voice, and the Limits of Domestic Resistance

The scene in which Jasbir strikes back against her harassers using judo answers Crenshaw's call to examine how overlapping identities shape women's lived experience, since the confrontation is legible only once caste, gender, and class are read together: a young Dalit woman from a basti family, traveling for paid work, meeting street harassment with force because neither her family's economic position nor her caste status affords her other forms of protection. Read alongside Guru's (1995, 2549) argument that mainstream Indian feminism has often relegated caste to Dalit women's own organizations rather than treating it as central, Jasbir's self-reliance

can be seen as enacting, in miniature, exactly the self-articulation Guru and Rege call for: she does not wait for an external rescuer, feminist or otherwise, but meets the threat with a capacity she has built herself.

Yet Spivak's caution about subaltern speech resists a wholly celebratory reading of this scene. Jasbir's physical retaliation is legible to the reader because Kajal, and behind her Bhanot's translation, has already framed and narrated it; the story's very existence as a piece of literary fiction, filtered through an English translation and an international publisher, is itself a form of mediation that Spivak's argument suggests should not be forgotten even as it is set aside for the purposes of literary analysis. Mohanty's related caution against treating any single character as representative of women elsewhere in the global South applies with equal force here: Jasbir's judo is a resource specific to her story, not a template for Dalit women's resistance more broadly, and reading it as such would repeat precisely the homogenizing move Mohanty warns against. Kajal's narrative seems aware of this limit. Jasbir's confidence does not travel outward into organized or collective action within the story; it remains a personal, bodily competence exercised within the bounds of her individual encounters. The story is, in this sense, more modest in its political claims than a triumphant reading of "empowerment" would suggest, and that modesty is itself an interpretive finding rather than a shortcoming.

Debate: Does Individual Resistance Substitute for Structural Change?

The valorization of domestic and individual resistance in "Ma Is Scared" invites a skeptical question that feminist theory has long posed to narratives of this kind: does celebrating a daughter's self-defense training risk quietly transferring responsibility for safety onto women themselves, leaving the underlying conditions that produce street harassment unexamined? Mohanty's (1984, 349) insistence that feminist politics requires historically specific, collective strategies rather than individual reversals of power sharpens this concern. If Jasbir's judo becomes the story's answer to caste-gender violence, the implicit lesson risks being that women who are not trained, not confident, or not physically capable bear some share of blame for their own vulnerability, an implication no thoughtful reading of the story should accept uncritically.

Kajal's narrative, however, resists offering judo as a comprehensive solution. Ma's fear does not resolve into relief once Jasbir demonstrates her capability; if anything, it intensifies, since the story suggests that visible defiance invites its own retaliation in a social order still organized around caste and gender hierarchy. The closing exchange of "Deluge," a companion story in the same collection, makes the collective dimension of this concern explicit: a woman regretting that her own mother never taught her how to defend herself is answered by a friend's resolve regarding the next generation of daughters, a resolve reported by Jindal (2023) as: "We'll make them strong." Read together, these two stories suggest that Kajal locates empowerment not in any single act of physical training but in a slower, intergenerational transmission of resources, one that individual families undertake precisely because broader structural protections remain unavailable to them. This is less a naive endorsement of self-help than an unsentimental portrait of what women do when institutional recourse, whether from caste privilege, police protection, or a less punishing labor market, is not forthcoming. Lau's related observation that South Asian women's kitchens and domestic routines function as sites where "their sense of self is recovered and new forms of empowerment can be achieved" (2006, 1098) describes this dynamic without romanticizing it: recovery and achievement, in Kajal's telling, remain partial, hard-won, and continually renegotiated rather than complete.

Conclusion

"Ma Is Scared" resists two temptations that a less careful reading might invite: treating the domestic sphere as simple confinement, and treating a daughter's physical confidence as simple triumph. Kajal's prose instead stages the home as a site of ongoing negotiation, where a mother's fear for her daughter and her fear of her daughter's defiance exist side by side, and where judo, tutoring, and the daily labor of cooking together carry political weight without ever declaring themselves as protest. Read through Crenshaw's, Chakravarti's, and Rege's accounts of intersecting caste and gender oppression, and held against Spivak's and Mohanty's cautions about voice and representativeness, the story emerges as an argument for incremental, intergenerational resistance rather than a celebration of individual empowerment. That argument carries a limitation worth stating openly: this analysis rests on a single title story read in English translation, and a fuller account of Kajal's contribution to Dalit feminist literature would need to consider the collection as a whole and, ideally, the Hindi originals. Within that scope, however, the story offers a valuable corrective to Indian literary criticism's continued underattention to vernacular, Dalit-authored fiction, and it suggests that the household, far from

being irrelevant to caste and gender politics, remains one of the places where that politics is most persistently worked out.

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