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Self-Narrative as Protest Literature: Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs

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Abstract

Aim: This study also highlights how the author overcame these barriers in order to find self-fulfillment. *The Weave of My Life* is a piece of protest literature, as the narrative relates the struggles Pawar makes in the predominantly Brahminical educational structure. Pawar protests the inferiorizing experiences associated with her caste and gender, and her self-narrative also critically engages with Dalit patriarchy, a debilitating barrier to the social progress of many Dalit women (Saha, 2017; Mahurkar, 2018; Sreelatha, 2015).

Methodology and Approach: The work has consulted primary and secondary sources on the subject to examine the novel. The paper has adopted an interdisciplinary approach to conduct this study especially focusing on subaltern studies.

Outcome: Urmila Pawar's narrative is a disruptive work and is a representative sample of resistance literature since it unintentionally disrupts the established literary conventions in style, diction, aesthetic sensibility, and contextual parameters.

Conclusion and Suggestions: To sum up, women's self-narratives are a rarely explored genre of literature, and within that genre, Dalit women's narratives are yet to attract critical attention. Caste and class are inextricably tied up to the socio-economic status and deny them any opportunities for upward social mobility.

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In the present era, Dalit women's literature has become a potent tool of socio-political and economic resistance, as the literature represents women resisting oppression in the historically marginalized communities (Mondal & Kumar, 2023; Rege, 1998, 2008). Urmila Pawar is one of the leading voices in the field. Her self-narrative, *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoir*, her representative non-fictional creative writing, stands out as a remarkable work that unmistakably weaves autobiography with socio-political defiance (Mahurkar, 2018; Sen, 2017). The book demonstrates how the author uses her personal experiences to channel her social critique. Her memoir challenges caste oppression and asserts her agency in the larger narrative of feminist and Dalit identity politics through literary self-representation (Azam, 2022). Self-narrative is generally considered a personal, often emotional, genre of writing, but when it comes to Dalit women's narratives, the genre reinvents itself as an instrument of protest. Indian Dalit women's status as subaltern women with respect to their place in the caste and class structure has been a matter of concern to so many writers, irrespective of whether they themselves hail from Dalit communities or not, since their subalternity leads to their social and economic alienation (Mondal & Kumar, 2023; Sen, 2017; Simon, 2021). Dalit women are subjected to exploitation of every kind and fall prey to biased social, economic, and religious customs because they belong to a certain caste, class, and gender, and therefore, their problems are distinct in many ways from other problems associated with subalternity (Kumar, 2022). Moreover, the powerful gender demarcation, ever present in India, complicates their problems further as their gender becomes the cause of double oppression—in society at large and close at home—adding yet another dimension to the factors contributing to the suffering of Dalit women. Self-narratives by Dalit women bring out all these factors and their consequences as first-hand versions of the sufferer's experience of injustice and inequality (Sengupta, 2021). Against this background, and as an influential Dalit feminist writer, Urmila Pawar presents the story of her life, narrating the social, economic, political, and familial events affecting her journey, and as a defiant assertion against the deeply entrenched caste and gender hierarchies in the male-dominated,

caste-oriented milieu of the Indian nation. *The Weave of My Life* amplifies her subaltern voice, disrupts the dominant mainstream narratives, and functions as a platform for solidarity among oppressed communities.

It is within the last four decades that ‘Dalit Studies’ has emerged as a major academic discipline in English and other critical theory-oriented interdisciplinary studies in India. In English studies in India, after the major intervention of the linguistic turn in interpretation, the English canon has included numerous publications in Dalit and minority literature in its fold. English language and literature are perceived as instruments of empowerment and upward social mobility in India, so the inclusion of Dalit texts is perceived as a step towards empowerment of the marginalized (Dutta, 2018). The literal meaning of the word *Dalit* [primarily derived from Sanskrit, meaning ‘broken,’ ‘oppressed,’ ‘repressed,’ or ‘crushed’] is downtrodden or oppressed. The word is said to be coined by the 19th-century Marathi social reformer Jyotiba Phule (timesnownews.com, 11 April 2018). In India the word is a synonym for the untouchables. Dalit writings, literature, and movements are influenced by Marxist ideology in a major way. The Dalit movement was provided with a solid backbone by Ambedkar’s writings (Limbale, 2004). Ambedkar’s strategy has been highly relevant to combat the marginalization of the Dalits and to fight against caste discrimination in social and economic institutions in India (Thorat & Kumar, 2008). Research and political activism on Dalit issues have helped raise Dalit consciousness, such as in the painful historical journey of Dalit women (see, for instance, Kumar’s [2014] essay “Evolution of Historical Consciousness among Dalit Women with Special Reference to Chamar Women of Uttar Pradesh”), including historical consciousness among them. Dalit women have been often misrepresented in the mainstream literature (Gupta, 2008). Dalit literature and its ramifications are growing rapidly, and the most recent spinoff from this socio-academic area are self-narratives by Dalit women, particularly by those who have undergone double-edged oppression and socio-economic exclusion—by both the non-Dalit forward-caste people and the Dalit patriarchs, male chauvinists (Sengupta, 2021; Solanki, 2017).

One of the strong reasons for the selection of Urmila Pawar's autobiography for investigation for the present study is her challenge to the established patriarchal norms and social practices that put women down in every sphere of social and economic activity. Subaltern women face, in addition to patriarchal control over their lives, numerous issues challenging their independence. Most of the time they fight for survival and for issues such as development-induced displacement, inequality in education, employment and wages, reproductive health-related problems, physical-sexual exploitation at work, and economic exploitation, particularly of rural women (Chaudhury, 2012). Almost all the self-narratives by Dalit women include pathetic narratives of their social and sexual exploitation, oppression, and pain. Subaltern Indian women's autobiographies have been studied from various angles (see, for example, Agnihotri 2018; Banerjee 2015; Dey 2018; Latha 2017; Mahale 2018; Naikar 2013; Poitevin 2002; Rege 2006; and Rose 2008, to name only a few). However, a preliminary review of the existing literature reveals that the most common research perspective has been to investigate them as Dalit literature. The present research, on the other hand, takes a different course. It is an extension of, and therefore a brief addition to, the existing literature on the representation of "self" in an Indian subaltern woman's self-narrative. The self-narrative under investigation testifies to the truth of a few points raised by Fivush (2011) in that Pawar displays a sense of subjective "self" journeyed through an autobiographical memory over a gradual development across childhood and adolescence. Moreover, the notion of self is closely associated with the idea of "self-identity," which reflects the individual's self-image constructed vis-à-vis a larger social establishment (Hill & Thomas, 2000). The identity realized by the self is a product of social interactions that impose labels on individuals, classifying them into groups. A corollary point to remember here is that the self-narratives of subaltern Indian women are not literary writings for aesthetic enjoyment (as might be the case with the narratives of writers from other groups) but writings of protest. They largely represent the voice of their community (Poitevin, 2002). The prominent triggers for self-expression in Indian subaltern women's self-narratives

are linked to their communities, and one of them is the feeling of self-degradation as an outcome of the hatred heaped upon them by their own communities and by the society at large. This aspect of their writings, that is, the problem of social ostracization, has attracted the attention of several researchers (Aston, 2001; Beth, 2002; Chairez-Garza, 2018; McNamara, 2007; Poitevin, 2002).

The other dimension of subaltern women's self-narratives attracting research works is the caste issue (see, for instance, Agnihotri, 2018; Aston, 2001; Banerjee, 2015; Beth, 2002; Bhagavan & Feldhaus, 2008; Chakravarti, 2003; Dadawala, 2016; Dey, 2018; Latha, 2017; Limbale, 2004; Mahale, 2018; Naikar, 2013; Poitevin, 2002; Rathee, 2014; Rege, 2006; Rose, 2008; Sarangi, 2011; Zelliott, 1996). The list is not exhaustive, though. The intersection of caste and gender is a recurring theme in Dalit literature (Simon, 2021). Caste has been a major factor in Dalit women's oppression, not only in the Hindu community to which most Dalits belong, but also in other communities. Dalit women's self-narratives act as weapons of defiance against caste stereotyping (Naikar, 2013). Urmila Pawar's narrative also disrupts the dominant historical Dalit accounts. Her memoir is a testament to caste issues, weaving her life experiences into a broader discourse on caste and gender oppression (Pawar, 2008). The narrative in *The Weave of My Life* operates within the caste and class paradigm by chronicling her struggles as a Dalit woman facing systemic discrimination from the forward castes around her (Naikar, 2013; Pawar, 2008). Feminist scholars' works on Dalit themes highlight Dalit women's experiences as doubly marginalized women—oppressed both by caste hierarchies and patriarchal structures (Rege, 2006). Dalit feminism also acknowledges that Dalit women face patriarchal oppression in society for being Dalit women and for being women in general at home/in their communities (Sen, 2017). *The Weave of My Life* is a critical examination of this dual oppression, drawing on the struggles of Dalit women within domestic and public spheres (Patil & Thorat, 2020). The narrative also aligns well with the broader Dalit feminist movement (Arya & Rathore, 2019). Another point to note at this juncture is that education for Dalit women is assigned a critical value in Pawar's memoir, which is symptomatic of the resistance against caste-based

educational exclusion (Patil & Thorat, 2020). Pawar's determination to pursue education in spite of mounting societal opposition mirrors her views on the transformative potential of literacy in Dalit communities (Rege, 2006).

As mentioned above too, the review of existing literature (not exhaustive though) shows that Dalit women's self-narratives have been examined from the common, broad perspective of research as Dalit literature. Research studies investigating their worth as protest literature by women are scanty (Oza, 2020). Thus, there exists a gap in the literature that requires further research focused on the representation of "self" and protest in Indian subaltern women's self-narratives.

Individuals in India are born into their respective castes with the power this cultural capital can buy, or deny, them. Caste and socio-economic status, as well as political power, are directly linked. The castes with lower social status have lower social bargaining power since their survival depends upon menial, low-paying modes of employment. So, caste bondage is the primary point of resistance identified in Dalit women's self-narratives, such as *The Weave of My Life*. The traditional job of Urmila Pawar's community, i.e., the Mahar community in Maharashtra state, was weaving bamboo baskets (called *aaydan* in Marathi). Pawar witnessed her mother weaving *aaydans*, and she calls the act of weaving the baskets the weave of pain, suffering, and agony that linked the family members (*The Weave*, Preface, p. 9). The issue with this traditional setup was that members of the community had few options to choose from, notwithstanding the fact that the profession their caste is involved in scarcely provided for their survival, and hence they were doomed to live in perpetual penury. The weaving business barely supported the family throughout the year; there was always a shortage of money, clothing, housing, and other needs of existence, let alone comfort.

Education opens the door to social and economic upward mobility for everyone. Caste plays an important role in accessing this option as well. Although untouchability is constitutionally eliminated in India, *The Weave of My Life* shows that the evil exists in the society in various forms, and children from the

subaltern communities face the practice at the hands of teachers, classmates, and other people at educational institutions to this day. Pawar paints a vivid picture of this reality of how children from her community were treated in day-to-day affairs. According to Pawar's memoirs, the Mahar children were hit with stones if they made any mistakes, as the teacher would avoid touching them even for punishing the culprits. She writes that "Naturally, our cousins lost all interest in learning and bunked school" (*The Weave*, p. 29). Mahar girls faced double marginalization, one on the basis of their caste and another on the basis of their gender. They were in an even more difficult situation because, first and foremost, they were not permitted to enroll, and even if they did, education was considered to be a pointless enterprise for them because, in the end, they were expected to live a cloistered life as housewives.

Dalits face extreme social discrimination. The forward caste Hindus eschew all social interactions with people from Dalit community, depriving them of any chance of social assimilation. As a result, the majority of people live in unsanitary clusters of huts teeming with pigs and other animals. The situation brings aversion among forward caste Hindus. Menial jobs are imposed on Dalits (Sarangi, 2011). Urmila Pawar has drawn readers' attention to the despicable practice of caste-based discrimination in Maharashtra. The condition was so bad that when somebody from the upper castes, such as Maratha, Kunbi, etc., came from the other side of the road, the person from the lower castes, such as Mahars, were supposed to get down from the road, and move away into the undergrowth, and march through the thorny shrubs on the roadside. It would also be pertinent here to bring in the issue of the objectifying gaze that Dalit women face in mainstream society and the psychological impact it leaves on their lives, which is most often devastating, generating the lifelong inferiority complex (Dey, 2018). It may be likened to the way women are characterised in films to provide the visual pleasure to the 'heterosexual male' and the way they are objectified as sexualized bodies (Mulvey, 1999). The objectification of women's bodies leads to the loss of their subjecthood and agency. Based on this observation, Dey (2018) argues that "much like the 'male gaze,' the dominant Brahminical patriarchal perspective has

continued to objectify Dalit women as laboring and having sexualized bodies, stigmatizing and dominating them” (p. 3). Dalit women do react to this gaze and oppose this gaze, and their reactions are reflected in autobiographical narratives, such as Urmila Pawar’s autobiography.

Dalits are wanted by upper castes for manual labour, but they are unwanted to partake of social festivities, celebrations, and other occasions of social integration and solidarity, although Dalits are claimed to be parts of the same festivities as they are required to provide their services at appropriate occasions. The contradictory nature of this love-hate relationship often leads to conflicts between communities. Incidents on festive occasions often turn sour and leave psychological trauma for the Dalit youths since, being on the receiving end, they are the victims of upper-caste aggression. Pawar narrates the incident of the celebration of the festival of Holi. Young men would go to the forest to collect wood for the village Holi. Mahars cut down the tree to burn for Holi, drag the cut tree down to the village, and erect it in front of the temple. “But once the Holi rituals and celebrations started, the Mahars would be simply ignored. They had no place in them” (*The Weave*, p. 45). If any Mahar youth tried to sneak into the upper caste groups enjoying Holi festivities, there would invariably be a fight, and the youth would be beaten up. The experience is psychologically traumatic. Pawar has narrated several other experiences that culminated in psychological inferiority, inflicted upon her community by upper castes because of their caste. The Mahars were specifically the targets of discrimination since some other ‘lower’ castes in her village, such as Bhandaris and Kulwadis, were spared the similar harsh treatment.

Poverty, psychological trauma, and centuries of oppression make the Dalits feel powerless and vulnerable. Urmila Pawar describes this situation in her narrative. Social class contributes to one’s subalternity in a big way. Class and subaltern status are intricately mixed and woven up in Indian subaltern women’s lives as their class drags them down. But Pawar challenges her subaltern status. Her life has been a struggle to defeat the forces of class and her Dalit-hood in an attempt to assert her selfhood beyond her class and to achieve a sense of

fulfillment. However, she never loses the sense of her status in the society around her. For instance, her classmates, the upper-caste girls, always brought novel food items in their tiffin boxes and when they went on excursions. But Pawar never asked herself the question, “Why don’t we make such dishes at home?” Because she was aware that she was born in a particular caste, in poverty, and that she had to live accordingly (*The Weave*, p. 70). Being aware of one’s caste and class in childhood leaves a lasting impact on the psyche of the individual. On certain occasions, her community members would go begging for food to the houses of the affluent and would survive for two days on those leftovers.... “In some houses the flesh of dead animals would be eaten. But that was forbidden in our house” (*The Weave*, p. 47).

Gender is an extremely debilitating factor contributing to Indian Dalit women’s subalternity. The experiences of Dalit women are unique in the sense that they face double oppression: (a) they are oppressed by the upper-class society for their caste and class, and (b) at the same time, since they are part of a patriarchal setup, they are oppressed at home because of their gender. Urmila Pawar addresses this issue in her writing. At home, the Dalit men adhere to all of the patriarchal social standards they inherently have imbibed from the upper-caste society. Rather than treating women as human beings, they treat them as objects; they expect their women to work the whole day along with them in labour jobs, cook food for the entire family, do all the household chores, take care of the children, and then serve them in the bed at night. If a woman dares to refuse any of these obligations imposed on her, violence ensues, and the woman is always blamed for the family disaster by the husband, his relatives, and even the community. Urmila Pawar writes that she was held accountable for her husband Harishchandra’s illness, which resulted in his untimely death, the death of her son, and other challenges the family encountered during hard times. Her education, job, writing career, social work, meetings, programs, and finally, she herself, because of who she was, were held responsible for her husband’s illness (*The Weave*, p. 198). But since Pawar was determined to go on fighting to shed off her subalternity, and for the sake of innumerable men and women of her

community, such blame games didn't matter to her. The patriarchal Indian society blames only women for the problems families face if women are active in the public sphere for the betterment of the community. If a woman displays any sign of happiness after the death of her abusive husband, they call the condition "widow's swelling" (p. 199). Even in organizations formed for social resistance against oppression of the subaltern communities, women members are faced with staunch patriarchal attitudes from male members. "If the Mahar community is the 'other' for the Brahmins, Mahar women become the 'other' for the Mahar men" (Pandit, 2008, p. xi). The same men who display extreme sensitivity to caste discrimination against the community turn a deaf ear to gender discrimination in the same community.

The other gendered concept Pawar brings up in her autobiography that drags lower-caste women down is the sole responsibility of women to safeguard their chastity for personal dignity as well as for social respect, whereas the men involved in an act of physical/sexual assault on women have nothing to lose as regards social respect and dignity. All sorts of insults are heaped upon the woman if something untoward happens to her, as if it is her sole responsibility to safeguard her reputation, while her man possesses the power to abandon her as a disreputable woman if he desires to. Gendered segregation of roles of boys and girls in India is inscribed in the very structure of their childhood games, in which a girl is taught to be submissive, docile, homely, non-aggressive, cooperative under all circumstances, and meekly following her husband irrespective of numerous faults in his character, whereas a boy is trained to be fierce, aggressive, dominating, overbearing, repressive, and commanding to his wife. Thus, a girl is taught to accept her subalternity at the very outset of her life. The upper hand of man is inbuilt in Indian culture at every step, and men and women are taught their gender roles very clearly in the beginning of their adult lives too. The other facet of the gendered thinking affecting the lives of lower-caste women is that there is a traditional hierarchy of power and control among women in the house, especially in a joint family. The social outcome of this arrangement is that women, in general, begin hating each other.

Pawar's narrative may be read as a testimonio invoking the transformation of the upper-caste society in India and a big change in the attitude of their own menfolk towards women. Her writing is particularly an advocacy for the elimination of the gender stereotyping that inadvertently drags the marginalized women to subalternity. Pawar places a high premium on the education of her people in the hope that the more the people are educated, the more they will realize that in place of becoming agents of change for their community, they are indirectly hurting the community by blocking the progress of their women, whom they are supposed to protect from exploitation and triple marginalization of caste, class, and gender. Expansion of formal schooling would bring increased income, reduced poverty, delay in marriage, and improved health for Dalit girls and women (Dejaeghere & Arur, 2020). Her account is powerful, bringing to light the plight of subaltern women, despite the fact that Pawar herself did not encounter significant gender discrimination at home. Nonetheless, she had plenty of opportunities to confront the unpleasant truth of the world around her, and her writing is an attempt to spiritually heal both herself and others.

The Weave of My Life exposes the patriarchal societal doctrine instilled in Dalit women's lives from an early age, teaching women that a woman can only stay happy with her husband, at her in-laws', no matter how oppressive her husband and in-laws are. Pawar presents in her narrative examples of such events from her own family. Her father, despite being educated and having faith in the education and empowerment of women, believed in the same ideology. Male chauvinism is a common trait among lower-caste men (but not exclusive to them) that Pawar's self-narrative draws readers' attention to. For instance, men enjoy the freedom to entertain themselves in various ways, such as going to see the popular Marathi erotic performance at a tamasha, while if their women attempted to entertain themselves imitating a tamasha show, they would beat them black and blue. Pawar takes special note of such instances, as they are testimonies to the male chauvinistic behaviour in her community. Under the present circumstances, as represented by Pawar in her narrative and as advocated, in a subtle manner, for a change in the societal attitude towards women, the answer to the question of

individuality is in the negative, while her loss of personality to her kith and kin is in the affirmative.

To sum up, women's self-narratives are a rarely explored genre of literature, and within that genre, Dalit women's narratives are yet to attract critical attention. For Dalit women, as explicated by Pawar, the dimensions of caste, class, and gender deepen their inequality and drag them down into perpetual subalternity. Caste and class are inextricably tied up to the socio-economic status and deny them any opportunities for upward social mobility. Pawar provides the reader with a first-hand account of her experiences of injustice and inequality at various stages in her life. Thus, her experiences are not just personal but representative of the experiences of the community she hails from and an oblique protest against the injustices. Pawar's narrative is a significant milestone in her journey for freedom, as it provides moral support for protest against caste and gender segregation to other female Dalit writers (Mondal & Kumar, 2023). Pawar's narrative needs to be examined apart from 'Dalit Writing,' as it is embedded in various spatial implications of Dalit women's lives, the characters' interaction with it, and a self-reflexive narrative gaze of a Dalit woman that sets it apart from the common Dalit literature (Kumar, 2022; Samarjeet & Bharti, 2023; Vinoth & Soundhararajan, 2022).

Dalit women's self-narratives are part of the 'outlaw' genre. The term 'outlaw genre' means a literary genre that disrupts literary conventions and constitutes resistance literature (Kaplan, 1992). Urmila Pawar's narrative is a disruptive work and is a representative sample of resistance literature since it unintentionally disrupts the established literary conventions in style, diction, aesthetic sensibility, and contextual parameters, as well as obliquely addresses the historical wrongs in the lives of subaltern women in India and offers a platform for resistance to the factors contributing to their perpetual subaltern status. Pawar's narrative provides many hints that the issue is not simple and malleable enough to be resolved easily; it's a highly complex issue since it is not only a product of the patriarchal system inherited by people for thousands of years but also intertwined with the caste and class system. In a sense, the gendered concepts

are subtle forms of casteism. Various narratives documented by Pawar in *The Weave* suggest that women from subaltern communities in India suffer more from gender hierarchy-related inequality because the subaltern communities are in the tight grip of illiteracy and traditional lifestyles based on rigid patriarchal patterns, which teach men to dictate the lives of women at home. Pawar hopes that with the spread of higher education and more subaltern men discarding the tradition-bound lifestyle, things stand a chance for improvement. But, as things stand today, the dynamics of the caste system, class rigidity, and gender inequality inherent in subaltern Indian women's lives depicted in the autobiography of Urmila Pawar are real and reflect the ugly face of Indian society.

¹ Leela Dube's (2005) analysis that "the principles of caste inform the specific nature of sexual asymmetry in Hindu society" (242) explains why the boundaries and the hierarchical structure of caste have much in common with the boundaries and hierarchical structuration observed in the concept of gender. In other words, in the Brahminical Indian system, women share the lowest social pedestal devised for the lowest social order—the Shudras—as regards their power vis-à-vis the men in the household. A woman is accorded a lower rank in the household, as Shudras are accorded a lower rank in the social order; therefore, she has to show deference to the wishes of men, the same way as Shudras are supposed to show deference to the wishes of others higher than them in the social order. A related interesting fact is that a woman of lower rank married to a person of higher social rank achieves his social rank, whereas a woman of higher social rank married to a man of lower rank loses her higher rank and is reduced to a lower social rank. Since such conditions create a confused social order, inter-caste marriages are completely banned in India to protect the purity of blood and rank.

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