



Threads of oppression and resistance: Gendered caste struggles in Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2008)

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Abstract

Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2008) is a seminal Dalit feminist autobiography that explores the intersecting oppressions of caste and gender. This paper examines how Pawar's childhood and adolescence were shaped by systemic deprivation, domestic labor, social exclusion, and limited access to education, illustrating the dual marginalization faced by Dalit women. Her narrative transforms personal suffering into a political act, using autobiography as a tool of resistance and collective testimony. Through education, work, and storytelling, Pawar asserts agency, challenges patriarchal and caste hierarchies, and reclaims her selfhood. By situating her experiences within the broader context of Dalit women's lives, the autobiography foregrounds collective struggles and solidarity. This study highlights how Pawar's life-writing contributes to Dalit feminist discourse and Indian literature, demonstrating that the pursuit of identity and dignity is inseparable from confronting structural inequalities.

Keywords: Dalit feminism, gendered oppression, caste, autobiography, resistance

Introduction

One of the most well-known authors of Dalit feminist literature, Urmila Pawar, has made a substantial contribution to the representation of Dalit women's experiences in modern Indian literature. In addition to being a personal narrative, her autobiography, *The Weave of My Life* (2008), bears witness to the communal challenges of Dalit women who have traditionally been disenfranchised by the intersections of patriarchy and caste. By placing her life experience within larger social, cultural, and political settings, Pawar's narrative highlights the daily realities of exclusion, labor, and perseverance. Through her autobiography, she asserts a type of literary resistance that contradicts popular, upper-caste narratives and draws attention to the systematic injustices experienced by Dalit women. She emerges as both an activist and a historian.

The Weave of My Life holds a significant place in the Indian Dalit autobiographical tradition, on par with Sharankumar Limbale's *Outcaste* (1984) and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (1986). Pawar highlights the twin marginalization experienced by Dalit women, where caste and gender interact to generate compounded feelings of deprivation, humiliation, and denial of agency, whereas Limbale and other male Dalit autobiographers primarily focus on caste oppression and illegitimacy. Thus, by highlighting the gendered aspect of oppression and bringing to light the particular difficulties faced by Dalit women in the social, educational, and home domains, her story broadens the conversation around Dalit life-writing.

The idea of intersectionality, a paradigm that shows how several axes of social identity—in this case, caste and gender—interact to create intricate kinds of discrimination and social exclusion, is fundamental to Pawar's story. Her writings on Dalit feminism emphasize the need of identifying these interconnected hierarchies and comprehending women's experiences under the structural limitations of patriarchy and caste. In Pawar's life, social exclusion takes the form of limited educational

opportunities, early work entrance, home subordination, and ongoing marginalization, illustrating that oppression is rarely felt along a single axis but rather is systematic and cumulative.

Examining how gender and caste interact to create systematic oppression in Pawar's life and how she overcomes these obstacles via self-assertion and acts of resistance is the goal of this essay. This research examines how Pawar regains agency, affirms selfhood, and turns her personal story into a communal witness of Dalit women's struggles by examining *The Weave of My Life* within the framework of Dalit feminist rhetoric. Thus, the autobiography highlights the inseparability of societal critique and personal experience, functioning not just as a personal narrative but also as a critical intervention in Dalit literature and feminist philosophy.

Gendered Caste Oppression: Lived Experiences and Social Exclusion

The Weave of My Life by Urmila Pawar is a powerful description of the exacerbated marginalization that Dalit women endure, showing how early experiences of starvation, poverty, and social exclusion mold identity and awareness. Pawar faces a caste-hierarchical culture from a young age, which controls not just social interactions but also access to necessities. Her early years were characterized by hardship since she was born into a Dalit household, where even everyday survival is difficult and hunger becomes a physical reality and a sign of caste-based exclusion. Pawar states,

young Mahar boys, poverty-stricken and destitute, would drink liquor and get intoxicated. They would try to forget their toils, the labor spent in cutting the trees and carrying them down the slope to the temple. Fires of hunger would rage in their stomachs and they would try to quench these flames by pouring glass after glass of liquor down their throats. (Pawar 62)

Her status as a girl in a patriarchal society—where Dalit women are frequently confined to the lowest levels of social, economic, and family hierarchies—further exacerbates her struggles. According to Pawar, childhood is not a moment of innocence but rather one in which caste and gender intersections impose constraints, work, and humiliation, fostering an early sense of marginalization (Rege 45).

In Pawar's portrayal of oppression, gendered assumptions are crucial. From an early age, Dalit women are expected to perform difficult home duties such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of their siblings, which leaves little time for schooling or personal development (Pawar 35). Dalit girls' work is frequently underappreciated, seen as a continuation of caste-based slavery, and imposed through both overt household authority and covert societal standards. Despite being theoretically possible, economic need and social beliefs that favor males' education over girls' sometimes limit access to education (Pawar 38).

nobody was in favor of Akka's going to school and her staying so far away from home. All the women complained, "Bah! What do women have to do with education? Ultimately, she would be blowing on the stove, wouldn't she?" or "Is she going to be a teacher, a Brahmin lady, that she goes to school?" (Pawar 40)

By restricting options for self-assertion and perpetuating cycles of dependency, these limitations were essential to preserving Dalit women's subservient status (Rege 52). In this sense, caste oppression and patriarchal domination combine to create a twin system of enslavement, with girls like Pawar bearing the brunt of marginalization.

Throughout her story, the nexus of gender and caste recurs frequently. Caste and patriarchy are not distinct axes of discrimination against Dalit women; rather, they are mutually reinforcing "simultaneous structures of oppression," according to Sharmila Rege (Rege 48). According to Pawar, social marginalization occurs on several levels: as a Dalit, she is stigmatized and dehumanized, and at the same time, she is denied freedom, movement, and a voice due to her gender. Her descriptions of self-doubt, internalized humiliation, and the ongoing battle to establish her identity in environments that provide little acknowledgment are replete with emotional and psychological repercussions (Pawar 42). Living at the confluence of gender and caste adds psychological weight to the sensation of exclusion, resulting in a multi-layered and enduring sense of vulnerability that molds Pawar's identity.

The communal aspect of oppression, where social interactions continuously reinforce inequalities, is further shown by her early and teenage years. Dalit girls' invisibility within the greater social order is reinforced by the systematic discouragement of their participation in cultural activities, public places, and social mobility (Pawar 50). Pawar's story highlights how these lived experiences are representative of the Dalit women's collective predicament, highlighting how hunger, work, and domesticity are not just personal struggles but also indicators of systemic injustices. Dalit autobiographies, according to Eleanor Zelliot, are crucial for comprehending these gendered features because they highlight the particular ways in which oppression is internalized and fought (Zelliot 102). By providing a detailed account of her early years,

Pawar shows that gendered caste discrimination is systemic rather than accidental, influencing every facet of her life, from social interactions and self-perception to employment and education.

Pawar highlights the power and tenacity of Dalit women navigating these interlocking oppressive frameworks via her life narrative. Her story also documents moments of assertion, resistance, and ultimate empowerment, setting the stage for further acts of self-expression and advocacy, even when childhood and societal isolation impose severe constraints (Pawar 65). Thus, *The Weave of My Life* documents systematic injustice while also showcasing the resilience and will of Dalit women who, in spite of several layers of discrimination, pursue independence, education, and respect.

Resistance and Selfhood: Reclaiming Agency through Narrative

The Weave of My Life by Urmila Pawar is a prime example of the revolutionary power of autobiography as a weapon of resistance, especially for underprivileged Dalit women whose voices have traditionally been repressed. Pawar challenges prevailing literary and social narratives that have marginalized or misrepresented Dalit women by sharing her own experiences as well as those of her community. Her life narrative serves as a vehicle for both highlighting the systemic violence caused by patriarchy and caste and reaffirming the autonomy and dignity of individuals who are subjected to it. Pawar transforms her autobiography into a political intervention by bringing attention to situations that are frequently hidden in popular narratives through in-depth descriptions of hunger, work, household duties, and social marginalization (Pawar 12). Her work is situated within the larger tradition of Dalit feminist writing, which holds that individual suffering is inextricably linked to community reality, thanks to its dual purpose of both collective representation and personal witness (Rege 52).

In Pawar's story, employment and education are shown to be essential tools for regaining control over one's life and restoring one's identity. Even though Pawar and other Dalit girls encounter structural obstacles to education, the chances, she was able to take advantage of, offered her a framework for critical thought in addition to useful skills. She was able to express oppression, fight internalized marginalization, and ultimately create a narrative that questions social inequalities thanks to literacy and education (Pawar 38). Another way to feel empowered is via work, both in the home and subsequently in larger social settings.

I also did a few jobs: nothing permanent—these were temporary jobs; I worked in leave vacancies, that is, I filled in for people who were away. Both my office and college were at a stone's throw from my house. But it was difficult to attend morning college, get home, change clothes, wear a sari, and go to the office carrying a tiffin box. So, I used to carry my lunch to the college and go to the office straight from there.

At that time, I possessed only one sari and two or three skirts. I usually wore a skirt to the office. Why not, I reasoned. Didn't working girls in Pune and Mumbai wear skirts? So why couldn't I? People, of course, did not say anything to my face, but they considered me a very "fast" girl! (Pawar 155)

Pawar challenges conventional expectations and redefines the parameters of Dalit womanhood by pursuing work with

purpose and claiming her skills, consequently navigating venues that were previously closed to women of her caste. She is able to assert both intellectual and material autonomy through her work and education, which paves the way for activist and literary interventions (Omvedt 134).

Pawar's story also emphasizes how crucial unity and group consciousness are to the fight for identity. Although her autobiography describes personal experiences, it always places them in the context of a larger group of Dalit women whose lives are equally characterized by gendered and caste-based oppression. By highlighting the fact that liberation is a collective as well as individual endeavor, this feeling of shared struggle turns personal narratives into tools of societal critique (Rege 60). Pawar creates a discourse of solidarity by using narrative to connect the macrocosm of systemic injustice to the microcosm of her community and home, validating lived realities and inspiring group action. Thus, her writing serves as an example of how life writing may serve as a vehicle for creating social consciousness, wherein the lines between the political and personal spheres are purposefully blurred (Zelliot 102).

Pawar's autobiography's themes and strategies of resistance are echoed in the stories of other Dalit women, particularly Baby Kamble's *The Prison We Broke* (2008) [1]. The overlapping oppressions of caste and gender are also documented in Kamble's autobiography, which describes the struggles for education, social isolation, and domestic work. Both writers show how Dalit women utilize autobiography to question and resist institutional inequalities by transforming marginalization experiences into literary actions of empowerment. Kamble highlights the material and domestic challenges that shape resistance within everyday circumstances, whereas Pawar highlights the collective dimensions of Dalit women's life and the possibilities for solidarity (Kamble 18–20). When taken as a whole, these pieces demonstrate how Dalit women's autobiographies serve as interventions that support societal transformation while validating lived experience.

These life-writing techniques are important, as critical research emphasizes. Dalit women's autobiographies are influenced by both patriarchal and caste institutions at the same time, according to Sharmila Rege, and as such, their stories are crucial to comprehending the complex aspects of oppression (Rege 48). Dalit life-writing, according to Eleanor Zelliot, makes the social and emotional reality of oppressed populations apparent and sheds light on the ways in which systematic discrimination is absorbed, fought, and told (Zelliot 102). The emancipatory potential of Dalit women's stories is also highlighted by Gail Omvedt, who frames them as both political critique and personal testimony that subverts hegemonic social norms (Omvedt 134). Within this critical framework, Pawar's work shows that autobiography is a purposeful act of social resistance that empowers both the writer and the reader, rather than just a retelling of personal experience.

To sum up, *The Weave of My Life* is a wonderful example of how political declaration and personal story may coexist. By giving voice to experiences that have been repressed, using employment and education as means of self-assertion, and encouraging collective consciousness among Dalit women, Pawar turns her autobiography into a place of resistance. Her story demonstrates how selfhood is inextricably linked to the battle against caste and gendered oppression by placing individual action within collective

struggle. Pawar makes a substantial contribution to Dalit feminist writing by using narrative to regain identity and dignity, proving that autobiography can be used as a tool for societal change as well as a personal witness.

Conclusion

In the *Weave of My Life*, Urmila Pawar eloquently demonstrates how caste and gender intersected to form her experiences, especially in her early years. She experienced social exclusion, household work, institutional impoverishment, and educational limitations as a Dalit girl growing up, all of which highlighted the dual burden of marginalization. These acts weren't unique; rather, they were a manifestation of larger systemic injustices that limited Dalit women's life for many generations. Pawar's story demonstrates how the emotional and social repercussions of these interlocking oppressions—from internalized guilt and humiliation to a lack of agency—were crucial in shaping her awareness and worldview.

Her autobiography serves as a potent tool for both political opposition and self-expression at the same time. Pawar exposes structural injustices and challenges prevailing societal narratives that have traditionally repressed minority voices by sharing her personal story and the stories of other Dalit women, turning personal pain into a collective witness. She is able to express experiences that were frequently discounted or made invisible through writing, which turns into an act of agency. She demonstrates the emancipatory possibilities of life-writing by using storytelling to recover not just her personal identity but also to help Dalit women create a collective identity.

By highlighting the gendered aspects of caste oppression, *The Weave of My Life* significantly advances Dalit feminist discourse and Indian literature. Pawar's story demonstrates how institutional injustices and human hardships are inextricably linked by placing individual experiences within broader social and historical frameworks. Her life narrative demonstrates the tenacity, ingenuity, and camaraderie of Dalit women while highlighting the value of education, independence, and group support in achieving autonomy and dignity. In the end, Pawar shows that recovering oneself is a process that requires challenging long-standing caste and patriarchal systems, claiming one's agency, and converting individual pain into group empowerment. Her writings serve as a testament and a guide for comprehending the intricacies of social justice, resistance, and identity in the lives of underrepresented groups.

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