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Folklore In Dalit Literature: Channeling Female Self-Expression In Faustina Bama's *Sangati* And Urmila Pawar's *The Weave Of My Life*

Bhavya Juneja
Scholar, Masters in English

Abstract
This paper looks into the blossoming of folklore legends, rituals, and ceremonies in Faustina Bama's *Sangati* and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*, further investigating the power dynamics central to the intersection of caste and gender. Fetching ideas from Mayuresh Mishra, Binod Mishra, and Gopal Guru, this essay explores how folklore exists as an "alternative epistemological" site to the authorial narratives, which are presented as universalized authentic socio-cultural visions. Drawing from Sudhadeep Mukherjee, Bhushan Sharma, and Claire R. Farrer's ideas regarding the underlining of conventional folklore by rigid gender norms, this paper looks into the traversing of patriarchal boundaries via the empowering Dalit folklorist narratives present in these books. Both the novels stand out in glorifying Dalit women's potent anecdotes that testify to their journey towards self-reflexivity, self-reliance, and self-esteem. They boldly celebrate the Dalit female bodies that are always seen through the male gaze, which dually incarcerates them in the prison of caste and patriarchal roles. Thus, the research endeavors to showcase Dalit women's collective rebellion in terms of the communal identity they forge, giving significance to the unacknowledged cultural heritage of the Dalit community. Relying on Sharmila Rege's idea about how Dalit women talk differently, this paper further portrays their distinct and heterogeneous identity within a shared community space as they weave stories for future generations.
Keywords: folklore, intersection, power dynamics, communal identity, patriarchal roles, cultural heritage

INTRODUCTION

Oral culture is celebrated by writers like Mayuresh Mishra and Binod Mishra in the essay "Resistance from the Roots: Exploring Dalit Consciousness in Nautanki tradition," which describes folklore as a new idiom of communication for Dalits that deconstructs the Brahmanical codes and values. Furthermore, G.N. Devy in *After Amnesia* equates oral culture with communal bonding. Thus, both Faustina Bama and Urmila Pawar draw on these vast recesses of oral tradition and its communal value while fashioning it as a new medium for recording Dalit women's inner growth and expansion of the horizons of their selfhood.

Faustina Bama's *Sangati* traces Dalit women's evolution and fierce transformation. It not only records Dalit women's oppression via religious policing, social excommunication, and sexual abuse but also their refusal to surrender and bend against authorities. At the heart of the novel lies not only the celebration of the festivals, customs, clothes, and stories that are unique to Dalit cultural inheritance but also the unmasking of gendered rituals and their upturning into a

distinctive space rooted in female subjectivity and intuitiveness.

Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* commences with the author's recollection of her childhood days in the town of Ratnagiri in the Konkan region, where she experiences the fatal blow of caste prejudices and gender stereotypes, which is followed by her marriage in Bhiraunde and her shift to Mumbai. This happens in the background of class backwardness, an elitist education system, religious biases, female patriarchy, Buddhist conversion, the Ambedkarite movement, and the rise of separatist Dalit female groups. Through this journey, the novel subtly depicts the rising consciousness of a Dalit female, despite her constriction to the roles of a wife, a daughter, and a mother.

Both *Sangati* and *The Weave of My Life* cover the three-generational trauma that weighs down the Dalit female throughout her life. They trace the Dalit woman's journey towards a new-found communal voice that matures parallel to the development of their autonomous selfhood. Thus, the objective of this paper is to depict how both the autobiographies rediscover and reconnect to Dalit female's authentic roots as they rejoice in the everyday material performance of oral tradition, which acts as a counter-hegemonic force to the mutually constitutive discourses of patriarchy and caste.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Optimizing the theories of folklore and feminism as an analytical tool, this paper challenges the treatment of Dalit women as a unitary subject that disregards the presence of multiple axes of identity and the multi-faceted layers of oppression as proposed by Anandita Pan in *Mapping Dalit Feminism* and Sharmila Rege in *Dalit Women Talk Differently*. This intersectional approach to research does not restrict one to a particular experience that is narrow, restrictive, and static; rather, this particularity is evoked to understand the system in its entirety. Thus, intersectionality as an inclusive methodology refuses to privilege a single perspective or sustain monolithic categories.

This paper employs textual analysis as another methodology by reading between the lines of the text to analyze it structurally, as well as through its socio-cultural motifs and symbols to understand the text's moral, political, and religious potency. Thus, the focus of the paper is firstly on understanding Dalit women's revolt based on their everyday experiences and activities (labor), and secondly on foregrounding their voice within the spectrum of the polyphonic voices in the folklorist tradition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The intimate connection between folklore and feminism has not been fully explored within the ambit of Dalit literary tradition, specifically concerning the revolutionary autobiographical narratives that serve as a powerful medium for capturing the rising consciousness of Dalit female writers. For instance, Arun Kumar's "Portrayal of Dalit Women in Bama's Sangati" does not fully explore folklore in the context of the formation of individual consciousness.

Interestingly, Annam Ragamalika in "Caste, Gender Dichotomy: A Dalit Feminist Perspective—a Study of Bama's Sangati" records the folklore's tradition liberating potential in the hands of Dalit women but not its construction as a counter-hegemonic narrative against the convergent caste and patriarchal ideologies. Additionally, both essays like the other ones fail to explore the construction of Dalit women's differential aesthetics, disparate everyday lifestyles, and new ways of communication.

Praveshika's essay "Contextualizing Dalit women's voices: A study of Urmila Pawar and Bama's autobiographies" emphasizes only the structural mode of rebellion via language and literature, ignoring other socio-cultural spaces that allow for the exchange of local culture and redefinition of customs by Dalit women. Therefore, this paper sheds light on the yet unexplored motif of folklore that binds together Dalit women in a bond of mutual understanding, selfless connection, and holistic embrace. Furthermore, it recognizes and honors the diverse regional or cultural expressions of Dalit women in Bama and Pawar's stories, which share a common language of love, acceptance, and freedom.

Invisibilizing Dalit Cultural Heritage

Gopal Guru in the work *Humiliation: Claims and Context* describes humiliation as a complex socio-cultural phenomenon at the centre of discourses that exerts epistemological violence on Dalits who exist as objects in the larger worldview of myths and cosmology of the upper castes. For instance, in the preface to *The Weave of My Life*, Urmila Pawar mentions the "perpetual insecurity" (10) Dalits experience as they "shrink" (10) within themselves.

Dipankar Chatterjee in "Projections of the Atrocities on the Dalits" reflects on caste being a privilege for the upper castes as it can be forgotten and erased, unlike the Dalits for whom it is a burden that they carry for generations. For instance, Pawar highlights the humiliation induced in her for her mother— of "her sari…her bare legs and uncombed hair" (85). Likewise, Bama, in her preface to *Sangati*, scrutinizes this sense of self-doubt, self-condemnation, and self-pity. Thus, Pawar like Bama emphasizes on the need to "Awaken the sense of identity and selfhood in everyone" (268).

Both Bama and Pawar highlight the hypocrisy of the relic of purity and pollution that is central to the performance of caste hierarchy. For instance, Pawar narrates how the offerings served by Mahars and Chambals become acceptable, but only after washing away the pollution. Also, ironically, their tasks of beating drums and cutting heavy trees are of value in the festival of Holi, yet they are merely outcastes whose touch can pollute the palanquin.

The fight between the Mahars and the Bhats in Pawar's novel opens the debate on the rightful ownership of religion and culture. Likewise, Baby Kamble in *The Prisons We Broke* scrutinizes the selfish and prejudiced religion that has since centuries "pierced the Mahars noses with ignorance" (63) and is yet flogging them with the "whip of pollution" (63), when the very upper caste palaces are built with the soil that is soaked with the Mahars' blood and sweat.

In the work "The Brahmanisation of Indian Sociology or the Birth of the Racial Theories of Untouchability" Jesus articulates how the Dalit cultural practices are scrutinized through a Brahmanical gaze that labels the former's eating practices as barbarous, religious customs as irrational, and political struggle as inauthentic and a product of colonial influence. He mentions how the non-assimilation of Dalits in society has been justified on ethnographic (lacking racial heritage) grounds, due to which Dalit customs suffered an "epistemicide" (1), that is, "a deliberate killing, silencing, annihilation or devaluing of knowledge system" (1).

Countering the upper castes' standardized cultural ethos, the multiplicity and vibrancy of the Dalit culture is presented in both the above-mentioned novels through various festivals like that of Garhane, the folk drama of Khele, the distinctive wedding rites, death rites, the initiation rites, a variety of games, food, and religious rituals. Optimizing the terminology of "Nautanki tradition," both Mayuresh Kumar Mishra and Binod Mishra describe how the folklore central to these novels factors in Bakhtin's idea of carnivalesque by offering a site of celebration that

mocks and upturns hierarchies, suspending power structures.

Furthermore, access to this Nautanki tradition with its "heterogenous and dialogic worldview" (59) is lent to the reader by the Dalit women in the books of Pawar and Bama. Thus, through the folk songs, new cultural symbols, values, and modes of communication, these women open a window to an "unofficial culture" (59); a culture that is inclusive and open to interpretation.

Dalit Women Weave Counter-Cultural Hegemonic Chronicles

In both the novels, Dalit women's narratives and folklore provide an alternative epistemological space to the other male-privileged spaces, such as the Panchayat meetings, the Church, the cinema hall, and the standardized festivities. Bama describes how in the community meetings, the men gather in front, but the women stand behind them. E.g., "Once again the women were silenced" (23). Even standardized role-playing games are prefixed to place men in authoritarian positions. For instance, in the oral performance of the play, men refuse to let women perform the role of 'Our Lady' (33).

Pawar further describes how women are refused to see the erotic performances of the Tamasha group (fig.1.1) and are brutally punished for violating the so-called honor of the community. Thus, both Bama and Pawar showcase the appropriation of market space by men and the relegation of women to the margins of society even if the latter are ostensibly given the freedom to work outside.

Fig.1.1. *Tamasha performance challenges hetero-patriarchal norms*

Pawar and Bama refuse to bear the heavy burdens of patriarchal rituals of control. For instance, Pawar questions the ritual of gurumandali that provides social sanction through one's association with a specific caste and religion. She further criticizes the widow ritual which she believes is a big show and continues to wear her mangalsutra as a form of rebellion. She commands, "Why must one bear such burdens?" (303). Thus, she expresses a sense of horror at "the mindsets frozen in rituals and caste discrimination" (305).

Sharmila Rege further describes how Pawar's book challenges the very masculine identity adopted by the Dalit movement as it excludes and sidelines the expression of Dalit women. In both novels, Dalit women unmask the loopholes of the hegemonic narratives through their tacit and unmediated acts of everyday resistance like murmuring, muttering, and whispering during community meetings or during walks to the market.

In *Sangati*, Bama mentions how "Nobody spoke much after that. But the women continued to mutter amongst themselves" (24). In a parallel tone, Pawar writes, "Thus, I continued to write" (228). Pawar proposes her act of writing and her mother's act of weaving aaydans to be "organically linked" (11). She says, "It is the weave of pain, suffering, and agony that links us" (11). Thus, these 'aaydans' become a kind of "recording instruments" (90) that document history and reveal the "agony and ecstasy in the lives of those toiling women" (90).

Bhushan Sharma in "Narratives of Dalit Women and 'the Outsider Within': Towards a Literary Practice of Dalit Feminist Standpoint" describes how the distinctive marginalized spaces of weaving as well as writing turn into sites of "epistemic privilege" (25) for the Dalit women whose socio-cultural locations provide them with an inclusive understanding of the social reality and the power relations.

The Dalit female stories mirror their lived realities. E.g., Pawar writes, "In the process, however, even something insignificant became a long-winded narrative of epic proportions." Thus, their new knowledge as outsiders "within" their community allows them to (as they are marginalized within the Dalit community too) challenge the dominant traditions in force while forging space for new social order and new meaning-making processes.

Fabricating New Narratives: Embracing the Dalit Female Body

Pawar and Bama weave a new social order by celebrating the Dalit female bodies that are portrayed as signifiers of contamination. For instance, in both stories, Bama and Pawar reflect on the transformation of the female body into a polluting object during menstruation and the commercialization of their bodies for matrimonial transactions as they are turned into commodities or objects of desire.

In *The Weave of My Life*, Pawar meditates on crucial questions like "Why should only women have to suffer like this? Why are men free?" (131). Likewise, in *Sangati*, Patti exposes the hypocrisy of the patriarchal rituals like kulavai (an ululation or a folk song celebrating initiation rites) by saying, "Daughter of a wretch, what good did it do her to come of age and become a pushvapati? The next week she fell ill and took to her bed (17)".

Sudhadeep Mukherjee describes how in *Sangati*, the bodies of the female figures refigure into instruments of revolt rather than tools of systemic oppression. For instance, parallel to Judith Butler's idea of gender 'performativity' in *Gender Trouble*; in *Sangati*, Sammuga Khizavi exposes the performance of gender and caste dictums by spitting water in the upper-caste well and standing half-naked in it. Later, she urinates in the upper-caste pot as a form of rebellion. By giving voice to mutilated bodies, Dalit women like Khizavi upturn caste and the patriarchal dichotomy between soul and body that objectifies both Dalit men and women, but mostly the latter.

The hysteric display by Tulshi, or Irulappan's wife (possessed by the ghost of Essaki), becomes another expression of Dalit women's celebration of their ill-fitted and unconventional bodies as they refuse to abide by the set norms of society. For instance, Irulappan's wife's hysteria reveals the concealed story of the Vanaan caste woman Esaaki, who is killed by her

brothers for having an inter-caste marriage. Therefore, 'hysteria' becomes a language of physical and linguistic protest against the symbolic laws of the upper-caste paternal structures.

Pawar explores the distinctive identity of the Dalit women who possess a "different voice" (39) from that of the upper castes as well as the Dalit men. Recalling her childhood, she further describes how she "felt so left out" in her childhood, being "so different from the traditional girls." (129). Sharmila Rege in *Dalit Women Talk Differently* argues for the necessity to transform this "difference" into a standpoint rather than a means of oppression.

In the novel, Pawar eulogizes Dalit women's wearied bodies and even their clothes that smell "of cashew nuts, mangoes, the medicinal nut bibble…cow dung, and earth" (155) that are strictly against the dictums of chasteness of the upper castes and Dalit men's notions of Dalit women's subjectivity (smell as symbolic of their distinctive identity). Sudhadeep Mukherjee in "Women of the Dalit Unrest: Rewriting Bodies, Reinforcing Resistance" describes how a Dalit woman is always molded and encapsulated in the roles of a mother or a passive sexual victim snapped of her individuality.

Bama and Urmila both attribute a more prominent role to Dalit women's labor and their contributions to the Dalit culture that are deliberately invisibilized or given a "sanctioned Ignorance (Nair 57)". For instance, Patti single-handedly raises her children much like Pawar's mother and Mariamma and her sister alone gather firewood to earn their family's livelihood. Bama applauds Dalit women's "skills and capabilities" (66) to be a breadwinner for their family. Likewise, Pawar argues that this "boldness, plumpness, or caste!" (130) is what patriarchy is threatened by and thus attempts to control, reprimand, and humiliate them for.

Bama highlights the powerful position of Patti as a "kothachi" (8) who forms a small-knit local community for work. Mary Allen in "Women, Folklore, and Feminism" describes how Dalit women participate in "non-competitive, collaborative, connected, repeated, everyday shared "cultural processes that "affirm relationships" (12). This collaborative, life-affirming space in contemporary culture can be situated in The Deccan Development Society (DDS), a community formed by Dalit and tribal women that works on food sovereignty and production, sharing of seeds, governance of resources, and fair market (fig. 1.2).

Fig.1.2 *Equator Initiative by the Deccan development Society*

Dalit women in both novels carve space for their independent identities, while they collectively struggle for emancipation from all sorts of shackles and imprisonments. Pawar, through her autobiography, traces how her estrangement from her mother later blossoms into a bond of mutual understanding and a desire to live life with self-respect and self-reliance. Likewise,

Bama shares a deep-affectionate bond with Vellaiyamma Kizhavi, her grandmother, who creates an autonomous space for Bama to uncover the hidden secrets, or "gossips" (6) of patriarchy that are embroiled in caste prejudices.

In *Sangati*, the shared struggle between Bama and Kizhavi in the novel grows into a tender, nurturing bond between the innumerable women of both the past and present whose sufferings get registered only through oral anecdotes. Beverely further describes how the Dalit women's testimonies narrated in the first person 'I' communicate a "group's oppression, imprisonment, and struggle." (94). Thus, the collective and the individual intermingle, as the individual becomes a witness to the collective struggle and vice versa.

The anecdotes and narratives of Dalit women evoke the "memories" of the rich cultural tapestry of "mango blossoms, flowering Kuda trees, the soil soaked in the first rains, [and] of mud…" (35). These tales provide an authentic depiction of their everyday struggles as they recount the "colors and smells of decomposing fish…their sweat, and the setting sun" (37) that become a true reflection of their lived reality.

These narratives exalt in the "murmur of the flowing river, the splashing of streams, and the chirruping of birds." (35) The anecdotes intermingle like a deeply stirring and ubiquitous music of stream that silently flows and leaves its mark everywhere. The symbol of stream emphasizes the social mobility, pointing at the precariousness and magic in which everything runs together (gender fluidity and disruption of caste hierarchy), which becomes a threat to the upper-castes; and in Pawar's and Bama's work, the Dalit men too.

New Found Voice of Dalit Women: Language, Food, and Folk Songs as Instruments of Distinct Representation

Nicole Kousaleos in "Feminist Theory and Folklore" describes how traditionally knowledge, truth, and reality are normatively male centered. Both Bama and Pawar question this shaping of paradigms and methods by male perspectives, displaying how the female experiences rooted in an "introspective, subjective, and unscientific" (22) language have been completely ignored, devalued, and denied in "the production of knowledge" (21).

Bama in *Sangati* states that "It is what men say that has become the rule of law" (110). Thus, she warns women to remain conscious of how "men are at the very centre of their lives" (123). Bama further writes how women are like "grinning puppets" (104) who have been marginalized both within and outside their homes, and it's high time for them to question and act; to "sharpen and renew [themselves]…generation by generation" (104).

Claire R. Farrer in "Women and Folklore," proposes how the women's genres have been downplayed and disregarded by folklorists. Specific to the Indian casteist context, Dalit women's images have been molded as per the conventional cultural expectations of gender roles. Pawar describes how "easily men appear poor and women "shameless"!" for stepping outside the private domain (294).

Pawar breaks the dichotomy between private and public by writing stealthily in the kitchen and turning the ritualized domain of passivity into a domain of active revolt and value. Thus, she modifies her personal space and narrative into a tool of rebellion, widening the historically rationalized paternal narrative to include the spaces and experiences it excludes, a task that further becomes possible by Bama and Pawar's attempt to transgress linguistic norms.

Pawar interrogates Dalit women's abandoning of bold and transparent language in imitation of the plural forms. Similarly, Laksmi Holmstrom states how Bama diverges from the

grammatical rulebook by refusing to name everything (recognizing naming to be an act of power). She elides words, joins them differently, and uses the Dalit Tamil dialect along with vigorous proverbs and obscene words that are sexually charged and are underlined by a sense of buffoonery. Bama states, "…I wrote the way people speak. I didn't force a literary language on myself." Therefore, in both works, there are silences, gaps, breaks, and rhetoric that tear to pieces the masculine norms of sanctified language.

Dalit women in both autobiographies bond over the rich cultural heritage of their community while simultaneously reinventing the traditions and reclaiming them. Food becomes a metaphor for both Dalit women's everyday oppression and bonds of intimacy. For instance, Pawar symbolizes Dalit women's reassertion of their solidarity against patriarchal authority via the exchange of "paan, betel nuts, and quicklime."

Pawar embraces the raw and unrefined description of Dalit women's cleaning of fish, grinding of 'masalas', their search for "tisrya", crabs, oysters, mulefish, and their gulping of bread pieces with baked oysters. She further highlights how the presence of meager resources forces the former to live only on cheap or dried fish 'with onions, red chilli powder, and salt', 'takla leaves', 'ambeel', 'kaat', saar and 'ragi- kuuzh'. Thus, it shows how the dictums of pollution dictating their cultural choices are forced upon them by upper caste people as propaganda to regulate their agency.

Aindrila Choudhury presents how Dalit women's collective labour and cultural forms enable them to unify and perform "the subtle acts of social and sexual rebellion" (106). Bama and Pawar instantiate how Dalit women sing songs whether working in the fields or ululations like kulavai, lullabies, rorattu songs (to the babies), or "high ota." Pawar's description of the "rhythmic back and forth movement" (194) of the winnowing, similar to the melody of folk songs and the reflexive nature of the narrative, choruses the need for self-introspection, insurrection, and rejuvenation of folklore; a seedling that is planted and watered by the Dalit female figures.

To conclude, this research emphasizes the significance of folklore as an alternative site of knowledge against the Brahmanical rituals and its potential as a new idiom of emancipation for Dalit women. It becomes a new medium for staging a revolt against the upper-caste discourses that either disparage Dalits' cultural heritage or label them as 'cultureless.' Thus, it is this binary between the low and the high, pollution and purity, body and soul, and domestic and public that the Dalit women attempt to shatter.

Dalit women expose the underbelly of sanctimonious rituals of control that doubly oppress them. Thus, their marginalized position as an outsider "within" their community enables them to form a new vision, which is rooted in communitarian and egalitarian spirit. Both the autobiographies become eyewitnesses to the redefining of caste and patriarchal norms, the reinvention of traditions, the formation of communal bonds, and the rise of individual subjectivity of Dalit women as they weave a tradition based on their immediate realities be it in the form of folk songs, proverbs, clothes, food, and local language.

This essay endeavors to show that Dalit women are not silent upholders of customs but active writers of an inclusive, heterogeneous, and non-conformist tradition. Therefore, Bama and Pawar, by writing an autobiography, consciously restore life to the oral songs, folk art and legends of Dalit women that work as unrestrained platforms for their autonomous self-expression.

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