

## Representing Self: A Study of a Dalit Woman Autobiography

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### Abstract

The present research paper aims to depict the experiencing Dalit Women's life and their lived experiences in Dalit Autobiographies. It is not composed on any fictional overview or is not composed of the idea of imagination or romantic fictional concepts to represent the psychological and emotional cluster of the protagonist; however it is the voice of truth, a story of blunt reality and a struggle of enhancing the self. In narrative autobiographical text, the narrator encounters himself as the narrator of his lived experience, loaded with the social reality, identity and location. It shows their struggle throughout the life to pursuit social dignity. The paper is a humble attempt to investigate into the relevance of Dalit autobiographies in identity formation and self-assertion and how these writings not just provide an alternative narrative but also catalogue tones of emotional exclusivity of discrimination, negligence, rage, resistance and retaliation and many other social evils.

Taking in consideration the theoretical framework of Uma Chakravarti, Gopla Guru, Sharankumar Limbale and Sharmila Rege, it will interrogate the contentions about the construction of a casteist gendered body on the Banhmanical patriarchal social structure. Further, it will substantiate the delineation of memory, intersecting of caste and gender in Dalit women's autobiography. The long-silenced voices become visible private and public representations of their culture by reconstructing their caste identity from a feminist perspective.

**Keywords:** Dalit Writers, Dalit Life narratives, Untouchable, Caste, Dalit Feminism

### Introduction:

Autobiography is basically a self-written biography of one's own life. William Taylor deprecatingly comments this form as 'pedantic'. Roy Pascal differentiates autobiography from the periodic self-reflective mode of journal or diary writing by noting that "[autobiography] is a review of a life from a particular moment in time, while the diary, however reflective it may be, moves through a series of moments in time". The memoir form is closely associated with autobiography but it tends, as Pascal claims, to focus less on the self and more on others during the autobiographer's review of their own life (Pascal, 5).

Bourdieu (1987) is how ever critical of autobiography and biography and considers them an “illusion”. Bourdieu revisits the symbolic violence of ‘scholastic fallacy’ and habitus in the context of personal experiences and developments of one’s own. “Is this an autobiography? The heavily freighted denial which opens the text rides very low in the water. I do not intend to indulge in the genre of autobiography”, he writes “which I have often enough described as both conventional and illusionary.” For Bourdieu, “no life is a coherent unified whole” with a linear, sequential trajectory, nor is its expression that of a cohesive. Bourdieu’s ‘self-experiment’ is perhaps so irritating because it does not only elude any aesthetic stylization, but it also over extends the gesture of observing the author himself while observing his own history –what he calls ‘participatory objectification’. The first sentence of the self-experiment is a kind of ‘preamble’: ‘I do not intend here to pay homage to a type of writing that I have said often enough how pleasing and at the same time deceptive it is: the autobiography’(Bourdieu 9). Consistently this announcement is not followed by chronological references to his life story, but rather brief reflections on his ‘work history’ (Bourdieu 10-11). There is no question that Bourdieu hated the format of autobiography. The polemical reference in his essay *L’illusion biographique* to the ‘complicity’ between autobiographers who are interested in an ‘orderly story’ and researchers who see themselves as ‘meaning seekers’(Bourdieu 76-77) proves this convincingly.

But whatever criticism it may face this genre of autobiography seeks to engage with questions of selfhood and identity of an individual. The memory and history, of voice and agency, of “truth” and authenticity, and of many other aspects of a self-revolutionary method that seeks to revel oneself to the world. An awareness of this subjectivity, and engagement with it, allowing it to flourishing the self, without suppressing it or indeed giving it undue weight, is in fact a movement into the ‘unknown through the known’. Limbale asserts dalit literature has a distinct ‘dialogism’ that is dalit reality is a luminal reality in time and space. The content and form of this literature that is about to that liminality has its own particular features. It is the first hand experience of this unique “dalitness” that represents in dalit literature as authentic and Limbale terms this authenticity as “mimetic” (12)

On the other hand subjectivity of Dalit woman autobiography is marginalized. So it basically explores the subaltern’s experience of the social hegemonic world. Thus Autobiography is well-defined as the story of one’s own self. Instead of eluding the ‘life- illusions’, it elucidates personal experience, deeper trend of fundamental attitudes that is “true to itself”, a social and psychological insights. All these personal accounts of diversive experiences create a different epistemic knowledge which creates a distinction between Dalit autobiographies from other writings in the same genre because they do not represent the life of an individual but are the "collective consciousness of a community." Therefore, their relevance to the contemporary cultural context is highly relevant. They are not only suffered by caste humiliation but also as ‘second sex dalits’. Dalit women came to be dominantly represented as vulnerable. Images of the permanently polluted Dalit woman’s body is the symbol of a suffering body of grotesque, which came together in iconographies of sentimentality, sympathy and subservience. This shift in representation of Dalit women from polluting to victimized, and lascivious to vulnerable was intentionally created by the reallocation of focus from Surpanakha to Shabari as Charu Gupta

states in her article that the shifting of representation through the iconographic model figure in this regard.(55-72)

It is the main earliest genre that had gained importance among suppressed classes of society in the eighteenth century. The suppressed classes Black women initiated to write down their autobiographies about their own racial experiences. Their writing as a form of their agency were followed by Indian Dalit women in India in the twentieth century against the caste discrimination. Within this context of resistance and protest, various *Dalit* women's autobiographies started coming out during the 1990's in several regional languages such as Marathi, Tamil, Hindi, etc. These women writers were amongst the few *Dalit* men who had somehow managed to move out of their villages and gain education. These autobiographies were not only talking about the life of an individual but also they represented the past and at times even the present of their own communities, their lived experiences both individual and collective. In these autobiographies therefore, there is a lot of emphasis on expression (*bhav*) rather than language (*bhasha*).

Urmila Pawar, a highly acclaimed writer who is actively involved in advocating for the rights of Dalit community and promoting feminist cause, born in a Dalit family in Maharashtra in 1945. Her autobiography entitled *The Weave of my Life* was first released as *Aaydan* in 2003. It reflects upon her projection of life as a dalit woman facing injustice, exploitation, hunger, poverty, and humiliation. As a prominent social activist, her vocal protests have served as a source of inspiration for several Dalit women who follows her path of becoming a speaking subject form the context of mere objective and sympathetic discourse. Getting highly inspired by Dr. Ambedkar, she and her family members converted to Buddhism and Buddhist philosophy and way of life continues to influence her writings. Despite facing various rejections based on caste and gender, she successfully obtained a Master's degree in Marathi Literature and decided to focus on her lived experiences on the marginalized status of women in her community. Yet she makes us see the harshness and hustle in the Dalit child's road to education is full of obstacles. "*The Children are made to sit apart, they are singled out to perform duties like sweeping the school, they are beaten without reason, for the Brahmin teachers still feels that untouchables have no right to an education*" (Pawar 7). *The Weave of My Life*, an autobiographical tale by Urmila Pawar, is a significant achievement in the literary works of Dalit women as it questions the established norms and beliefs related to the concept of caste, class and patriarchy. It explicitly challenges the deliberate neglect of histories related to caste oppression, struggles, and resistance and even goes on to expose the conflicts and contradictions within the Dalit and feminist movements and its continuous urge for asserting selfhood.

There is always an ongoing debate on whether recounting the hateful and traumatic past should be brought into the present social and cultural scenario, or we should forget the complex relationship of memory, trauma, forgetfulness and shameful identity. Dalit life narratives or autobiographies are often criticized to bring the undesirable past into present. Besides these autobiographies remain the most direct and accessible means through which the long –standing silence and misrepresentations of dalit communities have been challenged. These narratives function as testimonies that transform personal lived experience into historical accounts, thereby offering a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse of the caste system. As Gopal Guru puts it

succinctly that this testimonies have the ability to convert and it perform a double function; they inflict an inferiority complex in the minds of adversaries by resurrecting Dalit triumph and bring out guilt in the minds of 'upper caste' by recording social wrong done by ancestor.(49-55)

Dalit constitute one of the most socially and historically marginalized groups within Indian society. This community continues to confront persistent socio-economic barrier, including limited access to education, inadequate health facilities, and lack of dignified employment, pervasive superstitions and systemic violence in the form of physical and verbal abuse, public humiliation and untouchability. This humiliation is underpinned by religious, cultural and ideological justification of purity of blood. Scholars of dalit feminists' theorist emphasizes that Dalit women suffer a compound form of oppression by caste hierarchy, lower class and gender bias (Rege 64). Women belonging to the Dalit group are commonly referred to as "Dalits among Dalits" (Bhoite vii) since they are at the lowest ladder even among the dalits. Their experiences reflect what Sharmila Rege calls the "brahmanical patriarchy of caste society", which very systematically silenced, erased and choked dalit women's voices (Rege 45). In this context, the novelist, Bama Faustina Soosairaj, effectively encapsulates the inter-connectedness of caste, class, and gender-based subjugation experienced by women. As she says that "in the fields, they have to escape from upper-caste men's molestations; at church, they first lick the priest's shoes and be his slaves" (Bama 35). According to her, even after returning to their home, or before preparing meals, resting briefly, or attending to household duties, Dalit women are often compelled to endure further emotional and physical violence inflicted upon them by their husbands or by their in-laws, demonstrating how oppression operates at multiple level in their everyday lives.

### **Selfhood:**

The concept of self has long been understood as "intrinsically reflexive" that is a structure in which consciousness turns back upon itself. William James articulated that the distinction between "I" and "Me" by noting the self emerges when the "I" reflect back upon "Me", thereby producing a dual structure of subject and object in self experience (James 291). This insight had already anticipated in the ancient Greek philosophical thoughts, underscores that selfhood is not simply given but it continues though reflective awareness. The central notion of selfhood can have three strands: that of the self may be seen as a social actor, who enacts roles and displays traits by performing behaviors in the presence of others; that is the cultural self (McAdams 17-21). The second kind of self may be seen as a social actor, who enacts roles and displays traits by performing behaviors in the presence of others; that may be the revolutionary self (McAdams 527). Thirdly, the self eventually becomes an autobiographical author, too, who takes stock of life past, present, and future to create a story about who I am, how I came to be, and where my life may be going, that is an existential self. While in general, 'identity' is used to refer to one's social 'face' how one perceives how one is perceived by others. 'Self' is generally used to refer to one's sense of 'who I am and what I am' and is the way the term is employed within the circle of social sciences and humanities. (McAdams 164)

### **Dalit Autobiographical Self:**

Narrative theory suggests that the self is constituted through our narrative experiences. All our memories, ideas, experiences, achievements and failures are deeply enmeshed and create our own narrative experiences incoherence to our sense of self. This autobiographical does not rely

solely on individual experiences but also incorporates the inherent histories, ideologies, and cultural beliefs from our ancestors. Thus an individual story merges into broader collective experiences. Urmila Pawar's autobiography *Aaydan* (translated as *The Weave of My Life*) exemplifies this intersection of personal memory, caste experience and gendered selfhood. She narrates her consciousness of her 'Dalit selfhood' as she experiences every minute detail of caste impact on her community and her social life. She has seen patriarchal domination along with gender biasness within her community from a very early age. Her arrival was met with disapproval within the family as she says "when I was born, my cousin Govind dada wanted to throw me away onto a dung heap" (Pawar 64). Their community was subjected to the practice of untouchability from the moment of the child birth. The author says that the children of their community developed an awareness of caste biasness through their daily experiences, often without any instruction or guidance. As one sees in the autobiography that when the mother of the author dispatched her to transport baskets to her clients, they consistently denied her entry into their residences and compelled her to stand at the entrance. Water was applied to the baskets in order to remove the pollutants. In order to minimize physical interaction, they would deposit pennies into her hand from a higher position. Furthermore, the author recollects her engagements with a Brahmin family, wherein her 'Aaye' (mother) would give her money to facilitate the acquisition of pickles from them but was prohibited from advancing beyond the initial level of Brahmin's residence. As she recalls "Kaku would bring some fiery red pickle on a plantain leaf... but only after she had sprinkled water on them to cleanse them of pollution" (78). They were also prohibited from accessing potable water from the well. Her school teacher would often comment on her uniform calling it dirty and humiliate her in front of the entire class saying "go and buy a good soap and start washing your clothes yourself...start bathing every day" (90, 91). Additionally, people would make fun of her eating habits calling her "monster" (117).

Charles Cooley (1864–1929) argued our development of a self is similar to looking through a looking glass. With the looking-glass self, we base our image on what we think other people see (Cooley 152-155). We imagine how we must appear to others, and then react to this speculation. We wear certain clothes, prepare our hair in a particular manner, wear makeup, use cologne, and the like—all with the notion that our presentation of ourselves is going to affect how others perceive us. Cooley believed that our sense of self is based upon this idea: we imagine how we look to others, draw conclusions based upon what we think other people are thinking about, and then we develop our personal sense of self. In other words, people's reactions to us are like partial mirrors in which we are reflected. Meanwhile Pawar developed her idea that she belongs to certain community whose touch or shadow or even the entire presence is defined as impure. Also being a woman into this community, having menstruation cycle, carrying a womb and reproduction system or urging any kind of sexual desire is 'impure among the impurities'.

### Consciousness and Body:

A central question in Feminist theory concerns whether consciousness can exist independently as the sense of self or as body. Although the self is a multilayered concept, conceptualized differently across disciplines, among them one primary dimension is the narrative or autobiographical self. This is the self that organizes past, present and future into a coherent identity. While the autobiographical self plays a significant role in shaping subjectivity. Besides, Feminist scholars for a long has been seen her own existence intimately connected to the body.

Shildrick and Price say that it has responded to the masculinist conventions by producing a variety of oftentimes incompatible theories which attempt to take the body into account (Shildrick and Price, 1). The female body in this way regarded as a barrier to women's access to power afforded to men in a patriarchal culture. In Grosz's view, it "have accepted patriarchal and misogynistic assumptions about the female body as somehow more natural, less detached, more engaged with and directly related to its 'objects' than male bodies" (Grosz, 15). Pawar mention "*Randki Sooj*" which translates as widow's swelling. The word *Raand* means both widow and a prostitute. She also says that she was ashamed for her own body because it creates a sexual consciousness of gender restrictions. "*It was more or less a shameful thing! We would all hide our real ages, using as tight a bra as possible so the bust would not show... it was known that the beginning of menses marked the imposition of restrictions on girl who had them. Don't do this; don't stay out for long... there was no end to the nos' that we have to listen to.*"(77) Child sexual abuse is another form of heinous crime of female body. Child maltreatment creates an immediate negative impact on physical, psychological and social aspects of life and it followed by the potential for numerous problems throughout her entire lifespan. *My maternal uncle plays dolls with me and pretends to be my husband, drag me into an alcove and pressed me hard*" and *"the neighbor comes to play with her daughter and pinches the young child in particular parts of her anatomy."*(78)

A study examining sexual violence against Dalit women in India conducted by Pandey and Mishra (2021) found that 83 % of the 195 Dalit women who participated faced threats of sexual harassment or assault; 40.2 % had experienced multiple instances of physical sexual assault, specifically groping or having their clothing torn; and 23.3 % had been raped. "She was a Valmiki like us, from a landless and poor family like ours. They raped her, brutalized her and when she died, they burnt her body without the consent of her family. And even after all of that, they would not allow her family to talk about it and threaten them to keep quiet" (Pandey & Mishra 318). This is exactly the same story for all poor, helpless, vulnerable girls. "Violence, including rape and gang rape, has been systematically utilized as weapons by dominant castes to oppress Dalit women and girls and reinforce structural gender and caste hierarchies," states a new report by *Equality Now*, a global non-profit which promotes women's rights, and *Swabhiman Society*, a Dalit-led grassroots organization in India (Equality Now and Swabhiman Society). Mashaal believes that almost 80 percent of Dalit women who are raped do not report the crime because of political and social pressure as the women and their families are usually threatened by the perpetrators (Paul). So the women bodies are being used as a battleground to assert caste supremacy and to keep woman into their second class position. The condition of widow and daughter-in-law are more wretched ever Pawar herself accounted her sister in law as their "maid servant". Beating of wife is supposed to be the order of the day. The poverty stricken dalit family who are often called as "bit-counters", where there is no bit left for their daughter-in-laws. Besides in the case of widow, sexuality is becoming a major concern for them. Once a pregnant widow was made to stand leaning forward and the women kicked her from behind in order to abort the child. Worst of all that is they feel proud of their deed as they protect the village honour.

### **Autobiographical memory:**

Autobiographical self knowledge is constituted by the memories of some personal events in our lives that define oneself in respect with the other social relations as well. Autobiographical memory specifically involves mentally returning to one's personal past and retrieving experiences that are integrated into one's sense of self. Pawar in her autobiography *The Way of My Life*, recalls her vivid autobiographical memory that the arduous labour that defined the lives of dalit women in her community. She describes how women should travel long distance to gather firewood and grass to sell at the market, often moving through forest area the roars of the tiger startled them. The life of dalit women entirely depended upon the natural resources for survival. Their daily works involves gathering of firewood, desiccated grass, and untamed fruits from woodland areas. The author would accompany them with her mother and saw how they would stick their hands into the rocks to catch crabs, but the jagged edges of the rocks would cut their hands and feet and then "salty seawater stung the wounds" further (44). She encounters hardworking nature of these women. Arpita Saini & Manjeet Rathee shows that dalit women never gave up on their family members, despite all the abuse they have received from both society and family members. Rather they worked together with their corresponding spouses. To sustain the family, they actually put in more effort than their husbands do. They knew that they will not receive 'bhakris' if they did not work. They disliked begging for food and therefore worked in the fields to make a decent living for themselves. "Aaydan" refers to the weaving of cane baskets, an activity that constituted the primary economic occupation of Mahar community to which Pawar belongs. Another meaning to the word Aaydan; it is utensils used by them (Saini & Rathee 52). Weaving of bamboo baskets, the main profession of the Urmila Pawar's mother, indicate their low caste as well as their dire economic poverty "*My mother used to weave aaydans, the Marathi generic term for all things made from bamboo. Pawar writes, "My mother used to weave Aaydan and I was writing this book, both were activities of creation of thought and practical reality of life. I find that her act of weaving and my act of writing are organically linked. The weave is similar. It is the weave of pain, suffering, and agony that links us."*(1)

She was much sensitive about her caste as well as her poverty so during school period onwards her conscious mind was aware of the limitations of person of lower caste and meaning of poverty in reality. Pawar refers to her school life and sharing of lunch boxes experience, She writes, "The upper caste girls always used words like "Ladu", "Modak", "karanjya", "Puranpolya". They brought such novel items in their tiffin boxes as well as at times we went on excursions. However, I never asked myself the stupid question, why we do not prepare such dishes at home? We were aware, without anybody telling us, that we were born in a particular caste and in poverty, and that we had to live accordingly."(93)

### **The Sense of Agency:**

The subjective awareness that is one is in control of one action and their outcomes. The sense of agency is also associated with an individual's sense of identity and autonomy. The sense of agency is of utmost importance when a person is controlling an external device that is a mechanism which allows one to attribute one's own actions to oneself, the sense of agency depends on the sensory feedback resulting from the action. The sense of agency can be divided into two components (1) the feeling of agency and (2) the judgment of agency. The feeling of agency is prereflective, implicit, low-level, and nonconceptual while the judgment of agency is reflective, explicit, high-order, belief-like, and conceptual. In other words, the feeling of agency precedes the action, and triggered during the preparation of the action, while the judgment of agency results from the computation of the comparison between the predicted and actual

outcomes of the action (Synofzik, Vosgerau, and Newen 220). Urmila Pawar access this sense of agency as she always becomes so stubborn to choose her mind instead of the societal pressure. She deliberately chooses her life partner, studies hard to get a job, and opts for higher studies despite facing many hardships and the expectations placed on a married woman. When she ask for the permmission for her further masters course her husband says: “*Look, you can do what you like only after finishing your daily chores in the house. Cooking, looking after children, bad all the stuff. If you think you can do this and get more education, fine!*”(144)

### Resilience:

The concept of resilience originates from navigating through darkness and adversity. Resilience is not an innate or static attribute but a dynamic process that is cultivated and strengthens within conditions of adversity, precarity and socio-structural turmoil. Its growth acknowledges and addresses both internal and external challenges, including situational difficulties and adopting diverse strategies across personal, professional, and social spheres of life. Resilience is the most crucial trait that empowers individuals, learn from several obstacles, and ultimately emerge as a stronger being. Rather than function as merely enduring life’s challenges but also transforms them into several opportunities for personal growth and development to create their agency. Within Feminist frameworks resilience acquire additional meaning, particularly in the context of woman who confront personal and systemic challenges. A resilient woman does not simply withstand structural inequalities but actively reconfigures the emotional and social resources available to her, prioritizing adaptability, reflexibility and strategic resistance over resignation (Rege 75). She leverages her strength in all sectors of life, understanding that these challenges not only shape her identity but also enhance her ability to grow in the deeper understanding of her circumstances.

In sciencetific discourses ‘resilience’ denotes the capacity of materials to regain its original form after being bent, compressed or stretched. The foundational idea has been metaphorically extended into the social sciences to describe human ability to withstand and recover from adversity. Their resilience is to transform problems into opportunities, driving into both personal and professional growth. Their resilience is demonstrated through their ability to reconstruct, recover, refocus, and reengage after moments of self-reflection, renewed purpose, sustained commitment, adaptability and determination (Masten 227).

Within Indo cultural context, Dalit women represent a particularly compelling site of resilient subjectivity, despite being oppressive in the caste structural hierarchy that undermines them at each and every turn of life. They don't fear from the horrible circumstances that they find themselves in. Despite the difficult environment, they possess a strong sense of subjectivity and a desire to lead a dignified life. They bravely confront the challenges and took part in politics and rearticulate their agency by embracing their selfhood. As Gopal Guru in *Prisons We Broke* rightly said that “the testimonio is for a Dalit woman a powerful medium to protest against adversaries within and without” (Kamble 71-158). Following her husband’s death, Pawar’s mother took the full responsibility for the family, taking expanded range of duties both within the domestic sphere and in public dealing. Her labour intensifies emotional, physical and economic struggle, which required a sustained resilience that enables her to confront the

hardship of her life. She works tirelessly, weaving ‘aaydans’ (bamboo baskets) without pause transforming this quotidian act into a crucial means of survival. She neither permits herself a temporal space for grief, nor indulges in self pity or complaint. Instead her tireless work exemplified a form of agency rooted in perseverance. Her identity and that of many women similar to that socio-economic and caste-bound context, is shaped not by the luxury of introspective sorrows but by the relentless demands of labour, responsibility, and determination.

### Conclusion:

Urmila Pawar’s autobiography *The Weaver of my Life* emerges as far more than an individual life narrative; it is a transformative socio-political documentation that foregrounds the intersection of caste, gender and class. By interlacing her personal memories with the collective histories of her community, Pawar construct her autobiographical self. She embraces her selfhood not only to reclaim her suppress memory but to challenge her dominate narratives that routinely erase dalit women’s labour, suffering and agency. It asserts the centrality of dalit women’s voice by portraying three generations of Mahar women; each negotiating oppressive social structure while striving for dignity and selfhood. So it is understood the formation of dalit selfhood is a dynamic interplay of memory, resistance and self-affirmation. In doing so, *The Weave of My Life* serves a personal historiography and a social critique, compelling readers to confront the intersectionality of caste and gender while celebrating the agency and resilience of Dalit women. It is a profound exploration of identity, memory, and the fight for self-worth and dignity.

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