# International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

# Unveiling the Self: Negotiating Dalit Identity and the Politics of Caste in Daya Pawar's *Baluta*

*Dr. Prakash Eknath Navgire*

Sir Vithaldas Thackersey College of Home Science, (Empowered Autonomous Status), S.N.D, T Women's University, Juhu Capus, Santacruz (W), Mumbai, Maharashtra 400049

**ABSTRACT:**

Daya Pawar's *Baluta* stands as a seminal work in Dalit literature, offering a profound insight into the lived experiences of caste-based oppression and the complex process of identity formation. This research paper examines how Pawar negotiates his Dalit identity through personal narratives that intertwine the socio-political realities of caste. It explores themes of selfhood, marginalization, and the psychological impact of caste discrimination. By analysing the narrative style and Pawar's portrayal of the Dalit experience, the paper argues that *Baluta* is not just an autobiography but a political statement that resists the erasure of Dalit voices. Through the lens of identity theory and postcolonial critique, this paper highlights how *Baluta* challenges dominant caste narratives while offering a powerful articulation of Dalit consciousness.

**Keywords:** Dalit identity, caste politics, Daya Pawar, *Baluta*, Dalit literature, selfhood, marginalization, identity negotiation…

Dalit literature has long served as a powerful medium for expressing the lived experiences of India's most marginalized communities. Within this tradition, Daya Pawar's *Baluta* (1978) occupies a foundational place. As one of the earliest autobiographies written by a Dalit author, *Baluta* breaks new ground in its unflinching portrayal of caste-based discrimination. More than a personal memoir, it becomes a political statement, illuminating how the personal and the political are inseparably woven in the life of a Dalit. This paper explores how Pawar constructs and navigates his Dalit identity, revealing the ways in which selfhood, memory, and resistance come together in the telling of his story.

Understanding Dalit Identity in *Baluta* In *Baluta*, identity is not a fixed label but a painful and often fragmented process of becoming. Pawar's account is deeply rooted in everyday encounters with exclusion, humiliation, and systemic violence. The title itself, *Baluta*—referring to the traditional, caste-based payments made to village servants—serves as a stark reminder of the historical exploitation of Dalit labor. Through his lived experiences, Pawar critiques not only individual acts of discrimination but the very structures that normalize and sustain caste hierarchies.

His journey of self-understanding is marked by a persistent tension: on one hand, the internalized inferiority instilled by the caste system, and on the other, an urgent need to reclaim dignity and agency. Pawar navigates this space of contradiction, revealing how Dalit identity is shaped by both inherited oppression and the desire for transformation. His reflections uncover the emotional and psychological burdens that come with caste, showing that Dalit identity is not something passively accepted but actively negotiated in a hostile world. In doing so, he speaks not only for himself but for many others caught in the same struggle.

Narrative Strategy and the Politics of Representation Pawar's storytelling is raw, confessional, and deeply personal, yet it resonates on a collective level. His use of the first-person voice lends authenticity and immediacy to the narrative, pulling the reader into his world. This style breaks from sanitized literary conventions that have long erased or romanticized Dalit lives. Instead, Pawar opts for directness—sometimes unsettling in its honesty—that demands attention.

The emotional weight of *Baluta* lies in its refusal to flinch. Pawar's vulnerability becomes his strength, allowing him to challenge dominant narratives that reduce Dalit experience to mere statistics or stereotypes. In one poignant moment, he writes, "I speak not just for myself but for all who carry the weight of caste on their backs." Such statements underscore the communal dimension of his personal story. Through his confessional approach, Pawar not only asserts his own voice but also carves space for the silenced voices of others.

This approach also questions what is considered "literary" in mainstream Indian literature. By centering Dalit experiences and rejecting the need to conform to upper-caste aesthetics, *Baluta* becomes a radical act of self-representation. The text refuses to beautify suffering or package it for a privileged audience. Instead, it insists that these lived realities be seen, acknowledged, and understood on their own terms.

Caste, Memory, and Trauma Memory in *Baluta* is not a passive recollection of events—it is a battleground. Pawar revisits moments of deep personal pain: being denied water in school, being treated as impure, being constantly reminded of his "place" in the social order. These memories are more than individual wounds; they are representative of a shared history of dehumanization.

Yet in recalling them, Pawar resists the erasure of Dalit experience. He writes, "Even as I tried to escape caste, it clung to me like a shadow." In this haunting image, we see how caste functions as a constant, inescapable presence. Trauma, in this sense, is not a one-time event but an ongoing condition. Pawar's act of remembering becomes political—it is a way of reclaiming his past from a society that would prefer to forget it.

His personal trauma is intricately tied to collective memory. The emotional scars he carries are not his alone; they echo through generations. By placing his experiences within a broader context, Pawar turns memory into a form of resistance. He reminds us that caste is not just a relic of the past, but a continuing force shaping lives in the present.

The Intersection of Caste and Class One of the most compelling aspects of *Baluta* is its exploration of how caste and class intersect to deepen marginalization. Pawar makes it clear that poverty, for Dalits, is never just about material deprivation—it is a constant reminder of social exclusion. He observes, "Our poverty was not just about hunger; it was a reminder of our caste, an invisible mark we carried everywhere."

Even in urban spaces, where one might expect anonymity or escape, caste follows him. The city, often idealized as a space of liberation, becomes yet another site of exclusion. "In the city, I was still a Mahar before I was a man," he reflects, laying bare the illusion of social mobility. Education and work offer some avenues for advancement, but they rarely erase the stigma attached to caste identity.

Pawar's experiences underscore the limits of individual aspiration in the face of structural inequality. The system is rigged to keep Dalits at the margins, regardless of talent or ambition. His story exposes how deeply caste is embedded in Indian society—even where it is least expected—and how it continues to shape opportunities, relationships, and self-worth.

Resistance and Dalit Consciousness For all its depictions of pain, *Baluta* is ultimately a work of defiance. Pawar's decision to write his story is itself an act of resistance. In a world that demands silence from the oppressed, speaking out becomes a revolutionary act. "Writing this is painful, but silence would be a greater betrayal," he asserts.

By documenting his life, Pawar affirms the value of Dalit voices and challenges the systems that seek to suppress them. His narrative is not just about bearing witness to suffering; it is about reclaiming agency. "By telling my story, I tell the story of many who cannot speak," he writes, transforming his autobiography into a collective manifesto.

This emerging Dalit consciousness is about more than survival—it is about transformation. Pawar's reflections on education, migration, and self-assertion point to new possibilities for identity and empowerment. His writing demands not pity, but recognition and justice. In doing so, *Baluta* becomes a foundational text in the larger movement for Dalit liberation.

Conclusion Daya Pawar's *Baluta* is more than an autobiography—it is a landmark in Indian literature and a courageous act of truth-telling. Through his candid portrayal of life under caste oppression, Pawar redefines what it means to write from the margins. His narrative does not seek to conform to dominant expectations but challenges them head-on, asserting the legitimacy and power of Dalit self-expression.

By intertwining personal memory with collective trauma, and individual struggle with political resistance, Pawar crafts a narrative that is both deeply personal and profoundly political. "To write is to resist being forgotten," he declares—and in doing so, ensures that the stories of countless Dalits are brought into the light.

In documenting his journey, Pawar doesn't just reclaim his own identity—he helps pave the way for a more just and inclusive literary and social landscape. *Baluta* reminds us that the act of telling one's story, especially from the margins, can be one of the most powerful tools for change.

## References

1. Pawar, Daya. *Baluta*. Translated by Jerry Pinto, Speaking Tiger, 2015.

2. Limbale, Sharankumar. *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies, and Considerations*. Translated by Alok Mukherjee, Orient BlackSwan, 2004.

3. Valmiki, Omprakash. *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*. Columbia University Press, 2003.

4. Satyanarayana, K., and Susie Tharu, editors. *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing from South India*. Penguin Books, 2011.

5. Ilaiah, Kancha. *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Shudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture, and Political Economy*. Samya, 1996.