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Dalit Feminist Voices in Select Works of Bama and Urmila Pawar

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ABSTRACT :

This paper explores the intersection of caste and gender through a close literary examination of two significant Dalit autobiographies—*Karukku* by Bama and *The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar. Both texts are powerful narratives of lived experience that narrate the struggles faced by Dalit women in India, situating their voices within the framework of Dalit feminism. Drawing upon methodologies such as intersectional analysis, narrative theory, and comparative literary criticism, the study uncovers how these autobiographies challenge dominant patriarchal and casteist discourses both within and outside Dalit communities. Bama and Pawar articulate a politics of resistance through their non-linear, colloquial, and community-rooted storytelling, reclaiming their identities in a society that has historically silenced them. By highlighting themes such as religious critique, education as empowerment, collective memory, and feminist consciousness, the paper demonstrates how these autobiographies not only document trauma but also function as radical tools for social critique and transformation. This research thus affirms the critical importance of Dalit women's narratives in expanding the boundaries of both Indian literature and feminist discourse.

Keywords – Dalit, Feminism, Oppression, Intersectionality, Bama, Urmila Pawar, Caste, Gender

Introduction

The Dalit past in India is deeply integrated into the strict hierarchical caste system formulated by Brahmanical Hinduism. As ancient texts such as the *Manusmriti* state, society was classified into four varnas—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras—while those who were outside of this system were later classified as Avarnas and were excluded from society and downgraded to the most humiliating types of labour. These outcastes, who later came to be referred to as Dalits, meaning: "broken" or "oppressed", were assigned tasks like manual scavenging, carrying animal carcasses, and sweeping streets—tasks considered impure and contaminating to the higher castes. These occupations were eventually hereditary, resulting in deep-seated social and economic exclusion. The social policies of purity and pollution controlled every sphere of interaction with Dalits, from spatial segregation to exclusion from temple access and forbidding them from bringing water from public wells. Dalits were deprived of education, movement, and fundamental human dignity for centuries and thus became voiceless and invisible in the dominant historical and cultural account.

The colonial era and the resulting rise of social reform movements in the 19th and 20th centuries made Dalit causes more widely known. Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule were among the earliest reformers who raised awareness of Dalit injustice, even including women's education in their upliftment scheme. Later, B.R. Ambedkar pointed out the issue of the moral rightness of the caste system and stressed education and political activism as means of emancipation. Ambedkar, a Dalit himself, spearheaded major movements against discrimination by caste, such as the Mahad Satyagraha for access to public water tanks for drinking and the composition of the Indian Constitution, which prohibited untouchability and assured basic rights to all citizens. Ambedkar in his prominent work *Annihilation of Caste* states that "The assertion by the individual of his own opinions and beliefs, his independence and interest—over and against group standards and controls—is the beginning of all reform." (198) This shows his strong opinions on the rejection of the imposed hierarchies.

Dalit women, who are at the margins of caste, class, and gender inferiority, are both unequally and uniquely disadvantaged. They are the poorest and most oppressed of India's marginalised communities, being doubly marginalised, first, being poor, female, and then Dalit. Dalits have historically faced layered oppression due to their caste and economic status. When it comes to Dalit women, it adds another hurdle, i.e., being a woman. They often experience systemic discrimination not only from the dominant upper castes but also within their communities. Denied access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, Dalit women are often subjected to violence, exploitation, and social exclusion.

Bina Rai states, "Dalit women face verbal, physical and sexual violence in the public and private domain…Dalit women are often the victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation. Dalit women's sexual and bodily integrity are threatened and violated, even from a young age." (142) These incidents are not some exceptions but reflect deep-rooted patterns of marginalisation, often upheld by traditional and cultural practices. For instance, Dalit women are still forced into degrading customs like the devadasi system, where young girls are "married" to deities and later exploited by men from dominant castes. Such practices contribute to widespread issues among Dalit women, including low literacy levels, poor nutrition, and limited access to healthcare services.

Social and institutional mechanisms in India fail to protect Dalit women despite the progressive constitutional structure in the country. By law, there have been many efforts for the protection and upliftment of Dalits, for example, the Protection of Civil Rights Act (1955) and the Prevention of Atrocities Act (1989), designed to discourage caste violence and empower marginalised groups. But it is the absence of effective enforcement of legislation, along with impunity in caste- and gender-based violence, that makes Dalit women especially susceptible. Sabharwal and Sonalkar draw attention to the fact that public brutality against Dalit women is systematically neglected or downplayed by the law enforcement machinery as well as by society, even after

numerous laws for safeguarding them exist. They state, "It is this 'exclusion-induced deprivation' that differentiates Dalit women's problem from those of other women, and it also makes their problems more intense and complicated than those faced by other women." (72) Therefore, even if the struggles faced by Dalit women and other women are almost the same, Dalit women still carry the heavier cross on their backs for which the law enforcement at times do not even aid. Caste violence and discrimination continue to exist in both explicit and tacit forms, primarily in the countryside.

In addition, Dalit women's experiences are often erased in feminist and Dalit movements. As T. Brahmanandam discusses "…the mainstream Indian women's movement continues to be controlled by the privileged/dominant caste and educated women and this may be the possible factor for non-representation or marginal representation of Dalit women's voices in the women's movement."(159) Dalit political movements have mostly focused on caste issues in terms of male leadership, sidelining gender issues. Therefore, Dalit feminism appears not only as a critique but also as an independent ideological claim that requires recognition of the distinct oppressions of Dalit women.

Dalit Literary Traditions and Feminist Writings

Dalit literary tradition refers to the literary works produced by Dalit authors that express their experiences and struggles in a discriminatory driven society. The sole purpose of Dalit literary traditions is to bring out the issues like exclusion, violence, and poverty to the mainstream literature. It has now become a strong weapon of resistance and assertion, providing a voice to the historically silenced voices of oppression based on caste. Dalit literature resists the dominant discourses that have long ignored or misrepresented Dalit experiences. It is unique for its stark, explicit vocabulary, colloquial language and emphasis on topics such as caste-based discrimination, poverty, humiliation, and survival. Dalit literature talks about the brutalities of untouchability and societal exclusion. The literature is not a form of creative writing but an instrument of social justice that seeks to enlighten the subaltern to reclaim what they have lost.

Explaining the point of Dalit literary tradition, Sharankumar Limbale writes "Dalit Literature is born from the womb of untouchability…Only Dalit writers have narrated the pain of Dalits-this is as true as the fact that rural writers have not depicted the life of Dalits." (29) This statement further raises another point where the Dalit story is always to be told by a Dalit person only. No one other than the person who has suffered the pain themselves can purely write about the sufferings. All the sufferings that the Dalits have gone through make them eager to tell their experiences by themselves, hence making autobiographical works take over a large portion of Dalit literary works. Therefore, Dalit literary works capture a collective memory and identity that have been denied recognition in discourses of the upper castes. It transcends mere artistic expression, serving instead as a literature rooted in lived experiences. (Johri 177, Prasad 138) The emergence of Dalit literature is inextricably linked to the broader Dalit movement and Ambedkarite thought, including education, empowerment, and rewriting history from a Dalit point of view.

While Dalit literature in itself has a major challenge of fighting caste-based oppression, Dalit women have suffered even more by fighting against both gender and caste-based discrimination doubly marginalising them too. The patriarchal domination is deeply rooted in both caste society and their communities. Manjari Johri points out this dominance as she states "Across cultures, men have enjoyed a superior status, further reinforced through religious practices, rituals, narratives, myths, and mythology. It has become deeply internalized and ingrained in human consciousness." (2) Dalit female writers have talked not only about untouchability but also brought issues like domestic labour, sexual violence, and suppression within the Dalit movement itself. These women have turned the narrative from a personal to a much wider level and are making the Dalit literature incomplete without female narratives. Amongst the countless Dalit feminist writers, the research paper discusses the contribution of Bama and Urmila Pawar by analysing their works *Karukku* and *The Weave of my Life* respectively.

Bama and Urmila Pawar give us autobiographical accounts that are influential works that represent such resistance. These women tell lived histories of gender and caste repression in *Karukku* and *The Weave of My Life*, providing room for a Dalit feminist voice on a larger scale. These authors' literature demonstrates more than individual trauma; it transforms memory into political critique and activism. In their narratives of resistance against untouchability, poverty, and patriarchal domination, Bama and Pawar reveal the distinct consciousness of Dalit women—one that resists not only upper-caste authority but also patriarchal orders in their own space. Spivak comments on this double marginalisation by saying "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling…" (74)

Bama's criticism of Christianity's involvement in casteism and Pawar's examination of the gendered exclusions of Dalit activism compel readers to realise the painful realities. They reveal the complicity of religious, social, and political institutions in strengthening hierarchies that further undermine Dalit women's humanity. Therefore, these books are an important part of the growing Dalit feminist writing, and they deserve more attention from researchers interested in this field. This essay examines the history and thought behind Dalit identity, exclusion based on caste, and the development of Dalit feminist thought. It focuses on the writings of Bama and Urmila Pawar—two strong voices from various parts of India—to show why these books are important for understanding how Dalit women question both mainstream feminism and male-dominated Dalit affairs.

To appreciate *Karukku* and *The Weave of My Life*, it is necessary to understand their authors, Bama and Urmila Pawar in the particular social, cultural, and historical contexts from which they write. Each of these writers is a representative of a specific regional and religious tradition, but through the shared prism of caste and gender domination, they converge. Their autobiographies are not personal accounts but insurgent texts that capture broader social facts and subvert Indian literature and dominant feminist discourses.

Bama Faustina Soosairaj, better known as Bama, is a Tamil Dalit Christian author whose first autobiographical novel *Karukku* was released in 1992. Raised in a Roman Catholic Dalit family in Tamil Nadu, Bama's early life was marked by severe caste discrimination both in the village and in the Church. Her school experience, where she was humiliated by upper-caste teachers and classmates, and subsequent disappointment with religious institutions, make up the bulk of *Karukku*. The title itself—serrated palm leaves i.e. *Karukku* is painful and biting resistance, metaphorically expressing both pain and strength of Dalit existence.

As a Dalit Christian, Bama's positioning is particularly significant. Although conversion to Christianity was historically seen as an escape from caste hierarchies, *Karukku* exposes the reality that discrimination by caste endures even among Christian groups. Bama's narrative dissents from this facade and marks the extent to which religion fails to deliver true freedom to Dalits. As described by Vijay Kumar "This autobiography is a narrative of three-

fold subjugation of Dalit Christian women. Bama is the spokesperson of all the Dalit women, especially of converted Chriatisn who, inspite of conversion into Christianity, suffered at three levels: as women, as dalit and as poor." (2) Her choice of writing in Tamil, incorporating native dialects and a colloquial, oral voice, is also an act of resistance—it refuses the elitism of "literary" language and makes Dalit women's voices heard in their language.

On the other hand, Marathi Dalit Buddhist writer Urmila Pawar offers a different but equally strong narrative of suffering and self-realisation. *The Weave of My Life*, first published in Marathi as Aaydaan, chronicles her journey from her poor childhood and humiliation in the caste hierarchy to becoming a writer, activist, and intellectual in Maharashtra. Her existence is organically linked with the Ambedkarite tradition, which emphasised education, self-respect, and organised opposition to caste violence, as a consequence of her being born into a family that converted to Buddhism due to the influence of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's movement.

While Bama's story captures the rural, religious, and gendered aspects of caste in Tamil Nadu, Pawar's book projects the urban, political, and collective aspects of Dalit womanhood. She provides a sophisticated image of her mother's and grandmother's lives, the work they did, and the cultural heritage of caste occupations such as weaving (aaydaan), which is both metaphor and theme in her work. Her involvement in the women's movement, and her criticism of the same's upper-caste leanings, make her text an additional layered one, a critical contribution to Dalit feminist thought.

The authors also diverge in their activism and resistance. Bama's resistance is highly personal and spiritual—she defies the convent, she defies Church authorities, and she commits to education and writing. Her prose is reflective, emotive, and frequently lyrical, gathering power from memory and daily observation. Pawar's resistance, on the other hand, is more organised and political—she is an active participant in the Dalit and feminist struggles, joins public demonstrations, and produces essays, short stories, and speeches along with her memoir. Her writing style is documentary in nature, chronicling not just her existence but the existence of other Dalit women and the development of social movements around her.

Despite the differences, both *Karukku* and *The Weave of My Life* are instruments of reclaiming history and identity. Neither of their autobiographies proceeds in the linear fashion characteristic of the genre but takes on a fractured, contemplative form that reflects the discontinuous and frequently excruciating nature of memory. This formal innovation breaks with the conventions of traditional autobiography and fits with feminist narrative forms that privilege voice and experience rather than chronology.

In addition, both texts are crucial in broadening the field of Indian feminist discourse. They resist being confined within the framework of either mainstream feminism, which tends to overlook Dalit discourse and tends to push gender aside. Instead, they have created a space for Dalit feminist speakers, where lived experience is the site of knowledge production and struggle. Their works are acts of resistance against erasure, stating that Dalit women are not victims alone but agents of transformation and narrators of their own experiences.

Major Thematic Concerns

The autobiographies *Karukku* by Bama and *The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar are not personal memoirs but highly political works that reveal the multilayered realities of Dalit women in India. These books converge caste, gender, class, and religion to speak about systemic injustice as well as to represent resistance and resilience. The subsequent thematic sections discuss the key issues addressed in these works.

i. Intersectionality of Caste and Gender

Drawing from Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, both memoirs centre around the intricate intersection of caste and gender. The writers demonstrate how Dalit women undergo double marginalisation: one by their caste, and the other as women in patriarchal societies.

Bama narrates several episodes from her childhood that exposed the deeply ingrained caste hierarchy surrounding her. For instance, she is amazed to find an elder from her community carrying snacks on a string so as not to come into contact with them, as they are destined for a dominant-caste man. This initial experience of caste discrimination remains a recurring theme. Her Christian faith is not a refuge, as she comes to realise later that the Church itself replicates caste hierarchies—Dalit Christians are forced to perform servile labour, and caste-insults persist even in the religious institution. She quotes critiquing the upper castes "But Dalits have also understood that God is not like this… There is a new strength within them… to begin to live with honour and respect and love of all humankind. To my mind, that alone is true devotion." (106)

In the same way, *The Weave of My Life* accounts for how Urmila Pawar suffers from both gendered and caste-based violence. From not being allowed to touch food at lunchtime in school to a teacher slapping her for a mess she did not make, Pawar's life is an indication of the normalcy of caste discrimination. Her womanhood does not save her; instead, it adds to her vulnerability, as observed through the recollections of abuse experienced by her sisters-in-law and other women in her village. Pawar states "Discrimination for caste adds salt to the wounds of the Dalit women who are already oppressed."

Both writers maintain that Dalit women are not just oppressed by upper-caste men and women but also in their communities by Dalit men. This intersectionality calls for a self-evident Dalit feminist paradigm. Vijay Kumar affirms as he asserts "Dalit women are being inflicted with much more insult and shame as compared to their male counterparts because they have to bear both social humiliation as well as the male dominance in the family" pointing out the extensive plight of Dalit women. (1)

ii. Resistance and Agency

Both *Karukku* and *The Weave of My Life* portray not only suffering but also acts of defiance. The workplace writing itself as an act of resistance—each woman uses her voice to speak back to power.

In *Karukku*, Bama's leaving the convent, which had initially been for her a site of service, is a turning point. She understands that service has to emanate from spaces not engaging in internal casteism. Leaving and deciding to pen *Karukku*—a tale "cutting like the blade of a palm leaf"—is a symbol of taking back agency. Bama speaks about the collective resistance in *Karukku* "There are other Dalit hears like mine…They, who have been the oppressed, are now themselves like the double-edged *Karukku*, challenging their oppressors." (Bama 11)

Pawar, however, pushes resistance into the political arena. Her involvement in the Ambedkarite movement, her public speaking engagements, and her activism form her "public transcripts"—a term borrowed from James C. Scott that denotes open defiance against domination. Her resistance is not loud in every case; sometimes it is subtle, embodied in the silences and survival strategies of women like her sister-in-law Parvati. She quotes "Her silence is her hidden transcript; silence is her reward, her burden and her source of her strength" These "hidden transcripts" of everyday resilience also become tools of resistance. (24)

iii. Education and Empowerment

Education is central to both memoirs—both as a method of transcending social constraints but also as a vehicle of change and empowerment. Bama is continually informed by her older brother that learning is the sole escape route from systemic humiliation: "If we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities". (27) Despite working in the fields during her school years, she continues, and learning is her journey to self-realisation and empowerment. Her narratives highlight the revelatory moment when she first understands what untouchability means. It initiates her political and educational self-awareness.

Pawar, also, speaks of education as an important escape. Yet, her education is conflict-ridden. Her husband, though cooperative at first, becomes uneasy when she asks for a postgraduate degree. But still, she keeps learning while keeping house and bringing up her children. The contradictions of domestic responsibility and intellectual aspiration are laid bare, revealing how patriarchal norms weigh even educated Dalit women down. Pawar talks about the hurdles in education for Dalit children as she writes "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" (20)

iv. Religion and Social Reform

Religion, particularly conversion, is addressed differently in the two memoirs. In *Karukku*, Bama is also very critical of Christianity. While her family joined the faith hoping to escape caste persecution, she sees the same caste attitudes being repeated within the Church as well. Dalit Christians are still assigned clerical labour, and Bama is treated as second-class even when she is a nun. Bama in *Karukku* even challenges the Church's actions where it contrasts what the religion preaches. Her re-reading and interpretation of the Christian scriptures emphasise the revolutionary aspects of Christianity, the values of equality, social justice, and love towards all. Her religion becomes an arena for inner turmoil, and she ends up quitting the religious order.

Conversely, Urmila Pawar's family's turn to Buddhism is a liberating choice. Inspired by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Pawar's community turns to Buddhism as a path to dignity and social transformation. The religion is not merely religious but political—it offers a discourse of equality, moral resilience, and shared identity. It is a basis for her feminist awareness and activism.

v. Community, Solidarity, and Feminist Consciousness

One of the notable features of both the books is the gradual awakening of feminist awareness through the life of the community and the collective struggle. Bama's feminism is village-based. She tells us about the toughness of Dalit women who toil day and night, face physical violence, but still maintain families. These women may not be members of an organised movement, but they personify feminist resilience in action. Bama's later writings like Sangati further engage with gender. Still, *Karukku's* critique of institutional structures sows the seeds of Dalit feminist thought.

Pawar's transition is more planned out. She starts joining women's groups, political conclaves, and energetically engages with fellow activists. Her memoir demonstrates how feminism for Dalit women cannot be dichotomised from the issues of class and caste. She also criticises some features of the Indian women's movement by observing how the leadership of upper-caste women tends to overlook or exclude Dalit issues. Pawar writes while metaphorically linking her mother's basket weaving to her writing, placing herself in a lineage between the feminine labour and oppression and expressions. She writes "This aaydan of my life and its weave…what will it have to offer readers?" (304)

Pawar also gives voice to other women in her community, her mother, sisters, and neighbours creating a chorus of resistance rather than a single protagonist's journey. This collective storytelling strategy underscores how Dalit feminism is inherently community-centred. "Dalit women's autobiography…becomes the saga of the entire Dalit consciousness" she writes asserting that this movement knows no boundaries and is inclusive, extensive and collective.

vi. Language as a Weapon

Both the novels *Karukku* and *The Weave of My Life* use language as a weapon to fight against society. They reject the romanticised, polished, aesthetically pleasing form of way of storytelling, instead using a rogue, rough form with the usage of explicit language too. They favoured a fragmented, non-linear form of storytelling. The choice of language also makes a huge impression, i.e. Marathi and Tamil. Bama boldly stated once "My language, style and content are rooted in my community, I will not borrow upper-caste voice to tell my story." Thus proving the usage of heavy community idioms, oral and folk expressions are deeply rooted in their traditions. In both texts, language is used as a powerful tool for reclaiming what they have lost and fighting marginalisation too.

Conclusion

The autobiographies *Karukku* by Bama and *The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar are great literary interventions that raise the voices of silenced Dalit women. These books transcend individual accounts to challenge deeply embedded structures of caste and patriarchy and bring out the double marginalisation of Dalit women within their societies as well as society in general. Through the use of their local languages and integration of oral histories, each resists literary elitism and appropriates space for the Dalit voice in its originality.

Their autobiographical modes of writing—disjointed, fragmented, and intimate—are reflections of the broken lives they narrate and are instruments of resistance and recuperation. They centred the whole novel around their voice, and they gained more recognition. Their works pinpointed the invisibility that women face both within upper-caste-dominated mainstream feminism and within the male-centric Dalit movement. The works of Bama, Pawar and several other women writers helped create a space of recognition for these doubly marginalised women from where they can no longer be ignored.

The challenges faced by women to fight for justice, dignity and equality make readers realise the importance of it. Seeing these women fighting for even basic human rights instils a thought of social transformation in the minds of readers. This impact is not only limited to the literary or a small societal level but it influences greater level activism and policy discussions taking this discourse beyond borders.

This research confirms that Dalit feminist writing is not so much about representation but about rearticulating the models through which we comprehend identity, resistance, and agency. Bama and Pawar not only question the boundaries of mainstream feminism and Dalit politics but also compel a more inclusive and intersectional conversation. Their work invites a re-reading of history, literature, and activism in terms of women who have been pushed to the margins for so long. In so doing, they don't merely speak stories—they require justice, acknowledgement, and transformation.

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