

## Breaking the Silence: A Critical Analysis of Dalit Women's Worldview in Urmila Pawar's *Motherwit*

Kamna Singh\*  
Ph.D Research Scholar  
Department of English  
University of Delhi

### ABSTRACT

The Dalit group is among the most oppressed under the contentious but widely accepted social structure known as caste, but some Dalit women have experienced even worse subjugation. The perspective of oppressed Dalit women is examined in this essay. Not Dalit women in isolation, but rather Dalit women collectively. In doing so, *Motherwit*, a collection of short stories by Urmila Pawar, is the main subject of this essay. It aims to initiate a conversation about the worldview of Dalit women, which is situated at the nexus of gender, caste, and class. It also aims to address the worldview that has largely gone unchallenged in both the well-known Dalit and feminist discourses in India. The article has been divided into three sections. The first section provides a brief biography of Urmila Pawar and then discusses the rise of Dalit women writers, focusing on her collection of short stories *Motherwit*. The second section discusses the text's themes, offers a commentary on how it uses language, and ends with a statement on Dalit feminism. Women from various castes and social classes may identify with Pawar's feminism since it is not exclusive to any one lady. Any woman, regardless of caste or class status, can readily relate to Pawar's feminism, which is evident in all of her characters. This suggests that women's experiences as women are similar, but Dalit women's experiences are still significantly more complex than those of upper-caste women in all classes.

**Keywords:** Dalit, Urmila Pawar, *Motherwit*, Mahar community, caste and gender.

In the controversial but highly accepted social order — caste — Dalit community is one of the most subjugated, yet there lies Dalit women who have been further subjugated. This paper engages with the worldview of subjugated Dalit women. Not Dalit women as an individual, rather the Dalit women as a category. In doing so, this paper extensively focuses on Urmila Pawar's short story collection — *Motherwit*. It intends to bring forth a discussion about the worldview of Dalit women, the worldview that lies at the intersection of caste, class and gender and the worldview that largely remained undealt within the popular Dalit discourses as well as within the celebrated feminist discourses of India. The paper is divided into three parts wherein the first part talks about Urmila Pawar in brief, and then goes on to talk about the emergence of Dalit women's writing with special reference to Urmila Pawar's short story collection

---

\* Author: Kamna Singh

Email: [Writetokamna.kmc@gmail.com](mailto:Writetokamna.kmc@gmail.com)

Received 02 Dec 2024; Accepted 21 Dec. 2024. Available online: 25 Dec 2023.

Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension)

[This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)



Motherwit. The second part engages in a thematic discussion of the text, a note on its usage of language and concludes with a note on Dalit feminism.

Urmila Pawar is an author and an activist from the Mahar community in Maharashtra. Born and raised in different parts of Maharashtra, she spent much of her life in rural and urban settings. The impact of the same can be seen in the vivid descriptions of her protagonists negotiating with their identities in both urban and rural spaces. Her works primarily deal with the social realities of being a Dalit and, more importantly, being a woman within the Dalit community. If Dalit men's writing primarily focuses on the oppression faced by Dalits at the hands of the upper castes, her writings as a Dalit woman also stress the oppression intimately felt by Dalit women within their own communities as a result of Brahminical patriarchy also practised within Dalit communities.

Pawar's work derives importance from the fact that it aided in laying a framework under which the gendered struggle of Dalit women could be understood within the larger structure of caste. She wrote short fiction much before her autobiography *Aydaan*, published in 2003, yet her fiction was compiled and published as a short story collection titled *Motherwit* almost a decade later in 2013. In all her writings, be it her autobiography or her short stories, one cannot help but notice her ability to project her struggles of discovering her identity as a Dalit woman and her need to understand the caste system in a manner which enables the reader to empathize with her sufferings and the sufferings of many others like her.

The gendered sufferings that Urmila Pawar and many others talk about were absent from both women's movement as well as the Dalit literary movement before the 1980s due to their position in the caste and the gender hierarchy. It is only later when Dalit women themselves started articulating their own voices through literary platforms like *Samvadini- Dalit Stree Sahitya Manch*, which emerged because of *Mahila Sansad*, a group of young Dalit women in the 1980s which intensified Dalit feminist literary (Mahurkar).

It is already established that the origin of Dalit literature finds its roots in the dissonance between "the savarna" and "the avarna" experience of lives within Indian society. Baburao Bagul in his essay on the origin of Dalit literature asserts that the established literature of India is inherently Hindu literature which not only excludes the so-called low castes but also portrays a privileged and unrelatable "savarna" experience as the normative experience of living in Indian society (Satyanarayan and Tharu 8). The excluded "avarna" experience of life found space in the writings of Jotiba Phule, Ambedkar and others in the twentieth-century and later formulated the body of Dalit literature today.

The emergence of Dalit literature can be seen as an act of resistance in itself as it breaks the age-old tradition of silence. The notion of defiance and resistance are the key features of Dalit literature as the very idea of the same is premised in challenging and thwarting the dictates of the Brahminical caste Hindu society, which has historically denied Dalits the basic rights or any kind of self-expression.

Fundamentally, absence and misrepresentation are two chief accuses when one talks about Dalit women's writing. As Dalit literature emerged as a response to Hindu literature dominated by upper-castes, the Dalit women's writing emerged as a response to the absence of Dalit woman's worldview in the body of Dalit literature largely dominated by men. It can be further argued that in the case of Urmila Pawar, the notion of oppression becomes all the more nuanced and pronounced because of her triply disadvantaged position as a Dalit woman who has been historically silenced and denied the agency and right to self-expression due to her caste, class as well as gender. This paper will attempt to explore this notion of oppression through a study of her collection of short stories titled *Motherwit*.

The term "motherwit" loosely translates to the natural ability of an individual to cope with everyday matters, and it derives its meaning through establishing the relationship of wit with our first point of contact with the world, our mothers. Veena Deo rightly mentions the usage of the term *Motherwit* by Pawar as "a rich metaphor pointing out to women/mother's knowledge that goes unnoticed and is often destroyed by powerful forces of domination" (xxxvi). Here, the short story collection speaks of this unnoticed knowledge of mothers, daughters and women in general.

What makes Urmila Pawar's short stories remarkable is the presence of strong and rebellious women whose latent subversive potential is revealed at the end of the story through twisted, unconventional plots and unpredictable endings. As the characters and the plot are not very long-drawn, the short story form facilitates this unpredictability of plot and character. It can be argued that the structure of Pawar's short stories resembles the political trajectory of the Ambedkarite or women's movement in that it moves from experiences of despair, hopelessness, injustice and inequality into the direction of subversion, protest and rebellion. Pawar's protagonists are mostly the women we meet every day, the fruit vendor or the clerk checking documents in a government office or a neighbour or acquaintance we may have known for years but have never bothered to enquire or look beyond what is visible. Sometimes Pawar's women are able to change their circumstances by completely overthrowing the patriarchal structure. Sometimes they just bend it to find a way to work around them.

Pawar's choice of working with fictional narrative allows the reader to analyse the experience of gender and caste from a necessary distance which helps in theorising the structural violence. It leaves enough room for the reader to reflect upon how they envisage caste allowing them to pinpoint the cultural practices that reproduce the structure of both caste and gender. In doing so, Pawar is not blaming people or shaming the non-experiencer but allowing them into the shoes of the ones at the receiving end thereby, enabling them to understand the complex and oppressive combination of caste and gender.

A key feature of her fiction is that it keeps merging with her autobiographical works. The experiences of her characters in *Motherwit* can be traced back to her autobiography. While her autobiography represents and reflects on experiences, encounters, and confrontations, her fictional work goes a step further and imagines these significant occurrences that left an impression on Pawar in her life in different ways. For instance, the short stories *Aaye*, *The Odd One* and *Nyay* all find some kind of a mention in *Aydaan's* autobiography. In *Aydaan*, Pawar mentions about her mother, who engaged in basket weaving for economic sustenance, her father's early death and the challenges her mother endured while raising her and her siblings (34). In *Aaye*, she builds upon the same narrative, and we see a more nuanced representation of her mother's vulnerability owing to the fact that she was a single woman and a widow.

The mother in *Aaye* seems to be a character that Pawar clearly modelled after her own mother, whom we first met in *Aydaan*. She is silent and persistent in the face of adversity and is also shown following the occupation of weaving baskets, just like Pawar's mother. Along with that, the occupation of the narrator's father, along with the reason for the narrator's father's death is the same as Pawar's father.

Secondly, her story '*Vegli or The Odd One*' is a story about a modern Dalit woman who is facing issues with her in-laws regarding her choice of continuing to work after marriage and her plans of moving out of the 'filthy' neighbourhood, which also served as their caste marker. This story can again be seen as something we find a mention of in *Aydaan* where she speaks about the quarrels in her sister's family and her husband's silence and unwillingness to stand up to wrongs done by his parents (Pawar 74).

In the third story '*Nyay Paru*', a young widow becomes pregnant not by her choice but as a result of an egregious sexual assault. When the entire village summons her to get rid of the child, she decides to raise the baby all by herself. In fact, even in Pawar's autobiography, we see a similar incident where the outcome of a similar situation has a tragic outcome where "the village women" become the agents of patriarchy and kick a pregnant woman in the belly to abort her child and thus, upholding the patriarchal norm (94).

It is important to note that in her fiction, Pawar chooses to imagine more rebellious outcomes of the situations, which, as mentioned in her autobiography, may have ended tragically. For instance, in the last story discussed above, Paru claims her baby as opposed to the act of other women kicking the pregnant woman's womb in her autobiography. This act of other women kicking the woman can be seen as the lack of agency over one's own body, which Pawar subverts in her fictional narrative. In her fictional narratives, in almost all the cases, Pawar imagines a scenario where the woman and nobody else gets to decide things on her behalf.

Another strand that emerges in Pawar's stories is the idea of labour and the sexual division of labour. Here, I would like to mention that Professor Kancha Ilaiah has opined that the Dalit women are freer in terms of their movement which is not restricted to the domestic realm (38). The idea gets problematised if we try to look at it from Pawar's perspective, whose stories mention the double burden that lies on a woman's shoulders, the burden of managing both household responsibilities and earning a living. It appears as if the free movement that Ilaiah talks about, is more out of economic necessity than with the desire to treat the woman as an equal. Also, Pawar's stories clearly talk about how the women who venture out of domestic spaces into public ones are more vulnerable to physical and sexual assaults. (Ex. Paru was exploited while going to work)

These stories 'Kavach and Vegli' reflect the idea of the sexual division of labour as it talks about the domestic work that the women were expected to do along with earning a living for the family. In Kavach, which is set in rural, we see an elaborate description of Indira, a female fruit seller travelling all the way to the market, braving hills and thick forests to sell mangoes in order to make ends meet. At home, we see Indira struggling with an alcoholic husband who is mostly sleeping and abusing her, and in the market, we see her struggle with the customers who not only exploit her by paying less but also by using sexual innuendos to harass and humiliate her in public (Pawar 80).

In 'Vegli', which is set in urban, we see how a large chunk of domestic work was left for the daughter-in-law to take care of. She was also working outside and was also expected to take care of the domestic chores once she was back from her office. Despite doing both the household work and her job, her in-laws used to shout at her. Nalini works in a government office where she hears things like "Dalits...have it good...the government pampers them" (Pawar 57), which is probably the only instance where Pawar makes mentions of institutional casteism that the protagonist Nalini experiences in her workplace. We see that in her house, her office and her neighbourhood where she resides in a one-room apartment with her husband, a child and in-laws she is acutely aware of her position as "the other". The title, which translates

to “the odd one” explains the othering of Nalini in office, amongst her in-laws and in her locality where she gets mocked by other women from her own community. Women in the chawl call out to Nalini “Here comes the schoolmistress”, “Look at her petticoat shine!”, “What’s the point of all that education, after all, you too have to blow on the cooking fires to keep them lit” (Pawar 61). The act of walking away in the end without waiting for her husband can be seen as Nalini accepting the reality and standing up to it. This simple act of walking away here is a bold statement where Nalini refuses to bow down to the patriarchal domination Nalini is faced with.

Coming back to the story *Nyay*, which is a story where we are presented with the story of a young widow Paru through the perspective of the male narrator with urban sensibilities. It appears as if Pawar deliberately chose a male narrator to narrate this story. It enables the reader to understand the predicament of men from the community who move outside their native villages and start considering themselves different from the villagers. Pawar presenting Paru’s story through the male narrator’s gaze also allows the reader to analyze how the male gaze looks at the particular issue of assault of women and how it interprets the woman wanting to keep the child and, in doing so allows us to look at the skewed power dynamics of gender and caste in a rural setting.

In the story, we see that Paru is aware of her position as a widow and considers the unborn child a part of herself and something that belongs to her. Her response to the villagers when they ask her to get rid of it was that she doesn’t need a man to support her in raising the child. We see Paru stating her opinion loud and clear when she says, “This child is mine and I want it. I’ll raise the child myself” (Pawar 38). By stating her opinion politely yet with a firm demeanour Paru questions the village authority and demands what was rightfully hers, the right over her own body. Although she does address her sexual violation in the meeting, the purpose of doing that was to ask for her right to choose the fate of the baby rather than doing what she is told. This very act, at large, raises an important question articulated through questioning women's agency over their bodies. She definitely seeks justice in the story but in a different manner. Instead of asking for the perpetrators to be punished, she wants her autonomy, the right over her own body, the right to choose what she wants to do with the foetus, which is a part of her body. Her decision to raise the child and discarding the idea that she needs a man to do so makes the narrator reflect on his male privileges and his gendered understanding of Paru’s situation. Here, we see him reflecting on his biases and correcting himself.

Pawar also questions the unequal distribution of power within marriage, which is evident in her short stories like *Cheed* (Anger) and *Sahav Bot* (Sixth Finger). This particular story is about

two friends, Shanta and Neema. Neema makes her husband a part of not just what is happening in her life but also in her friend's life. Here, Pawar uses female friendships and how they change after a woman gets married to talk about the unequal nature of marriages. In doing so, Pawar questions the social structure that hierarchizes personal relationships, where the husband is always the centre of a woman's world. This story allows the reader to analyse the indoctrination of women into accepting that their husbands are above them in almost every sphere rather than as equal partners in a marriage.

Similarly, in *Sahav Bot* or *Sixth Finger*, Pawar brings forth the side of marriage where the institution of marriage controls women and forces her into a life where she is constantly tried and tested. This story has a reference from Ramayana, where the agony of Sita is discussed by Sneha, who is also made to give an Agni pariksha just like Sita (Pawar 19). The story revolves around a joke that Umesh, Sneha's husband made about his wife and the neighbour having a baby together. But later we see that his own word became a ghost and started haunting him as well as Sneha. Initially what was a funny matter became extremely uncomfortable when Sneha conceives and her husband suspects that Sneha has cheated on him and it is Nayan's child. When the child is born, he also has a sixth finger just like Umesh but dies immediately after birth. Tragically, Sneha also dies during childbirth but interestingly she dies only after knowing that the child had a marker which testifies her innocence, which reminds us of the Ramayana reference again where the Earth engulfed Sita after her Agni pariksha.

The language used by Pawar in her short stories is simple and unpolished. She uses it to record and represent her characters' struggles and mundane lives. This involves the usage of regional expressions and slangs used by the people of the class/castes she represents in her stories, making her language and writing style more realistic and relatable vis-à-vis lower caste Maharashtrian life. For example, in the story *Shalya*, while mentioning the second midwife, we could see the usage of how "she cannot keep a sesame seed moistened in her mouth," which depicts that she talks a lot (Pawar 42). The translator, Veena Deo, has also taken special care to retain Marathi expressions, forms of address, and words to refer to family members and relatives like "Aaye" for mother, "Vahini" for sister-in-law and so on, which enables her to capture and retain the essence of the original in translations and allows the reader to get a glimpse of the lives of lower-class and lower caste Marathi women, even in a foreign language, that is, English in a postcolonial country like India.

Lastly, I would like to end this paper with a brief note on Pawar's writings as a note on Dalit Feminism. Eleanor Zelliot notes in her forward that Pawar's feminism is strongly evident in her strong central characters, and the three parts of Pawar's identity as a Dalit, as a Buddhist

and as a feminist manifest themselves in each story in varying proportions (x). To understand Urmila Pawar's brand of feminism, if at all I am allowed to use this terminology, I would want to talk about how in all her works she attempts to "right" the "wrongs" through her writing. Her writings bring forth the narratives of absent women from the mainstream narratives to the forefront and do the job sans exaggeration which demands a new definition of social realism as opposed to the established understanding of the genre-specific to upper caste writings. Her books *Amihi Itihas Gadhvala or We Also Made History* and *Aydaan or The Weave of My Life*, published in 2008 laid the groundwork for establishing a much more complex and layered experience of womanhood demanding or rather creating a kind of feminism which largely caters to Dalit women. In the text, *We Also Made History*, Pawar states that during the Ambedkarite movement Dalit women "courted arrest and spent time in prison often with babies in their arms" (Pawar and Moon 3). Such a description of Dalit women's contribution was missing from mainstream narratives of history before she and Moon ventured to write about it. Pawar's feminism is not limited to any particular woman, and women across all caste, class can relate to her writings. However, it is to be noted that a Dalit woman, in most cases, will not be able to connect to the writings by the mainstream upper-caste feminist writer, which drives home the idea that Dalit feminism is more inclusive. Pawar's feminism, which is evident in all her characters, is something that any woman, irrespective of her caste or class status, will easily relate to, suggesting an overlap in their experience of womanhood, yet the experience of a Dalit woman remains much more complex than that of an upper-caste woman across all classes. As Veena Deo suggests in the introduction of the text that the women in Pawar's stories are not always placard-holding women suggesting a radical rejection of social structures or institutions altogether. But they are the ones who subtly revise and reshape the unjust social practices imposed on them. This ensures two things: first, their entry into the power structure and second, that these women, unlike the ones that came before them will not become the agents of patriarchy that they have been fighting with.

### **Work Cited:**

Deo Veena, Introduction. *Motherwit* by Urmila Pawar, translated by Veena Deo. Zubaan Books, 2013, pp. xiii-xliii.

Ilaiah, Kancha. *Why I am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*. Popular Prakashan, 2002.



Interviews with Pawar 1998, *Amihi Itihas Gadhawala: Urmila Pawar and The Making of History*. Mumbai: SPARROW.

Kumar, Raj. "Beyond the Margin: Dalit Women's Autobiographies." *Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity*, by Raj Kumar, Orient BlackSwan, 2011, pp. 210–260.

Mahurkar, Vaishnavi. "Locating Urmila Pawar's Work in the Dalit Feminist Canon." *Sahapedia*, 26 Apr. 2018, [www.sahapedia.org/locating-urmila-pawars-work-the-dalit-feminist-canon](http://www.sahapedia.org/locating-urmila-pawars-work-the-dalit-feminist-canon).

Pawar, Urmila. *Motherwit*. Translated by Veena Deo, Zubaan Books, 2013.

---. *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*. Translated by Maya Pandit, Columbia University Press, 2015.

Pawar, Urmila, and Meenakshi Moon. *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement*. Translated by Wandana Sonalkar, Zubaan, 2014.

Satyanarayana, K., and Susie Tharu. "Dalit Writing: An Introduction." *The Exercise of Freedom: an Introduction to Dalit Writing*, edited by K. Satyanarayana and Susie J. Tharu, Navayana Publishing, 2013, pp. 8–21

Zelliot, Ellinor. Foreword. *Motherwit* by Urmila Pawar, translated by Veena Deo. Zubaan Books, 2013, pp. ix- xii.