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Narratives of Dalit Women and 'the Outsider Within': Toward a Literary Practice of Dalit Feminist Standpoint

By Bhushan Sharma¹

Abstract

This paper establishes an experimental methodology for developing a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Theory through the analysis of Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*. Exploration suggests an outline method to attain a standpoint and represents the more significant issues of marginalization of Dalit women, their subjectivity, their lack of voice as reflected in the Dalit Movement, Dalit Literature, Indian feminism, and in their everyday lives. This study claims that Dalit women writers have a potent standpoint as an 'outsider within,' and argues that their triply oppressed caste, class, and gender identity allows for diverse perspectives that appraise one another and helps readers gain an understanding of their condition as women and Dalit subjects. Thus, Dalit women create this new knowledge that subverts dominant androcentric knowledge construction. This study marks an awakening of consciousness, an approach to social change, Dalit women's activism, and empowerment. Most of all, this exploration may help other marginalized groups of people or sociologists by putting greater trust in the creative potential of their narratives and cultural biographies.

Keywords: Standpoint, Feminist Standpoint Theory, caste, gender, marginalization, 'outsider-within', substituted knowledge, Dalits, Dalit Feminist Standpoint.

Introduction

Standpoint theory is a social theory that supports the notion that the perspectives of oppressed and/or marginalized individuals can help generate more objective accounts of the world. The theory argues that group location in hierarchal power relations produces common challenges for individuals in those groups. They have collective experiences that lead to their standpoint considered essential for informed political action (Collins 2002: 300). Standpoint theory originated with the standpoint of the proletariat² which reflects political consciousness, empowerment, and intellectual achievement. Feminist Standpoint theorists extended the idea to mark out the rational space for a Feminist Standpoint. Their principal argument is that certain socio-political positions occupied by women, that is, 'marginalized locations' (Harding, 2004) can turn into sites of epistemic privilege. Men's dominating position in society results in perverse and partial

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² Refer to G. Lukacs. (1971). *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Trans Rodney Livingstone. Cambridge: The MIT Press; Berenson, Frances (1982). "Hegel on Others and the Self," *Philosophy* 57 (219), 83-84. www.jstor.org/stable/4619540

understandings, whereas women's subdued positions provide the possibility of inclusive understandings.

Feminist Standpoint Theory claims that knowledge is socially situated; the social location of marginalized groups makes it more possible for them to be aware of social reality (Rolin 2009). Thus, research that predominantly focuses on power relations should commence with the lives of the marginalized. The theory argues that experiences of the marginalized disclose underlying problems that are to be voiced, made public, and explained; problems that can become research agendas and raise questions to examine ways of life, social structures, bigotry of the dominant social groups, the proposition that has previously counted as knowledge (Harding 2004).

Feminist Standpoint Theory is an extensive categorization that embraces somewhat diverse methods³ and is ruminated in terms of standpoint theories as it is not easy to compare oppression across cultural-historical contexts (Narayan 2004: 216). Each group has the prospect of developing specific insights about the system of social relations in general in which their subjugation is a feature. As a result, the theory has expanded beyond gender to encompass categories such as culture, race, religion, and social class.

Dalit women in India are 'unique social organisms' (Pan 2018). They have unique lived experiences because their identity is rooted in the intersectional oppression of two groups: 'Dalits' and 'women' (Sharma and Kumar 2020). Their doubly marginalized status makes them a separate category; their experience as Dalit women cannot be understood simply from the position of just being 'Dalit' or 'women'. Their identity includes the interrelations and interactions of these two identities that reinforce each other. The awareness of Dalit women's issues has been submerged under the logic of universal sisterhood propagated by the Indian feminist movement (Pandit 2015: xxiv). The Dalit literary movement has also been largely patriarchal; Dalit men are at the center of most prominent works (Bhoite and Bhoite 1997: 69). Thus the issues of Dalit women did not have a place in the agenda of the Dalit movement or the Women's movement. They remained outsiders-within.

This paper establishes an experimental methodology for developing a Dalit Feminist Standpoint through the creative use of learning from their outsider-within position. I analyze the two life narratives of Dalit women, Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, to study the sociological import that situates a Dalit Feminist Standpoint.

'Outsider within' and the Life Narratives of Dalit women

The term 'outsider within' was coined by Patricia Hill Collins (1986), the creator of *Black Feminist Thought* (1990). The concept of the 'outsider within' refers to a social location or marginalized space that marks the boundary between groups of unequal power (Collins 2002: 300). Individuals acquire identity or status through their placement in these social locations. For instance, people of color, Black women in particular, and immigrants in the US are 'outsiders within', who receive daily threats and are subjected to active assaults. They occupy a distinct space that their difference makes. This status was first captured by bell hooks, the Black feminist scholar-activist author, giving an account of her small town. She stated that living at the periphery of her community, Black women developed a specific way of seeing reality; "We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out... we understood both" (1984: vii). Thus the 'outsider within'

³ Diverse methods for Feminist theorizing stretch from Haraway's analysis of situated knowledges (1988), Hartsock's feminist historical materialist perspective (1983, 2004), Collins' the black feminist thought (1990), Smith's everyday world sociology for women (1987), and others.

status holders develop double vision which shapes their unique perspectives on life. They present a radical view of society that has not previously taken into account. Dalit women are treated similarly in India as their counterparts—Black women⁴ (African-American)—in America. The analogy between caste and race has been frequently explored by many scholars. Oliver C. Cox (1942) noted the resurgence of caste as a model for explaining racial order in the United States, and this was also noted in the recent publication of Isabel Wilkerson’s widely acclaimed *Caste: The Origins of Discontent*. She returns to caste to explain the U.S. racial hierarchy at a moment when wealth polarization, racial strife, and white supremacist revanchism are again on the rise⁵. Gunnar Myrdal’s influential book *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944) argues that caste defines the situation of the “American Negro.” Myrdal adopted the caste theory of race relations based on the assumption that Southern slavery, and thus all race relations emanating from Southern slavery, constituted a caste system (Cox 1942).

The marginal social location of Dalits and African American women make them conscious of patterns of social structures that are not decipherable to sociological insiders; hooks stated, “I am speaking from a place in the margins where I am different, where I see things differently” (hooks 1990: 208). Learning from their outsider within status has helped Dalit women to understand that the advantaged groups use ideologies to confine them to the margins, thus limiting their access to societal resources and institutions to control, define, and relegate them. As reality can only be known if it is represented, Dalit women penned their life narratives—social epiphanies—that then drove women impregnated with Dalit and feminist consciousness to trail the ethics of Black women writers, thus ‘politicizing of their memory’ and ‘remembering that serves to illuminate and transform the present’ (hooks 1990: 147).

Narratives of Dalit women are autoethnographies, cultural biographies, and social accounts of experiences of a muted group, realities that have not been revealed before. Dalit Feminist Standpoint is not a mere perspective that is occupied simply by the dint of being a woman but is earned through the experience of the group’s political struggle. Dalit women writers, while writing about the oppressed past and struggles of the Dalit community, lean towards feminist issues which showcases the hierarchical multiple power relations of caste, class, gender, and ethnicity that create such a group (Haider 2015: 336).

The other shared feature of Dalit women’s narratives is that they are written in regional languages originating from Marathi, and next in Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Gujarati, Hindi, and Panjabi. These writings are brought to the forefront of the literary arena by the political commitment of their translators, who ingeniously introduce the readers, who are outsiders to the overall regional landscape, social structure, and culture in the text. The upsurge of Dalit women’s life narratives in the 1980s, such as Janabai Kachru Girhe’s *Marankala*, Kumud Pawade’s *Antasphot*, Shanta Bai Kamble’s *Majya Jalmachi Chitrakatha*, P.Sivakami’s *Pazhaiyana Kazhithalum*, Bama’s *Karukku* and *Sangati*, Kaushlaya Baisentri’s *Dohra Abhishaap*, and Urmila Pawar’s *Aydan* suggest to their social intentionality. Thus, these writers do not write for art’s sake but their narratives claim an agency. Hence many researchers, such as M.S.S. Pandian (2003),

⁴ In this paper ‘Black women’ refers to ‘African-American women.’

⁵ There is a reason why caste has an enduring appeal as a framework to explain the organization of U.S. society. It offers a convenient explanation for the ongoing violence and discrimination against racialized people while avoiding biological conceptions of race, which, we are often reminded, is a social construct.’ Caste can be readily employed as a shorthand for all forms of subjection emanating from systems of caste, class, and racism regardless of history, content, geography, and form. (Boston Review, 15-Dec-2020).
https://www.academia.edu/44734859/Caste_Does_Not_Explains_Race <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/17/caste-book-india-dalit-outcast-wilkerson-review/>

Parmod Kumar Nayar (2006), and Sharmila Rege (2006) imported Beverley's lexicon 'testimonio' for the life narratives of Dalit women. Beverly states:

In a testimonio, the intention is not one of literariness but of communicating the situation of a group's oppression, imprisonment, and struggle. The narrator claims some agency in the act of narrating and calls upon the readers to respond actively in judging the situation (Beverley1992: 94).

A testimonio is a narrative in a book or pamphlet form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts and whose unit of narration is usually a 'life' or significant life experience (Beverley1992: 92-93).

Urmila Pawar (the author of *The Weave*) and Baby Kamble (the author of *The Prisons*) are also protagonists who elucidate the intricacies of their lives along with the complex rubric of other women of their community. Dalit women writers situate a Dalit Feminist Standpoint by making creative use of their social location, making the underrepresented voices of the socially unprivileged heard, voices who have a greater understanding of social reality because of their unprivileged experiences (Rolin 2009: 218), an argument that forms the foundation of standpoint theory (Harding 2004). The lived experiences of Dalit women show that they have "no choice"; the subject has to live with that experience (Guru and Sarukkai 2012: 35). Shared experiences foster similar angles of vision, leading to new knowledge or standpoints (Collins 2002: 300) that call for agency and show their resistance against the discriminatory and oppressive practices. Perspectives of Dalit women showcase the overlapping oppressions of caste, class, and gender.

Caste Oppression

The idiosyncratic concern in the life narratives of Dalit women is their caste⁶, which makes the lives of Dalits, primarily Dalit women, more complicated. The exploration of the select texts elucidates that Dalits are considered polluted, and are socially excluded. They are assigned marginalized locations on the peripheries of society. Kamble argues, "Our place was in the garbage pits outside the village, where everyone threw away their waste We ate the leftovers without complaining and labored for others" (2008: 49). Pawar recollects that when she used to travel to Ratnagiri with the women of her caste to sell things, high caste women took care to "avoid their touch" (*The Weave*, 12). People distance themselves from Dalits as soon as they come to know about their caste. Kamble (2008) also shares her childhood memories of when her grandmother and other women used to go to fetch wood:

They were not allowed to use the regular road that was used by the higher castes. When somebody from these castes walked from the opposite direction, the Mahars had to leave the road, descend into the shrubbery and walk through the thorny bushes on the roadside (*The Prisons*, 52).

⁶ One of the hereditary social classes in Hinduism that restrict the occupation of their members and their association with the members of other castes (<https://www.merriam-webster.com>).

These women cannot pass without showing due respect to the upper-caste men, otherwise, they have to face the rage of their masters and elder male members of the family. They also have to cover themselves fully if they see any upper-caste men coming down the road, and they have to chant, “The humble Mahar women fall at your feet” (*The Prisons*, 52). Thus, the marginality and social exclusion of the Dalit community further situates their women as the second sex. Subsequently, the gathered firewood is mostly sold in the Brahmin lane. Every house in this lane has a platform of a chest height meant to prohibit the *Mahar* (low-caste) women from directly reaching the entrance. These women must also carry the bundles to the courtyard of their house. Finally, they stack the wood neatly after ensuring no thread or hair is left sticking to the wood which might pollute the lady's house.

Children also become conscious of their caste at a young age. Pawar encounters caste prejudice from her childhood. She still has colonial imprints in her memories. *Aaye* (mother) sent her to deliver baskets to the customers, who made her stand at the threshold. They sprinkled water on the baskets to wash away the pollution and dropped coins in her hand from above to avoid contact with her. In school, she must clean the blackboard and classroom. When it is her class's turn to clean the school, Pawar alone is made to work because of her low caste.

The notion that “ritual pollution is internalized” (Guru 2008:164) by the Dalit community is the result of their continuous victimization of the caste hierarchy. The internalization of this notion by Dalits is showcased in Kamble's *The Prisons* where she debates the ‘question of conversion and the option of Buddhism’⁷. The *karbhari*, leader of the traditional *Mahars* (low Caste), seek to resist conversion; “Ambedkar⁸ has spoiled your head with his strange foreign knowledge. He has become a Christian. Then is he not polluted?” Thus those who are the victim of the ideology of purity-pollution also participate in its perpetuation (Guru 2008:164). Therefore, the standpoint of the writers shows that caste discrimination, which is banned by the Indian constitution, is still entrenched in the social structure and human psyche of the people.

Gender Oppression

When writing about problems in their communities, Dalit women writers tend to gravitate towards feminist issues as their experiences are not rooted in caste alone; they exist at the intersection of caste and gender. The Dalit community has obvious gendered social practices that are oppressive and are also responsible for the repression and exploitation of their women. The narratives of Dalit women writers are not just sob stories, they are a standpoint and a resistance against these practices.

Representations of the writers delineate that Dalit women endure the twofold patriarchal oppression: First, from intrinsic conventional patriarchy by Dalit men that perpetuates silently and is generally acceptable; Second, from the extended patriarchy of the upper-caste men and the caste councils or *Panchayats*⁹. The second category of patriarchy is severe and unquestionable. Pawar

⁷ The ‘Question of conversion and the option of Buddhism’ is a part of the program of the Ambedkerite movement that was launched in 1956 by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar when nearly half a million Dalits – formerly ‘Untouchables’ – joined him and converted to Navayana Buddhism. It rejected Hinduism, challenged the caste system in India, and promoted the rights of the Dalit community.

⁸ Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (14 April 1891-6 December 1956), also known as Babasaheb Ambedkar, was an Indian jurist, economist, politician, and social reformer who inspired the Dalit Buddhist movement and campaigned against social discrimination of the untouchables (Dalits).

⁹ A *Caste Council* or *Jati Panchayat* is one of the formally organized units in Indian society. The key objective of the Caste Council is to maintain the unity of the Caste and secure uniformity of the rules.

discusses the case of a widow who is found to be pregnant. The whole village knows the man but only the woman is given the verdict:

She was made to stand to lean forward, and women kicked her from behind till the child was aborted. The villagers felt this was a valiant act of bravery. They felt proud that they had protected the village's honor. If a woman was suspected to have erred, she was brought before the Panchayat for justice and punishment. She was publically judged and her other relatives would beat her up as well (*The Weave*, 156).

To maintain their caste and gender ideology, women are prevented from going to court, and the decision of the *Panchayat* is final. The full account of Mariamma in Bama's *Sangati* (2005) and Thangam's in P. Sivakami *The Grip of Change* (2006) are testimonies to this social cruelty. Therefore, the standpoint made by Dalit women writers echoes Kimberle Crenshaw's assertion (1991) that the feminist theory addresses only one form of marginalized identity (gender) but neglects the intersection of multiple operational identities of caste, gender, and class. Indian feminism has not broadened its perspective to encompass the concerns of Dalit women, and a sisterhood cannot be assumed based on gender only; it must be forged in concrete historical and political practice and analysis (Mohanty 1984: 334).

Violence, Silence, and Impunity

Narratives of Dalit women are testimonies of the violence against women. Regardless of their dutiful and selfless conduct, they are victimized by their husbands. Tormenting and thrashing one's wife is common and an everyday occurrence in Dalit households. The authors recount, "At the slightest pretext, the husband showered blows and kicks on her. Sometimes he even whipped her" (*The Weave*, 112-113), "[H]e would beat me up for flimsy reason..., this was the life most women-led" (*The Prisons*, 155). Pawar discusses the persecution of her cousin:

Her husband was a drunkard and her mother-in-law a tyrant. Both beat her up mercilessly at the slightest pretext. They would drive her out of the house with her young children even on stormy nights. The poor woman would take her children and cross the hills and valleys at night, her face broken, body swollen, bleeding and aching all over, and reach her mother's house (*The Weave*, 33).

This viciousness against women shows mothers-in-law infer the same harsh treatment to their daughters-in-law as they have received from their own. Also, Dalit men are replicating the same mechanisms against their women, which the high caste opponents have been using to dominate them. Thus, a culture of violence, silence, and impunity prevails for women in the Dalit community, and numerous heart-wrenching cases have been put forth by the two authors. Kamble explains that inhuman practices such as chopping off a woman's nose are seen as a manly act (*The Prisons*, 100-101). Bhikiakka is mistreated by her husband who remarries despite begetting two children by her (*The Weave*, 112-113). Hence, the perspectives of Dalit women writers reject the claims made by others, that domestic violence can be fought back by Dalit women (Dietrich, 2003) and that Dalit women experience less patriarchal oppression (Ilaiah 1996). The narrated stories of Dalit women are atrocious. Violence is the outcome of gender-based inequalities, and this is intensified by caste discrimination, which grants impunity to the dominant groups.

The Gendered Division of Labor

The Dalit community observes the gendered division of labor, where economically deprived women work in the fields with their men and also perform household work, which is feminine and essential. Dalit women's labor may be compared to that of Black women during the period of slavery.

During U.S. slavery, there was a gendered division of enslaved labor where Black women performed fieldwork with Black men but also domestic work that Black men would not do. Black women's labor as field workers, i.e., harvesting crops in fields, and as domestic workers, was devalued by Black men because it was seen as feminine (hooks 1981: 23).

The gendered division of labor is the most common but complex oppressive practice that engages women in various household activities such as cooking, fetching water, cleaning, washing, managing raw materials, taking care of family members, fulfilling their emotional and physical needs, and so forth. Hence, the community has a common saying: that a family can be strong if its woman has a strong backbone (*The Weave*, 200), which indicates that Dalit women are at the center of the Dalit family structure. Despite this, women's everyday work is unrecognized, unrepresented, taken for granted, and not valued. Hence, women represent their collective experiences which shape their perspectives which paves the way to a Dalit Feminist Standpoint.

Perspectives of Dalit women writers show that gendered labor subjugates women from their childhood. Many girls leave school at a young age. They are made to perform survival activities, complete household work, and babysit their younger siblings. Household work forms an integral part of Dalit women's lives and it is assumed that women are born to perform household work, so many people ask, "What do women have to do with education? Ultimately, she would be blowing on the stove" (*The Weave*, 20). As a result, education is not considered a prime concern for Dalit girls. The statistics observed in *Dalit Women Speak Out* (2011) also reveal higher school dropout rates among Dalit girls, which is 36.1% in standard I-V, 60% in standard I-VIII, and 74.2% in standard I- X (Irudayam et al. 2011: 19).

Girls are usually married at a very early age. Marriage to them means the multiplication of their difficulties (Kamble 2008). When the bride arrives in her in-laws' home, she is asked to make two baskets of *bhakris*¹⁰ (*The Prisons*, 94). Marriage for poor Dalit girls turns out to be burdensome due to grinding household chores, and hostile treatment from their drunkard husbands and strict mothers-in-law. Dalit women perform difficult labor, which is made even more intricate because of their poor economic conditions and peripheral locations. The writers articulate the lived experience of three generations of women of their community. Kamble's *The Prisons* and Pawar's *The Weave* represent the narratives of the first generation that are also historical testimonies to the enslavement of women, mostly young daughters-in-law. Kamble's descriptions (2008) show that they are treated like captives and forced to work as slaves. The domestic responsibilities are so torturous that often daughters-in-law will try to run away. If they are brought back to their in-laws, a worse fate awaits these women. A massive log of wood is tied to her leg, and she is forced to work with this load. She must drag that heavyweight each time she tries to move, which wounds her limb badly (*The Prisons*, 98-99). Still, many other daughters-in-law are worn out in meeting the needs of the household, for instance, the shortage of water:

¹⁰ Homemade bread from *jowar* flour.

There was a terrible scarcity of water in this village. Their house was atop a hill, and they had to carry water up from a stream, which met the sea several feet below. The daughters-in-law of the village were worn out doing this essential task. Some even succumbed to tuberculosis (*The Weave* 19).

Amidst all these difficulties, many Dalit women also have to endure unwanted pregnancies and difficult motherhood. Biological reproduction is a life-long process for these women. Kamble states, “A Mahar woman would continue to give birth till she reached menopause... Hardly a few of the babies would survive. Many a time these too were given away in the service of the village” (Kamble 2008: 82). A one-word definition of Dalit motherhood is 'sacrifice' (*The Weave*, 298). Kamble describes the dire conditions in which *Mahar* and *Mang* (low-castes) women give birth to children:

The ignorant midwives would keep thrusting their hands into the poor girl's vagina to see how far the baby had progressed. Invariably, the vagina would get swollen; obstructing the baby's path...It was a battle with death (*The Prisons*, 58).

They lack the essential facilities needed for a safe birth. They do not have cotton or cloth pads, so they often continue to bleed. Many young girls on the threshold of life succumb to death. The fear of death drives people to the goddess *Satwai*, and they perform all the customary rituals (*The Prisons*, 61). The rituals are executed to protect women from the complications of childbirth. The narrative indicates the writer's resistance to the ignorance of Mahars, leading them to perform these blind practices. On the other hand, when Pawar, the author of *The Weave* moves to the city they find that a woman's silent sufferings are considered a sign of her good upbringing. Pawar's mother-in-law always takes pride in saying, “I gave birth to eleven children...How I suffered! But did a single sound ever escape out of me? No way!” (*The Weave*, 197). This description shows the average Dalit women's submission and the author's resistance to the hegemonic gender ideology, which values women with self-effacing mannerisms.

Like childbearing, child-rearing is also a difficult task for poverty-stricken women. Mothers struggle when they have to go outside for long hours of laboring, leaving their infants behind. Unlike the Hindi public sphere and many Dalit men's autobiographies that have both depicted these women barren of motherly love, the representations of writers show how these women suffer the double burden of their motherhood and the hard labor they perform for survival. Pawar describes the complex state of the mother:

How's my baby? I'm so worried! Did they give him his medicine? A young mother would find her breasts aching, heavy with milk. Often while crossing boulders it would drop out, wetting her blouse. The young mother would interpret this as a sign of her baby crying at home for milk and breakdown into uncontrollable sobs (*The Weave*, 67).

Despite the problems women face in motherhood, it becomes even more painful if a child dies. Pawar and her mother are such unlucky mothers. The author suffers the intense ache of losing her young son. She takes up writing because she cannot sleep. She also recalls the pain her mother had undergone when the author's elder brother died. Her mother cries every night, ceaselessly grieving for her son. And during the day she goes on mourning while working. Pawar remembers, “[H]er fingers frantically, ceaselessly, weaving baskets, winnows and other stuff, one after another, stricken with suffering (*The Weave*, 27). The author's pain becomes a link to her broken umbilical

cord, and she begins to see ‘how both the ever-moving *aaydan*¹¹ in her mother's hands and the pen in hers were therapeutic (*The Weave*, 27).

Thus, for the women of depressed classes¹², motherhood is both empowering and problematic. It is empowering because children are the only wealth they possess, but problematic because of their hardships, lack of medical facilities and hygiene awareness, and poverty. The standpoint of the writers explains the oppressive conditions of Dalit motherhood and their resistance to the practice of considering them mere child procreating machines. Their experiences of motherhood are testimonies to their sufferings and denial, yet also means that they are stronger than the other upper-caste women.

People would be covered in thick layers of dust and dirt, a black coating on their skin ... Hair, untouched by oil, fell over their shoulders in thick tangles. They looked like rag dolls, nibbled and torn by sharp teathed mice... Each hut contained at least eight to ten such kids, even some had fifteen to twenty (*The Prisons*, 8).

Kamble also explicates the practice of the *Muralis* or *devadasi* system, in which a Dalit girl is offered to god *Khandoba* in marriage, a rare kind of spiritual elevation. This is done for the well-being of the male child. But according to reformists¹³, this practice is a reduction of a human being to the worst form of exploitation. This system is still prevalent among Dalit women from several Indian states.

Apart from the sufferings of economically deprived women, perspectives of the writers also illustrate gender oppression of educated and working women in the Dalit community. Pawar states that the community has an additional exploitative culture for women, who must give their salaries to their husbands, to which the author feels is, “[D]eliberately offering your head for butcher’s knife” (*The Weave*, 208). To speak from the perspective of a woman is not the same as speaking from the political perspective of a feminist, because to know as a ‘woman’ means to know from the perspective of the structure of gender, whereas a feminist perspective means that one has a critical distance from gender and oneself (Grant 1993). Furthermore, the moment a man is promoted, he immediately becomes a ‘*Bhausahab*’¹⁴ but a woman, even after her promotion, remains ‘*Bai*’¹⁵ without the ‘*Sahab*’¹⁶ (*The Weave*, 209). Household remains the duty of the woman even if she is employed. Hence, many social practices are gender-based, which sustains a patriarchal social order and Dalit women's repression. Many other do's and don'ts are attached to the woman's life. For instance, women must have a husband or deliver a baby boy and manage the household. Men often object to women's moves from their marginal community to dominant social structures through pursuing education, working outside the home, performing intellectual work, or developing a feminist identity; women's gender-based work and household duties may also make these activities impossible to achieve. As a result, Pawar has faced harsh criticism for writing her memoir, *The Weave*, and discusses her ‘feminist’ perception and stand against patriarchal

¹¹ A generic term used for all things made from bamboo.

¹² “Depressed classes” is the term used by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1936) for the former ‘Untouchables,’ the present Dalits.

¹³ Dr Muthulakshmi Reddy of Madras (now called Chennai), Muvalur Ramamirtham Ammal of Madras, Nalwadi Krishna Raja Wodeyar IV of Mysore, and many others. Refer to <https://www.opindia.com/2020/11/devadasi-abolition-act-dravidian-movement-history/>

¹⁴ A respectful term of address to people in authority.

¹⁵ Nursemaid

¹⁶ Sir

domination in the Dalit community. On account of similar marginalization, a very apt question (common to all Dalit women writers) has been raised by the Marathi poet, Pradnya Lokhanda:

Why is it that we are accepted as Dalit writers when we oppose Manu and the upper caste tradition, but turn into traitors the moment we voice our protest against patriarchy within the Dalit caste ... We need to confront the caste system as well as patriarchy within the Dalit tradition to make ourselves heard (Joseph 2004: 657).

A similar discriminatory practice is also observed by Laura R. Brueck, who asserts that many Dalit women writers feel profoundly that their voices are marginalized, and they are frequently made to feel under attack by male writers who construe feminist expression as aggression toward Dalit men and as a divisive influence on the counter-public identity (2014: 39). Kamble's life narrative is a testimony to Brueck's observation; she has to keep her autobiography a secret for twenty years before it gets published in 1986. She shares with her readers:

I had to take great care that nobody saw me writing. I used to hide the papers under old newspapers. I used to keep my notebooks hidden in places that nobody bothered about, like the uppermost corner of an alcove where all useless things were thrown together (*The Prisons*, 147).

Thus, the life narratives of Dalit women present a Dalit feminist critique of patriarchy to reveal how patriarchy and caste intersect to perpetuate exploitative practices against women. It is here that Dalit woman's urge to define the self becomes most evident, and they have emerged as the agents of transformation in their community (Pandit 2008, xv). Yet this has not been easy work for them as the household remains their duty and priority. Hence, Pawar wakes up at midnight to write, and Kamble spares some time from her shop and family duties to write about the sufferings of her community. Her autobiography, aside from being a personal account, is profoundly political and a critical record of the making of the nation from the vantage point of a marginal social location. It is the biography of the Dalit community, chronicled through the perspective of the untouchable woman. Hence, the narratives of Dalit women explain constraints on women, which signify a patriarchal social order and relations of power that systematically privilege men as a social group, and disadvantage, exclude, and disempower women as a social group (Lazar, 2017:145).

Class Oppression, Poverty, and Hunger

The oppressions of caste, class, and gender are interlocking¹⁷, which makes the lives of many Dalit women even more burdensome. Narratives of Dalit women are descriptions of their poverty and starvation and struggle for food. Most Dalit men spend their earnings on drinking alcohol. A survey conducted by Nitya Rao shows that 60 percent of the women reported high male alcohol consumption and violence (Rao, 2015)¹⁸. *Dalit Women Speak Out* (2011) is another significant study that analyses the narratives of 500 Dalit women to present the complexities of

¹⁷ Refer to Sharma, Bhushan, and Kumar, Anurag (2020). Learning from the 'Outsider Within': The Sociological Significance of Dalit Women's Life Narratives. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 21(6), 25-37. <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol21/iss6/2>.

¹⁸ Rao, N. (2015). Marriage, Violence, and Choice: Understanding Dalit Women's Agency in Rural Tamil Nadu. *Gender and Society*, 29 (3), 421. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43669978>

their lives. The text underlines that many Dalit wives suffer economically from their husbands' habitual drinking, as the earnings of the family are squandered on alcohol rather than used to meet household needs (Irudayam et al., 2011: 90). Because of this, the responsibility of running the household¹⁹ and managing the resources is left to women. Deprived conditions and Dalit women's struggle for resources are the prime concerns of the writers. In Pawar's memoir, most of her classmates in the village work as stone quarry workers, sweepers, or scavengers to carry the burden of their families. Pawar's *Mawashi* (maternal aunt) earns her living by working as a coolie, "[C]arrying a basket full of fish unloaded from the fishing boats to the hill. That is how she and her two sons had managed to survive" (*The Weave*, 26). Kamble elucidates the repressed condition of her community who were 'just like animals, ate the leftovers without complaining, and labored for others' (*The Prisons*, 49). This passage shows how these women work for upper-caste people to mitigate their hunger.

Tulsa and Kasa...Every morning would pick up their baskets and brooms and set off towards the Maratha Households where they cleaned the animal pens...They would return in the afternoon with a couple of baskets full of leftover food (*The Prisons*, 46).

Kamble explicates that hunger is the biggest enemy of this oppressed community. Hence, they work as slaves for dominant castes to overcome their starvation. They work as sweepers, cleaning their pens, cutting grass, selling them firewood, tending their plants, and cultivating their lands. Fifty-two percent of Dalit women work as agricultural wage laborers in rural areas. They continue to toil under harsh weather conditions with no protection or benefits from labor laws since the majority of these women are in the unorganized sector. Only 9.80 percent of Dalit women have been employed as regular salaried workers (Sabharwal and Sonalkar 2015: 53).

Because of the concept of pollution that prevalent in a caste-based society, women of the Dalit community are not allowed to work in the household of the upper-caste women as nannies or cooks as African-American women can for white American women. Thus, their stigmatized occupations form Dalit women's identity as they are recognized with their caste and menial occupation (Gupta 2017: 19). The traditional polluted occupations and services performed by the Dalit community for the society, though essential, are considered menial, unclean, and bring terribly low returns" (National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes)²⁰.

Dalit women living in remote locations mostly depend on natural resources for their survival. They work as food gatherers and take up other survival activities which prevent them from developing to their full potential. These narratives thus portray the subhuman existence and difficult working conditions of peripheral Dalit women, who are shamelessly exploited and dehumanized to a state of beasts of burden. They collect bundles of firewood, grass, long pieces of bamboo, and mangoes. *The Weave* documents a chilling account of the dangerous journey women undertake to sell their wares for their family's survival. They labor from dawn to dusk, grinding between the household and outside work as food gatherers:

¹⁹ A comprehensive term that includes the physical, financial and emotional demands of sustaining a house and a family. Refer to <https://forum.wordreference.com/threads/run-a-household-keep-a-family-going.2370006/>

²⁰ National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, supra note 44, para 3.3.1. qt. in Aloysius Irudayam S.J, Jayshree P. Mangubhai, Joel G. Lee, *Dalit Women Speak Out: Caste, Class and Gender Violence in India* (New Delhi: Zuban, 2011), 17.

The day began very early for women, at 4 a.m. In spite of the heavy rain, they had to fetch water from the well for everybody in the house to bathe in, drink, and cook the food. Then they cleaned the pots and plates used the previous night and cooked for the whole house. They breakfasted with their menfolk and went with them to work in the fields. They planted paddy till their backs broke. They had to carry lunch if the fields were far away. After lunch, they worked in the fields once again and returned home in the evening, just half an hour earlier than their men. They lit their stoves under an earthen pot, which they had filled up in the morning, to keep the hot bath water ready for their men, returning from the fields (*The Weave*, 246).

Women hunted for crawfish or crabs in the rocks by pushing their hands inside. They got drenched in the waves dashing against the rocks. Their hands and feet would be cut by the sharp edges of the rocks, and the salty seawater stung the wounds (*The Weave*, 44).

Aaye (Pawar's mother) earns a meager amount by weaving baskets. The author is sensitive about her caste and poverty. She pours over her childhood memories of class prejudice when she has only two sets of clothes, which she wears alternately for three or four days. Her dirty clothes infuriate her teacher. The author also describes their inability to get quality food like upper caste people. She feels inferior to her classmates, who bring succulent food items in their tiffin boxes like '*ladu*', '*modak*', '*karanjya*', and '*Puranpolya*'. At home, *Aaye* serves jackfruit immediately before meals so that they eat less. Their menu hardly ever changes even at festive times. The author recollects, "Aaye used to make a dish called *bore*: small round balls, made with rice flour mixed with black sesame and molasses and fried in oil. They were hard as stones but we celebrated Diwali munching on them" (*The Weave*, 99). Pawar writes about her memory of humiliation, recalling how girls were not allowed to have a proper appetite. In her class get-together, she is not allowed to touch anything, but she eats to her heart's content. The next day her eating becomes the hottest topic of discussion, "She ate like a monster... She ate so much of everything! Awful!" (*The Weave*, 102). The author shares, "It was so humiliating that I died a thousand deaths that day!" (*The Weave*, 102).

Because Dalits are poor, they live day-to-day. During the fish season, fish is dried for lean days by the rich people who store the flesh of tistra, or mule; poor Dalits store the water in which these fish are boiled. The stock is further boiled until it becomes thick like sauce called *kaat*, which is then stored in bottles and is used to make soup. Similarly, *saar* is prepared from another low-quality fish and is the 'regular diet for daughters-in-law' (*The Weave*, 100). Dalit feminist writings explicate that women of the Dalit community are at the lowest level of the Indian social ladder and bear the brunt of sexist, casteist, and classist oppression. The neglect of the intersection of multiple operational identities of caste, gender, and class in feminist theory results in the lack of Dalit women's activism, resources, laws, and policies needed to combat the multiple interlocking oppressions of these women. Consequently, the operation [of oppressive practices] is cyclically perpetuated and strategies framed to lift depressed women often fail to produce fruitful results. The represented perspectives of these writers thus open a dialogue between scholars and activists on the unacknowledged universalist claims of the Women's movement and the critiques of the movement that have come from Dalit scholars and activists (Chakravarti 2013: 134). This also indicates that non-Dalit scholars can "reinvent themselves as Dalit feminists" (Rege 1998: 45), theorizing the Dalit Feminist Standpoint.

Conclusion

The ‘outsider within’ social location of Dalit women gives them a distinctive perspective on social, political, economic, and intellectual realities. They make creative use of this perspective and bring a more nuanced outlook to feminist and social thought. The select narratives of Dalit women, *The Weave of My Life* and *The Prisons We Broke*, reveal and discuss their idiosyncratically different suffering, interlocking oppressions of caste, class, and gender, and also explicate the factors that bring this difference into existence. Adding layers of oppressions situate a strong Dalit Feminist Standpoint, which shows an oppositional consciousness, and Dalit women’s resistance against the discussed discriminative and oppressive social structures and practices.

A Dalit Feminist Standpoint emancipates Dalit women, since the subject of their knowledge is embodied and visible. Therefore, Dalit women’s understanding that they occupy a specific standpoint as the confluence of their life experiences begins with them. First-hand reflections are generated that are absent in mainstream feminist discourse and Dalit literature. The literary practice of situating a Dalit Feminist Standpoint has created new meanings and epistemology. The voices of Dalit women confront the dominant viewpoint of mainstream society that has for so long muted their voices. It also challenges the social order, which validates the truth that many social practices are not neutral, but caste and gender-based. They sustain and propagate a patriarchal social order, caste-based social hierarchy, and relations of power that systematically privilege men and upper caste people, and simultaneously disadvantage and objectify women and lower castes as a social group. Thus, Dalit Feminist Standpoint allows the feminist voice to dismantle the exclusive community of dominant ideology, and patriarchal critical discourse also broadens the perspective of Dalit literature, Dalit activism, and Indian feminism.

In the 1990s, several assertions were made for Dalit women’s identity and voiced their issues, including the formation of the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW), All India Dalit Women’s Forum, and *Maharashtra Dalit Mahila Sanghatana* in 1995, *Vikas Vanchit Dalit Mahila Parishad* in 1996, the *Christi Mahila Sangharsh Sanghatana*, an organization of Dalit Christian women that was founded in 1997, and many others.

The creative potential of the marginalized narratives and the discursive space of a Dalit Feminist Standpoint has found its way into the formation of acts, policies, and schemes for transforming Dalit lives. These communities are recognized as Scheduled Castes²¹ as per Clause 1 of Article 341 of the Indian Constitution (established in 1950). Since then, a Constitutional mechanism has been set-up (followed by many amendments) for their upliftment in society.

- Article 17 abolishes Untouchability.
- Article 46 requires the State ‘to promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes, and to protect them from social injustice and all forms of exploitation.
- Article 15(4) refers to the special provisions for their advancement.
- Article 16 (4A) speaks of “reservation in matters of promotion to any class or classes of posts in the services under the State in favor of SCs/STs.”
- Article 338 provides for a National Commission for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes with duties to investigate and monitor all matters relating to safeguards provided for

²¹ Scheduled Castes are sub-communities within the framework of the Hindu caste system who have historically faced deprivation, oppression, and extreme social isolation in India on account of their perceived low status.

them, to inquire into specific complaints, and to participate and advise on the planning process of their socio-economic development, etc.

- Article 330 and Article 332 of the Constitution respectively provide for reservation of seats in favor of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes in the House of the People and the legislative assemblies of the States. Under Part IX relating to the *Panchayats*²² and Part IXA of the Constitution relating to the Municipalities, reservation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in local bodies have been envisaged and provided.

Many measures have been taken for social empowerment of Dalits such as The Protection of Civil Rights Act (1955), The Protection of Civil Rights Rules (1977), Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (1989), Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Rules (1995). The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act (MS Act, 2013), Launching of National Scheme for Liberation and Rehabilitation of Scavengers (NSLRS), and many other schemes for impoverished people (*Ujjwala Yojna*²³, *Shochalaya* for BPL²⁴, and 'Housing scheme for BPL'²⁵), Venture Capital Fund for Scheduled Castes, Stand-up India, and many other schemes have resulted in success stories of several Dalits²⁶.

²² A *Panchayat* is a village council.

²³ *Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana* was launched by Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi on 1st May 2016 to distribute 50 million LPG connections to women of BPL (Below Poverty Line) families. A budgetary allocation of ₹800 billion was made for the scheme.

²⁴ Under the scheme, '*the Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan*' subsidy to build a household toilet is provided to BPL (Below Poverty Line) families.

²⁵ *Pradhan Mantri Gramin Awaas Yojana*, previously *Indira Awaas Yojana*, is a social welfare flagship program, created by the Indian Government, to provide housing for the rural poor in India. A similar scheme for the urban poor was launched in 2015 as *Housing for All by 2022*.

²⁶ <https://yourstory.com/2018/01/dalit-entrepreneurs>

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