

Original Article

Voices of Testimony and Resistance: Mapping Trauma in Dalit Women's Writing

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ABSTRACT: *This paper argues that Dalit women's writing functions simultaneously as testimony, resistance, and an archive of caste-gendered trauma. Drawing on works by Bama, Baby Kamble, and Urmila Pawar, this examination explores how these authors transform their lived experiences into collective witness accounts that challenge dominant caste structures and patriarchal norms. The analysis suggests that Dalit women's autobiographical writing does not operate within conventional literary frameworks but instead reworks life-writing into a testimonial mode that foregrounds communal suffering, generational memory, and political awakening. Integrating insights from trauma studies, feminist narratology, and Dalit discourse, the study demonstrates how these writers map trauma across spatial, bodily, and social registers. Their narratives ultimately reshape the understanding of trauma from an individual psychological event to a structural and collective condition rooted in caste oppression. Through voice, form, and ideological standpoint, Dalit women writers redefine the narrative self, turning testimony into an unmistakable gesture of resistance.*

KEYWORDS: *Dalit Feminism, Ambedkarite Discourse, Narrative Form, Body Politics, Counter-History, Subaltern Studies.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The critical reception of Dalit women's writing, however, demonstrates that these are not simply stories of personal suffering but testimonies written in what many have called a witness-voice [10] to histories of violence, humiliation, and survival experienced communally. Unlike conventional autobiographies that celebrate individual self-making, Dalit women's life-writing privileges the collective and positions the narrating "I" as necessarily imbricated in a communal "we". This is reflected in the writings of Bama, Baby Kamble, and Urmila Pawar, who chart a world in which caste and gender intersect with fierce regularity to mould labour, mobility, dignity, and memory. They subvert age-old narrative tropes that have been normalized in Indian writing. Their writings ultimately expose how the dominant upper-caste feminist discourse and Dalit male writing have, for long, sidelined the voices of Dalit women. In their stories, Dalit women assert the right to speak and claim their right to remember and resist. The texts chart trauma not as a single or instantaneous wound but as an iterative, structural effect that saturates the everyday: from the well to places of religious worship and schools, on the street, inside homes. The adage that Dalit women's writing is not only a genre but also a decisive political intervention appears to be reinforced. This paper analyses the interplay of testimony, trauma, and resistance in Dalit women's narratives. It examines how these writers reinvent forms of autobiographical expression, transmute memory into counter-memory, and struggle against both caste oppression and patriarchal silencing. The paper contends that Dalit women's writing is to be treated as a living ideological site where voice meets action and literature ranges far beyond what can be anticipated into an amorphous entity acting for social change.

2. TESTIMONY AS GENRE AND STRATEGY

Autobiographical Writings The autobiographical writings of Dalit women function as testimonial literature rather than traditional autobiographies. Dalit women's life-writings "elude generic conventions of the autobiography" and work as "testimonies of collective resistance", in the arguments put forth by Paulomi Sharma (37 Sharma). This empathy corresponds to the narrative techniques in *The Prisons We Broke*, *Karukku*, and *The Weave of My Life*. And these are not mere memories of individual struggles but a legacy of struggle against caste oppression by a community. The chronicler in *Baby Kamble* here is a case in point. In contrast to the positioning of an isolated protagonist, she foregrounds the pain, struggle, and resilience of the entire Mahar community. "As the 'peripheral geography' of the constellated spaces in which Dalits are segregated, it is also a site at which resistance is centred," observes Sharma (38). So documenting the caste-ghettos is a political act of testimony. Dalit women's writing also serves as a site for the reimagination of bodily and emotional realities. "These authors write their female bodies into their autobiographical texts by revaluing human experience at large" (Tyagi 79). This focus also serves to underline that the testimony at stake in Dalit women's writing should not only depict trauma but, more crucially, claim presence and agency and voice. Corporeal subjects once controlled and policed by caste society become sites of articulation and resistance.

3. MAPPING TRAUMA: INDIVIDUAL, COLLECTIVE, AND INTERSECTIONAL

These texts are read closely to concentrate or focus on the links of trauma in Dalit women's writing. It cannot be perceived as something that characterizes solely the individual's experience or simply a social process. It does not come as a separate and private history of trauma, but surfaces in this volume as both an individual life experience of humiliation and exclusion, intersecting with the collective in systemic casteist oppression, while also taking the form of gendered violability under patriarchy within and outside Dalit communities. This intersectional axis is particularly evident in Bama's *Karukku*. Bama also experienced caste discrimination from nuns, teachers, and fellow students despite converting to Christianity—evidence of how deeply rooted the caste system is within institutions that claim to treat everyone equally. Jawade says when Dalit women writers take up writing, "they have to resist both the physical violence of upper castes and their patriarchal oppression within and outside their different communities" (12). Trauma, therefore, becomes a multi-layered reality of life where a Dalit woman faces violence not just from the state and the village community but also from religious institutions and even at home.

Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* captures this phenomenon magnificently. In her memoir, she writes about how water access, social respectability, educational spaces, and the freedom of movement were always intermediated by caste. At another point, she remembers how as a child, she had been conscious that they were discriminated against: "We children came to know which caste we belonged to only because of the indignities heaped upon us" (Pawar 64). This line highlights a key realization: trauma is not an event, but an ongoing structure. Trauma in these narratives is narratively mapped onto spaces including the well, school, church, and on the margins of the village; bodies are marked by experiences which police "pollution," physical violence, and labour exploitation; it is experienced across a range of time frames that span from early memories to intergenerational experiences and processes of political awakening. Sharma's insight that stories of Dalit women are "testimonial narratives of resistance" (41) is an illustrative example of this transition. Trauma is not hidden or sentimentalised in these texts; it is remembered, retold, and reassembled as a vital ingredient of political consciousness.

4. RESISTANCE THROUGH VOICE, FORM, AND COMMUNITY

Close reading of these works shows that resistance in Dalit women's literature is not only thematic but also formal, aesthetic, and political. Dalit women write without needing to earn the good graces of upper-caste readers, and their voice is often not polite or deferential. They speak to their own communities and histories directly, confidently, and produce a registered voice that is itself resistance against the literary gaze that has traditionally othered them. Tyagi discusses how Dalit women writers produce "counter narratives where women occupy subject positions" (79), these being counter to both Savarna feminist and Dalit male truth claims, which have spoken on behalf of Dalit women while simultaneously silencing them.

The form of the narrative itself fortifies this resistance. These texts resist the temporal, subject-based model of conventional autobiography. Instead, they seamlessly move between the personal, the communal, and the political. ³ This action dismantles individualist self-narration and foreshadows the centrality of collective identity in this narrative form, shifting narrative structure to an ideological statement.

Finally, memory also becomes a key space of resistance. Kamble and Pawar do not narrate their experiences of discrimination to elicit sympathy; they protest them in order that a history (a caste society wants to erase) be archived. They are counter-histories of remembered moments, which reveal the horror of caste and patriarchy. Also important is the ideological position of these stories. A number of Dalit women writers, in particular, rely on the thought of Ambedkarite for structuring their critique of caste order, religious fraudulence, patriarchal supremacy, and systemic injustice. Sharma notes that both Bama and Kamble "question oppressive religious ideology and contribute to social transformation in women's terms" (41), a dynamic most notably present in *Karukku* when Bama critiques the church for perpetuating caste even though it specifically denies doing so.

Maybe the most potent dimension of this resistance is its demand for dignity. Dalit women writers ask for the right to speak, to remember, and to live with dignity. Their stories are not a plea for compassion; they express agency and self-value.

5. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Drawing upon the writing of Dalit women, we find that it disrupts many received literary wisdom. Until now, trauma studies have focused on isolated catastrophic events, but the stories of Dalit women illustrate that their trauma is chronic, systemic, and socially accepted. Their writing extends theoretical comprehension of trauma to include inter-generational degradation, caste-based segregation, institutionalised discrimination, and gendered exploitation. They also challenge traditional feminist theorizing. The area where the upper-caste feminist has constantly failed is to understand the lived experiences of caste and Dalit women's literature highlights this gap, stating that gender cannot be critically examined without analyzing caste. So subaltern studies are transformed by these texts. Dalit women do not emerge as silent objects; they speak back, and they speak up, often angrily and certainly assertively. They reject a middle ground and express themselves without needing approval from the mainstream. Dalit women's writing thus reconfigures the notion of subalternity not the subject who "cannot speak," but one whose speech disrupts power structures.

6. DALIT WOMEN'S WRITING AND THE LIMITS OF WESTERN TRAUMA THEORY

The life-writing of Dalit women offers a sustained challenge to dominant framings in Western trauma studies: rather than as an exceptionally rupturing, largely unspeakable experience, they recast 'trauma' as ongoing, structural, and narratable. Touchstone formulations in Anglophone trauma theory Cathy Caruth's formulation of trauma as the belated, repeated return of an event that cannot be fully represented (Caruth 1996), Dominick LaCapra's clarification between historically specific traumas and more structural forms of suffering (LaCapra 2001), Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's insistence on testimony and the ethical relation between speaker and listener (Felman & Laub 1992) and Judith Herman's clinical model relating trauma, memory, recovery (Herman 1992) furnish indispensable vocabularies for thinking about witnessing, injury. And yet the autobiographies and memoirs of Dalit women (Bama's *Karukku*, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*, to name just a few) throw these paradigms into repeated complexities. Far from epitomizing a onetime catastrophic break that returns as an invasive presence through a life, Dalit women's texts narrate humiliation, exclusion, and violations of fleshly integrity as routinized features of social life – etched in labour routines; ritual purity/pollution codes; access to commons (to wells, crops lands, schools), and institution practices such as churches or courts or classroom.

While Caruth's model emphasizes the impossibility or difficulty of representing some traumas in language, Dalit women writers argue for their deliberate articulation: testimony is not an inability to represent but an ethical-political practice seeking collective recognition and redress. LaCapra's helpful distinction between "acting out" and "working through" can take on new valency here--when recast to accommodate the sorts of structural, intergenerational injuries that require forms of communal "working through," rather than psychotherapeutic closure alone (LaCapra 2001). Felman and Laub's claim of the efficacy of the listener also needs re-negotiation: many Dalit testimonies are addressed inwards to members of the caste community, or outwards as counter-archives that are not necessarily directed toward securing therapeutic or judicial witnessing (Felman & Laub 1992). Recent research on Dalit trauma is also reflective of this turn from an event-based model.

Work on Dalit women's memoirs, which frame caste-inflected suffering as cultural and structural trauma, contends that memory in these texts generates enduring political knowledge and collective agency rather than functioning solely as evidence of clinical pathology (Alankrita 2024). In other words, Dalit women's writing underscores that trauma may also be quotidian, localizable, collective and narratively productive, challenging theoretical paradigms to venture beyond those that locate themselves in exceptional breakage or silence or individual recovery (Caruth 1996; LaCapra 2001; Felman & Laub 1992; Herman 1992).

7. INTERSECTIONALITY, DALIT FEMINIST STANDPOINTS, AND TESTIMONY AS EPISTEMIC INTERVENTION

In tandem with this reorientation in trauma theory, an explicitly intersectional and Dalit feminist approach is required to address the specifics of caste-gender suffering and testimony. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) work on intersectionality offers a concept-based entry point for thinking about how axes of oppression intersect; however, Crenshaw's insight must be broadened in the Indian context to relocate at the centre of intersectional analysis, caste, and not just race. The relevance of the Sharmila Rege advocate for a Dalit feminist standpoint is clear: Rege establishes that Dalit women's narratives generate epistemic claims neither reducible to "woman" nor to "Dalit" and further that mainstream (Savarna) feminist stories consistently obliterate caste-specific injustice.

Gopal Guru's work on humiliation and experiential knowledge also serves to highlight the epistemic status of lived Dalit experience: collections edited by Guru theorize humiliation as a social-structural category but demonstrate in practice that untouchability's quotidian degradations yield claims that are political no less than psychic (Guru 2009/2011). Read in the space defined by Crenshaw's intersectionality, Rege's Dalit standpoint, and Guru's theorisation of humiliation, it is clear that narratives of Dalit women are acts of 'epistemic violence'; they speak to knowledge informed by embodied and collective experience; they contest the limitations of liberal feminist universalisms; they reorient testimony as a form of situated theory-making.

Recent literary scholarship on Dalit women's accounts/testimonies and trauma literature supports this intervention: writings released over the past two years insist that Dalit memoirs decline to allow the privatization of suffering, and display instead collective witness-bearing as political demands reconfigure themselves here against therapeutic lexicons (Shukla 2025; Alankrita 2024). So, to bring Crenshaw, Rege, and Guru into conversation with one another is to permit a theoretical shift from intersectionality-as-analytical-tool to intersectionality-as-practice in life-writing: the texts of Dalit women do not simply illustrate intersecting oppressions; they enact intersectional epistemologies and challenge Western trauma paradigms and mainstream feminist theory while theorizing counter-histories that demand justice.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper proposes Dalit women's writing as the potent intersection of testimony, trauma-mapping, and resistance. Bama, Baby Kamble, and Urmila Pawar are among its most important interventions in Indian literature today. Their stories reveal

trauma to be not only personal but systemic, spatial, and intergenerational. "And at the same time, their writing converts trauma into resistance: in voice, memory, narrative form, and ideological sharpness. In the writings of Dalit women, readers are forced to grapple with the unpleasant facts of caste and patriarchy. Their testimonies refuse erasure, their memories defy dominant histories, their voices demand space, and their narratives affirm dignity. The reading of Dalit women's writings, therefore, becomes not only a literary exploration but also an ethical commitment to justice. These are not simply written words, they are written in order to live, resist, and wake up together.

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