

Reclaiming Voices: Autobiographical Journeys of Bama, Urmila Pawar, and Shantabai Kamble

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Abstract

This research article aims to explore the autobiographical narratives of Bama, Urmila Pawar, and Shantabai Kamble, three renowned women writers whose works have challenged societal norms and given voice to marginalized communities. The focus of the study is to analyze their autobiographical works like, *Karukku*, *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoir*, and *The Kaleidoscope Story of My Life* as powerful tools for resistance, redefinition, and recounting of silenced experiences of Dalit women. The article examines the ways in which Bama, Urmila Pawar, and Shantabai Kamble resist social and cultural constraints through their autobiographical writings and it explores how these women redefine their traditional narratives and challenges of dominant discourses through their life stories. This article investigates the role of recounting silenced experiences in fostering empowerment, social change, and cultural understanding of their life. The research analyzes the thematic similarities and differences in the autobiographies of the selected writers and their contributions to feminist and Dalit literature. The research article highlights the significance of reclaiming voices and the transformative potential of autobiographical narratives in addressing social injustices and promoting inclusivity. Despite the recognition of autobiographical writings as powerful tools for marginalized voices, there is a lack of comprehensive study. This article aims to fill this gap by closely examining their works, analyzing how their narratives challenge oppressive structures, and emphasizing the transformative potential of their stories. By doing so, the research aims to contribute to the broader understanding of feminist and Dalit literature and underscores the significance of centering marginalized voices in academic discourse.

Keywords: resistance, redefinition, recounting, dalit feminism, autobiography

1. Introduction

Dalit feminism explores the intricate dynamics and relationship between gender and caste. It is a framework that critically examines the oppression and marginalization experienced by Dalit women, whose identities are shaped by both their gender and caste. This intersectional approach recognizes the unique challenges faced by Dalit women, who grapple with not only gender-based discrimination but also caste-based prejudice and social exclusion. Within the realm of Dalit feminism, scholars and activists analyze and challenge the intertwined systems of patriarchy and caste hierarchy, seeking to liberate Dalit women from the oppressive structures that limit their agency and opportunities for advancement. Liddle (1986) asserted that, “the gender division reinforced the caste division, and the gender ideology legitimated not only the structure of the patriarchy but also the organization of the caste” (69). In the muddled display of Indian society, where caste hierarchies and gender inequalities continue to demonstrate, the plight of Dalit women remains a distressing reality. The stories of the distressed women of the past bring up more postulation about their lives. The memoirs serve as an irresistible reminder of the emergence to vocalize their harrowing lived experiences and stipulate their rightful representation. Employing a conscientious examination of selected autobiographies such as *Karukku* which was written by Bama in Tamil in 1992, later translated into English by Lakshmi Holstrom which details the caste subjugation predominant in the Catholic Church in Tamil Nadu. She relives the experiences through her narrative. Aaydan, which was written in Marathi in 2008 by Urmila Pawar, and later translated into English as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoir*, portrays a vivid picture of Dalit Women and intersecting oppression in India. *Mazhya Jalamachi Chittarkatha* was written by Shantabai Kamble in Marathi in 1983, later translated into English as *The Kaleidoscope Story of My Life*, it reflects on her experience of caste oppression, and addresses the double oppression. Through these autobiographical narratives, the article unfolds and reveals the layers of vitality and life that lie within Dalit women. These autobiographical accounts function as both a scathing critique and a poignant examination of innate resilience, providing valuable insights into their transformative experiences toward personal growth and inner strengthening.

The poignant narratives of Bama, Urmila Pawar and Shantabai expose the multifaceted dimensions of Dalit women's experiences. Pandey (2013) writes, “Dalit autobiography . . . foregrounded the vicious history of caste prejudice. The very titles of numerous Dalit life writings indicated the history of stigmatization, oppression, and poverty”. These autobiographies not only serve as a platform for these women to voice their lived realities of oppression, resilience, and resistance but also challenge the conventional narratives and representations of Dalit women in mainstream discourse. Therefore, this paper aims to dissect the layers of caste and gender oppression as depicted in these

narratives, while highlighting the unique forms of resilience and agency that Dalit women exhibit. It examines the socio-political contexts that shape their identities and struggles, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on caste, gender, and empowerment in India. The selected research narratives challenge the dominant narrative style by fostering empathy and understanding. The article seeks to contribute to an innate understanding of the complexities of caste, gender, and class in these works.

2. Literature Review

Dalit feminism, as seen in the work of Ciotti (2006), Gorasya (2019), Desai (2021), and Senapati (2021), is shaped by the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender, and the specific experiences of Dalit women. It challenged the dominant savarna feminist viewpoint and sought to reformulate an alternative agenda of women's emancipation (Senapati, 2021). In contrast, black and white feminism has historically been more focused on gender equality and women's rights, with black feminism emphasizing the intersectionality of race and gender (Hooks, 1981). Despite these differences, all three feminist movements share a common goal of challenging and dismantling systems of oppression. The literature on Dalit feminist theory is diverse and complex, with a focus on the intersectionality of caste, gender, and class. Shailaja Paik (2018) in her article demonstrated that Dalit women's universal perspectives and historical and Political practices are deeply democratic and as such have the potential of engaging in inclusive and productive politics, building solidarities and actually reshaping the larger fields of Dalit Studies and Gender Studies. Arya and Rathore's edited collection provides a comprehensive overview of this field, while Banerjee's (2020) work highlights the need for more representation of Dalit women's experiences in literature. Shahida's (2020) review of Dalit literature underscores its role in social resistance and identity formation, particularly in the context of the Dalit community's history of suffering and humiliation. Mehta's (2021) analysis of the Indian feminist movement emphasizes the importance of understanding gender within the framework of caste and class. These studies collectively underscore the significance of Dalit feminist theory in challenging dominant power structures and advocating for social transformation.

3. Objectives

The main objective is to examine how Bama, Urmila Pawar, and Shantabai Kamble resist social and cultural constraints through their autobiographical writings - *Karukku*, *The Weave of My Life* and *The Kaleidoscopic Story of My Life*. The aim is to explore the ways in which these women writers redefine traditional narratives and challenge dominant discourses through their life stories and to highlight the significance of reclaiming voices and the transformative potential of autobiographical narratives in addressing social injustices and promoting inclusivity. The secondary objective is to address the existing lack of comprehensive study on the autobiographical writings of Bama, Urmila Pawar, and Shantabai Kamble, shedding light on their resistance, redefinition, and recounting of silenced experiences, and to contribute to the broader understanding of feminist and Dalit literature. The ultimate objective of reclaiming voices is to bring about social change and transform oppressive systems. By sharing their experiences, Bama, Urmila Pawar, and Shantabai Kamble aim to challenge and disrupt the status quo, advocating for justice, equality, and dignity for marginalized communities. Their stories serve as catalysts for dialogue, mobilization, and activism, inspiring individuals and communities to work towards a more inclusive and impartial society.

4. Background of the Novels

Karukku (1992) is a groundbreaking autobiographical novel written by Bama, a Tamil Dalit writer and activist. It is considered one of the first significant Dalit feminist writings in India. The novel provides a candid and intimate account of Bama's experiences growing up as a Dalit woman in a deeply casteist and patriarchal society. It explores the intersecting oppressions faced by Dalit women and the complex dynamics of caste discrimination, poverty, and gender inequality. Bama narrates her childhood in a rural Tamil Nadu village, where she confronts the harsh realities of untouchability and the systemic oppression faced by Dalits. She vividly depicts the discrimination, humiliation, and social ostracism inflicted upon her community by the upper castes. *Karukku* is not only a personal memoir but also an exploration of the larger socio-political context of caste and gender oppression in India. She also explores the impact of religion, particularly Hinduism, on the lives of Dalits, highlighting the oppressive practices and the caste-based hierarchy within religious institutions. Bama endured three years of hardship within the convent, and due to feeling completely disconnected from her surroundings, she decided to depart from the religious order and pursue a life of theatrical performances. Bama reflects upon her perspectives that, "How long can one play act in this way? Any way it wasn't possible for me I had to leave the order and come into the world. And I do not know if they have become so habituated to their play-acting that they can no longer distinguish between the role and the reality" (*Karukku*, p 107).

Bama courageously challenges the casteist norms and practices that perpetuate social inequalities, calling for social justice, equality, and the empowerment of Dalit women. It has inspired and influenced numerous writers and activists in their fight against caste discrimination and gender oppression. *Karukku* continues to be a significant work, throws light on the lived experiences of Dalit women and their ongoing struggle for dignity, equality, and social change.

The Weave of My Life is an autobiography written by Urmila Pawar, an Indian Dalit feminist and writer. The book provides a powerful account of Pawar's life, highlighting her experiences as a Dalit woman and her struggles against caste and gender discrimination. Pawar was born into a Dalit family, belonging to the Mahar community, which is considered one of the lowest castes in the Indian caste system. The book explores her childhood in the village of Walvanda in Maharashtra and the oppressive social hierarchy she faced from a young age. She vividly describes the discrimination, poverty, and violence that she and her community endured. As Pawar grows older, she becomes increasingly aware of the injustices faced by Dalits and women in Indian society. She narrates her journey of self-discovery and

resistance, as she challenges the oppressive norms and expectations imposed on her. Sharmila Rege in her afterword writes: Memoirs of humiliation and resistance delineate the reproduction of caste as a form of modern inequality both in the village and the city. People would first purify the Aaydan, the basket, woven by Dalits by sprinkling water on it. At school, teachers would pick on Dalit girls to clean the dung on the school verandah when it was the turn of their class to undertake the cleaning. (Pawar, p. 26)

Pawar actively participates in the Dalit and feminist movements, fighting for equality and social justice. *The Weave of My Life* also delves into Pawar's experiences as a textile mill worker in Mumbai. Through this part of her life, she exposes the exploitative working conditions and the intersectionality of caste, gender, and class oppression. Pawar's narrative reflects the broader struggles faced by Dalit women in India and serves as a critique of the social and economic structures that perpetuate inequality.

The Kaleidoscopic Story of My Life by Shantabai Kamble is a significant work in Marathi literature and an important document in Dalit feminist writing. Her autobiography provides a vivid and intimate portrayal of the struggles and resilience of Dalit women. The book offers insights into the multiple dimensions of oppression faced by Dalit women, including caste discrimination, gender inequality, and poverty. Kamble narrates her life story, starting from her childhood in a small village in Maharashtra, India, where she faced the harsh realities of caste-based discrimination and the struggle to access education. Despite these challenges, she pursued education with determination, eventually becoming a teacher and an activist. Kamble's narrative goes beyond her personal journey, reflecting the broader socio-political context of the time, including the impact of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's movement for Dalit rights and the fight against caste oppression. Her story is a testament to the strength and perseverance of Dalit women, who navigate through the complexities of social hierarchies and discrimination to assert their dignity and rights.

5. Discussion

5.1 Beyond Boundaries: A Dalit Woman's Quest for Identity and Freedom in Bama's *Karukku*

Bama, a renowned as the inaugural Tamil Dalit female writer, presents herself as a formidable instrument in dismantling the dominant influence of Patriarchy. Her identity as a Dalit woman is not a static, imposed label but a dynamic, self-fashioned beacon that guides her through the darkness of social exclusion. Through her literary work, Bama chronicles her journey, highlighting the oppressive ordeals, discriminatory practices, systemic injustice, and pervasive poverty that afflict the existence of Dalit women. Consequently, *Karukku* emerges as a profound testament to the collective experiences of Dalit women prevailing in Tamil Nadu. In the Preface to the novel, she writes:

I left behind my life of renunciation and came out into the world. After that, I wrote my book, *Karukku*. That book was written as a means of healing my inward wounds; I had no other motive. Yes, it had unexpected results. It influenced people in many different ways. *Karukku* made me realize how potent a book can be. . . They could comprehend the pain I had experienced in my life. My friends read it. They praised it because it was a new kind of writing. People from my village read it. Although they were hostile at first, they realized that it was necessary. They rejoiced and encouraged me. Many Dalits read it and said it gave them strength. (*Karukku*, p.ix)

Bama, vividly portrays the suffocating confinement of the relentless and overpowering societal norms that stifle the lives and dreams of Dalit women. Bama's native and unfiltered writing style denuded the convolutions of caste discrimination, offering the readers a truthful look into the harsh realities of her life.

One of the central themes of *Karukku* is the persistent struggle for education. Bama bespeaks the generative power of education, both in her own life and in the lives of other Dalit women. Bama embarks on a quest to resources to empower herself and her community, driven by her enduring resilience in the face of adversity. Her elder brother becomes a guiding light, pointing her towards the path of education as the means to attain equal opportunities. In his viewpoint, education emerges as the key to breaking free from the constraints imposed by societal hierarchies and achieving social mobility.

Because we are born into the Paraiya jati, we are never given any honour or dignity or respect. We are stripped of all that. But if we study and make progress, we can throw away these indignities. So study with care, learn all you can. If you are always ahead in your lessons, people will come to you of their own accord and attach themselves to you. Work hard and learn. (Bama, p.17-18)

Bama is profoundly influenced by her elder brother's support. His assistance has left a lasting impact on her, motivating her to strive for personal success. Since her brother began conversing with her, she has dedicated herself wholeheartedly to her studies. With unwavering determination, she works diligently, ensuring that she consistently achieves the top position in her class. Bama writes: "I stood first in class. And because of that; many people become my friends, even though I am a Paraiya" (Bama, p.18). Through her writing, she serves as a life-changing potential and evolves by advocating for the rights of Dalit women. Bama urges the creamy-layer, privileged people to recognize the struggles of Dalit women and provide support for their upliftment. Because, Bama insists that women are always considered submissive and oppressive by the patriarchal society. Bama establishes a testament that women are the most oppressed in the stratified society. Bama states that, "In this society, if you are born into a low caste, you are forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation until your death. Even after death, caste-difference does not disappear. Wherever you look, however much you study, whatever you take up, caste discrimination stalks us in every nook and corner and drives us into a frenzy" (Bama, p.26). So, in this context, what prevents us

from accessing quality education and advancing alongside our peers. Consequently, we are compelled to endure a life characterized by hardship and marginalization.

Through her words, she boldly challenges societal norms and conventions that perpetuate the systemic marginalization of Dalit women. In doing so, she advocates for a more inclusive and progressive society that recognizes and values the inherent dignity and worth of all individuals, irrespective of their caste or gender. *Karukku* acts as a clarion call for collective social change and empowerment. Bama's powerful narrative foregrounds the emergence to dismantle the intensely rooted caste system that withholds and sustains inequality and discrimination. Bama states that, "Dalits have begun to realize the truth. . . . They have become aware that they have been made slaves in the name of God, the Pusai and the Church. They have experienced a state of affairs where, in the name of serving the poor, these others have risen in power while actually treading on the poor. Dalits have learnt that these others have never respected them as human beings, but bent the religion to their benefit, to maintain their own falsehoods"(Bama, p.108-109).

Freedom in *Karukku* is depicted as multifaceted encompassing the personal, the spiritual, and the communal. Bama's narrative is a relentless quest for freedom from the shackles of caste, the constraints of gender norms, and the confines of a rigidly hierarchical society. She vividly describes her experiences of discrimination and the pain of being ostracized, yet her story is not one of despair but of defiance. Through education and a deep engagement with her Christian faith, Bama seeks liberation not just for herself but for her community. It also challenges the conventional boundaries of genre. Bama's narrative technique, which intertwines prose and poetry, personal anecdotes, and folk traditions, creates a rich array that defies easy categorization. This stylistic choice underscores the fluidity of her identity and the non-linear path of her journey towards self-realization.

Karukku is a critique of institutionalized religion and its role in perpetuating caste discrimination. Bama's disillusionment with the Church as a Dalit Christian reveals the complexities of navigating faith and identity within oppressive social structures. Yet, it is through this very disillusionment that she finds her true calling to fight for justice and equality. It is more than an autobiography; it is a manifesto of resistance and a declaration of independence from the societal norms that seek to confine and define. Bama's narrative is a beacon of hope and a call to action for those on the margins, offering a vision of a world beyond boundaries a world where identity is self-crafted, and freedom is attainable for all. Through *Karukku*, Bama not only shares her quest for identity and freedom but also invites us to embark on our own journeys of self-discovery and liberation.

The work focuses on the triple marginalization Bama faces due to her caste, gender, and religious minority status. It delves into the Dalit community's struggles against caste oppression, economic exploitation, and social exclusion, all while exploring Bama's personal journey of resistance and self-discovery. Comparing it with white and black feminism highlights the distinct contexts, histories, and challenges each movement addresses, while also revealing areas of overlap and solidarity. *Karukku* and black feminism both emphasize intersectionality, though from different cultural and historical perspectives. Bama's narrative brings to light how caste intersects with gender, much like how black feminism elucidates the intersection of race and gender. Both advocate for recognizing and addressing the multifaceted nature of oppression. While white feminism has been criticized for its lack of intersectional focus, there is a growing recognition within the movement of the need to address diverse issues affecting women of different backgrounds, races, and classes. A potential area of solidarity among these movements is the shared goal of dismantling systems of oppression that marginalize women. However, the specific forms of oppression each addresses - such as caste for Bama, race for black feminism, and a more generalized gender oppression often critiqued by white feminism - highlight the need for nuanced approaches and mutual support that respects and understands these differences. Bama's *Karukku*, white feminism, and black feminism operate within distinct socio-cultural and historical contexts, comparing those underscores the importance of an intersectional approach to understanding and combating oppression.

5.2 *Threads of Resistance: A Journey of Self-Discovery and Empowerment in Urmila Pawar's The Weave of My Life*

The original title of the book, *Aaydan*, holds significant symbolism as it refers to various bamboo-based objects such as trays, baskets, and hand fans. Translated into English as *The Weave of My Life* by Maya Pandit, the author Urmila Pawar draws a parallel between her mother's weaving of Aaydans and her weaving of words. Through her writing, Pawar skillfully crafts narratives that intricately depict the experiences of Dalit women, including her life journey. Just as her mother weaves intricate patterns with bamboo strips, Pawar weaves through her words the intricate life stories that shed light on the struggles and victories of Dalit women. Pawar articulates, 'my mother used to weave Aaydan. . . I find that her act of weaving and my act of writing are organically linked. The weave is similar. It is the weave of pain, suffering and agony that links us when I asked my mother about 'motherhood', she replied in one word 'sacrifice' with pain on her face (Pawar, p. ix). Chelliah and Singh (2019) states that, "In this memoir, Pawar charts the day-to-day life experience in the time of her grandmother, mother and in her childhood. These three generations of Dalit women struggled to overcome the burden of their caste as Dalits or Untouchables make up India's poorest class. She also talks about how things have changed for the Dalits during her lifetime" (p.74). The author vividly depicts the unforgiving terrain of the Konkan region in Maharashtra. Additionally, she provides a heartfelt portrayal of the Dalit women from her village that would traverse the desolate landscape, engaging in the exchange of goods or the acquisition of necessities. She states that, "women from our village travelled to the market at Ratnagiri... with huge, heavy bundles on their heads, filled with firewood. . . Their loads would be heavy enough to break their necks. . . quite an exhausting trip. . . narrow winding paths full of jutting sharp stones and pebbles. . . two big rivers to cross. . . After crossing hills and rivers, the women had to walk on a long, dusty and dirty path till they reached the city" (Pawar, p.1).

For many years, Dalits were subjected to the unjust perception of being racially inferior and were consequently compelled to reside in

segregated communities. Pawar's upbringing took place along the rugged Konkan Coast, where the Mahar Dalits were confined to a centralized location within the village, enabling the upper castes to summon them at their convenience. As Pawar writes, "the community grew up with a sense of perpetual insecurity, fearing that they could be attacked from all four sides in times of conflict. That is why there has always been a tendency in our people to shrink within ourselves like a tortoise and proceed at a snail's pace" (Pawar 1).

In *The Weave of My Life*, Urmila Pawar skillfully highlights the inherent clash between caste and gender. Despite her family's objections, she defies societal expectations by marrying a man of lower social standing who possesses a lesser educational background than her own. Following her family's relocation to Mumbai, Pawar becomes deeply involved in Dalit rights movements and emerges as a prominent figure in the Dalit Literary Movement. She fearlessly recounts the constant criticism and emotional abuse she endures from her husband as she continues her social work. Through her remarkable writing, Pawar gains fame and garners prestigious accolades. Pawar also explores into the realms of Hinduism, Buddhism, and the political movements that contributed to transformative changes in the lives of Dalits. These subjects directly impact her own life, and she candidly acknowledges the profound influence of Dalit Literature, as well as the significant impact of Dr. Baba Saheb's Movement of Dalit conversion to Navbuddha. In her memoir, Urmila provides insightful explanations and reflections on these facets of her life. "The pace of conversion picked up radically after the conversion to Buddhism. To begin with, there was tremendous interest in the new religion and in the images of Buddha and Dr Ambedkar. Initially, it was difficult to replace the images of Gods. To replace it with Buddha and Ambedkar's, the age old habits of praying to the gods for praying for difficult times, were to strong be given up" (qtd. Chelliah and Singh, p.77).

Pawar's memoir underscores the importance of an intersectional lens in understanding oppression. Her work highlights how caste and gender intersect to create a complex web of discrimination and social exclusion for Dalit women in India, offering a critical perspective that resonates with the intersectional framework of black feminism. While white feminism has historically been criticized for its lack of intersectionality, there is an increasing awareness and effort within the movement to embrace a more inclusive and intersectional approach. Pawar's narrative, with its focus on caste and gender, challenges the universalizing tendencies of early white feminist discourse and underscores the importance of acknowledging diverse experiences of oppression. Pawar's work, like that of black feminism, underscores the need for solidarity across different movements to address the intersecting forms of oppression women face. Both movements advocate for an understanding of feminism that is inclusive of diverse experiences and identities. The key difference lies in the specific forms of oppression each movement focuses on caste for Pawar, race for black feminism, and historically, more generalized gender oppression in white feminism. These differences necessitate tailored approaches to activism and theory but also offer opportunities for learning and solidarity across movements.

5.3 *Shattered Silences: A Dalit Woman's Reclamation of Voice and Visibility in Shantabai Kamble's The Kaleidoscopic Story of My Life*

The autobiography, *The Kaleidoscopic Story of My Life*, authored by Shantabai Kamble, recounts the remarkable narrative of Najabai Sakharam Babar, who later came to be known as Shantabai Krishnaji Kamble. This memoir chronicles Najabai's profound struggle against the complex and interconnected obstacles of class, caste, and gender-based discrimination. Originating from the Mahar caste, which represents one of Maharashtra's largest Dalit communities, Najabai's journey showcases an unwavering spirit and resolute determination. Shantabai Kamble vividly portrays the practice of untouchability within the sacred institution of education, where Dalit children were compelled to sit outside the classroom, and the teacher maintained a strict distance, refraining from any physical contact. In her writings, she describes that, "Patil Master was the teacher of Standard III. He forced us to sit outside the classroom. He did not let us touch either to him or the other upper-caste students. He used to punish us from a safe distance with a cane. While checking our homework he used to make us put our slates on the floor and after checking he put them down. Only then we were allowed to take them back. He did not like to be touched by us" (Kamble.p. 30). Her transformative journey is exemplified by her notable achievement as the first Dalit woman to become a teacher in the Sholapur district.

Shantabai, a teacher, faced ongoing discrimination and torture based on her caste despite her education and government service. Despite being warned by upper-caste villagers, she courageously fulfilled her duties. In another instance, Shantabai and her husband were transferred to a new village where they started adult education classes for the poor. Their efforts were praised by education officials and the President of Zillah Parishd, but an upper caste village leader refused to acknowledge their success and repeatedly requested their transfer.

The text describes the experiences of Shantabai, a teacher who faced humiliation and torture based on her caste, despite her education and government service. In 1942, after being appointed as a teacher in Kadals village, she was warned by upper caste people to return or face the same treatment as previous lower caste teachers. However, she bravely continued her work. In 1959, when Shantabai and her husband were transferred to Dighinchi village, she started adult education classes in the Neo-Buddhist residential quarters, teaching reading and writing to the poor for free. Although the education officer and President of Zillah Parishd were impressed by their efforts, an upper caste village leader named Honrao refused to acknowledge their accomplishments and tried to have the couple transferred.

Kamble highlights the prevalence of caste discrimination and hierarchy even among lower caste groups in Indian society. It specifically mentions an incident where women from the Gosavi caste refuse to allow women from untouchable castes to use their well, showcasing the hierarchical divisions among lower castes: One day, women and men of our samaj (caste community) went to the gosavi's (one of the lower castes) well to fill water. . . The gosavi women said, "The well is mine. So if the maharas touch it, it gets polluted, so I do not allow them to fill water." The hawaldar said, "I know the well belongs to you." The gosavi women replied, "I will allow filling when the engine

is on but they cannot go to the well”(Kamble, p.86). The text also references gender prejudice, with parents prioritizing the education and nurturing of their sons over their daughters. A personal account is shared, where Shantabai’s father expressed a negative reaction to the birth of a fourth daughter, wishing he could have buried her alive. Her father remarked, “The daughter is good; we had two sons right after her. Study hard in seventh grade; my Naja had a nice destiny” (Kamble, p.39).

The autobiography emphasizes the importance of education in empowering individuals and breaking free from oppressive systems, such as the caste system in India. It highlights the struggles faced by lower-caste individuals, particularly women, who experience discrimination and hierarchy within their communities. However, it also acknowledges the progress made through the Phule-Ambedkarite human liberation struggle, which fought for equal rights and education for all. The text underscores the belief that knowledge and education can lead to freedom from bondage and oppression.

Shantabai Kamble’s memoir is referenced in the text as a powerful testament to the need for change. Through her personal story, Kamble’s experiences serve as a compelling call to action, challenging the oppressive structures that stifle marginalized voices. The memoir serves as a rallying cry, inspiring readers to join in the fight against inequality and injustice. The emphasis on collective action suggests that addressing the challenges faced by Dalit women requires a unified effort that is intersectional in nature, recognizing and addressing the intersecting oppressions faced by marginalized groups.

Hence, the novel focuses on the experiences of Dalit women, emphasizing the challenges they face and their determination to overcome them. It explores their struggles within the wider feminist movement, drawing attention to the specific issues and discrimination they encounter as Dalit women. Through comparative analysis with Black and White feminism, it aims to highlight the shared struggles and interconnectedness of diverse feminist movements around the world. By examining these various movements, readers can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities and intersections of gender, race, and caste-based discrimination.

6. Limitations of the Study

The autobiographies of Bama, Urmila Pawar, and Shantabai Kamble provide invaluable insights into the Dalit experience in India, particularly from the perspective of Dalit women. However, their experiences cannot represent the entire spectrum of Dalit women’s experiences across different regions, castes, and socio-economic backgrounds in India. The study is limited by the specific socio-cultural and historical contexts of these authors. If the autobiographies were originally written in languages other than English (Bama’s writings are in Tamil, for example), translation into English or other languages could introduce interpretation biases.

The study’s approach to analyzing autobiographical narratives focuses on literary, socio-political, and historical interpretations. The study might be limited by the availability of comprehensive historical and socio-political context needed to fully understand the implications of the autobiographies. The impact of the autobiographies and their interpretation is highly subjective, influenced by the reader’s personal experiences, cultural background, and academic training. This subjectivity limits the study’s ability to draw generalized conclusions about the narratives’ impact on broader societal understandings of caste, gender, and identity in India.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this article through the autobiographies effectively highlights the experiences and struggles of three Dalit women in India. Through their narratives, they offer a unique perspective on caste-based discrimination and oppression, challenging dominant narratives and reclaiming their own voices. One of the key themes that emerge from these autobiographies is the importance of education and activism in empowering marginalized communities. These novelists emphasize the transformative impact of education and how it allowed them to break free from societal constraints and gain a greater sense of agency. Their stories serve as a testament to the power of education as a tool for social change, as well as the need for continued efforts to provide equal educational opportunities for all. Another significant aspect of these autobiographies is the portrayal of Dalit women as agents of change and resilience. Despite facing pervasive discrimination and violence, they refuse to be silenced or defeated. Their courage and determination to challenge oppressive structures and fight for justice are inspiring and serve as an important reminder of the pliability and strength of marginalized communities. Hence, this article offers a powerful and necessary contribution to Dalit literature. These autobiographies provide an important platform for these women to share their stories and reclaim their voices, ultimately challenging existing power structures and advocating for a more inclusive and equal society.

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Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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