

Marathi Dalit Autobiographies: Challenging Family, Marriage and Value Structures

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Abstract

This paper explores how Marathi Dalit autobiographies reconfigure traditional notions of family, marriage, and social values. Dalit life-narratives, particularly within Marathi literature, serve as sites of resistance against Brahmanical normativity and caste hierarchies. Through a critical reading of key texts, this research highlights how Dalit writers disrupt patriarchal structures in family and marriage, contest hegemonic cultural values, and articulate an ethos grounded in dignity, autonomy, and social justice. By foregrounding lived experience, these narratives critique oppressive social institutions and propose reimagined frameworks of kinship, partnership, and community ethics.

Introduction

Dalit autobiography in Marathi literature has emerged as one of the most powerful sites of subaltern expression in post-colonial India. Beginning with the canonical *Baluta* (1978) by Daya Pawar and continuing through works by Namdev Dhasal, Baburao Bagul, Laxman Mane, and Bama, Marathi Dalit life-narratives confront the politics of caste, class, and gender. While much scholarship has focused on oppression, trauma, and resistance in Dalit writing, there is a pressing need to examine how these texts reconstruct social institutions—especially *family, marriage, and values*—that have traditionally upheld upper-caste patriarchal power.

In this paper, I argue that *Marathi Dalit autobiographies not only critique dominant social structures but also enact alternative modes of family, marriage, and value systems* rooted in egalitarianism, community solidarity, and ethical resistance against casteism. These transformations are not merely thematic; they reflect a deep reorganization of social imaginaries through narrative practice.

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Literature Review

The emergence of Dalit autobiographical writing in India—a genre that combines personal narrative with social critique—has been a major site of scholarly interest since the late twentieth century. Scholars across literature, sociology, and cultural studies have examined Dalit life-writing not merely as testimony but as a form of cultural resistance and identity formation. This literature review synthesizes key contributions, highlighting how existing scholarship addresses caste, narrative agency, and social structures such as family and marriage.

Foundational Scholarship on Dalit Autobiography

The publication of *Daya Pawar's Baluta* (1978) marked a seminal moment in Marathi Dalit literature. Early scholars such as Eleanor Zelliot (1992) and Gail Omvedt (1993) positioned Dalit autobiography within the broader socio-political context of Dalit movements in Maharashtra. Zelliot's *From Untouchable to Dalit* traced the historical evolution of Dalit identity politics, situating Pawar's narrative as a radical departure from mainstream autobiographical forms. Omvedt highlighted the intersection of caste and modernity, underlining how Dalit authors use personal narrative to challenge hegemonic historiographies.

Badri Narayan's work (1997) further theorized Dalit life-writing as a counter-discourse to dominant bourgeois and upper-caste narrative traditions. Narayan emphasized that Dalit autobiographies foreground the experiences of marginalization in ways that subvert literary conventions and contest social hierarchies. His interdisciplinary approach—linking narrative to social structure—laid groundwork for later critical engagements.

Intersection of Caste, Gender, and Narrative Agency

Later scholarship expanded analytic lenses to include gender and intersectionality. Scholars such as Uma Chakravarti (2003) and Sharmila Rege (2006) critiqued dominant caste analyses for their neglect of gendered experiences within Dalit communities. Chakravarti's *Gendering Caste* argued that Dalit women encounter dual oppressions of caste and patriarchy, a theme reflected in autobiographical narratives that resist homogenized portrayals of Dalit experience.

Rege's *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* highlighted the complexities of Dalit women's life-writing, positioning these narratives as sites of negotiation between caste oppression and gendered agency. Her work underscored how Dalit women writers disrupt patriarchal family structures and challenge gender norms while contesting caste domination.



In feminist and subaltern studies discourse, scholars such as Gopal Guru and K. Satyanarayana have emphasized the narrative agency of Dalit autobiographers as a means of *self-assertion*—particularly in defying Brahmanical norms around purity, honor, and domesticity. Their work intersects with postcolonial critiques of representation, arguing that Dalit life-writing reframes the body, family, and community as arenas of political struggle.

Family, Marriage, and Kinship in Dalit Narratives

While much of the foundational scholarship discussed caste oppression and resistance, specific inquiry into *family and marriage structures within Dalit autobiographies* has gained attention more recently. Scholars such as Anand Teltumbde (2010) have analyzed how Dalit narratives challenge Brahmanical models of familial honor and kinship. Teltumbde argues that Dalit autobiographies often depict families fractured by caste violence, migration, and economic precarity—thereby contesting idealized representations of family unity prevalent in mainstream Indian literature.

Anthropological work by Karin Kapadia (1995) on Indian kinship structures offers a broader contextual frame, challenging assumptions of static family systems. Kapadia's research, though not exclusively Dalit-focused, provides useful comparative insights into how caste, class, and social mobility affect family organization.

More recent contributions include Ganesh Devy's work on community ethos in folk and Dalit literature, which highlights how Dalit writing often reconstructs kinship beyond biological lineage—valuing community ties formed through shared experiences of resistance. His work suggests that Dalit autobiographies not only critique oppressive family norms but also propose *alternative networks of care, solidarity, and belonging*.

Reimagined Values and Social Ethics

The question of values—particularly dignity (*manava*), solidarity, and justice—has been central to studies in Dalit narratives. Scholars such as Sharmila Rege, Arjun Dangle, and Satyanarayana have underscored how Dalit life-writing situates ethical assertions against caste hierarchies. Dangle's *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* (1992) demonstrates through translated narratives how value systems within Dalit writing subvert Brahmanical notions of purity and honor, foregrounding humanistic and egalitarian ethics instead.

Theorists in subaltern and postcolonial studies (Spivak 1988; Chakrabarty 2000) have also influenced Dalit autobiography scholarship by foregrounding questions of voice, agency, and representation. Spivak's pivotal question—*Can the subaltern speak?*—echoes in Dalit life-writing scholarship, where narrators assert self-representation against structures of social silence.

Gaps and Emerging Trends

Despite the rich scholarship on Dalit autobiography, there remains a need for focused analysis on how narratives actively reorganize social structures such as family and marriage, rather than merely depicting oppression. Much of the literature historically has focused on caste resistance, trauma, and identity formation, with lesser attention to how Dalit writers propose reconstituted values and social frameworks.

Recent scholarship attempts to fill this gap by combining subaltern theory with feminist and kinship studies, examining how family and marriage are sites of both oppression and transformation. Yet, there is space for more work that centers the narrative logic of reimagined social values—particularly through comparative analysis of Marathi Dalit autobiographies.

The literature on Marathi Dalit autobiographies reveals a dynamic interplay between personal narrative and social critique. Foundational works have established life-writing as a powerful mode of resistance, while feminist and intersectional scholarship has deepened understanding of gendered experiences. Emerging trends underscore the need to examine family, marriage, and value systems as sites of narrative reconstruction. These trajectories provide a rich foundation for this paper's argument—namely, that Dalit autobiographies do not merely depict social realities but actively propose alternative structures of social life grounded in dignity, solidarity, and justice.

Since the publication of *Baluta*, Dalit autobiographies have attracted interdisciplinary scholarship. Narayan (1997) situates Dalit life-writing within the politics of subalternity, while Zelliott (1992) historicizes Dalit identity within social movements. More recent scholars, such as Ramaswamy (2007), explore how caste intersects with gender in Dalit narratives.

However, focused scholarship on family and marriage within Dalit autobiographies remains sparse. Chakravarti (2003) analyzes patriarchy's role in caste oppression, and Kapadia (1995) examines Indian kinship patterns under structural pressures. Yet, how Dalit writers actively reimagine these structures—rather than merely describe them—has not been adequately theorized.



This paper fills that gap by applying narrative theory and subaltern studies frameworks to analyse the reconstitution of social values in Dalit autobiographies, situating them not as reflections of individual biography but as collective cultural agency.

Theoretical Framework

This research draws upon three key theoretical perspectives:

1. **Subalternity and Resistance** – Drawing from Gramsci’s notion of hegemony and Spivak’s query “Can the subaltern speak?”, Dalit autobiographies become crucial arenas for marginalized voices to articulate resistance to dominant caste narratives.
2. **Feminist and Intersectional Analysis** – Influenced by Crenshaw, this examines how caste and gender intersect to shape experiences in family and marriage, especially for Dalit women.
3. **Narrative Reconstitution Theory** – Based on Ricoeur and Bakhtin’s dialogic theory of narrative, which understands autobiographies not merely as personal stories but as **sites of social re-imagination**.

Family Structures in Dalit Life-Writing

Family, in dominant Brahmanical imagination, is often idealized as an unchanging unit rooted in hierarchy and ritual purity. Dalit autobiographies subvert this ideal in the following ways:

Breaking Hierarchy within the Family

In *Baluta*, Daya Pawar narrates his fractured relationship with his father, showing how caste stigma and economic precarity strain familial bonds. Pawar’s narrative dismantles the myth of a unified, harmonious family—revealing instead how structural violence penetrates domestic life.

Similarly, in Laxman Mane’s *Upura*, the family is not a secure space; it is marked by caste humiliation and forced migration. Mane’s narrative underscores how Dalit families reconstruct themselves through collective resilience rather than adherence to Brahmanical prescriptions of kinship.

Reimagining Care and Kinship

Dalit writers often expand the notion of family beyond blood relations, incorporating community bonds formed in resistance. Communal support networks become surrogate families. As Urmila Pawar and



Meenakshi Moon show in *We Were Making History*, collective activism redefines kinship as mutual care grounded in shared struggle. In these texts, family becomes less about lineage and ritual order and more about unequivocal solidarity and survival under oppression.

Marriage and Partner Relations in Dalit Life-Writing

Marriage, too, is rearticulated in Dalit autobiographies:

Critique of Arranged and Caste Endogamous Marriage

Traditional Hindu marriage is governed by caste endogamy and patriarchal control. Dalit autobiographies challenge this norm. For example, in Baburao Bagul's narratives, we witness characters resisting forced alliances that perpetuate caste boundaries. Marriage becomes a site of contention against social prescriptions. Dalit writing also foregrounds the agency of women in choosing partners—a radical departure from patriarchal norms. The autobiographies highlight women who assert choice despite social sanction, as seen in Bama's *Karukku* (though Tamil, deeply connected to Dalit literary mobilization), where women articulate autonomy over their relationships.

Redefining Marital Relationships

Rather than marital relationships rooted in duty and hierarchy, Dalit narratives present partnerships as mutual respect and shared struggle. Love and companionship become liberatory, not oppressive—a radical re-valuation of values.

Reconstructing Social Values

Dalit autobiographies do more than critique—they propose alternative value systems:

Dignity over Ritual Purity

In Brahmanical orders, purity is valorized; Dalit writers reverse this by centering dignity (*manava*) as the highest value. Personal narratives become ethical assertions—asserting self-worth against socially imposed impurity.

Solidarity over Individualism

Dalit life-writing often emphasizes community solidarity. This is neither romantic nor nostalgic; it is a strategic collective ethic that offers psychological and physical resistance to caste violence.

Justice over Submission

Rather than resigning to caste fate, Dalit autobiographies endorse justice through self-assertion. Narratives transform personal suffering into collective demand for dignity and rights.

Case Studies

Below are close readings to illustrate how family, marriage, and values are reshaped:

1. *Baluta* by Daya Pawar

Pawar dismantles the myth of family harmony by narrating alienation from his own. Marriage is seen within caste stratification, not romantic idealism. His value system rejects ritual purity and champions dignity.

2. *Upara* by Laxman Mane

Mane describes family ruptures due to caste violence and economic exploitation. Marriage here becomes a survival partnership, and household values evolve beyond caste structures toward egalitarian practices.

3. *Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha* by Urmila Pawar

Pawar's narrative decouples family from Brahmanical honor and reconstructs it as a space of resistance and nurturance. Her autobiography redefines values through sisterhood and collective memory.

Discussion

Dalit Autobiography as Social Reorganization

These narratives are not passive testimonies; they are acts of social reorganization. By narrating personal histories, Dalit writers reconstruct the very social institutions that once confined them. Family and marriage cease to be merely oppressive sites and become arenas for asserting autonomy, solidarity, and justice.

Gender and Intersectionality

Women's voices in these autobiographies reveal how caste patriarchy intersects with gender oppression. Dalit women's narratives do not simply imitate feminist critiques; they embed them within caste realities, making a dual claim against both patriarchy and casteism.

Narrative Practice as Cultural Agency

From a theoretical standpoint, these autobiographies demonstrate how narrative practice itself becomes a form of cultural agency. By telling their own stories, Dalit authors rewrite social values and challenge dominant cultural scripts.

Conclusion

Marathi Dalit autobiographies serve as vital texts for understanding the transformation of family, marriage, and social values within the context of caste oppression. These narratives do not merely depict suffering; they actively reimagine social structures—asserting dignity, mutual respect, and collective solidarity as core principles. Through a dialogic interplay of personal experience and social critique, Dalit life-writing constructs alternative models of kinship and partnership that challenge hegemonic norms.

In doing so, these autobiographies function not just as literary artifacts, but as ethical and political projects that redefine what it means to live—and to resist—in a caste-stratified society.

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