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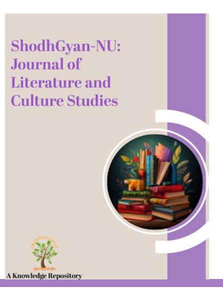

Original Article

CLAIMING OWN SPACES: ANALYSING SPATIALITY IN SELECT DALIT WOMEN LIFE NARRATIVES

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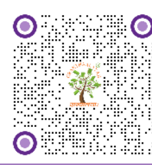

ABSTRACT

This paper examines Dalit women's autobiographies as powerful sites of articulation, focusing specifically on how spatiality shapes and structures their lived experiences of caste and gender oppression. Dalit autobiographies are marked by their immediacy and authenticity, as they narrate everyday realities such as exclusion, labour, hunger, and humiliation from within the community. Within this genre, Dalit women's life narratives occupy a distinct position, revealing forms of marginalisation often overlooked in both mainstream literature and male-authored Dalit texts. By foregrounding domestic, bodily, and intimate spaces, these narratives expose the layered intersections of caste, patriarchy, and class.

The study analyses select autobiographies by Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble and Viramma to explore how space operates as a mechanism of control and exclusion. Segregated settlements, restricted access to public resources, and regulated mobility illustrate how caste is materially embedded in spatial arrangements. Simultaneously, patriarchal norms impose further spatial constraints on Dalit women, confining them to private spheres and marking their bodies as sites of ritual impurity, particularly during menstruation and childbirth. Public spaces, too, become contested arenas where their presence is surveilled and stigmatised.

By reading these narratives through the lens of spatiality, the paper demonstrates that oppression is not merely social but geographically organised. At the same time, it highlights moments of resistance, where writing becomes an act of reclaiming space and asserting identity. Ultimately, Dalit women's autobiographies map a complex geography of suffering and agency, challenging dominant structures and redefining the relationship between space, caste, and gender.

Keywords: Dalit Women, Autobiographies, Spatiality, Caste and Gender

INTRODUCTION

Dalit autobiographies are often considered the most articulative and expressive genre in Dalit literature because they allow Dalit writers to speak directly about their lived realities in their own voices. This directness gives the genre a powerful authenticity and emotional force. In simple terms, Dalit autobiographies tell stories that were long silenced or ignored in mainstream literature. They record everyday experiences—such as denial of education, segregation in living spaces, hunger, manual labour, and social exclusion—that reveal how caste operates in daily life. Because these experiences are narrated from within the community, they challenge dominant upper-caste perspectives and question the idea that Indian society is harmonious or egalitarian.

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Autobiographies also become a form of self-assertion. For Dalit women especially, autobiography becomes a space to express layered oppression based on caste, gender, and class. Dalit women's autobiographies occupy a distinct and crucial space within Dalit literature because they speak from a position of multiple marginalisation—as Dalits and as women. Their speciality lies in the way they reveal experiences that are often absent even in Dalit men's writings, particularly those related to domestic life, bodily labour, hunger, sexuality, motherhood, and everyday humiliation. Unlike many male-authored Dalit autobiographies that focus largely on public discrimination, education, or political awakening, Dalit women's life narratives foreground the private and intimate spaces where oppression is most intense. By writing, Dalit women challenge both upper-caste dominance and patriarchal silencing within their own communities. Their narratives question male authority, religious practices, and social customs, while simultaneously asserting self-respect and agency.

Themes such as suffering, caste discrimination, and gender inequality recur persistently in Dalit women's autobiographies because these experiences shape their everyday existence from childhood to adulthood. Scholars have pointed out that pain and deprivation are not incidental in these narratives but central to how Dalit lives are articulated and remembered. As Charu Gupta notes, "Studies on Dalit life testimonies and autobiographies stress that narratives of pain and suffering are often their cultural capital… Most works on Dalits have rightly recognized exploitation, violence, victimhood, stigma, pain, suffering, upward mobility, and assertiveness as motifs critical to Dalit studies" Gupta (2016). Other than these, motifs like hunger, physical exhaustion, humiliation, and emotional pain appear repeatedly, showing how deprivation becomes normalised within their lives. This repetition itself is significant—it reveals that suffering is systemic rather than accidental. Caste discrimination emerges as a lived reality that operates through daily practices: segregation of living areas, denial of access to water and temples, abusive language, and unequal labour relations. Dalit women writers repeatedly describe being made aware of their caste through spatial markers—where they live, where they can walk, sit, or work. These experiences are often intensified by gender, as women face stricter controls over mobility and greater vulnerability in public and private spaces. Gender inequality within the Dalit community further compounds this, as women bear the burden of both survival labour and social reproduction while remaining marginal to decision-making and authority.

This thematic recurrence opens a productive way to explore the aspect of space or spatiality in Dalit women's autobiographies—an area that remains relatively less explored. Caste and gender are not only social identities but are also spatially organised. Dalit women always confront the problem of lack of space or rather the problem of having to remain invisible in the social space. As Roja Singh comments "In the eyes of the larger Indian society and global community, these women are tucked into invisible spaces as invisible bodies" Singh (2018). Though they exist and are inevitable to society, they are forced to remain outside the peripheries like invisible beings whose visible presence can reck the social purity. Dalit women's narratives constantly reference physical spaces such as segregated settlements, upper-caste households, temples, schools, factories, trains, and urban chawls. These spaces regulate access, movement, and visibility, shaping women's experiences of discrimination and control. By reading select autobiographies by Dalit women through the lens of spatiality, one can examine how power operates through space: how exclusion is enforced through boundaries, how the body becomes a contested space, and how mobility itself becomes a form of resistance. Such an approach allows scholars to move beyond thematic analysis toward understanding how lived space structures oppression and agency. Exploring spatiality thus offers a new critical pathway to deepen our understanding of Dalit women's autobiographies as texts that map not only suffering and inequality but also the geography of caste and gender in everyday life. This research paper would like to navigate the aspects of spatiality in select Dalit women life narratives, *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble, *The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar and *Viramma, Life of an Untouchable* by Viramma, Josiane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine. These autobiographies are perfect portrayals of life of Dalit women under specific intersections of caste, culture, gender and geographical distinctions.

The Prisons We Broke by Baby Kamble and *The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar are finest examples of how Mahar Dalit women of Maharashtra have traversed the trials of caste system and endured their suffering. Baby Kamble's work is one of the earliest narratives in Dalit women's literature and functions primarily as a social and historical document. It foregrounds the collective experiences of Dalit women rather than an individual life story. In contrast, Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* offers a more personal narrative that begins with a caste-based understanding of the world but gradually moves toward a feminist redefinition of identity beyond caste. *Viramma, Life of an Untouchable* by Viramma, Josiane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine offer a glimpse into the lives of Paraiya Dalit women in Tamil Nadu and their existence in harshest social conditions. Viramma shares her life story as a narrated autobiography of an illiterate, agricultural worker who lived in the clutches of caste and its mistaken aura.

Caste acts spatial segregation in case of Dalits. The traditional Hindu Varna system categorises and grades people in society based on their ritual status. The system divided society into four primary varnas or social groups: Brahmins, who performed religious and scholarly roles; Kshatriyas, who held positions as rulers and warriors; Vaishyas, engaged in trade and agriculture; and Shudras, who carried out labour and service-related work. Beyond this fourfold social hierarchy existed communities labelled as "untouchables," who were excluded from the varna system altogether and assigned the most degrading and menial forms of labour. This category included numerous caste groups such as the Mangs, Mahars, Chambhars, Dhors, Kaikadis, Wadars, Bhangis, Paraiyas, Pulayas, among many others, all of whom were subjected to severe social exclusion and discrimination. They were termed untouchables as their touch even their presence would pollute higher caste people and their so-called pure spaces. As Francesca Denegri puts it

Untouchability demands that upper castes protect their pure, sacred bodies from the ritually defiling bodies of the Untouchables, through insulation rather than assimilation – hence the location of Dalits in discreet socio-spatial units outside villages and the strict regulations that are enforced even today to separate access to water, tea, food, classroom space, temples, burial grounds, and so on. Denegri (2022)

Denegri highlights how exclusion operates not through integration but through enforced distance. This logic of separation translates directly into the physical layout of villages, where Dalits are pushed to the margins and confined to segregated spaces outside the main settlement. In the autobiographical narratives of Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar, we can see how Dalit are spatially segregated and distanced from the mainstream habitation. In Maharashtra, untouchable settlements were generally placed outside the village proper. Each caste was compulsorily obliged to live separately in their own settlements like, maharwada, 'chamarwada', 'mangwada', etc. Baby Kamble comments about 'maharwada' where she grew up in Veergaon near Pune. There were sixteen houses in her Maharwada which was in abject poverty in utter dirtiness. Viramma also traces this pattern of Dalit settlements in Tamil Nadu. These settlements were known as *Ceri*, a term used to denote a slum-like residential area set apart from the main village, referred to as the *Ur*. The *Ur* was the space occupied collectively by the upper castes, while the *Ceri* housed those considered untouchable. In effect, the village was spatially divided into two distinct zones, reflecting the sharp social divide between upper castes and Dalit communities. Most of the villages were divided into upper caste and lower caste areas. Upper caste groups usually lived together in the main village. Other castes like Paraiya, Chaliar, etc. lived little away from the main village. Most of the shops, schools, church, temples and offices were located in the main village premises for their convenience. Nalini Pai reflects about the tones of cultural geography in this spatial gradation. She states,

The geographical categories of 'street', 'field' and *chavady* are not just geographical spaces but are also heavily political terms. We read that the Parayar community has to pass through the streets of many other castes like the Naickers, Nadars, Thevars and the Pallars before they reach their own street. There is, thus, a hierarchy denoted here. Even the church that the Parayars attend does not lie in their part of the village, even though they are the only Christians there! Pai (2018)

Viramma and other untouchable children never went to school as the only school in village was inside *Ur*, which was meant for upper caste children. Apart from that, untouchables were not allowed to access water from wells or taps used by higher castes. Rupa Viswanath, in *The Pariah Problem*, identifies this enforced segregation as a defining feature of caste-based village organisation, noting that "ūr stand in opposition to the cēri, with the ūr understood as the habitation of caste people alone. 'The village' was thus in fact two settlements divided by what we might call the 'touchability line'" Viswanath (2014).

In Dalit life narratives, this division becomes a recurring memory, showing how exclusion is experienced not only socially but also through the lived geography of home, work, and movement. Urmila Pawar differs in her opinion of Dalit settlement. She notes in her *The Weave of My Life*, "Dalit houses in the Konkan region (of Maharashtra) were usually not located on the margins of the village but found at its centre, probably as a matter of convenience for the upper castes…The community was haunted by a sense of perpetual insecurity" (Pawar x). The space occupied by untouchable or lower castes were deliberately placed either at periphery or in the centre depending on how higher castes want to use them for their services. These spaces are not merely residential zones but material expressions of caste hierarchy, designed to regulate contact, movement, and access. Restrictions on shared resources—water sources, temples, schools, burial grounds, and even everyday acts such as drinking tea—reinforce this spatial segregation and make caste discrimination a lived, visible reality. In her essay "No Name is Yours Until You Speak It", Laetitia Zecchini puts it,

The hierarchical caste system traditionally implied a strict partitioning of space and physical segregation, particularly in force in South India, between outcastes and 'twice-born' upper castes. Dalits were often relegated outside the village or at its margins. This physical apartheid corresponds to a symbolic expropriation of humanity itself. Zecchini (2018)

Other than caste, gender acts as a form of spatial restriction for Dalit women. Dalit women are often marginalised on multiple intersections of caste control and patriarchal power. Patriarchy has always put its control on female bodies to control and maintain societal power and order. Carolyn Hibbs comments on different markers on female body which are labelled as deviatory. She says, "Women's bodies, including their experiences of menstruating, sexual desire or violence, are … excluded from intellectual–political and spiritual–religious spaces as a deviation from, and a threat to, the universal and ritually pure male body" Hibbs (2018). This insight helps explain why Dalit women are often denied access to public, religious, and intellectual spaces, as their bodies are simultaneously caste-marked and gendered as polluting, making spatial exclusion a deeply embodied experience.

The select autobiographies are rich in references regarding gendered control of space. Menstruation is one of the biggest flaw of women as perceived by society and religion which make them unapproachable. Viramma, in her narrative, discusses at length the taboos surrounding menstruation and the attainment of puberty. She appears as a woman who unquestioningly accepts prevailing superstitions associated with the female body. She states, "Whether you are Pariah or high caste, you have to cleanse yourself when you reach puberty, because evil spirits are attracted by the strong smell of periods. They come and prowl around girls" Viramma et al. (1997). Viramma goes on to describe the prolonged rituals and strict observances imposed during puberty, reflecting her internalised belief that menstruation pollutes not only the girl but also the surrounding social environment. As a result, the menstruating woman is expected to be isolated, almost as if enclosed in a cage, so that her touch does not contaminate others. The practice of sitting or living separately during menstruation was widely followed by women across caste groups. Urmila Pawar also recalls how she was required to sit outside the house and avoid touching household objects both before and after her marriage.

However, unlike Viramma, Pawar gradually abandoned these practices with education and growing awareness. Her elder sister, Shantiakka, played a crucial role in empowering both Pawar and their mother to question and eventually resist the physical segregation imposed during menstruation.

Childbirth also led to the physical and spatial seclusion of women, a pattern evident across all the selected autobiographies. Baby Kamble narrates the hardships faced by new mothers from the Mahar caste after childbirth. Already impoverished and chronically hungry, young Mahar girls—often married off immediately after attaining puberty—suffered severe malnutrition and undernourishment. These conditions were further intensified by superstitious beliefs surrounding the evil eye and compulsory confinement, which restricted new mothers to spaces considered polluted and ritually impure. As part of these rituals, the new mother and her own mother were required to remain awake throughout the night, believing that gods would arrive to inscribe the child's destiny on its forehead. Kamble scathingly critiques this belief, remarking that "one common stamp was probably more than adequate for all Mahar babies!" Kamble (2015), suggesting that members of the Mahar community were collectively condemned to a life of suffering and deprivation. Viramma also reflects at length on childbirth and the cultural importance placed on Dalit women bearing children. Having worked as a midwife in her *ceri*, she was intimately familiar with the rituals and customs imposed on Dalit women, which effectively confined them due to the perceived pollution of both caste and childbirth. Although pregnancy is culturally regarded as auspicious, Viramma presents it as a condition that invites fear and unwanted attention. She observes, "a pregnant woman is the prey of everything that roams around her. I mean the ghosts, the ghouls, the demons, the *pei picacu*; especially if she is a Pariah" Viramma et al. (1997). It is as if the evil spirits are targeting Paraiya women more than others. This belief suggests that Paraiya women, in particular, are imagined as especially vulnerable, reinforcing how caste, gender, and space intersect to regulate and confine Dalit women's bodies during childbirth.

Other than the gendered control of space over Dalit women, access to public space or sphere also becomes central to the narratives. Dalits were historically restricted from using public spaces. In many parts of India, Dalits were required to keep a considerable physical distance from upper castes, let alone touch them. Within the conflict between public sphere and private sphere, women were further relegated to the unseen spaces or private sphere of domestic duties and responsibilities. Public spaces like streets and open spaces were not available for all women to access. Vasanth Kannabiran and Kalpana Kannabiran in "Caste and Gender: Understanding Dynamics of Power and Violence" observes the difference in how men and women occupy the public space like common streets while also highlighting how Dalit women face intensified segregation due to their caste.

Streets are gendered spaces that are mediated by caste... While men and youth inhabit and use streets naturally and forcefully with a sense of belonging, notice how women scurry-along, or often sidle along pavements fully conscious of its being alien, unfriendly territory. When Dalit women step onto the streets, they are seen as transgressing their limits. (257)

This observation underscores how public space functions as a site of regulation and surveillance, where Dalit women's mobility is policed not only through patriarchal norms but also through caste hierarchies. Their presence in public becomes a visible challenge to entrenched social boundaries, revealing how space itself operates as a mechanism of exclusion and control. Viramma fumes over how upper caste people despise seeing Paraiya women on streets. Their voices, whether heard in markets, hospitals, buses, or at public wells, were deemed intrusive and inappropriate, reinforcing their marked status as outsiders within shared spaces. The sounds they made were not merely criticised but used to stigmatise them collectively, turning everyday speech into a sign of caste difference. In institutional spaces such as hospitals, this discrimination became overt, as they were openly mocked and humiliated with comments like, "you shout like fishwives! You are the real Pariahs!" Viramma et al. (1997), revealing how public spaces functioned as arenas of caste-based control and exclusion. If upper caste finds the public presence of Dalit women as despising and polluting, Dalit men perceive it as a threat. Sara Sindhu Thomas explains how Dalit masculinity itself reinforces restrictions on women's mobility by confining them to the private sphere. She notes,

It is clear that Dalit men dominate the outdoors or the public space, while Dalit girls and women are restricted indoors, that is, within the four walls of the house – or worse still, the kitchen. Thus, for the Dalit woman, while caste prescribes the role, her gender assigns her duties and responsibilities. By limiting Dalit women to the private sphere, Dalit men are guaranteed control over their wives and their subordination. Thomas (2018)

Taken together, these perspectives reveal that Dalit women's exclusion from public space is sustained through a complex interplay of caste oppression and patriarchal control, where both upper-caste dominance and intra-caste gender hierarchies work to regulate their bodies, voices, and movement. This paper has examined how spatiality operates as a crucial axis through which caste and gender intersect in select Dalit women's life narratives. By foregrounding lived spaces—settlements, homes, streets, workplaces, religious sites, and institutional spaces—the study has shown that caste oppression is materially organised through space, while patriarchy further restricts women's mobility, visibility, and bodily autonomy. Dalit women's autobiographies reveal how segregation, distance, and exclusion are not abstract social conditions but everyday spatial practices that shape hunger, labour, humiliation, and fear. The narratives of Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, and Viramma demonstrate that women experience caste not only as social discrimination but as a geography that determines where they can live, move, speak, and even exist without punishment.

At the same time, these narratives also mark moments of resistance and re-signification of space. Writing itself becomes an act of claiming space—intellectual, narrative, and political—for voices historically confined to silence. By mapping oppression onto lived

geographies, Dalit women transform marginal and forbidden spaces into sites of testimony and assertion. Reading these autobiographies through spatiality thus deepens our understanding of how power works through everyday spaces while also highlighting Dalit women's agency in challenging these structures. Ultimately, these life narratives do not merely record suffering; they redraw the spatial boundaries of caste and gender, asserting presence where invisibility was once enforced.

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