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THE PARADOX OF MOTHERHOOD – AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S LIVES IN *MOTHERWIT* BY URMILA PAWAR

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Abstract: Dalit writer and activist Urmila Pawar addresses the persistence of gender biases in Motherwit (2014), an anthology of short stories. She challenges the monolithic, hegemonic, colonial and patriarchal notion of motherhood in the anthology. Urmila Pawar's analysis locates the agency of a woman within and beyond the biologically inscribed body, presenting the women at the intersection of asserting rights, demands for equilibrium and greater gender justice through their narrations of experience of mothering. Using Rich's arguments on patriarchal motherhood, O'Reilly's assertion of mothering as a feminist response to motherhood defined in terms of patriarchy and Bagchi's assertion that 'motherhood' is a paradox as i oscillates between "ideological glorification of motherhood as Shakti (power) and the powerlessness faced by mothers in their everyday lived reality", the paper explores how Pawar locates the women as mothers negotiating "the complex process of the ideological use of motherhood" as a social, ideological apparatus which confines "women to the reproductive domain of 'home' and denying them access to the 'world'". As a feminist and a Dalit writer, her narratives offer a glimpse into the experiences of women marked by the intersectional marginalities of gender, caste and class. She presents varying material realities through her stories. She shows how that contributes to the diverse social and cultural negotiations, often contradictory and quite often reminiscent of the vulnerable, contingent and strategic locations women as mothers have to inhabit.
Keywords: Motherhood, Mothering, Dalit Literature, Postcolonial, Urmila Pawar

I. INTRODUCTION

Dalit literature has striven to present an alternative to canonical literature. From D R Nagaraj, Arjun Dangle, Sharan Kumar Limbale and others, Dalit literature has represented a specific focus. It stands for "revolution" (Dangle 289) and "a transformation" (Kumari & Kapoor 1). It has reclaimed rights and assertions within a democratic society to assert existence, agency and experience (Nagaraj). The historical exclusion of Dalit identities and experiences is marked and foregrounded in Dalit literature through the reiteration of social justice. The Buddha-Periyar-Ambedkar movements form the historical precursor of the political and socio-cultural identity in Dalit scholarship, which primarily aims at retrieving "the stories of Dalits from the threat of erasure and ensures their exposure through articulate assertion" (Kumari & Kapoor 2). One could also contextualise the reading of Dalit Literature in subaltern studies. Ranajit Guha defines

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"subaltern' as: [T]he word 'subaltern'… stands for the meaning as given in the Concise Oxford Dictionary, that is, 'of inferior rank'. It will be used… as a name for the general attitude of subordination in South Asian Society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way…. There will be much…which should relate to the history, politics, economics and sociology of subalterneity as well as to the attitudes, ideologies and belief systems—in short, the culture informing that condition …." (1982, p. vii).

The invocation of the subaltern scholarship on Dalit experiences brings to the foreground the oppressive dimensions of 'caste'. Albeit a contested term within postcolonial contexts, the category of subalternity seeks to draw attention to the marginalised sections of society. The foregrounding of caste expands the scope of subaltern studies to include Dalit perspectives. These perspectives address questions of oppression and discrimination while upholding affirmative assertions. Sathianathan Clarke claims that Dalit scholarship and activism refer to a Dalit identity as a way to historically acknowledge the experiences and present their assertions as a collective (Clarke, 2002). This allows them to articulate subjectivities that negotiate hierarchical structures of social relations. Dalit literature, therefore, embodies the Dalit consciousness and "their inner quest for identity against the cultural denunciations of the iniquitous Hindu dispensation" (Poitevin, 2002; quoted in Nath, 2018). As a result, cultural and social ostracism as a corollary of an "an ideologically constructed system" (Nath, 2018) forms an important element of Dalit life narratives and fiction. Pandian (2002) argued that "...the very domain of sovereignty that nationalism carves out in the face of colonial domination is simultaneously a domain of enforcing domination over the subaltern social groups such as lower castes, women and marginal linguistic regions, by the national elite." Within the purview of nationalism, caste as a system of exploitation and domination didn't feature as a direct focal point and, if at all articulated, were mostly through the upper caste experiences (Pandian, 2002), often their lived realities of social ostracism in private and public lives were transposed to a different time-space discourse.

In this connection, a mention of Dalit aesthetics becomes important. Dalit aesthetics "defamiliarises the popular notion of Dalits in mainstream literature through portraying the stories of Dalits by applying their own aesthetics in different genres of literature," thereby presenting a distinct discursive approach to narratives which aims to challenge the hegemonic "social, cultural, economic, religious, and literary configurations" (Kumari & Kapoor 2). Failing to acknowledge and engage with the critical work by Dalit writers makes us conform to the hegemony of upper caste discourses on the Indian polity's socio-political, cultural and historical accounts "that excludes the realities and experience of nearly a quarter of the country's people" (Mukherjee vii).

In literary studies in India, caste and class concerns are being studied together (Rege, 2006). Rege asserts, "intersectionality operates as a tool to observe and address the patriarchal injustices faced by the most marginalized and vulnerable women in the world" (Rege, p. 171). Dalit literature in regional languages has had a strong presence, often reiterated through an autobiographical mode that articulates the realities of Dalit existence. Nath (2018) echoes Pandian and asserts that autobiographies of Dalit writers, through translations in English, have created a space for reclaiming the erasures through a definitive demonstration of the author's life experiences to expose continued ostracism. These narratives expose "the reality behind the institutional narrative that caste no longer functions as a significant force in the public sphere of modern India" (Beth, 2002). In this way, these autobiographies Dalit autobiographies act as a "revolution" (Dangle 289) and "a

transformation" (Kumari & Kapoor 1) to reveal "political assertion and resistance to upper caste hegemony" (Nath, 2018, p. 232).

Dalit Feminism and Motherhood Studies

While Dalit scholarship focuses on reclaiming their discursive space in literary scholarship, Pramod Nayar reiterates that Dalit women's testimonies provide a way to understand social ostracism and present an alternative counter-discourse of sociocultural experiences (1983, p. 100) which presents the triple ostracism that Dalit women face in the intersectional axes of caste, class, and gender. Vaishnavi Mahurkar (2017) asserts that Dalit feminism through literary endeavours has become important in acknowledging Dalit experiences. This academic theorisation and scholarship in Dalit feminism, especially with contributions from Sharmila Rege's (1998) articulation of a Dalit feminist standpoint devoid of a resonating primacy of "upper caste/middle-class issues".

Ambedkar writes,

"The protagonists of Chaturvarnya do not seem to have considered what is to happen to women in their system. Are they also to be divided into four classes, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra? Or are they to be allowed to take the status of their husbands? If the status of the woman is to be the consequence of marriage, what becomes of the underlying principle of Chaturvarnya, namely, that the status of a person should be based upon the worth of that person? If they are to be classified according to their worth, is their classification to be nominal or real? If it is to be nominal, then it is useless, and then the protagonists of Chaturvarnya must admit that their system does not apply to women. If it is real, are the protagonists of Chaturvarnya prepared to follow the logical consequences of applying it to women?" (Ambedkar 61).

Scholarship on gender in India have indicated the indispensability of an intersectional approach that includes caste and class (Geetha, 1991, pp. 3387–3388; Chakraborty, 2003). Crenshaw's (1991) argument that feminist assertions must address not one form of marginalised identity (gender) but multiple operational identities provides a lens to understand the oppressions of Dalits and women. Being aware of the criticism that many scholars critique adopting Crenshaw's model of intersectionality to Global South, Collins and Bilge (2016) argued that intersectionality is prevalent in past discourses as well. They cite Savitribai Phule, a social activist and anti-caste campaigner (19th century), who highlighted and 'confronted several axes of social division, namely caste, gender, religion and economic disadvantage or class' (Collins & Bilge, 2016, pp. 29–30). Radhika Govinda (2022) argued that these intersectional experiences contribute to theorisations without essentializing and objectifying the caste experiences of Dalit women. The marginalisation, as poignantly indicated by Ambedkar, makes it difficult to be analysed using a single location of either being a woman or a Dalit, gender or casteism. They articulate subjectivities and agencies, albeit based on social and material conditions. This remains significant as, in current times, motherhood discourses are acknowledging the urgent need to revisit the essentialist, pan-national and homogeneous definitions of the experiences of motherhood. This, therefore, provides a distinct way to understand alternative formulations of motherhood. Many autobiographies of Dalit women highlight "the ambivalence inherent in maternal responsibility" as "it becomes the catalyst for writing and narrating her experiences, which has a social and political significance because it is as much a process of survival and self-constitution as it is a social intervention against the hegemonic practices of the dominant cultural narrative of maternity" (Nath 2018). The ambivalence is productive because it allows us to question the romantic notions of motherhood. An intersectional approach highlights the concerns

with the essentializing and patronising tone of patriarchal formulations of motherhood, which uncritically sentimentalises motherhood. Keeping this in the backdrop, it is important to note that mothers who are Dalits often have to negotiate social and cultural oppressions quite distinctly.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Dalit feminist fiction is based on real experiences of persistent discrimination and historical oppression: Urmila Pawar's own writing is influenced by her autobiographical experiences, and it challenges, rewrites and confronts a gap in accounts presented through the lens of Dalit aesthetics and feminist approaches by bringing forth an intersectional focus on Dalit women. MotherWit is an anthology that captures narratives that are based on real-life but have been fictionalised in certain aspects. The significance of Motherwit is its focus on female characters, especially mothers and their choices, agency, and assertions. They fight triple-edged oppression, marked by oppressive regimes of class, caste, gender and patriarchy, but present a transformative assertion (Gail Omvedt; Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015). Gopal Guru reiterated Rege's assertion that Dalit women talk differently (Guru 1995), wherein they articulate that the language of Dalit women are articulated by the social hierarchies.

Urmila Pawar, born in 1945 is a Maharashtrian Dalit writer. She identifies herself as a feminist and acknowledges the Buddhist influences in her work and writing (Deo xii). She has a Master's in Marathi Literature and worked as a draftsperson in the Public Works Department. She had a particularly difficult childhood with financial concerns and lost her father early in her life. Her awareness of the complex socio-political region of Maharashtra, witnessing Babasaheb's call for mass conversion to Buddhism, and her experience of navigating the complex lived experiences witnessing first-hand discriminations and untouchability in her everyday life in both rural and urban spaces feature prominently in her autobiography and fiction. The recognition of the analogies between her and mother's life, her family's insistence on education as a precursor to social change, her knowledge of the Marathi language/s and its affordances, and her participation in women's movements motivate her writings to bring forth her assertion for literary, political and social aspirations. She has been vocal about issues of caste oppression and has engaged actively with causes connected with the same. While she remains critical of the symbolic articulation of social equity that states present, she does claim that writing is her "avenue for recording, protesting, and expressing personal and well as group experience" (Deo xxi).

Her autobiography Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoir (Aaydaan translated by Maya Pandit) garnered significant attention. Reading Urmila Pawar's Mother Wit brings forth accounts of Dalit women negotiating systemic discrimination and issues. Her political location is influenced by the Mahaad satyagraha of 1927 and the religious conversion of 1956 – the Ambedkar movement led by Babasaheb- important moments in shaping Dalit assertions. Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon write in their author's note for the book We also made history: women in the Ambedkarite Movement about how women's voices in the Dalit movement are of essential importance. They write about the "neglected, underrated woman activist of the Ambedkar Movement: her capability, the history she had made in the most diverse circumstances, the change that took place in her because of that history, the way she was shaped and influenced, her longing for education and her deep feeling for the importance of education, her ethical integrity, her courage, and her development as an individual". Pawar's Motherwit brings these important premises through the Dalit women's voices. Her

narratives are by a diverse group of women of varied generations, having differential access to institutional education, living in different regions, belonging to different classes, but somehow bringing forth the gendered reality of a "woman".

This paper focuses on four stories from this anthology that specifically focus on women as mothers: their choices, assertions and 'failures', their role in education, and their contribution to helping us acknowledge and understand the Dalit consciousness that is inevitable for achieving social progress. Motherwit is "a vibrant metaphor that points to women's/mother's pieces of knowledge but also local experiential knowledge that is often discarded and destroyed by powerful forces of domination" (Deo xiii).

Rich asserts that Motherhood is a patriarchal institution which necessitates the acceptance of subordination of the woman within inevitable heterosexual relationships, which incidentally ensures the fulfilment of the role of a mother (Rich 1986). Rich asserts, "We know more about the air we breath, the seas we travel, than about the nature and meaning of motherhood" (11). With the increasing attention to unpacking motherhood in feminist theorisations after the publication of Of Woman Born, Rich made a clear distinction "between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction—and to children; and the institution—which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control". Bagchi asserts that 'motherhood' is a paradox as the concept oscillates between "ideological glorification of motherhood as Shakti (power) and the powerlessness mothers face in their everyday lived reality". She alerts us to "the complex process of the ideological use of motherhood to keep the family as the regulating and regulated social order, thereby confining women to the reproductive domain of 'home' and denying them access to the 'world'." If "motherhood" continues to show allegiance to the patriarchal institution, constructed and controlled by it in its articulation, then it is deeply oppressive to women, "mothering" on the other hand refers to "women's experiences of mothering that are female-defined and potentially empowering to women. The reality of patriarchal motherhood, thus, must be distinguished from the possibility or potentiality of gynocentric or feminist mothering. Therefore, while motherhood, as an institution, is a male-defined site of oppression, women's own experiences of mothering can nonetheless be a source of power" (O'Reilly 2004, p. 2).

It is against this backdrop that we are reading the four stories Mother (Aaye), Sixth Finger (Sahav Bot), and Kavach (Armour) from Urmila Pawar's Motherwit. We argue that Urmila Pawar presents narratives of women who reflect mothering and not motherhood. Pawar's mothers focus more on mothering as a form of resistance than motherhood, reminding us of African American maternal practices. Mothering is empowering. It allows us to weave nurturing, empowerment and a feminist sensibility. In the stories selected from her anthology, we see a diverse set of responses towards an imposition of the "negative discourse" of motherhood. Umansky presented two alternative views on motherhood in feminist scholarship: "the "negative" discourse that "focus[ses] on motherhood as a social mandate, an oppressive institution, a compromise of woman's independence," and the "positive" discourse that argues that "motherhood minus 'patriarchy' [. . .] holds the truly spectacular potential to bond women to each other and to nature, to foster a liberating knowledge of self, to release the very creativity and generativity that the institution of motherhood denies to women" (2–3). Her approach transposes our understanding of motherhood as an exclusively patriarchal institution devoid of the agency of a woman to become a non-patriarchal experiential account of mothering. A mother need not be self-sacrificing and self non-enabling, rather, it is the totality of her experience, including cognitive, affective and

care towards herself, that nurtures the child. The reciprocity inherent in mothering allows the bond between mother and child to acknowledge 'mother work' and avoid self-effacement. The stories show how Urmila Pawar's women/mothers negotiate the home/world boundaries. Reminding us of Chandra Talpade Mohanty and O'Reilly's call that "As a cultural construction, its meaning varies with time and place; there is no essential or universal experience of motherhood", she carefully presents the spectrum of possibilities that mothers negotiate depending on their material conditions and hence her mothers are educated, not educated in formal institutions, workers or are women primarily involved in domestic life, they are in urban or rural settings and thereby presenting a tapestry of various ways in which their lives are being inscribed by or they are able to assert a counter-discourse breaking the hegemonic controls of motherhood. She avoids the expected tonality of blaming and victimisation and instead uses her writing as a way to forge a sympathetic encounter with a larger audience. Presenting varied narratives, she aims to recover an authentic "gynocentric mothering" who emerge as "outlaws from the institution of motherhood" (Rich), present a "view of mothering as a socially engaged enterprise that seeks to effect cultural change in the home through feminist child rearing and the world at-large through political/social activism" (O'Reilly).

III. DISCUSSION

In the opening story, Mother (Aaye), a bereaved wife, battles against the pressure of others (including close family members) trying to control her and her children's lives. The patriarchal system tries to encircle her and take away her independence of thought and judgment, but she fights back against all odds. When her husband's family members, especially his brother, Tatya, insist they shift to the village, she decides to think about her children's future despite knowing the struggles she has to face remaining in town. She is persistent. She shows her rational and independent thoughts with dignity yet assertiveness. Despite Tatya provoking her with statements such as "Vahini, do you see what state the poor boy is in? You want to save your son's life, don't you?" (Pawar 3), she remains unperturbed. Her anger is not reactive but responsive. She asserts,

"Bhavji, why are you talking like this?" she said angrily. She had never taken that tone with him before. In my life of fourteen years, I heard her talk back in anger this way for the first time" (3).

This story tugs at an important concern. Struggles for Dalit struggle and emancipation foregrounded the need for education, women's self-development and better articulation of women's rights; "the male-centred efforts were also contradictory and ambiguous" (Paik 65). Many Dalit radicals, while highlighting agency and dignity, foregrounded their necessary unwavering responsibility towards family. While these were important ambiguities, collectively the assertions by Phule and Ambedkar with collective struggles enhanced women's agencies. Bagchi states, "Motherhood has been conceived as a culmination of the ideal womanhood, compliant towards the family elders" (2), and Aaye resists the oppressive demand. Among the villagers performing a sacrificial ritual for her son, Krishna, who was unwell and whose condition deteriorated after Tatya met him, trying to demonstrate the "evil" nature of the townland, she reminds Tatya of Babasaheb's call for education. She says, "Aho, my husband always told us that Babasaheb Ambedkar told us to leave our villages and move to towns." In Phule's Trutiya Ratna, the jewel was used metaphorically. It stood for the third eye, which sought knowledge to break social oppressive structures. It could be a tool/weapon for the marginalised people to fight gender, caste and educational ostracism. Pawar, through Aaye, seems to be reminding us of the Trutiya Ratna which would guarantee criticality in consciousness and brings forth social change. She remains strong-willed

despite the others telling her that "…Vahini, this is not a rational decision. There is something evil in this land." (Pawar 5) While she watches everyone engaged in a rather performative healing sacrifice, "quietly, alarmed" (Pawar 6), at night, when others rested, she "sat changing the wet clothes dipped in salt water which she was placing on Krishna's forehead".

Aaye learns at dawn that Krishna was fed poison by Tatva, which aggravated his condition. The morning after, when the villagers and Tatya loudly proclaim that they are shifting to the village without Aaye's consent, Aaye, using a tone like ovis, wailed and narrated the happenings, how her husband warned her of his family members, what Tatya has done, what their purpose is and so forth. When Aaye sarcastically denounces her dishonest brother-in-law while singing an ode to her deceased husband, it also defies the notion of the calm and obedient Indian woman, "My dear husband…my master…my love…You left your children behind, and you are gone. You told me not to trust your brother, Tatya. You were right my Raja" (Pawar 10). This narrative form chosen is reminiscent of the "oral forms of expression as in songs sung in everyday life as well as in formal performative songs and dances – the Lavani and tamasha" (Deo xvi) which were the precursors of the feminist voice. O'Reilly asserts that Motherhood is

defined and controlled by the larger patriarchal society in which they live. Mothers do not make the rules, as Rich reminds us, they simply enforce them. Motherhood, in Rich's words, is an experience of "powerless responsibility."Whether it is in the form of parenting books, a physician's advice, or the father's rules, a mother raises her children in accordance with the values and expectations of the dominant culture. Mothers are policed by what Sara Ruddick calls the "gaze of others." Under the gaze of others, mothers "relinquish authority to others, [and] lose confidence in their own values" (111). "Teachers, grandparents, mates, friends, employers, even an anonymous passerby," continues Ruddick, "can judge a mother and find her wanting" (111–112). "Fear of the gaze of others", she continues, "can be expressed intellectually as inauthenticity, a repudiation of one's own perceptions and values" (112). (p. 9)

While motherhood is glorified on the one hand, on the other, Aaye is asked to prove her sincerity as a mother, which slips to being labelled as a demonising figure when she doesn't conform to the patriarchal conduct. To resist that is the revolution, silent yet persistent. Aaye subverts the expectation that Ruddick mentions above. Aaye shows a transformative potential through her choices. She doesn't leave. She speaks the truth. She doesn't let social dogma or the demands of family dictate her choices or decisions. Her subjectivity is complicated here. She is expected to be a grieving wife, a self-effacing mother, subsuming herself and subjectivity in the name of family. She instead challenges the "Fear of the gaze of others" (112), she challenges the family — what is domestic and private and asserts that kinship cannot escape criticism. She affirms that home, as a sanctimonious space, does not guarantee equal opportunities for everyone. The evils of the absoluteness of the assumption that home is sanctimonious are brought forth, and what is foregrounded is her refusal to be subsumed under the dominance of patriarchy, represented through male family members. The contestation between the ideal emblematic feature of a good mother and wife is rewritten by a persistent, silent affirmation — the will to contribute to a better life for her child and herself.

The second story, Sixth Finger (Sahav Bot), narrates the lack of agency and victimhood a woman faces as a mother. Patriarchy forces women to be penalised for being childless, whereas men remain morally free. Bagchi states that motherhood is often theorised within the role of a mother in the nation-building process of the colonial and postcolonial state, and "the mother who lurks within this ideology is the mother of a son and not

a daughter. As such, she is the keeper of the social order by upholding the upper caste/upper-class Hindu family as a hegemonic instrument in keeping the public/private, productive/reproductive, and sadar/andar (public/private) binaries intact so that the boundaries of patriarchy are never crossed". Sneha, the protagonist, is childless for a long time and later must deal with ongoing personal insults that push her into melancholy. The woman's body is inscribed with historical systemic demands: the need to be morally pure, be a mother, and be untouched by 'evil'. While the demands are on women, the focus never shifts to the institutions that perpetuate the need for saving women; a society that values equity and doesn't assault women need not protect women. It's this contradiction that is lived in this narrative tale. Her husband is shocked to hear that they are pregnant and is reminded of a past joke that he made about his friend and Sneha being engaged in playful sexual intimacy. While Sneha perhaps considered that to be playful banter, her husband, bound by the hypermasculine ego held upright by hegemonic masculinities, immediately attacks the woman as 'fallen'. Sneha's insistence, emotions, and attempts to convince her husband that they are pregnant and have no connection to their friend don't succeed. A woman having a male friend is enough for condemnation. This is Bagchi's paradox. The helplessness that a woman faces – to be a woman, to prove that she is the rightful mother, that she is a moral mother and that she is pure and an incarnation of a goddess in terms of fidelity and virtue. During childbirth, Sneha dies, but the child is shown to be her husband's — both her husband and the child have six fingers. In the Overview Report Overview Report of Study in Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu/Pondicherry and Uttar Pradesh by Aloysius Irudayam S J, Jayshree P. Mangubhai and Joel G. Lee, they assert that "the subjugation, and lack of power and authority in the general community for the women's husbands, marital and natal families, is often replicated in violence in the family, a phenomenon noted in many socially marginalised communities. This domestic violence is further bolstered by the internalised dominant caste ideology of wife fidelity (pativrata) and duty of chastity, placing a premium on notions of women's "honour", "purity" and "obedience"". Brahmanical patriarchy expects an aggressive response to being emasculated in society. His suspicion is a corollary of how a Dalit woman's subjectivities can be conceived, the ambivalence, while sensed yet pushed to the margins, forms her identity as a disempowered entity. While some may read this story as a victim narrative, falling within perhaps the ambit of patriarchal motherhood, we argue that it is not in two ways. First, by reiterating the impacts of patriarchal motherhood, it exposes the absolute sanctity of the romantic and idealised notions of motherhood and demonstrates the ironic and offensive expectations levied on the woman second, Urmila Pawar shows a spectrum where not all women can assert themselves equally. Several intersecting dimensions affect her agency and choices. Her responses are inscribed in her life experiences.

In "Kavach" (Armour), Indira's son Gaurya makes a valiant effort to save his mother from casteist assault. He sees at school how a teacher resists the implicit sexualised connotation of addressing women from a village, Choli, where they reside. She resists the discriminatory humour. He feels embarrassed by how her mother, too, is looked at by customers and onlookers while selling mangoes at the market. He is aggravated by customer misbehaviour. Initially, he despises his mother as she doesn't react and doesn't resist. But one day, in a particularly aggressive encounter, when inebriated customers say in a rather derogatory manner, "Mami, where are your mangoes from? Choli mangoes, yes? Yes, yes…Choli mangoes. Let me try with my own hands, yes..yes.." (Pawar 5), her mother reclaims the slur to change the connotation. She says, "Yes. yes. These are mangoes from a choli, but your mother's choli. If you are so interested in checking them out, go and find your

mother's choli" (p. 86).

O'Reilly claims that "Feminist historians agree that motherhood is primarily not a natural or biological function; rather, it is specifically and fundamentally a cultural practice that is continuously redesigned in response to changing economic and societal factors" (4). V. Geetha (2017) asserts, "Dalit women- always in the forefront of the rural economy, providers and workers in their families, and fighting to educate their children, and to affirm their self-respect in a violent and mean-spirited caste society- find that their attempts to lead a life of dignity and equality are met with rancour and violence"(n.p). In addition, Manuela Ciotti (2014, pp. 305-306) elaborates on the "multi-fold subjection" of Dalit women and argues that their subjectivities have no equal categories within Indian society emphasising the intersectional impetus that must be used while studying them. She argues that they are "quintessentially marginalised and disenfranchised — a subject almost exclusively constituted through multiple and simultaneous forms of subjugation, exploitation and violence". There are graded inequalities within the caste system in the Indian social order. Similarly, there are "graded patriarchies" within Hindu societies (Chakravarti 2018: 79). Since Brahmanical patriarchy includes "the multiform nature of patriarchy-cum-caste in India" (Arya and Rathore, 1960) that is perpetuated not only by Brahmins, Brahmin men or men (Rathore, 2020), 'Dalit manifestations of Brahmanical patriarchy' (Arya & Rathore, 2020:15) often explicate a range of discriminatory practices which necessarily make the body of the woman, a gendered and caste driven marginality which can be hypersexualised "and despite her 'untouchability' made available to both the dominant class male as well as Dalit male as sexual objects" revealing the "convenient non-isomorphism of the gender relations across caste lines constructed by the Brahmanical patriarchy" (Mukherjee, 2022). The customers in this context try to deface her to make her ostracised in the public sphere, thereby extending the impact of hegemonic masculinity not just from within the domestic sphere but in the public sphere. Sharma and Geetha (2021) iterate that "Dalit literature not only reveals the angst of being a Dalit in a caste-driven society, it also simultaneously registers a revolutionary discourse that challenges the hegemonic caste structures of the society (Geetha, 2011). Pawar, through Indira in this narrative, reclaims the Dalit woman's location and empowers her through a powerful articulation of language that is affirmative, powerful and strategic. The naming (Choli) that was being used to "other", vilify and objectify the woman now was being used with a reminder of veneration - it enters the man's world - his origin - his mother. That this is not a discrete instance is substantiated by a similar anecdote in Baburao Bagul's Mother. Fighting adversities and domestic abuse at the hands of her sick husband, her neighbours vitiated her son against her and expected her son to distance himself from her and make her feel ostracised when she had requested to shift to their village, lived a life marred with arduous labour.

Ambedkar "wanted women to be independent-minded and daring; hence, he recognised their autonomous subjectivity, however conflicted and limited. Nevertheless, and most significantly, from the everyday ambiguity and negotiations of Dalit consciousness, actions, events and unintended results sprang forth actively. All the everyday contradictions and convergences of power and powerlessness, of vulnerabilities, of truth and illusions, of what women did and did not control, helped them to improve their knowledge of the means to transform their lives" (Ambedkar 83). Pawar narrates the stories of such women as mothers who are negotiating "the complex process of the ideological use of motherhood" as a social, ideological apparatus which confines "women to the reproductive domain of 'home' and denies them access to the 'world'". Her mothers challenge the monolithic, hegemonic, colonial and patriarchal notion of motherhood in the anthology. Urmila Pawar's

analysis locates the agency of a woman within and beyond the biologically inscribed body, presenting the women at the intersection of asserting rights, demands for equilibrium and greater gender justice through their narrations of experience of mothering and motherhood. As a feminist and a Dalit writer, her narratives offer a glimpse into the experiences of women marked by the intersectional marginalities of gender, caste and class. Using Bagchi's assertion that 'motherhood' is a paradox as the concept oscillates between "ideological glorification of motherhood as Shakti (power) and the powerlessness faced by mothers in their everyday lived reality", the paper explores how Pawar locates the women as mothers negotiating "the complex process of the ideological use of motherhood" as a social, ideological apparatus which confines "women to the reproductive domain of 'home' and denying them access to the 'world'" (Bagchi 2).

Jyoti in Pain (Shalya), who had to rip her heart in two when she had to exchange her daughter with someone else's baby to please her son, can exhibit the strength necessary to resist society. Her unfathomable predicament at being separated from her daughter must have been made worse by the thought of her child's death. The desire to have sons is an aspect of patriarchy and is part and parcel of the oppression, devaluation and exploitation of Indian women," retorts Bagchi (Bagchi 91). The story highlights the pressure women experience by ripping a piece of themselves. This is quite sympathetic to her words, "In heart to" (Pawar 55). These lines illustrate the isolation that women experience even amidst a crowd. The intense desire for a son is very consistent with the nationalist movement's preference for sons. Sons were then expected to save the country and were seen as necessary. They are seen as the family's (and the country's) deliverers in many areas of India. According to Bagchi, the prevalence of female foeticides in many South Asian nations has entirely overturned and eliminated any potential celebration of motherhood. The Indian custom bestows upon married women the blessing Putravati Bhavaa or "May you be the bearer of son". This phrase actually symbolises the aim of the ongoing penetration of patriarchal traditions through the bearing and nurturing of sons, who alone may represent the country.

O'Reilly observes

After pregnancy ends with the birth of a eugenically desirable child, the duties of motherhood are described with the same nationalistic rhetoric. Children are configured as a national resource that needs to be carefully trained and preserved for the good of the nation-state. One metaphor commonly used equates children with "blank paper" (baizhi), saying: "If you write with black ink, they turn black; if you write with red ink, they turn red" ("Hopes for children's year" 1). While the caregiver, in particular the mother, is granted the responsibility of writing on the paper, texts assert the right of the nation-state to mandate what type of ink should be used, in order to create the final, ideal citizen. This connection between the household and the country is semantically exemplified by the term guojia, used to translate the idea of the modern nation and literally meaning "nation-family" (48).

In this predicament, the control on the woman's pregnancy, motherhood and reproductive choices are often subsumed under "paternalistic control over women's reproductive capacities." (O'Reilly, — p. 48). The patriarchal motherhood subsumes the woman's and mother's subjectivities - the mother without social, cultural and economic support fails to assert her agency. In a different context, Courtenay Hall observes that mothers "are born with a built-in set of capacities, dispositions, and desires to nurture children. . . and that this] engagement of love and instinct is utterly distant from the world of paid work [. . .]" (337). Pawar's assertion here flips the expected roles of a mother, showing the underlying paradox that the mother has to be a mother,

but only that of a son who is connected with the nation-state and its progress. Jyoti shows an abdication of maternal authority (Ruddick), substantiating that she is indeed subsumed under patriarchal motherhood and, therefore, inauthentic mothering.

IV. CONCLUSION

Paik observes that "Dalit women's modern and strategic subjectivity and agential capacities emerged out of the exigencies of the immense, discontinuous and shifting political situation, and from their complex everyday negotiation with Dalit men's ambivalences and civilisational and cultural anxieties as well as with elite feminism's discourse and power of exclusions, erasures and repressions" (65). Motherwit presents a certain narrative collation of these strategic subjectivities and agential capacities. It introduces underrepresented voices to the mainstream with a remarkable collection of tales from one of India's most renowned Dalit authors, Urmila Pawar. Another stereotype—that of the soft-spoken female writer—is challenged by her loud, occasionally obscene, and consistently hard-hitting vocabulary. The wit, agency, and resilience that women possess and demonstrate when presented with challenging circumstances are alluded to in Pawar's chosen short stories. Paik notes that "Phule and Ambedkar appropriated forces of modern power and sought to arrange and rearrange social and political conditions (both discursive and non-discursive) so as to oblige Dalit women to reform their subjectivities, make choices within constraints and transform themselves for sudhaaranaa (improvement). In the process, the micro-technologies of governmentality and power polished, disciplined and 'civilised' Dalit women while simultaneously restricting them" (66). Urmila Pawar's stories and their narration resonate with this observation. Within the constraints of their environment, her characters struggle against everyday discrimination. Still, they assert their agency in most cases. Phule and Ambedkar sought to break the hegemonic structures for actual parity and equity for women, unlike other 20th-century feminists who seemed to be accommodative of limited public participation and agency (Paik). Agency, as Saba Mahmood asserts, is "not simply a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as the capacity of action that specific relations of subordination create and enable' (Mahmood, 2005, p. 18). They challenge the binaries in Dalit scholarship on women's agencies. They are moving beyond the conventional tropes of the Dalit woman as either 'labouring poor'/ 'unfortunate and lowly' (Rao, 2003) or those who have 'smash(ed) the prisons' (Omvedt). They contest the binaries of home and the world, the private and the public, the personal and the political. In addition, she highlights the interconnections between caste, class, and gender and how they cumulatively affect women's lives. She also highlights the isolation that results from these axes of distinction. The stories that are in a home highlight that "the imagination of family with its affective and social and political relations, making the home a political space and reforming women and gender was critical to the discourse of Dalit emancipation" (Paik 72). The protagonists are resilient in the face of caste oppression, strong in defying oppressive regimes, defiant when insulted, and determined when defending their interests. Dalit women's subjectivities, hence, are contingent upon everyday material and social realities. The point that "everyday negotiation involving the dialectic of appropriation and subversion operated at every moment in the social, cultural, educational and political realms" which made them constantly participate in a "process of making micro transformations through everyday negotiations" provides a fortification to Pawar's mothers and her narrative choices. According to Veena Deo, "Reading Urmila Pawar's stories not only provides multifaceted appreciation and understanding of Dalit women's lives in different contexts, she clearly provides a very nuanced and sophisticated articulation of an emergent voice that moves through a variety of discourses and

enriches Marathi literature as a whole." (Pawar xli) In the tapestry of voicelessness in a rather noisy world – encapsulating what Nayar calls 'traumatic materialism' (Nayar), she brings forth "The idea of maternal writing." Extending Emily Jeremiah's assertion that maternal writing interrupts and "upsets other [. . .] oppositions, such as public/private and mind/body [; . . . as well it] entails a publicizing of maternal experience, [. . .] subverts the traditional notion of the mother as an instinctual, purely corporeal being [and] challenge[s] dominant ideals of individuality and autonomy" (p. 7). Maternal writing therefore, breaks the normativity of mothering as silent. Mothering, therefore, as maternal writing can be a "strategy of subversion," of patriarchal and hegemonic ideas of motherhood and articulation. (10–11). Pawar's mothers write, assert and present a spectrum that cannot be subsumed under simplistic and binary notions of motherhood; instead, she evokes mothering as a possible response resonating with Rich and O'Reilly's call for counter-hegemonic discourses on motherhood without failing to acknowledge stories of inauthentic mothering sympathetically to bring forth the symbolic relationship between the patriarchal structures and limits of agencies of mothers. In this way her stories do not celebrate, romanticise or present utopian notions of motherhood; they are neither dehumanised nor idealised. Extending literary contributions such as Urmila Pawar, Baby Halder, and Sujatha Gidla, Bama, Baburao Bagul and their writing on mothers, it provides an avenue for motherhood studies to delve deeper into the social and material conditions of motherhood, especially from the South Asian perspective which has not contributed to the scholarship on motherhood adequately.

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