

GENDER PERSPECTIVES IN DALIT LITERATURE:**A STUDY OF DAYA PAWAR'S BALUTA****Lavanya S.**

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18786495>**ABSTRACT:**

Dalit literature has emerged as a powerful literary and socio-political movement that challenges caste-based hierarchies by foregrounding the lived experiences of historically marginalized communities. Among the various literary forms adopted by Dalit writers, autobiography occupies a central position as it enables self-representation, resistance, and the articulation of social realities. Daya Pawar's *Baluta* (1978), one of the earliest Dalit autobiographies in Marathi, is widely regarded as a foundational text in Dalit literary studies. While the autobiography has been extensively analysed as a narrative of caste oppression and identity formation, its gender dimensions have received relatively limited scholarly attention. This paper argues that *Baluta* also demands a sustained gender-based analysis. Using the theoretical frameworks of intersectionality and Dalit feminist criticism, the study examines how caste and patriarchy intersect in shaping the lives of Dalit women represented in the text. Although the narrative voice remains male-centred, *Baluta* implicitly reveals women's labour, domestic responsibilities, emotional endurance, and social vulnerability. The paper also explores constructions of Dalit masculinity and the functioning of patriarchy within oppressed communities. It concludes that a gender-sensitive reading of *Baluta* enriches Dalit literary criticism and highlights the necessity of integrating feminist perspectives into the study of male-authored Dalit texts.

KEYWORDS:

Dalit Literature, Gender Perspective, Intersectionality, Dalit Women, Caste and Patriarchy, Dalit Autobiography.

Introduction

Dalit literature represents a decisive intervention in Indian literary discourse by articulating voices historically silenced by the caste system. Rooted in social protest and political consciousness, Dalit writing rejects the aesthetic detachment of mainstream literature and instead prioritizes lived experience as its primary source of authenticity. The emergence of Dalit literature in regional languages, particularly Marathi, Kannada, Tamil, and Hindi, reflects a collective attempt to challenge Brahmanical dominance and assert Dalit identity.

Autobiography has emerged as one of the most influential genres within Dalit literature. Unlike fictional narratives, Dalit autobiographies claim moral authority through lived experience and expose the everyday realities of caste discrimination, poverty, humiliation, and resistance. Daya Pawar's *Baluta*, published in 1978, is widely recognized as a pioneering Dalit autobiography that paved the way for later works by writers such as Sharan Kumar Limbale and Omprakash Valmiki.

Critical engagement with *Baluta* has largely focused on caste oppression, social exclusion, and political awakening. However, caste-centred readings alone fail to account for the gendered dimensions of oppression embedded within the text. Dalit women experience marginalization not only as members of an oppressed caste but also as women within patriarchal social structures. This paper argues that a gender perspective is essential to fully understand the social world represented in *Baluta*. By examining the intersection of caste and gender, this study seeks to uncover the silenced experiences of Dalit women and interrogate patriarchal practices within oppressed communities.

Dalit Literature and Gender: A Theoretical Framework

Dalit literature cannot be understood as a homogeneous body of writing because experiences within Dalit communities vary according to gender, class, region, and education. Dalit feminist

scholars have emphasized that Dalit women face multiple and overlapping forms of oppression. They are subjected to caste-based discrimination by upper-caste society and patriarchal control within their own communities. As Sharmila Rege argues, mainstream feminist discourse often ignores caste, while male-centred Dalit narratives frequently marginalize women's voices.

The concept of intersectionality provides a useful framework for analysing gender in Dalit literature. Intersectionality explains how different forms of oppression—such as caste, gender, class, and sexuality—interact to produce unique experiences of marginalization. For Dalit women, caste oppression intensifies gender inequality, making their social position distinct from both upper-caste women and Dalit men.

Gender perspectives in Dalit literature involve examining representations of women, analysing domestic and social power relations, and interrogating constructions of masculinity. While Dalit women writers explicitly foreground these issues, male-authored texts like *Baluta* require feminist reinterpretation to uncover implicit gender dynamics. Such readings do not diminish the political significance of these texts but rather expand their critical scope.

Overview of *Baluta*: Caste, Memory, and Identity

The term “*Baluta*” refers to the traditional system under which Dalits were compensated with leftover food or goods for their services to upper-caste communities. The title itself symbolizes inherited humiliation, economic dependency, and structural exploitation. *Baluta* narrates Pawar's life from childhood to adulthood, documenting experiences of poverty, hunger, educational struggle, and social exclusion.

The autobiography vividly portrays untouchability as a lived reality rather than an abstract concept. Pawar recounts incidents of exclusion from schools, public spaces, and employment opportunities.

His narrative voice is marked by anger, irony, and a refusal to sanitize suffering. Through memory and personal testimony, Baluta exposes the psychological trauma inflicted by caste discrimination.

While the primary focus of Baluta is the author's struggle against caste oppression, women appear throughout the narrative as mothers, wives, sisters, and labourers. Their presence, though often marginal, provides important insights into the gendered dimensions of Dalit life. A gender-oriented reading brings these marginalized experiences into critical focus.

Representation of Dalit Women in Baluta

Dalit women in Baluta are portrayed primarily as figures of endurance and survival. Pawar's mother emerges as a central figure who shoulders the responsibility of sustaining the family under conditions of extreme poverty. She represents the emotional and economic backbone of the household, performing physically demanding labour while enduring social humiliation and insecurity.

Women in the text are shown engaging in multiple forms of labour-domestic work, wage labour, and community service-often without recognition or autonomy. Their labour is normalized as duty rather than acknowledged as contribution. This invisibility reflects patriarchal structures that devalue women's work, even within marginalized communities.

Although women are integral to the survival of Dalit families, their voices remain largely unheard. Their experiences are mediated through the male narrator, which limits their agency within the text. This narrative silence itself becomes a significant marker of gender inequality and invites feminist critique.

Double Marginalization and Gendered Vulnerability

Dalit women in Baluta experience double marginalization: oppression by upper-caste society and subordination within patriarchal family structures. Their vulnerability is intensified by poverty, illiteracy, and lack of access to social mobility. The

autobiography indirectly reveals how women's bodies and labour are subject to surveillance, regulation, and moral judgement.

Gendered vulnerability is evident in the limited choices available to women and the expectations placed upon them to endure suffering silently. Unlike men, whose caste oppression is often articulated publicly, women's struggles remain confined to domestic spaces. This confinement reinforces their marginal status and perpetuates cycles of dependency.

The absence of women's direct narratives in Baluta highlights the limitations of male-authored Dalit autobiographies. However, this absence also underscores the importance of feminist reinterpretation in recovering suppressed gendered experiences.

Patriarchy and Domestic Space

Baluta reveals that patriarchy continues to operate within oppressed communities, shaping domestic relationships and gender roles. Despite shared experiences of caste discrimination, men often occupy positions of authority within the family. Domestic space becomes a site where patriarchal norms are reinforced and women's obedience is expected.

Women are portrayed as caregivers and emotional anchors, while men assume decision-making roles. This division of labour reflects broader societal norms and demonstrates how patriarchy coexists with caste oppression. The text thus complicates simplistic narratives that portray Dalit communities solely as victims of external oppression.

Masculinity, Caste Trauma, and Gender Relations

The autobiography provides insight into the construction of Dalit masculinity shaped by caste humiliation, poverty, and social exclusion. Repeated experiences of rejection and degradation produce frustration, anger, and emotional instability among men. These emotions sometimes manifest as aggression or withdrawal within domestic relationships.

Pawar does not romanticize Dalit masculinity; instead, he presents men as flawed individuals shaped by structural inequality. This honest portrayal allows readers to examine how caste trauma intersects with patriarchal behaviour, often at the expense of women. The text thus reveals the complex relationship between oppression and power within marginalized communities.

Intersectionality: Caste and Gender

An intersectional reading of Baluta demonstrates that caste and gender are inseparable in shaping social experience. Dalit women's oppression cannot be understood solely in terms of caste or gender; it emerges from the interaction of both. Restricted mobility, economic dependence, and social invisibility characterize women's lives and highlight the layered nature of oppression.

This perspective challenges monolithic representations of Dalit experience and calls for inclusive critical approaches that recognize gender differences within marginalized communities. Intersectionality also emphasizes the need to examine internal hierarchies alongside external structures of domination.

Limitations of Male-Centred Narratives

While Baluta is a pioneering Dalit text, its male-centred narration limits the articulation of women's perspectives. The absence of women's direct voices reflects broader patterns of exclusion within literary and political discourse. However, this limitation does not diminish the value of the text; rather, it highlights the necessity of Dalit feminist engagement with male-authored narratives.

Reading Baluta alongside Dalit women's autobiographies such as Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan* enables a more comprehensive understanding of Dalit realities. Such comparative readings reveal differences in emphasis, voice, and perspective, enriching Dalit literary criticism.

Critical Implications for Dalit Literary Studies

A gender-sensitive reading of Baluta has broader implications for Dalit literary studies. It challenges the dominance of male narratives and calls for inclusive critical frameworks that account for gendered experiences. Incorporating feminist perspectives strengthens the political and ethical dimensions of Dalit literature by ensuring that marginalized voices within marginalized communities are not overlooked.

This approach also encourages scholars to re-evaluate canonical Dalit texts and to recognize the diversity of experiences they represent. Gender analysis thus becomes an essential component of socially responsible literary criticism.

Conclusion

A sustained gender-based analysis of Daya Pawar's Baluta reveals dimensions of oppression that remain understated in caste-centric interpretations. While the autobiography foregrounds the author's struggle against caste discrimination, it also implicitly documents the marginalized position of Dalit women within both public and private spheres. The text exposes how caste and patriarchy intersect to shape everyday life, social relationships, and power structures.

Incorporating gender perspectives into the study of Baluta enriches Dalit literary criticism and challenges the dominance of male-authored narratives. Such readings underscore the importance of Dalit feminist interventions and contribute to a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of Dalit literature. Ultimately, a gender-sensitive approach enables a deeper engagement with questions of justice, representation, and resistance in Indian literary studies.

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