

Performative Insurgencies at the Margins: Constructions of Alternative Histories through Folk Wisdom among Dalit Women

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One of the central concerns of Dalit feminism is to question the failure of the mainstream women's movement to address the specificity of Dalit women's oppression. On the other hand, the Dalit movement at its inception was largely masculine and did not adequately represent the female perspective. Additionally, it has been criticized by Dalit feminists for its uncritical acceptance of Dalit patriarchy. Marathi poet, Pradnya Lokhande asks why Dalit scholarship, despite its revolutionary nature, has not turned its insurgent attention to the threats posed by its internal patriarchal structure. She asks why anyone challenging dalit patriarchy from within the community is branded a traitor to the Dalit movement. While Dalit women's experiences are shaped by both parameters of caste and gender, the former is prioritized, almost exclusively in Dalit scholarship and the latter in feminist scholarship. The need to underscore a comprehensive understanding of intersectionality to address how multiple social parameters affect the experiences of women who lie at the intersections of gender, caste and class is Dalit feminism's main concern. This is a concern that Dalit feminism shares in common with Black feminism. Black feminism too, routinely challenges the traditional idea that women of the community should stand by their "Black bothers" even if they are agents of an oppressive Black patriarchal rule.

As mentioned, among both Dalit and African-American women, gender identity is subordinated to caste and racial identities, respectively. A natural consequence of this cultural practice is a manifest silencing of voices raised against Dalit and Black patriarchy from within the folds of their own community. Black and Dalit women often try to contain and control other women in their community within 'safe spaces' that are respectable and responsible and foster better representation. In the absence of spaces that allow for an unhindered expression of protest against Dalit/Black as well as Brahminical/White patriarchy and because of the late arrival of education (hence the absence of early written narratives), women took to oral and participatory forms of self-expression. Among both African-Americans and Dalits, women articulated their oppression, thoughts and desires and gave voice to their sexuality through orality, often verging on what is supposedly 'obscene' in 'polite societies'. These subtle acts of insurgencies often came through oral transmission of remembered history and memories. They were not, however, always historically accurate because memories are inherently subjective and given to gaps, flaws, inconsistencies and handed-down superstitions. Such qualities hold their own significance, seeing as they tell a great deal about the emotional, political and psychosocial conditions of women at particular moments in history. These cultural forms often relied on collective expression through community participation and took the form of songs, superstitions, gossip and folk wisdom- the cultural forms that are specifically feminine

and are often discredited and dismissed as sentimental or irrational. Such cultural forms as expressions of a community that has historically been relegated to the realms of silence and invisibilization, correspond to the French feminist idea of “écriture feminism” or Kristeva’s “anti-phallic” modes of writing. It departs from the masculine writing tradition of a linear, uniform, coherent narrative in favour of inconsistency, instability and fragmentation of self and the narrative, to suggest the plurality of the Dalit female experience. Dalit feminism is in line with the third wave of feminism that emerged in the 1990s. It is marked by a rejection of universalism coupled with an emphasis on acknowledgement and celebration of difference. The idea of women as fluid, dynamic, plural and fragmented subjects emerged and this was reflected in the effort to shift the focus of the movement from centre to the margins.

Since the emphasis was on collective rather than personal, these cultural forms not only allowed Dalit women to form a community of sister women, but also offered a space to act out insurgencies against Dalit as well as Brahminical patriarchy. The songs they sung, whether hummed on daily as they labored in the fields or a part of ordered rituals like weddings, funerals or religious pilgrimages like ‘lavani’ or ‘tamasha’, or performed like the Erpula women of the Baidla caste did professionally, were performances that women participated in, whether collectively or as individuals. In effect, they were acting out what Patricia Hill Collins borrows from anthropologist James C. Scott to call, “infrapolitics”, to explain “the hidden behaviours of everyday resistance”. (Collins 49) This paper shall analyze through close readings, the nature of Dalit women everyday insurgencies. To underscore the specific nature of everyday Dalit feminism, the first part of the paper shall deal with accounts of Dalit “Viranganas”, where they are spoken for. In contrast, the second part of the paper shall focus on Dalit women’s voices as told by themselves with a focus on stories from Urmila Pawar’s *Motherwit*.

Charu Gupta notes that the Dalit literature of the 1857 mutiny presents the revolt as it played out in the collective memory of the community. It combines memories, myths and remembered history. Folk tales and songs, oral accounts and remembered legends form its foundation. But since the emphasis was on remembered history rather than accurately documented historical facts, they were never canonical. Besides, they gained a reputation for being sentimental, sensational, exaggerated, unintellectual and mimetic and hence of inferior literary quality. These written accounts of oral history were mass produced in pamphlets by Dalit publishers and sold in places where the community came together like fairs and rallies. These alternative accounts were clearly written to visibilize the struggles of marginalized communities that are routinely erased, and challenge the hegemony of canonical history. A number of historians like Tara Chand, Thomas R. Metcalf, S.B Chaudhuri and R.C Mazumdar maintain that the revolt of 1857 was primarily an elite one. It was an upper-caste and upper-class uprising by the assumed “natural leaders” of a society segregated along caste and class lines to “restore a pre-British social order.” In the accounts of alternative Dalit histories, sometimes exaggerated and at others, verified by other sources, Dalits were the main heroes of the struggle. The Dalit effort to place those on the margins, on the main map of the freedom struggle is poignantly captured in poet Bihari Lal Hari’s words, translated by Gupta:

“nai, dhobi, kurmi, kachchi/bharbhuje bhaat kumhaar lare. Lare khak rub mochi dhanak/
sab daliton ke parivar lare.

(Barbers, washermen, kurmis, gardeners, grain-parchers, bards and potters fought.
Cobblers rolling in dust and cotton-carders fought. All dalit families fought)” (Gupta 3)

Gupta notes that women heroes in the Dalit literature of the revolt far outnumber the men. In her essay, she makes mentions of Jhalkari Bai (of caste Kori), Asha Devi (of Gurjari caste), Avanti Bai (of Lodhi caste), Mahabiri Devi (of Bhangi caste) and Uda Devi (of Pasi caste) amongst others who have been hailed as 'Viranganas': icons of Dalit pride and bravery. Several of these female heroes have been mentioned in works of British historians. Udi Devi of Pasi caste finds a mention in W. Gordon-Alexander's account, who calls her an "Amazon negress". Like Uda Devi, Jhalkari Bai's bravery is celebrated across a number of Dalit castes as an icon of Dalit pride. Jhalkari Bai, who, as the story goes, was the friend and accomplice of Rani Lakshmbai, also has a number of poems, plays, myths and legends written about her. One such orally transmitted poem is one that appropriates the writing style of a poem by Subhadrakumari on Rani Lakshmi Bai. In what is an obvious reminder of the very popular "Khub ladi mardani who toh Jhansi wali rani thi", the rewritten poem on Jhalkari Bai goes:

"khub lari jhalkari tu tau, teri ek jawani thi. dur firangi ko karne mein, veeron mein mardani thi." (Gupta 5)

(You fought bravely like a man to overthrow the foreign rule)

Since these songs and poems were documented not in the written tradition but orally, constant improvisations were performed on them as they were handed down from one generation to the next. This tradition has much in common with the Black musical tradition of jazz which also thrives on unending improvisations where apart from the musician/cultural producer, the audiences add to the narrative before passing it on to posterity. As another way of unsettling the hegemonic history, stories constructed around the 'Viranganas' were often ones where the attack on established upper-caste idols were not covert. To cite an instance, Jhalkari Bai, in popular oral discourse, was said to be the actual hero of the revolt against the British, not Lakshmbai. One such story asserts that Lakshmbai had fled to Nepal and lived there until the age of eighty leaving Jhalkari Bai to die the death of a martyr. In another, Lakshmbai is shown as passive, meek and pliable whom Jhalkari Bai suspected would surrender to the British from fear of war. Such subversive narratives, sometimes overt and at others more subtle, were weaponized to perform insurgencies and it was through folk culture that such insurgencies were performed and transmitted.

The 'Viranganas' were however, conceived as models of sexual purity. They did not reflect the lived realities of Dalit women, nor are they representatives of the women of the community. Viranganas exemplified the ideal Dalit woman, exalted as heroes and goddesses that women of the community were expected to aspire to. Time and again, attention is drawn to their 'mardani' or their masculinity. Their choice of attire, too, is decidedly masculine to negate negative stereotypes about Dalit female hypersexuality. Interesting to note here is the fact that most of these accounts were the works of male authors. While images of the 'Viranganas' are encouraging and subvert negative stereotypes about Dalit women as either vamps or victims, they are images controlled by men. The respectability politics of these accounts is painfully patriarchal, working insidiously to promote an idea of a morally pious Dalit womanhood. This, far from giving representation to the lived realities of the women of the community, served only to pit them against the patriarchal ideal. Such accounts, though transformative in some sense, necessitate closer readings of texts where Dalit women speak for themselves and are not spoken for. Urmila Pawar's *Motherwit*, a text that reflects with an impressive honesty, the

psycho-social condition of Dalit womanhood in stories about Dalit women from all walks of life, is an instance of such a text where the women speak and are not spoken for.

Urmila Pawar in the introduction to her collection of short stories, *Motherwit*, calls attention to the naming of her novel, a theme that runs through the lengths of most texts written by Dalit women. 'Motherwit' is a straightforward combination of two words, 'mother' and 'wit'. 'Motherwit' is in other words, the wisdom of the women of the community. Following Ambedkar's exhortation to "educate, agitate and organize" as tools of insurgency, education has come to be highly valued and prioritized among Dalits. *Motherwit* presents that which the modern Dalit preoccupation with formal education often forgets to acknowledge or dismisses as outdated and irrational: folk wisdom. *Motherwit* foregrounds, among other aspects of the Dalit experience, the importance of "local knowledges". This knowledge is the knowledge of experience. What follows is a strong emphasis on orality in Pawar's work because the knowledge of experience is handed down to posterity through oral transmission. In Pawar's own words: "...education and literacy for Dalit communities have multiple dimensions and cultural literacies require not merely formal education but keen critical perceptions as well as strong confidence in local knowledges developed and honed through the everyday experience of survival among dalit men and women." (Pawar xvii) Pawar's short stories in the collection do not deal with rural women alone. The experiences of the women in the collection are richly diverse, serving not just to disrupt the homogenization of all Dalit women's experiences as universal, but also to explore how and in what ways 'motherwit' figures in the lives of these women.

"Dhamma Chakra" in the same collection opens with Vikas's grandfather's death and his grandmother, Sita Mai's unbent resolve to fulfil her late husband's wish: to bury him. The problem arises when the village elders oppose her decision. Making a case for modernity as opposed to Sita Mai's traditional ideas, they argue that when they converted to Buddhism, they promised to give up old rituals. In accordance with what they consider more "modern" and "progressive" ways of thinking, they decide to burn rather than bury the body. The story progresses through the numerous accounts of Sita Mai's supposed oddities, recounted by the men to dismiss her as an irrational old woman whose opinions are of no consequence. Paradoxically, to an informed reader, the men establish themselves as rigidly patriarchal instead. Dismissing the knowledge women garner from their lived experiences, they make the reader conscious of the dangers of a blind reliance on formal education without an unbiased judgement of either modern or traditional modes of thinking. The village head levels attacks on Sita Mai's intelligence because she lacks formal education prompting the reader to question if intelligence can be measured through education alone. He establishes her demands as illogical, but bases such a judgement not on the validity of the claims she makes, but on her gender and her ignorance of modern education, reforms and laws: "Now listen up. You are telling me what the old woman is saying. But what kind of education does she have? What size is her brain anyway?" (Pawar 229) It is revealed in the course of their conversation that Sita Mai did not stand for any disrespect or 'dirty jokes' that belittled women. One of the village elders, Bairu Anna had on a previous occasion, cracked an inappropriate joke about her for which he was made to apologize in public: "You could never get away with ugly jokes on women in her presence. She always pushed men to apologize for their words. Everyone there today knew some such episode, but thought it best to swallow his embarrassing memories in silence." (Pawar 230)

Sita Mai, although unschooled, did not take disrespect sitting down. Fiercely self-assertive, she is not only the repository of mother-wit but also shows recognition, awareness and respect for the labour of the women of the village. Another village elder recounts a second incident when Sita Mai made a case for keeping certain traditions alive. When it was decided that the village would give up older rituals like sifting baskets of several kinds during funerals, it was Sita Mai who argued strongly for keeping the tradition of sifting baskets alive: "...at the time, Roopaji's mother said, the baskets are our trade and our art. We sell these for a few paise and light the cooking fires from that income. If we lose that, is the village going to feed us?" (Pawar 231) Sita Mai's words reveal a deep recognition of the value of Dalit women's labour. Gopal Guru points out that physical labour, though traditionally considered degrading since it equates humans with animals (who were made to labour), was for Dalit women, the basis of their "intellectual imagination." The condition of labouring Dalit women is agonizing, the labour itself is exhausting and morally demeaning, but something that they cannot extricate themselves from. Since unschooled, labouring Dalit women cannot access Ambedkar through education, they do so through the art forms they have developed through their labour. It is their 'experience' and not readings of Ambedkar that made them resonate with "Ambedkar's thought." Churning lemonade from the lemons life threw at them, dalit women have turned their long, arduous hours of back-breaking labour into opportunities to develop folk poetry and art of several kinds. In Bihar, they developed 'Godna' painting and in Maharashtra, a genre of folk poetry called 'ovie' is the product of their collective harvesting. Since the nature of this labour is collective, it has made their cultural production a participatory activity. Labouring collectively has allowed them to form a close community of women. This, in turn, has allowed them to be vocal in criticizing dalit patriarchy. Urmila Pawar herself, in her autobiography *The Weave of my Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoir*, has compared her own intellectual pursuit of writing to her mother's physical labour of weaving baskets to make ends meet. In using the image of a cane basket to explain how stories, lives and events are "woven together in a narrative that gradually reveals different aspects of the everyday life of Dalits", she establishes not just labouring Dalit woman as an intellectual subject, but also emphasizes the folk cultural and oral quality of her own work. Sita Mai's awareness of the Dalit labouring body wins her the admiration of the local schoolteacher, Dinkar. His presence though brief, is crucial. So long a detached observer, Dinkar reminds the crowd that Sita Mai's baskets are greatly valued in Mumbai and are worth being displayed in exhibitions. Dinkar briefly talks about meeting another woman named Indu in Mumbai who was in awe of Sita Mai's baskets. Indu's love for Sita Mai's baskets is perhaps how as a modern woman, she accesses the traditional folk-wisdom of mothers and grandmothers. It is in moments like these that Pawar's feminist ingenuity is most poignant. Dinkar is perhaps a better representation of a more informed modernity. His acknowledgement of the old woman's wisdom unsettles much of the village elders' claims: all modern ideas are progressive and all that is traditional is illogical and no longer of relevance. Dinkar's words fall on deaf ears as the village elders, concerned only with a superficial understanding of Ambedkarite modernism, sees this as an opportunity to discriminate against other lower Dalit castes. Not recognizing the intellectual basis or the collective spirit of Dalit women's labour, the elders roared: "That old woman has turned us into nothing but a burud caste." (Pawar 233) Sita Mai's wisdom and the support she gains from the most formally educated person in the room is so threatening that they spoke

out in anger: "Are we all bangle wearing eunuchs to listen to this woman?" (Pawar 233) The idea of giving a woman a deciding voice or acknowledging her 'mother-wit' is so revolting to the village elders, that they find it emasculating. Pawar uses Sita Mai's figure to demonstrate how women's traditional wisdom is not always in alliance with patriarchy. They are often radically subversive and this subversion is one that unsettles and challenges the usually unshaken authority of patriarchy from the inside. Such acts are also instances of what Patricia Hill Collins calls "infrapolitics" or everyday acts of resistance. Traditional feminine wisdom might not appear feminist in an obvious way, but they often work more discreetly, employing the tools at their disposal to threaten patriarchy at home.

Fearing the corpse might start to rot as the meeting to decide the fate of her husband's last rites goes on for hours, she hauls the body to the burial ground herself. Helping her, again, are women and children of the community, educated by her mother-wit. In what is the most striking scene, the old woman explains the reason for her determined effort to bury her husband's body:

...have you seen what has happened to the old burial grounds lately? Since no one goes there, the farm next to it has inched its way half into this land...All you men should know, when we frequented the old burial grounds, all the rice paddies adjacent to it together produced ten or twelve *khandi* rice. Now even when we dump all the manure to fertilize the earth, we do not get a single grain over one or one -and-a-quarter *khandi*. (Pawar 235)

Sita Mai's words show that her comprehensive understanding of the environment did not require formal education. The mother-wit that has been handed down over generations and her own lived experience is what enlightens her. Sita Mai's rationale is clearly not prejudiced against modernity, just as it is not informed by a blind adherence to unchanging traditionality. It is not to hold on to the old ways and reject the new. It is against a blind acceptance of the new and rejection of the old without a proper understanding of either. The old might not be entirely unscientific just as the new might not be completely scientific. Sita Mai's rational and very scientifically backed argument is countered with dismissive remarks like: "She is a woman; why are you even talking to her?" (Pawar 236) The reaction of the men to Sita Mai's ideas are an accurate representation of how folk wisdom is received. They are dismissed as nonsensical arguments of irrational female minds. While Sita Mai's pleas fall on deaf ears and the family finally gives in to the elder's decision when faced with the threat of social ostracization, the logic of her argument fell with full force on her grandson. As Vikas comes to make sense of how the environment operates in a chain, one process setting off the next, the story too comes to a full circle. It had started with Vikas not being able to grasp his teacher monotone voice explaining biology and it ends with him identifying in his grandmother, an image of his teacher, their mouth moving in a similar way to explain the logic of "organisms...life cycles...food pyramids, food chains..." He connects the teacher's wisdom to his grandmother's, who lacks formal knowledge but makes up for it with her experience and mother-wit.

A similar theme is taken up in *Kavach* (translated as 'Armor'). This story is at once a direct attack on dalit patriarchy and an acknowledgement of the unacknowledged ways Dalit women act out their feminisms on a day-to-day basis. The story starts and ends with the idea of how the language of everyday is masculine, coded in a way where it sexualizes women. But this coded language is so normalized that calling it out is often

viewed as an overreaction. Language, in some sense, contributes to and becomes a tool of casual sexism, loaded as it is with sexual innuendos that have come to be normalized with time. At school, the female teacher Bai's admonishment of a male teacher, Guruji, for his use of a sexually suggestive remark, earns her the protagonist, Gaurya's admiration. Guruji had asked Bai, supposedly innocently, if her mangoes are bigger than his. Guruji's question is further problematized by the social context; the story is set in a village named 'Choligaon', named after the Savarna epic, Ramayana (after Sita's Choli that as the legend goes, she wanted to make from the hide of the golden deer that she wanted Ram to kill). Choli, which is Hindi for blouse, combined with the fact that the village was known for its mangoes were thereafter carefully coded as metaphors and puns to sexualize the women of the village. The origin of the name had long been forgotten and the present meaning as a double entendre was deployed to hypersexualize the women of the village. This is one of the many ways language is mobilized as a tool of sexual threat, but one that is clever enough to not be proven guilty on account of the slippery nature of metaphors, and by extension, of language itself. Guruji's remark not only makes a newly aware Gaurya conscious of the sexually coded nature of everyday language but also makes him embarrassed on his mother's behalf. When Bai's protests are met with dismissive laughter, Guruji not only calls upon another male teacher to gang up on Bai, but also, in an act even more inappropriate, sexualizes Gaurya's mother, a mango seller. To explain his behaviour, he calls upon Gaurya to establish the coded language as so normalized that its blatant sexism is almost invisible. To Gaurya's embarrassment and Bai's fury, he says: "Bai, everyone talks that way around here... When women from this town go to sell mangoes in the market that's what everyone says, 'How much for your Choli's mangoes'" (Pawar 74)

Gaurya's admiration of Bai's direct confrontation which he attributes to her education is immediately contrasted with the disgust he feels at his mother's unsophistication and what he assumes, passiveness. Following the rude shock of the adult world interrupting his childish one and having been teased by his friends about his mother, he resolves not to let his mother sell mangoes anymore. He not only becomes the spokesperson for respectability politics but also assumes the voyeuristic male gaze that had previously jarred him into adulthood. Gaurya's mother Indira is the breadwinner of her family of three; her husband is an idle, abusive drunkard. It is on Indira's labouring body that the family depends for their sustenance and so she pays no heed to her son's empty commands. Newly aware of his mother's social sexualization, Gaurya turns Indira's labouring body to one that is debased, one that accepts the imposed ill-repute instead of calling it out as his teacher had done. Indira's hypersexualization is further associated with the fact her body is both Dalit and labouring, a body that has historically been hypersexualized. As poet Hira Bansode notes, the strict rules of sexual chastity that were imposed on upper caste women becomes relaxed as it travels down the social hierarchy. What followed was the notion of the Dalit female body as both laboring and sexually polluted. Mantra Roy too, in comparing Dalit women with black slave women's sexual exploitation, notes that similar to slave women, Dalit women's bodies are highly sexualized, even in their own communities and by mainstream upper-class standards. As with black women, this forms the basis for their sexual exploitation. As in Dharma Chakra, Pawar in *Kavach* too, throws light on the Dalit female labouring body and the space collective labour offers women to form their own community. As the women make their way to the market through the fields, Pawar describes scenes of them bonding, sharing their joys and sorrows with each other. Gaurya, whose mind is weighed down

by the memory of jeers and taunts of his classmates, notices none of this. Even as he is filled with embarrassment and disgust for his mother and her friends, he assumes the gaze that had reduced the women to debased sexual objects: "He could see their saris were rags and their buttocks bounced as they walked. Their backs were exposed through their torn *cholis* and it was obvious you could see their breasts bouncing up and down as they walked too." (Pawar 77)

He compares his mother to another object- soggy cooked greens, not realizing that the comparison is not unlike the one that had sparked his initial discomfort. He has so internalized his mother's imposed hypersexualization that he resents the idea of the neighboring village being renamed Indira Nagar. As they make their way to the market to sell mangoes, Gaurya gradually becomes the repository of patriarchal values. Even though he is a child, his instinct is to 'protect' his mother from the lecherous eyes around her. His fear of his mother's sexualization is so intense that he constantly tries to drive away customers, lest they sexualize his mother. He even tells off a couple of women sellers from the fish market who come to buy mangoes from Indira. He becomes so fixated with the sexual connotation of the words 'choli' and 'mangoes' that he attaches sexual intent on them whether they were actually meant by the buyers in that sense or not. Gaurya's injunction to his mother and her friends to give up using the words 'choli' and 'mangoes' altogether sounds not unlike Bell Hooks' idea of using celibacy as a tool to combat Black women's hypersexualization. His attempts at policing his mother's speech is met with reprimands from her mother and he has no option but to hush up. As the story nears end, the unsuspecting reader is met with an unexpected climax. Two drunk men attempting to harass Indira attacks her with the same coded words Gaurya was teased with in school: "Mami, where are your mangoes from? *Choli* mangoes, yes? Yes, yes...*Choli* mangoes. Let me try with my own hands, yes, yes" (Pawar 85) While Gaurya who had earlier assumed the role of the patriarch is positively scared at this encounter, his mother's reaction surprises both him and the aggressors: "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. Go." (86) In what comes as a surprise to the reader, Indira uses the slippery nature of language to speak back to the patriarchy that uses the same tool to hurl indignities at her and the women of her community. She twists the meaning of the word 'choli' to mean 'Sita's choli'; Sita often being called 'Ma' or mother in local usage. In a single act of sheer genius, Indira does what Audre Lorde had warned the subaltern could never do: use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house. Indira uses the same coded language as do the men who use it to humiliate her but transforms this quality of language into a feminist tool. On decoding her reply, Gaurya is transported back to Bai's lessons on how the village came to be named after Sita and realizes his fallacy in equating his mother's lack of formal schooling to ignorance. In some ways, Indira's reply works significantly better than Bai's actions did. While Bai did stand up to the men's sexist remarks, she was met with scornful laughter. Indira's assailants, on the other hand, react at first with shock and then with empty threats before they stagger away. Through Indira's response, Pawar shows how Dalit women's everyday experience has taught them to deal with misogyny, perhaps even better than education has taught Bai.

The stories in *Motherwit* are an accurate reflection of Pawar's literary genius and her commitment to the ideals of Dalit feminism. On that account, they also paint an honest picture of the lived experiences of Dalit women and the ways they act out their feminisms on a daily basis. The nature of their labour and cultural forms (which are often the products

of their labour) are collective and performative, allowing the women of the community to strengthen bonds of solidarity. Like Gogu Shyamala and Baby Kamble, Pawar emphasizes this aspect of performative feminism that takes the form of songs, superstitions, legends and myths, which are oftentimes discredited, not through a process of unbiased judgement but because they are performed mostly by women. Through a close reading of Pawar's texts, this paper establishes how Dalit women continue to express their subjectivities and articulate their subtle acts of social and sexual rebellion. It also looks at the importance given to education in the community as a way to decode hegemonic superstructures and conversely the discussion it prompts about cultural relativism: an inherited, holistic but critical understanding of one's history, culture and environment and the subsequent neglect of the latter that formal education has effected.

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