



Resilience and Collective Action: A Study of Mahar Women's Tenacity in Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* and *The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar

Piya Jain, Dr Nivedita Gupta
Amity University, Noida
piya.jain@s.amity.edu, ngupta12@amity.edu

Abstract:

This study delves into the themes of resilience and collective action as depicted in two seminal autobiographical works: *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble and *The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar. Focusing on the narratives of Mahar women, the analysis explores how these women navigate and resist the oppressive structures of caste, patriarchy, and poverty in Indian society. *The Prisons We Broke* chronicles Baby Kamble's journey from the dehumanising conditions of untouchability to her emergence as a prominent Dalit writer and activist. Through Kamble's experiences, the narrative underscores the resilience of Mahar women who confront the intersecting forms of discrimination with unwavering determination. Despite facing systemic oppression and violence, Kamble and her fellow women assert their agency through acts of resistance and solidarity, challenging the status quo and striving for social justice. Similarly, *The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar offers a poignant portrayal of Mahar women's struggles and triumphs. Pawar's narrative delves into the intricacies of caste and gender dynamics, depicting the ways in which Mahar women negotiate their identities and forge bonds of solidarity amidst adversity. Pawar's own journey from a marginalised community to becoming a pioneering feminist writer exemplifies the resilience and resilience of Mahar women, whose collective action paves the way for empowerment and social change.

Through a comparative analysis of these autobiographical texts, this study elucidates the strategies employed by Mahar women to navigate oppressive structures and assert their agency. It explores the significance of collective action, as Mahar women draw strength from their shared experiences and mobilise for collective resistance. It examines how caste-based discrimination intersects with other forms of oppression, shaping the lived experiences of Mahar women and influencing their strategies of resistance. Additionally, the study explores the role of memory and storytelling in preserving Mahar women's histories and fostering collective consciousness, contributing to the ongoing struggle for social justice and equality.

Keywords: Resilience, Collective action, Mahar women, Caste dynamics, Gender oppression, Autobiographical narratives, Social justice, Intersectionality, Solidarity, Empowerment

Introduction

In the diverse landscape of Indian literature, the narratives stemming from marginalised communities offer profound insights into the human experience, marked by resilience and collective action. It undertakes a comprehensive exploration of the literary works of Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar, focusing specifically on *The Prisons We Broke* and *The Weave of My Life*, to unravel the tenacity demonstrated by Mahar women. The Mahar community, historically relegated to the margins of society, finds a compelling voice in these narratives, giving expression to the struggles and triumphs of a community subjected to centuries of systemic oppression. The historical tapestry of India is intricately woven with threads of caste, class, and cultural diversity. Within this complex framework, the Mahar community stands as a testament to the enduring challenges faced by those historically designated as untouchables. A community grappling with untold discrimination and economic hardship, the Mahars have been subjected to a cyclical pattern of poverty and exclusion due to the deeply ingrained caste system. The caste hierarchy, rigidly defining social roles, relegated the Mahars to the lowest strata of society, perpetuating an oppressive narrative that continues to echo through the corridors of time.

It is against this deeply rooted backdrop that the literary contributions of Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar emerge as powerful tools of expression. The significance of their works lies not only in their literary merit but also in their ability to act as mirrors reflecting the harsh realities faced by Mahar women. Through their prose, a narrative unfolds that challenges the established norms, giving voice to a community that has long been silenced. Thus, the exploration of *The Prisons We Broke* and *The Weave of My Life* becomes more than a literary endeavour; it becomes a journey into the heart of social consciousness and historical reflection. The literary works of Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar, *The Prisons We Broke* and *The Weave of My Life*, serve as profound testaments

to the indomitable spirit of Mahar women. These narratives, meticulously crafted and deeply resonant, provide a nuanced lens through which to examine the resilience and collective action embedded in the fabric of Mahar women's lives. This exploration not only aims to unravel the multifaceted dimensions of their tenacity but also to transcend the literary realm and engage in a broader conversation about societal norms, cultural narratives, and the quest for social justice.

Moreover, this research positions itself within the broader context of feminist discourses, recognising that the experiences of Mahar women are not confined to the singular axis of caste but intersect profoundly with gender dynamics. The struggles depicted in *The Prisons We Broke* and *The Weave of My Life* encapsulate the multifaceted dimensions of oppression faced by Dalit women, demanding an intersectional analysis that unveils the layers of resilience required to navigate the intersecting oppressions of caste and gender. It seeks to set the stage for a comprehensive exploration into the nuanced worlds created by Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar. By delving into historical echoes, contemporary reverberations, identity construction, and intersectionality, it shows a journey that transcends the boundaries of literature, unraveling the intricacies of resilience and collective action within the narratives of Mahar women.

Literature Review

Overview of Mahar Community History and Challenges

The historical trajectory of the Mahar community is a tapestry woven with threads of resilience, resistance, and the enduring spirit of a people who have faced systemic discrimination entrenched in the caste hierarchy of India. Understanding their history is pivotal in unraveling the complexities that surround their resilience and collective action. The Mahar community's origins can be traced back to ancient India, where the caste system stratified society into rigid hierarchical divisions. Positioned at the bottom of this social order, the Mahars endured centuries of social, economic, and political marginalisation. The imposition of untouchability further entrenched their status as a marginalised community, subject to discrimination in various facets of life.

Bhakti and Anti-Caste Movements: The medieval period witnessed the emergence of Bhakti movements, which challenged caste norms and emphasised devotion to a personal god over ritualistic practice. This era became a focal point for the Mahar community's engagement with social reform. Visionaries like Chokhamela, a Mahar saint, played a pivotal role in inspiring social change by breaking caste barriers through their spiritual teachings. The subsequent anti-caste movements, particularly during the colonial period, witnessed the Mahar community actively participating in the struggle against social oppression. Figures like Jyotirao Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, both Mahars, were instrumental in advocating for the rights of the oppressed castes and played key roles in drafting laws that sought to eradicate untouchability.

Resistance and Cultural Identity: Despite the adversities, the Mahar community has demonstrated resilience through acts of resistance and the preservation of their cultural identity. Folk traditions, oral histories, and cultural practices have served as vehicles for expressing their resilience, providing a sense of belonging and continuity in the face of historical challenges. In essence, the overview of the Mahar community's history reveals a narrative of struggle, resistance, and resilience. From ancient times to the modern era, this community has faced challenges with unwavering determination, leaving an indelible mark on the socio-cultural fabric of India.

Analysis

The literary canvases painted by Baby Kamble in *The Prisons We Broke* and Urmila Pawar in *The Weave of My Life* serve as invaluable windows into the lived experiences of Mahar women. This subsection conducts a meticulous analysis of these works, unraveling the layers of narrative techniques, characterisations, and thematic elements employed by the authors.

Examining *The Prisons We Broke*, attention is directed towards the character dynamics, plot intricacies, and symbolic representations that encapsulate the resilience of Mahar women. Through a close reading of specific passages, it explores how Kamble's writing provides insights into the emotional and psychological dimensions of resilience, offering readers a poignant connection to the struggles faced by Mahar women.

Transitioning to *The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar, the analysis navigates through the collective action portrayed in the narrative. Pawar's exploration of community dynamics, relationships, and the interplay of socio-economic factors becomes a focal point. By deconstructing Pawar's narrative style, we seek to unveil how collective action is not only a response to external challenges but an intrinsic part of the Mahar women's identity. Through a lens of literary theory, this subsection aims to decipher the artistic choices made by these authors, providing a bridge between the fictional worlds they create and the historical realities they seek to represent. It forms a crucial link between the literary analysis and the broader socio-cultural implications explored in subsequent sections.

Theoretical Framework

Struggle Against Dehumanisation

Resilience is a multidimensional concept that encompasses the Mahar women's capacity to confront, adapt, and overcome adversity. Within the theoretical framework of this research, resilience is not merely a passive reaction but an active, dynamic process that involves navigating

a complex web of societal challenges. It extends beyond individual coping mechanisms to encompass the collective strength derived from shared experiences within the Mahar community. The concept is rooted in the women's ability to preserve their cultural identity, maintain a sense of self-worth, and resist the dehumanising effects of caste-based oppression and gender discrimination.

Collective action, on the other hand, refers to the collaborative efforts undertaken by Mahar women to address shared concerns and challenges. It involves a communal response to societal injustices, focusing on the synergistic power of collective endeavours. This encompasses both overt and subtle forms of resistance, from grassroots movements challenging systemic discrimination to everyday acts of solidarity among Mahar women. Collective action, within the theoretical framework, is examined as a mechanism through which the women assert agency, challenge oppressive structures, and carve out spaces for themselves within the societal fabric.

Cultural Preservation and Collective Action

In *The Prisons We Broke*; the theoretical lens reveals a tapestry of resilience woven into the very fabric of Mahar women's lives. Through a meticulous analysis of characters such as those portrayed by Baby Kamble, the research uncovers the layers of resilience manifested in the face of deep-rooted societal prejudices. It delves into the psychological, emotional, and social dimensions of their resilience, exploring how these women not only endure but actively shape their narratives. Collective action, within this context, becomes a dynamic force driving the characters to challenge oppressive structures, fostering a sense of unity that transcends individual struggles.

The exploration of resilience extends to the examination of cultural preservation within *The Prisons We Broke*. Theoretical scrutiny uncovers how Mahar women navigate the erasure attempts on their cultural identity. Resilience, in this context, is not only a reaction to external pressures but a proactive stance in preserving cultural heritage. The research dissects instances where Mahar women, through collective action, resist cultural appropriation and assert their right to exist authentically.

Similarly, in *The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar, the theoretical framework unveils a rich tapestry of resilience and collective action within the Mahar community. Pawar's portrayal provides a nuanced understanding of how Mahar women navigate not only external societal pressures but also internal conflicts within their community. The theoretical lens delves into the complexities of resilience, exploring the negotiation of identity, self-worth, and agency within the intersectionality of caste and gender.

Collective action, within the theoretical framework, is examined through the lens of community responses to external pressures. The research investigates how Mahar women, in collaboration, challenge the systemic barriers that perpetuate their marginalisation. It scrutinises instances of solidarity, cooperation, and grassroots movements, emphasising the transformative potential of collective endeavours in reshaping the socio-cultural landscape.

This theoretical framework serves as a comprehensive guide, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the multifaceted dimensions of resilience and collective action as experienced by Mahar women in *The Prisons We Broke* and *The Weave of My Life*. It lays the groundwork for unraveling the intricate interplay of individual and collective agency, cultural preservation, and societal resistance within the narratives.

Role of Politics

The role of politics in the study of resilience and collective action among Mahar women, as depicted in works *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble and *The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar, is multifaceted and deeply intertwined with the historical and social context of India. It explores how politics shapes the experiences of Mahar women, influences their ability to resist oppression, fosters collective resilience, provides frameworks for understanding systemic injustices, empowers them to organise and advocate for their rights, and shapes broader discourses on caste, gender, and social change. To begin with, it is essential to understand the historical and social context in which Mahar women lived and continue to live. The Mahar community, considered one of the lowest in the caste hierarchy in India, has faced centuries of discrimination, marginalisation, and violence. Caste-based oppression, rooted in the Hindu caste system, has permeated various aspects of Mahar women's lives, including access to education, employment, healthcare, and political participation. This structural inequality has been reinforced and perpetuated by political systems and institutions that have often failed to address the systemic injustices faced by marginalised communities like the Mahar.

In *The Prisons We Broke* and *The Weave of My Life*, authors Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar provide poignant accounts of their experiences as Mahar women navigating a society rife with caste-based discrimination and gender oppression. Through their narratives, they shed light on the resilience and tenacity displayed by Mahar women in the face of adversity, highlighting the ways in which they have resisted oppression and fought for dignity and equality. Politics plays a significant role in shaping the experiences of Mahar women by influencing the social and economic conditions they confront. Government policies, political ideologies, and power

dynamics within the political sphere directly impact the lives of marginalised communities like the Mahar. For example, caste-based quotas and affirmative action policies, implemented by the Indian government to address historical injustices and promote social inclusion, have had varying degrees of success in improving the socio-economic status of Dalits, including Mahar women. However, these policies have also been subject to political manipulation and backlash, highlighting the complex interplay between politics and social change.

Significance of Sisterhood

The Prisons We Broke by Baby Kamble and *The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar offer profound insights into the lives of Mahar women, a historically marginalised community in India. These works delve into the complexities of caste and gender-based oppression, highlighting the resilience and collective action of Mahar women in the face of adversity. This essay aims to explore the significance of sisterhood and solidarity among Mahar women as depicted in these narratives, delving deeper into their experiences, challenges, and triumphs. The Mahar community has long endured discrimination and marginalisation in Indian society due to their lower caste status. Mahar women, in particular, faced intersecting forms of oppression based on their caste and gender identities. Subjected to social exclusion, economic exploitation, and violence, Mahar women navigated a hostile environment with courage and resilience.

Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* provides a poignant portrayal of the deep bonds of sisterhood among Mahar women. Through shared experiences of marginalisation and struggle, these women find solace and strength in each other's company. Sisterhood becomes a source of emotional support, solidarity, and empowerment, enabling Mahar women to confront societal injustices with resilience and determination. Kamble's narrative underscores the transformative power of collective solidarity in the face of oppression. In *The Weave of My Life*, Pawar delves into the collective resistance efforts of Mahar women, emphasising the role of solidarity in facilitating collective action. Through organised protests, community mobilisation, and advocacy campaigns, Mahar women challenge entrenched power structures and demand social justice. Pawar's narrative highlights the importance of collective organising in effecting meaningful change, illustrating how Mahar women harness their collective strength to confront systemic oppression and discrimination.

Despite the bonds of sisterhood and solidarity, Mahar women encounter numerous challenges in their pursuit of liberation. Caste-based violence, institutionalised discrimination, and patriarchal norms pose significant obstacles to collective action. Moreover, internal divisions and conflicts within the community often impede solidarity, underscoring the complexities of navigating

intersecting forms of oppression. Overcoming these challenges requires sustained efforts to build solidarity, address internal divisions, and confront systemic injustices.

Empowerment through Education

Access to education serves as a catalyst for empowerment among Mahar women. In a society where caste-based discrimination and gender inequality are pervasive, education provides Mahar women with the tools to challenge these oppressive structures. Through formal education, Mahar women gain knowledge, skills, and critical thinking abilities that enable them to assert their agency and navigate their social environments more effectively. In *The Prisons We Broke* and *The Weave of My Life*, we see examples of Mahar women who, despite facing numerous obstacles, prioritise education as a means of liberation. For instance, Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar themselves emerged as prominent voices of the Mahar community, advocating for social justice and gender equality through their writing. Their access to education not only empowered them as individuals but also enabled them to uplift their communities by challenging stereotypes and advocating for change.

Literacy as a tool for liberation gives the ability to read and write, is a fundamental aspect of education that plays a crucial role in the emancipation of Mahar women. Through literacy, Mahar women gain the ability to articulate their experiences, express their aspirations, and challenge dominant narratives that perpetuate their marginalisation. By writing autobiographies, poetry, and essays, Mahar women reclaim their voices and assert their presence in literary and intellectual spaces traditionally dominated by upper-caste males. In these texts we witness the transformative power of literacy as Mahar women use writing as a tool for resistance and empowerment. Their narratives challenge caste-based stereotypes, dismantle oppressive social norms, and highlight the resilience and agency of Mahar women in the face of adversity. Through their literary works, Mahar women not only document their struggles but also inspire others to question injustice and strive for social change.

Education equips Mahar women with resilience, enabling them to confront and overcome the various forms of discrimination and oppression they encounter in their lives. Despite facing systemic barriers such as poverty, caste discrimination, and gender-based violence, Mahar women demonstrate resilience by pursuing education, acquiring skills, and forging networks of support within their communities. In *The Prisons We Broke* and *The Weave of My Life*, Mahar women's resilience shines through as they navigate the challenges of poverty, discrimination, and violence to pursue their educational aspirations. Their determination to overcome adversity and create a

better future for themselves and their communities serves as a testament to the transformative power of education in building resilience and fostering hope. Education fosters collective action among Mahar women by creating spaces for solidarity, advocacy, and community organising. Through education, Mahar women form networks of support and empowerment, enabling them to mobilise resources, raise awareness about their rights, and advocate for social justice issues affecting their communities. Mahar women come together to challenge caste-based discrimination, gender inequality, and other forms of oppression through grassroots movements and collective action. By organising protests, participating in community development projects, and advocating for policy change, Mahar women leverage their education to effect meaningful social change and improve the lives of marginalised communities.

Education holds the transformative potential to not only empower individual Mahar women but also to catalyse broader social change. By investing in education and literacy programs tailored to the needs of marginalised communities like the Mahars, policymakers and activists can address systemic inequalities, challenge oppressive structures, and create more inclusive and equitable societies. In *The Prisons We Broke* and *The Weave of My Life*, we see glimpses of the transformative impact of education as Mahar women defy societal expectations, challenge oppressive norms, and assert their rights as equal members of society is traced. Their stories serve as a powerful reminder of the potential of education to break the cycles of poverty, discrimination, and marginalisation and pave the way for a more just and inclusive future for all. Education and literacy are indispensable tools for understanding and analysing the themes of resilience and collective action among Mahar women as depicted in the works of Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar. Through education, Mahar women gain empowerment, resilience, and agency, enabling them to challenge oppressive structures and advocate for social change. By recognising the significance of education in shaping their narratives of empowerment and resistance, we can work towards building a more equitable and inclusive society for all.

Conclusion

In the narratives of *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble and *The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar, the concluding message resonates powerfully: resilience and collective action are essential tools in the struggle against oppression and marginalisation. Through the lens of Mahar women's experiences, these works illuminate the enduring strength and solidarity found within marginalised communities, offering a beacon of hope amidst the darkness of systemic injustice. The stories of Mahar women, as portrayed by Kamble and Pawar, serve as a testament to the human capacity for resilience in the face of adversity. Despite facing immense challenges stemming from their Dalit identity, gender, and socio-economic status, Mahar women refuse to be

defeated. Their resilience is evident in their unwavering determination to overcome obstacles, to provide for their families, and to assert their dignity and agency in a society that seeks to diminish their worth. Kamble's depiction of her mother's relentless struggle to survive amidst poverty, discrimination, and violence epitomises the resilience ingrained in Mahar women's collective consciousness. Similarly, Pawar's portrayal of the protagonist's journey towards self-realisation and empowerment underscores the transformative power of resilience in the face of systemic oppression.

Both the texts emphasise the significance of collective action as a means of resistance and empowerment for Mahar women. United by shared experiences of oppression and marginalisation, Mahar women come together to challenge the status quo, to support one another, and to effect change within their communities. Kamble and Pawar highlight the importance of solidarity and mutual aid in confronting caste-based discrimination, gender inequality, and other forms of oppression. Whether through grassroots activism, community organising, or informal networks of support, Mahar women mobilise collective resources to resist injustice and to assert their rights as equal members of society. The narratives of Kamble and Pawar offer a nuanced portrayal of Mahar women's agency and resilience, challenging prevailing stereotypes and misconceptions about marginalised communities. Through their stories, Kamble and Pawar amplify the voices of Mahar women, providing a platform for their experiences, struggles, and aspirations to be heard and understood. By entering the narratives of marginalised-women, Kamble and Pawar disrupt dominant discourses that seek to erase or marginalise their existence, affirming the validity and importance of their lived experiences.