



From Margins to ‘Third Space’: Urmila Pawar’s *The Weave of My Life* through Homi K. Bhabha’s Lens Dr Anand Bajaj and Dr Shubhra

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ABSTRACT

This article conducts an incisive exploration of Urmila Pawar’s autobiography, *The Weave of My Life*, through the analytical framework of Homi K. Bhabha’s postcolonial theory, particularly focusing on the concept of the “third space.” It delves into how Pawar’s autobiographical narrative serves as a manifestation of the liminal, hybrid spaces where diverse cultural identities intersect, thereby fostering the emergence of new, dynamic forms of selfhood that subvert essentialist views. The study highlights several pivotal elements, including the influential role of maternal narratives in forging a third space that catalyzes resistance and empowerment; Pawar’s navigation and amalgamation of cultural disparities leading to hybrid identity formations; and the complex interplay of caste, gender, and Dalit feminist consciousness. Additionally, it examines the nuances of identity ambivalence in Pawar’s professional endeavors and the role of cultural translation in her literary expressions. By tracing Pawar’s trajectory as a Dalit woman through the realms of education, profession, and social activism, the article illustrates how her engagement in the ambiguous third space acts as a conduit for challenging dichotomous colonial narratives and asserting subaltern agency. Ultimately, the analysis posits that Pawar’s autobiography transcends the realm of personal history, articulating a potent political critique that aligns with Bhabha’s theoretical propositions and underscores the radical potential of cultural hybridity in dismantling entrenched hegemonic structures.

INTRODUCTION

In the kaleidoscope of reality as painted by female Dalit writers, *The Weave of My Life* potently chronicles the intersections and the resultant tensions and ambiguities at the crossroads of caste, gender, and identity, potentially disrupting casteist and patriarchal discourses in contemporary Dalit Indian society. The memoir not only outlines Pawar’s struggles and hardships (while facing and countering dominant social structures) but also delves into cultural fusions, unconventional traditions, and the consequent advent of fresh identities. Postcolonial theories proposed by Homi K. Bhabha—particularly the concepts of the “third space,” “cultural translations,” and “liminality”—offer an apt theoretical approach for understanding the multifaceted negotiations, resistance, and subversions that



undergird the forging of both individual and collective identities in marginal accounts like *The Weave of My Life*.

Identity, power relations, and resistance have emerged as key areas of concern within postcolonial literature, owing to the layers of complexity stemming from colonial oppression. Although India has gained political independence, the legacies of colonial rule endure. Upper-caste dominants internalized this colonial mindset, instituting hierarchies and 'othering' to serve their own interests. Consequently, Dalits were rendered perpetually voiceless. These privileged strata effectively became what Frantz Fanon termed "brown masters with white masks," exerting unwarranted oppression upon Dalits. Bhabha's observations on "cultural fusions" and "hybridity" upset the binary logic intrinsic to colonial discourse, highlighting the dynamic interplay between dominant and subjugated cultures that subsequently engenders novel, syncretic identities aiming for genuine socio-cultural representation. Rather than conceiving of a rigid clash, Bhabha's notion of hybridity foregrounds the colonized subject's agency not only to reinterpret but also to transform colonial culture. Furthermore, Bhabha's emphasis on translation metaphorically represents the process whereby diverse worldviews intersect, a perspective instrumental in situating marginal narratives such as Pawar's. Linguistic translation enables peripheral languages to intersect with the historically privileged colonial language. It thereby operates as a conduit, bringing the less dominant worldview into the mainstream textual realm while simultaneously creating avenues for resistance. A fundamental dimension of Bhabha's thinking is the "third space," which emerges as a compelling site of negotiation and liminality whenever cultures converge. This interstitial zone births novel meanings and identities, destabilizing rigid binary oppositions integral to colonial systems. Bhabha observes: "The third space is a mode of articulation, a way of describing a productive, and not merely reflective, space that engenders new possibilities" [1, p. 211]. Such a concept is profoundly relevant to marginalized groups, compelled to dwell along the fringes of prevailing norms and hierarchies. Interpreted within *The Weave of My Life*, Bhabha's third space clarifies the transformative positions Pawar occupies as a Dalit woman: socially excluded yet equipped to reorganize that exclusion into strategies of empowerment, ultimately forging a self-determined identity.



The Power of Maternal Narratives: Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* as a Third Space

The Weave of My Life operates as a compelling narrative that transcends personal introspection, evolving into a tool for liberation from casteist and patriarchal restrictions—not only on an individual scale, but also on behalf of all Dalit women. Pawar's storytelling flair, particularly the portrayal of her mother, constructs a distinctive “third space” that emboldens marginalized women to derive both practical lessons and collective strategies for emancipation. By recounting the maternal narrative, Pawar crafts a territory unclaimed by casteist patriarchy, though adjacent to Mahar life. Its liminal nature welcomes subversive stances that challenge patriarchal dominance at every turn, thus opening space for new, autonomous identities to materialize.

In her autobiography, Pawar spotlights her mother, Laxmi Pawar, who supported her family by weaving bamboo baskets and persistently prioritized education for her children following her husband's death. Pawar's choice of book title, *The Weave of My Life*, underscores her mother's influence, since Pawar “weaves” stories much like her mother once wove baskets. She writes, “The weave is similar. It is the weave of pain, suffering, and agony that link us. I find that her act of weaving and my act of writing are originally linked” [20, p. x]. Pawar idolizes her mother, seeing her as an “artist who left her mark in the only material she could afford and in the only medium, her position in society allowed her to use,” echoing sentiments akin to Alice Walker's perspective [25, p. 407]. This dedicated maternal narrative foregrounds the lived adversities of the Pawar family, while simultaneously galvanizing Urmila to carve her own course of self-realization by harnessing education. As Collins notes, “...mothers in [marginalized] women's [stories] are strong and devoted...they are really affectionate” [6, p. 187].

Despite enduring “economic precarity...leading to a low or unpredictable income, precarious or contingent employment, lack of job security, poverty, and limited access to basic resources” [16, p. 337], Pawar's mother (affectionately called “Aaye”) served as a steadfast source of encouragement. Her relentless basket-weaving to support her children's education reflected a resolute determination: “That was the last thing our eyes, heavy with sleep, would take in before we went to bed. And when we opened our eyes early in the morning, she would be sitting in the same place” [20, p. 64]. Her unwavering work ethic enabled Urmila to withstand casteist-patriarchal manipulations without



succumbing to despair: “In the past, it was my father’s hands that worked, now it was hers.... Pressing a rod or pestle into her stomach to lessen her pains, she would continue with her weaving” [20, pp. 64–75].

Bhabha’s ideas on third space imply that the instability of cultural boundaries intensifies the agency of marginalized individuals [1]. This is evident in the activism and protective stance assumed by Aaye. After Urmila was singled out by her upper-caste teacher, Herlekar, who insisted she perform menial tasks as a “polluted” Dalit, Pawar initially resisted. When violence ensued, her mother intervened, publicly rebuking him:

“...Look, I am a widow; my life is ruined. Yet I sit here, under this tree, and work. Why? Because I want education for my children so that their future will be better. And you treat my girl like this? How dare you? ...Let me see you laying even a finger on my girl again and I’ll show you!...” [20, p. 69].

As Glenn explains, “mothering” in marginalized contexts entails agonizing burdens [8, p. 1]. The mother’s support and the vivid recollection of her endurance have become enduring themes in women’s narratives, and Dalit autobiographies are no exception. Comparably, Alice Walker recounts her own mother’s herculean dedication to her children’s education in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* [25, p. 406]. This maternal tale in Pawar’s text inspires another generation of Dalit women, including Pawar herself, to resist oppression. In adulthood, Pawar likewise stood by her daughters’ choices, even when it meant confronting the broader family’s objections, thus exemplifying what Toni Morrison calls “other-mothering” [15, p. xiii]. Morrison notes the importance of “a chorus of mamas, grandmamas, aunts, cousins, sisters, neighbors...” whose collective strength fosters resilience [15, p. 311].

By recounting her mother’s sacrifices, Pawar crafts a “third space,” a zone neither exclusively “ancient” nor strictly “modern,” that enables Dalit women to acknowledge historical exploitation yet chart a path toward collective articulation and liberation. As West observes, a “third space...a place where the oppressed can plot their liberation” [26, p. 53], emerges when overlapping legacies of suffering inspire unified resistance. This blending of personal and collective maternal history transcends the individual story of Aaye to symbolize a clarion call for Dalit women: awaken from passivity and strive for voice, dignity, and rights.





The Negotiation of Cultural Differences and Emergence of Hybridity

From early childhood, Pawar confronted her Dalit identity within a predominantly caste-based society: “We were Mahars, untouchables. Our ancestors had been landless, bonded labourers” [20, p. 3]. This realization shaped her self-perception. Her life narrative underscores how cultural interchanges in liminal zones generate forms of hybridity. For instance, her father’s exquisite basket-weaving skills attracted wealthy clients, paradoxically bridging a gap between “untouchable” Mahars and the affluent: “My father wove baskets with such skill and artistry that even the wealthy would commission him to make special pieces for them” [20, p. 4]. This professional “third space” exemplifies how categories of “pure” upper caste and “impure” Dalit are rendered fluid when real-life practices blur rigid boundaries.

Bhabha’s theory challenges the colonial paradigm of a direct collision between colonizer and colonized, instead emphasizing the latter’s proactive role in adjusting and reshaping the dominant culture [1][2]. In *The Weave of My Life*, Pawar underscores the power of local folk traditions, Buddhism, and oral histories, suggesting these can erode hegemonic Brahmanical authority. Nyers’s notion of “cultural precarity” also applies: one’s cultural identity can be vulnerable if mainstream norms deny recognition or inclusion [17, p. 4]. This situation is clearly seen when Pawar and her community embraced Buddhism under Dr. Ambedkar’s movement, discarding Hindu symbols that perpetuated casteist oppression. Conversion simultaneously acted as resistance and a search for dignity. However, the deep-rooted structures of Brahmanical patriarchy crept back, posing new challenges and creating ongoing hybrid dynamics. By integrating Buddhist doctrines with indigenous Mahar customs, Pawar’s community forged a hybrid identity distinct from traditional Hindu or purely Buddhist frameworks. Byrne clarifies that the “third space” is “not simply one thing or the other, nor both at the same time, but a kind of negotiation between both positions” [5, p. 42].

In this light, the Mahars’ conversion mirrors Bhabha’s “anti-essentialist revolutionary strategy,” wherein new cultural identities emerge through cross-pollination and refusal of monolithic traditions [1, p. 10]. Their move toward Buddhism signified a declaration of agency in the “beyond,” subverting hierarchical norms. Hybridity, thus, is not a static end but an ongoing process, helping marginalized groups redefine identities on their own terms.



Forging a Third Space: The Intersectional Landscape of Caste, Gender, and Dalit Feminist Awakening

The Weave of My Life scrutinizes how caste and gender intersect to influence both individual and collective self-understandings. Occupying the intersection between an orthodox patriarchal culture and an internal Dalit patriarchal structure, Pawar champions Dalit feminist agency, leveraging her position to challenge multiple oppressions simultaneously.

She confronts “social precarity,” the state of exclusion and diminished social networks [24, p. 415]. While being systematically excluded due to her caste, Pawar also contends with patriarchal limitations within her community. Hence, her rejection of subjugation arises not only from resistance to overarching casteist oppression but also from challenging the Mahar patriarchy’s prescriptions. She offers firsthand instances illustrating such rebellion, providing glimpses of how she balanced tradition and modern aspirations to construct a hybrid womanist identity.

Equally pivotal is Pawar’s Dalit activism, placing her in an even more ambivalent “third space.” While her formal education empowers her, it also creates discord with the broader Dalit community, which sometimes hesitates to align with her feminist viewpoint. Furthermore, mainstream feminist movements, largely helmed by upper-caste women, seldom highlight the unique burdens borne by Dalit women. Pawar laments, “The women’s movement in Maharashtra was largely led by urban, educated, upper-caste women. They did not recognize the specific concerns of Dalit women” [20, p. 122]. Consequently, she sets about establishing a Dalit feminist “third space,” consistent with Bhabha’s view of subaltern agency that “displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority” [22, p. 21].

By spearheading a distinctly Dalit women’s praxis, she challenges not only patriarchal norms within her community but also the exclusionary biases of mainstream feminism, effectively enacting a “cultural translation” of Dalit women’s realities into political action. Her multifaceted role exemplifies the fluidity Bhabha identifies in the hybrid zone, where contradictory identities—Dalit, feminist, activist—converge to reshape social norms. Hence, Pawar’s autobiography cultivates a transformative space where silenced



female voices find resonance, dismantling the hegemony of upper-caste patriarchy and legitimizing a bottom-up, intersectional approach to social justice.

As Bhabha highlights, such acts within the third space can spawn “new forms of cultural meaning and production” [1, p. 12]. Pawar’s journey, mapped in her narrative, exemplifies an in-between stance: at once an heir to ancient Dalit traditions and an active participant in modern discourses of equality and rights. Through her struggles—seeking education, mobilizing collective resistance, and articulating a woman-centered Dalit platform—she demonstrates the robust efficacy of harnessing the ambiguities of hybrid identity to contest oppressive structures. Writing becomes both a personal and political tool, showcasing how interstitial cultural positions can defy binaries and seed new possibilities for empowerment.



The Ambivalence of Identity and the Liminal Third Space

Pawar's professional and activist roles illustrate the "ambivalence" and "liminality" characteristic of Bhabha's third space. Her Dalit identity, enlivened by cultural modes of expression, exemplifies "hybrid" dynamics in which the oppressed adopt certain symbols or strategies of the dominant without capitulating entirely, thus transforming them into a site of potential insurgence. Bhabha remarks that "hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities...a strategic reversal of the process of domination" [1, p. 112].

Throughout her education, Pawar felt the weight of caste-based bias: "I was a Mahar woman, an educated woman,...- all these identities were in conflict with each other" [20, p. 71]. This continual state of negotiation underscores Bhabha's assertion that "ambivalence" marks third-space experiences. Drawing on Bakhtin's concept of a "double-voiced" text and Derrida's notions of differance, Bhabha emphasizes that hybridity interrogates colonial fixities by proliferating internal contradictions [4, p. 355][1, p. 115]. In Pawar's case, her multiple subject positions—Dalit, woman, activist—coexist and clash, ultimately driving the formation of a self-defined identity that unsettles conventional binaries.

Her dedication to social activism exemplifies what Bhabha terms "mimicry," a complicated mechanism through which the colonized partially imitates the colonizer, unveiling the fragility of dominant norms [1, p. 115]. By occupying an authoritative role as an activist, Pawar contradicts the prevalent stereotyping of Dalit women as perpetually submissive. This assertiveness diminishes the gap between dominant and dominated, exposing fissures within the broader patriarchal caste system. Jefferess notes that "such moments of transformation...are enabled by modes of discursive refusal wherein the colonial narrative does not simply fail but is transformed" [11, p. 29]. Pawar's everyday negotiations—acknowledging her Dalit roots while wielding the social capital of education—reflect precisely these transformative dynamics.

Within this ongoing "in-between" state, Pawar's subjectivity emerges in resonance with Bhabha's view that the third space is a crucible of "cultural hybridity" forging novel cultural meanings [1, p. 12]. Lazarus describes Bhabha's theory as "a fighting term" that challenges monolithic ideas of culture [14, p. 4]. Pawar's life narrative—bridging her Mahar background, Western feminist thought, Buddhist teachings, and modern



activism—ultimately attests to the significance of reconciling the past with the present. Through this process, she refutes essentialist notions that might bind Dalit women to a single historical narrative. Instead, her autobiography unveils how reimagining the past can reshape the present, granting marginalized women the impetus to transcend oppressive scripts.



Transcending Borders: The Third Space Dynamics of Acts of Translation

In Bhabha's work, translation stands as a pivotal concept to illustrate how languages, cultures, and perspectives interact, adapt, and negotiate in the hybrid third space [1, pp. 224–225]. *The Weave of My Life* exemplifies such cultural translation, bridging the experiential realities of Dalit communities with a wider readership. By channeling oral traditions, historical patterns of oppression, and Buddhist influences into a cohesive narrative, Pawar deftly translates Dalit cultural life for unfamiliar audiences. This endeavor resonates with Bhabha's articulation that translation transcends mere linguistic transposition to encompass the negotiation of entire worldviews.

Pawar's narrative further showcases interlaced translations between local Dalit traditions, Western feminist discourse, and Buddhist philosophy. She accommodates these diverse frameworks, "adopting" and "adapting" them into expressions that serve her immediate context as a Dalit woman confronting social bias. The text thus functions as a generative contact zone where new identities and viewpoints emerge through cross-cultural dialogue. By shining a light on Dalit lived experiences, Pawar widens the scope of feminist debate, highlighting lesser-known issues of caste discrimination and socio-economic exclusion.

Her storytelling affirms that translation is not a neutral activity but a transformative one, creating avenues for subaltern agency. By "writing back" against the dominant narrative, she effectively combats the erasure and distortion of Dalit women's histories, revealing how genealogies of oppression intertwine with contemporary structures of inequity. In doing so, she uses translation to reconfigure established hierarchies and articulate a perspective that is at once distinctly Dalit and authentically feminist.



Conclusion

Urmila Pawar's autobiography, *The Weave of My Life*, intricately aligns with Homi K. Bhabha's concept of the third space, offering a rich tapestry of experiences that epitomize the liminal zones of cultural intersection and identity formation. Through her narrative, Pawar captures the essence of these in-between spaces, where divergent cultural elements converge, fostering the emergence of hybrid identities that challenge traditional, essentialist constructs of selfhood. As a Dalit woman traversing the multifaceted landscapes of education, career, and activism, Pawar embodies the dynamic processes of cultural negotiation, translation, and subversion that are fundamental to Bhabha's theory. Her autobiography not only reflects the fluidity and multiplicity of identity but also serves as a poignant testament to the transformative power of cultural hybridity. By inhabiting the ambiguous realm of the third space, Pawar actively disrupts the binary constructs of colonial and postcolonial discourses, thereby forging new avenues of subaltern agency and resistance. Bhabha's theoretical framework offers a vital lens for dissecting the interplay of power, identity, and societal transformation within Pawar's life story. Her narrative vividly illustrates how the "cutting edge of translation and negotiation," as Bhabha phrases, can catalyze innovative forms of existence and political engagement that directly confront and destabilize dominant power structures. Consequently, *The Weave of My Life* transcends the bounds of personal memoir to resonate as a formidable political discourse, echoing Bhabha's imperative to "unsettle the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but to emerge as the Others of ourselves" [1, p. 44]. In this narrative, Pawar not only shares her journey but also invites readers to recognize and harness the potent, transformative capacity of the third space, where novel identities, alliances, and forms of resistance can thrive and reshape societal norms.



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