Urmila Pawar’s life narrative *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman’s Memoirs* depicts the ‘public’ and ‘private’ aspects of a Dalit woman’s life. The subtitle of the life narrative *A Dalit Woman’s Memoirs* signifies Dalit woman as the centre subject. She is not only the subject but also—along with the social structure which is responsible for her oppression—the object of investigation, remembrance and contemplation in the life narrative. *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman’s Memoirs* in Marathi is titled *Aaydan* which is a generic term used for all the things weaved from bamboo.

Weaving bamboo baskets has been a regular economic activity of the Mahar community of the Konkan region of Maharashtra. Urmila Pawar states, “My mother used to weave aaydans” (Pawar, Preface x). Her mother used to weave bamboo baskets for livelihood. Barbara Smith’s remark: “…Zora Neale Hurston, Margret Walker, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker incorporate the traditional Black female activities of rootworking, herbal medicine, conjure, and midwifery into the fabric of their stories is not mere coincidence…” (137) substantiate the importance of incorporation of traditional activities in women’s writings as a subtle way of creating female bonding through women’s world of experiences. The reference to these traditional economic activities places Black women’s writings within their community: “…the writer defines herself not as a *writer* who stands outside the community, but as a figure within…the writer places herself within a community, reconstructed in terms of a feminism whose origins are now not outside, but inside” (Driver 181). In the same manner, the metaphor of ‘weave’ runs throughout *The Weave of My Life* which positions the narrative within the Mahar community and signifies Urmila Pawar’s identity as a Mahar woman which she shares with the other women of her community.

Dorothy Driver emphasizes, “…writing is linked to thatching and knitting and weaving, the acts women perform in their construction of home and community” (181). Like her mother, who weaved bamboo baskets for the survival of her family, Urmila Pawar weaves her life’s experiences and memories into her life narrative. Urmila Pawar has linked her writing with the metaphor of weaving baskets by her mother: “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” (Pawar, Preface x). The quill
dipped in the ink is the same as the needle used for weaving because both writing and weaving are the means of expression: “text and textiles…are the same thing” (Prain). In *The Weave of My Life*, both the activities articulate the unexpressed pain.

Sandra M. Gilbert, Susan Gubar and many other feminists have also referred to women’s “process of writing as weaving” (McGovern 88). They emphasize the importance of images and symbols weaved in women’s writings. The image ‘weave’ in *The Weave of My Life* symbolizes poverty and struggle associated with gender and Mahar caste: “It is a complex narrative of a *gendered* individual who looks at the world initially from her location within the caste but who goes on to transcend the caste identity from a feminist perspective” (Pandit, Introduction, *The Weave of My Life* xvii). The narrative weaves the complex notion of margin emphasizing that gendered oppression does not act in isolation but along with caste and class identity. Thus, *The Weave of My Life* weaves caste, class, and gender marginalization that affect in different ways the lives of Dalit women.

The other meaning of *Aaydan* is “weapon” (Pawar, Preface x). Urmila Pawar has used her life narrative as a weapon in her fight against the social structure which marginalizes Dalit women and is responsible for their oppression, ignorance, gloom, distress and suffering. *The Weave of My Life* is divided into twelve chapters. Like Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke*, the chapters in *The Weave of My Life* are numbered, not titled. The chapters are again divided into sections which are neither titled nor numbered. The narration covers the life journey of Urmila Pawar from her childhood to an adult woman witnessing and experiencing caste injustice, patriarchal domination, and the daily hazards of poverty, and later on as a mature individual looking back on her victimization with the insights she has gained from her life’s experience.

Urmila Pawar recollects the memories of hunger and poverty which form an integral part of her childhood: “…which together compose the developmental system as a whole” (Nelson and Fivush 487). It is imperative to consider the social and economic conditions in which childhood is spent because “childhood experiences are regarded as deep and genuine parts of the person” (Gullstead 9). Even as a child, Urmila Pawar was aware of the disadvantages of being born in a lower caste. Her family never had adequate
food to eat: “Coarse rice grains, bought from the ration shop, would be cooked for lunch.” Her mother encouraged the children to eat the food: “‘Eat it, eat it child! Only the person who can eat such food can achieve a lot of good!’” (The Weave of My Life 94). The words like “‘patwadi’, ‘sandge’, ‘dhapate’, ‘khakre’ and ‘methkut’…” (WML 93) were alien to Mahars as these food items were uncommon in their households: “But I never asked myself the stupid question, ‘Why don’t we make such dishes at home?’ We were aware, without anybody telling us, that we were born in a particular caste and in poverty that we had to live accordingly” (93-94). She longed for new clothes but her family did not have the means to buy her clothes. She never got new clothes except “school uniforms” and had “never worn chappals till I was in the ninth class” (142). Her childhood experiences of hunger and destitution bring forth the gloominess of Urmila Pawar’s childhood in particular and Mahar girls in general.

Like Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar in her life narrative also talks about the grim conditions in which Mahar women gave birth to children. After delivery, a mother’s body “needs to heal and recover.” Therefore, the “mothers need to maintain a healthy diet to promote healing and recovery…so that they can be healthy and active and able to care for their baby” (M. Kumar and R. Kumar, Childbirth 71). Unfortunately, Mahars never followed such practices as they could not afford the expenditure: “For the first two days, she would be given rice with a little coconut milk mixed with a bit of molasses and pepper. After that she ate the same food as everybody else” (WML 163-164).

In Mahar community the tradition to first serve food to the male members of the family was practised. When men folk finished dinner, there was hardly any food left. Mahar women ate saar: “This was an extremely low quality dish with no nutritional value. It would invariably upset the stomach” (100). However, Mahar women ate it without complaints: “…in many Indian homes men eat first and women have to make with the leftovers. Most women serve their husbands and male relatives first, and only after the others have finished eating, they start their meal. As a result of this common habit, 83% of women in India suffer from iron deficiency anaemia….” (Gurcharan Das qtd. in Nubile 25).
Urmila Pawar feels pained to recall and narrate the “lived experience” (Rege, *Writing Caste* 5) of caste exclusion. Alexander de Heering states, “Testifying and denouncing is by no means an innocent exercise, but is rather a very demanding ordeal for those who are ready to be the pioneers of dalit expression” (41). While expressing the suffering and victimization, Urmila Pawar relives the pain of humiliation which she faced as a Mahar girl at school. The upper caste girls kept away from her due to caste prejudices:

One day my classmates decided to cook a meal. They were discussing what everyone must bring: rice, lentils, and so on. I went up to them, eager to participate in the cooking….But they wanted to avoid asking me to bring something…. I really enjoyed the meal. The next day I was horrified to hear that my eating had become the hottest topic for juicy gossip. Girls were whispering in groups about how much I had eaten. ‘She ate like a monster,’ someone said. Another endorsed it, ‘God, she ate like a goat.’ ‘She ate so much of everything! Awful!’ It was so humiliating that I died a thousand deaths that day! *(WML 101-02)*

The incident highlights how children recognize the notion of caste distinction, untouchability practice besides the humiliation faced by Mahar girls because of their caste and poverty.

Urmila Pawar recalls with distress her teacher’s derisive remarks about her dirty clothes in front of the whole class:

‘Tell your mother to make two nice frocks for you. Your clothes are always so dirty! Now go and buy a good soap and start washing your clothes yourself. Understand? And yes, start bathing every day.’ There was laughter in the classroom. The boys stared at me. Now they knew that my clothes were dirty and I did not bathe every day. I died a million deaths at this humiliation. (91)

The teacher failed to figure out the compulsions of poverty. She was insensitive and never bothered to enquire from Urmila Pawar regarding her family and economic status but left no stone unturned to shame her. The insult hurled at her in front of everyone made her feel low: “…emotions such as anger, wonderment, powerlessness, sadness, and frustration, all contributing to the perceptions of school as an unwelcoming space…” (Holzwarth, Kanthy and Tucci 8). This incident brings out the school environment as standoffish leading to frustration and sadness among Dalit girls. The constant disgrace at
school made her realize her marginal space in the “public sphere” (Guru, Afterword 165). This “experience of space” (hooks, “Choosing the Margin,” 205) infused in her, her existence as a Mahar girl.

The experiences of mortification became a part of her life as she had to swallow the poison of ignominy wherever she went. Urmila Pawar narrates several incidents when she had to suffer humiliation. She disliked to go to the upper castes’ houses as they made her:

…stand at the threshold; I put the baskets down and they sprinkled water on them to wash away the pollution, and only then would they touch them. They would drop the coins in my hands from above, avoiding contact, as if their hands would have burnt had they touched me….Taking care not to touch, or even let my shadow fall on the things lying around, I would reach the cement steps of their house. The crescent shaped steps looked like a sort of pyramid from below. I had to stand at the lowest step. The pyramid would make anyone standing at the bottom feel really low….Then I kept my coins on a step, which the Kaku collected, but only after she had sprinkled water on them to cleanse them of pollution! (WML 65-77)

These incidents of social segregation left a deep impact on the mind of Urmila Pawar. She realized though a human being like others her bodily and spatial segregation established her identity as a Mahar girl. This awakened in her a critical examination of the institutions and structures responsible for her marginalization: “Identity, be it sexual or other, is always produced and sustained by cultural norms…” (Judith Butler qtd. in Smith and Watson, Women, Autobiography 27). Individual’s identity is the result of an inescapable socio-cultural and economic context. Urmila Pawar standing at the lowest step of the upper caste people’s houses signified her caste identity and the space and place granted to her in the “public sphere.” The threshold symbolizes the demarcation which she was never allowed to cross to enter “feudal space” (Guru, Afterword 165). The threshold indicates the separation of Mahars from the people above them in caste and class hierarchy.

Not only Urmila Pawar but later on her children also became victims of untouchability. Her younger daughter Manini on her fifth birthday invited her friend Kishori, who was from Maratha caste to her house. Kishori’s brother told his mother
about the photographs of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Buddha which he had seen at Urmila Pawar’s house. The next day, Kishori’s mother “stood at our door…abusing without even stepping inside….A semi-literate woman had insulted me,…and at the same time created a vertical split in the mind of my young child, and hers too” (WML 241-42). Children are innocent but parents and elders permeate in them caste hierarchies creating distance and hatred. This incident exposes the enforced conditioning of the children in the caste system. The juxtaposition of her experiences with her children’s experiences of untouchability reveals that the sufferings of Dalits through generations have remained the same.

When Dalits move from villages to towns/cities to improve their economic condition they again face discrimination at the hands of urban class people. It is difficult for Dalits to rent a room in the city because of their caste. Upper caste people do not want to keep them as tenants. They usually get a place to stay in dirty surroundings. Omprakash Valmiki in Joothan describes one such place: “The room was practically bare. A string went across the room on which dirty clothes were piled in a disorderly manner. The room, littered with their stuff, looked unkempt. A clean up happened only rarely” (67). Like Omprakash Valmiki, Urmila Pawar also reflects on the difficulties she and her husband Harishchandra faced when after marriage they moved to Ratnagiri. The room they found “was in the basement. There was a high window near the ceiling….There was a gutter in front of the door in which the water used for washing malaria slides flowed continuously. The strong smell gave me [Urmila Pawar] severe headaches” (WML 206-07). Left with no option and under compulsion, they stayed in this room. However, the situation became difficult for her when she lost her private space in such an environment: “…people passing on the road, pretending to talk to someone from the ‘malaria’ office above us, peeped into ours to see what we were doing. Finally, I hung a curtain there. However, I found the darkness…quite suffocating…” (206).

Besides some of Urmila Pawar’s friends, “…married and carried the burden of their homes on their shoulders”, faced more or less the same situation. Working as stone quarry workers, sweepers and scavengers in Mumbai, they shared one-room flats with two or three families—divided into two or three sections because of poverty: “Bhikiakka
used to tell us, ‘We sleep with our legs raised against the wall’” (151). Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s observation, “There is no such thing as a private sphere for people of Color [the marginalized other] except that which they manage to create and protect in an otherwise hostile environment” (51) holds true in context of Mahar women who suffered the denial of private space even in their marital home.

Urmila Pawar’s awakening as a Dalit woman began when she shifted to Mumbai along with her husband and started attending Dalit meetings. She was introduced to the women’s organization called Maitrini in Dadar by her friend Hira Bansode. She attended the women’s meetings regularly to listen to the discussions. This gave her a new perspective of looking at women:

The women’s movement had given me great strength to perceive every man and woman as an equal individual. It had taught me to relate to them freely, without any prejudice whatsoever!...I learnt in the women’s movement that this was the source from which women in distress could draw support. (WML 248)

She got conscious of the rights of women as individuals. She recognized the need of support system and importance of bonding among women: “Women are enriched when we bond with one another….They bond with other women on the basis of share strengths and resources. This is the woman bonding feminist movement should encourage” (hooks, Feminist Theory 45). Urmila Pawar also calls upon women to recognize their strengths: “I felt that a woman was also an individual….If man has a muscle power, woman has the power to give birth….I was slowly learning to treat the suffering woman as an equal, a friend, and provide her with support she needed” (WML 248), to feel a bond with other women, especially in reaching out to help women in distress.

Urmila Pawar in The Weave of My Life also highlights the swaying position of Dalit women in Dalit movement as well as in feminist movement:

The people from the dalit movement, however, treated women in the same discriminatory manner as if they were some inferior species, as they did the ones at home….Women’s issues did not have any place on the agenda of the dalit movement and the women’s movement was indifferent to the issues in the dalit movement. Even today things have not changed! (235-60)
Dalit women face marginalization within Dalit movement as women and within women’s movement as Dalits. Seeing the invisibility of Dalit women, Urmila Pawar along with her friends—Hira Bansode, Meenakshi Moon, Sulochana, Nanda Lokhande decided to launch Dalit Women’s Literary Organization: “a platform where Dalit women would organize, speak and share their experiences with each other, they went around Dalit localities telling people about their organization and coaxing Dalit women to become members.” This interaction with the women of her community enlightened her regarding the invisibility of Dalit women: “The primary reason being that Dalits who had good jobs and were well-settled did not want to be identified as Dalits. Besides, the upper caste people think of them as “Kokanstha Brahman”, in short “Kobras” (270). What bell hooks observes in case of Blacks who: 

…are taught that the only way we can gain any degree of economic self-sufficiency or be materially privileged is by first rejecting blackness, our history and culture, then there will always be a crisis in black identity. Internalized racism will continue to erode collective struggle for self determination (Black Looks 18),

seems appropriate in case of Dalits who in a better position never wanted to disclose their caste origins as they did not want to be humiliated, and therefore suffer “alienation from their own castes as well as their new found social class” (Pandit, Introduction The Weave of My Life xviii). They thought “…every individual must work for his own development and progress…” (WML 270). They did not want to work for the upliftment of their community members who were still suffering: “Many people in our community look after their own interests alone; they…hide their caste…” (271). Like Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar also criticizes the indifferent attitude of Dalits who are self-absorbed.

Besides another reason for the invisibility of Dalit women is the double standards and sham attitude of Dalit men who give loud sermons on women’s emancipation and empowerment but never let their wives go outside the house to share their experience with the members of the Dalit women’s organization on the argument:

…why do you think our women need this? They are already free and liberated. If they don’t get along with their husbands, they just tell them to their faces, “I can’t get along with you. Take back your dorle
“...it is painful to see that when Dalit men become the leaders their wives are relegated to the subordinate role alike all elite women” (265). Hence, in Gopal Guru’s words as stated earlier in section one of this chapter, the indifferent attitude of Dalit men towards Dalit women destroys the myth that Dalit patriarchy is democratic and Dalit women enjoy equal status with Dalit men. Moreover, as Urmila Pawar observes, in the women’s conventions organized by Dalit activists “…men are found to occupy all the chairs on the platform! Naturally, women find it very difficult to express themselves freely” (WML 259). Hence, Dalit women lose their space within the Dalit movement because of gender marginalization. Brought up in an environment where the male is the privileged one and a woman dare not speak in front of him or about him, Dalit women are relegated to margins/silence.

Urmila Pawar narrates the layers of embedded discrimination against Dalit women. When she became the branch manager in her office, the suffix like “Saheb” (235) was not used after her name: “The moment a man was promoted, he immediately became a ‘Bhausaheb’ or ‘Raosaheb’. But women remained simply, ‘Bai’, without the ‘Saheb’ even after promotions!” She remembers the tetchy of her juniors: “‘Why should she expect to be addressed as Bai Saheb?’ ‘Why should we ask for her permission?’” (235). As she was woman, the employees in her office refused to address her with respect. Moreover, she was a Dalit, so it became hard for them to accept her status above them.

Urmila Pawar suffered marginalization not only in the social sphere but also in the main literary sphere when she started writing. She was perceived as a writer of lower caliber because of her identity as a Mahar woman. There was always a pressure on her to prove her merit. Once she had a fight with her friend Vilas Kaleskar who underestimated her creative skills:
‘You will never understand it. You need an IQ for that!’….‘Suppose you were given the same opportunities that these scientists got, would you be a Newton, an Einstein, a Jayant Narlikar?’ I was so angry; I wanted to crack a coconut on his head. (233)

He found her writings neither “civilized” nor “cultured” (232). According to A.R. Rather, “…difference in sex does not contribute towards difference in intelligence…intelligence is not the birth right of a particular race or group. The ‘bright’ and ‘dull’ can be found in any race, caste or cultural group and the difference which are found can be explained in terms of environment influences” (276). Urmila Pawar corroborates this observation, when she states that IQ depends on the “opportunities” an individual “gets for his or her development” (WML 233). Hence, one’s intellect never depends upon caste or gender. Narrating her personal experience of marginalization within the literary sphere Urmila Pawar questions why the upper caste people’s writing is considered refined and cultured whereas Dalit writings are taken to be crude by upper caste people. Omprakash Valmiki, in his life narrative Joothan, asks a similar question:

Why is my caste my only identity? Many friends hint at the loudness and arrogance of my writings. They insinuate that I have imprisoned myself in a narrow circle….That is, my being Dalit and arriving at a point of view according to my environment and my socioeconomic situation ….Because in their eyes, I am only an SC, the one who stands outside the door. (134)

A Dalit writer is always recognized as Dalit. There is no consideration for creativity and individuality in her/his writing which creates a barrier between the Dalit literature and the upper caste/ mainstream literature and, hence develops no perceptiveness between the two sides.

Moreover, Ruth Manorama observes:

Civil society keeps both racism and casteism alive by the creation of stereotypes that are very similar across cultures; attributing characteristics such as laziness, lack of intelligence, and too much sexuality to the lower castes/races. Such stereotypes still abound in Indian society…and are a form of “symbolic violence” directed against the marginalized. (Channa 262)

Like Black women writers who suffer marginalization because of race and gender politics: “All segments of the literary world-whether establishment, progressive, Black,
female, or lesbian—do not know, or at least act as if they do not know, that Black women writers...exist” (B. Smith 1), the caste and gender identity of the Dalit women writers makes it difficult for them to have space in the literary arena and the traditional notions that Dalit women have less IQ complicate the situation further. Tulsidas in *Ramcharitmanas* states:

> “Dhor, gavaar, pashu aur nari
> Yeh sab tadan ke adhikari.” (qtd. in Yadava 159).

Animals, illiterates, lower castes and women should be subjected to beating. According to Tulsidas, Dalits and women are fit for beating. Under such perceptions, the space for Dalit women in society as well as in literary sphere becomes twice shrunk due to caste and gender identity.

Urmila Pawar’s life experiences illustrate that Dalit woman have marginal identity and occupy marginal space within the family and the community. Urmila Pawar “was an unwanted child because I was a girl. When I was born, my cousin Govind dada wanted to throw me away onto the dung heap. When I grew a little older, many would beat me” (*WML* 64). A daughter in Indian patriarchal society is considered a liability and “the chief miserable object” (*Manusmriti*, qtd. in B. Jhunjhunwala and M. Jhunjhunwala 184) among all classes in the Indian society. This age old custom still prevails in Indian families irrespective of caste, class, creed or colour. Vrinda Nabar observes, “The fact remains that the desire for a male child and gender infanticide has been a common practice in several cultures across the globe; that daughters have been the primary victims of infanticide everywhere” (Arpita Ghosh). A son is always preferred to a daughter. Every family wants to be blessed with a son and not a daughter. When Urmila Pawar was born, her family wanted to throw her away in the garbage. However, today she has established her name in social as well as in literary sphere making her family and community feel proud of her.

Even her *vahini* who gave birth to five daughters became a victim of barbed comments of family and society: “Every time she gave birth to a daughter, our family and community would react sharply!” (*WML* 284). This inspired Urmila Pawar to write the story “Shalya” in Marathi which was translated into English as “Pain.” Jyoti in the story
“Pain” had five daughters. She was pregnant for the sixth time. In desperation to have a son, at the time of delivery in the hospital, she persuaded the midwife to exchange her newly born daughter with a boy of the other woman: “The woman sitting outside most definitely will have a boy. And I will have a daughter. If that happens exchange our babies” (Pawar, “Pain,” 45). The story reveals the psychological dilemma of a woman desperate to have a son to secure her space and position in her family and escape community wrath. Girls are considered a liability, a burden, a worry, a responsibility, an unwelcome guest in the family. The “‘unwanted girl child’ syndrome” (Nubile 19) is also fictionalized by several Indian women writers like Rama Mehta in Inside the Haveli (1977), Kamala Markandaya in Nectar in a Sieve (1954), Shantabai Kamble in Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha (1983), etc.

Sons are must for the family as they are carriers of family’s name and progeny. No attention is given to mother’s health or her desire or her preference. Urmila Pawar’s family was complete with two children: a boy and a girl. However, her husband wanted to have another son: “‘Let’s take one more chance.’” She laments, “…how simple and easy it was to have a baby, like saying let’s have one more cup of tea!” (WML 218). Her husband’s concern was a son even at the cost of his wife’s health. Adrennine Rich comments that for centuries men desire for sons as they are considered carriers of progeny and successors of family’s property. A husband of first century B.C. instructed his wife: “If, as well may happen, you give birth to a child, if it is a boy let it live; if it is a girl, expose it” (Rich 185-86). It is by becoming a son’s mother, a woman fully achieves her physiological destiny.

As per social customs, women are dependents and can lay no claim on father’s property. Manu declares, “Day and night woman must be kept in dependence by the males (of) their families….Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protects (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence” (IX. 2-3). Close observation of her surroundings forced Urmila Pawar to raise the issue of daughter’s property rights: “‘Don’t you know that Babasaheb had asked in Hindu Code Bill to give the daughters their share of property? So come on, get up now!’” (WML 285). Like Virginia Woolf who in “A Room of One’s Own” emphasized
the economic independence for women: “…a woman must have money and a room of her own…” (6), Urmila Pawar also stresses upon women’s economic independence by claiming their right in their father’s property.

Urmila Pawar and her husband Harishchandra had a love marriage. They knew each other before marriage but once married like other men, Harishchandra started enforcing himself on her, not only in decision making but also in marital relations. She describes the night her marriage was consummated:

‘So frigid!’ He said in the morning. That was the certificate I had earned from my husband after our first night! Yet he smiled to himself. May be he did expect me to be ‘frigid’ on the first night. A sign of my being a virgin! Had I taken any initiative, he would have suspected my virginity! I was not at all frigid! I understood every move very well. However, these were being done to me against my wishes. (WML 183-84)

She confesses she was not ignorant or dumb not to understand her husband’s moves or acts but by showing unwillingness for sex through her frigid body she asserted her right on her body whereas her husband took it as a confirmation of her being a virgin. In Yajnavalkya Smriti, it is said, “One should marry a woman whose virginity is intact…” (qtd. in Chakravarti 28). It is important to keep the subject-object relationship between man and woman intact. Woman blurs out her status as a docile object the moment she expresses her sexual desire. Therefore, patriarchal society does everything to curb the sexuality of woman often taking the disguise of religious or moral ideologies. A woman who loses her virginity before marriage is considered to be promiscuous, whore or slut. However, after marriage sex becomes her moral obligation towards her husband whether she is willing or not. Rani Dharkar in her novel The Virgin Syndrome states, “…the virgin syndrome is a prevalent one “more so in India, where the idea of virginity till marriage is a fixation”” (qtd. in Chowdhury). The idea of suppressing female sexuality is a thread that keeps the patriarchal weaving of the society in place.

The name changing ceremony of the bride during marriage results in the effacement of her identity as an individual:

In India,…the bride’s name is changed by her in-laws or husband….This could be interpreted as subscribing to a new cultural code where a
woman’s identity becomes subjected to arbitrary social laws which confirm her initiation into a new patriarchal order ascertaining her subordination and repression. Changing of the name and endowing her with a new name implies how the cultural politics operates in such rituals. (M. Pandey 81)

Unable to protest against this anguish, practised on the pretext of marital rituals, splits her ‘self’ into two parts. Urmila Pawar too witnessed this pain when her name was changed during her marriage: “Somebody in the pandal said, ‘So give the bride a name…what is it?’ My sasu said, ‘Taramati!’” Harishchandra suggested, “‘Urmila! That is a good name!’”, as a result within a few seconds her name/identity “Vimal” (WML 210) was discarded and she became Urmila. The name changing ceremony of the bride during marriage shows the rejection of the identity and earlier life of the bride. It shows after marriage a bride is expected to sever her relations with her parents, as thereafter she solely belongs to her in-laws. Her fate rests with them. Only death can set her free. Shashi Deshpande in her novel That Long Silence (1988) through her protagonist Jaya also underscores the issue of the forced identity on women by male hegemonic society: “…when he wrote my name, it had been ‘Suhasini’, not Jaya. And if I disowned the name, he had never failed to say reproachfully, ‘I chose that name for you’” (15). Jaya who becomes Suhasini after marriage is unable to accept this enforced identity which becomes one of the reasons for her tragic end.

A woman in Hindu society loses her identity in marriage, relinquishes her freedom and sets about pleasing everybody in the family. Urmila, the name suggested by her husband became Urmila Pawar’s new identity, severing all her connections with her premarital life—her parents, her childhood, her youth, etc: “It is customary in Maharashtra to change the name of the bride when she gets married, which means a change of identity. One is identified by their name and changing that name means changing the identity” (Kazhungil). Urmila Pawar who was confused and not ready to accept the imposed identity, however, she later on realized that her new name identified her marginalization with Urmila, a character from the Ramayana: “She is Lakshman’s wife, always marginalized” (WML 180). The towering embodiments of ideals in the epic story end up neglecting the contributions of some characters who silently bear the consequences of others’ decisions and promises. One such mythological character
happens to be Urmila. Kavita Kane comments: “If not Sita’s sister, Urmila is known as Lakshman’s wife. That sadly is her Introduction. Not more, much less” (qtd. in “F-Page”). Urmila Pawar identifies her dilemma with the character of Urmila in *Ramayana*. She before marriage was known by the name given by her father and after marriage she became known as Urmila, the name and identity given by her husband, thereby resulting in two selves of her identity.

Besides, change of her name, Urmila Pawar also lost control on her salary which went into her husband’s pocket after her marriage: “If this is not like deliberately offering your head for the butcher’s knife, what else is it?” (*WML* 208). Despite having a government job, she remained dependent on her husband for money. When her daughter Malvika married Ravi against her father’s wishes, he told Urmila Pawar to leave the house, which she had bought with her own money, for supporting the daughter: “Don’t step into this house. I don’t want to see your face!” Mr. Pawar shouted at me.” However, she asserted herself by continuing to live in the house which prompted further humiliation from her husband. She suffered silently: “That is what a woman is trained to do in spite of such intense humiliation” (310). Patriarchy conditions women “to serve, to be weak” (hooks, “Understanding Patriarchy” 1) and to suffer and remain dependent on male members of the family all through their life.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was a strong supporter of Dalit women’s education: “Attend more to the cultivation of the mind and spirit of self-Help…But do not feed in any case your spouse or sons if they are drunkards….Education is as necessary for Females as it is for males. If you know how to read and write, there would be much progress. As you are, so your Children will be” (B. R. Ambedkar qtd. in Kalukar). Inspired by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar’s speech Urmila Pawar decided to study further. She enrolled for the M.A. course. However, her decision to study was not supported by Harishchandra. He felt “that he had lost control over his wife…” He objected: “‘Why do you want to do M.A.? Now pay more attention to the children and the house’” (*WML* 240). But she retorted:

‘Look. I am paying enough attention to the house and the children. I take good care of their food, studies and all the household work. Besides, I work in the office as well….It is you who need to pay more attention to the house now. Instead of going to the bar, why don’t you come home
early and pay some attention to their studies?... Besides, whatever I study, I do it in my spare time! Why should you object to it?’ (240-41)

Urmila Pawar’s resolve to study further and her objection to Harishchandra’s habit of drinking further annoyed her husband for whom looking after the house and children was the sole responsibility of the wife and warned “that a man has the right to behave anyway he likes” (241). He wanted her to massage his feet like the women of his village who despite toiling day and night never forgot to massage their husbands’ head and feet at night: “Patriarchy is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence” (hooks, “Understanding Patriarchy” 1). Harishchandra’s thinking was conditioned according to what he had seen since his childhood: man to rule and woman to serve. He was not ready to give up his traditional expectations: “He felt that he...had to establish his authority with an iron hand so as to keep her within bounds!” (WML 247). He never understood that Urmila Pawar was an educated and self-confident woman who “had seen the outside world and that he did not have the power to keep me confined to the narrow space of home anymore” (248). Urmila Pawar’s higher qualification hurt her husband’s ‘male’ ego. He kept on bullying his wife to break her confidence. Harishchandra is similar to the character of Michael in Audrey Thomas’ novel Latakia (1979) who resents that Rachel neither takes her identity from him nor sacrifices her writing work for love of him: “…you came to believe that anything nice which happened to me somehow lessened you in the world’s eyes” (108-09). Rachel’s success as a writer threatens Michael on both professional and personal levels. His work is unknown, while Rachel criss-crosses Canada on speaking engagements. Like Michael, Harishchandra too is jealous and feels threatened of losing his power/dominance in the family to an educated, aware and articulate wife.

The marital relation of Urmila Pawar and Harishchandra underscores that women are “defined and restrained by male boundaries” (Nubile 2). A woman is never encouraged to have an identity outside the shadows of her husband. Urmila Pawar made every effort to keep her husband happy for the survival of her marriage. Many a time she
massaged Harishchandra’s feet to keep him in good humour. However, she refused to succumb to the hegemony of the “malist culture” (Swain 128). She claimed her identity by passing her M.A. examination, continuing with her writing and participating in Dalit organizations as well as women’s programmes: “that everything that gave me an independent identity—my writing, which was getting published, my education, my participation in public programme—irritated Mr. Pawar no end. Gradually, he began to be full of resentment” (WML 246). He wanted to stop all her initiatives to establish independent identity outside his shadow. The bitterness between Urmila Pawar and her husband increased with the passage of time. From “Harischandra” (176) and “Aho” (187) he became “Mr. Pawar” (246). The address ‘Harishchandra’ and ‘Aho’ reflects love, intimacy and respect she initially felt for her husband. However, the ceremonial address ‘Mr. Pawar’ highlights the increasing distance between them presenting him as an archetypal patriarch:

The documentation of memories of the tensions within the household reveal disagreements, arguments and quarrels that started as women began to tell husbands to pay some attention to the household and the children and took important decisions regarding their public life or even made public ‘private’ matters like inter-caste marriages of daughters. The uneasiness of men for whom the gap between the images of women in their families back in the villages who served tirelessly and the wives who were getting these ‘new horns’ and their ‘helplessness’ at not always being able to nip these ‘horns in time’ (Rege, Afterword 340), who felt threatened of losing his patriarchal existence, which resulted in bickering, fights, allegations between the husband and the wife.

Sari, bangles, *kumkum, mangalsutra*, etc., are fundamental visible symbols of married women in Hindu culture. These symbols signify her marital status. Her life is productive when she bears her husband’s children. At the death of husband:

The wife’s mangalsutra is pulled out and broken at the dead husband’s feet. She is made to wear green bangles, which are also broken. She is made to wear a string of flowers in her hair, which is then pulled out and finally the kumkum on her forehead is wiped off with the toe of her husband’s left foot…. (WML 318)
Removing *kumkum, mangalsutra*, bangles and string of flowers declare her figurative death along with the death of her husband. She is a dead person waiting for the physical death of her body. She not only undergoes emotional agony because of her husband’s absence but also faces social humiliation. Urmila Pawar was pained to observe that these markers—her life, her happiness, her dressing up, her makeup, her cheerfulness—are only for her husband. The choice and desire of women stand nowhere. After Harishchandra’s death, she “refused to perform” (318) those rituals. Her refusal was an act of assertion of her individual existence and claim that her identity did not depend upon her husband besides a no/rebuff to society to define her role and status.

Domestic violence within Mahar community is a threat to Mahar women. Like Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar also addresses the issue of wife battering among Mahars in *The Weave of My Life*: “…your personal experiences, too, are not wholly yours. Others are and do form a part of your personal world. So they inevitably enter your personal experiences” (Pawar, “Urmila Pawar”). An Individual cannot be separated from her/his society. Urmila Pawar reflects on the misery of the women in her family as well as women in her neighbourhood who suffered because of domestic violence. Her cousin Susheela was married to a man in the village Partavane. Her husband and mother-in-law used to beat her brutally and drive her out of the house even on stormy dark nights: “The poor woman would take her children and cross the hills and valleys at night, her face broken, body swollen, bleeding and aching all over, and reach her mother’s house at Phansavale.” Her arrival brought disgust in her father’s eyes, “…he would bark, ‘Who’s that? Susha? All right, give her something to eat and send her back the way she’s come. She must stay with her in-laws!’” (*WML* 33). She was unable to figure out the father’s behaviour regarding Susheela: “Did he believe so firmly in the diktatt that a girl has to live with family she has been married into?” (34). The same man who insisted on education for his daughters behaved so irresponsibly in Susheela’s case: “…the culpability of parents be recognized….Their…abdication of responsibility during the period of her torment make them complicit in her abuse” (Flavia Agnes qtd. in S. Ghosh 60-61). Lack of support from her parental side made Susheela a vulnerable victim in the hands of her in-laws. She died later under mysterious circumstances in her in-laws’ house. The incident reflects that education extended its ways into the lives of people but
their minds still remained bound and obsessed with the traditional patriarchal system and codes: people became literate but not educated.

Incidents of wife beating around Urmila Pawar’s house and office area were quite common. Men did not hesitate to beat their wives on road:

One day, near our office, Hira and I were talking when suddenly I saw a drunkard hitting his wife on the face with his chappals. The poor woman, a bundle of skin-and-bones wrapped in rags, continued to take it silently, trying to shield the emaciated child in her arms from the blows and her own nakedness from the public. (WML 250)

Passers-by saw but nobody intervened to help the poor woman. Even in her in-laws’ family, her father-in-law used to beat his wife. However, the woman never resisted and when asked about the injuries she would say: “…slipped from the stairs or had been to the toilet where she slipped and fell and hurt her shoulder!” (189). This reflects how patriarchy teaches women to endure torture silently: “The good woman is sweet, gentle, loving, caring and ever sacrificing. The mainstream concept of the role of a woman seems to be best described in the anonymous Sanskrit couplet: “She (in relation to her husband) is like a mother while cooking and serving food, secretary while he is working, servant at his feet, courtesan in his bed and earth-like in forbearance” (Neera Desai and Usha Thakkar qtd. in Bhattachariya 87).

A woman who raises her voice against her husband is looked upon as a bad/evil woman irrespective of her husband’s cruelty. Urmila Pawar’s mother-in-law despite battering from her husband remained silent and hid the incidents from others in order to maintain her and her family’s honour: “If the husband calls you a whore, the whole world is ready to sleep with you” (WML 195). In Indian culture, patriarchy treats a woman with respect only based on her relationship with men in her family, community and society. Unwillingness to subject themselves to the humiliation of being identified as battered women and fear of being subject to more abuses for revealing the family secrets force Dalit women to suffer silently within the four walls of the house. In a patriarchal society, it is the male’s right to shout, abuse, bully and blame and it is the women’s duty to listen, tolerate and remain passive. The underlying theme is same, the use of violence to reinforce the indoctrination and acceptance of patriarchy.
Dalit women suffer not only at the hands of their husbands and in-laws but the community also has vindictive attitude towards them. In case a Mahar woman committed something impermissible as per societal norms she was brought before the *panchayat* for justice and punishment. She was publicly judged and beaten but no punishment for the man, her accomplice in the crime. Urmila Pawar narrates the incident when a widow in the village was found pregnant. Everybody knew who the man was. But no action was taken against him. The village ordered the widow to abort the child but she refused. At this, she was forced to stand leaning forward and women kicked her from behind till the fetus aborted. Villagers felt it was an act of bravery. In another incident, when an eight-month pregnant woman accused her husband of having an illicit affair, the villagers gave her the same punishment and within a week’s time the woman died. The silent suffering of women compels Urmila Pawar to question, “Why should this so-called honour, this murder of humanity, this tool of self-destruction, be so deeply rooted in women’s blood? Why?” (*WML* 156). Urmila Pawar in her narrative attempts to expose such women who become assistants/perpetrators in atrocities against women: “To end patriarchy (another way of naming the institutionalized sexism) we need to be clear that we are all participants in perpetuating sexism until we change our minds and hearts, until we let go of sexist thought and action and replace it with feminist thought and action” (bell hooks, *Feminism* xi). Women are tools in the perpetuation of patriarchy. Patriarchy uses women as means by crushing womanhood and turning them against one another. In order to end patriarchy, women need to liberate their minds from patriarchal thoughts/sexism and work in the interest of women which in turn would lead to humanism as feminism is not only concerned with the emancipation of women but also of men who are the victims of patriarchy.

Urmila Pawar is critical of the women who speak loudly on women’s issues but themselves are the perpetuators of violence against women. She remembers, “A woman activist was speaking like a spitfire on women’s oppression….Later I came to know that this woman had gagged her daughter-in-law and burnt her alive” (*WML* 280). She is against this sort of hypocrisy: “It is not men alone who are responsible for gender inequity and gender discrimination in our society. Women themselves are also to blame—in several cases, one generation visits onto the next the inequities of the
previous; and so the vicious circle goes on” (Armin Wandrewala qtd. in Nubile 17). It is only through awareness about their victimization that Dalit women can make efforts to gain command over their lives and emerge as the agency of reformation.

Dalits are ‘impure’ for the upper caste people but they never miss a chance to molest, touch and exploit the untouchable girls. Urmila Pawar recalls an upper caste priest who once locked himself inside the temple with a young girl from a “Komti” (WML 66) family. The girl left the temple in tears. Anupama Rao in her work The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India quotes the statement of a Satnami: “The upper castes would not touch us. They would never eat with us. But they were always ready to fornicate. For ‘doing it’ our women were not untouchable…Even after licking the private parts of Satnami women, they would not lose their purity” (234). Urmila Pawar raises a pertinent question: how do the upper castes justify their purity when they touch the body of a Dalit woman for sexual gratification? Subdahra Mitra Channa remarks, “It is political and not a sexual matter. It is pure and simple violence and violation of human rights and dignity” (267). People who shun even the shadow of Dalit women feel no violation of their purity when they rape them. This shows the subjugation of Dalit women is not based on any criteria of religion or purity or pollution as upper caste people claim. It is a matter of sexual exploitation and extraction of labour and services at the cheapest possible terms from them.

Dalit women also experience sexual exploitation in their private space. Urmila Pawar narrates many incidents of sexual harassment which the immature and innocent Dalit girls suffered at the hands of the male members of their families. A friend confided to her: “‘My stepbrother sits on my sister’s stomach and has threatened to do the same thing to me if I told anyone.’” Another friend told her, “My maternal uncle plays dolls with me and pretends to be my husband, drags me into an alcove and presses me hard.” Another woman confided, “…their neighbour comes to play with her daughter and pinches the young children particular parts of her anatomy” (WML 125). Urmila Pawar shares her own experience of sexual harassment when a farmer who used to work in their field tried to molest her. She somehow managed to escape from his clutches but did not disclose it to her mother who “would have simply torn him apart.” She knew her mother
was supportive. But in spite of this, “I was so ashamed, that I simply could not bring myself to tell her” (126). The label of being abused is disgraceful for a girl:

Violence against women and girls continues unabated in every continent, country and culture. It takes a devastating toll on women’s lives, on their families, and on society as a whole. Most societies prohibit such violence—yet the reality is that too often, it is covered up or tacitly condoned. (United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon qtd. in Murray 134)

Urmila Pawar in The Weave of My Life underscores through individual and collective incidents the exploitation of Dalit women’s bodies as sites of sexual aggression for the upper caste as well as the Dalit men: “…have secretly reveled in it, not only bullying, selling, and raping it…wanting to beat, bruise, possess, forsake, protect, and love it” (Dickerson 195). Sexual violence against Dalit women is a recurring phenomenon. However, Dalit women are now opening up, speaking publicly, sharing their experiences with each other as “Every girl, I think, goes through this experience” (WML 125), thus creating female bonding to emerge as an agency to secure space for themselves in the society.

Women’s sexuality is a silent subject in society. The repression of female sexuality through cultural codes is a form of violence against women. According to Rita Felski, in women’s life narrative “…naming the unspeakable is a coming to voice that can create new subjects, precisely because women’s marginality may be unnamable within the terms or parameters of the dominant culture” (Watson, “Unspeakable Differences,” 393). By voicing her female sexuality, Urmila Pawar has explored the unknown and unspeakable “The Dark continent” (Cixous 85). According to Helene Cixous, “We have been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty….Women must write through their bodies…they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse…” (86). Urmila Pawar in her life narrative gives space to her feminine desires. She admits that on the onset of puberty she felt a liking and attraction for the boys: “…I could feel my eyes repeatedly turning to look at the boys in my class. I blushed without reason….I liked boys a lot. I was especially keen on some of the boys in our class, like Avinash Torgalkar, Prakash Kode, Anil Dhumak and Shantanu” (WML 122).
Another taboo topic about which Urmila Pawar speaks is menstruation. Women still hesitate to talk about it among themselves or with their daughters. Archana Patkar explains: “The taboo is related to a very complex web of issues, but the starting point is an extremely patriarchal, hierarchical society responsible for the silence around menstruation” (qtd. in Mollins). Taboos regarding menstruation are the ploy of the patriarchy to subjugate women. When Urmila Pawar got her periods for the first time her mother told her to change the clothes and sit away from others: “…people in the class kept me at a distance because of my caste. Now because of this even my own people in the house would keep me away” (WML 124). Urmila Pawar bathed and changed her clothes but did not sit aloof. She moved freely everywhere as she refused to take this periodical change in her body as impurity to stay isolated: “if a person is aware of menstruation and they know the facts, they are more likely to resist restrictions and spread awareness” (Tuhin Paul qtd. in Albornoz).

Urmila Pawar, being aware, assertive and articulate, emerged from the cultural codes of an orthodox traditional society. She did not allow others to dictate her life. After finishing school, Urmila Pawar started doing temporary jobs and enrolled herself in college. During those days she usually wore skirts which prompted people to gossip about her as they considered skirts, a western outfit worn by extrovert girls: “I usually wore a skirt to the office. Why not, I reasoned. Didn’t working girls in Pune and Mumbai wear skirts? So why couldn’t I? People, of course, did not say anything to my face, but they considered me a very ‘fast’ girl?” (WML 172). Urmila Pawar asserted her individual identity by resisting the dress code designed to snatch a woman’s choice in dress selection. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, on 18th July 1927, while addressing a meeting of about three thousand women of underprivileged classes said, “None can restrict your freedom in the choice of your garments…” (qtd. in Keer 104). Urmila Pawar understood the message that in order to free themselves from political and social shackles, women must gain control first over their bodies which are always directed and managed by the patriarchy.

The closeness and connection that characterize mother-daughter relationship in The Weave of My Life attests to the presence of powerful mother figure in the narrative.
In “A Room of One’s Own”, Virginia Woolf writes, “…we think back through our mothers, if we are women” (76). Urmila Pawar thinks back to understand the circumstances and hardships of her mother’s life which propelled Urmila Pawar to improve her own position through education and self-awareness. Gloria Wade-Gayles remarks, “…mothers in Black women’s fiction are strong and devoted…they are really affectionate” (qtd. in Collins 187). Similarly, Urmila Pawar considers her mother a great support and source of strength to her. After her husband’s death, her mother worked hard with the primary aim to educate her daughter. Urmila Pawar always carried in her mind the image of her mother weaving baskets under a Vad tree: “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” (WML 64). Her mother fell ill frequently but she continued weaving the baskets: “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” (64-75). According to Suzanna Danuta Walter, “The victimization of the mother is carried over onto the daughter” (145), likewise the daughter also imbibes the strong qualities of mother like courage and perseverance. The undaunted spirit of her mother taught Urmila Pawar to remain courageous and strong even in adverse circumstances. Hence, despite the unfavorable social and cultural circumstances, her mother exercised a great influence on the persona of Urmila Pawar.

A teacher named Herlekar always selected Urmila Pawar to do the menial work in the school like cleaning the board, the classroom, collecting the dirt and disposing it off. He once slapped Urmila Pawar when she refused. Her mother came to her immediate rescue. She warned Herlekar to mend his discriminatory attitude towards her daughter:

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?” Aaye was speaking in her dialect in a voice, loud and ringing. Then she thundered, ‘Let me see you laying even a finger on my girl again and I’ll show you! Let me see how you can pass this road if you do so.’ (WML 69)

Despite her lowly status, the Dalit mother not only came forward to protect her daughter but also impart “…the necessary skills to survive” (Crew). Urmila Pawar’s mother taught
her to face the challenges of life and never succumb to discrimination and violence. She learnt from her mother to raise voice against injustice: “Guruji did not beat me again. I started going to school on time. And most important of all, I started considering my mother a great support” (69). The incident confirms Urmila Pawar’s mother as a strong individual who emerged as an agent of change and a role model for her daughter.

Subsequently, Urmila Pawar, like her mother, also emerged as an agency and support for her daughter Malvika, when her daughter wanted to marry Ravi, a boy from Uttar Pradesh, whom she loved. She supported Malvika and did not let Harischandra and others force her daughter to marry Uday, a boy of her father’s choice, whom she did not like. She also aroused the hidden strength in her younger daughter Manini to resist compulsive marriage with Uday:

‘….Are you willing to marry Uday? I have nothing to say if you are willing.’
‘No’, she said, ‘I am not at all willing.’
‘All right then. Tell your father clearly.’ (312)

She told Manini to assert herself and to explain her father that she was not interested in marrying a boy first chosen for her sister and then thrust on her. 

*The Weave of My Life* brings three generations of female members of a Dalit family together. Laxmi Pawar belongs to the first generation. Urmila Pawar belongs to the second generation. Urmila Pawar chose her mother her role model because of her fortitude, courage and determination. She imbibes these qualities from her mother to fight back familial and societal oppression. Urmila Pawar later on instilled the same strength in her daughters Malvika and Manini who belong to third generation in decision making regarding their life partners and preferences in life.

Urmila Pawar also feels a debt towards Mahar women of Phanswale whose unbreakable spirit always remained the source of inspiration and courage for her to challenge caste discrimination. Urmila Pawar unfolds her life narrative with the memories of the women of her village Phansawale that form an integral part of her life. *The Weave of My Life* opens with the phrase “WOMEN FROM OUR VILLAGE…..” (1).
In the Acknowledgements, Urmila Pawar affirms, “I must first mention a longstanding debt that I owe. The toiling women of my village climbed up and down the hills with terribly heavy loads on their heads in order to make ends meet. They carried me in their arms during this arduous journey. They indulged me so much when I was a child. I wanted to repay this debt, however inadequately” (viii). The acknowledgements emphasize the development of Urmila Pawar’s individual self connected to generations of Mahar women before her.

Urmila Pawar advocates for freedom and space for every individual in every relationship. One must not force one’s opinion on the other and it becomes all the more essential if the other is woman: “…women make more concessions and wives make the greater adjustment in marriage” (R.J., *Family* 45). Urmila Pawar admits: “I wrote my autobiography after the death of my husband. I have portrayed all shades and states of womanhood without any fear in it….I have written everything without any kind of inhibitions. I think I could not have written all this so boldly, had my husband been alive” (Pawar, “Urmila Pawar”). Like Virginia Woolf, Urmila Pawar affirms that a woman “speaks only when she is given her own space” (*WML* 216). Writing her life narrative is an act of “self-preservation and revolution” (Mohanty 51). Her life narrative becomes a space, a site for the articulation of the story of a Dalit woman not only as an individual but also as community.

Memories are the base of the life narrative on which its structure stands: “memory weighs heavily in what I write, in how I begin and in what I find to be significant” (91). Urmila Pawar through her memories of oppression in her life narrative reveals the unhidden and unspoken aspects of her life as well as of the lives of Dalit women of her community. By memorizing and weaving her experiences of marginalization and suffering in her life narrative, Urmila Pawar uses them as a baton to assert her self to tear the very net of shadows, codes and institutions which oppress and distress a Mahar woman. According to Kalpana Kannabiran and Vasanth Kannabiran, articulation indicates “awareness” (287). *The Weave of My Life* reveals the awakening, awareness and assessment of Urmila Pawar’s individual self. However, she discovers that her individual self is not separate from her social self as it is always in conflict with
oppressive social and cultural factors. She employs her awakening and understanding to voice the victimization of Dalit women: “What the writer writes about is social reality, and not his or her individual life!” (WML 230). Her awareness about herself and social system helped her to be strong and true to herself in spite of opposition not only from the society but also from within the family. Consequently, from the identity of being a victimized Mahar woman, she emerges as an active agent to gain her identity as an individual, as a writer and as a dignified Mahar woman.

To conclude, *The Prisons We Broke* and *The Weave of My Life*, both the life narratives voice the pain and sufferings of Dalit women. Both the narratives are used as ‘third space’ for the fight against and as a way of emerging from oppression. The narratives mirror the miserable conditions and subjugation of Dalit women and explore and present a “new world of experience” (Narayankar 277) unknown to the mainstream world. Mahar women as the subjects of these life narratives occupy the central place. Hunger, nakedness, humiliation, women’s bodily experiences and violence inflicted on Mahar women by high caste men and women as well as by Mahar men are the focus of these two life narratives. Memories, experiences, marginal space, violence, bewilderment, emotions, feelings and rage are employed for Dalit feminist critique of patriarchy as well as caste system. As both the narrators are from Maharashtra, the land of “emergence of an unprecedented Dalit movement under the inspiration of Ambedkar” (G. Pandey), there is the reflection of Ambedkarite struggle and expression of gratitude towards Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in the life narratives.

*The Prisons We Broke* and *The Weave of My Life* voice the distress and sufferings of Dalit women. Memories and experiences of victimization are articulated to tear down the shadows of oppression. There is an attempt to make the invisible visible, to make the silence speak. In both the narratives; the importance of education is emphasized to break the shackles of ignorance. The narrators through their life narratives attempt to carve a space and identity for themselves as individuals and as members of a marginalized section of the society. Drawing from Paul Freire, the narratives aim at the awareness about and recognition of social barriers, that is caste, class and gender which dehumanize Dalit women. The narratives break ‘the culture of silence’ and advocate the
transformation of Dalit women from victims to agents resisting oppression, marginalization and ignorance.