

The Radical Margin: De-Centering Feminism Through the Selected Works of Bell Hooks and Urmila Pawar

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ABSTRACT: Mainstream feminist discourses have often failed to represent marginalized women, focusing instead on the experiences of dominant-group women. This paper offers a comparative study of Black American feminism and Indian Dalit feminism, examining how structural oppression is expressed and resisted from the margins. It brings together bell hooks' theoretical work with the lived experience and writing of Dalit writer-activist Urmila Pawar. This paper shows how Black and Dalit women's differently shaped experiences of layered oppression produce distinct forms of feminist knowledge from the margins. Drawing on hooks' idea of the margin as a "space of radical openness" from *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, and reading it alongside the broader concept of intersectionality that Kimberlé Crenshaw developed, this paper closely examines Pawar's autobiography, *The Weave of My Life*. This comparison shows that both writers challenge dominant structures that marginalize women in different ways: hooks by critiquing white-centric feminist discourse and Pawar by exposing how Brahmanical patriarchy operates. This paper also traces how hooks' focus on race, capitalism, and gender lines up with Pawar's focus on caste, class, and gender. Ultimately, it argues that bringing Black feminist thought and Dalit feminism into dialogue creates a meaningful transnational, decolonial conversation, one that reframes subaltern agency, body politics, and solidarity within transnational feminist discourses.

KEYWORDS: Black Feminism, Dalit Feminism, bell hooks, Urmila Pawar, Intersectionality, Brahmanical Patriarchy

I. INTRODUCTION

Mainstream feminist discourses have historically had structural blind spots. They have often focused on the concerns of dominant-group women while sidelining the specific experiences of women affected by race, caste, and class. In the American context, this has meant that the movement has often been shaped by white, middle-class priorities. In the Indian context, it has meant that the movement has often been shaped by upper-caste assumptions about womanhood and feminist struggle. Black women in the United States and Dalit women in India have each, in their own historical circumstances, been sidelined by movements that claim to speak on their behalf.

This paper examines this structural gap through a close side-by-side reading of Black American feminism and Indian Dalit feminism. It traces how oppression created through more than one structure at the same time is named and resisted from the margins. It does this by practicing bell hooks' theoretical frameworks alongside the experimental and literary narratives of Dalit writer-activist Urmila Pawar. Read together, these two bodies of work reveal a strong parallel that this paper takes as its starting point. Black women in hooks' account face what this paper describes as a double oppression, with race and gender operating together; while Dalit women in Pawar's account face a triple oppression, with caste, class, and gender operating together. This descriptive distinction is not this paper's central theoretical claim. Instead, it is a starting observation that the following sections examine in greater depth. Ultimately, this paper traces how each writer turns her differently shaped experience of compounded oppression into a distinct form of feminist knowledge produced from her position at the margin.

hooks addresses her side of this problem directly in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* [1]. Drawing from her childhood in the segregated American South, hooks argues that women living at the margin of American society have a distinctive vantage point. From this position, they can see both the center and their own place within it in ways that are not possible from the center itself. She calls this vantage point "a space of radical openness". This understanding of the margin can be read alongside the broader analytical idea of intersectionality that Kimberlé Crenshaw later developed. Intersectionality recognizes that categories of identity do not operate as separate or simply additive concerns. Instead, they combine to shape a person's experience of oppression in ways that no single category can explain on its own [2].

Urmila Pawar's autobiography, published in English translation, offers an independently developed response to a structurally related problem [3]. Originally written in Marathi and translated by Maya Pandit, the memoir documents, through dated and specific

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details, how caste, class, and gender exclusion operated together throughout Pawar's life as a woman of the Mahar community in coastal Maharashtra. This paper analyzes the autobiography directly, reading it as a document that resists structural oppression from the margins with the same seriousness and rigor that hooks brings to her theoretical writing.

The comparative reading that follows shows how both authors resist dominant structures that exclude women along different lines. hooks critiques a white-centric feminism organized around the assumption that one particular kind of women's experience in the West is universal. Pawar, in contrast, exposes the workings of Brahmanical patriarchy organized around caste priority and hereditary hierarchy in India. The further sections bring these two critiques into direct comparison. They examine what the shared refusal of both assimilation and silence reveals about voice, embodiment, and the possibility of solidarity across difference.

II. METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper's method is close, side-by-side reading: a careful comparison of two primary texts, hooks' theoretical writing and Pawar's autobiographical testimony. Each text is read through the language and ideas it provides itself, rather than through one outside framework applied equally to both. The comparison focuses on three concerns that appear independently in each text: subaltern agency, body politics, and solidarity. Later sections show that these three concerns are genuinely present and independently developed in both hooks and Pawar. The section where all three are brought together and examined jointly is where the main work of this paper takes place. This is the point where the comparison itself, rather than either text alone, produces this paper's central claim.

hooks and Pawar were chosen for this comparison for a specific reason beyond their shared concern with marginality. Both writers explicitly reject a choice that is often given to someone excluded from a dominant center: either assimilation on the center's terms or silence at the margin. Instead, both place authority in the margin itself. This shared refusal, rather than any assumed similarity between their histories, is the reason for reading them together. It is also why this paper treats caste and race as related but non-equivalent systems throughout. Racial slavery in the United States was based on chattel property, racial classification, and the legal denial of personhood. Caste hierarchy in India, by contrast, was based on hereditary status, ideas of ritual purity and pollution, and the regulation of social and occupational life. These are different religious, legal, and economic systems. This paper, therefore, never treats hooks' account of race as interchangeable with Pawar's account of caste. When this paper identifies structural similarities later on, those similarities concern the shared refusal both writers make, rather than the systems that made that refusal necessary.

Existing scholarship has developed Black feminist thought and Dalit feminist thought extensively as separate bodies of theory. Some comparative work has also begun connecting the two traditions, including close attention to what one recent volume calls the analogical relationship between Black feminism and Dalit feminism [4]. What remains less developed in this growing comparative scholarship is a close reading of hooks and Pawar, specifically through the question of marginality as a source of theoretical knowledge. This is different from focusing only on intersectionality, which has already received much more comparative attention in relation to Dalit women's experiences generally. This paper's contribution is therefore narrow and specific. It does not make the broad claim that Black and Dalit feminist thought can be compared, since existing scholarship has already established this possibility. Instead, it closely reads these two particular texts and asks what happens when marginality itself, rather than any single identity category, becomes the shared analytical lens.

One final point concerns how the claims in this paper should be understood. The terms "double oppression" and "triple oppression" are used throughout simply as shorthand for the joint oppression of race and gender, and of caste, class and gender. They are not intended as complete theoretical accounts of either writer's own thinking. They also do not suggest that the two historical systems they describe are structurally the same. Some of what this paper attributes to hooks and Pawar comes directly from each writer's own language. For example, hooks' phrase "radical openness" is her own. Other claims, especially the way class is discussed later in the paper, reflect this paper's own interpretation of Pawar's narrative rather than language Pawar herself uses. With this framework in place, the sections that follow turn to hooks and Pawar's texts directly.

III. HOOKS: INTERROGATING RACE, CAPITALISM, AND GENDER

hooks opens *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* with a story from her childhood in a small, segregated town in Kentucky. Over there the railroad tracks separated the Black community from the white community. She remembers crossing between the two sides of town every day. She later understands this experience as giving her a distinctive kind of double awareness: a close and forced familiarity with both the margin and the center, and an understanding that people living at the center never had to develop in return [1]. hooks describes this awareness in spatial and perceptual terms. She writes about a way of seeing that works both from the outside in and from the inside out, allowing her to remain aware of the center and the margin at the same time. She presents the survival of Black women at the margin as depending on this dual and constant awareness – an awareness that the center itself was never forced to develop [1]. This is not simply a claim about disadvantage. hooks goes further by describing her community's position not as a lesser part of American society, but as a necessary and vital part of one whole made up of both the margin and the center. This claim already points toward the fuller argument she develops later in the book: the margin produces a kind of

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understanding that the center cannot produce because of its structural position [1]. This imbalance becomes the foundation of hooks' larger argument. Black women, in her account, live with both racial subordination and gendered subordination at the same time. These two forms of oppression cannot be addressed separately without distorting the experience of women who occupy both positions together. This is the double oppression that this paper identifies as her starting point.

She develops this observation into a sustained critique of the feminist movement of her time. Her critique focuses on race, capitalism, and gender as forces that operate together rather than as separate categories that can be addressed one at a time. She argues that mainstream feminist organizing had often assumed, without openly saying so, a universal category of "woman" shaped in practice by the concerns of white, financially secure women. These concerns included career advancement, formal legal equality, and reproductive autonomy understood in fairly narrow terms. Her reading of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* makes this point clear. hooks does not deny that Friedan's book describes something real, but she argues that this experience belonged to a narrow group. Treating this group's dissatisfaction as representative of women in general erases women whose material lives were very different from Friedan's. For Black women, hooks writes, more immediate realities often included low-paid work, unstable housing, and the constant presence of racism [1].

Her focus on capitalism completes this three-part critique. She points out that the feminist movement's early focus on bringing women into professional jobs assumed a starting position that many Black women did not have. Black women had long worked outside the home because of economic necessity, often in conditions that offered neither dignity nor opportunities for advancement. In this reading, capitalism functions less as a third status alongside race and gender and more as the economic ground on which hooks' double oppression is actually experienced. This is a distinction that this paper applies consistently throughout.

Crucially, hooks does not respond to this exclusion by trying to gain a place within an unchanged feminist center. Instead, she argues that the margin itself, because of the distinct perspectives it provides, should be recognized as a source of theory in its own right. This is the meaning of her phrase "radical openness". The margin is not only something imposed on a person. Once it is claimed rather than simply endured, it can reveal ways of seeing that the center cannot reach because of its own structural position [1]. hooks develops this argument further by distinguishing between two ways Black women might appear in feminist thought: as subjects studied by others or as thinkers who produce their own theories. Her account of the margin is specifically meant to challenge this arrangement. She argues that much otherwise well-meaning feminist scholarship had, in practice, placed Black women in the first category. Their experiences were treated as raw material for theories developed elsewhere, rather than recognizing Black women as capable of producing theory from the specific conditions of their own position. This is what it means for hooks to challenge a monolithic, white-centric feminist structure. She is not only criticizing its exclusions from the outside; she is also creating an alternative center of theoretical authority from the margin she occupies. This theoretical move continues to receive serious scholarly attention beyond its original 1984 publication. Recent work has directly taken up the task of extending hooks' feminist theory into current debates, showing that her account of the margin remains a living theoretical resource rather than something limited to one historical period [5].

IV. PAWAR: CRITIQUING CASTE, CLASS, AND GENDER

Urmila Pawar's memoir presents a documented, lived version of a similar challenge. She writes from within the layered oppression introduced at the beginning of this paper: caste, class, and gender working together as a basic condition. Her narrative repeatedly returns to specific and dated moments of exclusion connected to her family's position as Mahars, a community historically placed outside caste-Hindu society and treated as untouchable. For example, she describes how customers accepted the baskets her mother made while refusing to let her enter their homes. Instead, they required the goods to be left at the doorstep and the payment to be handed over from a careful distance. This practice was specifically meant to avoid what was believed to be ritual pollution caused by bodily contact. Moments like this appear repeatedly throughout the memoir, and this repetition is important. In Pawar's account, caste exclusion is not an abstract legal idea. It is something repeatedly enacted through and on the body.

Pawar's critique of caste is never separate from a critique of class and gender. The same moments that mark her as ritually polluting according to caste logic also mark her as a woman whose labor – delivering baskets, fetching water, and doing domestic work – was assigned specifically because of her gender within an already subordinated community. Existing scholarship of Indian feminism has pointed out that the category of "woman" cannot be treated as one uniform group. A woman's visibility, and the ways her body and labor are used politically, can differ greatly according to caste and class [6]. Pawar's memoir gives a sustained, first-person example of this layering. Her body is read and treated differently from the bodies of upper-caste women in the same region and period. Recent scholarship focused specifically on this memoir has examined this layering through the ways caste and gender shape memory in Pawar's narrative [7]. This paper reads Pawar's account of caste-assigned labor as evidence that her class position, in her particular historical context, is deeply shaped by caste rather than functioning as an independent economic condition. This is this paper's own interpretation, not a claim made in Pawar's own words. It is offered as the basis for treating caste, class, and gender together as a starting condition.

Her memoir is also shaped by her family's conversion to Buddhism, following B. R. Ambedkar's own conversion along with hundreds of thousands of his followers in 1956 [8]. She presents this conversion not as an attempt to join an existing religious center,

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but as a collective decision to build spiritual and social authority entirely outside Brahmanical Hinduism. Ambedkar's own argument that caste hierarchy could not be reformed and had to be rejected completely provides the intellectual foundation for this same move within the wider Dalit context [9]. Chakravarti's concept of Brahmanical patriarchy explains the specific historical way in which caste and gender control work together. It names the system that Pawar's memoir challenges: a single historically specific structure in which control over women's bodies, sexuality and labor is one of the main ways caste purity is maintained [10]. Read in this way, Pawar's memoir is a sustained critique of caste, class, and gender together. It challenges a system that this paper treats as an extension of Chakravarti's concept. The class dimension discussed above is this paper's own addition to that concept, not something Chakravarti herself claims. This analysis is carried out through the same kind of structural approach that hooks uses from within her own, differently layered position.

At the same time, Pawar's memoir does not romanticize this position. She writes openly about tensions within her own household, including her husband's discomfort as she became more publicly visible as a writer and activist. She understands this discomfort as evidence that a shared experience of caste exclusion does not by itself create equal standing between men and women within the same community. This detail is important for the comparison developed in this paper. It shows that Pawar, like hooks, understands marginality as internally divided. A Dalit woman's position within her own community is not the same as Dalit man's, just as hooks argues that Black women's position within the Black community differs from a Black man's [1]. The literary form Pawar uses to challenge Brahmanical patriarchy is also part of her critique. Her memoir relies heavily on oral tradition, weaving the songs and remembered speech of Mahar women directly into the written text. In doing so, she treats an oral inheritance that caste-Hindu society had long dismissed as a legitimate and central source of testimony rather than as background material to a written narrative.

Pawar's account of her own education adds another layer to this critique. She describes the difficulty of pursuing schooling as a Mahar girl at a time when formal education remained largely closed to Dalit communities. She is also careful to show that gaining an education did not remove her from her community's history of exclusion. Instead, it gave her the tools to write that history down. This prevents a possible misunderstanding of her memoir: that challenging Brahmanical patriarchy from this layered position means rejecting the resources of the center altogether. Pawar makes no such claim. She writes as a woman who fought for and eventually received a formal education, while still insisting on the value of the oral and communal knowledge that formal education is often assumed to replace.

V. TRANSNATIONAL DIALOGUE: SUBALTERN AGENCY, BODY POLITICS, AND SOLIDARITY

Read together, hooks' and Pawar's separate acts of challenge come together around three concerns that this paper treats as its main points of comparison: subaltern agency, body politics, and the possibility of solidarity among marginalized women globally.

On the question of agency, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's well-known question about who is authorized to speak for and about a subaltern position is directly relevant to both texts [11]. hooks writes as a theorist who analytically examines a position she herself occupies. Pawar writes as a direct participant who offers autobiographical testimony based on lived experience. Reading through Spivak's question, both texts can be understood as attempts to challenge the gap between being spoken about and claiming the authority to speak. hooks does this through sustained theoretical argument that claims the authority to develop theory from lived experience, while Pawar does it through the specific authority of direct and embodied witness. Patricia Hill Collins' account of Black feminist standpoint adds another layer. A shared position within connected structures of subordination can produce a standpoint from which those structures become more visible than they are from positions of relative privilege [12]. This framework also works well for reading Pawar's memoir, where the shared knowledge among Mahar women performs the same standpoint-producing function that Collins describes.

The form each writer chooses is itself part of how she builds authority. It is not simply a neutral container for her ideas. hooks' dual awareness of margin and center together is reflected in the sustained and argumentative style of her theoretical writing. This form suits the broader vision that this paper attributes to her understanding of the marginal position. Pawar's reliance on oral tradition performs a similar function through very different means. While hooks argues that the margin produces a distinctive way of seeing, Pawar's memoir demonstrates a distinctive way of telling. She brings communal orally passed-down memories into a written record that refuses to separate individual testimony from collective knowledge. Neither writer's chosen form is incidental to her argument. hooks' argument about the margin's broader vision fits especially well with the sustained theoretical form she uses. Similarly, Pawar's treatment of collective and embodied knowledge fits, in this reading, inseparable from the oral inheritance woven into her memoir. This connection between argument and form becomes clearer when hooks and Pawar are read together rather than separately. It strengthens this paper's central claim: marginality is not simply a topic that both writers discuss, but a structuring principle that shapes how each writer's text is constructed.

On the question of the body, the comparison becomes much clearer. hooks' account of controlling images directed at Black women and Pawar's account of ritual pollution enforced through physical distance and exclusion at doorways, both show how a dominant order places its hierarchy directly onto bodies. Existing scholarship on Indian feminism has argued that women's bodies become sites where caste, class, and nationalist politics are contested and used selectively. Upper-caste and Dalit women's bodies are treated in systematically different ways, even within movements that claim to be shared [6]. Reading this alongside hooks'

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account of the historical hypersexualization of Black women's bodies under slavery and its aftermath reveals a shared, though not identical, logic. The specific mechanisms are different, and these differences are important to name clearly. hooks' account of controlling images works mainly through representation and stereotypes spread through popular discourse. Pawar's account of ritual pollution works through enforced physical distance and direct avoidance of the body. It is built into the everyday pattern of who may enter which threshold. Both are forms of body politics in the sense used by this paper: systems in which hierarchy is maintained through decisions about bodies. However, there are different kinds of body politics. One is mainly representational, while the other is directly physical. A useful comparison must keep both differences in view.

This shared structure of bodily control also produces a shared, though differently expressed form of resistance. hooks' habit of deliberately moving between the margin and the center of a segregated childhood town, the same practice that produced her double awareness, can also be understood in bodily terms. Her daily crossing can be seen as a way of refusing the boundary itself, even when crossing it carried real risk. Pawar's doorstep exchange allows for a similar reading. The same moment that enacts ritual pollution's control over her body also becomes, through Pawar's decision to record it in exact physical detail decades later, a way of repositioning that body as a source of authoritative testimony rather than only as an object of control. In both cases, the body is not only the place where hierarchy is enforced. In this reading, it is also a place where violating that hierarchy, or later telling the story of it, however risky or limited, becomes a form of resistance in its own right. This double function of the body, as a site of both domination and resistance, is not fully visible in either text alone. It becomes visible through the comparison between them.

On the question of solidarity, María Lugones' idea of the "coloniality of gender" offers a useful way to understand why hooks' and Pawar's separate critiques can be read together without erasing their real differences [13]. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's critique of a universalizing Western-centered feminism that treats non-Western women as one undifferentiated group further clarifies what genuine solidarity would require [14]. It would not mean claiming that double and triple oppression are the same experience under different names. This paper explicitly rejects that claim. Instead, it would mean recognizing that both writers, working independently, arrived at a similar refusal: neither accepts assimilation into an unchanged center, and neither accepts silence at the margin. This shared refusal is what this paper treats as the basis for genuinely global solidarity among marginalized women. Such solidarity does not require identical histories of oppression. It requires a shared willingness to build authority from the margin and on the margin's own terms. A global solidarity that erases the real differences between American racial slavery and Indian caste hierarchy would repeat, on a smaller scale, the same universalizing move that both hooks and Pawar challenge. These systems have distinct religious, legal, and economic foundations. What this paper proposes, instead, is a solidarity based on structural resemblance rather than sameness, one that other marginalized women facing their own forms of layered exclusion might recognize and draw upon.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has argued that bell hooks and Urmila Pawar each challenge a dominant structure that made their communities invisible. hooks challenges white-centric feminism, while Pawar challenges Brahmanical patriarchy. Both write from positions of layered oppression: hooks from race and gender together and Pawar from caste, class, and gender together. Reading them side by side shows something that neither text shows on its own: a shared way of building authority, voice, and solidarity from the margin, without suggesting that their histories are the same. Two moments make this clear. hooks describes learning to hold both center and margin in view together. Pawar describes a body that was once controlled through ritual pollution. Decades later, she writes about that same experience in detail. By doing so, she turns her body into something that speaks with authority. Neither moment proves much on its own. Together, however, they show marginality working as a real source of knowledge, rather than simply describing exclusion.

This paper's contribution is narrower than simply arguing that Black and Dalit feminism can be compared, since other scholars have already established this possibility. What is new here is reading hooks and Pawar through marginality itself rather than through intersectionality alone. This approach brings out something that a purely intersectional reading might miss: both writers reject two options – joining an unchanged center or remaining silent at the margin. This suggests that future scholarship should pay as much attention to how each writer builds authority through language and form as it already does to their shared historical conditions.

This paper does not claim that the histories of Black and Dalit women are the same. It does not claim that intersectionality and Brahmanical patriarchy are the same idea under different names. Its contribution is intentionally limited. Future research could extend this comparison to other writers and other communities at different margins. This could help test whether the same pattern appears more broadly in feminist writing shaped by layered exclusion.

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