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Brazil and India's Cross-Cultural Paths in Literature: De Jesus and Pawar's Narratives on Marginalisation, Oppression, and Resilience

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Abstract:

This paper examines cross-cultural connections between Brazilian and Indian literatures. It explores convergent themes such as identity, displacement, resilience, and subaltern representation, while also attending to historical, geographic, and cultural differences. *Child of the Dark* 1962 (Quarto de Despejo,1960) by Carolina Maria de Jesus (1914–1977), and *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* (2009) (*Aaydan, 2003)* by Urmila Pawar (born in 1945) are women's autobiographies that organically and courageously engage in social critique, exposing oppression, gender violence, and internalized hierarchies. By reading Brazil and India in relation to each other, the paper argues that the encounter between these literatures creates a dynamic crossroads in which singular cultural experiences enable transnational plurality, ultimately revealing a common sense of human experience.

Keywords: Brazilian minority literature, Indian Dalit literature, resistance, cross-cultural comparison, cultural identity, dignity, subaltern narratives.

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Introduction

A conversation between literary texts from desperate spatiotemporal locations is a fertile ground to raise reflections about how cultures, languages, histories, and traditions come together in Literature. It enables one to explore how local and global literary movements, despite historical, temporal, geographic, and social differences feature singularities that emphasize their uniqueness, and at the same reveal common grounds regarding conflict, change, and transformation. From this perspective, world literature emerges when a work transcends its community or nation and becomes an avenue that connects cultures and times (Damrosch, 2003). Interconnections of ideas, ideologies, characters, and settings are then bound to interact and influence one another, exposing shared literary and social movements, collective suffering, and inward reflection on aspects of human nature that align with broader struggles and drive transformation.

This article seeks to raise some reflections on how, despite differences in culture, language, history, geography, and social differences, Brazil and India, two vibrant cultures in the Global South, share comparable structures of oppression and resistance by examining the work *Child of the Dark* 1962 (Quarto de Despejo,1960) by Carolina Maria de Jesus (1914–1977), and the book *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* (2009) (*Aaydan, 2003)* by Urmila Pawar (born in 1945). These are both women's autobiographies about subalternity and social exclusion. They are organic writers who portrayed their daily lives and revealed their struggles as low-class women (within class/caste systems) living under dehumanizing conditions. In their narratives, they organically and courageously engage in social critique, exposing oppression, gender violence, and internalized hierarchies. Although each preserves singularities and uniqueness, both reveal conflict, change, and transformation. This paper is grounded in produced knowledge on world literature and organic intellectuals. According to Damrosch (2003), world literature emerges when a work transcends its community or nation

and becomes an avenue that connects cultures and times. Also, Carvalhal (2006) agrees that literary works acquire new meanings through their circulation across cultural and national boundaries, establishing dialogues that place them within a broader network of world literature. That considered, the comparative study in this paper emphasizes the incredible connection across Brazil and India by presenting two organic intellectuals who gave writing to their voices and gave their share in transforming marginal societies.

Spivak (1988) declares that there is no space within the dominant political and academic systems for the subalterns to participate in a conversation. However, the rise of the organic intellectual from among the subaltern makes space for the subaltern voices to be heard. For Guru (2013), the organic intellectual can be understood as an intellectual who emerges from the lived experiences of an oppressed community and who transforms those experiences into social and political critique. Also, Jha et al. (2025) reiterate that organic intellectuals are individuals who emerge from marginalised social groups, remain connected to those communities, and transform lived experience into critical social thought. According to Santos (2017), from a Gramscian perspective, the organic intellectual emerges from the subaltern classes and assumes both educational and organisational roles, articulating collective experiences and contributing to the development of social consciousness among marginalised groups. It is with this theoretical underpinning that this paper approaches de Jesus and Pawar as organic intellectuals.

The methodology is descriptive and analytical and reveals how the narratives are interconnected by establishing the plot, settings, main characters' routines, and ideology as criteria for analysis.

The works of De Jesus and Pawar had a significant impact in their respective countries, and their translation into English has allowed their messages to cross borders.

Firstly, this article presents a description of the plot, main characters, setting, and general aspects of the narrative in Carolina Maria de Jesus and Urmila Pawar's autobiographies.

1. Carolina Maria de Jesus's Child of the Dark (1962) (*Quarto de Despejo*,1960)

Carolina Maria de Jesus's Child of the Dark (1962) (*Quarto de Despejo*,1960) is a 200-page handwritten diary that keeps a record of her life, a black woman, single mother of 3, living out of paper and other things she finds in the garbage.

1.1 Plot

Child of the Dark is a diary-based autobiographical narrative that chronicles the daily life of Carolina Maria de Jesus, a Black single mother living in the Canindé favela in São Paulo during the 1950s. The book follows her relentless struggle to provide food and shelter for her three children while earning a living as a waste picker. Through her daily entries, Carolina records the realities of hunger, poverty, violence, and social exclusion, while also commenting on politics, racism, and inequality in Brazilian society. Despite the hardships she faces, she remains determined to educate her children and pursue her passion for reading and writing. The narrative transforms her personal experiences into a powerful testimony of life in the favela and a critique of the social conditions that perpetuate poverty and marginalisation.

1.2 Setting

The setting in *Quarto de Despejo* is far more than a physical backdrop for the narrative; it functions as a powerful representation of social inequality and exclusion in mid-twentieth-century Brazil.

The setting is the *favela* of Canindé, São Paulo, from 1955 to 1960. De Jesus lives with her 3 children: João José, João Carlos, and Vera Eunice, in a one-bedroom shaky house that she describes as a very simple place:

"The roof is covered with cardboard, and the cardboard is rotten"[1] (De Jesus 128).

During her narrative, she mentions that the floor is just dirt, that there is no furniture, and no protection from the cold weather. In the neighbourhood, some people are mean to her and to her children, but also some people are helpful and merciful of her situation. She repeatedly expresses that she needs to defend and protect her oldest son because he is the one people want to blame, no matter the situation.

De Jesus also describes her city - São Paulo. She compares the city to a house and says that in São Paulo, the Palace of the Governor is the beautiful living room for visitors; the City Hall is the dining room; the city is the garden; and the *favela* is the backyard where rubbish is discarded"[2] (De Jesus 34). In this metaphor, she compares the *favela* to the area where society disposes of what it does not want to see, suggesting that it functions as a social dumping ground for the poor and marginalised. This image directly relates to the title in Portuguese, *Quarto de Despejo.*

Although the setting portrays the precarious living conditions faced by the urban poor, marked by hunger, inadequate housing, and social neglect, at the same time, it reveals the resilience, solidarity, and daily struggles of its inhabitants.

1.3 Main character: routine and insights

Carolina de Jesus portrays her daily routine as a relentless struggle for survival, shaped by poverty, hunger, and her responsibility as a single mother of three children. It revolves around recurrent activities: collecting papers and scrap materials, searching for food, managing household and neighbours, reading, and writing.

1 "O meu barraco é coberto de papelões. As paredes são de tábuas. Não tenho nada bonito para dizer da minha casa.,"
2 Eu classifico São Paulo assim: o Palácio é a sala de visita. A Prefeitura é a sala de jantar.

She pushes a cart through the streets, collecting paper, metal, bottles, and other recyclable materials, and she sells whatever she gathers to earn some money to provide a daily minimum of food for her family - at least for one meal. The income is always uncertain and never enough to feed them out of hunger.

Hunger becomes a character in the book as she dialogues. She explains that whenever she is hungry, everything appears yellow to her. She makes hunger a protagonist by creating a physical and psychological metaphor for her food deprivation. This allows a sensory experience in her narrative, making the impact of poverty on the body visible to one's perception of reality.

Carolina performs the daily tasks necessary to maintain her home, including taking care of the children, fetching water, cooking, and mending leaks and holes caused by the rain and other hazards.

In her environment, she has to deal with crime and violence, conflicts among neighbours, and political events. She reveals a critical understanding of what she sees and hears. She is aware of her condition of poverty and injustice, and she understands that she belongs to a neglected part of the population.

Although she had limited formal education, Carolina valued literature and writing. She devoted time to reading whenever possible and recorded her experiences in notebooks she often found among discarded materials. Writing became both a personal refuge and a means of social denunciation, in her words. Caroline brings out the sham of patronage as she remarks: "When it is election time, the politicians come to the favela. They promise milk, bread, jobs. After the election, they disappear"[3] (De Jesus 46). Similarly, she brings out the legacy of slavery and the

3 De quatro em quatro anos muda-se os políticos e não soluciona a fome, que tem a sua matriz nas favelas e as sucursais nos lares dos operários." (https://frasesdelivro.com.br/frase/de-quatro-em-quatro-anos-muda-se-os-politicos-e-nao-soluciona-a-fome-que-tem-a-sua-matriz-nas-favelas-e-as-sucursaes-nos-lares-dos-operarios/?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

predicament of being Black when she writes, "...and freedom meant the Negro had to work for his daily ration of beans and rice, and the work was in the cities (De Jesus 8). She brings to our notice the urban segregation as she states, "The poor wanting something. The rich not wanting to give" (De Jesus 70).

Carolina Maria de Jesus's daily routine is characterised by a constant tension between material survival and intellectual resistance. While she spends her days struggling against hunger, poverty, and social exclusion, she simultaneously transforms her experiences into a powerful literary testimony. Her routine reveals not only the hardships of favela life but also her determination, dignity, and commitment to giving voice to those marginalised by society.

De Jesus turns personal suffering into a form of literary cryout and a public appeal for the recognition of people like her. Her raw and organic narrative affirms dignity and visibility within a social order that denies both.

1.4 Ideology

The ideology underlying *Child of the Dark* is centred on social justice, human dignity, and the denunciation of poverty and inequality. Through her diary, Carolina Maria de Jesus exposes the harsh realities of life in the Canindé favela and criticises a social system that condemns millions of people to hunger, exclusion, and marginalisation. Her narrative reveals a strong awareness of class divisions and challenges the indifference of political leaders and the privileged classes toward the suffering of the poor.

The book also reflects an ideology of resilience and self-determination. Despite extreme poverty, Carolina values education, reading, and writing as means of personal empowerment and social advancement. She believes that knowledge can help individuals overcome social barriers and achieve a better life. Throughout the narrative, she expresses a desire for dignity, independence, and recognition, refusing to accept poverty as a natural or permanent condition.

In addition, the memoir contains reflections on race and gender. As a Black woman and single mother, Carolina exposes the multiple forms of discrimination faced by marginalized groups in Brazilian society. Her observations reveal how poverty, racism, and gender inequality intersect to shape everyday experiences. Ultimately, *Child of the Dark* advocates a more humane and equitable society, one in which all people have access to food, housing, education, and the opportunity to live with dignity.

2. Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan* (2003)

Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan* (2003) is an organic narrative that represents a later moment in Dalit women's life writing and dives into a reflective diary of her condition. Pawar's autobiography is written in the first person. Given Pawar's active role in documenting Dalit Women's resistance and significant contributions to Dr. Ambedkar's anti-caste social movement through her text 'Amhihi *Itihas Ghadavala* (W*e Also Made History,1989*) co-authored with Meenakshi Menon, one cannot but notice a strong feminist Dalit activist perspective in her autobiography.

2.1 Plot

The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs recounts Urmila Pawar's journey from a poor Dalit childhood in the Konkan region of Maharashtra to becoming an educated woman, writer, and social activist. The memoir chronicles her experiences of caste discrimination, gender inequality, poverty, and social exclusion, while also highlighting the importance of education, family support, and the influence of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's social movement. Through personal memories and reflections, Pawar portrays the struggles and achievements of Dalit women in post-independence India, revealing how individual resilience and collective activism can challenge oppressive social structures.

2.2 Setting

The setting of *The Weave of My Life* spans both rural and urban Maharashtra and plays a crucial role in shaping Urmila Pawar's experiences as a Dalit woman. The memoir begins in the Konkan region on the western coast of India, where Pawar spends her childhood in a Mahar community. The Konkan landscape is depicted through its villages, forests, agricultural fields, and coastal environment, creating a vivid backdrop for the narrative. However, this natural beauty contrasts sharply with the social realities of caste discrimination, poverty, and exclusion that structure everyday life. Pawar's village is not merely a geographical location but a social space where caste identities determine opportunities, relationships, and access to resources.

As the narrative progresses, the setting shifts to Mumbai, reflecting both personal and social transformation. The city represents education, employment, political awareness, and greater social mobility. Yet, urban life does not completely erase caste and gender inequalities. Instead, Pawar reveals how discrimination continues to operate in new forms within modern institutions and workplaces. Through this movement from the rural Konkan to metropolitan Mumbai, the memoir traces the journey of a Dalit woman negotiating multiple identities and challenging systems of oppression.

The setting therefore functions as more than a physical backdrop. It serves as a reflection of the social structures that shape Dalit lives while simultaneously highlighting processes of resistance, education, and empowerment. By portraying both village and city life, Pawar demonstrates how caste, gender, and class inequalities permeate different environments, making the setting a central element in her critique of Indian society.

2.3 Main character and insights

The main character and narrator of *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* is Urmila Pawar herself. The memoir follows her life from childhood in a poor Dalit community

in rural Maharashtra to adulthood as an educated woman, writer, and activist. Her daily routine changes throughout the narrative, reflecting different stages of her life. As a child, she helps her family with household chores and observes the hardships faced by Dalit women, especially her mother, who supports the family through basket weaving. As a student, Pawar dedicates herself to education despite economic difficulties and social discrimination. Later, as a wife, mother, employee, and activist, she balances domestic responsibilities with professional work and participation in social movements. Memory, domestic labour, and cultural practices are placed in the *aaydan*, a bamboo basket woven by Mahar women, which functions as a repository of historical knowledge. Pawar's reflections speak up for caste oppression and patriarchy within Dalit communities. Pawar underlines the practice of lower-caste exclusion when she remarks that the Dalits, or untouchables, are India's poorest community and are forbidden from performing other tasks than undesirable and unsanitary duties (Pawar, 2009).

Pawar's awareness of her community's spatial exclusion is evident in the following lines: "…most often they live on menial, low-paying means of subsistence," *no independent means of living* and often working as agricultural labourers because they do not own land or such other property" (Singh 12).

Through her experiences, Pawar develops important insights about caste, gender, and social inequality. She recognises that discrimination is deeply embedded in Indian society and affects nearly every aspect of Dalit life, including education, employment, marriage, and social relationships. At the same time, she emphasises the transformative power of education, collective action, and political awareness. Influenced by the ideas of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, Pawar comes to understand that social change requires both personal determination and collective struggle. Her reflections reveal a growing consciousness of the intersection between caste and gender oppression, highlighting the particular challenges faced by Dalit women.

Throughout the memoir, she demonstrates resilience and a commitment to social justice, transforming personal memories into a broader critique of inequality and exclusion in India.

2.4 Ideology

The ideology underlying *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* is rooted in Dalit consciousness, social justice, equality, and women's empowerment. Throughout the memoir, Urmila Pawar challenges the caste system and exposes the discrimination, exclusion, and humiliation experienced by Dalit communities in India. Influenced by the teachings of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, she advocates education, self-respect, and collective action as essential tools for overcoming social oppression and achieving dignity.

The memoir also reflects a strong feminist perspective. Pawar demonstrates the double bind for Dalit women as they face the caste as well as gender discrimination. By narrating her own experiences and those of other women, she critiques patriarchal structures within society and highlights the contributions of women to social change. Her narrative promotes the values of equality, human dignity, resistance, and social transformation, while encouraging marginalised groups to challenge oppressive systems and claim their rights.

Ultimately, the memoir's ideology is one of empowerment and liberation. Pawar presents education, political awareness, and community solidarity as pathways toward a more just and inclusive society, where individuals are valued not according to caste or gender, but according to their humanity.

Each subaltern autobiography, although singular in its place and time, is a unified mode to promote changes in structural practices that maintain subalternity. From Carolina’s immediacy to Pawar’s feminist reflection, life writing becomes a dynamic instrument of cultural resistance across the Global South. Their convergence invites a South–to-South

comparative perspective in which autobiography operates as a form of political agency, transforming marginal lives into transnational histories of strength and resilience.

3. Final Comments: Writing from suffering: comparing autobiographies

The autobiographical works of Carolina Maria de Jesus and Urmila Pawar reveal how women writing from structurally marginalised positions reveal the unseen and the unheard. Although situated in distinct national contexts of Brazil and India, these authors share comparable conditions of exclusion shaped by structural subalternity. In Brazil, slavery, genre, patronage, urban segregation, and racial capitalism are the main foundations of social exclusion and subordination. Similarly, in India, the main foundations of subalternity include the caste system, gender, patriarchy, and spatial exclusion and socio-spatial segregation,

A common feature among the works discussed is that, except for Urmila's *Aaydan* (2003), they were produced within the same historical period, which suggests that, despite geographical distance, literary movements advocating for subaltern groups were emerging simultaneously across continents. The impact of those voices on society is profound: their writing rendered visible lives and experiences that had long been ignored, making the invisible visible while also challenging paradigms designed to preserve elite interests. Their singularities were, in fact, part of a world, a broader global movement toward greater human awareness and social transformation. Language shapes reality, and those writers expanded the concept of subalternity. Subalternity is no longer a word defined solely by oppression, suffering, cruelty, and marginalisation; it increasingly becomes associated with resistance, resilience, courage, and dignity. In this sense, Brazil and India share a commitment to social justice and to the pursuit of a more humane society.

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4 This article is an original and authentic one. The authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) for language refinement and clarity during the revision process.

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