

Caste and Silence: The Psychic Transmission of Trauma in Dalit Women

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ABSTRACT

For decades, Dalit narratives have been primarily examined through sociological and historical lenses, often neglecting the psychic dimension of caste exclusion and its transgenerational effects. This article proposes a critical listening to this dimension by investigating how the trauma of untouchability is psychically inscribed and transmitted among Dalit women, based on the autobiography *The Weave of My Life* (2022), by Urmila Pawar. Drawing on critical psychoanalysis, French Discourse Analysis, and subaltern studies, the analysis explores how trauma operates as an affective and historical grammar. Scenes involving shame, silence, bodily violence, sexual harassment, and symbolic dispossession are examined. The findings suggest that caste suffering is transmitted through sensitive, non-discursive inscriptions such as the body, affect, and gesture, constituting a legacy that speaks through silence. The autobiography thus becomes a space for reinscribing trauma and collectively elaborating memory. As a key contribution, the study proposes a decentred clinic that affirms the epistemic legitimacy of Dalit testimony and challenges universalist paradigms in psychoanalytic theory to enable a situated listening of historical suffering.

Keywords: *Dalit Women, Psychic Trauma, Silence, Postcolonial Psychoanalysis*

The caste system in India, though legally abolished by the 1950 Constitution, continues to function as a material and symbolic structure of hierarchy (Apoliano et al., 2022; Hofbauer, 2020). Ambedkar (2020/2014) demonstrated that caste, beyond being a religious system, is a mechanism of social control founded on endogamy and ritual segregation. Through this logic, the purity of Brahmin lineages and the subordination of others are maintained, converting spiritual morality into a hereditary privilege that naturalizes inequality. Far from being a remnant of the past, untouchability endures an active regime of exclusion that regulates access to rights, resources, and social relations, inscribing itself in institutions and in consciousness (Ambedkar, 1916/2020, 1948/2024).

This persistence, despite formal abolition, exposes a gap rarely explored by psychoanalytic and discursive studies: how caste exclusion is psychically lived, felt, and transmitted. While there is a substantial sociological and feminist literature on caste and gender, few studies

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investigate the subjective and intergenerational dimensions of Dalit trauma. This article approaches precisely that dimension, conceiving the body and language as sites where violence is recorded and reactivated.

The guiding question is: how is the trauma of caste exclusion psychically inscribed and transmitted among Dalit women, as portrayed in Urmila Pawar's autobiography *The Weave of My Life* (2022)? The analysis aims to comprehend both explicit experiences of discrimination and the subtler ways trauma emerges through affect, gesture, and silence. We propose that caste trauma operates through affective grammars of shame and silence that are embodied and transmitted across generations. These threads sustain the Brahminical order by converting hierarchy into moral habit and exclusion into emotional learning. Understanding this psychic and corporeal inscription therefore requires listening to trauma as both language and silence.

According to Chakravarti (2018), caste functions as a political technology of domination that articulates sexuality, reproduction, and bodily control to the logic of purity and pollution on which Brahminical authority is structured. Even under an egalitarian legal framework, this ideology silently infiltrates everyday life. Ambedkar (1948/2024) explains that the Brahmin caste's historical claim to divine origin and scriptural knowledge evolved into hereditary privilege, ensuring that prestige and authority would persist irrespective of merit. Within this framework, *Dalit*, literally *crushed* or *oppressed*, marks a social identity historically burdened with dehumanization and stigma. Ambedkar (1916/2020, 1948/2024) showed that untouchability is not rooted in impurity but emerged as political retaliation against those who resisted Brahminical hegemony. Caste thus converts differences of occupation into hierarchies of purity and codifies inequality as divine order.

Keerthana (2022) observes that being Dalit is not a status overcome by education or professional achievement; it is a socially imposed identity that persists as stigma. The term *Dalit* becomes, therefore, a political assertion of shared resistance. Rege (2006) further argues that Dalit women are subjected to multiple forms of oppression, by caste, gender, and class, rendered invisible both in upper-caste feminism and within the male-centered Dalit movement itself. Together with Guru (1995), she emphasizes that Dalit women's testimonies disrupt hegemonic systems of domination and epistemic authority.

In this context, the present study undertakes a psychoanalytic reading of *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* (2022) by Urmila Pawar, writer and activist, whose narrative intertwines childhood, caste identity, gender, and political awakening. Her testimony reveals how social exclusion becomes embodied, shaping subjectivity and collective memory.

Fanon (1952/2020) helps elucidate this psychic mechanism: under systemic oppression, the gaze of the other turns inward as self-surveillance, forming identities grounded in negation. Following Khanna (2003), this article reinterprets psychoanalytic notions such as trauma, repression, and identification through Dalit women's lived experience, adopting a *situated postcolonial psychoanalysis* attentive to silences and affects produced in subalternized bodies. Khanna's critique of the universal subject converges with Nandy's (1995) analysis of modern historicism, which reveals how Western epistemology erases alternative forms of memory and selfhood. As Domingues (2010) explains, Nandy's *critical traditionalism* recuperates indigenous modes of thought that modern rationalism had marginalized, suggesting that the subject is constituted by multiple, non-convergent civilizational layers.

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To recognize this multiplicity is to affirm that clinical listening must move beyond universal models of subjectivity. As Nandy (1995, p. 44) warns, modern historicism *absolutizes the past* and pathologizes other modes of remembrance. This critique resonates within psychoanalysis itself, which tends to interpret trauma along linear temporalities, event, repression, elaboration, whereas in Dalit contexts, suffering circulates through silence, gesture, and collective memory.

Following Rolnik (2019), the body is understood here as a micropolitical territory traversed by colonial and institutional forces, yet capable of transforming pain into invention. From this perspective, psychoanalysis can serve as a mode of listening to social and historical suffering rather than merely intrapsychic disorder.

The choice of Pawar's autobiography rests on its testimonial force: her writing exposes how caste violence endures as embodied memory. As Rege (2006) notes, Dalit women's *testimonios* are not only life stories but epistemological interventions. Thus, to listen to them is to displace both clinical theory and academic discourse toward historically silenced voices.

Anchored in the articulation between psychoanalysis and discourse analysis, this study examines the *inscription* and *transmission* of trauma through three analytical axes: (1) silence and shame, the affective language of exclusion; (2) transmission of suffering, as non-symbolized inheritance; and (3) body and trauma, as inscription of violence and resistance. By listening to what caste silences, this article affirms the epistemic legitimacy of Dalit testimony and advances a decentered, ethical psychoanalytic practice attuned to historical suffering.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory, and interpretive approach, aimed at understanding the meanings produced around the caste exclusion experienced by Dalit women, based on the psychoanalytic listening of the effects of meaning present in an autobiographical discourse. The analysis is based on the framework of French-oriented Discourse Analysis (DA), formulated by Michel Pêcheux (2002), whose proposal articulates language, ideology, and the unconscious, understanding discourse as a materiality crossed by discursive formations, conditions of production, and processes of constitution of the subject. This perspective rejects the idea of transparent or neutral language and starts from the assumption that every saying is crossed by the unsaid, silences, repetitions, and displacements, that is, marks of the constitutive opacity of the subject in language (Orlandi, 2007, 2018).

The methodological path was constructed in four interdependent moments, articulating selection, reading, coding, and interpretation. Initially, the autobiography *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* (2022), by Urmila Pawar, an Indian writer whose trajectory crosses the fields of militancy, literature, and subjectivity, was chosen as the main corpus. The choice of the work is justified by its political and symbolic value as a testimony of caste exclusion and by its discursive power to problematize the relationship between body, language, and trauma.

As inclusion criteria, the presence of explicit scenes of exclusion, humiliation, silence, or bodily violence was considered, as well as their relevance to the thematic axis of the transmission of suffering. Other Dalit autobiographies, such as *Karukku* (Bama, 2014) and

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The Prisons We Broke (Kamble, 2018), were consulted only in a complementary way, with the aim of interpretative triangulation, not integrating the main corpus.

The full reading of Pawar's autobiography was carried out in the form of a listening to the effects of meaning, privileging the recurrences of affects, bodily images, and discursive silences. The floating reading procedure made it possible to recognize thematic nuclei that are repeated throughout the narrative. Analytical saturation was achieved when new passages no longer added relevant interpretative elements to the central axes of the investigation, ensuring consistency to the emerging categories. During the process, reflective notes (memos) were produced that served as an instrument of self-reflexivity on the possible biases of the researchers.

After the initial reading and coding, the selected excerpts were organized according to an interpretative axis composed of four main dimensions: the narrated scene, the identified discursive mark (word, gesture, metaphor, or silence), the psychoanalytic concept mobilized, and the derived analytical implication. This stage was intended to ensure coherence between the empirical materials and the theoretical inferences. From this procedure, an interpretative matrix was elaborated that synthesizes the most representative scenes of the corpus.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the central objective of this study, the analysis sought to understand how the trauma of caste exclusion is psychically inscribed and transmitted among Dalit women, through the autobiography of Urmila Pawar. To systematize the interpretive process and make visible the relationships between narrated scenes and their discursive and affective effects, an analytical matrix was developed that synthesizes the coding process and the main categories emerging from the corpus. This matrix highlights how language and the body operate as symbolic repositories of caste trauma. Table 1, presented below, compiles the eleven most representative scenes from Pawar's narrative, connecting each discursive mark to its thematic axis and analytical implication. These episodes reveal the dense network of gestures, gazes, and silences through which humiliation and resistance are simultaneously enacted.

Table 1 Interpretive matrix: scene, discursive mark, and analytical implication

Scene	Discursive mark	Analytical implication
Tree ritual	The "contaminating" shadow and the distant Brahmin	The Dalit body is constituted as a moral danger; the gaze of the other establishes a position of dirt and exclusion.
Coin thrown from above	Gesture without contact; purification of the offering	Bodily distance becomes a narrative of class and caste; the gesture replaces the word and establishes a pedagogy of social place.
Shame of the mother's sari	Tattered clothes and disheveled hair	The daughter introjects society's demeaning gaze; the maternal body becomes a mirror of devaluation and affective transmission.
Humiliation at school	Classmate's fixed gaze and the feeling of "dying a million times"	The other's gaze produces a collapse of social bonds; the petrified body is a symptom of collective repression.
Hunger and alcohol	"Fires of hunger burned in their stomachs"	Material deprivation becomes a language of helplessness; alcohol functions as a narcotic defense in the face of chronic hunger.
Father's illness and death	Swollen stomach and draining of water	The un-symbolized parental pain is embodied by the daughters; the lamp over the mother's

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Scene	Discursive mark	Analytical implication
		belly makes the inheritance of suffering visible.
Bent bodies of women	“Backs bent like bows”	The curvature stages historical subjection; the bent gesture is a silent writing of oppression.
Maternal nakedness	“Trying to protect the skeletal child from nakedness and public gazes”	The exposure of the Dalit female body reveals double victimization, condensing motherhood and humiliation.
Symbolic death through the gaze	“He looked at me and I died a million times”	The gaze of the other wounds the self; the symbolic death expresses the internalization of social contempt and the repetition of visual trauma.
Sexual harassment (“the snake”)	“The bastard showed his snake”	The female body is taken as colonial territory; the gaze and the act confirm its position as an object of consumption.
Punitive haircut	“Her hair was cut as punishment”	The forced cutting neutralizes eroticism and imposes obedience; the female body is divested of power and reinscribed as a sign of submission.

The results confirm what Ambedkar (1916/2020, 1948/2024) had already identified as the core of caste perpetuation: the naturalization of the principle of purity and the introjection of inequality as a moral law. The symbolic violence that structures the Brahmanic system reappears in Pawar’s narrative as an *affective mechanism of shame*, sustained by the internalization of the hierarchical gaze and the silent repetition of exclusion.

Table 1 shows that the selected scenes condense, in symbolic form, the ways in which the trauma of caste exclusion manifests itself in the body and in language. In them, violence appears naturalized in gestures, gazes, and silences that are repeated from generation to generation. By articulating the discursive marks and psychoanalytic concepts, the matrix reveals that Dalit suffering is produced by an affective economy of shame, humiliation, and dehumanization.

These results point to the complex interdependence between the social and the psychic, showing that trauma is not limited to the event and is reinscribed as embodied inheritance, both individual and collective. Based on these findings, the analysis was organized into three interconnected axes that structure the psychoanalytic and discursive reading of the work. These axes are not presented linearly, but as complementary dimensions of a single process: the inscription and transmission of Dalit trauma.

Silence and shame: the affective language of exclusion

The scenes evoked by Pawar about the tree ritual, the coin thrown from above, and the humiliation at school operate as pedagogical devices of a social order based on purity and separation. These episodes do not appear in the narrative merely as descriptions of traumatic events, but as modes of affective inscription of caste in the body and in language. Each gesture of refusal, each humiliating gaze, each silence imposed becomes a lesson about the social place that the Dalit girl must occupy. It is a pedagogy of shame that perpetuates itself without the need for explicit physical violence, for it acts directly on the plane of affect.

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Shame, in this context, fulfills a double function: subjective and political. As Tomkins (1963) describes, shame is one of the most disorganizing affects of the *self*, since it is directly linked to the perception of inappropriate exposure before the other. It is produced at the moment when the subject sees themselves under a gaze that disauthorizes or invalidates them. Nathanson (1994) complements this theory by asserting that shame is an affect of disintegration: it paralyzes, isolates, and marks the subject with the feeling of non-belonging. In Pawar's accounts, this process appears clearly in the school scene: the narrator describes the intensity of her classmate's gaze as an experience of symbolic death, a moment in which the self dissolves under the power of the social gaze.

Scheff (2000), in turn, proposes that shame is the central affect that maintains or breaks social bonds. From a sociological perspective, the author explains that the feeling of shame indicates a threat to the social bond, a sign of exclusion that, if not repaired, becomes structural. Applied to the context of caste, this theory allows us to understand how shame functions as a mechanism for producing and maintaining subalternity: it signals and naturalizes exclusion. The Dalit child learns from a very early age that her presence is excessive, that her body is contaminating, and that her voice is disauthorized. This is taught implicitly through gesture: the food thrown from above, the Brahmin who does not touch, the silence that imposes itself.

On the discursive level, the Brahmanic order operates through a coded language of purity that structures social relations from the most banal gesture to the institutional organization of daily life. Chakravarti (2018) emphasizes that the caste system is sustained not only by religious prohibitions or state laws but by a symbolic economy of internalized values. This economy shapes what can be touched, whom one may look at, who may speak, and who must remain silent. In this context, the silence of Dalit women and Dalit girls, like Urmila, is the effect of a narrative that naturalizes inequality and transforms it into a moral habit.

Rege (2006), in turn, deepens this reading by pointing out that shame is one of the main regulatory devices of the Dalit female body. When analyzing the testimonies and autobiographies of subaltern women, the author argues that the shame imposed through the body, the voice, and presence is a form of moral discipline. The pedagogy of shame functions as a technology of domination because it is internalized even before the awareness of injustice. The language of exclusion, therefore, is not limited to words; it inhabits rituals, gazes, and silences that guide everyday relations.

Nandy (1995) contributes to this analysis by suggesting that systems of domination operate within the moral imagination of subjects and in their bodies. For him, the internalization of inferiority is the most devastating result of power: it convinces the subalterns that their inferior position is just, or even desirable. In this sense, shame ceases to be a contingent affect and becomes a matrix of subjectivation. What Pawar narrates, in describing rituals of separation and the gaze of the other, is precisely this process of moral colonization: an affective learning about her place in the social hierarchy.

The evocation of the concept of *living outside history*, proposed by Nandy (1995), resonates here as a political gesture of refusal. To be outside dominant history is not to remain silent but to claim other ways of narrating lived experience; forms that escape Brahmanic rationality and contemporary linearity. Shame, in this register, besides being oppressive, also becomes a field of rupture. By writing her autobiography, Pawar removes shame from

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silence and reinscribes it as discourse: that which was pedagogical and normative becomes testimony and resistance.

Silence, therefore, is the effect of a shame historically embodied and transmitted. It is an affective pedagogy that sustains itself by updating from generation to generation.

Transmission of suffering: inheritances that hurt in the body

In *The Weave of My Life*, suffering is not an isolated event or something confined to the past; it reverberates silently between generations, crossing bodies, gestures, and destinies. The accounts of the father's illness and death, the mother's abdominal pain, the hunger that burns the stomach, the silence in the face of humiliation, and the maternal plea for the daughters to study are not only elements of family memory but condensations of pain transmitted through repetition and inscription. Trauma is dramatized in the body. It manifests through the gaze, the absence of touch, illness, the silence of shame, and gestures of care that persist across time. In this sense, psychoanalysis offers tools to think about traumatic transmission through non-discursive pathways.

Abraham and Torok (1972/1978), when introducing the concept of the *crypt*, show that certain traumas, for not finding the possibility of symbolization, are psychically enclosed, forming an inner tomb where the unspeakable remains active. The crypt preserves the trauma as a living presence that later resurfaces in the form of symptoms, without the subject knowing its origin. In Pawar's writing, images such as the lamp burning over the mother's belly and the father's swollen stomach in agony appear as encrypted signs of pain. They are sensitive inscriptions of what could not be said, and which insist on reappearing.

Ferenczi (1932/1990) had already intuited that trauma can be cumulative, structuring itself over time through small wounds that repeat and accumulate until the mind can no longer contain them. He describes how trauma may remain silent in one body and speak in another: suffering is transgenerationally displaced and reappears in new subjects who, without having lived the original experience directly, carry its effects. In Pawar, this is manifested in the maternal desire for the daughters to study as a way to break with the pain of submission. This seemingly emancipatory gesture is imbued with the memory of what was silenced. The project of liberation is paradoxically intertwined with the inheritance of humiliation.

This relational dimension of suffering becomes clearer when we consider that it is transmitted through the body and affects, and not through conscious speech. Rolnik (2019), when thinking of the body as a micropolitical territory, argues that it stores and reactivates historical affects, especially those linked to coloniality and structural violence. In her reading, the body is not passive but a living archive of social and historical forces that inscribe themselves in it, often beyond consciousness. In Pawar's text, this bodily memory appears both in the signs of physical suffering and in gestures of care and survival repeated between mothers and daughters.

Shrishti Yadav's (2024) study on the Partition of India offers a powerful analytical counterpoint. When investigating the silence of Dalit women in the face of sexual violence during the Partition, Yadav shows that collective trauma, as in Pawar, was neither dissolved over time nor symbolized by public narratives. On the contrary, it was transmitted silently through female bodies and through the social impositions of motherhood, purity, and obedience. Many women, kidnapped and violated, were forced to abandon the children born out of wedlock, the result of violence that, for the State and dominant morality, represented

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the epitome of humiliation. These children, deprived of belonging and legitimate language, became, as Yadav writes, living mirrors of collective shame whose only possible form of bond was shared silence.

This inheritance of violence, observed by Yadav (2024), is shaped and amplified by political institutions, religion, and the nation-state, which decide who can remember, who must forget, and which maternities are considered legitimate. Similarly, in Pawar, the project of educating the daughters carries, alongside a desire for transformation, a moral imperative of silent overcoming of pain. Dalit mothers are often compelled to work through suffering without symbolic tools, a movement that paradoxically reinscribes trauma as an effort of transcendence.

This articulation between affect, politics, and memory shows that the transmission of suffering, beyond being a psychic process, is historical and discursive. Daughters carry in their bodies and behaviors the un-symbolized pain of their parents and the failed yet persistent attempts at elaboration. The autobiography, by narrating this process, transforms silence into discourse, gesture into language, and trauma into testimony. The body, once invaded and forbidden, becomes the living writing of suffering and resistance.

This logic of transgenerational transmission also calls for an ethics of listening and naming. As Ferenczi (1932/1990) reminds us, un-symbolized pain needs another who can welcome it without violence, someone able to bear the weight of the unsaid. Pawar's writing, by inviting the reader to occupy this place of listening, mobilizes both individual memory and a collective awareness of historical suffering. The trauma of caste exclusion is not private; it is transindividual, and its transmission reveals both the persistence of suffering and the desire for overcoming.

Understanding the transmission of suffering in the Dalit context requires shifting the focus from trauma as rupture to trauma as inheritance. It involves continuous processes of devaluation, humiliation, and silencing, which are embodied and perpetuated through affective pathways. However, as Pawar shows, this inheritance can also be re-signified. The act of writing, narrating, and giving form to pain becomes a political act of survival, healing, and re-existence.

Body and trauma: inscriptions of violence and resistance

In *The Weave of My Life*, the body of Dalit women appears as the surface where historical regimes of violence, subjection, and symbolic dispossession are inscribed. The narrated scenes reveal that the body is more than a metaphor of suffering; it is the very battlefield where disputes between hierarchy and dignity, silencing and memory, symbolic death and reinvention are fought.

Frantz Fanon (1952/2020), in his analysis of the internalization of colonial racism, offers an important perspective to understand the narcissistic wound that opens when the body is seen and constructed as a sign of inferiority. In the episode in which Pawar describes sexual harassment with the phrase "he showed his snake", the author exposes the aggression. Fanon demonstrates that, before the racializing gaze, the subject is no longer the owner of his image, but captured by an optical regime that defines, classifies, and subjugates.

This process becomes radicalized in the scene of maternal nakedness, in which the body of the Dalit woman, trying to protect the child from hunger and from the public gaze, becomes

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an emblematic image of the coloniality of gender and of the moral expropriation of poverty. Here, the gaze that humiliates is the gaze of a social structure that consumes nakedness as a spectacle of inferiority. The exposed body becomes a naturalized sign of the Brahmanic order, as if it visually confirmed the narrative of impurity and indignity associated with the oppressed castes.

Khanna (2003) proposes the concept of *symbolic dispossession* to name the violence that occurs in the body and in its capacity to signify. The Dalit female body, when punished with the forced cutting of hair, is torn from its symbolic agency, suffering physical violence and being prevented from constructing and controlling its own narrative of self. In this sense, the body becomes a field of dispossession.

However, this reading does not end in loss. In Rolnik (2019), the body is also the place where pain is transformed into the power of reinvention. When Pawar describes the “backs bent like bows” of Dalit women, she does not do so as a portrait of defeat. The image carries an essential ambiguity: on the one hand, it stages the historical subjection of a class and a gender; on the other, it condenses the strength of a life that has not broken. It has only bent, insisting on continuing.

The autobiography is a gesture of reinscription in language. What was once forbidden, such as hunger, nakedness, harassment, or exhausting work, becomes enunciation. Violence, when narrated, loses its monopoly over silence; it is confronted by the word that, although marked by pain, is also affirmative of a subjectivity that refuses to disappear. This psychic operation of naming the unnameable and giving body to what has been stripped of voice is, in the Freudian and Ferenczian sense, a form of symbolic elaboration of trauma.

By articulating the colonizing gaze, the disciplinary inscription, and the embodied resistance, Pawar’s scenes reveal that the Dalit female body is simultaneously wound and voice, ruin and insurrection. The curved posture, the persistent silence, and the gesture of covering nakedness are fragments of an affective dynamic that transmits more than submission.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of Pawar’s work showed that caste trauma is not limited to historical events of violence. It continues to reproduce and update itself through an affective narrative of shame and silence that crosses generations and is inscribed in bodies and everyday gestures. The study offers an analytical-clinical framework that articulates enunciation, silence, affect, and body as axes for reading collective trauma. By proposing a situated psychoanalysis, it displaces the universalist gaze of theory and recognizes Dalit suffering as simultaneously psychic, historical, and political. This perspective suggests an ethical listening grounded in the awareness that interpretation is always political. Listening, in this sense, means recognizing the subject’s multiplicity, civilizational, religious, and historical, without reducing it to a unified self.

From this understanding, the clinic is conceived as a space of critical translation, where the analyst must recognize that their language carries colonial traces and that the other’s suffering resists universal models. It calls for a decentered psychoanalysis that hears silence as testimony and the body as history.

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Regarding the limitations of this study, the research was limited to a single main corpus, supported by cross-validation with other Dalit authors. The absence of direct clinical material calls for caution in the generalization of findings. Theoretical triangulation among discourse analysis, critical psychoanalysis, and subaltern studies was used to mitigate interpretive bias.

It is suggested for future research to expand the corpus with other Dalit autobiographical narratives and to include clinical interviews or testimonies of women assisted in mental health contexts. Comparative studies across different settings of structural exclusion may consolidate the proposed framework and inform public policies for listening and clinical training more attuned to collective trauma.

Ultimately, caste silences a traumatic discourse that calls for patient and engaged listening. The study therefore proposes a clinical practice that unites ethics and critique, welcoming what resists language and sustaining, through the encounter with suffering, the possibility of elaboration and transformation.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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