Reading across Borders

Autosociobiography and Dalit Autobiography at the Intersections of Class, Caste, and Gender

Mrunmayee Sathye

Not even a decade after the German translation of Didier Eribon's *Retour à Reims* was released to great success (Suhrkamp 2016), academics at German universities – especially those invested in interdisciplinary connections between sociology and literary studies – are busy writing and publishing critical texts on what is being established as the 'autosociobiographical genre'. The impulse on the part of scholarly readers to name this rather stimulating corpus of research objects – which, as of now, has mostly been restricted to some constellation of Annie Ernaux, Didier Eribon, and Édouard Louis, perhaps extending to Daniela Dröscher and Christian Baron on the German side – is understandable; the question I am concerned with in this article, however is whether that impulse is ultimately enough to carry the newly minted terminology beyond the scope of two Western European countries with similar political problems and social structures.

With that question in mind, I would like to contrast the discourse around autosociobiography with another corpus – a 'sub-genre', if you will – of autobiographical writing from South Asia, namely the field of Dalit autobiography, dynamically positioned between questions of caste and its entanglements with class, gender, sexuality, and location. Dalit life writing since the 1970s necessarily navigates and deconstructs caste as "a system of both production and reproduction" (Mani 2005: 28). This holds especially true for Dalit women's autobiographies, which are powerfully anchored at the crossroads of the "caste-feudal conjoint system of caste-class-patriarchy" (Velaskar, 2016: 408). Taking Urmila Pawar's 2003 Marathi text *Aaydan*, translated into English by Maya Pandit and published as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* (2008) as a case study, I wish to investigate how individual and collective identity, social

mobility and political agency, and multiple and fragmented selves are posited in differing ways in Dalit autobiographies, and what turns a set of texts into a genre-defining corpus.

The main aim of this paper is to highlight both the parallels and the differences between the two 'genres' at hand (autosociobiography and Dalit autobiography) by investigating their workings on the literary and socio-political levels, while also critically examining the repercussions of genre-building practices, especially in the field of autobiography studies.

Auto-socio-bio-graphy

It will be interesting to begin by listing some of the main features which have been identified as characteristic of autosociobiography, setting the texts which constitute its corpus apart from other instances, movements, and sub-genres of autobiographical writing. Some of these features have already been mapped out by the editors in the introduction to this anthology, but I would like to recapitulate and interpret them here with the context of this article in mind. While there is both a significant body of working-class autobiographies dealing with class subjectivity, experience, and consciousness across literary cultures and a rich tradition of autobiography research engaging with it,[1] the transdisciplinary interplay of sociology and literature that characterises Ernaux's and Eribon's style of writing has encouraged contemporary scholars to study them as more or less distinct from that history.

The autosociobiographical corpus is heavily reliant upon the motif of class borders, in that the narrative revolves around the crossing of this social and spatial border by the individual narrator. The experience of upward social mobility via education leads the narrator to leave their milieu of origin and become what Chantal Jacquet terms a *transclasse* – indeed, the first traversal of sociocultural boundaries in the narrative tends to be just such a *Klassenwechsel*. Furthermore, autosociobiographies employ the traditional narrative model of *nostos* or homecoming, in that they depict a "second border crossing movement homewards in physical space, or they capture the act of remembering as a mental homecoming: having experienced a transformation, the protago-

1 See, for example, the studies authored by John Burnett, Stuart Laing, Paul Lauter, Sara Richardson, Regenia Gagnier, Carolyn Steedman, and Helga Schwalm.

nist embarks on a return and experiences a sense of foreignness" (Twellmann/Lammers 2023: 50).

Scholarly engagements with the corpus name the rehabilitation of class as a category as their underlying motivation, the editors of *Autosoziobiographie: Poetik und Politik* listing three aspects of the autosociobiographical subject: class and origin, education and upward mobility, and affect and memory (Blome et al. 2020: 5–7). It is thus both the awareness of borders and their transgression in which scholars have located the subject matter of autosociobiography. The idea of visible and invisible dividing lines is reinforced by the location of the narrator – and the narrative – in a sort of in-between space, never quite at home on either side and experiencing a sense of estrangement, alienation, and "double-edged non-belonging" (Twellmann/Lammers 2023: 50). A similar constellation can be observed with regard to discipline and genre: the texts in question are located somewhere between sociological analysis and literary narrative, autobiography and sociology. Ernaux's work has often been described as genre-transgressive for precisely that reason, which again draws attention to the border-crossing motif.

The second aspect recognised by current theorisations of the nascent genre is the overlapping of the narrator's personal journey through life and between two worlds demarcated by class lines, and its depiction as a shared experience and collective truth. This collectivity is here perceived in terms of class, which is only understandable considering the authors' socio-national background (French/German society with a White and Christian majority). Despite feelings of non-belonging towards both their milieu of origin and their milieu of arrival, the narrators seem to uphold the "collective value of the 'I'" (Twellmann/Lammers 2023: 55), telling the story not only of an individual, but of an entire community. These features, however, are not unique to these texts at all; it will not do to neglect various canons of autobiographical writing on the margins, writing against power, which not only express a sense of belonging to a collective identity but situate the 'I' specifically and necessarily in terms of a 'we': women's autobiography, African-American autobiography, and illness memoirs narrating the 'I' in relational terms are just a few examples.

Though Andreas Reckwitz's diagnosis that "the society of singularities […] leads to a sort of 'crisis of the general'" (Reckwitz 2022: 277) may well apply to the explosion of interest in self-representation and life writing in this day and age, it is worth noting the mechanisms by which these texts are not only composed but published, sold, marketed, received, and theorised over. Twellmann and Lammers make a very important point in this regard: in the extremely

competitive literary field under neoliberal auspices, the authors ironically end up reproducing "the conditions of the very regime they intend to resist" (2023: 56–7). Operating as they do within a publishing industry that capitalises on the popularity of certain texts – and names – over others, influenced greatly by the tides and trends of readerly interest, their writing ends up contributing to the "immobilization of the very class frontiers it depicts" (Twellmann/Lammers 2023: 63). Together with the commodification of stories within a capitalist set-up, this threat of authorial individualism does seem to affect several narrative contexts that position themselves as subversive, and it is interesting to note how their varying relevance and 'success' in the global literary sphere also corresponds to variations in the perceived emancipatory potential – and, ultimately, the political and discursive impact – of such self-narratives 'from the margins'.

The third aspect, the *socio*, becomes a genre-defining quality when autosociobiography is seen as the narrative of a *transclasse* subject combining its theoretical sociological knowledge with a literary mode, thereby giving birth to a theory-based reflection on personal history and experience which is defined by the crossing of class boundaries. However, it should be noted that while classic European sociological traditions may take class to be the primary category of social stratification, any further questioning of the disciplinary mechanisms of sociology in a broader, more global (or generally non-Eurocentric) sense points to the limitations of such a notion. Sociology in India, for instance, works intensively with caste or multi-religious, multi-cultural social realities, whereas sociological analyses in North America cannot neglect *race* or indigenous-settler histories. Given that the political, economic, and cultural histories of societies across the world are so radically different, a predominant focus on categories established in European contexts runs the risk of arrogantly relegating any discussion of social structures in non-Western contexts to the realm of anthropology (if no longer ethnography).

Authors like Louis, Eribon, and Ernaux do not work with the concept of class difference in a Marxist sense, foregrounding instead the influence of Bourdieu's notion of class and forms of capital on their writing. Hence, the dynamic between the 'I' and the 'we' is not one of radical class consciousness and revolutionary movement, but of an acute awareness of social milieu upon acquiring cultural capital in the face of a lamented lack thereof in childhood. The combination of these theoretical concepts with an academic register that cuts through personal, affective experience by means of a certain *écriture de la distance* or *écriture plate* (distant or plain writing) (Twellmann/Lammers

2023: 59) is widely regarded as a constituent feature of autosociobiographical writing.

The context of production and reception of texts classified as autosociobiographical makes up the fourth, and especially intriguing point. Eribon and Louis, in particular, explicitly thematise the recent migration of the working class towards right-wing populist parties as a consequence of its plight within a political system that refuses to take the needs of its members seriously. As scholars have noted, the texts under consideration here have found resonance in social contexts where a certain awareness of class emerges from the post-boom expansion of mass education, and where socio-political developments in the past few decades have followed comparable trajectories. I would argue, however, that the right-wing populism in the societies in question is of a rather similar nature if contrasted with right-wing discourse in other parts of the world, a contention to which I will return later in this article.

The positioning of the autosociobiographical narrator as a "translator of the social", in Carlos Spoerhase's words (2017: 35)[2], invites us to delve deeper into the intended readership of these texts: on the one hand, there are readers who have experienced a similar upward mobility and can relate to the authors on a personal level, finding in their stories a sense of representation of their own lives. On the other hand, it could well be argued that the narrative act of 'making visible the invisible category of class' from an 'authentic' class defector perspective specifically cater to the intellectual elite from the middle and upper classes, who have an urge to understand 'how the other half lives',[3] and why it votes the way it does. Against the backdrop of their explosive reception in a German literary scene seeking "intellectual replenishment" after the dramatically declared "end of theory" (Twellmann/Lammers 2023: 60), it is entirely possible that the relatability and urgency of these narratives speaks more directly to the reader's intellectuality than their empathy.

2 Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

3 The phrase comes from the title of Jacob Riis's photojournalistic publication that exposed the living conditions in the slums of New York City in the 1880s (Riis, Jacob, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York*, Kessinger Publishing 2004 [1890]).

Class in Transit

While the decades since the 1990s have seen a rise in not only activist but also academic and pop-cultural interest in questions of gender, sexuality, and *race*, class as a category has been relatively neglected in the *race*-class-gender triad of intersectional analysis. Blome et al. criticise the defensive stance with which class has been treated in contemporary literary and cultural studies, "as a warning to also take socio-economic inequality into account" (Blome et al. 2010: 158).

Historically speaking, the specific amalgamation of European imperialism, capitalism, and industrialisation did not lead to an analogous reproduction of European class divisions in the colonised peripheries that would have turned indigenous subjects into an extension of the working-class in metropolitan Europe; rather, it mutated into a global capitalist system of political, economic, and cultural subjugation, and produced a stratification of racial and cultural difference. In light of this development, a genuinely transnational comparative study of class and social structures is bound to remain unfeasible. A variety of cultural, historical, and political elements determine the relevance and interplay of social markers and identity categories within individual societies, and engender vast differences in what constitutes socio-economic status across nations and continents.

One thing, however, is certain: that it is impossible to "specify someone's class from his or her tax return" (Appiah 2018: 144). In *Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider*, Satnam Virdee analyses the British working class as a multi-ethnic formation and emphasises the aspect of *race* as central to the functioning of class, highlighting the historical entanglements of Whiteness, racism, and anti-racism with class struggles. The fact that different forms of capital work in different ways is "one reason why efforts to reduce class to any single hierarchy don't work" (Appiah 2018: 165). Class as a category by itself is bound to lack the complexity needed to understand social inequality and economic injustice today, even in societies like Germany and France which continue to regard themselves predominantly as White and Christian despite decades of post-war (and post-colonial) migration. Moreover, social class continues to have a strongly heteronormative masculinist undertone – in Kwame Anthony Appiah's poetic turn of phrase, "[c]lass in Britain isn't a ladder. It's a mountain, with multiple paths for ascent and descent. It rises, though, from a single valley to a single peak" (Appiah 2018: 166).

There are two concepts it might be useful to unpack at this point: the first is the notion of origin, which features prominently in scholarly reflections on the narratives at hand.[4] Taking a step back from the logic of duality between the lower-class milieu of origin and upper-class/elite/educated milieu of arrival, it becomes clear that questions of *race* and ethnicity, of native languages and religious diversity, of coloniality and belonging, of migration and asylum must play a greater role in discussions of origin and where an individual comes from. This, however, does lead to a certain unease due to the ways in which 'origin' tends to solidify sociocultural hierarchies and boundaries by virtue of its connotation as 'roots', especially when we encounter individuals or social groups where origin is more complicated than class or where class is irretrievably entangled with other categories of identity such as language (including dialect, accent, multilingualism), religious affiliation, *race*, ethnicity, literacy, education, occupation, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and so on. The point here is that class by itself cannot account for socio-economic status, because that status is the result not only of overarching global-capitalist structures reflected within the nation-state, but of the interpenetration of class with further categories of difference which neither exhibit the same flexibility nor permit the same social mobility that class by itself does. The problem with class as a standalone category of analysis, then, is its inability to properly reflect greater (migratory) movements between nations or continents. Instead of a singular focus on *transclasse* mobility and instances of vertical, individual border-crossings with the connotation of 'trans-' in the sense of transition from origin to destination, it might be more useful to supplement it with another 'trans-' concept in the sense of 'transnational', which refers to movement across and/or beyond boundaries, and provides a more horizontal perspective on the question of origin.

The second is the concept of social mobility. Appiah highlights the way in which *race* and class interpenetrate every aspect of social life and are impossible to view separately:

> [A]mong whites, as among blacks, there were hierarchies of status associated with distinctions of habits between those who came from uneducated families in which men and women worked with their hands and those who

4 For a sort of 'origin myth' of the autosociobiographical tradition, see Twellmann/Lammers 2023: 48–9.

> came from educated families and did not earn a living from manual labor. (Appiah, 2018: 152)

Chantal Jaquet replaces the term 'class defector' with that of *transclasse* to refer to those who have undergone social mobility either as a rise (*embourgeoisés*) or as a fall (*déclassés*). According to her, this phenomenon "is not unique to those who change class; it affects all those who do not reproduce the dominant model and discover their identity after being branded by an insult or taunt – unnamed because unnameable" (Jaquet 2023: 9). While this perspective may work well for subjects of non-reproduction in terms of sexuality or gender, a view of caste as "a system of both production and reproduction" (Mani 2015: 28), located within the framework of both *race* and class relations, further complicates this notion of social non-reproduction.

Dalit Autobiography: Life Writing Between Caste and Class

Much of the sociological study of caste, especially with regard to its precise nature and in relation to class, has followed either of two major points of view: the culturalist interpretation, revolving around what the likes of Max Weber and Louis Dumont[5] saw as a hierarchical religious-cultural value system unique to Indian (or South Asian) society based on the idea of pollution/purity and endogamy, and the materialist interpretation including both Marxist and non-Marxist perspectives focussing on the political and economic dimensions of caste as a class system.

Noting how the view of caste and class as opposing concepts has hindered constructive analysis based on historicity, K.L. Sharma suggests an approach involving the four elements of "dialectics, history, culture, and structure" (Sharma 1984: 21) to study the interplay of caste, class, ethnicity, power, religion, and economy, while Ramkrishna Mukherjee proposes the concept of "caste *in* class" (Mukherjee 1999: 1761). The conflicting understanding of caste and class struggle (embodied respectively by the Dalit and communist movements in India) has been denounced by B.R. Ambedkar as a false dichotomy

5 Dumont's 1966 writings on 'homo hierarchicus' postulated an essentialist dichotomy, diagnosing the Indian people with a unique, irredeemable ideology of caste hierarchy which he saw as the polar opposite of the egalitarian societies created by the European 'homo aequalis'.

emerging from a misunderstanding of Marxist theory (Teltumbde 2016: 34). Another effective way of looking at the social structure in modern India is as "capitalism within casteism within feudalism" (Yengde 2019: 229). Incorporating "material, cultural and ideological perspectives", Padma Velaskar sees the caste-class system "both as a religiously constructed structure of honour/prestige relations and as a structure of class relations of production and labour control with an exploitative occupational division of labour" which emerges from the "interpenetration of social and economic relations in the caste-feudal mode" (Velaskar 2016: 401).

Beyond the South Asian context, inquiries into the concept of caste in other societies lead us to an analytically intertwined trifecta of caste-class-*race*: while Trinidadian-American sociologist Oliver Cox contrasted *race*-class relations in the USA with the caste system in India only to strongly distinguish between the two, Isabel Wilkerson in her study of what she calls caste systems across India, America, and Nazi Germany, writes, "[c]aste and race are neither synonymous nor mutually exclusive. […] Caste is the bones, race the skin" (Wilkerson 2020: 19)[6]. It is thus imperative to envision the unalterable entanglements of caste as a social category with notions of *race* and class as well as the patriarchy, resulting in a complex system of social stratification, which, even in the twenty-first century, plays itself out in the political, economic, and sociocultural fields. The spread of neoliberal corporate capitalism in post-1980s India did usher in economic globalisation, but "individual liberalism" characterised by "cultural identifiers like sexuality, gender and class" failed to "shake off the entrenched casteism" (Yengde 2019: 234).

> Like wild animals fast disappearing from the woods, caste seems to have 'disappeared'. Yet like a wild animal hiding behind a bush, it remains hidden, poised for attack. People travelling in fast vehicles may not notice the wild eyes looking at them, but those who walk do and are struck with terror. (Pawar 2018: xii)

The word Dalit, originally a pejorative epithet meaning "crushed", "broken", or "ground down", was reclaimed and re-connoted first by Ambedkar and later by

6 Wilkerson lists eight pillars by which a caste system is held in place over the course of centuries: divine will and the laws of nature, heritability, endogamy, purity versus pollution, occupational hierarchy, dehumanisation and stigma, terror as enforcement and cruelty as a means of control, and inherent superiority versus inherent inferiority.

the Dalit Panthers[7], who turned it into an emancipatory *nom de guerre* for those who as such exist *outside* of the caste system and are engaged in the struggle against caste discrimination, violence, and untouchability. Urmila Pawar defines the term as describing "people who have been oppressed by a repressive social system, and challenge the oppression from a scientific, rational and humanitarian perspective" (Pawar 2018: xii). Sharmila Rege argues that the politics of Jyotirao Phule, Shahu Maharaj, the non-Brahman movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and Ambedkar were engaged in the project of "recovering a space" for "a language of caste on its own terms" (Rege 2013: 36) in the colonial public sphere, thereby contesting the exclusion of caste and women's questions from the political domain and their relegation to the realm of the cultural.

The question of social mobility is complicated in South Asian society by the dynamic interplay of religion, mother tongue, caste, geographical location, gender, and class in determining access to education, occupational freedom, and economic opportunity. Apart from the multiple socio-economic and political obstacles, an insidious trio of untouchability, mob violence, and a corrupt police and judicial system continues to impact the conditions shaping a potential Dalit class defector's future. Dalits who do manage to move up the class ladder often end up concealing – having to conceal – their caste identity.

> Earlier, upper castes could identify Dalits because of where they lived, how they dressed and what they did for a living. Today Dalits, at least those in urban areas, easily blend in with the upper castes and their identifiers have changed with them. An untraceable last name that isn't Brahmin, Bania, Kshatriya or Dalit, vague responses to the caste question and any association with Ambedkar are generally lower-caste red flags in post-Independence India. (Dutt 2019: 140)

According to Suraj Yengde, the "primary identity of upper-middle-class Dalits is based on caste followed by class", as "the casteist set-up of the economic order does not allow [them] the freedom to slip into the fluid capitalist chain" (Yengde 2019: 200). In other words, it remains extremely difficult if not impossible to reject or subordinate caste identity in the public eye. Dalitness, in

7 The Dalit Panthers are a radical socialist organisation founded in 1972, inspired and supported by the Black Panther Party in the USA.

particular, continues to be a sort of blotch that refuses to fade, regardless of how much economic, cultural, and social capital one might acquire.

The 1970s saw the "explosive arrival of the modern Dalit voice" (Brueck 2019: 26) on the Indian literary scene, predominantly in the form of resistance poetry and autobiography. In light of the fact that Dalit writings, both academic and literary, do not enjoy a very long tradition and even today continue to be rejected and excluded by large sections of the social and intellectual elite and a right-wing populist government, the history, roots, and scope of Dalit literature are still in the process of being negotiated (Thiara/Misrahi-Barak 2019: 3). The editors of the 2019 special issue of the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* on Dalit literature have highlighted the persistent struggle against discrimination and oppression through which Dalit writers are constantly confronted with questions of their perception, representation, and misrepresentation by upper-caste Indian and Western academic scholarship (Thiara/Misrahi-Barak 2019: 7).

A major issue with life narratives from the 'lowest rungs' of (a) society, or from communities subjected to horrific violence in the past or the present, is that they potentially run the risk of turning the author's and/or protagonist's suffering and pain into a spectacle for readers significantly more privileged. Dalit literature, for example, has often been dismissed as stories of anguish and sorrow or accused of "digging out stench from hateful waste bins of the past" (Rege 2013: 18).

Autobiographical narratives from systematically marginalised communities necessarily carry with them the aspect of witnessing and testifying, of resisting through the very act of self-expression. That said, a critical discourse which regards these autobiographical narratives especially (or solely) as *testimonios*[8] risks superimposing on them the intention "not of literariness but of communicating the situation of a group's oppression, imprisonment and struggle" (Rege 2013: 17), underscoring the political urgency of the writing while dismissing its formal literary qualities (Brueck 2019: 26). The term Dalit autobiography by no means refers to a homogenous set of texts, its corpus ranging across states and languages, villages and cities, authors of various genders, educational qualifications, professions, and ages. Far from being a restrictive formal category extensively theorised in academic discourse, it is a tradition

8 The term *testimonio* is used in Latin American contexts to denote autobiographical narratives from the margins of society which speak up against a collective experience of oppression and social injustice.

that has grown organically through the narratives and the lives of their authors. This is not to say that literary conventions play a subordinate role here, but it could certainly be argued that this type of autobiographical (sub-)genre-building functions more rhizomatically than linearly, perhaps allowing more room for self-invention and -definition.

For Sharmila Rege, Dalit life narratives "forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and contest explicitly or implicitly the 'official forgetting' of histories of caste oppression, struggles and resistance." (Rege 2013: 16) Dalit women's autobiographical texts, in particular, engage with a dialectic of self and community, transcending the boundaries of genre and bourgeois autobiography by depleting the 'I' and displacing it with the collective 'we' (Rege 2013: 17). Inevitably positioned at the intersection of caste, class, and gender, female Dalit autobiographers are well equipped to address the "nexus of *ghar-parivar-samaj* (home-family-community/society)" (Brueck 2019: 35) from a decidedly female perspective, their narratives inhabiting both the domestic and the public sphere without emphasising one over the other. It is this multiplicity of selves, identities, and impetuses which sets the tone and provides the framework for Dalit (women's) autobiography.

Aaydan, or *The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar

Urmila Pawar's autobiography *Aaydan*, originally published in Marathi in 2003, was first translated into English by Maya Pandit under the title *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* (2008). Pawar was born in 1945 in Phansawale village on the Konkan coast of Maharashtra. Having grown up as a girl in the Mahar community, the memories of her rural and urban childhood are imbued with experiences not only of untouchability and poverty, but also of literacy, education, and empowerment. After a Masters in Marathi literature, Pawar worked at the State Government Public Works Department and has collaborated closely with several Dalit feminist organisations (Rege 2013: 345).

The word *aaydan*, as Pawar explains in the preface, is a generic term used to describe things made from bamboo, other meanings being 'utensil' or 'weapon'. The weaving of bamboo baskets is traditionally assigned to the Mahar caste in the Konkan region. Pawar's choice of the title for her autobiography incorporates an allegory of pain passed down generations, an allegory for a life of struggle on several levels, the life of an individual interwoven with the lives of the collective. Pawar seems to fashion herself out of the perpetual

movement of the hands of her mother, busy weaving her sorrows into baskets to support her family (Pawar 2018: 54, 254). The metaphor of weaving is not restricted to the work's title – in fact, it ends up representing the style of Pawar's narration: "My mother used to weave aaydans. I find that her act of weaving and my act of writing are organically linked. The weave is similar. It is the weave of pain, suffering, and agony that links us" (Pawar 2018: ix).

Sadly, the English translation misses out on an important aspect of the preface, whose original title *ātmabhān* can be translated as 'awareness of the self'. Shy of four pages long, the brief text moves from explaining the title to describing and defining the truths of Dalit/women's existence in post-Independence Indian society, situating the author as a Dalit feminist within both groups, and, at the same time, beyond them. For Pawar, "far more important than mere words such as savarna, avarna, dalit, Buddhist or woman, is the awareness of each and every individual about who he/she is" (Pawar 2018: xii), a profound self-knowledge that her narrative combines with an acute awareness of social relations, injustices, violence, the effects of globalisation, privatisation, and the politicisation of religion on humanity in general and Indian society in particular.

The sense of collective identity and belonging out of which the 'I' is writing is very noticeably multiple and simultaneous, switching back and forth between the individual, the relational, and as part of a larger collective. Pawar steadfastly narrates her life through her own eyes as the authorial 'I', but also interprets it from the position of a daughter, sister-in-law, wife, and mother in relation to other individuals. Furthermore, there is a sense of shared womanhood that runs through the entire narrative and encompasses family members, village communities, feminist friends, and female writer colleagues in Mumbai across castes and religions. The narrative begins with several pages describing the Mahar women's arduous journey from Phansawale village to the market at Ratnagiri, carrying heavy bundles of things to sell on their heads, their feet burning in the sweltering sun. Cursing their mutual ancestor for their plight[9] and swearing loudly, the women would make their way through the unending narrow, winding, slippery paths through hills and across rivers, talking to each other about their children and husbands, complaining about

9 "The reason for the abuse was simple. It was he who had chosen this particular village, Phansawale, in the back of beyond, for his people to settle. It was an extremely difficult and inconvenient terrain, as it lay in an obscure ditch in a far-off corner of the hills." (Pawar 2018: 1)

their in-laws, telling each other stories about evil spirits and gossip from the village (Pawar 2018: 1–3). *Aaydan* attributes a strong sense of collectivity to rural Dalit communities entrenched in fear, anger, destitution, and pain, but also recognises an urban sense of Dalit belonging which underlies various experiences of explicit and implicit discrimination and humiliation. Another important collective identity is that of Dalit feminists and activists: Pawar recounts writing a history of the women in the Ambedkarite movement together with Meenakshi Moon, entitled "We Also Made History" (*Amhihi Itihas Ghadavla*).

There are several frontiers of social and cultural belonging, as well as personal experience which *Aaydan*'s narrative draws on, or better still, plays with. Caste, and Dalitness specifically, is not a structure of belonging which allows much room for crossing over, but the text vividly depicts several instances of borders being transgressed: rural vs urban, lower class vs upper class, Marathi as spoken by the Dalit women villagers vs 'pure' or literary Marathi and English (as an avenue of translation), girlhood vs womanhood, illiteracy vs literacy/education, working woman vs middle-class housewife.

Born just two years before the birth of independent India in 1947, Pawar is very aware of the role of education in allowing an individual to escape the dynamics of caste, class, and gender on the most precarious end of the spectrum. Her parents' stubborn determination to send not only their sons but also their daughters to school is often underlined as her greatest privilege, along with her appreciation of her husband Harishchandra's support that allowed her to complete her BA and MA in Marathi literature while working full-time and raising children, not at all ordinary under the circumstances.

The village/city dichotomy likewise plays a significant role in Pawar's descriptions of her own experiences and those of the people around her. In post-Independence Indian society, she notes that caste has not vanished but has merely donned a more insidious guise, with the difference between Dalit and non-Dalit communities having been radically reduced in some ways while remaining very much present in others nevertheless. Pawar sees two trajectories for a Dalit woman's existence in modern India: one in slums and gutters, harrowed by work, dirt, and violence; the other as a well-to-do, educated member of the middle-class. The difference is not simply one between rural and urban existence – there is also a rift between life as illiterate bonded labourers and the educated middle class, or between women and men under either of the two circumstances.

In *Aaydan*, food operates as a leitmotif across personal, social and cultural contexts, connecting the most intimate of experiences with broader social

dimensions. The interplay of destitution, starvation, and the marginalisation of the Dalit community, along with the traditional relegation of cooking to the realm of women, places food in all its variety, scarcity, and social relevance at the very heart of the narrative, as a crucial marker of both caste and class. Recalling the sweets that many upper-caste girls brought to school picnics, delicacies with names she was not even acquainted with, Pawar writes about how, even as a child, she never raised the question as to why such dishes were never prepared at their home – rather, she was aware, "without anybody telling us, that we were born in a particular caste and in poverty, and that we had to live accordingly" (Pawar, 2018: 94). She goes on to describe the simple and thrifty meals her mother would cook and make her eat with the words "eat it, eat it child! Only the person who can eat such food can achieve a lot of good!" (Pawar, 2018: 94) Pawar's father being the community priest and a schoolteacher, food was never scarce at home. It would make him extremely angry when her sisters-in-law joined the other Dalit women going from door to door in hopes of collecting leftovers from upper-caste households, putting themselves in the position of beggars. Ultimately, however, regardless of what delicacies the women had hoped to gather, they ended up coming back with an inedible mixture of stale leftovers in a single pot, which they would then have to wash in the river, hoping to at least salvage some of the rice (Pawar, 2018: 51). These fraught experiences associated with food function within the realm of the unspoken, almost self-evident knowledge which accompanies the lived experience of class and caste boundaries.

As a grown woman working and writing in metropolitan Mumbai, Pawar describes an instance of more implicit, underhand discrimination within a literary context, where a fellow Dalit writer's work is underhandedly praised with a tone of surprise at how 'cultured' her language sounds. Looking back upon the situation, she asks, "[w]hat exactly did he mean? Which culture were they talking about? Whose dominance were they praising? Patriarchy? Caste system? Class? What was it? And why was our writing termed uncivilised, uncultured? How?" (Pawar, 2018: 232–3)

Urmila Pawar has a MA in Marathi literature and is professionally a writer and Dalit feminist historian and activist. The sociographical aspect of theoretical, sociological reflection on a personal journey which is central to scholarly accounts of the autosociobiographical genre-in-the-making is absent here, at least if we are to understand it in terms of a formal qualification in sociology or an active use of the theories and terminology current in the field. Yet *Aaydan*, with its intricate narrative acts of individual recollection and reflection

extended to a collective, at no point in time seems like a less thorough or insightful analysis of society. In the context of marginalised communities and oral history, especially from the Global South, a rift between the theoretical and the empirical or practical quickly becomes unsustainable, so that knowledge, awareness, and comprehension are more wrapped up in embodied experience and intuition than in academic institutions. This, of course, is not at all to propagate a North-South binary in the sense of a Cartesian dualism, but practices of dismantling colonial and capitalist logic must begin with questions like these. Pawar's narrative does not merely transcend conventional criteria of 'literary language'; it oscillates back and forth across temporalities, her style of writing and non-linear narrative strategies keenly reminiscent of the rhythm of (her mother's) weaving, evoking a sense of collective identity with every strand.

Aaydan is as much a story about being, experiencing, and existing at the margins, and interacting with the boundaries of social identity and reality themselves, as it is about crossing them. I have attempted to show that to read the narrative of Pawar's life as a linear journey of upward mobility (although it certainly qualifies as such, as, in varying ways, do most Dalit autobiographies) would be reductive. The 'social' here is evidently more than socio-economic mobility, but it also transcends unilateral views of caste identification, gendered experience, or rural 'origins'. We can choose to read this narrative as a woman's memoir, as a Dalit person's text, as a class defector's narrative, or as a postcolonial subject's rise to literary activism – indeed, the text is all those things, but it is also crucial to allow it to occupy multiple spaces without compartmentalising it into neat categories and trying to disentangle and analyse one strand at a time. Confronted with a text simultaneously employing such a multiplicity of narrative mechanisms and identificatory processes, we as (scholarly) readers need to be equipped with a methodological toolkit that is more multidimensional than a single-axis sociological focus on class – or even caste – as a primary indicator of social reality.

Comparing 'Genres'

Let us quickly recapitulate the features considered characteristic of autosociobiography and see how the notion of Dalit autobiography fares when held up to them. Both 'genres' share the narration of instances and experiences of border crossing, especially in the form of upward social mobility across classes by means of education. That said, things become considerably more compli-

cated when considering Dalit existence with its complex interplay of caste and class that allows for varying degrees of mobility and possibilities of a return. The Dalit autobiographer is in many ways also a kind of 'translator of the social', making invisible violence and discrimination visible to an upper-caste or a foreign intellectual audience, or forging connections with fellow Dalit readers who might feel seen in their own lives. Both in this regard and with respect to the dynamic movement between the narrating 'I' and multiple narrated 'we's, it also takes on the form of a personal journey bound in collective experience and representation. Dalit autobiographical writing certainly also incorporates an acute awareness of one's milieu of origin, the lack of economic, social, and cultural capital often associated with it, and the concomitant labyrinth of obstacles, depicting a strong sense of non-belonging, estrangement, and uncertainty along with a rebellious zest for justice and emancipation. Where the prototypical autosociobiographical 'canon' is profoundly and self-avowedly influenced by the thought of Bourdieu, Dalit autobiography and Dalit authors in general draw their inspiration to write and act from the anti-discriminatory ideas, social theories, and emancipatory politics of Ambedkar, who often plays a significant role in their narratives as well.

In contrast to the autosociobiographer in the above-mentioned sense, the Dalit autobiographer's writing style is more intimate, less theoretical in the sense of an academic discipline, but just as introspective and discerning with regard to social phenomena and collective truths. There are young Dalit writers, journalists, and academics who have been publishing memoirs and academic texts in English (as opposed to the enormous corpus of Dalit literature established since the 1970s in various vernacular languages and dialects) and who make use of globalised academic terminology, but this raises the question of whether Western-influenced academic language adds to the validity of an author's expertise and narrative. Here, it is instructive to consider the intended readership of the text in question as well as the conditions and actors involved in its publication and reception. It would not be an exaggeration to claim that the works composed by the authors in the autosociobiographical canon have predominantly been read by the intellectual elite in literary-academic circles in France and Germany; they have been critically acclaimed not only for their social insights, but also for their literary qualities (Ernaux's winning of the Nobel Prize in Literature certainly has to do with both). Dalit autobiography, on the other hand, has long been relegated to the realm of testimonial literature, and doubt has often been cast on its literary value and formal qualities – erroneously and often not out of a neutral or caste-blind position, it must be said.

As I have mentioned above, another noteworthy context surrounding the explosive interest in the autosociobiographical form – in the works of Eribon and Louis, in particular – is the rise of far-right populism in Europe, especially in France. It is important to note that even amid the exorbitant right-wing surge across the world, its manifestations are not identical: the rhetoric employed may be similar, but the mechanisms of asserting power are in fact very different. While Germany's racist *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) party is unapologetically White, questions of *race* and representation play out rather differently in the UK with several conservative POC politicians representing a brutal xenophobic agenda; India's political present, meanwhile, is rife as ever with communalism and structural violence against religious minorities and precarious groups. Bearing these differences in mind but also contrasting and examining them against the backdrop of the undeniable rise of right-wing ideologies on a transnational scale, it is essential to ask what such narratives of the self and the collective can contribute to the discussion. Stories which 'make visible the invisible' by speaking from the margins of society, articulating the experiences of communities rendered voiceless by the prevailing power structures, carry within them an inherently subversive potential to oppose the oppressive and discriminatory logics of the right. The question that remains is whether it is in fact necessary to define new genres of autobiographical narration to effectively study these texts and their repercussions for the societies in and from which they emerge.

I would like to end this article with a series of questions and musings which point to certain limitations associated with the classification of autosociobiography as a 'genre-in-the-making' and which continue to cause me some unease. If a narrative fulfils some of the relevant conditions but not others, to what extent might it be reasonable to call it an autosociobiography? What if the narrator never actually mentions the concepts of class, milieu, and habitus explicitly, but refers instead to racial, caste-based, or gender-related identities which are very clearly complicit in class belonging? Given that the existing scholarly discourse on autosociobiography has treated sociological knowledge almost as a precondition of narrative authority, what happens if the narrator reflects on their personal journey through the lens of collective experience, but without resorting to the discipline-bound terminology of academic discourse? If these texts are so clearly a 'first-world' phenomenon visible in Western class societies which have experienced mass education in the post-war period, any attempt to expand the so-called genre to the rest of the world in order to prove its validity across literary contexts needs to spell out the precise goals it seeks to achieve.

Basing the theorisation of autosociobiography as a new genre on the tropes employed by Eribon (and imitated and further developed with equal success by Louis) runs the danger of being unsustainable due to the sheer narrowness of the corpus. Defining generic boundaries before narratives dealing with the issues at hand in more complex, intersectional ways have been properly examined constitutes a rather risky undertaking that is bound to suffocate the narratives and defeat the purpose of their theorisation. In many cases, too many conditions have been imposed to hold the genre in place, while its canon simultaneously seems to be growing with every new scholarly intervention. When there are so many borders to cross and so many boundaries along so many lines constantly interacting with each other, it appears short-sighted first to draw these borders along class lines and then to try and expand them to include intersections with further social categories. Considering the workings of the neoliberal university which requires researchers to constantly produce to remain relevant, the academic gesture of rehabilitating class by means of genre-building which seems to lurk behind the hasty theorisation of the autosociobiographical form does seem sadly ironic. Or is this a rare instance where the master's tools can indeed dismantle the master's house?

Criticising the attempts of his contemporaries to define autobiography as a distinct genre in the face of a plethora of unanswered questions and canonical grey zones resulting from the attempt to distinguish generically between fiction and autobiography, Paul de Man proposed the view of autobiography not as a literary genre or mode at all, but as "a figure of reading or of understanding" (de Man 1979: 921). There may be a lot in de Man's essay to disagree with, but there is much to be gained from thinking of Dalit autobiography in these terms; not as a distinct genre governed by rigid formal criteria, but as a loose collection of rhizomatically connected narratives bounded in identity, experience, and belonging. In an appendix to the second edition of *Reading Autobiography*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson list sixty different genres of life writing. "Through reading their lives within and against the terms of life writing," they say about autobiographical subjects, "they shift its terms and invite different ways of being read. […] Established generic templates mutate and new generic possibilities emerge." (Smith/Watson, 2010: 253) The question, then, is whether – and in what way – the generic boundaries of autosociobiography, whose ink has not yet entirely dried, will survive the passage of time and a potential widening of its scope.

Works Cited

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *The Lies that Bind. Rethinking Identity: Creed, Country, Colour, Class, Culture*, London: Profile Books 2018.

Blome, Eva/Eiden-Offe, Patrick/Weinberg, Manfred. "Klassen-Bildung. Ein Problemaufriss", *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur* 35.2 (2010), 158–94.

Blome, Eva/Lammers, Philipp/Seidel, Sarah. "Zur Poetik und Politik der Autosoziobiographie. Eine Einführung", in: Blome, Eva et al. (eds.): *Autosoziobiographie: Poetik und Politik*, Heidelberg: J.B. Metzler 2022, 1–14.

Brueck, Laura R. "Narrating Dalit Womanhood and the Aesthetics of Autobiography", *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 54.1 (2019), 25–37.

de Man, Paul. "Autobiography as De-facement", *MLN* 94.5 (1979), 919–30. https://doi.org/10.2307/2906560.

Dumont, Louis. *Homo Hierarchicus*, Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press 1970.

Dutt, Yashica. *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir*, New Delhi: Aleph Book Company 2019.

Jaquet, Chantal. *Transclasses: A Theory of Social Non-reproduction*, transl. by Gregory Elliott, London/New York: Verso 2023.

Limbale, Sharankumar. *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*, transl. and ed. by Alok Mukherjee, New Delhi: Orient Longman 2004.

Mani, Braj Ranjan. *Debrahmanising History: Dominance and Resistance in Indian Society*, revised edition 2015, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributers 2005.

Mukherjee, Ramkrishna. "Caste in Itself, Caste and Class, or Caste in Class", *Economic and Political Weekly* 34.27 (1999), 1759–61, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4408152 (accessed 6 February 2024).

Pawar, Urmila. *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*, first published as *Aaydan* in Marathi by Granthali in 2003, transl. by Maya Pandit, 3rd reprint, Kolkata: STREE 2018.

Reckwitz, Andreas. "The Society of Singularities – 10 Theses", *Analyse & Kritik* 44.2 (2022), 269–78. https://doi.org/10.1515/auk-2022-2031.

Rege, Sharmila. *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios*, New Delhi: Zubaan Books 2013.

Riis, Jacob. *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York*, Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing 2004 [1890].

Sharma, K.L. "Caste and Class in India: Some Conceptual Problems", *Sociological Bulletin* 33.1/2 (1984), 1–28, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23620093 (accessed 6 February 2024).

Smith, Sidonie/Watson, Julia. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 2nd ed., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2010.

Teltumbde, Anand. "Dichotomisation of Caste and Class", *Economic and Political Weekly* 51.47 (2016), 34–8, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44165876 (accessed 8 February 2024).

Thapar, Romila. *The Penguin History of Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300*, New Delhi: Penguin Books 2003.

Thiara, Nicole/Misrahi-Barak, Judith. "Editorial: Why Should We Read Dalit Literature?", *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 54.1 (2019), 3–8.

Twellmann, Marcus/Lammers, Philipp. "Autosociobiography: A Travelling Form", *Comparative Critical Studies* 20.1 (2023), Edinburgh University Press, 47–68.

Velaskar, Padma. "Theorising the Interaction of Caste, Class and Gender: A Feminist Sociological Approach", *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 50.3 (2016), 389–414.

Virdee, Satnam. *Racism, Class and the Racialized Outsider*, London: Red Globe Press 2014.

Wilkerson, Isabel. *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*, New York: Random House 2020.

Yengde, Suraj. *Caste Matters*, Gurgaon: Penguin Viking 2019.