



The Teacher's Voice: Pedagogy of Resistance in Kumud Pawde's "The Story of My Sanskrit" and Mary Church Terrell's A Colored Woman in a White World

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Abstract: This study asks what a teacher's training contributes to the way a woman writes about exclusion. It reads Kumud Pawde's "The Story of My Sanskrit" (from Antahsphot, 1981) alongside Mary Church Terrell's A Colored Woman in a White World (1940), two autobiographical texts by women who were teachers. Pawde taught Sanskrit, a language her caste had been forbidden to study. Terrell taught at Wilberforce University and M Street High School in Washington before marriage ended her teaching career. Through close reading, the study identifies a teacher's voice: a narrative strategy that explains how a system of exclusion works by setting out worked examples, drawing distinctions, and guiding the reader step by step. In Pawde, this strategy appears in her separation of visible cleanliness from caste-based purity and in her account of a lectureship credited to her husband's surname. In Terrell, it appears in her chapter on the absence of any hotel or restaurant open to a Black traveler and in her sequence of letters in which a school's acceptance was reversed within two days. This strategy differs in emphasis from argument, which mainly seeks agreement, and from testimony, which mainly asks the reader to witness. The study claims an association, not a cause, and rests on two texts. It proposes that professional identity, alongside caste, race, and gender, can shape how a life is written, and it names the teacher's voice as a category for comparative study of life writing.

Key Words: Kumud Pawde, Mary Church Terrell, Dalit Autobiography, Black Women's Autobiography, Teacher's Voice, Pedagogy, Comparative Life-Writing, Caste, Race

1. INTRODUCTION:

Autobiographical writing by women from historically excluded communities is usually read for what it tells us about their experience: the lived weight of caste or racial discrimination, the detail of everyday humiliation, the record of a self that official history did not think worth keeping. This is true of Kumud Pawde's "The Story of My Sanskrit", an essay drawn from her 1981 Marathi autobiography Antahsphot, and it is true of Mary Church Terrell's 1940 memoir A Colored Woman in a White World. Both texts are usually discussed as records of exclusion. Pawde's essay, for example, has been read as evidence of how deeply untouchability persisted in independent India despite constitutional guarantees (Jayasree, 2013) and as testimony that breaks silence (Sharma, 2021). Terrell's life is often told through her activism, her role as first president of the National Association of Colored Women, and her decades of involvement in the civil rights struggle (Parker, 2020).

These readings leave a more specific question open: what did it mean that both women were, by profession, teachers, and that both wrote with the experience and voice of teachers? Pawde taught Sanskrit at a government college, working in a language her community had traditionally been forbidden to study (Sharma, 2021). Terrell taught French and other subjects at Wilberforce University and then Latin at M Street High School in Washington, D.C. As a married woman she was legally barred from teaching, so her marriage in 1891 ended her classroom career (Ham, 2021). To this study's knowledge, no work has read the two writers together or asked this question.

This study argues that this shared vocation may shape how each woman narrates her own life. In the passages examined here, both writers explain, define, and walk the reader through the logic of the system they survived, rather than relying only on personal testimony or an appeal to sympathy. These passages help the reader understand how caste and racial exclusion operate. This study calls the pattern the teacher's voice. By teacher's voice, it means a narrative strategy that explains how a system of exclusion works through worked examples, drawn distinctions, and step-by-step



guidance of the reader. It differs in emphasis from argument, which mainly seeks agreement, and from testimony, which mainly asks the reader to witness. The study asks one question: how does a teacher's habit of explaining shape the way a woman narrates exclusion in her own life writing? The method is comparative close reading. Pawde's essay is read in its English version (Pawde, 2013), as discussed in Sharma (2021). Terrell's memoir is read in the 2021 Rowman & Littlefield edition (Terrell, 2021), with Ham's foreword.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Scholarship on Pawde's essay has focused mainly on its documentary and testimonial value. Jayasree (2013) reads "The Story of My Sanskrit" as a study of the social, economic, and political implications of untouchability nearly twenty years after independence. She points to the way individuals meet resistance to constitutional measures at different bureaucratic levels, and she singles out "the unsentimental and factual tone and the strong sense of individual assertion" as a defining feature of the narration. This observation about tone is useful, but Jayasree does not connect it to Pawde's work as a teacher. Sharma (2021) reads the essay as testimony, as a practice of bearing witness that breaks silence. Sharma records Pawde's students' admiration as a moment of joy set against the scorn she meets elsewhere, but does not treat it as a clue to how she writes. Dalit feminist scholarship, notably Rege (1998), argues that Dalit women's accounts of their own lives form a distinct standpoint and cannot be absorbed into upper-caste feminism. The scholarship reviewed here generally situates the essay's explanatory style within Dalit women's testimonial writing and does not examine its possible relation to Pawde's own experience of teaching Sanskrit.

Scholarship on Terrell's memoir follows a similar pattern. Parker's biography *Unceasing Militant* (2020) places the memoir within Terrell's wider political life, as evidence of her activism and her negotiation of a public role. Ham's foreword (2021) recounts Terrell's education at Oberlin, her early teaching at Wilberforce University and in Washington, and her activism, but does not ask whether her classroom years shaped how she narrates her life. In this body of work, the memoir is read as a political and personal record.

To this study's knowledge, no work brings Pawde and Terrell into direct comparison, or asks whether a shared professional identity as an educator produces a recognizable narrative strategy, different from testimony, argument, or protest. The gap is not simply the absence of a comparison between these two writers. It is the absence of any attention to teaching as a professional identity that may shape how women narrate their own experiences of exclusion.

3. THE PATH TO THE CLASSROOM - PAWDE AND TERRELL AS EDUCATORS:

Both women came to teaching by paths that were exceptional for their communities. For Pawde, the decision to study Sanskrit was an act of defiance before it became a career. As a child she was shouted at for watching a thread ceremony from outside, and Sharma (2021) reads that incident as strengthening her resolve to learn the language. Her father encouraged her, reasoning that independence had changed things. When she took Sanskrit as an elective in class nine, people warned her that she would not manage, but she persisted and earned a good mark at matriculation (Pawde, 2013; Sharma, 2021). She went on to an M.A. despite taunts, and she became the first woman from a scheduled caste to pass with distinction in Sanskrit. A job did not follow. She stayed unemployed for two years, met remarks that such people should not teach Sanskrit, and appealed to a minister and to the chief minister without result. After her marriage, a lectureship came within months, and she records that the credit belonged to her husband's surname, not to her record (Pawde, 2013; Sharma, 2021). She then taught Sanskrit at a government college.

Terrell's path differed but resembled Pawde's in one important way: she too entered a profession that was not easily open to someone of her background. She chose Oberlin's four-year gentleman's course over the shorter course generally expected of women and graduated in 1884 (Ham, 2021). In 1885 she began teaching at Wilberforce University for forty dollars a month. She taught five classes, from French and mineralogy in the college department to reading and writing in the preparatory department, and she worked late into the night to stay ahead of her pupils (Terrell, 2021, ch. 7). In Washington she sat an examination on methods of teaching, about which she knew only what Wilberforce had taught her, and she was appointed (Terrell, 2021, ch. 7). She taught in the high school's Latin department until her marriage in October 1891. As a married woman she was legally barred from teaching (Ham, 2021). She later served on the Washington school board, appointed in 1895 as one of the first Black women in the country to hold such a post (Ham, 2021).

In both cases, teaching was neither an incidental occupation nor a fallback. It was a professional achievement won against resistance: caste prejudice in Pawde's case, and in Terrell's case her father's opposition (Terrell, 2021, ch. 7) and the barriers facing a Black woman with a college degree. It came before each woman's better-known life as a writer and public figure, and in Pawde's case it continued alongside it. Both spent years in a profession built around



explaining structured knowledge to someone who did not yet have it. Those years may help explain how each woman later explains, structures, and presents her own experience in her autobiographical writing.

4. THE TEACHER'S VOICE IN KUMUD PAWDE'S "THE STORY OF MY SANSKRIT":

Pawde's essay does not simply tell the reader what was done to her. It explains, almost like a lesson, how the system around her worked. Jayasree's (2013) description of "the unsentimental and factual tone and the strong sense of individual assertion" can be read as more than a comment on style. It also points to a teaching method that Pawde applies to her own life. The clearest case is her account of cleanliness. As a child she is kept at a distance by classmates' mothers, who treat her as unclean, so she tests the claim against evidence: she bathes, her hair is oiled and plaited, her clothes are washed, and the other girls like to sit beside her (Pawde, 2013; Sharma, 2021). The evidence does not fit the charge, and she draws the conclusion that visible hygiene and caste-based purity are different things. A teacher does not simply describe a phenomenon. She classifies it, so that a student can tell one kind of thing from another, and Pawde does exactly this.

The same method runs through her account of employment. She records the sequence in order: distinction in Sanskrit; two years without a post; remarks at interviews that such people should not teach Sanskrit; appeals to a minister and to the chief minister; and then a lectureship within months of her marriage. From that order she draws the inference that the credit for the job belonged to her husband's surname and not to her record (Pawde, 2013; Sharma, 2021). The officials' promises receive the same treatment. She separates a promise from a job, and answers advice to turn to research by observing that research needs peace of mind, which a person without work does not have (Sharma, 2021). Each step is laid out so that the reader can follow how a constitutional promise is defeated in practice, through the sort of bureaucratic resistance Jayasree (2013) describes.

Pawde also teaches the reader how to hear what is said around her. Remarks made to her arrive in polished and even approving words, such as surprise that she teaches at a government college, and she records them so that the contempt beneath the courtesy becomes audible. Sharma (2021) reads the same remarks as carrying an undercurrent of hatred and sarcasm. Remarks that scriptures have been polluted by her presence do the same work in plainer form. Public praise is examined in turn, since praise at official functions is aimed at her caste more than her knowledge. The classroom is the exception. She records the admiration of students, whose response to her teaching contrasts with the caste-based judgments she meets elsewhere, and a student's wish that her lesson would never end (Pawde, 2013; Sharma, 2021). It is a modest detail, but it shows where her teaching is received as teaching. Each of these moments may work less like a confession and more like a worked example: a specific case offered to illustrate a general, otherwise invisible structural point. In this essay, Pawde's autobiography does not only tell the reader what happened to her; it also teaches the reader how to recognize the form through which caste inequality operates.

5. THE TEACHER'S VOICE IN MARY CHURCH TERRELL'S A COLORED WOMAN IN A WHITE WORLD:

Terrell's memoir also explains, as it tells, though its method comes from a different classroom. Her work as a teacher included classifying. In the Latin department at M Street High School, her colleague and future husband Robert Terrell would tell his pupils that he did not know whether a construction in Virgil was a subjunctive of purpose or of result. He would ask her opinion, report it the next day, and urge the pupils to accept it (Terrell, 2021, ch. 7). The anecdote shows the habit her profession gave her and her colleague relied on: deciding which kind of thing a sentence is.

The memoir applies that habit to segregation. The chapter on Washington takes up the city's old name, the Colored Man's Paradise, and tests it against the facts, as a teacher tests a student's claim. A Black woman arriving in the capital as a stranger could walk for miles without finding a hotel that would take her, and could cross from the Capitol to the White House, hungry and with money in hand, without finding a restaurant that would serve her unless she accepted a screen. A dinner at a hotel near Union Station follows as the first worked case. Terrell sees the proprietor watching from the doorway and understands at once what is wrong. Her hostess is rebuked afterward for inviting Black guests. Terrell draws the lesson that the dinner, though it ended in rebuke, established a principle (Terrell, 2021, ch. 39). The chapter then moves through the same pattern in churches, theaters, shops, and jobs, each case laid out in parallel, so that the reader learns the system as a set of connected rules (Terrell, 2021, ch. 39). A second chapter shows the method in documents. A family tries to place a young Black woman, called Ruth, in a girls' school in the North. Terrell reproduces the principals' letters in sequence. The first school sends an acceptance, then a cancellation within forty-eight hours, then a refusal to reconsider. A second school writes months after Ruth's admission to warn that the student body suspects her ancestry (Terrell, 2021, ch. 29). The order matters: the reader meets the welcome first, so the



cancellation arrives as a contradiction the reader is already equipped to see. She lets the letters carry the evidence and then explains what this shows, namely that the same institution can welcome and reject in the same week, and that its stated principles depend on who is asking. A teacher builds a lesson in this way, with the primary source first and the interpretation after.

Read together, these chapters suggest that Terrell treats her reader as a student who has not yet been shown how segregation works. She does not simply protest it. She sets out cases, draws distinctions, and states the principle each case proves. That method may help explain why the memoir reads, in these chapters, like a lesson as much as a plea.

6. DISCUSSION - TWO CLASSROOMS, ONE STRATEGY:

Together, Pawde and Terrell present exclusion as a system to be understood. Pawde tests the charge of uncleanness against the evidence of her own childhood and concludes that hygiene and caste-based purity are different things. She reads the order of her employment history and infers whose name earned the post. Terrell tests the old name of her city against the facts and sets out the same pattern in hotels, restaurants, churches, and shops. She also lays out a sequence of letters from school principals and then explains what they show. In each case, a personal incident serves as a worked example of a general rule. These habits can be read alongside the years each woman spent in a profession built around explaining structured knowledge: Pawde through Sanskrit and Terrell through Latin, French, and mineralogy. A writer who only states a rule is explaining; the teacher's voice builds the rule from cases and leaves the reader able to recognize it elsewhere. That is the test applied to both texts: a passage counts as the teacher's voice when a particular case is arranged so that the reader can see the general rule behind it. The strategy is shared; the systems it explains are not. Pawde explains an exclusion grounded in birth and purity, enforced through remarks, interviews, and appointments, while Terrell explains segregation enforced through public space and institutional rules.

This strategy differs in emphasis from two other common forms of autobiographical writing: argument mainly tries to win the reader's agreement, and testimony mainly asks the reader to witness. A teacher's explanation works differently. It assumes the reader can understand a structure once it is properly laid out, and it places the responsibility on the writer to lay it out correctly. In these passages, the reader is treated less as a judge to be persuaded or a witness to be moved, and more as a student who has not yet been taught. In this sense the teacher's voice works as a pedagogy of resistance: it exposes, case by case, rules that institutions present as normal, and it teaches the reader to recognize them. The teacher's voice does not replace testimony in either text, and it sits beside the testimonial reading that Sharma (2021) offers for Pawde.

The claim made here is limited: it rests on two texts and on selected passages from each. Pawde's essay is read through its English version and Sharma's account of it, not through the Marathi original. The study claims an association between each woman's profession and her narrative strategy, not a cause. Other explanations remain possible, including each writer's activism, education, and reform traditions, and the evidence presented here cannot rule them out. The teacher's voice is offered as a textual category that describes recurring strategies in the passages examined. It makes no claim about either writer's intention. The comparison would be strengthened by further passages from both texts, by the Marathi original and by other women educators who wrote their lives.

7. CONCLUSION:

This study has read Kumud Pawde's "The Story of My Sanskrit" and Mary Church Terrell's *A Colored Woman in a White World* as texts that may be shaped by a professional identity that earlier scholarship has not treated as significant. Both women were teachers before they became known as writers. In the passages examined, each explains how exclusion works through worked examples, drawn distinctions, and step-by-step guidance of the reader. Pawde separates hygiene from caste-based purity and traces a lectureship to her husband's surname. Terrell tests the name of a city against the facts and lets a sequence of letters show how a school's welcome turned into a refusal. This is the teacher's voice, and it differs in emphasis from both argument and testimony.

The comparison suggests that professional identity, alongside caste, race, and gender, can shape how a life is written. The finding is an association drawn from two texts, and it opens a question for further work. Future research can test whether a comparable teacher's voice appears in the life writing of other women educators from excluded communities. The teacher's voice names a strategy in life writing and offers comparative scholarship a category to read for.

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