

## Relevance of Dalit Life Narratives: A Contextual Study of Urmila Pawar's 'The *Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*'

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### Abstract

Urmila Pawar's autobiography *Aaydan (The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs)* is a moving saga of a socially deprived woman who fights all odds in life. Pawar narrates the pitiable tales of three generations of Dalit women driven deeper into invisibility by the patriarchy. In her memoir, Pawar not only shares her tireless efforts to surmount hideous personal tragedies but also conveys the excitement of an awakening consciousness among the Dalit community. This paper explores the relevance of Dalit autobiography in the present scenario with particular reference to Urmila Pawar's autobiography *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*. She delicately navigates her readers through her long journey from the harsh landscape of the Konkan region to Mumbai, first as a Mahar and later as a woman as she challenged the conventions of both caste and gender to emerge as an activist and strong literary voice. Urmila Pawar is an Indian writer and activist, born in a Hindu Mahar family in Maharashtra. Apart from *The Weave of My Life* she has published several short story collection which talk about the caste-class and gender axes in everyday life. She is a prominent figure in the Dalit and feminist movements. Her writings are hailed as a critique of social discrimination.

Keywords – Caste, Dalit feminism, Gender, Life narrative, Outcaste

## 1. Introduction

Autobiographies are part of a literary genre that brings personal accounts of life into public domain. Autobiographies of Dalit writers are called as narratives of pain as they carry the distorted historical truth. India's caste system is among the world's oldest and surviving form of social stratification. Manusmriti, widely regarded to be the most authoritative book on Hindu law acknowledges and justifies the caste system as “the basis of order and regularity of society”. The religious principle of pollution and purity has sneakily elbowed a majority into the margins and discriminated them as outcastes or Dalits. The autobiographies of many Dalit women writers unveiled the worse living conditions of Dalit women and how they are degraded, demoralized, exploited and kept uneducated in our society. They have been socially, culturally, economically and politically subjugated and marginalized. Thus Dalit women writers have purposefully chosen autobiographies to fight against the inequality and liberty for claims like the identity of self and individuality. These autobiographies carve a new image of Dalit women far different from the elite class women. Urmila Pawar’s *The Weave of My Life* narrate the evils of oppressions and exploitations. She filled her autobiography with her innate individualistic feelings of subjugation and exploitation. This memoir is an attempt to analyze how ‘caste’ and ‘gender’ determines the position of a woman in a society.

## 2. Through the Weave of a Dalit Woman’s Life

Even in the wake of post-modernism, Dalit women are living in dark era of savagery. Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* exposes these issues by questioning the atrocious social positions of caste, class and gender, and its cumulative effects on lives of women. Gail Omvedt, a feminist sociologist, has called Indian Dalit woman as Dalit among Dalit. *The*

*Weave of my Life* is a self-conscious Dalit feminist testimony. Her honesty in presenting her life, daily struggles and victories is inspiring and is a testament to her courage and strength of character. Urmila Pawar makes impossible rebellious acts possible through her resistance. Pawar not only shares the tragic lives of Dalits but also presents her excitement of an awakening consciousness that brings in a drastic change in their conditions and situations. Through her memoir, she challenges the bourgeois genre of autobiography. Her memoir came to represent not the journey of an individual voice, emotion and consciousness but rather a social community and its chorus of voices. However read as testimonio of caste based exploitation, everyday resistance and organized anti-caste struggles, this memoir bring new insight into caste based Indian society. Through *The Weave of My Life*, Urmila Pawar proves that Dalit life narratives cannot simply be reduced to mere 'narratives of pain and sorrow' or 'memories of a hateful past'. Rather it violates the parameters set by bourgeois autobiographies and creates an awakening consciousness among Dalits to fight back the injustice. The weave of Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan* is a significant reminder of ways in which Dalit feminism in defying the construction of Dalit and woman as consistent cases is a crucial force in the present constitution of Dalit studies. Urmila Pawar challenges the views that see caste as a social institution frozen in time, reinstates the intellectual contributions and agency of Dalit women and brings together the 'private' lived experience and the 'public' practices of anti-caste struggles. The weave of memories thus documents a detailed narrative of how Dalits encountered modernity, bringing into focus 'new' times and spaces of modernity. Thus *The Weave of My Life*, enables a mapping of Dalit modernity as a social experience in process.

At the end of her memoir, Urmila Pawar writes:

Life has taught me many things, showed me so much, it has also lashed out at me till I bled. I don't know how much longer I am going to live, nor do I know

in what form life is going to confront me. Let it come in any form; I am ready to face it stoically. This is what my life has taught me. This is my life and that is me! (268)

The political power in this country has for long been the monopoly of a few dominated upper caste men, which merely deprived the downtrodden. This clearly reflects the degree of inequalities of the society. The women leaders who enjoyed the power also have neglected the downtrodden women and did not try to improve their social, economic and political status. But they must have played an important role in forming the social program and legislation for the welfare of women. It is regrettable and unfortunate for Dalits, especially women to get neglected in considering their share in active politics and their potential in the national development process. By choosing literature as the chief medium to assert their lost identities, Urmila Pawar and other Dalit writers are striving to carve a niche for Dalits in the mainstream literary discourse. The Dalits occupy low status in society. They are trying very much to be a part of the society. To an extent their hard work for liberation and freedom reach success but the dominants cannot accept them completely. "To the Untouchables," Ambedkar said, with the sort of nerve that present day intellectuals in India find hard to summon, "Hinduism is a veritable chamber of horrors...There cannot be a more degrading system of social organization than the caste system that deadens paralyses and cripples the people from helpful activity."(20)

### 3. Conclusion

To Dalit writers, autobiography, in realistic sense is not about the mere facts and events related to the achievements and failure of their personal life, it is about a political act by their choice to interpret it from a Dalit point of view and make sense of these events to assert Dalit identity.

As Rochana Majumdar said:

Through descriptions of her early family life, Urmila Pawar skilfully takes the reader through a rich archive of Dalit history. Remarkable in many ways, her autobiography demonstrates the deep fissures between feminist movement and movements for uplift of lower castes. Pawar's own experiences as a Dalit Buddhist female activist abound in the difficulties she faced while joining these different causes. (16)

Pawar's autobiography narrates the injustices meted out to Dalits and Dalit women, specifically. It also emphasizes their faith in justice and transformation in society in the conditions of Dalits and caste system. Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of my Life* has great relevance in the present scenario as it portrays the real face of our society. Pawar and other Dalit writers, through their life and writing are exhorting the downtrodden section to wage a war against the odds of caste system. The society should change first in order to erase the social evils like casteism and gender disparity. These autobiographies are pleading to us that, for a better tomorrow we, the citizens of India must stand united to de-weaponize caste, for it is a sore spot that needed to be urgently addressed.

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