

A Reading of Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*: Concerns of Dalit Women Remain Different

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Abstract: -

The feminist concerns of the dalit women in India remain different from those of the mainstream higher caste women. The existence of patriarchal forces pervading through at all levels in the lives of mainstream women offers them with a scope to struggle for certain rights that remain peculiar to their caste and community. It has been claimed by many critics as well as the readers of dalit women's writings that the women of this community bear the brunt of 'double oppression' and 'double marginalisation' i.e. they remain subjected to their victimisation at the hands of the caste system, being dalit women as well as to the oppression at the hands of the internal patriarchal forces. Therefore, they remain 'doubly victimised'. A critical reading of Urmila Pawar's memoir, *The Weave of My Life*, which has often been viewed as a text with dalit feminist concerns, proves an otherwise picture of the dalit community and its treatment of the women. The present paper has attempted to study some of the aspects presented in the memoir to construct a viewpoint that since the lives of the women of the two communities and the social rules governing their lives, remain different, their concerns remain different and therefore their rights remain different.

Keywords: Dalit women, Feminist concerns, Patriarchy, victimisation, empowerment

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Among the notable contributions made by Dalit women writers to the literary canon of Dalit studies in India, Urmila Pawar's autobiographical narrative, *The Weave of My Life*, (2008) stands distinguished. A renowned dalit activist and

a celebrated author, Pawar has been hailed as a noted dalit writer and a feminist¹. *The Weave of My Life* finds placed itself among all those autobiographical narratives contributed by dalit writers, a characteristic feature of whom, is to dress up the subjective narrative of the author's life, embedded into the macroscopic picture of the community to which the author belongs. The piece of literary writing, under discussion here, is a memoir rather than an autobiography of its author in a true sense. Pawar has shared the distinct memories of her life, charting out her several experiences at various fronts to build up a narrative in a framework of the bildungsroman genre. The notion of the female subjectivity dominates the narrative throughout. The narrative explores to the core, the idea of what it means to be a dalit woman in the Indian society? It does focus on the several difficulties and woes faced by the author as a dalit woman in her life and her community in general but the sufferings do not necessarily flow out of those parameters, against which the Indian women of other castes struggle in their social lives.

In the recent times, the conditions of dalit women have been viewed at as those of 'doubly oppressed' and 'doubly marginalised' by feminist critics and readers. By 'double oppression', the critics mean that the women of dalit community are subjected to the patriarchal forces external to their community as well as the internal forces operating within their community. However, the closer analysis of writings like *The Weave of My Life* yields an otherwise picture of the social conditions to which the dalit women are subjected to. The present paper focusses on the differences in the struggles faced by the women of dalit community in India vis-à-vis the women of other *Hindu* castes, thereby, constructing a viewpoint that the feminist aspirations of dalit women remain much different from those of other Indian women and therefore, the rights of the former differ from the latter.

Indian *Hindu* women have been at the receiving end of the unjust treatment meted out to them at all levels in society, in the name of the domination of patriarchal forces in their social lives, over many centuries. The sufferings that they have been subjected to, resulted from the unequal treatment to them in terms of gender disparity and discriminations at various levels. These include the practicing of social ills such as those of widow system, childhood marriages, marriage without their consents, dowry system, forceful relegation of women to private spaces, restricting them to receive education and exposing themselves to the public sphere and many more other ills. The social reform movement in India of post 1857 Revolt, which garnered nationwide strength, had remained successful in abolishing most of the mentioned social ills.

However, the remnants of these ills still continue to find their way creeping into the lives of Indian women, even today. Much has been achieved but still much remains to be conquered. Patriarchy has still continued to operate itself as the governing force within the family structure, though at an implicit level. Though,

¹ Notes from the Margins: Dalit Writer Urmila Pawar's autobiography inspires a Marathi Play. *The Indian Express*. 2014-07-20.

there has been a rise in the increasing awareness in the society regarding the gendered disparity in the society with the development of the feminist studies and the feminist movement in India during the later half of the twentieth century. The social conditions in the lives of Indian women have constantly improved and have witnessed an upsurge with the rise in their education levels and more exposure to public spheres in the post-independent era.

A careful study of the basic social structure governing the dalit community and its women, as depicted in Pawar's memoir, *The Weave of My Life*, uncovers the fact that it integrally differs from the caste Hindu community and its various social rules of governance, in its very constitution. Upon a closer analysis of *The Weave of My Life*, one comes across various aspects of the life of its author as well as the behaviour of its community in general. The manner of its presentation and the selection of the issues depicted in it, contradict its status as the text that echoes the feminist concerns of dalit women. The memoir becomes the portrayal of the life of its author and certain influences on her which have shaped her into a kind of the personality that she ultimately becomes. These influences come from within the community as well as from the outside larger world. If one analyses the influences upon her life that come from within, one notes that these have played a positive role for her and supported her to become what she is at present.

Pawar belongs to the *Mahar* community (one of the dalit sub-castes in Maharashtra state of India). She describes her father as a teacher by profession and one who acts as a priest for the community at the same time. Her mother is a weaver of cane baskets and contributes to the income of the family. Both the parents exert a great amount of positive influence upon the children in the family. Her father does not hesitate to adopt harsh attitude towards them, when it comes to the matter of receiving education, especially for the girls. He maintains a strict disciplinarian atmosphere in the house to encourage their studies. Having realised that education could be the only outlet to come out of the wretched conditions of the caste discrimination in the larger society, he emphasises more upon the education of his children. Pawar reminisces about her father in her memoir, highlighting that

“He was the one who insisted on our getting educated. (He would say) Let the girls go to school. They have to stand on their own feet, be independent. They must also learn to ride bicycles” (Pawar, 33)

Further, it has been depicted in one of the episodes that the illiterate elder women of the community were not too happy with the girls of the Pawar family receiving support for their education so liberally from their parents. They would often mock their efforts to study hard and would comment sarcastically in the following terms,

“What do the women have to do with the education? Ultimately, she would be blowing on the stove, wouldn't she? Or Is she going to be a teacher...., a *Brahmin* lady, that she goes to school?” (18)

Such humiliating and condescending remarks could not deter the steely determination of her father and his resolve to educate his girls became deeper. For instance, her elder sister, Shanti *Akka* has been least interested in studies however the father sees to it that she not only receives the proper education but she becomes self-reliant and financially independent by seeking a professional job. The village school offered only limited education up to a particular standard. The father arranges for his daughter's studies in the nearby town, which offers higher education. Later when she is required to report for her job responsibilities in a distant town and nobody from her in-law's family could accompany her, it is the father who decides to stay with her so that she does not suffer any break in her job. Unfortunately, the father dies while Pawar is still three years old but his dream of seeing his children, particularly the girls, well-educated and well placed in their lives, is turned into reality with the relentless efforts of the mother.

Pawar's childhood can be described as happy except for the poor financial conditions of the family. She is however a carefree child and least bothered about her studies. The mother, though, keeps a strict watch upon her academic performance. She herself plays the role of an ideal model for her daughter. Later in the narrative, the author proves herself to be the most educated among all the children in the family as well as in their community. The unconditional support of her parents made it possible for her to be self-reliant, independent and chart out a path of success in her life. The father sets the foundation of education of the children while the mother builds the confidence required to be oneself. Both contribute equally to the progress of their children.

One does not come across any specific instance of discrimination practiced at home of author when it comes to the treatment of the children, as well as the women of the family. The women of the family receive due respect and have the liberty to exercise their wills and participate freely in the family matters of significance. The mother, for instance, is not bounded by her husband or the elder members of the family in any manner to participate in the decision-making process for the family. In one of the cases pertaining to the marriage of author's elder sister, it is the mother who declines the proposal after giving her own arguments to the family. The father respects the decision taken by her. Thus, it is not only the male members of the family, who can take ultimate decisions in the family, unlike in the higher caste families. After the sad demise of the father, it is the mother, who leads the family and takes upon its responsibilities in entirety. In one episode, Pawar describes the ill-intention of the author's cousin brothers who have an eye on the ancestral house. They make a demand to share a part of their house (built by her parents in Ratnagiri) and attempt to intimidate the mother about all kinds of imagined superstitious spirits that hovered around the house in question. The mother is not easy to be fooled and taken by any nonsense. She does not only put up a good resistance against their ill-arguments but drives them away by threatening in a manner that nobody ever dares to come back to her family with evil intentions. She emerges as a confident woman who has been made strong by her husband's constant motivation and encouragement to her all through her life. As a widow, she never needs to depend on anyone for anything in life. She earns a livelihood for her family by continuing to weave cane baskets.

The other women characters within the family also do not lag behind as described in the memoir. Pawar describes Parvati *vahini*, the sister-in-law of Pawar emerging as self-reliant in her own ways. No restrictions are put upon her by the community when she becomes a widow. She does not observe any seclusion period during her widowhood. On the contrary, she exercises her own decisions within her family. Manjula *tai*, the elder sister of the author, puts up with her in-law's family and their harassment for some time but after, when it becomes unbearable for her, she leaves forever to live independently with her husband, who supports her decision. In case of Pawar, she also becomes widow after the death of Harishchandra, her husband. Nevertheless, she continues to live independently. She loses her son as well. Thus, there is no male member in her marital family. She continues to live as she used to while her husband had been alive. There exists no concept of living in seclusion for dalit widows the community, unlike in the case with the widows of *Hindu* upper caste families. The narrative in the memoir is replete with the instances of women who lead their own lives in significant manner. There are no limitations of any kind exercised upon them by the male members within their families. This results in their self-assertion and self-dependence, unlike in the lives of women of higher caste families, who are constantly controlled by the various patriarchal forces to 'keep them in their due places'. Women characters in Pawar's memoir emerge as independent-spirited.

If one attempts to analyse the author's personal life for the influence of any internal patriarchal force, it is found to be almost absent. One hardly witnesses the presence of any external control or patriarchal force that puts restrictions in her life. On the contrary, the men in her family in particular and community in general, remain instrumental in bringing about the remarkable progress in every stage of her life. Her brother, Shahu remains encouraging to her before her marriage as well as post marriage. Her elder brother, *Bhai*, finally comes to her rescue and gets her married to a man of her choice after realising that she has made a firm decision in this regard. Upon her marriage, her father-in-law treats her affectionately as a daughter rather than a daughter-in-law and makes sure that she is treated respectfully in her marital family. In the company of her mother-in-law, she never feels harassed. She finds her more generous than her own mother, when it comes to the distribution of the food in the family. Urmila observes about her mother-in-law in the following terms,

"I like my *sasu* very much. She was very nice, affectionate and enthusiastic person and loved to chat with people.... She was simple alright, but she was by no means a simpleton! There was one more reason, however why we felt that she was very close to us. She never allowed any backbiting. She never encouraged us when we complained about each other. Instead, she would effectively silence the person who complained" (197-198)

Her husband is a man of her choice for marriage. He remains true in his loyalty and love for her at all times that encourages her to achieve her ambitions. He never exercises his patriarchal control over his wife, rather he wholeheartedly supports her decisions in the family. It is upon his encouragement that she decides to pursue higher studies and achieve degrees. It is he, who supports her to pursue her job as well as continue to nurture other creative activities such as those of writing, reading, participating in public discourses, visits to theatres etc. He always approves her active participation in social activities and women's organisations. She continues to soar high with the freedom to pursue her ambitions and

aspirations. At every stage of their lives, he appreciates her efforts and at the same time, he worries for her health and overall well-being. Thus, within the community, she finds no resistance in the name of patriarchy. On the contrary, it is the perpetual encouraging support to her from within the community that helps her to establish a strong identity for herself in the long run.

As far as is the case of the external influence of patriarchal forces upon Pawar as a dalit woman, it is evident that it has brought about the sufferings for her and her family. She suffers, as a person, on the account of her caste in the *Hindu* society. As a dalit person, she receives ill-treatment everywhere outside her community and is subjected to caste based discriminations. At the social level, her family remains so poor that she had to remain hungry at times in her childhood and had to satisfy her hunger with the minimally available poor quality of food. In school, she is made fun of, by her upper caste classmates for her accommodating appetite (at a picnic, she relished the meal prepared by her upper caste classmates), her class-teacher humiliates her by making her sweep the entire playground of the school almost every day till her mother intervenes in the matter. After her marriage, she has to face several difficulties in finding a house on rent. At her workplace, she is subjected to constant casteist remarks and her husband is forced to resign from one of his jobs by virtue of his caste, her children face continuous humiliations for belonging to a dalit caste in their school, her only son as well as her elder brother commit suicide because of the overtly casteist attitude of the teachers in the college and the office colleagues respectively. She gets subjected to increasing marital discord at home because of the too much external influence of feminist women outside the community. The unbearable humiliating remarks subjected to her elder sister by an upper caste lunatic woman in the mental asylum and many other similar episodes in her life reveal the mental trauma suffered by the dalits at the hands of other higher caste people.

The aggravation of her problems begins with the increasing influence upon her mind of the ideology of the women of higher caste women, whom she comes in contact with, at various women's organisations. The closer is the imitation, the more the mental agonies for her. The abandoning of her *mangalsutra* in an effort to imitate the ideology of the feminist women of upper caste is the perfect illustration in this regard.

“When I saw the bare necks of the activists, in the women's movements, I always asked myself, why should I wear the *mangalsutra*? I am a Buddhist! My religion does not tell me to wear one. It suggests only a white string both for the husband and wife, to be tied in their wrists! I resolved to do away with the *mangalsutra*. I went to the women's programmes without wearing the *mangalsutra*. If somebody asked me why, I would deliver a lecture on women's liberation. And sometimes when the love for my husband overflowed my heart, I found myself wearing it again.” (253)

She faces the dilemma of imitating the mannerisms and thought processes of the urban feminists on one hand and to retain the internal belief systems of the dalit community on the other hand. Thus, in an instance when she is expected to deliver a speech at one of the women's organisations, she falters in her speech since her ideology is not clear to her own self. Under the influence of imitation, her

rhetoric alters. She begins to perceive herself as a victim of patriarchy and her husband as a patriarchal tyrant in her 'new found vision'.

The given text cannot be termed as the text with the feminist concerns since there is absolutely no role of internal patriarchy in the life of the author or other women characters throughout the narrative. The women characters suffer, though, not under the influence of any patriarchal norm but as members of a community which belongs to the lowest caste i.e. *atishudras*. The feminist concerns of the mainstream women deal with the rights of women to gain dignity in the society, to seek independent identities, to fight against social ills such as widow remarriages, dowry system and inheritance rights in property, to establish an egalitarian society which recognises the women as equal members of the society. All the mentioned rights are available to the women of dalit community in *The Weave of My Life* so these concerns cannot be the concerns for dalit women. Their concerns remain different and they arise out of the caste discrimination rather than workings of internal patriarchy. If the society prepares itself to recognise them as its respectful members and acknowledges their basic rights as human rights, then the dalit community would truly be liberated from any kind of injustice.

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