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Unheard Voices of the Voiceless: A Study on Urmila Pawar's Autobiography *The Weave of My Life : A Dalit Women's Memoirs*

**Abstract:**

Dalit literature has acquired a space of its own amidst the major literary canons. They speak of the umpteen numbers of atrocities and humiliations meted out towards them. A fair representation of the dalit life has been given by the tales narrated in dalit autobiographies. But seldom do they give a fair account of the life of dalit women. Dalit women are ignored even by the feminist movements that championed the cause of women. So a true and realistic portrayal of the lives of dalit women are featured only in the dalit women autobiographies. This paper sets out to analyse the autobiography (*The Weave of My Life*) of the dalit writer Urmila Pawar and examines how the incidents of her life have shaped and steered her personal and creative life.

**Key Words:-** Dalit literature, marginalised, autobiography

The voice of dalits has become a major presence in the literary scenario of Indian writings. Dalits are the people who are ostracised and victimised by the so called high class who occupies the centre of society. For them the dalits are inferior in every aspect and meant to do all sorts of menial and odd jobs. They are people who nurture centuries old history of struggle, oppression and marginalisation. Dalit movements gained momentum with the strenuous effort, teachings and works of great leaders like Dr. Ambedkar, Mahatma Jotirao Phule etc. Inspired by their teachings, the dalits understood the greatness and value of education and found it as the true beacon of hope and change in future.

Dalit literary movement emerged in Marathi literature during the 1960s. Educated dalits started to appear in the literary forefront and they found it to be a strong mode to voice their anguish of age old oppression, suffering and humiliation. The plight of dalits had become the subject matter in many novels written by writes such as Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao etc. A true account of the dalit experiences are given by the autobiographical mode of narration where we get an authentic account of their lives in their own voice. The repressed and silenced voice got an unbridled expression through these narratives. Dalit writings

foreground the tragic story and life of the dalit communities but seldom do they encompass the conditions of the dalit women. The role of dalit women are poorly addressed in the dalit men's writings. In spite of leading a malnourished and poverty stricken life, the women of these communities are at the receiving ends. They are devoid of the basic dignity of life and face double marginalisation owing to their status as a woman and a dalit. The multitudes of humiliations and atrocities meted out to them forced them to awake from silence and protest against deprivations and humiliations. The autobiographies written by women give an authentic and poignant saga of their struggle towards existence and resistance. They are a social critique of the existing social system where the privileged classes enjoy all rights and the dalits are relegated to the fringes of the society.

Even the feminist movements that took up the cause of the women did not give due significance to the plights of the dalit women. They universalise the condition of all women and did not take up the cause of the dalit women. Thus dalit women's issues were overlooked and were scantily represented in the domain of the feminist movements. Self assertion and self identity are the primary features of an autobiography. It proves to be an excellent medium to reach out to the masses and let others know of their sorrows and exploitations. According to K. Sachidanandan, "Dalit literature empowers the marginalised by retrieving the voices, spaces and identities silenced or suppressed by castiest power" (Sachidanandan 14). It verbalises the suppressed anger and wounded pride of thousands of dalit communities who live as an outcaste in the margins of Indian society.

Daya Pawar's autobiography *Baluta: Social Claim* written in 1978 is credited to have inaugurated the autobiographical narratives among the dalit writers. As dalit writings emerged in the Marathi literature, numerous autobiographies flourished in the Marathi language and many were translated into English owing to their strong and powerful mode of narration. Major voices in Marathi autobiographies include Saran Kumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi*, Laxman Gaikwad's *Uchalya: The Branded*, Narendra Jadav's *Outcaste*, Vasant Moon's *Vasti: Growing Up Untouchable in India*. Influenced by these writings many other autobiographies emerged in various other languages like Bama's *Karikku*, and Gunasekaran's *The Scar in Tamil*, Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life* in Hindi. These narratives are charged with lived experience which shaped their life and aims at deconstructing the established order and inspire a passion for change among the dalits.

Credit for the dalit women movements and literary contributions owes to the leaders like Dr. B.R.Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule, Periyar etc who inspired them to organise themselves and recognise their rights. Through their teachings, the dalit women felt the need to be educated and the educated women became the torchbearers of social change and revolution of their status. They organised themselves under various banners like Dalit Mahila Federation, National Federation of Dalit Women, All India Dalit Women's Forum etc.

Inspired by the teachings of these leaders and the dalit movements, many dalit women came to the forefront to give voice to their lives and also to give a counter narrative of their lives. Dalit women like Baby Kambale, Urmila Pawar, Bama, P.Sivakami, Hira Bansode, and many others used their pens to fight against the dalit patriarchy and biased feminism. In their writings women are not just passive sufferers and victims of exploitation but a being of self will and identity.

This project probes into the life of one of the most acclaimed dalit women writers Urmila Pawar where we get a true account of the social rejection and atrocities against dalit women and how these women gather strength and power from the light of events in their

lives and moulded themselves into eminent creative writers. Through her writing she tries to unleash the frustrations and anger she bears in her minds towards the discriminations they had faced during their lifetime.

Urmila Pawar, one of the foremost literary figures in Marathi literature has written numerous short stories and novels which vibrate with the theme of caste distinctions and social ostracism. She is an internationally acclaimed writer who had won many awards and honours. Her life itself is an example of struggle for existence amidst a life of setbacks and rejection.

She was born in 1945 in the Adagon village of Ratnagiri district in Maharashtra and belongs to the Mahar community. Her autobiography *Aaydan* translated into English as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* by Maya Pandit is a striking narrative of the life of the Mahar community. The numerous incidents of social rejections that she herself had to face in her lifetime had been a strong influence in her later life and helped her shape her creative career. She used these incidents as a means of protest and resistance against the cast conscious people who once relegated her and her community as untouchables. The touching incidents that she narrates in her autobiography deal with caste and related issues.

She begins her narration with a description of the women of her village whose daily routine is to tread a long path to reach the market at Ratnagiri to sell various things like bamboo sticks, firewood, grass, semolina, ripe or raw mangoes etc. in order to make their ends meet. The path they use is so dangerous that even a slight mistake in their steps would make them meet with death deep down on the bottom of the valley. The women used to curse their ancestors while making the hazardous steps for making them live in this part of the earth. "Every time a toe crushed against a jutting stone, a curse rang out, probably making the poor ancestor turn in his grave" (1). Urmila was a keen observer of the manners and habits of the women in her community right from her childhood. She enjoyed accompanying these women to the markets so that she can enjoy the various gossips that they exchanged during the course of their journey to relive themselves from the tedious journey. Apart from this, there would be danger lurking behind the shrubs and trees in the form of wild animals and miscreants and perverts who assault women. What worries them more is about their reputation than about their life. Among them may be a young mother who has a baby at home. The heavy climb would often make her breasts heavy with milk drip and make her blouse wet. This throws light on the dangerous life of the Mahar women who brave the dangers in their life in order to make their livelihood. The men folks in their family were drunkards and it was the duty of the women to run the household.

Urmila's father was literate and worked as a teacher in a school. He insists his sons and daughters to be educated as he knows that education is the only means by which they can empower themselves from the bane of casteism. When she was in the third standard her father passed away. It was a severe blow to the family as mother has to weave baskets to bring up her family. It simply brings to us the fact that her family lived in utter penury. Urmila had only two old dresses of her own to wear at school and it was often covered with dirt and mud. In spite of bearing the brunt of discrimination at school, Urmila and her siblings studied well at school and acquired government job. Urmila narrates many incidents from her childhood where she had to face the ills of caste discrimination.

'Aydan' generally means weaving of cane baskets. The concept of weaving plays an important role in the protagonist's life as it is the source of income for her family and it is these weaves that built up her life and career. The way she looked at the twelve rupees that

she received as a scholarship in fourth standard shows the value of money in her family. She was eager to show it to her mother and see the happiness in her face.

Aye was weaving her baskets as usual. She did not see me when I crossed her and entered the house. Her face looked worried. She was engrossed in her own thoughts and her fingers flew over the basket. Going to her, I told her about the scholarship and held the twelve rupees before her. Suddenly her face lit up with a sunny smile and eyes sparkled. (Pawar 91).

Incidents of social rejection permeate throughout her story. As a child she always noticed the difference between the dishes in her tiffin box and her friends' tiffin. She could never dream of such delicious food at her home. She remembers an incident at school when her friends plan to cook food at school. Each student volunteered to bring an item and when Urmila asked about the item she should bring, her friends asked her not to bring anything but money to purchase things. Urmila was conscious of the caste that she was born into. "We were aware, without anybody telling us that we were born in particular caste and in poverty, and that we have to live accordingly" (96). Though they sat together to eat, they didn't allow her to touch anything. They whispered and mocked at the way she had eaten. Urmila was very much humiliated to hear such comments about her and realised that she owed to hear such things since she was born as a dalit.

The girls were poorly fed and therefore whenever they saw food they grew gluttonous and grew out of control. Urmila remembers one such incident in her life when she went to a wedding at her sister-in-law's place. Urmila and her two nieces started devouring plenty of food and when they demanded more food they were insulted by the cook by calling them monsters.

Even at home, there was difference between the food items prepared for the male and female members of the family. The male members were given better food and the females were given the leftovers. The condition of the daughter-in-laws was awful since they had to do all the daily chores and were fed with meagre food. They were even ill treated by their husbands and mother-in-laws. They were beaten up and sent out of their house even at night. Married dalit women neither got care in her in-laws house nor could they return to their own house. Urmila remembers her father sending back her cousin Susheela to her husband's home telling that "she must stay with her in-laws" (33). Urmila recounts an incident when her cousin Shantaram beats his wife and she fell unconscious in a pool of blood. But what shocked Urmila was that nobody dared to interfere in this issue. They simply thought that he was her master and has the right to do anything to her. There were several such women who suffered at the hands of their husbands.

Urmila's father was a man of many qualities. Though she is not too attached to him, it was his strict and punctual way of life that had an immense influence on Urmila's life. He wanted his daughters to work and be financially independent. He was adamant that his girl children shall be educated and took special care to attend to their educational needs. Even at his death bed he reminded his wife to educate the children. He said, "let the girls go to the school. They have to stand on their own feet, be independent. They must also learn to drive bicycles" (33). He kept away from the sahabhojan programme organised by Ambedkar as he thinks that people attended the programme only because of the delicious food supplied there.

Mahar children discontinue their studies since they were treated like untouchables at school. The teachers never touched their slates and checked it from a distance to avoid pollution and if they made mistakes they were hit with stones. They were also seated outside

the school courtyard. The teacher often made Urmila to clean the school premises made dirty by cows with cow dung which was a great insult to her.

Social rejection was a social reality for the dalit women. She detests going to the house of the high caste people to sell bamboo baskets that her mother had woven. She was not allowed to enter their house and was asked to wait outside and the way they accept it from her made her humiliated. They sprinkle “water on them to wash away the pollution, and only then would they touch them” (65). The coins were dropped to her hands from a distance as if their hands would burn if they touch her. All these create deep unforgettable wounds in her mind and reminded her of her outcast status. These bitter incidents in her life have made her mind stronger and resolved to fight back through her writings.

Ambedkarite movement had a great influence upon the Mahar community. Urmila’s family along with other Mahar communities embraced Buddhism in the hope of escaping from the caste stigma. They renounced all their Hindu religious ideals and accepted the new religious doctrine in the hope of leading a new life. For them their Hindu belief has given them nothing but shame and dishonour.

Urmila was quite different from all other traditional girls. When other girls enjoyed being pursued by boys and enjoyed jokes with them Urmila was bold and different. She resolved not to remain behind in anything. She was very active and participated in almost all programmes at school. Not a single programme at school happened without her participation. The boys at school mocked her by calling her ‘Aga,’ the name of a famous Hindi comedian. It made her incensed and she even retorted to them in the most fowl language.

Being rebel in her character made her move forward in her academics and achieves whatever she has been deprived of in the past. Through her education, she resolved to shed light on the dark community to which she belongs. Only a few girls from her caste got education and people dissuade the parents when they sent their daughters to get educated. They believed that education is not a necessity to do the household chores. It is from such dissuading circumstances that she had grown into a writer of international acclaim.

The incidents of physical abuse by men from their own community point a finger at the insecure lives of women inside their own house or community. Pawar narrates how she made a narrow escape from a farmer named Sanagare. One of her friends narrates an incident when her maternal uncle abused her physically. “My maternal uncle plays dolls with me and pretends to be my husband, drags me into an alcove and press me hard”(125).

Urmila had great admiration to her sister Manjula Tai who was forward in her habits and manners. She adopted these mannerisms from her Brahmin friends. Instead of the slang words used by others in her family she used polished words like ‘Ayi’ instead of ‘Aaye’. Both Aaye and Urmila could not make out what she says. She prohibits Urmila from sitting in the backdoors during her monthly periods. She said, “There is nothing like sin or merit in starting your periods. It is just a natural thing to happen to a woman!” (124). The first thing she did after getting a job was building an enclosed stone latrine. The transformation of Manjula Tai points to the reality that when a dalit woman is educated she can contribute equally to the society as any other woman. She can help transform the society and built a better community of her own. Education helps them tackle the stigma of casteism to a certain extent. It was through her education Urmila was able to imbibe values and shape her life and career.

Her husband was not so supportive of her being enrolled in college and taking a degree or a post graduation. By being so he became one among the hundreds of males who believe that a woman's duty is to look after her husband and nurture her children. But in a way he was supportive in the sense that he was proud of her when she began to gain acceptance among the reading public. But Urmila dared to enrol and continue her studies. She laboured to find time to study in the midst of night without interrupting her official and household responsibilities. She was against his philosophy that "a man has the right to behave any way he likes"(241).

Even after being grown up she had to face many sorts of social rejections and humiliations on account of her caste. They were not given accommodation even by an educated land lady when she discovered her dalit status. Even the people of her community dissuaded her from being part of the Maitri organisation which worked for the cause of subordinated women. She insisted every woman she met to participate in the awareness programme organised by this group.

The women in the movement left an indelible print on the history through their sincere and strenuous work. They had been harassed by their families and by people at home and outside. They had been subjected to harsh words, were badly beaten up by their husbands. Still their history remains forgotten. These movements awakened their memories and made them talk. Inspired by these movements many women dared to come out of their houses braving the abuses of their husbands and relatives and became dalit activists and played a major part in the dalit literary front. Through her narrative Pawar depicts the humiliation and embarrassment suffered by the female children and women who occupy the fringes of the society. Her autobiography narrated in a simple and authentic style is a bold and courageous attempt on her own to tackle the stigma of casteism and struggle to exist in the midst of obstacles that hinder her progress to success. Her own life is an excellent example of how a dalit woman from a lowly background could ascend herself to a person of international acclaim.

It is a true fact that these dalit narratives attacked the power politics of castiesm and showcase the deprivation and humiliations of various dalit communities. Though these once silenced voice took up the cause of the dalit community as a whole, they forget to give due voice to their women folks. Educated dalit women understood the need to represent their part and started making literary contributions in this respect. They have to bear the brunt of exploitation not only from other people but also from among their own community simply because they are born as women. Branding them as the vulnerable gender they are susceptible to all forms of exploitations and sufferings. When the male dalit autobiographies look into the politics of caste, the dalit women took up the politics of caste as well as the politics of gender. These personal narratives by women also aim at giving a new face and voice to dalit women by deconstructing the stereotyped images of dalit women in dalit patriarchal writings.

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