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Dalit Feminism: Identity of women In Short Stories of Urmila Pawar

“If you wish to know how civilized a culture is, look at how they treat its women.”

Bacha Khan

The word Dalit has been coined from the term ‘*dalan*’ which means to grind. The etymology of the word Dalit comes from The Sanskrit and it means ‘downtrodden’, ‘suppressed’, ‘crushed’ or ‘broken to pieces’. The clear definition of dalit in contemporary usage has been given by a professor of Marathi Gangadhar Pantwane who is also founder editor of **Asmitadarsh**. He says:

To me, Dalit is not a caste. He is a man exploited by the social and economic traditions of this country. He does not believe in God, Rebirth, soul, Holy books teachings separatism,

Fate and heaven because they have made him a slave. He does not believe inhumanism. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution.¹

Talking about Main Stream Literature Vs Marginal Literature, the main stream literature is based on Varnas and Varnashramas. The main theme in most of the literary works is based on the glorified stories of kings and queens and their lives while marginal literature has expressed the stark and harsh brutality of personal experiences and feelings. Dalit writers express their feelings and experiences in the most realistic way by using their native speech and writing in their regional language. Dalit writes to attract others so that others can know about their struggles. The themes of Dalit Literature can be listed as the problems of untouchability, exploitation of dalit women by higher caste men, the hopes and aspirations of the exploited masses, patriarchy system, exploitation within their own community etc. Dalit literature is written by dalits, on dalits for dalits. India is a land where hundreds of minor communities are living indeed. Dalit autobiographies have already made an inroad in Indian Literature. Autobiographies unveiled dalit life in vivid manners. In many regional languages dalit writers have expressed their sensibility. The language used in Dalit writings is caste and community oriented. Hence they have their own Aesthetics. And one such known name in writers' fraternity is Urmila Pawar. She is a known Dalit fiction writer who writes in Marathi, who has penned down her autobiography "Aaydan"(meaning weaving of baskets, chief occupation of mahar community) which is later translated into English by **Maya Pandit with the name "The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs"**.

Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* is both a continuation of and more importantly a significant departure from these dalit autobiographical narratives by both men and women writers. *The weave of my life* also talks about a community (**Mahar**), its conditions,

shamelessly exploited by the upper castes and extremely marginalized. And unlike other dalit communities their houses were centrally located in the village so that they could be summoned at any given point of time as per the convenience of upper castes.

Urmila Pawar has talked about so many unusual social rituals performed in Mahar community. It describes the long journey from the Konkan to Mumbai, talking about the struggle of three generations for dalit modernity. She has written frankly of the 'private' and 'public' aspects of her life, her familial and marital conflicts of all the grievous shocks which she encountered, and which in later has outraged people even, especially her admirers. She has offered a cogent critique of feminist and dalit politics through her writings wherein she has talked about the feminist perception and stance against patriarchal domination in dalit families. Urmila Pawar's memoir represents the struggle of a dalit woman who has travelled a long journey from a small town to a metropolis and became one of its leading intellectuals and writers. She has tried to make several values an integral part of her dalit feminist utopia like equality, justice, freedom, progress etc. Apart from her autobiography she had collection of short stories in her account which has raised voice on behalf of several known, unknown silent sufferers.

In India, the concern with identity has been more practically oriented for a very long time rather than being a matter of intellectual analysis. The dynamics of social relations in India are characterized by twointerrelated processes: the perception of one's own identity in a given situation; and the reaction of others in terms of the perceived identity of that individual. Assertion of identity and creative pleasure can clearly be seen and felt in autobiographies. Dalitness is essentially a means towards achieving a sense of cultural identity.

The beauty of dalit women cannot be evaluated by keeping in mind Shakuntala's concept which says *Kimiv hi madhuranam hi mandanakrutum*, instead it lies on her face while she works in the field. Dr. Ambedkar once advised his followers in one of his seminar if you want to educate your children, first educate women. The potential contribution from Dalit women writers to Dalit literature is significant. Dalit women have awakened and are expressing their deep feelings in literature. To name a few, Urmila Pawar, Daya Pawar, Asha Thorat, Aruna Lokhand are examples from Maharashtra. Women in general have always been marginalized and oppressed by patriarchy, so Dalit women are more marginalized than Dalit men, they are humiliated not only by upper caste people but also by their own men folk. A Dalit woman is a Dalit amongst Dalits. Hiremath quotes Manorama, a Dalit feminist :

Gender oppression is the same for all women irrespective of their caste. But when it comes to poor Dalit women, the issue is multi-layered. There may be some options available for upper caste women like walking out on a bad marriage. But what will a Dalit woman do if she doesn't even have a shelter?.... Dalit women's priorities are different from Adivasi women or women belonging to minorities.²

Out of many dalit women writers in Marathi, Urmila Pawar's short stories have been registered as an emergent voice in Marathi short fiction. Urmila Pawar lived experiences as a young dalit woman in rural as well as urban communities; her familiarity with a variety of uses of the Marathi language and its regional variants; her perspective on dalit women's lives; and her active participation in dalit and Buddhist women's literary and social organizations provide her storytelling with an edge that throws into relief the many ironies and contradictions in the lives of dalit woman. The delights of her short stories are her women and her endings. She uses the classic short story form with its surprise endings with great effect. Urmila Pawar's *Mother Wit*; a collection of short stories, is an attempt to unravel these

extraordinary stories of ordinary women. The title 'Mother Wit', alludes to the wit, agency, strength these women possess and exercise when they faced difficult situations.

Women in Mother Wit:

In one of her short story "**Woman as caste**" (*Baichi Jaat*), the surprise ending reveals the bravery of an older generation of second wives in helping a younger first wife secure a divorce when her marriage is threatened with a second wife. The plight of being second wife was explained as:

"Your mother accepted me into her household and everyone praised her for her generosity. I too had to accept all of you. What did I get for that? A husband can enjoy the company of two wives, but what about the wives themselves? No one thinks about their feelings."

The philosophical and practical bent of mind of an uneducated woman was further explained to remind her about the strength of an educated woman and to teach men a lesson,

"Tara, you are educated. You are a working woman and you are empowered enough to take your husband to court. What do you think your mother and I were able to do? I was the second wife of a man old enough to be my father. Think about that. You never thought about it that way, did you? You said when you visited us that woman from Sonabavdi enjoys disrupting homes. That is not true, woman don't ruin or disrupt. Men do. Men who want to marry young girls on a whim need to taught a lesson. I believed that too. But I am uneducated and have no power. I admire what you are doing."

Pawar weaves together Dalit women's narratives and systematically undoes each of the ties- caste, gender and class- to portray historical subordination of her protagonists. Women in her

stories do not write slogans and march in movements but they fight everyday discrimination within the circumstances that they find themselves in.

Pawar's protagonists sometimes completely overthrow patriarchal structures and at other times mend and bend it in ways that work for them. They have a sense of their situations and are constantly trying to mitigate the inescapable subordination.

In '*Odd One*' (originally *Vegli*), Nalini (the protagonist) is seen to be acutely aware of her situation. She is, as the title depicts, always the 'Other' - in office, amongst her in laws, in her neighborhood. She changes her life by shifting from chawl to the new house, and is doing so aspires to move away from historical markers of identity and create a new one for her family. She works in a government office where she has to hear about how 'Dalits...have it good....the government pampers them' (pp.57). Nalini, after getting housing at government quarters, is determined to move out. Her husband assures her he will persuade his parents. Eventually, her husband gives in to his mother's persuasion in spite of wanting to move away himself. But the climax of the story as discussed earlier also about the endings of Urmila Pawar's stories is astonishing when we see Nalini pick up her baby and leave without waiting to persuade anyone or seek approval. She just leaves. This act of walking away without waiting for her husband's answer, knowing that he has already given in to his mother's pressure, is both a stoic acceptance of reality but the stubbornness to overcome it and act.

A very interesting story in this collection was '*Cheed*' (*Anger*). It is a story of female friendship- a topic hardly dealt with in fiction. It tells the story of two female friends and their bond and how a husband changes the dynamics of this relationship. It also questions the social structure which makes a vertical hierarchy out of our personal relations and always situates the husband at the apex. The story also questions the norms where women end up

accepting their husband's opinions as the right one and don't assert their own thoughts. It also questions the individualistic approach of women which they themselves don't let flourish even if they are correct.

In another story named '*Aaye*' (**Mother**) the main character is probably modelled after her own mother, the one introduced in her autobiography. The short story is a classic example of what death of the patriarch does to a family in a patriarchal system and how difficult it is for a widow to take decisions for her family and is even not considered fit to take any decision. The mother sticks and continues her chief occupation of weaving baskets to sustain her family. The only thing in her mind which pushes her to work is to educate all her children- the promise made to her husband on his deathbed. The mother fights her in-laws and every possible adverse condition to stay there so that she can continue to send her children to school even though the village relatives are adamant on taking the family back to their village house.

Conclusion:

Dalit Literature is a journey from main stream literature to marginal literature, from ideal to real, from individual identity to group identity. This can be called the "celebration of difference". Through her stories Pawar has portrayed the strong and clever women who has derived all emotions i.e. anger, tears laughter and despair in us. Her harsh sometimes hard-hitting language subverts another stereotype- that of the soft spoken woman writer. Her protagonists may not always be Dalit, and the mood not always be of anger, but caste is never far from the context and informs a strong subtext of each story. All her stories come from her own dalit world, revealing the great variety of Dalit life.

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