

Weaving the Narrative: Urmila Pawar's Quest in *The Weave of My Life*

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Abstract

Urmila Pawar's Aaydan (2003) offers an insightful portrayal of a life of a Dalit woman who exists within a society where caste, religion, and gender act as insuperable barriers. It illustrates the challenges encountered by the Dalit community in articulating their experiences and stories within a culture that frequently stifles their narrative. Writing itself becomes an act of self-inscription in a language and especially the culture that tries to silence the Dalit narrative. Belonging to the Mahar community of Maharashtra, she portrays the struggle against her caste identity. Her journey depicts the discrimination and humiliation she faced that led her to carve her own path of her life. Maya Pandit's translation, The Weave of My Life, tells the struggle of Dalit life, indicating the significance of Dalit Studies. The text effectively portrays feminine sensibility and builds self and identity through a feminist testimonial, weaving an engaging narrative through the intertwining of various individuals' lives. The paper will discuss the subtle nuances of her journey towards finding her self and identity by examining the existing scholarship. It will also look at how the translated text looks at the linguistic and cultural specificities and becomes contingencies of her expression of oppression. The paper aims to explore the art of 'Aaydan' in the weaving of Urmila Pawar's self and identity. By examining the complexities of her work, the paper seeks to highlight the power dynamics at play in constructing identity within marginalized communities.

Keywords: Dalit Literature, Translation, Self, Identity, Memory

My mother used to weave *aaydans*. I find that her act of weaving and my act of writing are organically linked. The weave is similar. It is the weave of pain, suffering and agony that links us. (Pawar x)

Aaydan, an act of weaving a basket by the Burud Community of Ratnagiri district is now becoming a rarely practised form of art similar to the genre of autobiography which is the rarely practised art by Indians as compared to that of poetry and fiction. But what makes this particular text stand apart? Urmila Pawar's autobiographical narrative, *The Weave of My Life* (2008) stands distinguished among the notable contributions made by Dalit women writers. It is an important milestone in Dalit women's writings. As Sharmila Rege writes in her afterword:

Aaydan, Urmila Pawar's testimonio, weaves a complex relationship between 'official forgetting', memory, and identity-forging a right to speak both for and beyond

the gendered individual and contesting explicitly the 'official forgetting' of histories of caste oppression, struggles and resistance. (Rege 333)

Urmila Pawar (born 1945) is a Mahar from a village near Ratnagiri in the Konkan region. Her family converted to Buddhism when she was twelve years old. Her struggle against her caste identity and the discrimination and humiliation she faced carved the path of her life. Her autobiography *Aaydan* (2003), translated by Maya Pandit as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*, depicts the struggle of Dalit life, highlighting the prominence of Dalit Studies and repressive caste and gender societal institutions.

In the book's preface, she clearly describes what she means by the term Dalit: "Dalit means people who have been oppressed by a repressive social system, and challenge the oppression from a scientific, rational, and humanitarian perspective" (Pawar xii). As her writing not

only focuses on her individual self but also puts a lot of emphasis on the Dalit community, she is able to delineate the identity of Dalit women. Women from the Dalit community face multiple forms of discrimination based on their gender, economic status, and caste. They are often subjected to social, economic, and political inequality as a result of these biases. What makes their situation worse is that they are discriminated against not only because of their gender or caste, but also because they are women within their community. This further exacerbates their suffering and denies them the basic human rights they deserve. Jyoti Lanjewar observes, "Dalit women are also Dalits in relation to Dalit men within the Dalit community. They are thus Dalits twice over insofar as they bear the burden of both gender and caste oppression" (qtd. in Basu 195).

Dalit women, by writing their own stories, challenge the age-old traditions and enclosed boundaries as well as the silence that is imposed on them. By publishing autobiographies about their lives and pasts, Dalit women authors are taking a stand against the dominant societal framework, particularly patriarchy, caste, and its underlying value system. In addition, these authors insist on speaking from their perspective and refuse to be represented by others, converting themselves from passive subjects to active actors. As a Dalit writer, Urmila Pawar highlights individual pain and communal suffering by bringing to the foreground poverty, caste discrimination, helplessness and unfulfilled aspirations. She portrays the shameless exploitation done by the upper castes and how 'others' are extremely marginalized. What makes her autobiography stand apart is the way she has charted her journey. It's a difficult narrative about a gendered individual who, at first, perceives the world through the prism of her caste identity, but later transcends it through a feminist vision. Her journey reveals the continuity of pain, tracing them back to the past and diverging toward a future in which education plays a significant role not only in elevating but also in claiming and reaffirming an individual's rights and identity. She deliberately paints the image of her falsely moulded identity carved out through social status, religion, her surroundings, male chauvinism, and her values. She is able to break through all of the barriers to identify her true

identity and find the true definition of self. She had an independent mind that prompted her to challenge society's outdated and worn-out customs and proclaim her self-hood.

At the same time, the translation of *The Weave of My Life* paves the path towards the idea of Dalit feminism. It allows the convergence of different contexts and perspectives regarding feminist and Dalit politics. Translation, in a way, enables the work to not only transcend the geographical barrier but also the social barrier at the same time. It helps in the reconstruction of the past and metaphorically weaving the memories that are deliberately being erased from the consciousness of the nation.

What makes *The Weave of My Life* retain the soul of Aaydan is that the translation by Maya Pandit retains the regional terms making it possible to keep the original flavour intact. Maya Pandit's engaged translation helps us as a reader to understand that this text as an autobiography is quite different. She is able to construct the same metaphor of writing method as Pawar. As a translator, one needs to be judicious about 'compensatory' involvements. If we look at the original title, the word Aaydan is a generic term used for weaving indigenous utensils from bamboo sticks. At the same time, it can also mean a weapon. Its English title is a literal translation of the Marathi original encompassing both ideas. Pawar saw her mother's basket weaving and her writing as related and intrinsically linked endeavours. From another viewpoint, it might be argued that they both employed weaving and writing as weapons or techniques for coping with their tragedy. Apart from inspiring Pawar to write, the act of weaving expresses not just their economic standing but also the gender-specificity of the vocation within the society. Poverty is at the root of many problems in Pawar's community. For many poor Dalit women, weaving is a weapon or a means of survival. In her own words, her writing 'is the weave of pain, suffering and agony that links us'. (Pawar x)

Retaining the voice of Aaydan's narrative allows the subject's fiery personality to be translated keeping the originality of her writing style which is candid and witty. Narrating her tale, she is able to bring out the mundane,

everyday acts and objects forcing us to look at the deep roots of caste discrimination and patriarchy. The narrative becomes much more inclusive; incorporating diverse voices narrating the lives lived on margins and the influence of B.R. Ambedkar.

Coming to the text, weaving happens to be the central metaphor and the main profession of Pawar's mother indicating the lower caste as well as dire economic conditions. She weaves together the struggles faced by three generations-her grandmother, her mother, her sister and numerous other women she met on her quest for her own voice and identity. The narrative opens with a striking depiction of Dalit women's bond with the rugged nature of India's Konkan area on the western coast.

The range of the Sahyadri's runs along the coastline and there is a sheer drop down to the sea. The main crop is rice; the poor grow a form of red millet that thrives on the thin soil. [Pawar13].

Women's memories of labour, camaraderie, and tensions, as well as their pains and labour in the house, provide an archive of nuanced relationships between sexual and caste-based divisions of labour. Memories of tough labour at the stream serve as a comprehensive record of labour methods and cultures. She narrates the painstaking journey of the women of her villages crossing the barriers of hills and thick forests to sell items in the main market to make ends meet. She portrays the realistic scenarios of the dangers faced by them and all these acted as the metaphor of the hardships faced by them. She depicts Dalit women's extensive usage of curse words during quarrels, underlining not just the traditional component, but also how they utilise it as a defence mechanism and a technique to humiliate the aggressive male, so avoiding bodily and psychological harm. It brings out the suppressed emotions of anger and frustration. Urmila Pawar sketches the invisible identity of the women within her community and the roles they are expected to perform within a family.

Pawar's voice in her narration is distinct from the usual angry tone that is often seen in Dalit writings. Instead, she poses direct questions that challenge the dominant ideologies of caste, patriarchy, and being a woman. In some ways, she uses her sorrow to raise Dalit

women's awareness. It becomes a story of her tenacity and determination.

Pawar's account of her childhood recollections of food, cooking abilities, and meal times gives a stark picture of Dalit households in the Konkan area. Rice cooked from coarse grains with a lentil sauce, occasionally a green vegetable, and Bhakri prepared from red jowar or grain dust were the staples of daily meals.

The memories of the humiliations she felt and the exploitations as a girl child delineate the inequality both in her village and the city. She narrates an incident where the basket woven by her mother was purified by sprinkling water and the coins were thrown in front of her. The humiliation is clearly brought when she describes the hunger and the insult it comes with.

Pawar is able to reflect on her experiences by describing her memories about food and poverty which the readers can feel and many of them can associate with. A naive child's innocence was growing aware that they were born into a specific caste and adversity, and that they had to live and survive. By talking about the politics of food, she presents the cultural differences which more often than not act as a barrier. The upper caste girls would talk about various kinds of sweets like laddu, modak etc. which were novel items. Pawar also recalls an instance from her school days in which her friends intended to make some food at school and discussed what everyone should contribute, but when she inquired about what she should bring, she was told to "bring some money." (Pawar 101). She continues the painful description and writes

They did not allow me to touch anything. However, we all ate together. I really enjoyed the meal. The next day I was horrified to hear that my eating had become the hottest topic for juicy gossip. Girls were whispering in groups about 'how much I had eaten. (Pawar 102)

Urmila found it extremely humiliating that even children displayed caste inequalities and untouchability, and that impoverished people were ridiculed for their hunger. This anecdote demonstrates how caste is engrained in the psyche of our upper-class children.

Going further, she reveals that food, just not within society but also in the home portrays the difference between the two genders. Women have to work hard and

for long periods, yet they are only allowed to have leftover food. The food was mainly cooked for the men of the house and the leftover food was for women. John Stuart Mill remarks: "Women are brought up from earliest years...to live for others, to make a complete negation of themselves and to have no life but in their affection." (Mill 27).

Her autobiography sheds light on the harsh realities of belonging to the Mahar community through a series of poignant anecdotes. She offers a glimpse into the daily struggle and challenges and the anecdotes act as a vivid portrayal of social and economic exclusion and the systematic discrimination faced by the community. Her father realized that to overcome caste discrimination, education was the only way forward. Despite being patriarchal, her father exerts a positive influence as he adopts a harsh attitude in the matter of education, especially for the girls. He emphasizes the importance of education.

But the girls receiving education and the Pawar family supporting them became an eyesore for the illiterate women of her community. They would often mock and comment sarcastically, "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?" (Pawar 18).

Her father would do anything for the sake of his daughter's education and wanted to provide them with the best education possible, but unfortunately, he passed away when Urmila Pawar was three years old. Despite this setback, Urmila's mother was determined to fulfil her husband's dream and worked tirelessly to make it a reality. Education resulted in her self-assertion and self-dependence along with the realization of her own identity. She emerged as a confident woman with a voice of her own. If we look at her marriage, she marries a man of her own choice. In the latter chapters, we witness that Urmila Pawar goes to Mumbai with her husband and takes a job in a government department. Her husband encourages her to pursue her higher studies and to pursue her job, but at the same time, we can see the shifting of emotions. Pawar has clearly depicted the change in her husband's perspective. Harishchandra grows sterner as Pawar

obtains more educational qualifications. In reality, he attempts to obstruct the way to obtaining educational certification by saying,

—Look, you can do what you like only after finishing your daily chores in the house. Cooking, looking after children, and all that stuff. If you think you can do this and get more education, fine! This was actually his way of saying -no! (Pawar 153).

She recognised for the first time in her marriage that her husband's ego was bruised. He couldn't stand his wife's progression and accomplishment.

Pawar's newfound independence has enabled her to become an active member of a women's organization and pursue her passion for writing. What truly sets her work apart is the way she intertwines her personal successes with her astute observations about the society around her. *Aaydan* or *The Weave of My Life* represents Dalit women in today's society. Recounting the three generations and her journey from the rugged Konkan Coast to Mumbai, she joined a feminist organisation and, with the support of friends as well as professional colleagues, founded a feminist forum for Dalit women.

Urmila Pawar's use of rustic language lends a regional flavour to her autobiography. She uses the vocabulary with its raw usage which becomes illustrative of the silent voice, giving us the taste of women's cursing and their bodily functions. The music performed by women following their commitment to Buddhism brings the connections closer to the ground. Like Kamala Das, she discusses the physical aspect of her relationship in an open manner.

Anger and revolt are common themes in Marathi Dalit literature, but Pawar's style is different, and the narrative has a satirical tone. Her works are representative of the setting, the geographical, social, and material reality of everyday life, and are not always influenced by Marathi literary conventions and tradition.

The translation of *Aaydan* into *The Weave of My Life* brings it closer to Pan-India making it understand the social biases and prejudices which are still prevalent in society. It is able to capture the essence of the autobiography by retaining the charm of proverbs and folksongs as well as the free use of abusive terms. The

translated texts like *Aaydan* provide the self-authentication for Dalit Literature and, similar to Urmila Pawar's journey, for her own self and its celebration, the translation becomes the 'celebration of difference.' (Saha 130). The English translation elevates the translated Dalit literature to the level of mainstream literature. Maya Pandit deliberately keeps the regional terms so that we are able to feel that distinct difference and form a bridge of understanding. The act of writing helps Pawar in self-realization and by revealing her true self in front of the readers, she makes them a part of her journey. She legitimizes her experience and is able to explore her true identity. The art of weaving her memories brings to foreground her strength and resilience building her identity.

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