

Dalit Women Consciousness and Expression of Resistance in Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life:* *A Dalit Woman's Memoir*

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Abstract

Dalit literature has effectively portrayed the oppression and sufferings of Dalit life in Indian society. Dalit women's autobiographies, in particular, have become a powerful form of resistance, asserting their voices against gender discrimination and untouchability. This paper analyses Urmila Pawar's autobiography, The Weave of My Life – A Dalit Woman's Memoir, which depicts the life of women in the Mahar community, a Dalit sub-caste in Maharashtra. The memoir serves as a voice for Dalits and Dalit women, highlighting incidents of social rejection and injustice. Pawar articulates the challenges of being born into a patriarchal society within the Hindu varna hierarchy, describing the lack of basic needs, such as food and hygiene, among Dalits. The memoir also exposed the humiliation experienced by Dalits, particularly women, who were often given leftovers and denied entry into upper-caste households. There is an attempt to show Pawar's autobiography serves as a means of protest and resistance against the social injustices faced by Dalits, especially women, in Indian society.

Keywords: gender discrimination, untouchability, dalit literature, injustice, memoir

The emergence of Dalit literature in Marathi during the 1960s and its subsequent extension to other Indian regional languages heralded a new era in narrative writing characterized by poems, short stories, and auto biographies that depicted the oppression and suffering of Dalit life in society. Dalit autobiographies, in particular, serve as personal accounts of one's own life, expressing the pain and injustices endured by Dalits as a result of the rigid beliefs and practices of the Hindu religion. These narratives assert that gender discrimination and untouchability are societal constructs designed to suppress and confine women within the patriarchal norms that prevail in society. By representing the self as a voice of resistance on behalf of all those who have been marginalized and segregated due to their Dalit identity, Dalit women's autobiographies have become a powerful tool of assertion. The works of Dalit women writers have significantly contributed to the feminist movement by providing a platform for Dalit women to strongly voice their

own life experiences through autobiographies. This shift in feminism, led by Dalit women's autobiographies, has played a pivotal role in challenging and transforming traditional power structures.

The literay works of Dalit women writers such as Shantabai Kamble's *Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha (The Kaleidoscopic Story of My Life)*, Urmila Pawar's *Aidan (Weave of My Life)*, Banytai Kamble's *Jina Amucha (Prisons We Broke)*, Kumud Pawade's *Antasphot (Thoughtful Outburst)*, have brought to light the emotional, physical, and psychological hardships endured by these marginalized individuals, which were previously unvoiced. These authors have bravely challenged the inhumane treatment they have faced with a sense of defiance and anger, but not self-pity.

Urmila Pawar, a renowned Dalit author and social activist, has written extensively about the lives of women and their struggles with caste discrimination and social isolation in society. Born in Adagon Village, Maharashtra in

1945. Pawar hails from the Mahar community, a Dalit sub-caste in Maharashtra. Her autobiography *Ayadan*, published in Marathi and translated into English as *The Weave of My Life – A Dalit Woman's Memoir* by Maya Pandit in 2008, provides an insightful account of her experiences as a Dalit and the lives of women from her community. The memoir offers a powerful portrayal of the author's life, which serves as a voice for the Dalits and Dalit women, when marginalized women strive to articulate their thoughts and lives, they emerge as a sign of resistance against patriarchal and societal norms. The analysis of Urmila Pawar's memoir reveals several incidents of social rejection, which are used as means of protest and resistance against social injustice.

The word 'ayadan' is taken from the local dialect used in her village. Ayadan is the name for the cane baskets her mother woven. The idea of weaving plays a vital role in the protagonist's life. The weaving of bamboo or cane baskets is the profession of Pawar's mother. The source of income is from weaving the cane baskets. It is also the main monetary pursuit of the Mahar community where she belongs. Weaving cane basket is the symbol of poverty and struggle associated with the Mahar community. Urmila, the protagonist is born in a poor family of Mahar caste of the Konkan region. The region is utterly backward and in a backward caste, Pawar articulates the problems of being born in a patriarchal society in the Hindu varna hierarchy. She describes the association of poverty and Dalit custom:

"They somehow managed to buy a little rice, which they would cook in a big mud pot and serve with some watery soup. This was served to the men first in one common dish. They sat on their haunches to dine, as if they had sat down to shit! It was true that Dalits had the custom of all people eating from one plate, but that was usually because there were few plates in the homes" (Pawar 17)

The writer describes the problem of poverty and its connection to Dalits, who lack sufficient food and other basic needs. Dalits were often abandoned from villages and were made to live in ghettos or wadas, in thatched houses that lacked hygiene. The lines depict the harsh socio-economic realities and entrenched caste-based practices experienced by the Dalit community. The act of men eating first, sitting on their haunches, underscores the

dehumanizing conditions they endure, symbolizing a lack of dignity in their daily lives. The communal eating from a single plate, while a practical solution to scarcity, is framed within the context of deprivation rather than tradition. This practice, born out of necessity, reflects a broader systemic neglect and marginalization of Dalits. The writer recollects an incident where the Mahar women were given the Joothan (scraps of food left on a plate) for their duties. The waste which is destined for garbage or animals. Dalit families would survive with those leftovers due to the dire poverty and many most of them served upper-caste people, Dalits would go for requesting for festive food from the upper-caste people. Mahar people would beg for festive food for the customary duties they have done for upper-class people, but they would get leftover food or hard pieces of bhakri or rice but never get festival food. Pawar expresses the humiliation she experienced when she stood at the threshold of customer's houses. When customers demanded the cane baskets to be delivered to their houses, she was never allowed to enter into their houses. Ironically, the weaved baskets by a Dalit woman were accepted and made pure by sprinkling water or cow's urine, but the weaver was considered impure, and touching them or letting them enter the house was considered impure or polluted. The customer would accept them and would drop coins from a distance, being cautious about not touching them. It is the same experience Pawar had when she bought pickles from a Pandit family that lived opposite Urmila's house. She had to stand outside the door at the lowest step and had to shout. Pawar says:

"Taking care not to touch, or even let my shadow fall on things lying around I would reach the cement steps of their house. The crescent-shaped steps looked like a sort of pyramid from below. I had to stand at the lowest step. The pyramid would make anyone standing at the bottom feel really low. From there I tried to peep into the house, trying to see if anyone was around. But it would look quite deserted from where I stood" (Pawar 77)

Pawar demonstrates the miserable and helpless condition of Dalits in society when they were humiliated by not touching the coins given by Dalits before they were sprinkled water on them to make pure or to cleanse them. While giving them anything, the way item was kept on a

plantain leaf and placed it considerable distance away from where they stood. The writer recollects the instances of the brutality experienced by people of the Mahar community in the vicious hands of upper caste people. The state of Mahars was very miserable and no less than animals. It was reduced to it in the name of rituals. The inhuman practices of upper-class people in society have always humiliated Dalits. Mahars signified 'the animal sacrificed' who were forbidden from dignified human life and respect. Dalits were not only reduced to the state of animals, but they were also excluded in many rituals such as being prohibited from touching the palanquin of the goddess as touching that was considered as defiled. They were made to work hard such as collecting wood for the fire to be lit during the celebration of Holi festival, but they were not included in the celebration. When they were allowed to howl the curse in public, it was forbidden to throw color and colored water during Holi celebrations. The upper caste people would pray for prosperity for themselves and calamities on the Mahars. They were often beaten for being rebellious against these evil practices. Even the children of the Mahar community were treated badly. They often discontinued their studies as they were not treated well at school. The slates and books of Mahar children were never touched by teachers, and they were ordered to sit outside the school, and they were used to clean the school premises. Pawar explains how insulting it was to clean the cow dung at the school premises and when she refused, the teacher slapped in a way that the mark of the fingers on her face was there for Pawar's a long time. Seeing that her mother resisted it by questioning the teacher who treated the community students in biased ways:

"My girl studies in your class, Guruji ! What did she do today that you beat her up so much? She pulled me toward him and showed him my swollen cheek. 'your white cow shits in the verandah'. ' Our white cow? She shits there, eh? Why, did you see her doing that? Guruji, you are educated and yet you speak so foolishly? Look, I am a widow; my life is ruined. Yet I sit here, under this tree, and work. Why? Because I want education for my children so that their future will be better. And you treat my girl like this? How dare you? Aaye was speaking in her dialect in a voice, loud

and ringing. Then she thundered, 'Let me see you laying even a finger on my girl again and I'll show you! Let me see how you can pass this road if you do so.' (Pawar 68-69)

Aaye's (Pawar's mother) resistance against the act of insulting and beating community children is an example of how strongly they questioned the oppression inflicted on them. Pawar, being rebellious in her character tried to achieve whatever she wanted to achieve. Pawar's voice of resistance is very strong against the oppression of the society. She was greatly influenced by the progressive thoughts of her sister Manjula Tai who built an enclosed stone latrine after getting a job. Pawar realized the need for education and the transformation associated with it in making a better community. Pawar was denied education after her marriage as her husband was not encouraging. He never valued Pawar as an individual. When she asked for his consent to continue education, he said:

"Look you can do what you like only after finishing your daily chores in the house. Cooking, looking after children, all that stuff. If you can do this and get more education, fine!" (Pawar 236)

He restricted her from getting an education and her learning, but her desire for learning made her enroll herself for a post-graduation course. Despite the duties and responsibilities, when Urmila passed her master's degree, he could not accept that easily and understood that he could not rule his wife. She was accused by her husband that she was not a good mother and ideal wife. As Urmila explains:

"Gradually it became clear to me that everything that gave me an independent identity; my writing which was getting published, my education, my participation in public programmes – irritated Mr. Pawar no end. Gradually, he began to be full of resentment" (Pawar 246)

Resentful expressions of Urmila's husband demonstrate his restrictions on her, and he represents most of the men in the society who suppress women and restrict them from creating their independent identities. Urmila's independent identity made her husband control, and subdue her by quarreling, arguing, and regarding her as an impractical and negligent person. She was criticized by her family members when she tried to establish her identity

outside the family. Urmila used the word 'weave' symbolically in her autobiography to indicate how women are trapped young, pushed to fulfill their roles, duties and how they are confined to live within the societal or patriarchal norms like the way bamboo though hard can be given many shapes when cut tender, losing their originality and taking the shape which has been given. Urmila chose writing as a medium to powerfully attack power politics, and oppression inflicted on them. She started writing and became enthusiastically involved in Dalit and Women's Literature. She not only throws light on the brutality, and exploitation of Dalits but also strongly expresses resistance against the system and patriarchal norms.

Pawar's mode of resistance is characterized by her determination to pursue her desires and interests without the burden of conforming to societal or familial expectations. She articulates the experiences of Dalit women with boldness, presenting an unvarnished portrayal of both her personal and societal life. In her autobiography, Pawar consistently links education with personal independence, underscoring its crucial role in empowering individuals within marginalized communities. The narrative adeptly explores the intricate interplay between caste and gender politics within the Mahar community. It not only highlights the systemic oppression faced by Dalit women but also illuminates the pathways to resistance and empowerment through education and self-determination. This approach not only provides a candid insight into her life but also serves as a broader commentary on the socio-political structures affecting Dalit women. The

detailed study of Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life – A Dalit Woman's Memoir*, is an example of how an autobiography can become a literary genre to express Dalit consciousness and the Dalit female voice of resistance. She has not only addressed the issues of gender and Dalit oppression but also stressed the significance of education as a remedy for the many suppressions. There is no doubt that Pawar's autobiography prompts readers to step forward for the understanding of self and to find ways to come out with defiance of the cocoons in which they are bound to live.

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