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## REPRESENTATION OF HUMILIATION AND SELF-ASSERTION OF THE DALITS IN URMILA PAWAR'S *THE WEAVE OF MY LIFE: A DALIT WOMAN'S MEMOIRS*

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### **Abstract:**

*While dealing with the three generations of the narrator's family - the narrator herself, her mother and her grandmother - Urmila Pawar's life-story *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* also depicts the predicament of the entire Mahar community of Maharashtra. The most important concern of the book is the sad plight of the Dalit women who are doubly marginalised both as Dalit and as female. Although many Dalit women actively participated in the anti-caste movements, their contributions are never acknowledged. One meaning of the titular word "Aaydan" is weapon. The book provides the space for the representation of the exploitations of Dalit women and acts as a weapon to raise a voice of protest against such injustices through making the Dalit women aware of their exploitations and subjugation in every field of life, empowering them with a sense of their self-respect, self-confidence and solidarity among them, and thus helping to grow in them a sense of their distinct identity as Dalit women based on their unique subject position.*

**Keywords:** Caste, gender, subaltern, untouchability, mainstream feminism, brahminical ideology, hegemony, dalit feminism, resistance, identity formation.

### **Introduction**

Urmila Pawar is one of the very few Dalit women who took to writing on the issues related to the Dalit females. Born in the Konkan region of Maharashtra in a Mahar family, she was the first woman from the Konkan region to have obtained a Master of Arts degree. She did her M.A. in Marathi literature while working in the State Government Public Works Department. She was a social activist working throughout her life in the interest of the Dalits in general and the Dalit women in particular. She is popular as a short story writer. Her stories mainly seek to expose the strategic exploitations of Dalit women by both their families, communities and the upper caste people. Her short story "Kavach", after being included in the curriculum of a university, created much furore because of its frank and bold exposure of the sexual exploitation of Dalit women by the upper caste people. Her book *Mauritius: A Journey* deals with the condition of the people taken away from India to work as sugarcane labourers-whether or not caste based discriminations of the Indian society is still maintained among them. Her book *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement*, co-authored by Meenakshi Moon, is a kind of re-writing of history from the grass roots, focusing on the significant contributions of the women in the movement which has so far been ignored and forgotten. However, she is most widely acclaimed for her autobiography entitled *Aaydan* (2003). The book was translated into English as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* by Maya Pandit in 2008. She was awarded Laxmibai Tilak Award for *Aaydan*, considered to be the best published autobiography, by the Maharashtra Sahitya Parishad.

*The Weave of My Life* depicts the condition of the Mahars, a Dalit community, exploited by the upper castes. The book deals with the three generations of the narrator's family (the narrator herself, her mother and her grandmother) their lives of humiliation and oppression. It maps the arduous journey of the narrator from a small town to a big metropolitan city to become one of its most eminent writers and

intellectuals. While dealing with the narrator's family, it also gives a realistic representation of the entire community, their harsh existence and endless struggle for survival in the face of various types of opposition from the upper castes. Since the focus of her book is the Dalit people of her community, Pawar clearly states in her Preface to the book what she means by the word *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). So, two things about the Dalits come out of this definition: first, they are oppressed, and second, they also fight against their oppressors. Quite in keeping with this definition of the word *Dalit*, *The Weave of My Life* also represents not only the suffering and pathetic condition of the Dalits but also how they resist and protest against their exploiters and assert their own identity.

However, the most important aspect of *The Weave of My Life* is the representation of the multidimensional exploitations and hapless suffering of the Dalit women who were doubly marginalised both as Dalits and as women. They were exploited both inside the house and outside. Although many of them had played active role in the caste movements, their contributions were never acknowledged. They were always pushed to the margin in their own families and communities. The Leftist movement, the traditional Feminist studies which is Brahminical Feminism, and the caste movements had ignored the condition and position of Dalit women. But both Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and Mahatma Phule had placed a considerable emphasis on the gender issues within the caste issues. Phule's Sarvajanik Satyadharma propagated the idea of a non-hierarchical relation between the males and the females, also stressing on the role of education of the women. Ambedkar also highlighted the intrinsic link between caste and gender. As Maya Pandit in her Introduction to Pawar's memoirs said:

He argued that castes could not maintain their 'purity' unless rigid controls were obtained over women's sexuality, thus the link between endogamous marriages and women's subordinate status was clearly formulated in his theory of the caste system. He had traced the origin of many horrifying customs such as sati, the upper caste widow's inferior status and restrictions on her remarriage, the institution of child marriage and argued that women were the gateway to caste (Pawar xxiii).

And yet the traditional feminism remained oblivious of this crucial link between caste and gender. They mainly dealt with the problems of the upper and upper middle class women who had no experience of the caste based discriminations. In other words, the mainstream feminism was parochial in its approach to the gender issues. Maya Pandit very precisely brings out the limitations of the mainstream feminism in her following observation:

The awareness of Dalit women's issues was submerged under the logic of universal sisterhood propagated by the feminist movement. It was believed that caste identities could be overcome by the larger identities of universal sisterhood. But the feminists did not have a theoretical apparatus to deal with the issues of caste. Their use of gender as a category of analysis was devoid of caste concerns and therefore it failed to account for the harsh realities of millions of Dalits and especially Dalit women, and sometimes were even devoid of class concerns (Pawar xxiv).

As a reaction to the traditional feminism's Brahminical alliance there emerged what is called Dalit feminism in the early nineties. It posed serious challenge to the mainstream feminism, pointing to its complicity with the Brahminical ideology which is hegemonic to the core. It tried to re-trace the forgotten link between caste and gender, so strongly articulated by Ambedkar and Phule. Their central focus was on the double marginalisation of the Dalit females, how they were the 'others' within the 'others'. According to Baby Kamble, "If the Mahar community is the 'other' for the Brahmins, Mahar women become the 'other' for the Mahar men" (Kamble xv). In the words of Sharmila Rege, "In the early nineties, dalit feminist articulations, especially on the issue of quotas within quotas, challenged the conceptions of 'genderless

caste' and 'casteless gender'" (Rege 3). Regarding the integration of the gender issues with caste and class issues under the impact of the reservation policy for the women, Mary John said:

The revival of reservations for women in the 1990s after Mandal, Ayodhya and globalisation offers us the chance to conceive of alternate modernities. This is nothing less than an opportunity to link rather than oppose women's rights to the rights based on caste, class or minority status in the broader context of a common democratic struggle (John 3829).

Regarding the issue of representation, the subject position of the person who represents is very crucial because his/her way of perceiving reality, which precedes the act of representation, depends on the perceiver's position. Going by this line of argument, Dalit women often dismiss the representation of the Dalit women by the non-Dalit women on the ground of its lesser amount of authenticity. They resent about not only the misrepresentation of their reality but also their frequent absence in the works of the non-Dalit writers and activists. Gopal Guru in his article "Dalit Women Talk Differently" explains this point:

Thus beneath the call for women's solidarity the identity of the dalit woman as 'dalit' gets whitewashed and allows a 'non-dalit' woman to speak on her behalf. It is against this background that dalit women have of late protested against their 'guest appearances' in a text or a speech of a non-dalit woman and instead organized on their own terms. They consider the feminist theory developed by non-dalit women as unauthentic since it does not capture their reality (Guru 82-83).

The title of the book is quite significant. It has a layered meaning. Literally, the word 'Aaydan' refers to the things which are made from bamboo. 'Awata' is a synonymous word. Various types of things to be used daily like baskets, containers and so on were generally made using bamboo as their material before the prevalence of plastic bags. Although, as the narrator informs the readers in her prefatorial notes to the text, the job of weaving baskets from bamboo was traditionally assigned to the nomadic tribes like the Burud, the Mahars earned by this job in the Konkan region. The narrator gives the example of her mother who run their family by earning through her ceaseless act of weaving. Sitting under a tree in the courtyard, her mother would go on weaving till late at night. She wove different kinds of cane things like big baskets, small baskets with closed tops, baskets for locking in hens, small baskets for collecting flowers, cradles, etc. The word 'Aaydan' also means 'utensil' and 'weapon'. The act of weaving is the weapon or means of survival of so many poor Dalit women. On a metaphorical plane, the narrator relates 'weaving' and 'writing'. She forges a connection between her mother's act of weaving from bamboo and her act of writing. She says, "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). From another point of view it can be said that both of them took refuge in the act of weaving and writing as a 'weapon' or means to escape their agonies of losing their respective child. So the narrator writes:

I was estranged from her. But now the agony of the loss of a child brought us together once again. She had drowned her grief in endlessly weaving aaydans. I could see her hands constantly flying over the weave. For me writing was the only solace. Who knows what I was writing, whether it was of any worth. But that was the only way in which I could keep the agony at bay (Pawar 304).

### **Representation of Humiliation**

Like other Dalit autobiographies, in *The Weave of My Life* the issue of untouchability occupies an important place. Pawar specifically focuses on the ludicrous and the violent in the practice of untouchability. The upper-caste people considered it defiling to get touched by the Mahars. So, the priest who was called to come to the Maharwada to perform worship and the rituals of marriage would climb a tree at the fringe of the Mahar locality from where he would perform his task. The priest was so much conscious to avoid any kind of contact from the lower caste people that he would not even directly accept

his payment. He would at first sprinkle some holy water on the coins to remove the pollution. He also would not himself carry other things like rice, coconuts, and so on, offered to him. His servant would do that task. Such antics of the priest regarding the maintenance of untouchability adds some ludicrous elements to the practice of the inhuman caste system. It is not only the priests but also the teachers at the school who practised untouchability. They taught the Mahar children and checked their slates from a distance. They were also conscious not to touch the Dalit students even at the time of punishing them. Rather they would throw stones at those students to hit them as punishment for their mistakes. Such a cruel behaviour of the teachers exemplifies the violent in the practice of untouchability. All these had really an adverse impact of the Dalit students. They used to lose interest in learning and play truant.

The Mahars were also humiliated through certain ritualistic exploitations and tortures on them as scapegoat. For example, although the entire laborious task of carrying the trees and making them stand in front of the Shambhu temple was performed by the Mahars on the day of Holy, they were not only excluded from the celebration but also cursed by the upper castes who would pray to divert all the disasters they feared to face in their lives to the Mahars. Again on another occasion the narrator was utterly shocked to discover how in the name of an age-old sacrificial ritual for the well-being of the village a flagrant violation of human dignity took place: "An upper caste man would inflict a big wound on a Mahar man's back and his wife had to cover the wound with some cloth and go on walking around, howling!" (Pawar 86). It was such injustices and violation of human dignity sanctioned within Hinduism that led the subaltern people to religious conversion to Buddhism.

The condition of the rural Dalit women was really too pathetic. They had to manage all the domestic chores and at the same time went to work outside with their menfolk. Whereas the men could rest after returning home, the women had to begin a fresh course of work after returning home. The women did not have the luxury of repose that the men did have. Even after doing such heavy works the women had no voice in the home, nor outside too. Urmila Pawar's description of the lives of excessive labour and extreme suffering of the Dalit women bears much similarity with that in Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati* because what Pawar represented in her autobiography regarding the condition of the Dalit women is not an isolated and exceptional case but a true picture of the situation of the Dalit women throughout India. The instances of wife beating as documented by Urmila Pawar are also to be found in Bama's autobiography. For example, Pawar's description on the issue of wife beating and the indifference of the people around is reminiscent of the brutal physical tortures inflicted by a man named Uudan on his wife in Bama's *Karukku*: "...everyday he'd drag his wife by the hair to the community hall and beat her up as if she were an animal, with his belt" (Bama, *Karukku* 61). Again in *Sangati* Bama elaborately talks about the exploitations of the Dalit women in every field of life:

The position of women is both pitiful and humiliating, really. In the fields they have to escape from upper-caste men's molestations. At church they must lick the priest's shoes and be his slaves while he threatens them with tales of God, Heaven, and Hell. Even when they go to their own homes, before they have had a chance to cook some kanji or lie down and rest a little, they have to submit themselves to their husbands' torment (Bama, *Sangati* 35).

The patriarchal Dalit society used different yardstick to judge a similar case for men and women. A man could have as many extramarital affairs as he liked. There was nobody to question him or no law to punish him. But if a woman was just suspected and not even proved to have such affair, she would be beaten black and blue by her husband and in-laws and publicly humiliated and punished before the village jury. Even the women themselves, being fed with the patriarchal ideology, would take active role to inflict brutal torment on the victim. The narrator recalls one incident relating to a widow who was found to be pregnant. Although everybody knew the man who was responsible for this, nobody raised a finger at him. The widow was held solely responsible and hence the entire punishment was put on her:

The village ordered her to abort the baby. She did not listen to them. So she was judged



before nine villages and punished in keeping with their verdict. She was made to stand leaning forward, and women kicked her from behind till the child was aborted. The villagers felt this was a valiant act of bravery. They felt proud that they had protected the villages' honour! (Pawar 156)

The case exemplifies how patriarchy works through women as women appropriate male role, imitating men's cruel ways to women.

### **Representation of Self-Assertion**

Besides depicting the abject humiliations of the Dalits, *The Weave of My Life* also documents the sparks of resistance and moments of self-assertion among the Dalits in general and the Dalit females in particular against their otherisation and exploitations. One remarkable instance of Dalit assertion takes place as early as the time of one of the narrator's ancestors Hari who, as a protest against the practice of untouchability, usurped the post of a Brahmin priest through his command of Sanskrit and decided to conduct all the rituals by themselves. This was, as the narrator thinks, the result of the influence of Mahatma Jotiba Phule's Satyashodhak movement in 1873 because Phule had an immense contribution in delivering the Dalits from the clutches of the Brahmin priests by simplifying the rituals to the point of getting performed unaided by a Brahmin priest. Another case of articulation of the self-respect on behalf of the subaltern took place through the narrator's father's strong protest against the humiliating practice of collecting joothan or the leftover foods from the upper caste households--an act reminiscent of the similar kind of protest of Omprakash Valmiki's father against the shameful custom of accepting 'salaam': "My son will not go salaaming" (Valmiki 33). Such display of boldness, self-respect and self-assertion was the result of the influence of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar who brought a significant transformation in the situation of the Dalits by encouraging them to get converted to Buddhism and promoting education as the crucial means of uplift for the subaltern people. The text also shows the literary and political activities of the narrator whose entire life was devoted to the betterment of her community in general and more specifically the women of her community. She was an activist with her own organization called Maitrini whose sole aim was to find out the root causes of the suffering of the Dalits and the Dalit women, removing those causes, solving problems, helping the subaltern people raise in rebellion against their oppressors and construct their distinct identity.

One of the significant aspects of the text is the narrator's protest in various ways against gender biases in the society. In her personal life also she had to fight against the male chauvinism of her husband who wanted to see her in the traditional role of a woman always attending upon her husband and children inside the four walls of the household. However, the narrator did not submit to his narrow mentality. She strongly protested and became quite outspoken in proving her indispensable role in the family, the way she simultaneously managed her family, her job and her studies and especially how she was particularly careful about not letting her public affairs make her neglect her private life. She also did not hesitate to launch a counterattack on her husband by diverting to him the very same charges that he put against herself: "Instead of going to the bar, why don't you come home early and pay some attention to their studies? That would be far better. Besides, whatever I study, I do it in my spare time! Why should you object to it?" (Pawar 241).

One of her most significant projects was to write a book on the role of women in the Ambedkarite movement. Such a work was unprecedented. There were ample writings on Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and his movement in the interest of the Dalits. But whatever was written on such issues, the focus everywhere was invariably on the participation of men in the movement. Although Ambedkar's biography had clearly mentioned the significant role played by many Dalit women to make the Ambedkarite movement more effective and successful, the later writers remained totally oblivious of this particular aspect of the movement. With the help of Mr. and Mrs. Meenakshi Moon, the narrator began to hunt many libraries and search many archives. Since the archival materials were scanty, she mainly depended on interviews she

took of those women who took part in the Ambedkarite movement. The interviews revealed how such women had suffered and sacrificed personal happiness to participate in the movement. Urmila Pawar's book *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement*, co-authored with Meenakshi Moon, attempts to bring in the limelight this unacknowledged and forgotten history of the Dalit women. The authors in their prefatorial note to the book clearly state their purpose of writing such a book:

The purpose of doing all this was to try and form a picture of the neglected, underrated woman activist of the Ambedkar movement: her capability, the history she had made in the most adverse circumstances, the change that took place in her because of that history, the way she was shaped and influenced, her longing for education and her deep feeling for the importance of education, her ethical integrity, her courage, and her development as an individual. We wanted to bring her contribution to public view (Pawar and Moon 41).

Subversion is often used as a tool of identity formation. Just as the Dalit writers often seek to construct their distinct identity by their deconstructive approach to certain Hindu myths like that of Dronacharya and Ekalavya, many of them also attempt to form their identity in positive terms by subverting the accepted connotations of certain cultural symbols of the Dalits. To give a concrete example, pig is generally associated with dirt and filth and the Dalits' keeping of pigs in the houses makes them utterly filthy and hence untouchable in the eyes of the upper caste people. But certain Dalit writers subtly subvert the negative connotation of the pig by attributing to it a new connotation in positive terms and thus redefining their own identity also in positive and assertive terms. According to Sarah Beth, "Functioning as a counter-symbol, the image of the pig is re-interpreted in Dalit autobiographical narratives from an object of filth and uncultured practices to a symbol of prosperity, celebration and most importantly, a separate and unique cultural tradition of the Dalit community" (Beth 547). Urmila Pawar in her autobiography also gives a new interpretation to the symbolism of pig to bring in the limelight what Sara Beth calls, as already cited, "a separate and unique cultural tradition of the Dalit community." She reinterprets the pig in devotional terms, giving it a mythological dimension and transforming what is traditionally considered to be profane to something sacred. In their community the pig was considered to be a deity and so its presence in a household increased the social respectability of that family. That a symbol traditionally associated with filth assumes a holy and auspicious connotation is unequivocally brought out in the following lines from the text:

Those who had the pig as their family deity were respected tremendously. The story went that Lord Shankar had once taken the form of the pig to save somebody from our caste. So it was an unwritten rule that pigs could never be killed. Some people would not even utter the word. God knows why. But it was something similar to the Muslims never doing so (Pawar 57-58).

Thus exploiting the subversive potential of certain cultural symbols of the Dalits, the Dalit writers seek to give a positive and self-assertive dimension to their own identity in stark contrast to the negative dimension of their identity based on a negative connotation of the Dalit cultural symbols.

### **Conclusion**

Like Bama's *Sangati: Events* which, as the title indicates, strings together a series of events of suffering, struggle and resistance in the daily lives of the women of the Paraiya community of Tamilnadu, Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* is also constituted of a series of events. The book is a kind of Aaydan, as its title indicates, made by the weaving of several events in the day-to-day lives of the Dalit women of the Mahar community of Maharashtra. One meaning of Aaydan is weapon. The book is not merely a personal life-story. But, more importantly, it provides a space for the representation of the daily sufferings and exploitations of the Dalit women by both their own men and the society at large and acts as a weapon, an instrument, to raise a voice of protest against such injustices through making the Dalit women aware of their exploitations and subordination in every field of life, empowering them with a sense of their self-

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