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## ADDING LAYERS OF OPPRESSION: DEVELOPING DALIT FEMINIST STANDPOINT IN URMILA PAWAR'S *THE WEAVE OF MY LIFE*

*Bhushan Sharma, Research Scholar, Shri Mata Vaishno Devi University, Jammu & Kashmir, India*

### **Abstract**

*India has advanced by leaps and bounds after getting freedom from colonialism. It has proved its capability and charisma in the context of inventions, discoveries and novel theories. But do its pre-colonial social credentials of gender, caste and class domination stand up to scrutiny? Despite progressive strides in the customary spheres, social disparity and caste prejudice remain deeply ingrained in the social structure of Indian subcontinent and has not deciphered into a greater benefit for the rural Indian populace. The reality cannot be known until represented. This paper scrutinizes the articulated lived experience of Dalit women in Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoir* to look for the cultural undercurrents and power relations that repress and dehumanize 'Dalit female'. This exploration may also illustrate how the author develops Dalit Feminist Standpoint?*

**Keywords:** *Caste, marginalization, intersectional oppressions, testimonio, Dalit Feminist Standpoint.*

The mainstream discourse “reflects the worldview of the dominant group members and marginalized groups are largely muted because their lived experiences are not represented” (Orbe, 4). Edwin Ardener and Shirley Ardener, the founders of Muted Group Theory (1975) made the observation that the traditional writings on the marginalized groups largely represented the realities and perspectives of adult male members only while the realities pertaining to the majority of the subdued members like their women have largely been absent.

Correspondingly the sociological and ethnographic studies of the Dalit community have left out the perspectives of Dalit women who have either not been represented or misrepresented in Dalit literature. Furthermore, mainstream Indian feminism also overlooked their issues owing to its tricky concept where women come from diverse cultural backgrounds and have assorted issues. As a result, many women of the Dalit community imbued with consciousness took up the center stage to articulate their lived experience and concerns. They have come up with their strident life narratives, for instance, Kumud Pawade's *Antasphot*, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, Bama's *Karukku*, Kaushalya Baisentri's *Dohra Abishaap*, Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan* and the like. This paper is an attempt to look through the analysis of Urmila's *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoir* to find social and cultural connotations, to illustrate power relations and the framework of intersectional oppressions of caste, gender and class responsible for crippled existence of Dalit women which may form a rationale for Dalit Feminist Standpoint.

Urmila Pawar, one of the foremost literary figures in Marathi, an acclaimed Dalit writer and the strongest advocate of Dalit feminism asserts “Dalit women's issues did not have any place on the agenda of the Dalit movement and the Women's movement. Even today things have not changed” (2015, 260). All her literary works: *Mother wit*, *The Weave of My Life*, *We Also Made History* (A joint venture with Meenakshi Moon) are entrenched in social and historical context, therefore, inescapably shaped by Dalit movement, Dalit Literary movement and Dalit feminist perspectives.

*The Weave of My Life* is an English translation of Pawar's life-narrative *Aaydan* (2003) written in Marathi. The writer who is also the main protagonist of the text develops Dalit Feminist Standpoint by

articulating the lived experiences of three generations of her family and other women of her community. It gives an authentic picture of the subhuman lived experience of peripheral Dalit women who 'looked like cadavers...their emaciated bodies covered in rags, bony stick-like legs, bare feet, pale, lifeless faces dripping either with sweat or rain, sunken stomachs'(p.2). Besides, the opening paragraph of the text renders a spine-chilling account of the unending struggle of Dalit women for survival.

The narrative provides poignant and intricate day-to-day lived experiences of women of Dalit community in the Konkan region of India, the native place of the writer. The protagonist explores the intricacies of her own life together with the complex rubric of other women of her community. The analysis of text shows that it is knitted on the colonial imprints of caste, class, and gender, which are embedded deep in the author's memory and are impossible to erase. Here the memory is politicized to fetch a social change in the society. The text is a witness and testify life experience; a 'testimonio' which is not an act of literariness but wherein 'the narrator claims some agency in the act of narrating' (Beverley, 94-97), a 'strategy ...that lifts the narrative from the local and turns it into a universal statement about oppression' (Pandian, 14). Therefore the voice of unprivileged social locations becomes significant because 'those who are unprivileged with respect to their social positions are likely to be privileged with respect to gaining knowledge of social reality' (qt. Rolin, 2009, 218), an argument that forms the rationale of feminist standpoint theory (Harding, 2004). Feminist theorists like Smith, Collins, Alison, Harding (Harding, 2004) and alike have marked out the coherent space for feminist standpoint based on this prime argument that 'certain socio-political positions occupied by women can turn into sites of epistemic privilege' (Jaggar, 55).

*The Weave* is a site of consciousness, understanding, and knowledge developing a multiplicity of experience; the articulated everyday subhuman existence of the muted faction of Dalit women form the crucial starting point in developing Dalit Feminist Standpoint. The writer endeavors to explain the people outside her community the account of multiple prejudices that Dalit women endure subsequently her own stance, an 'oppositional consciousness' against the following articulated repressive factors and prejudices.

### **Caste Prejudice**

Being a Dalit, Pawar suffered caste prejudice from her childhood as caste is a significant feature ingrained in the Indian social structure. According to the holy texts, the Hindu social order consists of four-fold *varna* division in the society, "The highest is that of the Brahmans or priests, below them the Kshatriyas or warriors, then the Vaishyas, in modern usage mainly merchants, and finally the Shudras, the servants or have-nots" (Dumonts, 1999, 66-67). Dumonts subsequently argues that there is a fifth category, the untouchables, who are left outside the classification. So these were 'outcastes' who were made to perform menial and impure jobs and were relegated to the rank of those who should not be touched, in another word 'Untouchables', now called 'Dalits'.

Like many members of the Dalit community, Pawar too has the colonial imprints in her memories. Aaye sent Urmila to deliver baskets to her customers who never allowed her to enter their houses and made her stand at the threshold. They sprinkled water on the baskets to wash away the pollution. To avoid contact with her they would drop coins in her hand from above. Pawar still remembers her accounts with 'Pandit' family to whom her Aye would send her off with a couple of paisa coins to buy some pickle from them. She was not allowed to go beyond the first step of Pandit's house.

"Kaku would bring some fiery red pickle on a plantain leaf, the lime pieces covered with yellow rai dal and oil, and keep it on the second or third step. Then I kept my coins on a step, which the Kaku collected, but only after she had sprinkled water on them to cleanse them of pollution." (p.78)

Thus the practice of untouchability is imposed on Dalits by birth which dictates their fate of repression and marginalization in casteist Indian social structure. As a consequence the protagonist was a frequent target of Herlekar Guruji who always made her do the dirty work like cleaning the class, collecting the dirt and

disposing it off. When it was the turn of their class to clean the school, she alone was made to work. Pawar also remembers when she used to travel to Ratnagiri with the women of her caste to sell things how the high caste women avoided their shadows, "Sometimes, a bunch of Kulwadi women coming from behind would cross them, taking care to avoid their touch" (p.12). Thus people distanced from Dalits as soon as they came to know about their caste. Even their Muslim tenants did so. Her friends, Baby and Saida also stopped talking to her and began to behave like strangers. Their relatives refused to accept biryani touched by Pawar. Baby also said, "What a waste of time! Now, who will eat all this?" (p. 105). Pawar's Hindi learning lessons from them also lost interest. The incidents weighed heavy on the author's heart for a long time. After her marriage, Pawar shifted with her family to the city to avoid caste discrimination for the reason that caste system was more prevalent in villages. Their three children experienced caste discrimination in subtle ways, though not poverty.

### **Gender Prejudice**

The analysis of *The Weave* shows that gender with caste forms a lethal combination in the life of Dalit woman as the majority of Dalit women are illiterate and backward hence they are exploited because of their ignorance. Pawar remembers a man from the Pangri village who was extremely suspicious of his wife. He would even enquire her after she returned from attending to nature's call. He would keep a watch on her, beat her, and harass her. The protagonist then shares the case of a widow who was found to be pregnant. The whole village knew who the man was. But only she was given the verdict.

"She was made to lean 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 village's honor. If a woman was suspected to have erred, she was brought before the Panchayat for justice and punishment. She was publically judged and her other relatives would beat her up as well" (p.156).

Hence gender prejudice is more severe in the Dalit community. Feminist theory addresses one form of marginalized identity (gender) but neglects the intersection of multiple operational identities of caste and class. Since intersectional identities are overlooked in the case of Dalit women, there is a lack of resources, laws, and policies needed to combat the multiple oppressions and discriminations of Dalit women. Consequently, their operation is cyclically perpetuated and strategies framed to lift Dalit women often fail to produce fruitful results.

The text furthermore surfaces the fact that birth of a girl is never welcomed in a family and this discrimination becomes grimmer with her age. Urmila feels further marginalized on the onset of her menstrual cycle as she states, "Change your clothes, take a pad and sit at the back door... This made me cry harder... people in the class kept me at a distance because of my caste. Now because of this, even my own people in the house would keep me away!" (p. 124). This double marginalization plays havoc with the protagonist's psyche at a tender age. The text further records numerous examples which establish men's supremacy and score marginalization of women, for instance, 'if a woman delivered a baby boy that means she has won a great battle', 'a man always has greatness thrust upon him whereas a woman has to achieve it' (p. 196). 'The family can be strong if the woman's waist is strong.'(p. 200). Therefore, the family's responsibility mainly lies with the woman. If the family suffers the pangs of poverty she has to toil hard for the survival of her family. In contrast, if she is a working woman; her employment is relatively a repressive state for the reason that employment doubles her burden. For instance, "Manjula Tai had to get up at the crack of dawn, prepare a morning meal for everyone in the house and reach her office in time for signing the register" (p.146). Even when the protagonist was desperate to complete her education, her husband attached the conditions that she could do anything but only after finishing daily chores in the house. The community had an additional exploitative culture for working women to hand over their salary to their husbands. At this protagonist felt like "deliberately offering your head for butcher's knife." (p. 208). Gender discrimination is further seen in working women at the time of promotion. The moment a man is

promoted; he immediately becomes a 'Bhauasaheb' or 'Raosaheb'. But women can never earn the title of 'saheb'. After their promotions, they remain 'Bai', without the 'Saheb', condemns the writer. Therefore, many social practices far from being neutral are in fact gendered which sustains a patriarchal social order and Dalit women's repression.

### **Class Prejudice**

The long opening paragraph of the text portrays the subhuman existence of rural Dalit women, shamelessly exploited, dehumanized to a state of beasts of burden that were compelled to undertake the life-threatening journey to the market to sell their wares for their family's survival. For a common woman of Dalit community, the day begins very early-at at 4 o'clock in the morning. They work round the clock grinding between the household work and field work with their men.

“They planted paddy till their backs broke. They had to carry lunch if the fields were far away. After Lunch, they worked in the fields once again and return home in the evening, just half an hour earlier than their men...to begin preparations for the evening meals... After the children went to sleep, they sat down and massaged the heads and feet of their husbands with oil. By the time they lay down in bed their back would be bent like a bow because of the hard work.” (p. 246)

The women toil hard in farms with their men as well as at home. They are exploited economically, receive lower wages to men; oppressed politically and have no say in the community. Parvathi, an acquaintance of Pawar worked like a busy bee. “Every day she carried huge bundles that were too heavy even for a man on her head to Ratnagiri... she got busy with everything, from farming vegetables to cleaning paddy... yet her *sasu*, mother-in-law, always barked at her” (p. 36). Mirya and Sakhar, Pawar's maternal uncle's daughters also worked in dehumanized conditions. They descended the hills in a great hurry and got to the creek. They thrust their hands into the sand to collect the variety of fish there. When they thrust their hands into the sand, their nails often got pulled apart from the flesh. Their fingers often got bloodied and their feet numb. Their backs ached with the strain of constant bending. Some women went towards the sea to collect the white salt accumulated in some of the pits for years. Other women hunted for crawfish or crabs in the rocks by pushing their hands inside. They got drenched in the waves dashing against the rocks, their hands and feet would be cut by the sharp edges of the rocks. The salty seawater stung their wounds. Some lost their lives because they failed to notice the rising tide. Even today many rural Dalit women are forced to work in life threatening conditions.

Most of Pawar's childhood friends in the village work as stone quarry workers; sweepers or scavengers to carry the burden of their families. Many of them live in dark dingy suffocating one-room flats where two or three families stay together. Aaye, widow mother of the protagonist also had a tough life. She could earn meager means through weaving baskets. The protagonist used to have only two sets of clothes, which she wore alternately for three or four days. Cleanliness was her worst enemy. Her extremely dirty clothes infuriated her teacher. The food habits of the Dalit community were also different and their food was of low quality. The upper caste girls brought novel items in their tiffin boxes like 'ladu', 'modak', 'karanjya', 'Puranpolya'. Pawar used to feel terribly inferior to the other children. Aaye used to serve jackfruit immediately before meals so that they ate less. Their menu hardly ever changed even at festive times. She remembers,

“Aaye used to make a dish called bore: small round balls, made with rice flour mixed with black sesame and molasses and fried in oil. They were hard as stones but we celebrated Diwali munching on them” (p. 99).

Pawar also describes their inability to get good food like upper caste people and not allowing girls to have a proper appetite. Pawar recollects the incident from her school memories. One day her classmates ate together though the protagonist was not allowed to touch anything she enjoyed the meal. The next day her eating became the hottest topic for juicy gossips, “She ate like a monster...She ate so much of

everything! Awful!... 'It was so humiliating that I died a thousand deaths that day!'" (p. 102) Thus Pawar has given very minute detail of marginalization and humiliation of girl children and this narration also shows that children learn 'caste prejudice' from the very beginning with the result Dalit children become aware of their poverty and other deprivations without anybody telling them.

Dalits being poor lived only on daily basis. During the fish season, fish was dried for lean days by the rich people who stored the flesh of tistra, or mule; poor Dalits stored the water in which these fish were boiled. The stock was boiled till it became thick like sauce and was then stored in bottles and was called 'kaat'. 'When the menfolk went out and women and girls remained at home, they dined only on kaat. A small quantity was poured in water and cooked as a soup, with chili powder, salt and a piece of raw mango. This was called 'saar'. Similar saar would be made with the stock of other fish. 'This was an extremely low-quality dish with no nutritional value. It would invariably upset the stomach... This saar used to be a regular diet for daughters-in-law (p. 100).

### **The Culture of Violence, Silence, and Impunity**

Pawar digs out numerous cases of violence against Dalit women. Pawar's cousin was one such tormented soul. Her husband was a drunkard and mother-in-law a tyrant.

"Both beat her up mercilessly at the slightest pretext. They would drive her out of the house with her young children even on stormy dark nights. The poor women would take her children and cross the hills and valleys at night, her face broken, body swollen, bleeding and aching all over, and reach her mother's house." (p. 33)

Another case of violence was met with Bhikiakka, a beautiful young girl whose husband remarried in spite of begetting two children by her. 'At the slightest pretext, the husband showered blows and kicks on her. Sometimes he even whipped her.' (p. 112-113). Pramila was another victim, a non-dalit girl, who had love marriage with Shantaram. But he did not get along well with her and would beat her often. Once he bashed her head with a big stone. She lay in a pool of blood for a long time. No one demanded an explanation from him nor came forward to help her. People felt that he was her master and had the right to do anything to her. While she lay unconscious, her master, her savior, was shamelessly making the public announcement, "I have killed a sheep in our field. Anybody interested in getting the blood?" (p. 154) Therefore, a Dalit woman is only a subservient partner in marital relation, only an object of lust fulfillment, an unpaid servant, and a beast of burden. Pawar has narrated numerous experiences of sexual exploitation of her schoolmates and other young girls in her vicinity. "Every girl, I think, goes through this experience" (Pawar, 125). Thus the everyday experiences of many Dalit women substantiate their helplessness as "Powerlessness comes from the real concrete circumstances of exploitation" (Hooks, 1990, p.220) and disapproves off the all-is-well myth of the society.

### **Pawar's Feminist Stand and Activism**

Pawar like Bell Hooks sees her 'marginality as site of radical possibility, a space of resistance' (Hooks, 1990, p.148). Pawar continued her studies after her marriage and children; though it was strongly objected by her husband, Harishchandra, who had conservative thought and expected Pawar to be like a typical woman of her community; giving all her time to domestic affairs and housekeeping. She was publically felicitated for being the first woman from the Konkan region to have obtained an M.A. degree while taking care of the household. Pawar's stance had strengthened her. She began to write amidst a repressive environment and husband who resented her being recognized as a writer, her speaking in public programs and her emerging as a figure in the public domain.

Despite confrontation from her community, Pawar joined Maitrini group, a women's organization of female friends. Amongst them quite a few women were outstanding like Chhaya Datar, Vidya Bal, and Usha Mehta. They discussed women's issues: 'atrocities against women', 'women's marginalization', 'dowry deaths', 'women's liberation' and so on. Pawar also learned that the women's movement was the source from which women in distress could draw support. She also got aware of the biological aspects of

male and female bodies with the help of books and illustrations.

“I felt that a woman was also an individual. If a man has muscle power, a woman has the power to give birth. These are distinctly different capacities and need to be evaluated differently, not in the same way...I had realized that I now had a new vision, a new perspective of looking at women. I had lost my fear.” (p. 248)

Her journey as a literary figure was also punctured with resistance from her household as they could not understand her need to have a life beyond home. She shared a 'bittersweet relationship' with her husband. 'Her confessions about her teenage friendships and later on her perceptive and yet objective account of her frustrating first night with her husband were found somewhat bold and shocking by writers like Sharankumar Limbale' (Pandit, 2008). Thus, Pawar had to face pointed criticism against *The Weave* because of her 'feminist' perception and stand against patriarchal domination in the Dalit community. On account of similar marginalization a very apt question (common to all Dalit women writers) was raised by Marathi poet, Pradnya Lokhanda:

“Why is it that we are accepted as Dalit writers when we oppose Manu and the upper caste tradition, but turn into traitors the moment we voice our protest against patriarchy within the Dalit caste ... We need to confront the caste system as well as patriarchy within the Dalit tradition in order to make ourselves heard.” (Joseph, 2004, pp.657).

Pawar continued her perseverance regardless of all criticisms and confrontations. She also wrote a street play for golden jubilee celebration of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's visit to Kankavli (p. 242). Ordinary housewives in the Konkan performed on the stage for the first time. She also tried hard to do away with the ancient symbols of subservience, like wearing manglasutra, haldi-kumkum programme of Dalit women. Gradually she started contributing into the Ambedkarite movement, Women's movement, Dalit literary movement, women's literature but had to exert manifold because most of her time was given to her job and household, children and education and in combating community's criticism at every stand. She grew with each experience and “came to understand more about rationalism, humanism, scientific thinking, and the distinction between suffering born out of natural causes and those caused by man-made artificial factors such as hierarchical relations” (p.260).

“I had discovered my voice at last!” (p. 260)

The author also became friends with Meenakshi, Vasantrao and through them to Dr. Eleanor Zelliot. Pawar, along with Meenakshi Moon co-authored the book, '*We Also Made History*', which was the first effort to dig and detail the history of women's participation in Dr. Ambedkar's Dalit movement. Pawar also formed 'Dalit Women's Organization' and few other groups to spread awareness among backward and illiterate Dalit women

### **Conclusion**

The exploration leads to the inference that Indian feminism has not yet been looked through gender caste perspective. Pawar's memoir provides this missing link which not only represents her journey from the callous landscape of Konkan region to Mumbai- first as Mahar and later as a woman but also her defiance to the conventions of both patriarchy and caste to emerge as a strong literary voice, as a feminist and an activist.

Colonial imprints woven in *The Weave* reveal gender handmaid with caste and class oppression plays havoc with Dalit women's lives. Therefore writing from the perspective of a Dalit woman is representing their 'lived experience' which are unique to the subject and 'there is no choice that allows the subject to leave or even to modify it” (Guru, 2012, 35). *The Weave* is a testimony to the hardships and sufferings of women which show that Dalit women are at the bottom of the social and occupational ladder bearing the brunt of sexist, casteist and classist oppressions. The representations of the lived experience of women of Dalit community elucidating adding layers of their oppressions develop a resilient Dalit feminist standpoint.

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