

FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS IN URMILA PAWAR'S *THE WEAVE OF MY LIFE*

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**Abstract:**

*The Dalit women testimonials do talk about the Dalit patriarchy and violence generated by caste and gender dynamics in Dalit families. The expression of Dalit women experiences of family violence is important in the context of Dalit movement being patriarchal and blind to the patriarchal violence within Dalit castes. Dalit women are perceived to be enjoying more freedom in the society. At one level, Dalit women suffer the untouchability and sexual exploitation by upper-caste men. At another level, Dalit women are treated inferior by the community and the family. Urmila Pawar's (1945-) *The Weave of my Life* (2008) appeared in Marathi language as 'Aaydan', which was published in the year 2003, was translated by Dr. Maya Pandit as *The Weave of my life: A Dalit woman's Memoir*. 'Aaydan' means weaving of cane baskets. It was the main economic activity of the Mahar community. There is another meaning to the word Aaydan; it is utensils used by them. The Mahar community was staying in the central location of the village, as they could be useful to the upper caste people for their sanitation related works as well as to protect themselves from the attacks from outsiders. Even Mahar people were busy in weaving of basket before plastic entered in their life.*

**Key words:** Dalit, Women, Oppression, Caste, Gender, Discrimination

**Introduction:**

Pawar's autobiography talks about how the Dalits in the villages and town are treated with contempt by upper-castes. On the one hand, the humiliation that she faced in the society in various contexts in the school, neighbourhood made her become aware of the caste system and untouchability that prevails in the society. On the other hand it left her deeply humiliated at every step of her life. Pawar writes, "My mother used to weave *Aaydan* and I was writing this book, both were activities of creation of thought and practical reality of life" (1).

Unlike many Dalit autobiographies that only proclaim the significance of Dalit education in the context of Ambedkarite philosophy and Dalit movement, she deals with the difficulties experienced in the educational system that has been Brahmanical for centuries. She writes about her experiences of inferiority associated with her caste position. Her autobiography also critically engages in describing Dalit patriarchy. Sharmila Rege writes:

Thus as a self-consciously Dalit feminist testimonial positioned against the brahminical and neo-liberal practices of the state, *The Weave of My Life* violates both bourgeois individualism and communitarian notions of the singular Dalit community, thus becoming a milestone in the archive of resources for practicing Dalit studies as critical and inclusive social science (Rege 2006: 325).

Pawar's autobiography has detailed saga of her life from childhood memories to the recent personal tragedies. Set up in Ratnagiri of Konkan region of Maharashtra, her childhood starts in the middle of the beautiful nature, mangoes, jackfruits and sea food the only affordable food item for cooking. She begins the narration with her innocent childhood memories and girlhood fancies, friends, school, schoolmates and teachers who discriminate her on the basis of caste. She had hardly any awareness at this stage about

caste and untouchability. Her childhood details can never be considered as personal because though they sound personal in tone they are very much part of caste experiences of a Dalit girl. The image of Pawar's mother weaving the bamboo baskets (to earn a living), throughout her life in her youth, old age, though pain, suffering and personal loss sets the background to the narration. The title *The Weave of My Life* reminds the reader of this same image throughout the writing.

Pawar is the youngest child in a Dalit family. Her father is an educated and workaholic man who believes in the importance of education for Dalits. He aims to see all his children educated including the girl children. He has a very good understanding and awareness of caste and caste discrimination in the society of his time. Once after moving to the town Ratnagiri, he always does as much help as he can do to all those Dalits who come from the village. Since water is not offered to Dalits from caste Hindu houses, he got a well dug in front of his house and kept a bucket and rope outside for the Dalit women vendors to drink water who come from villages around to the town. He wanted all his nephews to get education. Pawar's mother takes up the same duty of educating her children after he dies. Pawar describes how Dalits children are treated in schools and how they are also excluded by the schoolmates in various instances. Nonetheless, she becomes very active in studies and extra-curricular activities soon after passing the fourth standard. Her sister is also educated and gets a job in mental hospital. Through her marriage, Pawar understands the patriarchal violence in Dalit women's lives.

Though Pawar's father has good awareness of caste, he never supports the idea of married women taking shelter at natal houses due to violence in in-laws families. Pawar tries to understand this dichotomy. She introduces us to various men who torture their wives at the slightest pretext including her brother-in-law (elder sister's husband). A few men among them are working in the Dalit movement. She also describes her education, marriage, motherhood. She describes her life tragedies such as she lost her father, brother, her son and she also lost her husband.

Pawar describes many instances of brutal physical violence that Dalit women endure in families. Cousin Susheela is married to a drunkard man, her mother-in-law and her husband beat her up at the slightest pretext. She comes back to her natal houses in the nights completely bruised and bleeding. Pawar's father never supported her against such inhuman treatment. He firmly believes that women should live in their in-laws house at any cost. Though he is an educated man who believes in Dalit education, he has no gender sensitivity in case of Dalit women. Another such Dalit woman appears in her autobiography is Bhikiakka. Bhikiakka is married to a man and begot two children. He got married again and brought her co-wife home. She begot five or six children. All the children, both the wives and husband were living a small house in a chawl in Bombay. He also tortures Bhikiakka for small reasons almost every day. At the slightest pretext, the husband showered blows and kicks on her. Sometimes he even whipped her. The other wife abused her with dirty words.

Several other women in maharwada run around the houses when the torture by their husbands crosses limits. Her elder sister is an educated Dalit woman married off to an educated Dalit man. He passed B.A. But he used to torture his wife every day. He used to kick her in her stomach even when she was carrying. Pawar writes, "Dalit men fight for humanity, but what is humanity, even they do not know because they do not have humanity towards their wives" (13).

## II

Pawar in her childhood lived in a small village and then her family moved to Ratnagiri, a town in the Konkan region of Maharashtra and then to Mumbai. When she gets married she goes to live in Mumbai with her husband. Since the autobiography is set against the backdrop of the Phule and Ambedkarite movements, we read about a few Dalits who would feel utterly humiliated when the priest does not solemnize the Dalit marriage but still comes and stands far away in order to escape from being polluted. "Then the priest would climb down, sprinkle holy water from his *panchpatra*-- a vessel with five compartments -- with a *pali*, a small ritual spoon, on the coins kept as his *dakshina* to wash away the

pollution and make them clean, and push it into his waistband. He would also make it a point to take away all the offerings: rice, coconuts, and so on, as part his *dakshina*. He never carried these himself, of course! He had his servant for that task" (13).

In this time, education was given importance in Dalit families due to the influence of Ambedkarite and post Ambedkarite Dalit movement. Pawar's sisters and brothers had gone to school. But the Dalit children in the school were made to sit outside the class room. Teachers used to treat them with contempt and they always examine their slates from a distance and severe punishments like hitting them with stones (so that they don't have to touch the Dalit children) used to be meted out to Dalit children in the school. This made many of Pawar's cousins leave the school. Thus they were deprived of the benefits of education (17). In the situation where Dalit education and their entry into schools was not so easy with the teachers carrying caste prejudice, Dalit girl education was an even more difficult task. Many schools would not enroll Dalit girls.

Apart from this, Dalits were kept away from the wells and water tanks to prevent the water getting polluted. Pawar's father is an educated Ambedkarite Dalit. He got a well dug in front of his house for the use of Dalit women who come to the town to sell fruits or vegetables (23). These women could not get drinking water from any other place. Pawar got to know more about the women who come to drink water who would chat with Pawar's mother sitting in the shade after completing their work in the town. In her girlhood unaware of the situation of Dalits used to feel embarrassed to acknowledge them as friends and relatives because of their poor condition.

Pawar recalls the memories of poor conditions of her community and family in her childhood. Poverty in Dalit families is very common due to the lack of access to property, wages and education. Since the family lived near the sea, they had some access to seafood. The amount of rice or rotis they got to eat was very little (45). Apart from poverty, Dalits' lives are entwined with so many superstitions and rituals which marginalize them further. On the day of Holi, Marathas, Bhandaris and Kulwadis would start the worship by setting trees on fire. They pray to gods to divert the calamities onto the Dalit community. Young Dalit boys would consume liquor and get intoxicated. This gives them a bit of relief from everyday pain of labour, poverty and starvation. The upper-caste men would carry the palanquin of the God, whereas Dalit boys were not even allowed to touch it or to come close to it. If any Dalit boy would go to hold the palanquin, there would be quarrels between upper-castes and Mahars (48). On the day of festival upper-caste women would make sweet chapatis, lentil and other food items, whereas Dalit women would go to the upper-castes' doorsteps to beg festival food. It depends upon luck of the Dalit women whether they will be offered food by upper-caste women or not. A few might be offered food and a few might be denied entirely. Kulwadi women pour out all the food items like vegetable, kheer, rice everything mixed up into the baskets of Dalit women. The Dalit families survive on these leftovers for at least two days. In some houses the meat of dead animals would be eaten. Pawar's father, being an Ambedkarite would not allow this in their house. He was also against Dalit women begging food from upper-caste houses (50).

Pawar's family found itself destitute after the death her father who was a school teacher, of severe pain in the abdomen (74). Her eldest brother Achyut also passed away due to typhoid when he was twelve years old. Though these disasters seem to be her personal tragedies, there is a suggestion that there is lack of healthcare for Dalits.

Dalits buy things from the shopkeeper standing away from the thresholds of their houses. They are not supposed to touch anything in their courtyards. But Pawar was ready to defile and subvert the concept of ritual purity. Pawar describes this with a satiric tone. When Pawar goes to buy pickle from the 'Pandit' family, she shouts into the house for a small amount of pickle to be sold to her. The woman from inside comes in a few minutes because she never touches the pickle without taking bath and changing into a special sari meant for doing such things like taking out the pickles. Pawar's brother always used to tell her to pollute the pickle by touching the jar before she comes, so that she would give away whole jar of pickle

to her.

Pawar describes the incident of Marathas of the village trying to provoke Dalits. They muddied the water by washing their buffalos in the part of the river when Dalits fetch drinking water. Though Dalits were very upset about it, they were helpless to fight against this injustice (85). Once, Pawar visited her elder sister's house after her sister got married. Her sister and brother-in-law used to help the poor people from Dalit community. A man and his wife come from a neighboring village takes shelter in their verandah for shade. They find out that the man was a victim of a violent ritual followed in their village:

The husband had wrapped a loincloth around his waist. ... The Mahar symbolizes the animal sacrificed! I tell you, get convened then this will automatically stop (86).

Pawar's mother gave one of the rooms in their house on rent to a Muslim couple, who become very close to the family. Mohammad and Haseena lived in the house on rent, later, two girls Baby and Saida came to join them and became friends with Pawar. But this did not last long. Once, Pawar was invited by Baby to go with them to her aunt's house. They also made some food ready for that aunt. Pawar carried the parcel of food all through the way. When they got to their aunt's house, Pawar was introduced as the landlady's daughter. Their aunt gets annoyed at them and tells them clearly how shameful it is to live in a Mahar house. She did not allow inside the house. She asked her to sit outside the house and wait for Baby and her sister to come out. Pawar feels deeply humiliated. Embarrassed to be friends with Pawar, Baby and her sister stopped talking to her completely. They also did not touch the food container which had been carried by Pawar and polluted. The family vacated the house soon. "At the time of going back to Mumbai at the end of their holidays, they just said 'Bye' and left. How this hurt me! I wept bitterly" (105).

The only reason that Dalits are allowed to take part in temple rituals is the belief of the caste Hindus that if an animal is sacrificed, gods will be pacified. Dalit men and women are symbolic of the animal that is sacrificed in the ritual. Potrajas and Joginis are also tortured like animals in these rituals. Even an older form of ritual described by Pawar was torturing a Dalit man and making a wound on his back as part of the ritual. Caste Hindus believe by doing such sacrificing rituals to gods, they would have good future and will have no threats from natural calamities and epidemics. Pawar's brother showing the solution and escape from the torture to the couple (man who was wounded) was to convert. Conversion as suggested by Ambedkar has political significance in the context of Dalits. Ignorance makes Dalits blindly accept the superiority of the upper-caste. So conversion to Buddhism would make them reject the ignorance. Pawar and Meenakshi Moon point out in *We also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement* that Ambedkar believed that such ignorance would only disappear with conversion. By converting to Buddhism, Dalits would be able to give up superstitious beliefs, so they also become knowledgeable and aware of caste (101).

The incident of upper-castes washing their cattle in the part of the river where Dalits fetch drinking water was meant as provocation. Such acts are also meant to remind Dalits of their inferior status especially when they seem to have been progressing beyond their "limits". If there was any resistance from Dalits in case of muddying their drinking water, the symbolic ways of humiliating Dalits would have turned into atrocities on Dalits as in case of Karamchedu. In this village in Prakasam District of Andhra Pradesh, the upper-caste Kamma landlords similarly washed their cattle in the pond where Dalits fetch drinking water. The resistance of Dalits against the act led to mass killings (Mohanty Manoranjan 2007).

Pawar's recollection of the school teachers and the humiliation that Dalit children face has its political significance. Schools were open to Dalits. But the school and curriculum and teachers are still Brahminical. On the one hand Dalit children due to the poor conditions of family, find it hard to get enrolled in the schools. On the other hand they are not privileged in the school like other upper-caste children. Caste prejudice in schools is deterrent for Dalit education. Kancha Ilaiah in *Why I am not A Hindu?* describes how the upper-caste teachers used to discriminate against Dalit bahun students in the



schools. Teachers used to even say that due to their misfortune they got to teach Dalit bahun students: "If he was a Brahmin he hated us and told us to our faces that it was because of the evil time-because of Kaliyuga, that he was being forced to teach 'Sudras' like us" (12).

Pawar's autobiography *The Weave of My Life* describes various instances of symbolic caste violence that Dalits are subjected to. Pawar's autobiography covers a wider Dalit feminist perspective of various instances of caste violence. Her autobiography brings out the experiences of Dalits and Dalit women collectively facing untouchability and humiliation which prevents them from being part of human civilization and progress.

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