

## DALIT LIFE IN URMILA PAWAR'S *THE WEAVE OF MY LIFE*

**Sneha M Thomas\***

### ABSTRACT

Marginalisation is both a condition and a process that prevents individuals and groups from full participation in social, economic, and political life enjoyed by the wider society. Dalits are considered to be the lowest in the Indian caste system and are continuously subjected to systematic oppression. Dalit literature offers a window of insight into their lives which are of anger and helplessness, violence and fortitude, pain and sorrow, humour and pathos, despair and hope. It is a quest for identity and social equality. Autobiography *Aaiden*, by Urmila Pawar is known as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*, in its English translation by Maya Pandit. She talks about how things changed for Dalits during her lifetime. She gives details about Hinduism, Buddhism and the political movements that helped to change the life of the Dalits. Dalits, she argues, are those oppressed and humiliated by the social system and who stand in rebellion against it as rational –humanists. She clarifies that it exists in several hidden forms and that it may remain 'invisible' to those who have their feet on the ground. The gender question has either not been comprehended or was excluded from mainstream literature. 'Seemingly Indian feminism has not broadened its perspective to encompass the concerns of Dalit women who are 'Dalit of Dalits'' (Manorma: 2008). The story weaves the struggles of women in their life- her mother, sister, grandmother and numerous others. She projects her

struggles to discover her identity and her need to understand the caste

---

\* Department of English, St. Mary's College, Manarcaud

system and its consequences around her, in a way that even a reader who has no sense of such suffering can empathise with her. The process of understanding issues such as caste and gender through the lens of lived experience makes it easy to understand them emphatically. This paper tries to analyse the life of Dalits, particularly of a simple but strong Dalit woman, Urmila Pawar who broke all the shackles of gender and caste bias.

*Keywords: Dalit Literature, Dalits, Caste, Marginalisation*

## INTRODUCTION

Literature offers a window of insight into the lives of people. Yet most pieces of literature give the bright side of life. But there are also lives of dull colours who live as outcasts. Dalit literature, just like African – American slave narratives, paints this dull life, which is of anger and helplessness, violence and fortitude, pain and sorrow, humour and pathos, despair and hope. Dalits were not given the right to express their pains and sufferings. Their cultural and economic condition never let them pop out of their deprivation. They had been compelled for social exclusion and glaring inequalities. Dalits were destined for inferior activities such as leather paintings, butchering or elimination of garbage, animal carcasses and waste. They were considered to be the lowest within the hierarchical Indian caste system and subjected to systematic oppression.

Dalit literature forms an important and separate part of literature which is an articulation of the unrepresented painful past of former 'untouchables' of the Indian subcontinent. Dalit narratives have been a part of the Indian social narratives from 11<sup>th</sup> century, with Sekkizhar's *Periya Puranam* portraying Dalit women as half-naked, sexually exploitable and praising the killing of thousands of Dalits on Kazhumaram in the hands of Gnasambandan. It was a new

phenomenon, which explains the tormenting experiences of Dalits; untouchable writers exposed their present contemporary social, mental conditions before Dalit and non- dalit readers. Mulk Raj Anand was the first to insulate Dalit literature through his novels like 'Untouchable',

'Coolie' in English and there are simultaneously translated in English and different languages. The language which is used in Dalit literature is considered uncouth-impolite. Most of the Dalit writers used the spoken language or local language for their writings. By this they represented the society as accurately as possible. A dalit's life portrayed in Dalit literature is different from the common life portrayed in traditional literature. Traditional concept of hero does not suit Dalit literature. It presents a common man as his hero for the sake of a more egalitarian society. It presents the most injurious exploitation of an individual because of his birth which they (proponents of the traditional literature) think, is the sin of the previous birth. Dalit aesthetics talks about the pain and sufferings of a big group of Indian population. Thus Dalit literature is a rebellion against the prevailing social traditions and demands equal rights for the Dalits.

Dalit Auto narratives on the other hand, interprets their own experiences regarding social injustice in their autobiographies. This form of literature is best suited to a dalit writer. Dalits and all other communities who are moved to the lower part of the society have had similar experiences of marginalisation which gave rise to their cumulative shame as well as anger. Most of the Dalit autobiographies are the accounts of author's personal experiences of childhood days whatever they witnessed and suffered due to their social, economic and cultural status, are depicted in the narratives. In these writings, the voice of protests have been raised mainly in a confessional mode. Their confessions about sufferings are generally taken as a form of protest, as they were unable to register their protest directly. Dalit autobiographies raised their voice against the

humiliation due to untouchability and biased customs imposed on them. In these autonarratives, they not only talked about their own life stories but also recorded the sufferings of entire dalit community.

However, Dalit literature has its internal limitations which is not yet completely resolved. The gender question has either not been comprehended or was excluded from mainstream Dalit literature: "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" (Pawar 2015: 260). The experiences of Dalit women are far different from those of upper caste women. The mental and the physical trauma they go through cannot be compared with the ease and comfort of nonDalits. Mainstream Feminists failed to acknowledge the problem of the subaltern, underprivileged sections and particularly that of the Dalit women. This leads to very little or no recognition to Dalit women in the mainstream feminist writings or movement. The important aspect of Dalit women autobiographies is that they recreated history through their writings., their works present special emphasis on women's helplessness. Their experiences, expressions, and expectations are explicitly depicted in their writings.

Urmila Pawar's *Aaiden* is a quest for identity and social equality. The manifestation of caste in private as well as in public life is the core of this narrative. She provides a glimpse of her childhood during the time of her grandmother, mother, and also about herself. She also talks about how things have changed for the Dalits during her lifetime. This narrative is a portrayal of the sub-human existence of the entire Mahar community. Simply, it is the graph of a Mahar girl who travels from innocence to experience, from inferiority to superiority, from passivity to activity and from an ordinary Dalit woman to an acclaimed writer, social worker, public speaker and icon of woman's liberation movement. This work gradually unravels the story of her awakening from a dalit girl, living in a small village near Ratnagiri and her journey from there to Mumbai.

She was born in the Konkan region of Maharashtra where weaving aaiden – bamboo baskets, storage bins and other household items – was the main caste based occupation of the mahar community. Looking back on her childhood, Urmila sees a close connection – one of unspoken pain – between the weave of the aaiden that her mother made and her writing. Urmila recounts, “My mother used to weave aaiden and I was writing this book, both were activities of creation of thought and practical reality of life” (Pawar 1). It was because of this that she called her autobiography *Aaiden*.

As she was introduced to Dalit literature and the Dalit movement, Urmila learned about the controversies over the use of the category ‘Dalit’. Autobiography *Aaiden* by Urmila Pawar known as the *The Weave of My Life : A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* in its English translation by Maya Pandit is a landmark in the history of Dalit writing. *The Weave of My Life* is written in a realistic mode and is characterized by bold verbalization of a Dalit woman's experiences. It is written in a manner that allows the reader to understand and empathize with her own experiences of caste discrimination in school and among friends; along with her there are many others who were the victims of discrimination due to caste and gender. Urmila has several experiences of these hidden caste agendas at her job place and in her house. In her writings, she primarily gives importance to the portrayal of Dalit women. Pawar has specified minute evidences of oppression and exploitation of girl children and women. She has described her experiences of sexual exploitation in her early adulthood and about her schoolmates. From the beginning to the end of the autobiography, Pawar has accumulated and tried immensely to narrate the incidents which she saw with her own eyes. As a native of the village, she has succeeded in recording minuscule and the minute details of all those events which affect the lives of Dalit women. As a dalit narrative this work always constitute the representation of Dalit society, a detailed account of everyday life, customs and beliefs of the community, social practices and superstitions, and ignorance of the people. On the other hand, narratives written

by Dalit men are a saga of the socio-political deprivation and oppression by the upper caste stratum, but they do not talk about the intra-community realities. This intra - community realities are found only in the narratives of Dalit women that has concerns such as caste, gender, family, and children which appear again and again.

The writer depicts a variety of her life experiences related to the oppressions. First, she describes her dual oppression or double marginalization in terms of gender and caste and the consequent disabilities and disadvantages in life. Patriarchal domination, she considers, is one of the root causes of this multi-layer oppression. It was these memories and experiences that created the sense of resistance in her to raise voice against all odds related to caste and gender. The narrative can also be looked upon as the weave of innumerable memories of humiliation, memories of pre-Ambedkarite life and the resistance movement started under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar. This narrative also work as a religious critique, as it raise the campaign against the Hindu religion for its unfounded beliefs and superstitions. Though, the upper caste critiques of this memoir argues that an individual story cannot be generalised to a community's experience, reader must look at the underlying social structure that allows for such oppressions and violence. According to the author, the deprivation and the suffocation of being a Dalit and Dalitwoman is not only due to the caste but of the psyche of the members of the same caste who accept themselves as inferior.

My mind as in turmoil, too. I was full of many new thoughts. I felt that woman was also an individual, just as a man was, and was entitled to all rights of an individual. If man has muscle power, woman has power to give birth. These are distinctly differently 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 woman. I had lost my fear. Women's movement had given me strength to relate them freely, without any prejudice whatsoever.(120)

This quotation is the gist of *The Weave of My Life*, as it deals with various agendas of her writing such as caste, class and patriarchy along with the developed, modern and independent woman who successfully came out of their cocoon to influence the world with the feminine power and feminine sensibilities. Dalit women's oppressive condition and the labelling like "voiceless among voiceless" is due to caste along with gender. Urmila Pawar expresses her angst, anguish and the anger for becoming the victim of caste oppression. She describes the personal experiences as well as the experiences that her family members face in the name of caste. In fact, the title *The Weave of My Life* is symbolic, as actually she is weaving the caste and class, patriarchal threads to create the life of her own along with the lives of the millions of women, who are crushed down because of their low caste identity.

Dalits in India remains socially excluded, economically exploited and politically marginalised. At present they constitute about 15 per cent of the population of India. *Aaiden* shows the pain and despair that became inevitable part of the lives of dalits, especially Dalit women. Indeed, this work can be seen as the real picture of her protest and resistance, which is an important milestone in Dalit women's writings. Moreover, they were neither treated humanely by their in-laws nor by the society. Devoid of the historical developments of the society, sociopolitical changes in the country, caste, is an inevitable factor that is still working under hidden agendas. She has to face the several problems being a woman, especially from a poor family in having a separate space and privacy for the practice of her creative writing. As Virginia Woolf rightly says, "But for women, I thought, looking at the empty shelves, these difficulties were infinitely more formidable. In the first place, to have a room of her own, let alone a quiet room or a sound-proof room, was out of the question, unless her parents were exceptionally rich

or very noble, even up to the beginning of the nineteenth century(Woolf, 102). But Urmila overcomes all these basic difficulties and pursues her career of creative writing with remarkable zeal and succeeds in becoming an accepted writer.

The struggle of Dalit women in India is often perceived as a fight against patriarchy, and caste - as separate entities. The truth, however, is that their struggle is against caste-ridden patriarchy. This struggle finds a suitable place in the autobiography of Urmila Pawar. In summing up it can be said that Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* may be received as a socio-biography. It truly portrays an original account of people who had to live a very pathetic life only because of their caste . The story of her life unfolds that she has been very close to her family members. It penetrates deep into the lives of Dalit women who were subjected to similar humiliation and discrimination as Urmila Pawar herself faced. Altogether, it also scrutinises how the upper-castes restrictions on women are imposed in order to retain caste, class and patriarchal structure and safeguard their own interests.

## REFERENCES

1. J, Samson(2018)."*Revisiting Urmila Pawar's The Weave of My Life as a testimonial narrative.*"  
[https://www.google.com/url?q=http://iasir.net/AJRHASSpapers/AJRHAS S19-118.pdf&usg=AOvVaw0gSA6SypGVs04ohodVPVb5&hl=en\\_IN](https://www.google.com/url?q=http://iasir.net/AJRHASSpapers/AJRHAS%20S19-118.pdf&usg=AOvVaw0gSA6SypGVs04ohodVPVb5&hl=en_IN)
2. Kavitha, K. "*Dalit literature in India*".S. V. University, 2014  
[https://www.google.com/url?q=https://bgc.org.in/pdf/study-material/Dalit-Literature-in-India-For-Second-Semester.pdf&usg=AOvVaw3Gl-jkLIVYyRCMMgBbfJK1&hl=en\\_IN](https://www.google.com/url?q=https://bgc.org.in/pdf/study-material/Dalit-Literature-in-India-For-Second-Semester.pdf&usg=AOvVaw3Gl-jkLIVYyRCMMgBbfJK1&hl=en_IN)
3. Kumari, Kamalesh. "*From oppression to expression : A Study of Urmila Pawar's The Weave of My Life*"MullanaUniversity, 2020  
<https://www.bibliomed.org/fulltextpdf.php?mno=101140>

4. Mahurkar, Vaishnavi. "Urmila Pawar : Pioneering Dalit feminist writer".
5. Pawar, Urmila. *The Weave of My Life:A Dalit Women's Memoirs*. Columbia University press. 2009
6. Rege, Sharmila. *Writing Caste Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios*. Zubaan India, 2006
7. Sahepedia, 2018 <https://www.sahapedia.org/urmila-pawar-pioneering-dalit-feminist-writer>
8. Saksena, Devesh. "The problems of marginalized groups ii India."Academike,2014<https://www.lawctopus.com/academike/problems-marginalized-groups-india/> 2020
9. Sharma, Bhushan. "*Learning from the outsider within : The sociological significance of Dalit women's life narratives.*" 2020[https://www.google.com/url?q=https://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi%3Farticle%3D2332%26context%3Djiws&usg=AOvVaw3JHrlz6rrQqaTLnrwvLI2Y&hl=en\\_IN](https://www.google.com/url?q=https://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi%3Farticle%3D2332%26context%3Djiws&usg=AOvVaw3JHrlz6rrQqaTLnrwvLI2Y&hl=en_IN)