

The Pain of Voiceless Dalit Women in Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*

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Abstract

The original title of Urmila Pawar's memoir is *Aaidan*. It is a name used for the cane baskets. Urmila's mother wove the cane baskets for additional income for her family. It is translated into English as *The Weave of My Life*. The book explores the plight of the Dalits who get humiliated and harassed by the upper castes. It reflects the three generations of the narrator's family. How the entire Mahar community is treated in the society and their sorrowful condition because of double marginalization both as Dalit and as a female. The awakening of Dalit awareness of selfhood is also traced. The paper aims at focusing the terrible plight of voiceless Dalit women, their agonies, exploitation in their daily lives and their awareness of their subjugation in the society. The women begin to raise their voice against the injustice in which they are forced to live.

Key Words -Dalit, caste, gender, discrimination, subjugation, patriarchy

Introduction

The remarkable presence of the Dalit literature focused in the 1960s, first in Marathi literature later in Hindi, Tamil and Malayalam. Then it emerged in English poems, novels, autobiographies and short stories from Dalit expression to significant genres. Literature that is focused by Dalit women is an attempt to articulate unheard and unspoken voices. Their writing explores the issues of cast and gender identity. Urmila Pawar is an Indian writer and activist in the Dalit and feminist movements in India. She was born in the Konkani region of Maharashtra. Being a social activist, she begins her life with the lives of Dalits in general and the Dalit women in particular. She is a well-known short story writer. Her stories generally explore the strategic exploitation of Dalit women by both their families and by the community.

Urmila Pawar's autobiography *Aaydan* published in 2003 and it was translated by

Maya Pandit in English as *The Weave of My Life*. She was awarded Laxmibai Tilak award for her well-known autobiography *Aaydan*. Dalit women's lives, their patient and unending sufferings and patriarchal issues are reflected through her memoir. Her mother was weaving aaydan for their livelihood and Urmila Pawar started writing to break the shackles of voiceless Dalit women, both the activities are here the means of expression. This memoir focuses on the life journey of Urmila Pawar from her childhood to adulthood and the social problems like patriarchal issues, gender discrimination, caste conflict and poverty, faced by Dalit women.

Urmila Pawar makes it clear to us that her marginalization started with her birth because of a girl and not a boy. She becomes a victim of gender discrimination. She was a girl so her cousin Govinda Dada decided to throw her away onto the dung heap. When she became older, many started beating her. We can't get that she is

a girl and not a boy so she has given this kind of treatment which is very hostile and ruthless. As a girl child she is marginalized everywhere. The age old customs prefer a boy instead of a daughter in her novel. Baby Kamble, an Indian activist and writer in her novel *The Prisons We Broke* highlights the significance of a son in a family and not a daughter. In Urmila Pawar's family her family members also give a lot of importance to a son and not to a daughter. Her elder brother may be offered as *Vagya* so her father offers many efforts to him and tries to give him proper training. Urmila's struggle begins from her family to society.

Urmila Pawar explores the pitiable and ruthless condition of Dalit girls in the family by their family members as well as by the community in her memoir. They become victim of double marginalization. She gives certain incidents in the novel. Her friend is exploited by her stepbrother and gets a threat to do the same thing to her if she would expose the fact to others. She narrates one more incident of a widow from the village, who was pregnant. She was ordered to abort her child. When she refused to abort her child, she was treated very brutally and cruelly by the other women of the village. Here Urmila Pawar has depicted the sorrowful condition of Dalit women. They suffer mutely without raising their voice against the injustice. Urmila Pawar also suffers a lot before and after her marriage due to her traditional husband. When she wanted to take admission for M.A course, her husband Harishchandra became a hurdle in her journey. He strongly opposed her to complete her education. He expected from her to give more attention at her home and towards their children. He compared her with other Dalit women. He wanted that she should be like other Dalit women who

silently accepted everything and spent their whole time for their household work. But she is a different woman. She wants to raise her voice against all kinds of discrimination against women. She doesn't want to keep herself silent and suffer patiently instead she becomes a strong woman, completes her degree course and takes proper care of her children, home as well as other Dalit women. She wants to create her own identity inside and outside of her house.

She also exposes the different layers of discrimination against Dalit women. When she was posted as the branch manager in her office, she was not addressed with respect by her employees because she was a Dalit woman. In each and every moment in her life she faced discrimination. She writes..... "The moment a man was promoted he immediately became a 'Bhau Saheb' or 'Rao Saheb'. But women remained simply Bai, without the 'Saheb' even after their promotions! Besides I was a Dalit! 'Why should she expect to be addressed as Bai Saheb?' Why should we ask for her permission?' Some people grumbled." (P. 235) she reveals different aspects of her maternal family, her in-laws family, her neighbours and classmates in different approaches. She has elaborated the ruthless stories of Indian Dalit women and their conflict to liberate themselves from the hostile shackles of slavery. She has focused the subjugation and oppression of people on the basis of caste, class and gender.

The narrator is born in an extremely poor family of Mahar cast in a village which is near to Ratnagiri. The women of her village always go to nearby woods, facing many dangerous situations to collect wood and to sell them at Ratnagiri.

They travel to Ratnagiri with having heavy loads on their heads to sell their various things in the market and get money for their bread and butter. Their struggle has no bounds. Their life journey is very difficult. They face severe poverty and because of that never get sufficient food, proper clothing and shelter. They sometimes go for begging in festive time for food. She says “..... Our sisters -in- law Vitha and Parvati would also go for begging along with other women in our community..... Their entire house would survive for two days on those leftovers. In some houses the flesh of dead animals would be eaten but that was forbidden in our house.” (P. 43)

Women become victim of social, economic as well as gender problems. The narrator suffers a lot due to her cast. She faces humiliation in all her social intercourse. When people get to know her caste, they try to avoid her. She gives one example when her daughter’s friend comes to celebrate her birthday; she gets humiliated by the mother of her daughter’s friend Kishore. Their lower caste becomes a curse for them. They are suppressed everywhere in the social life as well as in family. They face patriarchal issues at their family. The male members of the family have priorities over food than female. The leftover is given to the females and sometimes to stay empty stomach also. No one survives without food but the Dalit women have to struggle for their basic needs continuously.

Urmila Pawar, after her marriage always gets discouraged for completing her higher education, but still she persists to overcome all the obstacles that come in her way and succeeds to achieve her higher education. It is very clear to her that education is the only one source to liberate

the people from the narrow shackles of ignorance, sufferings and their helplessness. She gets success to eradicate all her emancipation and be liberated. Through her education, she acquires a new strength, courage and confidence. She becomes empowered because of her education and succeeds in asserting her identity. She then gets a job and starts earning livelihood as complementary to her husband’s earning. She even takes an active part in the Dalit women’s organization. Though there is always conflict between her husband and her, she doesn't move away from her independent thinking of women's organization. She starts writing with taking interest in Dalit literature as well as in women's literature.

This autobiography takes us from her early life in the town of Ratnagiri, the continuous struggles of her mother to make ends meet to her marriage life in Mumbai where she starts writing, meets a feminist group and becomes an organizer and an activist of the Dalit Women. Her mother is a very hard working woman who struggles in her whole life and supports her family by weaving the bamboo baskets. In those days according to Urmila Pawar, the Dalit Women were totally forbidden from drinking water from the wells of the Marathas and Brahmins. They faced social discrimination in the society because of Dalit. They were severely beaten by their husbands but they never raised their voice against that, instead mutely accepted everything. Her daughters also face humiliation because of their Dalit caste. After her marriage Urmila Pawar acquires her education, becomes an activist and organizer and raises her voice against all kinds of discrimination that the Dalit women faced everywhere. She fights for their identity. She has noticed how the

Dalit women are always considered secondary and everywhere they get marginalized. She has observed the condition of the Dalit girls, the married women as well as widows. After joining the organization called 'Maitrini' she starts to support the suffering women. She takes an initiation to talk very extensively about the problems and positions of Dalit women in the society and in the family and their participation to resist the oppression.

Conclusion

In India the Dalit women have been vulnerably placed at the bottom by both the cast and gender hierarchies. As women and being Dalit they are doubly

marginalized. They are affected greatly by poverty, cast, violence and unemployment. They are treated very harshly and inhumanly. When the matter comes of honour, they get punished very brutally as compared to men. Though the men involve in the fault, they are not treated ruthlessly like women. Patriarchal domination is also another issue in the lives of Dalit women. Urmila herself, her daughters and their contemporaries face the discrimination of gender, class and caste. But later Urmila Pawar becomes conscious, starts writing and becomes an activist and raises her voice against the situation, exploitation and violence of the voiceless Dalit women.

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