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Challenging Caste and Gender Disparity in Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*

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The Research paper questions the society and its strategies to downgrade dalit women. The body of a Dalit woman becomes a site for the assertion of caste based pride and domination. She is only the silent recipient of patriarchal notion of supremacy of males. Dalit women and girls are especially vulnerable, experiencing not only the discrimination of caste, but also of class and gender – ‘triple discrimination’ as it’s called here in India – leaving them in a vicious cycle of marginalization and exploitation. The burden of caste, class and gender has a strong influence on Dalit women autobiographical writings. Gender and caste in a way bring together a collection of historical and contemporary political developments, reports, manifestos and testimonies. Women who are trying to get some identity now found themselves challenged with new arena. Dalit women in India started questioning whether feminist movement in India discussed the muted areas of caste and gender oppression of Dalit women or not. The primary text taken into consideration is Urmila Pawar's ‘*The Weave of My Life*’.

In our caste-based Indian society, upper caste women are more advantaged than lower caste men and women. But the condition of lower caste women is worse because apart from caste discriminations, they even are the victims of gender discrimination in the domestic and social level too. The intersections of caste, class and gender express power relations in the political, economic, social and cultural domains and Dalit women's suppression cannot be decontextualised from these realities. It is emphasized that women's subjugation is the result of sexual oppression, economic exploitation, socio-cultural suppression, unequal gender relations. Dalit women shared an impurity in nature and even shared the location with dalit men of their same community. However, caste shapes the very integral part of gender status and identity of Dalit women. Because of this only, Dalit women considered as derogated laborer or slave left to do menial service works which are constructed as polluting and inferior. In comparison to high caste women, Dalit women are at the lowest end of the society.

The condition of Dalit women is even worst due to caste and gender discrimination which indirectly exposes the gender and caste differences prevalent in the society. In the present time, gender and caste are not separate issues. They overlap at significant points and determine the society. Leela Dube in her article ‘*Caste and women*’ explores the interconnection between caste and gender and notes: “*the principles of caste inform the specific nature of sexual asymmetry in*

Hindu Society making it inevitable that the boundaries and hierarchies of caste are articulated by gender". (Rao 242)

Dalit women are suppressed and exploited by the upper caste men and even by Dalit men too. This results into their victimization both within and outside the caste. The way a Dalit woman is differentiated under the crushing impact of caste and gender is poignantly conveyed in Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*. Urmila Pawar is a literary figure who wrote several novels and short stories in Marathi literature. She was born in Konkan region of Maharashtra. As a dalit writer she made herself comparable to any other Dalit woman writer like Baby Kamble etc. Her autobiography *'Aaydan'* published in 2003 translated by Maya Pundit as *'The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoir'*. *'Aaydan'* means weaving of cane baskets. It is regarded as the main occupation of Mahar community. The translator Maya Pundit said in 'Preface' to the novel:

Pawar's narrative transverses a range of positions, 'graded marginalities' and the text can be read as a 'complex narrative of a gendered individual who looks at the world initially from her location within the caste but who also goes on to transcend the caste identity from a feminist perspective. (XVII)

There are several incidents narrated regarding the exploitation and harassment of Dalit women. One such episode is when Pawar goes to deliver the baskets made by her mother and how she stands outside of upper caste houses. Pawar puts the baskets down and the customers "*sprinkle water on them to wash away the pollution, and only the would they touch them*" (65) and "*drop coins in my hands from above, avoiding contact as if their hands would have burnt if they touched me*". (65) Another episode is when Pawar after marriage with her husband shifted to Ratnagiri and his landlord forced them to find any other accommodation because of their caste: "*May earlier landlady was a maidservant and this landlady was a municipal councilor. Yet the maid and the honorable councilor were united on one point: caste*". (206)

Pawar not only shares the tragic lives of Dalit women but also presents her excitement of an awakening consciousness that will bring a drastic change in their conditions and situations. The aim of Pawar in writing this novel is to highlight the self. She talks about her personal life and her life experiences. She admits: "*What the writer writes about is social reality and not his her individual life*". (342) Thus her novel delineates a detailed narrative of how dalit men, women and children encountered modernity- the school, the city, the family, the beaurocracy, activism, society, religion- bringing in to focus new times and spaces. Thus, the novel talks about the intersectionality of caste and gender indicated further to the subjugation of Dalit women. She questioned the whole caste system for subsiding women and made their struggles 'private' to hide the truth.

There are few incidents narrated in the novel *'The Weave of My Life'*, where Urmila shows certain traces of resistance in Dalit women. One example is that when a woman entered

into Pawar's house to get some shelter from her husband who was running for her life. She shouts: "*The son of a bitch beats me up without any rhyme or reason. May his face burn!*" (155). There are references to Ambedkarite movement, dalit women actively participating in various emancipatory movements. She writes: "...*These and many such women who made history by participating in the Ambedkar movement became a source of inspiration for us...*" (295). Urmila also made certain indications indirectly to her own life where she has now started a Dalit women's organization for the welfare of Dalit women. She says: "*There are so many issues concerning the women in our community, such as ignorance, casteism, employment and others. That is why it is necessary for all of us to come forward and unite*". (268)

Thus, through her novel, Urmila Pawar enables herself to map the dalit modernity as a social experience in process. It is a narrative of how dalit women encountered modernity- the school, city and so on and used them for their own welfare and development. She openly challenges the caste and gender discrimination drawn upon Dalit women. She even provides different suggestion to protect the rights of dalit women and also to fight against such evils.

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