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ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Chronicling the History of Dalit Consciousness: An Analysis of Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life- A Dalit Woman's Memoir*

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Abstract:

'Dalit' in Indian society means someone who is suppressed, exploited, tortured, detested and discouraged and who stays at the lowest stairs of the staircase of caste hierarchy. Dalit literature that today occupies an important place in Indian literature is the deep felt voice of humanity to enlighten the life of those who have been dragged behind the invisible identity. Eminent theorist Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak in her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak' describe women as subalterns, who are not only marginalized and neglected, but also forcefully denied the right to expression. In Indian society, where the goddesses are blessed with awesome powers, women are subalterns and the Dalit women are twice marginalized for being a woman and a Dalit.

Though Spivak insists that the authentic subaltern female voice can never be heard because she is always spoken for by supremacists or elites, the Dalit women of India are being able to change their repressed identity by articulating their resistance and defiance through their literature. Activist and award winning writer Urmila Pawar in her 'The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoir' describes the long journey of Dalit woman from konkan to Mumbai bringing to fruition the struggle of three generations for a Dalit modernity. In this intimate memoir she shows her tireless effort to surmount hideous personal tragedy and also conveys the excitement of an awakening consciousness.

This paper tries to bring out how this autobiographical narrative imbued with a Dalit feminist standpoint acknowledges the significance of the experience of oppression and resistance among Dalit women against patriarchy and caste prejudice. It also analyses how this narrative is able to represent not the journey of an individual voice, emotion and consciousness but becomes a saga of social consciousness summoning resistance, education and progress in the lives of Dalit women.

Keywords: Dalit, Memoir, Consciousness, Resistance, patriarchy, caste.

The caste system of India ostracized certain sections of people by classifying the society into four varnas- where the Dalits are called 'avarnas', marginalized and alienated in every walk of

their lives by the mainstream majority society. They have been reduced to men who ‘left no foot prints in sand, no ripples in water, no image in mirror’. (Roy, 216) Being treated worse than animals they are often bound to hang clay pots from their necks so that they may not pollute the streets of the privileged by their spittle. They are even forced to carry brooms tied to their bodies so that while passing through the upper lanes they can wipe away their footprints. But the Dalit women, vulnerably positioned at the bottom of both India’s caste and gender hierarchies, experience endemic gender and caste discrimination and violence as the outcome of severely imbalanced social, economic and political power equations and their socio-economic vulnerability combined with double risk factors of being Dalit and female, increase their exposure to potentially violent situations while simultaneously reducing their ability to escape.

‘Subaltern’ is the other term primarily encompassing the Dalits along with other oppressed sections of the society. When Gramsci, the coiner of the word ‘Subaltern’ says that ‘The history of Subaltern social groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic’ (Gramsci, 55) , Gayatri Spivak in her illuminating essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak’ observed that the subaltern cannot speak because ‘the phased development of the Subaltern is complicated by the imperialist project’ (Spivak, 271). But the articulation of the subaltern is possible, not always only through an ordered language but through gaps, fissures and silences in one’s speech or narrative. The articulation is not what an oppressed subject says but it could be what he does not say. To answer Spivak’s question. “With what voice consciousness can the subaltern speak?” (Spivak, 285) one can refer Althusser’s concept of ‘interpellated subjectivity’, (Althusser, 66) by which he believes, experiences of oppression do not always make the oppressed burst with anger, it sometimes interpolates his/her experience allowing for the construction of an ‘interpellated subjectivity’ that is more effective a strategy for confrontation with the dominant ideology, by virtue of its indirect encounter. Recently, James C. Scott innovates two terms ‘public transcripts’ and ‘hidden transcripts’ and show how ‘hidden transcripts’ can be more effective in resisting domination, by its strategy of indirect confrontation with the agencies of domination. (Scott, 2-4) When a Dalit woman is twice marginalized in her society, her gestures, her silence, her feelings, her rural language is able to articulate her resistance against the caste & gender discriminations. Spivak’s essay and Scott’s categorization of two forms of resistance provide for a new paradigm of tracing the voice of the powerless women. The subaltern woman in her lived experiences seems to have her own strategies of appropriation to the dominant discourse as reflected in Urmila Pawar’s *The Weave of My life*. Here, the woman is trying to redefine her ‘self’ in terms of her own cultural roles, independent of the role assigned to her by the male world.

When Helene Cixous asserts that woman must write her body, the subaltern woman in her new self defined cultural role turns her body into a language. Simone De Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex*, says ‘He (man) is the subject, he is the absolute- she is the other’ (Beauvoir -xix). But it is from this position of the ‘other’, that the subaltern woman is trying to understand the manner in which her body and her relation to the world are modified through the action of others

than herself. As literature responds to life, Dalit women are using literature as the medium of expressing the relation of their body with the society as well as their guiding light in raising their identity which is sinking under the triple burden of class, caste and gender discriminations.

Now, Dalit literature is emerging as an important form of 'resistance literature', a term of Barbara Harlow, which endeavors to assert and affirm the identity of the Dalits under the weight of casteism. Dalit women autobiography, another form of this genre, is becoming the most forceful vehicle of Dalit women in asserting their profound voices of resistance. These narratives show that neither of caste untouchability and gender discrimination is ordained by nature or inscribed in genres. These are created by the society to crush a woman's destiny to the benefit of a patriarchal dispensation. Dalit women writers in their narratives exposes the inhuman tortures meted out to them never with a touch of self-pity but with a sense of anger, anguish and protest. The analysis of Urmila Pawar's 'The Weave of My Life- A Dalit Woman's Memoir' shows how autobiography as a literary genre becomes not only the means of expressing the identity of an individual Dalit women, but also becomes the saga of the entire Dalit consciousness.

The voices of the Dalit women reflect the consciousness that they have, the consciousness or identity that dominates their being or the consciousness of changing their oppressed identity. This consciousness of Dalit women towards affirming their 'self' and 'identity' gives birth to Dalit feminism. Urmila Pawar, a Dalit feminist writer, recounts three generations of Dalit women who struggled to overcome the double burden of caste and gender. She engages with issues of identity and selfhood, caste and class consciousness, changing expressions of patriarchy and Dalit women's participation in emancipatory struggles. 'Aaydan' translated into English as 'The Weave of My life. A Dalit Woman's Memoirs' takes the readers from her childhood memories of life, her mother's constant struggle, her school and college days, to her marriage and stay in Mumbai where she encounters a feminist group and becomes a writer and activist.

Urmila in her memoir delineates the interplay of caste, class and gender in the lives of Dalit women for which they are triply marginalized. One of the special features of Pawar's memoirs is her account of patriarchy inside and outside of Dalit society. The description of the marriage ceremony of her eldest brother, where the saptaphera of the sacred fire by the bride and groom is replaced by arranging seven piles of rice on a wooded plank for the bride to step on followed by some traditional games about which Pawar remarked that all these were only to control the bride and keep her in check. Though critics like Kancha Ilaiah insists that Dalit patriarchy is somewhat democratic, and there are also some evidences given by Pawar in her grandfather, father and husband's outlooks, yet each time Sushila came home being tortured by her drunkard husband and mother-in-law, Urmila's father would insist on sending her back after a good meal. Afterwards, Sushila's untimely death makes Urmila dumbstruck. Sometimes, she felt that her father was a reformist for the outsiders, but for her own daughters he has patriarchal approach.

Later on in the book, Pawar gives us more examples of patriarchal oppression of women outside the Dalit Community. While the upper caste men naturally fear to walk in the streets used by the Dalits, they are enjoying freely the license to exploit the Dalit women sexually. The coming out of a young Komti girl in tears from the temple makes the young mind of Urmila suspected. Afterwards, she becomes awestricken knowing the abasements of the young girl by the priest.

Sometimes the upper caste women and to some extent the women of their own community are responsible for their own lot. There is a terrible story of a pregnant widow who is kicked in her stomach by the village women until she aborts and later dies. Perhaps it was done to protect the so-called honor of their community. Speaking this story, Urmila asks, “Why should this so-called honor, this murderer of humanity, this tool of self-destruction, be so deeply rooted in women’s blood? Why? (Pawar 132). Numerous examples are given about the victimization of Dalit women by the upper caste women in the name of caste. Urmila’s sister Shantiakka worked in the mental hospital where one mentally ill woman, figuring out Shantiakka’s caste refused to accept food from her.

There were some cases of Dalit men ill treating their wives. Shantaram fell in love with a woman of another caste and was not allowed to marry her. Being frustrated, he began to ill-treat and attacked her wife with a big stone and went around telling people to go and see the bleeding sheep in his front yard. Parvati, Urmila’s sister-in-law did all the household chores, fetched water from the river, cleaned the house of the cowshed, made cow dung cakes, did all the tasks from cleaning the ground to beating the rice in the farming season and in return gets the indifference of her husband and slapping of mother-in-law. Her hunger was always satisfied by the left over and her embarrassing outlook once made Urmila told her friend that she was a servant of the household. Hearing this, Parvati only nodded and smiled. Suppose silence is the only outcome of her quest for her ‘self’ or her interrogation of the patriarchal order. Silence is her hidden transcripts; silence is her reward, her burden and her source of strength. Many years later, Parvati’s silence, her helplessness struck Urmila forcefully and she tried to make up the negligence by taking Parvati round Bombay when she visited them. If we can take Parvati’s tolerance, silence, indifference as ‘hidden transcripts’ which is a powerful weapon of defiance and resistance of the dominant discourse of power, Urmila’s struggles in completing her education, her rejection of social taboos, her works as an activist, her powerful lectures, her writings can be traced as ‘public transcripts’, which according to Scott is ‘the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate’. (Scott, 4)

Discrimination for caste adds salt to the wounds of the Dalit women who are already injured by the blows of patriarchy inside and outside their community. Urmila’s own experience of caste discrimination is given as the teacher slapped her with the unjustified accusation that their family cow made a mess in the school verandah and as she refused to abide by the order of

teacher to clean the dung. Once, the girls in her class had decided to cook a meal for themselves and Urmila was asked to contribute money instead of food and was not allowed to touch the food that was being cooked. But Urmila was able to resist this discrimination in this case by enjoying the meal and eating well and also in the case of Herkekar Guruji by the tremendous support of her mother. Similarly, Urmila also recalls how two of her Muslim friends who stayed in their rented rooms suddenly stopped interacting and eating with her after a relative of theirs forbid them to observe intimacy with Mahars. Pawar is subjected to caste discrimination when she and her husband look for rented accommodations; have to vacate rooms after the landlady discovers their caste. Once one of her landlady's daughters borrows a sari from her, but stops to have social intercourse with her after knowing her caste. The insults continue. When her son was born Urmila remembers that an upper caste man passing by their home asked if the child was a boy or a girl and getting the answer remarked, "These bastards always have baby boys". (Pawar,178). . The interface of caste and gender becomes explicit when Pawar tells us about her experience of collecting donation for her organization 'Samwadini'. She was donated only five rupees from her boss and was informed by the office peon that, 'the Sahib gave it because you are a woman' (P-276).

Though some critics often says that patriarchy in Dalit society is not so dreadful as it is in the upper class society, Pawar gives us an account of *randki suj'* (Pawar,128) which means widow's swelling. . When widows naturally grow pale because of the tremendous grief caused by their husband's death, the Dalit women look better and fresh only after being a widow. Even Urmila Pawar though had a caring husband, puts on some weight and looks better after her husband's death. Perhaps, the Dalit women are able to create a space of their own only after their husbands' death.

Though hers was a socially happy marriage, she also has to undergo patriarchal domination in her life to some extent. Her husband allowed her to do her studies, as well as her job as she did all the housework and cared for the children as usual. When Urmila received her B.A. degree, he framed and hung it on the wall of their home. But her decision to enroll her name for the Masters cracks their marital relationship for the first time. When she asks him to pay some attention on the household and wards, their misunderstandings grow into more arguments and quarrels. Her writing, her works as an activist, her public speaking all make him angry and upset. But still Urmila was struggling to find her own ideological position by participating in the Ambedkarite movements, delivering speech in meetings organized for Dalit women and also by her writings at the same time doing all the household duties including the education of her children.

Though the Dalit women's body is the site of their embarrassment and sufferings, it is their bodies that initiate resistance. In this memoir, Urmila's resistance finds expression in her comments about certain taboos, in the depiction of female sexuality, in her experiences of attaining puberty, in the list of bindings suggested by Urmila's mother and her sister's defends,

in her frustration on spending the first night with Harishchandra. Investing a language to her body, she becomes able to identify herself in the culture which seeks to erase her cultural identity. But in assertion of the 'Self', the Dalit women are also using their rural language as their weapon. The string of chosen abuses showered upon their ancestors by the village women, their curses, their quarrels and their openness in discussions- all act as the medium of resisting attempts to silence their identity.

This text also provides elaborate descriptions of recipes and food habits to show the integral relation of the food with the identity of the Dalit women. The experience of abject poverty, inadequacy of proper nutrition of the children, hunger of Dalit wives are conveyed by the eating and food references. Eating habits like the Mahars eating together from a single dish, serving of jackfruits before the meal only to economize and cut down the quantity of the prepared foods, the storing of 'kaat' that is the water in which the shrimps were boiled only to serve the women of the family or satisfying the hunger of Dalit wives only by left-over are brought out by Urmila in minute details. But sometimes Urmila becomes able to resist these discriminations by enjoying and eating well the meal in school which she was forbidden to do.

In raising her identity, Urmila continues to resist the so-called social norms by discarding some established customs. The practice of addressing each other by first name despite age differences, rejection of wearing mangalsutra as marital symbol interested her, though these made her husband upset. Urmilatai's arranging her elder daughter Malavika's marriage with her selected suitor against the wish of her husband provoked him to further drinking. He remarked, "This woman has ruined my family. Because of her, I lost face in the community! ... She is selfish, useless, shameless." (Pawar, 259) Harish Chandra's proneness to drinking could not be stopped by Urmil's repeated naggings, as he always wanted Urmila to discontinue her social works. Both of them were running towards two different directions with their respective addictions.

When critics like Sharmila Rege states that 'A Dalit feminist acknowledges the significance of the experience of oppression and resistance among Dalit women acquiring a perspective against an unjust social order but it does not celebrate oppressive traditions merely because they are practiced by the oppressed' (Rege, 74), Urmila Pawar talks in great detail about the position of Dalit women and their participation in the Ambedkarite movement to resist the oppressing social order. Elucidating exactly why and how caste plays a definite role in Dalit feminism and how Dalit woman acts as active agents in introducing changes with their communities, the text shows how the Dalit woman emerges as a separate category in the canon of Indian feminisms by establishing herself in a society where she is being oppressed from time immemorial.

Urmila Pawar's memoir comes to represent not the journey of an individual voice, emotion and consciousness but rather a social and community-based chorus of voices. She recounts three generations of Dalit women- her grandmother, her mother and herself. The lives of several

women in her village, different members of her family, her husband's family, her neighbors and classmates are woven together to reveal different aspects of Dalit life.

Though in her journey of establishing her identity, Urmila lost her father, her bhai, her only son, her mother and lastly her life-partner, in every walk of her life she goes on struggling and at last becomes able to be the path-finder of the Dalit women as well as a well-established writer. She becomes able to forget her own personal tragedy for the broader cause of her society. Establishing the rumblings of resistance, Urmila becomes able to make her heard and recognized through her autobiography. Nonetheless, when Urmila looks at her awards, she cannot feel a sense of satisfaction as she still sees so much ignorance and superstition around her. She concludes "This aaydan of my life and its weave...what will it have to offer readers?" (Pawar, 268) and she hopes that her autobiography might remind the readers of their lives, some may feel like throwing it out, but the life of each person in this community is an unfolding of social reality and it is in this way that her life too should be looked at.

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