

Impact Factor: 8.67

ISSN:0976-8165



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

16 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

VOL. 16 ISSUE-2, APRIL 2025

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Intersections of Caste, Class and Gender in *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* by Urmila Pawar

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15316341>

Article History: Submitted-07/03/2025, Revised-05/04/2025, Accepted-13/04/2025, Published-30/04/2025.

Abstract:

Dalit women have been historically facing marginalization and appalling condition being a part of Indian society. It is a burning question for Indian rational society. The oppression of Dalit women is a unique feature of Indian society. Dalit feminists have argued that the intersectional oppression of caste, class and gender produce specific experiences for Dalit women. In the autobiography, *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* by Urmila Pawar intersectionality plays a crucial role. Consequently, an intersectional reading of Dalit women's oppression is necessary to understand the interwoven nature of their oppression.

This paper intends to study Dalit woman's intersectional oppression of caste, class and gender with reference to *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* by Urmila Pawar. Dalit women have turned to literature as a means of expressing themselves as a result of the severe oppression they endure inside the patriarchal system. Pawar frequently brings up her

mother and her attempts to weave the basket when she refers to her autobiography writing. In brief, Pawar thought writing as a way to heal the sorrows of her life.

Keyword: Oppression, Dali women, intersectional, gender, caste, class.

Introduction

Dalit women have historically face marginalization, oppression and subjugation being a part of Indian society. The oppression of Dalit women is a unique feature of Indian society. Dalit feminists have argued that the intersectional oppression of caste, class and gender produce specific experiences for Dalit women. Dalit women experience patriarchal oppression not only at the hands of upper caste men but also from the members of their own community. A major portion of Dalit literature is in autobiographical form written by both male and female Dalit writers. In the autobiographies written by Dalit women intersectionality plays a crucial role. According to Mondal and Kumar,

The lens of intersectionality provides a clear picture of the Dalit women's experiences which is quite different as it encapsulates different forms of heterogeneity- how they are different in terms of caste, class, gender, etc.¹

As a result, these many viewpoints that overlap. Thus, it is crucial to view the world through the intersectionality lens in order to comprehend the various facets of Dalit women's struggles and sufferings. Accordingly, an intersectional reading of Dalit women's oppression is necessary to understand the interwoven nature of their oppression. This paper highlights the Dalit woman's intersectional oppression of caste, class and gender with reference to *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* by Urmila Pawar.

¹ Mondal, Dr. Jati Sankar and Asish Kumar. "Female Dalit Voice and Intersectionality: A Study of Kalyani Thakur Charal's Autobiography *Ami Keno Charal Likhi*." *Quest Journals* Vol 11, Issue 8, (2023) pp: 74-79.
ISSN(Online):2321-9467 www.questjournals.org

Dalit Women and Society

In India's caste-based society, Dalits are physically, psychologically, and socially exploited. When a Dalit is a woman, the situation degrades to an unacceptable level. Sexual exploitation is another form of exploitation that Dalit women experience. A Dalit woman has to cope with sexual exploitation, gender subjugation, and discrimination based on caste. According to Runa, women in this group are subjected to both gender-based and caste-based double colonization. Dalit women are subjected to sexual exploitation, which takes their exploitation to a higher level. A Dalit woman must deal with caste prejudice, gender subordination, and sexual exploitation. Runa writes, that "the majority of high caste writers rarely address the hardship of Dalits, especially not the plight of Dalit women².

Life- writing of Dalit Women

Dalit feminist movements have been effective in positioning "Dalit women" as a important component of the mainstream feminist discourse. It has challenged it, arguing that a caste framework is necessary to comprehend women's question. Unfortunately, the mainstream feminist discourse has mostly avoided discussing caste beyond the context of reading and understanding Dalit women. Intersectionality helps to highlight the gaps in our knowledge of the ways that caste, class and gender interact in contemporary discourses.

Vulnerability, exploitation, and violence overly define Dalit women. As a result, the whole range of experiences that Dalit women have experience gets eliminated. Therefore, it is significant to study how caste and gender intersect to influence the lives of Dalit women. Additionally, it would provide a holistic understanding of the situations that a Dalit woman undergoes through and would develop into a crucial weapon to bring about justice.

² Runa. "Intersection of caste and gender in Dalit Autobiography: A comparative study of Joothan and The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs" *Creative Saplings*, Vol. 01, No. 04, July 2022 Edited by AlkaSharma
ISSN-0974-536X, <https://creativesaplings.in/>

The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs

Urmila Pawar is an eminent writer from the Dalit community who has made a name for herself in literature. Her short stories in Marathi language have made her a literary figure. The Kokan area of Maharashtra state is her birth place. In the Adgaon village of the Ratnagiri District, she was born in May of 1945. *The Weave of my life: A Dalit woman's Memoir* is the translation of Urmila Pawar's autobiography *Aaydan*, which was released in 2003 and translated by Dr. Maya Pandit. Urmila Pawar has centred her life narrative around the Mahar community in Maharashtra and their struggles in the years following Mahatma Phule-Ambedkar. The autobiography sheds light on Dalit life experiences and acquaints us with their feelings toward their community and family.

Autobiography is genre that is less practiced by Indians as compared to novels, drama and poetry. This genre helps the individual present her or his life experience as she or he has witnessed it. Dalit woman writers use this genre to problematize the issues of caste, class and gender in the Indian context to enable the people around them aware of their current situation. The situation Dalit women face and how they are portrayed in autobiographies shows that they are subjected to double exploitation in comparison to Dalit men. *The Weave of My Life* is a realistic fictional work that boldly and honestly articulates the lived realities of a Dalit woman's life.

In addition to documenting a woman's journey of self-discovery and identity assertion, it also provides a backdrop of Indian culture. Dalit women are at the bottom of caste and gender hierarchy in society. They experience oppression in the society in three ways: first from society for being women, then from the Dalit community for being Dalit, and finally from within the Dalit community for being women again.

Patil writes, "Triple form of oppression is one of the fundamental premises of Dalit feminist theoretical tradition. It is argued that Dalit women are oppressed by non-Dalit men,

non-Dalit women, and Dalit men, and it results in the external and internal patriarchy that accelerates the oppression of Dalit women”³ (Patil 4). Dalit women frequently experienced verbal and physical abuse from their fathers, are forced to submit to their husband’s pleasures, experienced domestic and sexual violence. They are forcibly humiliated in public and this is made worse by their sexual harassment. Most of the time, Dalit women’s difficulties go unspoken and unacknowledged, but the stories written by educated Dalit writers offer us a glimpse of the oppression they endure.

“Aaydan” is a word which means “weaving cane basket”. It was the main source of earning for the Mahar community to which Urmila Pawar belonged. Another interpretation of the word “Aaydan” is “the utensils they use”. The primary occupation of Urmila Pawar’s mother, who weaves bamboo baskets, is a sign of their extreme poverty and low caste. “My mother used to weave aaydans,” which is the Marathi word for anything made of bamboo. As Pawar puts it,

‘My mother used to weave Aaydan and I was writing this book; both were activities of creation of thought and practical reality of life’. I find that her act of weaving and my act of writing are organically linked. The weave is similar. It is the weave of pain, suffering, and agony that links us. (Pawar 1)

Growing up on the Konkan coast, not far from Mumbai, Urmila Pawar witnessed the Mahar Dalits living in the middle of the village, ready to be called upon at any time for labor linked to cleanliness by the upper castes. For years, they were only allowed to carry out the dirtiest and most filthy tasks. Their community was raised in constant fear of being attack during periods of conflict, believing they may be targeted by forces on all four sides. The Mahar community was long afraid that upper class society would commit atrocities against them. According to Urmila Pawar, as a result, the people of her community have always had a

³ Caste and Gender Debates in India by Smita M. Patil

propensity to shrink within and move slowly, much like a tortoise. She was highly sensitive to both her caste and her poverty.

Gender Exploitation and Dalit Woman

The process of preparing food at home is another significant allusion to community life and the exploitation of women. The narrative makes it clear that different food preparations were made for men and women in Dalit houses. Urmila Pawar believes that, although her father was a reformist when it came to the outer world and society, but he too took a patriarchal stance with his own daughters. She remembers that her father never took care of Sushi, her older sister upon their marriage. She passed away experiencing personal suffering after marriage.

Urmila declare that she was leading a life devoid of hope. She talks about her schoolmates and her early adult experiences of sexual exploitation. She states the incident of her sexual exploitation and says, “My maternal uncle plays dolls with me and pretends to be my husband, drags me into an alcove and presses me hard” (Pawar 125). This is the terrible reality that a woman of Dalit must live with. She is taken advantage of by both men of their own caste community and the upper caste men.

Urmila Pawar consistently exposes the exploitation and the oppression faced by Dalit woman or a Dalit girl because she herself had experienced it. Eventually, this experience never ceases to haunt her mind. The above incidents show that Dalit women are victimized not only by the upper- caste man but also by the man of her own Dalit community because they are aware of the fact that there is no one to protect her or even stand for her. It shows that the most vulnerable members of Dalit community are, its women.

Caste discrimination and the experiences of Pawar

Participation in the community activities is prohibited for Dalits. The upper castes do not consume food that has come into contact with Dalit people. They do not even use the same

water sources as the Dalits. And the most severely impacted group is women. Pawar carries back the memories of her child days at school. During a day when her parents were away, her schoolmates made the decision to prepare a meal at Tarlatan Savant's home. Everyone was expected to bring rice, lentils, and other food items, as they had discussed. Pawar recalls asking himself, "What should I bring? They said nothing. You need to bring some cash" (Pawar 107). Upper caste children did not want Pawar to bring anything as it would get polluted on her touch and they could not consume anything touched by her.

Since they forbade Urmila from touching anything, it was an extremely traumatic experience for her. She remembers the following incident:

They did not allow me to touch anything. However, we all ate together. I really enjoyed the meal. The next day I was horrified to hear that my eating had become the hottest topic for juicy gossip. Girls were whispering in groups about 'how much I had eaten. (Pawar 110)

Urmila finds this experience extremely traumatic. Even young children like these, display signs of caste and untouchability. The above incident makes the poor and the underprivileged people ashamed of their hunger. This demonstrates how caste is ingrained in the minds of school going children in our upper-class society.

Gender discrimination

Gender discrimination is also apparent in the autobiography as Urmila remarks that there is separate food prepared for the male members of the family. Pawar remembers her happiness when she receives her first salary following her marriage. It was a moment of boundless happiness for her but she also knew that she must give it to her husband, Harishchandra. Pawar earns for herself but she cannot use the money the way she wants unlike men. She was independent but she was made to depend on her husband.

Pawar writes,

When I got my first salary, I could not believe that all that money was mine; that I could spend it the way I liked. Before my marriage, I used to hand over my salary to my mother; now I started handling it over to my husband. If this is not like deliberately offering head for the butcher's knife, what else is it? (Pawar 208)

Despite being independent she is unable to make her own choices. She is incapable to use her rights. When she was admitted to the M.A. program, her husband Harishchandra objected strongly, as she recalls. Being a traditional spouse, he expected her to devote more time to domestic duties, like the other women in the neighborhood would do. As a typical wife, she should take care of her children's health and education in addition to handling housekeeping duties. Pawar understands that her husband's ego is wounded and that he is unable to accept a more competent wife than herself.

The patriarchal structure of society is deeply rooted in its men. They curb the independence of women in order to reign in the realm of household. Pawar's husband being a true patriarchal figure denies her to pursue her education. As a result, she lacks the courage to move further with her studies.

Poverty and Hunger

Food, poverty and hunger are related terms which are very significant in everybody's life. The presentation of food becomes significant when we study an autobiography as it represents the economic condition of the writer. Urmila Pawar throughout the autobiography gives a detailed picture of their poverty and the food prepared and ate by her community. Their regular food is bhakri, ambalee and dried fish. Only a few people are fortunate enough to get rice daily.

Pawar was consciously aware of the limits of people from lower castes and the true meaning of poverty during her school years. Only at the time of festivals they had good food. Food was always scarce in Pawar's house. Every child of her community eagerly waited for the festival just to eat good food. Her community people even ate the flesh of dead animals.

Urmila never carried tiffin box to school because there was nothing cooked in the house worth carrying outside. Pawar writes about her schooldays and her experience sharing lunchboxes.

The upper caste girls always used words like 'Ladu', 'Modak', 'karanjya', 'Puranpolya'. They brought such novel items in their tiffin boxes as well as at times we went on excursions. However, I never asked myself the stupid question, why we do not prepare such dishes at home? We were aware, without anybody telling us, that we were born in a particular caste and in poverty, and that we had to live accordingly. (Pawar 93)

She has made specific reference of the food cooked by the upper-class students. The food they brought attracted Urmila but she could not ask her parents for it considering their economic condition. This marks a contrast between the realities of the living condition of both the upper caste and the lower caste children. Her struggle to meet basic needs like food and water is a glaring example of this. Urmila and many lower caste students like her struggle to meet basic needs like food and water makes this very visible.

Pawar remembers the insult and hunger she faced as a girl child while receiving food. She acknowledges that it was difficult for them to control whenever they were offered good dish or complete food. Pawar writes,

Once, I went to attend wedding at my sister-in-law's place, along with two of my nieces. However, when we three spout girls set down to eat and begun asking rice repeatedly, the cook got angry, 'Whose daughters are these anyway?' He burst out. 'They are eating like monsters' then someone answered, 'they are from our Sushi's family! Daughters of Arjun master!' On hearing this, the host came forward. 'Oh! Are they? All right, all right let them eat as much as they want! Serve them well!' The cook returned with more rice but being called monster was not easy to digest and we politely declined. (Pawar 117)

The above incident where Pawar feels insulted, she politely denies the food. It shows her self-respect which she considers being more important than the food. The group of girls repeatedly asked for food because they really hungry but they denied. Instead of having a complete meal, they denied food when they heard the word “monster”. It is a dire hunger that compels them to have more food all the time. Children are innocent, and small ones do not know how to react but they could easily differentiate between good remark and a bad remark. These children very well knew why they were called monsters.

Conclusion

Dalit women are repeatedly crushed by the society but they manage to survive. In the patriarchal setup, they define themselves through the articulation of their experience, which they view as an opportunity to define their identity. Pawar's experiences as a Dalit woman shapes her identity. Her identity is a outcome of her experiences of caste, class and gender. Dalit women have turned to literature as a means of expressing themselves as a result of the severe oppression they endure inside the patriarchal system. Pawar saw her writing as a way to escape the sorrows of her life.

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