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The Journey of Dalit Feminist Empowerment in Urmila Pawar's The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs

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Abstract: Dalit communities experience the most extreme form of discrimination known as untouchability due to the severe manifestation of the caste system in Indian society. The ancient Hindu texts, such as the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Smritis, the Dharma Shastras, especially the Manu Smriti divide people based on their birth, split the society into four varnas, emphasize the supremacy of the Brahmins and consider Dalits as the lowest caste. These religious texts laid a solid foundation for the caste system in Indian society and promoted discrimination among the people by institutionalizing social hierarchy and paving the room for social exclusion and untouchability. Dalit writers, such as B.R. Ambedkar, Omprakash Valmiki, and Urmila Pawar have played a crucial role in eradicating caste-based discrimination and untouchability. Through their writings, especially through their autobiographies, they highlight the harsh realities of caste-based discrimination and untouchability. By sharing their personal struggles, humiliations, and oppression Dalit writers look for social and legal transformation in Indian society thus their narratives are often found in mainstream literature. They critique religious texts, especially the Manusmriti that promote casteism. Through their writings, they mobilize people against caste oppression and emphasize equality, dignity, self-respect and empowerment. This article is an attempt to explore the caste prejudice depicted in Urmila Pawar's autobiography *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*, and highlights the transformation of her characters from subjugation to empowerment. Through this work, Pawar exposes the harsh realities of untouchability and caste-based discrimination and advocates social reformation through her characters.

Keywords: Discrimination, Casteism, Untouchability, Transformation, Humiliation, Emancipation, Equality

Introduction:

Urmila Pawar is a well-known Marathi writer and a social activist, her works mainly consist of short stories. She records the historical sufferings of the Dalit people and captures the role of women in the movement for Dalits' emancipation. Her personal experiences involving caste and gender prejudice pave the way for her thoughts in the form of short stories. Her autobiography, *Aaydan* is a remarkable piece of art that received much critical acclaim, originally written in Marathi and later translated into English as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* depicts the story of three generations of Dalit family from the age of untouchability to the life of modernity. Pawar expresses her intention to write this memoir, stating, "I felt a terrible restlessness growing inside me which refused to let me sit quiet. My own experiences, those of my friends and other women, that of living in the same village, casteism, being a woman, built up a pressure inside me!" (Pandit 226). *Aaydan* was translated into English in 2008 by Maya Pandit. The English translation played a crucial role in its reach and accessibility that allowed the outside world to understand the challenges faced by Dalits in India. The positive reception of the English translation emphasizes the significance of the author's endeavour. Urmila Pawar recalls:

A woman missionary had offered to take my father to England, but my grandfather had turned it down… had he been allowed to go to England, maybe, we, his children, would have been born there and our lives would have taken a different turn. I would often regret this had not happened. Now Aaydan will be able to reach the foreign readers because it has been translated into English. This gives me great happiness (Pandit 348).

Aaydan is a Marathi word that refers to containers made of bamboo that people wave and sell for their survival. Through this work, Urmila takes the reader to her childhood memories and her suffocating life experiences from rural to urban. She narrates her hardships and her mother's constant struggles, due to social discrimination and untouchability. She reveals the deep-seated pain and suffering experienced by Dalit women under the caste system in India. She states, "My mother used to weave *aaydans*, the Marathi generic term for all things made from bamboo. 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" (Pandit x). Through this comparison, Urmila highlights the shared experiences and resilience of Dalit women. She uses her writings to articulate their collective history and struggles.

Urmila Pawar covers the social life of India from its independence to the end of the 20th century. The narrative captures the everyday lives of her immediate family members and neighbours which gradually reveals the pain, suffering, and agony of Dalits' everyday life in which caste grinds them down. Urmila Pawar views society from the perspective of a young girl and a mature woman. The young girl unintentionally witnesses caste and social injustice, patriarchal restriction, domination, and poverty. And the mature woman looks back on these social injustices with the insights she has gained from her previous encounters.

The Weave of My Life begins with a detailed description of the harsh landscape and the harsh reality of Dalit women in the Konkan region on the west coast of India. Due to untouchability and social discrimination, they are denied basic rights, they find it difficult to access education, job opportunities, and economic possibilities. They are also subjected to inhuman social practices, and undergo notorious treatment and violence. The narrative captures the everyday life of Dalit women in the Konkan village where they carry rice bags, firewood, and grass to sell in the town market to meet their ends. These women begin their journey with a group accompanied by their children and gossip among themselves as they climb the hills. Their adversities and predicaments are voiced through the author's tone thus her memoir serves as a reflecting tool to expose Dalit women's harsh reality. Thus, *The Weave of My Life* is interpreted as a "complex narrative of a gendered individual who looks at the world initially from her location within her caste but also goes on to transcend the caste identity from a feminist perspective" (Pandit xvii). In the Konkan region, Dalit people experience all sorts of troubles when they farm to feed and cultivate rice which is the main crop, and fruits like mangoes and cashews. The region has heavy rains during the monsoon; paradoxically, it is hard to find drinking water during most of the year.

Urmila Pawar compares the sufferings of the Dalits in India to those of the black slaves in America which emphasizes the universality of their sufferings and shared experiences of oppression, discrimination, and marginalization. In *The Weave of My Life* Pawar admits that she was not interested in her studies and was not a laborious student like her siblings. She only attended school because of the completion of her father whom she was very much afraid of. She was a sensitive child and underwent numerous ill-treatment during her childhood due to her low caste status. Even at a young age, she was very much aware of caste prejudice. Pawar's mother weaved bamboo baskets and sold them into the market to make ends meet and often asked her daughter to sell the baskets to the high caste people. Pawar always hated to deliver the bamboo baskets due to the rude and arrogant behaviour of the high-caste people. Through her personal humiliations and unfortunate experiences, Pawar exposes the caste discrimination faced by Dalits. She narrates:

Some of the people she sent me to never allowed me to enter their houses. They made me stand at the threshold; I put the baskets and they sprinkled water on them to wash away the pollution, and only then would they touch them. They would drop coins in my hands from above, avoiding contact, as if their hands would have burnt had they touched me. If the house belonged to one of my classmates, the shame of it was killing (Pandit 65).

Pawar's recollection of caste-based discrimination and dehumanizing treatment of high-caste people illustrate the existence of the rigid nature of the caste system. The imaginative perspective of Dalits as impure and untouchable reflects the manifestation of the notion that Dalits are untouchable by virtue of their birth. This kind of discrimination not only reinforces social exclusion but also creates psychological and emotional degradation in the mind of the victim.

The narrative of *The Weave of My Life* captures the inhuman treatment of discrimination by the high-caste people in the Konkan region of Maharashtra. They treat the Mahar community as untouchables and take control including their access to water. This situation is persisting in many parts of this huge nation and that can be eradicated only through radical thoughts. Urmila Pawar village was no different, followed all sorts of discrimination. Despite being an embodiment of pain and suffering, Arjun Pawar represented resilience and strength by advocating human values. He shamed and slammed the high-caste people through his compassionate act, providing practical assistance against the inhumane treatment of untouchables:

The houses of the Marathas and the Brahmins were at some distance from our house. Bhandari and Kulwadi women could drink water from their wells but untouchable women were absolutely forbidden to do so. This was a permanent wound in Baba's heart. Therefore he had given clear instructions to my mother to allow the untouchable women to draw water from our well. The rope and bucket were permanent fixtures to the well. These were never removed. (Pandit 23)

Urmila Pawar's narrative mainly depicts the ordinary and everyday experiences of her family members and community. This is the most recurring feature of Dalit autobiographies in which the authors themselves are members of the community as well as victims, "A protagonist in dalit literature is never an individual, he is always a person carrying the weight of social oppression over him and thus becomes a representative voice of all people around him" (Pandit 25).

In the Konkan region of Maharashtra, the Mahars are regarded as outcasts living at the edge of the village among the high caste with a feeling of perpetual insecurity and fear. Pawar observes, "amongst our people there was always a tendency to shrink within themselves like a tortoise and proceed very slowly" (Pandit xi). Pawar's father, Arjun Pawar did not want to raise his children under these stifling circumstances, hence, he decided to move to a more secular urban, Ratnagiri. It is evident that urban areas and lifestyles provide anonymity, better economic opportunities, education, legal awareness, and law enforcement these are not achievable in rural areas. Arjun Pawar took a significant step to shape the personality of his children by moving from his village, providing education, instilling radical thinking and a revolutionary spirit in their approach towards life.

Arjun Pawar was a teacher by profession; thus, he understood its importance and stressed it to his children. The fact that Mahars valued education more than the upper castes people and wanted to improve their social status by utilizing education, but due to the vicious intentions of the upper castes they were deliberately denied access to education. Arjun Pawar moved from one school to the other teaching at different places, convinced his community of the key role of education in one's life. He always believed that education is the key to not only success but also an identity for the person. He also insisted on women's education and asserted that education has the power to break the shackles of patriarchy and can provide economic and personal freedom.

Arjun Pawar was a man of progressive thinking, he eradicated all the barriers and was determined to educate his children, especially his daughters. Urmila Pawar recollects the reaction of other women in her community when her father decided to send his daughter Shanti out of her village for education, '"Bai! What do women have to do with education? Ultimately she would be blowing on the stove, wouldn't she?' or 'Is she going to be a teacher, a brahmin lady, that she goes to school?'" (Pandit 18). Arjun Pawar always believed that education gave meaning to women's lives, especially to the outcasts. Education provided his daughter Shanti a financial freedom and an individual identity through a job in the mental hospital in Ratnagiri. However, Shanti

experienced discrimination when an insane woman refused to accept food from her hands due to her low caste status. This incident psychologically impacted on Shanti's mind and she resolved to quit the job. Her father once again came for rescue but this time emerged as an emotional support. Arjun Pawar's radical thinking never allowed her daughter even to be sad, he stated, '"In any case, they are mad people. But you are sane, aren't you? So behave like a sane person"' (Pandit 21). This statement of her father not only reflects his idea of motivating his daughter but also his strong contempt for casteism.

The powerful narrative of Urmila Pawar is blended with her personal humiliating experiences, and multiple layers of discrimination faced by Dalit women. This memoir captures multiple forms of oppression and highlights social injustice and inequality. Through this wonderful piece of art, she emphasizes resilience in the face of adversity and states the importance of education in overcoming social barriers. By documenting systematic oppression and discrimination against Dalits, she voices for social reformation, social justice and the urgent need to fight against caste discrimination. She addresses social and gender equality and the importance of collective struggle to achieve the pinnacle of success, abolishing casteism.

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