

Oray's Publications
Impact Factor: 4.359(SJIF)
Research Journal Of English (RJOE)
(Scopus Evaluation)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal

Vol-3, Special Issue: 1, 2018

“Women in Literature”

www.rjoe.org.in

ISSN: 2456-2696

Indexed in: International Citation Indexing (ICI), International Scientific Indexing (ISI),
Cosmos, Directory of Research Journal Indexing (DRJI), Cite Factor and Google Scholar

CASTE, CULTURE, AND IDENTITY OF DALITS IN URMILA PAWAR'S THE WEAVE OF MY LIFE

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Abstract

The stream of Dalit Literature is based on the Dalits and their unheard voice which has not been considered for previous centuries. The author of this literature presents their sufferings through self-narration in the form of poems, short stories, and autobiographies. Urmila Pawar's The Weave of My Life is a notable autobiography's leaves a deep impact on the mind of every caste and class reader. The Dalit woman's raised their voices with their own stories of pain and suffering, narrating the anguish of Dalit life in the original. They depict the hardships and helplessness against the discriminating attitudes of dominating caste for the weakest section of society and they suffer from caste discrimination as well as gender discrimination within and outside their community.

Keywords: Dalit, Community, Society, Caste, and Identity.

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India is one of the fastest growing countries in the world, yet, it is notorious for its rigid caste system. This paper examines the history of suppression, condition of the suppressed and origin of Dalit writings. It explores how Dalit community struggled for equality and liberty. Due to strong Dalit movements as well as hammering on upper caste society through Dalit literature by writers and thinkers, and also by the implementation of welfare schemes by Government, a positive approach toward equality is seen in the social life of Dalit community nowadays. Discrimination on the basis of caste and gender are banned by law.

The Dalit problems in India are unique in its own ways, not just in terms of its form but also its dynamics. Nowhere and never on this earth an enormous mass of people, sons of their soil, have been treated so badly for a continuous thousand years or more that they were reduced to the level of two-footed animals under the social system called the Caste system as its popularly known. Dalit problems are not like the problem of slavery as existed in the west till the last century but have its own religious cultural dimensions to it. It goes beyond the realm of mere physical exploitation of somebody for economic gains using whips and batons but simultaneously using the weapon of religion to spoil the living spirit of man.

As the lowest in the caste hierarchy, Dalits in Indian society have historically suffered caste-based social exclusion from economic, civil, cultural, and political rights. Women from this community suffer from gender discrimination gender, caste identity, and consequent economic deprivation. Dalit women's problems encompass not only gender and economic deprivation but also discrimination associated with religion, caste, and untouchability, which in turn results in the denial of their social, economic, cultural, and political rights. They become vulnerable to sexual violence and exploitation due to their gender and caste. `Urmila Pawar describes her experiences in terms of education, earning a livelihood and the emergence of individual identity in the modern world. Pawar's Aaydan is translated to English by Maya Pandit and published as The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman Memoirs. The personal narrative was originally published in Marathi in 2003.

Pawar expresses a deep interest in Dalit literature and women's literature by taking to creative writing, which reinforces her subaltern activism. Her stories are translated into many Indian languages and earn many awards for her. One of her stories is adapted as a television

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play. Thus she comes to be recognized as an established Dalit woman writer. One may trace an evolution in the life of the protagonist from innocence to experience, from an inferiority complex to self-confidence, and from passivity to activism. Pawar was much sensitive about her caste as well as her poverty so during school period onwards her conscious mind was aware of the limitations of the person of lower caste and meaning of poverty not described in the books, but in reality. As she writes. 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. (The Weave of My Life, 31).

Urmila Pawar reflects on her use of the category ‘Dalit’, arguing that is a radical, rational humanistic category developed in the rebellion of those oppressed and humiliated by the social system. She sees her consciousness of becoming a modern individual emerging from the Phule Ambedkarite movement and granting individuality to both men and women from the women's movement in Maharashtra Sharmila Rege in her afterword writes,

Both in the village and the city, people would first purify the Aayadan, the basket, woven by Dalits by sprinkling water on it. At school, teachers would pick on Dalit girls to clean the dung on the school veranda when it was the turn of their class to undertake the cleaning. (The Weave of My Life, 105).

In the autobiographical work, Aaydan Pawar provides an account of the day to day life and routine of Dalit women as they carry out their work in order to earn a living and hence sufficing to the family's income. Pawar describes how all the women of the community gathered to embark on their daily journey of work in the following words: Women from our village traveled to the market at Ratnagiri to sell various things. They trudged the whole distance, with huge, heavy bundles on their heads, firewood or grass, rice or semolina, long pieces of bamboo, baskets or ripe or raw mangoes... vexed women would utter choicest abuses, abusing our original ancestor, the mool purush of the family... It was he who had chosen this particular village... [which]... was an extremely difficult and inconvenient terrain.... (The Weave of My Life, 87).

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By providing the reader with this rich description Pawar earmarks the work culture of the Dalit women. This may be different from the women of the 'upper' caste or the city-bred women who work in offices, nonetheless, the tasks that these women carry out is equivalent to any other job that requires a level of practice and experience, and also helps them earn money. These women actively support their family economically. The sections of the society that lives in a 'hand to mouth' position, their lives are spent in daily labor to collect family members. Labour is a characteristic of Dalits' life and is identified with their vocational jobs. Despite the upper castes' looking down upon their work and life, it cannot be denied that this is their very culture. The description brings forth another significant aspect; it provides an information about how these people came to be settled in this area which is isolated because of being surrounded with hills and thereby making any sort of travel difficult, creating impediments to their routine jobs.

In to be recording their history which has remained absent in the any of the 'historical' records. History and culture are intertwined as the former is believed to be the carrier of the latter. Here Pawar's narrative accounts the work ethos and the historiography of her community. The other important reference about the community living and exploitation of the women are seen in their food preparations at home. It is very evident from the memoir that separate food preparations were done for men and women and particularly the daughter-in-law is exploited up to maximum level.

When the menfolk went out and women and girls remained at home, they dined at kata. A small quantity poured in water and cooked as a soup, with chili powder, salt and a piece of mango or maul. This was called sugar! This sugar used to be the regular diet for daughters-in-law. Women ate their rice with the water dish. to sing:" (The Weave of My Life,152).

The transformation of religious activities also took place after Dr.B.Ambedkar's Maha Nirwan .It was unanimously decided by the villagers to discard all Gods and Goddesses and replace them by Dr. Ambedkar's photo and Lord Buddha's photo. As Urmila narrates,We put all of them in a basket.In fact, the silver and the brass would have fetched a tidy amount if we had sold the stuff. However, we have firmly resolved to discard the gods with all the accompanying paraphernalia. Therefore, we went to the river with the other people, the

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young children in a row. On the way, people chanted the same traditional invocation but with a completely different set of words. (The Weave of My Life,184).

The conversion was the main activity in those days in the days of Buddha and Ambedkar revolution of change in religious faith. After conversion to Buddhism and keeping a portrait of Dr. Ambedkar on the wall, the signs of change were visible even in the rituals of marriage and other religious activities. Pawar also gives an account of the celebration of festivals by her community. Sometimes the festivals are the same for all the castes, but they may be celebrated on different days and also in a different manner, in a community's own chosen way. In enumerating upon the festivals as enjoyed by the people she says:

In our was customary to celebrate Tersa Shimga. On the hill beyond the river of our village, there was a huge rock known as Chandaki Devi's Rock...There they would put turmeric and kumkum on the covered rock, worship it, break a coconut, and then set it on fire...they would pray...this would be followed with obscene curses and shouts....(The Weave of My Life,172).

This sketch of the celebration of festival and life serves as a response to the critique that Dalit literature is all about pain and suffering. The whole idea of pain-pathos as the sole constituent of Dalit autobiographies is subverted here. It instead provides a view that along with the suffering, there are also moments of joy. Pawar accounts that they have their own way of celebrating the festivals that includes a different customary ritual to carry out the festival related processions.

This comes across as an interventionist voice that asserts itself, and refuses to be subsumed within the meta-narrative. If they are prohibited from participating into the ritual of celebration it does not signify their bareness of cultural ethos. There are no records to show such procession of the people of Pawar's caste and the other related castes that indulge in during the festive time.

By finding a way into Pawar's literary or socio historical account it has also found an access to the reader allowing them to rethink about the Dalit community and culture. At the same time Pawar also anecdotes how the casteist social structure has framed the mindsets of

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the Dalits that the latter are made to believe and conform to certain practices, which though then becomes a part of their culture too. It has been substantiated with two examples; the festival of Holy for which the Mahar boys carry the heavy woods and gather it for the ritual of burning it to initiate the festival, they are restricted to participate in the following practice of bearing the palanquin.

After the physical work is done, the society dismisses their presence, nonetheless the Mahars do not object to the task of carrying logs. Secondly, the next morning of the festival the Mahar women would go to the 'upper' caste houses to 'beg for the festive food'. In the given circumstances, the social construct has shaped their consciousness in a way that the dismissal and begging are accepted by them without any contestation. This in turn becomes a part of their life and practice and thereby contributing to their cultural capitalism.

Harishchandra, Urmila Pawar's husband also got the bad experience of caste differences when he left his job at Ratnagiri and joined the office of District of Superintendent. Harishchandra had understood the strong caste barriers prevailing even in upper castes also. Even the educated people treated him like an untouchable. This horrible experienced had changed his mind and decided to go for a job in the city He has reached to the conclusion very strongly for the discrimination due to low caste treatment and decided not to do job in the village. He remembers the call given by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar to youngsters that they should go to the city and forget the caste barrier.

Thus in these Memoirs we see a graphic description by Urmila Pawar of three generations of Dalit women who struggled to overcome the burden of their caste. The Dalits belong to the lowest strata and are prohibited from performing respectful tasks. On the contrary they are forcefully made to do menial jobs and unsanitary duties. Due to this cyclical path of them being considered racially inferior and polluted by nature and poverty they could never overcome these barriers and progress and were therefore forced to live as isolated communities on the outskirts.

Still after so many years of Independence and so much work done by the Women Liberation Movement activists, the situation for women in India has not changed

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much. In these Memoirs, Pawar brings out the struggle for discovering her selfhood and identity of being an independent woman and a respectable human being.

The writer gives a detailed account of their caste and community provide a narrative of the culture of Dalit world. Dalit literature is contested to be 'Literature of Revolt' that intends to break down the Brahminic hegemony over the realm of literary creation. This 'revolt' is also an attempt to claim their identity via the power of rhetoric. In the process of defying the age old subjugation, they assert themselves and their lives, followed with an attempt to open up their world to the readers. The potential reader is given a window to the culture of the Dalits. Commenting upon the unique genre of Dalit women autobiographies Sharmila Rege elucidates that it washed out the 'I', an outcome of bourgeois individualism and displaced it with the collectivists of the Dalit community....

(Sharmila rege, 11).

Therefore the form of Dalit women life narratives that presents a collective consciousness of a community then by definition becomes a cultural account of their respective communities.

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