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The Interface of Caste, Class, and Gender: Insights from Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoir*

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Abstract:

A prominent work in the Dalit feminist writing genre, Urmila Pawar's The Weave of My Life makes artful use of the memoir to share the personal and collective traumas of caste-based oppression faced by women of Dalit. The primary intent of the paper is to examine how the unholy nexus of caste, class, and gender perpetuates the triple oppression of Dalit women. At the same time, it also highlights how Dalit women suffer both under Brahmanical and Dalit Patriarchy. The paper highlights the transformative and empowering potential of education. Besides, it also examines how the author negotiated the multiple forms of Dalit oppression to survive and thrive in a hostile environment dominated by casteism.

Keywords: Dalit Patriarchy, violence, sisterhood, gender, oppression.

I was born in a backward caste in a backward region, that too, a girl. (Pawar 106)

The quoted lines from Urmila Pawar's memoir *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoir* merge the diverse elements of caste, class, and gender and their role in constructing the author's social identity. Born into an impoverished family in the Mahar community in Maharashtra, Pawar was doomed to a life of discrimination and oppression. The author uses the intensely personal

space of the memoir to record tales of her suffering perpetuated by the subordinating influences of caste, class, and gender. The complex nature of her oppression located at the juncture of these forces defies interpretation from the theoretical lens of gender-centric mainstream feminism, with its overall focus on the impact of triple oppression perpetuated by caste, class, and gender, the theoretical framework of Dalit feminism has proved to be the most appropriate investigative tool in analyzing a Dalit woman's lived realities. In this context, Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, formulated to describe the lives of Black American women, can be extended to include the experiences of Dalit women as well. Crenshaw defines intersectionality as "a metaphor for understanding how multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and create obstacles that often are not understood within conventional ways of thinking." In the case of Dalit women, the intersection of caste, class, and gender makes their sufferings worse compounded. Dalit feminism facilitates a self-commentary of one's own life as Dalit writers emerge as their storytellers. Dalit feminist works like Shantabai Kamble's *The Kaleidoscopic Story of My Life* (1983), Babytai Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (1987), and Bama's *Karruku* (1992) come from the authorial standpoint of personal experiences. "One of the major assertions of new Dalit feminism, then, centers on the claim to self-representation: they are no longer content to have upper-caste feminists acting and speaking on their behalf" (Sonalkar 89). Pawar uses her personal stories as a reference point to depict the collective pain and suffering of the Dalit women in her community. In doing so, Pawar infuses her narrative with political force and motivation, advocating for the urgent need for social change and transformation.

The metaphor of weaving effectively describes the many narrative threads of poverty, deprivation, and caste discrimination that make up the fabric of her life. Inspired by her mother's occupation of weaving bamboo baskets to eke out a living, the image of 'weaving' extends further to her threading words to share stories of suffering. Without being solely confined to the rural background, the narrative focus expands to include urban spaces as well, thereby exposing the deeply entrenched and all-encompassing nature of caste discrimination.

Published in 2008, *The Weave of My Life* moves back to unravel many painful memories of oppression and discrimination. As the narrative unfolds, harrowing details of the hardships and misery of the Dalit women begin to emerge. As the poorest of the poor, weakest of the weak, and most deprived of the deprived. Mahar women find themselves in a highly vulnerable position. "On

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the one side, she is oppressed by the caste system, on the other side, she is subjected to gender and class oppression. She is a Dalit among Dalits" (Challapalli 22). The narrative unfolds with a general description of the lives of Mahar women etched in blood, sweat, and tears. A typical day for the Mahar woman starts even before daybreak amidst numerous household responsibilities, such as cleaning, cooking, washing, etc. Since the husbands cannot adequately provide for the families, women are forced to take up odd jobs to make ends meet. This involves undertaking tiring walks to the distant markets of Ratnagiri covering a stretch of 15 km daily, carrying heavy loads on their heads. Trudging up sloppy mountains and dangerous cliffs, wading through knee-deep waters, and walking barefoot on cobbled roads, they undertake this daily trip to the distant markets of Ratnagiri to sell their wares before returning home to another round of household drudgery and retiring to bed on an empty stomach. A bowl of tasteless 'saar' is too little to satiate their hunger after a day of back-breaking labor. Their diet mainly consists of the stale and tasteless soup called 'saar,' which is poor in nutritive value and bad for the stomach. "The poor things ate it without a complaint and naturally faced the consequences," Pawar grimly reminisces (208). In Dalit households, food is scarce, and the women of the family are the ones to compromise. Food allocation is gendered, with the wives and mothers being the last and least to eat.

In this context, Pawar cites the instance of Parvativahini:

"In all this, Parvativahini had no say. She continued working like a maid in the house, doing everything except cooking. She had no power at all. She could not even help herself to the sour Ambeel if she were hungry" (114).

Other than the lack of access to adequate and nutritious food, Dalit women also grapple with limited access to drinking water. Dalit women are the worst affected by water scarcity since collecting water is a woman's responsibility. As Dalit families are not allowed to draw water from the village wells, the Dalit women have to climb hills to collect it. The arduous climb up and down the hills, takes a toll on their health. At a young age, these women succumb to deadly diseases like tuberculosis in the absence of medical care and attention.

Domestic violence is rampant in every Dalit household. Physically assaulted, verbally abused, and emotionally harassed, Dalit women's lives are a living nightmare. Pawar recounts many such incidents of violence she was frequently witness to. Husbands would come home drunk and beat

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up their wives for no reason. Many female members of her extended family had been through it, from her cousin Susheela, Bhikkiakka, or even her aging mother-in-law. Sharing Bhikkiakka's ordeal, Pawar writes, "At the slightest pretext, the husband showered blows and kicks on her. Sometimes, he even whipped her" (228). Describing chilling details of yet another horrific case of domestic violence where the victim was almost bludgeoned to death by her husband Shantaram, Urmila reports

"Once, she came and stood in front of my mother, her head covered with blood. Shantaram, for some reason, had bashed her head with a big stone. She lay unconscious in a pool of blood for a long time. No one demanded an explanation from him nor came forward to help her. People felt that he was her master and had the right to do anything to her." (348)

The issue of domestic violence and the oppression of Dalit women by male members of the family brings into sharp focus the concept of Dalit patriarchy. The idea of Dalit patriarchy has been much discussed and debated. The two terms, 'Dalit' and 'patriarchy,' are seemingly contradictory. While Dalit conjures up associations of 'powerlessness' and 'subjugation,' patriarchy represents power, control, and authority. The inherent contradiction in the term itself renders the concept of 'Dalit patriarchy' redundant. The term is justifiable only in so far as it refers to the reproduction of patriarchal norms, behaviors, and attitudes strictly within Dalit settings and societies. The domestic abuse suffered by Dalit women at the hands of Dalit men is one of the many insidious ways Dalit Patriarchy operates. The subordinate roles assigned to Dalit women and societal expectations from them within their community are an assertion of Dalit patriarchy. What feminist sociologist V. Geetha says in this regard puts matters into proper perspective. She states that Dalit men vent their pent-up rage and anger on the women of the family instead of the upper-caste men who taunt their masculine failure to provide and protect (Geetha 108). Reiterating the same, Uma Chakravarti observes, "It is not as if patriarchy does not exist among the Dalit castes, or that Dalit women do not have to struggle against patriarchy within their communities" (Chakravarti 86).

Violence against Dalit women takes various forms, from physical to sexual. There is a blatant sexual objectification of Dalit women, with upper-caste men exploiting them freely for sexual pleasure. It is as if Dalit women have no right to sexual autonomy or bodily control, with their bodies available for sexual consumption. "The bodies of Dalit women are seen collectively as mute

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and capable of bearing penetration and other modes of marking upper-caste hegemony without the intervention of a discourse of desire and/or sexuality because of the overdetermination of this violence as caste privilege" (Rao, 229). The roots of this behavior are psycho-social. The increased visibility and movement of Dalit women in public spaces, due to financial compulsions, stigmatizes them as sexually impure and spoiled. Since the notions of 'chastity' and 'purity' are inextricably tied to the sanctity of private spaces, any woman who transgresses these physical boundaries is considered sexually immoral and lax. The sexual exploitation of Dalit women is rooted in such beliefs. This, coupled with their social and economic powerlessness, also makes them vulnerable to sexual violence. Pawar vividly remembers a temple priest sexually exploiting a minor girl from the Komti community within the temple premises. In In Her Write: Writing from a Dalit Feminist Standpoint, Uma Chakraborty identifies the sexual availability of Dalit women as one of the thrust areas, or points of focus, in Dalit writings by women across different Indian languages (Chakravarti 134-145).

Despite the unfortunate circumstances of their lives, Dalit women display remarkable mental strength and resilience. Much of this strength comes from the female friendships and bonding they share with the other women in their community. The collective and identical nature of their suffering, perpetuated by the unholy nexus of caste, class, and gender, helps develop bonds of mutual understanding, empathy, and compassion. Being in it together, they stand by each other, ready to extend a helping hand and a shoulder to cry on. Traveling in groups to distant Ratnagiri, they laugh and cry together, sharing their joys and sorrows. In such moments, their grief is lightened, and the pain of suffering subsides. One of the many ways these women exhibit sisterhood is through 'Other Mothering' or 'Community Mothering.' In the absence of the biological mother for various reasons, these women take on the role of caregivers and nurturers, whether it be through breastfeeding or tending to a sick child who is not their own. Through such relationships of solidarity, Dalit women exert passive resistance to patriarchal oppression. In this context, Dalit feminist writer Bama's observation about the women of her community rings true for the Mahar women as well: "Our women have an abundant will to survive; however, they might have to struggle for their last breath. Knowingly or unknowingly, we find ways of coping in the best ways we can" (2005: 68). In this connection, Brantley also remarks, "The women always sang songs and laughed like this, while weeding, transplanting rice, harvesting, etc. Their habitual act of lampooning and joking finally gives them the strength to stand up courageously against caste

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oppression, which shows feminist solidarity, a celebration of female bonding, and the creation of a community that opens up a place to begin the healing" (Brantley 1999).

Amongst the innumerable ways the Dalit community faces oppression, the lack of access to education is a serious one. Casting a retrospective glance at her childhood, Pawar laments the lack of educational opportunities for the children of the Mahar community. Even though boys were allowed to attend school much later, for the girls of the Mahar community, attending school was still a distant dream. "Our village had a school, but it was only till the fourth standard. Moreover, girls were not allowed to enroll" (73). This exclusion from educational spaces is rooted in the misogynistic philosophy of the Manusmriti that has shaped Hindu religious thought. Calling women inferior to men, Manu identifies marriage and motherhood as the ultimate destiny of a woman. Pawar's memoir highlights her struggles to gain access to education and her consequent victimization, once she gained admission into school. That caste was an indispensable part of her identity, and societal demands and expectations influenced it, is evident from her experiences at school. “I was a frequent target for Herlekar Guruji. He always made me do the dirty work, like cleaning the board, cleaning the glass, collecting the dirt, and disposing of it” (154). When she refused on one occasion, she was thrashed badly, leaving her in terrible pain and tears. Since the only way they could hope to emancipate themselves was through the power of education, they silently put up with this injustice in the hope of a better future. In this context, Pawar appreciates the supportive role of her father and his relentless efforts and dedication to ensure his children's education. Not compromising or giving up under any condition, he sent his children away from home to the city when the local schools refused to take them in. When the local school refused her sister, Shantiakka admission, her father made arrangements for her accommodation at a friend, Jadhav Guruji's place, located miles away, just to ensure that she could attend school. Later, when Shantiakka almost contemplated quitting her job due to work pressures, her father stayed with her to ease her burden. For him, the financial independence of his children was of utmost importance, and he ensured that they achieved it. Inspired by the Ambedkarite vision that envisages education as a potent tool for women's empowerment, his dying words to his wife were: "Educate the children" (110).

In her memoir, Urmila Pawar further highlights the higher caste aspirations of unmarried Dalit girls. As a possible means to escape their wretched state of existence reeling under caste

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oppression, it is not uncommon for young girls to dream of marrying into upper-caste families. Pawar also nursed such a desire and was left distraught when one such opportunity slipped out of her hands. Losing out on the much-coveted proposal from a Brahmin boy, who eventually went on to marry a girl from the Bhandari caste, she exclaims with a tinge of regret: "Here goes my chance of an inter-caste marriage!" I said to myself. "That is, probably why he lingered in my memory for a long time" (309). In a society where caste divisions were rigidly demarcated and upheld, inter-caste marriages could ensure upward caste mobility for Dalits, though it hardly ever happened.

In a frank and candid articulation of her lived realities, Pawar's narrative is also punctuated by some deeply personal and uncomfortable revelations. Always academically inclined, Pawar did not give up her studies after she married Harishchandra. As a spouse, Harishchandra supported her decision to pursue a B.A. after their marriage. However, when she contemplated enrolling for a Master's, Harishchandra was skeptical, and the earlier enthusiasm was missing. It did not take her long to realize that men want women to keep to their socially defined and non-threatening spaces. Successful women are a threat to the patriarchal order and a source of patriarchal anxiety. Behind Harish Chandra's stereotypical response was the fear of losing masculine control over his wife. As she became more active in social activism and the Dalit movement, which kept her away from home for long hours, Harishchandra was quick to complain and label her as an irresponsible mother and negligent wife. Taking the reader into confidence, Pawar shares these personal details to refer to one of the many ways Dalit patriarchy can manifest itself in subtle ways. Similarly, as her memoir further reveals, prominent Dalit women like Babytai Kamble, Shantabai Kamble, and Chandrika Ramteke also had to face spousal resistance in the form of mental and physical abuse because they participated in the Ambedkar movement.

In her memoir, *The Weave of My Life*, Urmila Pawar exposes the patriarchal politics of marginalization within Dalit organizations. Dalit political and literary organizations have a masculine organizational structure. Even though Dalit women contribute significantly to organizational activities, they are conspicuous by their absence in positions of power. "Usually, in the Dalit movement, whenever women's conventions are organized, men are found to occupy all the chairs on the platform!" (475). Within the overarching masculine hegemony of Dalit organizations, the issues central to the Dalit women's lived experiences remain unaddressed. "One

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thing was, however, very clear to me. Women's issues did not have any place on the agenda of the Dalit movement..." (476). It is this negligence and apathy that has forced Dalit women to speak for themselves and emerge as their storytellers. The launch of the literary magazine *Samvadini* by Urmila Pawar was a response to this very need for self-representation. The menace of casteism is widespread and deep-rooted. The belief that caste-based oppression is limited to rural spaces is a myth. Incidents of caste-based discrimination are reported even in the most unlikely spaces, such as towns and cities. Urmila Pawar draws from her personal experiences to share bitter encounters with caste prejudices in the bustling metropolis of Mumbai. Upon relocating to Mumbai, her search for rented accommodation becomes an ordeal. House owners shut the doors on her the moment her caste identity is known. On other occasions, she has to vacate the house due to her Mahar origins. Pawar also narrates her workplace experiences, which are no less painful. She recalls how she had to endure the toxic behavior of her colleagues when she received a promotion. They dismissed her success as a caste privilege rather than as something duly earned through merit. Her inferiors, mainly men, would refuse to cooperate and take her orders. On the one hand, their response was an outcome of patriarchal anxiety, and on the other, it reflected their deeply entrenched caste bias.

Given the pervasive nature of caste discrimination that sweeps across villages and cities alike, Dalits residing in non-Dalit settings often take refuge in impersonation. It is a survival strategy and a defense mechanism to escape caste-based discrimination. Pawar notes with concern that many Dalit families would dispense with all markers of their caste identity, including their surnames and the idols of gods they worshipped. It was their tactic of incorporating into the culture of non-Dalit settings while masking their real identity. As long as it granted them immunity against caste oppression, they were content to survive on a borrowed identity. In this context, Urmila Pawar writes:

"Some had hung the image of Padma Pani rather than that of Buddha on the wall as a decorative piece, and some kept tiny images with their plants so that they would not be visible. Some had hidden them in embroidery and knitting and hung them as showpieces with decorative frames. In short, they took great care to keep these symbols of their caste hidden from the public eye in a less prominent place." (495) Calling it an illusionary camouflage, Yashica Dutt remarks: "There are so many of us who are living this lie. We avoid talking about caste, hoping to somehow find a place

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in the world of upper castes that have been forbidden to us. We create upper caste identities—stolen badges—that help us gain entry to a space that will reject us the moment it finds out who we are." (Yashica, 11)

In this way, Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* emerges as a telling commentary on the vicious nature of caste discrimination and how it impacts Dalit women. Men and women suffer oppression differently. Coming from the triple sources of caste, class, and gender, Dalit women's experiences are neither identical to those of Dalit men nor upper-caste women. It is this difference that has forced Dalit women to devise their mode of representation that can reflect their lived realities with all sincerity and accuracy. Dalit women's experiences need to be couched in a different vocabulary altogether. Only then will the voices of Dalit women be properly heard and addressed, paving the way for their emancipation in the real sense.

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