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An Account of Audacity: Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*

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Abstract: Urmila Pawar is one of the leading Dalit writers in Marathi, belonging to the Mahar community, writing ingenuously about her life. Her memoirs are a voyage of self discovery set from the rural areas of Konkan region to the big streets of Mumbai centring on the travails and tribulations of the poor dalit women, the most oppressed and subdued section of our society. It is a blatant and bold narrative of a woman exposing the hidden personal layers of her marital clashes, familial conflicts as well as disputes at her work place due to the stigmatization faced by her. This paper evaluates the predicaments of Dalit women carrying the burden of triple oppression in the form of caste, class and gender.

Keywords: Dalit, memoirs, oppression, women.

The autobiographies written by dalit male writers have completely sidelined the troubles faced by dalit women. Dalit women have witnessed marginalization in the representation of the dalit experience by male authors. They suffered exclusion in the literary, social as well as political field. Their written testimonies articulate their unsaid and unheard experiences as women and as Dalits. The narratives of dalit women reveal their efforts at rejecting the dictatorial traditions and ideologies by revolting against them. The testimonies by dalit women assert their independent space where they have expressed themselves freely without any restriction or fear. Their written accounts serve as the channels for expression and verbalization of their thoughts. The emergence of dalit women writers is a direct reaction to the exclusion experienced by women in the writings of the people of their own community. The narratives written by dalit women share the experiences of the whole community. Their writings advocate the need for listening to the voices of the disenfranchised people. Sharmila Rege in her afterword of *The Weave Of My Life* writes, "Dalit testimonies have not only washed out the 'I', an outcome of bourgeois individualism and displaced



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it with the collectivity of the dalit community but by bringing details of lives into the public domain they have also challenged the communitarian control on the self' (Pawar 322).

Urmila Pawar is one of the leading Dalit writers in Marathi, belonging to the Mahar community, writing ingenuously about her life. Her autobiography *Aaydan* is a weave of her struggles, sorrows and anguish over the span of years. It is a narrative which puts forth the experiences of a dalit woman since childhood till today, fondest or bitter all the memories are penned down explicitly. It focuses on the events that unfolded and impacted her life during her physical as well as psychological journey. It is the journey of an individual soaked up in the struggles and hardships of the three generations of dalit women. Her memoirs are a voyage of self discovery set from the rural areas of Konkan region to the big streets of Mumbai centring on the travails and tribulations of the poor dalit women, the most oppressed and subdued section of our society. Not only does her autobiography portray the exploitation and discrimination suffered by her community but also explores the conflicts of her personal life. It is a blatant and bold narrative of a woman exposing the hidden personal layers of her marital clashes, familial conflicts as well as disputes at her work place due to the stigma of casteism attached with her. *The Weave Of My Life* brings issues of exploitation revolving around the existence of dalits, mainly dalit women to the forefront. The tyranny of the social system and how deeply it affected the young minds and souls is reflected upon. As mentioned by Maya Pandit in the introduction of the book, *The Weave of My Life* portrays the conditions of a subhuman existence of an entire community, shamelessly exploited by the upper castes, reduced to a status of beasts of burden, extremely marginalized (xvi). Urmila Pawar also questions the dominance of patriarchal ideologies where a woman's independence is seen as a threat to man's control over her. Maya Pandit observes, "*The Weave of My Life* represents a terrain where the dalit woman stands today, questioning the established ideologies of caste, modernity and patriarchy. It goes on to expose the contradictions, fissures and fractures within the dalit and feminist movements and also within the kind of modernity that we have inherited and, in turn, eventually constructed" (xxvi)..



Her writings showcase the lives of disadvantaged Dalit women crushed under the oppressive structures. She questions the existence of dalit woman, her place in the society, validity of her rights and her identity. Her heart goes out for the poor uneducated women living in filthy places exploited brutally by the upper castes. Through her pen she champions the cause of the unprivileged dalit women, succumbed to conventional silence in this androcentric society. The translator Maya Pandit also mentions in her introductory note, “It is a complex narrative of a *gendered* individual who looks at the world initially from her location within the caste but who also goes on to transcend the caste identity from a feminist perspective”³ (xvii).

Women being the victims of strong indoctrination of belonging to the weaker sex have quite less participation in the important matters. Caste as well as male supremacy result in their ill treatment collectively. Alladi Uma, on the condition of the women observes, “Most women still abide by social attitudes and beliefs, continuing to be passive, submissive, docile beings, and willing to act as sex and baby machines producing countless children, and as robots running the horse effectively” (Uma 8). Reminiscing her childhood, Pawar mentions how women became the worst sufferers of inequities and maltreatment as they had to trudge day and night, were bashed up by their drunkard husbands and ruthless in-laws, became the victims of aversion of upper castes and society, caught in the web of superstitious beliefs and black magic. While describing her school days she remarks how the upper castes claimed their caste supremacy by exercising power and control on the poor low caste children. They inflicted sheer cruelty on them. Few dalit children who somehow managed to go to school were mishandled and suffered various forms of abuse. Pawar writes, “. . . some Mahar children also went to school but they had to sit outside the courtyard. The teachers taught them and examined their slates, from a distance. They would hit the children with stones if they made any mistakes” (17). Furthermore, poverty exacerbated their problems as being uprooted from their rights they had no existence in the oppressive environment of the ruling high class. Their minds were conditioned to accept their miserable fates without raising any hue and cry. The leftovers of the upper castes satiated the hunger of Mahars. They begged for food in return of the services they rendered to them. They would labour in the fields, weave baskets of various sizes



and shapes for them, beat the dhol and dispose off dead animals. After performing such menial tasks, they would go to them excitedly hoping to get something in return.

The concept of purity and pollution associated with the upper caste and the lower caste is also given place in her memoirs by Pawar. Being the victim of this she was denied entry into the houses of high class people. She has penned down the humiliation people like her face as a consequence of belonging to the dalit community. Low caste people are considered to be filthy and unworthy of physical contact of the upper caste. Pawar recalls the hurtful experiences of her childhood when on the insistence of her mother she would go to the houses of people to sell the hand woven baskets made by her mother. She writes :

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 down and they sprinkled water on them to wash away the pollution, and only then would they touch them. They would drop the 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. (65)

Pawar through her memoirs attacks the double standards of the Upper castes. The Brahmins considered themselves to be the purest and the holiest among all other castes. Not only did they deny the entry of dalits to their places but also kept a physical distance from them because of the fear of getting polluted from their touch. But Urmila Pawar questions that while physically and sexually abusing the dalit girls where do their moral values and beliefs go? In order to satisfy their lust they brutally exploited the low caste women. Pawar narrates an incident of her childhood time where the fair Brahmin, dressed in half pants, with a janeu, the sacred thread, around his bare white torso, and wearing a red vertical kumkum mark on his forehead molested and sexually abused a Komti girl called Ulgawwa inside the temple (66). The holy outer appearance of the priest had a soul stained with the marks of unholy practices. Even today just because these heinous deeds done in the deep darkness don't get surfaced easily, people with power in their hands shamelessly keep on committing them. On the issues of dalit women, Ruth Manorama observes, "the lives of dalit women have been characterized by "Culture of silence", as they have lacked a political, economic and social "space for utterance" for centuries" (259). Pawar also portrays the emotional ordeals that



a mind and a heart go through when the society breaks off its ties from the people on the basis of caste, creed, race and religion. The muslim family who were the tenants of Pawars on coming to know about their mahar caste stopped talking to them. The cordial bond shared by the landlords and the tenants suddenly transformed into a bitter one. As soon as the muslim family came to know from their relatives about the low caste of Pawars they vacated their house and shifted to somewhere else. The relative of the muslim family uttered in disgust, "Didn't you find any other place? Why did you go and stay at that Mahar's house?"(104). All this impacted the mind of Urmila a lot as she felt humiliated greatly. In her own words:

Who knows what the fat woman in Rajiwada had told them about me but somehow they stopped talking to me from that day on. They began to behave like strangers. Before this happened I would return eagerly from school to chat with them; now I began to feel guilty as if I had committed some grave offence. At the time of going back to Mumbai at the end of their holidays, they just said 'Bye' and left. How this hurt me! I wept bitterly. (105)

The victimization of Pawar and her family never stopped though the perpetrators kept on changing. From the people of rural area to the denizens of cities, the mindsets of people hardly differed. Majority of the high caste people they came across had minds ingrained in caste ideology. Even after moving from a backward village of Ratnagiri to a metropolitan like Mumbai, the web of the dominant ideology of casteism followed them everywhere. Her husband, Harishchandra resigned from his job because of the disgrace he had to face for belonging to the low caste. The stigma of caste attached with them made it difficult for them to find a rented accommodation in Mumbai. She recounts how her illiterate widow landlady belonging to a non-dalit peasant caste forced them to leave the house. On knowing about the caste of Pawar she could not tolerate her as her tenant. Urmila remembers how her landlady said in a moment, 'Look for another room!' Nothing made sense! But why do I say so? Of course, everything made sense! It was about caste! (205). The next landlady who was an educated one also behaved like the earlier one. What vexes Pawar, is the question, What is the difference between an illiterate and an educated one if the people falling in both the categories are similar in their thinking? She writes, "My earlier landlady



was a maidservant and this landlady was a municipal councillor. Yet the maid and the honourable councillor were united on one point: caste” (206).

Urmila owes the betterment of her community to the work of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar. She mentions about the conversion of dalits into Buddhist religion. Because of the rigid mindsets and obsolete traditions in which Hinduism is rooted, dalits abandoned the hindu religion and embraced Buddhism. They gave up all the older rituals which resulted in the ignominy of dalits. She writes that under the guidance of Dr Ambedker the dumb got a voice and the blind a vision (312).

Urmila’s writing slams the parochial customs and obsolete traditions triggering the harassment of women. Dalit women being uneducated and ignorant of their rights lead a life of deprivation. In the Indian society, a woman is considered as an epitome of endurance and perseverance. Thus, the smothering culture forces her to carry the ideological baggage of what it is to be a ‘woman’ in this patriarchal set up. Pawar stresses the need to subvert this dominant rule imposing various tyrannical norms and customs on women. She feels that women should move from the darkness of suppression to the light of freedom. Dalit women, the marginalized gendered subaltern spend their entire lives in the gratification of the needs of their families. Urmila Pawar feels the dire need of upgrading their status and providing them a life of dignity, safety and liberty. There are many instances of domestic violence and the dehumanized plight of mahar women in the book. Even the women from her family, her sisters, sisters-in-law and mother-in-law also faced abuses and bashing at the hands of their husbands. She cites the ill treatment, her nephew Shantaram gave to his wife. She writes:

Shantaram did not get along well with her and would beat her often. Once she came and stood in front of my mother- her forehead covered with blood. Shantaram, for some silly 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. While she lay unconscious, her master, her saviour, was shamelessly making a public announcement, ‘I have killed a sheep in our field. Anybody interested in getting the blood?. (154)



Urmila remarks that most of the women of her community suffered the cruelty of the society. The position of women has always been one of subservience to men. They are the silent sufferers in the name of preservation of the honour of family and and village. They are beaten black and blue without any reason. While recounting the maltreatment faced by the dalit women of her village, Urmila writes, “It was not only husbands or family members who bashed up women. If a woman was suspected to have erred, she was brought before the Panchayat for justice and punishment. She was publicly judged and her other relatives would beat her up as well” (156). The three monsters of caste, class and gender victimise dalit women deeply by inflicting inestimable atrocities on them. The evil of casteism which makes one untouchable as soon as one is born, combined with penury makes the existence of a person really tough. A poor dalit woman who already finds herself a victim of caste discrimination is also weighed down by the presence of gender disparity. She is imprisoned by various customs and conventions which further ensure her suppression. Urmila Pawar recalls an incident when her menstrual cycle started for the first time. As it was a new experience for her so on finding her skirt stained all red she burst into tears. Her mother told her to change her clothes and then to go and sit back at the back door. On hearing such words from her mother Urmila felt bad. She remarks, “This made me cry harder. As it was, people in the class kept me at a distance because of my caste. Now because of this even my own people in the house would keep me away!” (124). The alienation and ostracization faced by women based on their caste and gender make them the worst sufferers of the system.

The issue of gender disparity begins at home and is deeply rooted in the patriarchal system of our society. Before marriage, a girl is dominated by her father and brothers and after marriage the control shifts to her husband. Throughout her life she is commanded by the male figures around her. A woman being known for her passivity and compliance is exploited and violated to the highest degree within the four walls of her house. Unequal treatment is meted out to women resulting in their subordination. Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* observes how “a man is socially an independent and complete individual” in our society as he is considered as the producer whereas a woman has not been guaranteed equal dignity as she is only confined to “reproductive and domestic role” (446).



Bama Faustina's work *Sangati* also states the sorrows and stories of struggling lives of dalit women who find themselves trapped and crushed in the phallocratic world built around them. In the conversation of Bama with her Paati, one can feel the agonized voices of pain, rising out of prevalent injustice. The discrimination has its roots planted in the early childhood only where the boy is given all the care, freedom and superior treatment where as a girl child is denied everything. She is just meant for carrying out the household duties by confining her to the four walls of the house. Her Paati conveys the troubles of millions of subjugated dalit women when she says:

We have to labour in the fields as hard as men do, and then on the top of that, struggle to bear and raise our children. As for the men, their work ends when they they've finished in the fields. If you are born into this world, it is best you were born a man. Born as women, what good do we get? We only toil in the fields and in the home until our vaginas shrivel.
(Bama 268)

Similarly Urmila's memoirs represent the distressing and appalling conditions of the weaker section of the society. The deep rooted conservatism augments the challenges of women. Urmila Pawar has presented various shades of discrimination and domination that a woman faces in different phases of her life. Since birth till the time a woman reaches the death bed she is shackled by innumerable invisible chains. Throughout her life she is under the control of power of male figures around her like father, brother, husband and father in law. She can neither protest nor retaliate as she knows very well that no one will support her. Once Urmila Pawar asked Bhikiakka, the meaning of words *randki suj* — widow swelling. She had heard the women of her village talking about such words. Her inquisitive mind wanted to know why some women use these words for widows who are somewhat plump. The reply given by Bhikkiakka sums up the extent of tyranny women go through in their lives. Urmila writes:

When I asked Bhikiakka the meaning of this word, she was taken aback. Instead of answering me, she examined her own arms, and asked me a question, 'Who has got randki suj? Who says so?'



‘No, no! I’m asking this because that’s what the village women say about the chakarmani women!’

Akka laughed when she heard this. ‘You know, for some women. When their husbands die, it is a release from oppression. Then they look a little better, fresh, so people say that they have got the randki suj.’(152)

Urmila Pawar’s narrative, in her words is an amalgamation of her own experiences, those of her friends and other women, that of living in the village and casteism (Pawar 226). After shifting to Mumbai, Urmila started writing prolifically. After the training sessions of her job would get over, she would spend her time writing stories. Her stories started finding their place in the ordinary magazines. Publishing of the stories came as an impetus to her writing. It was an encouragement, which kept her going through the hard times. Her passion for writing and the persistence efforts for the completion of her studies earned her a degree of a graduate. She actively started participating in various Sammelans or programmes. Meeting notable and illustrious scholars broadened her horizons of thinking as well as her writing. With this newly gained confidence, Urmila Pawar redefined her objectives and started working for social issues. She along with other women leaders started Dalit Women’s Organization which aimed at creating awareness about women’s issues. While being a part of various dalit movements she came to the realization that people from the dalit movement, treated women in the discriminatory manner as if they were some inferior species, as they did with the ones at home (235). She writes, “One thing was, however very clear to me. Women’s issues did not have any place on the agenda of the dalit movement and the women’s movement was indifferent to the issues in the dalit movement. Even today things have not changed!” (260).

The gruelling journey undertaken by Urmila Pawar found its way in the teeth of fierce opposition from the people around her. Her husband who was earlier a source of encouragement and motivation for her gradually started depreciating her efforts. Harischandra’s happiness at the attainment of a graduate degree of her wife suddenly changed into bitterness at the achievement of receiving Masters degree. She was publicly felicitated for being the first woman from the Konkan region to have obtained an M.A. All the achievements of Urmila started irking her husband. She



remarks, “his attitude towards me was full of contradictions. On the one hand, he was proud of my writing, he admitted as much to his friends and relatives. But on the other, he immensely resented my being recognized as a figure in the public domain” (246). Harischandra wanted Urmila to follow the footsteps of the village women who take on a subservient position in the familial matters. The male figures control their lives and keep constraint on their actions. Like majority of men, “he firmly believed that looking after the house was the sole responsibility of the woman. He kept stating his philosophy that a man has the right to behave any way he likes” (241).

Urmila was very well aware of the patriarchal eyes continuously scrutinising her life. She was conscious of her responsibilities as a wife and a mother. Besides completing her household tasks and after catering to the needs of everyone, she would devote time to her writing also. She would utilise all the time she had by continuously keeping herself busy so that no one could point a finger at her. Unfortunately, she couldn't keep everyone happy and all her efforts aimed at striking a balance between her home and her interests failed miserably. All this forced Harischandra to think that, “he was losing control over his wife fast and had to establish his authority with an iron hand so as to keep her within bounds! But he did not know that my horizons had expanded hugely; that I had seen the outside world and that he did not have the power to keep me confined to the narrow space of home anymore” (248). Education liberated her by establishing her identity as an individual. In an Indian society where the woman has always been assigned the role of a submissive, docile and passive being, Urmila Pawar turned out to be a rebel. Women in the patriarchal set up are indoctrinated with the thought of acceptance of their low status. As Alladi Uma observes, “The man, all powerful, wants to demonstrate his superiority over the woman; he controls her life, her actions and her behaviour” (Uma 3). Even Urmila's husband wanted to control her by exercising his authority on her. But she was unstoppable as she was all prepared to carve a niche for herself. Education and her active involvement in the public sphere helped her personality to evolve immensely. In her own words, “I had realized that I had a new vision, a new perspective of looking at women. I had lost my fear. The women's movement had given me great strength to perceive every man and woman as an equal individual” (248).



Urmila burnt the midnight oil to achieve her goals. She stood firmly against all the odds and kept moving forward with her earnest endeavours. She strove hard to fulfil her passion of writing by coping with all the struggles and criticism. Nothing came easy to her. Her hard earned achievements are a result of her fortitude with which she tackled all the problems encountering her way. Her degrees, her writings, her success, everything came at the expense of her family's peace. While recounting the ordeals of her marital life Urmila writes:

Only I slogged the whole day in the office, at home, and after an arduous journey was dead tired by the time I reached home. And yet at night, though my body was a mass of aches and pains, I pressed my husband's feet. I was ready to do anything he wanted, just to make him happy. I was ready to do anything he wanted, just to make him happy. I was ready to die for a smile, a glance from him. But he accused me, 'Leave alone being an ideal wife, you are not even a good one!' Later on he began saying that I was far from being a good mother as well! I failed to understand what exactly he wanted from me and became miserable. Gradually it became clear to me that everything that gave me an independent identity- my writing, which was getting published, my education, my participation in public programmes- irritated Mr. Pawar no end. Gradually, he began to be full of resentment. (246)

The Weave of My Life not only presents the harsh struggles of Urmila's life but also of the three generations associated with her. The caste discrimination that her family bore in terms of rural segregation in village continued in metropolis also. Her children like her also experienced caste discrimination in a big city like Mumbai. Urmila's children also started feeling bitterness in the amicable bond that they shared with their mother. The steps that her children took in their lives made people doubt her motherhood. When her elder daughter Malavika backed out of her arranged marriage at the last moment, Urmila Pawar was held responsible for that. She writes:

The marriage ended in the wedding hall. Everybody criticized me. 'What a foolish mother!' They said, 'What sort of a mother is she? How could she fail to notice what her daughter was upto? But it is to be expected, isn't it? She was too busy preening at her meetings, sammelanas and social work to notice what her daughter was doing!' My motherhood was torn to shreds. Mr. Pawar was furious. As it, all his expectations from me had come to



nought! Now he grew despondent and furiously angry! He began to blow his top whenever he saw me. 'This woman has ruined my family. Because of her, I lost face in the community! She considers herself so intelligent! But she is plain stupid! She is selfish, useless, shameless.' (309)

The personal tragedies that encountered Urmila Pawar's life shook her world upside down. Be it the death of her son Mandar, refusal of her elder daughter, Malavika, to get married on her wedding day, loss of her husband Harishchandra, her brother or her mother. Despite facing all the catastrophes, Urmila's indefatigable spirit made her stand as hard as rock. Her restless soul and mind sought solace in her writing and social work. The candid and commendable narrative strikes a note of sheer positivity and faith. She proves that nothing is impossible if one has conviction in one's beliefs. Glancing over her life she perfectly sums up her journey by saying:

Life has taught me many things; showed me much; it has also lashed out at me till I bled. I do not know how much longer I am going to live; nor do I know in what form life is going to confront me. Let it come in any form, I am ready to face it stoically. That is what my life has taught me. That is my life, and this is me! (320)

Despite facing all the difficulties, Urmila Pawar's insatiable thirst for gaining knowledge and completing her education resulted in her enlightened self over the years. She attributes herself awareness to the Ambedkarite and Buddhist philosophy. Hence, by celebrating the essence of 'womanhood', *The Weave Of Life* does not evoke our pity but our admiration toward the unflinching spirit of dalit women.

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