

## **Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*: A Narrative of Protest**

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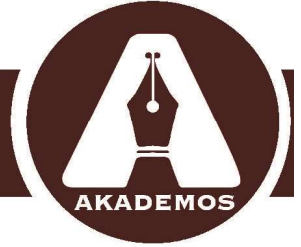
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### Abstract

A Dalit woman is a traumatised figure who is subjected to physical violence and verbal abuse. The rigid caste system along with other social restrictions make her survival extremely difficult and painful. As a girl child she is always on the receiving end because she neither gets nutrition nor priority. As a woman she is expected to perform her chores and manage the entire household in an unquestioning manner. This has been her sorry plight. However individuals like Urmila Pawar have managed to break these adamantine shackles of caste system and various social evils that continue to plague women in every sphere. This paper attempts to read the *Dalit memoir The Weave of My Life* as a narrative of protest by showcasing Urmila Pawar's struggle against a society that still remains hostile to woman and her basic rights. As a protagonist, we find her strong, modern and consistent in whatever she does to improve the beleaguered status of a Dalit woman who continues to suffer under the shadow of caste, patriarchy and other unscientific traditions that constantly jeopardise her existence.

**Keywords:** Violence, abuse, caste, protest, patriarchy





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Autobiography developed as an important literary form in the western world. It was one of the fastest growing fashions that took our society by storm. It captured the intricacies of life by genuinely portraying the history and growth of a protagonist who is constantly exposed to a specific “socio-cultural environment” (Kumar 8). The practice of writing autobiographies had started with Plato's *Seventh Epistle* (4<sup>th</sup> BC). This was followed by several masterpieces like Saint Augustine's *Confessions* (AD 397-398), Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* (1789), Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (1818) and J.S. Mill's *Autobiography* (1873).

In India, the genre of autobiography blossomed with Banarasidas's *Ardhakathanaka* (1641). It has been observed that:

Indian autobiographies are written by persons coming from different and divergent fields of activities. Among them are authors, journalists, artists, academicians, politicians, social workers, philosophers, civil servants, public figures and others. While the autobiographies written by men outnumbered women's autobiographies, nevertheless Indian women had a distinction in narrating their personal life-stories in as early as second part of the nineteenth century...(Kumar 43)

Dalit writers also became a part of this trend. They narrated their life-stories in a simple way highlighting their ceaseless struggle against the caste-system. However, such alarming trends were observed only after independence. They were quite popular and they also marked the emergence of an Indian society “with a well-developed historical manner of thinking” (Parekh 25).





Dalit autobiographies have played a pivotal role in enriching the world of literature. They express the psyche of writers who have faced a lot of discrimination in various fields. Such autobiographies are unique as they not only talk about the neglected Dalit society but also explore the various ways in which their condition can be improved. In other words, these autobiographies were “capable of bringing an individual, a group, a whole social class out of a state of alienation into an awareness of freedom” (Cox 7).

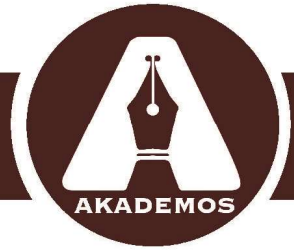
In the pre-independent era, the Dalits were suppressed and silenced by the caste-system and its hegemonic forces. To these forces, Dalit autobiography was an answer. It flourished as a part of Dalit literature that embraced modern India through the contributions made by a group of energetic writers who were inspired by personalities like Gandhi, Phule and Babarao Ambedkar and the sentiments of the oppressed Blacks in North America. Initially, Marathi language became their medium of expression and this continued for sometime. Later, languages like Hindi, Kannada, Telugu, Tamil and English were explored by Dalit writers to express the echoes of Dalit sentiment.

Thus, in modern India, Dalit autobiographies have managed to capture the minds of readers through the contributions made by prolific writers like Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle, J.V. Pawar, Namdeo Nimgade, Omprakash Valmiki, Shankarrao Karat, Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar. These writers have expressed the perpetual pain of the Dalits who are compelled to live “a life full of poverty, starvation, ignorance, insults, injustice, atrocities-practices totally against humanity” (Dangle xxi).

Dalit women writers like Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar have played a significant role in the development of Dalit autobiographies. They stand as strong symbols of feminism by depicting the tragic plight of Dalit women who have been forcefully pushed to the margins of human civilization by Dalit men on one hand and the caste-system on the other. These writers have penned shocking experiences in their personal narratives that function as testimonies. They expose a partial system that inflicts physical and psychological pain on the Dalits (Maya Pandit) who are treated like animals in our society.

In this society which is governed by rules, a woman has to play a number of roles. She is a wife and also a mother. She is also someone’s daughter. Unfortunately, a woman is also a victim of violence. This violence against women is a serious issue that has caused a lot of stir around the globe. There are several factors like child marriage, female foeticide and domestic violence that has gradually weakened the position of the girl child. It has also been observed that the status of



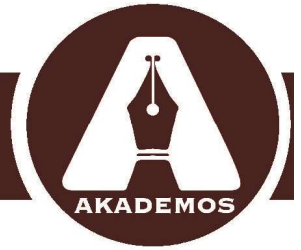


a Dalit woman is far worse than those who belong to the upper strata of the society. A Dalit woman is a perpetual victim of the caste-system that paralyses her socially and economically. She is tortured by the upper class men who treat her like an animal. At home, too, she helplessly faces domestic aggression and violence. Thus, she is doubly marginalised. The words of Simon and Varghese aptly present the miserable situation of Dalit woman:

‘The eternal other’, ‘the perpetual minor’, ‘an occasional and incomplete being’ ‘a kind of imperfect man’-a woman is everything but a person...At the lowest level, a wretched landscape presents itself: Dalit women are paraded naked, raped; her children and husband are forced to drink urine; she is made to carry shit on her head and told to force it down her throat too. She is ostracised. She is prostituted; her sexuality is religion’s playground. Even Dalit men have debased her to a level lower than where they find themselves in; from where they are crying for emancipation. (Prasad and Gaijan 240)

Hence we need to change the system that has ostracised her in every way. Her emancipation lies in it. Researches show that Dalit women are pathetic figures who have been doubly marginalised by those who are in power. She remains in a suffocating atmosphere of fear and trauma. She is subjected to physical and verbal abuse which makes her survival extremely difficult and painful. As a girl child, she is cursed and deprived of food and other basic amenities. As a woman, she is expected to perform all the household chores in an unquestioning manner. This has been her sorry plight. Dalit autobiographies have graphically explored this situation. According to Nayar, a Dalit autobiography acts as a “testimonio, an atrocity narrative by witnesses” (109). A testimonio, as observed by William in Beverley’s *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (2004), represents the miserable plight of weak subjects like women and children who are denied “authorised representation.” As readers, we come across the “problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment” and a “struggle for survival” in “testimonio-like texts” (Beverley 31). Through this powerful observation, we may firmly conclude that Urmila Pawar’s *The Weave of My Life* (2008) is one such text that serves as a narrative of “trauma, pain, resistance, protest, and social change” (Nayar 109).

Urmila Pawar’s *The Weave of My Life* (2008) is an attempt that showcases her protest and struggle against a society that still remains hostile to woman and her basic rights. In this Dalit memoir, she presents herself as a protagonist who is strong, modern and consistent in whatever she does to improve the beleaguered status of a Dalit woman who continues to suffer



under the shadow of caste, patriarchy and various other unscientific traditions that constantly jeopardise her existence and leave her “on the receiving end” (Alexander 1-2).

Pawar’s childhood was spent on the rugged Konkan coast. She was a Mahar Dalit and the description that she gives in her memoir of her community is tragic:

...the Mahars could be summoned anytime by the upper castes, or could be attacked from all sides if anything went wrong. They were supposed to work hard during the preparations of festivals like holi but they were not entitled to participate in it like the upper castes. If they tried to do so they were beaten up till they bled (*Weave of My Life* xvi-xvii).

Such “assaults” that cause “intense anxiety” (Alexander 8) were quite common in the Mahar community. These tragic descriptions prick our conscience and make the readers realise that:

Life is difficult if u happen to be poor, even though you are born into the upper castes. When this is the case, the condition of those who are born into the Paraya community, as the poorest of the poor struggling for daily survival, dosen’t need spelling out (Bama 67-68).

Even as a student she and other Dalit girls were not treated well by the teacher. There was one teacher, Pawar recalls, who had slapped her once. He was called Kerlekar Guruji. Guruji thought that it was their cow Kapila who had made the class dirty with her dung. So, Pawar was asked to clean the place. When she refused, the teacher slapped her. When Pawar’s mother saw her swollen cheeks, she went to him and demanded for an explanation:

My girl studies in your class, *Guruji!* What did she do today that you beat her up so much? She pulled me towards him and showed him my swollen cheek. ‘Your white cow shits in the verandah’. ‘Our white cow? She shits there, eh? Why, did you see her doing that? *Guruji*, you are educated and yet you speak so foolishly? Look, I am a widow; my life is ruined. Yet I sit here, under this tree and work. Why? Because I want education for my children so that their future will be better...” (*Weave of My Life* 68-69).

These words were enough to strengthen Pawar that day. She could clearly see the presence of a tigress in her mom. Baby Kamble is one more Dalit woman who narrates similar



situations in her autobiography *Jina Amucha* or *The Prisons We Broke* (2008). She writes: “A majority of girls in our class belonged to the higher castes. For the first time in their lives, they had girls like us- who could pollute them-studying with them. They treated us like lepers, as if our bodies dripped with dirty blood or as if pus oozed out of our rotten flesh” (*Prisons We Broke* 108). Pawar also cites a similar kind of incident in her memoir. It happened in a school picnic where she was not allowed to touch anything or do any work:

They did not allow me to touch anything though 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...It was so humiliating that I died a thousand deaths that day! (*Weave of My Life* 102)

Thus, the world of Kamble and Pawar is filled with humiliation. Other Dalit and Non-Dalit writers like Valmiki and Premchand have narrated similar excruciating incidents where Dalits have lost their self respect due to their Dalit background. Such incidents also cause a lot of trauma to the victims who can never forget these experiences.

As a wife, Pawar’s journey was not at all eventful. She was not treated well by her husband. Her marriage to Harishchandra was not smooth journey because she was squarely blamed for his illness and bad luck:

Even in his last days, I got squarely blamed for Harishchandra’s illness. First it was said that he was completely heartbroken by his daughter’s rebellious marriage. Gradually, my education, my job, my writing, my social work, my meetings, my programmes and finally I, because of what I was, were held responsible for his illness. But nothing affected me anymore! Nothing! Neither Harishchandra’s harsh words, nor his tantrums, nor our fights! All that I was able to see was a great wave of darkness, pitch-black as coal powder, rolling towards Harishchandra who faced it with his back turned to me... (*Weave of My Life* 317)

Thus, there was a lot of criticism that she had to face and she did it through “advocacy literature” (Alexander 12). This act of writing was actually her weapon as it helped her to present her point and position from where she observed and absorbed:



Writing about is a conscious act as it represents the subject's desire to express-and thus record-feelings and emotions, as well as events. Though an individual diarist may start writing initially at random, the fact that the momentum is sustained over a period of time implies that the act of writing is fulfilling a certain role. It helps in the formation of a distinct identity and of a sense of self, as the writer is able to physically view on palm leaves or paper what she feels about herself. Often it can be followed by a period of reflection, observation and recantation. Out of all this, a being emerges, a creation often of fractured, disjointed accounts of life, which do not follow a chronological pattern. Sometimes, this self expression comes at a specific time of life when, due to a number of reasons, opportunities coincide with the desire to write. (Karlekar 15-16)

Her writing skills were appreciated but at the same time she was made aware of her status as a Dalit. The words of her colleague make this claim clear: "Great! You write beautifully. You have lived abroad but it has not affected the excellent grasp you have on the language. How is it so civilized, so cultured, so rooted?" (*Weave of My Life* 232)

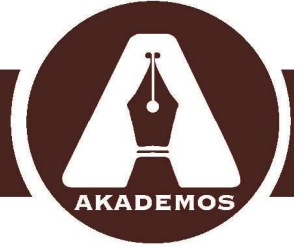
This was an unwelcoming remark that Pawar could never absorb. But she went on with her work.

In those days Dalit women were treated like dumb animals who could be sacrificed at slightest provocation. The words of Kamble in her autobiography prove this claim:

In those days, at least one woman in a hundred would have let her nose chopped off. You may well ask why. Its because of the sasu, who would poison her son's mind. These sasus ruined the lives of innocent women forever. Everyday the maharwada would rebound with the cries of some hapless women in some house or the other. Husbands flogging their wives, as if they were beasts, would do until the sticks broke with the effort. The heads of these women would break open, their backbones would be crushed, and some would collapse unconscious. But there was nobody to care for them. (*Prisons We Broke* 98)

Pawar also faced a lot of obstacles and criticism but nothing could stop her. She with the power of education fought against the exploitation of women and through her writing was able





to break her silence. Individuals like Pawar, Kamble and Valmiki have narrated many disturbing incidents of humiliation and discrimination. However, they have also managed to establish their identity as individuals who could serve the society and build a strong future.

Finally, we may conclude by saying that Dalit narratives are “life narratives.” They present a protagonist with a lot of potential. These narratives “cannot be accused of bringing an undesired past into the present, for they are one of the most direct and accessible ways in which the silence and misrepresentation of Dalits has been countered” (Rege 13).

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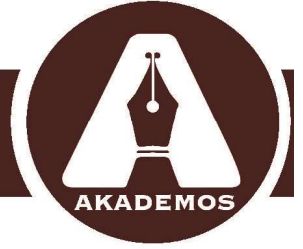
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