



**IS URMILA'S 'THE WEAVE OF MY LIFE' IS A MIRROR OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE LIFE OF DALIT WOMEN?
– A CRITICAL ANALYSIS**

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Abstract: In fact, even in the 21st century, the entire population of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, India and in Hindu regions is often seen as defiled from birth as “Dalits, or Untouchables,” these individuals face segregation and even viciousness from traditional social classes, especially with regard to admission to occupations, edification, and marriage accomplices. India's Untouchables did spiritually polluting jobs, like the “Eta” outcasts in Japan. “Dalit” means “broken” or “persecuted” and is simply the name given during the 1930s by individuals from this gathering. The ruling East India Company (British) attempted to end some aspects of the caste system in India in the 19th century, particularly those concerning the Untouchables. Indian reformers like Mahatma Jyotiba Phule also took up the cause and tried to educate women especially in Maharashtra to bring them out from these caste clutches. This initiative led women towards literary writings. Urmila Pawar is one among those writers, penned her Auto/biography in Marathi called “Aaydan” with the name “*The Weave of My Life*” was translated into English in later days. The Weave of My Life signifies the increasing visibility of dalit as an epistemic community and recognition of the dalit testimonio as an articulation of life experience. This paper critically analyzes the aspects of private and public life of dalit women among three generations, who struggled to conquer their caste's burden of power and Gender discrimination in detailed.

Keywords: Auto/Biography, Dalit Life Narratives, Private & Public Aspects, Community.

Introduction

Urmila Pawar, a well-acquainted woman among dalit writers and well-known activist in the dalit and feminist struggles in Maharashtra. Her Auto/biography, Aaydan, called *The Weave of My Life* in its English translation, has been yet another landmark, a signpost in the history of dalit writing in Marathi. Aaydan is the generic term that refers to all things made from bamboo; awata is another word. The other meanings of aaydan are “utensil” and “weapon.” This auto/biography eschews the conventional mode, leaving out many personal details. The events of Urmila's life are not described in a chronological order like other auto/biographies but reflected from different perspectives. She discovered that her mother's weaving act and her writing act are organically related. In describing the misery, suffering and anguish they have endured throughout their public and private lives, both the weaves are comparable.

Dictionary significance of the word public as a thing implies concerning individuals all in all, general, existing in open view while the word private is its antonym, which means singular, individual, classified, mystery and so on. Extensively the social development of open arena alludes to the network, public establishments, the universe of governmental issues and paid work while the private alludes to the individual personality, the universe of close relational connections, family and home.

The twofold of public/ private life is one of those arrangements that have been utilized in practically all chastisements. This division descended in the western world from Athenian polis in which however the two domains showed up as entomb. The link between public and private was viewed by Hannah Arendt as a connection between need and freedom, noting that men are threatened and guided by need as living creatures worried about the security of life. Need to be uniquely aced by supremacy (Havelkova, 1996).

There was an associative public domain, a social, discursive, and cultural sphere of development, according to Klein (1995). The sense of “public” was sociable as opposed to solitary (“private”) for the citizens of the 18th century. Sociability here means engaging the organization of others in a number of different environments and combinations. There were two main requirements for this kind of publicity. Perceptibility was one. “Public issues were those that were revealed to certain others' perceptions or to individuals in general”, while “private issues were normally imperceptible or held away from others' perceptions”. Thus the “public” and the “private” were associated with the distinction between openness and confidentiality, honesty and opaqueness. The other requirements of this form of publicity were the issue of accessibility. “Public” applied to those matters which were open to involvement by others or by individuals in general, whereas “private matters were limited or closed in certain respects”.

A Dalit Woman's Memoir - The Weave of My Life is an important product, as it speaks of caste, community, and ethnicity, regional and linguistic differences, on their own terms, rendering thus unmarked claims to represent and classify the modern as being situated, local and partial. Through her school and college days in the town of Ratnagiri, this auto/biography takes us from her childhood memories of life in the village, and the constant struggle of her mother to make ends meet, to her life after her marriage, in Mumbai, where she meets a feminist group and later becomes an author and organizer of Dalit women. The period of time it spans is from just after the independence of India in 1947 to the end of the century. Urmila defines ‘Dalit’ as ‘a human being crushed under



the heels of the social order dominated by the oppressive caste system, a neglected, ignored entity, but with a rationalist, humanist ideology stood up to resist it. She also says that rather than so called words it is the awareness of each and every individual about who he/ she is. Urmila Pawar challenges views that see caste as a social institution frozen in time, reinstates the intellectual contributions and agency of dalit women, brings together 'Private' and 'Public' life of dalit women among three generations. The three generations are Urmila's Mother (First generation), Urmila and her Cousins (Second generation) and Urmila's daughters (Third generation). Urmila Pawar, refers to the three ages of Dalit women who tried to beat the caste's dual weight and gender orientation.

Public & Private Life of Urmila's Mother and Her Contemporaries

Urmila Pawar's mother was a hard working woman who obeyed her husband's suggestions. Being the first-generation women Urmila's mother have no differentiation for 'public' and 'private' life. She always lived the life created by the society following all the customs and rituals. She never thought anything other than her family and children. She supported her family by weaving the bamboo baskets but this became her livelihood after death of Urmila's father. She suffered the pain of death of her son and husband silently. Earlier the money was support to the family but she has to manage the total family with that income only, so she started working hard. She became strong and more rigid than ever.

Urmila says about her mother, "Aaye changed. Earlier she was thrifty, now she became sordidly stingy. The village women or our cousin's wives occasionally came to borrow a little money. But now she never parted with a farthing even when she had any. She would send Manjula to sell the eggs our hen produced. Earlier, she used to grumble. Now she became combative. The slightest thing would provoke her. It could be anything: the slightly late arrival of the man who fetched the bamboos for her in his bullock cart, the fare charged by him, the quality and number of the bamboos. Earlier, she would scold us, now she started cursing us."

The loss of her twenty-year-old son, Achyut, made her isolated and dejected. Soon after some days her husband fell sick and died. After her husband's death, she worked throughout the day till late night. She wanted her children to study as her husband expected. When it came to school and studies, she was strict and kept a watch on the children. She challenged the school master who hit Urmila as an act of caste discrimination. Women of her living area had complete belief in Urmila's mother as she did not chinwag people's matters. The poverty of Pawar's mother gives us a picture of her persona. She was a compassionate, responsible and kind woman.

Her contemporary women along with Urmila's mother from Phansawale village would start their exhaustive journey to the market at Ratnagiri early in the morning to sell various things like firewood, grass, rice, semolina, long pieces of bamboo, baskets of ripen or raw mangoes. They use to trek all the distance with huge, heavy bundles on their heads and it was heavy enough to break their necks. All the way of their journey they would curse their family moolpurush, who has chosen this particular village, as 'motherfucker' for making them travel such a terrible and exhaustive journey. While going to the market they use to be very enthusiastic and cross all the hills, rivers and the forest area with a great strength, but their voices lacked the morning's excitement and enthusiasm while returning back to home. They use to travel by cracking jokes and sharing their pains to each other and making laughter out of the incidents. But that laughter often camouflaged a deep anguish in their hearts for their wretched lives.

The houses of the Marathas and the Brahmins were at some distance from Urmila's house. Bhandari and Kulwadi women could drink water from their wells but untouchable women were absolutely forbidden to do so.

Every house in Phansawale had its own share of drunken people. At least one woman among them would be severely beaten by her husband, and they would walk slowly, managing to drag their bodies all the way to the market early in the morning. Daughters-in-law were always despised and bashed up. There was a common expression that mothers-in law would use about their daughters-in-law was 'Trust the bitch to oblige you with a few drops from her private hair!' Similarly, the wives of the people who had migrated to Mumbai for work are also invited ridicule, 'Do you think the bitch will move her thick neck? No way!' (Pawar 5).

During Gauri and Ganapati festivals women work very hard to prepare for the festival and earn a little extra money by selling more grass and firewood bundles to buy new clothes, bangles, necklaces etc., for their children. All the women including their daughters would get tattoos on their foreheads, arms and hands. There is a belief that God will ask for the tattoo after death, if someone who did not get a tattoo were scolded and get it done by saying the same. During these gatherings, the married girls would share their stories of married lives, cry and laugh over their sad and happy experiences.

Public & Private Life of Urmila and Her Cousins

Urmila Pawar, being a girl and born in a dalit community, suffered a double folded discrimination, though evolved as an activist and writer. In her memoir she is the representative for the generation who fought for their identity. Urmila wrote very frankly about her private aspects of life like menstruation, love, marriage, family and marriage conflicts, children etc., and public aspects of life like workplace treatment, involvement in women/ dalit movement, evolution as a poet etc.



Normally every girl's private life starts from the age of puberty. During her time of puberty, so much of superstitions, taboos and much silence was there around the issue of 'menstruation' in the society. But Urmila very courageously described about the 'menstruation', which is extremely important topic among the girls. The girls at that time used to name menstruation as 'the touching of the crow.' Open expression about the menstruation is more or less a shameful thing for the girls some may accept and some may not. But Urmila is the one who opposed this practice with the support of her sister.

When Urmila was in ninth/ tenth standard, some women complained that a widow was found to be pregnant. The whole villagers were aware of the man's whereabouts but the women was asked to get the baby aborted. As the women didn't listen, she was judged before nine villages and decided to punish the women with kicks until the baby was got aborted. In another case, where eight months pregnant women complained about her husband saying that he is having illicit relation with other women was also killed in the same manner.

Susheela, a cousin of Urmila was married to a man in Partavane. He was drunkard and her mother-in-law was a tyrant. Both beat her up mercilessly and they would drive her out of the house with her young children even on stormy dark nights. She neither had support of maternal home nor from in-laws home. Susheela's untimely death makes Urmila dumbstruck.

Urmila fell in love with Harishchandra when she was in her eighth standard and married him with the consent of the family at last. All the love journey with Harishchandra, proposal from Barve, a Brahmin boy and another proposal of Ramanath through his sister Vasanthi Vahini was amenably articulated by her in the auto/biography. Urmila says that she had learnt a lesson from all these experiences that "Boys will simply interpret anything that girls say to suit their interests". She also describes about her feelings towards Harishchandra and how her heart was captured by his smile, his loving gaze and his speech etc., (Pawar 168). She also boldly pronounced her first night experience and the certificate received from her husband in the next morning 'So frigid' (Pawar 183). Though Urmila's was a happy marriage socially, Harishchandra supported her till her completion of Graduation but later when she enrolls for Master Degree her marital life starts cracking. This proves that Harishchandra is also a representative of patriarchal society.

Urmila also describes about her first pregnancy and the experience in the labour room, the embarrassment when she heard the people's casual talk about the stitches that she had during delivery of the baby which was also passed to the male relatives with equal ease, without any way feeling ashamed of the area that was stitched up. She says that the news of her first pregnancy didn't give her any 'ecstatic euphoria' but how it made Harishchandra thrilled (Pawar 209). She also pronounces about the lessons learnt from her mother's experiential based teachings about post-natal care of self and baby. She also admits that, she couldn't breast feed the baby as she have only one and a half months' maternity leave before and after the delivery.

After completion of Matriculation Urmila worked in several temporary positions and leave vacancies. It was very difficult for her to balance the college as well as the office hours. She also worked in State Transport Office. After moving to Mumbai also she worked in several temporary jobs at many places like civil court, election office, the Glaxo Laboratory etc. She left the job in Glaxo Laboratory as a packer at the time of her marriage with Harishchandra. After marriage Urmila enrolled her name in employment exchange and received two offer letters. She choose the one as per the suggestion of the Harishchandra and reported to the same. Urmila was recognized through her literary works by other co-writers, co-employees and organizations. Recognition as a poet and receipt of promotion in the job made some of the persons furious towards Urmila. They started resenting the reservation policy through which dalits and tribes were placed and posted in the public sector. "People used to say at that time, 'Oh these low castes! No less than the government's son-in-law! 'Or' it's such a pampered lo! 'Or' the low castes will be referred to as the greedy,' the bigheaded!" (Pawar 234). In her terms, Urmila is not exempt from caste discrimination at her workplace... He automatically became a 'Bhausahab' or 'Raosahab' when a man was promoted. But women simply stayed, 'Bai' even after their promotions, without the 'Saheb'! I was still a Dalit! 'Why should she look forward to being addressed as Bai Sahab? "Why would we ask for permission from her?" A few people were grumbling' (Pawar 235).

Urmila became an acclaimed short story writer and a dalit feminist historian, which led to be a target for attacks by fundamentalist organizations. She had narrated her stories mostly in the meetings of 'Asmitadarsha Sahitya Sammelanas' Inclusion of Urmila's short story '*Kavach*' in text book for SNTD Women's University was vehemently criticized by many Hindutva activists about her outspoken critique of the exploitative treatment by Savarna men towards dalit women's sexuality and worried that this nature of her would spoil the innocent, unsullied minds of young girls in college (Pawar xiv). Urmila's documentation with Meenakshi Moon (1989) regarding participation of dalit women in the Ambedkarite struggle was a unique reconstruction of history from the bottom line of caste system. This autobiography of Urmila has become another landmark in the history of dalit writing in Marathi and generated a fierce controversy (Pawar xiv). Urmila wrote a book titled '*Mauritius: A Journey*' by portraying the lives of the sugarcane labourers, who were away from India to work. Her experiences with people in Mauritius, made her understand the deeper impact of the caste which would not be casted off.



Urmila was a well-known activist in the dalit and feminist struggles in Maharashtra. Her documentation on participation of dalit women in the Ambedkarite struggle has thrown light on the material circumstances under which dalit women had asserted their selfhood and emerged as activists in the movement (Pawar xiv). She joined an organization called 'Maitrini'. After joining this organization, she says that she learnt to treat the suffering women as an equal, a friend, and provide her with the support she needed, while working with the groups in women's movement. Urmila worked with many feminist, dalit organizations, addressed in many seminars, meetings, public gatherings and realized the distinction between suffering born out of natural causes and those caused by man-made artificial factors such as hierarchical relations (Pawar 260). She talks very extensively about the Dalit women's position in the society and their participation to resist the oppressing social order in the Ambedkarite movement. After starting a Dalit women's organization – Dalit Mahila Sahitya Sanghatan, Urmila and her friend Meenakshi started searching for Dalit women members to make them part of the organization in the nearby localities to their residence. To identify the same category of women they came up with the codes AP – Any of Our People and DP – Different People (Pawar 268). During this pursuit they came to know that many of the educated Dalit families changed their surnames to dodge the caste discrimination and humiliation. Urmila and other women collected the miserable stories of women who underwent multi-dimensional oppression and cruel treatment from their husbands while working in the Ambedkarite movement and published a book edited by Dr. Eleanor Zelliot with name 'Aamhi hi ItihasGhadawala - We Also Made History.'

Urmila rejected to accomplish the ritual called removal of mangalsutra, bangles, flowers and kumkum on forehead that need to be performed as per the tradition after the death of Harishchandra. She feels that it is an insult to women. This incident angered quite a few people but they had covered it with Dr. Ambedkar's philosophy. This anger surfaced into the comments like 'She is so stupid!' 'She thinks she's so wise' (Pawar 318). This ritual is relic of past but still continues in the modern days too.

After the death of Harishchandra, Urmila continued to wear the mangalsutra very deliberately.

Public & Private Life of Urmila's Daughters

Manini, Younger daughter of Urmila also faces humiliation as she belongs to the Mahar caste. At the occasion of the birthday of Manini she invites her friend Kishori to celebrate the birthday with them. Urmila narrates the experience of humiliation thus, "Kishori and her brother came, ate the cake, and went home after celebrating the birthday. Kishori's brother told his mother that he had seen photographs of Ambedkar and Buddha in our house. The next day, Kishori's mother came and stood at our door. She started abusing us without even stepping inside. 'We did not know that you belonged to this particular caste! That is why I sent my children to you. From now on, don't give my daughter anything to eat if she comes to your house. We are Marathas. We cannot eat with you'" (Pawar 241).

Urmila's elder daughter, Malavika's love marriage brings a big turmoil in the family. Harishchandra won't accept this marriage and not allowed Malavika into the house. During Malavika's arranged marriage ceremony, Ravi, who wanted to marry her suddenly announces the matter. This makes all the relatives furious and the relations become broken. Though Malavika was educated, being a woman she has no right to choose her groom according to the patriarchal practices. Though Malavika understood her mother's heart and assurance given by her mother she has not shared Ravi's matter with Urmila. In this matter Harishchandra remarked Urmila as, "This woman has ruined my family. Because of her, I lost face in the community! ... She is selfish, useless, and shameless." (Pawar, 259).

Gender Discrimination

Dalit women in India have been vulnerably situated at the bottom of both caste and gender hierarchies. Endemic gender and caste discrimination and violence is the consequence of deeply imbalanced economic, social, and their socio-economic vulnerability, and political power equations coupled with the double risk factors of being Dalit and female.

Even in some areas during menstruation, making the girls sit at the back door is cultural practice today. No one dared to speak about it and all restrictions would be imposed on girls' starts from this point onwards. This is one of the practices of a discrimination entwined around the reproductive system of women, which is a silent suffrage. Sexual abuse is another threat to the girls during their childhood. No girl child is exception to this including Urmila.

The widows in the village were treated very inhumanely and they have no say in every aspect. If the women had a caustic tongue and gave herself airs, they were hated and tagged with '*randkisuj*'. This was given because some women look little better, fresh and were free from oppression after the death of their husband.

Urmila says about her father's behaviour in the case of Susheela as each time she came home being tortured by her drunkard husband and mother-in-law, Urmila's father would insist on sending her back after giving her a good meal. She feels that her father has patriarchal approach towards his own daughters but was a reformist for the outsiders.



Honour killings was another practice found in that village in which gender discrimination was very ostensible. Though the fault lies with the both men and women, men were not punished rather women were punished very brutally. By doing so the villagers feel that the 'honour' of the village was protected.

Urmila narrates how the gendered practices were absorbed into the nerves of the people around birth of a child and in practices of child rearing. She explains the women's ideas about male and female bodies and this was clearly indicated in the massage of their bodies. The women use to squeeze the tiny palms of the baby girls in their fists whereas the palms of baby boys were pressed with their thumbs to broaden them and finger were pulled to make them long. The body parts of the boy and girl were massaged completely in an opposite direction.

Urmila's father selected a match to his elder daughter Shanti, from Urmila's mother's village Mire. In this village there was a terrible scarcity of water, the daughters-in-law of this village were worn out doing this essential task. Some even succumbed to tuberculosis.

Urmila also underwent some patriarchal domination in her life after marriage, though her husband allowed her to study and do job she need to complete all the household chores herself. After enrolling into Masters, when Urmila asks Harishchandra to pay little attention on the house and their kids, the misunderstandings between them grow into more arguments and quarrels. Identification of self and sharing the household chores to men remember them the designed status of men by the society and their dominant position in the society. This kind of beliefs and ideology making so many couples suffer even in this 21st century.

Want of a son, another major gendered practice and Urmila is not exception to that, though she has awareness on that issue. She also wanted a son as her second child, when she gave birth to baby girl Harishchandra says 'Let's take one more chance.' She articulates this incident as "how easy and simple it was for men to have a baby, like saying let's have another cup of tea!" (Pawar 218)

The workplace treatment towards Urmila depicts us the picture of 'Caste and Gender' based double edged marginalization and humiliation. This kind of discriminatory treatment was also seen among the women involved in dalit movement and Urmila depicts this as an 'unconscious behaviour.'

It is also evident from Pawar's memoir that the Sub- caste variations and practices within the caste also makes difference in the lives of the people and discrimination exists within the caste too on the basis of class.

Once Urmila was invited to participate in public meeting to be held at Bhiwandi, during her journey she was not able to attend her nature's call just like men. This incident shows the insensitiveness of men towards women's specific needs, who were travelling along with her. She had to suffer all the way and till the end of the meeting till she was able to get another women's help.

Conclusion

This memoir depicts us the picture of triple marginalization of Gender, Caste and Class. Urmila Pawar's memoir represents not the journey of an individual woman, emotion and consciousness but rather a social and community-based chorus of women. In her village, the lives of several women, various members of her family, the family of her husband, her neighbors and classmates are woven together to reveal private and public aspects of the life of Dalit women. Dalit women were affected to the greatest extent by poverty, unemployment and caste violence in both the public and private domains.

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