

**Knitting Tales of Intersectional Oppression: An Analysis of Urmila**

***Pawar's The Weave Of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs***

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## Preface

Intersectionality is an analytical framework for understanding how diverse aspects of social and political identities combine to create different modes of discrimination and oppression against the marginalized. The term ‘intersectionality’ was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989. It began as an exploration of the oppression of black women due to their race and gender identity. This theory can also be associated with the life of Dalit women who faces discriminations and oppressions on the basis of multiple identities like caste, class, gender etc. Urmila Pawar’s autobiography *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit woman’s Memoirs* deal with multiple layers of oppressions faced by her as a Dalit woman and also by other women of her community.

The dissertation entitled *Knitting Tales of Intersectional Oppression: An Analysis of Urmila Pawar’s The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman’s Memoirs* is divided into four chapters. The first chapter, which serves as the Introduction, deals with the theory of intersectionality in general and also introduces the author. The second chapter presents a summary of the work and describes the caste- based discrimination faced by Dalit women. The third chapter discusses the class and gender-based discrimination encountered by women of the community. This chapter ends with the assumption that Dalit women are going through multifarious forms of discrimination unlike women of other communities and they are, therefore, intersectionally oppressed.

The fourth and the final chapter conclude the project with a brief summary. The subtle observations and the analysis which occupied the first three chapters reinforce the concluding chapter. This chapter also highlights the reality that even though the author Urmila Pawar has attained an identity

and position in society, she still has to face the above mentioned discriminations, underlining the fact that the mentality of the society towards Dalit women needs to be changed.

## **Chapter One**

### **Introduction**

Literature is a mixture of fact and fiction, containing descriptions of reality, thinking patterns, rules, values and conventions existing in society. It enriches our thought process, curiosity, ability and creativity and is a way through which we can comprehend culture, morality, history and different facets of life. Hence, literature is a medium through which we can interpret life and society.

Dalits, called Harijans (children of God) by Mahatma Gandhi, are known by the official term 'Scheduled Castes' as per the Constitution of India. In India, 'Dalits' is the tag given to people belonging to the lowest section of castes, those who were once marked as untouchables. The foundations of Dalit subjugation can be traced to the caste system prevalent in Hindu religion. The way of conditioning of such rank is derived from the *Manusmriti*, a sacred Hindu text of the second century. This underprivileged section was destined to live in inconsiderate and undignified conditions. They were prohibited from participating in social life and religious activities and were seen as polluting creatures and people who are meant for unskilled tasks like leather working, scavenging and animal butchering. Dalits were socially excluded and economically exploited by the upper castes. Among them, women were the worst affected. They were marginalized in view of their sex as well as due to caste, social and cultural hierarchies. The shame of untouchability opened them to a much higher gamble of misuse and abuse.

Dalit literature addresses the tormenting experiences of Dalits like the social, political, religious and economic enslavement and other sufferings

faced by Dalits, especially penned by Dalit writers for Dalit and non-Dalit readers. It deals with the painful life of Dalits. Dalit writers queried identity and religion through their writings. It is a campaigning for fundamental rights, a mode of literature of protest and challenge and a mirroring of Dalit's reality. Earlier literary writings, monopolized by upper class authors, represented their life and did not give voice to the subalterns. On the other hand, Dalit literature gives voice to these exploited communities who suffered social inequalities and injustices for a prolonged period. Releasing Dalits from those shackles of servitude is the objective of Dalit literature. Such works focus on the Dalit's self-consciousness about their own identity as a living soul rather than as a passive being. Moreover, they used their writings as a tool against the existing social hierarchy. Dalit literature consists of various genres like poetry, short stories, novels and autobiographies which mainly deal with concepts like impoverishment, the questioning and consciousness of identity, caste and class discrimination, untouchability, and rebellion. They attempt to interrogate and confront the high-class Hindu literature, and to reveal the situation which they sustained. Dalit writers used the same weapon of literacy which was once denied to them by the aristocrats. It is evident in the words of Baburao Bagul, a Marathi Dalit writer "The established literature of India is Hindu Literature. But it is Dalit Literature which has the revolutionary power to accept new science and technology and bring about a total transformation. "Dalit" is the name of a total revolution; it is a revolution incarnate" (Bagul 289).

Literature of the Dalits firstly appeared in Marathi language in the 1960s and then extended to languages like Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, Sindhi, Punjabi and Bangla. The emergence of Dalit literature is from

Buddhist writing and Dalit Marathi Bhakti poets. Modern Dalit literature came after the thoughts of revolutionists like Ambedkar, Sree Narayana Guru, Jyotiba Phule and Ayyankali.

The tag 'Dalit literature' was used initially in Marathi literary conferences and Annabhau Sathe is known as the 'Father of Dalit literature'. Notable Dalit writers include Shantabai Kamble, Annabhau Sathe, Mulk Raj Anand, Savitribai Phule, Arjun Dangle and Urmila Pawar. After Marathi Dalit writings were translated to English, Dalit literature got into fame. Dalit women's voices were excluded from Dalit literary movements which were entirely masculine as well as from the mainstream women's movements. Dalit feminist literary movement arose in the 1980s as a reaction against this.

Urmila Pawar is an eminent Indian Dalit feminist writer who writes in Marathi and is an activist involved in caste and gender issues. Her writings are a voice against the social marginalisation and exploitation faced by the Dalits, especially the varied ways of discrimination faced by women, based on their gender and caste. Her writings are mirroring her own reality and make the reader contemplate about these issues. She is from the Mahar community in Ratnagiri district of Maharashtra. Her stories are straightforward and plain, with the elements of regular family relationships and home tragedies.

Pawar understood about her own repression, both as a woman and as a Dalit from her childhood onwards. With the knowledge of self-confidence and bravery from her own life lessons, she broke all obstacles and achieved an M.A. degree and later became a prolific Dalit feminist writer. Pawar is an award-winning writer who is involved in Dalit literary movements and has raised issues of caste and gender. Her writings are about women who face

caste oppression courageously, deal with family stress vigorously, show arrogant attitude while receiving insult and are stubborn in protecting their interests. Pawar portrays strong and clever women who take the readers to tears, chuckles, rage and anguish.

Her severe, especially unsophisticated language sabotages the convention of polite, genteel and reserved women writers. Her characters are not always Dalits, but the theme of casteism occurs in every subtext. The critic Eleanor Zelliot's words about Pawar are "there is tucked in every story, a note about a Buddhist Vihara or Dr Ambedkar. All her stories come from the Dalit world, revealing the great variety of Dalit life now." (Deo, xi). The identity of women, both Dalit and Buddhist, are integrated in her literature. Her literatures are not limited with her own life as a Dalit and as a woman, but also integrated other characters' lives. Her writings have their own charm, existence and entity, and have a critiquing tone that contributes a lot to enrich Dalit feminist literature. Both in subject matter and in mode of writing, she follows a sense of daring. She was an ex-actor of radical Marathi theatre and was also a dramaturgist. She had been working in Maharashtra government's Labour Welfare section after education. Blatant virtuous turns and twists and presentation of individual matters with sharp political touch are ingredients of her writings. Her protagonists are women from Indian surroundings, who are confronting the triple inequity of caste, gender and class. The objective of her writing is to assemble all the Dalits and thereby gain impartiality in all sectors. Pawar's writings are different from the conventional Marathi literature which is predominated by Brahminical styles and themes. She uses colloquial language and has thus emerged as the voice which had been suppressed in



Marathi literature for a prolonged period. Her narratives are actual representations of geographical, social and material truths of quotidian life and thus recreate the caste and gender discriminations faced by them.

Pawar has written an autobiography and several fictional works including short stories which provide us with knowledge of the caste and gender truth in Maharashtra. *Motherwit* (2013), an anthology of short stories dealing with unusual stories of common women, was translated by Veena Deo, Professor of Hamline University, USA. The tale *Mother*, modelled upon the life of her own mother, is an exemplary illustration of how the demise of the patriarch affects a family in a man centric framework and how the widow is not considered fit to settle choices for her loved ones. The anthology includes *Anger (Cheed)*, a story that portrays the socialization of ladies to acknowledge the spouse as somebody more proficient and somebody to gaze upward to, rather than as somebody equivalent. In another short story, *Sixth Finger (Sahav Bot)*, Pawar makes a scathing illustration of how the institution of marriage controls a woman. In *Armour (Kavach)*, a student figures out how his mom avoids inappropriate behaviour, yet additionally notices, may be without having the option to completely get a handle on the intricacies, the dangers that even taught working class ladies take, testing sexism at the working environment. Pawar co-authored a book along with Meenakshi Moon titled *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement*, pointing to women's involvement in the Ambedkar movement and considers the social statuses of Dalit ladies' lives, the everyday strict practices and conjugal guidelines set for them, the act of custom prostitution and other ladies' issues of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Pawar wrote an autobiography titled *Aaydan* in 2003 in Marathi. Maya Pandit, an activist and Pro-Vice Chancellor, as well as a skilled translator of Marathi narrations especially in the matter of women's writings, converted the Marathi version of *Aaydan* into English and named it as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* in 2008. Maya Pandit has published a lot of articles on feminism and Dalit life. The preface was written by Wandana Sonalkar and, in her Foreword to the English interpretation, she observes that the title of the book 'The Weave' is an illustration of the composing strategy utilized by Pawar, "the existences of various individuals from her family, her husband's family, her neighbours and colleagues are woven together in a story that progressively uncovers various parts of the daily existence of Dalits, the complex manners by which station champions itself and drudgeries them down" (Pawar xv). This personal account by Pawar and other Dalit writers of that time went past self-articulation and authentic record. It was a vehicle for the Dalits to declare their character and challenge the mistreatment they have been facing for hundreds of years. Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* is the first Dalit life account written by a Dalit woman and also the first Dalit autobiography in an Indian language.

Feminism is an ideology and a revolutionary movement for political, economic, social, cultural, gender, and sexual respect and a demand for equal rights and the liberation of women in every sphere of life. It is first mentioned in the essay *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* by Mary Wollstonecraft. As an ideology it supports equality, and as a movement it resists the patriarchal conventions. It's not about hating and surpassing men but arose due to the prevailing male centred world. Female marginalisation, oppression and misuse

are distinctive features of the patriarchal world and feminism, as a global movement, aims at empowering and improving the place of women in all these respects. Patriarchy claims men as the supreme authority and gives autocratic power to men in the family as well as those in the society. Feminism demonstrates that the variation between male and female is only a construction of culture and society. It looks at the psychological sides of the bias. The theory of feminism explains that it is the culture and society that saw females as a second sex and thus created a disparity between the female and the male (Mambrol *Literariness*).

As per the history of western feminism, there are four waves of feminism. The first wave commenced in UK and US (1848-1920) and demanded equal voting and equal opportunities for education and employment and property rights. Even though white women gained suffrage rights after this, black women were denied these rights. The women activists battled against property relationship and wrestled for political and financial balance. A significant text of the main wave is Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), which declared the significance of female autonomy and through the character Judith Shakespeare (Shakespeare's fictional sister), elucidated how the male centric culture kept women from realizing their imaginative potential. Woolf additionally initiated the discussion of language being gendered- an issue which was subsequently taken up by Dale Spender who composed *Man Made Language* (1981), Helene Cixous, who presented *écriture féminine* (*The Laugh of Medusa*) and Julia Kristeva, who recognized the representative and the semiotic language.

The second wave of feminism during the 1960s and 1970s focussed on issues of equality and discrimination. Simon de Beauvoir, in her work *The Second Sex* (1949), stated that “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.” (Beauvoir, 273). This statement reveals the truth that a woman is termed as the “other”. *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan, a revolutionary text passed on to all women, including educated women and housewives, was another influential text. The second wave dealt with rights regarding sex, relationships, domestic labour, Equal Pay Act, right to birth control, and right against sexual harassment. As a mark of protest against the patriarchal system, women had thrown away all the images of objectification, including bras and playboy copies. This was known as the bra-burning incident. The motto of this phase, “The personal is the political” was the after effect of the mindfulness of the misleading comparison between women’s domestic and men’s public spheres. Denoting its entrance into the scholastic domain, the presence of women’s liberation was reflected in diaries and scholarly talks.

The third phase (1990-2010) of feminism battled against the physical abuse in workplaces and attempted to increase the number of women in influential places. The third wave is credited to Rebecca Walker’s article *Becoming the Third Wave* (1992). The fourth wave, the wave happening in the current time, talks about sexual harassment and molestations- mainly the ‘Me Too’ movement.

Initially aspects of gender and sex was focussed only in the first and second wave of feminism since all the women involved in the rebellion were of the white and upper middle class. Black women felt isolated from these movements. Therefore, their problems were not discussed in the mainstream

feminist movements. But gender is not the only factor that discriminates a woman. Some women, like the blacks, experience racial discrimination more than the discrimination of gender. Paying attention to the interconnecting character of gender, caste, class, race, and sex has made a shift in the ideas of feminism. Hence has been born the concept of intersectionality (Grady Vox).

The term 'intersectionality' was first coined by the black feminist scholar Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 in order to disrupt the racial hierarchies. Crenshaw first spread out her theory of intersectionality when she presented a paper in the University of Chicago Legal Forum named "*Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex*". Crenshaw is an exponent of the American Civil Rights movement and is a critical racist theorist. She has served as a Professor at Law schools where she concentrated on concepts of race and gender.

Crenshaw is known for the presentation and advancement of intersectional theory - the investigation of how converging, intersecting social and political identities, especially minority characters, connect with frameworks and constructions of persecution, control or discrimination. Intersectionality deals with oppression and discrimination faced by women on the basis of various identities like gender, caste, sex, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion, disability, weight, physical appearance and height. As said by Bell Hooks, it was against the thought that gender is the only factor that decides women's destiny. On the other hand, during its inception, the revolutionary feminist thinkers, who talked about gender with reference to caste, race, class, sex etc., were considered as renegade. Though intersectionality gave importance to race and class at the starting point, later it incorporated so many new elements of caste, nationality, body type, citizenship etc... for the analysis (Atrey 45).

Intersectionality has a deep affinity with variants of feminisms like Black feminism and Dalit feminism. In Black feminism, women face the dual oppression of race and gender whereas, in the case of Dalit women, they face gender, caste and class discriminations. In the Indian context, this intersectionality can be very much associated with the case of Dalit women in the same way as it can be with the Black women in the West.

Popular Indian feministic movements were guided by female members of the upper castes. They didn't address the dilemmas of Dalit women like patriarchal oppression, caste discrimination, poverty, hunger, sexual abuses and public violence. The Dalit women are forced to undergo the pressures of being a woman and a Dalit simultaneously. The social identity of gender represses them in the form of patriarchal conventions, both inside and outside their community. The violence and abuse they face, both mentally and physically, is an extension of their gender troubles. They endure subjugation in terms of untouchability, segregation and alienation. Dalit women were often treated badly as mere servants of the upper caste women. Again, these women had to confront class struggles since they were poor, had no capital traditionally and therefore had to face impoverishment and lack of resources. Disadvantages of material reality form the base of class struggles. As a consequence, Dalit women face triple marginalisation, and thus they are intersectionally oppressed. Technically speaking, there are some similarities between the lives of Dalit women and those of Black women.

The Dalit political and literary movements didn't take care of intersectional endurances. The Dalit movement was highly masculinized and so Dalit women were left as 'Dalits among Dalits'. The Dalit women were

neglected from the main stream Indian feminism as it was only meant for the upper caste women. The seclusion of Dalit women from the mainstream Indian feminism and Dalit movement led to Dalit women raising their voices for themselves. Thus, Dalit feminism arose as a reaction against the male autocracy in the Dalit movement and savarnisation in feminist movements in the 1990s. Dalit ladies essentially live in South Asia, predominantly in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan. Dalit feminism addresses both external (outside caste) and internal (inside caste) problems. Dalit women face more difficulties in comparison to women of higher ranks in these nations. They are bound to be poor, uninformed and socially minimized. Dalit women activists advocate and have pushed for equivalent freedom for Dalit women in caste, gender, class and other different issues. They have organized gatherings, made associations and have aided in choosing Dalit ladies into political offices. Dalit feminism claims that caste, class and gender, rather than being viewed as totally unrelated categories, ought to be considered as intersectional. Hence it would be proper to say that Dalit feminism deals with the intersectional oppression faced by Dalit women on the basis of caste, class and gender and is thus linked to intersectional feminism (46).

Other than through social and political platforms, Dalit women have also vocalized their lives through writings. Literature, as a mode of Dalit liberation movement, has been a revolutionary discourse that shows defiance against casteism and gender violence. So, Dalit literary movement is a 'social movement for the liberation of Dalits and to bring about fundamental changes in the Indian social order'. Dalit literature germinated in the 1960s in Maharashtra and then flourished to other areas and developed as a separate

genre. Writings by Dalit ladies 'is an endeavour to verbalize unheard, implicit voices.' A substantial portrayal of Dalit ladies' encounters has been neglected against the compositions of Dalit men. Dalit authors have essentially utilized verse, brief tales, expositions and more to challenge the diverse types of abuse they faced. Dalit women's writing brings to light instances of mistreatment particularly from that of upper caste women as well as from Dalit men. During this period there appeared a deluge of Dalit women's life writings written in regional languages. Dalit women's self-portrayal, like Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of my Life* and Sivakami's *The Grip of Change* can be seen as dissent accounts against the double-dealing of Dalit ladies by upper station individuals, as well as by the internal gender hierarchy inside Dalit families. By projecting the oppressed identities of Dalit women through their personal writings, Dalit feminism has been portrayed as an intersectional movement. The triple marginalisation of caste, class and gender faced by Dalit women is a usual theme in Dalit feminist writing, even though the life backgrounds and situations of characters differ in each text. Thus, Dalit feminism provides an area for Dalit women to make people conscious of their intersectional oppressions (46).



## Chapter Two

### Caste Discrimination

Dalit literature is also studied as the 'literature of minority'.

Autobiography is the most popular genre among Dalit writers. It documents the hardships and disgraces faced by the whole Dalit community. Their social and political reality and injustices faced by Dalits are the thread of Dalit life writings. Their sufferings are three-way - in the name of caste, class and gender. Such experiences of the Dalit women always remain muted and get excluded by our society but the writings about those realities by learned Dalit writers give us a brief look into their actuality.

The autobiographical work *Aaydan* (2003), written by Urmila Pawar, was later translated into English as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* (2008) by Maya Pandit. The book is about her life – her growth from a village girl to a mature woman and a feminist who got involved in Ambedkarite movements and also worked for the upliftment of Dalit women. Even though it is about painful realities, she has written it with humour. *The Weave of My Life* portrays Dalit life experiences and their emotions with respect to their community and family. Pawar has penned her life story within the backdrop of the Mahar community in Maharashtra and their struggle after the Mahatma-Phule-Ambedkar period. The term 'Aaydan' is a Marathi generic word which refers to things made from bamboo - like baskets, trays, hand fans and utensils. Weaving of baskets was the main source of income for Urmila Pawar's mother to meet the two ends of her family and to educate the children after her father's death. Her father was a priest as well as a teacher of their community and was someone who gave importance to education. Hence, he

takes a promise from his wife, before his death, that she will educate all their children. At the same time, he is a man who admits patriarchy. Since her father's death, her mother worked hard to make the two ends meet. Food was scarce in their house and Urmila Pawar was forced to eat less nutritional rice with soup made from fish water, which would upset the stomach. Pawar found a similarity between the weaving of bamboo baskets and her act of writing, as both contain the weave of their agonies, pains and struggles. So weaving is a metaphor of Urmila's *Aaydan*, where her mother used to weave *Aaydan* and she was writing this book. Both were activities of creation of thought and practical reality of life. About writing this memoir Urmila had said, "I was a rebellious child and had numerous fights with my mother while growing up. But by the time I wrote this book, I felt I had taken her place. Like her, I was attempting to make the most of my life in a patriarchal society; I had lost my husband and my son and my two girls misunderstood me because they could not understand my need to have a life beyond home. It's as if our lives had been juxtaposed" (Hemangi, *The Theatre Times*).

Even though this is an autobiographical novel, she addresses not only her own troubles and life but represents the whole community. In the very beginning itself, she has written about the plights of village women who took long walks through dangerous forests and hills in order to sell their baskets, firewood, utensils and rice for their livelihood. In addition to these weighty jobs outside, they had to do household jobs, prepare food and serve the family and also were regularly beaten up by their husbands.

Urmila Pawar was born in the Konkan coast near Ratnagiri in Maharashtra in the Mahar community. The Mahar community lived at the

centre of the village so that the nobles could call them easily at any time for their sanitation works. They were disallowed from participating in anything public and were forced to do this undesirable and unhygienic work by the upper castes. For instance, they were the ones who did all the arrangements and work behind Holi celebrations but were totally excluded from the area when the celebrations began. The Mahar community lived under a constant fear of attack, brutality and insecurity from all the four sides as they were living at the centre of the village. So, the Mahar Dalits have a propensity to contract like a tortoise. Her father shifted them from the village to a small hut in the city for giving his children better education. At the age of twelve, her family got converted to Buddhism following B.R. Ambedkar's words. She narrates the discriminations felt throughout her life from schoolteachers, friends, and from other places and people due to caste and also expressed about the embarrassment felt due to destitution. She was forced to clean the school by a teacher and her mother's questioning the educator concerning the incident accommodates Urmila to her mom and lays out her mom's personality. This autobiographical work is a little bit different from other Dalit autobiographies because while other writings dealt with full of negativities and hardships of the Dalit life and thus provided a sense of hopelessness, *The Weave of My Life*, even in the midst of unbreakable sufferings, projects some positive hopes. She passed the matriculation exam and then started doing various jobs. Meanwhile, she fell in love with an educated man named Harishchandra and then describes their courtship and the marital life with him.

The good remarks that she received from schools for her essays encouraged her to pick up the pen and write. Her own experiences, those of

her friends, the lives of other women living in the village, and casteism were the themes of her works. Her important published works include *Kavach*, *Shalya*, and *The Sixth Finger*. After wedding, she continued her studies and obtained graduation and post-graduation in Marathi literature despite the objections of her husband. During this period, she took part in presentations and public speeches connected to the Dalit movement. She suffered several problems both at her working space and at home. She was blamed as a careless mother and wife by her family. Her own sufferings made her come forward and fight against the social injustices and she stood for rights, particularly those of Dalit women. As a Dalit feminist and activist, she formed a women's welfare organisation for solving Dalit women's issues and co-ordinated a literary conference for empowering Dalit woman writers. She celebrated Manusmriti Burning Day, 25<sup>th</sup> December, as Women's Liberation Day.

Urmila confronted an injury in her own life, losing her son. She touchingly portrays her endeavours to get used to his misfortune by remembering stories such as those in which Buddha requests a woman to procure mustard seeds from a house where there had been no death. She then portrays the wound of her mother's death. Her husband was against her involvement in all these and engaged in quarrel with her after drinking, and finally died of cancer. There are consistent references to strict conventionality and socio-political changes. For instance, Urmila alludes to the *Manusmriti* which is said to have forced numerous limitations on women and also framed a caste system. This clears up her further demonstration for Buddhism to revoke the rank-based Hindu religion, following Ambedkar. Likewise, for

some Dalits of the period, this act prompted self- awareness for Urmila's situation. The following stage was her discovery of woman's rights after moving to Mumbai, adding to her development. Thus, she outlines her journey from a Dalit young girl in a village to an adult woman in Mumbai, with a lot more prominent mindfulness and an increased awareness. This journey becomes striking and touches a chord with the readers because of its strong content and presentation. This has been performed as a play directed by Sushama Deshpande, a journalist and a writer.

Intersectionality in feminist theory is the concept of intersection (caste, class, gender, race etc.) that originated from Black feminist thought. It claims that oppression is not a singular process but is an interwoven system. Intersectionality widens the focal point of the first and second wave of feminism, which generally centred around the encounters of ladies who were both white and middle class, to incorporate women of colour, women who are poor, immigrant women and other groups. Intersectional feminism differentiates it from white women's liberation by recognizing varieties of encounters and identities experienced by women. In an interview Crenshaw said, "My own use of the term intersectionality was just a metaphor. I was simply looking at the way of all these systems of oppression that overlap. But more importantly, how in the process of that structural convergence rhetorical politics and identity politics – based on the idea that systems of subordination do not overlap- would abandon issues and causes and people who actually were affected by overlapping systems of subordination." (Guidroz and Berger, 65).

As it is based in standpoint theory, critics say the attention on personal experiences can prompt inconsistencies and powerlessness to recognize normal reasons for oppression. Forms of subjugation undergone by black women are different from that of disabled or white women. It contradicts the idea that women are a homogeneous group and studied women's problems based on caste, class etc. Using intersectionality, Crenshaw has shown the disadvantages caused by overlapping systems that make structural, political, and representational parts of savagery against minorities in the working environment and in the society. In her essay "*Mapping the Margins*", Crenshaw provides a three-fold idea of intersectionality which manages how non-white ladies experience aggressive behaviour at home and assault in a subjective manner, not quite the same as that of white ladies. Political intersectionality analyses how rules and regulations that worked to increase equality ironically sparked violence against non-white women. At last representational intersectionality digs into how mainstream society's depictions of non-white ladies often cloud their own legitimate lived experiences (Atrey 60).

The Black feminist struggle in Brazil as well as the Dalit women's resistance in India work with intersectional frames for fighting against multiple forms of oppression like caste, sex, gender, race and class. Intersectionality can be considered as one of the most successful travelling theories because it has travelled across national and continental boundaries like South America, Africa and Asia and expanded its analyses from race and sex to caste, nationality, age, disability, sexuality etc. and has also been applied to various disciplines like literature, sociology, anthropology, gender

studies, economics, history etc. Dalit feminism in India is an example for this (60).

Although Ambedkar and other leaders encouraged Dalit women to participate in Dalit liberation movements, they only focussed on caste, property and social status. Issues like the gender exploitation they faced went unnoticed. Those concepts are meant for the power and authority of men but these patriarchal issues affected women badly. This is evident in Ambedkar's own essay "*Annihilation of Caste*" (1936). Eventually Dalit women were excluded from Dalit movements. Indian feministic movements started Dalit feministic movements to bring them from the margin to the centre. Feminism which deals with the intersectional oppression faced by Dalit women is called Dalit feminism. Later Dalit feminist organisations were started which aimed at sending girls to schools and giving them proper training. National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW), an independent autonomous group made by Dalit women, deals with the thrice marginalisation faced by Dalit women due to caste, class and gender ( 62).

Caste is a type of social separation based on endogamy. The beginnings of South Asian caste system were after the Aryans attacked South Asia and brought the caste system in order to control the common people there. Caste has religious and political ways of behaving and extraction. Caste system is a socio-religious Hindu stratification of man into four hierarchically ranked castes called varnas according to ancient holy texts. The Hindu social division is comprised of the four-tier caste system mainly based on occupation, which determine a person's entrance to wealth, energy and privilege. Brahmins who are usually priests and teachers, occupy the highest

rank. Then comes the Kshatriyas who are mainly rulers and warriors. The next group is the Vaishyas, who are traders and merchants and the fourth group is the Shudras. They are servants and labourers, who did unskilled jobs for the first three groups. According to Louis Dumont, a French anthropologist, there is a fifth group, in addition to these groups, which is placed out of this categorisation and is referred to as Avarnas or “outcastes”. They did fully unskilled cleaning jobs like scavenging, peeling of animal skin etc. and therefore were positioned at the very bottom of classifications and the margin of the society and were titled as ‘untouchables’. The movement under the leadership of Ambedkar excoriated the existing system of Hindu ideas. Thus, as a part of revolution and change, the untouchables were called the ‘Depressed class’, ‘Harijans’ or ‘Dalits’ (Gupta *Pen Acclaims*).

Mahar, also known as Mehra, is a lower caste community in India and their major population exists in Maharashtra. A large number of Mahar community got converted to Buddhism, inspired by Ambedkar’s thoughts and the Indian Constitution proclaimed them as ‘Scheduled Castes’. Long back they guarded villagers from invaders and existed as administrators. The Baluta system assigned to Mahars the duty of removing dead cows from the village. They then began to eat the flesh of dead cows and this eating of meat formed the reason for the caste being framed as untouchables. During Peshwa rule, Mahars were exposed to outrageous limitations like wearing an earthen pot to prevent pollution of the ground due to their spit, as well as limitations because of debasement by their shadows and footprints. So, they were reduced to low status .



Dalit women face multi-layered oppression in the form of caste, class and gender. Both Dalit men and women were discriminated and oppressed in the name of caste by the upper caste society but women were the worst affected. They were segregated and teased as filthy. Moreover, they were considered as polluted and impure, and hence, treated as untouchables. Touching them, interacting with them, using things from their hands, walking or following the paths used by them, and even the act of the shadow of Dalits falling on them were considered sinful for the Brahmins. The majority of the population were of higher castes, and they occupied positions of authority as high rank officials. Hence it was easy for them to crucify the minority Mahars. Using the authorities and positions they had, the aristocrats suppressed the Dalits in public places like work places, schools, educational institutions, vehicles, wells etc. Caste atrocities against Dalit women may happen at individual level or at group level. Non-physical forms of violence like humiliation, separation at educational institutions, as well as hegemonic upper caste cultural values that mark Dalits as inferior are termed as symbolic caste violence. Caste later became the root cause of other types of discrimination like class and gender. "Purity" is a value deeply connected with the Indian caste system according to the norms of our society. Whether a person is pure or polluted is determined by his birth in a particular caste. The lack of ritual purity makes Dalit women already "impure". Hence, they are untouchables. Untouchability is a social practice within the caste system, where people belonging to lower castes are thought to be ritually impure. So, touching them or even seeing them was deemed to cause pollution. Thus, the lower caste

people are discriminated on the basis of their caste as untouchables (Sharma *Journal of International Women Studies*).

After the death of Urmila Pawar's father, her mother started weaving and selling bamboo baskets and utensils, which was their only source of livelihood. She saw her mother doing the job late without proper sleep. Pawar did the home delivery of the baskets, a process during which she often felt insulted in the name of untouchability. She remembers that "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 they would touch them. They would drop coins in my hands from above, avoiding contact, as if their hands would have burnt had they touched me" (Pawar, 65). Due to this inhuman treatment, Pawar sometimes used to ignore her mother's call for the delivery of baskets.

Dalits used to buy things from the upper caste shopkeepers by staying away from the threshold of their house. They were not supposed to touch anything in their compound. Another such incident of untouchability she mentions is about the discrimination that happened in the Pandit family. They used to buy pickle from them. The problem starts when she enters their house. "Taking care not to touch or even let my shadow fall on things lying around, I would reach the cement steps of their house. The crescent shaped steps looked like a sort of pyramid from below. I had to stand at the lowest step" (Pawar 77). The pyramid would make her feel really low. From there, she peeped inside and called them. After calling them repeatedly like a beggar, Pandit Kaku would come and again, after a lot of time waiting for it, she would be

given the pickle on a plantain leaf. Urmila says that then she would keep the coins on a step, which Kaku collected, but only after she had sprinkled water on them to cleanse them of pollution. These are the two situations recounted by her, where Pawar herself felt marginalised due to her caste identity. The upper caste houses were far away from that of Mahars who stayed at a corner portion of the village. They felt insulted even from the kulwadi women (the peasant caste) at the market. The kulwadi women, coming from behind, would cross them, taking care to avoid their touch.

In order to prevent the water from getting polluted, Dalit women were kept away from the wells and rivers by the upper caste people. The untouchable women were forbidden to take water from upper caste wells. This made a wound in Urmila's father's heart and later he himself made a well for the use of the Dalit women who came to the market for selling vegetables. Dalit women not only face discrimination from aristocratic men but also from caste Hindu women when it comes to the case of accessing drinking water. It is the duty only of women to collect water for daily use. Hence it became a kind of caste-gender discrimination. The Dalits faced greater difficulties and discrimination in getting water from high caste Hindu locales. They were allowed to take water only after the upper caste women and their positions at the taps, wells and rivers were marked separately. Mahar women had to wait until the upper caste women had filled water in their pots. Urmila narrates an incident in which "The Dalits were supposed to collect drinking water from a particular part of the river. One day early in the morning, people from the Maratha community deliberately took their buffaloes and bullocks to the designated part of the river to wash them. The Dalit women from Wadi had to

wait for a long, long time before the muddied water settled down and they could collect some clean drinking water” (Pawar, 85). Though they were angry about this, they were helpless to question this injustice. Such an act had been done to provoke the Dalits and also as a means to remind them about their inferior position even at a moment when time started progressing. Urmila encountered a similar situation at her in-laws’ place. During the height of summer, when their own well dried, the Mahar women, including Urmila, went to the well of the Marathas to fetch water but they were not allowed to do so. They begged the Maratha women, with empty pitchers, to give them some drinking water. But they denied drinking water, which is very essential to sustain life, to the Dalit women. Thus, Urmila and the other women returned with empty hands.

Dalit women’s autobiographies not only address their own problem but also try to bring the issues of all Dalit women into picture. Later in the book, Urmila mentions the caste discrimination that happened to her sister at her work place. Even though the Dalits were allowed entry to all public places after independence, they were still haunted by those upper castes in these public places. Urmila Pawar’s elder sister is a victim of that. Her sister had a job in a mental hospital but once a mad woman in the hospital, an upper caste lady, understood that she is a Dalit woman, she was not willing to take food from her hands and also, she abused Urmila’s akka because of her caste. Such incidents of insults happening continuously in the name of caste made her quit the job.

Savarnisation in educational institutions was a significant factor that prevented Dalit girls from aspiring for education. Urmila Pawar depicts the

humiliation and alienation that she, as a Dalit student, faced in school. Even though Dalits had been given the right to education after independence and also after a lot of movements and struggles from their part, the control of curriculum and teaching were under the savarnas. They didn't get any privileges like the upper caste students. The Brahmin teachers would often say that it is because of their unluckiness that they needed to teach the Dalit students. Urmila had gone to school at a time when Dalit girls' education was problematic. She portrays some incidents where the teachers and the upper caste students showed contempt towards her. They make situations in order to ridicule Dalit students by forcing them to sit outside the study rooms and by seeing them as children whose work is to clean the impurities in society. Urmila disliked going to school because of such reasons. The primary reason among that is teachers treated her with disgust. One of her teachers, Herlekar Guruji, who had a frightening face, practised strict disciplines and it was mostly directed to her. He made her clean the classrooms contaminated by cows. Even if it is not her turn, because of his caste prejudice over her, she was forced to do such cleaning work. She describes the situation as,

One day Guruji asked me to clean the mess. It was not even the turn of our class. Still, he told me because I was late. It was so humiliating that I refused even to budge. Guruji ordered me to clean up once again. But I didn't move from my place. My friends – more foes than friends really – turned to look at me and laughed. Guruji got up. I could feel the heat waves of his anger. *Aaye* used to tell me that if one comes across a tiger or a python, one is paralysed with fear. I felt just the same. Guruji

come close and slapped me hard. Then he told me to get out.

Howling, I ran home (Pawar, 67-68).

Her face had got swollen and carried the deep imprint of his palm.

Illiteracy or lack of educational development is one of the important problems faced by a Dalit woman. Due to fear of all these kinds of discriminations, the Dalit girls used to dropout from schools. Urmila even bunked classes because of her fear of Guruji and, in addition to this, she even hid her only cloth in order to escape from going to school.

Not only from teachers, but from classmates also she faced discrimination due to her Dalit identity. Once her friends decided to cook a meal outside and asked everyone to bring some ingredients but when Urmila asked what she should bring, they told her to bring some money only, not any ingredient. When the girls cooked, they didn't allow Urmila to cook and touch the food items as she was an untouchable girl, even though they did give her some food to eat. But the very next day, those girls started gossiping and lampooning about her eating manner. They told everyone that she ate like a monster. It was a kind of humiliation equal to death for her. The higher caste considers the food prepared by Dalits as impure and polluted as there was a prejudiced notion of untouchability among the higher castes. So, they never eat the food cooked by Dalits and they won't see Dalit women as clean and equal to them. There was a preconceived idea that people belonging to lower castes are untidy and hence because of this thought, Urmila was teased by her friends.

After marrying Harishchandra and spending some months in his home, both of them came to Mumbai where Urmila Pawar did different jobs, started

her writing career, publishing her works and also getting engaged in different movements. They had three children and it was during their younger daughter Manini's birthday that her friend Kishori was invited for the cake cutting ceremony. Kishori and her brother came and they saw the photographs of Ambedkar and Buddha in Urmila's home. Kishori's brother informed this to their mother. Following this Urmila says that,

The next day Kishori's mother came and stood at our door. She started abusing us without even stepping inside. We didn't know that you belonged to this particular caste! That is why I sent my children to you. From now on don't you give my daughter anything to eat if she comes to your house. We are Marathas. We cannot eat with you (Pawar, 241).

This incident shows that the upper caste people are injecting caste domination ideology to their upcoming generations also and, at the same time, the next generation of Urmila, represented by her daughter Manini, is facing the same caste issues without any change. All these incidents sketched by Urmila about her real life and from the lives of other women from her community, vividly show that Dalit women were discriminated on the basis of their caste in different circumstances.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Class and Gender Discrimination**

People are segregated by different boundaries all over the planet. Some are partitioned by nations and some others through class, caste, religion etc. Class is characterised as the social status of a person in society. There are many factors that impact class like occupation, money, caste etc. Different groups of social classes are upper class, upper middle class, middle class, lower class and working class. Lower classes are a group of people who are lying below the middle class and thus, having the lowest social rank. As per the scientists, lower class refers to as the service employers, low-level manual labourers and the unemployed people. People who are working in the lower-class occupations are colloquially referred to as 'the working poor'. The skilled workers among this class are the carpenters, plumbers and electricians and they are called 'blue collar workers'. Unskilled workers of this class include servants, washerwomen, waitresses, basket weavers etc. Jobs of lower-class people are more physical in nature but with low wages. These kinds of people live in slums. Lower class people are those with low income, having poor skills and lack of education. Dalits are people having low economic status as they are doing daily wage work with meagre income, and are illiterate and unskilled. The identity of belonging to the lower caste becomes a hurdle in their path to reach heights. In total, their lower caste status has set the Dalits in the low class position. As per Karl Marx, class struggle is a situation where the lower-class people always submit in front of the higher class, have no opinion, voice or choice and are forced to obey high status people, especially with regard to the payment of the work they had done. The



same happens to Dalits, especially to Dalit women. Dalit women lack access to income, earnings and regular employment. They depend mainly on wage labour and self–employment. This source of income was not equal even within the category of women. The Dalits will not get permanent salaried jobs like the upper caste women and won't be employed for cooking, and household chores in upper caste houses as they are impure. Also, they won't get professional, technical and other related works like the upper caste women due to their lower caste identity. So, caste is interlinked with class and this caste status will create problems in class identity. Dalit men acquire more wages than a Dalit woman but they spend it for drinking. Moreover, there is a difference in wages given to lower class women when compared to upper class women. Both gender and caste status adds the difficulties in class position. The form of discrimination in wage earnings causes a higher incidence of poverty among the Dalit women. The rate of unemployment among Dalit women is high. Poverty leads to under nutrition, underweight and related health problems among Dalit women. Due to malnutrition, the life expectancy of Dalit women has become 11 years lower than that of high caste ladies.

Class discrimination arises out of differences in economic status, possession and achievements. Power, wealth and resources are always in the hands of the high class and hence they discriminated and subjugated lower-class members with that wealth. Caste can also lead to class related issues. Members of lower caste group like Dalits were economically poor, so obviously Dalits belong to the lower-class group, especially the working-class group. The nature of violence faced by women varies according to differences in caste and class. No women of upper caste had to go through the

circumstances faced by lower caste and lower-class women. Lower caste members most probably are stuck under the low-class status, which is mainly due to caste identity. Dalits are economically backward in status and that leads to their poverty-stricken life, they are being teased on hygiene and facing lack of resources and basic amenities of life. These in turn lead to other kinds of discrimination in the case of low-class people, which affect Dalit women more than men. Sometimes, a few members of the minority group did achieve some wealth in between these struggles but, ironically, the developed people of the same minority group will neglect the economically lacking people of their own group. Now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with a lot of inventions and discoveries to boast of, and also a time when people are thinking of buying land on Mars, these kinds of age-old thoughts and discrimination are prevailing in our country (Sabharwal *Global Justice*).

The literature of Dalit women is mainly the illustration of their impoverishment and hunger. They face economic deprivation. Urmila Pawar, in the initial part of the autobiography itself, speaks about the economic problems faced by Dalit women in her village and also describes the effort they put to earn a meagre income. Urmila wrote that they used to go to market in the early morning with heavy bundles on their heads, filled with firewood, grass, rice, long bamboo pieces, and baskets of mangoes that would be huge enough to break their necks. They had to go through dangerous paths in the forest where they were frequently attacked by tigers and thieves and often wounded by rocks and thorns. Most of the Dalit husbands are habitual drunkards and didn't provide any part of their earning for household needs. So, in order to meet the expenses of life, the Dalit women were doing these

kinds of low paid yet danger encircling jobs. They used to travel with heavy loads by enduring so much of pain to sell them in the market. However, that money would also be taken by the drunkard husbands after beating their wives. Moreover, a large portion of the food they prepared was eaten by those drunkards. These women would get only a little amount of food left by them which also was not at all nutritious. So, these women were mostly affected by poverty. In addition to the labours outside, they had to do household work also. So, all these jobs, inside and outside, and poverty made them physically weaker again. This weakness got increased because of the lack of nutritious food. Urmila's mother is an epitome of this category of women. After her husband's death, it is with her weaving job that the household expenses were met. She needed money for house needs as well as to educate her children. So, she worked continuously day and night without any rest. As a result, she became physically weaker with frequent fevers, stomach aches, and diphtheria and even went near death. Thus, we can see that class problems lie overlapping with female identity.

Pawar in her school life felt isolated firstly because of her class and caste, and secondly because of the low-quality food that she brought, which made her inferior in front of the high-class girls. She rarely had good food and clothes. Pawar remembers that "They brought such novel items in their tiffin boxes as well as at times when we went on excursions. They would also bring such food when they played with dolls. But I never asked myself the stupid question, why don't we make such dishes at home? We were aware, without anybody telling us, that we are born in a particular caste and in poverty, and

we had to live accordingly” (Pawar 93-94). She had no choice but to eat food that was low in quality and nutrition, which would create stomach aches.

Due to their low economic status, they couldn't afford to buy basic resources like soap, clothes etc. Urmila had only two set of clothes that she wore alternately. Once she got a scholarship, Biwalker teacher told her to buy soap and clothes as she appeared dirty. She said this to Urmila in front of the whole class and the children started laughing and teasing her immediately. However, she couldn't buy dress and soap with that scholarship money because they had other demands in home. Teasing based on filth is another form of discrimination she faced due to lack of resources, which in turn occurred due to lower class status. Pawar family lacked the most needed basic resources such as a bathroom till her sister got a job. Urmila explains their situation thus:

After *Tai* got a job, she got an enclosed stone latrine built for us in our own backyard. Till then we had to go to the bank of a stream far away from our backyard to attend to nature's call. The place was thickly populated with mangoes, cashew and other huge trees. A small path led towards the hills through them. We had to sit there hiding ourselves, taking care not to be seen by the men who passed by. Even we, the children had heard that men attacked women there (Pawar, 141).

They used to go to that place with much fear as they had no other way. Going to open grounds for such activities was not easy for women unlike men. Women are often fearful of doing such private activities openly as they are vulnerable and can be easily assaulted physically at such circumstances,

whereas it doesn't create much problem for a man who has complete freedom in everything.

The high-class people always repress, devalue, and insult the lower class using their economic power. Urmila's mother rented a room to a Muslim couple, Mohammed and Haseena, to earn a small income. When they visited their aunt, who was a wealthy lady, they took Urmila with them and introduced her as their landlady's daughter. The woman in gold jewels got annoyed immediately and scolded them for living in a Mahar's house, since the Mahars were low-class people, living in bad conditions. She didn't take the food container they brought as it had been held by Urmila and didn't allow her even to enter the house. Urmila was made to sit alone outside. She felt deeply humiliated and, on the same day, the Muslim family left their room. The high-class people themselves, claiming to be superior, looked at the lower class with contempt.

Accordingly, women were most severely affected by all these complications of lower-class status like lack of basic necessities, poverty and the lampooning they received for being unhygienic. All these problems, which occurred due to their lower-class status, further led to other sort of issues in which women again become the victims. As lower caste identity is the base of all class discriminations, so the three of them are interconnected.

The World Health Organisation defines gender as the result of socially constructed ideas about the behaviour, actions and roles a particular sex performs. These influence the ways that people act, interact and feel about themselves. If sex difference is due to nature and gender difference is due to nurture, behaviour is never purely nature or nurture, as it is always a very

complex interweaving of both. A person's gender is the complex interrelationship between four dimensions: biological sex, gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation. Biological sex is the classification of a person as male or female at birth, usually based on the appearances of their external genital. Gender identity is the sense that one is a man or a woman. Gender expression is the person's presentation including physical appearance, clothing choice and behaviour, masculine or feminine. Sexual orientation refers to a person's attraction to others based on gender - male, female or both. Both physical and social features influence gender formation. Gender shapes us into who we are. Gender is the range of attributes relating to womanliness and manliness and the separation between them. Gender is sometimes congruent to natal sex (in most cases) but sometimes it may be different in which the person behaves opposite to biological identity - for example the LGBTQ. There are mainly two categories of gender as per our culture - man and woman and those who live outside is the third gender.

The term gender identity was first coined by Robert J. Stoller in 1964 and was popularized by John Money. It is usually shaped after the age of three. The term 'woman' has been considered synonymous to female bodies for ages and being female signifies one as weak, emotional, irrational and incapable of actions that are attributed only to men. This division into male and female role creates problems. Judith Butler considers that the concept of being a woman is to have more challenges—since it is a culturally constructed identity. There is no universal feminine role and belief in all cultures. Instead, there are different norms and beliefs in different cultures, based on gender.

Social roles are based on culture and they lead to the formation of gender systems. Feminine gender is politically and socially controlled (Butler 180).

Women always face marginalisation based on their gender identity of being a woman. A Dalit woman faces issues of being a woman as well as of being a Dalit. They face extrinsic and intrinsic patriarchal issues. The patriarchal problems faced by a Dalit woman within the community are called intrinsic patriarchy. It includes domestic violence, dowry related problems, physical and verbal abuse from their husbands and relatives, female infanticide or wanting of a son, gendered division of labour between man and woman or gender roles, giving importance to virginity in case of females unlike male, honour killing, ritual and customs, difference in rearing male and female children and sexual exploitation. Being born in the Dalit community, the Dalit women have to face discrimination and oppression in terms of particular rituals and customs which are only meant for women of the community. Honour killing is a kind of marginalisation that Dalit women face, unlike Dalit men. These are types of caste-gender discriminations, where suppression occurs due to both caste and gender. Patriarchal oppressions outside the community are called extrinsic patriarchy. It includes physical and verbal exploitation of Dalit women by upper caste man, and they have no power or authority to react against them. Sometimes they have to face such abuse, threat and exploitation in the public sphere. Moreover, the identity of being a low-caste adds problems to Dalit women when compared to highly privileged upper-caste women. The women population among the Dalits is crushed under the wheels of patriarchy and caste. Dalit women at work places face caste discrimination from high caste people along with gender

discrimination (caste-gender discrimination). Masculinity is moulded by suppressing women in both the family and the community (Sharma *Journal of International Women's Studies*).

Dalit women undergo segregation, as well as physical and mental problems, through customs and rituals. India is a country associated with different types of rituals and customs. Customs are rules or regulations which are not composed yet are drilled into us since old times and are given to us by our predecessors – they can refer to anything individuals do and have done since significant timeframes and are polished consistently or on unambiguous levels. Whenever a custom is given over from one age to another and gets rehearsed in a similar way as in the past, it turns into a tradition. Rituals are procedures which are performed by recommended rules. It has a purpose. Chhaupadi is a type of menstrual taboo or custom in which menstruating women are supposed to sit outside without touching anybody or anything inside the house and without engaging in any family activity as they are supposed to be impure during this time. This is a custom maintained among Dalits. When Urmila Pawar underwent her menstrual cycle for the first time, she was amused at first and later felt sad when her mother told her to sit back at the door without touching anything. She felt alienated because “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” (Pawar, 124). Even today, this custom of making girls sitting at the backdoor during their menstrual cycle is conducted. This is a form of segregation intertwined around the female reproductive system. Restrictions started being imposed upon women from this time onwards as nobody dared to speak against it. There



were special rituals meant for women as part of marriages that served as an invisible form of male domination. Urmila remembers a wedding function in which she was chosen as one of the *muhurtawalis* and had to observe strict fasting until the marriage took place, which turned out to be highly problematic for a young girl like Urmila as she found it difficult to cope up with hunger for such long hours. Rituals existing in Dalit marriages are a symbolic representation of patriarchal domination. For instance, there is a ritual which taught the groom how to deal with his wife. When the bride comes with a pot of water on her head, the groom would strike the ground with a stick and demand an explanation for why she was late. After her reply, they would make her swear that she would never be late again. As part of Holi, Mahar women have a custom in which they would go to upper-caste houses to beg for festive food. On such festival days, upper-caste women would make chapattis, lentil, dal etc. and the daughters-in-law from the Mahar community would go to their door steps and beg for food. Urmila's sisters-in-law, Vitha and Parvathi, would go from their home. In response to this process, a few might get food and a few are denied. The Dalit families would survive for the next two days with those leftovers. Here again, human dignity and self-respect is denied to Dalit women. These kinds of customs and rituals are an invisible form of oppression. They were made to believe that the only way to keep the community alive is to maintain such rituals. Dalit community enslave women through rituals, practises and customs.

Patriarchy is a system in which men have the ruling power and domination over women's labour, fertility, sexuality and mobility in the work place and in society in general. It is a cultural and human invention which

involves bias between men and women. Patriarchal ideas of gender, power and honour include partner abuse and domestic violence. In a male privileged society, men exert their power over women through physical and verbal abuse. Physical abuse can be in the form of whipping and rape, which often lead to serious health problems including death. Verbal abuse can be in the form of harsh and sharp words, which may involve substandard and sexually connoted words that served to retard them mentally. Urmila describes how Dalit women are treated after marriage. Torturing and beating of wives are everyday happenings in Dalit houses. She explains the patriarchal problems of physical abuse and domestic violence by mothers-in-law and husbands within the Dalit community by pointing out the life of Susheela and Bhikiakka, her cousins. In Susheela's case,

She was married to a man in Partavane. He was a drunkard and Susheela's mother-in-law was a tyrant. Both beat her up mercilessly at the slightest pretext. They would drive her out of the house with her young children even on stormy dark nights. The poor woman would take her children and cross the hills and valleys at night, her face broken, body swollen, bleeding and aching all over and reach her mother's house at Phansavale (Pawar, 33).

Though Urmila's father was highly supportive in educating girl children, he behaved patriarchally in Susheela's case. He didn't allow her to stay in her natal house and sent her back. It is not simple for a Dalit woman to escape these tortures. She had to stay at her husband's house enduring all pains because she failed to get any space in her home. Bhikiakka, another

cousin, was mistreated by her husband who, along with her co-wife, beat her regularly to show dominance. He even whipped all her teeth down. She had to do all the work at home while he made love with her co-wife.

Her own tai (sister) too was a victim of domestic violence from her mother-in-law. After marriage, she had to do all the household chores before going to office and also after coming back. If she became late at work or took help from her sisters-in-law, her mother-in-law would abuse her verbally. For her, working in office was simply sitting in a chair and relaxing. Dalit women didn't have to do sati or pada puja like upper caste woman but that didn't mean they were free from patriarchy. Facing domestic violence was an occurrence common to Dalit women. Dalit women were considered as slaves or inferiors by the husband's family and hence they were not free from patriarchy. Urmila Pawar also felt physical exploitation from her husband. After her first night, she could sense only terrible disappointment and a certificate of 'so frigid' from her husband. If she was not frigid, he would have suspected her virginity. One thing she clearly emphasizes here is that everything that happened was against her wishes. Using a woman's body without her consent is equal to rape. Urmila has described an argument between her mother-in-law and father-in-law, which ended in bashing her up. To remove her pain, she had to apply hot compress on her shoulder for a week.

There is a gendered division of labour that exists between men and women. It is the dividing of certain types of jobs by the society based on gender. It is a part of gender role and is male oriented. Gender role involves the dress an individual decides to wear, the profession a person chooses to

follow and the individual connections a person enters into. Historically, the role of a woman is supposed to be that of man's partner and helper. She should have to sacrifice all her personal inclinations and desires and should help in relieving the stress and tension of her husband and should do all household works, looking after children and taking care of all family members. She should be faithful, devoted and submitted to her husband. A woman should devote her effort, time, labour, and thoughts for the well-being of her family members. The stereotypical idea followed is that she herself doesn't have choices and desires whereas he always does. Gender roles prescribed by society leads to gendered division of labour. There is a gendered division of labour among Dalit woman in which the women do wage labour outside home along with household works, which is a kind of oppressive factor. The work women do is not recognized. Marriage adds to the burden. This often leads to health problems. A group of women from her village succumbed to tuberculosis after doing household jobs and collecting water from long distance.

Gendered division sustains patriarchal order. Urmila also underwent patriarchal domination after marriage. She was restricted from education and doing feministic activity. Even though her husband supported her in doing job outside, he was not supportive in her wish to complete a degree. He gave a big 'no' but somehow, she does the degree in between doing all the household chores, office jobs and the caring of children. However, when Urmila requested him to pay a little attention to the kids and home while she engaged in study, it created misconceptions and quarrels between them. This was because of the prejudiced notion that man is not supposed to do household

chores as it will reduce his dominancy. He always kept arguing that a man has the right to behave in the way he likes. After doing B.A. she had the desire to do M.A. but he says “Why do you want to do M.A.? Now pay more attention to the children and the house” (Pawar,240). He says so because he feared whether he will lose patriarchal control over her. Later on, verbal abuse became common in their house. It was something that created deeper wounds than physical abuse. During this time, Urmila started her writing career. Because of her passion for writing, she wrote at midnight after completing all the household works. She wrote continuously without sleeping for a whole night in the kitchen. She thus managed to establish herself as a writer and published stories like *Kavach*, *Shalya* and so on. Urmila changed to new thoughts and started engaging in social work and feministic movements. Even while engaging in all these movements, she had to do household work and had to take care of the children primarily. In an interview given by her own daughter, she says that her father became agitated while her mother was getting educated and started involving herself in social work. He resisted it and, as a consequence, he started drinking. Quarrels increased, which affected their studies. He wanted a perfect home maker as his wife.

Female infanticide is the deliberate killing of baby girls since the culture and society give preference to male children. This kind of discrimination and bias occurs due to socioeconomic reasons which point out that the son will earn and provide for family. He will bring economic prosperity through dowry and provide a helper for household duties, whereas a female child is a burden in terms of having to arrange a dowry. Everybody, including Dalits, wants a male child. Urmila’s birth itself was unwanted for

her family as she was a girl child. Her cousin Govinda even wanted to throw her into a dung heap. Her husband Harishchandra too wanted two sons. After their second child too turned out to be a girl, he said, “Let’s take one more chance” (Pawar, 218). He said it simply as if he were suggesting the need for another cup of tea. Pregnancy sometimes can become an activity that lasts up to menopause for a Dalit woman, all in the need for a son. Her brother’s wife had to go through six pregnancies to get a son. Every time when she gave birth to a daughter, her family and community would react sharply. Based on this fact, Urmila wrote the story *Shalya*.

Honour killing is the murder of a person, most probably a woman, may be an outsider, or maybe even a family member, in order to maintain what they feel as dignity and honour to themselves and to their family. Even if the fault lies with the men, women are questioned and punished for sexually immoral activities whereas a man is not questioned and punished. When a woman is suspected to have erred, she was brought before the Panchayat for punishment. Urmila Pawar mentions two incidents related to this theme in her autobiography. One is the incident where a widow became pregnant. Instead of questioning the man behind it, the Panchayat directly ordered to abort the baby. The second incident is that of a pregnant lady who complained of her husband’s illicit relation. The Panchayat gave the same mode of verdict. In both cases, village women kicked the concerned ladies from behind till the child was aborted and the women died. At the end, the perpetrators felt proud of the role they played in protecting the honour of the village.

Urmila Pawar has also written about the gender related practices in rearing a child. She describes the different ways in which male and female

body is seen, through the massage given to the hands of baby girl and baby boy. The baby girl's small palm was pressed inside their fists while baby boy's palms were pressed using the thumbs in order to create width and the fingers were pulled for getting length. Whatever happens, women will be blamed in our society and there is always a tendency to glorify a man's words and actions, even though the mistake is on his part. Blaming Urmila for her husband's illness and death is an instance of this criticizing attitude of society. The patriarchal society, including her own family members, twisted the reason of her husband's illness and death. They said that it was her education, job, writing, social works, meetings and feministic programmes that were responsible for his illness and death. They couldn't accept the changes in her which led her away from traditional gender roles. When a woman does something other than the expected roles, she would be blamed or questioned by the society always. Later, Urmila continued to live with this blame forever.

Dalit women face patriarchal oppression from the upper-caste society, through means of physical abuse including rape as well as through verbal abuse, in order that dominance over the lower caste is maintained. It is the ultimate form of violence over females. Dalit men have no access to upper caste women as it would contaminate them. On the other hand, Dalit women are seen traditionally bound to be subservient and accessible to upper caste men. One such incident happens to Urmila Pawar during her childhood when she goes to call a peasant to till their small plot. He tried to abuse her physically and used words with sexual connotations but she escaped out of luck. In spite of these kinds of abuses, women are supposed to maintain

chastity. Due to the power of the upper castes over the Dalits, it is not easily possible for the Dalit community to fight against such exploitation.

Gender discrimination happens at work place also, where the achievements of women are seen as silly and unworthy though even a small accomplishment of a man is treated as worthy. When Urmila Pawar got a promotion in her work, she felt the gender difference in the matter of the title addressing a man and a woman occupying same position. She says “The moment a man was promoted, he immediately became a ‘Bhau Saheb’ or ‘Rao Saheb’. But women remained simply, ‘Bai’ without ‘Saheb’ even after their promotions! Besides I was a Dalit! Why should she expect to be addressed as ‘Bai Saheb’? Why should we ask for her permission?” (Pawar,235). Her colleagues didn’t respect her because of her gender and caste. The customs and rituals in which they suffer oppression are meant only for women of the community. Honour killing in Mahar community is an injustice to women because it served to save the men who did mistakes. Patriarchy favours the male in every society including that of the Dalits. Totally the identity of caste and gender are interconnected and this adds to the discrimination and sufferings of the Dalit women.

In her autobiography, Urmila Pawar speaks for her whole community as she describes the discrimination and oppression that she and other female members of the community faced due to issues such as untouchability at wells, work place and educational institutions. Women have more chances of getting oppressed as they are easily vulnerable and also due to household duties like water collection which are meant only for women. Customs, rituals, honour killing, child rearing etc. which only affect women in the community,



increases their pain. All these combine to form a network of caste-gender discrimination. Caste is at the root of class related problems like poverty, hunger and lack of resources which in turn leads to other kinds of sufferings. Women are the worst affected by these class and gender issues that are basically caused by caste. So, the suppression and discrimination faced by Dalit women under the identities of caste, class and gender are interlinked. Thus, it is evident from the autobiography *The Weave of My Life* that Dalit women face oppression and discrimination due to the intersectional identities of caste, class and gender, unlike an upper caste woman or a white woman who only faces discrimination in terms of gender, or a Dalit man who only faces discrimination due to his Dalit identity.

By narrating her own and as well as other women's life experiences of her community, Urmila proves that the servitude and harassment faced in their life are not only based on their gender identity but also due to their caste and class situations. So, Dalit women are simultaneously controlled under these triple identities. For her, literature is a platform to open up about the brutality and atrocities they had to go through because of caste, class and gender identity. Hence, Dalit feminist writers including Urmila Pawar and the theory of Dalit feminism reinforce Kimberlee Crenshaw's ideology which says that the feminist theory only focuses on gender identity and ignores the intersection of multiple oppressional identities of caste, class and gender.

## Chapter Four

### Conclusion

Dalit literature is literature written about Dalits with the experience of being a Dalit and with a consciousness of Dalit hood. Initially it was difficult for Dalits to publish their writings because culture, language and literature were under the control of the upper caste. Dalits were considered as inferior and likewise, their literature was also considered as valueless and inferior. Since Dalit literature has a particular style, language and value and addresses the atrocities they faced from caste Hindus, it didn't have any space in the mainstream literature. So, the Dalit writers themselves started a new era of literature called Dalit literature through which they aroused their voice. Hence, Dalit literature is also known as 'literature of the muted' or 'literature of the minority'. Autobiography is a major genre among Dalit writings, as it helps to document the authentic experiences of Dalits and their expression. Dalit autobiographical writings have portrayed the experiences of untouchability in the society. On the other hand, Dalit women autobiographies depict the intersectional oppression these women face in terms of caste, class and gender. Actually, the genre of autobiography deals with the life of an individual but in the case of Dalit autobiographies, they deal with the experiences of the community. Almost a huge part of Urmila Pawar's autobiography is a general description of the features of the Mahar community in which the reader cannot locate the writer and her position other than as a part of the Mahar community. Dalit feminist writer Urmila Pawar's autobiographical work '*Aaydan*' translated into English as '*The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Women's Memoirs*' by Maya Pandit, has pictured her whole life experiences, her emotions,

oppression, discrimination, challenges and the brutality she faced under various identities like that of lower caste and class status and also because of her gender identity.

Discrimination is the act of pushing a specific group of people to the border of the society in the name of caste, class, gender, race and religion by not permitting them to raise an active voice, place or identity within it. Directly or indirectly, they are degraded to a secondary position. It is about the preservation of control and power by the elite. As part of Dalit feminism, Dalit women were active in anti-caste, anti-untouchability movements as well as non-Brahman movements which passed decisions in opposition to issues such as forced widowhood, minor marriage, marriage settlement etc. All India Depressed Classes Women's Conference passed resolutions in support of women's right for divorce, condemned polygamy and demanded better working facilities, women's inclusion in politics as well as education for women. In the 1970s, personal histories of Dalit women's lives and encounters started to be published inspired by Babasaheb Ambedkar. Organisations like National Federation of Dalit Women and All India Dalit Women's Forum were formed to represent the Dalit women. *Khabar Lahariya*, a newspaper composed for and by Dalit ladies, centres on issues in the Dalit group, in their own languages. In March 2006 the National Conference on Violence against Dalit Women took place in New Delhi. This meeting passed the 'Delhi Declaration' which pointed out how Dalit ladies confronted inconsistencies in the commonness of viciousness, neediness and infection and depicted how predominant positions were liable for these disparities.

An intersectional conference on the human rights of Dalit women which took place at Hague in November, 2006 examined their identities and the savagery against them, all of which made a sense of unity. Dalit ladies perceived that they had a character 'produced in different struggles'. The Hague gathering not just required the production of regulations to safeguard basic liberties for Dalit ladies, yet additionally demanded that these regulations be appropriately authorized. All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (ADIMAM) arranged a conference called 'Dalit Women Speak Out'. ADIMAM spoke about the caste and gender-based hurdles in front of the United Nations Human Rights Council. The first report submitted about caste violence against women in UN is called "Voices Against Caste Impunity: Narratives of Dalit women in India".

Urmila Pawar, a Dalit feminist writer, in her autobiography, has portrayed her life from a village girl to a matured woman and a feminist who got involved in social works and feministic movements. She was born in the Konkan coast near Ratnagiri in Maharashtra and belongs to Mahar caste, a community that's a part of the Scheduled Castes, as per the constitution of India. Dalits are people who belong to the lowest hierarchy of the caste system and hence are identified as untouchables.

*The Weave of My Life* outlines the journey of Urmila as a student. She sketches her recollections of her father who believed that his children should be educated. Urmila was conscious of the limitations of her caste, class and gender identity. Being written by a female Dalit writer '*The Weave of My Life*' displays the turmoil and sufferings that Dalit women go through. It addresses not only her own problems but also that of the whole Dalit communities. Dalit

men face discrimination only on the basis of their caste but Dalit women faces discrimination not only in terms of caste but also on the basis of their class and gender. So, they are triple marginalised. Due to their caste status, Dalit women are considered as polluted and hence treated as untouchables by the upper caste families. The upper caste families to whom Urmila and her mother sell their bamboo baskets and the Brahmin family from where she buys pickles won't allow her to enter inside their doorsteps and they would take the baskets and money without touching Urmila's body and also only after sprinkling water on them to avoid pollution. She is untouchable and impure according to them. She faced caste discrimination at school from Guruji when he slaps her for not cleaning the dung in the classroom. Urmila and other women from her community face caste discrimination due to untouchability at public places like schools, public wells, rivers etc.

Caste forms the base of all other kinds of discrimination like class and gender. Due to this lower caste status, they couldn't get good salaried and regular jobs, and therefore they came under the lower-class strata. Most of the Dalit men are drunkards and didn't give any money for meeting family expenses. So, the Dalit women had to work outside along with doing jobs at home. Sometimes the money they earned would be taken by their drunkard husbands after beating them. They didn't have money to afford costly fish and other nutritious food like rich people. The only non- nutritional food available to them was consumed first by their husbands and they got to eat it only if something was left after all the family members ate. Thus, poverty, which occurs due to lower economic status, affected women the most in Dalit community. By doing all these jobs inside and outside the house and also due

to poverty, the health statuses of Dalit women are often deteriorated. The lack of resources like clothes and soap often led to teasing in the name of filth and the lack of latrine facilities affected women badly when compared to men. The Dalit woman was treated as inferior by her friends because of her poverty. All these occur due to lack of economic wealth that is a feature of the lower-class status. Caste is the basic foundation for class related problems which occur due to lower economic status.

The custom of menstrual cycle in which Dalit women are supposed to sit isolated, marriage rituals like the muhurtawali concept, in which girls have to fast for long days, the ritual of teaching men to control women, the custom of begging food from the upper castes by the Mahar communities' daughters - in-law, as well as the intrinsic and extrinsic patriarchal abuses faced by Urmila, Susheela, Bhikiakka, her sister and other Dalit women all happened because individuals of their gender belonged to this particular caste and class. So, caste, class and gender are interrelated and due to this linkage of caste, class and gender, all Dalit women are intersectionally oppressed. Hence the oppression faced by Dalit women is triple when compared to white and high ranked women who only face discrimination due to their gender identity. The analyses of all the incidents from the autobiography *The Weave of My Life*, mentioned in Chapter Two and Chapter Three proves that. Hence Dalit feminist writers including Urmila Pawar and the theory of Dalit feminism reinforces Kimberle Crenshaw's ideology which says that feminist theory only focuses on gender identity and ignores the intersection of multiple oppressional identities of caste, class and gender.

In the midst of all these struggles and oppressions, Urmila completed her schooling after a lot of hard work and studies, especially with regard to the paper of English. Then she joined college and started doing different jobs along with the course of study. She worked in a transport office, and then worked at a laboratory. Several marriage proposals came for her in between but she had an affair with a man called Harishchandra. At first her family was against her love affair with Harishchandra and brought other proposals for her, but finally accepted it because Urmila was stubborn in her love. After marriage, her college education got stuck for a while. She also lost her job at Glaxo laboratory after marriage because girls were not allowed to work there after their marriage.

Then she went to Mumbai with Harishchandra after marriage and engaged in different jobs there. When she expressed her desire to complete her B.A degree, which she had put on hold after marriage, her husband's reply was a big 'no' but she took it as a challenge and joined Siddhartha College for continuing her degree. She attended college after office work and did her studies in between household work and looking after her three children. Following this, she was abused verbally by her husband regularly after drinking since he wanted her to be a perfect home maker. Even if she did all the jobs inside the house, Harishchandra would insult and make complaints about her. Meanwhile she established herself as a writer. The good remarks that she received from schools for her essays encouraged her to write short stories. Her own experiences and feelings, as well as the lives and emotions of her friends, sisters, cousins, and other common women in her village based on caste, class and gender related issues are the main themes of her works. She

wrote stories whenever she got free time in office or may be while travelling in buses after work. At home, she wrote at midnight after completing all the kitchen work, while everybody, including her children, slept. She sat in the kitchen without disturbing anybody and wrote her stories by her breaking her slumber continuously for days even. Her major works published are *Kavach*, *Shalya* and *Sixth Finger*.

She attended the Second World Marathi Conference held in Mauritius and wrote a book after that titled *Mauritius: A Journey*. Her works were translated into other languages like English, Hindi, Gujarati, Tamil and Urdu. She got appreciation and recognition for her works in the form of awards. Her work '*Kavach*' was prescribed as a text book for B.A course run by the University of Mumbai. After completing B.A., she wanted to study M. A. in Marathi literature, which made her husband angry again and led to continuous fights. Even though he allowed her to work outside, he wanted her to be a typical house wife who did nothing other than kitchen duties and taking care of the family members. Despite his objections, she studied M.A and passed it with a second class. She was publicly felicitated for being the first woman from the Konkan region to have obtained an M.A. degree. Along with all these, she engaged in social works and Dalit feministic movements.

She had read Ambedkar's works and had visited his memorial. Inspired by Ambedkar's discourses and considerations, she started participating in Ambedkarite movements. It was Ambedkar who made awareness among Dalits about education. For him, education would help the Dalits to fight against untouchability and discrimination. Educated Dalit women took the initiative to organize other Dalit women to revolt against such



discrimination not only in the society as a whole but also within the so-called emancipatory movements such as Dalit movements and feministic groups. Dalit women actively participated in Ambedkarite movements and demanded free and compulsory education for Dalit women and they also protested against child marriage which was common among Dalits. Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon analysed the methods and work of Dalit women organisations and their participation in Ambedkarite movements. In this phase, Dalit women who participated in Ambedkarite movements also stood for the reformation of marriage and rituals associated with the community. Urmila was acquainted with a women's organisation called Maitrini through a companion named Heera Bansode, an organisation which mainly discussed women's issues. *Manusmriti* had imposed restrictions on women and had built the caste system. So she celebrated Manusmriti Burning Day, 25<sup>th</sup> December, as Women's Liberation Day. She and her friends then started another Dalit women's organisation to discuss and present the writings of women. Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon together wrote *We Also Made History* on women's contribution to Ambedkarite movements. She tried to help Dalit women, who were at the lowest rank of the social ladder, to climb one step above using their education, writing and involvement in movements.

All these influenced her, changed her vision and brought new thoughts in her. She says, "On the one hand, I was full of many new thoughts. I felt that a woman was also an individual just as a man was and was entitled to all the rights of an individual. If man has muscle power, woman has the power to give birth" (Pawar, 248). By getting education, standing independent with a job and by engaging in writing and feministic movements, Urmila Pawar made

an identity and existence of her own and hence set a model and inspiration for other Dalit women. However, while standing at this position also, she faced the same discriminations and oppressions as before. For instance, her daughter's friend Kishori's mother, an upper caste lady, abused Urmila and her daughter for giving her children some food from their home, as they were Dalits. Moreover, Urmila's husband wanted her to be a home maker and he didn't like her continuing studies and engaging in writing and feministic movements. Therefore, he would abuse her using substandard words regularly after drinking. He called her a feminist and a brainless woman with much contempt. He told her that she had no intelligence and practical knowledge. When she went with other men as part of any movement, people saw it in a wrong way and started backbiting about her. When her husband escaped a function for drinking by lying that he had to store water, a sensitive artist there said he is a poor husband as he was storing water at home and his wife was a shameless woman. Her own community members twisted the reason for her husband's disease and death and blamed her that his illness and death happened only because of her education, writing and feministic activities. The caste and gender discrimination she faced at work place after getting a promotion is another instance of discrimination.

This proves the fact that even after she acquires an identity after a lot of effort, struggling between all these oppressions and even after she became an inspiration for other Dalit women, she was continued to be oppressed and discriminated on the basis of her caste, class and gender. However hard they tried to get free from all the restrictions and marginalisation they faced, the Dalit women are nowhere close to getting free from that intersectional

oppression forever. Whatever heights they reached, the way Dalits are seen by upper caste people and the manner in which a woman is seen by the society is not going to be changed. In order to get a complete change in this kind of multiple oppression, the mentality of the society about Dalits and about women needs to be changed and also the special privileges and laws made for them should be properly implemented. This is the message or information that Urmila Pawar gives through her autobiography and through her life.

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