

## **Intersection of caste and gender in Dalit Autobiography: A comparative study of *Joothan* and *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs***

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### **ABSTRACT**

In Dalit literature, autobiography has been an influential mode of narrative. It has been a crucial confessional instrument for expressing the plight of the underprivileged and bringing attention to several levels of oppression experienced by the outcaste. Dalit autobiographies discuss the plight of the Dalit in India and provide insight into how they challenge the power of the upper caste. However, there are two methods to approach this resistance. One, where it discusses the Dalit community's battles against the horrors committed by the higher caste. Second, it has been used as a potential tool to address how women are doubly marginalised in the Dalit community. Dalit women are more marginalised than Dalit men due to the economic, social and cultural factors. In the proposed paper, there will be a comparative study of the two chief autobiographies- one by a male author, second by a female author. The paper would study the representation of gender divide and its intersection with caste atrocities in the selected works. It aims to shed more light on the apparent differences and similarities between autobiographies written by a woman and a man respectively and try to analyse the mode with reference to gender inequality and caste.

**Keywords:** *Intersection, gender inequality, caste system, Dalit.*

### **Introduction**

Dalit literature has been identified as the literature depicting overlapping issues such as caste and class, exposing the vulnerabilities of the marginalised. When we try to make a comparative study of the ideological hegemony, the quest for identity and caste conflict as delineated in the autobiographies of the two authors, it provides us an analytical lens to critique the under representation of females. Raj Kumar emphasises in his work *Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity* (2011) that “writing an autobiography is a special act for the members of this group who use the genre to achieve a sense of identity and mobilise resistance against different forms of oppression” (Kumar 5). The life narratives also become the main means of addressing and asserting Dalit women's sense of identity, gender status, and self-respect, which is also the subject of this study. They portray the women's lives in their true state. As a genre, autobiographies appear to have aided them in bolstering their existential awareness and self-assurance in the face of oppression and its extensive effects on the social system. In their sustained interrogation of existential quest, the Dalit writers have endeavoured radical and an uninhibited search of their identities along with drawing the grim picture of

poverty, illiteracy, caste based and gender-based exploitation as the major themes in their works. Hence, a study of gender issues as also those related to caste and class would be an important one in this field.

Up until recently, there were numerous Dalit autobiographies published in English and other Indian languages. All of them have confessional writing styles. These are primarily intended to evoke the difficult experiences the authors had growing up in a caste-based society. However, the viewpoint and the concerns throughout the narration is always that of the male protagonist in many Dalit autobiographies. It focuses on his battle against caste as he attempts to forge his identity. The Dalit male self becomes the paradigm for Dalit-selves and Dalit male develops from non-self to self-hood; Dalit female becomes the "Other". A woman is denied subjectivity because her unspoken protest voice never gets expressed. A Dalit autobiography, therefore, can be closely read to show how this is done. This glaring underrepresentation of women in comparison to men is an emerging subject. Furthermore, an intersectional frame of analysis in this regard allows us to examine the complexity and interconnected nature of all the factors affecting identity and the eventual marginalisation of one category or the other. The paper elucidates on this approach to reflect on the intersectional impact of gender and caste in the two Dalit narratives.

### **Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan***

'Joothan: A Dalit's Life' is an autobiographical account of Valmiki's life as an untouchable in post-independence era. The work is one of the earliest depictions of Dalit life in north India. The book was initially written in Hindi. Later, Arun Prabha Mukherjee translated it into English. In his autobiography, Om Prakash Valmiki broke new ground by describing the life of the Chuhra caste placed at the bottom of Indian society, which had previously been underrepresented by high-caste writers in literature. He also described his struggle to end physical and mental exploitation through education, as promoted by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Joothan is a narrative of continued discrimination, economic deprivation, violence, and humiliation faced by Dalits on daily basis, and an account of the lives of unimaginable pain. It largely deals with the writer's bitter experiences as a Dalit in the society, especially in the school and Inter College. The village where he lives in is divided into several quarters of different castes such as Taga, Jhinwar, Muslim and Chamars which surrounded his Basti (slum). The village pond near Basti ended up creating a separation between the residence of Chuhra and other castes. The Chuhra Basti was home to Valmiki's family. Even though

everyone in his family helped out in some capacity under Tagas—cleaning, farming, and general labour—they still struggled to satisfy their needs even for a day. Nobody got paid for the task they did. The Chuhras were treated as lower than animals and were only exploited as a resource until their task was completed. Furthermore, Valmiki's autobiography placed a lot of emphasis on education. He was allowed to enrol in a basic elementary school, where students from the Basti, Chuhra community were not permitted.

Om Prakash's critique of the caste system is an account of a traumatic experience he faced while growing up in Barla village, Muzaffarnagar, Uttar Pradesh. He belonged to the Chuhra community where the entire village was segregated on untouchability and untouchability. Soon after he was introduced into the field of education thanks to the efforts of his father to improve their status, this development saw further discrimination based on gender where the education of women in the Chuhra community was still considered a luxury for women. This included no entry of girls into public institutions and a more vulnerable position for women in the already existing caste-based patriarchal society. He faced extreme poverty and discrimination. He recounts the days when he had to live in perpetual fear of violence and ill-treatment. He also strongly resonated with Ambedkar's ideology and displayed immense courage against caste oppression. For Valmiki, it was crucial to understanding the discrimination around him. Further, he noticed that those Dalits who faced extreme caste oppression would largely refrain from using their respective caste identities. They would even alter or hide their identities or change their surnames in order to avoid caste oppression. In the last section of the autobiography, Valmiki portrays the ubiquity of caste by showing how it operates in urban and secular spaces. Valmiki narrates his experience of caste discrimination in an urban, metropolitan city like Mumbai.

### **Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs***

*The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* is an autobiography of Urmila Pawar. It was translated from Marathi by Maya Pandit. *The Weave of My Life* gives a description of the stages of the autobiographer's life and her contribution to the canon of literature. Urmila begins to describe her travels when she was a young child. She had a really unstable upbringing. She also had to deal with social and cultural issues brought on by society's hierarchical structure. Her caste turned into a roadblock in her life, a stumbling block on the way. Since she was the family's sixth child, her birth was seen as an additional responsibility. In other words, she had

to endure the pain of birth. The women characters in this autobiography are worth studying because their lives give the readers an idea about the nature of society during the author's formative years. It offers the readers an opportunity to study the women characters. The women are ordinary village women who are searching for bread and chutney, and at the same time, they desire to send their children to school.

Collecting firewood would be challenging for the ladies of her tribe. The women left their children at home with elderly women or neighbours while they went to the market. They had to carry heavy firewood, rice bags, grass-covered in leaves, or woollen blankets on their heads. Children would ask for food after returning home, and their demands fuelled their desire to work. The women would try to outsmart one another with their narration techniques, and each would do her best to deliver a remarkable story with actions and words. From these women, the narrator learned how to tell stories. According to Pawar, ladies were frightened that their husbands would not properly care for their children. These women appeared to be concerned with day-to-day issues. Their priority was to feed the members of their household. They are willing to work from dawn to sunset for that objective. Pawar also noted that women have the ability to tell stories. Pawar portrays her village's women as pious and superstitious. She passionately condemns the possessed ladies who sought relief from the monotony of daily existence. It is clear that due to ignorance, women became the victims of blind beliefs. Urmila Pawar depicts the superstitious beliefs of society in her unique style. The Dalit women in the narrator's village were inspired by the hard work of the women from other villages. When they wandered across the village, the Jat Panchayat used to keep watch. Women who violated the unwritten rules of the Jat Panchayat would be punished by the male members of the Panchayat. The men of the Mahar village kept a watchful eye on the women. A vigil was kept on the Mahar women whenever they went to gather firewood in the forest or relieve themselves outside of the village. If the Mahar woman had any extramarital relationships, she was tortured, humiliated, and in some cases, even put to death. A Dalit woman had to face strict punishment if all the Panchayat members came to know about her misbehaviour. Family members and society would be the institutions of awarding justice or punishment. There were no such rules for men. If a man had an extramarital affair or did not fulfil his family duties, he was neither questioned nor punished.

### **A comparative and critical analysis**

Gopal Guru suggested in one of the articles that Dalit women need to talk differently due to both internal and external forces affecting the Dalit community. This could be further explained in light of the Dalit community's political and cultural marginalisation and mainstream feminists' opposition to including caste in their examination of gender inequity. Furthermore, only Dalit women could speak for themselves; Dalit men and non-Dalit women were unable to do so. However, Sharmila Rege contended that his notion of difference could actually lessen the emancipatory potential of Dalit women's activity and critiques. She also disputed his assertion that experience produces more true knowledge, which is implied by his embrace of a politics of difference. She argued that such a difference might make Dalit women's independent assertion an exclusive politics of identity and believed that the idea of difference had limited political and analytical applications and that it should be discussed alongside other ideologies. Without challenging upper caste/class assumptions, the bare assumption of difference and difference in epistemological position would simply result in a plurality of standpoints. It is essential to consider Dalit women's differences as a cultural difference as well as a difference in social status and the weight of gender, class, and caste.

In the light of the above-mentioned arguments, one can critique the representation of women in the two texts in reference in this paper. In the former text by Valmiki, there is no denying that the story was told from a man's perspective. Except for a few instances where women are acknowledged, men dominate the conversation, and women are consigned to the periphery. We might observe that whereas Dalit women do not have these choices, the male self, including the writer's own, is established via the empowering exercise of choosing. One might legitimately claim that a writer of the calibre of Valmiki failed to consider the hardships of women in his home and community. One can have a clear understanding of the Dalit men and community after reading the book, but one fails to get enough insight into the women of his village. This could be critiqued at several levels but mostly in comparison with the next text written by a female writer, Pawar. She gave full space to female characters and used them to voice her own agonies and challenges.

Women are projected as 'racially, sexual tropes' in both texts. Such notions emerge from a generation-long system of patriarchy, which is shared by both dominating and dominated tribes. One can notice that women have often been linked with deities and dehumanised from

claiming any kind of right or protection. For example, Valmiki in *Joothan* often refers to the spirit of Hindu mythology's female gods in his mother. When Sukhdev Singh Tyagi refused to feed her during his daughter's wedding and told her to take only the leftovers, Valmiki believed Goddess Durga had entered his mother (Valmiki 11). This paradigm takes women's self-awareness and shows how society and religion may influence people's beliefs and goals. When viewed from the male point of view, the Valmiki narratives fail to arouse much sympathy for the Dalit women and end up serving as agents of resistance, much like Pawar's works. Pawar does an excellent job of portraying the class divide among women. The higher caste women lived well in their own homes, receiving all they needed. They did not leave their homes to borrow anything. Nobody ventured to bother or degrade them, even if they did purchase something. They were well-liked by their families. It seems that the women of the upper caste were devout and adherents to Hindu traditions. On the other hand, Dalit women should be aware that their families did not respect them. In addition to doing household chores and having children, they suffered severe beatings from their husbands and in-laws. The untouchables are notable for requiring the wedded girl to live exclusively with her in-laws. This practice was carried over from upper-class women. Valmiki narrates before us the work of his mother and sister, and sister-in-law. They had to work not only in the fields but also 'cleaned the baithaks and the ghers of eight or ten Tagas, both Hindus and Muslims' (Valmiki 8). In exchange for all their work, they were paid grains, some leftover rotis and joothan or scraps. This vividly explains the dehumanisation of human labour. As often presented in the text, the chuhras were considered good enough to be used for labour but too untouchable and dirty to be treated equally. The Dalit women, therefore, were forced to trade their 'labour' for wages, often paid in the form of leftovers or joothan. Widow remarriage is also reduced to such an exchange. Valmiki narrates in his text as to how Sukhbir's wife was married to his younger brother, Jasbir (Valmiki 12). or, Shyamlal Chacha's wife Ramkatori started living with Solhar Chacha after Shyamlal left the house (Valmiki 27). This change in life partners of women shows how they are treated and considered as secondary beings with an existence that is nowhere closer to men. Urmila Pawar, on the other hand, describes her double repression or double elimination in relation to her gender and caste, and the consequent disability and life disadvantages. She suffered from financial, social and gender aspects. At the same time, she has a keen interest in Dalit and women's literature, looking at her creative writing. This enhances her subaltern activity. She doesn't have her own room, but she seriously and continuously begins to write her revenge. She must face the common problem of having independent space and privacy to

pursue creative writing, especially faced by women in poor families. As Virginia Woolf rightly says:

But for women, I thought, looking at the empty shelves, these difficulties were infinitely more formidable. In the first place, to have a room of her own, let alone a quiet room or a sound-proof room, was out of the question, unless her parents were exceptionally rich or very noble, even up to the beginning of the nineteenth century.” (Woolf 50).

However, Urmila Pawar was able to overcome all these basic difficulties, pursue her creative writing career with amazing enthusiasm, and become a recognised writer. She is proud to have successfully published her story in Diwali magazine. Written in a realistic and fictional mode, it expresses the Dalit women's experience honestly, frankly, and courageously and can be easily compared to the story of an African-American woman. No attempt is made here to obscure the harsh truths about her personal, home, and social life. “The lives of different members of her family, her husband’s family her neighbours and classmates, are woven together in a narrative that gradually reveals different aspects of everyday life of Dalits, the manifold ways in which caste asserts itself and grinds them down”, (Pawar 15). She showed the world that she, the lowest-ranked subaltern woman in the Mahal caste, could express, speak and write her personal and social vision. The honesty and credibility of her experience, clearly shown in her memoirs, is very noteworthy. It is her own odyssey, showing her spiritual journey from ignorance to knowledge and from powerlessness to courage. From shyness to self-confidence, and from multiple attachments within the patriarchal framework to liberation. It shows that Urmila Pawar’s life, “like every woman’s life, is unique.” (Heilbrun 35)

The dichotomy between men occupying public spaces and the woman’s role is limited to the household is a result of the patriarchal view that governs our society. Urmila Pawar is seen challenging this established dichotomy through her determination to pursue a university education and active participation in various cultural and literary events organised by Dalit rights organisations. Her descriptions of the hard-working women in her village are incredibly vivid. Violence and hunger in the private sphere are frequently occurring features of rural settings. The socioeconomic conditions of Dalit women of the village are further reflected on their inability to consume nutritious and healthy food, sacrificing whatever little food they could procure to the family's men and elders. A nuanced understanding of this dichotomy is important for the understanding of the theme of gender discourse in the Dalit narrative. Urmila Pawar has attempted quite an extremely important process of de-gendering of spaces and resistance against the patriarchy. She succeeds in investigating the politics which determine a

woman's life. She ensures, through her text, the visibility of the Dalit woman in the public sphere too.

On taking a closer account of Dalit women's presence in the home, one can find that none of the authors provides us with much access to their "private" space. The writers' thought processes are not revealed to us. As the "public" setting is shown to us, the woman is mute and being subjected. Dalit Women are frequently treated like objects and are denied any individual identity. The separation of public and private life within society is an inherently political process that both reflects and reinforces power relations, particularly the power relations of gender, race, and class, according to Donna Sullivan's observation in "The Public/Private Distinction in International Human Law," (Joseph 75). Space is obviously a site of power, and although Dalit women may have the freedom to move around freely, they are ultimately in the same subjugated and exploited space. This public-private dichotomy finds ample representation in her work and shows a woman's involvement in the public sphere that often leads to her victimisation in the private sphere. It is here that we find a slight difference between her autobiography and that of Valimki who has not been able to give as much space to the predicament of women in his own autobiography.

### **Conclusion**

One can consider the issue, "Do women regard these writings as instruments for resistance?" after reading both texts. In all of Valmiki's writing, women hold a supporting role. Although their voices are not heard, the readers are given a description of the daily struggles they face. Who will subsequently speak on their behalf is the next issue. If it is a woman, one must consider if women from high castes can speak on behalf of Dalits. In this sense, the second text by Pawar can be used as an example. The situation, in this case, is comparable to one in which the 'White' woman speaks on behalf of her counterpart in Third World nations. One may say that Dalit women are the ones who can express their difficulties the best. In a nutshell, "Dalit narratives" are authentic in nature and highlight the complaints Dalit women could have about their lives and society. It runs the risk of inciting sympathy and sorrow in readers when a male Dalit writer expresses the feelings of Dalit women. As opposed to this, books like the one by Pawar provide women with a true voice to speak out against their marginalisation. In colonial India, the British maintained a higher social class, and the indigenous people were driven to a lower class. However, indigenous people were divided into groups, claiming multiple social



statuses based on caste. The British used both groups, but the upper castes imitated the colonial authority and used the lower castes to show their own advantage. In post-colonised countries such as India, upper castes, bureaucrats and capitalists played the role of colonisers, while lower castes, untouchables, and Dalits played the role of colonised. Women in this group experienced double colonisation based on caste or class, and gender. When this idea is applied to Dalit works in order to investigate the status of women, it becomes further apparent that the majority of high caste writers rarely address the hardship of Dalits, especially not the plight of Dalit women. If there is any allusion to the Dalits in these publications, it is of a lower calibre. They are portrayed as unkempt, filthy scavengers. Once more, their characters are underdeveloped and have a flat nature, as if the authors are suggesting that one may be swapped out for another. As it aids in bringing women to the fore and enables them to elude the forced systems of representation imposed by the hegemonic others, the problem of dual marginalisation becomes pertinent to studying women in Dalit Literature.

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