

Caste and Gender: Dalit Women's Narratives

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Abstract

The paper underlines the narratives written by Dalit women and their assertion of identity. Women were subjugated not just through gender but also caste. It was difficult for them to write or in simple terms to articulate their ideas. Urmila Pawar and Baby Kamble through their memoirs tried to show the atrocities inflicted on women. They had no voice but through education or learning, they gained a status. It is through their changed perspective on the gender roles they feel that women can achieve anything. Their autobiographies' not only depict their suffering, pain, and struggle but it advocates that through courage and confidence they can break shackles and moreover the contribution of Dr. B.R Ambedkar in their lives showcases their development.

KEYWORDS: Caste, gender, Untouchables, Autobiography, Patriarchy

The idea of purity versus pollution forms the basis of Caste system. Brahmins were classified by purity whereas lower castes were by pollution and dirt. In Manusmriti, Manu advocates Chaturvarna i.e. fourfold varna system. There are several castes in fact sub-castes in the Hindu hierarchical system based on the laws of Manu. Approximately 3,000 castes have been identified in India. According to the hierarchical structure of Manusmriti, four varnas are Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra whereas Untouchables have no position in Hindu social order. The Untouchables have no agency and right. They were supposed to serve the four varnas.

The Hindus are taught that the Brahmins are Bhudevas (Gods on earth). The rules and regulation were demanded from untouchables, "The Untouchables have no rights against the touchable. For them, there is no equal right, no justice by which that which is due to the untouchables is allowed to them. Nothing is due to them except what the Touchable are prepared to grant. The untouchables must not insist on rights. They should pray for mercy and favour and rest content with what is offered. Once a touchable, always a touchable. Once an untouchable, always an untouchable. Once a Brahmin, always a Brahmin. Once a sweeper, always a sweeper. Under it, those who are born high, remain high; those who are born low, remain low. In other words, the established order is based on an inexorable law of karma or destiny which is fixed once for all and can never be changed and an untouchable must conform to the status of an inferior and he must wear the marks of his inferiority for the public to know and identify him such as- Having a contemptible name, not wearing clean clothes, not having tiled roof, not wearing silver and gold ornaments. This destiny had no relation to the merits of the individuals living

under it”¹. Upward social mobility was out of the question for untouchables. They worked under pressure without even getting the credit and respect. The caste system in India is definitely a mode of oppression which deprived the rights of lower caste and further dehumanized them.

Untouchable women suffered not only from the rigid caste laws and rules but also poverty and gender made their condition more deplorable. Manuscript V. 147 by a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently even in her own house. IX. A wife, a son, and a slave those three are declared to have no property, the wealth which they earn is (acquired) for him to which they belong².

Urmila Pawar and Baby Kamble both as Dalit women writers were strongly influenced by the Ambedkarite movement. Their autobiography focuses on women's identity and urges them to fight against the inequality. Dalit women's writing expresses their pain and suffering. It's not just their caste and class that oppresses them but also gender. Although Dalit men autobiographies also portray the reality of caste system but women writings illustrate their experiences of both outside and inside (domestic) world.

Autobiography or memoir is quite helpful for Dalit women, in a way it helped them for revealing their pain and suffering if upper caste women's writings revolves around their urge to have freedom and independence then Dalit women's narratives focus on poverty, injustice, unequal access to basic facilities like water and sanitation, most importantly humiliation faced by them. *Pan on fire, The Prison We Broke* by Baby Kamble and *The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar are about Dalit women's lives and their self-story, they speak for themselves as Gopal Guru in "Dalit women talk differently" rightly mentions that the difference was essential for understanding the subjugation of Dalit women and Hindu law order which is two distinct structure one is patriarchal and

Nilanjana Bhattacharya writes, "Maya Pandit's English translation of Baby Kamble's *JinaAmucha*, (1982) and Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan*, (2003) locating the establishment of a Dalit feminist standpoint within the canon of feminism." *The Prisons We Broke* is a work by Baby Kamble, translated from *JinaAmucha* in 1982 by Maya Pandit. Kamble shows the real side of caste and subjugation of women within the caste system. She expresses the helplessness of the woman, who suffered more at home. Kamble writes about the superstition of her community and she blames the caste system because Brahmins knowingly deprived the Mahars of attaining education. Kamble's teacher deliberately ignored the low caste students. Gabriele Dietrich points out in her essay "Dalit Movement and Women's Movements" that Dalit women have been targets of upper caste violence and also became the property of Dalit men. Kamble writes that "the labor of the entire family was paid in the form of bhakris (pieces of bread), which the yesker (Mahar) had to collect from house to house every evening" (74-78).

¹Rodrigues, Valerian Ed. *The Essential Writing of B.R Ambedkar, VII, CH 22*

² *The Laws of Manuscript*, translated by G. Bühler, Oxford 1886, Indian repr. Delhi 1964, pp. 195-197)

In “Annihilation of caste”, Ambedkar writes about untouchables in Poona who “were required to carry an earthen pot hung around his neck wherever he went for holding his spit, lest his spit falling on the earth should pollute a Hindu who might unknowingly happen to tread on it”. Kamble said that “We were just like animals but without tails”. The caste system not only alienated women but it also in a way dehumanized them. Women mentally as well as physically suffered violence. Kamble shows the double standard of Brahmin caste that on the one hand they are afraid to touch Dalits because touch from them is taboo or sin but on the other hand they eat the corn that is touched by Dalits Kamble writes, “That when the Mahar women labour in the fields, the corn gets wet with their sweat. The same corn goes to make your pure, rich dishes. And you feast on them with such evident relish! Your palaces are built with the sweat and blood of Mahars. But does it rot your skin? You drink their blood and sleep comfortably on the bed of their misery. Doesn’t it pollute you then? and you have been flogging us with the whip of pollution. This is all that your selfish religion has given to us. But now we have learnt how utterly worthless your religion is” (,56).

Education was out of the way for Dalit women but Kamble’s autobiography is not merely an act of writing but she reclaims her identity and individuality. She says that Ambedkar became the savior figure for Dalit community as Zellig in "Dr. Ambedkar and Empowerment of Women", explains the importance of an ambedkarite vision for the empowerment of women.

Urmila Pawar’s *Aaydan* translated in English as *The Weave of my life: A Dalit woman's memoir* was published in 2003 by Maya Pandit. *Aaydan* was made from bamboo and it is weaving of cane baskets. *Aaydan* word highlights the main concern in the novel. Pawar connects writing and weaving as the same. Weaving is not merely a mode of survival or their reality but it represents a weaving of pain, agony, and suffering. Pawar’s novel is based on women’s issues and problems of caste differences. Her autobiography portrays her long journey from her village to Mumbai. She was aware of caste differences when she was small. At the age of seven, she lost her father and being from a dalit mahar family her mother suffered a lot. Luckily Urmila parents always emphasized on education even after losing her husband Urmila’s mother worked so hard for her children education weaved from day till noon. Her autobiography shows the differences between upper and lower caste also in terms of food. As she says, “The upper caste girls always used words like ‘Ladu’, ‘Modak’, ‘karanjya’, ‘Puranpolya’. They brought such novel items in their tiffin boxes as well as at times we went on excursions. However, I never asked myself the stupid question, why we do not prepare such dishes at home? We were aware, without anybody telling us, that we were born in a particular caste and in poverty, and that we had to live accordingly”

Urmila candidly writes about the sexual harassment in her memoir “My maternal uncle plays dolls with me and pretends to be my husband drags me into an alcove and presses me hard.” The world (outside) and the home (inside) was not secure for Dalit girls. Urmila also reveals about her husband disagreement with her, though he supported her dream to study further but at the same time he became jealous of seeing her socially active. She said that his attitude towards her was keep changing but the fact it is not her

husband fault or mindset but it's patriarchal society which is responsible for inequality and moreover, cannot see and tolerate women's achievement and success.

Pawar at the later stage of her life loses her mother, son, and husband. She was accused by her community of not being good wife and mother but we see courage and strength in Pawar's personality. She says that Dalit community now is self-aware, they are more inclined towards the idea of equality and casteless society and it is Ambedkar and Buddhism that gave them the power to do so. "The older rituals to mark birth, marriage, and death were given up and new ones gradually came to be finalized, according to the Buddhist religion."

Furthermore, Pawar writes that it is Babasaheb's contribution towards his mission of casteless society that women have dared to come out from the domestic walls of their home. She mentions that on December 25 Ambedkar had burned Manu Smriti and that is why the women organization for Dalit women celebrates December 25 as liberation day for women. Pawar was deeply impressed with Ambedkar's idea of casteless society.

Ambedkar disagreed with the ideas and customs of Hindu society and in the very end of his life he accepted and embraced Buddhism not just to show the world that there is an alternative to his problem but to question the very existence of rigid Hindu caste system. He urged all the Dalits, women and downtrodden to embrace Buddhism because the ideas of Buddhism were completely opposite to Hinduism. In Buddhism, there is no lower or upper caste, the divisions are not made on the basis of birth like in Hinduism, where a son of untouchable will be untouchable forever and a son of Brahmin will be Brahmin forever. Buddhism preaches peace, equality and non-violence just as men enjoyed the freedom similarly women also enjoyed liberty and equality and also, Buddhism is unlike Manu's law which imposes many restrictions on women, their identity and individuality was under control and no freedom was given to them.

Education or higher degree became a luxury for Dalits. They survived hard for the basic facilities in school they suffered humiliations. Ambedkar was also discriminated in his school. He later felt that it was a deliberate attempt by the upper caste people to suppress the Dalits so that they cannot rise, serve upper caste and through education cannot achieve success. Ambedkar advised all the lower caste people to educate themselves then only they can fight against the bias system.

Urmila Pawar and Baby Kamble in their autobiographies show the differences between the dark caste system in contrast to Buddhism which gave them identity and light. Both women were strongly impressed with the ideas of Buddhism because in many ways it helped them to renounce their humiliation and suffering. It is Buddhism which regained their hope in lost humanity and unity as Uma Chakaravarti in "The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism (Oxford University Press, Delhi .2000)" argues that Buddhism became an important social critique of inequality

In fact, in Dalit women's work, the influence of Ambedkar and Buddha is clearly manifested in their personal lives too. Dalit women's voice has been a cry for equality, justice and the desire to live and attain freedom from the clutches of the caste system. As

Pratima Pradesh argues in her essay Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and the Position of women liberation in India that the women's freedom and equality was critical to Ambedkar".

Ambedkar urged the Dalit community to unite for egalitarian and casteless society. He said

"My final words of advice to you educate, agitate and organize; have faith in yourself. The battle to me is a matter of joy. The battle is in the fullest sense spiritual. There is nothing material or social in it, for ours is a battle, not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom. It is a battle for the reclamation of human personality".

Women writers delve deeply into the dark reality of Chaturvarna. From their perspective, we see the inhuman caste practices. Women's identity in Dalit community had no place for it but both autobiographies *The Prison We Broke* by Baby Kamble and *The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar are about the questioning of whole caste politics and gender politics. Through their eyes and perspective, we see the injustice evident in the Hindu society. Furthermore, both women writers set an example for Dalit women that instead of getting oppressed they expressed their experience and through their writing they show that even the oppressed, women and downtrodden have agency and identity.

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