

Mirror to Reality: Humiliation & Oppression in The Weave of My Life

Ashwin P. Ranjanikar

Associate Professor & Head, Dept. of English Shri SantSavta Mali GraminMahavidyalaya, Phulambri, India

Abstract

Dalit and African American Autobiography possess a unique place in the history of mankind as it represents the socio-political and socio-economic aspects of the contemporary Dalit and African American society. UrmilaPawar's life story is very important and noteworthy document to understand the very nature of Dalit Women Autobiography. Dalit Women autobiography has a unique place in literature as it portrays the pathetic condition of women in Dalit community in particular and as a woman in general. Present paper is going to discuss about the humiliation and oppression of Dalit woman. UrmilaPawar boldly and frankly exposed the real picture of Dalit community in particular and society in general. UrmilaPawar was denied to attend the school by her own relatives and community members. They believed that education was not their right. But Urmila's father asked and forced her to attend the school. Urmila went to school. She was the first girl from the Ratnagiri to complete Master in Marathi Literature. She was appointed in Public works department of Maharashtra government. Facing numerous odds and oppression throughout life Urmila managed to rise up and provided a platform for woman to come forward.

KEYWORDS: Oppression, suppression, Humiliation, women harassment, hunger and poverty, inspiration and motivation.

Urmila Pawar and Maya Angelou both of them through their autobiography explored the issues of caste, class, colour and resistance. On the surface level these autobiographies penned the suffering of women of Dalit and African American community of India and America respectively. As we delve deep in the life-stories of the protagonist we realized that these life-stories are not individual stories. It is the story of the whole community which represents the scars of gender, race, and caste, class on grounds like social, cultural, political and economic. Both the autobiographies followed a particular pattern. Urmila Pawar's autobiography starts with the description of her ancestors, her grandfather, father, mother, family members and her birth story and then childhood incidents. Maya's life started with a description of her childhood, how she and her brother were the victims of divorce of their parents. Both of them forced to live with paternal grandmother where she was raped by her own stepfather. Various incidents of gender inequality, poverty, oppression, exploitation, suppression are penned in both the life stories.

Dalits were humiliated and degraded a lot. To overcome the pain of humiliation and injustices the community members became the drunkards. In frustration, for no reason these drunkard people used to bash their sisters, mothers and wives. Urmila narrates the incident "Every house had its own share of drunkards. There would be at least one woman among them badly bashed up by her husband. She would walk painfully, somehow managing to drag her aching body along the way. If someone asked her what was wrong, her anger gushed out 'Let his drinking mouth be burnt off forever. Let his hands rot.' This would be followed by a detailed account of the

reasons for the beating. He demanded money for liquor, she was late in serving his meal; she asked for money for household expenses, for buying medicines for the sick child. The narrative would be followed by spirited discussion and curses, which propelled them forward on their way". (The Weave of My Life: 5). Experiencing such a brutal physical harassment Women from the Dalit Community were spending their whole life in a desolate condition. Nobody from the family was going to resist the beating. After experiencing harsh beating when the woman returns to her mother and father, they without a single word protests about the beating. They asked the girl to return back to her house after few days stay with them. Susheela, Urmila's cousin sister was also victim of such a severe beating. Urmila explained her story "I always remembered my cousin Susheela at such times. 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 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. When she came like that, and if Baba saw her, he would bark, 'Who's that? Susha? All right give her something to eat and send her back the way she's come. She must stay with her in-laws!" (The Weave of My Life:33). The men in the family used to beat his wife and the women in the family also join him in beating his wife like above mentioned incident. Victims Mother-in-law and sister-in-law used to join in humiliating the other woman. This other woman is for the day and night serving for the welfare of the family, taking care of all their needs though she has to experience such a severe beating from all the family members. Urmila and her brother-in-law including her mother were the victims of male dominant society. Urmila got educated, married with an educated man and shifted to Mumbai. In Mumbai also Urmila faced the oppression because of being a woman. She was degraded, oppressed and insulted by her colleagues in the office, and in the family by her husband. Urmila married with Harishchandra. Both of them were in love for many years. Harishchandra was living as a paying guest in Urmila's house. Harishchandra was very affectionate and kind person, a simple one. He respects Urmila a lot and encouraged to complete graduation. Urmila completed the graduation and when she wanted to continue with studies to complete Masters in Marathi literature, Harishchandra asked her to pay attention towards the family. Urmila was also engaged in various woman empowerment and feminist activities. She became a member of a feminist group Maitrin which was also not accepted by Mr. Pawar. Mr. Pawar for no reason used to start quarrel with Urmila. With the change in behavior of Mr. Pawar Urmila frustrated a lot and she was demoralized to continue her social work. Urmila narrates his change in behavior in as: "Before joining the Maitrini group, I knew I was a woman and looked at myself with patriarchal eyes. Gadkari's Sindhu had entrenched herself deep down in my unconsciousness. I slogged the whole day in the office, at home, and after an arduous journey was dead tired by the time I reached home. And yet at night, though my body was a mass of aches and pains, I pressed my husband's feet. I was ready to do anything he wanted, just to make him happy. I was ready to die for a smile, a glance from him. But he accused me, 'Leave alone being an ideal wife, you are not even a good one!' Later on he began saying that I was far from being a good mother as well! I failed to understand what exactly he wanted from me that everything that gave me an independent identity- my writing, which was getting published, my education, my participation in public programmes- irritated Mr. Pawar no end. Gradually, he began to be full of resentment. His attitude towards me was full of contradictions. On the one hand, he was proud of my writing; he admitted as much to

his friends and relatives. But on the other, he immensely resented my being recognized as a writer, my speaking in public programmes and my emerging as a figure in the public domain. Our arguments would invariably end in bitter quarrels. I would say, 'Please, have a heart! I am a human being too. I too work like you. I too get tired. My work also has the same value as yours'. But neither my words nor my work had any meaning for him! On the contrary, he would tell me, 'Look at the village woman. The husband's wish is law for her. She does not dare to sit down or get up without his permission. Tell me, in that case, how is she able to run her home well?' Was not the answer implicit in the question itself?' (The Weave of My Life: 246)

From the childhood Mr. Pawar had seen the hardships of woman in the village. For the whole day women were busy in their household works and they were not complaining about the very hardships. The women and men also believed that women have to carry out and experience all those hardships because they are women. That was their duty and part of life. But Urmila Pawar was going to participate in public programs, she has established herself as a writer and she has been invited by the various organizations for speech and other public programs. This experience was new for her husband Mr. Pawar. He had not seen such new things. His image of women was stereotypical. He felt that his wife is not under his control and now she is not going to respect him anymore and so on. Urmila Pawar narrates "the picture of our house in Bhirunde floated before my eyes, especially the way it was during the rainy season. The day began very early for women, at four o'clock in the morning. In spite of the heavy rain, they had to fetch water from the well for everybody in the house to bathe in, drink, cook the food and so on. Then they cleaned the pots and plates used previous night and cooked for the whole house. They breakfasted with their men folk and went with them to work in the fields. They planted paddy till their backs broke. They had to carry lunch if the fields were far away. After lunch they worked in the fields once again and returned home in the evening, just half an hour earlier than their men. They lit the stove under an earthen pot, which they had filled up in the morning, to keep the hot bath water ready for their men, returning from the fields. After heating the bath water, they began preparations for the evening meals. The spices had to be pounded and grains ground. Then there was the cooking to do! Sometimes they had even husk the rice before cooking. Even as they worked ceaselessly on these tasks, the men arrived, bathed and sat smoking leisurely in the verandah; some of them drinking liquor. Women would again go to the well to fetch water, wash the muddied clothes of all the people in the house, hang them out to dry, light the lamps and serve food to the men first. After everybody in the house had eaten, they ate a few morsels from the leftovers. Then they had to roll out the beds for everybody. The work was still not over. After the children went to sleep, they sat down and massaged the heads and feet of their husbands with oil. By the time they lay down in bed, their backs would be bent like a bow because of the hard work. After a few hours' rest, however, it was dawn again- time to get up and welcome the new day with a smile on one's face!

"There were several such women around who suffered at the hands of their heartless husbands. When the torture crossed the limits of their endurance, they came to my mother to confide in her, to give vent to their anger. One such woman, I remember, came to us from the village Pali.

'The son of a bitch beats me up without any rhyme or reason. May his face burn!' She started abusing him. Then she saw her husband coming by and, terrified, asked

mother to hide her. We made her climb the ladder to the loft and hide there. We hid the ladder as well.

The husband arrived with a stick in his hand, his eyes spitting fire. 'Where's that whore?' Without asking my mother's permission, he pushed his way into our house. This infuriated her. She shouted, 'You bastard, whose house do you think you are in? Get out, get out first!' But he was dead drunk. He searched for his wife everywhere in the house, looking even under the small wooden bench. He asked us, the children, all kinds of questions in order to know to find out about his wife. When he could not find her, he went up to Aai and repeatedly touching her feet, apologized again and again. He called Aai, 'Akka! He was a cousin of our first mother, our father's first wife. He kept making flimsy excuses for beating up his wife. By this time the anger had subsided.

'You idiot, you drunkard! What reasons you give!' Aai shouted, 'Get up and get out! Go, leave his instant'. But he wouldn't stop. 'My wife quarrels with my mother. She tells her to get out. She doesn't even wash her sari. She steals food from the house.'

His wife, listening from the loft above, started shouting, forgetting that she was hiding from him. Then, without waiting for the ladder, she stepped on the plank in the wall and jumped down. Standing in front of her husband, sitting like a spent force now, she fired at him. 'What are you saying? I steal food? What do I steal? Your mother locks up all the food. Even on festival days, when she makes vadas, she counts them before going for a piss, and makes sure their number is the same when she comes back. What is there for me to steal? Why should I wash her sari?' (The Weave of My Life: 154,155)

"I must have been in the ninth or tenth standard then. One day some women from the village came, reporting that a widow was found pregnant. The whole village knew who the man was. The village ordered her to abort the baby. She did not listen to them. So she was judged before nine villages and punished in keeping with their verdict. She was made to stand leaning forward and women kicked her from behind till the child was aborted. The villagers felt this was a valiant act of bravery. They felt proud that they had protected the villager's honour! In another incident, when an eight months' pregnant woman openly accused her husband of having illicit relations with another woman, the villagers gave her the same punishment. Women, mad with excitement, kicked her till the baby died inside her and the woman died in pain in a week's time. Why should this so-called honour, this murderer of humanity, this tool of self-destruction, be so deeply rooted in women's blood? Why? (The Weave of My Life: 156)

This was not an isolated picture of an unusual household. It was representative of the way things were in host of our households. All were run like this. In addition, the woman had to behave as if she were a deaf and dumb creature. (The Weave of My Life: 246).

Women's' suffering is not limited to rural area only they were beaten up severely and harassed by family especially husband and her mother-in-law in metro cities like Mumbai. Urmila Pawar was disturbed with the incident of woman harassment. She experienced and watched the various incidents of oppression during her childhood and in Mumbai also she was the eye witness of women harassment. Her heart was dejected to see such degrade and inhumane treatment to woman. She

narrates “one day, near our office, Hira and I were talking when suddenly I saw a drunkard hitting his wife on the face with his chappals. The poor woman, a bundle of skin-and bones wrapped in rags, continued to take it silently, trying to shield the emaciated child in her arms from the blows and her own nakedness from the public. Crowds of educated, middle class people were spilling onto the street as the offices had just closed for the day, passing the couple by, but no one had the guts to stop the man from hitting his wife. I could not bear it any longer. I stepped forward and Hira too followed me. We shouted at the man, ‘What are you doing? Stop it, stop it this instant! What has she done? If she has made a mistake, tell her about it, but why are you hitting her? Stop it this instant, otherwise we will hand you over to the police right away!’ Finally that did it: he stopped beating her.

At a slum near my house, every second day I would see drunkards swaying on their feet in an inebriated condition, their wives and children hanging onto them, being dragged to the nearby police station. Sometimes I would try to intervene from the verandah or climb down the steps to make them see reason. The people around looked at me as if I had gone out of my mind! (The Weave of My Life: 250)

Above all incidents shows the degraded place of a woman in Dalit Community. Dalits in general were the victims of caste and class but women in particular are victims of gender, caste, class and patriarchy. One cannot imagine that such type of degraded treatment was offered to a woman who is looking after the family forgetting her life. It’s truly very disturbing and heartrending.

Urmila’s husband was not behaving properly with her. He used to get indulged in quarrel with her for no reason at all. The reason behind such behavior is the feeling of insecurity and fear. Urmila Pawar became branch manager and established herself as a writer and a public figure; she was full of various new thoughts and new way of living life because of the education. A new ray of freedom and liberation she is experiencing in the life. But her husband’s behaviour disturbed her a lot. She narrates: My mind was in turmoil too. 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. These are distinctly different capacities and need to be evaluated differently, not in the same way. On the other hand, the people of my community often confronted me with, ‘Who are those women you are mixing with these days? Take care; they belong to a different caste. Our community does not need their thoughts and values’. While they said this, their way of saying made me feel as if I had joined some criminal gang. I had realized that I now had a new vision, a new perspective of looking at women. I had lost my fear. The women’s movement had given me great strength to perceive every man and woman as an equal individual. It had taught me to relate to them freely, without any prejudice whatsoever! (The Weave of My Life: 248)

Urmila Pawar got educated and now serving for women empowerment. She delivered lectures and speeches in various slum areas of Mumbai. She along with her friends engaged in various literary activities. She understood the importance of male-female equality. She was trying to create awareness about gender equality which was very difficult to digest to the community members who from centuries believed that woman is meant to work for the household. She didn’t have right to think beyond her family. Her world is limited to her family only. A man always has greatness thrust upon him whereas a woman has to achieve it! (The Weave of My Life: 196). Urmila

Pawar was promoted in the office. But some of his colleagues' especially male colleagues were not happy with her promotion. Urmila Pawar narrates the incident "In truth, my promotion hardly meant anything to me. There would be a meager raise in my salary by some fifty or sixty rupees. But I had to get a little power and that precisely was what irked people. I had taken this job in 1966. During the ten years after that, that is, up to 1976, it was rare to hear people say, 'Oh these low castes! No less than the sons-in-law of government!' or 'They are such a pampered lot! Or they would refer to low castes as 'the arrogant', 'the bigheaded!' But in 1970, the roster system was introduced in government jobs and it became mandatory to appoint dalit and tribal candidates. The resentment against the dalits and other reserved category people began to rise high. This was the period during which such expressions began to be increasingly used against the dalits! This was also the time that I had become the branch manager. Sitting in my chair at work would make me very happy. Until that day I would have to ask my boss for his permission; now I would be the one to grant permission to my juniors!. Those who felt happy about it congratulated me from the bottom of their heart, while some others just pretended to be happy as they resented my rise very much! The moment a man was promoted, he immediately became a 'Bhauasaheb' or 'Raosaheb'. But women remained simply, 'Bai, without the 'Saheb' even after their promotions! Besides I was a dalit! 'Why should she expect to be addressed as Bhauasaheb? 'Why should we ask for her permissions?' some people grumbled. (The Weave of My Life: 234, 235).

Dr. Bhabasaheb Ambedkar gave a call of educate, unite and resist to Dalit Community. Dr. Ambedkar knew the importance of education. It is the education on the basis of which Dalit community overcome the cudgels of banishment and exploitation. So the people from the community joined the school and sent their children to school. Urmila Pawar's father was also well connected with Ambedkari movement. He started a school in his village for Dalit children. Some of his community members and his relatives were against the schooling. They used to humiliate him on occasions. But he was reluctant on his views of educating the children. He encouraged his children to attend the school and anyone who missed the school has to experience severe punishment. Urmila's elder sister was admitted to school but the community members were always cursing her father in the words 'Actually nobody was in favour of Akka's going to school and her staying so far away from home. All the women complained 'Bah! What do women have to do with the education? Ultimately she would be blowing on the stove, wouldn't she? Or is she going to be a teacher, a Brahmin lady, the she goes to school? (The Weave of My Life: 18). Dalits' believed that education is not their right. They were born to look after the family. The life of a woman is limited to her home, husband and children only. Her life is not beyond the threshold of the house. Though she got educated she has to look after the family. But Urmila's father neglected such remarks and asked Urmila to attend the school regularly. Urmila Pawar went to school. Along with studies Urmila participated in drama. She was influenced by various characters and understood the power of liberation and education. Her vision and attitude towards woman of Dalit community changed and she was getting more sensitive for them and always engulfed in thinking of welfare of the woman. Urmila Pawar started to participate in woman programs for which she has joined Maitreen group. She was the active member of the group and used to go for various programs of woman empowerment and liberation activities in Mumbai. Urmila Pawar was the first woman from the Konkan region who pursued Masters in Marathi Literature. She established

herself as the writer and social worker on the basis of the education which is truly extraordinary. Urmila Pawar faced various downs in the life. Her childhood was full of adversaries. She faced abject poverty and humiliation due to her low caste. She rose up and inspired many women to come forward and to achieve dignity and pride.

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