THE TRUTH ABOUT FICTION: CASTE, CLASS, GENDER AND DISSENT IN URMILA PAWAR'S SHORT STORIES

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Introduction

This paper engages with Dalit feminist fiction by Urmila Pawar, focusing on her select short stories and how these stories draw from her celebrated autobiographical work *Aaydaan* (Marathi original) translated as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* by Maya Pandit.[1] Pawar`s autobiography is one of the remarkable books written in the canon of dalit literature on life lived as a dalit woman, but her short stories have also equally attracted a lot of attention. This paper seeks to understand how fiction writing has been descriptive of the historical oppression the women of the dalit community have been subjected to, through the lenses of gender, caste and class. Pawar`s *Motherwit* (2013) is a collection of selected short stories translated by Veena Deo.

For locating Pawar`s work in its social and historical context, it becomes important to understand the dalit literary movement and the dalit feminist movement. This paper, therefore, provides a conceptual understanding of these movements that inevitably shape Pawar`s work. For this very reason, before delving deeper into Pawar`s world, the first part of the paper gives a brief account of these movements. The second part has detailed discussions on her stories, especially referring to "Aaye" ("Mother"), "Nyay" ("Justice"), "Vegli" ("The Odd One"), "Kavach" ("Armour") and "Cheed" ("Anger").

Dalit Feminism

The dalit feminist struggle in Maharashtra can be divided into three significant parts: activism, dalit women`s literature in the form of autobiographies and fiction, and academic formulation of dalit feminism.[2] In this paper, we focus on the second category to understand caste and gender, through Urmila Pawar`s short stories. The paper explores how the axes of caste, gender and class are portrayed in Pawar`s works of fiction. The upper-caste women`s movement discarded caste as affecting women`s position, claiming that caste

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has been transcended by category of 'women`. Dalit women`s issues did not find a place in that narrative. 'The exclusion of dalit women in decision making from the women`s movement gave rise to dalit feminism` remarked Pawar in our discussion about the beginnings of what Sharmila Rege (1998) calls a 'dalit feminist standpoint`.

The 1990s became a crucial decade for feminist politics in India. There was a radical shift in feminism when dalit women vehemently questioned Indian feminism`s exclusive focus on the issues of upper-caste/middle-class women (Rege 2013). This paper looks at the dalit feminist fiction writings of Pawar to explore how she deals with the question of gender and caste, a question which I believe is at once indenty-based and political.

Dalit Literature

The dalit literary movement in Maharashtra is closely associated with the Dalit Panther Movement, which began around the 1970s. Writing as an essential instrument for reinforcing and spreading the political message was an important aspect of the movement. Baburao Bagul, Namdev Dhasal, Anna Bhau Sathe and numerous others gave dalit Marathi writing the truly necessary force in this sense—it was about bringing into light the political and personal experiences of violence and oppression. Thus I would argue that the dalit literary movement is inherently a political project. Dalit literature and the Dalit movement go hand in hand, each feeding into the other.

Dalit literature in Maharashtra is characterised by angry, self-assertive voices. It narrates the historical injustices and looks at the ways in which the social structure has marginalised populations on the basis of caste. It is about seeking what has been denied to dalits historically. Above all, it is about self assertion and is influenced by Amedkar`s work. The roots of dalit literature can be traced back to Phule and then to Ambedkar who furthered Phule`s thought—both of them were anti-caste social reformists.[3]

While dalit literature is characterised by anger and revolt, Pawar`s fiction writing, I argue, is not necessarily marked with an upfront protest and anger. I argue that her work is sociological in some sense in that it explains lived experiences. Her autobiography and short stories, the former informing the latter in parts, provide a different imagination of dalit lives, one located in a woman`s perspective.

While dalit men have written evocative works on the question of caste, their works have missed out on the gendered living experiences of women. Although they do allude to some such experiences, the criticism of dalit

male writers has been that they speak on behalf of the women, resulting in miscomprehensions of women`s position. In our discussion,[4] Pawar said, "Male dalit writers write truth about their lives but miss out on certain aspects of dalit lives, the gendered aspect." This has meant that dalit women`s voices have been inadequately represented or sometimes even rendered completely absent from male narratives. At other times, there are romanticised narratives about women without really engaging with their extremely low position in the hierarchy of caste and gender. The men put forward their own views as those of dalit women in a manner similar to how the upper-caste women`s feminist politics had failed to account for caste atrocities by claiming that the category of "women" surpassed that of "caste" (as an identity).

Dalit literature is rooted in dissent. It is a space where the conditions of life of dalit men and women are portrayed as lived by them, thus making allusion to the pathological and violent social structure that colours every aspect of their lives. The literary movement provided a voice to dalit consciousness and hence autobiography became a favoured genre within it, though poetry and fiction writing in the dalit literary movement were not far behind. While there have been diverse literary forms, the evocative voice of dissent and political rigour has continued.

Of Mothers, Daughters and Women's Wit

This section provides a detailed analysis of the selected short stories as an attempt to unravel these extraordinary stories of ordinary women. The title *Motherwit* alludes to a certain wit, agency and strength these women possess and exercise when faced with difficult situations. While we begin this quest of unfolding the stories, it is important to keep in mind what is at stake for Pawar when she writes these stories. These are not mere fictions, but each story has a trace in the life experiences Pawar struggled through and questioned. The stories in *Motherwit* are written by a woman who at the very root of this endeavour wills to write about the glimpses of the past she has lived through or what she has seen in people around her struggling against a harsh reality. The act of writing here is the very will to speak for or on behalf of those who cannot and to let them be heard. For Pawar, it is the important, fundamental will to be heard that drives these stories.

The translator of the book *Motherwit*, Veena Deo argues, "Of the numerous dalit women prose writers in Marathi, Urmila Pawar`s short stories stamp a vital developing voice in Marathi short fiction" (2013: xviii). Deo`s introduction to the book also speaks about the question of language and

how this distinct voice is formed. This allows us to look at the short stories as windows into the lives dalit women live on the ground.

Pawar weaves together Dalit women`s narratives and systematically unpacks each of the ties—caste, gender and class—to portray the historical subordination of her protagonists. Women in her stories do not write slogans or march in movements, but they fight everyday discrimination within the circumstances they find themselves in. Pawar`s protagonists sometimes completely overthrow the patriarchal structure and at other times mend and bend it in ways that works for them. The women are portrayed as stoic, and they voice dissent in the light of their own agency. There is a heightened sense of their location, and they are constantly trying to mitigate their inescapable subordination. For example, in case of "The Odd One" (originally "Vegli"), the protagonist Nalini is portrayed as being acutely aware of her location. She is as the title depicts always the "other" everywhere—at office, amongst her in-laws, in her locality. She can change her life by shifting from the *chawl* to the new house, and the story shows how in doing so, she aspires to move away from historical markers of identity and create a new one for her family. There are remarks on dressing as a marker of caste and class. She works in a government office where she has to hear about how "Dalits...have it good... the government pampers them" (p. 57).

Nalini after getting a government living quarters is determined to move out, and her husband assures her that he will persuade his parents. Eventually her husband gives in to his mother`s persuasion in spite of wanting to move away into the government quarters himself. But the climax of the story is astonishing when we see Nalini pick up her baby and leave without waiting to persuade anyone or seek anyone`s approval. She just leaves. This act of walking away without waiting for her husband`s answer, knowing that he has already given in to his mother`s pressure, is both a stoic acceptance of reality and the stubbornness to overcome it and act.

In another story "Justice" ("Nyaya"), the woman Paru asks the people of her village to let her keep her child, and in doing so, she exercises her own agency. This story is interesting because it is narrated by a man who belongs to the village but now lives in the city; he considers himself modern, but we know little about him except that he is here to get his land deal signed and is a lawyer. He walks us through the story, and we see Paru through his gaze. He questions Paru and is sympathetic to the villager who is rumoured to be the alleged father of Paru`s child. Paru is very well aware of her location as a widow and looks at the child as someone who belongs to her, someone she

can bring up on her own without a man to support her. She has no qualms about being able to do so. She acknowledges that she was assaulted, but now what she seeks is the choice to decide the baby`s fate, and in doing so, she seeks justice.

It is also important to note that Pawar`s autobiography mentions a similar incident happening to a woman of her community—in the autobiographical version, the woman is made to abort her child, with two other women kicking her womb. In this account, the woman is not asked if she wants to keep the child. But the same incident is weaved into a different fabric for the readers in the short story and we see the woman choosing to keep the child. She says, "This child is mine and I want it. I`ll raise the child myself" (p. 38). She has a "voice that was unexpectedly firm and fearless" (p. 36), questioning the village authority and its ways of imparting justice.

Pawar`s stories are not just about recording historical injustices but also about the gendered relations of the everyday. In the story "Kavach" ("Armour"), Gaurya, Indira`s son, is trying hard to protect his mother. He compares her with the teacher in school and feels ashamed about the way she dresses when she goes to the market to sell mangoes or how she lets the customers misbehave with her without answering back like the teacher does with the male teachers in school. The story beautifully brings out the implicit sexual undertones of language itself. The men in the market say "Where are your mangoes from? Choli (blouse and also the name of Gaurya`s village) mangoes?...let me try with my own hands" (p. 85).

Gaurya is ecstatic when he hears his mother talk back to these men, bravely standing her ground, when he himself is frightened and feels helpless in their presence. He ponders over how "words had a way of changing meaning quickly" (p. 86.) The boy`s way of looking at his mother shifts from being weak and sticky (like a mango) to strong and hard like the mango seed. Here, the lost-in-translation problem persists even after the lucid translation of Veena Deo—something about the language slips, making an important metaphor in Marathi sound plain once translated into English.

I do not believe this story is necessarily drawn out of Pawar`s own life experiences, but it comes from a general observation of her milieu. On the other hand, the stoic, silent and persistent mother in "Aaye" ("Mother"), is a character modelled after her own mother,[5] someone we are introduced to in her autobiography. The short story is a classic example of what the death of the patriarch does to a family in a patriarchal system and how a woman is not deemed fit to decide for her family.

The mother continues to work on basket weaving to sustain her family, and the only thing on her mind is to educate all her children, a promise her husband takes from her on his deathbed. She is slender, a bit bent and has a worn-out expression on her face, but nevertheless her hands constantly work on weaving. The mother (her name never mentioned) fights her in-laws and chooses to stay where she is so that she can continue to send her children to school even though the village relatives are insistent on taking the family back to the village house. Here the commonality with her autobiographical account is bare.

A very interesting story in this collection is "Cheed" ("Anger"). As a story of female friendships, it is a topic, I would argue, that is not generally dealt with, and Pawar agreed and exclaimed in our discussion that she really enjoyed writing this one. She said it was something she always wondered about—how female friendships change once the husband enters the bond that was earlier shared by only two people. In a way, I would argue, it questions the social structure which makes a vertical hierarchy out of our personal relationships and always puts the husband on a pedestal. This story also questions the norms by which the woman ends up accepting the husband`s opinion as the right one and does not assert her own thoughts. The story has many layers and also talks about the woman`s agency and how every time she meets her husband she changes her opinion and adapts to his.

Conclusion

Pawar`s fiction is a place where she imagines different, better and more gender-sensitive outcomes to events she came across in her real life. Dalit literature is also characterised by a peculiar language that is layered with implicit caste and gender connotations. Dalit writing is a way of fighting structural injustice by writing about the historical in the first instance and then taking the historical thread to trace its continuity with how discrimination manifests itself in the present times.

Pawar`s short stories, I would argue, are a space of bringing into light the atrocious social positions of caste, class and gender and its cumulative effects on the lives of the women—their intersections but also the isolation that comes along with these axes of difference. Given the complexity of lives lived with the burdens of caste, class and gender, how do women dissent? Are they protesting? What is the form of their protest? Pawar`s fiction is an important revelation or entry point to these questions. She makes strange rebellious acts imaginable through her short stories. Each of her characters is a real person

that Pawar has come across. Her characters escape the pages of her book and the realm of fiction—they become living, breathing human beings who we come across every day.

End Notes

1 Pawar (along with Meenakshi Moon) is well known for her work *Amihi Itihas ghadavla*, translated into English as *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement* by Wandana Sonalkar, on dalit women`s participation in the historical anti-caste movement (Dalit movement) led by Dr B R Ambedkar.

2 I would hold that dalit autobiographies and fiction assume greater importance as political work, as works of protest. Even though dalit feminism is understood to be the ideas of dalit women activists and writers, the theoretical formulation of this discourse has been mostly shaped by a few non-dalit feminists and dalit intellectuals. For example, Sharmila Rege has been considered to be one of the important figures in dalit feminism. See http://feministsindia.com/tag/dalit-feminism/

3 I would locate dalit literature as a literature of self-assertion. Within dalit writing, women`s writing brings in even more layers of dissent and protest because the post-independence women`s movement, unlike the movements started by Phule and Ambedkar, excluded dalit women. The dalit women`s literary movement in Maharashtra was a result of the double oppression these women faced.

4 Here and subsequently in the paper, "discussion" refers to the interview I did with Urmila Pawar at her home in Mumbai on 13 January 2017. It was an opportunity I am immensely grateful for. Even though I have seldom quoted her directly, the entire reflection in this paper was possible in the manner it is because of her willingness and patience to listen to my questions and discuss the stories broadly with me.

5 Pawar confirmed this in our discussion.

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