

VOICES OF RESISTANCE: DALIT WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES AND CONSCIOUSNESS IN *MOTHERWIT*

Prerna Priya^{1*} & Prof. Ajay Kumar²

¹Research scholar, P.G. Department of English, Veer Kunwar Singh University, Ara

²Head, P.G. Department of English, Veer Kunwar Singh University, Ara

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Abstract: Dalit literature has grown in significance as a channel of protesting social injustice, caste prejudice and the marginalization of Dalit populations in India. Dalit women's writing has gained a distinctive position in this literature because it demonstrates how caste and gender inequality impact women simultaneously. Further, it portrayed how sexism, poverty and class affect their lives. A significant work of Dalit women's writing is *Motherwit: Stories* (2013) by Urmila Pawar, translated into English by Veena Deo. Pawar has challenged the caste system and male supremacy prevalent in society by presenting a variety of short tales about women and their daily lives, portraying women as strong, brave, intellectual and capable of making their own choices. The collection is particularly significant because it has depicted the women as more than just defenseless victims of injustice, rather as someone who reflects on their circumstances, speaks out against injustice, challenges unjust procedures, and attempts to take control of their own lives. The experiences have made them aware and confident. This study examines the emergence of a new awareness among Motherwit's Dalit women. Pawar demonstrates how ordinary events like household chores, employment, marriage, motherhood, caste discrimination, social humiliation and relationships can become crucial spaces for questioning and opposing injustice. In order to comprehend these experiences, the study is going to use Dalit feminist and intersectional perspectives as well. These approaches will help in the explanation of how the lives of Dalit women are shaped by the interplay of caste, gender and class.

Keywords: Urmila Pawar, *Motherwit*, Dalit women, Dalit feminism, caste, patriarchy, consciousness, intersectionality, resistance, agency.

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INTRODUCTION

Indian English literature has frequently addressed injustice and socio-economic inequity. Dalit writing, on the other hand, has vigorously challenged the literary traditions which have overlooked the realities of those subjected to caste prejudice. The work of the Dalit authors are not just limited to the domain of hardship and poverty, but also they try to break the societal structures that give rise to these issues. Their writing exposes the compassion, dignity and individuality of those who have been silenced for a long time. In this regard, Dr Sanjay Kumar has rightly opined that:

These narratives are not merely accounts of suffering; they are also powerful assertions of identity, resilience, and resistance. (Kumar 21)

Even within the Dalit literature, Dalit women's writing holds a significant position. Because of their gender and caste, Dalit women often experience prejudice. These two types of subjugation are closely intertwined. Other factors such as class, education, employment, marriage, family and financial dependence also have rather significant impact on their lives. Because of the different variable factors, Dalit women's writing demonstrates that not all women encounter prejudice and oppression in the same

manner, drawing attention to the unique challenges faced by Dalit women.

Urmila Pawar is a significant author in the modern Marathi Dalit women's literature. She has written short stories, an autobiography and works about the role of women in the Ambedkarite movement. Relevant issues such as caste, gender, memory, education, women's labor and societal transformation is highlighted in her autobiography, *The Weave of My Life* and other works. Her collection *Motherwit*, published in English translation by Zubaan in 2013, consists of selected short stories originally written in Marathi and translated by Veena Deo. The collection runs to 244 pages and contains fourteen stories, including "Mother," "Sixth Finger," "Justice," "Pain," "The Odd One," "Armor," "Woman as Caste," "Freedom," "Anger," "One in Hand!," "My People," "Circle," "Public Disgrace," and "The Cycle of Dhamma."

Motherwit is relevant because of its portrayal of Dalit women. The female characters are not portrayed as ideal heroines, rather as someone who works, raises children, deals with marriage and family issues, endure poverty, and encounters prejudice based on caste. They also find it difficult to be respected and acknowledged in society. Though these experiences appear to be ordinary, they have political significance because the women

gradually become conscious of the social institutions that limit and regulate their lives. Ibadur Rahman has rightly stated that:

The women in her tales take on many roles, and each short narrative conveys gender identity and gender conflict despite expressing it explicitly. This realism makes these stories makes them incredibly invigorating. (Rahman 130)

Veena Deo, the translator of *Motherwit*, also, has rightly expressed that Pawar's tales provide a fresh and evolving voice in Marathi literature. An essential concept in this research is the "emergent voice". *Motherwit* has demonstrated that the manifestation of new consciousness does not always lead to an organized political action, rather it develops in stages through different forms of everyday resistance. The process incorporates challenging unfair practices, refusing oppression, developing self-respect, gaining education, becoming financially independent, growing the confidence of speaking out and supporting other women as well.

Motherwit, undoubtedly, demonstrates the emergence of a new Dalit feminist consciousness. The female character in Pawar's tales gradually transitions from being socially subservient to being aware and independent. They got skilled in grasping their circumstances and overcoming the challenges they encounter. Further the narratives demonstrate how individual experiences are linked to more significant societal and political problems. Therefore, the everyday struggles of Dalit women reveal wider problems related to caste, gender, inequality and societal injustice are shown by the daily difficulties of Dalit women.

DALIT WOMEN'S WRITING AND NEED FOR A SEPARATE PERSPECTIVE

Both the Dalit struggle as well as the Indian women's movement are of great significance for the growth of Dalit women's literature. The prevalence of upper-caste culture and caste oppression gave rise to Dalit literature. At the same time, it was noticed in the works of mainstream feminist, which concentrated on women's oppression, frequently overlooked caste and class inequalities.

Thus, Dalit women faced a challenging circumstance. Because of their caste, they were frequently neglected in mainstream women's movements. Moreover, their unique experiences as women were not given enough attention within Dalit literature dominated by men. Several research papers on *Motherwit* similarly demonstrate how caste, gender, and class all work together to influence the lives of Dalit women. In this regard, Kamna Singh has aptly expressed that:

It intends to bring forth a discussion about the worldview of Dalit women, the worldview that lies at the intersection of caste, class and gender and the worldview that largely remained undealt within the popular Dalit discourses as well as within the celebrated feminist discourses of India. (Singh 46)

It is not for nothing to say that it requires an awareness of this intersection to understand Pawar's female characters as there are several sources of their issues. For instance, a woman may experience social shame, financial reliance in marriage, restrictions within her family and discrimination at work due to her caste. These many types of injustice, cumulatively exacerbate her predicament.

Hence, Dalit feminism forces us to see beyond the binary difference between "men" and "women". It compels us to consider which women are being represented and what are the societal advantages and the drawbacks they face. It also shed light on how women's perception of gender and oppression are impacted by caste. The very peculiar fact about Pawar's work is that she refused to treat "women" as a single and universal category. Because of this, it provides a unique perception that feminism is not restricted to any certain kind of women, there are multiple layers within. Nonetheless, Dalit women's experiences continue to be a major theme in her literature.

Pawar's fiction contributes to this perspective by refusing to treat "woman" as a single and universal category. Her stories contain women belonging to different caste and class positions. This diversity is important because Pawar's feminism is not limited to one kind of woman, even though the experiences of Dalit women remain particularly complex. Understanding these distinctions is the first step toward the new consciousness of *Motherwit*. Although women encounter sexism in similar ways, their experiences are not the same. Their social background, economic status, caste and class all influence their experiences.

THE MEANING OF "MOTHERWIT"

In order to comprehend Pawar's work, the understanding of the term *Motherwit* is crucial. The term refers to practical intelligence, common sense, experience-based understanding, and the capacity to deal with challenging circumstances. Pawar has put emphasis on the importance of women's everyday knowledge and demonstrates that it should be acknowledged as well. Veena Deo, the translator, has rightly explained in the introduction of the book that "Motherwit" is a "rich metaphor" for women's and mother's wisdom and it is frequently overlooked by the oppressive societal pressures. (Deo xxxvi).

Motherwit is not just associated with biological parenthood. It alludes to the knowledge that women acquire through their daily experiences of living, working, taking care of others, overcoming adversity and challenging injustice. Since women's expertise is associated with the home, it is given less importance by the patriarchal society. Women's labour in the house, kitchen fields, and communities is frequently viewed as routine labour rather than as a sign of intellect or expertise. Pawar questions this conventional view.

In *Motherwit*, women get power and autonomy from their practical expertise. Their experiences enable them to deal with injustice and comprehend social interactions. This expertise of theirs is not any less significant than formal schooling. In fact, their personal experiences aid them in understanding and recognizing injustice. In *Motherwit*, practical intelligence becomes a source of agency. Women use their experience to understand social relationships and to negotiate unequal circumstances. Their knowledge is not presented as inferior to formal education. In many situations, it is precisely their lived experience that enables them to recognize injustice. Thus, the evolution of women's awareness is also represented through *Motherwit*. The women are already intelligent and knowledgeable, it is their realization that their information is valuable that changes their perspectives, growing more self assured and capable of challenging the oppression.

FROM SILENCE TO VOICE

One of the most significant movements in *Motherwit* is the movement from silence to speech. Instead of giving the opportunity to speak for themselves, women from marginalized areas have been discussed by others. The whole scenario shifts, when Pawar gives voice to these women by sharing their personal stories. It is also crucial from a political standpoint to discuss their experiences as the women's personal experiences become an illustration of a broader social issue. When several women encounter similar issues, their unique experiences become common knowledge. The essay of Pawar demonstrates how asking questions may be the first step toward mindfulness.

The female characters in her work start to doubt the laws and customs that govern their life. They raised questions such as:

- Why are there regulations that women must abide by constantly?
- Why is discrimination based on caste accepted as the norm?
- After marriage, why should a woman quit her job?
- Why should women put up with humiliation?
- Why are the efforts of women frequently disregarded or undervalued?

These inquiries cast doubt on legitimacy of conventional social norms. They encourage women to consider the need and fairness of these practices. Deo rightly notes that Pawar's stories offer a fresh perspective that enriches Marathi literature. (Deo xli).

This "voice" refers to more than just speaking. It also refers to the capacity to understand one's position in the society and challenge the ideologies that have historically governed women's lives. As a result, speech becomes a crucial aspect of consciousness. Women start to identify and confront the societal systems that restrict them when they start to talk about, and raise questions related to it.

"MOTHER": LABOUR, POVERTY AND FEMALE STRENGTH

The main character of the story "Mother" (also known as "Aaye") is based in many ways on Urmila Pawar's mother and the experiences depicted in the story are also linked to those detailed in Pawar's autobiography. The mother is a widow who takes on a small job and works hard to support her children; she weaves baskets to generate income and faces numerous challenges due to poverty, widowhood, caste discrimination. However, Pawar does not only portray her as a weak, helpless and suffering woman, rather the mother is shown as a resilient, sensible lady who is capable of handling challenging circumstances. The very existence of family is possible because of her hard work. This is noteworthy because, although being often neglected and undervalued, Dalit women's labor has always been crucial to providing for their family. Pawar brings this hidden labour into focus. Thus, the mother represents the relationship between women's freedom and financial survival. Despite her lack of social and financial advantages, she has learned a lot from her experiences in life.

The narrative also demonstrates the interplay between gender and caste. The mother's social status is particularly challenging because she is a poor Dalit lady and a widow. As a result, her difficulty is not exclusive to women. It is also influenced

by gender inequality, caste, poverty and family obligations. The story's significance stems from Pawar's refusal to portray suffering as something lovely or appealing. Because she manages to live and provide for her family amid an unjust societal structure, the mother is portrayed as noble. Her behaviour demonstrates her awareness. She makes a living by earning money from the weaving work. She looks after her children while struggling with societal issues. Despite the situation, she doesn't give up entirely. "Mother" therefore demonstrates how economic and home labour may also be used as a form of resistance. The mother uses her daily labour as a medium of demonstrating her resilience, strength and ability for survival.

"THE ODD ONE": EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND THE ASSERTION OF IDENTITY

One of the stories that most clearly illustrates the emergence of new awareness among Pawar's female community is "The Odd One" ("Vegli"). The female protagonist, Nalini, is educated and is a working lady. And just because she wants to continue her job in order to provide a better life to her family, she encounters resistance from in-laws and neighbours. Also, she is referred to as "odd" because she defies conventional norms. Instead of following the expectations society has for women, she wants to live her life by her own choices.

It's her education that sets her apart from those around her. However, in no way, this does not suggest that education is the only means to gain individual achievement. It can also be said that Nalini's awareness regarding the prevailing societal issues is the by-product of her being educated.

Nalini is conscious of the fact that the limitations imposed on her are related to both gender and caste. And because of the blatant display of her caste status by her neighborhood, she wants to leave the locality where she lives, so that she could provide a better environment for herself as well as her kids. Therefore, her decision to relocate is not about changing houses but about remodeling the social identity that has been assigned to her. Further, the women around her are also directly responsible for her marginalization. They ridicule her attempts to enhance her life and her education. They make fun of her, remarking:

"Here comes the schoolmistress," (Pawar 61)

This is ironic as education ought to lead to more possibilities and respect. Instead she is mocked because of her education. The women around her question the value of her education as they believe that eventually they have to go back to doing housework. So, no point in being educated if they still have to be stuck in the same situation as before. This demonstrates how patriarchal beliefs may persist in day-to-day conduct. Sometimes women are responsible for their own downfall as instead of rejecting the patriarchal ideas that limit women, they occasionally support the traditional ideas.

Nalini does not just accept the identity that society assigns her. Her decision for financial independence is evident in her decision to keep working. Her desire to leave a place marked by caste is evident in her intention to relocate. Her confidence in her ability to make her own judgments is demonstrated by reluctance to wait for her spouse indefinitely.

Thus, education is portrayed in the narrative as a source of consciousness. Nalini is able to see a new life because of her education. She may strive toward that life now that she is

financially independent. She has the guts to question societal norms since she is self-aware. The new consciousness that Pawar examines in *Motherwit* is symbolized by this growth of awareness and resistance.

CASTE CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE QUESTION OF RESERVATION

Caste reservation and the unfavorable perceptions of Dalits who benefit from reservation are covered in "The Old One". Nalini has received insults because she got an opportunity through the reservation system.

Nalini disputes the notion that reservation is an unfair or undeserved benefit. She emphasizes that Dalits have endured prejudice and injustice for many centuries, which is why reservations are in place. She is aware of the history of caste prejudice, as seen by this comment.

In the story, Nalini declares:

"Our ancestors suffered injustices for centuries because you were privileged by birth." (Pawar 57)

Nalini views her predicament as more than just a private matter. She makes a connection between the long history of caste persecution and her current situation. She also notes that many Dalits continue to get unfair treatment. She feels that society has an obligation to reduce this historical disparity.

Her remarks demonstrate how caste knowledge may develop into political consciousness. Nalini is aware that the lengthy history of prejudice against Dalits is linked to what could seem to be an individual advantage.

Pawar rejects the widespread accusations that reservations provide Dalit unfair benefits via the character of Nalini. The story challenges viewers to evaluate if true equality can be attained without taking into account the uneven histories of diverse social groups. Therefore, Nalini's awareness is anti-caste and feminist. She seeks equality not only as a woman but also as a Dalit woman.

"JUSTICE": SEXUAL VIOLENCE, WIDOWHOOD AND RESISTANCE

Another type of oppression experienced by Dalit women is shown in the novella "Justice" ("Nyay"). Paru, the protagonist, is a young widow who gets pregnant after being sexually abused. The villagers put pressure on her to give up the kid rather than offering her support. The narrative illustrates how vulnerable women may become when they are already at a disadvantage due to their widowhood. The society used the medium of moral and social pressure just to be in control of Paru's body and choices.

The central issue in the story is not the pregnancy but it revolves around the question: who has the authority to make decisions on a woman's body and destiny. Paru chooses to raise the child on her own. Because she refuses to abide by the choices that the community has forced upon her, her choice turns into an act of resistance. The narrative is significant since there are several sources of oppression. Everyone in the community participates in controlling the body of Paru. As a result, patriarchal power is derived from the community. This is crucial to comprehending Pawar's concept of consciousness. The definition of resistance does not just mean defeating a powerful institution. Resistance can sometimes be as simple as refusing to accept a choice that has been

made for you by others. Paru now has authority over her own life because of her choice she made. Thus, her decision might be interpreted as a manifestation of her moral, physical and personal agency.

A paradox in patriarchal morality is also depicted in this narrative. It is claimed by society they will uphold the honour of a woman, however, at the same time, women are not given the liberty to make decisions about their own life. Pawar forces the readers to rethink the definition of "Justice." Is justice just according to social norms? Or does justice mean respecting an individual's autonomy and dignity? The latter concept of "Justice" is upheld in the tale. It displays that a true justice ought to uphold a person's freedom, dignity and autonomy.

FROM INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE TO COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

Motherwit demonstrates a new state of self-awareness that extends beyond specific women. Pawar transmuted her characters' individual experiences into societal knowledge. Readers learn from her novels, the issues faced by women are not isolated incidents. And they are associated larger institutions like caste, gender, and inequality to these issues.

There are 4 stages of development:-

Experience → Acknowledgement → Resistance → Collective Consciousness

In simple terms, the first thing that happens is women encountering injustice or discrimination. Then, she realizes her own shortcomings are not the only issue, rather it is associated with broader societal circumstances. After acknowledging the issue, she starts to question and openly challenges the expectations which are placed on her by the society. Ultimately, her experience becomes part of a wider understanding shared among other women. Thus, individual experience becomes a communal experience.

In Dalit feminist theory, this whole process is significant because documentation of personal narratives of those women who are frequently overlooked can act as an important form of testimony. As a result, Pawar's literature plays a significant role in Dalit feminist consciousness. Her narratives help to preserve the experiences of Dalit women that could otherwise be excluded from official history. Thus, it is possible to view her fiction as a form of social memory, since it offers underprivileged women a space in literature to retain their memories and experiences.

The deep connection between memory and resistance is further demonstrated in the studies conducted on Pawar's autobiographical writing. According to researchers, Dalit women may challenge social exclusion and reclaim their identity just by revisiting their past.

Motherwit is one of the works which is closely associated with Pawar's personal life, though it is a fictional work. There are several connections between the incidents detailed in her autobiographies and stories like "Mother," "The Odd One," and "Justice". Therefore, it serves as a means of transmutating personal memories into narratives that can be shared among a wider audience. It also gives a greater exposure of Dalit's women life.

CHALLENGING BOTH PATRIARCHY AND CASTE HIERRACHY

What makes Pawar's feminist views distinct is her accentuation on both caste and gender. She does not treat these two types of oppression in isolation. For Dalit women, getting liberated from caste discrimination does not mean putting up with the patriarchal norms or any kind of discrimination in their societies. In the same way, if caste-related issues are ignored, feminism cannot be fully realized.

One of *Motherwit*'s key advantages is combined criticism. The women depicted in the narratives of Pawar's challenge the male authority as well as question the caste system. Women want financial independence as well as they also want to be treated with dignity and respect in society. They oppose the control imposed by family, at the same time, they resist social discrimination and exclusion.

As a result, their problems occur at different stages. They have to fight the issues which are prevalent in both their families and in society at large. Because of this, Pawar's method is explicitly Dalit feminist rather than just feminism in general. Her goal is not limited to providing a space for women in the current social institutions, rather to challenge and change such structures. In the end, *Motherwit* contends that an equal society is one in which a person's worth, dignity and chances by their caste or gender.

CONCLUSION

Motherwit by Urmila Pawar is a significant piece of Dalit literature. It depicts the emergence of a common, lived-experience based, feminist awareness that opposes caste inequality. The collection demonstrates that awareness among Dalit women does not emerge overnight. It develops gradually as a result of their regular encounters. Work, poverty, marriage, parenting, education, caste prejudice, social humiliation and relationships are some of those experiences.

The narrative "Mother" demonstrates the resilience and practical knowledge that women acquire from their labour and struggles for survival. "The Odd One" depicts how work and education can make women more self-aware and self-sufficient. It also addresses the issues related to caste discrimination and traditional expectations about women. "Justice" challenges the authority of the community which interferes in the lives of women and their decision-making process. Further, highlighting the significance of individual autonomy, dignity and self-respect. Pawar demonstrates through these tales how everyday life can also become a space for political awareness and consciousness.

The concept of "*Motherwit*" is of extreme significance because it contradicts the notion that knowledge must always come from formal schooling or institutions. It also casts doubts on the ideology that knowledge is mainly associated with men. Pawar gives significance to the knowledge the Dalit women acquire throughout their daily encounters.

Therefore, *Motherwit* is not just simply a collection of tales, it shows how a new Dalit feminist awareness is emerging. The narratives show that resistance is not the only option to express protest. Everyday activities like working, communicating, learning, rejecting unjust demands, making demands, reflecting on the past and demanding respect are also examples of form of resistance.

Ultimately, Pawar demonstrates that underprivileged women's daily lives are more than just personal issues. They are linked to the broader history of social development, gender inequality, and caste. *Motherwit* gives greater visibility to women whose voices are frequently overlooked by documenting these experiences in literature.

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