

ANALYSIS OF THE CONDITIONS OF DALIT WOMEN AS PORTRAYED IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE STUDY ON 'THE WEAVE OF MY LIFE' AND 'THE PRISON WE BROKE'

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ABSTRACT

The agony, frustration and pain of Dalit women find a distinctive place in Indian literature. The present research has been thus focused on to analysing the conditions of Dalit women as portrayed in contemporary literature. For this, comparative analysis of 'The Weave of Life' and 'The Prison We Broke' has been conducted here. The study has specially focused on the manner in which the social and economic conditions of the Dalit women have been portrayed in the two literary works. The common themes that have been found in both the autobiographies are identity crisis, gender discrimination, sexual subjugation and denial of the right to education.

KEYWORDS: Dalit Women, Mahar, Poverty, Society

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INTRODUCTION

Empowerment can be defined as the right to access resources, material well-being, decision making power and the ability to make decisions individually without an external influence. Women empowerment in particular refers to the right of women to have equal right as men as far as access to resources, decision making, wellbeing are concerned (S. D. Kamble). In India, Dalit women are the specific segment of women population who have been made to live in silence centuries and remain silent sufferers of the numerous instances of exploitations, societal barbarity and oppressions. They are not expected to have control on their body, earnings or lives. The societal position of Dalit women in India is distinctively different from that of other Indian women in the manner that they are denied education, societal identity and dignity, income, religious rights and human rights (Ghatak).

The agony, frustration and pain of Dalit women finds a distinctive place in Indian literature. Eminent authors have given expression to the experience to the deep feelings of these Dalit women through various literary works (Ghosh). Thus, the study has taken into consideration two prominent literary creations of the contemporary times, namely, *The Weave of Life* by Urmila Pawar and *The Prison We Broke* to analyse the condition of Dalit women in India. The study shall specially focus on the manner in which the social and economic conditions of the Dalit women have been portrayed in the two literary works.

DISCUSSION

The Weave of Life

The Weave of Life is the English translation of the Marathi autobiography named *Aidan* by Urmila Pawar. This book reflects on the raging issue of double marginalization and double oppression faced by the Dalit women of India due to caste, caste and gender based societal discrimination. The focus of the story is the discovery of the selfhood of a Dalit woman who is a basket weaver amidst her struggles with poverty, marginalization, caste barrier and patriarchal subjugation. The word 'weave' has been used by the author as a pun. On the apparent level, 'weave' indicates towards the profession of the Dalit woman Urmila, at the deeper level, it points out towards their societal status which characterizes pain, anguish and misery (Naikar). The theme of this book is social marginalization of Dalit women. Hence, the story opens with Urmila, who is a born to a poverty-stricken family of the marginalized Mahar community and lives nearby the Ratnagiri village. Urmila has to take the hardship of collecting faggots from the nearby woods, carry the huge burden on head, walk for a long distance and sell it at the Ratnagiri market. Pawar depicts in the autobiography that the hardship and poverty that Urmila endured was not her individual problem. Rather, this societal concern is linked with Dalit-hood. It is a status quo of the Dalit women that they have to struggle with all the unfavourable societal factors for establishing their self-hood (Naikar; Syal and Kumari). To depict this, Pawar narrates the socio-economic condition of Urmila and her daughter as,

"...They somehow managed to buy a little rice which they could cook in a big mud pot and serve with some watery soup. This was served to men first, in one common dish...was usually because there were few plates in the homes" (Pawar, pp.17).

Pawar further shows that their marginalized societal status make Dalit women so immensely helpless that they often live on leftover food of the upper class people.

"...Our sister-in-law, Vitha and Parvathi would also go begging, along with other women in our community...Their entire house would survive for two days on those leftovers" (Pawar, pp.43)

Through the depiction of the wretched condition of Urmila and her family, Pawar also expressed the despicable socio-economic condition of the Dalit women who do not have proper clothing too, and is often humiliated by the upper class for it instead of receiving any compassion or sympathy. Thus, as mouthpiece of Urmila, Pawar writes,

"I had only two sets of clothes, which I wore alternatively for three to four days. It was not surprising that they looked extremely dirty. My clothes made Biwakar teacher froth at the mouth" (Pawar, pp.43).

Through these instances in the autobiography Pawar brings out a prominent social vice of the Indian society, which is, Dalits are bound in a vicious circle of grinding poverty and hunger which is created by the upper class population of the society (Grey).

Sexual subjugation and sexual abuse of Dalit women is another societal malice that goes on undocumented most of the times in the country. They are not only abused by outsiders, people within their communities and families also dominate them sexually and completely ignore their worth or wish as human being (Sabharwal and Sonalkar; SJ et al.). While speaking of the agony of the Dalit women in Indian society in particular, Pawar creates a sequence of the experience of the first night of Urmila with her husband after their marriage. The author shows clear signs of sexual subjugation and double exploitation of Dalit women here. Thus, Pawar describes,

"After his first examination, he came to the cot and suddenly threw his arms around me...My husband's hands were groping all over my body. I was completely thrown out of gear...I could sense nothing except my husband's terrible disappointment. "So frigid!" he said in the morning. May be he expected me to be "frigid" on the first night! A sign of my being a virgin. Had I taken any initiative, he would have suspected my virginity"(Pawar, pp.154)."

Dalit women do not enjoy the right to education in the similar manner as that of other women in the Indian society. Not only people outside their community, the Dalit women face stringent objections even from people belonging to their own community when they express their desire to study (Ghatak; Naikar). Pawar has also highlighted upon this social injustice faced by Dalit women through Urmila. The author shows that Urmila had to struggle a lot and go against the will of her husband when she completed her B.A. after her motherhood and expressed further desires to pursue M.A. Her husband retorted,

"Why do you want to do M.A? Now pay more attention to the children and the house...He firmly believed that looking after the household was the sole responsibility of the women...a man has the right to behave anyway he likes"(Pawar, pp.200).

Pawar further shows that her husband was shocked and taken aback to find that Urmila made repeated efforts to break the cocoon of abused, harassed yet numb woman and endeavoured to establish her own identity in the society. He was stunned to observe how Urmila changed from an obedient slavish woman to an individual who thinks independently. Thus, Pawar writes,

"He was perplexed as to why his wife, a product of the same mold, who had behaved perfectly so far, was behaving quite differently now...He felt he was losing control over his wife fast, and had to establish his authority with an iron hand so as to keep her within bounds!"(Pawar, pp.207)

The Prison We Broke

The Prison We Broke, written by Baby Kamble, reflects on the challenges that Dalit women face in the patriarchal society of India. The book of Kamble emphasizes that caste is ubiquitous and invincible in the Indian society. Therefore, people born to lower casts become seasoned to accept that oppression and subjugation will be their fate till their death. The situation of women belonging to lower caste is even worse. They have to accept it as fait accompli that they will never have their own identity, social prestige, respect or dignity because they are Dalit women. However, Kamble has tried to denounce this faulty and hollow status quo of Dalit women through this autobiography by emphasizing upon the themes of resistance and liberalisation as rebellion against social vices like starvation, poverty, child marriage and caste based humiliation (Kavya).

Although *The Prison We Broke* is an autobiography of Kamble, it actually depicts talks about the sufferings, subjugation and socio-economical of all the Dalit women of the Indian society where caste consciousness is at its pinnacle. Through the life story of Jina Amuche, the author narrates the oppression of the Mahar community that makes lives of Dalit women of the community even more miserable. Kamble shows in her autobiography how Dalit women were victimized and tortured, and denied any social identity (Rather; Paswan). Even though the Dalit women shoulder the financial burden of their family just like their menfolk, they were denied their social identity. They considered as burden who are meant to be warded off as soon as possible (Morve; Paswan). Kamble has shown this social injustice through the transcript of a content father of a domestically abused married woman. The father says,

“Yesterday, I had gone to leave my daughter at her in-laws’ place. She really is most lucky, you know, to get into such a house. What a prestigious house”(Kamble, pp.9)

Kamble also criticizes the pseudo caste consciousness of the mainstream India society that is wholly dependent upon the Mahar women, but denies it and practices social discrimination and untouchability instead. Thus, the lines read,

“When 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 soil soaked 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?”(Kamble, pp.56)

While poverty, exploitation and humiliation are regular affairs in the lives of the women of Mahar community, aggressive domestic violence made situations worse. Their husbands would flog them like beasts to such an extent that most of the times the hitting sticks would break. The spines of the tortured women got crushed, their noses broke, and they would often lay unconscious without anybody to show any mercy for them. Some women escaped from their homes to get rid of this heinous domestic violence. Unfortunately, situations would be even more pathetic if they got caught. They would be brought back to their in-laws’ house again, where their mothers-in-laws would conspire and poison the ears of their sons so that they would be tortured more harshly(Paswan). Thus, as the mouthpiece of all the villainous and sadist mothers-in-laws of the Mahar community who experienced the same treatment from the menfolk in their family, Kamble writes,

“Son, what good is such a runaway wife to you? Some bastard must have made her leave you. I suspect that this somebody is from our own community. This bitch will bring nothing but disgrace to us”(Kamble, pp.99)

Through these parts of the story, Kamble has drawn the attention of her readers towards the frequently followed malpractice among Dalits; spousal violence and wife beating. While Dalit women twice more socially vulnerable, this ill practice brings down their dignity and self-esteem as a human being even further (Surekha and Mathur). Hence, the fathers of Mahar household, who otherwise did not have any social recognition owing of their Dalit caste, would consider wife-beating as a symbol of masculinity, and would instruct their sons,

“You are a man. You must behave like one! You must be proud and firm. You must walk tall. Twirl your moustache and show us that you are a man...Never mind if you have to go to prison for six months! You must chop off your wife’s nose and present it to her brother and father. They mustn’t have any respect left to sit with the members of the panch”(Kamble, pp.100-101)

The next social issue that needs due attention in the story is forced removal of the Dalit women from enjoying the right to education. These women are victims of double discrimination because their own community obstructs them from getting educated even though there are lots of scopes of educational facilities for Dalit women(Paik). Thus, Kamble reflects upon the thoughts of Ambedkar in the story to revolt against gender discrimination against Mahar women in education by saying,

“...now onwards you have to follow a different path. You must educate your children. Divorce your children from god. Teach them good things. Send them to schools. The result will be there for you to see. When your children begin to be educated, your conditions will start improving. Your family, your life will improve. Your children will bring you out of this hell. We are humans. We, too, have the right to live as human beings”(Kamble, pp.65).

CONCLUSIONS

Two autobiographies of eminent Dalit female writers Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar were chosen to conduct close study on the social discrimination that the women of this community face within their community as well as outside it. The common themes that have been found in both the autobiographies are identity crisis, gender discrimination, sexual subjugation and denial of the right to education. It was however found that both the authors highlight upon the fact that the people within the Dalit community subscribe to aggressive gender biasness and make lives doubly miserable for their womenfolk.

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