

Negotiating Patriarchy and Caste: Women's Autobiographical Voices in Twentieth-Century Western India

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Abstract

This article critically examines the autobiographical writings of Dalit women in 20th century western India, highlighting their dual negotiation of patriarchy and caste. Focusing on authors like Urmila Pawar and Shantabai Kamble, the work unpacks how their lived experiences challenge both gender and caste hegemonies, revealing the compounding oppression of “double discrimination” unique to Dalit women. The text also explores the politics of representation, translation, and the debates regarding the authenticity and radical potential of such narratives in the genre of autobiography. It situates Dalit women's voices not merely as reminders of a painful past but as empowering testimonies that contest the silencing and marginalization in both mainstream feminist and caste discourses: thereby, it argues for the political significance of Dalit feminist perspectives in reshaping the broader historical and social understanding of caste and gender in India.

Introduction

To begin with as E.H Carr says “study the historian before you begin to study the facts”. He argues that “It is important to know the background and ideological underpinning of the author to locate and understand why was the work undertaken, viz. the intent of the work. The author decides to include which data and events and to exclude which ones. Once we know the historian's background we get some idea and understanding of the framework of his work.”¹

Sharmila Rege was born in Kolhapur. She was brought up at Pune where she got education from Ferguson College and Department of Sociology, University of Pune. She was associated with Krantijyoti Savitribai Phule Women's Studies Centre which was part of Department of Sociology for a very long time. She writes on gender and sociology, Dalit feminism and social history of popular cultural practices in Marathi and English. She has published a series of essays on the history of African- American feminism and several booklets and music cultures of Ambedkarite counter publics and pedagogical issues in Dalit cultural studies. Her major publication includes Sociology of Gender: The Challenge of Feminist Sociological Thought, Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios and her last published book, Against the Madness of Manu: B.R. Ambedkar's Writings on Brahmanical Patriarchy.

This book is in the form of “collection of testimonies” which is not exhaustive and brings together writings that vary in their style, thematic content and politics. It includes narratives that came into public circulation in the last two and half decades and these have been arranged by the author's date of birth. Six of the

¹ E. H. Carr, What is History? Penguin Modern Classics, 1961

writers inscribe memories of different phases of the transition from Mahar to a Neo-Buddhist community. Two testimonies inscribe into the histories of Dalit feminism, voices of the Gopal and Gondhali castes, which are marked in Maharashtra as nomadic communities. While all writers belong to the larger universe of the Dalit movement, their politics differs by region, community and their ideological position. The testimonies seek an engagement with the category of Dalit women not as an automatically unitary group and or as defined by the 'same problems' but as emerging in a context of struggles and a viable oppositional alliance. The life narratives present Dalit women's interpretation of society.

Urmila Pawar is known for her short story writings in Marathi literature. She was born and bred in Maharashtra state. She belongs to Mahar community of the state. Her memoir 'Aaydan', was published in the year 2003 and was translated as *The Weave of my life: A Dalit woman's Memoir*. 'Aaydan' means weaving of cane baskets. It was the main economic activity of the Mahar community. The other meaning of Aaydan is utensils used by Mahar community. Pawar writes to express the weariness of Dalit women from different generations holding the similar kind of anguish.

*"My mother used to weave "aaydans," the Marathi generic term for all things made from bamboo. I find that her act of weaving and my act of writing are organically linked. The weave is similar. It is the weave of pain, suffering, and agony that links us."*²

Pawar has given very minute details of oppression and exploitations of girl child and women. She explains that sometimes the humiliation is so much that it is biting to the reader with his/her sensibility.

Pawar describes in this following quotation both the insult and hunger of the girl child. Whenever they get good dish or complete food, it is difficult for them to control. As Pawar narrates the incident, "Once, I went to attend wedding at my sister in-law's place, along with two of my nieces. However, when we three spout girls set down to eat and begun asking rice repeatedly, the cook got angry, 'Whose daughters are these anyway? 'He burst out. 'They are eating like monsters' then someone answered 'they are from our'' Sushi's family! Daughters of Arjun master!' On hearing this, the host came forward. 'Oh! Are they? All right, all right let them eat as much as they want! Serve them well!' The cook returned with more rice but being called monster was not easy to digest and we politely declined.'"³

She has recounted her experiences of sexual exploitation at her early adulthood and about her schoolmates. This narration and incidents of sexual exploitation are evident 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."*⁴

Pawar shows the distinction of male and female positions and titles awarded to them. She says when any man is promoted he would become a 'Bhaushaeb' or 'Raosaheb' but a woman officer will remain only a 'Bai' without the title of Sahib. As a Dalit writer, she felt much as it is an insult to her position and caste. Due to English language, today all women are called 'Madam' irrespective of their position. This has generated the question of self-respect among the women.

Pawar also accepts the harsh reality of household work done by the husband in the presence of the guests, whether with understanding or just for the sake of pretention. It was difficult for her to judge her husband's intentions, "Once, both of us were at a function. Mr. Pawar was very reluctant to attend it and I had literally

² Rege, Sharmila. *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonies*, Zubaan: An imprint of Kali for Women, New Delhi, 2006

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

dragged him there. When it was time for drinking session, he got up to go. A sensitive artist sitting there asked him, why you are leaving. Oh yes, Mr. Pawar answered easily we have to leave. This is the time we get water in the house. So I have to go fill it up.” After some days, that artist was narrating the story to someone, “The poor husband was going to store water at home and this shameless woman was laughing. How easily, men appeared poor and women shameless.” In the concluding paragraphs of her Memoir Urmila Pawar writes,

“Life has taught me many things, showed me so much. It has also lashed it me till I bled, I don't know how much longer I am going to live, nor do I know in what form life is going to confront me let it come in any form; I am ready to face it stoically. This is what my life has taught me. This is my life and that is me”⁵

Najabai Sakharam Babar(renamed Shantabai Krishnaji Kamble after her marriage), was the first dalit woman teacher in Solapur district. Later, she also served as an education extension officer in the Jat taluka of Sangli district. She wrote “Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha” (The Kaleidoscopic Story of my Life) after she retired from teaching in 1981. This is the story of Naja, who bears the brunt of class, caste and gender. Naja is from the Mahar caste, one of the biggest Dalit communities in Maharashtra. The dedication to this book reads as:

“To my aaye-appa(mother-father) who worked the entire day in the hot glaring sun, hungry and without water, and through the drudgery of labour, with hunger pinching their stomach, educated me and brought me from darkness into light”⁶

The self-narrative of Shantabai is her story, being born in a Dalit and impoverished family. Her education was the only thing which was most important for her family. Shantabai was also a bright student amongst others. Shantabai’s father’s opinion on her second marriage was

“If the girl stays on by herself, well and good- or else let her go wherever she wants to- we are not Brahmins you know”⁷

Shantabai’s family was poor. Her mother was forced to go from door to door early in the morning, asking for the leftover. If it rained, there would be no dry firewood to light the hearth. On such nights, the entire family would go to sleep hungry. As a child, shantabai had seen the bruised back of one the men in the community. The village policeman beat up gangaram only. Because he was trying to listen in on the investigation into the death of an upper caste woman who had been found drowned in the well.

Shantabai writes about two of the early memories of caste-based humiliation that disturbed her. As a part of a marriage party that was travelling across village, their bullock cart was stopped and the bullocks were detached from the cart by the upper caste Patil of the village. And, they were asked to go back walking on foot. Another incident that she recalls is when in the sixth standard, she was asked by the teacher to go to shaku, her barahman classmate’s house. “on seeing me shaku’s mother shouted, ‘Eh daughter of mahar, stop right there! You will stamp on the rangoli at the door’. When shantabai and kamble master had married, the marriage procession had not been allowed to enter the village.

⁵ Rege, Sharmila. Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women’s Testimonies, Zubaan: An imprint of Kali for Women, New Delhi, 2006, p.97

⁶ Rege, Sharmila. Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women’s Testimonies, Zubaan: An imprint of Kali for Women, New Delhi, 2006

⁷ Ibid., p.110

This book “Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women’s Testimonios” by Sharmila Rege notes at length “the dominance of Brahmans who constituted only four percent of the population in the intellectual field”. It explains how articulation of caste in the public sphere came to be seen as illegitimate and even as a betrayal of the nation. Historically, we see in the pre-independence period when the national struggle was solely directed against the British for the liberation of India. An urgent need was felt by the nationalist for the consolidation of India as a nation to challenge the white supremacy who claims to be more civilized and modern. Seeing a refuge in “Hindu revivalism”, the nationalist came up with the concept of “One Hindu Nation” to morally alleviate the sentiment of the mass. So when Ambedkar presented his stand for the rights of certain section of the society, “The Depressed Classes” he was portrayed as a threat to “One Hindu Nation”. Thus he came to be tagged as a “Nation Breaker”. This nationalist demotion of caste to the private sphere was contested by the mobilization of Satyasodhak, a non-Brahmanical Dalit counter public movement.

The “caste debate” first started in the 1830s, when initially caste system was justified by taking “recourse to tradition” or “modern idiom”. Later, this debate transformed to underlining the problems with caste system and sought to reform it. Supporters of the caste system argued that the survival of the Hindu religion was contingent on the survival of caste order and justified the system in terms of divine intervention. Some spoke the language of reforming certain components to prove the scientific basis and functions of the caste order.

The Author exposes the reader with the other camp, who sought to underline the malaise of the caste system and spoke in a reformist, nationalist or sociological language. In their articulations, the caste system is often reduced to practices of purity-pollution and untouchability. M. S. S. Pandian⁸ argued that caste gets transcoded as a modern institution in an effort to shut out the language of caste from public sphere. The author further explains how the politics of Phule, Shahuji Maharaj and Ambedkar underlined the historical character of caste-based exploitation, rejected the Varna order and suggested annihilation of caste as the only path to an egalitarian society.

The understanding of caste as an ideological system based on an irreconcilable opposition of the principles of purity and pollution has dominated disciplinary knowledges. For instance if we bring the context of “theological studies” even in the modern scenario we find the apparent functioning of instrumental education or pedagogy particularly in Hindu religion. There is no scope for creativity and the body of knowledge structured is regarded as immutable or infallible. Such an understanding of caste was derived from what is known as “top to down approach”. The gardener of such understanding highlights caste as a system of consensual values.

There has been a general spurt of interest in mainstream English publishing of Dalit life narratives. For quite some time, this theme has been thriving in the vernacular languages. The realm of English language is still much unexplored. Translations from vernacular languages to mainstream languages will make Dalit voices accessible and will also expose casteism. This new scholarship is breaking the walls of old scholarship and creating space for itself. There is a politics in selection of work in terms of what is translated and by whom. Considering this reality in the neoliberal perspective, today we see a constant tussle broadly between two sets of people, viz. the proprietor class who are mostly upper caste and the lower caste. There is a sense of assertion that is operating at the two level and both perceive the opportunity and constraint distinctly thus widening the gap of consensus between the two.

⁸ Pandian M. S. S. 1998.”On a Dalit Woman’s Testimoni”, Seminar, No, 471, November, 53-6

Most recently published Dalit writings are autobiographical in nature. Some scholars question the radical potential and theorization of these texts; they ask “can readers really relate to different autobiographies?” Anand Teltumbde finds the autobiographical narratives too individualistic, often glorifying the author, romanticizing and failing to represent collective pain. This sort of sceptical questioning by Teltumbde an IIT graduate, who hails from the same background, reflects a progressive critique and non-radical outlook. The book discusses the question of issues related to the autobiographical nature of Dalit life narratives. The first issue I would like to frame as “Are Dalit life narratives a moral source for political movements or reminders of a hateful past? Some scholars say that the narratives are stories of pain and sufferings. Several Dalit scholars argued against Dalits writing autobiographies and compared the process to ‘digging out stench from hateful waste bins of the past’. To cite with an example is a portion from Baby Kondiba Kamble in her book “Jinne Amuche” (1986), who belief that the younger generation should not forget the “memories of humiliation and enslavement” so that they can understand the meaning of hard fought battle against the caste system. However, here one needs to be careful while recounting the history which teaches us not is radical and become an exploiter himself. This narrative should only bring about imbibing perseverance in the younger generation.

Next in line is the issue that “are these narratives Dreadful or empowering”? Translator and teacher, Arun Prabha Mukherjee argues that autobiographies are not just sob stories but, stories of anger against injustice. On the contrary Baby Kondiba Kamble in her book “Jinne Amuche” 1986, explains that “the lowly conditions of life can be narrated without embarrassment for this were imposed and not a matter of choice” (p. 194).

Third issue can be summarized as “Is the token inclusion of Dalit writings with Dalit studies becoming a fad within academia?” Gail Omvedt⁹ opines that there is an increasing critical awareness about Brahmanical domination among sensitive ‘upper caste’ academics in India. On the other hand, Alok Mukherjee says Dalit writing is still seen as not representing “universal themes”. And, K. P. Singh argues that the discipline has not reached a point where it has become fashionable to “do” Dalit studies.

Fourth issue can be seen as “what is the political significance, limitation and challenges Dalit life narratives pose to the genre of bourgeois autobiography”. Some argue that Dalit life narratives focus more on the pre-Ambedkarite era and thus do not adequately represent the history of agitation and progress. Manohar Jadhav¹⁰ makes a case against autobiographies being labelled revivals of memories of a hateful past. He argues that the continued stream of Dalit life narratives over three generations and more suggests that there is no reason for either embarrassment or blame. On the other hand, Baburao Bagul, a leading Dalit intellectual explained how Dalit literature is not defined by anguish, waiting and sorrow alone but, it is historical necessity in promoting human freedom.

The whole debate on whether the hateful past or historical necessity should be written and brought into the present suggests the complex relationship in the pursuit of history. Dalit life narratives cannot be accused of bringing an undesired past into the present for they are one of the most direct and accessible ways in which the silence and misinterpretation of Dalits has been countered. Daya Pawar argues that Dalit life narratives are in fact testimonies, which forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual

⁹ Omvedt, Gail. 1976. Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The non-Brahman movement in Western India: 1873 to 1930, Bombay: Scientific Socialist Education Trust.

¹⁰ Jadhav, Manohar. 2001. Dalit Streeyanche Atmakathane: Swarup Aani Chikitsa. Pune: Suvidha Prakashan (Marathi)

and context explicitly or implicitly “the official forgetting” of histories of caste oppression, struggles and resistance.¹¹

In this book all the sections are narratives of women belonging from Dalit community. “Dalit feminism” is a new arena which is breaking the walls of general feminism and making space for newer forms of feminist interpretations. Why is this Dalit feminism important? Why can't it be simply studied under the heading of feminism? In this context Shailaja Paik in her book “Double Discrimination: Dalit Women's Education In Modern India” talks about a phenomenon called “Double Discrimination”. Double discrimination means the compounding effect Gender discrimination and Caste discrimination, which leaves the Dalit women on the lowest pedestal of society open for reckless mental, physical, economic and labour exploitation.¹²

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¹¹ Pawar, Daya (ed.) 1985. 'Kallapa Yashwant Dhale' hyanchi Durmil Diary, Mumbai: Maharashtra Rajya sahitya Aani Sanskruti Mandal (Marathi)

¹² Paik, Shailaja, Double Discrimination: Dalit Women's Education In Modern India, Routledge research on gender in Asia series, 2014