

Challenging the Societal Barriers: A Dalit Feminist Reading of Urmila Pawar's Select Short Stories

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Abstract

Feminism, a social and political movement, promotes gender equality and dismantles oppressive structures that uphold discrimination and inequality against women. In order to build an egalitarian society for all genders, it strives to fight against patriarchal conventions, stereotypes, and power structures. Dalit feminism addresses the experiences, struggles, and empowerment of Dalit women in the broader aspect of feminism. It focuses on the intersectionality of caste, gender, and class. By giving voice to the experiences of Dalit women and challenging the prevailing narratives and power structures in Indian society, the writings of Urmila Pawar aid in defending the rights and welfare of Dalit women and in creating a more inclusive and equitable society. With particular reference to Urmila Pawar's short stories, such as “Mother”(Aaye), “The Odd One” (Vegli), and “Justice” (Nyay), the paper intends to analyze how Dalit women challenge various social and cultural barriers in the male-dominated society. The paper also illustrates how Dalit women are doubly marginalized and oppressed in terms of gender and caste. The paper explores how Dalit women assert their identity and agency in various spheres of their lives in the patriarchal society.

Keywords: Dalit Feminism, Power structure, Societal Barriers, Identity, Intersectionality

Introduction

Caste is a dominant factor determining the status of people in Indian society. The traditional caste system divides people into four categories— “the highest is that of Brahmans or priests, below them the Kshatriyas or warriors, then the Vaishyas, in modern usage mainly merchants, and finally the Shudras, the servants or have-nots” (Dumont 66-67). Dalits are given the bottom place in the hierarchical caste system, where they have minimal rights to survive. Since time immemorial, the upper caste people have marginalized and exploited Dalits. Feminism is a discourse that can be understood not as an ideology against men but against the domination of men and patriarchy. In the same way, Dalit feminism questions the domination of not only Dalits but also non-Dalits. Feminism fights for men's and women's equal rights. Dalit feminism addresses the question of intersectionality often absent from the mainstream feminist discourse— “Dalit Feminism positions as a more effective

ideology for the empowerment of Indian women as it links up women's exploitation with that of the patriarchy and also of the varna-caste system which Feminism, in general, couldn't do" (Karunyakara 3).

Dalit feminism emerged as a revolutionary outcome against feminism that overlooked the oppression of women in the politics of the caste system (Sen 2019). Feminism places its focus on recognizing the ways in which current gender discourses categorize individuals as 'men' or 'women,' rather than fixating solely on the concept of 'women' in isolation. Feminism acknowledges women and the politics of caste, class, and race as neither stable nor homogeneous categories (Menon 2015). In the early stages of Dalit feminism, the voices of Dalit women struggled to break through the barriers of caste and societal norms. While urban-dwelling Dalit women found more opportunities to participate in the Dalit movement and assert their autonomy, their rural counterparts often remained muted for an extended period, a phenomenon described by Rege as a 'silenced era of feminism' (Chakravarti 2012).

The discussion of Marathi Dalit feminism emphasizes how canonical Brahminic feminist interventions have rendered Dalit women's sufferings epistemically invisible. Marathi Dalit feminism presents itself as a standpoint that recognizes and encompasses the critiques and diverse inequalities faced by Dalit women who occupy socially marginalized positions. Dalits have been victimized by the hierarchical caste structure, which perpetuates inequality and enforces the segregation of power. Dalits are subjected to racial discrimination, exploitation, and systematic erasure at every level of inequality. The obnoxious connections between caste, gender, and class continue to oppress Dalit women (Patil 2023).

An Overview of Urmila Pawar's Select Stories

Urmila Pawar is a prominent Marathi Dalit woman writer. Among the contemporary Dalit writers of her time, like Limbale, Baby Kamble, and Daya Pawar, she is held in high esteem for his feminist approach to literature. Pawar's narratives chronicle the saga of Dalit women and how they revolt against the politics of power prevailing in society due to the caste system and patriarchal mindset. *Motherwit* is a collection of short stories where Pawar projects all the female characters not as passive subservient to oppression but as defiant and courageous individuals who have the power to fight against the social stigma of caste and gender. This collection, particularly significant for Dalit women, serves as a catalyst for asserting their legal rights. Pawar's writing emerges as a powerful critique of mainstream feminist discourse, where Dalit women rise against societal injustices and norms that have denied them equal rights. Veena Deo, the translator of the collection *Motherwit*, writes,

Reading Urmila Pawar's stories not only provides multifaceted appreciation and understanding of Dalit women's lives in different contexts, she clearly provides a very nuanced and sophisticated articulation of an emergent voice that moves through a variety of discourses and enriches Marathi literature as a whole. (Pawar xli)

The study delves into three stories by Pawar, namely "Aaye" (Mother), "Vegli" (The Odd One), and "Nyay" (Justice) from her collection *Motherwit*. All the stories were originally written in Marathi and later translated into English by Veena Deo. All three stories are vibrant from the feminist standpoint, where all the women characters are designed as revolutionary in asserting their identity. The story "Aaye" (Mother), based on Pawar's own mother, tells the story of a determined woman who had to face oppression for her stubborn determination to stay in town after her husband's death to give her children a better education and a better future. This story vividly depicts the hardships the woman endured while trying to support her family. Following her husband's death, she is persuaded by her husband's brother to sell the family property and relocate to the village. Discovering the conspiracy, she remains steadfast in her decision not to leave the town.

“Vegli” (The Odd One) is a story that encompasses various aspects of Dalit Feminist theory. The protagonist, Nalini, is an educated Dalit woman who constantly confronts her identity as a Dalit and a woman, not only within her in-laws’ family but also in her workplace. Her in-laws insist on her staying at home and tending to household chores. However, Nalini’s decision to work outside the home challenges traditional norms, establishing her as an independent woman. The plot takes a turn when Nalini receives a promotion and secures a government apartment in Mumbai. Colleagues begin to insult her, claiming that Dalits always have an advantage. In response, she encourages her husband, Vithal, to raise funds for them to move to a better place. Although Vithal attempts to persuade his parents about the decision to relocate for their betterment, his parents remain unresponsive, falsely accusing Nalini of scheming to disrupt the family and take Vithal away from them. The story ends with Nalini deciding to leave her home with her baby without seeking anyone’s consent or approval. Her act of leaving home illustrates her determination and her willingness to confront societal barriers, overcoming obstacles as she strives to move forward in life.

“Nyay” (Justice) is another prominent story of Urmila Pawar, where she delineates the sufferings of a woman, Paru. The protagonist, Paru, a woman of approximately twenty-six, experienced widowhood at a very young age. She possessed beauty, innocence, a strong work ethic, and virtues. Following her husband’s passing, she labors tirelessly to support her family and care for her elderly father-in-law. Paru achieves this through the cultivation and sale of bananas in the town. However, her life took a distressing turn when she was accused of having an affair with a man named Shantanu and bearing his illegitimate child. The villagers believed that the child in Paru’s womb was the result of this alleged liaison. Consequently, she was summoned to the village court to address the issue of the child’s parentage. She was firm in her standpoint and told the truth in front of the gathered audience about how she was attacked and brutally raped by people while returning from the market. The story takes a remarkable turn when Paru makes the decision to embrace motherhood and is granted justice.

The Marathi Dalit Literary Movement

The emergence of Dalit literature empowers Dalit writers to break the silence that has shrouded their voices for a long time, enabling them to confront societal norms and barriers head-on. Central to the issue is the Manusmriti, a document considered the ideological framework that perpetuates discrimination. Regarded as the Hindu legal code, it systematically denies women of all castes equal rights and opportunities (Sen 2019).

While the Dalit movement represents an ongoing struggle for comprehensive human freedom, it often appears to give insufficient attention to the women’s question. The fight for women’s liberation should intertwine with the broader endeavor for human emancipation. There is a persistent notion that Dalit women enjoy exemption from the bonds and oppressive constraints, unlike Brahmin women, which is false. It is crucial for educated Dalit women to discard the false belief that their success in the world is solely dependent on male support. To forge a path towards empowerment, it is important to stand up for one’s rights both as women and as Dalits (Pan 2020). National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW), in 2009 convention, declared that “We are concerned that Dalit women in India suffer from three oppressions: gender, as a result of patriarchy; class, being from the poorest and most marginalized communities; and caste, coming from the lowest caste, the ‘untouchables’” (Qtd. In Pan 30). The mainstream literature suppressed the voices of Dalits by not giving equal rights and opportunity as “the mainstream discourse reflects the worldview of the dominant group members and marginalized groups are largely muted because their lived experiences are not represented” (Orbe 4).

In Marathi literature, the writings of Dalit women span a broad spectrum of narratives, stretching from the 13th century A.D. to the early stages of colonialism. The colonial era brought forth a new wave of female authors in Marathi literature who focused on stories centered around women. However, a significant development in post-1967 Marathi women's literature was the emergence of Dalit women writers. The Marathi Dalit movement signifies the rebellion of untouchable castes against the established Hindu/Indian social structure. In this context, the writings of Dalit women stand out as the most poignant expressions, shedding light not only on the pain and suffering experienced by Dalit women but also on the challenges and experiences linked to their caste. From the 13th century A.D. to the post-1967 period, Marathi women's literature consistently encourages women to exhibit their resilience and create counter-cultural spaces.

With the rise of the Ambedkarite and Dalit Panther movements, Marathi Dalit literature gained popularity. These movements gave rise to the numerous women writers who delineated their struggles through their narratives. In her writing, *The Weave of My Life* (2009), Pawar illustrates how women are always treated inferior, and she defends the point by saying that women are no longer weaker in respect to men. They are viewed as secondary in traditional society, as Pawar States:

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...I had realized that I now had a new vision, a new perspective on looking at women. I had lost my fear. (Pawar 207- 208)

Contextualizing Dalit Women's State of 'Outsider Within'

In literature, Dalit women's voices remained silent for a long time. In the article "Theorising Gender in South Asia: Dalit Feminist Perspective," Sunaina Arya writes— "The Dalit women who are at the bottom of caste hierarchy suffered doubly— not only denial of rights (economic and educational) and individual freedom as 'untouchables,' but also as 'lower' caste women" (xi). Pawar gives a detailed description of her mother's condition, "My poor mother didn't even have time to grieve in peace. She had our four mouths to feed and not even a coin tied in the knot of her sari" (*Motherwit* 2). Due to caste, gender, and class politics, Dalit women bear the two axes of patriarchal oppression. They first have to put up with the inherent patriarchy that is silent and unchallenged. Second, the prolonged patriarchy that men from the upper caste maintain. Dalit women suffer from various viewpoints— "Dalit women are a faction that comprises the intersection of two groups oppressed on account of their birth: 'women' and 'Dalits.' Women, 'the second sex' and Dalits, the former 'untouchables,' who are kept outside the four Varnas of the Hindu social order" (Sharma and Kumar 842). Dalits are the same as subalterns who don't have any voice, and even their voices are not heard or given importance-

It is not so much that subaltern women did not speak, but rather that others did not know how to listen, how to enter into a transaction between speaker and listener. The subaltern cannot because their words cannot be properly interpreted. Hence, the silence of the female as subaltern is the result of failure of interpretation and not a failure of articulation. (Nubile 35)

Dalit women are often denied space to speak. However, Pawar presents characters that raise their voices against oppression. In the story "Aaye" (Mother), the narrator saw her mother speak with her uncle in protest and anger, "She had never taken that tone with him before. In my life of fourteen years, I heard her talk back in anger this way for the first time" (*Motherwit* 3). In spite of Satya's enforcement to leave the town and stay in the village, the mother in the story knows very well how the caste system in the village will affect her children as she says, "Caste troubles are in

the village too. As a matter of fact, caste discrimination is much worse in the village” (*Motherwit* 4). She also said how her children would get a better education in town, “we are here in town. Here our children go to school with children from other Brahmin and trader families. They will learn to speak like them and be like them” (*Motherwit* 4). In the story “Vegli” (The Odd One), Pawar gives a detailed description of how Dalits have been suffering the injustice of caste discrimination. When Nalini is insulted for getting an advantage being a Dalit, she screams out,

Our ancestors suffered injustices for centuries because you were privileged by birth. Even today most of us are suffering and do not have equal opportunity. We have been degraded, humiliated, ridiculed, and pushed around and continue to be victimized. The government isn’t giving us anything. It is their responsibility to level the playing ground. (*Motherwit* 57)

Patriarchy is also prevalent in the Dalit community as Sunaina Arya, in the article “Dalit or Brahmanical Patriarchy? Rethinking Indian Feminism,” writes, “It is not as if patriarchies do not exist among the Dalit castes, or that Dalit women do not have to struggle against the patriarchies within their own communities” (219). Dalit women are doubly oppressed due to their intersectional identities. As a result of exploitation by the Brahmins, Dalit men may exhibit more aggressive behavior and oppress women who find themselves vulnerable within the complex dynamics of the social structure. Dalit women “make creative use of their marginality and an unprivileged social location that situates their standpoint because those who are unprivileged with respect to their social positions are likely to be privileged with real respect to gaining knowledge of social” (Rolin 218). Contemporary literature witnessed the politics of exclusion of Dalits on the basis of caste, gender, class, and economic factors. Women are confined to household chores, denying their aspirations and hope to succeed in life. The in-laws of Nalini in the story “Vegli” treated Nalini “like a servant who is supposed to take care of the housework” (*Motherwit* 59) and tried to restrict her in the household activities. They complained to Vithal, their son, about Nalini, “Vithal, you work, and your father works. Why do we need her to work? If she really wants to earn something, we can always take in boarders to feed, and she can earn something that way” (*Motherwit* 60). Nalini was given a separate identity of being Dalit in the office where she worked. Colleagues of Nalini thought that Nalini got the promotion due to the reservation policy as they said, “Dalits really have it good these days. The government pampers them. They are always first with promotions, housing” (*Motherwit* 57). Urmila Pawar, in an interview with Munira Salem, links Dalit feminists with feminist issues by saying that “as far [long] as men have their masculinity (within themselves) and women have their femininity, they would always go parallel” (Salem 5).

Dalit women’s social position as an ‘outsider within’ gives them a unique perspective on social, political, economic, and intellectual realities. They cleverly employ this viewpoint and give feminist and social thought a more nuanced outlook (Sharma 2021). The phrase “outsider within,” which was first used in 1968 by Patricia Hill Collins, describes a social space or marginalized area that acts as a boundary between groups with different levels of power. Dalit women writers are perceived as ‘outsiders within’ within the feminist framework, shedding light on the intersecting experiences of oppression faced by Dalit women on three distinct levels: caste, class, and gender identity. This multifaceted perspective offers a range of complementary viewpoints that help readers comprehend the complex realities of being both Dalit individuals and women in society. In the story “Nyay,” Paru led a life of extreme poverty after her husband’s death and managed to run the family as the narrator of the story writes,

For five years after his death, she had lived without any regard for her own physical needs and desire. She had used all her blood and sweat in raising the banana trees on my land. She walked the difficult four miles into town to sell the bananas. That’s how she supported her aging parents-in-law and herself. (*Motherwit* 27-28)

As a result, Dalit women produce this new body of knowledge, which challenges the dominant androcentric paradigm. The stories of Dalit women reflect their development from exclusion to inclusion in the dominant social structures, where they are denied equal rights and continue to be ‘outsiders within.’ Dalit women have learned from their position as ‘outsiders within’ how privileged groups use ideologies to marginalize them, restricting their access to societal resources and institutions that shape, regulate, and marginalize their existence.

Critiquing ‘Feminist Standpoint’ and ‘Agency’

The Dalit Feminist Standpoint is not merely a perspective that women inherently possess; rather, it is a perspective that the group has acquired through active engagement in political struggles. When addressing the historical and ongoing struggles faced by the Dalit community, Dalit women writers often frame their narratives around feminist concerns, thereby emphasizing the complex interplay of hierarchical power dynamics encompassing caste, class, gender, and ethnicity. The feminist standpoint theory promotes the notion that marginalized or oppressed people’s perspectives can help to produce more impartial accounts of the world. Theorists of the Feminist Standpoint expanded the notion to delineate the logical framework for a Feminist Standpoint. Their main contention is that some sociopolitical roles held by women, or ‘marginalized locations,’ can develop into centers of epistemic privilege. Men’s dominant positions in society result in perverse and partial understandings, whereas women’s subdued situations provide the opportunity for inclusive understandings (Sharma 2021). The Dalit feminist standpoint empowers the feminist voice to dismantle dominant ideologies and patriarchal mindsets, broadening the perspective of Dalit activism and feminist discourse. Dalit feminist theory focuses on how caste and gender are dominant in Indian society, especially in the lives of Dalit women, and persists on upper caste people’s understanding of the feminist movement, which failed to highlight the caste-based exploitations that Dalit women have been experiencing so long (Chakraborty 2023).

The narratives of Dalit women delve into the inhumane brutality, torture, and exploitation inflicted upon Dalits by the upper caste, giving rise to protests, anguish, and rebellion against entrenched inequality. Dalit women’s assertions of autonomy and identity are visible through their narratives. Dalit literature evolved as a kind of resistance literature where the unheard voices of the Dalits can be heard in mainstream literature. Vemula Ellaiah writes, “Where there is oppression, there is resistance” (Purushotham and Bheemaiah 341). Nalini’s leaving the house in the story “Vegli” illustrates her resistance against the patriarchal oppressions and creating an identity of her own. Nalini “heard her husband’s words with rising anger and frustration. She quickly got up with her baby son in her arms and said, Aho, wait; don’t say we won’t go. If you don’t want to go, that’s fine. But I am leaving. Nalini did not wait for an answer. She simply walked out with her baby” (*Motherwit* 68). Since Dalit women “are oppressed, they will find their own forms of resistance, and Dalit feminism is a form of resistance” (Purushotham and Bheemaiah 341). Recently, the ceaseless struggles, oppressions, and exploitations of Dalit women gained visibility due to Dalit women’s association with the Dalit movement and their articulation to assert their rights. In order to understand why Dalit women need to speak differently, it is crucial to recognize the internal and external factors that affect this phenomenon. Gopal Guru writes,

Dalit women’s claim to ‘talk differently’ assumes certain positions. It assumes that the social location of the speaker will be more or less stable; therefore, ‘talking differently’ can be treated as genuinely representative. This makes the claim of Dalit women to speak on behalf of Dalit women automatically valid. In doing so, the phenomenon of ‘talking differently’ foregrounds the identity of Dalit women. (2550)

The idea of ‘agency’ in Dalit feminist theory refers to Dalit women’s capacity to take action, make decisions, and exercise power in their lives. It acknowledges their ability to confront and withstand injustice, prejudice, and violence within interlocking caste, class, and gender systems.

Paru, in the story “Nyay,” appeared as a ‘New woman,’ a term coined by Sarah Grand, in asserting her agency by saying,

The child is mine, and I want it. I’ll raise the child myself...we can’t let such an illegitimate child live among us. Why not? I am a woman, and every woman wants to be a mother. I have feelings too. It doesn’t matter who the child is, but I am the baby’s mother. And I, too, need support in my old age. I am a widow. Whose support can I depend on for the rest of my life? Is anyone here going to support me? Paru asked everyone with her neck straightened. (*Motherwit* 38)

Paru’s voice gave new insight into the story as Paru became an inspiration for those who are still unable to fight against dominant cultural barriers— “No educated woman would have said all this calmly and clearly as well as Paru did, giving her testimony that evening. People were shocked listening to her story. No one knew what to say” (*Motherwit* 37). In order to counteract dominant narratives that frequently depict Dalit women as helpless victims or passive recipients of assistance, Dalit feminist theorists emphasize the need to acknowledge and emphasize the ‘agency’ of Dalit women. According to Dalit feminist theory, Dalit women are active participants in their own lives rather than passive victims despite these oppressive circumstances. Mother in the story “Aaye” sticks to her decision of not moving to the village as she says, “My husband always told us that Babasaheb Ambedkar told us to leave our village and move to towns,” and she continued to say, “I am not going to leave this place” (*Motherwit* 4). To oppose caste-based patriarchy and work for social justice, they take part in various forms of resistance, empowerment, and group actions. ‘Agency’ can show up in various ways, including organizing grassroots movements, participating in political and advocacy campaigns, defending one’s rights, and reclaiming one’s cultural identity.

Conclusion

Regardless of their age, education, or profession, Urmila Pawar’s female characters transcend the boundaries of caste, class, gender, politics, and religion. These women’s characters are assertive, decisive, active, and sane rather than weak, helpless, and inactive. They bravely make the decision to take action and take control of their own destiny rather than leaving it in the hands of patriarchs. Education became a useful tool for Dalit women to assert their agency against the intersectionality of caste and gender that was prevalent in Indian society. Pawar’s application of feminism in her literary works is evident through the portrayal of female characters in her short stories. These characters are depicted in a way that underscores their identities as Dalit individuals and also highlights their resolute determination, willingness, and strong feminist agency, which empowers them to establish an independent identity. Stepping out from the shadows of oppressive caste and gender discrimination, the women in these stories display remarkable courage in their battle to dismantle the entrenched ideology of gender and caste intersectionality. They boldly assert their agency, advocating for equal rights and challenging the barriers that persist in society.

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