



Critically reading Resistance of Dalit Women against Patriarchy in Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* and Josiane Rachine and Jean-Luc Racine's *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable*

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Abstract : This research paper encloses the rise of Dalit literature written by Dalit Women in India. For the longest period in the Indian history, the Dalit community was not associated with literacy and literature but once the people became aware of their rights they started voicing their issues through written literature and it was only a matter of time that the women of that community started writing their issues and problems because being a Dalit was less problematic than being a Dalit Women.

Keywords : *Dalit Literature, Dalit Women Writers, Indian Caste System*

Introduction

The caste system found in India is generally believed to be both unique and precious to the Indian Society. The caste system in India is divided into four groups and in the order from highest to the lowest these are Brahmins; the ones that are the closest to god, Kshatriyas; the warriors, Vaishis; the moneylenders and Shudras; the working class (Kumar, 11). And as a social hierarchy it (caste system) divides the Hindu population of India into two distinct social groups namely, the upper cast and the lower caste. These divisions are a permanent part of the society and is backed by a large number of Sanskrit scriptures known as the 'dharma shastras'. These shastras are the law books that are both thought of and written by the Brahmins to enforce caste rules on the lower castes (Shudras), 'Dalits' and women.

Dalit is a political term assigned to a particular group of people who in the earlier times were regarded as ‘untouchable’s’. Dalit is their new identity. Untouchability is a deeply ingrained consequence of the Indian Caste system and is a very hurtful practice that divides human on the basis of their social status and they are called people of ‘low-birth’. It was abolished legally when the Constitution of India came into effect in 1950 but even after its legal abolition, it continued to prevail and practice in many ways and forms in most parts of the country. Dalits are working hard to and struggling to reclaim their identity and self-respect as a human. The rise of the Dalit social and political movements and the rise of the Dalit literature is an example of how Dalits are emerging as a stronger new political community. Through their writings and activities, they have been speaking truth to power.

The literatures of India, until very recently, have never focused on the problems born out of inequality and the rigid caste system. One of the many reasons behind this can be that the pen (both metaphorical and literal) have been in the hands of the powerful. The people or social groups falling outside the grid of authority have been invisible to the people with power and their problems, struggles and issues have been rendered invisible in the canonized literary texts of India. In the nineteenth century we see a slight shift towards the theme of social oppression. In the twentieth and the twenty-first century we have seen people giving importance and spreading awareness in literature of those who for the longest period in the Indian history have been considered as the outcastes, the indigenous, the landless and the dispossessed.

Indian society is fundamentally cast- centric and hence the power and privileges are distributed among people along the caste lines. We can think of it as, caste and it’s ruthless rules were made to prevent the Dalits from entering the social and civic spheres of the country. Michel Foucault’s theory of knowledge and power can be applied here in an attempt to understand the main and primary ways in which the Dalits were oppressed. In his thesis he focuses on the correlation between knowledge and domination. He says that knowledge- its production and dissemination cannot be separated from the complex activity of domination. Quoting Michel Foucault, *“what makes power hold onto them, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it does not only weigh on us a force that says no, but that it transverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression.”* (Kumar, 119)

This is exactly what happened in the caste society. The hegemony of the higher castes became so pervasive because all the power and knowledge was generated by them. Sanskrit was the language of the Vedas (The only source of knowledge during that time) and only the upper caste precisely the Brahmins had access to both the Vedas and the language and hence, Dalits and women were forbidden to have the access to the language.

Chapter 1: The emergence of Dalit Women writers and their influence on Indian Literature

Within the broad spectrum of Dalit literature, the contribution of women writers is both outstanding and engaging. Their experience is two-tiered, meaning that women have been oppressed both by caste (their birth as Dalit) and by patriarchy (living and growing up in a male dominated society). Dalit women were not only oppressed by the higher castes but also were neglected by the men of their own caste. Their vulnerability is a result of social, economic and sexual exploitation. Women were sometimes forced to do tasks even Dalit men found menial and they did it because they had to feed their families.

Dalit women and their writings were not regarded as a part of the Indian Feminist Movement but regardless of being left out, Dalit women emerged as fighters rather than victims and started another big movement called the Dalit Feminism or more specifically Dalit Womanism, in order to define the conditions and experience of Dalit women both in and out of their community. ‘Womanism’ is a term coined by Alice Walker, and is a term that covers a much wider spectrum than Feminism; social, racial, cultural, sexual and economic conflicts.

Dalit women have been able to emerge powerful and break the hierarchy of oppression of any kind by writing autobiographies. These autobiographies serve as first hand testimonies of their experience in brutal conditions. When men wrote about Dalit women, they portrayed them as victims of rape and assault and never once were they shown as strong figure and this made Dalit women realize, not to give a man the right to voice their thoughts and hence they started writing and portraying the women of their communities as people who resist and fight back like any other victim of social oppression who will take stand or guard their dignity. .Dalit writing has been deeply autobiographical in intent as it was a way where the marginalized “other” became part of mainstream literature and discourse.

Chapter 2: Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*

“My mother used to weave aayadans, a generic Marathi term for all things made of bamboo. I find that her act of weaving and my act of writing are originally linked. The weave is similar. It is the weave of pain, agony and suffering that links us.” (Pawar,96)

Activist and award-winning writer Urmila Pawar, in her book recounts three generations of Dalit women who struggled to overcome the burden imposed on them due to their castes. Dalits make up India’s poorest class. They are forbidden to perform anything other than the most unsanitary and menial work. For years they were considered to be polluted by nature and hence were forced to live in isolated communities away from the upper castes.

Pawar belonged to the Mahar Dalit community and grew up on the rugged and rough Konan Coast near Mumbai. In her village, her community was made to reside in the centre of the village so that they are always available whenever the upper castes desired to summon them. Her community grew with a sense of immense and perpetual insecurity and the fear that they could be attacked from all four sides during the time of conflicts. And this constant living in fear according to Pawar has made her community to shrink within themselves like a turtle and their growth and development happened at a snail’s pace. In this very intimate and at the same time frank memoir, Pawar not only talks about her personal tragedy but also talks enthusiastically about the awakening of a moment among rapidly changing political and social changes. This autobiography not only talks about a woman’s rediscovery of her own self while rising from the barriers of caste, poverty and also patriarchy but also talks about the background of the Indian community (especially the Maharashtrian community) including both the inter and intra communal disturbances and clashes.

In the novel Urmila Pawar talks about the relation between poverty and Dalit-hood that is how the Mahars as a community not only lied in the bottom of the caste hierarchy but also were the weakest in terms of economy. The problems of gender are also highlighted in the novel as the problems of patriarchy that being a woman born in a Dalit community. Due to their extreme poverty, people of their community had to go to the upper castes begging for festive food leftovers (Pawar mentions that her sisters-in-law Vitha and Parvati used to go begging with other women of the village). The author talks about her dual oppression or double marginalization relating it to her gender, caste and the disadvantages that followed. She even talks about how each and every single one of her social inter-courses, ended up in disdain or humiliation or rejection from the people of the other caste. One

same instance happened when Urmila organized her younger daughter's birthday party and asked her friends to come over for some cake and later, she was insulted by the guests because they had no idea that she belonged to the lower caste (this happened before she converted to Buddhism).

An addition to being born in a lower caste is extreme poverty which forbids them to eat nice or dress properly or to be clean in public spaces. They were devoid of the basic human rights and dreams due to two factors, poverty and caste. The news of B.R Ambedkar's death came in as a shock and fueled the Ambedkar Movement and this in turn gave rise to the necessity to convert into Buddhism to avoid the caste humiliation. Pawar talks frankly about her first sexual experience with her husband and how him and her mother-in law were happy to confirm her virginity (as she bled on the first night). Pawar was the first female Indian author who spoke both frankly and bluntly about the extreme personal details of her life. She also talks about the importance of education and how being educated helps you to create your own identity and helps to shape your views and improve your perspective towards things. After she joins the Dalit Women's Organization she found "a new vision of women" that made her aware of the equality of men and women. Pawar compares man and woman saying that they both are equally strong in the context that if man has muscular power, then woman has the power to give birth. When she started taking Dalit Literature and Women's literature, it reinforced her subaltern activism. The book is an example of her evolution as a woman of the lower caste who questioned both the caste system and patriarchy in India.

Chapter 3: Josiane Rachine and Jean-Luc Racine's *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable* and its impact on Dalit literature

Dalit women who belonged to the Paraiyar caste and her experiences give a worldview that actually connects diverse issues that connect the identities of the Dalit women. Viramma's story is presented through foreign interlocutors who were not very fond of the sensitivities that were associated with her Dalit womanhood and yet her encounters and stories are important because they both define and describe the process that helped her form her identity. This rich narrative the runs around her own life describes her social position as a person, her perspective regarding the people with powers whose rules prevailed in the region or her perception of the postcolonial states. This novel is filled with oral testimonies that deal with the history and mythologies of the Paraiyar community, their ways of survival and protests and how they refused to be manipulated by the caste discrimination that prevailed in the rural Tamil Nadu back in the late eighty's.

This novel is a detailed account of a ten-year long conversation between Viramma and Josiane Rachine. Translator Will Hobbson says that Viramma's knowledge of the rural songs and chants helped Rachine with her ethno musicological research. For the first five year, Viramma never really talked freely and initially paraphrased her experiences. This could have happened for two reasons; she was not comfortable with sharing her experiences with an outsider and that too a white woman and the other reason could be that she thought that Rachine could never understand about her feelings because she belonged to a completely different background and will never be able to give justice to her words. It was from the sixth year onwards when Viramma started addressing Rachine as Siramma, she began opening up honestly and truly. Viramma for the longest period of time thought that if she will slip out details that were way too personal or controversial and could be used by people to mark her caste as "uncivilized" and being stigmatized as something they were not was the last thing that Viramma wanted.

The thing that was a matter of concern for Rachine was that Viramma's experiences were shared verbally and most of the spice lied in the tone, pitch and expressions of the speaker. So, she had to make sure that during translation none of this is lost as it would make it less authentic and appealing and as the translator Will Hobbson was asked to minimise the use of any kind of dialect and use very basic English. Viramma throughout the novel is very aware about her place or how she is very different from the people outside of her caste. She talks about the gap that exists between her and the "respectable" lady in the novel mainly to draw the attention of the listener towards how different she is from the interlocutor.

Viramma talks about her experiences as a young bride and how she saw her husband as a man who treated her as an animal at night and disappeared in the day. And how for the longest time she hated the man that society called her husband. She made sure to take revenge by disrespecting him and even she was yelled at and cursed by the husband she felt satisfied with what she did. She abided by the patriarchal rules of marriage that made her do everything for husband, from serving him meals to warming up the water for his bath but could not love him until he started treating her with love and affection.

Since the beginning of time, Dalits have been said or seen as people who pollute the path they travel on or contaminate the well they draw water from. Through the spectacle of "pollution", Viramma in her narrative points out the double standards of the upper castes. She narrates that one time the Reddy's daughter-in-law handed her eldest newborn son to Viramma to breastfeed as the Paraiyar's consumed beef and their milk was supposed

to be much richer in vitamins. The same boy when grown up denies a glass of water to Viramma and says that it “it stinks of Paraya in here.”

Finally, what is revealed through Viramma’s narrative is that the political economy of the village was divided into two parts, one belonged to the privileged who owned the lands and the other belonged to her community that worked in those lands. For a decade, anyone who read Viramma’s narrative said that it was a Dalit text but the later revelation was that it was not a Dalit text, instead it was a text not targeting the oppression but focusing on “how an oppressed woman lives and thinks.”

Conclusion

The reading of both the texts, Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* and Josiane Rachine and Jean-Luc Racine's *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable* gives us a clear picture that women were seen as racial and sexually stereotyped beings who did not have either a voice or an identity of their own. The idea of patriarchy which is the root cause of this kind of mindset and is prevalent in both the dominating and the dominated groups. The novels suggest that women were treated as objects of pleasure and hate. But the query is do women see those writings as units for resistance. The answer is in strongly negative. Women in most of these writings occupy a secondary position. The readers are presented with narration of the ordinary trials and tribulations in their lives however do now no longer get to listen their voice. The subsequent query then is who will talk for those women. If it's miles women, then one wishes to assume whether or not the high-caste women can talk for the Dalits? The scenario here would be similar to at least one in which the ‘White’ woman speaks for her female counterpart in the third world countries. The articulation of the feelings of Dalit women by non-Dalit writers fall in the danger of arousing pity and sympathy in the readers. On the otherhand the Dalit writers force the readers to read without feeling guilty or sympathetic for their lot. Authenticity becomes the hall mark of these writings. It is a very well understood that the authenticity of a text is maintained only if the events that are mentioned have been written by the person who has experienced them firsthand . As soon as there is the involvement of a writer who is not very well connected to the speaker, both the text and it’s meaning lose their authentication which entirely defeats the purpose of writing that text. Whether it’s Pawar writing about her oppression of Rachine writing about Viramma’s experience the goal and focus has always been to make sure that the reader is made familiar with the facts without any alteration. Dalit women writers have made sure to give the readers an experience that is authentically theirs without any alteration.

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