

Redefinition of Emancipation in Dalit Life Narratives from Gender Perspective

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Abstract

This paper attempts to discuss Vasant Moon's *The Growing up Untouchable in India* and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* as literature of Emancipation that transcends the trauma narration of hunger, poverty, deprivation, and social injustice. These Ambedkarite texts revolve around the hidden history of pain and humiliation on the one hand and the conscientious recording of their lives as an alternative history of Dalits on the other. Besides, these texts display their caste and gender identities. Hence, this paper critiques the subhuman status of Dalit men and the thrice oppressed status of Dalit women and their inevitable relation to Indian aesthetics and Indian feminism.

Keywords: Dalit Life Narratives, Untouchables, Ambedkar, Emancipation, Gender Perspectives.

India is a country known for its unity in diversity, secularism, and multiculturalism. Ironically, the same country is known for its age-old social hierarchical order – the Varna system – that encourages the social, cultural, economic, political and emotional exploitation of one group of people. Such exploitation enables the upper caste people to coin one group of the same soil as "untouchables" or "Dalits" signifying the lower power in the hierarchical order. The struggle against such exploitation is also persistent and the social reformers, activists, and thinkers work for the empowerment of Dalit people. Along with political thinkers and social reformers, creative writers record the alternative history of India from Dalit perspective in the form of Poetry, Autobiography, Memoirs, Short stories, Novels, Drama, Biography, Semi-autobiography, and Fictional texts. Hence, Dalit literature reflects the agitation of Dalits, varying facets of

Dalit movements, their struggle for survival and emotional universe of Dalit life and it re/defines Dalit aesthetics from Dalit perspectives.

Usually, the Dalit narratives are viewed as a form of painful narratives that withhold and endure the pain, exploitation, misery, poverty, hunger and social exclusion. Politically, Dalit narratives oppose and resist social oppression and cultural slavery. Further, Dalit narratives go beyond the recording of their suffering and they, in turn, serve as a document of strategies and a rule book of their emancipation and liberation from social injustice. Besides, Dalit narratives highlight the intra-communal struggles and many Dalit narratives functions as an articulation of the need for the reunification of sub-caste groups and community formation. But, the gender disparity that prevails within the Dalit community remains a less articulated issues both in the creative and research domain. This paper attempts to study gender disparity that prevails within Dalit groups in defining emancipation. Hence, this paper attempts to study two Dalit life narratives written by – Vasant Moon's *Vasti* (1995) trans. *The Growing up Untouchable in India* (2001), and Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan* (2003) trans. *The Weave of My Life* (2008) – male and female writers belonging to the same Mahar community to highlight the gender difference prevail within the same community.

Oxford dictionary defines the term emancipation as "to free somebody, especially from legal, political or social restrictions." But, for Dalits, the term emancipation does not stagnate with freeing somebody but extending to the level of restructuring the social hierarchical order and thereby bringing a change in the attitude of the world towards Dalits. Reformers and thinkers like Jothibharao Phule, Dr. Ambedkar, Narayana Guru, Periyar articulate the necessity of eradicating social injustice and the importance of empowering Dalits. Among these thinkers, Dr. Ambedkar remains a source of inspiration for Vasant Moon and Urmila Pawar. Dr. Ambedkar's thought and philosophy of emancipation believe education as the foremost important entity in the freeing of Dalit. Dr. Ambedkar believes that education

would emancipate Dalit as education has the potentiality to awaken a kind of consciousness that would finally bring about real change in their society and rejection of injustice based on irrationality.

Dr. Ambedkar views the problem of caste difference as an issue of class struggle and as a struggle between the caste hierarchical Hindus and untouchables. According to him, untouchability cannot be narrowed down as an injustice done by "one class against another" (Ambedkar 9). The concept of untouchability is all about class relation and the struggle begins while Dalit claims equal treatment with others. Dr. Ambedkar believes the struggle between Hindus and untouchables as a "permanent phenomenon" (Ambedkar 10) that enunciates its presence whenever the Dalits "cross their level" (Ambedkar 10) given by the Hindu religion.

According to Ambedkar, as long as Dalits remain as Hindus, their position will either remain as slaves or they will be the participants of the eternal class struggle. Dr. Ambedkar advocates the need for essential powers – man-power, wealth and mental strength – to survive through the struggle. Dr. Ambedkar conscientiously comments on the casteism and religious fanaticism of the country that naturalized the social hierarchy. He says that within Hindu society every human helps each other while they suffer from poverty, sorrow and pain but none comes forward to resist the maltreatment given to untouchables, whom they think do not deserves equal treatment, within their religion.

Dr. Ambedkar has remained highly optimistic to bring political and economic changes, through access to education and right to vote, for more than a decade after his return from London in 1923. But the reality has altered his views after his organization of the civil disobedience at Mahad, the temple entry movements at Pune and Nasik and the famous Poona Pact in 1932. All these disappointments have engendered Dr. Ambedkar to shift his focus from bringing political and economic changes to reforming the core values of Hinduism rather than accepting the social reform initiated by Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj, and subsequently renouncing Hinduism for Buddhism.

Dr. Ambedkar included women's empowerment while preaching the strategies of emancipation. He wants women to liberate themselves from religious, legal, economic, sexual oppression and encourages them to access higher education and emphasizes their escape from narrow gender roles within their community as well as outside their community. The issue of Dalit women is associated with the issue of patriarchy. The subordination of Dalit women results in several exploitations of the upper caste males, upper-caste females, and males of their castes. In a male-dominated society, Dalit women could not escape from indescribable caste and gender oppression. Due to the lack of education, Dalit women have to work in socially degradable jobs, and lowly paid jobs. Thus, the most Dalit women are agriculture labourers, marginal cultivators, menial scavengers, fisherwomen, leather workers, and midwives; and a few women work in location-specific Beedi factories and unorganized sectors.

Dr. Ambedkar has politicized the creation of political consciousness among untouchable women through larger campaigns that are not specifically about women's issues. He has spoken about the importance of women's education, eradication of child marriage and continued to address himself to women to stop practicing meaningless superstitious rituals. He also argued that all problems related to Dalit women are merely the manifestation of the caste system and thus only certain revolutionary steps aiming at the annihilation of caste could prove beneficial for Dalit women. He strongly advocates that women should recognize their worth as social forces to participate in social and political agitations. The processes adopted by Dr. Ambedkar to emancipate and empower Dalit women were primarily founded upon two premises: educating Dalit women and encouraging them to participate in the public event. He foresees a subsequent creation of a sense of self-respect in them for reforming the social order of Indian society.

Dalit men and women are inspired by the thoughts and ideologies of Dr. Ambedkar. The spirit of Ambedkarite ideology remains a part and parcel of any Dalit narrative. The texts – *Growing up Untouchable in India* and *The Weave of My Life* – that have been considered for the research on gender

disparity can be described as a complete Ambedkarite text. These two narratives are the narratives of hunger, poverty, deprivation; and above all, they are the texts of emancipation. These two life narratives present a powerful personal and collective memory of caste oppression through individual recollections.

Both the life narratives have been originally written in Marathi and subsequently translated into English. Both the works, apart from recording the pains and suffering of Mahar, celebrate the uniqueness of the Mahar community. Mahars are the earlier inhabitants of Maharashtra and the term has its etymological reference from the meaning as inhabitants of Mahars. The Mahars are Marathi speaking people living in various regions of Maharashtra. The traditional roles of the Mahar community are to clean village roads, to scavenge dead animals, to carry a message from one village to another village. Vasant Moon is from Vidarbha region and Urmila Pawar is from Konkan region. Both the texts, apart from recording prejudice, violence and crime, represent the spirit that does not allow them to remain as unhappy victims.

The titles of both the life narratives chosen for discussion require a special mention as they articulate gender differences. Vasant Moon's *Growing up Untouchable in India* denotes the neighbourhood of Mahar community in Nagpur signifying the public domain that goes along with the male world. Whereas the title of Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* is referred to as the generic term used for all household things made from bamboo. Urmila Pawar grows up seeing her mother weaving the bamboo baskets. Hence, her choice of the title signifies personal. For Vasant Moon, the sense of liberation comes from the outside world, whereas for Urmila Pawar, the inspiration comes from the inside domestic world of the women. In both the text they progress the concept of the public and personal world that gets blurred.

Vasant's father desolates his family at the age of nine and her family – his mother, younger sister and himself – moves to his grandfather's house located in Vidarbha for their livelihood. Vasant's family completely depends on their upper-caste neighbourhood for their livelihood mostly inhabited by Brahmins. His mother Purnabai worked as a maid-servant in the houses of Europeans to bring up her children, Vasant

and Malti. Initially, Vasant's family faces difficult situations to survive in Nagpur. Due to their economic position, Vasant could not continue to attend school. Through his childhood memories, Vasant Moon highlights the injustice done on untouchable people. Upper caste Hindu people know about the limitations of lower caste people. So, lower caste people are always insulted by one way or the other way by high caste people. *Growing up untouchable in India* Vasant narrates how his classmates laugh at their teacher for wrong pronunciation. The teacher does not punish them as they are from the upper caste community and targets Vasant due to his caste identity. Vasant narrates how the “impure pronunciation” of the teacher has got him “a powerful slap” and how he “swallowed the insult and kept quit”. (Vasant 84)

The incident leaves a deeper impact on the body and soul of Vasant. He feels the pressure of casteism and wants to create his own identity. He narrates another insulting incident that has left a greater impression on him. In his school days, Brahmin students have been considered more talented, capable and intelligent than untouchable students. It is believed that untouchable students cannot compete with Brahmin students. Due to this orthodox mentality, after passing the eighth class, most Brahmin students have been given education in the English medium. While Vasant expresses his wish to be in English medium, one of his teachers denies it and discourages him by telling him that he will not be able to understand English medium as the “subject is very difficult, you will not be able to manage it.” (Vasant 85)

For Vasant Moon making money is only to reduce his hunger. He collects empty aluminum tubes containing lotion, match labels and packets of cigarettes and sells them for food. This petty trade is later converted to collecting caricatures of the war. In his life hunger is just a tip of the perennial stigma. After his education at the age of twenty-three, he has been appointed as Deputy County Commissioner in Nagpur district. As he starts to earn for his family his mother leaves her work in the mill and the family gradually attains middle-class status.

The history of the Dalit movement is inseparable from Vasant Moon's personal history. In the 1930s, Nagpur became the centre of Dalit movements. As the number of Dalit movements such as the

"Samata Sainik Dal", triggered a few upper caste people to impose physical violence on Dalits. The upper caste people could not accept the social, economic and political prosperity of the untouchables. They also prevented the Dalit people from mingling with the political mainstream. Mahar youths were kept under house arrest. Dalit people were brutally attacked with deadly weapons. Vasant and his group were hiding in the neighborhood for thirty days fearing the attack of Atkya, an upper-caste gangster.

The impact of Wamanrao Godbole and Dr. Ambedkar can be seen in the personality of the Vasant Moon. He also converts from Hinduism to Buddhism on "14th October 1956" (Vasant 54) on the call of Dr. Ambedkar along with his followers. Vasant walks in the footsteps of Dr. Ambedkar. Vasant's conversion to Buddhism gives him a sense of self-satisfaction. He expresses his sense of belonging to the community as he has been brought up in it and shows gratitude towards it. He strongly believes that it is his "Vasti" (neighbourhood) that showed him the path of education. It has given him everything from food, love, friendship, care, and total life experience. But with the changing times, Vasant has observed the loss of togetherness in "Vasti". He also feels that changes are due to urbanization of a locality where individual interests are given priority over the group interests of the community. Vasant expresses his nostalgia to go back to "Vasti" and "hear again the Buddhist and Ambedkarite songs sung by the new generation and be merged with the soil that nurtured that community". (Vasant 176)

Throughout *The Growing up Untouchable in India*, there are only fewer references available regarding the status of women in his society. He glorifies his mother Purnabai as a dedicated and determined worker. As a desolate woman, she takes up the responsibility of her two children. She finds a job that earns her two rupees per day. Vasant reminds of her mother's moral strength, hard work, and commitment towards Vasant's education sympathetically. Thus, Vasant documents the challenging and tough situation of Dalit women to live in an orthodox and superstitious society where castism was on its peak. Apart from the description of his mother's struggle, Vasant does not discuss the pain of other Dalit women.

Whereas Urmila begins her narration with a description of the women of her village whose daily routine is to tread a long path to reach the market at Ratnagiri to sell various things like bamboo sticks, firewood, grass, semolina, and ripe or raw mangoes to make their ends meet. The path they use is so dangerous that even a slight mistake in their steps would make them meet with death deep down on the bottom of the valley. The women used to curse their ancestors for making them live in this part of the earth. Urmila is a keen observer of the manners and habits of the women in her community right from her childhood. She enjoyed accompanying these women to the markets so that she can enjoy the various gossips that they exchanged during their journey that relieve themselves from the tedious journey. Apart from this, there would be danger lurking behind the shrubs and trees in the form of wild animals and miscreants who assault women. This throws light on the dangerous life of the Mahar women who face dangers in everyday life to make their livelihood. The men folks in their family are usually drunkards and Urmila acknowledges the role of the women in running the household, unlike Vasan Moon.

Urmila's father was literate and worked as a teacher in a school. He insisted on educating his sons and daughters because he knew that education was the only way to improve themselves from the barrier of casteism. Her father passed away when she was in the third grade. It was a severe setback to the family as the mother had to weave baskets to raise her family. Urmila had only two old clothes to wear at school, which were often covered with dirt and mud. Despite the burden of discrimination at school, Urmila and her siblings studied well in school and got a government job. Urmila recounts many incidents in which she had to face the effects of caste discrimination from her childhood.

Urmila's father was a man of many qualities. Although she did not have much contact with him, it was his tough and timely lifestyle that had a major influence on Urmila's life. He wanted his daughters to work and be financially independent. He was adamant that he would educate his girls, and pay special attention to their educational needs. He reminded his wife to educate the children even in the death bed. He said, "Let the girls go to school. They have to stand on their own feet, be independent. They must also

learn to drive bicycles" (Urmila 33). He kept away from the Sahabhajan program organized by Ambedkar, as he thinks that people attended the program only because of the delicious food supplied there.

Incidents of social rejection spread throughout her life. As a child, she always noticed the difference between the foods in the lunch box of her friends. She could never dream of such delicious food at her home. She remembered an incident at school when her friends planned to cook food at school. Each student volunteered to bring an item, and when Urmila asked about the item she had to bring, her friends asked her to bring nothing but money to buy the items as she was a Mahar. Though they sat down to eat together, she was not allowed to touch anything. They whispered and mocked at the way she had eaten. Urmila was so embarrassed to hear such comments about herself and realized that she had to hear such things since she was a Dalit.

She writes about there was a difference between the food prepared for the male and female members of the family. Male members were given the best food and the females were given the leftovers. The condition of the daughter-in-law was bad because they had to do their daily chores and eat very little. They were also treated badly by their husbands and parents-in-law. They were beaten and sent home, even at night. Urmila recalled that her father sent her cousin Susheela back to her husband's house, as "she must stay with her in-laws" (Urmila 33). Urmila recounted the victimhood of her cousin Shantaram's wife who fell unconscious in a pool of blood. But what shocked Urmila was that no one dared to intervene on the issue. They simply thought Shantaram had the right to do anything on his wife.

The social rejection was a social reality for Dalit women. She hates going to the upper caste home to sell her mother woven bamboo baskets. She was not allowed to enter her house and was asked to wait outside, and the way they accepted it from her was an insult to her. The "water on them to wash away the pollution, and only then would they touch them" (Urmila 65). The coins were thrown down to her hands from a distance. All this created unforgettable wounds in her mind and reminded her of her lower caste status. These bitter events in her life strengthened her mind and resolved to fight back through her writings.

Urmila faced many forms of social rejection and humiliation because of her caste identity. Even the members of her community dissuaded her from being part of the Maitri organization that worked for the welfare of the submissive women. She urged every woman she met to participate in an awareness program organized by this group. Urmila Pawar's life narrative is a landmark recording the necessity of empowering and uplifting Dalit women. Her memoir critiques the exploitation of upper caste people and male-dominated Dalit society.

The incidents of physical abuse by men of their community, showcases the insecure lives of women within their own home or community. Initially, Urmila's husband was not so supportive of her attending college and earning a degree or master's degree. By doing so, he became one among hundreds of men who believe that a woman must look after her husband and nurture her children. But Urmila dared to pursue her studies. She worked to find time to study at midnight without interrupting her official and home responsibilities. She was against the philosophy that “a man has the right to behave any way he likes” (Urmila241). Gradually he became supportive and he was proud of her when she was accepted among people.

The Ambedkarite movement had a major impact on Urmila's life. Urmila's family and other Mahar communities embraced Buddhism in hopes of the escape from caste stigma. They abandoned all their Hindu doctrines and embraced the new religious doctrine in the hope of leading a new life. For them, their Hindu faith gives nothing but humiliation and embarrassment. Being a rebel she has made progress in her academics and achieves everything that she has lost in the past. Through her education, she decided to enlighten her community. She believed that education was not necessary to do household chores. It is from such chaotic and unfriendly circumstances she emerged as an internationally acclaimed writer.

Growing up Untouchable in India and *The Weave of My Life* is not the text of celebration, but a social document that appraises the difficulty of growing up as a Dalit in India. Dr. Ambedkar is the sole inspiration behind the life narratives of Vasant Moon and Urmila Pawar. Both the text articulate

Ambedkarite Philosophy of emancipation. Still, Vasant Moon views emancipation as an entity accomplished in the public domain whereas Urmila Pawar sees emancipation as a concept to be identified within the family, the personal domain.

When Dr. Ambedkar coined the term Dalit, he included both men and women of untouchable population and while he advocated conversion to Buddhism he invited both Dalit men and women. His thoughts and ideologies are applicable both for men and women. But when Dalit men practice Ambedkar's principles they could not empathize with Dalit women and they could not include Dalit women's issues like the issue of Dalit.

Even within the Dalit community, women remain victims of domestic violence and child marriage, dowry issues and they even lack education as their parents do not invest in their daughter's education. The Dalit movement is inclusive of both men and women and they ensure a more balanced and equal relationship between Dalit men and women. Still, the leadership positions in the Dalit movement are occupied only by men despite the active participation of women. This condition reflects the male superiority that leads towards wife-beating, harassment, and desertion.

Both Vasant Moon and Urmila Pawar highlight their pain to be Dalits and have shown their commitment to the emancipation of Dalits. But the narrative of Vasant Moon remains male-specific whereas Urmila Pawar questions the patriarchal values and caste system. Besides, she also questions the partial nature of Indian women's movement and the attitude of upper-caste women. Most often women's movement incorporated Dalit women's issues under the same umbrella and they fail to acknowledge the plurality prevail among Indian women in terms of caste questions. Hence, Dalit women's issues have been diluted and remain less analysed and less focused. Urmila Pawar exemplifies that there is an immediate need for all autonomous women's movement to include the issues of Dalit women. She even proceeds further to comment on the need for all women to renounce their caste identities. Her narrative aptly raises a question "who leads whom" by focusing on Dalit women's issues as the issues of human rights and

projecting Dalit women issues as the intersectionality of caste, class, and gender. Hence this paper resonates with the proposition of Ruth Manorama on Dalit women as “Dalits among Dalits”. (Rao 110)

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