

**URMILA PAWAR'S AYDAAN (THE WEAVE OF MY LIFE) AND
BABY KAMBLE'S JINA AMUCHA (THE PRISONS WE BROKE) :
(RE)READING DALIT NARRATIVES**

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Culture has for long been defined in terms of “civilisation” and “elitism” and the power to formulate a defining paradigm for it rested with the ones that could be bracketed into these categories. This denoted that culture became a privilege and hence denied to the ones that were pushed to the lower rung of the societal ladder. There are variegated factors that constitute to affiliating an individual or a community to be at the bottom and thence stripping them of their stature, dignity and personhood, the very constituents that the ‘ruling’ class associates with culture. Indian history records a stratification of the society premised on the principle of *varna* and *jati* of *Manusmiriti*. This division of society pushed the Dalits or the “*Achuts*” (untouchables) as they were called, to the bottom of the hierarchy, denying them basic human rights and hence leaving them socially, culturally and economically exploited. The institution of caste system which fundamentally is based upon gradation then by default becomes unequal in nature, implying one section to be ‘superior’ to the other. The fabric of caste has been explored in terms of class, caste, gender, and literary marginalisation. This paper is an attempt to scrutinise the cultural marginalisation of the Dalits through an analysis of two texts: Urmila Pawar’s *Aydaan* (The Weave of My Life) and Baby Kamble’s *Jina Amucha* (The Prisons We Broke).

The relationship between the ‘upper’ and the ‘lower’ caste can very well be defined in terms of the coloniser and the colonised, respectively. The colonised status of the Dalits made them the “upper-caste Hindu’s Other” (Mukherjee 2). They were denied from all the spheres of life that according to upper caste/class defined ‘tradition’ and ‘culture’. Restricting their entry to temples and the scriptures can be seen as a strategy employed by the *savarnas* to keep them away from a territory that they maintained for themselves. Dalits were denied a right to

education which made power exclusive to a certain section of society. Knowledge and power bear an intricate relationship as Foucault explains "...that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (27). Corroborating upon the same line of argument one may argue that the strategy to keep the Dalits away from the realm of education also implied their absence from any claim to power. This argument is central to the paper as the one who possesses power is also the one to conceptualise 'norm' and thereby denoting it to be 'universal' by which everything else is supposed to be measured.

Ranjit Guha says that "[t]he historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism- colonialist elitism and bourgeois elitism" (37). Expanding upon Guha's argument it can be said that the historical and the fictional construction of the Dalits were either at the hands of the British or the indigenous elite, who were always the non-Dalits, leaving the Dalits to be in the subaltern (abiding by the definition put by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak) position. Alok Mukerjee in his introduction to Sharankumar Limbale's book *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* presents three stages that explains an absence of Dalit literature- "erasure" (Mukherjee 5) of their presence on the grounds that they were not to learn or read Sanskrit, their "containment" (Mukherjee 5) into Brahminic literature, lastly, to treat them as "objects of pity" (Mukherjee 8). So the emergence of Dalit literature can be viewed as a revolt to these challenges and hence present a voice of the most oppressed section of the society as we see the subaltern speaking for itself. Writing then not only becomes a counter answer to the colonialist project of the 'upper' castes of culturally and socially enslaving Dalits but at the same time is also to be seen as an act of "assertion" (Mukherjee 1). Dalit writing hence can be proposed as the process of deconstruction of the already existing 'norms', literary and otherwise, and at the same time reconstruction of their history, ideology, and culture.

B. R. Ambedkar in his speech at Mahad said that women are the "gateways to caste" which is why the Brahmin woman became the one bearing the burden of maintaining caste laws. Furthering Ambedkar's idea it can be argued that along with caste, women are also made to assume the status of the 'bearer of culture'. Therefore an examination into the life-writings of Dalit women which presents a collective consciousness of a community provides a window to the Dalit way of life. But before an analysis into the aforementioned texts, the term 'culture' needs to be explicated, not in the terms that it may be 'accepted' but the attributes that it envisages. Cultural critic Raymond Williams explains culture as:

Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land (93)

Williams here reformulates the definition of culture which is not tainted with any class prejudice and rather foregrounds 'commonness' of shared beliefs that are in constant process of a dialectical change. Williams removes exclusivity from the realm of culture making it available to all. In this line of argument, the paper is an attempt to propose that Dalits, unlike the popular

belief, have a culture of their own, which may not align or fit into the definition of upper caste Hindus or upper class' notion of culture.

In the autobiographical work *Aydaan* Pawar provides an account of the day-to-day life and routine of Dalit women as they carry out their work in order to earn a living and hence sufficing to the family's income. Pawar describes how all the women of the community gathered to embark on their daily journey of work in the following words:

WOMEN FROM OUR village travelled to the market at Ratnagiri to sell various things. They trudged the whole distance, with huge, heavy bundles on their on their heads, filled with firewood or grass, rice or semolina, long pieces of bamboo, baskets or ripe or raw mangoes... They would start their journey to Ratnagiri early in the morning. Between our village and Ratnagiri the road was difficult to negotiate as it wound up and down hills...the vexed women would utter choicest abuses, abusing our original ancestor, the *mool purush* of the family...It was he who had chosen this particular village ...[which]... was an extremely difficult and inconvenient terrain... (Pawar 1).

By providing the reader with this rich description Pawar earmarks the *work culture* of the Dalit women. This may be different from the women of the 'upper' caste or the city-bred women who works in offices, nonetheless, the tasks that these women carry out is equivalent to any other job that requires a level of practice and experience, and also helps them earn money. These women not only run the domestic errands but also actively support their family economically. The sections of the society that live in a 'hand to mouth' position, their lives are spent in daily labour to collect a minimum sum to provide for themselves and other family members. Labour is a characteristic of Dalits' life and is identified with their vocational jobs. Despite the upper castes' looking down upon their work and life, it cannot be denied that this is their very culture. The description brings forth another significant aspect; it provides an information about how these people came to be settled in this area which is isolated because of being surrounded with hills and thereby making any sort of travel difficult, creating impediments to their routinely jobs. In tracing the origins of their settlement Pawar seems to be recording their history which has remained absent in the any of the 'historical' records. History and culture are intertwined as the former is believed to be the carrier of the latter. Here Pawar's narrative accounts the work ethos and the historiography of her community.

Pawar also gives an account of the celebration of festivals by her community. Sometimes the festivals are the same for all the castes, but they may be celebrated on different days and also in a different manner, in a community's own chosen way. In enumerating upon the festivals as enjoyed by her people she says:

In our village it was customary to celebrate Tersa Shimga. On the hill beyond the river of our village, there was a huge rock known as Chandaki Devi's Rock. The young men of the village would cover the rock with dry leaves and grass a week before the festival. On the day of Holi all the old and young men and children in the villages would go to this rock on the hill, playing a band. There they would put turmeric and kumkum on the covered rock, worship it, break a coconut, and then set it on fire...they

would pray...this would be followed with obscene curses and shouts...
(Pawar 46, 47)

This sketch of the celebration of festival and life serves as a response to the critique that Dalit literature is all about pain and suffering. The whole idea of pain-pathos as the sole constituent of Dalit autobiographies is subverted here. It instead provides a view that along with the suffering, there are also moments of joy. Pawar accounts that they have their own way of celebrating the festivals that includes a different customary ritual to carry out the festival related processions. This comes across as an interventionist voice that asserts itself, and refuses to be subsumed within the meta-narrative. If they are prohibited from participating into the ritual of celebration it does not signify their bareness of cultural ethos. There are no records to show such procession of the people of Pawar's caste and the other related castes that indulge in during the festive time. By finding a way into Pawar's literary/socio-historical account it has also found an access to the reader allowing them to rethink about the Dalit community and culture. At the same time Pawar also anecdotes how the casteist social structure has framed the mindsets of the Dalits that the latter are made to believe and conform to certain practices, which though then becomes a part of their culture too. It has been substantiated with two examples; the festival of Holi for which the Mahar boys carry the heavy woods and gather it for the ritual of burning it to initiate the festival, they are restricted to participate in the following practice of bearing the palanquin. After the physical work is done, the society dismisses their presence, nonetheless the Mahars do not object to the task of carrying logs. Secondly, the next morning of the festival the Mahar women would go to the 'upper' caste houses to "beg for the festive food" (Pawar 50). In the given circumstances, the social construct has shaped their consciousness in a way that the dismissal and begging are accepted by them without any contestation. This in turn becomes a part of their life and practice and thereby contributing to their cultural capitalism.

Baby Kamble's piece of life-writing by the title *Jina Amucha* is received as a "socio-biography" (Pandit xiii) rather than concentrated upon an individual. Scrutinising the kind of lives that the Dalit women were subjected to, Kamble brings in light how the upper-castes' restriction upon women in order to retain caste structure and safeguard their sexuality has also percolated into the sphere of Dalit world. Because of the abject poverty and deprived state of being, Dalit women were always active in family income contribution. However with the changing time, the Dalit men in imitating the 'upper' caste idea of 'women' and by extension their definition of culture, the Dalit women were also imposed with certain constraints. Kamble substantiates this with the following detail given in her narrative:

In those days, it was the custom to keep women at home, behind the threshold. The honour enjoyed by a family was in proportion to the restrictions imposed on the women of the house. When no one could see even a nail of the woman thus confined within the four walls of the house, then this 'honour' became the talk of the town...My father had locked up my aai in his houe, like a bird in a cage" (Kamble 5).

The upper castes though minor in number yet held enormous power with them and were the upholders of hegemony. Under the influence of the intimidating power of this 'hegemony' Dalits constantly appropriated their lifestyles in their aspiration to be a part of the 'dominant' culture. Such amendments are not unique to Dalits but a 'phenomenon' quite common as Raymond Williams in his attempt in explaining "Hegemony" says:

It [Hegemony] is a whole body of practices and expectations, over the whole of living: our senses and assignments of energy, our shaping perceptions of ourselves and our world. It is a lived system of meanings and values-constitutive and constituting- which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute because experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move, in most areas of their lives. It is, that is to say, in the strongest sense a 'culture', but a culture which has also to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes. (110)

Dalit culture then being the Other of the “hegemony” of the upper caste are vulnerable and are under a constant threat of giving way to the ‘dominant’ culture to take over. The cultures of the *savarnas* and the Dalits then can said to be in a dialectical relationship though one having ‘supremacy’ over the other. Although Kamble provides an unhesitant account of the Mahar way of living, devoid of a desire to fit into the mould of ‘cultured’ life. Neither is her narrative tainted with a yearning to appear like the upper castes which is evidenced in her chronicle as she talk about a string tied above the chulha (earthen oven) to hang the intestines of the dead animals to be dried. She calls it “markers of our birth” (Kamble 8). She parallels it with the holy threads of Brahmins which are called “*janeu*”. Despite of the comparison that is drawn between the two kinds of threads she is not accounting this in lines of Brahmanism which follows a strict caste code of purity-pollution and defies meat eating. Rather she takes pride in attributing these threads with a sense of identification with their caste.

The author also has provided a much detailed account of the celebration of the month of *Ashadh*, the whole month is a prolonged indulgence in the spirit of festivity. Kamble records that “the Mahars considered this their own month. This was the month for ritual baths, house cleaning and polishing of floors with dung...it was a month of comfort, of sweet food!” (12). Kamble records how in the celebrations the children are made a prominent part of the rituals in helping their mothers in washing and cleaning, and also how it brings in all the women of the community together following the tradition of division of work. Women help each other during the month long festival by dividing their work amongst each other and visiting their houses as a ritual and share the sweets and food. It brings solidarity to the community where one feels related to the other on the basis of shared customs and beliefs. Kamble also narrates about the Mahar gods and goddesses which are different from the deities followed by the upper castes. The narrative mentions names of several divinities that are common only to Mahars. Religion and god forms the fundamental of the Indian society, Kamble’s account of these gods act as an interjection to the Hinduist mainstream ideology of ‘*holy*’.

Kamble’s narrative also describes the music culture of her community. In a society that is predominantly preoccupied with physical work all day, music and singing serves as an entertainment and as a means that keeps the women in harmony. Sometimes the songs are for special occasions like marriages where the lyrics are focussed upon the occasion; “Zalubai zalu, in front of the house/ There was a lovely jujube tree/ Then came a thief, the son-in-law/ He carried it off, for all to see” (Kamble 93). While the women of the community also sing to their children lullaby to lure them to sleep while they are still working. These songs pass down from one generation to the other giving it a traditional value.

Both the writers in providing a detailed account of their caste and community provide a narrative of the culture of Dalit world. Dalit literature is contested to be “Literature of Revolt” (Omvedt 5) that intends to break down the Brahminic hegemony over the realm of literary creation. This “revolt” is also an attempt to claim their identity via the power of rhetoric. In the process of defying the age old subjugation, they assert themselves and their lives, followed with an attempt to open up their world to the readers. The potential reader is given a window to the culture of the Dalits. Commenting upon the unique genre of Dalit women autobiographies Sharmila Rege elucidates that it “...washed out the ‘I’, an outcome of bourgeois individualism and displaced it with the collectivity of the Dalit community...” (323). Therefore the form of Dalit women life-narratives that presents a collective consciousness of a community then by definition becomes a cultural account of their respective communities.

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