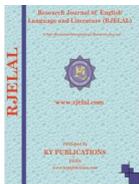




DICHOTOMY OF INVISIBILITY AND HYPER VISIBILITY: A READING OF 'THE WEAVE OF MY LIFE'

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Abstract

The recent spurt in English translations of Dalit life narratives like Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan*, translated into English as *The Weave of My Life*, signifies the increasing visibility of Dalit studies as an epistemic community and recognition of the Dalit testimonio as both an articulation of life experience and source of articulating theory. Dalit life narratives have created the genre of the testimonio in the process of summoning truth from the past and consciously violating the boundaries set by bourgeois autobiography. *Aaydan*, Urmila Pawar's testimonio weaves a complex relationship between official forgetting, memory and identity- forging a right to speak both for and beyond the gendered individual and contesting explicitly the official forgetting of histories of caste oppression, struggles and resistance

Keywords: autobiography, Dalit, testimonio

Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* is a self-conscious Dalit feminist testimonio as it labours to weave the memories of sites and processes of production and reproduction in a caste-based society in an integrated manner. Urmila Pawar reflects on her use of the category 'Dalit', arguing that it is a racial, rational-humanist category developed in the rebellion of those oppressed and humiliated by the social system. She sees her consciousness of 'becoming a modern individual' emerging from the Phule-Ambedkarite movement and granting individuality to both men and women from the women's movement in Maharashtra. At the level of practice, it may be argued that her critique of women's place in the Dalit movement and the indifference of the women's movement to the caste question have defined her writing and organizing for Dalit feminism in Maharashtra.

Urmila Pawar locates her testimonio in a time defined by the invisibility of caste and the hyper visibility of women. Caste, she argues may be 'invisible' to those who zoom pass in cars but visible to those with their feet on the ground. The same is true of the women's situation: 'women' seem to be everywhere and yet the question that troubles her is 'where is the Dalit woman?' Even as the voices of some educated, employed Dalit women are just coming to be inscribed in the public sphere, she is anxious that the spectre of globalization has put a question mark on the direction and the lines of progress. It is her faith in the tenacity of human beings that steers her forward to write caste or write gender as experienced in the community and in society and directs her to resist the strategies of state co-optation. Thus as a self-consciously Dalit feminist testimonio positioned against the brahmanical and neo-liberal practices of the state, *The Weave of My Life* violates both bourgeois individualism and

communitarian notions of the singular Dalit community, thus becoming a milestone in the archive of resources for practising Dalit studies as critical and inclusive social science.

The dialectics of self and community in the Dalit testimonio assumes further significance in a Dalit woman's testimonio, for the testimonio is for a Dalit woman a powerful medium to protest against adversaries within and without. The weave of Pawar's *Aydan* is a significant reminder of ways in which Dalit feminism in defying the construction of Dalit and woman as consistent cases is a crucial force in the present constitution of Dalit studies. Dalit studies is not just a new body of knowledge about Dalits, that it is a new perspective to study Indian society and to redefine existing disciplines. Further, Dalit studies is not indiscriminate valorisation of dalitism, it is inclusive in that it seeks to be potentially and theoretically universal. In a historical conjuncture marked by the resurgence of caste and community within the women's movement and feminism in the Dalit movement, *The Weave of My Life* which promotes a greater historical sensitivity to intersectionality of axes of caste and gender is an important text for practitioners of women's studies and Dalit studies. It has the potential to create a space for dialogue and debate on the dynamics of intersectionality of axes of oppression and thus makes clear the pitfalls of either a hasty opposition or fusion between Dalit studies and women's studies.

Urmila Pawar challenges views that see caste as a social institution frozen in time, reinstates the intellectual contributions and agency of Dalit women, brings together 'private' lived experience and the 'public' practices of anti-caste struggles. *The Weave of My Life* thus empowers the subaltern studies and allows the dominant to interrogate their complicity in entrenched privileges without freezing in guilt. Further, *The Weave of My Life* as a translation opens up possibilities of new conversations, especially since the term 'Dalit feminism' is radically unstable in that it assumes different meanings in different times and contexts and yet allows a sustained critique of feminist and Dalit politics. Translation wedges open the

geographically and culturally indeterminate character of Dalit feminism and suggests comparative frameworks across different locations and imaginaries: social, geographical and epistemic. Reading of *The Weave of My Life* thus is an engagement in the processes of 're-memory' or the reconstruction of histories of institutions and practices in a nation actively invested in forgetting them.

For Urmila Pawar, the interrogation of dominant accounts of history and engagement with collective memory and historical truth goes back to her efforts with Meenakshi Moon to recover the agency of women in the Ambedkerite movement. She recalls how her urge to do research took her on a long search for women, whom she knew from reading Dr. Ambedkar's biographies, had participated actively in his struggles. She was disturbed with what she could see around - only men - both in the worlds of activism and of literature. Beginning with references from Dr. Vasanth Moon's library, this project culminated into the hitherto sole published classic historical account of the articulations of the women's question and voices in the Ambedkar movement.

The memoirs presents to the reader an archive of meanings and values of Dalit modernity as it is figured in the interweaving of nostalgia and critical memories of three generations of Dalit men, women and children. The encounter with colonial modernity mediated through early employment in the British army, missionary, school, in the towns, is complex in the attractions and anxieties posed for knowledge seekers in a village where there would be just one panaji who taught only Brahmin children in his own house. School is an important motif in the memories: men teaching at different places in the region, taking time out to convince all in the community about the importance of education, at times beating up the children if they played truant and missed school and even sending daughters to live with friends' families in the towns since schools in the villages did not admit girls. Memories of food, culinary skills and meal times draw a picture of the moral economy of Dalit families in the Konkan

region. Special festival food for the upper castes consisted of sweet bread while in Mahar homes rice and lentils would constitute the special meal. Memories of labour, camaraderie and tensions between women who climbed hills daily to take their wares to the market and of their pains and labour within the homes presents an archive of complex relations between sexual - and caste - based division of labour. Memories of backbreaking labour at the creek present a detailed documentation of the processes and cultures of labour. Memories of humiliation and resistance delineate the reproduction of caste as a form of modern inequality both in village and city. Through the memories of deaths under suspicious circumstances – suicides committed by young men due to false implication in frauds or ‘accidents’ of students in anti-reservationist medical colleges, Pawar documents the ‘routine violence’ of caste in modern institutions.

Years later, new wedding songs had been composed in the villages of the Konkan as the Buddha statues replaced the memorial stones of the ancestors that had been given pride of place in the locality and casteist family names came to be replaced with new ones. There are memories of relatives and acquaintances who did not like discarding the gods, remained Hindu. The weave of memories thus documents a detailed narrative of how Dalit man, women and children encountered modernity – the school, the city, the conjugal family, the bureaucracy, activism, literary societies, renunciation of a feudal religion – bringing into focus ‘new’ times and spaces of modernity.

Texts like *The Weave of My Life* provide the necessary historical resources of different times and sites which contested the power of the elite to represent and name modernity and thus to recover meanings and values of alternative Dalit modernity. The text provides insights into ways in which Dalits alienated from the postcolonial Indian state did not reject the discourse of modernization and modernity but sought to establish Buddhist ways of living as modernist expressions. It allows us to see the tensions and contestations which framed the transition from a language of

obligations to a language of rights in the schools, government offices, housing societies and spheres of social activism. As also the often life threatening stumbling blocks and limits of bourgeois modernity experienced in the city, the tensions and contestations with fractured middle class sensibilities and negotiations of gender and community for women agitating into the public sphere stressed their rejection of a specifically Dalit notion of modernity grounded in traditional Dalit knowledge. The glorious moments of sewing together emancipatory materialistic traditions like Buddhism and new western ideas to fashion distinctive Dalit sensibilities unfold from *The Weave of My Life*, enabling a mapping of Dalit modernity as a social experience in process.

Urmila Pawar’s memoir represents the struggle of a Dalit woman who has travelled on a long journey from a small town to a huge metropolis, and became one of its leading intellectuals and writers. She has tried to make values like justice, equality, freedom, rationality, citizenship, progress and democracy an integral part of her Dalit feminist utopia. This is what sets *The Weave of My Life* apart from all other books written in the tradition of the feminist, radical and Dalit struggles.

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