



# Uncovering Dalit Women's Resilience: A Study Of Urmila Pawar's Autobiography *The Weave Of My Life*

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

Born into a Dalit family in Maharashtra in 1945, Urmila Pawar is a highly esteemed writer who is actively involved in advocating for the rights of Dalit community and promoting feminist cause. Urmila Pawar's autobiography entitled *The Weave of my Life* was first released as *Aaydan* in 2003. It covers many themes including injustice, exploitation, hunger, poverty, and humiliation. The paper explores how dalit women adapts to the difficult and the challenging situations and find happiness in their work. The paper also deals with the influences in the author's life which helped her in becoming a strong and independent woman. The everyday struggles of Dalit women and their socioeconomic issues in a caste-dominated society are also discussed in the paper.

**Keywords:** Resilience, Dalit women, Oppression, Marginalization, Female support system.

Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter

-Chinua Achebe

Born into a Dalit family in Maharashtra in 1945, Urmila Pawar is a highly esteemed writer who is actively involved in advocating for the rights of Dalit community and promoting feminist cause. As a prominent social activist, her vocal protests have served as a source of inspiration for several Dalit women. Inspired by Dr. Ambedkar, she and her family members converted to Buddhism when she was quite young and Buddhist philosophy and way of life continues to inspire her writings. Despite facing varying degrees of prejudice based on caste and gender, she successfully obtained a Master's degree in Marathi Literature and decided to focus her writing on the marginalized status of women in her community. *The Weave of My Life*, an autobiographical tale by Urmila Pawar, is a significant achievement in the literary works of Dalit women as it questions the established norms and beliefs related to the concept of caste, class and patriarchy. It explicitly challenges the deliberate neglect of histories related to caste oppression, struggles, and resistance and even goes on to expose the conflicts and contradictions within the Dalit and feminist movements.

The autobiography signifies a notable deviation from the trajectory followed by previous dalit autobiographies. It explores the experiences of an individual who initially views the world through the lens of their gender and caste, but then transcends her caste identity from a feminist standpoint. The voyage leads the readers towards a potential future in which distinct caste identities are transformed into a broader 'human' identity. She situates her identity within a temporal context characterized by the obscurity of social hierarchy and establishes the interconnectedness of caste, class and gender. It has the capacity to facilitate a platform for discussion and analysis on the complex interactions between different forms of oppression, highlighting the risks of hastily opposing or merging dalit studies and women's studies. Her autobiography offers essential historical resources from many periods and locations that challenged the authority of the privileged class to define and characterize modernity. It aims to rediscover the significance and principles of an alternative dalit modernity.

The autobiography, *The Weave of My Life* explores how dalits, who were marginalized by the postcolonial Indian state, did not completely reject the ideas of modernization and modernity. Instead, they aimed to develop Buddhist ways of life as a form of modern expression. It also provides insight into the conflicts and debates that shaped the shift from a language centered around duties to one focused on rights in various settings that included schools, government offices, housing societies, and social activity. Simultaneously, it explores the integration of emancipatory materialistic traditions such as Buddhism with new western concepts

to create unique dalit modernities. It also offers a detailed examination of dalit modernity as a dynamic social experience.

Dalit women, through the act of documenting their own narratives, defy long-standing customs and societal restrictions, as well as the enforced suppression of their voices. The narratives shared by Dalit women are not merely arbitrary occurrences, but are potent accounts that defy the existing social hierarchy by opposing acts of unfairness. Dalit women authors are challenging the prevailing cultural structure, including patriarchy, caste, and its associated values, by sharing memoirs about their lives and experiences. Furthermore, they assert the importance of expressing their own viewpoint and reject being portrayed by others, transforming themselves from passive individuals to proactive participants. As rightly said by the author herself, "dalit studies is not indiscriminate valorization of dalitism; it is inclusive in that it seeks to be potentially and theoretically universal" (Pawar 325). The autobiographies serve as a means for the marginalized women to regain control over their own history and assert their rights to recount their lived experiences. Laura R. Brueck notes that many scholars regard Dalit women autobiographies as testimonials, as "testimonio, a critical category originally created to describe the life narratives of Latin American women ...has emerged as a popular catch-all category for Dalit women's life narratives as well" (34). Their autobiographies not only analyze and recreate the ideas and personal encounters of Dalit women, but also provide them with the chance to introspect and find strength.

The concept of resilience is derived from the origins of darkness. Resilience is cultivated, nurtured, and developed within the challenging and unsettling circumstances of adversity and turmoil. The cultivation of resilience is achieved by acknowledging and addressing both internal and external challenges, including those of a situational nature, and employing diverse coping strategies across personal, professional, and social domains. Resilience is an essential characteristic that facilitates the ability to recover from setbacks and obstacles, acquire knowledge from them, and ultimately emerge with increased strength. It is not solely about enduring the challenges of life, rather it is about utilizing them as a chance for personal development.

A resilient woman is a typical female who consistently confronts personal and systemic challenges, yet prioritizes adaptability over devastation and utilizes her inherent qualities of genuineness in all facets of her existence. She acknowledges that the challenges not only shape her identity, but also enhances her ability to grow and develop with better understanding of circumstances. Resilience, in the field of science, refers to materials that possess the ability to regain their former shape following bending or stretching. Women leaders, for instance, employ their resilience to effectively leverage and enhance their ability to convert problems into opportunities, so facilitating their personal and professional growth. Resilience is exemplified by their capacity to recover, regain focus, and reengage in the game following self-reflection.

Dalits are among the most socially disadvantaged groups in Indian society. The Dalit community faces a range of socioeconomic challenges, including lack of opportunities like education, health facilities, lack of dignified unemployment, superstitions, and all kinds of violence including abuse and public humiliation. These objections are frequently justified by religious, cultural, and ideological factors. Within the community, Dalit women are the most susceptible to exploitation and suppression. They experience triple oppression in the form of caste hierarchy, lower class and gender bias. They are subjected to exploitation in both domestic and public domains. Women belonging to the Dalit group are commonly referred to as "Dalits among Dalits" (Bhoite vii) since they are at the lowest ladder even among the dalits. They endure the interrelated kinds of subjugation arising from their caste, social standing, and gender. Even among the Dalit community, the voices of Dalit women have been ignored and not recorded during the societal changes. This disregard has been viewed as a deliberate lack of knowledge by the mainstream academic and historical institutions. The novelist, Bama Faustina Soosairaj, effectively encapsulates the inter-connectedness of caste, class, and gender-based subjugation experienced by women. As she highlights the condition of women in her community saying "In the fields, they have to escape from upper-caste men's molestations. At church, they first lick the priest's shoes and be his slaves" (Bama 35). According to her, even when returning to their respective residences, or before engaging in activities such as cooking dinner or taking a brief period of relaxation, dalit women are compelled to subject themselves to the anguish inflicted upon them by their spouses.

Dalit women experience a great deal of oppression and suffering, and they are viewed as weaker gender in their own communities. Their ignorance and lack of education left them unsure of which form of oppression to oppose. They disregarded the possibility that sexism could be just as repressive as racism. As the American feminist Bell Hooks rightly asserts in *Ain't I A Woman* that "when the women's movement raised the issue to sexist oppression, they argued that sexism was insignificant in light of the harsher, more brutal reality of racism" (1). Autobiography was one of the first forms of self-expression that Dalit women opted. They started writing about their life in order to authentically share their oppression and experiences. While writing about their experiences, they have to undergo deep pain as "When drawing on bitter memories and writing about them, the tendency to reconstruct instead of resurrecting the past is inevitable" (Whitehead, 126)

The autobiographies of Dalit women have always focused on the group as a whole rather than the individual. Urmila Pawar is one such Dalit autobiographer who has tried to pen down her journey of oppression and other women around her in an honest way. The author has seen herself more as a community member rather than an individual self. As Baby Kamble rightly said "The suffering of my community has always been more important than my own individual suffering" (Pawar xv). Urmila Pawar too has become a voice of the voiceless of her community and fearlessly portrayed the marginalization and subhuman existence of her whole community in the face of their shameless exploitation by the upper castes.

Urmila Pawar's autobiography entitled *The Weave of my Life* was first released as *Aaydan* in 2003. It covers many themes including injustice, exploitation, hunger, poverty, and humiliation. It chronicles the author's experiences beginning from her school and college years in Ratnagiri to her married life and in the later phase, her struggles as an activist. The autobiography highlights the memories of her childhood and her mother's persistent financial difficulties. It also delves into her post-marital life in Mumbai, where she encounters a feminist organization and subsequently emerges as an author and advocates for Dalit women. The present paper examines the difficulties and struggles faced by Urmila Pawar and how she deals with it. The paper explores how dalit women adapts to the difficult and the challenging situations and find happiness in their work. The paper also deals with the influences in the author's life which helped her in becoming a strong and independent woman. The everyday struggles of Dalit women and their socioeconomic issues in a caste-dominated society are also discussed in the paper.

Urmila Pawar was born in a small village named Phansawale in Maharashtra. Being a local, she has firsthand knowledge of every little detail that has an impact on her community and her social life. She has seen the gender bias within her community from a very early age. Her arrival was met with disapproval within the family as she says "when I was born, my cousin Govind dada wanted to throw me away onto a dung heap" (Pawar 64). Their community was subjected to the practice of untouchability from the moment of their birth. The author says that the children of their community developed an awareness of caste bias through their daily experiences, often without any instruction or guidance. As one see in the autobiography that when the mother of the author dispatched her to transport baskets to her clients, they consistently denied her entry into their residences and compelled her to stand at the entrance. Water was applied to the baskets in order to remove the pollutants. In order to minimize physical interaction, they would deposit pennies into her hand from a higher position. Furthermore, the author recollects her engagements with a Brahmin family, wherein her 'Aaye' (mother) would give her money to facilitate the acquisition of pickles from them but was prohibited from advancing beyond the initial level of Brahmin's residence. As she recalls "Kaku would bring some fiery red pickle on a plantain leaf... but only after she had sprinkled water on them to cleanse them of pollution" (78). They were also prohibited from accessing potable water from the well. Her school teacher would often comment on her uniform calling it dirty and humiliate her in front of the entire class saying "go and buy a good soap and start washing your clothes yourself...start bathing every day" (90, 91). Additionally, people would make fun of her eating habits calling her "monster" (117).

The author addresses the challenges she encountered during her adolescent years, such as menstruation or "touching of the crow" (123), as it was referred in her society. According to her, girls would understand the true significance of this phrase by the time they reached the eighth grade. "It was more or less a shameful thing!" for them to be associated with (123). The onset of menstruation was accompanied by many restrictions imposed on girls, such as confinement indoors and isolation within their own households, as well as limitations on interacting with individuals of the opposite gender. As a result of this anxiety, the author asserts that girls would either conceal their menstruation discreetly, falsify their ages, or wear the tightest possible bra to hide their bust. However, upon observing her sister's state, her sister adopted a firm stance and says that "There is no need for you to sit secluded. Behave naturally...there is nothing like sin or merit in starting your periods" (124). That is how the false perception regarding menstruation was removed from her mind.

The author talks about the issue of child abuse. She asserts that the abuse became so ingrained and accepted within their society that it was considered normal for a girl child to be humiliated. As she says "Every girl, I think, goes through this experience" (125). During her time in school, the author saw instances where boys in her class would engage in stalking behavior and eagerly offer her various items such as flowers, berries, or tamarinds in order to exploit her. In addition, she received information from her peers indicating "My maternal uncle plays dolls with me and pretends to be my husband, drags me into an alcove and press me hard" (125). She frequently receives news from her friends about instances where their uncles or cousins forcefully sit on their stomachs and issue threats if they disclose the incidents to anybody.

Urmila Pawar discusses numerous challenges encountered by the women in her community. As the women would gather firewood or grass to sell at the market, they were startled by the tiger's roaring. They would trek a great distance to go to the market as most of them were employed as gatherers of food and rely heavily on natural resources for their sustenance. They often engage in the gathering of firewood, desiccated grass, untamed fruits from woodland areas. The author would accompany them with her mother and saw how they would stick their hands into the rocks to catch crabs, but the jagged edges of the rocks would cut their hands

and feet and then “salty seawater stung the wounds” further (44). She encounters hardworking nature of these women. According to the author, dalit women never gave up on their family members, despite all the abuse they have received from both society and family members. Rather they worked together with their corresponding spouses. To sustain the family, they actually put in more effort than their husbands do. They knew that they will not receive ‘bhakris’ if they did not work. They disliked begging for food and therefore worked in the fields to make a decent living for themselves

The author realized that talking and sharing their experiences with each other is the only source of entertainment in dalit women’s lives. Their consistent engagement in singing songs and laughter while performing tasks such as weeding, transplanting rice, and harvesting, helped them in demonstrating togetherness, and the establishment of a community that provides a space for initiating the process of healing. The author would listen intently to the stories told by them. She noted that these women were adept storytellers. They would tell tales with a specific theme running through them. When they were gossiping with other women, they used crude language. Every woman would make an effort to narrate a compelling story using both her words and her actions, competing with one another to outsmart the other. As the author recalls “I straightway said to her face, go stuff your stove with this money and see if it burns well.’ This raised a collective burst of laughter from all!” (10). According to the author, the women had never made such statements to their customers. These discussions provided an outlet for their repressed rage and served as the sole source of amusement in their monotonous existence. In this way, the author learnt the craft of storytelling.

Due to extreme poverty, food scarcity was always a concern for author’s family. Due to the lack of resources, they could only eat vegetables like aloo or colocassia leaves that were produced in their courtyard. Even though the Konkan region had a plenty of rice, they would purchase cheap rice and inexpensive fish, or ‘chadu’ Pampfret fish and specialties like ‘ladu’ and ‘karanjya’ were never prepared at home. Even in the worst conditions, the dalit women never lose humanity. In spite of the adversity and hardship endured by them, they possess an inherent drive to persist. As Bama asserts, “Our women have an abundant will to survive however they might have to struggle for their last breath. Knowingly or unknowingly, we find ways of coping in the best ways we can” (68). They adhere to strong principles, exudes compassion and empathy as motherhood can be felt among the women folk as they used to feed and take care of other’s children when their mothers were not around. The author felt that the children of her community have not one but many mothers as in the absence of the former, latter used to take care of them. As the author says “Akka used to come home to breastfeed her children in her lunch break. She would feed us also at her breast...thus my siblings and I grew up on her milk as well” (25).

Dalit women exhibit remarkable resilience despite the oppressive caste structure that undermines them at every turn. They don’t run from the horrible circumstances that they find themselves in. Despite the difficult environment, they possess a strong sense of resolve and a desire to lead a dignified life. They bravely confront the challenges. As Gopal Guru in *Prisons We Broke* rightly said that “the testimonio is for a Dalit woman a powerful medium to protest against adversaries within and without” (Kamble 158-71). Following her husband’s passing, the author’s mother took care of the entire family. Her duties both within and outside the house grew. She overcame the difficulties by remaining strong. She would weave ‘aaydans’ (bamboo baskets) nonstop. She used to constantly accuse the author for being lazy and not paying attention to her studies. Over time, the author gradually comprehended that her mother’s harsh behaviour towards her and her siblings stemmed from her persistent aspiration for them to be self-reliant and autonomous.

The author believes that her mother’s tenacity and unwavering determination in the face of adversity, serves as the reservoir of wisdom for women of her community to surmount challenging situations. As despite being poor and uneducated, her mother never compensated for her children’s education. She would speak out against the controlling instructor who prevented her daughter from studying and instead had her engage in various sweeping duties. When young Urmila refused to sweep the school porch because it was not her turn, her teacher Herlekar Guruji slapped her severely in addition to humiliating her in front of her classmates. Her mother made the decision to speak with the teacher about the situation saying “Hey you Guruji, wait a moment! My girl studies in your class, Guruji!... I want education for my children so that their future will be better... Let me see you laying even a finger on my girl again and I’ll show you!” (68-69). Her actions taught the author that injustice must never be allowed to continue. The author’s life changed for the better because her mother handled the matter straight away. As rightly said by Sinha that the initial step towards achieving women’s empowerment should involve prioritizing “education and economic upliftment” (247). After the incidence, she started regarding her mother as a significant source of support.

As a result of societal conditioning, the author developed a perception that it was normal to regard certain individuals as inferior or cause them distress. For instance, author’s sister-in-law was subjected to disdain as a result of her physical abnormality. Her diligent efforts went unnoticed and unacknowledged by every member of the family. The author too displayed a contemptuous indifference towards her due to her prominent kneecaps, slender legs, tattered sari, cracked feet, and unkempt hair. In addition, she kept a significant distance from her to the extent that when one of her classmates inquired about the woman’s identity, the author responded by stating that she was her domestic servant. One day, her sister-in-law directly asked her if she was her maidservant, smiled and left without displaying anger. The author realized her mistake and developed a

heightened sense of empathy for others. As she says “This incident changed the way I thought and made me more humane” (43).

The author believes that the nature of the gender oppression and discrimination has not changed much as she talks about the obsession with a male child that continues in her community and in the society at large. Even after being educated, author's husband used to force her to get pregnant very often in order to get a son. Even after birth of a son, her husband used to say “Let's take one more chance” (Pawar 218). When he was diagnosed with liver cancer, her relatives put the blame on her for his illness. Seeing the humiliation, insult and hardships done to her and the women around her, the author decided to take the destiny into her own hands. She decided not to suffer at the hands of fate. As Sharmila Rege aptly quotes Baburao Bagul, a Dalit intellectual in *Writing Caste Writing Gender*, who says that “Dalit literature is not defined by anguish, waiting and sorrow alone but is a historical necessity in promoting human freedom” (Rege12).

The author finds education as the only medium which would help her to live a life on her own terms. When she was determined to pursue higher education after her marriage, her husband would not be in the favor of it. Regardless of his opinions, she does not lose hope and took writing as the only mission and vision of her life. She felt the dire need to pen down her experiences in order to create a change and motivate the women around her. As she would say:

I began to write. I would write anywhere...Sometimes my eyes would droop, heavy with sleep...scold myself severely, ‘Hey, lazy bones, wake up, wake up! How dare you sleep! Come on write! (Pawar 190-91).

The author took inspiration from her mother as despite her poor health, the author's mother too persisted in weaving baskets. The author says that earlier it was her father's hands that performed the task, but now it is the duty of her mother to take all the responsibilities as “Pressing a rod or pestle into her stomach to lessen her pains, she would continue with her weaving” (64-75). Notwithstanding the difficulties, her mother remained resolute in her mental fortitude, recognizing that her negotiation skills served as a model for her daughter. Urmila Pawar reflects upon the adversities faced by her mother, which served as a catalyst for her pursuit of advancement and the cultivation of her own sense of self and autonomy through the avenues of education and self-reflection. As rightly said “Resilient cheerfulness resists despair and courts hope” (Ruddick 21). Her resilience in resisting both familial and social oppression inspired her daughter with hope, and the author subsequently transmitted the same resilience to her children as well. Hence, the narrative of her mother's arduous journey serves as a wellspring of motivation, not just for the author and her offspring, but also for women who encounter marginalization on a broader scale.

The author encountered numerous obstacles in her role as a woman activist as well. Upon relocating to Mumbai, she witnessed the deplorable living circumstances endured by the local people, particularly women. She began documenting her personal experiences, as well as those of her friends and other women. Regardless of any encouragement from her husband, she would efficiently handle all tasks by waking up at four o'clock in the morning, preparing chapattis and veggies, and then proceeding to the office. Even upon returning, she diligently performed all the domestic responsibilities before dedicating her evenings to writing. Due to the declining number of readers and lack of actual efforts being made to improve the position of women, she decided to become a member of a women's organization called *Maitrini*. Even though she initiated awareness campaigns and encouraged the women, particularly the housewives, to actively participate and become members of the organization, there was inconsistency in their attendance. Another challenge she encountered was the predominance of male speakers representing the audience and speaking on the behalf of women in public programs where speeches or debates were held as “women find it very difficult to express themselves freely” (259). Thus, *Samwadini Dalit Stree Sahitya Manch* was initiated by her to empower women from rural and impoverished areas to freely express themselves. The word 'samwadini' was chosen, as it signifies a woman who seeks to engage in communication with everyone. When faced with circumstances beyond her control, the author endeavored to incorporate those difficulties into her writings. Through the organization, she became acquainted with a range of women's issues, including dowry killings, rapes, and gradually she ceased viewing herself through a patriarchal lens and began advocating for herself. As she says “The women's movement had given me great strength to perceive every man and woman as an equal individual” (248).

One may find that Urmila Pawar's autobiography is both a personal and social chronicle as she has so deftly blended her personal and societal experiences. It introduces new opportunities for discussions and encounters with the dalit women. The readers are made aware of the struggles and experiences faced by her as well as three generations of women in her society. One cannot help but notice dalit women's resilience even in the worst conditions. Despite their miserable circumstances they keep their calm and portray utmost courage. The day-to-day struggle of the women to overcome caste and gender oppression and begin living a life of dignity and self-worth is chronicled in the autobiography in a most authentic manner. This constant sense of struggle and pride while adapting to all kinds of circumstances provided them with the agency of transformation of their own lives as well as the plight of Mahar community in general. Engaging with *The Weave of My Life* involves delving into the processes of 'rememory', which entails reconstructing the history of institutions and practices in a nation that is deliberately committed to forgetting them.

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