

Weaving Resistance: Intersectionality, Identity, and Dalit Feminist Consciousness in Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*

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Abstract :

Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (Aidan) occupies a significant position in contemporary Dalit autobiographical and feminist literature. The autobiography transforms an individual life narrative into a collective testimony of caste oppression, gender discrimination, economic deprivation, social exclusion, and resistance. This research paper critically examines Pawar's autobiography through the interconnected concepts of caste, gender, class, identity, education, and Dalit feminist consciousness. It argues that Pawar's experiences cannot be understood through the isolated category of either caste or gender because her social location as a Dalit woman exposes her to overlapping structures of marginalisation. The paper further explores education as an instrument of liberation, the role of Ambedkarite ideology in the formation of an assertive Dalit identity, economic and social struggles, patriarchal structures within domestic and public spaces, and the

participation of women in the Dalit movement. Particular attention is given to the metaphor of the aidan, or woven mat, which symbolises labour, memory, interconnectedness, resilience, and the collective experiences of Dalit women. The study also analyses Pawar's narrative authenticity, symbolism, multivocality, and integration of personal memory with collective history. It concludes that *The Weave of My Life* transcends conventional autobiography by functioning as a Dalit feminist testimony and a literary intervention against caste hierarchy and patriarchy. Pawar's narrative demonstrates that the struggle for Dalit emancipation remains incomplete without gender justice and that feminist liberation cannot be achieved without confronting caste inequality.

Keywords: Urmila Pawar, *The Weave of My Life*, Aidan, Dalit Feminism, Intersectionality, Caste, Gender, Identity, Ambedkarism, Autobiography

1. Introduction

Dalit autobiographical literature has emerged as one of the most powerful forms of literary resistance in modern Indian literature. By foregrounding experiences historically excluded from mainstream literary and cultural traditions, Dalit autobiographies challenge dominant representations of caste, society, history, and identity. They transform personal memories into social documents and individual suffering into collective testimony. Within this literary tradition, Dalit women's autobiographical writing occupies a particularly significant position because it reveals the simultaneous operations of caste hierarchy, patriarchy, class inequality, and social exclusion.

Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*, originally published in Marathi as *Aaidan*, is a landmark contribution to this tradition. Pawar narrates her journey from a socially and economically marginalised childhood in the Konkan region of Maharashtra to her emergence as an educated woman, government employee, writer, activist, and public intellectual. However, the autobiography is much more than a chronological account of personal achievement. It documents the complex social conditions that shape the lives of Dalit women and demonstrates how caste discrimination intersects with patriarchal domination.

The title *Aaidan*, referring to a woven mat traditionally made by Dalit women, provides the central metaphor of the autobiography. The process of weaving symbolically reflects the structure of Pawar's life narrative. Memories of childhood, poverty, caste discrimination, education, marriage, motherhood, employment, political consciousness, literary activity, and social resistance are woven together to construct a multidimensional account of Dalit womanhood.

The metaphor also draws attention to Dalit women's labour. Activities traditionally regarded as ordinary domestic or economic work acquire cultural and political significance in Pawar's narrative. The woven mat consequently represents not merely material survival but also creativity, endurance, collective memory, and resistance.

This paper examines *The Weave of My Life* as a Dalit feminist autobiography that challenges both caste hierarchy and patriarchal domination. It analyses how Pawar transforms autobiographical writing into an instrument of self-assertion and collective representation while demonstrating the importance of education, Ambedkarite consciousness, women's agency, and literary expression in struggles for social emancipation.

2. Objectives of the Study

The present study has the following objectives:

1. To examine the intersection of caste and gender in Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*.

2. To analyse the representation of Dalit women's social and economic struggles in the autobiography.
3. To study education as an instrument of liberation and social mobility.
4. To explore the development of Dalit identity and Ambedkarite consciousness in Pawar's life narrative.
5. To examine the representation of patriarchy within domestic and public spaces.
6. To analyse the role and position of women within the Dalit movement.
7. To investigate the metaphorical and stylistic significance of weaving in the autobiography.
8. To evaluate *The Weave of My Life* as a significant contribution to Dalit feminist discourse.

3. Research Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative and interpretative research methodology. The primary text for analysis is Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*. The research employs close textual analysis to examine major themes, narrative strategies, symbols, metaphors, and representations of caste and gender.

The theoretical framework draws primarily upon Dalit feminist criticism, intersectionality, Ambedkarite thought, and feminist approaches to autobiography. The concept of intersectionality is particularly useful because Pawar's experiences demonstrate that caste and gender do not function as completely separate categories of oppression. Rather, they interact with class, labour, education, and social status to produce distinctive experiences of marginalisation.

The study also considers the critical perspectives of scholars including Sharmila Rege, Gail Omvedt, Gopal Guru, Uma Chakravarti, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Susie Tharu, K. Lalita, Eleanor Zelliot, and others who have contributed to discussions surrounding caste, gender, Dalit identity, feminism, and marginalised life writing.

4. Caste and Gender: An Intersectional Reading

One of the most significant aspects of *The Weave of My Life* is its representation of the intersection of caste and gender. Pawar's identity as a Dalit woman places her within multiple structures of inequality, making it inadequate to examine caste discrimination separately from patriarchal oppression.

The concept of intersectionality, particularly associated with Kimberlé Crenshaw, provides a useful theoretical framework for understanding these overlapping forms of marginalisation. Pawar's autobiography demonstrates how caste discrimination operates in educational

institutions, workplaces, neighbourhoods, and social relationships, while gender shapes the specific ways in which Dalit women experience such discrimination.

Dalit women may encounter discrimination from dominant caste society while simultaneously experiencing patriarchal restrictions within their families and communities. Pawar therefore acknowledges the importance of anti-caste movements while critically examining gender inequalities within marginalised communities.

Her narrative makes an important intervention in both Dalit politics and feminist discourse. A feminist approach that ignores caste cannot adequately represent Dalit women, just as anti-caste politics that overlooks gender cannot fully address their oppression. *The Weave of My Life* thus articulates a distinctly Dalit feminist perspective in which caste liberation and gender emancipation are inseparable.

5. Education as an Instrument of Liberation

Education emerges as a transformative force in Pawar's autobiography, representing a struggle against poverty, caste discrimination, social prejudice, and gender restrictions. Within Ambedkarite thought, education is a fundamental means of achieving consciousness, dignity, empowerment, and resistance.

Pawar's educational journey reflects this emancipatory vision. Despite economic hardship and limited opportunities for girls, family support, particularly from her mother, strengthened her determination to pursue education. Learning enabled Pawar to enter new intellectual and professional spaces and provided her with the critical consciousness necessary to question caste hierarchy and patriarchal domination.

However, Pawar does not portray education as an automatic solution to social inequality. Her experiences demonstrate that caste and gender prejudice can persist within modern educational and professional institutions. Thus, education in *The Weave of My Life* functions simultaneously as liberation and struggle, creating opportunities for employment, self-confidence, intellectual development, and social mobility while exposing the continuing presence of structural inequality.

6. Economic Marginalisation and Dalit Women's Labour

Economic marginalisation is another significant theme in Pawar's narrative. Poverty is presented not merely as an individual condition but as a consequence of historically structured inequalities that restrict Dalit access to land, resources, employment, and social mobility.

Dalit women experience economic marginalisation through the combined pressures of caste, class, and gender. Their labour extends across domestic and productive spheres as they contribute to household survival while performing caregiving responsibilities. Pawar's mother is particularly significant in this context, symbolising the perseverance and often invisible

economic contribution of Dalit women. The weaving of mats becomes a powerful symbol of material necessity, labour, and resilience.

Migration to Mumbai creates opportunities for education and employment but does not completely eliminate caste discrimination or economic insecurity. Pawar's autobiography therefore demonstrates that economic marginalisation is inseparable from caste and gender structures that determine access to resources, opportunities, and institutional power.

7. Identity, Ambedkarism, and Self-Assertion

The journey from stigmatised identity to self-assertion is central to *The Weave of My Life*. Pawar becomes conscious of caste through experiences of discrimination, humiliation, and exclusion. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's philosophy transforms this consciousness by presenting Dalit identity as a basis for dignity, resistance, and collective mobilisation. Buddhism similarly represents a rejection of caste hierarchy and an affirmation of equality. Pawar's emergence as a writer becomes an act of self-assertion through which autobiography reclaims Dalit women's subjectivity and transforms personal testimony into political resistance.

8. Domestic Space, Marriage, and Patriarchy

Pawar critically portrays the domestic sphere as a site where patriarchal expectations concerning marriage, motherhood, household labour, and female responsibility are reproduced. Her experiences reveal the difficulties of balancing education, employment, family, activism, and personal aspirations. She also exposes contradictions within anti-caste movements that challenge caste inequality while retaining patriarchal practices. For Pawar, genuine liberation requires resistance to both caste and gender oppression.

9. Dalit Women and the Politics of Movement

Pawar highlights Dalit women's contributions to anti-caste movements through activism, community organisation, labour, and cultural production. Her narrative challenges their marginalisation within male-dominated movements and presents Dalit women as active political agents. Literature, testimony, and memory consequently become forms of political intervention, contributing to a Dalit feminist standpoint centred on women's lived experiences.

10. The Metaphor of Weaving

The metaphor of the *aidan* is a distinctive feature of Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*. The woven mat, associated with Dalit women's labour, symbolises survival, memory, creativity, identity, and resistance. Just as individual strands are woven into a stronger structure, Pawar interweaves personal memories, family histories, caste discrimination, poverty, education, marriage, and activism into a collective narrative. The metaphor also restores dignity to Dalit women's labour, transforming an ordinary object into a powerful literary symbol. Thus, weaving

represents both material survival and the transformation of individual memory into collective history.

11. Narrative Authenticity and Multivocality

Pawar's direct and accessible narrative style gives testimonial authenticity to experiences of caste discrimination, poverty, domestic conflict, and social exclusion. Her individual voice frequently expands into a collective "we" by incorporating the experiences of family members, Dalit women, activists, and marginalised communities. This multivocality transforms personal autobiography into collective social documentation while acknowledging the diversity of Dalit experiences.

12. Autobiography as Testimony and Resistance

The Weave of My Life functions as testimony and political resistance by documenting histories often excluded from official narratives. Pawar establishes lived experience as legitimate knowledge and reclaims narrative authority for Dalit women. Through remembering, documenting, questioning, and resisting oppression, autobiography becomes an alternative archive of caste and gender history and a powerful instrument of self-representation.

13. Contribution to Dalit Feminist Discourse

Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* makes a significant contribution to Dalit feminist discourse by simultaneously critiquing caste oppression and patriarchal domination. It challenges mainstream feminist perspectives that overlook caste while questioning anti-caste politics that marginalise gender concerns. Pawar demonstrates that Dalit women's experiences cannot be understood merely through the experiences of Dalit men or through feminist frameworks centred on socially privileged women. Her narrative establishes that caste and patriarchy are interconnected structures that must be challenged together. By foregrounding education, labour, writing, activism, and self-assertion, Pawar portrays Dalit women not merely as victims but as active agents of resistance, resilience, creativity, and social transformation.

14. Contemporary Relevance

The contemporary significance of *The Weave of My Life* lies in its engagement with continuing debates on caste, gender, education, representation, equality, and social mobility. Pawar demonstrates that constitutional guarantees alone cannot eliminate deeply embedded social prejudices that persist within educational institutions, workplaces, families, and communities. Her autobiography reinforces the importance of an intersectional approach that examines caste, gender, class, and labour together. By foregrounding marginalised voices, the text transforms understandings of history, identity, and knowledge. *The Weave of My Life* therefore remains both an important literary achievement and a powerful critique of the social structures that continue to reproduce inequality.

15. Findings

The study finds that Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* is a significant Dalit feminist autobiography in which personal memory functions as collective testimony. The major findings are as follows:

1. Caste and gender operate as interconnected structures of oppression in the lives of Dalit women.
2. Pawar's experiences demonstrate that Dalit women face marginalisation both within dominant caste society and patriarchal social structures.
3. Education functions as a major instrument of empowerment, consciousness, dignity, and social mobility.
4. Ambedkarite philosophy plays an important role in transforming caste stigma into political consciousness and self-assertion.
5. Economic deprivation in the autobiography is closely connected with caste hierarchy, gender inequality, and the historical devaluation of Dalit labour.
6. The domestic sphere functions simultaneously as a site of patriarchal control, negotiation, and resistance.
7. Pawar critically examines the inadequate recognition of women's contributions within anti-caste movements.
8. The metaphor of the *aidan* symbolises Dalit women's labour, resilience, creativity, collective memory, and interconnected struggles.
9. Narrative authenticity and multivocality transform Pawar's individual autobiography into a broader representation of community experience.
10. Autobiographical writing functions as a political act through which marginalised women reclaim narrative authority and preserve suppressed histories.
11. Pawar's work challenges both caste-blind feminism and gender-blind anti-caste politics.
12. The autobiography remains relevant to contemporary discussions of intersectionality, social justice, identity, and representation.

16. Conclusion

Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* represents a powerful convergence of autobiography, social history, Dalit consciousness, and feminist resistance. Through the narration of her personal journey, Pawar documents the complex structures of caste, gender, class, poverty, and patriarchy that shape the lives of Dalit women. Yet her autobiography is not merely an account

of oppression. It is equally a narrative of education, transformation, agency, creativity, resistance, and self-assertion.

The central metaphor of weaving captures the fundamental character of Pawar's autobiographical project. Individual memories are woven together with family histories and collective experiences, transforming the story of one woman into a broader testimony of Dalit women's lives. The *aidan* symbolises both the material labour of marginalised women and their capacity to transform struggle into creativity and resilience.

Pawar's engagement with education demonstrates its transformative potential while acknowledging the persistence of caste discrimination even within modern institutions. Her development of Ambedkarite consciousness reveals how political ideas can transform socially imposed stigma into dignity and collective assertion. At the same time, her critique of patriarchy within domestic life and the Dalit movement demonstrates her commitment to a comprehensive vision of liberation.

The enduring significance of *The Weave of My Life* lies in its insistence that struggles against caste and patriarchy cannot be separated. Dalit emancipation remains incomplete without the liberation of Dalit women, while feminist politics remains inadequate if it ignores caste-based inequality. Through this intersectional vision, Pawar makes an indispensable contribution to Dalit feminist discourse.

Ultimately, *The Weave of My Life* transforms autobiography into an act of resistance. By claiming the authority to narrate her own life and the collective experiences woven into it, Urmila Pawar challenges historical silencing and creates literary space for marginalised voices. Her autobiography stands as an enduring testimony to the resilience, dignity, intellectual agency, and political consciousness of Dalit women and continues to contribute meaningfully to contemporary discussions of caste, gender, identity, and social justice.

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