

Representation of Dalit Women in Literature: A Reading of *Chauti Bhint (The Fourth Wall)*

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Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urmila_Pawar

Abstract

What is Dalit literature? How are Dalit women represented in Dalit literature? Is there any difference between Dalit male writing and Dalit female writings? The present paper proposes to focus on questions like these, with special reference to a short story titled *Chauti Bhint (The Fourth Wall)*.

Keywords: Urmila Pawar, *Chauti Bhint (The Fourth Wall)*; Dalit Literature; Representation.

Introduction

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar famously wrote in *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) “You cannot build anything on the foundations of caste. You cannot build a nation; you cannot build up a morality. Anything that you will build on the foundations of caste will crack and never be a whole”. Dalit Literature is the voice of the oppressed community, seeking justice on the name of caste from the centuries. Authors rising from caste backgrounds are coming forward to engage in this rapidly increasing literary genre.

The portrayal of Dalit characters has always remained a sensitive issue in literature. Dalit Literature is a literature of resistance, which primarily focuses on the exclusion and marginalization of oppressed communities like Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes and other backward castes, and is fighting for harsh reality of caste system in India. Dalit literature is the voice of all oppressed communities who challenge the rigidity of caste system and demand equality. Dalit literature represents the bitter lived experiences of Dalit's, who are victims of so-called upper classes.

Urmila Pawar (1945--) was born in the village of Ratnagiri, Phansawale district, in the Konkan Maharashtra. She pursued her M.A. from Bombay University and served in the Maharashtra government's social protection department for many years. Her father, Aqun Pawar, was a teacher in a school for untouchables. She had completed his sixth standard in ‘the school of the polluted converts’ where only the children of converted Mahar-Christians went to study. He was a very stingy man. He worked as a priest and conducted the ceremonies like marriage, worship, and death rites for his own people. He was inspired by the philosophy of Ambedkar to educate the children. He lost his first wife and decided to remarry. He got married to Laxmibai, to whom Urmila was born. Laxmibai could weave cane baskets, storage bins and other household items. The weaving was her family occupation. When Urmila's father died in 1954, her mother easily carried the whole responsibility of the house. Her mother raised her children by making baskets, which the children sold door-to-door. Urmila had two sisters—Shantiakka and Manjulatai, and two brothers Achyut and Shahu. She married to Harishchandra, an educated boy of Bhiraunde.

Pawar as a Dalit Writer

The writings of Urmila Pawar are focused on her knowledge and are infused with the transparency required for her aesthetic value. Pawar started to write about her childhood for ‘the toiling women of her village’ and to repay the debt of those women who indulged her so much when she was a child. Her writing actually began with a play *Srikrushanacha Pendhy* when she was studying in sixth. Her writing was published for the first time in the Diwali issue of Ababa Haiti, children's magazine in 1989. Her writings about her life got published in the magazines like Akshar, Charvak, Prerak Lalakari and Milan Saryajani. Sahava Bot (Sixth Finger) (1988), Chauthi Bhint (Fourth Wall) (1990), Hacha Ek (2004) are her short stories collection. She is well-known

for a chronology *Dr. Ambedkar: Jeevankalpat* (2003). She is also a former actor of radical Marathi Theater and a playwright.

Review of Literature

In 1975, Urmila started writing and short stories became her specialty, and number of her short stories is read even in college. Her short story “Kavach” (Armour), was much criticized for its earthy tone, although it is completely honest about the vicious teasing given low caste women. In 1980’s Urmila Pawar was acclaimed as major Marathi writer, and she has been invited to represent Marathi letters as a short story writer. Urmila autobiography *Aaydan* (2003) initially written in Marathi translated into English by Maya Pandit as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman’s Memoirs* (2008) puts forth the changed life of women and captures successfully the transition of the Mahar community. This is an important addition to Dalit literature since, so far, the only Dalit autobiographies are by minimally educated women. It will certainly contain strong views on the well-established patriarchy both outside and inside the Dalit the people. It may deal with the personal tragedy of the death of her son in a railway accident. It will unquestionably mirror the strength and inventiveness that can be found in Dalit women. Often Pawar's characters totally overturn patriarchal structures, and sometimes repair and bend them in ways that work with them. Female characters depicted in the context of their own organization as stoic speech opposition-they have an enhanced understanding of their position and are continuously trying to mitigate the inevitable subordination. Pawar weaves the histories of Dalit people together and deliberately undoes each of the links-caste; gender and class-to reflect their characters ' historical subordination. Women in her stories do not write slogans and march in movements but fight discrimination on a daily basis in the circumstances in which they find themselves.

Discussion

Chauthi Bhint, a tale originally written in Marathi translated into English as (*The Fourth Wall*) is one of the best-known stories of Urmila Pawar, and Urmila herself is probably the most famous Dalit woman novelist. *Chauthi Bhint (Fourth Wall)* got awarded with Shakuntala Nene Award, Mumbai in 1992. *The Fourth Wall* indirectly touches upon the problems of idealism and caste. This reflects on a family crisis, which lays bare the difference between idealism and social reality in a silent yet compassionate way. The caste status becomes an unnecessary burden, which is taken to the farthest end of life from conception. Unfortunately, even the educated and elderly are not spared from its ill effects.

The story of *The Fourth Wall* revolves around Pandurang Medhekar (Nana) who no longer finds tranquility and pleasure in ‘Samadhan’ the building where he lives. Over a matter of charity, a tussle arises between Nana and his sons. The story highlights the fact that often men who glorify great social leaders publicly are hypocritical and self-centered in private lives. The entire drama begins on the eve of Nana’s retirement from postal services. The humble Nana is worried by the

patronizing speeches that memorialize the immense service to mankind by the social reformers like Mahatma Phule, Dr Ambedkar, and the comparison between an ordinary person like him and these great legendary figures. Nana, who has devoted his lifetime for his 'family' is surprised to hear high flown words such as "social responsibility", repaying "debt to society" and being addressed as "servant of society" "great benefactor" and "lover of knowledge". Nana feels that he too owes lot to the society of which he has been a part and passionately announces fifty thousand rupees as a donation towards the construction of a cultural centre. The forthcoming cultural centre proposes to have kindergarten for children, sewing classes for women, literacy classes for the uneducated and support for the needy and helpless.

The gesture of Nana originates genuinely from his love of fellow beings and his sense of social responsibility. Ironically, Nana knows little that his decision would soon put him in trouble and make him one of the helpless and needy he wants to support. By contacting his family members, Nana's action at the spur of the moment leaves him a vulnerable and powerless human when everyone turns cruelly on him.

Nana's zest for helping society, his heart full of love and contentment gets little encouragement or praise from his sons and daughters in law who are greedy. Their behavior against him is changing drastically. All members of his family rebuke him for his charity and their barbed words sound like poison to his ears. His sons are chastising him for preferring his family to the community while giving away a large proportion of his income. The wretched Nana is reminded of money matters and casts a shadow of gloom and desolation upon his life's evening phase. Nana is left vulnerable and dejected to endure shame and insults hurled by members of his own family despite countless hardships and lifetime support for his country.

Language will inflict deeper wounds and his own people's misbehavior leaves Nana utterly shaken. He is cruelly forced out of the house, and his disrespectful sons are being told to go to his home. The condition of Nana appears as that of Shakespearian King Lear who in his old age is exposed to the storm of life. Nana is shamelessly told that "he is no longer useful to his sons". They boldly accuse him of making a show of social service and generosity to gain public approval and honor. Unable to bear all this torture and suffering, Nana goes away the house and assisted by his neighbor, Manohar reaches an Old Age home, 'Evening Shadows'.

The second part of the story depicts the residence of Nana at the Old Age Home Evening Shadows'. He and three others, Joshi, Rasal and Savant, are asked to share a bed. The trio tells him to unpack his things and to put pictures of gods on the fourth wall that belongs to him. Nana is in shock. Already a misfit in his own home, Nana is now confronted by social exclusion, becoming insecure in the fresh refuge that no longer seems to give his troubled soul any relief. The trio knows his whereabouts and is especially keen to learn about his caste. He is stereotyped and

treated as ‘Other’, the moment they came to know that he belongs to different caste. Nana's negligence enters a full circle with his age-old friends refusing to accept him. The old age that symbolizes wisdom, humanity, empathy is paradoxically incapable of growing out of its antipathy and caste insensitivity. Sadly, neither the family he dedicated his entire life for, nor his current roommates appear enough radical to include him in their classes or their lives. His utter marginalization by his loved ones and his fellow beings is a compelling statement on the hypocritical culture and its double standards.

The subtle idealism clashes clearly with the harsh facts that impose upon him. He is forced to agree to certain regulations that in normal circumstances he would not have compromised. Time appears to check the determination for Nana. Manohar tries to reason out by making things bearable for him and encourages him to follow the rules by putting up a few pictures of idols, observing the timings of prayers and donating fifty rupees for pujas and religious rituals every month. The atheist Nana, a firm believer in Dr Ambedkar's ideals, is left abandoned on the mercy of destiny. Everything Nana's hopes of finding happiness and love in her remaining life are ruined by his orthodox companions' unfeeling coldness and rigidity. Dismayed Nana “realized that home for the aged meant a common life for those of the same age, and the same sad situation. Each would be considerate of the other and with a free, liberated mind they would go fearlessly towards the final end” (p.27).

Nana's soul is further tortured with grief as he watches the inmates haggling with a few ascetic including boys barely twelve years old with almost naked, emaciated bodies, wrinkled faces, covered with bee-bite boils and frozen eyes. The band has small children and older people than Nana who have come to sell honey cakes, sealing wax bits, and herbal medicines and wild herbs.

Nana is an unwanted member back in his house and is implicitly forced to declare his identity by disclosing his surname and roots. Unfortunately, our society's surnames are identical with the identity of castes. Although each has experienced similar traumatic experiences, being deserted after being penniless, when they find the fourth wall empty, they are uncomfortable. These hallow walls literally and metaphorically become an issue for Nana. Being an atheist becomes an unforgivable sin which elevates between them an invisible wall of ignorance and inhumanity. Regardless of the matter how much Nana seeks to pacify and eradicate the source of differences, his personality becomes the cause of alienation and suffering. His avoidance of the questions and insinuating remarks about his caste receive more cold responses from his roommates and indifference. His ‘otherness’ is confirmed’. It leads in a more traumatic marginalization in which he is overlooked, polite contact is interrupted, and his frustration and alienation become more intense.

The heart-broken Nana finds comfort only when his old aunt, who had warned him of his sons' selfish disposition and egoistic intentions, returns as a great support and relief. She decides to take him to his ancestral place. The empty wall of 'caste' makes him a cast-away. This unnoticed wall built by his so-called learned friends leaves a profound impact on Nana's tormented soul. The conservative, narrow minded people around him saddened all his efforts to belong or fit in the new social community. Soon he realizes there is no point in making any further efforts to belong to this society which is completely disintegrated and segregated by its narrow loyalties.

The main issue that needs to be addressed is about the caste system's long cast shadow, which cannot be easily shed away, and which seems to pervade human life as a whole, and it sticks like a burr to existence. This inseparable existence leads to separation and absolute discrimination. One is eventually led to wonder, how necessary are surnames for our survival? Can they not be scrapped to create an egalitarian society? Why is the education not modifying the mindsets of these narrow people? The story proposes that caste system still has not been completely abolished from our social system and is blatant in Indian societies. This so-called modern moan has lost the basic things of humanity. There is an urgent need to respect each other's individuality and human rights. The shades of caste and status thrown over should be shed for a bright future and genuine joy, which only an egalitarian society can promise.

One might well wonder, what is that tale about Dalit? Other than that, it addresses caste subtly and finishes not so subtly with the image of Ambedkar on the fourth wall of a space with depictions of gods on the other three walls? What is feminine or womanly about it, other than the very end presence of a strong woman in the village?

Dalit's writing has a certain definable consistency and a distinction between female and male writing. Urmila Pawar mixes the common theme of praising Ambedkar and glorifying social work. She shows no hesitation in revealing a family's brutality. The distinctive feature of Dalit women writers, particularly the patriarchy, is their capacity to critique both caste Hindu culture and Dalit society.

As Urmila asked the Sparrow series interviewer that the callous treatment of women by people within the Dalit group should be acknowledged: "You (male Dalit writers) set out to write the truth about your own life. So, to write about only one aspect of your life is not very fair. Life should be written about from every angle. You should write about your mistakes also."

Urmila speaks about the unkindness of those committed to the Ambedkar cause as they risk their own welfare. The greatest idealist of her story is a peasant woman who has been neglected by all but in a somewhat vague conclusion turns out to be the solver of the problems. Her reports

are calm; worried about the issues that anybody could have, based on a personal or family crisis. There, Nana, a no-one, has the courage to leave his unkind sons and to reveal who he is to his high caste roommates in an old people's home, but without cinematic overtones. Like some of her other tales, the people (the sons) are not overbearingly oppressive in this story; they and their spouses are similarly stubborn about the lack of a "righteous" inheritance.

In many of the tales of Urmila the roles of women are treated with great sympathy. This story is not about Urmila's own life, as many Dalit writings are, but simply reflects a human situation. However, the stout aunt may be modeled after an aunt of her mother's, who loved her deeply.

Urmila Pawar's writings are not just about recording the historical injustice but also about the gendered relations of every day. There are certain characteristics which categorizes men women in society. But this categorization is more psychological. 'Gender' is just a socially constructed idea about the behavior and role a particular 'sex' performs, and while sex is biological. In this classification men are considered to be bold, strong, assertive, independent, aspiring, and rational and on the contrary, women were considered to be timid, yielding, gentle, dependent, self-sacrificing, emotional, and intuitive.

Though women qualities are appreciated, and they are worshiped for being great, but on the contrary women are exploited and humiliated because of these great qualities. Women have accepted this patriarchy and discrimination unconsciously and sometimes were forced to remain mute, but how long? Education and social movements brought a change within women's consciousness and a sense that they too should have equal rights justice. And it was with the influence of western culture and education, women in India came in contact with these changes. For the equal rights and equal opportunities women organized themselves. Women started taking part in social movements for the sake of women. Not only through movements but they also adopted writing as a medium to protest and demand for equal rights.

In this process of writing, Elaine Showalter (1941--) in her classical work *A Literature of their Own* (1977) discusses the female literary tradition which she analyses as an evolution through three phases: the Feminine (1840-1880), Feminist (1880-1920) and Female (1920-to till around 1960). Showalter calls the first phase as "feminine", a phase of imitation, when women wrote with male pseudonyms; the second as the feminist phase (the phase of protest) when women won voting rights; the third phase as the female phase when women's writing entered a new phase of self-awareness.

Feminism is not simply a discourse to be analyzed but a technique to carry social change. Feminist criticism seeks to expose the mechanism of writing related to gender issues. They study

the patriarchal society depicted in works. Women started voicing their concerns in the form of writing and, with writing different genres they brooked the canon the women are frail or in the words of Shakespeare 'frailty thy name is women' is no more tolerated by them. Urmila felt the need to write for herself and her entire community of Dalit women. Her voice is the voice of every Dalit woman, their concern, their torture, anguish and pain.

Conclusion

Writing from the margins, she kept challenging the divisions of caste-based society, and her short story *The Fourth Wall* is one of the best examples. Pawar weaves the histories of Dalit people and links - caste; gender and class-to reflect their characters' historical subordination. Pawar's fiction is a place where she imagines different, better, and more gender-sensitive outcomes in her real life and demands for an egalitarian society. Also characterized by language, Dalit literature is layered with implicit connotations of the caste-gender. Dalit Literature is a way to combat systemic injustice: first, by learning about the past and then following the history to see how oppression persists in the current. Pawar's short stories depict the horrible social roles of caste, class and gender and, their cumulative effects on women's lives are brought to light and questioned; their intersections but also the alienation that comes with those axes of distinction.

The complexity of life has existed with race, class, and gender burdens: how do these people dissent? Are they complaining? What form does their protest take? Pawar's work on some of these issues is a significant discovery or starting of enquiry.

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