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DOUBLE SUFFERINGS OF DALIT WOMEN: A Post-Colonial Feminist study With special reference to Sangati by Bama & The Weave of my Life by Urmila Pawar

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Abstract:

Dalits who are excluded from the four fold Varna system of Hinduism and were seen as forming a fifth Varna who were previously characterized as untouchables in India. The word 'Dalit' means "oppressed" or "broken" and this name was given to them in 1930. The Dalits has to face oppression, discrimination, isolation and humiliation from other castes of society in their day to day life. The condition of Dalit women in Indian society are even more tragic as they have to suffer from double discrimination. Dalit literature is about the sufferings of this 'oppressed classes'. The endless miseries of Dalit women, their inhuman victimization and shocking gender discrimination found a realistic but painful portrayal in the novel like Sangati by Bama and The Weave of My Life by Urmila Pawar which have been taken into consideration in this study to throw a startling insight into the lives of Dalit women who face the double disadvantage of caste and gender discrimination. This paper is a study or the analysis of Dalit oppression, marginalization, discrimination, isolation and humiliation specially women in their day to day life.

Keywords: Dalit literature, oppression, marginalization, discrimination, isolation, humiliation.

Exploitation or oppression of weaker by stronger is as an age old concept where the weaker section is always suppressed, humiliated, exploited, discriminated and marginalized in every sphere of life. India is also not an exception of this, rather Indian history is a vibrant record of strife and conflict between two opposite forces like exploiters and exploited, colonizer and colonized, powerful and powerless.

In India the society is divided into castes and the four major caste divisions are Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. All the lowest caste people come under the category of Shudra. The Dalits fall under this category and they are also regarded as untouchables or Achoot or Harijan. Though India's caste system was officially abolished in 1948¹ but the age old caste hierarchy imposed on people by birth still exists. These people are suppressed, humiliated, exploited, discriminated and marginalized in every sphere of life.

The outcome of this age old suppression of dalit people was an emergence of dalit literature. Dalit literature is always marked by the revolt against casteism and a great

struggle of lower caste, against the high class people. It is a form of post-colonial literature which is a study of marginal and colonized. Dalit fiction and its literary movement are based on the common ground of social oppression.

Dalit feminism is a concept propagated by Dalit women who speak out the double sufferings of Dalit women, first being a Dalit and second being a woman who struggle with social norms, condition, which are extremely propagated by a patriarchal society. Women always was considered as the 'other' in the society who had to go through lot of sufferings throughout their life but till 1960 dalit women could not voice against their oppression. Women's movement in India especially in Tamilnadu movement of 1960s may be noted as the starting point of dalit feminism². Dalit feminism means Dalit women fighting against the hegemonies of caste, class and masculinity — the political expression of the intertwining struggles of caste and gender.

Dalits women's oppression by double patriarchies —the apparent subjugation of the patriarchal system of the upper castes and the furtive domination of males within their own community are the main concern of Dalit feminism. It fights against the absolute power of the society that rests with men in the community and in the institutions led by them - the caste courts, the religious institutions, the Panchayats and Dalit feminism tries to break down those social norms.

The age old pain of the Dalit women was portrayed in the novels by the Dalit writers like Bama, Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble etc who tried to bring forth the traumatic oppression of them in the patriarchal society. The endless miseries of Dalit women, their inhuman victimization and shocking gender discrimination found a realistic but painful portrayal in their novel. *Sangati* by Bama and *The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar throw a startling insight into the lives of Dalit women who face the double disadvantage of caste and gender discrimination. The novel 'Sangati' was originally written in Tamil in 1994 and the novel well defines the name 'Sangati' which means 'events' that it portrays the event that takes place in the life of women in Paraiya community through individual stories, anecdotes and memories. Various experiences and stories of the Dalit women are strung together in the novel and thus it becomes the mouthpiece of the community. The "difference" between the life of Dalit women and the higher class women are projected in the novel where the image of a Dalit woman is made with all her strength, labour, patience and resilience. Though the dalit women are treated not as human but insignificant creatures who are always oppressed, tormented, subjugated and looked down upon both by the upper-class people and by their own men, these women show their potentiality with an extraordinary strength of survival.

Urmila Pawar's autobiography 'Aaydan' published in 2003 translated by Maya Pundit as 'The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoir' portrays the life of a Dalit woman which is different from the others caused by the crushing impact of caste and gender. Though it is a personal testimonial of the sufferings of the novelist, but it functions as a social document as well as historical witness of the traumatic oppression of her people and the plight of her

community as a collective way. Using her life experiences, she documents the caste discrimination, physical violence and patriarchal dominance and injustice executed on Dalits especially Dalit women.

The life struggles of Paraiya women like Maikanni, Muukkama, Irulaayi and Peechamma is the subject matter of the novel *Sangati* by Bama. It is an autobiography of her community where the events of the day to day happenings of Dalit community have been narrated. The caste and gender problems that the Dalit women had to go through both outside and inside the community, the life and sufferings of a Dalit women right from the child birth to old age everything gets a vivid exposure in Bama's novel. The way the voices of these women have been recorded, they are either of frustration and anger or of pain and helplessness. It is very true when Bama says "All women in the world are second class citizens. For Dalit women, the problem is grave. Their Dalit identity gave them a different set of problems. This Experiences a total leak of social status. Even they are not considered dignified human beings. My stories are based on these aspects of Dalit culture"³. 'The Weave Of My Life' gives a graphic description of another lived reality of Dalit women and a testimony to the harshness, violence and torments that the Dalit women had to face under patriarchy at home, within and outside the community.

Bama's 'Sangati' and Urmila Pawar's 'The Weave of My Life' both are painful projection of Dalit women's sufferings but of two different communities which are almost common in nature. The Physical and mental toil of women are portrayed in a realistic way in both the novels. Women play a predominant role as breadwinners in the family in both the novels. In the novel 'Sangati', we can see women working as hard as men both in agricultural fields and building sites but when they are given wages, they are exploited and they are not able to earn as much as men do. Even same work and equal labour too made them less paid. Bama gives examples how women worked more than men but earned less. In the matter of tying up firewood bundles, the boys always got five or six rupees more. And if the girls tied up the bundles, but the boys actually sold them, they got the better price.

Normally it is the men, who take the responsibility of the family. But in case of Paraiya community, it is women who bear the financial burden of running the family and Men use to spend the money they earn, the way they please. Men, having the habit of drinking; sometimes spent their whole wages on alcohol and other self amusement activities and women alone have to manage the expenses of the house. The division of labour was also not same. Men, who returned from the day's work in the field, went straight to the bazaar or chavadi to relax and enjoy with friends and came home when the meal was ready. For women the second shift of work awaited at home. As soon as they return, they have to manage the household chores. They need to engage themselves in washing vessels, cleaning the house, collecting water, gathering firewood, going to the shops to buy rice and other provision, cooking rice, making a kazhambu or a kanji and many more other works. Finally, they feed their husband and children and eat the left over. But that is not the end of their

day's toil. When they go to bed, even they lay down their bodies wracked with pain; they were not allowed to sleep. Whether they died or survived, she had to please their husbands. Thus women bear the double burden of the work outside and inside home.

The struggle and pain of women are endless. After maintaining the double burden of the work, struggling with poverty and adversities at home, they had to face the beating and abasement of their drunken husbands. Still they were concerned about the well being of their husbands. They always used to talk to their husbands to give up the habit of drinking of country liquor. They would always talk about their husbands' habit of drinking country liquor. They would leave no stones unturned to dissuade the men from bad habits. In the neighborhood they would talk publicly how they could be stopped the habit of drinking, they would also appreciate the Dalit men in the neighboring villages who did not have or gave up such bad habits. Thus setting example of men from other villages, they wanted to bring their husbands to the right track. They even looked after the study of their children among all the adversities and thought of the welfare of their families. It shows how strong they were mentally and physically.

Weaving baskets, collecting the fire wood or grass and selling them in the market are some of the professions of Dalit women of Mahar community took up to run their families in Urmila Pawar's novel 'The Weave of my Life'. The author's mother also used to sell firewood or other domestic items made from bamboo and for this she had to travel to Ratnagiri where the author accompanied her. The author describes the difficulties of the women of her village had to face while collecting the fire wood or grass that they sold in the market. The women were threatened by the roaring of the tiger in broad day light. Venomous snakes and thorny bushes in the jungle added to their suffering. The village vagabonds also used to trouble the helpless women collecting fire wood or grass. The women left their children at home with elderly women or with neighbours. Every day they worked so hard to carry heavy firewood, rice bags or grass covered with leaves or woolen blankets on their head. They walked through the dark forest taking the risk of life and accepted the hard challenges of life. The women adopted different methods to increase their sell attracting the customers with different actions and words to surpass other women.

When these women were at work, they were concerned of their babies who are left with the family. They would worry about their children at home who are not treated properly by their husbands. They would worry about their sick and hungry babies who are left in care of the drunkard husbands. They are always in fear and doubts which made them rush towards their home. As soon as they return home, children would ask for food to them and they had to be busy in household works. Their main concern was to feed the hungry stomachs of the family members and to fulfill this purpose they struggled hard from the dawn to dusk. They had no other option than working hard as they had neither capital nor education to do some other work. Pawar used to go to the seashore with her cousin several times and there she saw the women of her community collecting oysters, mule fish and crabs to earn their livelihood. Their nails would get hurt and skin would get some cuts while searching for the

oyster shells, still they continued to do it in the hope of earning a good sum by selling the oysters they had collected. The women used to take examples from neighboring villages called Bhandari and Daldini who became rich enough to buy gold ornaments and were inspired by the hard work of them. They always kept an urge to uplift the financial condition of the family by any means.

Women of Dalit community are destined to meet with humiliation, harassment, sexual exploitation and violence in and outside the family. Physical violence, like lynching, whipping and canning by fathers, husbands, and brothers are very common to Dalit women. Maariamamma and Thaayi were regularly beaten by their husbands who proudly considered it as their right to harass their partners. Marriamma's suffering was life long as she did not get any love and affection that she expected for before her marriage too. Her parents arranged her marriage with Maanikkam who is a drunkard and often goes to jail. She cried bitterly to stop this marriage but nobody showed any sympathy to her. Since then she suffered endlessly beaten by her husband every day. The psychological stress and stairs that every Dalit women felt was invincible but nobody pay a heed to them. To quote the writer "man can humiliate woman many times, he can disrespect a woman, it is very normal. But in this partial double minded society woman has no right to spoken out anything. This is acceptable to all"⁴.

The Dalit women were sexually harassed at their workplace also. Marriamma was molested by KumarasamiAyya, her upper caste land owner when she was returning home after collecting heavy bundle of firewood. The burning heat of the sun drove her to the nearby irrigation pump-set. When she goes to the pump to drink water, KumarasamiAyya seizes her hand and pulls her inside the pump set. Somehow escaping when she tells the incident to her friends, they agreed to the fact that landowner was an evil man but they feared to stand against him due to his power of money and high caste. KumarasamiAyya one the other hand was scared of being complained against him, and so he hurries to the village and lodge a false complain to the headman of the Paraiya community Naattaamai, against Marriamma that Marriamma, daughter of Samudrakani, and that Mnukkayi's grandson Manikkam were behaving in a very dirty way. An inquiry was made in the village against Marriamma and Manikkam were called and asked to stand each to one side with folded arms. The Naattaamai blames the women for every mis-happening by saying that "It is you female chicks who ought to be humble and modest. A man may do a hundred things and still get away with it. You girls should consider what you are left with, in your bellies"⁵. Finally Marriamma and Manikkam were fined with Rs 200/- and Rs 100/- respectively. The Paraya men were speechless when she was victimized.

Urmila Pawar's novel 'The Weave of my Life' explains that Dalit women were always put under restriction having no liberty to move around the village. They could not enjoy the freedom of roaming inside the village too. The unwritten laws of the Jat Panchayat should be strictly observed by female members of the Mahar community to avoid harassment.

Mahar women were kept under vigilance whenever they went to fetch fire wood in the forest and most shamefully even when they went for defecating themselves at the outskirts of the village. Any suspicion of extra-marital affair would make her subjected to physical torment, abasement and sometimes death penalty too. But the same law was not implemented on men. If a man had such an extra-marital affair or did not fulfill his family duties, no punishment awaited for him. Women did not have the right even to question him for his mis-conduct. If women wanted to stay with their husband, they quietly tolerated men's eccentricity or had to leave the home of the in-law and accept the fate of hardworking life in their father's place.

The Dalit women's saga was full of criticism and ill treatment. Not only the male, but elderly female members of the family and society like mother-in-laws also abused, criticized and envied the young daughters-in-law. They were abused and beaten for simple mistakes like eating without permission or missing of vada or any other food items for which daughter in law is suspected. Hiriakka and Bhikkiakka were such victims of in-laws and their husbands. Beaten wives were allowed to hide by Aaye in her house till his effect of the liquor lessened.

Dalit women were never given proper respect by the people of other caste too. They were humiliated and ill treated in spite of having specialty in certain works. The novel *Sangati* introduces Patti who had special capability in attending childbirth in the village who could even handle the most difficult cases. This specialty of her was known to most people of the village who were liked by people for this. People themselves feel in a safe hand if she attended the birth of the child around of villages. However, the people of the upper caste did not approach her in attending the childbirth even in the most critical situation because of her low caste. Her quality was not honoured by them as she was a Paraiya woman.

In Urmila Pawar's novel too we find examples how Dalit women are ill treated by upper caste. While buying the bundles of the fire wood brought by the Dalit women, the high caste Hindus kept the money on the ground instead of giving it in the hands of the Dalit women as they observe untouchability.

Equality in education was also not available for Dalit women. Very few girls went to school those days but those who went, they also had to face lot of troubles to survive in school. Practice of untouchability was still prominent and teachers find it troublesome to make separate seating arrangement for them. The upper class students always make complaints against them and therefore teachers not only discouraged but humiliated Dalit students. Urmila Pawar exposes her bitter childhood experiences how the Dalit students were made to work by the teachers and false allegations also were brought against them to stop them going school. Pawar was slapped tight by her Guruji when she questions Herlekar Teacher who always told her to clean the cow dung bringing false allegation that their cow Kapila daily makes the place dirty with cow dung. The fingers' imprint remained on her face till she went home and Aaye, Pawar's mother, became furious and questioned to Guruji

for falsely accusing her. Women like Power's mother always wanted to educate their children and give them a better future. But teachers always had a dehumanizing attitude towards them and make them an easy target of punishment who could not voice against their brutality. Urmila was also made to fail in the fourth standard because she had argued with Herlekar Guruji.

The Dalit women had to face gender bias right from the childhood. Girl babies are always neglected by parents and given little care. Their childhood passed taking care of their younger siblings and also taking the burden of the family. The seventh chapter of the novel *Sangati* portrays such a child born with ill fate and inconsolable sufferings: a girl of eleven years named Maikkanni. Walking and working started almost at similar time for her. Besides doing household work, she went to work in place of her mother when her mother delivers a baby. She looked after the new born babies too. When her mother became pregnant for the seventh time having very little gap among the children, she becomes so weak that she was unable to go to work. Maikkanni then took all the responsibility of the house to avoid starving of the family. The life of a grown up Dalit women were worse who had to face sexual assault within and outside the community. The narrator's cousin Marriamma had to face sexual abuse like other Dalit women but could not stand against it. The pathetic picture of Dalit women are vividly drawn by Bama in her novel.

Urmila Pawar portrays another aspect of Dalit women's childhood experiences which was insecure and packed with many psychological problems. Social and cultural problems caused by the hierarchal order of the society added to their sufferings which the author personally had to go through. Her caste became a stumbling block in the progress of her life. The birth of a sixth child in a poor family specially a girl is generally unwelcomed and therefore Power's birth also was treated as extra burden making her face complexities of life since birth.

Oppression of temples and church is another kind of oppression Dalit women had to face. The Dalit people adopted Christian religion because they thought adopting Christianity will give them social respect. But in reality, the situation was just the opposite especially of the women. In *Sangati*, the author has described how Catholic priests guided by gender biasness, treated the converted Dalit women as inferior. Pawar has presented the oppression of the priest in a different angle. Among the Dalit community, the priest from a higher caste, used to perform all the rituals but he did it by standing at a distance. He did not touch any object of Dalit community. Even to collect the fees, the Bhat had appointed a person to collect whatever was given for the respective ritual. Pawar describes how one of her relatives had challenged the priest. She explains how Hari who had served in the British Army, saw all the discrimination of the priest during one of his visits, and thought of practising all the rituals by learning Sanskrit and Pranayam. But the Bhat was not ready to accept Hari's skills, though he learnt Sanskrit and take part in religious activities.

Marriage is another institution that follows the patriarchal rule of gender biasness. Women have no right to choose their life partner as marriages are arranged by the elders in the family. After marriage women have no choice than to please their husband. Both Bama and Pawar describe how most of the women in the novel, had to do full day's labour inside and outside home, but their labour did not end there. They had to spend their night pleasing their husbands and their willingness or pleasure not at all mattered in the marriage life. They have to give birth as many children as their husbands want to even if it affected their health. Birth control measures also had to be adopted by women as men are never ready to lose their masculinity. The poverty of the family and irresponsibility of the husband made pregnant women to work in the field even in their last part of their pregnancy. During pregnancy they did not get enough food and after delivery too, women are not given proper medical care resulting to their death. Domestic violence is very common in Dalit family where women are abused and tortured physically, mentally and emotionally by their husbands which was considered quite 'natural' as if women are born to face this abasement. The common relationship between husbands and wives are not 'love' but 'fight'. Even pregnant women too could not escape from it. In Sangati, Bama describes how once she watched a woman chased by her husband with a stick of fire wood in his hand. She tried her best to escape by running on the street but soon she was caught and carried home by her husband and beaten bitterly behind the locked door. Most of the men as described by Bama used to beat their wife after consuming alcohol. The anger of being humiliated by their employers, made the men folk outburst their suffocation on their meek and weak wives. This violence and suffering were common to the live of most of the women. Bama is afraid when women of Dalit community will be free from this kind of life but Dalit women were strong enough to survive till their last breath bearing all humiliation and torture.

Though Dalit women face humiliation in married life, she had no right to go back to the parents. Staying with parents after marriage was a matter of disgrace. Parents were not financially strong to afford her expenditure, or fulfill the demand of in-laws. Lack of financial support from parents and relatives made her bound to live with in-laws in spite of all hatred and sufferings. The writer gives example how her cousin Susheela left home with children being unable to bear the humiliation and sufferings.

The Dalit women had to go through hard times not only during pregnancy but also during delivery of the baby. They could not stop working in the fields for longer hours though their health did not permit it. Burdened with family responsibilities, they could not take rest at that critical time. The author narrates the story of Pachamuukipillai, a Dalit woman who went to cut grass during full term pregnancy, and there she managed to deliver the child and came home carrying the baby and her bundle of grass. Vellaiyamma, the grandmother of Bama narrates that Dalit women never saw hospitals during delivery as there were no hospitals nearby and so child birth took place in their village. Bama's grandmother was an expert in attending every child birth in the village even the critical one too. She never charged any fee for this task. She also had an ill luck as she was married to

Govindan at the age of 14 years who disappeared just after four years of their marriage. She brought up her children single handedly and struggled hard to care of them. Bama's mother too worked for whole day in the fields and then went into labor.

Gender discrimination began at home at a very young age. The boys were free to lead life as they wanted. They had freedom to play and eat as much as they wanted. But the girls were made to stay at home and do the household works. Bama explains how her grandmother too gave more preference to the grandsons and gave them more care. Whenever some food items were brought by her, grandsons enjoyed them to the fullest and grand daughters were given only the leftovers.

Urmila Pawar explains how the death of a husband made the Dalit women suffer even more. Being financially weak, to some extent they became dependent on the elders and they became more susceptible to the harshness of the superiors. Responsibilities to take care the children single handedly made her work even harder inside and outside home. She had no other option left than to accept and deal with the challenges waited for her. Rearing children, household duties, solving the financial crisis made the life of them miserable. Urmila Pawar remembers how looking after several children turned to be a very tough task for Aaya. Pawar's birth became an additional burden for the family. She became a cause of hatred for the family.

The standard of living of the people of Dalit community was so low that they even did not know the name of food items that the upper caste people used to eat. Dalit people were not allowed to live in the same locality where upper caste people used to reside and from the name of the area only people could recognize from which community they used to belong to. Many cultural habits of upper caste were also unknown to them. But staying completely departed from each other was not possible for them. Social rituals and customs like the wedding ceremony could not be solemnized without the presence of the priest of upper caste. During festivals of the upper caste, the Dalits could get the unpalatable part of food; either the leftovers in pieces or the rotten one or food without good taste. They could not cook the similar food at home having lack of money and the knowledge of the recipe or cooking method. They even did not dare to ask and learn the cooking process from the upper caste women due to lack of communication.

Urmila Pawar in her novel gives a detailed description of the various food items that her upper class classmates used to have. The mouth watering names of the food tempted her and made her curious to open her classmates' Tiffin boxes to check what that particular food actually looked like. When the upper caste girls talked about the food items like 'Poli' for chapati, 'Bhakri' as 'Dashmi' 'dadapepohe' etc and sweet dishes like 'Ladu', 'puranpoli', 'modak', and 'Karanjya' etc, it allured the author. But she never had the courage to ask her mother to cook the items as she knew those pleasant food items would not be accessible to them. Lack of sufficient money and knowledge did not allow them to intensify their standard of living. They had access to some cheap food like kaot (fish soup), chadu (cheap

fish) and vegetables grown in their courtyard, aloo / colocassia leaves etc. Pawar narrates why kheer was not cooked in her house because it needed oil and sugar and poverty did not allow her to enjoy the delicacies of the sweets when she was a little girl. Fishes like Pampfret and delicacies like 'ladu' and 'karanjya' were never cooked at home. But when Pawar visited her sister Akka, in Kudal, she was surprised to see such items.

If we study both the novels, *Sangati* by Bama and *The Weave of My Life* by Urmila Pawar we will find a common factor which makes the Dalit women suffer so deep. Deprived of the light of education, these lower caste women could not come out of their socio-economic and political status. Poverty, ignorance and social problems like untouchability and caste discrimination subdued them permanently and they became the victims of injustice, discrimination and exploitation. Dalits did not accept education for centuries, and the upper caste people tried to keep them uneducated to rule over them until Ambedkar had tried to uplift their condition with an ideology "Educate, Organize and Agitate". During the post independent period the Dalits understood the value of education and learnt to demand for their rights and got the idea for revolution and voice of protest. Their anger, agitation, distress finds its voice in the writings of their people. The conventional literature never gave attention to the pain and sufferings of Dalit lives, the Dalit narratives brought their situation, condition, life experiences, pains and sufferings into light demanding a solution to them. They started questioning against the injustice, discrimination and exploitation of the Dalits. They could understand that education is the only medium and most important weapons to eradicate caste system. Urmila's father who was a school teacher also could understand the value of education and gave lot of importance on educating his children. Before his death, he urged his wife to continue the education of his children so that they are not trapped within multiple layers of subordination.

Both the novels 'Sangati' by Bama and 'The Weave of My Life' by Urmila protest against the hegemony of dominant social structures documenting the pain and sufferings of the Dalit women due to age old oppression and subjugation. Bama has brought out the differences between the life of Dalit women and the higher caste women and, exhibits their strength to accept the challenges of the hardships of life. Though the voice of the Dalit women is silenced but they could create their identity through their power of labour and resistance. Urmila with her personal narrative describes the collective experience of humiliation and suffering and accentuates the voice of the community behind the voice of the self and thus both the novels highlight the issues of caste, class and gender in a very fruitful manner. Both the narrators have very skillfully combined their personal experience with the social one and thus they work as an eye opener for the readers offering them a new perspective to see the saga of Dalit women.

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