

## **Resistance and Reconstruction in Urmila Pawar's Mother Wit**

<sup>1</sup>Ulka Tewari, AICC, Amity University, Noida

<sup>2</sup>Dr. Shravan Kumar, Associate Professor, AIESR, Amity University, Noida

### **Introduction**

Language as a medium could be pleasant or unpleasant under various circumstances. Dalit women undergo various sufferings and ordeals where the sexual harassment is the most common. In early days, when caste system and Varna system was initialised, Dalit women are treated as *devadasi/jogini* where they would be sexually exploited by the upper caste people as a cultural practice. There was no law or regulations that could drop this atrocity. Even after 4000 years, there are many old traditions and practices in existence among the places like Karnataka, Andhra, etc. where *devadasi* is still a cultural practice. But apart from this sexual harassment practice, in the technology-based era where the Dalit women are educated and settled in career, they are still exploited and mistreated among the peers and the society. Vulgarity in language is used as a tool for sexual harassment by many men with power, higher-caste, superiority and gender bias, etc. The use of foul language in writings of Dalit feminists and authors explore the atrocity they have against the male dominance and oppression; however, the foul language used by men against the Dalit women are a different case. The Dalit women due to their inferiority and being a weaker sex must undergo this again and again in daily basis where they experience psychological torture and sometimes succumb to death. This had made the feminists and authors to focus upon language and sexual harassment on Dalit women and to narrate their share with true facts and information through narratives and stories.

One such story, *Nyay* explores the thought process of men and their crooked minds upon Dalit women where the law feeds on its preys through power and position. As the verses go:

*“Her facial features were sharp, her body well-endowed and firm, flourishing like a young banana tree. Her curves were so attractive that even a man like me in his fifties would have been tempted to touch her in passing in a crowded place.”*Source: Pawar (Nyay: Mother wit, 2013)

## **Discussion**

Dalit literature, the oppressed social class courtesy of the Indian caste system, is an important and distinct part of Indian literature. As a collective voice, providing an insight into the injustices and harassment faced by Dalit, Dalit literature emerged into prominence after 1960. Dalit literature began with Marathi language and soon transcended itself into other regional languages via self-narratives such as autobiographies, poems and short stories. Dalit literature began to be perceived as a weapon against the inhuman oppression of the Dalits by the Brahminical social order of the Indian society, which actively denies them with basic human rights and dignity.

This paper attempts to explore the reviews on the issues and sufferings of women through caste discrimination, gender inequality, education for exploitation and empowerment, male dominance, sexual harassment and so on, globally; especially in the view of Urmila Pawar’s *Mother wit*.

Women have undergone some or other kind of tests to prove themselves which is termed as *Agni Pariksha* from ancient times. *Agni Pariksha* as the term goes in Hinduism is normally defined as *purity test* for women under misunderstanding or suspicion by men. Suspicion is the base for misdeeds among human beings. Numerous suicides and murders around the globe had been recorded due to a mere suspicion even if the information is not true and among those death toll

women are the most one end up dead. Many Dalit men in India, due to their arrogance physically torture their wives to death just with mere doubts in their twisted minds. Contrarily, the deaths of men due to suspicion have been recorded less, globally. Hence, it is safer to argue that women are the most affected souls when it comes to prove them against the falsified information.

In India, “*Agni Pariksha*” came into existence for the sole purpose of women proving them self to men that they are not stained or corrupted or wronged in any situation (Byadgi, 2011). Even the most powerful, intellectual/ intelligent, skilful and narrow minded women becomes a victim under suspicion which makes them to end their lives in order to prove themselves; contradictorily when a woman ends her life under suspicion it is believed that she was wronged and thus the suspicion is true after all. There are several literatures and scholarly works upon violence of women particularly Dalits and how they were ill-treated by men for many reasons. The views and opinions of the authors might vary from one to another; however, the fact is women are mistreated by men and put to test by force (Dwivedi and Soni, 2017).

The Dalit Panthers movement from the 1970s gave significant rise to the modern Dalit maharwada which symbolized utter poverty and total destitution. Epidemics, especially cholera and plague, were extremely fond of mahars; or we can say that mahars were more prone to it, a couple of mahars would die like flies every day”. Kamble also described the filthy and squalid conditions of the people belonging to mahar caste and provided the sordid descriptions of dusty and naked children with their watery noses scavenging for food. She also described the shocking condition of women post-birth. As feminist writer, Pawar and Kamble has vividly described the marriages, housework and cooking in their books. Though Urmila’s *Mother wit* stories never attempted to imply Agni Pariksha as a sin indirectly the use of language and verses in the stories like *Aaye*, *Vegli*, *Sahay Bot*, *Shalya*, and *Nyay* firmly insisted that the men, especially Dalits treat

their women with lesser dignity and no respect. This is not only the case with mahars, if we see in totality it is the mindset of male dominated society. To explain, in Ramayana goddess Sita have been through an Agni Pariksha and at every step these days too women have to go through some kind of Agni Pariksha to clarify their point of view.

In the short story sixth sense (*Sahav Bot*) Urmila has explained how a woman is literally murdered through mental torture and depression by her husband who mistreats her and has suspicion on her character. According to Urmila a murder need not be carried physically through weapons as instruments rather usage of words, emotions and other aspects that affect one's lifestyle to end their life is also a murder. Through the short stories in *Mother wit* Urmila, expressed her discontent that women too have feelings, emotions, dignity, prestige, and not only they should be given respect but their opinions and work as well. Through *Mother wit* Urmila also brings up that women are always the one who go under Agni Pariksha for what they haven't done, instead men should be treated the same way too.

In the patriarchal system this has been observed that the oldest and wisest man of the family is the head of the family and the legacy would be passed on to males for generations. For example, the *rasam pagri* which still is a tradition or social ceremony in so many Punjabi and Rajasthani(marvadi) families in which the eldest surviving male member ties a turban (pagri) on his head in the presence of the extended family or clan. Pagri here is considered as a symbol of responsibility. Famous actor Saif Ali Khan was crowned pagri as The Nawab of Pataudi, forty days after the death of his father. Though this system of male dominance might be a family practice in Indian cultures but there are countries who term it as illegitimate and arrogant act against women. In India, Dalit men usually portray their dominance through two actions,

violence and ill-language. Male dominance particularly in the patriarchal family system is deep rooted and prevails stronger and important since they prefer male children over female children and all female children privileges would be completely ignored. The Dalit women are mostly illiterate when compared against other caste and experience so much pain and sufferings due to their lifestyle and upbringing; howsoever the same cannot be said for the Dalit men since they have power over their women (Sreelatha, 2016).

*Men are at the top and women of that caste are on the bottom like crushed and wasted powder. And at the very bottom are the Dalits and below them are the suppressed Dalit women (Omvedt 321).*

The short stories *Vegli* and *Shalya* clearly explained the facts of Dalit women and how they were treated by men. In *Shalya* (Pain), the mother character Jyothi, gives birth to a girl child and was forced to exchange her girl child with a boy child undergoes depression, aggression, shame, void and more feelings that reduced her worth being a woman. In another story *Vegli* (The Odd One), the character Nalini, an educated and working mother of a child, faced numerous oppression and male dominance from her family and her peers and then was mentally tortured which in-turn led her to quit her job and marriage. Thus, male dominance in the stories of *Mother wit* was portrayed transparently and clearly through the author's verses and senses that even a layman would grasp with ease.

Urmila in the story *One in Hand*, portrays the character Kaki who suffers throughout her life and is mistreated by everyone as a slave and not as a family member. To an extent in this story the wife was forced to donate her kidney to her sick-in-bed husband who drastically goes under coma stage after the surgery. When later she was ignored by her family in deciding the property rights and ends up with no share, she finally wakes up herself from coma of slavery herself.

Thus, the stories of each woman in Urmila's *Mother wit* are explained in such awe and ease for its readers to understand clearly and relate themselves with their own situations.

Urmila Pawar in her story *Dhind* (Public Disgrace) has explained the rights of Dalits, social activism, gender and caste bias in her twisted humorous way. For instance, her wit in utilizing the verse to portray the harsh truth of the society could be witnessed.

*"This is like a boil on your anus — you can neither show anyone, nor tell anyone about it..."*

Source: Pawar; (*Dhind*, In *Mother wit*: 2013).

The above statement from *Dhind* depicts the reality of three Dalit women who were publicly disgraced by upper caste people by pelting and with torn saris for guarding their caste-based children against a feud among upper caste children. The story focused on the atrocity and exploitation of Dalit women. Thus, caste and gender exploitation has been, will be inexistence until it is eradicated completely off the humanity.

Urmila Pawar in "*Mother wit*" had also explained the same level of male dominance via her short stories where the male as a father, a husband, as an in-law, a relative and as peer's possess the masculine qualities over women and makes them their subordinate. The short stories *Vegli* and *Shalya* clearly explained the facts of Dalit women and how they were treated by men as a weaker sex. *Vegli* is a story of an educated, working dalit woman named Nalini. Her happiness at her success is, therefore, mediated by constant reminders that she does not really deserve what she has. In *Shalya* the narrative voice expresses appropriate sorrow for the fate of a girl-child as well as an ironic sympathy for the woman who has failed her own humanity.

The initial definition and concept of patriarchal system in India was rule of father or elder man of the house or a patriarch where the male dominates over the family and decisions. Later on, as the culture, people, society and community developed and restructured itself in the 2000s, patriarch

system reshaped and the same instead of getting eradicated due to the subordination of educated women in the society got expanded into social culture where it could be generally stated as: *male dominance over a family of children and women and manipulating their life and decisions in private and public life*. Hence, in the current era the patriarchal system could be termed as a social relationship between women and men under material base via hierarchical approach establishing solidarity and independence among the dominating men.

The story *Aaye* (Mother) in *Mother wit* is closely inspired by the mother of Urmila Pawar. This realistic portrayal resembles the ordeals faced by a widow, in consideration with her Dalit caste. The story closely mentions and speaks about the oppressions faced by the protagonist since the death of her husband, and the constant subjugation of her by various patriarchal elements present in her life and in society. After the death of her husband, *Aaye* takes on the role of the economical provider of her kids and tries to make ends meet. She resided in town, which allowed her the opportunity to sell her hand-woven baskets to the consumers. They were going through hard times, however, *Aaye* didn't mind going the extra mile and putting all the hard work in order to earn money. She wanted to live in the city as she wanted to give her kids the education, she herself couldn't get and wanted them to escape the ordeals that she was facing in life, she wanted to give them a chance to have a future. Her children studied with other Brahmin kids, which gave her and her children the chance to a better life and enhanced living standards. Her quest to provide education to her children was the central theme of the story; this anxiety of providing education to her children hints the most alarming want of Dalit in order to achieve social and economic upliftment.

However, her journey wasn't devoid of the oppression faced by a Dalit widow and a woman in general. The family of her husband's forced her to quit her job and leave the city and settle with

them in their village. They forced *Vahini (Aaye)* to sell her land in the city as they could exploit them money gained from them and use her land for their ulterior motives. They even emotionally coaxed her by blaming the land for the sickness of her son. Furthermore, they emotionally abused her on a regular basis and tried to portray the indecent image of hers in front of her children. Her in-laws fed the children lies by claiming that *Aaye* doesn't want to part with the land as she's selfish and she doesn't care for the betterment of her own children. With these emotional tactics, her husband's family hoped that she would sell the land; however, she remained assertive during the entire ordeal. She raised her voice for she wanted the best for her children and didn't let anyone oppress or subjugate her. She resisted the tradition and posited that she can settle well in the city and give her children the life and education they deserve (Pawar 8).

In another story title *Vegli (The Odd One)*, the protagonist throws the patriarchal methods and takes charge of her own destiny without relying on her husband or anyone else. The protagonist, Nalini is a working woman and works in a government office. The family members of Nalini, particularly her mother-in-law constantly raises objection about Nalini working outside the house, according to her "*Vithal you work, and your father works. Why do we need her to work? If she really wants to earn something, we can always take in boarders to feed and she can earn something that way. Everyone does it*" (Pawar 60). This ground reality about rejecting the ambition of Dalit women and her constant criticism of career choices has been depicted in this story. The patriarchal notions disallow the working, ambition and freedom enjoyed by any women and is perceived as a challenge considering the cultural norms that apparently ties our Indian society together. Women are constantly asked to be domesticated within the four walls of the house, and to work for the family and never her personal desires. In the case of Nalini, she

refuses to be domesticated and yearns for a better lifestyle and growth within her professional capacity. She lived in chawls with her husband's family and would often hear other daughters-in-law pass comments on her lifestyle, such as, "*Here comes the schoolmistress*", "*Look at her petticoat shine!*", "*What's the point of all that education, after all you too have to blow on the cooking fires to keep them lit*" (Pawar 61). The story represents the typical ordeal faced by women, wherein, they are confined within the four walls and the ability for mothers-in-law to disallow their daughters-in-law from working. Soon Nalini gains government housing due to her role in the office and urges her husband to move out from the chawl. However, the husband is unable to take a stand for his wife and gives into his mother's persuasion despite his own personal want of moving into the new housing facility. Thus, Nalini left with her baby without waiting to persuade anyone or seek approval. This act of walking away without waiting for her husband's answer, knowing that he has already given in to his mother's pressure, is both a stoic acceptance of reality but the stubbornness to overcome it and act for a better life. With this story, Pawar wanted the society to welcome the modern world, wherein, the woman is responsible for her own actions and the lack of adherence she should place on her family for wanting something for herself and fulfilling her desires. Pawar wanted the society to accept the new modern women, rather than inhibit her.

Similarly, in *Kavach*, the use of language as a sexual harassment was explained very clearly where the mother and son, Gaurya who lives in the village Choli undergoes worst ordeals. "*Choliche ambe*" a proactive and improper words which means Mangoes *from the blouse*, used by the male harassers towards Gaurya's mother, who sells mangoes in the market (Roopa, 2015).

This obscene language against the powerless and weaker sex of Dalit oppress, harass and dehumanise the dignity the Dalit woman has for their daily lifestyle. Thus, the use of language in harassing a powerless Dalit woman not just happens on rural areas rather also happens in the urban areas. To overcome these issues, women must stand against these harassers boldly and act accordingly.

## **Conclusion**

Hence, it can be concluded that, the patriarchy system, male dominance, sexual harassment against Dalit women have reduced fairly but not completely. To bring the changes into implementation people of India should accept that people are soul and body and not made of caste or religion. Thus, Urmila have narrated the ordeals and oppression of Dalit women in such a way that everyone could relate their life to the stories in *Mother wit*.

Urmila Pawar's stories not only provides multifaceted appreciation and understanding of Dalit women's lives in different contexts. These stories offer insights that suggest ironies and humour, but also pain and abuse. It is a voice of passion for justice, compassion for most characters which needs to be heard.

## **References:**

1. Byadgi. P. S, (2011), "Clinical assessment of strength of Agni", *IJRAP – International Research of Research in Ayurveda & Pharmacy*, Vol. 2 (6), pp: 1625-1627.
2. Dwivedi. M and Soni. S, (2017), "Depiction of Different Shades of Female Characters in The Ramayana", *International Journal of Recent Trends in Engineering & Research (IJRTER)*, Volume 03, Issue 07, pp: 427-431.
3. Pawar. U, (2013), "*Mother wit*" Zubaan Books Pub, India, pages: 288.