

The Weave of My Life: A Critical Study of the Unweaving of Phallogocentric Hegemonic Dominion

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Abstract

Since time immemorial, muscle power - reigning and ruling over less powerful - overwhelmingly controlled them and deprived them from their lawful positions/possessions, rendering the less powerful froth out in anger. At present, politically and economically influential as well as masculine forces, framing rules and regulations, control and direct less powerful, lower castes and females authoritatively by engaging all kinds of oppressive tools as if it is their privilege to display mastery over them. Females become subaltern in their society where they are oppressed both by the upper castes and their own clan too. Urmila's sympathy-trickling portrayal of women speculates over their lots-how is it that earning Mahar women become victim of the oppressive tools that men use on them? Are self-reliant women out the clutches of phallogocentric hegemonic dominion? This research article tries to delve deep into the very texture of phallogocentric hegemonic dominion and tries to find out ways of coming out from this suppressive mechanism.

Keywords: Phallogocentric, hegemony, dalit consciousness, women movement, castigation

“Every house had its own share of drunkards. There would be at least one woman among them badly bashed up by her husband” [Pawar p 23]. “The Weave of My Life” begins with a detailed description of the harsh landscape of the Konkan region on the west coast of India and the relation these dalit women--their own lives harsh and full of toil--have with this landscape and with each line, the tincture of arbitrary castigations upon women is rebuffed by the minute portrayal of women. In fact, the women are scapegoats and are always compelled to sacrifice their life in the holocaust of family and society, yet they are overpowered by the men. Their subjugation persists through the obnoxious linkages of caste, gender and class. In fact, caste system is a set of values acknowledged by both the dominant and subjugated (Chakravarti 2003, p 6&7). Here “women were compelled to make the journey to the market because they had to sell their wares in order to survive: bundles of firewood or rice bags or grass or whatever merchandise; covered with leaves or woolen blankets” [Pawar, p 21]. This journey takes them “through the obscure ditch in a far off corner of hills where one wrong step would straightway roll down to one's death” [Pawar, p 21]. Actually this is also a symbolic journey of the hardship of the dalit women in the path of life where women are beaten by their male counterpart; women are allowed to eat leftover meal after all the men consume their food; pregnant women are beaten to death while men, involved in illicit affairs are lauded for their masculine vigour.

The much more Aaye, mother of Urmila Pawar, weaves bamboo wares, the much more unweaving of the knot of phallogocentric hegemonic dominion takes place. After Baba's death, Aaye took the entire responsibility of running her family smooth and taking care of her children too. But when Baba was alive, he took the responsibility of educating children, marketing and earning money. Aaye then continued her domestic chores, such as cooking food, collecting woods, washing clothes in the nearby river etc. But in the neighboring areas, women were forced to work in the field to grow rice and red millet besides cooking, child bearing and going to market for selling and so on. Urmila feels sympathy for such women's plight "Though her name was Pramila, we called her Shantiram's wife. Because of her useless husband she too had to slog to earn her livelihood along with her mother in law, selling grain bundles and other things in the market" [Pawar, p 103].

In the village Phansawale, women uttered the choicest abuses, cursing the 'mool purus' [Pawar, p 21] for selecting this barren godforsaken land where danger of snake biting and tiger attacking always lurked. Apart from harsh nature the male counterpart added much trouble to their lots. Phallogocentrism that gives privilege of masculine in understanding meaning of social relations is under scanner of Urmila. If husband demanded money and she did not pay, she was brutally beaten; if she was late in serving food, she was again beaten. In short, dalit women faced domestic violence –the violence that became part and parcel of their life. Daughters in law were always despised and bashed up [Pawar, p 23]. Once Aaye was weaving, a woman came and took shelter in her mud-built first floor veranda, followed by husband. Upon finding her, there was a strong argument between them and the woman was beaten brutally irrespective of her fault. Still, women had to go to her husband. This type of subservience as Srinivasa explains 'as adoptability of similar values and cultures borrowed from the immediate higher caste groups' [Srinivasa 1996].

Children and Mahar women faced canonical Brahmanic hegemonic dominion in respect of getting tutelage, as teachers taught them and examined their slates from a distance and also hit the children with stones as if they had made great mistakes. Once in Urmila's school she was beaten vehemently on her back with print of finger by the teacher, and Aaye waited on the path to reproach that teacher. If a teacher inflicts corporeal punishment for betterment of students is somewhat acceptable but for being low born is nothing but the manifestation of bestial power. Regarding the education of Akka (the representative of dalit women) questions were raised against "What do women have to do with education? Ultimately, she would be blowing on stove, wouldn't she?" [Pawar, p 30]. Urmila here strikes the very concept that influentials most often frame rules and regulations for their own benefits and creates furor and mindset among the people in such a way that other people dare to be equal with them. Gramscian theory of 'hegemony' that a social class achieves a predominant influence and power, not by direct or overt means, but by succeeding in making its ideological view of society so pervasive that the subordinate classes unwittingly accept and participate in their own oppression is in fact getting followed by the people. The upper caste people, imposing some restrictions of casteism, deprive them from education and use them as daily wage earners; again, dalit men don't want their women to get much more education lest they overpower them and ignore domestic chores. This is evident in case of Urmila when she goes to seek consent of Harishchandra for higher education, and he says "Look, you can do what you like only after finishing your daily chores in the house-cooking, looking after children and all that stuff, if you think you can do this and get more education, fine!" [Pawar, p 153] This was actually his way of saying 'no'. B.R Ambedkar, Jyotirao Phule with their telescopic

vision realized that caste ridden society and religion would never allow dalits/subalterns their rightful amenities to live on but at the same time with microscopic vision also understood that dalit women would be like utmost dreg, befallen at the very bottom of hierarchical society unless they get education and become self-reliant. Ambedkar outlined succinctly, stating that women are the gateway of caste system [Ambedkar, 1950]. Hence, they stressed on education that Urmila Pawar too advocates here in this memoir.

Is education all to disrupt the phallogocentric hegemonic dominion? Then look at the life of Manjulatai. Probably, it is not all; it may be a way of emancipation. Mindset and resistance are too required to nullify the imposing forces of phallogocentric hegemonic dominion. Manjulatai gets married to Harlekar, the aspiring judge and social worker who has law degree. But in his house Manjulatai works, to be more precise, not works but slaves, since the breaking of dawn and looks after father in law and mother in law and then gets ready for office. On returning, she also gets immersed in domestic chores. Actually she is subjugated and subsisted on the very desire of her family members and yet her husband remains indifferent and does nothing to help her. Her pent up emotions and feelings takes the form of frustration and anxiety and at extreme moment of endurance she bursts out in tears and threatens to commit suicide. Is this description not enough to blatantly speak out that unless phallogocentric mindset is broken, the women in India will continue to become victim of oppression? May be Harlekar, while doing social work helps the oppressed men and women but he does not help Manjulatai in domestic chores. Phallogocentrism thinks that to do domestic chores is the sole responsibility of women. Thus, when Manjulatai comes back to Aaye, she unburdens her heart, lamenting over her lot. Actually Manjulatai was the victim of submissive nature, social suppression and oppression. But in Mumbai of urban area in 'Maitrini' association, women speak about female emancipation, dowry, women's right but somehow at the end of the day they give in to their male counterpart and demand money/dowry for their sons' marriages and oppress daughters in law. Again on the street of Mumbai, people enjoy the street fight between husband and wife; none comes to help the wife until Urmila interrupts and rescues the wife from the oppressive clutches of husband, the unequivocal symbol of phallogocentric tribulations and tortures. Urmila was very well acquainted with Ambedkar's "Buddha and his Dhamma" [Pawar, p 147] where he advocated that human being must be free from greed and creed and only then 'moksha' could be achieved. All kind of greed and creed are the bed rock of vices and vituperations. Change the mindset and consider all equal is, in fact, the underlying motto of this memoir [Ambedkar, 1994].

Dalit women are the most vulnerable, as they are ill-treated by the so called upper Brahmanic society as well as by their own dalit men too. Above all, women are the worst enemy of their own. As a result, collective force and assimilation of resistances are not coming fore to safeguard women from the onslaught of masculine dominion. Dalit leaders fail to homogenize the problem of dalit women; community members exercise their power/autonomy over others (within and without) instead of building their collective consciousness for the common cause of fighting against situational hierarchy [Srinivasa, 1996]. After Baba's death, Aaye under a tree "wore all sorts of cane things, big baskets, small baskets with closed tops, baskets for locking in hen etc." [Pawar, p32]. Then women came and unearthed their hearts in vituperative vengeance against women. One day, a woman complained to Aaye about her mother in law "You know what she did today? Don't tell this to anyone please. All right? This morning we were coming from village. On the way my sasu

saw cock it belonged to the Kulwadi woman nearby you! She pounced on the cock, rushed to the market and sold it off” [Pawar, p 56]. Even when the Mahar women on their way to the market of Ratnagiuri, they passed comments on other women, who went to sleep to other man; who has many husband etc. Urmila herself experienced rebukes from her female colleagues when she got broken her leg in her MA semester and lost much time to recuperate. To compensate her education, she reached to the house of man, named Bhau and went through the reservoir of books, then women said “You know his wife does not live with him. And yet you go his house every day! what most people be saying?” [Pawar, p 155]. At this Urmila was simply aghast and questioned the deplorable condition of women “How we women nurture and protect patriarchy, like a baby in the cradle! A woman’s character is always on display. Always suspect! Anybody can come gaze at us with their eyes on our flesh, drool and lick their fingers” [Pawar, p 156].

Disseminating human beings in the vast texture of humanity disseminate variegated spectra of life force, some are controlling and some are controlled, some are oppressive and some are oppressed. Harishchandra in this memoir is multifaceted, dimensional character in Urmila’s life. During the school days, they both spent much time, talking to each other, showing compassion to each other’s plight. When Mohan, friend of Harishchandra got drowned into river while going to Chinchakhari Temple, Urmila extended condolences. But after marriage, conjugal relation deteriorated. And with the passage of time, the more qualification and recognition she earned, the more detached she became from her husband. In the village house of Harishchandra, Urmila had to work along with Mai all the homely chores. But during menstrual she was not allowed to touch anything. Actually our society considers periodic menstrual as sacrilegious and discriminates women in this way in the garb of tradition, religion. Patriarchy always considers women as instrument of child breeding, not paying much attention on the physical and emotional turmoil. “Many women went through sterilization after having two sons and showed off their status. But my second child was a girl. So Harishchandra said “let’s take one more chance”. But once again it was a girl. I thought how simple and easy it was to have a baby like saying let’s have one more cup of tea” [Pawar, p 144]. As per natural law, women are supposed to breed but their child bearing pain, if equated with “let’s have one more cup of tea” is surely inhumane and bestial. This is nothing but the male aggression and indifference towards women as if women were substandard living creatures. In Mumbai in her apartment, she had to go through strenuous physical labour to meet the demand of family “I used to get up at four o’clock in the morning, make chapattis and cook vegetables and then at six I would be out of the house. After college was over I rushed to work and after office I rushed home” [Pawar, p 154]. Still she is not good wife and good mother, according to her husband. But the ensuing tussle with Harishchandra is indicative that she is not a caged bird rather independent one with social status and fame. It is possible because of her indomitable courage and stamina that, Harishchandra too does not mind anything of her attending social functions and literary seminars later in life.

Urmila retorted Harishchandra’s complain of not taking care of family “Look, I am paying enough attention to the house and the children ... I take leave and nurse them without sleeping a wink at night ... it is you who needs to pay more attention to the house now. Instead of going to the bar, why don’t you come early and pay some attention to their study. That would be far better” [Pawar, p156]. After passing M.A. degree Urmila accolades her husband as Mr Pawar as if alienation and otherness is averred out there. “He felt that he was

losing control over his wife fast and had to establish his authority with an iron hand so as to keep her within bound! But she did not know that my horizon had expanded hugely that I had seen the outside world and that he did not have the power to keep me confined to the narrow space of home any more” [Pawar, p 161]. But now Urmila does not see herself from patriarchal point of view, rather considers herself as individual, equal to men in every respect. She became member of ‘Maitrini’ and tries to help each and every one coming to her for help to come out from their distracted condition. Around the quarter of Urmila, everyday drunkards are seen beating their wives and children. Urmila, Chhaya Dater, Aruna Burte, Jaya Valankar become panacea to them for their distressed, suffocating situations.

The redemptive and salvaging power came into women when they-not dalit but all women-become member of ‘Maitrini’ and organized campaign for women liberation. Urmila herself discarded the use of Mangalsutra, the emblem of wed-women, and sometimes Harishchandra burst out though not always “Ha! Why would you wear Mangalsutra? You are just waiting for me to die!” [Pawar, p 163]. Sometimes Harishchandra refused to accompany Urmila saying “you are a feminist! Why do you need the accompany of a man” [Pawar, p 163]. Probably he felt that his days of controlling women were on an end. Whenever Urmila went to address women issues he never belched out any word. Urmila rejected all kind of imposing religious gesticulations such as haldi kumkum ceremony during marriage and took the true path of humanity, the path that Ambedkar showed to women on December 25, 1927 by burning Manusmriti. Urmila realized that in almost all the dalit movement, women’s issues were not given priority. Women were not given chance to vent out their pent up frustrations against men. Thus, when Urmila quoted Krantiba Phule’s line in Ambedkar’s birth anniversary celebration at Chambur “When a woman’s husband dies she is made to commit *sati*, therefore if a woman dies why does not a man commit *sata*?” [Pawar, p 165], women clapped at her. In fact, it is the rising women’s consciousness that Urmila cherished to grow among the women of all category. So far patriarchy enjoyed its strength, now it is the women liberation, women protest that Urmila wanted women to get embraced by and hence organized Stree Uwacha Samwadini Dalit Stree Sahitya Manch. Only women could speak out their own emotion.

Breaking the traditional circumscribed condition of women from the clutches of phallogocentric hegemonic dominion is not at all easy one, rather strong rebuttal came both from the men and women. But Urmila, Hira, Sulochana and so many went on to the door step of every slum-area people with the women issues, women freedom, women oppression etc. Few heard them but mostly bashed them out from their houses. In this regard, Omvedt has shown anti-caste and women movement have not addressed each other’s issues and neither has analyzed the problem of peasantry and nature [Omvedt, 1995]. Still, with little hopes Urmila attended Asmitadarsha, Dalit Buddhist Marathi Sahitya Sammelan and urged women to speak out of their own. Therefore, she wondered “It is always men who organized their right? We women only presented out writings. Why should not we have our own independent platform for liberation” [Pawar, p 170]. Therefore Dalit Mahila Sahitya Sangathan was formed where women spoke about their domestic violence, atrocities, and oppression etc, inflicted on them by husband or mother in law. In fact few problems were addressed and solved, concomitantly came Midas Touch to their endeavors, though meager in quality. Now people began to reach to the with their problems. Though all oppressed did not open up their heart; the split between the educated dalit women as the spokeswomen versus the illiterate dalit women as listeners, as observed by Dater at dalit women’s gatherings is underlined and further the women leaders

of the feminist movement are graded as more democratic than those in the dalit women's movement [Dater,1998]. Yet the stranglehold phallocentricism began to lose.

Urmila herself felt in her life that always Harischandra tried to suppress her. Even at no fault, he rebuked her, insulted her, humiliated her and called her stupid and so many abusing words. Sometimes, he did not feel the need to tell of his whereabouts. Once he left home without saying anything "But why leave suddenly like this without saying a word? I kept wondering" [Pawar, p 143]. When Malavika refused to marry Uday, all the family responsibilities stormed on the shoulder of Urmila. Harischandra blamed Urmila. If she had paid much attention to the proceedings of her own family, probably such type of untoward incident did not take place. Even after booking marriage hall, printing invitation card, cancellation of marriage was really a heart breaking incident. Urmila feared that if Malavika did not get married to Ravi, she might take wrong step. That's why Urmila took the side of Malavika. Harischandra tried to be morally right and prestigious in society, therefore, insisted on the marriage of Malavika with Uday. But it is the strong determination and female freedom in Urmila that she allowed Malavika to marry Rabi, taking all kind of ignominy on her shoulder. After all, all women have their right to select their life partner; it requires distribution of power among women [Palshikar 1998] At the time of funeral ceremony of Harischandra, Urmila refused to get wiped out of kumkum from her head by the left leg of Harishchandra, then a brother in law nastily remarked on her that she had spoiled the life of Harishchandra. Actually she defied all kind of religious gesticulations that discriminated, humiliated her womanhood and castigated the true value of humanity.

Whether, Urmila destroyed the life of Harishchandra and his family by neglecting family matters, and paying much attention on conferences, writings seminars or not, but Malavika's comment on Urmila obviates the need to probe further on that matter "The real change came when Aai began to educate herself ... After she passed M.A., the change was still more pronounced ... we tell her everything. Even if I fall in love, I don't think I will hide it. I am sure she will understand me .She is a friend now! But I have never felt this confidence about father" [Pawar, p 192]. Even Urmila herself wondered "Would the picture have been different if I had not devoted so much time to education, writing and other things?" [Pawar, p 191]. The answer is 'no'. Urmila's writing career, and recognitions brought her a distinct identity—the identity that had the capabilities to vie with the so called established phallocentric attitude.

Certainly, 'women movement' rocked the foundation of phallocentric hegemonic dominion. Several women movement took place to pronounce the women issues. Babytai Kamble, Shantibai Kamble endured physical abuse from their husbands because they wanted to leave the house to work in the movement. Virendrabai Teerthankar remained unmarried because she wanted to be an activist. Devki Khandari, Laxmibai Naik and Chandrabhaga Chotmal gave up their family, shaved their heads and became Buddhist bhikshunis [Pawar, p 186]. The long standing battle of women shatters the hollow affectations of phallocentric hegemonic dominion. This autobiography that highlights the struggle of dalit women is an enunciatory. Sharmila Rege writes "the writers wrote her account to record the making of history by dalits and making the younger generations of dalits realize the great deeds of Dr Ambedkar, so that they will not be ashamed of their story of struggle which they have to take forward" [Rege,1998]. Symbolically, the more Aaye weaves to make a bamboo ware strong,

the more deprivative, discriminatory phallogocentric hegemonic dominion gets shattered. Men and women are two sides of a coin; if one undervalued, the other side becomes invalid.

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