



# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION



## The Voice of a Dalit Feminist: An Interview with Urmila Pawar

Mahuya Bhaumik

*Urmila Pawar is a prolific Dalit feminist writer who belongs to the Mahar community of Maharashtra. She is a social activist whose protesting voice has been a source of inspiration for thousands of Dalit women. Despite encountering diverse levels of discrimination on the basis of caste and gender she completed her Masters in Marathi Literature and chose to write about the women of her society and their marginalised position. Her autobiography Aidan, written in Marathi, has been translated into English as The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs and published by Columbia University Press. Her short story 'Kavach' has been included in the syllabus for SNDT Women's University and her documentation with Meenakshi Moon on the participation of Dalit women has been a seminal contribution to the construction of Dalit history from a feminist perspective.*

*I went to Urmila Pawar's house in Mumbai in early 2019 to take the interview. I was touched by her warm hospitality. She spoke sometimes in English and at times in Hindi. Then I compiled the entire conversation in English. The following version is published with her approval.*

**M.B.** How would you differentiate your position from any writer of India, particularly of mainstream literature?

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**U.P.** In literature there should not be any difference in ‘position’ as literature is related to human emotions and situatedness. Hence these parameters can never be denied which precondition the content a particular writer handles in his or her literary composition. Thoughts and emotions spring from the situation in which a person is placed. Mainstream writers have not been exposed to those experiences of life which are integral to Dalit existence. Hence the chosen subject matters of their writings are essentially different from those of Dalit writers.

**M.B.** What would you consider to be the turning point of your literary career?

**U.P.** We (Dalit writers) are considered inferior by the centre. Earlier the thoughts which were rooted in the psyche of people at large were that God made us inferior. In fact the Dalits themselves were firmly convinced about their social inferiority as the dictate of God. After embracing Buddhism, this self-demeaning attitude of the Dalits got radically transformed and a realisation dawned that these discriminations were not made by God but by humans for their own benefits. So getting converted to Buddhism has been a turning point in my life. The fear that God is going to destroy us if we do not follow the caste-based norms laid down by the upper castes of the society, was gradually gone. Instead of being apprehensive and timid to obey all socio-cultural discriminations, I started looking at scientific reasoning behind every action and tried to locate the source of this discrimination which the Dalits had been victims of since centuries. My focus of study eventually changed. I began to read Buddhist literature and Pali texts whose references are found in my writings. Hence the direction of my writing changed.

**M.B.** How do you handle the real-life crisis faced by Dalit women in your writing?

**U.P.** In any society gender inequality is prevalent. It is customary that all household chores and time-consuming works are to be done by women. Male members of the family are hardly conscious about the time dedicated and effort given by women to run the family smoothly. Only certain bit of concern is shown by the males towards their mothers which gets reflected in autobiographies and poems of Dalit writers; but, unfortunately, no recognition is given to the other female members of the family. In fact, our society has always taken women for granted and has been influenced by the role and identity of women as enunciated in seminal Hindu texts like *Manusmriti*. Our society suffers from a constricted and diseased thought that women are intellectually inferior. But in reality a woman’s intellect is at par with a man. So we, the women, should never be considered less and we would fight for our rights and achieve them. The reflection of these humiliations and our attempts to fight against these are found in our literature. Society gives no value to Dalits, and the situation is worsened when it comes to Dalit women. Sexual abuse and physical assault are considered ‘normal’ as far as Dalit women are concerned. No one is bothered about a Dalit woman’s identity and

honour. I keep on writing about us, the Dalit women, as I have done in *Aidan*.<sup>1</sup> The mind set and temperament of society, particularly patriarchy, has to change. Even today the situation is dismal. In several places in Maharashtra women are still penalised and tortured. In places like Nagpur and Kolhapur women are raped and the rapes are justified as being given punishment for their promiscuous nature.

**M.B.** What is your opinion about the chosen themes of mainstream literature?

**U.P.** Everyone is considered about 'jaat' (caste). The thoughts conveyed are narrow and regressive. References are given to Vedas and the Indian epics to strengthen the discriminatory attitude of mainstream writers against the Dalits. There is absolute dearth of progressive thoughts and this is reflected in mainstream literature.

**M.B.** What prompted you to take up writing?

**U.P.** I started writing long back during 1975-76. At that point of time I used to write whatever came in my mind in the form of short stories. Being a woman I was affected by women's issues like atrocities hurled upon women and girl child abuse. During that time feminism had begun to pave its way in India. I remember that I used to listen to and discuss the various facets of feminism and feminist movements taking place abroad, with educated women at our school hall. My experiences were limited. I used to imbibe new thoughts and attain newer perspectives through the discussions at the school hall. And then I started writing. Once you start writing it does not stop. It is an addiction. Moreover, people also want me to write because there are only a few Dalit women who write.

**M.B.** How would you like to describe yourself- an activist or a writer?

**U.P.** Basically these are two sides of the same coin. The society I hail from is marked by a sense of suffocation and humiliation. Hence the scar on the psyche is permanent. So, social activism and writing a literature of protest go hand-in-glove. Both are inter-related and inter-dependent.

**M.B.** Your book *Aidan* has been critically acclaimed and won awards. What is your response to that?

**U.P.** This kind of recognition is definitely a source of contentment. I wrote about those women who do not possess the power to write. I gave expression to my mother's emotions. My mother was an expert at weaving; similarly I also wove with words. This book is dedicated to all those women who lead a throttled existence. My narrative is like a box woven with their sorrows and pain.

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<sup>1</sup> *Aidan*, Pawar's autobiography, written in Marathi, has been translated into English and titled as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*.

**M.B.** Would you please share your international exposure and your learning from the same?

**U.P.** The international exposure that I received has been the consequence of an urgency of the world to know about Dalit existence. I had been to six countries where I was asked several questions on casteism. In Switzerland I was asked that why I immersed the Hindu idols in water after getting converted to Buddhism. I answered that our culture and constitution teach us to pay respect to others' thoughts and emotions. Hence I immersed the idols in water to show respect to others' religious beliefs and sentiments.

During my international tours and exchange of thoughts I came to know of the plight of the Australian aboriginal women who are even denied the right of raising up their babies if they beget children from white fathers. I could understand that women all around are compelled to lead marginal existence.

**M.B.** Can you relate with other Dalit women writers across the country?

**U.P.** Casteism is a thread through which all Dalit women are tied up. The thread has been plaited strong enough and is the symbol of our solidarity. It will only loosen when the upper castes will understand that the basis of casteism is imaginary. Thus our bond with each other is quite inevitable.

**M.B.** What would be your comment on mainstream feminism in India?

**U.P.** Mainstream feminism does not bother to ponder over issues pertaining to caste barriers. They are well acquainted with Western feminist theories and celebrated writers like Kate Millet; but they do nothing to improve the Indian scenario adopting a comprehensive way of looking at socio-cultural issues related to women hailing from diverse backgrounds. There is not a single reference about Dalit women's movement; there is no protest against the abominable suffering of Dalit women.

**M.B.** Who were the writers who inspired you to be a significant part of Dalit literary discourse?

**U.P.** My mother and the women of my native village are sources of inspiration. I thought of writing by witnessing the pain, agony and humiliation of these women around me. Babasaheb Ambedkar and Savitribhai Phule had also been huge motivations for me.

**M.B.** Do you feel that Dalit feminism is a need for the day?

**U.P.** Dalit feminism talks about Dalit women who belong to the lowest rungs of the society. There is no one placed in a more dismal position than a Dalit woman. OBC feminism claims that it is the same as Dalit feminism but that is not a right statement. As per caste Dalit women are the most suppressed and tormented; hence they are the victims of apprehension and fear. This fear is not a part of OBC feminism. So a separate Dalit feminism is badly needed.

**M.B.** Which factor, according to you, is a major hindrance in the path of development of Dalits?

**U.P.** Since centuries the Dalits had been consciously kept behind and thus they are economically backward. Their low caste and their poverty-stricken state are integrally related to create obstacles in their paths. I will share with you my own experience. When I used to attend meetings based on feminist discussions and it used to get late I had to rush home to make 'rotis' for my family while the upper caste women would instruct their 'bai' (cook) to prepare dinner. This example would throw light on the essential difference between our life styles. A Dalit's income has to be shared and is not merely for one's own development. Rather it is for the family and the extended family. The upper castes always put responsibility of the upliftment of Dalits on the educated Dalits. But certain responsibilities have to be taken up by the upper castes who enjoy all the privileges of the society.

**M.B.** In what way do you think the upper castes can play a positive role in the social development of the Dalits?

**U.P.** The Brahminical social structure should think in some different way for the progress of the Dalit community. The enormous amount of wealth that is donated to the temples can be used for construction of factories and thus employment can be ensured. This is a difficult step but yet not impossible. The Dalits are not in a position to take such measures. For such social reformation positive approach of the upper castes is crucial. Then only a significant change can be brought in society and all human beings can live with their own dignity and assert their own identity.



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