

## Transcending socio-cultural construction of Gender in Urmila Pawar's Select Short Stories

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Urmila Pawar has carved a niche for as a dalit feminist writer. Her short stories are one of its kind in portraying the dalit women's sensibilities in a remarkably forceful, revolutionary, effective and surprising manner. She weaves her tales revolving around strong, resilient and powerful women who can be called as the 'new women', possessing masculine traits. Pawar amuses the readers with her surprise endings which can be called as 'sting-in-tail' endings. Where the 'new woman' braves all the odds and refuses to be suppressed, repressed and oppressed by the patriarchal society. She creates an altogether new world of women that transcends the boundaries of gender. For eg women protagonists in the stories 'Aaye' and 'Nyay' are presented by the writer as possessing extraordinary courage which helps them fight with the unjust society. Pawar's protagonists are defiant, tough and hard. They are complete and independent individuals before whom their male counterparts seem trivial and unimportant. To quote Pawar, they do back breaking labour. The Writer generally presents them as the sole bread earners for the entire family as their husbands are either not alive or are generally drunkards.

In the stories 'Aaye' and "Nyay" both Aaye and Paru are widows. Aaye does basket weaving whereas Paru works as a farmer. After the death of her husband, Aaye assumes upon herself the additional responsibility to act as a father to her children. Her ambitious brother-in-law comes with the whole team of delegates from the village to convince her that there is something wrong in the house that would kill her son so she should vacate it and live with his family at the village but she is not a fool. She is concerned about the education and well being of her children which gives her strength to see through the trap and blatantly expel him and his team from her house. Her masculine traits let her see through the manipulations of her brother-in-law who aims to grab her house considering her weak and uneducated. She has the courage to blame him directly for trying to kill her son. She remembers her dead husband and wails aloud-

"My dear husband...You told me not to trust your brother...He poisoned your son at night...All the crows have gathered like birds of prey...They are all waiting to sell your land..." (pg 10)

Her bold words fail all the ambitious plans of her manipulative brother-in-law who flees from the house like a cat. Her strength saved her family from deception. She has no other support except her will-power which makes her turn victorious even in the unfavourable circumstances. The reader doesn't feel pity for Aaye rather a sense of respect is all that she deserves.

Another story by Pawar, 'Nyay' has the female protagonist who has all the circumstances against her. She is an uneducated poor woman from a village. Fate too had been cruel to her as she lost her husband soon after her marriage. As her husband was the only son of his parents so Paru assumed

upon herself the responsibility to feed the aged in-laws and herself. At a stage when she might have been enjoying the marital bliss, she toiled hard to make both ends meet. The narrator is told by Vishnu, a villager that she had used her blood and sweat in raising the banana trees on the narrator's land. She walked the difficult four miles into town to sell the bananas.

The narrator himself is impressed by her qualities and calls her polite, hardworking, even-tempered and quiet. The whole village knows about her goodness but when she becomes pregnant, all fingers are raised at her. As is the norm, the society blames only women for such an act. No second thought is given to the possibility of any injustice done to her. After knowing about her pregnancy, she is called as a 'fucking woman' and a 'slut'. Without knowing the reality, she is accused of adultery. The whole village wishes to prosecute her and teach her a lesson for such a shameful act but the reality is opposite to what is concocted. Infact Paru was raped by someone on her way to town to sell the bananas. Paru is bold enough to assert not only the truth before the society but also to announce her decision to keep and bring up the child in her womb. Offering her own justice, she speaks forcefully-

"The child is mine and I want it. I'll raise the child myself." (pg38)

She reprimands the villager on the question of an illegitimate child living in the society.

"It doesn't matter who the child is, but I am the baby's mother, And I too need support in my old age. I am a widow. Whose support can I depend on for the rest of my life?" (pg 38)

To further question the question of any judgement about her life, she raises a very meaningful point before the self assumed judges-

"Is anyone here going to support me?" (pg 38)

No one has the courage to meet her eyes then. Due to her inner strength she turns her curse into a blessing. If she had been a weak woman, what would her plight have been? She might have been asked to abort the child, looked down upon with contempt or even eliminated from the society. Her determination won her respect and support for old age.

'*The Odd One*' story by Pawar speaks of Nalini, an educated and working dalit woman who is the odd one as she, just like Pawar's other women protagonists, is determined, defiant and fearless. She is determined to secure a better future for herself and her family. Due to the reservations for the dalits, Nalini is able to get a government apartment in a good locality. This is a lifetime opportunity for her which she doesn't want to miss as it would enable her family to leave the chawl which she never considered her home. Pawar remarks-

"It looked like a garbage bin in the midst of a posh area." (pg60)

The idea of leaving the chawl and shifting to an apartment is not digested by her manipulative mother-in-law as she thinks it would loosen her control and authority over her daughter-in-law whom she otherwise abuses constantly. On being asked by the father-in-law-

"What is wrong with the place we are in?" (pg 66)

She comments-

“This place is not bad for him. It is bad for his queen” (pg 66)

He is rather against Nalini's job which makes her superior to all the women of her cast including the mother-in-law. Unlike them, she has manners, she is silent, educated and doesn't eat paan. This is what is disliked by everyone and why she is called 'The odd one'. She is called with a number of names tauntingly- 'queen', 'school mistress', 'terrible woman'. Her mother-in-law wants her to be like them. She neither wants to change her nor anybody else's plight. She creates a lot of drama to fail their plans to shift to the apartment and her son gets trapped into it but Nalini's determination for a better future can fail. She emerges in the end of the story as the 'New woman' who no longer needs even her husband's support to take decision. When she finds her husband got manipulated, she takes her decision independently to move to the apartment with her child. Pawar remarks-

“She quickly got up with her baby son in her arms”. (pg 68) and said that -

“If you don't want to go, that's fine. But I am leaving”. (pg 68)

A daring act like this one by a woman is generally not heard of. Such is Pawar's craft that she creates a world of new possibilities and aspirations for women. She gives the women their own space to explore their self confidence, to think constructively and eventually to improve their lot. All the three women discussed in this paper 'Aaye', 'Paru', and 'Nalini' are the women from the category of 'New Women' who transcend the boundaries of caste, class and gender in their determined struggle to improve their plight in the patriarchal and biased society. I call them 'masculine women'. Aayi, Nalini and Paru, all the three women set examples for the likes of them to be bold, determined and fearless if they wish to live in this society with their self respect intact. Pawar provides a very nuanced and sophisticated articulation of the narratives to redefine realities and changing roles for the dalit as well as non dalit women.

## REFERENCES

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