

Women Empowerment in translated works:Urmila Pawar's collection of short stories 'Motherwit'.

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Ever since women began to question their place in the society; feminism, or less controversially; female empowerment has caught the world like a newfound power. From the suffragettes demanding voting rights near the close of the 19th century; the 21st century has witnessed empowerment evolving into a multi-dimensional social process occurring at multiple strata of the community; within sociological, psychological and economic dimensions to name a few. What had been just another community demanding respect; the movement has encompassed all sections of the society; with its stance writ large, particularly in the literary provinces.

Urmila Pawar's *Mother Wit* is an echo of half our population; one or other of her stories sending shivers of dreadful memory down spines; of judgement, abjection, disregard, ignorance, or outright humiliation; of stares, whispers, and touches.

Herself not just a woman, but also a Dalit, the author is no stranger to dejection or disregard. Her personal experiences, perhaps, bring the relevance to her stories. She uses the short story to a great effect, in not setting the stage for her women, but rather allowing them to be just faces in the crowds, to come play their parts on a stage that's already been set by the world for the world, and leave it for another sister, for another tale of struggle, to bring out the parts left yet unexplored. The same stage is used over, and over, and over again; yet each story leaves the reader questioning his knowledge of female oppression, otherwise, mostly confined to physical assaults.

Living in the 21st century, with all the luxuries of modern life, we at times forget, or rather ignore the world that surrounds us. We ignore the social stigmas, the inequalities, the injustices or the misdeeds around us, either deeming them as insignificant everyday things, or overlooking them entirely, as the society around us trains us to. Therein lies her greatest success; in not bringing overly dramatic or heroic acts, but rather everyday stories of people far from our little worlds, from perspectives of people whose thoughts can serve as bridges between us and them.

With most of her stories set in the late 20th century, in her home state of Maharashtra and retaining a distinct Marathi taste, they are an insight into her own life as a Dalit, woman, and a

Buddhist; serving as representations of a much wider class in both rural and urban post-independence India. The collection of her works is a testimony to her gritty, vivid, and unabashed form, which are important works of contemporary Dalit and Indian feminist literature. She conveys the excitement of an awakening consciousness. Her women don't look up to the world for inspiration, but tries to redefine her "self" in terms of her own culture, free of the role the patriarchal society has set for her.

As literature and life are inseparable, Dalit women are using literature as the medium of expressing the relation with the society as well as their guiding light in raising their identity which is sinking under the triple burden of class, caste and gender discrimination. Urmila Pawar makes each one of her protagonists very representative of day today life who refuse to accept the patriarchal structure, or at times, breaking their expectations of them, mending and bending it in ways to work around them. In her short stories like "Mother", "Pain", "Justice" etc she delineates female characters who are brave in the face of caste oppression, ignorant to the society's jibes, resistant against demands of their family, defiant and determined when guarding their interests. These stories offer an insight into themes that are important to the redefinition of women's roles.

Her language contains distinctive elements, suggestive of her Marathi versed background, in quite uninhibited forms - being explicit where the everyday man is; a form of expression that although had started quite a while ago, has caught on only recently with millennial centred content. Phrases that are otherwise considered too graphical or indecent to be put into works of literature; have been used to her characters' needs. Her stories, though not quite as vivid or picturesque as works of authors like R.K. Narayan are; excel at depicting the mindset of her characters.

Of her Dalit background, the stories rarely are indicative. However, even if the protagonist does not associate with a Dalit background, her stories always contain subtleties of caste or class differentiation, even where one might not expect them. This is perhaps, quite exemplary in the story "The Odd One (Vegli)", where the *Pant Nagar* area is considered too posh for a woman of the protagonist's caste or class (p. 56). The same story is also a testimony to the hinderance in progress of the female society as a whole where women themselves serve as obstacles their sisters must overcome to progress. It also shows the subtleties of the much controversial issue of caste-based reservation from the perspective of an educated woman. With the same stories serving multiple issues, she successfully unifies two very different social revolutions in India, that of women, and of Dalits; perhaps serving as reminder to Dalits, of the plights of women in their society, that they must improvise the conditions of their weakest sect to truly develop beyond the shackles of oppression, and to the feminists, so that they might not overlook a community that has, for generations, been left out in reaping the benefits of a revolution.

The first story in the collection, “Aaye” (Mother) is the struggle of a widow, adamant on a future for her children, against the oppression widows have had to face since the times of Sati, with people dictating their lives for them. Closely fashioned on Pawar’s own mother, this story is a realistic portrayal of ordeals widows go through every day to meet both ends meet, while portraying the acceptance and dejection people expect from them. It is a story of a woman who is ready to accept education at the cost of segregation; a story presumably shaped on the author’s own experience in coming to Mumbai. It also breaks the stereotype of the quiet and submissive Indian woman when *Aaye* sarcastically calls out her deceitful brother-in-law, whilst singing an ode to her dead husband, “*My dear husband...my master...my love...You left your children behind and you are gone. You told me not to trust your brother, Taty. You were right my Raja.*” (p. 10). Her words also bring to light another aspect of rural India, when she sings that it was her husband who suggested his brother was not the best person to trust when he wasn’t around. Perhaps by doing so, she was saving herself from being branded as a mad-woman, it being a common practice in India, by passing the idea as her late husband’s.

However not all women can display the strength necessary to defy the society; such being the case with *Jyoti* in *Pain (Shalya)*; who had to tear her heart in two when she exchanged her daughter with someone else’s baby just to please her son. Her insurmountable plight at separation from her daughter must have been exacerbated to consider the possibility of her daughter’s death. This story portrays in rather painful manner; the sacrifices women have to make to please the society around them. To be tearing a part of her from herself; puts in light the kind of pressure women bear. The self-reflection, “In the midst of it all her heart seemed bruised. She wondered who she would ever be able to show her bruised heart to.” (p. 55), depicts the seclusion women feel, even in everyone’s midst.

But then, it is her sisters who ridicule their own empowerment and the changes practicality brings to lives. The line, “*The fact that she wore a modern five-yard sari unlike the others made her the butt of their ridicule.*” (p. 61) highlights the internal resistance towards modernisation and placing practicality before social norms. In a society where women are judged for the length of their saris, it should really be no surprise that the speaker in *Justice (Nyay)* notices a woman’s curves before looking at her temple to see that she’s sweating.

Oxford defines feminism as “the advocacy of women's rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes.”. But in modern times, people often confuse equality with commutability. The sexes aren’t meant to be equal, they are meant to be complementary, to be each other’s support, to respect, care, and cherish. It is restoring this respect that must be the true goal of feminism, and

not swapping gender roles. Such is very strongly portrayed by Paru, when she confidently tells the village elders that she wants to raise the “*illegitimate child*” as her own (p.38). Her womanhood, her desire to be a mother shines in her words, “*I am a woman and every woman wants to be a mother. I have feelings too. It doesn't matter who the child is, but I am the baby's mother.*” (p. 38). In the author's own words, “*This uneducated woman had quickly and deftly covered everyone's shame. The village was there to grant her justice, but she had offered them her own justice.*”

Sixth Finger (Sahav bot) speaks of a much deeper question, that is, a woman's character. That a loving husband turns into a sceptical partner, and drives her wife to her death, brings to light the questions people often raise about a woman's character. As urban women are exposed to modern lifestyle, and become comfortable conversing with their male colleagues or friends, questions are often raised about their character and purity. The extent of mental damage such allegations can incur are profoundly expressed in views of the narrator.

The story that speaks most about rural women empowerment, in my opinion, is *Kavach (Armor)*; where a young boy, *Gaurya*, who is concerned about his mother, but cannot speak openly about the explicit remarks about women of her profession onlookers often make out of shame, is beaten up by his mother who sees him making unnecessary problems to their sole source of income; his father being a drunkard. This is a common story in rural, as well as urban areas, where women are forced to sustain their families when their husbands feel comfortable wasting it on liquor or gambling. A clear segregation of work and social ideology is evident by the fact that women are often busy saving up for their families whereas the freedom to waste their hard-earned money is exploited by their men. These women rarely stand up to their husbands; accepting their wastefulness as costs they must bear.

As the story progresses, we learn the reason of her son's tantrums – he learns in school the meaning of the remark “*Cholice ambe*”, choli being the name of the village he belonged to, and also English for blouse; the term was a quite provocative term for a woman's breasts. Also depicted, is the refusal of the male teachers at his school to consider the term as offensive, or rather sufficiently offensive as for them to stop using it. Remembering the way some customers and onlookers called out to her mother, a mango seller, he feels ashamed. He even tries to deny to himself, his connection with her. His shame fades however, when his mother strikes back at some drunk men asking her to ‘Show her mangoes’ with “*Yes, yes, they are mangoes from a choli, but your mother's choli. If you are so interested in checking them out, go and find your mother's choli.*” (p. 86), choosing to use their own words against them by use of the cunning double entendre, rather than fighting them as *Gaurya's* female schoolteacher chose to, successfully shutting them up. This also displays the stark contrast Indian men treat women

around them to; placing their mothers and sisters on pedestals, whilst treating all other women as sexual objects with no opinions.

As a matter of fact not only the stories discussed here but other stories of Urmila Pawar are all an attempt to unravel extraordinary department of ordinary women. The title Mother Wit alludes to the wit, agency, strength these women possess and exercise when faced with difficult situations. Women in her stories do not write slogans and march in movements but they fight everyday discrimination within the circumstances that they find themselves in. Her characters escape the pages of her book and the realm of fiction-they become living, breathing human beings who we come across every day.

As Veena Deo puts it, "Reading Urmila Pawar's stories not only provides multifaceted appreciation and understanding of Dalit women's lives in different contexts, she clearly provides a very nuanced and sophisticated articulation of an emergent voice that moves through a variety of discourses and enriches Marathi literature as a whole."

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