

An Interface of Nature, Caste and Race: A Reading of Urmila Pawar's Autobiography Aaydan and the Selected Poems of Maya Angelou

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Abstract

Human survival and resilience is directly tied to our relationship with the natural environment. However, the historic continuum can be seen where the control over resources is wielded by the privileged, relegating the marginalized communities to a perpetual state of subjugation and dispossession. The context of human identity finds its space in the elementary power of nature. Dalits in the Indian social context bear the weight of environmental injustice which can be seen in Urmila Pawar's autobiography "Aaydan" which dissects the layers of environmental injustice levied upon the Dalit people: the inaccessibility of drinking water, the way they were not allowed to use the roads used by the upper caste, rather rough deadly terrain was left for them for daily work. Moreover, the food disparity faced by them projects the patterns of power, privilege and marginalization that shape the relationship with nature. However, in the Black context, in the selected poems of Maya Angelou we find how she encapsulates the objects of nature to depict the power of her female characters. Having all these, the paper also focused on the spiritual connection of the both dalit women and the black women with nature. Nature for them remains their place of existence, the state of survival; Pawar and Angelou present how they are so connected with the natural sphere focusing on their psychological understanding of nature and its various elements.

Keywords: Caste, Race, Dalit, Black, Environmental Casteism, Nature, Hierarchy, Injustice

It is interesting to compare two writers from two different cultural contexts to elicit the differences and understand the underlying desires and motives which are context-bared. The purpose of such reading is to organize the universals as well as the particulars for a broad empathetic attitude towards each other. For the success of comparative reading mental flexibility is of great importance. More we connect to each

other greater is the solidity of the exploration. The present paper is making an analysis of the two writers from eco-critical angle.

Eco-criticism as an object of study has proven to be more dynamic as it is proven to provide light on ecological concerns but also encourages readers to think about their relationship with the natural world. Advocating the deep attachments with nature has laid the foundation for the eco-literary movement. Eco-literary works sought to blend personal reflection, natural observation and philosophical contemplation, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" by William Rueckert in the late 1970s introduced the term "ecocriticism" where he called for a critical approach that would explore the ecological dimensions of literature and consider how literary texts interact with the environment.

Urmila Pawar's "Aydaan" being a Dalit narrative talks about the subjugation faced by the Dalit community by the upper class society resulting in inappropriate distribution of basic needs for the survival of humans. Historic continuum can be seen where control over resources is wielded by the privileged, relegating the marginalized communities to a perpetual state of subjugation and dispossession. The upper class design of proportions signifies the hegemonic principles and exploitation of the dalit people. As an autobiography Pawar tries to depict the cultural domain and the practices of the dalit community and how nature is used to objectify the life of these dalit people. Dalits bear the weight of environmental injustice which dissect the layers of environmental injustice revealing the intricate patterns of power, privilege and marginalization that shapes our relationship with the environment, throwing light on eco-consciousness. In understanding environmental justice, social justice remains frequent in terms of environmental inequalities such as exclusion, discrimination, harms, victimization, distribution, access and rights and their relevance to specific social groups like the Dalits. Urmila Pawar shows how nature plays the role for the survival of the dalit community as most of their earning comes from weaving baskets from natural sources, as the title of the autobiography itself works as an indicating factor. At the very start of the book we see Pawar's mother weaving baskets as a customary practice of their community. After the death of her husband Pawar's Aai(mother) has been weaving baskets for the survival of their family. Nature always acted as a guiding factor for these dalit people especially with the dalit women who got everything from nature to run their families, "Women from our village travelled to the market at Ratnagiri to sell various things. They trudged the whole distance, with huge, heavy bundles on their heads, filled with firewood or grass rice or semolina, long pieces of bamboo, baskets of ripe or raw mangoes" (Pawar,pg.1)

The Dalit community co-exists with nature as nature acts as their chief benefactor, from collection of firewood to the basic necessities of survival, Dalit people's lifestyles revolve around nature. Their primitive existence with nature influences lives and how nature plays significant roles in terms of survival. Their foremost decisions regarding choice of work has the influence of nature in abundance; they consist mostly of doing jobs based on labour, like collecting firewood, fruits, vegetables, fish, baskets. Moreover, the way caste hierarchies perpetuate through the exploitation of nature, caste and nature are in fact interconnected and interwoven in Indian society. The ecological determination of caste provides the justification of the caste system through nature. Dalit's identity becomes visible the way they are placed in nature by the brahmanical society, it creates the power relation and social order thus creating the binary idea of purity and impurity.

Human survival is directly tied to our relationship with the natural environment; the ecocentric worldview is "nature-centered" and assumes that humans are a part of the natural world. "Dalits have had a long history of social and environmental struggles which have manifested in regular conflicts against Brahmin and Savarna (higher caste) domination of eco- space, as well as in assertion and creation of an autonomous Dalit eco-space" (Sharma,pg.83) But in the broad approach of ecocriticism, the focus on environmental casteism gave access to various dimensions of caste discrimination meted out to the Dalits thus leading to the socio-ecological movements espoused by Dr.B.R.Ambedkar representing the unheard and unacknowledged voices at the margin of the Hindu social structure. During the Mahar movement on 20 March 1927 Ambedkar tried to shape the paradigm of environmental justice in India by citing the inaccessibility of water around a village in Maharashtra. It was the first public assertion of the rights of Dalit as citizens to access natural resources such as water, as for Dalits water is not only an object for daily use but constant sets of struggle and conflict. Movements like the Mahar movements hold some of the fundamental themes of environmental and social justice like Dalits access, ownership, rights and participation in land, water, forests and commons. Economic deprivation forms a concern for many dalit narratives which shows hunger and struggle for food from very near. Urmila Pawar defines the 'dalits' as a "human being crushed under the heels of the social order dominated by the oppressive caste system, a neglected, ignored entity yet who had stood up to resist it with a rationalist humanist ideology"(Pawar, intro.pg xxvii). Pawar has tried to focus on the natural life of these dalit people especially the dalit women through her autobiography "Aaydan" (The Weave of My Life) that also shows how these dalit peoples' lives are associated with the ecology. The interconnectedness and collaboration between the Dalit community and natural environment that surrounds them has the greatest significance in terms of survival. She has glorified the relation of the dalit lives with nature, no matter

how hard the women find to cross the stiff rocky deadly hills, the fierceful Mirjole River, their life's grit with nature, it teaches them the hardship and calmness in life. The romanticization of nature in her work remains the embodiment of the environmental perspectives, the harmony which persists amongst the dalit women is due to their understanding of each other and their work which is surrounded around nature. It is worthy to mention that Pawar through her narrative narrates that the life of the dalits and their livelihood is all about nature. They are more environmentally conscious and we get to know it in the preface of the "Aaydan". Before plastic began to be utilized for making different objects of everyday use, bamboo was the most common material used to make baskets, containers, and other things of general utility in households. Aaydan is the generic term used for all things made from bamboo; awata is another word outside the Konkan, the job of weaving bamboo baskets has traditionally been assigned to nomadic tribes like the Barud. In the Konkan region, however, it was the Mahar caste which undertook this task. Nobody knows why even today, the practice, though considerably weaker, is still prevalent. The other meanings of aaydan are 'utensil' and 'weapon'. When we analyse the words, we get a clear perspective of how dalit community and their cultural practices have always been an integral part of nature. Nature acts as a protective weapon for them and their entire livelihood depends on nature. Even after marriage she saw how her mother-in-law took keen interest in relying on nature and she used to be very proud of herself for being able to relate herself with nature so profoundly and thereby-taking pride in doing agricultural work,taking care of their cattle etc; such close association with nature makes their life full and makes them feel free from prejudices and hierarchical framework.

Nature is seen as the predominant factor in Pawar's "Aaydan", it seeks to see how dalit culinary traditions developed across the country as a mode of survival, born from economic necessity and the need to adopt. Food practices were never made out of choice but due to lack of options and the struggle to get food on their plates. Nature is the epitome of fulfillment and fertility and so also food. Food which comes from nature is even controlled by the higher class to show the disparities on plate. The brahmanical ideologies of controlling habitats, natural resources, economy of the dalit community can be seen. Dalits are not allowed to choose food for themselves; they remain distant from nature in this manner where they have to take permission from the upper section of the society to get access to food. It's about food snobbery and imposing cultural hierarchy through food. What Dalits ate was always the food of poverty. They never felt that their food should be celebrated. What they ate was not the food prepared in abundance but that originated in the lack of ingredients and poverty in the kitchen.

Pawar mentions regarding the food disparity, “Our sisters-in-law, Nitha and Parvati, would also go begging along with other women in our community. They would carry baskets on their heads to collect the leftovers that might be given to them” (Pawar, pg.51). “Some women would go to far-flung houses. They would carry with them separate containers and pots for collecting various dishes. But the Kulwadi women who gave them food would pour everything together in their baskets. Whatever they wanted to give – dal, vegetables, kheer-would all be poured on the rice, in a mixed mound. Women would bring back basketfuls of rice, in which many things were mixed. Not wanting the remaining rice to go rancid, they would put it into a basket, and hold it against the running water in the river. Shaking the basket against the flowing water, they would rinse it till only the clean rice remained in the basket. Sometimes they would wash the rice at home. They poured the insipid, cooked rice in an earthen pot and put it on the stove on low heat. Their entire house would survive for two days on those leftovers. In some houses the flesh of dead animals would be eaten. But that was forbidden in our house”(Pawar, pg.51-52). While the dalits faced water discrimination, Pawar’s father would always allow everyone to use their well, the women would always come clean themselves, drink water and would take rest for sometime. Eating carcasses of animals remains the leftover choice of the dalit section as they were not allowed to eat fresh meat, traditionally it is being practiced, and they are not allowed to eat big fishes they have to survive on small fishes, dry smelly fishes. Pawar narrates how her childhood was spent in utter disgrace especially during her school days, while most of the students were of higher class they use to bring lavish tiffins which would always make her feel inferior and distinct her caste amongst her classmates, “The upper caste girls always used words like ‘ladu’, ‘modak’, ‘Karanjya’, ‘Puranpoli’. They bought such novel items in their tiffin boxes as well at times when we went on excursions. They would also bring such food when they played with dolls. But I never asked myself stupid questions, ‘Why don’t we make such dishes at home?’ We were aware, without anybody telling us, that we were born in a particular caste and in poverty, and that we had to live accordingly” (Pawar, pg. 93-94). Throughout the paper we discovered that how the interrelationship between caste, nature which results in unequal distribution of natural resources marked just a beginning of unraveling complexities of environmental injustices which has been projected by Pawar; whether it is the connectedness of the Dalit community with nature and how they survive with nature or the kind of subjugation the society leveled on them through nature. The way dalits saw nature as the epitome of fulfillment amidst the hardship they faced in their daily life, whether it is the route they have to choose to do their daily works or food marginalization they went through. But nature acts the healing property to them, it remains very clear of how they treat nature. The relation between nature and caste remains visible through two way projection; one, the dalit treatment of nature and other,

how the upper caste used nature as a tool to victimize the dalits.

Being a prolific writer in African American literary history, Maya Angelou's writings are loaded with real life images. The projection of the images and symbols through her writings display racial prejudices and gender discrimination. She presents before us the history of American Civil war, the life of black American and primarily her depiction of "repressed black women and the resilience of those women who stand up against injustice, feminism is the most well-known and frequently discussed subject" in Angelou's writing (K. Preethi, N. Gayathri, pg. 250). Angelou's poems like, "Phenomenal woman", "Caged Bird", "Still I Rise" and "Woman Work", explores the feminist stance taking racial concerns in larger dimensions implying the Eco-conscious ideas. Her poetry addresses the issue of marginalization, exploitation, prejudices of both gender, caste and nature as a single entity. She projects how nature serves as the productive guide for the black women to confront the racial and gender stereotyping. Nature stands out as the elementary power in emphasizing the resilience of the women presented through her poetry. Angelou's poems depict psychological, sexuality, intrinsic femininity and the idea of black power through the lens of black women and through the interconnected idea of natural entity.

Maya Angelou's writing projects the sense of humiliation faced by the black women due to their double oppressive treatments. "She exposes the description of African - American women cultural status under white- centered society"(Bazregarzaden,2). The idea of ecofeminism remains one of the main objectives in the writings of Maya Angelou; where she highlighted the important interlinked connections between women's subjectivity,color and the domain of nature. As women undergo the sense of humiliation, fear, destruction of mental, physical health and identity ;nature also goes through the same sufferings, the destruction of the ecological systems. That's why the treatment of women and nature as objects needs to be prevented. While her poetry shows the interconnectedness of women and nature where women find solace in nature. In "Still I Rise", Angelou puts forward the signs of oppression and traumatic issues that remain imprinted in the minds of oppressed women. They embrace and glide in nature, her references to the natural images in the poem is visible in the following lines,

Just like Moons and like Sun
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I Rise. (9-12)

The idea of survival and subduing patriarchy reinforces her interrelation with nature, focusing on spiritualities of nature. The poem encapsulates on the cyclical nature of the speaker's strength, comparing her to the rising sun which indicates her resilience as an unstoppable force. She compares herself with a 'black ocean' to justify the reality of her personal life, it evokes a sense of vastness and power representing the profound strength within her as well as to the elemental power of nature.

I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide. (33-34)

The eco- feminist approach resembles the idea of motherhood which finds the similarity between women and nature; it reflects the sacrificial instinct of a mother which indicates both women and the Earth. The generosity of death for the new beginning, glorifying the bond with nature which is achievable through death.

"Caged Bird", the title itself remains metaphorical, the poem talks about Bailey who wants to fly free like a bird, although she goes through some fragile stages of life, yet she is not entirely defeated because she is caged and not dead. She can still "sing the lyrical rhythm of freedom" indicating the courage and purpose of her life, the dream serves as the major hope and desire in her life, even in the stage of being caged. " She uses the metaphor of 'caged bird' for herself because she has learned to liberate herself from an imposed identity towards a free identity" (Aslam, 68).

The caged bird sings
with a fearful trill
of things unknown
but longed for still
and his tune is heard
on the distant hill
for the caged bird
sings of freedom. (15-22)

Just like a helpless bird feeling fragile inside a cage, a black woman under the level of patriarchy and white prejudices keeps on struggling with her fragile self. Both the bird and the woman in their own frame carry to overcome all the emotional and physical harm by opening his "throat to sing" which indicates that they remain imposed towards a free identity.

The free bird thinks of another breeze

and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees
 and the fat worms waiting on a dawn bright lawn
 and he names the sky his own. (23-26)

In Angelou's "Woman Work", she brings nature as the one who provides calmness to a chaotic mind. It describes how a woman takes responsibilities of the whole household; still cannot liberate herself or bring calmness. "The woman feels that nature is important to her because it is the only thing in her life that doesn't add any stress and is an outlet for the busy day" (Yustisiana, 163).

Shine on me, sunshine
 Rain on me, rain
 Fall soft, dewdrops
 And cool my brow again. (15)

Storm, blow me from here
 With your fiercest wind
 Let me float across the sky
 Til I can rest again. (20)

Fall gently, snowflakes
 Cover me with white
 Cold icy kisses and
 Let me rest tonight. (25)

Sun, rain, curving sky
 Mountain, ocean, leaf and stone
 Star shine, moon glow
 You're all that I can call my own. (30)

Nature acts as the healing factor in the woman's life. 'She' tries to escape and heal herself from the calmness of nature. The woman in the poem resembles all the women who suffer from the barriers of domesticity, cutting her from the world and from her own self. The 'woman' is left behind with no companion to share her thoughts. But we find out that, " In the absence of human company, it is the sun, the rain, the snow, dewdrops, the wind, the sky, mountains, oceans, leaves, stones, "star shine" and "moon glow" that are her friends" (Yustisiana, 165). The woman is more happy being associated with the natural world. The poem celebrates human connection and more specifically the deeper interconnectedness of woman and environment. The natural ties provide how human

existence is rooted in nature and how one “turns to nature for deliverance”(Yustisiana, 166).

The poem “Phenomenal Woman” celebrates eco- feminism and manifestation of mother earth which “emphasize the link between women and nature, drawing attention to not only their common exploitation by the capitalist patriarchy but also the active role played by women for the preservation of nature” (Patil, 165). “Phenomenal woman” celebrates the natural beauty of a black female body, Angelou through her poem projects the spirit of natural attraction that men feel towards being a ‘female’. The poem projects societal expectations from women, who expect them to look “Pretty” so that they appear attractive. Angelou challenges the patriarchal idea and criticizes the male gaze by asserting the idea that the woman's beauty lies in her own right, she goes on to claim that her attractiveness lies in “the span of my hips”. Although here, the desire of the female body by men is not objectified as an oppressive property or as the male gaze. But it is pictured as men being mesmerized by the beauty held by the black female body, its holistic, charismatic features which goes beyond the parameters of beauty set by the patriarchal world. The poem “Phenomenal Woman” celebrates eco- feminism and the manifestation of mother earth, human's interference in nature is visible where nature's exploitation can be seen. However, the mystery of nature is still unexplored by humans. By asserting the idea that men cannot grasp her “inner mystery”, she meant to elevate the eco-feminist identity.

Men themselves have wondered
What they see in me.
They try so much
But they can't touch
My inner mystery.
When I try to show them
They say they still can't see. (30-36)

Now you understand
Just why my head's not bowed.
I don't shout or jump about
Or have to talk real loud.
When you see me passing,
It ought to make you proud.
I say,
It's in the click of my heels,
The bend of my hair,

the palm of my hand,
The need for my care.
'Cause I'm a woman
Phenomenally.
Phenomenal woman,
That's me. (46-60)

Although Pawar and Angelou adopt two different forms of writings, both project the similar issues of patriarchal domination, exploitation of nature and imposition of capitalist configuration which is at work against the background of dissimilar socio-cultural and political set-up. Both the writers address the nature-culture conflict, their convergences and divergences. Although cultural expression is supposed to be nature-centric, consciously and unconsciously cultural articulation remains away from the spontaneous flow of nature. Hence, the article acts as a reminder to the mankind that subduing nature leads to catastrophe in terms of environmental hazard and climate change etc. A holistic method of coming close to nature may bring relief to mankind from depression, trauma and void.

Notes: 1. Pawar's autobiography *Aaydan* is originally written in Marathi, later translated by Maya Pandit under the title "The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Women's Memoirs". The autobiography traces events of her life from her childhood till her active participation in the Dalit Liberation Movement. The readers go through the condition of Dalit life, as witnessed and experienced by Pawar herself. Being a Mahar right from her childhood she fought against caste and gender. The narrative reflects different aspects of the everyday life of Dalits suffering discrimination in school to unavailability of drinking water. She describes how Dalits were deprived of everyday needs. "Aaydan" is also an account of experiences faced by Dalit women in India, Pawar's mother's engagement in weaving baskets which is the cultural practice of Dalit communities and in order to make ends meet after the demise of their father. Pawar navigates how she faced additional limitations based on her gender, the patriarchal and casteist structures that perpetuates inequality and discrimination. She reflects on the Dalit movement led by Babasaheb Ambedkar and mass conversion of Dalits to Buddhism for self affirmation. Overall, Pawar's "Aaydan" has left an indelible mark on feminist and Dalit discourses.

2. *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism* by William Rueckert is an essay written in the year 1978 to focus on the humanistic understanding of the relationship with the natural world. It emerged as an integral part of the environmental humanities

where Rueckert discussed the human disconnection from the natural world. The purpose of the study remains to eliminate the dichotomy between nature and society.

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