

Autobiographies of Maggie Gee and Kumud Pawade: A Comparative Study

Dr. Shivaji D. Sargar

Veer Wajekar Arts, Science & Commerce College, Phunde,
Maharashtra, India

Abstract

Margaret Mary Gee, better known as Maggie Gee in contemporary literary circle is a living British novelist with the famous works like *The Burning Book* (1983), *Where Are the Snows* (1991), *The White Family* (2002), *The Flood* (2004), *My Cleaner* (2005), *The Blue* (2006), *My Driver* (2009), etc. to her credit. *My Animal Life* (2010), which covers Maggie Gee's life from early childhood up to the middle age, is a story of a girl who bravely steers her life-boat through various cyclonic situations in her personal, familial and social life.

Kumud Pawade is a writer and activist from the Indian state of Maharashtra. She belonged to Mahar community which is one of the untouchable communities of India. She has written her autobiography in Marathi, entitled *Antasphot* (1981). Here Kumud has narrated the experiences of her early childhood and youth in caste-based Indian society.

Though Maggie and Kumud are women, they belong to different cultures and countries. Being women though they faced similar socio-cultural problems, there is certainly a marked difference between the attitudes of these writers towards looking at those problems. Therefore, the present paper attempts a comparative study of Maggie Gee's *My Animal Life* and Kumud Pawade's *Antasphot* in order to bring out the similarities and differences in their attitudes towards their milieu in general and individual lives in particular.

Keywords: Feminism, My Animal Life, Antasphot.

Literature of all ages, places and languages is considered to be a source immense pleasure for all its readers, irrespective of their age, gender, class, caste or race. However, it has been observed that the degree and intensity of pleasure the readers receive from the works of literature can be dependent upon various non-literary aspects like - who is the writer or the reader of that work?; to which gender/caste/race/class/country does he belong?; and with what attitude he looks at that work? It is so perhaps because the experience of creating or appreciating any work of literature is to a great extent coloured by the personality of the concerned person. And as every person is directly or indirectly influenced by various socio-politico-cultural conditions of his own time and place and also by various traditions that have come to him from the past, it is but natural that he cannot easily unravel himself from those conditions and traditions. However, it is possible that members of same caste or class or gender can look at certain aspects of their life with similar attitude and take similar stand against those circumstances. And at the same time it is also true that there can be certain differences in the attitudes of these people. Keeping in view these possibilities, the present paper attempts to study the autobiographies of Maggie Gee and Kumud Pawade and find out similarities as well as differences in their attitudes towards various aspects of their lives.

Margaret Mary Gee (b. 1948), better known as Maggie Gee in contemporary literary circle is a living British novelist with some really good works like *The Burning Book* (1983), *Where Are the Snows* (1991), *The White Family* (2002), *The Flood* (2004), *My Cleaner*

(2005), *The Blue* (2006), *My Driver* (2009), etc. to her credit. *My Animal Life* (2010), which covers Maggie Gee's life from early childhood up to the middle age, is a story of a girl who bravely steers her life-boat through various cyclonic situations in her personal, familial and social life. Here she frankly speaks about - her father who behaves like the 'master' of his wife and children; a teenage girl who feels immensely empowered both by her winning a scholarship to Oxford and the invention of the contraceptive pill; her love and married life; her responsibilities towards her daughter; her sad memories of the children lost in miscarriage; and also the ups and downs in her literary career.

Kumud Pawade, writer, feminist and social activist, was born in Nagpur, India in 1938 as a member of Dalit community. Her autobiographical work *Antasphot* consists of episodes taken from her life that weave the story of a Dalit girl who aspires not only to learn Sanskrit but also to master it to be able to impart the knowledge through teaching assignments. Besides throwing light on the barriers created by various socio-political institutions in Kumud's life and showing how she overcame them during her life-journey, *Antasphot* also speaks about many of the traditional inequalities of Hindu social structure resulting in making the lives of women and Dalits miserable.

Though both Maggie Gee and Kumud Pawade belong to the same gender and time, they are from two different places with their almost diametrically dissimilar socio-cultural conditions, which have forced them look at their personal and social lives with their own specific perspective. That is why '*My Animal Life*' and '*Antasphot*', the life-stories of these writers, depict the portrayals of Maggie and Kumud, which are tinted by their peculiar socio-cultural milieu thereby making them look quite different from each other.

To begin with, Maggie Gee comes from a fairly well-to-do family. Referring to the social status of her family, Maggie Gee writes:

"The Gees were clever and had standards, an end terrace house in Wolverton, Bucks, which meant they were upper working-class, a giant metal roller for the grass leaning against the garden wall, crimson holly-hocks six foot tall, and upstanding moral convictions". (Gee, 2010:19)

Further the family moved to the middle-class, enabling Maggie to spend her childhood in quite a comfortable manner. Her parents were caring and paid enough attention towards her educational and other needs. Even Maggie Gee proudly writes about the good financial condition of her mother's side, particularly of her grandparents' time. She writes:

"Martha Davis nee Leeson, my great-grandma, rode a tricycle.... There is a faded photograph of her in glory, slender once more, mounted straight-backed and imperious on a tall machine which, Aunt Eve assured me, was 'the first tricycle in Northampton'. It would have cost nearly £20, a fortune in those days". (Gee: 32)

Kumud Pawade's father was a lawyer by profession and also led a relatively comfortable life. Kumud lived in a big house and attended a good school. Hers were responsible parents who unfailingly took care of all her requirements. Such a happy atmosphere at home made Kumud Pawade remember her childhood again and again during the course of her life-story. In fact, she proudly refers to the material comfort at her home, when she writes:

I take a bath with Pears soap daily. My mother applies Kaminia hair oil to my hair and plaits them neatly. My clothes, too, are washed clean... At home, there are always various oils, soaps and perfumes. Besides the girls of our area, other girls of my class also liked to sit with me... My home is cleaner than theirs. (Pawade, 1981:24-25)

Such kinds of financial backgrounds of Maggie Gee and Kumud Pawade allowed their parents to satisfy the essential needs of their daughters and make them fit to enter into the outer world with confidence and self-determination. It is because of the encouragement and strong support of their parents that both Maggie and Kumud could attend the schools and colleges of their choice. In case of Kumud, it is only because of her father's unconditional support to her choice of Sanskrit as the major subject of her study that she could fulfill her dream of mastering the language.

Here it has to be taken into consideration that Kumud was born in Mahar caste, the members of which were forbidden to learn Sanskrit. Traditionally, Sanskrit was considered as *devwani*, the language of Gods. Hindu scriptures are written in this language. The social history of India shows that only the Brahmins were allowed to learn Sanskrit. Manu, the Hindu lawgiver, had forbidden Shudras and women not only from learning Sanskrit but also from taking any kind of education. If somebody tried to break this convention, he was punished for his 'sin'. The principle of inequality was shamelessly practiced in the society. However, with the Herculean efforts of social reformers like Mahatma Phule and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar supplemented by liberal English education and India's political independence from the British rule, the conditions of Shudras and women gradually improved, making these oppressed and marginalized sections of society aware of their rights. That is why Kumud Pawade, both a woman and a Dalit, could dream of becoming a Sanskrit teacher. However, in those days, it was very difficult for her to fulfill her dream without the strong backing of her father. It was so because her teachers and the other members of her own community did not want her to learn Sanskrit. Despite the opposition of some of her teachers, she had opted for Sanskrit in Standard IX and studied very hard and scored good marks in examination. After matriculation, she expressed her ambition of doing post-graduation in Sanskrit. When her neighbours came to know of her ambition, they discouraged her by saying that she would not be able to do so as Sanskrit was a difficult subject. Kumud Pawade writes:

“ Like the previous occasion, our educated neighbours made fun of me. Some of them were professors and lawyers. How is it possible? Though you scored good marks in Matriculation, is it so easy to complete M.A. with Sanskrit? One should not boast of one's abilities. Should realize one's capabilities. People were talking. And the amusing aspect of it all was that most of them belonged to our own caste. But their words couldn't deter me away from my determination. I did not respond to them. (1981:28)

It is surprising to listen to such discouraging words from the educated people of Kumud's community. However, undeterred by such attitudes of her people, Kumud worked hard and fulfilled her ambition. However, even though she mastered the language, she could not get a job easily. It was only after she got married to Motiram Pawade, a caste Hindu that she could get a job of teacher.

This is not the case with Maggie Gee, who could avail all the possible opportunities in her educational life as she belongs to the Western society, in which there is no caste-

system with its closed structure. It is the class-based capitalist society where there is definitely greater mobility for the individual members to move from one class to the other. That is why it was relatively easier for Maggie to pursue her education in her chosen field and institution without any obstacle from either her family or other members of the society. This sense of freedom in the Western society enables Maggie Gee to express the thoughts and emotions about her family and her sex-life freely, which is not the case with Kumud Pawade. It is observed that on most of the occasions Maggie opens up her mind and speaks about her parents and other relatives without any reservation. For example, she writes freely about the split-up of her parents in these words:

“In the end, Mum got what she wanted, by leaving ... after Vic had retired and they had left the Billingshurst community where separation would have meant disgrace in the married middle class... It didn't last... My father was astonished, and despairing, because he adored, and depended on, Aileen. Because she was afraid, she left him without warning. Took the car, and fled to me... I had to pretend, in answer to my father's desperate phone calls, to know nothing”. (Gee, 2010:84)

As Maggie was very much concerned with the ‘individuality’ of her mother, she supported her mother's decision of splitting from her father. This incident, followed by some other similar ones, is the proof of Maggie Gee's unreserved attitude towards narrating the personal details from the lives of her parents.

Of course, there are similar incidents in *Antasphot*, particularly when Kumud writes about her relationship with her father-in-law during the initial years of her married life. Here she speaks angrily about the unbecoming behavior of her father-in-law who was so obstinate and conservative that he refused to forgive his son for getting married to a Dalit woman even after the birth of his grandson. Kumud writes:

“I was terribly angry. The old man did not cuddle my son, didn't fondle him, didn't put his hand on his head... Though this man was our blood kin, he didn't touch his grandson, as he was born to a Mahar woman”. (Pawade, 1981:79)

Such kind of behavior of a man towards his daughter-in-law and grandson is certainly despicable and it is quite justifiable on the part of Kumud to get angry with him. However, there seems to be a slight difference between Maggie and Kumud as it is observed that after few years, Kumud forgave her father-in-law and lived happily with him until his death. The anger she expressed for her father-in-law was the anger for his loathsome behaviour, not for the man himself. In Kumud's case, there seems to be nothing selfish in her relation with her father-in-law. However, when Maggie writes about the split-up of her parents, she seems to be thinking more of her own well-being than her parents. It is evident from the words,

“Traumatic. I was twenty-seven, but the idea of my parents splitting up was unthinkable, much though I wanted my mother to be free of fear, and have the life she wanted”. (Gee, 2010:84)

However, she immediately goes on to add that

“*But how would they cope on their own? Could there be a Mummy without a Daddy, a Daddy without a Mummy? Inside, at that critical moment, I was still six years old. I suspect that somewhere in every child*

whose parents split up is this helpless terror; the foundations of the world are shaken". (2010:84)

From these words, it can be sensed that Maggie was more worried about her own life in the absence of either of the parents. And probably that is why she says, 'Could there be a *Mummy* without a *Daddy*, a *Daddy* without a *Mummy*? Instead of saying 'Could there be a *wife* without a *husband*, a *husband* without a *wife*? (emphasis added)

Another point of difference between these two autobiographies is the sex-life about which Maggie Gee has written at length, whereas Kumud has not touched upon it at all. In '*My Animal Life*', there is a chapter entitled 'What do women need? What do men need? This chapter is devoted to narrate the sexual adventures of Maggie. For example, she begins the chapter with these words:

"I was nineteen years old when I first had full sex with a man, which seemed shamefully behindhand. I think we were all eager not to be virgins, we clever girls at Somerville, but men were not allowed to stay overnight, and college rooms had thin walls like egg boxes. So it couldn't happen till I moved out of college... I remember sex in a churchyard; in a garden; in a room at a party where no one else was; with a famous male-to-female transsexual and his friend..." (2010:135-141)

There is free expression of her sex-life in her autobiography probably because Maggie belongs to Western culture, wherein sex, both before and after marriage, is not considered as taboo, as in India. That is why, Kumud Pawade, born and brought up in Indian socio-cultural milieu, has kept mum about her sex-life. Kumud, being both a Dalit and a woman cannot dare to speak out her mind on such a forbidden subject. In fact, Indian society is patriarchal, where the interests of men are always taken into consideration. Women are treated as the second-class citizens, though they are declared equal to men in all spheres of life by the Constitution. It is shocking to see that even today there are various fields in which women are not given equal opportunities. Naturally, Kumud Pawade, the voice of the modern Indian women, has written much about the partial treatment given to women. For example, Kumud has written about *Vatsavitri*, a fast observed by married women on full moon's day worshipping the fig tree to get the same husband in seven cycles of births. Kumud Pawade criticises this religious practice because it was partial and meant only for women. In her autobiography, she writes at length about *watsavitri vrat* and expresses her displeasure towards the false religious beliefs. She writes:

"Are all the scriptures have been written to keep the woman under control? Though such oppressive religious customs are gold-coated, they cannot be admired. Though I was happy in my husband's company, there were many other women who were enduring the pangs of hell in the company of their husbands. Though those women were wishing for the same hell again and again, didn't I have my own duty? Why should I follow such evil customs after being aware of their futility? And shouldn't I explain the cruelty and meaninglessness of those customs to the ignorant women?" (Pawade, 1981:10)

Kumud Pawade objects for having such a *vrat* because of its partial attitude towards women. This *vrat* propagates patriarchal system in which women had secondary place. However, it is shocking to see that most of the Indian women have accepted patriarchy as an unavoidable aspect of their lives. The customs and traditions of patriarchy have been deeply

rooted in their minds and hearts thereby making it difficult for the reformists to uproot them. Speaking about the impact of such customs, Kumud Pawade writes:

“I was immensely annoyed to notice the slavishness of those women who had accepted the false ideas without giving them a second thought. Were the women and Shudras given any other position than the slave in this society? By giving prestige for their death before their husbands’, women were taught to sacrifice even for the sake of evil. Naturally, haunted by such beliefs, women used to pray, “O’ God, let me die before my husband. Let me depart from this world in green bangles, yellow sari and *kumkum* on my forehead”. (1981:61-62)

Such kinds of false beliefs are being observed by Indian women for hundreds of years due to the lack of education leading them to the dark ghettos of ignorance. Compared to them, the conditions of women in Western countries are far better. But it doesn’t mean that they have attained unconditional equal status in their society. On the contrary, there are some incidents in *My Animal Life* in which Maggie Gee has written about the secondary treatment given to women in her society. Though Britain boasts of man-woman equality, it was:

“Only in 1919 did British women get the vote. Ninety years ago: that means women are alive who remember their own mothers being unable to vote. Is the problem that we still haven’t got over the war? It is very recent, the period when women were not allowed to graduate, nor to have a claim on their children when marriages broke down...women were allowed, as a concession, to go to university, but were not allowed to take degrees”. (Gee, 2010:153)

The autobiographer has also written about similar partial treatment received by both Maggie and her mother at the hands of other males in the family. While speaking about male-dominance at home, Maggie writes:

“The custom in our house was, defer to the male. My father always had the last word. My brother John, being four years older, and very brilliant, knew more than me, and must have had more say”. (2010:153)

Surprisingly, there are some incidents which show that instead of the partial treatment received in and outside the home, Maggie seems to have accepted her lot of being a woman, and even the inferior status accorded to women in her society. For example, while speaking about the weaknesses of women, she says:

“We need forgiveness for our female faults: obsessing about detail, worrying too much, talking about feelings when men don’t want to, criticising, thinking about the past, cleaning up when we could be having fun”. (2010:152)

It means the women of all ages and places have been the victims of male dominance in one or the other way. The comparative study of *My Animal Life* and *Antasphot* helps the readers to assess the real status of women in the present social structure and to appreciate the efforts of the intellectuals like Maggie Gee and Kumud Pawade in making the male-dominated world aware of its real nature.

Works Cited:

1. Maggie Gee, 2010. *My Animal life*. London: Telegram.
2. Pawade, Kumud. 1981. *Antasphot*. Aurangabad: Anand Prakashan.
3. Ghurey, G.S. 1969. *Caste and Race in India*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan.
4. Poitevin, Guy. *Dalit Autobiographical Narratives Figures of Subaltern Consciousness, Assertion and Identity*. Pune: Centre for Cooperative Research in Social Sciences.
5. Ruchira. 4 Feb. 2010. *Dishonored By History: arguably the biggest human rights crisis you've never heard of*.
http://accidentalblogger.typepad.com/accidental_blogger/2010/02/dishonored-by-history.html
6. Dasgupta, Manas. *Untouchability Still Prevalent in Rural Gujarat: Survey*, The Hindu, 28 Jan. 2010.
7. Merton, Robert. 1938. *Social Structure and Anomie*. American Sociological Review, Vol. 3, No.5.
8. White, Richard B. *The Mahar Movement's Military Component*, South Asia Graduate Research Journal.