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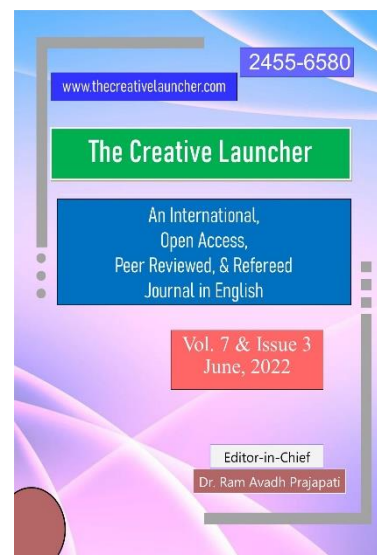
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☞ Research Article



Depiction of Plight and Subjugation of Dalit Women in Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*

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Abstract

Baby Kamble reflects on the subjugation and plight of Dalit women in her autobiography *The Prisons We Broke*. Kamble, while depicting her experiences of caste discrimination, also attempts to show how the women of the entire Mahar community face similar discrimination and, therefore, this autobiography is regarded as the testimony of the entire Mahar community.

On the one hand, it talks about how Dalit women fall victim to exploitation and discrimination by the upper caste people; on the other hand, it projects how these women tolerate similar discrimination by the patriarchal norms within their own Mahar community. This autobiography is a Dalit narrative that has been written from a feminist perspective. It offers a realistic insight into the oppressive caste and patriarchal norms of our Indian society. Thus, through this paper, an attempt has been made to bring forth the subjugation of Dalit women as reflected in Baby Kamble's autobiography *The Prisons We Broke*.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Hegemony, Subaltern, Dalit, Caste, Gender discrimination, Oppression, Identity, Marginalization, Hierarchy, Slavery, Subjugation, Untouchable, Purity, pollution, Impurity, Self

The Prisons We Broke, an autobiography of Baby Kamble, deals with the suffering of Dalit women portrayed through the life of the author and the women of the entire Mahar community. Through this text, the author brings forth the issues of the subjugation of Dalit women in the Mahar community. The text foregrounds the practice of untouchability and the atrocities hurled by the patriarchal system on Dalit women. It showcases Dalit women's triple marginalization i.e. in terms of gender, caste, and class. They countenance discrimination being women, belonging to the lower strata of society and a lower economic class. For Dalit women, gender discrimination, caste discrimination, and patriarchal domination go hand in hand. Thus, the term socio-biography seems more appropriate than an autobiography for this text because it depicts the sufferings of Dalit women and at the same time shows their metamorphosis under the leadership of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar. In this regard, the author contends that "The suffering of my community has always been more important than my own individual suffering. I have identified myself completely with my people" (Kamble 47).

Babytai Kamble is the first Dalit woman who pens her autobiography in the Marathi language and, hence, *The Prisons We Broke* emerges as a milestone in the history of writing in Marathi. It is an agonizing narrative of the sufferings of the Dalit Mahar community. The autobiography is originally written in the Marathi language with the title *Jina Amucha*. It was later translated into English by Maya Pandit. The translator, Maya Pandit contends about this autobiography that it is perhaps the first autobiography which is written by a Dalit woman, not only in Marathi but in any Indian language. The autobiography is basically a compilation of memoirs that was published earlier from 1982 to 1984 in a Marathi woman's magazine 'Stree'. All these series of memoirs are compiled in a book form in 1986 and its English translation gets published in the year 2008. The translator contends that Kamble's autobiography "is more of a socio-biography rather than an autobiography" (Kamble xii) as it deals more with the issues of the entire Mahar community. The revelry and rituals of the community are portrayed in a vivid manner but very less incidents are depicted from the life of the author which is a crucial element in other autobiographies. In the tradition of customary autobiographies, the author begins her text by depicting her life story but as the narrative proceeds, the issues of the Dalit

community take over her personal life incidents. The subsequent chapters are the depiction of the plight of the Mahar community.

Dalit autobiographies represent not the journey of an individual choice and experiences rather it signifies a social and community-based chorus of voices. Deo and Zelliott emphasize that autobiographical writing became trendy because “an individual’s story becomes significant in the exploration of group identity” (43). Babytai Kamble seems to have a similar ideology regarding it when she says, “...for me, the suffering of my community has always been more important than my own individual suffering. I have identified myself completely with my people. And, therefore, *Jina Amucha* was the autobiography of my entire community” (157). In this way, we see that Kamble’s autobiography is a collective account of Dalit Women of Maharwada. Talking about the collective identity in the text, N. Gulati points out:

Even though Kamble’s narrative is autobiographical, a genre that usually uploads the ‘I’, it is titled *The Prisons We Broke*, emphasizing the coming together of the individual (I) and the community (We). This is also evident in the fact that she narrates numerous women’s experiences but keeps the characters nameless to showcase their collective identity. (932)

Bhongle points out that the conventional autobiographies aim to instruct whereas Dalit autobiographies “explode popular myths about human values and dignity and reveal that aspect of society which, in its blatant form of ugliness, speaks for the total disregard for the suffering humanity” (159). Kamble regards writing as an effective way to defy the Brahminical hegemony. She contends that “I have to express this anger, give vent to my sense of outrage. But merely talking about it will not suffice. How many people can I reach that way? I must write about it. I must proclaim to the world what we have suffered” (146). In this way, her writing turns out to be the “means of countering the misinterpretation of Dalit people in the Indian literary and cultural discourse and reaching a larger audience at the same time” (Sonika 1380). But most of the time, for Dalit women writing is still not a feasible job.

The autobiography of Kamble can be studied in two parts. The first part portrays the anguish and pain of Mahar women who face discrimination and exploitation not only by the upper caste people but also by the males of their own community. The second part of the autobiography deals with the ideologies of Baba Bhimrao Ambedkar following which Mahar women can observe a kind of transformation in their condition.

As the autobiography begins, the author narrates that she belongs to a Dalit community called Mahar. It is one of the largest Dalit communities in Maharashtra. She was born to her maternal grandparent in Veergaon, a small village in Pune. Out of five issues of her parents, only Kamble and her brother could survive. Since her father was a contractor and her granduncles were butlers for the British people, the economical condition of her family was sound. But because of the generous nature of her father, no savings were managed for the future generation. While talking about her ancestry, Kamble writes:

There were about sixteen houses in our maharwada. All the people of the maharwada were illiterate except for my aaja. He was an educated man...It was because of their

association with the European sahibs that they could speak English so well. The villagers would be so impressed! He appeared no less than a minister to them. (45)

As the narrative proceeds, Kamble describes a prevalent belief in the Mahar community that “if a woman has her husband, she has the whole world; if she does not have a husband, then the world holds nothing for her” (41). Such kinds of women are identified as the prototype of ‘*Pativrata*’ women. She states that the Mahar women regard their existence as totally dependent upon their husbands. The author does not chop up words when she explains the physical, emotional, and psychological anguish of Mahar women. Sonika writes aptly in this regard: “The text abounds with instances of pain, suffering, and humiliation that highlight their subaltern position. It is further distressing and pitiful to read gory details of noses being chopped off of women, who falter from in line with the prescribed patriarchal dictum” (1380-81).

In the ‘Introduction’ of *The Prisons We Broke*, Maya Pandit says, If the Mahar community is the ‘other’ for the Brahmins, Mahar women became the ‘other’ for the Mahar men (Kamble xv). About the customs of Mahar community, Kamble describes: “In those days, it was the custom to keep women at home, behind the threshold. The honour enjoyed by a family was in proportion to the restrictions imposed on the women of the house. When no one could see even a nail of the woman thus confined within the four walls of the house”. She further adds that then “this ‘honour’ became the talk of town... Then people would tell each other, how one Pandharinath Mistry kept his wife completely hidden in the house and how even the rays of the sun did not know her” (Kamble 05). She goes on to reveal how her mother was also kept confined under the four walls of the home. She writes, “My father had locked up my aai in his house, like a bird in a cage” (Kamble 05).

The Dalit males usually follow and practice the ideologies of the Brahminical patriarchal system as a result they put limitations on women’s freedom, education, and sexuality. Even Kamble herself is not unaffected by this patriarchal hegemony put by the males of her community. In an interview with Maya Pandit, Baby Kamble confessed that just like other women of the community, she too had to face physical torture at the hands of her husband for no fault on her side. Her husband used to doubt her every time. The domination and subjugation of women by men connote patriarchal hegemony. This domination and physical assault became so common for the women of the Mahar community that they neither complain about it nor raised their voices against it. They had accepted this physical torture as their destiny. She too had accepted that she was not an exception and tolerated it silently. She also adds that she was not even willing to write about her physical assault because “it was the fate of most women; I wasn’t an exception. So why write about it, I felt” (156).

Talking about the domination and unequal treatment of women in society, Kamble takes the discussion ahead by pointing out that if the women from the high caste and class face gender discrimination, then the Dalit women face this discrimination in three folds- being women, being lowest in the caste hierarchy and being poor. Narrating the domination of women in their own community, Kamble writes about an incident where a newlywed girl unknowingly ignores

to bow down to a high caste man. At this act of ignorance, the upper caste man shouts: “Who, just tell me, who the hell is that new girl? Doesn’t she know that she has to bow down to the master? Shameless bitch! How dare she pass me without showing due respect?” (53). The mother-in-law had to beg for mercy for this act of disobedience by falling at the feet of the man. Filled with lots of remorse and guilt, the mother-in-law requests the upper caste man: “No, no kind master! That girl is a new animal in the herd! Quite foolish and ignorant. If she has erred, I, her sasra, fall at your feet, but please forgive us for this crime” (53).

Ramkete in his article “Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* and Urmila Pawar’s *The Weave of my Life: feminist Critiques of Patriarchy*” states “Dalits were slaves of Savarnas. But the mentality of enslaving others was deep-rooted in the psyche of Dalits too. Hence, they used to enslave their daughters-in-law. The act of enslaving daughters-in-law is the indication of the hold of patriarchy on Dalits” (04). About the males’ tendency of making slaves in her community, Kamble clearly writes: “The other world had bound us with chains of slavery. But we too were human beings. And we too desired to dominate, to wield power. But who would let us do that? So we made our own arrangements to find our slaves- our very own daughters-in-law! If nobody else, then we could at least enslave them” (Kamble 87).

Women are oppressed and exploited as daughters, wives, and mothers but they are enslaved as daughters-in-law and face the cruelest treatment not only by the male of the family but also by the females. Women turn the utmost enemy of the other woman. Kamble does not fail to depict the inhuman treatment of the daughters-in-law by their family members be it a man or a woman. She writes about the pitiable condition of the daughters-in-law, thus:

The daughter-in-law of that house was kept busy all twenty-four hours of the day. The men-folk would bring loads of meat in big baskets on their heads. The meat needed to be preserved. This was a very arduous task. And many a time, the duty fell on the daughter-in-law. More often than not, she would not be more than eight or nine years old. She had to sit down with a sharp knife, cut the huge piece of meat into smaller ones of about half kilo each, and stretch these into long snake-like strips. (Kamble 73-74)

Kamble points out that in the Mahar community, the young girls at the tender age of eight or nine years are married off and become the victim of physical assault both by the men and women of the family. They face cruelty not only inside the family but also outside the family. Many times the mothers-in-law address their daughters-in-law as evil and ominous as a result they are beaten bitterly and driven out of the house. The neighbors would gather over at sight to have fun because it adds some excitement to their monotonous lives. Kamble asserts that women of the Mahar community lead the most miserable life. Their lives turn out to be hell because of poverty, violence, oppression, discrimination, patriarchal domination, and humiliation. She depicts that in her community at least one Mahar woman in a hundred would have her nose chopped off. Her husband beats her as if she is a beast and he keeps on beating her until his stick breaks. Sometimes the head woman of the family would crush her backbone as a result she collapses unconscious to the ground. Because of these tortures, many daughters-in-law would try to run away.

Kamble also adds that in her community such torturous incidents taken place frequently. After her escape, if a woman is caught, she is brought back home where a more torturous life awaits her. The life of a Mahar woman is shaped by numerous disasters. Though these ordeals make them physically strong but their inner conscience cries against such heinous acts of inhumanity. In many cases, the mother poisons her son's mind against the unfortunate wife by saying, "Dhondya, what good is such a runaway wife to you? Some bastard must have made her leave you. She must be having an affair... This bitch will bring nothing but a disgrace to us. No, no! I don't want such a slut in my house. Don't let her off so easily. Dhondya, cut off the tip her nose" (Kamble 100).

We also observe that it's not only the mother but the father also who provokes their son to torture his wife. She is mostly treated inhumanly by her family members. The father provokes his son to punish his wife as she crossed her limits. He says, "You are a man. You must behave like one! Twirl your moustache and show us that you are a man... Never mind if you have to go to prison for six months! You must chop off your wife's nose and present it to her brother and father. They mustn't have any respect left to sit with the members of the panch" (Kamble 100-101). The legs of the wife are tied with a rope so that she can't make any movement when mutilation would take place. Kamble describes this heinous and horrible act of violence done by the father and son: "Then both father and son make a plan for chopping off the girl's nose...the son would keep ready a razor sharpened to an edge. At night, he would sit on her chest and taking his own time, cut off her nose" after that "they would drive the poor girl out of the house, with blood pouring out from mutilation" (101).

In her autobiography, Kamble describes various grounds on which women suffer. Marriage at an early age is one of them. She says, "A Mahar woman would continue to give birth till she reached menopause" (Kamble 82). The subsequent pregnancies deteriorate her physical health as she falls a victim of malnourishment. During her pregnancy, she gets only stale *rotis* and *jowar* as her food. "Pregnancy period and delivery were nightmares for the Mahar women... treatments of the old women were life-threatening. The community was totally unaware of the medication" (Sreelakshmi 116). Not only this, as Kamble describes, the midwives thrust their hands into the vagina of the pregnant lady in order to check the progress of the baby. Pregnancy becomes a battle of death for every Mahar woman. They get surely infected with tetanus as the midwives know no medication regarding it.

Kamble does not fail to project the discrimination done against Mahar women by the upper caste people. She asserts that there are separate spaces for the upper caste people and lower caste people so that the latter may not cross the path of the former one. Mahar people were restricted to go through the same path as the upper caste people. If any upper caste person passes through a certain path, the Dalit has to go back and has to walk on the shrub in order to show his apology and guilty. If the Mahar women happen to commit the same thing, they are expected to apologize by saying: "The humble Mahar Women fall at your feet, Master" (Kamble 52). Any kind of carelessness from the lower caste people would invite brutal trouble for them.

While talking about the atrocities of the upper caste Brahmin women over the Mahar women, Kamble describes the hypocrisy of the upper caste women. Just like any other women, Mahar women are also paid less for the work they do to earn a livelihood for their families. The Mahar women would go to the forest to collect the firewood and sell them in the village and this is how they earn bread and butter for their families. But the upper caste women purchase the firewood at low prices. Kamble narrates one incident where Kaki, an upper caste woman, asks the Mahar woman to put firewood in her courtyard warning her that any strand of her hair or her clothes should not be left behind. The Brahmin woman warns the Mahar woman, "Listen carefully, you dumb Mahar woman, check the stick well. If you overlook any of the threads sticking to them, there will be a lot of trouble. Your carelessness causes us heavily. Our house will be polluted" (55). The hypocrisy lies in the fact that the houses of the upper caste Brahmins don't get polluted when they cook the food on the firewood brought by the Mahar women but they get polluted when any strand of their hair is found sticking to the firewood.

Kamble narrates one more incident showing the hypocrisy of the upper caste Brahmins. In Mahar community, whenever any marriage is solemnized, the Brahmins are invited to do the rituals and ceremonial things. The Brahmin used to do the ritual by standing at a distance lest he would get polluted by their touch. But when it comes to taking the *Dakshina*, he never hesitates to take it from them. "That (*Dakshina*) he took away without any fear of pollution" (88).

Thus, we observe that the autobiography of Kamble is not completely an account of her own 'self'. In her autobiography, she depicts the sufferings of women that are mostly caused by the patriarchal setup. Just as the Varna system has given birth to the caste system and sanctioned discriminatory practices, patriarchy recognizes women as a subsidiary and dependent on men. Men, therefore, have been dominating women from the very beginning. Various causes of women's plight have been very minutely analysed in this autobiography. Kamble points out that it is women's illiteracy that drags them into such miserable conditions and only by educating themselves and exploring their 'self' can help them to achieve their identity and dignity. Kamble pens her autobiography to establish her identity as a writer and at the same time to spread awareness regarding the painful experiences Mahar women undergo because of gender, caste and class discrimination. She also encourages the women of her community to fight against the orthodox patriarchal norms to establish their identity.

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