

Breaking the shackles of Patriarchy : Baby Kamble's '*The Prisons We Broke*'

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Abstract

Baby Kamble's distress narrative "*The Prisons We Broke*" is a fine example of Dalit Feminist Literature. It is one of the first autobiographies by a Dalit woman, in an Indian language. Her book explicates the values of culture, customs, and rituals of Dalit women, their onerous way of life, and the resulting frustrations. Her book, like most books of Dalit Literature is a protest against the oppressive caste system, of which the Dalit men and women have always been victims. Kamble's women characters are sufferers of the centuries old patriarchal system and the caste system. They are yearning to break out of these shackles and see a utopia when they would have a lifestyle like the women of the upper castes. Her autobiography is a double-pronged attack on the patriarchal hegemony on one hand and Brahminical dominance on the other. She has seamlessly blended these two concerns in her mellifluous narrative, thereby striking a chord with her readers. She has not tried to evoke pity in the minds of people; on the other hand the joys and celebration of the community is brought out with such élan, that there is a feeling of abundance in the air. This makes the book an interesting read of Dalit Feminist literature.

Keywords: Dalit Literature, Dalit Feminist Literature, Caste subjugation, Panchama

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890), the fiery social activist and writer from Maharashtra, used the Marathi word "Dalit" in his writings, which means "broken or scattered", for the social outcasts who were forced to live in the outskirts of the society, Dalits were removed from the four tier caste system, and were seen as comprising a fifth caste known as Panchama. They were oppressed right through history, and they had little or no chance of succour in the future. "For obvious reasons, Dalit writing does not eulogize or glorify an idyllic past, nor does it project visions of a Utopian future; it also largely lacks the historical signposts that would allow it to participate in a nationalist historical chronology" (Gajrawala 3).

The Dalit women have always had a tough life as they faced a double-pronged subjugation – one from the men and women of the upper castes, and the other from their very own men. The rate of violence against Dalit women is much higher, as they are considered to be an 'easy prey' as compared to their upper caste counterparts. In addition, they often do not know their rights or are not informed of their rights. The police may show up when a Dalit woman reports a violent attack, but they may not investigate or take action to hold the

offender responsible, as the offender could be of a higher caste. “While it is true that Dalits in general are oppressed, Dalit women bear a disproportionately higher share of this burden. Given the division of labour within the household, women have to suffer more from the lack of access to water, fuel sources, and sanitation facilities, exposing them to humiliation and violence” (Malik par 5).

Such a centuries old malaise of double subjugation had to eventually find enlightened voices who would speak for their sistren fearlessly. Though Dalit literature started in the 1960s with the publication of autobiographies, dramas, novels, short stories and poems, the issues facing Dalit men have garnered more attention than the critical problems faced by their women counterparts, and valid depictions of Dalit women's experiences have been overlooked in the writings of Dalit men. Also, Indian Feminists have often ignored the issues plaguing Dalit women. Rightfully so, the Feminist movement in India, dominated by women of the upper castes, has been criticized by Dalit women for brushing aside the burning issues faced by the Dalit women. Indian feminists opine that all women, irrespective of their caste face the same problem. But the Dalit feminists begged to differ. They assert that an intersectional approach should be envisioned for dealing with the issues of ‘caste’ and ‘gender’. Hence a new category of literature burgeoned in India, known as Dalit Feminist Literature. Their literatures reveal that the experiences of Dalit women are worse and distinct from that of the women of the upper caste.

Some Feminist Dalit literature writers like Joopaka Subhadra, Jajula Gowri, and others have adopted the medium of poetry, essays, and short stories to voice their experiences on the oppressions they faced. Autobiographies were also a potent medium to express their pent-up feelings and can be read as fulmination accounts. Previously, there were many autobiographies written by Dalit men. The first of its kind was Hazari's *Untouchable: The autobiography of an Indian Outcaste* (1951), DP Das' *The Untouchable Story* (1985), and Balwant Singh's *An Untouchable in the IAS* (1997). Initially, there were very few Dalit women writers who wrote autobiographies. The reason being that they had very little chance of a formal education. Some of them, like Sumitra Bhawe, narrated their life experiences. Her narration was in Marathi, which was later translated by Gauri Deshpande, and named *Pan on Fire* (1988).

Kausalya Baisantry's *Doubly cursed*(1999) was written in Hindi, even though her mother tongue was Marathi. “Given that Marathi is my mother tongue, what was the motivation for writing in Hindi? Because there is a lack of autobiographical literature from Dalit women in Hindi and I wanted to take part in establishing something” (Merrill 3). The Dalit women who wrote autobiographies covering in detail the exploitation of Dalit women by the upper castes as well as the internal gender issues within their families, are Baby Kamble who wrote *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) and P. Sivakami who penned *The Grip of Change*, among a host of others. Dalit women's autobiographies are an important medium to establish Dalit feminism as an intersectional category by reinforcing Dalit women's identity as that which is affected by mutual and intersecting structures of caste and gender.

The dual subjugation of the Mahar community women is reflected sharply in Baby Kamble's autobiography. The Mahar women became the 'other' for the Mahar men and also for the upper caste men and women. The insidious prevalence of evil practices against Dalit women were a result of the convergence of caste and patriarchy. Just like the women of the upper caste, the Dalit women were also behind closed doors most of the time. Kamble's father, Pandharinath Mistry was a magnanimous personality, who on many occasions came to the rescue of the other community members during troubled times. Ironically his generous heart did not allow any freedom to his wife, and according to Kamble, he kept her locked in the house, like a caged bird, as it was honourable to do so. "When no one could see even a nail of the woman thus confined within the four walls of the house, then this honour became the talk of the town—a byword among the relatives and friends in the surrounding villages. 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 19). This insensitivity led women to become inhuman and indifferent to their sistren. "My aai must have felt so oppressed, so suffocated! And that must have made her so insensitive, so cruel towards the others. She could never maintain good relations with her relatives, not even with her own mother and sister. She could never get along with people. She was basically a very difficult person, with scant regard for others" (Kamble 19).

The Dalit women were treated savagely by the Hindus of the upper castes. They were barred from entering temples and were punished horrendously if they dared to do so. In spite of all this, the Hindu rites and rituals were very dear to a Dalit woman's heart. Ironically these were like a sliver of solace in their otherwise god-forsaken lives. "For our poor helpless women, the haldi-kumkum in their tiny boxes was more important than even a mine full of jewels. We desperately tried to preserve whatever bits of Hindu culture we managed to lay our hands on" (Kamble 30). They felt that by appeasing the Hindu Gods they would one day be able to perform all the rituals of the upper castes too, and their lives would be full of wealth and abundance, just like the women of the upper castes. "Our minds somehow kept on hoping against hope—that we too would be able to live like the upper castes, that we also would be able to enjoy wealth like the Patil's wife and practise the same rituals as them" (Kamble 30).

The Dalit community was a deeply religious one. They worshipped Hindu Gods and Goddesses. In fact, they had a big platform in the house on which they kept different idols of Gods and Goddesses. The prestige of the family was directly proportional to the size of the platform and the number of idols on them. "What a prestigious house! What a huge platform they have! Easily comes up to the waist! And the number of gods they have on this platform! O my! Simply unbelievable!" (Kamble 22). The holy month of Ashadh was a month of celebration for them. It was a month when they would break free of the drudgery of the other eleven months. "This would be only a tiny drop of happiness in a sea of suffering and yet it was this that helped them endure every misery in their life. This one month of happiness developed in their hearts an iron will to endure whatever suffering came their way during the remaining eleven months" (Kamble 25).

Married women had their share of extra celebrations on Tuesdays and Fridays in the month of Ashadh. Apart from having sweets and getting into the festive mood, some of these

women would be possessed by Goddesses. They screamed, and danced tirelessly, until they were implored by the men folk to stop dancing. "Then again the senior members of the community came forward with folded hands and begged them, Oh holy mother, please don't exhaust the poor woman's body so! Oh Mari Mata, Oh Laka Mata, we are all your children. Please protect us. Let the children grow to a ripe old age. They may have to go hungry but see to it that they survive. Please give us a good omen, a good forecast" (Kamble 34). It may be noted here that the men fall at the feet of their women when they believe that they are possessed by a goddess, and once they believe that the goddess has left the woman's body, the same woman is inhumanly treated by them. This sad dichotomy is well brought out by Baby Kamble, and reflects the strangeness of the religious scene in India, where irrespective of caste, the Divine Mother is worshipped in Her myriad forms, but women are looked down upon and are considered equivalent to animals – deserve to be dominated and caged. But for the woman, her husband means everything. "We believe 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. It's another thing that these masters of kumkum generally bestow upon us nothing but grief and suffering" (Kamble 50).

The marriage of the nine or ten year old girls and the resultant inhuman treatment at the hands of the in-laws, the dawn to dusk drudgery, and any attempt of running away from it, would end in her nose getting chopped off, is described in detail. This is a true case of patriarchal dominance and has nothing to do with the caste system. The mother-in-laws having faced similar treatment when they were newly married, ganged up with the males of the house to take their own sweet revenge. The childbirth is also excruciatingly painful, and there are stillbirths or death of the mother after delivery due to the horrifying rituals, processes, and bad hygiene.

Kamble vehemently cries out against this animal like condition of women throughout the book. She even blames the Creator for it, and asserts that the Creator has made women depend on men. Even though the woman is just like the Goddess, as she gives birth to a child, and nourishes it with all her might, she still has to depend on the patriarchal system to grant her what little she desires. She then goes on to say that it was a divine mother who gave birth to a divine flame – Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. He was a messiah, who lit up the lives of the Dalit women and men. He was an epitome of love and affection, and treated all like his own children. His words influenced the Dalit men who decided to break the prisons for their women. "Baby Kamble was brought up in this transition movement and has witnessed the ordeal of Dalit women in the pre and Post Ambedkar period. It is not only the story of Dalit women prisoners but about the fighter in her who broke her shackles to assert herself" (B par 2). Kamble thanks Ambedkar for making her a writer. "It is because of him that my pen can scribble out some thoughts. It is because of him that I have understood truth; that I can now see how morality is being trampled upon. It is because of him that I got the inspiration to join the struggle against oppression and contribute my small might to it" (Kamble 103).

There was a sea change in the attitude of the Mahar community once Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar exhorted them to give up the Hindu religion and asked them to convert to Buddhism. He said that worshipping the Hindu Gods and Goddesses brought them nothing but misery. "Do you know something? You don't worship god; you worship your ignorance! Generations after generations of Mahars have ruined themselves with such superstitions. And

what have you got in return from this god?" (Kamble 71). The Mahars were also required to give up eating dead animals and accept stale food from the upper castes. The community under his strong influence gave up those habits which made them feel slavish. They started living a dignified life and sent their children to schools and accepted a lifestyle which could make them free and dignified human beings. They stopped behaving like the schlimazels of the society. Kamble asserts that following Ambedkar's footsteps was more important than putting flowers at his feet and worshipping him. She followed Ambedkar's teachings and educated all her children. She even set up a school for Dalit orphans. She implores the current Dalit community to give up Hinduism and embrace Buddhism instead. She even requests all the educated and well placed members of the community to spare a thought and lend a helping hand to the down-trodden, just like the immensely educated Dr. Ambedkar did. "He had courage and fortitude; he was neither a defeatist nor an escapist. His words had the sharp edge of a vajra. Nobody could seal his lips with bribes. He had fire coursing through his veins. He had iron in his soul. He never changed his positions; nor did he ever compromise his principles for selfish gain. Money, prosperity, fame nothing could tempt him. He understood the times. Whims and fancies did not sway him. His heart was soft and tender, full of love for the downtrodden. He never sacrificed helpless people for his own selfish motives. His character was spotlessly clean, without any blemish" (Kamble 119). She even asks the educated women of the Dalit community to rebuke their educated and prosperous men folk if they fail to follow the teachings of Ambedkar, and remind them that all the luxury that they enjoy is a gift from him. The women ought to teach their children too about the principles of Buddhism. Thus Kamble wants the Dalit women to be the beacons for the community, and carry the torch, which Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar had lit, forward.

"The Dalit Feminist standpoint which emerges from the practices and struggles of Dalit women we recognize, may originate in the works of Dalit feminist intellectuals but it cannot flourish if isolated from experiences and ideas of other groups who must educate themselves about their histories, the preferred social relations and utopias, and the struggles of the marginalized." (Rege 8). The other groups need to know that there exists a symbiotic relationship between every flora and fauna of this beautiful planet. If the women of other castes and communities take the issues of the Dalit women seriously, and work with them to break them free from the sinister systems of caste and patriarchy, they would benefit themselves too in many ways than one. "It is time to effect a revolution in female manners - time to restore to them their lost dignity" (Wollstonecraft 7). Sad to say, that the golden words of this seminal book written in the eighteenth century still holds true. The time is yet to come, and it will only happen when women are one. Women need to unite irrespective of caste, colour, and race, if they wish to victoriously break the shackles of patriarchy.

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