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Writing For Her Creed: Feminine Agony In Baby Kamble's Autobiography

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During the second phase of Dalit Literature, the emergence of Dalit women's literature, particularly Dalit women's autobiographies, marks the advent of the Dalit women's voice. Dalit women writers have made an effort through their autobiographies to raise voices against the social and cultural forces that have marginalized them for ages. Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* is one such autobiography that allows us to venture into the Dalit women's world, their life struggles, and their community through her eyes.

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* is probably the first autobiography by a Dalit woman in any Indian language. She portrays the real picture of the degraded position of the Mahar community in the twelve chapters of this book, keeping her own life out of her autobiography. She doesn't focus on any single character and its development; instead, her book is a manifesto of her community. She demonstrates how caste and religion converge to perpetuate exploitative practices against Dalits in common and Dalit women in particular. Her autobiography can easily be divided into two parts. The first half portrays the oppression and exploitation of the Mahar community, and the second half brings forth the transformation and awakening of the Mahar community under the influence and leadership of Dr. Ambedkar.

The paper centres on the lives of the women of the Mahar community presented by Baby Kamble and tries to find out how the women of this community were ill-treated and subordinated by the upper caste as well as by their own male folks. The inhuman conditions these women have lived and survived for so many years are painful to see and hear. And how, with the advent of Baba Saheb Ambedkar, this community or the Dalits in common have tried to identify their righteous place is what narrated by the writer in her autobiography.

Keywords: Autobiography, Dalit, Mahars, patriarchy, identity, religion, caste.

Literature is the creative culmination of various socio-economic factors that are external as well as internal. Dalit literature represents a significant historic phase in the awakening of a large mass of suppressed people in India. It is the voice of liberation for them as well as of protest, dissent and rebellion. Dalit Literature has evolved as an offshoot of the Dalit political movement spearheaded by Dr Ambedkar. The literal meaning of the word 'Dalit' is 'cut off,' 'oppressed,' 'downtrodden,' or 'broken.' It comes from the Sanskrit root 'dal.' The term, in general, is used for castes and classes who have been held inferior by 'Varnashrama Dharma.' Dalits, therefore, constitute the most oppressed downtrodden castes in India. The self-degradation of these people finds a voice in

Dalit Literature. According to Limbale, "Dalit Literature is the writings about Dalits with a Dalit consciousness" (19), and its primary motive is the liberation of Dalits.

Dalit literature emerged at the forefront and as a prominent voice after 1960, starting with the Marathi language, and soon appeared in languages like Hindi, Kannada, Telugu and Tamil. Dalit literature in its initial stages was identified as specific protests directed against everyday humiliations that individual Dalits and Dalits as a community face. There is no doubt the fact that Dalit women are the most underprivileged group left out of any reform over the centuries. Compared to Dalit men, their sufferance has been more due to their position of dual disadvantages: being Dalit and being women. Being Dalit, they suffered due to caste discrimination and being women; they become the victims of the patriarchal social array in their own families and outside.

The Dalit narratives are mostly in the form of autobiographies which evolve the past experiences of the authors and their responses against their subjugation. It aims at the enhancement of the Dalit consciousness and calls for a change in Dalit's position in society. The continuous expansion in the scope of Dalit literature now includes the changes occurring in the status of the Dalits and their thinking. Emerging Dalit identity in twenty-first-century Dalit literature is the main theme.

A marked change is discernible in the second phase of Dalit narratives. The emergence of Dalit women's literature, particularly Dalit women's autobiographies, marks the advent of the Dalit women's voice. Women have been subjugated for a long time and there have been numerous attempts to voice these predicaments of suppression and oppression that has been the share of woman's life since ancient times. When we consider feminism in India, religion and caste become foremost in consideration of the level of oppression that has taken place. The woman has to endure suppression in different forms, but the caste system in India has uniquely differentiated the degree of oppression that women of different castes have to endure. Dalit women have been neglected and oppressed to such a degree that the voice of the suffering has not been able to reach the mainstream feminist movement. Dalit woman has suffered physical, mental, psychological, economic and radical discrimination at every step of her life.

The aim of the Dalit women writers through their narratives is to bring change, and this 'change' includes the social, political, and economical dimensions. In the social context, they write against discrimination on the grounds of caste, class and gender; in the political context- for the rights of women (rights for education, rights for political participation); in the economic front, they speak for equal opportunity, proper wages and good treatment at workplaces. Dalit narratives written by Dalit men have not done complete justice to the representation of Dalit women in their community. Though Dalit women are present in the Dalit men's narratives, they are not as rebellious against the system as they are in women's Dalit narratives. The Dalit women's history has remained a book of blank pages till the coming of Dalit women writers. Dalit women writers express their original experiences and themselves through their writings and have started marking themselves and their roles in history.

Sharmila Rege has used 'testimonies' as the substitute term for autobiographies written by Dalit women from Maharashtra. Dalit women's testimonies could be seen as a political initiative to engage with the Dalit patriarchy and social patriarchy. Dalit women's personal narratives are a kind of protest against their exclusion from the Dalit public sphere--- literary gatherings, academic gatherings, publishing sphere and other spheres of recognition, like political parties. Dalit women make only a guest appearance in the autobiographies written by Dalit males. Kumud Pawade, Shantabai Krishnji Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Shantabai Dani, Mukta Sarvagod and Baby Kamble are some of the important Dalit women writers who wrote their biographies. The narratives of exploitation, humiliation and starvation are common to all these autobiographies. The triple exploitation (caste, class and gender) is the common theme and representing modern Ambedkar also forms a common reference point in almost all the autobiographies. The autobiography under reference is different from other Dalit women's autobiographies as it offers a frank description of the nature of Dalit patriarchy.

One of the important Dalit woman writers who set the milestone of change in the history of Dalit literature is Baby Kamble. Her autobiographical narrative - *Jina Amucha*, originally written in Marathi and translated into English by Maya Pandit under the title - *The Prisons We Broke*, dealt with the whole community (Mahar) in general and female subjectivity in particular. Kamble, through her autobiography, raises important issues like untouchability, caste discrimination, women-subjugation, abject poverty of the Dalits and the influences of Dr Ambedkar on Dalit women regarding education and demand for their rights of equality in society. Kamble states her objective for writing this autobiography as:

Mahar community was nothing but the slave in the past 50 years. My motto is to reveal the plight of the community to grandson and granddaughters, who do not know the inhuman past of this community. What past these people had? Youngsters should know our past and the legendary contribution of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. (*The Prisons We Broke*, 1)

Dalit women in the text emerge as sandwiched between the upper castes and Dalit patriarchy. In the introduction of the novel, Maya Pandit states: "If the Mahar community is the 'other' for the Brahmins, Mahar women become the 'other' for Mahar Men" (*The Prisons*, xv). Dalit patriarchy, as represented by Kamble in her self-narrative, is the one in which Dalit men have become the epitome of brutality against their own wives and daughters. The text shows extreme types of exploitation that the Dalit women had to face in the Dalit patriarchal system. The traditional patriarchal system and the caste rigidity-sanctioned laws both subjugated the Dalit women simultaneously. They are bound to obey both the authorities. Any mistake done by the Dalit women, even unconsciously, is punishable by the authorities.

The Dalit women have always been in a state of double marginalization, first as a Dalit and secondly as a woman. They equally labour like their men, but they remain inferior in terms of power and have no role to play in decision-making in the family. Dalit patriarchy impounds a woman within four walls. Baby Kamble incorporated some examples in her narrative to unveil the facade of the harsh reality in which Dalit women survive in the cruel society. Kamble has the sole purpose behind writing this book, and that is to bring forth the suffering and anguish of her community. She says in her interview with Maya Pandit:

Anyway, 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. (*The Prisons*, 157)

Kamble, in her autobiography, speaks out for the women of her community and presents an unwavering portrait of its women, oppressed by both caste patriarchy and prevailing customs followed by the traditions, especially newly married young women, who suffer the worst fate. She presents the mechanism of patriarchy in the following words;

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 women of the house thus confined within the four walls of the house, then this 'honour' became the talk of the town--- (*The Prisons*, 5)

She presents a very detailed account of the possessed women of her community during the month of Ashadh. One after another, women keep getting those fits of possession. They dance, whirl, yell, and speak in high tones, unable to pacify until the elderly men of the society bow to them and promise to fulfil their desires in way of some offerings. While talking about the class/caste customs defined for the Mahar women, she writes:

There was caste rules even for how one tucked the pleats. Mahar women had to tuck them in such a way that the borders remained hidden... A Mahar woman was supposed to hide the borders under the pleats; otherwise, it was considered an offence to the high caste. (The Prisons, 54)

Kamble very categorically exposes the patriarchy of her community. She presents the account of newly married daughters-in-law to tell how the women of the community are maltreated. Usually married off at the age of eight or nine, immature even without knowing what a husband meant, yet the girl child has to go to her in-law's house to lead a married life. Baby Kamble calls this newly married life 'another world of slavery' of a Dalit woman. She describes the world of newly married Dalit girls as:

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 slaves - our very own daughters-in-law! If nobody else, then we could at least enslave them. (*The Prisons*, 87)

The condition of these newly married girls becomes far worse when they give birth to their babies. Kamble depicts that a mother needs soft and healthy food during this period, but Mahar women generally starve when they deliver a baby. She presents a very painful account of these young mothers:

They would lie down, pining for a few morsels while hunger gnawed their insides... Labour pains, mishandling by the midwife, wounds inflicted by the onlookers' nails, ever-gnawing hunger, infected wounds with puss oozing out, hot water baths, hot coals, profuse sweating---everything caused the new mother's condition to worsen and she would end up getting a burning fever. (The Prisons, 60)

The sufferings of the women of her community make Kamble write their agony in a very touching manner. She believes that these endless sufferings have made these women stronger and able to face more and more pain. She puts it:

Such was the life of our poor hapless daughters-in-law! The life of the women in the lower castes was thus shaped by the fire of calamities. This made their bodies strong, but their minds cried out against this oppression. (The Prisons, 102)

The more these women suffered, the more they yearned and tried for their emancipation. The kind of yearning that was latent in the women folk of this community could be seen in some of the incidents narrated in this text. When someone died in the upper castes, the white cloth of a shroud was given to the yeskar Mahar. This cloth was washed and given to the daughter of the house, who would drape it around herself in various styles and perform a kind of fashion show. She would drape it like high caste women and imitate their accents. Kamble comments:

What other evidence does one need to know how the Mahar woman craved to live like a Brahmin or a high caste Maratha or Patil woman? They, like anybody else, aspired for a better life. But they were bound by the chains of slavery. (The Prisons, 80)

Baby Kamble wishes to bring change in the thinking of society through her self-narrative. She wants to make Dalit women conscious of their rights so that they can raise their voices for social transformation. In her autobiography, she explains how the speech of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar influenced her, changed her mentality and inspired her for a better life. The teachings of Dr Ambedkar made her realize the falsehood of the caste system, superstitions and hypocrisies in the name of God and how to overcome it and exercise the right to live as a human being.

The influence of Ambedkar's thoughts is also visible in the last part of Kamble's text when Rani Sahiba organizes Mahila Mandal in Phaltan. She called Brahmin, Maratha and Mahar women for this organisation. The second round meeting was organized in the dining hall where all the Brahmin and Maratha women occupied the chairs, denying Mahar women any chairs to sit on. Suddenly, when Rani Sahiba was moving towards the stage, Thakubai (Maternal aunt of Baby Kamble) rushed forward shook her shoulder and said:

Your women are not allowing our women to sit on the chair. Our Ambedkar has told us to demand our rights. I am going to forcefully remove your women from the chairs and seat my women there. The Rani Sahiba was taken aback for a moment. But she immediately arranged chairs in the front for all of us. (*The Prisons*, 133)

Kamble narrates another incident of how the women folk have been more vigorously active in Babasaheb's movement than their male counterparts. She tells this story in her interview with Maya Pandit that women were determined to provide education to their children as Baba had told them to do so. But, the biggest problem they faced was to pay their school fees. Their husbands were not in any mood to arrange for the fees; instead, they would like to end their education and turn them into labourers. One such woman she talks about had arranged the school fees very cunningly and effortfully by pawning the necklace of one upper caste woman by borrowing it for marriage and then replacing it with her aunt's gold jewellery. She says:

Such were our women! So clever and committed. They listened to Babasaheb and did whatever he asked them to do. (*The Prisons*, 137-38)

Finally, we can easily sum up that the life story of Baby Kamble decisively destroys the myth that Dalit patriarchy is democratic. In her narrative, she brings out the worst form of exploitation and physical torture that the Dalit male inflicted on Dalit women. The physical torture not only involved physical injuries but also inflicted deep psychological pain, leaving a scar of humiliation in the minds of Dalit women. Kamble's autobiography shows us how the women of her community bore the most degradable atrocities and are still preserved.

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