Understanding Dalit Women: A study of Baby Kamble’s “The Prisons We Broke”

Sonika
Assistant Professor in English, D.N. Postgraduate College, Hisar.

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ABSTRACT
Dalit women writers have through their autobiographies made an attempt to raise voice against the social and cultural forces, which have marginalized them since centuries. 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 their lens. Reading the literary genre of autobiography as a means of identity construction and self-assertion, the paper focuses on the Dalit consciousness that is laid bare in Kamble’s text.

Keywords: Dalit Autobiographies, Dalit women, Dalit patriarchy, Mahars, Brahmanism

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Baby Kamble’s autobiography can be roughly divided into two parts. The first half portrays the oppression and exploitation of the Mahar community at the hands of the upper class. The pages are filled with descriptions of grim poverty and complete destitution of the Mahar people. It brings forward all the atrocities and hardships the Dalit women have to bear in the name of norms and traditions. They are victims of both Brahmanic and Dalit patriarchy. The second half records the transformation of the Mahar community under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar. By sharing her activist experience, Kamble underscores women’s participation and contribution in the Dalit liberation movement. Under the influence of Ambedkar’s radical ideas, the Dalit are able to challenge the varna order in an effective and aggressive manner.

Like most autobiographies, Kamble begins her book with her birth and an introduction to her family. But gradually the community takes precedence over the individualistic ‘I’. The following chapters are devoted entirely to descriptions of everyday existence of the Mahar community. A great emphasis is laid upon the festivities and rituals of the community. Kamble describes the nine-day long marriage ceremony, the buffalo fair, ritual baths, the jatras, and the festivities of the month of Asadh in minute detail. It is because of such descriptions that Maya Pandit asserts that Kamble’s book “is more of a socio-biography rather than an autobiography” (xiii). There are very few references to her personal life in her autobiography. On being asked about this dissonance, Kamble instinctively replies: “Well, I wrote about what my community experienced. The suffering of my people became my own suffering. Their experiences became mine. So I really find it difficult to think of myself outside of my community” (136).

Kamble reports that most of the stories she read about the Dalits were wrong. One such story was of Vrinda, a Shudra princess. The upper caste’s mythologizing of the repression of the Shudras infuriates and compels Kamble to write her side of the story. She views writing as an effective method of defying Brahmanical hegemony. “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). Thus, writing for Kamble becomes a means of countering the misrepresentation of Dalit people in the Indian literary and cultural discourse and reaching a larger audience at the same time. But writing itself is an impossible task for lower caste women. Kamble had to make sure that no one saw her writing in her home. Being extremely scared of her husband and her son, she had to hide her daily write-ups in the most dusty and untouched corners of the house. As a result, her autobiography was published twenty years after she had finished writing it.

Baby Kamble’s “The Prisons We Broke” performs a dual function. It challenges Brahmanical oppression on one hand and patriarchal domination on the other. Taking the matter of patriarchal dominance into account, the text attempts to destroy the myth of a ‘democratic’ Dalit patriarchy. It shows the brutality of Dalit men towards their own wives and daughters. Baby Kamble informs her readers that the Mahar women lived with the belief “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). Their thought process depicts a deep internalization of the patriarchal notions of a ‘pativrata’ woman. Women’s identity and existence remain solely dependent on their husbands. But what does women get in return of their unquestioning devotion? Baby Kamble doesn’t mince words while describing the physical, mental, and emotional traumas that are a part of everyday life of the muted
 Dalit women. 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 falling in line with the prescribed patriarchal dictums. Maya Pandit in the introduction to the text states “if the Mahar community is the ‘other’ for the Brahmins, Mahar women become the ‘other’ for the Mahar men” (XV).

About the situation in her own family, Baby Kamble writes, “My father had locked up my aai in his house, like a bird in the cage” (5). The more the restrictions imposed upon women, the greater the respect and honour of the family. Prof M N Srinivas calls this a process of Sanskritization or ‘emulation of upper caste practices’ in order to achieve a higher social status. The Dalits internalization of the Brahmin patriarchal ideology makes them impose restrictions on women’s mobility, education and sexuality. Baby Kamble’s own position in the private and public domain is similar to that of her mother’s. But more than her mother, her situation is akin to the Aaiwe encounter in Baburao Bagul’s short story of the same title. The story depicts a socially crippled man, who vents all his frustrations on his wife. In order to sustain his ego, the husband attempts to wholly suppress and control his wife. As a result of his insecurities, he suspects his wife of adultery. He is perennially suspicious and constantly watchful of her comings and goings. In a similar vein, Kamble reveals in her interview with Maya Pandit that she, like many other women, had to suffer unbearable physical violence at the hands of her always-suspecting husband. Such male aggression is an assertion of male patriarchal power, but it is at the same time a sign of their desperation. The violence is so common that women never complaint about it. Rather, they negotiate their ways around it. Kamble admits to not writing about this in her autobiography because “it was the fate of most women; I wasn’t an exception. So why write about it, I felt” (156).

The autobiography enumerates many more fronts on which women have to suffer. Marriages at an early age, followed by successive pregnancies shatter a woman’s physical and mental well-being. Kamble notes “a mahar woman would continue to give birth till she reached menopause” (82). Further, the pregnant women are the greatest victims of malnourishment. The only food available to them is the gruel made from stale rotis and jowar. As the outer and inner worlds bound the Dalitwomen into chains of slavery. They also find their own slaves, which are their bahus (daughters-in-law). Another woman, the saas (mother-in-law) in most cases, is the perpetrator of harshest calamities on her daughter-in-law. She is treated as nothing more than a work machine. As the bahu attains puberty, the saas keeps a hawk’s eye on the couple to prevent them from sexual intercourse. Wanting her son to always remain under her shadow, the mother never misses a chance to fill his ears with false allegations regarding his wife’s idleness, or lack of respect for elders. She even goes to the extent of alleging the bahu’s involvement in adulterous relationships with other men. Thus, an infuriated husband beats his wife black and blue. Kamble’s autobiography shows us how the women of her community bore the most degradable atrocities and still persevered.

Kamble’s autobiography recounts the numerous segregation laws that were prevalent in pre-independence India. The segregation of the spaces was such that Mahars were not allowed to use the same roads as the higher castes. If somebody from the upper castes was travelling on the road. The Mahars would have to come down and walk among the thorny bushes along the roadside. If the Mahar women encounter any high caste male member on their way, they are expected to perform an act of most humble submission by bowing down and uttering the words: “the humble Mahar women fall at your feet master” (52). Any negligence on their part incurred the wrath of the high caste community. Also, each Brahmin house had a high platform in front of their houses to prevent the Dalits from coming in direct contact with the house. This space was solely reserved for their dealings with the Dalits.

Kamble notes the different attitude of the yeskar Mahar in different spaces. While going out from his house for his begging round, with his stick in hand. He feels a sense of pride and honour. But as soon as he enters the village space he is forced to bend his head and ring the bell to announce his arrival. As even his voice could pollute the upper castes. This shows that the feudal/public space has a ‘diminishing effect’ on him and all other Dalits. It is only after returning back to his colony that the yeskar regains his confidence and composure; treating his black shawl (used for begging) as the coat of a barrister. However, during the Ambedkarite movement the Dalits begin to question this allocation of inferior spaces to them. For instance, during a mahilamandal meeting, the Dalit women aren’t given any chairs to sit on. They are expected to sit on the floor. But the Dalit women immediately ask the queen of Phaltanto allow Dalit women to also sit on chairs in the front rows. In this manner, the allocation of space is democratized. But things were not as easy as they might appear. It takes Kamble and her fellow schoolgirls two years to gather the courage to finally
enter the Ram temple, which was situated right infront of their school.

Kamble’s autobiography exposes the upper caste double standards in innumerable ways. For instance, most Mahar women contribute to the family income by collecting firewood and grass from the wild and selling it in the village. They are always paid less than the cost of the work done. And after having bought the firewood, the upper caste Kaki asks the Mahar women to stack the firewood in the backyard. Along with that she instructs them to look closely and make sure that not even a strand of their hair or clothes remains struck in the sticks, as that would pollute the entire house. The irony is the upper castes readily cooked their food on the firewood brought by the Mahar woman, which didn’t pollute them. In a similar fashion, the Brahmin who would be invited to conduct a Mahar wedding would stand at a distance and conduct the rituals. This was due to his fear of pollution. But when it came to taking dakshina. He made no compromises with that. “That he took away without any fear of pollution” (89).

The prisons we broke shows us how the Dalits who were the victims, also became active participants in perpetuating the ideology of purity-pollution. They considered an upper caste body sacred. The internalization of this ideology of purity-pollution forced a Mahar to keep his clothes folded and close to the body, fearful of touching the upper caste and thus polluting them. On one occasion, as an upper caste boy comes too close to a Mahar woman. She cautions him, “Take care little master! Please keep a distance. Don’t come too close. You might touch me and get polluted” (14). The Dalits acceptance of the purity-pollution binary helped in sustaining the caste hierarchy for many generations. Children closely observed and then emulated the behavior of their elders and the customs followed by them. Small kids, in their games, would become potrajas and pretend to go off to beg for food. So, as they grew up, they never questioned their lower social status. It appeared natural and deserving to them. Thus, the community continued to follow the same traditions and customs generation after generation.

Baby Kamble was greatly inspired by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, like many other radical Dalit writers. The political edge to her critical scrutiny of Mahar community’s oppression is influenced by Dr. Ambedkar’s radical, self-assertive politics. Kamble in her story traces the trajectory of the Ambedkarite movement. And tells the readers how Ambedkar’s speeches made the Mahar aware of their social oppression, and they were then able to critique the caste system in an effective manner. When Dr. Ambedkar arrives in Jejuri for his first meeting. The Mahars are shocked to see him. ‘They had never expected their own man to arrive in a car, dressed in European clothes’ (63–4). Ambedkar’s radical ideas and speeches compel the Mahars to reform their community. He inspires them to send their children to schools, to discard their superstitions, to stop cleaning the filth of the village, and finally, to stop the inhuman practice of eating dead animals. Most importantly, Ambedkar forces the Mahars to think. Debates and discussions begin to take place in Kamble’s chawdi. “Everybody began to understand, argue and consider” (69). The conservative Mahars firmly oppose Ambedkar’s intervention in their inner cultural/religious practices. The fiercest opposition comes from the karbharis: “Listen, we are born for this work. That’s our sacred duty. Why should we give up our religion, our duty?” (67). Something as dehumanizing as being a potraja is considered a rare privilege by the conservative Mahars. It is difficult to demobilize the Mahar from such practices.

The women’s participation in the Ambedkarite movement has been specifically highlighted in Kamble’s autobiography. They were greatly influenced by Dr. Ambedkar’s opinion that only women could bring the community out of the darkness of superstitions. Women who were the worst victims of the caste hierarchy became a driving force towards education and change. Kamble herself opens a grocery store to fund her son’s education. She is able to choose an occupation instead of being assigned one by birth and in doing so she displays that emancipation is possible for the Dalit male and female.

References