

What Marriage Meant for Mahar Women: An Examination of Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*

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Abstract:

It was in Maharashtra that the movement of Dalit literature first gained ground. In the 1960s, socio-political upheavals, spread of education, democratic values and enlightenment particularly influenced the Dalits of Maharashtra, where most Dalit writers are the followers of Dr. Ambedkar (Bhongle 158). While initial Dalit writings came in the form of fiction and poetry, the more recent forms have shifted to autobiography. The autobiographical forms became more popular because “an individual’s story becomes significant in the exploration of group identity” (Deo and Zelliott 43). Baby Kamble’s *Jina Amucha* (1986), translated as *The Prisons We Broke* was the first ever successful attempt of a Mahar woman to write her experiences as an autobiography. The book narrates the everyday struggles in the life of the author which come to represent the collective voice of the Mahar women community. Kamble brings forth a number of problems that plague the lives of the Mahars, particularly women. To speak out against the discrimination and subjugation faced by them is what she attempts in order to resist. Her resistance “emerges from a life of helplessness, limitations and servitude” (Dutt 48). As numerous critics have pointed out, Mahar women are doubly marginalized in the society because of their caste as well as gender. However, the institution of marriage adds a third dimension to this marginalization, adding many more problems to the life of a Mahar woman. The aim of this paper is to examine the position of married Mahar women with specific reference to Baby Kamble’s autobiography, *The Prisons We Broke*.

Keywords: Dalit literature, Mahar community, marriage, women, autobiography, resistance, marginalization, discrimination

Even though Kamble’s narrative is autobiographical, a genre that usually upholds the ‘I’, it is titled as *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 experiences but keeps the characters nameless to showcase their collective identity. She stands for this collective consciousness and argues, “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” (Kamble 157). This often holds true for Dalit autobiographies. Such writers are also “not bogged down by memory issues”. Their works

may not be great literary ones because their focus is on “the authenticity of experience” with an intention “to remember and record Dalit history and perhaps to ultimately heal wounds” (Singh 84). Unlike conventional autobiographies that aim to instruct, 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” (Bhongle 159).

Kamble, in her book, describes how the Mahar girls get married at a very tender age, before even attaining puberty. Child marriage was very common in the Mahar community, and Kamble herself got married at the age of thirteen. Poor young girls had to leave their home and move to an unknown house “to lead a married life, without even knowing what a husband meant, or what it was to be given away” (93). As she explains, the ceremony of marriage was quite peculiar and involved cumbersome rituals. The entire event lasted for eight days, and all the expenses were to be borne by the girl’s father. A Brahmin priest used to solemnize the ceremony but all for money, as he sat at a distance from the couple with the fear of getting ‘polluted’. After child marriage, it was child labour that followed, with the daughter-in-law having to work hard, “all twenty-four hours a day” (73). On the very first day, she had to prepare two baskets of *bhakris*, even if she did not know how to. If they were not properly cooked, the *sasu* would ridicule her in front of everyone and abuse her. All domestic work fell on her, the most difficult and tedious being that of preserving the meat. Kamble describes, “She had to sit down with a sharp knife, cut the huge pieces of meat into smaller ones of about half kilo each, and then stretch these into long snake like strips” (74). She had to spend her life serving all the members of her new family, even the neighbours!

They were not even allowed to sleep properly, as Kamble describes, “When the cock crowed at three in the morning, the *sasu* would wake her, dragging her by her hair” (94). While men of the family were having good sleep, women got to their work. However, at this time, it used to be very calm and serene, the outside atmosphere as well as the inner being of women, posing a contrast to the rest of the day that used to be full of violence. She presents this picture as one where they are grinding grains while singing sweet notes. By such a portrayal, Kamble probably wants to show how Mahar women are like other women. It is the society that binds their spirit in chains and considers them inferior. Those women who were allowed to work outside were mostly cleaners working for Maratha households. While their husbands squandered money on drinking and other excesses, women earned to run the house. They had to go around selling wood and begging food leftovers. Whenever a ritual had to be performed, all work fell on them – plastering house with cow dung, cleaning utensils and washing clothes.

The Mahars, regarded as being at the lowest rungs of the society according to the caste system, were slaves to the *Savarnas*. However, the daughters-in-law were enslaved by their very families, particularly the mothers-in-law, who usually left no stone unturned in suppressing and exploiting them in order to avenge their own suffering. Even though women are themselves victims of the gendered caste-system, they eventually become complicit in it and contribute to perpetuating stereotypes and roles. Such “escalator hierarchies” become the reason why oppressive systems continue to exist (Papanek). Kamble shows how the mothers-in-law acted as exploitative agents, instigating their sons against wives, instead of fighting for their rights. The author explains, “The other world had bound us with chains of slavery. But

we too were human beings. And 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” (87).

The *sasus* had a deep influence on their son’s relationship with his wife. The husband-wife relationship was extremely hierarchical and oppressive. Upon the insistence of their mothers, the husbands got their wife’s nose chopped off and her foot fixed with an iron bar in a heavy wooden piece. Customs like these were very much prevalent amongst the Mahars. Domestic violence was rampant, with “husbands flogging their wives as if they were beasts... until the sticks broke with the effort. The heads of these women would break open, their backbones would be crushed, and some would collapse unconscious” (98). The wife was in complete control of her husband and a victim of his mentality. They were often blamed without any fault. Kamble remembers one such incident when she was travelling with her husband in the general compartment of the train and some men stared at her. Instead of chiding them, he suspected her and hit her so hard that her nose started to bleed. He even kept hitting her in rage on their way back.

The conditions in which a married woman had to live were extremely poor. Deprived of proper food, clothing and other basic necessities, they led miserable existence. When they attained puberty, napkins used were actually the blouse pieces that were offered to goddesses. They were treated like child-producing machines and had to keep giving birth till menopause. Women are often closely associated with earth and nature, both treated similarly as being capable of giving birth perennially, both confined to definite boundaries. The worst thing for Mahar women was that the conditions during pregnancy and child birth were inhospitable. The midwives were unskilled and ignorant. They used to check the progress of the baby inside the womb by putting their hands inside the woman’s vagina. After birth, both, the mother and the baby had to suffer from under-nutrition and malnutrition, and the death rate for both of them was very high. A married Mahar woman could not have her share of meal until all her in-laws have had theirs, or she would get tantrums and abuses from them, like “shameless hussy” and “evil eye.” Her *sasu* would give her lessons on “how to behave like a good daughter-in-law” (30). Her husband would teach her how to behave in the society. If she comes across an upper-caste man, she must cover her body entirely and repeat the mantra, “The humble Mahar women fall at your feet master” (52). Failure to do this would cause uproar in the locality. If she had to make a purchase from a shop, she had to say, “Appasab, could you please give this despicable Mahar woman some shikakai...?”(13). Even on such a request, things were only thrown to her from a distance.

Running away from all such exploitative treatment back to her father’s house did not help as she was beaten up and sent back. Her *sasu* would spread false rumours to defame her and ruin her marriage. She would say to her son, “Eloped wife brings shame to family and to her husband. The bitch must have affair with someone. You should cut her nose, don’t be eunuch, and be a ‘man’, proud to be you are son of ours. Bring dignity to your father’s name.” (58). The father-in law would also be a participant in such oppression and violence. The married Mahar woman was supported neither by relatives nor by the community. She was not even allowed to enter into anyone’s house and was only seen as dishonourable. In fact, she was confined within the walls of her husband’s house and allowed no freedom. As Kamble explains, “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” (5).

Hence, Kamble’s narrative of her life shows how the lives of married Mahar women were sandwiched between Brahmanic domination and Dalit patriarchy. In the introduction to the translation, Maya Pundit says, “If the Mahar community is the ‘other’ for the Brahmins, Mahar women become the ‘other’ for the Mahar men” (XV). Ilaiyah Kancha in his book *Why I Am Not a Hindu* uses the term “patriarchal democracy as means of understanding the different structures of relating that prevail in Dalitbahujan homes” and argues “for the existence of comparatively looser norms in Dalitbahujan women’s lives” (Roy 218). Such a patriarchal setup allows the Dalit woman to escape her husband’s dictates stemming from coercive and pervasive ideology. However, Kamble’s narrative does not show patriarchal democracy but a society where men are enemies of their own wives as well as daughters. The mark of kumkum on a married woman’s forehead therefore became a symbol of servitude for them.

Being an ‘insider’ of the community, Kamble narrates the lived experiences of Mahar women. Even though she presents them as vulnerable and jeopardized, she does not render them weak. Throughout her web of stories, Kamble repeatedly uses the imagery of the cactus and its flower, symbolizing the difficulties that the Mahar women had to face. She describes, “The cactus was a boon to us poor people. It yielded us everything, right from toys to firewood. When we went hungry, they supplied us with food. They gave us ornaments too” (Kamble 43). This reflects women’s strength, determination and a constant quest for happiness despite perpetual struggle. Kamble shows that they know what they have gone through and that all of it was wrong. There is a sense of realization with which they emerge as strong and resilient individuals. With, what Freire would call “conscientization,” they achieve emancipation, strive to bring change in the society, and set examples for others to follow.

In this regard, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was a guiding light for the entire Mahar community. According to him, the caste system in India is “not merely division of labour. It is also a division of labourers” forming a “hierarchy in which the division of labourers are graded one above the other” (263). Kamble, too, was deeply influenced by Ambedkar, and a lot of her writing was inspired by him. Her devotion to him is also evident in the autobiography where she calls Ambedkar their king, their God, their “very own Buddha,” who transformed their lives and became the driving force behind the prisons and chains they broke together. Born in the Mahar community himself, Dr. Ambedkar converted to Buddhism in a 1956 conference of the Mahars, showing the path to several thousands who followed suit to escape the discrimination and exploitation faced by on the basis of caste. It was the beginning of Buddhist renaissance in India (Omvedt 264). Since then, most of the Mahars have converted to Buddhism (Beltz 15).

The Prisons we Broke is a significant text particularly because it outlines how the Mahar community has evolved from pre-Ambedkar days till the time at which Kamble is writing, having rapidly transformed through education and religious conversion. In this one, and other Dalit autobiographies, conversion is shown as a magical time; it was “the making of a community, of a new politics and culture” (Pandey 66). Kamble is critical of how the

current generation has forgotten the role Ambedkar played in shaping their lives. Meeting them after fifty years, she “bursts out in indignation” (Woerkens 236). She reminds the women that it was the Ambedkarite movement that encouraged them to abandon superstitions, gain education and reach closer to their dreams.

The Prisons We Broke “transcends the boundaries of personal narrative and is at once a sociological treatise, a historical and political record, a feminist critique, a protest against Hinduism and the sordid memoir of a cursed community” (Acharekar). Kamble brings to life her experiences of being a married Mahar woman, oppressed by her caste, her gender and by the institution of marriage. The narrative of her life interweaving numerous stories together becomes a testimonial voice of a subaltern group keeping silent. She is a victim as well as a witness to the injustices suffered by her and her community. But by breaking the prisons, they emerge as winners. Not only does she achieve a cathartic release or offer political resistance, she also compares contemporary situation with that of the past to remind the current generation of Ambedkar’s contribution. She provides a glimpse of how far they have come, but also reminds them of how far they still have to go.

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