

Trauma of Dalit Women as Thrice-Suppressed in Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*

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Abstract: Gender studies have established itself as a separate entity because of its relevance to the present scenario. Within this domain there is the emergence of Dalit women studies which have come up as an autonomous body of writing in literature nearly in the 1970s. Dalit women writings reproach feminist writings for ignoring caste as an important factor in deciding gender roles and the status of women in society. Women have always been treated as sub-ordinate to men, but a Dalit woman is triply sub-ordinate. Being a Dalit and a woman makes her more targeted to violence and she is projected towards thrice suffering in the hands of upper caste men to whom they are made available through cultural and social means and they are also treated as the other by upper caste women as well as their own Dalit men. In this context, the autobiography taken for the study is *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble. It was originally published in Marathi. Baby Kamble secures a path for the emancipation of Dalit women through the ideology of Ambedkar. The present paper attempts at showing how Dalit women endure insult and discrimination in their public as well as private life and tries to probe into their triply-dejected status as a Dalit woman.

Keywords: Dalit woman, Caste, Discrimination, Upper caste, Gender studies, Thrice suffering.

Man and woman run the cycle of life and both have done an equal contribution to the development of human race. Woman is the mother, the giver of life and has a high veneration in Hindu mythology, but in reality, she is treated as sub ordinate to men. In India, families run on patriarchal system in which man is the backbone of a family and is considered supreme as he earns and supports the whole family economically. Women were supposed to run domestic life and were given less power in comparison to men. Thus they were being ruled by them. They have shared a history of pain, trauma and exploitation from Vedic era to the age of modernism, and were considered weaker to men. Even today the issues of rape, eve teasing, dowry system and sexual harrasment are becoming main headlines of the newspapers. Women exploitation has become the burning question of today and to strengthen women's position in society, several feminist organizations are in existence but none of them thinks over the issue of caste as a major determinant in women's exploitation.

The Prisons We Broke is a lively self-narrative by Baby Kamble and it is the first autobiography by a Dalit woman in Marathi. The work was originally published as Jina Amucha (serialized in 1982 and published as a book in 1986). It is a tale of Dalit community from their enslavement to the emancipation brought by Babasaheb Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar. Kamble tries to show the triply-dejected status of Dalit women who are in a depressed state because of the discrimination based on caste and gender.

The present paper explores the pathetic life of Dalit women who are not only oppressed socially but also exploited sexually. First of all, their status becomes miserable because they are woman and secondly, they are Dalit. Dalits are the people who are considered impure, dirty and untouchable as they form the lowest varna in Hindu hierarchial system, and are excommunicated from the Hindu society, and also they were destined to serve the other three varnas. They were termed as ‘achhoot’ and ‘avarna’ by the sacred Hindu Vedas and were subjected to the meanest jobs such as sweeping, husbandry and scavenging. Women, who already have a secondary status in society, face a double pressure if they belong to a Dalit community. They are harassed in the house as well as out of the house. In their own house, they are being exploited by their own men, the reason being Dalit men do not have any power socially and are humiliated as well as suppressed by other upper caste men and to satisfy their male ego, they show their power in the house by controlling their own women, mothers and daughters.

Dalits were always suppressed and have endured extreme humiliation but Dalit women have not only gone through the physical pain but also experienced mental trauma more than Dalit men. Mahar woman had to walk on the sides of the road so as not to pollute anyone and had to wish every upper caste man or woman or even a small child belonging to high caste by saying, “The humble Mahar women fall at your feet master” (52). A Dalit woman is treated as a sexual object and is made available to upper caste men in every way. It has been a practice among the upper castes people since ages where Dalit men had to take their wives to their masters and were supposed to please them in every possible manner. Their own men give them a good thrashing and the upper caste women also treat them as ‘the other’. Thus, the situation of Dalit woman becomes more miserable, and therefore; they become triply cursed.

Dalit women are also used as a keep by other upper caste people. Sharan Kumar Limbale asserts in his autobiography that her mother was a keep of Hanmant Limbale, the village patil. He tells that her mother was abandoned by her husband and then kept by several patils. He also tells that none of his siblings were born of the same father. He explains: “... my mother was not an adultress but the victim of a social system. I grow restless whenever I read about a rape in the newspaper. A violation anywhere in the country, I feel, is a violation of my mother.” (Limbale ix acknowledgement)

The enslavement of Dalits is based on the concept of purity and pollution. This caste is considered dirty and contaminated. Even the touch of a shudra is considered impure. But such laws do not work when Dalit women are raped or treated as a sexual object. Thus it becomes totally inhuman, brutal act on the part of Dalit women. The issues of sexual assault, gang rape and adultery done by higher castes to Dalit women are very common and make an untouchable capable of being touched.

It is clear that the rules of contamination are ignored totally when it comes to the benefit of upper caste, be it a woman or the sweat of Mahar woman who work in their fields. Baby Kamble outrages on seeing the double standards of upper caste people:

When Mahar women labour in the fields, the corn gets wet with their sweat. The same corn goes to make your pure, rich dishes. And you feast on them with such evident relish! Your palaces are built with the soil soaked with the sweat and blood of Mahars. But does it rot your skin? You drink their blood and sleep comfortably on the bed of their misery. Doesn't it pollute you then?(56)

Women were always subjected to a subaltern state and are marginalized. The term subaltern designates those groups which are socially, politically and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure of the colony and are maltreated. Women face a double standard everywhere and in India, traditional taboos legitimize their exploitation. It cannot be denied that generally, women are subjected to the crimes like rape, gang rape, sexual harassment, forced marriages, eve-teasing and enforced prostitution. But a Dalit woman's plight cannot be compared with theirs because in a Dalit woman's case such crimes are done with social consent and sometimes they are even harassed in public. It has also come into light when Dalit women are forced to naked parading in public without any question. Even today, the punishments like plucking out nails and cutting the tongue, gang rape, blackening one's face and chopping off one's nose are given by village Panchayats in the name of caste and religion. In some cases Dalit women are forced to drink urine and are murdered in the name of superstitions. The woman can neither complain to local Panchayats nor go to police station because it has been noticed that these administrative bodies are supportive as well as involved in most of the cases.

Dalit women encounter humiliation and embarrassment at every step and they themselves are too terrified to pollute anyone by their touch. A Dalit woman is treated as an animal or a polluted object. She is even abused and insulted by the upper caste women. Besides the discrimination based on caste and gender, Dalit women endure the exploitation and bear the insults in the hands of upper caste women. There was a difference in their attires and there were caste rules regarding the tucking of the pleats. A Mahar woman was not allowed to show the borders of her sari and had to tuck it under the pleats; otherwise, it was considered an offence to the upper castes. Her sari was made of several patches and the blouse was made of rags. Only high caste women were supposed to show the borders. Thus the sense of inferiority was infused in them deeply by such rules and regulations. Kamble explains this sense of inferiority which has become inherent in them due to nonstop humiliation. She tells,

Listen carefully, you dumb Mahar woman, check the sticks well. If you overlook any of the threads sticking to the wood, there will be a lot of trouble. But what's that to you? Your carelessness will cost us heavily. Our house will get polluted. Then we will have to polish the floor with cow dung and wash all our clothes, even the rags in the house! Such trouble we'll have to undergo for your foolishness! And how will the gods tolerate this, tell me? They too will be polluted, won't they? That's why I am telling you, check the sticks well! The Mahar woman will check the bundles carefully, saying, 'Kaki, we have taken out

every strand of hair and thread from the sticks. Each stick has been checked. Have we gone mad that we will pollute your house? You are god's own people. Don't we know even that?'(55)

Baby Kamble totally outbursts in her anger and tell the double standard followed by upper caste people who are easily contaminated by the touch or the shadow of a low caste but do not get polluted while making their fortune out of their money. She instances the behavior of an upper caste shopkeeper, who, in fear of pollution, do not want to touch the Mahar woman but is ready to touch the money given by her. She tells:

He would give the innocent children lessons in social behavior, 'Chabu, hey you, can't you see the dirty Mahar woman standing there? Now don't you touch her. Keep your distance.' Immediately our Mahar woman, gathering her rags around her so tightly so as not to pollute the child, would say, 'Take care little master! Please keep a distance. Don't come too close. You might touch me and get polluted.' The shopkeeper would come out and, from a distance, throw the things into her pallav, which she had spread out in order to receive them. She would then respectfully keep her money on the threshold. That of course did not pollute him! (14)

The cycle of domination does not end in the outer world but opens its jaws more violently in the inner world. A poor Dalit woman endures triple suppression inside her house. She is flogged by her husband as if she were an animal and threatened by her mother-in-law. Every person needs the other one to suppress and to satisfy his or her ego. Kamble explains how this power structure works and how a Dalit woman comes under this triple-layered suppression.

The other world has 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. (87)

Kamble further describes the tortures a Dalit woman has to undergo. The instances of domestic violence are several like thrashing, physical torture, chopping off the girl's nose etc. but a Dalit woman endures everything till her last breath. Kamble portrays the plight of Dalit women evidently. She elaborates the tortures bore by the daughter- in-law in her own household,

Her in-laws would take a huge square piece of wood- weighing around five kilos- to the carpenter to have stocks made for her. The carpenter would drill a hole in the wood, big enough for her foot to go through. After this, they would pit an iron bar through the sides so as to make it impossible for her to pull her. The wood itself would be as huge and heavy as a large iron tub. She would have to drag this heavy burden each time she tried to move. She was forced to work with this device around her leg. Her leg would get wounded and blood would ooze out every time she tried to move her leg. She was not a human being for her in-laws but just another piece of wood. (99)

Thus, Dalit women are suppressed by upper caste men, their own husbands and by the other women. She is treated as 'the other' and in Hindu hierarchal ladder her status becomes the lowest and 'triple-subordinate'. Therefore, gender as well as caste bears an important role in the exploitation of a woman. In 'The Prisons We Broke' Baby Kamble has portrayed the triple-suppression of Dalit woman evidently and tells that only education can take Dalit women out of this agony. She emphasizes on the principles of unity, struggle and fraternity and ensures their emancipation only through the teachings of Ambedkar.

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