

BABY KAMBLE'S THE PRISONS WE BROKE: AN ARTICULATION OF SELF HOOD AND SUBJECTIVITIES

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ABSTRACT

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) is the first autobiography written by a Dalit woman not only in Marathi but in any Indian language. It has been translated by Maya Pandit into English. The text speaks of the history of Dalits. The narration shows her love for her people and the expression is one of protest. The text is a head on confrontation with the Brahmanical hegemony as well as the patriarchal domination and exploitation on the 'other'. She depicts the abject poverty, superstitions, illiteracy and social exclusion that they have endured. The fire of emancipatory struggle characterizes this recasting of history. She uses memory as a device to inculcate resistance in future generations. She acknowledges that Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar, Mahatma Phule had not only raised their voices against the atrocities of the brahmin dominated caste system but also played a crucial role in uplifting them. She says the oppression has turned the Mahars into slaves, forcing them to live in conditions worse than animals. She conspicuously presents the remarkable resistance and dignity of the Mahar women's struggles through which they have emerged as the agents of transformation in their marginalized community. Despite physical violence and mental torture Kamble raises her voice proclaiming to the world the things they suffered.

Key words: Autobiography, hegemony, patriarchal, superstitions, marginalised.

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*: An Articulation of Self-hood and Subjectivities

Indian system is based on the caste system, laid out by the Dharmashastras, which divides people based on the work they do. Accordingly, we had four Varnas based on hierarchy the Brahmins(priests) were on at the top of the hierarchy, the Kshatriyas(warriors), the Vaishyas(traders) and the Shudras (menial workers) formed the lowest of the low.

Brahmins spread the word that they were from God and hence caste system was made by God. The untouchables were the worst sufferers of the lot, they had to live in the outskirts of villages and these places were mostly burial lands and lands used for defecating. Their shadow/touch was said to pollute. They had to wear a particular type of cloth to distinguish them from the others, walk on specific roads. Some had to tie palm leaves at their backs so as to wipe away their footprints (symbolic of how their memory were wiped away, forgotten by history), they had a bowl tied around their throats, so that their spit might not fall on an upper caste. Such were their lives. The women of the lower caste were considered impure and hence they were abused and raped by the upper caste men, and their lives held the same fate at the hands of their own men who were supposed to be protecting them.

Baby Kamble in the *Prisons we Broke* demonstrates how caste and patriarchy converge to perpetuate exploitative practices against women. It is here that the urge to define the self becomes most evident in women. Kamble shows the remarkable dignity and resilience of the Mahar women in their struggle through which they have emerged as the agents of transformation in their community. *The Prisons We Broke* then brings to light experiential worlds as well as discursive practices that have rarely been discussed in mainstream writings.

It reveals the diverse ways in which the construction of resistant self-hood and subjectivity of not just a person but an entire marginalized community. It also brings to the fore the tremendous transformative potential of oppressed people to change the world.

In this work, Baby Kamble writes about the lives of the people belonging to the Mahar Community from the state of Maharashtra. She talks about her life in her village, Veergaon. Life seeped in superstition, poverty, diseases and ignorance. "All the dirty and laborious jobs were the privilege of the Mahar!" (Kamble, 76). Caste System played a very important role in India. Before Independence, history was recorded by the British historiographers and after gaining independence the power fell into the hands of the elitist historiographers. These elitist

historiographers included the people in power. Often this way of writing history excluded a large number of voices who had no one to represent them and their side of the story. These masses constituted the voiceless, oppressed by the elitist who claimed to be liberal but were not. The Hindu religion practiced in India known for its *Dharma*, was widely celebrated to practice tolerance, but the way it treated its own is deplorable. The Brahman discourses were filled with ideologies of caste hierarchy. When Jyotirao Pule attacked the caste system it was a staggering blow that caught them off guard, it was radical. Prachi Deshpande in her work, *Creative Past*s writes about an article “Where Do We Go Wrong?” by S.N.K where it mentions that the non-Brahmans felt alienated in works that stressed on the superiority of the Brahmins. (Deshpande, 180-181)

“Brahmans also towered over the sphere of history writing and the new nationalist agenda, both within and outside educational institutions...” (Deshpande, 179)

In the book, *The Prisons We Broke*, the author articulates her sufferings in these words:

“Hindu philosophy had discarded us as dirt and thrown us into their garbage pits, on the outskirts of the village. We lived in the filthiest conditions possible. Yet Hindu rites and rituals were dearest to our hearts... We desperately tried to preserve whatever bits of Hindu culture we managed to lay our hands on. And yet no one tried to understand us. Our minds somehow kept hoping against hope-that we too would be able to live like the upper castes. The month of Ashad was kept in full honor and reverence, but they were looking for help to the same forces that oppressed them, they sought liberation and hope from the same forces that tied them down and robbed them of their hope.” (Kamble, 18)

Superstition plays a major role in the lives of the Mahars. These practices were minutely followed by the Mahars, and yet it failed to liberate them. Sadly, the very same religion they ardently followed refused to treat them with honour and respect.

The lives of the Mahar was so pitiable and pathetic that they would never ask for what is due to them, they would be satisfied with begging for stale and dry jowar roti and would return home as if they had won the lottery. The children would bring home their “booty” and the entire family would feast on it like it was the best thing, and this is said to be their daily routine.

They were made to believe that it was the best thing. Hegemony is a belief system where exploited people believe in their own exploitation and do not see it as exploitation. It occurs when oppressed people partake in their oppression.

Bandhumadhav wrote a short story, titled *The Poisoned Bread*. The significance of the title is very thought provoking. Livelihood makes a difference to the kind of life the Mahars lived. Their lives and deaths are all connected to their livelihood, and this livelihood becomes their death. In order to make a change one needs to sever ties with their livelihood. Rather than asking for charity one should feel dignified to work and then ask for wages. In this story the Grandfather dies after eating the stale bread he had 'begged' for. And the Grandfather was so surprised that the cause of his poisoning was the bread. The author in this short story wants the lower class to first change their mindset. Caste based occupation creates a mindset to develop a fascination for something as bad as stale bread. To think that stale bread is the cause of poison is a radical thought. It is like saying that the cobbler died because of making shoes. The oppression meted out to the Mahars was mind boggling. They were not to use roads allotted to the higher caste. If a higher caste child or adult were to walk that way, the Mahars had to cover themselves up. The women had to wear their sari had to in the traditional way i.e. tucked between their legs. As per caste rules the Mahar women in a sari is not permitted to show the border of the sari, only a high caste woman could do so. Their blouses were made of rags. While selling things like firewood or grass to the higher caste, the Mahar women had to announce themselves from afar and they had to settle for a really low price. They then had to stack the wood and check each wood for any loose hair stands or threads of sari, so as to not pollute the houses of the upper caste, as the process of cleansing is rather a tedious one.

The way the author articulates the subjectivity of her people is worthy of attention.

“You palaces are built with the soil soaked with the sweat and blood of the Mahars...You drink their blood and sleep comfortably on the bed of their misery. Doesn't it pollute you then?... you have pierced the Mahar nose with the string of ignorance. And you have been flogging us with the whip of pollution. This is all your selfish religion has given to us.” (Kamble,56)

In her book *Creative Pasts*, Prachi Deshpande writes:

“Maratha history was widely invoked in the expression of caste identity and protest against Brahman dominance during the ‘non-Brahman movement’ of the early twentieth century.

The yeskar Mahar was paid in the form of bhakirs. He had to carry a stick which had a bell so that when he goes collecting his share of leftover food the upper caste would be duly noted of his arrival by the tinkling of the bell. The yeskar could not call out as his voice could pollute but not the sound of the bell. After working hard at the weddings of the Upper caste, the leftovers of the wedding would be given to the Mahars. “Children fought over their share” (Kamble,77). The higher caste created an illusion among the Mahars that the yeskar’s stick was like a royal staff. The next in line to receive it would do so with great pride as if a baton had been passed to him. While referring to themselves they had to use words like ‘despicable’, ‘fall at your feet” and while referring the upper castes words like, ‘you are god’s own people’ were used. They defined their selfhood with such terms and were thus reduced to animals without tails.

Kamble is witness to the sufferings of her community. This work is a writing of protest. Baby Kamble asserts that she was writing for her people. She asserts her selfhood by being proud of her race and her caste name. She is not ashamed to bear its name as it is a constant reminder of how far they had come.

Being a woman, the author has remained true to her inner self. She talks about marriage, ritual bath, pregnancy and how funerals were conducted. She describes it to us in great details. In many places the author talks about the poverty of the people, she highlights the snot covered faces of the children, the lice covered sari of the women and the mangled hair uncombed for months to depict the poverty so rooted that they are unable to take care of their physical selves. The month of Ashad is a favorite among the Mahars, a great detail is given to describe how the women folk would clean their houses, and then had to beg the shopkeepers for things they needed with their faces covered with her pallav, standing at a distance so as to not pollute the shopkeeper’s children.

The ordeal of a pregnant woman is simply pathetic. First of all the girl would be of a tender age as child marriage was practiced. She would have a safe delivery only if she were lucky. People were superstitious. The conditions were very unhygienic and the mother would develop wounds and cuts in her vaginal area, as the ignorant midwives kept thrusting their hands in to

see how far it has dilated. Having never heard of soaps, spit would be used to clean the baby's face. Epidemics killed the Mahars like flies, tetanus claimed women during childbirth.

“A Mahar woman would continue to give birth till she reached menopause.”
(Kamble, 82)

Child marriage was practiced and the dowry came up to fifteen to twenty thousand rupees which had to be borne by the bride's family. Arranged marriages took place and a lot of rituals and customs were practiced.

“However, for the girl, marriage meant nothing but calamity....without even knowing what a husband meant, or what it was to be given away.” (Kamble, 93)

The daughter in-law had to do all the chores under the strict eyes of her mother in-law, overlooking the fact that she was just a mere child. She would be dissed at for burning the bhakirs or making it imperfectly.

This treatment becomes worse once the child attains puberty. She also had to wear copper bangles to show that she was a Mahar. The mother in-law poisons the ears of her son and eventually the mother in-law and the husband would torture the bride. Domestic violence was an everyday scenario.

“...She was not a human being for her in-laws, but just another piece of wood....”(Kamble,99)

Fate of daughter-in-laws who escaped was that of mutilation of their nose at the hands of their husbands. This can be seen as a parallel to the epic Ramayana, where Rama cuts off the nose and breast of Shoorpanakha, an asura, for daring to approach the holy and mighty, Rama.

“Kamble raises certain important issues like caste discrimination, women subjugation and the influences of Dr. Ambedkar on issues like caste, discrimination, women subjugation and the influence of Dr. Ambedkar on Dalit women to get themselves educated both socially and culturally.” (Rajput,139)

Kamble presents an “unflinching portrait of its women, subjugated by both caste and patriarchy.” (Rajput,140). It is also important to note that when Kamble writes each chapter describing the oppression she ends it with awakening of consciousness.

“...Generation after generation wasted away in the senseless worship of stones, in utter misery...But it is a basic human need to hope for change. The tiny

sapling of hope was reared in their hearts too. It grew tall, drawing strength from the iron in their souls.”(Kamble, 11)

Conclusion:

Kamble acknowledges in her book over and over again that it is all due to the tireless and selfless efforts of Dr. Ambedkar who awakened his people from the level of sub humans. He began to organize meetings to the people and delivered speeches against customs, traditions, and superstitions. He championed the cause of untouchables in various ways: 1. To spread education among the untouchables 2. To promote cultural awakening by opening libraries 3. To advance and improve the economic conditions of the untouchables by starting industrial and agricultural schools

In the last part of her book Kamble reiterates the responsibility of the present society. In spite of the great efforts of Baba Saheb now discrimination is not completely wiped out from her society. Many villages are still to be brought into the light of main stream. It is the onus of the educated people who enjoy freedom should work to unchain others. A new inspiration is born out of her voice. Those who are enjoying the fruits of freedom should not be ignorant of the problems of society. We should work and liberate others from their social bondages.

Then we can enjoy the real value of life

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