



A Flawless Confession of Victimization and Revolt: The Prisons We Broke

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Abstract

The Prisons We Broke throws light on the complexities of caste and gender which characterize the position of dalit women in Indian society. The work is a detailed record of the hitherto unexpressed miseries of the Mahar women of Maharashtra - the miseries they have meekly borne for generations together. In addition to exposing the exploitation and victimization deeply embedded in the life of Mahars, the narrative also highlights the efforts made by Ambedkar towards the upliftment of dalit women.

Keywords: Caste, Patriarchy, Exploitation, Education, Upliftment

The Prisons We Broke by Baby Kamble is a milestone in the history of female dalit writing in Marathi. The main distinguishing feature of this autobiography is that it throws light on the plight of not only dalit men, but dalit women also, from the point of view of a woman who herself, along with other women of her community, has been a victim of the oppressive tenets of caste and gender throughout her life. The work is a testimony to the fact that "Dalit feminist issues are understood solely by Dalit ladies, as Dalit issues are understood solely by Dalits and not by non Dalits" (Kanakaratnam 6). As dalit women have to undergo multiple bouts of humiliation and domination, *The Prisons We Broke* presents a dalit feminist critique of both caste and patriarchy.

The narrative runs into 135 pages and is divided into twelve chapters. It describes the lives of the Mahar community of Maharashtra in a colloquial language. Being a sufferer and an eye witness to all the subtle actualities in the lives of dalit women of her community and the

devastating effects of the atrocities hurled upon them by both the hegemonic Hindu caste system and the patriarchal set up of their society, the author encapsulates the agonies of her entire community in general and dalit women in particular, in her epoch making autobiography *The Prisons We Broke*. Her autobiography gives a detailed description of the life style of her Mahar community as she has witnessed and experienced it for the last fifty years. In the introduction to *The Prisons We Broke*, Maya Pandit quotes her remarks about

the purpose and essence of her autobiography:

The readers should not feel ashamed of this history. I have tried to sketch a portrait of the actual life of the Mahars and the indignities they were subjected to. I am writing this history for my sons, daughters, daughters in law and my grandchildren to show them how the community suffered because of the chains of slavery and so that they realise what ordeals of fire the Mahars have passed through. (xiii-xiv)

In addition to exposing the exploitation and victimization deeply embedded in the life of Mahars, her purpose is also to highlight the efforts made by Ambedkar towards the upliftment of their community. On one hand, by giving the readers a glimpse of the socio cultural scenario of the Mahar community, the work highlights the plight of dalit women belonging to Mahar caste in the Western parts of Maharashtra, on the other hand, it also describes the progress made by the dalit women and the transformations that came in their life due to the Ambedkarite movement.

A realistic document of dalit women's tattered life, *The Prisons We Broke* draws one's attention to the complexities of caste and gender which characterize the position of dalit women in Indian society. The work is a detailed record of the hitherto unexpressed miseries of the Mahar women of Maharashtra - the miseries they have meekly borne for generations together. As Maya Pandit in her introduction to *The Prisons We Broke* remarks, "*The Prisons We Broke* is an expression of protest against the inhuman conditions of existence to which the Hindu caste system has subjected the Dalits for thousands of years" (xi). Being a self narrative of the realities, the sufferings and the pains experienced by the dalit women, the work presents various facets of the dalit way of life along with the vigour and zeal that comes from the bitter experiences of being doubly marginalized. Her life story brings to the fore the issues of dalit women as a subjugated social class, uncovering layers of despicable and discriminatory practices based on caste and gender.

Writing about the shattered lives of the Mahars, especially the Mahar women of Maharashtra, Baby Kamble reclaims memory and offers a graphic revelation of the inner world of Mahar community. Her autobiography "differs from traditional women's autobiographical writing in the context that it is not only an individual's life narration but also the depiction of physical and psychological violence women of her community went through both in public and private places" (M. Paswan 86). Nowhere does the narrative descend into self pity; rather the purpose is to bring about a social change by presenting to the reader the socio cultural life of the villages of Maharashtra where dalit exploitation has become an everyday affair and dalit women are always subjected to double exploitation on the basis of their caste as well as gender. Maya Pandit in her introduction to *The Prisons We Broke* observes:

Baby Kamble's engagement is with the history of Dalit oppression. She does not try to glorify the life of the Dalit community, rather she explicitly states that her intention is to subject the life of her

community to critical scrutiny in order to demonstrate how Brahminical domination had turned the Mahars into slaves, forcing them to live in conditions worse than animals. (xiii)

Kamble's life story makes a true representation of the lived experiences of dalits, specially dalit women, in order to make the readers think about the plight of this cursed community. In an interview with Maya Pandit, she admits, "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 very difficult to think of myself outside of my community" (136). While writing about the experiences and sufferings of the members of her community, she presents a strong critique of the Hindu caste system prevalent in the society and holds it responsible for the miserable condition of the low castes.

Throughout the narrative, Baby Kamble lays bare to the reader the mal practices driven from the prejudiced caste system and patriarchal social order that lead to the really pathetic condition of the dalit women of her community. Already ground down, these women as oppressed section of the society are always subjected to unbearable miseries and insults in their caste ridden patriarchal set up. At many places in the narrative, Baby Kamble is seen focusing on the adversities in the lives of these women, presenting their plight with great simplicity, with the aim of bringing about a change in the society. One is shocked to read about how the Mahar women of the villages of Maharashtra are always made victims to inhouse subjugation and how too many household restrictions are imposed on them in order to curtail their freedom. It is considered a matter of family prestige to keep these women inside the four walls of the house. It is even associated with the feudal pride of the family:

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 woman thus confined within the four walls of the house, then this 'honour' became the talk of the town – a byword among the relatives and friends in the surrounding villages. Then people would tell each other, how one Pandharinath Mistry kept his wife completely hidden in the house and how even the rays of the sun did not know her. (5)

By confining the dalit women inside their houses, the patriarchal set up denies them any chance to grow and develop physically and mentally. Baby Kamble feels sad over the fact that her mother is also made a victim to this kind of gender discrimination and as her father has locked her up in the house, just like a bird in a cage. The condition of the other dalit women of her community is also much the same as they find themselves always a victim to the oppressive behaviour of the male members who do not give them even a single chance to live a free life like their male counterparts.

Portraying their struggles, the author vividly explains the vulnerable existence of the Mahar women in a caste stratified, male dominated social set up which completely shatters their sense of being. She emphasizes that

their struggles serve as powerful agents that not only make dalit women protest against their subjugation, but also make the readers realize their rights of equality and liberty. In the words of Sunil Ramteke, “Baby 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” (“Portrayal” 2).

The autobiography is replete with instances of the prejudiced attitudes of orthodox upper caste men towards dalit women. Their life is barred from all directions and they are forced to live a wretched life, worse than that of animals. In an attempt to showcase the impact of these exploitative practices on the lives and mind sets of dalit women, the narrative also reveals the fact that the Mahar women can never stand against the inhuman treatment meted out to them by their own husbands and other men of their community. The mark of ‘kumkum’ on their foreheads, which is considered more important than even a mine full of jewels, becomes a symbol of everlasting servitude for them. Their caste ridden patriarchal environment conditions the minds of these doubly oppressed subaltern women in such a way that they learn to accept their maltreatment as their destiny, adoring their husbands as Gods.

The predicament of the newly wedded dalit women is described by the author as still worse.

The mothers in law ruin the lives of the young Mahar girls forever by poisoning their sons’ minds who, after being instigated by their mothers, go to the extent of chopping off their wives’ noses and beating them mercilessly without any sound pretext.

The autobiography emphasizes the harsh reality that the heart stunning humiliations, poverty, starvation and superstitions forced upon the dalit women by the social system of which they are a part never let them live a life of freedom and dignity. They are reduced to a status far worse than that of the animals, forced to live in utterly depressing conditions. Unable to tolerate such an agonizing condition of the Mahar women of her community, Kamble outcries:

Such was the condition of our people. We were just like animals, but without tails. We could be called human only because we had two legs instead of four. Otherwise there was no difference between us and the animals. But how had we been reduced to this bestial state? Who was responsible? Who else, but people of the high castes! They destroyed our reasoning, our ability to think. We were reduced to a condition far worse than that of the bullocks kept in the courtyards of the high castes. (49)

The heartfelt agonies of the dalit women of her community make Kamble really upset. She starts penning them down in her note book. The fact that she has to keep her writing hidden for almost twenty years is evidently a proof that she herself has also been a victim to the exploitation that other female members of her community suffer from. She feels it safe to write about the sufferings of her community when her husband goes out of the shop to buy some necessities for the household, leaving the shop entirely to her. As he usually

returns late in the evening, she has plenty of time and she furiously makes notes in his absence, filling many note books. She has, however, to take great care that nobody sees her writing and she hides her notes under old newspapers or at places where all the useless things are thrown.

Ultimately, it is only with the help of a sociologist named Maxine Berntson that her writings are serially printed in *Stree*.

Kamble infuses her narrative with all the painful elements that become the fate of dalit women and voices their shared painful history of unspeakable humiliations and degradations at the hands of the privileged class of society. Throughout the narrative, she reminds the readers about how dalit women are made victims to physical as well as mental injuries throughout their lives. In other words, her narration of the sufferings of dalit women of her community draws out the worst forms of exploitation that male hegemony and Hindu caste system impose upon this subaltern class who, bearing the burden of caste and patriarchy, always respond to it through a submissive silence in a typical way. The autobiography stresses upon the fact that this unquestioning acceptance of their fate on the part of dalit women as victims to exploitation at the hands of their own venom spitting mothers in law and hostile husbands, along with poor living conditions that have been described in the autobiography in great detail, is the result of their lack of knowledge and education. Because of their illiteracy, they are not able to judge the rationale behind the unjust socio religious practices and meekly surrender to all the rituals and superstitions like offering the eldest son to God, wearing 'kumkum' on the forehead, observing a 'pallav' and unquestioningly accepting domestic violence, considering their husbands to be their Gods. The dungeon of ignorance in which they live makes them unable to think of the unfairness of their maltreatment both at the domestic and public level and they are also unable to understand the causes of their unmitigated slavery and degraded status.

The caste ridden patriarchal society although sinks them deep into the mire of ignorance and decay, yet they keep on following its diktat unquestioningly and never dare to go against its atrocities that turn their lives into living hells. As a member of this grief stricken subaltern community, the author confesses that as human beings, they too have their dreams which are never fulfilled due to their lowly status and abject poverty and that they always look forward to a little ray of hope that will illuminate their lives and help them fulfill their hitherto unfulfilled dreams.

The autobiography strongly articulates the influence of B. R. Ambedkar in making a shift in the status and dignity of low caste women. Ambedkar's ideology provides them a platform for their upliftment and emancipation from the bonds of casteism and patriarchy. The author acknowledges the inspiration she receives from this great revolutionary to raise her voice against the evil practices of casteism and patriarchy prevalent in the society:

. . . my king Bhim, the son of Morality, saviour of the world. It is because of him that my pen can scribble out some thoughts. It is because of him that I have understood truth; that I can now see how morality is being trampled upon. It is because of him that I got the inspiration to join the struggle against oppression and contribute my small might to it. (102)

By bringing out the quest for identity of a dalit woman doubly oppressed and marginalized by the Hindu society, Kamble's narrative becomes an important instrument in bringing about a transition in the society. P. Shanthi observes:

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.

Kamble's autobiography not only sensitizes the readers to the plight of dalit women, but also urges this twice cursed community to move ahead and fight against the oppressive caste and patriarchal hegemonies.

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