



FROM DUKKHA TO TESTIMONY: THE RHETORIC OF RESISTANCE IN MUKTA SALVE AND BABY KAMBLE

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Abstract: This study examines how Dalit women's resistance writing changed over more than a century. It compares Mukta Salve's 1855 essay on the suffering (dukkha) of the Mang and Mahar communities with Baby Kamble's autobiography, *The Prisons We Broke* (Jina Amucha), published in the 1980s. Salve wrote her essay as a student at one of Jyotirao Phule's schools. She addresses her readers directly, building a moral and rhetorical case for why caste oppression is unjust and must be corrected. Her writing argues for a premise that had not yet been accepted in public life. Kamble wrote more than a hundred years later, when the Ambedkarite movement had developed a powerful political language for challenging caste oppression. Her writing does not foreground the argument against caste in the way Salve's essay does. Instead, she narrates her own life and the collective experience of Mahar women directly, offering testimony more than argument. The difference between the two writers, this study argues, is not simply a matter of genre, from essay to autobiography. It is a difference in rhetorical function. Salve's writing foregrounds persuasion, while Kamble's writing foregrounds witness, though neither text is purely one or the other. Reading these two works together shows how the political and social space available to Dalit women writers changed between 1855 and the 1980s, and how that change shaped the very purpose their writing would serve.

IndexTerms - Dalit Feminism, Mukta Salve, Baby Kamble, Testimony, Rhetoric, Dalit Autobiography, Ambedkarite Movement.

I. INTRODUCTION

Dalit women's writing in India is often discussed as a single, continuous tradition of resistance, beginning with early nineteenth-century reform-era writing and continuing into the testimonial autobiographies that became a major form of Dalit literary expression by the late twentieth century. This continuity is real, but it can also hide an equally important discontinuity: writing produced at these two historical moments does not perform the same rhetorical function, even when it addresses the same underlying experience of caste and gender oppression. This study examines two texts that stand at opposite ends of this history. The first is a short essay written in 1855 by Mukta Salve, a student at a school for "untouchable" castes and girls established by the social reformer Jyotirao Phule in Pune. Her essay, on the sufferings (dukkha) experienced by the Mang and Mahar communities, is an early example of writing by a Dalit woman [6]. The second is Baby Kamble's autobiography, *The Prisons We Broke* (Jina Amucha), written privately over several years and published in Marathi in the 1980s. It narrates her childhood and adult life within the Mahar community of rural Maharashtra and is regarded as one of the foundational autobiographies of modern Dalit women's writing [1].

Both texts deal with the same basic reality: the combined burden of caste and gender imposed on Dalit women, and the exclusion, labor, and violence that this burden produces. But the two texts do not approach this reality in the same way. Salve's essay is written to persuade its readers that this suffering is an injustice requiring correction. Kamble's memoir does not foreground persuasion in the same way. It does not set out to prove the injustice and instead presents lived

experience as testimony. This study argues that the difference between these two texts is best understood not simply as a shift in literary genre, from essay to autobiography, but as a shift in dominant rhetorical function, from argument to testimony, and that this shift tracks a real change in the political ground available to Dalit women writers across the century that separates them. Recent studies on Kamble show why this distinction needs care. Mandal (2025) reads *The Prisons We Broke* as an anti-caste manifesto, which treats the memoir as a political and theoretical intervention and not only as a personal record [3]. This study does not dispute that reading. Kamble's memoir does make political claims. The question here is how it makes them. Salve addresses her readers directly and presses them to accept a position. Kamble builds her political case through the lived incidents of a community, so that the reader reaches the conclusion by witnessing them. The distinction between argument and testimony therefore adds to Mandal's reading by describing the method through which the memoir's politics are carried.

This study reads both texts in English translation. For Salve, it uses translation by Sardar and Mani [5]. For Kamble, it uses Pandit's translation [1]. The analysis does not rest on single-quoted lines. It follows the incidents each writer chooses to describe and asks how each one is presented to the reader: as a point in an argument, or as an event the reader is made to witness. Because both texts are read in translation, the study makes claims about their rhetorical emphasis and does not make claims about the wording of the original Marathi.

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: FROM PHULE'S SCHOOLROOM TO THE AMBEDKARITE MOVEMENT

Mukta Salve wrote within a specific and narrow historical window. A few years earlier, Jyotirao Phule and his wife Savitribai Phule had opened schools in Pune that admitted girls and students from castes excluded from formal education under Brahminical custom. Salve's essay was written by a student within this still-new and still-contested institution, at a moment when the very premise that Dalit communities deserved education, let alone political standing, remained a live and unsettled question in public life. There was, in 1855, no established political movement that had already secured public acknowledgment of caste oppression as a wrong requiring state or social correction. The case had to be made, repeatedly, by reformers and by the students these reformers educated.

Salve's own position within this movement matters as much as the movement itself. She was not an established writer addressing a receptive leadership. She was a student writing an essay within an institution that itself faced opposition from those who rejected the education of untouchable castes and girls together. Her essay therefore carries a double burden: she had to argue for her community's equal standing while also, indirectly, defending the legitimacy of the school that had given her the chance to write at all. From this position, she had little choice but to write as a petitioner addressing an audience that needed, and might still refuse, to be convinced.

By the time Baby Kamble was writing her memoir in the second half of the twentieth century, this political ground had shifted substantially. B. R. Ambedkar's political and constitutional work had placed caste oppression within an established framework of rights, law, and organized political struggle. The 1956 conversion movement, the constitutional abolition of untouchability, and decades of Ambedkarite political organization meant that the basic claim Salve had been forced to argue for—that caste oppression was an injustice—no longer had to be established from first principles by a Dalit woman writing in the late twentieth century [4]. This does not mean that caste oppression has ended. Untouchability continued in everyday life long after its legal abolition, and the Ambedkarite movement is a condition that shapes how Kamble writes, not a complete explanation of it. Kamble's memoir repeatedly places her life and her community's resistance within this Ambedkarite political framework, treating Ambedkar's movement as the larger context through which her own experiences, and those of her community, take on their meaning. Her account of community meetings where Ambedkar's ideas were discussed and debated shows a community that already had a political language and a political movement it could claim as its own—something entirely unavailable to Salve and her contemporaries in 1855. The work of making the argument had, in other words, been substantially advanced by an organized movement that had developed its own leadership, institutions, and public standing by the time Kamble wrote. What Kamble's memoir does instead is provide something that political argument alone could never fully give: a direct, textured account of what it actually meant to live as a Mahar woman inside the conditions the movement had already identified as unjust.

This difference in available political ground also explains the difference in audience. Salve wrote, in effect, outward: toward reformers, toward a literate public that included those who might need persuading, and toward a colonial and caste-Hindu social order whose legitimacy she had to contest directly. Kamble, writing from within an already organized Ambedkarite community, could write both inward and outward: toward her own community as a record of shared experience, and toward readers who did not need to be persuaded from first principles that this experience mattered, but needed to see what it actually looked and felt like.

III. ARGUMENT AND PERSUASION: READING SALVE'S ESSAY

Salve's essay works mainly through direct address and rhetorical appeal rather than through narrative incidents. She does not primarily recount specific episodes from her own life, as a memoirist would. Instead, she builds a case, invoking religious and moral authority to ask why a community should be condemned to suffering by birth rather than by any wrongdoing of its own. Her essay repeatedly frames the suffering of the Mang and Mahar communities through the word *dukkha*, a term carrying weight far beyond ordinary distress. As scholarship on her essay has noted, her use of this word situates her argument within a much older tradition that treats suffering as a social and philosophical fact rather than a private feeling, one that reaches back toward Buddhist thought [2]. But Salve does not simply name this suffering; she argues from it. Her essay asks the reader to accept a clear conclusion: that this suffering is unjust and demands redress, that education is the means of that redress, and that the community's own moral standing is equal to, or exceeds, the standing of those who exclude it.

This is the work of a text written to convince someone who is not yet convinced. Salve writes as a representative voice for her community, addressing an outside audience that likely included sympathetic reformers and a wider literate public who had not yet accepted the premise she was arguing. The essay's short length and its origin in a school setting reinforce this reading. It is closer to a persuasive composition, defending a position, than to a sustained personal narrative. Its primary rhetorical labor is therefore argumentative. It must establish, for a reader for whom this is not obvious, that the suffering it describes is real, is unjust, and calls for a specific remedy. Her use of *dukkha* is itself an argumentative strategy, not simply a descriptive term. By naming her community's condition with a word carrying centuries of philosophical and religious weight, Salve borrows an authority that an unsupported personal complaint would not carry on its own. She is not simply saying that her community is unhappy; she is placing their condition within a register that a literate, religiously formed audience would already recognize as morally serious, and asking that audience to extend to her community the same seriousness it would extend to suffering described in any other register already respected. This is a rhetorical move characteristic of argument: it reaches for a shared premise the audience already accepts, in order to win acceptance for a further claim the audience does not yet accept. Salve does not have the luxury of assuming her readers already agree that Dalit suffering matters; she must build that argument, sentence by sentence, using whatever shared moral vocabulary is available to her.

The incidents Salve chooses show how her argument is built. She opens by addressing learned religious authorities directly and telling them to give up their empty claims to wisdom. She then lists what her community has suffered: removal from its land, extreme violence under Peshwa rule, people buried alive in the foundations of buildings, and women giving birth with no roof over them in rain and cold. She contrasts this with British rule, under which she says harassment lessened, untouchability weakened, and some schools began to admit Mahar and Mang students. She ends by urging her own community to seek education, while doubting whether education alone makes people behave well [5]. Each incident serves her case against the order she is challenging. Kawade notes that Sharmila Rege described the essay as the first feminist testimonio, which shows that it also carries witness. This study therefore treats the difference from Kamble as one of dominant emphasis [2].

IV. TESTIMONY AND WITNESS: READING KAMBLE'S MEMOIR

Kamble's memoir works altogether differently. It does not begin by arguing that caste oppression is unjust. Instead, it begins inside the lived experience of growing up within that oppression. Kamble narrates specific scenes, voices, and incidents from her childhood and adult life among the Mahar community. She describes communal gatherings, the daily texture of domestic life, and the violence and humiliation faced by Mahar women, both from caste-Hindu society and within her own community. She also describes her community's gradual political awakening through its contact with Ambedkar's movement. The memoir's dominant mode is testimonial. She is not organizing the narrative around a single conclusion that a skeptical reader must first be persuaded to accept. She places her own witnessed experience, together with the collective experience of the women around her, directly before the reader as evidence that speaks for itself. This is possible, in part, because the political context in which Kamble wrote differed from the one in which Salve wrote. Kamble's memoir draws on a political language of resistance developed through decades of Ambedkarite struggle. Rather than foregrounding persuasion in the same way as Salve's essay, it dwells on specific, embodied, first-person and communal memory, making testimony its primary rhetorical mode. Where Salve's essay asks a reader to be convinced, Kamble's memoir asks a reader to witness. This difference does not mean that one text is more developed than the other. The difference lies in the rhetorical task each text understood itself to be performing, shaped by the political context in which each was written.

Kamble's narration also moves fluidly between her own individual experience and the collective experience of the women around her, often without pausing to distinguish the two. A description of her own treatment within her marital

household can move, within the same passage, into an account of how other women in the Mahar community were treated in similar circumstances, as though her own life were simply one instance of a pattern she is recording on behalf of many. This collective register is itself evidence of the testimonial mode at work. An argumentative text, addressed to a skeptical outside reader, typically needs to marshal individual cases as evidence for a general claim it is trying to prove. A testimonial text, addressed to readers more likely to share its premise, can instead move between the individual and the collective as a single continuous witness, because its purpose is not to prove that the pattern exists but to make that pattern vivid, specific, and undeniable in its lived detail.

The incidents Kamble chooses work differently. She does not stop to prove that caste is unjust. She shows what a Mahar household's daily life was made of. She describes the Watan system, under which the community carried out hereditary duties for the village and was paid only in food or small returns. She describes girls married very young and women beaten inside the household. She describes community meetings where Ambedkar's ideas were discussed, so that a political message reaches a community through a shared gathering [1]. These incidents are left to speak for themselves, and the reader is not told what conclusion to draw. In each case, caste and gender appear through the ordinary routines of a household and a community, which is what makes these passages testimony and not argument: the reader sees oppression at work before any claim is made about it.

V. FROM ARGUMENT TO TESTIMONY: READING THE SHIFT ACROSS A CENTURY

Read together, these two texts mark the two ends of a trajectory in Dalit women's resistance writing, one that tracks the changing political ground on which that writing was produced. In Salve's essay, the argument for equality is foregrounded. In Kamble's memoir, lived experience and collective testimony take a more prominent role, making the texture of oppression and resistance directly present to the reader. This shift from argument to testimony is closely tied to the difference between the two genres, a short persuasive essay and a sustained autobiographical memoir. The growing significance of autobiographical and testimonial writing in Dalit women's literature can be understood partly in relation to the changing political context of the later twentieth century. The comparison between Salve and Kamble suggests that, as anti-caste movements developed new political languages and forms of collective resistance, testimony became an important means through which Dalit women writers recorded lived experience, challenged social hierarchies, and asserted their authority as writers [4].

The shift also changes the way each writer positions herself within the text. Salve writes as a representative voice: her individual voice speaks for a community whose case she is making, and her own biography is almost entirely absent from the essay, since the argument does not depend on it. Kamble writes as a witness, and her own life becomes the primary evidence to which the memoir speaks. Her narrative is organized around specific, named details of her childhood, marriage and community life, because testimony depends precisely on the specificity and authenticity of the person who lived through what she describes. An argument can, in principle, be made by anyone with the knowledge and standing to speak for a cause; testimony, however, can only come from the person who lived through or witnessed what is being described. This is part of why the shift from argument to testimony is also a shift toward a fuller, more individuated authorial presence, even as that presence continues to speak for a collective experience rather than only a private one.

For this reason, reading Salve's essay as a diminished or merely preliminary version of what Kamble's memoir later achieves misunderstands both texts. Salve's essay performs a labor that Kamble's memoir, by its own historical position, did not need to perform: it helps prepare the ground of legitimacy on which later testimony could stand. Kamble's memoir, in turn, performs a labor that Salve's essay, written by a student in 1855, could not yet have access to: a sustained communal, first-person witnessing of a life lived inside the conditions whose injustices had, by then, been given a powerful political language. Neither text is a lesser version of the other. The difference is one of emphasis, not of kind: Salve's essay also bears witness to suffering, and Kamble's memoir also argues, as it criticizes practices within her own community and the caste order that shaped them. Each does the work its historical moment made both possible and necessary, and reading them side by side makes visible a change in the rhetorical demands placed on Dalit women's writing that neither text, taken alone, could fully show.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study has examined Mukta Salve's 1855 essay and Baby Kamble's autobiography *The Prisons We Broke* as two rhetorical responses shaped by different historical moments in the history of anti-caste resistance. Salve's essay makes a direct argument against caste oppression at a time when the demand for equality still required explicit justification. Kamble's autobiography bears witness to the lived realities of caste oppression while reflecting the political consciousness built by decades of Ambedkarite struggle. Salve's writing foregrounds persuasion and Kamble's

foregrounds testimony, but neither text is limited to one mode. Both expose injustice and challenge the structures that sustain it.

The difference between them shows how the possibilities of Dalit women's writing changed across a century. Salve's essay is an early intervention in the struggle for equality, while Kamble's autobiography develops personal and collective testimony within a later political context. Their works show not a simple move from argument to witness, but a development in how Dalit women writers describe oppression, claim authority, and imagine change. Kamble's memoir shows the power of testimony to preserve collective experience and turn memory into resistance.

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