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The Prisons We Broke:A Bildungsroman

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Abstract
The Prisons We Broke helps us understand the Dalit community ethos and the huge vicissitudes that occurred throughout the course of the time period. Kamble's story reverberates with the impression of women's grief in the face of several dominances. She artfully weaves together the gender, socioeconomic, and caste-based dominance that Dalit women face. The caste system in India, where it still plays a role in determining people's social standing, is deeply problematic. Kamble's autobiography serves as a scathing parody of India's entrenched caste system, socioeconomic strata, and patriarchal beliefs. Kamble's writing has helped her express the range of emotions and physical struggles that she has experienced as a woman in both the professional and personal spheres. In her autobiography, she reveals the most private moments of her life, notingthe ups and downs of her development via the recording of countless traumatic events. In this study, we analyse Baby Kamble's strategy for using her pen to heal the downtrodden and work for the betterment of Dalit women.
Keywords: Socioeconomic, Dalit community, Gender, Feminism, culture, caste-based.

Introduction

Baby Kamble, a member of the Dalit minority, gained notoriety as a prolific author. She was well admired for her work and recognised for her activism, even among the most well-known traditional authors. Her book is dominated by female perspective and she emphasises the double suffering that women of lower castes experience at the hands of their higher caste men and their ownmen. A samember of the oppressed group, she felt compelled to shareherpain with the world via her writing.

Although India has improved its socioeconomic standing in many respects, the extremes of its south and north have not brought more prosperity to the majority of its citizens. According to Hindumythology's"VarnaSystem,"society'smisfortunateareclassified.TheBrahminswereat The pinnacle of the social hierarchy in Hindu texts, followed by the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas, and the Shudras. This method was what classified individuals into various social strata. Dalits are the lowest caste in the Hindu social hierarchy. In the Hindu caste system, they have a lower position. From the time of colonisation forward, the higher class cruelly treated these hapless people. But,

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those who had been marginalised were able to organise under the banner of "Dalit" to fight back and demand their rights. Unfortunately, crimes against Dalits persist even in the 21st century, notwithstanding the constitution of India. The realisation of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's vision of economic and social equality in India is still a matter of debate, especially in rural areas where atrocities endure to varying degrees.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Dalits began voicing their experiences in Marathi literature, and later in Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam, and Telugu. These writers transformed their lived experiences of caste discrimination into broader works of fiction, poetry, and theatre. In order to raise awareness about these issues and communicate their message to a wider audience, they increasingly turned to autobiographies, which provide authentic accounts of their lives.

When it comes to interpreting texts written in regional languages, translators play an active and crucial role. Such works must be translated into English to reach a diverse readership across social and geographical boundaries, including global audiences. The translators have firm faith in translation's ability to mediate conflict. *The Prisons We Broke* was selected for translation because of its in-depth exploration of the author's struggle to locate her identity as a woman within a patriarchal, caste-based Hindu Indian society.

In earlier literary traditions, Dalit culture and history were often represented by outsiders, resulting in distorted or incomplete portrayals. While these accounts presented a seemingly vivid picture of Dalit life, they frequently obscured what was truly significant to the community. In contrast, Dalit writers sought to produce more authentic narratives that could challenge and correct dominant representations found in mainstream texts. Therefore, many Dalit authors used literature as a means to resist oppression and assert their identity, rather than to promote hostility, by exposing the realities of caste-based discrimination to a wider audience.

Tripartite Subjugation

Kamble makes an important point when she says that Dalit women face societal suppression on three fronts: because of their gender, their socioeconomic status, and their caste. She portrayed patriarchyinawaythatwasn'tmeanttoshamethemenoftheculture,butrathertoshedlighton

why their culture condones violence against women. According to her, this practise allowed mento publicly humiliate and abuse their wives. Kamble says that every day, the Maharwada resounds with the cries of women whose husbands beat them for no reason. The parents' attitude towards their daughters had nothing to do with love and care. They endure hardship throughout their entire lives, regardless of age. They're put through a lot of unnecessary pain without having done anything wrong. As women, members of the Dalit community, and those living in poverty, the women of the Dalit community are subjected to three layers of discrimination.

Family members and the general public alike did not respect Dalit women. They weren't respected as anything more than a commodity, a means to an end (having children) and an object

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of lust (to be used in a sexual context). They are treated inhumanely, and she is unable to relax or breathe freely because of the tension she feels around them. Over time, the women become the target ofthe hostility and suffering of the Dalit men because they threaten their sense of masculinity and honour.

Some people believed that marriage cast a curse on young brides. They tied the knot when they were only eight or nine years old, before they even understood what marriage entailed. Tensions between them and their in-laws were high. Every day they have to convince themselves that they are doing their best, or else they will be severely beaten by their spouse or their in-laws. It was her parents' responsibility to account for even her little missteps. No man ever asked about or bothered to listen to her problems with her in-laws. They treated her like a slave, expecting her to performall the menial tasks around the home. When the in-laws mistreat the daughter-in-law, the in-laws' mother seeks reparation and justice by doing the same to her.

Women were subjugated to men in most societies. Female Dalits face triple subjugation in today's society. First, as a woman; second, as a Dalit; and third, as a member of her social class. As Dalits and women from lower social classes, the women are targets of discrimination and abuse. None of the Dalit movements have brought attention to the daily violence she endures. By making these motions, she was able to temporarily forget about the little family conflicts that bothered her on a daily basis. The majority of economically disadvantaged women in India report experiencing physical and/or sexual assault from their partner or in-laws, according data from the Indian National Family Health Survey.

Men have dominated society and it is they who have imposed these religious and cultural connotations on women. These people never let women live life to the fullest, the way they wanted to. The stigmatizing designation effectively banned and restricted them forever. Kamble was not unique; she describes the canning, lynching, and thrashing that women endure at the hands of their fathers, siblings, comrades, and spouses. Whenever and everywhere, her partner abused her; she defies tradition. She gives an example of how she was victimised by her husband's sexism. A complete stranger stared at Kamble the entire train ride. Because of this, her husband boarded the train with suspicion and struck her. Not her fault, but she took it as fate anyway. It's a symbol of patriarchal authority. This viewpoint is shared by many women from underrepresented groups. They may not even realise how easily they have come to tolerate this kind of behaviour. The man takes advantage of these women because they play the victim role in society.

Threads of Feminism

Feminism weaves its invisible way through Kamble's memoirs. She described the prejudice and discrimination that Dalit women endure because of their lower social status in both caste and gender. She has done the right thing by using her memoirs as a way to get her point through to

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peopleinherownneighbourhood.Shedocumentedthestrugglesofherselfandotherwomeninthe world in an autobiography she left as a message for the next generation. She felt it was importantto capture the history of her town in case its legacy was misrepresented in future ages.

Baby Kamble drew a lot of motivation from Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. She had seen his actions fromanearlyage.SheparticipatedinmovementsledbyAmbedkar.Hewasheldinhighesteemas a potential saviour who might alter the course of events. She heeded Ambedkar's advice and worked hard in class. She had no qualms claiming her education had helped her establish her identity as a proud member of the Mahar group.

She used her schooling as a powerful weapon in her struggle against the distorted caste system. In those times, it was far more difficult for a Dalit woman to pursue higher education. Kamble's success may be traced back to his father, whom Dr. Ambedkar inspired. At school, Kamble encountered many of the same difficulties that other Dalit women authors have had at the hands of their upper-caste professors and peers. Just a handful of males and a similar number of girls were able to complete secondary school. There was nothing positive from her time in school that she could look back on with pride.

A good education has set her on the path to success. She has bravely addressed the blind rituals, superstitions, and ignorance that permeate her culture. She has also brought attention to the dearth of literacy, technology, knowledge, and confidence among her people. She joined her brother and the Ambedkarite movement rather than accepting her destiny and giving up hope. She was therefor her brother and a group of young men who wrote songs praising Ambedkar's ideas when they needed her support. She diligently advised those who were reluctant to let go of their traditions.

She had a front-row seat to the evolution of her people, and she did it on purpose. After hearing Ambedkar'sspeech,someHindusevenbegantoconverttoBuddhism.Shewroteanautobiography in which she emphasised the numerous times her people turned down the scraps and dead animals that the higher castes provided them. In her works, she praised Babasaheb and felt honoured to be called a product of the Ambedkar movement.

Distressing Reminiscences

Kamble was taken aback by the newspaper article she read about Shudras in Hindu mythology. The analysis lacked objectivity. According to the story, Vishnu deceived a Shudras woman by pretending to be her husband. In this case, the woman's chastity was called into doubt. She became infuriated after reading the account. The higher caste has mythologized the oppression of Shudra people, the narrative showed. The ease with which they were taken off their hands greatly disturbed her. Her anger over the incident inspired her to write about her life for the first time.

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It is clear from her writing that the upper caste treated the Mahar people of both sexes with complete impunity. For Dalit women, there were a number of different forms of dress codes that were expected to be exhibited. A saree with borders was seen as a privilege reserved for women of higher social status, so they were not allowed to wear them. The only ways Dalit women could drape were by tearing the border or hiding it inside. They were not permitted to walk on the same sidewalks as members of the upper castes while wearing slippers. Mahar women were expected to bow and say, “The humble Mahar woman falls at your feet, master,” when encountering men of higher social status.

The weak Mahar women are easy prey, and everyone seizes the opportunity. They didn't hear their names being called. Instead of handing them their pay, it was thrown to them. Even though they did laborious tasks like carrying firewood, grazing the cattle, and cleaning the cow sheds from morning to night, working in the field, etc., they were sometimes paid with only the leftovers.

She also recalls how, despite numerous hardships, mothers and other female family members worked to make their homes spaces of comfort and joy for their children, maintaining them with care and dignity and often treating them as spaces worthy of a queen; practices such as cleaning and polishing with cow dung reflected both cultural tradition and a sense of pride. In this way, many mothers emerged as role models, perceiving their responsibilities as closely tied to devotion to the divine. Kamble particularly highlights the elevated roles women assume during religious ceremonies, where possession by deities or goddesses temporarily grants them authority and reverence, often compelling men to submit or seek forgiveness—an act that can be interpreted as a symbolic, albeit brief, resistance to patriarchal power. For a short period, this suspension of rigid gender hierarchies creates a space for emotional release, especially for women experiencing psychological distress. However, such moments of empowerment remain transient, as deeply internalised patriarchal norms persist; many women are conditioned to view their husbands as divine figures, leading them to silently endure verbal and physical abuse within the household, thereby reinforcing the very structures that oppress them.

The Prisons We Broke, an autobiography written by BabytaiKamble, was first published inMarathi under the name JinaAmucha and then translated into English by Maya Pandit. On the basis of her reasoning, we may divide it into two halves. For starters, she aims for a sweeping thematic depiction of the Dalit women's sense of otherness inside their own society. Second, she praises the efforts of other women who, like Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, want to see lower-caste Hindus treated the same as upper-caste Hindus.

Using her own experiences, Babytai Kamble identifies Dalit persecution in The Prisons We Broke, giving a bleak picture of the harsh reality they face. Since Maharwadas are the embodiment of the biases of the Hindu caste system, which are most prominent in and around

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Maharashtra, she will have a front-row seat to Dalit persecution as she grows up in a Maharwada community. Almost fifteen Mahar households make up a typical Maharwada on the outskirts of a hamlet in Maharashtra, a state whose name, strangely, has its etymological roots in the Mahar people. The Prisons We Broke's commentary on Dalit persecution is warranted since Maharashtra is one of the states where the caste system is most entrenched.

This does not imply that there has been no resistance to dominant social groups. Over time, Maharashtra has emerged as a significant site of Dalit uprisings across various spheres, including literature, political struggle, and religious practices. One such powerful intervention is The Prisons We Broke, which narrates the struggles of women and is particularly significant for being authored by a Dalit woman. During the first two phases of Indian feminism (approximately 1850 to the period just before independence), the discourse was largely shaped by privileged upper-class men who often adopted a saviour-like stance. At that time, political awareness among Indian women remained limited, as they were largely controlled by familial and religious institutions. Within third-wave feminism, three distinct phases can be identified: the accommodation phase, the crisis phase, and the empowerment phase. In the Indian context, the feminist movement initially focused on socio-economic concerns during the ‘phase of accommodation,’ which is generally understood to have transitioned into a ‘phase of crisis’ during the 1960s. This shift marked a growing recognition of structural inequalities and the need for more assertive forms of resistance.

The entirety of BabytaiKamble's (born in 1929) 2009 book The Prisons We Broke (original Marathi: JinaAmucha) is based on her own experiences, many of which date back to the 'Time of Accommodation' and beyond. For The Prisons We Broke to be considered literature of its day, it would have had to address feminist and women's rights concerns. However, Babytai's reliance on socio-economic disparities as the source of her writing in The Prisons We Broke is explicable through the lens of intersectional feminism, which explains why Dalit feminism cannot be said to be at par in its development and demands with the rest of the feminist movement in India.

Intersectional otherness of Dalit women

In The Prisons We Broke, the interconnectedness of Dalit women's suffering is a prominent subject. Babytai implies throughout the book that if Dalits were an othered society by higher caste Hindus, then Dalit women were an othered community by males within their own community. This, she says, may be traced back to deeply ingrained patriarchal social norms inside the family, which are most seen at the lowest socioeconomic levels.

She further argues that women are often positioned against one another due to power dynamics that emerge from familial and societal structures, thereby exacerbating the overall condition of women. In The Prisons We Broke, she substantiates this claim through real-life instances, including interactions between a woman and her mother-in-law, as well as between a Dalit

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woman and a Brahmin woman belonging to a higher caste. According to Babytai, it was common in Maharwadas for a mother to falsely accuse her daughter-in-law—who would have been around ten years old at the time—of committing crimes she could not even comprehend. In extreme cases, this led to the killing of the child, followed by persuading her son to remarry, often to a widow. She further explores the psychological condition that drives a woman to displace her frustrations onto an innocent victim, even at the risk of her own life. The Prisons We Broke thus highlights the multiple ways in which women are marginalised due to the intersection of caste, gender, and social hierarchies.

Conclusion

The act of writing one's autobiography is a form of personal exposure, and Kamble's work is, whether intentional or not, a reflection of the events of her life. It reveals not only her inner growth but also the turmoil she experiences. Exploring works written by women is essential for understanding the complexity of the female mind. The act of writing itself becomes a metaphor for her survival, while the autobiography serves as a mechanism through which she seeks to free herself from sadness and other afflictions. Her writings challenge both gender stereotypes and societal attitudes, thereby paving the way for other women to strive for freedom.

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