



**Giving Voice for the Female Subaltern:  
Local/ Global Articulation through Autobiography in Baby Kamble's  
“The Prisons We Broke”**

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**Abstract:** *The issue of Dalit women's voice in cultural expressions has gained great attention in recent years. It overlaps with the issues of caste and gender apart from being engaged in the discourse of the subaltern. This paper is an attempt to examine Dalit women's autobiography to see how life writing articulates the local realities in a global language-English.*

**Key Words:** *Dalit Women, Cultural Expression, Subaltern*

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In the context of Indian women writers, a Dalit woman writer like Baby Kamble speaks against the legacy of silence which is inflicted on the marginalized female subjects. Her autobiography is a path breaking effort in finding a voice for the unheard, unheeded lived experiences of Mahar women, how Kamble, through the medium of writing, takes Dalit issues to global platform.

Dalit women are not expected to be very expressive in the orthodox society. They are asked not to express pain, joy or hunger, resulting in a legacy of silence. Dalit women writers articulate and rearticulate this silence. Bama, for Instance, discusses this aesthetic predicament of Dalit women –being caught between the expected silence and the necessity to articulate:

Why cannot we be the same as boys? We are not allowed to talk loudly or laugh noisily, we always have to walk with our heads bowed down, gazing at our toes ..... Even when our stomachs are screaming with hunger, we must not eat first we are allowed to eat only after the men in the family have finished and gone (Bama 2005, 64)

Bama, a Dalit Tamil woman writer, also differentiates this female subaltern identity from the other popular female hood depicted in culture and literature:

From the moment they wake up, they set to work both in their homes and in the fields. At home they are pestered by their husbands and children: in the fields there is back-breaking work besides the harassment of the landlord. When they come home in the evening, there is no time even to draw breath. And once they have collected water and fire woods, cooked a Kanji and fed their hungry husband and children, even then cannot go to bed in peace and sleep until dawn (Bama 2005,22)

Ruchi Tomar theorizes the female subaltern by studying closely the hard work that Dalit women have both outside and inside the home. She explains the degradation involved in this kind of labour:

They become real animals and work restlessly. No one cares for them and they become mechanical in every corner of life. Individuality, freedom, and even the self and self consciousness are lost under the male patriarchal domination both inside and outside at home. (Tomar 2013, 7)

Dalit women's sensibility and culture also address the problems of the 'others' in the Nation. Dalit constitute the 'other' in the national imagination, which is constructed by the nationalist elites and propagated through literature, journalism and cinema. Such discourses construct imagined identities of the Dalit as 'the others' or as passive subjects. Dalit women writers, by exploring the differences between the idea of caste and the lived reality of caste, try to create a space for themselves in the national imaginary. This study has made an attempt to remap Indian Literature by locating Dalit women in it.

Gayatri Chakarvarty Spivak, an Indian literary theorist, philosopher, and University Professor, points to the central issues and paradoxes in women's articulation, in her path breaking essay, "Can the subaltern speak." What Spivak implies is that Dalit women do not have a voice as they have no cultural visibility or control over their representation and if a Dalit woman writes in English, she is no longer the subaltern. Spivak's point is that the doubly silenced subaltern woman is always spoken for and never speaks. She implores the just colonial female intellectuals to question this silencing of the subaltern women and not merely make an attempt to give her voice. Dalit women writers in the context of Spivak's argument are women who are truly 'the speaking subaltern'. This study has examined the voices, techniques, gestures, and strategies of subaltern speech. Spivak is apprehensive about the postcolonial scholars repeating the colonial and orientalist proxies of 'speaking for' the powerless. Dalit women writers Baby Kamble and Bama seem to have understood this textual control and their writings show the dangers of appropriating their voices by imposing a collective homogeneous identity and speech upon them. Their voices, one may assume, protest against cultural erasure. This study also focuses on Dalit women's strategies of resisting what they are spoken for.

Baby Kamble is from Paithan, a small town in Satara District of Maharashtra. She was inspired by the Dalit Movement lead by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. She was involved in Dalit activism from a very

young age. Eventually she also established residential school for socially backward students in Nimbure. Her memoirs *Jina Amucha* (first serialized in 1982 in *Stree* and published as a book in 1986) is the Marathi original, translated into English as *The Prisons We Broke*. *Jina Amucha* has been translated into many languages such as Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, French, and Spanish. It is probably the first autobiography by a Dalit woman in any Indian language. Her autobiography is largely a recollection of life as a Mahar, a socially backward community in Maharashtra. It provides a graphic picture of the oppressive effects of casteism and patriarchy of the Indian society. It also documents the festivals, rituals, superstitions and the memories of hardships that conditioned the lives of Mahar women. *The Prisons We Broke*, as an autobiography, also brings to the fore identities and subjectivities of Mahar women. It is reckoned today as a text that has crossed its formal boundaries to become a narrative, auto-ethnography, a feminist critique, a sociological record, a historical document and a political treatise. In its scope, Kamble's work is a hard hitting memoir of a marginalized community.

Even when it reads as a memoir, *The Prisons We Broke* traces the history of Mahar community's oppression. It could also be taken as a record of the self-assertive politics of Mahar women that also combines self expressions and Dalit feminist critique of patriarchy. Kamble unpacks, in an apparently unsophisticated style, the records of how caste and patriarchy conspire to form exploitative politics against women. The autobiographical tone becomes a mask to write a commentary on casteism and gender bias.

*The Prisons We Broke* opens with Kamble's memories of her childhood –of how she was brought up in her grand-parents home as it was a practice among the poor to allow the parents to work by leaving the kids in another village in the custody of grand-parents. The very first statement of the narrative is an indication of a deprivation and it emphasizes poverty that compels *Mahars* to leave their children elsewhere:

“Children love their grandparent's home. At least it used to be so forty-five years ago. Besides, in those days, most children were born in their maternal grandparent's home. Growing up in the grandparent's home was like in the cool shelter of love. Naturally, children would prefer their grandparent's home to that of their own parent's.” (Kamble 2009, 1)

In all most a bare style Kamble tells that grand-parents' home is the only shelter of love the under privileged children get in India. She also recollects a part of the family story that shows her mother had a series of miscarriages and the cases of infant mortality in the family. All these memories indicate malnutrition in the family: “My *aai* gave birth to three daughters after him, but none of them survived for more than two or three years, then, a long time, *Aai* did not conceive” (Kamble 2009, 1). These statements indicate the cruel face of exploitation of Mahar women at the physical level by forcing pregnancy on weak ones.

Kamble's childhoods memories also centre on the superstitions running in the family. Their beliefs in the Goddess *Kalubai* and the act of burying a hen in place of a child are indicative of the ways of poor people

coming to terms with personal tragedies. Kamble's father, despite being a labour contractor, is a picture of a poor man. While examining her father's work Kamble explain how the lives of Mahars depended on the availability of work. On the one hand her father emerges as a sensitive individual who is very generous to his workers and on the other hand, he locks her mother in and there by proving he is a male chauvinist. This also shows how Dalit women occupy a marginal space within the community.

All that Kamble remembers about her childhood is the close association with the working -class of the contract labourers. These memories vividly present the poverty of these people:

When work on the canal started, laborers got paid at the rate of one cowry shell per basket of soil removed. For carrying fifty baskets of soil, fifty cowries would be paid. Five cowries fetched one ganda, that is, one pai. Five pais made a paise. So a Laborer could make ten paise every day. Somehow managed to survive on that meager amount so long as there was work (Kamble 2009, 3)

Kamble's narrative has at its focus the Maharwada, the dwelling place of Mahars in Virgaon. The very description of Maharwada reveals the poor living conditions of a community. It also opens up a deplorable lifestyle which is otherwise unknown to the caste Hindus:

The walls were nothing but stones arranged vertically with some mud coating. They were tiny huts really. There would be a big clay pot with a small mouth kept at the entrance for drinking water. The pot was called *keli*. The mouth would be covered with a broken coconut shell that also served as a cup for drinking water. It had three holes at the bottom. One had to pour water into the coconut shell or, and blocking the holes with one's finger, hastily empty the shell into one's mouth. (Kamble 2009,7)

Like the houses which are neglected, the bodies of the Dalit are too unattended. The dismal living conditions forced them to ignore the standard of hygiene. Baby Kamble recollects how poverty would force them to neglect health and hygiene. While describing the hair of Dalit women, she emphasizes, how the lack of basic comforts leads to shabbiness:

The thick tangles of hair would be infested with lice and coated with lice eggs. Children looked as if they had rolled in mud, snot dripping from their noses in green gooey lines. If one were to use a figure of speech, their noses were like leaky taps of snot. Their bodies would be completely bare without a stitch on them. Each hut contained at least eight to ten such kids; some even had fifteen to twenty: (Kamble 2009, 8)

*The Prisons We Broke* is not just a description of a lower caste woman's life but a re-articulation of untouchability and the evils of *varna* system. Re-articulation, in literature and culture, is a technique by which the expressions and images used in dominant/hegemonic discourses are repeated ironically in the minority/marginalized discourse as parody or ventriloquism. Re-articulation might look like clichéd expressions but in reality they condemn the power structures which use them. The following extract from the third chapter is a good specimen of re-articulation:

We never rebelled against you, did we? We did not perform Namaz when you worshipped, did we? You considered the cow holy; we never insulted her, did we? We obeyed every diktat of your Hindu religion; we followed all your traditions – why did you single us out for your contempt? We were the people who lived in your house, yet we dared not drink even a drop of water there. (Kamble 2009, 38)

Fresh food is a dream in the lives of Dalit women and children. Kamble's memories have sensory details about rotting food: "We either have to remain hungry or eat rotten food." (Kamble 2009, 39)

The Mahar girls decide to discard all Gods and they also force their way into a temple. Their intention is to pollute the premise of God and to defy the norms of Brahmanism and untouchability. She observes: "Yes, I will never ever think of that god again in my life. Nor will I ever climb the steps of a temple again. I can very well do without god's thank you very much!" (Kamble 2009, 132)

Kamble also appreciates Dr. Ambedkar's vision of social reforms. She believes that it is necessary for the Dalit to improve their economic condition if they have to improve their social status. She gives credit to Ambedkar for having created Dalit unity in rural Maharashtra. She describes how it was achieved in 1938:

We were never out of Ambedkar's movement. I had devoted myself totally to the movement. As long as Baba lived, the community at Phaltan remained united. He was our sole protector. Without him, the world was nothing, a big zero. Nobody in the community was big or small. All were children of Bhimaai. (Kamble 2009, 134)

Kamble spells out the benefits of education, self-empowerment, employment, knowledge, and dignity with a great sense of pride. She explains how her investment in her children's education had changed their fortune:

Inspired by Ambedkar's thoughts, I sent my children to school. My eldest son, Sham, has done M.Sc. in Agriculture and has an L.L.M. He has become a regional manager in the Bank of India. My second son, Umakant, has done his B.A. and is a clerk in the Bank of India, his

wife, Manda, is a teacher. Our third son, Chandan, is an officer in the government dairy, his wife, is also a teacher. (Kamble 2009, 134)

Kamble's efforts in educating the members of her community made her the President of Mahatma Phule Dnyan Vikas Prasarak Sanstha, which provide provision for 200 children to complete their education. She explains the founding principles of this institute:

Sheel, pradnya, and karuna have been the founding principles of my life. What else does this humble servant of Bhim want when she has these three jewels in her possession? When one has this wealth, what does the ordinary world matter? (Kamble 2009, 135)

These are also the final words of Kamble's autobiography, they mark the emergence of hope and activism and they are life-affirming. Thus the life sketch of Baby Kamble ends with a vision of future – Dalit marching ahead in society with the help of education, self reliance and hard work. She calls herself a follower of Dr. Ambedkar and has bound to the principles of Buddhism. According to Kamble Lord Buddha and Dr.

**There are no sources in the current document.** Ambedkar will continue to be the guiding principles in the life of Dalit. By writing her life, Baby Kamble has possibly brought into print the untold stories and experiences of millions of the marginalized. This is truly an articulation of aesthetic /political journey of a female subaltern from the local to global.

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