

The Autobiographical act of Resistance: Resistance & Resilience in the Prisons we Broke

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Abstract

*This paper analyses resistance and resilience in *The Prisons We Broke*, an autobiography by Baby Kamble, one of the first Indian Dalit women writers. It studies the intersectional challenges faced by Dalit women in India and examines how the social conventions reinvigorate patriarchal ideologies and interpellate women into a social system that normalizes male hegemony.*

The paper also intends to place the text in the larger context of the rise of Dalit resistance and resilience under the influence of socio-cultural movements. It concludes that autobiographical narration is a significant tool of resistance that the Dalit women adopt to assert their identity and resist hegemonic power structures.

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Introduction

Voices from the margins have been silenced by hegemonic discourses since time immemorial. The marginalized have relied upon various means to resist oppression and silencing. Autobiographical narration constitutes one of the significant measures adopted by the oppressed to regain their voices and assert their identities. Self-representation is a political act of self-assertion for the marginalized.

The canonical conceptions about autobiography underpinned the centrality of conventional power structures. It usually represented the lives of Western, middle-class- male individuals. Autobiographical writings used to be a celebration of masculine values and the lives of great men. As observed by Laura Marcus, Autobiography was conceived as a genre that belongs to people of ‘lofty reputation’ or people who have something ‘of historical importance’ to say (Anderson 21). However, with the passage of time and the democratization of the world, self-representative narratives became more popular. With the ideological revolutions of Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis, the notions of centrality were challenged. Marxist studies questioned the class hierarchies and Freudian psychoanalysis questioned the rationality of the human self. Life narratives from the margins of society started to acquire significant critical attention. Contemporary academia provides sufficient attention to self-represented writings from the margins.

The evolution of Dalit autobiographies marks such a transition in Indian literature. Dalit writing emerged as a significant form of literature in Maharashtra (a state in India) in the 1960s. The word Dalit refers to ‘ground-down depressed’. The word was first used by Dr. Ambedkar to refer to the marginalized condition of the lower caste under Brahmanical hegemony. The burgeoning of Dalit writings was an outcome of the awareness of their oppressed condition. It reflects the expression of their quest for a life of dignity based on humanist and egalitarian values.

The current paper has its focus on the autobiography, *The Prisons We Broke*, the first autobiography by a Dalit woman. The paper analyses the discourse of trauma, resistance and resilience in autobiography. The paper observes that the autobiography may be categorised as a testimonio as it bears witness to the collective experiences of torture. The autobiography depicts the trauma experienced by the Dalit women who face multiple levels of marginalization under class, caste, and patriarchy. The socio-cultural oppression faced by the Dalit women creates a rupture in their psyche. Their perception of the world is influenced by traumatic experiences that they experienced in their youth. The internalization of the discourse of male hegemony normalizes the suppression of women. It delves into the intricate aspects of the Indian family where women often end up being oppressors of their own gender.

The paper also traces the resilience of Indian Dalit women despite the traumatic experiences suffered by them. The autobiography maps the discourse of resistance within the Dalit communities and the influence of Ambedkar¹ in the emancipation of the subalterns in India. The paper further observes that Indian Dalit women utilize autobiographical narration as a significant tool to disseminate their experiences of trauma to a wider audience. The act of narration in the autobiography bears witness to the individual as well as collective experiences of torture undergone by the Dalit community. It provides wider visibility to the experiences of torture and also infuses² ‘empathetic unsettlement’ among the readers who become secondary witnesses to the accounts of trauma narrated. The paper analyses *The Prisons We Broke* as a pioneer in self-represented narratives by Dalit women and examines how the publication of this autobiography resulted in the burgeoning of feminist consciousness among Dalit women in India.

The Prisons we broke as a testimony to the collective experiences of oppression.

The autobiography, *The Prisons We Broke* is a poignant account of Dalit women’s experiences in India by Baby Kamble. The autobiography, titled as ‘Jina Amucha’ was originally written in Marathi and was serialised in Pune Women’s magazine called ‘Sthree’ in 1982. The autobiography was translated into English in 2008 by Maya Pandit. The autobiography holds a significant status as the first autobiography written by a Dalit woman in India. It depicts the predicament of individuals caught between multiple forms of marginalization. It revised the canonical traditions of Indian literature and paved the way for a new tradition of resistance in the Indian literary sphere.

It may be argued that this autobiography belongs to the tradition of ‘testimonio narratives’ that document the collective experience of victimhood and subalternity through personal narratives. John Beverley defines a testimonio as “A novel, or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet, (that is printed, opposed to acoustic) form, told in first person, who is the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a ‘life’ or a significant life experience.” (Beverley 4). He further observes that it should “involve an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, and so on, implicated in the act of narration itself” (14).

Kamble’s autobiography stands as a testimony to the oppression suffered by her community. She has declared that the suffering of her community has been more significant to her than her individual suffering. According to her, her autobiographical account is not merely personal but is the autobiography of her entire community. To quote her,

“Anyway, for me, the suffering of my community has always been more important than my own individual suffering. I have identified myself completely with my people. And therefore *Jina Amucha* (The Prisons We Broke) was the autobiography of my entire community” (Kamble 150)

Kamble belonged to the Mahar community which was one of the most marginalised communities in Maharashtra. The testimonio serves as a representative voice of the oppressed women in the Mahar community.

The autobiography starts with a portrayal of the daily life experiences of the Mahar women. The narrative intertwines intricate issues of caste, class, and gender and highlights the intersectional challenges faced by the Dalit women in India. It vividly describes the atrocities and traumatic experiences that the Dalit women had to endure in their daily lives. The detailed description of the traditional rituals and practices reveals the historical oppression of the Dalits under hegemonic Brahmanism. As observed by her, the Dalits were stereotypically made to accept their lot as a pre-determined destiny and live as subordinate humans under Brahmanical Hinduism. Despite being oppressed by Brahmanical patriarchy, the people in the community steadfastly adhered to Hinduism.

The Dalit women in India, lacked agency to represent themselves as they were perpetually oppressed by manifold forms of power. The available representations were mediated by men and the media. *The Prisons We Broke* holds a historically significant status as the first authentic representation of Dalit women’s experiences. It bears witness to the experiences of torture suffered by the Dalit women in India.

Intersectional oppression of Dalit women.

Ever since the emergence of Dalit feminism, it has been addressing the intersectional challenges faced by Dalit women in India. This mainly includes caste-based oppression under upper castes, class-based oppression under higher-class landlords, and patriarchal oppression under male hegemony within and outside the families.

Caste-based marginalization of Dalit women.

Caste has been a specific feature of Hinduism that legitimates discrimination based on birth in a particular community. Ambedkar identifies caste as the basic feature of Hinduism. Kamble’s description of caste-based oppression gives an insider’s perspective on the extent of discrimination under the caste system in Maharashtra. Religion was used as a convenient means to legitimize the oppression of the underclass. Despite being oppressed under Brahmanical hegemony, the Mahar community blindly believed in Hinduism. They had to pay the Brahmin priests for the religious ceremonies. However, they were not allowed to touch or pollute the priestly class. Many of the religious rituals that were conceived to be divine

considered the Dalits as slaves to a higher caste. They utilized the manual labour of the Dalits and made them toil for the religious ceremonies, but considered them polluted and kept them away from the core rituals. The residential areas were segregated on the basis of castes. Dalits were prohibited from residing or entering the quarters reserved for the higher castes. Kamble critically exposes the Brahminic hypocrisy that utilized Dalits as slaves yet considered them to be untouchables.

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. For our poor helpless women, the haldi-kumkum in their tiny boxes was more important than even a mine full of jewels. 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. (Kamble 30)

This description of Kamble reveals the predicament of Dalit communities who desperately longed for acceptance in the religious system which disregarded them as infra-humans. Kamble points out that “generation after generation wasted away in the senseless worship of stones, in utter misery” (Kamble 24). It is evident that the majority of the Dalits internalised caste-based stereotypes that discriminated against them from others. Their strong adherence to institutionalised religion legitimised the most irrational form of discrimination and made it unquestionable.

Economic marginalisation of Dalit women.

Deprived in terms of economic means, the Dalit community faced severe class subjugation. Kamble gives a clear picture of the extreme poverty faced by the people in the community. They barely had anything to eat. Kamble observes that “The Mahar Wada symbolised utter poverty and total destitution. Epidemics, especially cholera and plague, were extremely fond of the Mahars. A couple of Mahars would die like flies every day. Today this family, tomorrow the next one” (Kamble 84). It was common among the people to die of poverty and epidemics. They were unable to afford modern medical facilities and often relied upon superstitious medical practices and ‘Godmen’ to treat diseases. Lack of education made them unfit for skilled regular jobs. They lacked the capital to start entrepreneurial endeavours.

Education was the privilege of the higher caste. People belonging to the lower caste were restricted from attending public schools attended by the higher caste. Even if they managed to get admission to public schools, they were made to suffer utter humiliation and ill-treatment by the school authorities and fellow students who belonged to the higher castes.

Girls who belonged to the lower caste communities hardly got opportunities to get educated. The lower caste communities considered it to be an unnecessary

expense to educate girls in their community. Kamble was forced to discontinue her education in the fourth grade. Apart from the economic difficulties, the dictums set by the patriarchal society considered education as an unnecessary expense for young girls. Marriage was considered as ultimate destiny for girls.

The gendered experience of marginalization finds strong expression in Kamble's autobiography. Being marginalized by gender, caste, and class, they lived a life of extreme misery. As in all patriarchal communities, women in the Mahar community had no voice in making any decisions in their lives. They had to obey the orders of the men in the family. The following section in the paper attempts to analyze the trauma imposed by patriarchy and social conventions in the life of women as represented in the autobiography.

Gendered Marginalisation of Dalit Women and Trauma of torture under Patriarchy.

Gender has been the most significant marker of marginalization for the Dalit women. As observed by Simone De Beauvoir, one is not born but made as a woman by societal stereotypes. Kamble's autobiography gives a clear description of the gendered discrimination experienced by the girls in the Mahar community. The institutionalized oppression based on gender doomed them to a life of trauma and misery forever.

Women's lives were burdened with a lot of domestic responsibilities. Marriage was a chaotic event that involved a lot of expense for the bride's family. Even when they were struggling to make ends meet, they had to make money to perform the rituals associated with marriage. Kamble reveals that "for the girl, marriage meant nothing but calamity" (Kamble 95). Often, the young girls were married at tender ages, even before attaining puberty. As per the patrilocal traditions, young girls had to leave their maiden homes and join their husband's family. Irrespective of their tender age, married young girls were made to toil by all means. They were expected to take up domestic responsibilities with immediate effect. It was expected that the newlywed brides should possess excellent culinary skills. If she doesn't meet the expectations of the bridegroom's family, it could lead to criticism or blame directed at her family for not teaching her this skill.

Marriage was completely a family affair and the individuals involved in it were given the least rights to make any decisions about their lives. Kamble observes that the newlywed couple was perpetually under the surveillance of the bridegroom's mother. She criticizes the undue influence of the joint family on the private lives of newly married couples. Mothers-in-law subjected the young brides to severe oppression. Newly married girls were treated as slaves in their husband's house.

Often, the mothers-in-law used to influence their sons by raising accusations against the daughters-in-law. Men considered it a matter of pride to keep their wives under control. They were subjected to inhuman domestic abuse by the husband's family.

Being married at a young age, the girls were often unprepared to get adjust to conjugal and domestic life. Kamble reveals that marital rape was quite rampant. Girls who were married at a young age were merely considered as objects to satisfy the sexual pleasure of men and to serve as slaves to the husband's family. Unable to bear with the torture, women used to run away to their own homes. Kamble reveals that the torture went to such an extent that the husbands used to chop their noses off and abandon their wives. The men used to remarry after this and the women were dragged into an ill-fate. It is stated that this practice was rampant until the 1940s.

The experience of motherhood is another significant aspect discussed in the autobiography. Being married at tender ages, the women were forced into early motherhood. Motherhood used to be a traumatic experience for the young women. Extreme poverty and lack of medical assistance made motherhood a nightmare for the women. As observed by Kamble, the stomach requires soft and light food after delivery. However, the Mahars couldn't afford such food. The poor women would just tie up their stomachs tightly and lie down on rags to forget the pain of post-partum (Kamble 65). Kamble gives a graphic account of the traumatic experiences undergone by new mothers. They lacked the financial means to afford medical facilities. Delivery used to take place at home under the supervision of midwives. Kamble observes:

Actually, the ordeal would begin from the time the labour pains set in. In the first place, the girl generally would be very young as all girls were married off at a very tender age. Obviously, they were physically quite underdeveloped at the time of their first pregnancy. The labour pains would continue for quite a long time, sometimes for even three or four days. The whole of the maharaja, in fact, would gather around the house. Women in any case did not have much work to do at home so they would simply flock to the house where a delivery was taking place. The ignorant midwives would keep thrusting their hands into the poor girl's vagina to see how far the baby had progressed. Invariably, the vagina would get swollen, obstructing the baby's path. The girl could overcome all obstacles and have a safe delivery only if her luck held strong! It was a battle with death" (Kamble 66).

This graphic description of pregnancy and childbirth reveals the torture undergone by young girls who were forced into marriage and motherhood at a young age. Marriage and motherhood were considered to be the major milestones in the life of a woman as per the strictures of traditional society. However, as revealed in the

autobiography, despite all the praise and accolades, these institutions integrate women into a system of suffering and subordination. As observed by Simone de Beauvoir, "Marriage is a destiny offered to a woman traditionally by the society." (Beauvoir 415). The experiences narrated in the autobiography reveal how a woman's destiny was limited to marriage and maternity. The traditional society assumes that "It is in maternity that woman fulfils her psychological destiny." (Beauvoir 467). Marriage and motherhood propel young girls into early adulthood. They are denied any opportunity to develop themselves as individuals capable of making decisions about their lives.

Psychological Impact of patriarchal oppression upon women.

It is observed that girls in the Mahar community were married at very young ages, even before attaining puberty. The trauma inflicted upon their psyche negatively affects the emotional organization of their self and perception of the external world. This influences the entire life cycle of the women. Significant studies have been made about the psychological impact of oppression on the oppressed. Social Cognitive Theory proposed by Albert Bandura emphasizes that individual behaviour is influenced by social influences and past experiences. The theory observes that one's past experience influences their social behaviour. Thus, the experiences of discrimination and devaluation influence the self-perception and self-efficacy of an individual. Long-term oppression can result in the internalization of oppressive ideas, self-blame, shame, and guilt. (Rao 2003)

Kamble's autobiography reveals that women within the family perpetuated the oppression of their gender. Kamble asserts that the mothers-in-law were highly oppressive to the new brides. They perpetuated oppression upon their daughters-in-law. They used to make the daughters-in-law be thrashed by their sons. The violence went to such an extent that men used to chop off the noses and abandon their wives on grounds of moral judgments proposed by the mothers-in-law.

It is significant to ponder over the psychological reasons behind the perpetuation of self-stereotypes among women which often inspires domestic abuses that the mothers-in-law impose upon the daughters-in-law. This reveals that the oppression of women was not merely a result of patriarchal subjugation. The elderly women in households exercised control over the women in the family to maintain the patriarchal order in the households and seek revenge for the oppression that they had faced in their lives.

The autobiographical narratives by Dalit women reveal that child marriage was a rampant practice among Dalit women in India from time immemorial. Thus, the mothers-in-law were also married at very young ages when they lacked the emotional and physical maturity to adapt themselves to married life. From their comfort zones,

they were relocated to a different house where they were burdened with numerous responsibilities. The experiences were often traumatic to young girls. Their dreams and aspirations ended with marriage and they were forced into a life of domesticity thereafter. The cultural stereotypes imposed by patriarchy made them believe that women are inherently inferior to men. Apart from this, the traumatic experiences suffered by them as young brides create a sense of revenge in them. This makes them arrive at a fallacious assumption that the newlywed brides deserve similar treatment. The extreme experiences of torture affect their perception of the world around them. This often reflects in the unjust treatment of their future daughters-in-law.

The cultural practice of Patri localism, wherein the bride moves into the bridegroom's family after marriage adds to the misery of women. This adds to the dominance that mothers-in-law have in the family. It may be observed that the older women oppress their younger counterparts to counter the oppression that they faced as young women and to reclaim their power. Thus, the trauma imposed upon women through societal stereotypes results in the perpetuation of the oppression of women.

The women who have undergone severe physical and psychological abuse are deprived of independence and individuality. Years of oppression lead them to internalise oppression. Social justice theory observes that marginalised groups internalise oppression as a result of the perpetuation of oppressive ideas. They assimilate with the oppressive ideas propagated by the oppressor and ultimately become perpetrators of self-stereotypes. The systemic abuse under patriarchy systematically dehumanizes them and they unknowingly become partakers in the oppression of their own creed. It requires meticulous effort and resilience for the women to come out of the systemic abuse imposed upon them.

It is significant to note that the autobiography doesn't merely narrate the experiences of torture undergone by the Mahar women but also documents their story of emancipation through years of struggle and resistance. The following section intends to examine the resistance and resilience of Dalit women despite oppressive circumstances.

Representation of Dalit Resistance and Empowerment in the Autobiography.

The autobiography *The Prisons We Broke* may be read as a literary documentation of the Dalit struggle towards progress through resistance and empowerment. It maps the history of Dalit resistance and emancipation in India. As mentioned in the introduction of the text,

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. There exists a long Marathi tradition of protest writing against the caste system. Since the nineteenth century, radical social reformers like Mahatma

Phule and Shahu Maharaj had raised their voice against the atrocities of the Brahmin-dominated caste system. It was Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar who provided the intellectual and ideological foundations for a sustained critique of the caste system. Under his leadership, Dalit protest acquired the form and force of a militant, political movement and challenged the very foundation of varnashrama dharma—the Brahminical creed that has sanctioned and perpetuated the oppression of Dalits (Kamble 11)

Baby Kamble's autobiography marks a significant moment in the history of Dalit emancipation. Being deprived of human rights and the basic necessities of life, the Dalit communities in India have been struggling under poverty and impoverishment. As observed by Ruaman Sutradhar, the Dalit movement is a social revolution aimed at social change, replacing age-old hierarchical Indian society and is based on the democratic ideals of liberty, equality, and social justice. Sutradhar further observes that the socio-cultural exclusion, economic deprivation, and political exploitation of centuries led the Dalits to break out of the age-old prejudices. They started to protest with the help of literature, or by forming organizations like the Dalit Panther Movement.

The publication of the Marathi fortnightly 'Bahiskrit Bharat' and weekly 'Janta' in Marathi by Ambedkar revolutionized the Dalit struggle for equality. He started the 'Samaj Samta Sang' to advocate social equality among the Dalits and caste Hindus. The proliferation of Dalit writings was significant in the empowerment of the Dalit communities. The Dalit literary movement in India had its origin in the Marathi literature. Dadawala observes that Dalit writings were in vogue even before the 1960s. Writers like Baburao Bagul, Bandhu Madhav, Sankara Rao Kharat, Narayan Surve, and Anna Bhahu Sathe used to express Dalit concerns in their writings.

Being marginalized in multiple forms, the women of Dalit communities faced many hurdles in their journey to progress. In 1928, a women's association was founded in Bombay with Ramabai Ambedkar as its president. Many attempts were made by the leaders to organize women in Dalit communities and empower them to fight for their rights. The impact of such social emancipation is evident in the writings of Dalit women.

Kamble's poignant account can be seen as a significant act of resistance against the Brahmanical hegemony. Her autobiography needs to be read as a testimonio that expresses the collective resistance of women in Dalit communities. She offers a sharp criticism of the hypocritical values followed in Hinduism. Kamble describes how the Ambedkarite movement caused an apocalyptic change in the Dalit consciousness of Maharashtra. Her voice of resistance reflects the spirit of resistance

imbued by the value of Ambedkar's. She writes that the Mahar Chawdi (the meeting place of the Mahar settlement) slowly changed into a space where people assembled and discussed Ambedkar's."The chawdi resounded with people ceaselessly debating these issues... Gradually the wind of Ambedkar's thoughts turned into a whirlwind. Everybody began to understand, argue, and consider (Kamble68-69). This reveals how the spirit of resistance developed among the Dalit communities.

Kamble also traces the changes in the women of the Mahar community across different periods. The women who were forced to limit themselves within the four walls of the house slowly emerged as powerful women who started to question the denial of human rights to them. Kamble's evolution as a woman who dares to speak is a reflection of this. The change seen among the women is a reflection of the influence of Dr. Ambedkar who declared that "measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress that the women have achieved".

The autobiography documents several significant acts of resistance adopted by the community under the influence of Ambedkar. The community's decision to give up the practice of inviting Brahmin priests to solemnize the Mahar marriage marks a significant aspect of Dalit empowerment. As seen at the beginning of the autobiography, the Mahar community blindly believed in Hinduism and followed all the principles religiously. Brahmin priests used to be invited to the marriage.

A Brahmin priest would be invited to solemnize the marriage. He would stand at a distance for fear of pollution, but he would never make any compromises dakshina! That he took away without any fear of pollution. Apart from the Dakshina money, he was also required to be given about two kilos of channa dal, one-and-a-half kilos of rice, three kilos of wheat, and a huge plateful of jaggery (Kamble 92).

This traditional practice was changed by the influence of Ambedkar who proclaimed that marriages should follow the Gandharva system which doesn't require solemnization by a Brahmin priest. This was a monumental step in the emancipation of the Dalit communities. The decision to reform one of the most fundamental religious practices was a significant political act of resistance.

Kamble exposes the hypocritical values of Hinduism and publicly renounces the rituals of Hinduism. Even though she doesn't worship Ambedkar under any religious tenet, she considers him as a divine presence in her life. According to Kamble, whatever she was able to do was due to the influence of Baba and she is ever grateful to him. The autobiography questions the tenets of religion that discriminate against the Dalit communities. Kamble's harsh criticism of the religious practices reveals the trajectory of change among the Dalit communities. The community which was highly religious once started to question many of the unjust

practices that were followed in the name of religion. This reflects the enlightenment among the members of the community due to the influence of Ambedkar.

Conclusion

It may be concluded that Baby Kamble's autobiography gave birth to a tradition of resistance within the most exploited community. Being marginalized by multiple forms of oppression, their voices were often silenced. They lacked the agency to speak up for themselves. Kamble's autobiography stands out as a pioneer of self-represented narratives among Dalit women.

Her autobiography can be rightly placed in the tradition of testimonio narratives that bear witness to the individual and collective experiences of torture. It provides wider visibility to the traumatic experiences of Dalit women. This creates empathetic unsettlement among the readers who become secondary witnesses to the experiences of torture narrated in the book. The autobiography also serves as a documentation of the history of Dalit emancipation in India. It highlights the significance of Dr. BR Ambedkar who played the most significant role in emancipating the backward classes and raising their lives from the clutches of poverty and discrimination.

Kamble utilizes narration as a significant instrument of resistance. As observed by Margot Badran, "Much of women's early practice of autobiography can be seen as a feminist act of assertion helping to shatter the complicity with patriarchal domination that has been affected through women's enforced invisibility and silence.... A woman, speaking about her own life constituted a form of shedding of the patriarchal surrogate voice" (Badran 97). Kamble unapologetically expresses the concerns of the Dalit women and fights for their emancipation. It may be observed that Baby Kamble represents the spirit of resistance and resilience of Mahar women. Her autobiography bears witness to the journey of Dalit women from being silent victims of oppression to strong women who reclaim their dignity and identity. Kamble utilises narration as a significant political act of self-assertion. The publication of her autobiography has resulted in the burgeoning of feminist consciousness in Indian literature and has paved the way for a new tradition of resistance writing.

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