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**METHODOLOGICAL EXCLUSIVISM AND ITS PREVALENCE IN DALIT NARRATIVES: A STUDY OF BABY KAMBLE'S *THE PRISONS WE BROKE***

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**Abstract:** The Dalit concept of God is intimately related to their living experiences. Unlike the traditional portrayal of the Hindu God as a believer in dharma, the Dalit God is not some dominating figure but one who stands with the marginalized communities sharing in their experiences of suffering and oppression. The significance of Dalit Christian theology identified as countering the dominant Brahmanical theology has been analyzed through the phenomenon of methodological exclusivism. Originally studied with reference to the Christian idea of God, this paper attempted to use this phenomenon to portray the interpretation of God by Mahar communities. It looks closely on the three modes of methodological exclusivism which identifies the extent to which each mode of knowledge is connected to the experience of Dalits. For this purpose, it has addressed the notion of 'God possession' in the Mahar community of Maharashtra as narrated by Baby Kamble in *The Prisons We Broke*.

**Keywords:** Theology, Methodological Exclusivism, Deconstruction, Dalit, Possession

The controversy that Dalit literature was constructed on social activism is gathering momentum as the specific history of margins within the larger dominant history is gradually being unfolded. The personal space to identify themselves as Dalits and locating their presence in an unrecognized history is one of the many prominent factors of self expression. The other factor of no less significance is the consistent presence of the figure of Ambedkar in most life narratives (especially from those of Maharashtra). The presence of 'Bhim' and his formulated ideology is much more than a means of justifying a struggle for self-assertion. The priority of Dalits, as before, is to deconstruct the casteist system of a newly emerging feudal democracy in post-independent India. As Kancha Ilaiah stated (quoted from Raj Kumar):

"Parliamentary democracy in essence became brahminical democracy. Within no time the colonial bureaucracy was transformed into a brahminical bureaucracy. The same brahminical forces transformed themselves to suit an emerging global capitalism...Their anglicization did

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not undermine their casteized (casteist) authoritarianism.” (37)

Hindu *shastras* have laid the foundation of caste and it is changing its strategies in order to continue to remain the dominant voice behind India’s place in globalization. While deconstructing traditional Hinduism by Dalit activists was one way to usher themselves into the mainstream, this has never been the sole means of rejuvenation. To represent an identity and be recognized as oppressed standing in a fight against caste hegemony, it has also been necessary to demarcate themselves and their community from the existing society. They needed to stand apart with the ideology born of their experiences.

This also includes a form of religious dissension that was materialized when Ambedkar, following the Poona Pact, decided to break apart from Hinduism altogether and in 1956 embraced Buddhism with a large group of followers. The consequence of this move was adding to the consciousness of their exploitation and the need not just to break a system but to retain a voice that would recognize them as separate. Brahminical faith had been the means of Dalit oppression but ironically faith itself could be a means of their psychological liberation. Jasbir Jain noted that Dalit narratives “expresses both a conscious and an unconscious need to reclaim their myths, histories and culture, to record the lost experiences that have

sustained them and to bring out their vitality” (Abraham and Barak 111). He stresses this point by providing an analysis of G. Kalyana Rao’s *Untouchable Spring* which is a testimony of Dalits in Andhra Pradesh.

The Mala and Madiga communities were persecuted in their every attempt to gain self-respect and dignity. Moreover, the caste discrimination was not something that was observed only by the Hindus. It was something observed by these communities against one another equally strongly. The justification of their wretched existence was confined to the myth of Kamadhenu regarded as the origin of Dalits in Andhra Pradesh. Kamadhenu was the cow whose milk was suffused with honey. Chennai, the cowherd, was believed to have expressed his desire to drink the milk hearing which Kamadhenu died. Therefore, one Jambavanta was told to move the cow, cut and divide her, but cook only a single part. However, Jambavanta cooked the entire meat and Chennai made matters worse by picking up a piece from the ground and then placing it in the cooking pot. Therefore, Jambavanta’s children became Madigas and Chennai’s children became Malas. They were condemned to spend their lives in Kaliyug moving and eating dead meat (113). Such fictive myths were explained to be the reason behind such discrimination and condition of their lives.

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Subverting a branded identity is more than just deconstructing oppressive myths and denying Hindu Gods. It indicates replacing conventional notions with a culture that would explicate Dalits themselves and their life worlds. This does not mean attempts made by outcastes to sanskritize themselves into the caste hierarchy. To them, emancipation involves creating a new myth, a new God or reinterpreting the existing ones that would at once be removed from the roots Brahmanism and be connected to their lives in the margins. Referring to the Matua faith in West Bengal, Sipra Mukherjee said that its emergence “brings to those dominated and suppressed by the earlier religion/society, an alternative worldview that gives them access to prestige and dignity” (143) This makes the emergence and acceptance of a new faith in a new God ‘not unrelated to the process of struggle between dominant and subordinate groups’ (Chatterjee 171). She justly asserted that Dalit writers attempt at connecting “their faith, their literature and the political presence they command in present times” (142). So how exactly do Dalits conceptualize their faith and their Gods? How far is this new religion and belief in a God related to their experience of suffering? This paper shall attempt to address these questions by analyzing the contemporary notion of Dalit theology and the concept of methodological exclusivism.

Theologians earlier attributed the phrase ‘Dalit’ to mean broken and crushed existence. This has been re-signified now to mean a consciousness of broken life. Conversion to other religion such as Buddhism or Christianity was a result of this consciousness. Dalit theology, much like Dalit lives, is set against the backdrop of an unjust society and unequal power structure existing between the dominant and dominated discourse. In this context, Sathianathan Clarke asserts the need of such theology to be on guard against being homogenized by the dominant traditional theology or what he calls as the ‘elite theology’ (Clarke, Manchala and Peacock 20). Referring to a distinctiveness of Christian Dalit theology, Arvind P. Nirmal asserted:

“I would say that a Christian Dalit theology will be produced by dalits. It will be based on their own dalit experiences, their own sufferings, their own aspirations and their own hope... It will represent a radical discontinuity with the classical Indian Christian Theology of the Brahmanic tradition.” (Nirmal 58 – 59)

He referred to Dalit theology as a ‘counter theology’ that stays both separate and challenges the classical Indian Christian Theology. The Brahminical tradition heralded God as one who formulated the principle of caste, meted out the caste duties as per hierarchical standard

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and presiding over the laws of dharma. Ambedkar codified the Hindu structure as given in the *Purusha Sukta*, the tenth mandala of Rig Veda. The breaking of Brahman's body into the popularly known *chaturvarna* system was something unique for which it stands contrast to other theologies as well as the rest of Rig Veda. He stated that *Purusha Sukta* attempted at explaining the origin of classes in Aryan society. This was its main concern for which it deviated from the otherwise corresponding Old Testament which only explains the creation of man (Ambedkar 8).

The conception of God in classical Indian Christian theology got aligned with Brahmanism for which appropriations of discriminations seeped into Churches as well. The institutional subjugation was explicated by Bama in her autobiography *Karukku*. During her time in a boarding school as a nun, she witnessed the teachings of god adhering strictly to His nature as gentle, humble, patient and one who forgives sinners. There was never the preaching of God as someone righteous, as one who opposes falsehood and inequality. Her assertion of the huge difference 'between this Jesus and the Jesus who is made known through daily pieties' (Bama 104) only sustains the need to keep Dalit Christian theology exclusive in nature. Methodological exclusivism in Dalit theology grants subjectivity, a space for them to both resist and be free from any

assimilation by dominant ideology. Considering the extent to which theology arises from the suffering of Dalits and removed from it, Nirmal referred to three modes of knowledge – “pathetic knowledge, empathetic knowledge and sympathetic knowledge” (Clarke, Manchala and Peacock 21). Clarke interpreted these modes in the form of concentric circles.

The pathetic knowledge is something which exclusively belonged to the Dalits as these directly emerge from their pain and anxiety. Generated from the first hand experiences of a caste community this constitutes the centre of Dalit theology without which it would not exist. Surrounding this centre is the circle of empathetic knowledge. If Dalits be regarded as outcastes, then this knowledge is something generated by the government recognized Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs and even women falling victim to patriarchy. As a part of Dalit theology, the experience of pain is similar (but not the same) and this knowledge is useful in the active involvement towards resistance and liberation. The outermost circle constitutes the sympathetic knowledge and this is the most removed from a direct assimilation of pain-pathos. It involves a commitment towards identifying with the Dalit cause despite a lack of Dalit identity. In other words, it constitutes the participation towards the removal of suffering by non-Dalits who have little or

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no first-hand experience of such pain (21 – 22). These formulations conceived in terms of a social and religious context can be applied to literature with regards to the representation and bridging the gap between Dalit self and their conception of God.

It is to be noted that all the modes of knowledge more or less constitute methodological exclusivism as the attempt in each is to connect with a theology that is willing to undertake a part in the alleviation of Dalit atrocities. However, not all three phrases and intrinsically connected with the discourse on God. Considering the phase of sympathetic knowledge it is obvious that a non-Dalit narrative devoid of the nauseating toil and occupation a Dalit is exposed to will always be the distanced onlooker, who understands, imagines what goes on in the mind of a labourer living hand to mouth. Following this framework, Mulk Raj Anand's novels fail to connect with the 'other' experiences of pain however aggravating the narrative turns out. Let us take for example his novel *Coolie* which is stated completely from the angle of the protagonist Munoo. Munoo's struggle involved doing menial jobs to earn wages such as working in factories or lifting sack of grains in Daulatpur (Anand 122).

The author had been successful in conveying the boy's naïve joy in a world of hard labour. But there was always the

presence of this non-Dalit omniscient narrator in describing the feelings of the boy. Further, Anand adhered to the conventional artistic values which provided him with the space to fictionalize his novel as art. However, in all the elaborate descriptions of pain-pathos, of what Munoo perceived, how he perceived, Anand ended up romanticizing Dalit life. The result was that *Coolie* conveyed at most the pity/sympathy for the plight of an untouchable character. In order to foresee the truth in the assertion of Nirmal and understand Dalit theology as counter theology, it will be necessary to see the narrative approach as produced by Dalits, especially the approach to faith. While the dialectics of methodological exclusivism was confined to Christian Dalit theology by Nirmal, I shall analyze this theory by applying it to the framework of understanding God in Marathi autobiographies. And for this purpose, I shall be taking into focus Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*. How exactly is the Marathi Dalit treatment of God exclusive in its foundation?

Michel Foucault considered power as something which needed to be regarded as 'a productive network which runs through the whole social body' (Foucault 119). In a similar vein, the upper caste hegemony generates and processes all knowledge. Raj Kumar gave the example of Sanskrit language which was the special

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privilege of the upper caste people for which both Dalits and women were denied access to the Vedas, smritis and puranas (Kumar 42). Being ignorant, Dalits remained at the mercy of the system with their Gods placed in temples where they were denied access. Further, as Nida Sajid explains, Hindu nationalists went deep excavating subaltern myths with the aim of reforming the cultural universe (Abraham and Barak 121). This was done to exploit the desire of Dalits to be accepted by the dominant communities who had deliberately expelled them.

It is in response to this we find Mahars depicting their own Gods and rituals. The most common instance in Kamble's narrative was the superstition of 'God possession' and application of 'haldi' and 'kumkum' as a remedy of appeasement. These were the most recurrent in the month of Ashadh looked upon by the whole maharwada as one of festivity. She writes:

"In the lilting tunes of the shehnai and amidst the rhythmic beats of the drums and dimdi, men and women would let themselves go. The portrajas would start their dance, and the women and young girls joined the dance, their hair flying wild... While dancing, they would be possessed by the spirit of the goddess." (Kamble 35)

The act of possession would mark the beginning of the event. This would be followed by dramatic speeches that would

either delight or frighten the people present. The dialogues would be like:

"I have crossed the waters, the spaces, the seven nether worlds to meet my children... Your simple devotion has pleased me immensely. Therefore I give you a good omen." (35)

Contrarily, some other 'God possessed' women would threaten with curses and bad omen such as:

"My children, there is a monster... no rain this yea... no crops will grow... all animals will die... no mother will know her child, nor any child its mother" (36)

Or even,

"Coachman, you've forgotten me. I won't go back without taking revenge on you. You know my wrath." (36 – 37)

Such taunts would often be accompanied by grinding of teeth and loud wailing for which the chosen portraja would smear her forehead with haldi to calm her down. And the community in their turn would beg for mercy, swear loyalty and touch the woman's feet.

The peculiar mode of interpreting God as someone who possesses women and is a well wisher of Mahar community is more than just deconstructing faith to mark a distinct nature of Dalit theology. Sathianathan Clarke opines that such theology involves a mode of refutation

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proving the wrongness of upper caste fabricated 'truth' and rejection of the violent Hindu lords serving dharma (Clarke, Manchala and Peacock 25). However, this would only be in confirmation to Nirmal's notion of 'counter theology'. The mark of exclusivity of this 'God possession' is the way it bridges the reconceptualization of God with the experience of Mahar community leading to pathetic knowledge. Economic depression and religious downgrading were the factors imposed upon Dalits adhering to the Hindu principle of karma – that the consequences of being born in a low caste was a result of sins committed in the previous birth. Resistance therefore involved refuting this dominant ideology and simultaneously accompanied with a 'privilege of construing their own versions of God – world – human' (29). If poverty and untouchability be the common experiences of Mahars amidst which they live their joy and anguish, their enlightening such moments of 'God possession' is auspicious for therein even God takes part in sharing with their experiences giving their blessings and curses accordingly. This is a striking feature of their theology.

Another feature which makes the Mahar representation of faith exclusive is the belief and role in their ability to 'control' Gods. And the agents tasked with the duty comprise of the 'portraja', 'karbhari' and 'suwasini' whose

instruments were 'haldi' and 'kumkum'. Elder boys and girls from families were chosen for these honourable posts dedicated to God's cause. The Mahars gave unique names for powerful deities such as Laka Mata and Laman Pathan whose possession would make the women frenzied in their movements that would be attributed to a form of dance. To reduce this state of exaltation, the portrajas would have to join in by beating rhythmically on their 'dimdi' (a form of drum). The rhythm needed to be constantly altered to match the changing dance beats (Kamble 22). And once these 'God possessed' women would dramatize all their kindness and wrath before being saturated by the worship of the entire community, the 'suwasinis' would urge the spirits to leave by smearing the women's forehead with haldi and kumkum (25).

The conventional belief in Hindu deities places them in high pedestals by dedicating a statue and temple with a priest appointed as servant. Despite the fact that they were denied entry to such holy places, Mahars would be blinded by such tradition. They would be building their own temples and statues with the few resources available. If such a task was instructed by the possessed women, it would become their sole objective. They would waste no effort in instructing people, near or distant, about the tasks each of them are required to do:

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“Tell them that a new god, Laman Pathan, has come to our land, and that we need good lime. Then go to the stream and look for nice round stones; wash them clean and then colour them white with the lime. Let us make an offering of lemon, ganja and thick wheat rotis to the god in the morning.” (26)

As much as this traditional resemblance is unable to intensify the self – other dichotomy in caste theological discourse, what reinforces it is the move the Mahar community took in going beyond worshipping their Gods on a pedestal. ‘God possession’, a belief which they performed, literally brought Him down to their level. He is presented as someone who stands beside them, with their people despite their omnipotent and omnipresent nature. This generates the hope for Mahars to overcome their own suffering by sharing it with a figure that arose in the first place from their lived reality – a collaboration of pathetic and empathetic knowledge. The reconstruction of this new kind of God as methodologically exclusive was earlier stressed by Devasahayam when he stated:

“God presents another vision of Godself... as not almighty, sovereign Lord but as one who comes in weakness and humility and stands with those despised and suffering people... The power of God is to be interpreted in the serenity of God i.e. the capacity to share and bear the grief of suffering humanity.” (Devasahayam 54)

Therefore, methodological exclusivism becomes an alternative discourse in Dalit theology which provides the creative social and literary space to liberalize their life narrative granting them authenticity.

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