
Trauma of Being Marginalized on the Basis of Caste and Gender: A Study of Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* as a Work of Memory Studies

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Abstract

The paper "Trauma of Being Marginalized on the Basis of Caste and Gender: A Study of Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* as a Work of Memory Studies" tries to study the novel *The Prisons We Broke* from the perspective of the autobiographical work of the author Baby Kamble. The paper focuses on the trauma of Mahar community women narrated in the novel, which brings to light the discrimination that is faced by them. Women are the main victims, irrespective of caste and community, who are subject to discrimination on the basis of gender. The author's personal experiences make this novel a piece of memory study in which there are sufferings on the basis of caste and gender.

Keywords: Dalit, Discrimination, Domestic Violence, Mahar, Marriage

Introduction:

Out of different genres in literature, Dalit literature is primarily concerned with the issues related to the discrimination of Dalits on the basis of caste. Not only this, women of the Dalit community face dual discrimination on the basis of caste and on the basis of gender. Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* is one of the remarkable works in Dalit literature that focuses on the pain and suffering of Dalits. Originally written and published in Marathi as *Jina Amucha* in 1986 and translated into English as *The Prisons We Broke*, published in 2008. This work is an autobiography of Baby Kamble, who recounts her miserable life from childhood to her life as a grown-up woman.

This paper tries to explore the elements of caste and gender, as well as the pain and suffering of women in the novel. This work can be considered as a document that encapsulates the sufferings and struggles of the Dalit community living on the outskirts of the village. Women experience double pain in comparison to men and women of other communities. This assertion of pain and suffering is being considered by Nanda Ramesh in the following words as he argues regarding Dalit literature:

Dalit women put forward a completely different perspective on their idea of what aspire to achieve in the name of equality. Their writings put limelight on the agony, distress and violence these women were put through. They narrated their struggle and protest through songs and folktales. Their writings portrayed their outrage towards the Dalit patriarchy, extreme criticism of mainstream feminism in India.

Dalit literature itself is considered a movement that has made a mark. Literature provided the sole means for women suffering to put forward their problems, and therefore, literature contained the entire pain, hardships, questions, and answers the Dalit women possessed. Dalit literature possesses the exclusive ability to give out to the reader a sense or feeling of what the narrator has been going through. (Nanda)

In these lines, Nanda Ramesh openly argues regarding the plight of Dalit women and how they bear the pain of being a 'Dalit.' Dalit literature presents the harsh reality of the life of the Dalit community, and it is full of hardships and pain. *The Prisons We Broke* talks about the Mahar community, a community of Dalits. As this work is an autobiography, the writer's experiences play a relevant role in the narration of the events. Baby Kamble, the writer and the narrator, who comes from the Mahar community, minutely describes the life of Mahars, how they live, what they eat, their marriages, their festivals, celebrations, and the rites and rituals related to birth and death of the community, etc. It is also described as how the community faces discrimination from the upper caste people. There are different levels of discrimination. Women of the Mahar community face dual discrimination on the basis of caste and then on the basis of gender. The narrator talks about the pain and suffering of Dalits in a comprehensive manner. Regarding the condition of Dalits in *The Prisons We Broke*, Amit Narula argues in the following words:

Baby Kamble's autobiographical narrative *The Prisons We Broke* is unique because in critiquing Brahminical domination in Indian society, it also speaks out for Mahar women - presenting an unflinching portrait of women subjugated by both caste and patriarchy. Baby Kamble minutely and painfully portrays the tortures a Dalit woman had to undergo. She had to suffer domestic violence in the form of thrashing, nose-chopping, work overload, and whatnot. She had to suffer because of her birth, her caste, her gender, and her poverty. (Amit)

From the beginning to the end, the whole narrative explores and talks about the pathetic condition of the Dalit community. This narrative explores the pathetic condition of the women belonging to the Mahar community, who suffer more in comparison to the men of the community. Amit Narula doesn't stop here; he argues further in the following words:

The Prisons We Broke by Baby Kamble articulates the problems of Dalits effectively. It gives a vivid picture of the lifestyle of the Mahar community, the untouchable section of the society. Poverty is life for them. The minute but significant details of their poverty-stricken life do not fail to leave an imprinting mark in the hearts of the readers. It talks about how life is difficult for Mahar women. Kamble herself says how difficult it was for her to write and get the book published and that Mahar women welcomed it greatly because it was a realistic picture of their lives. (Amit)

In the above lines, Narula asserts that this novel presents the life of Mahar community in exhaustive manner and way it is written, the readers are apt to feel the pain. And this is the reason that this novel gets popularity.

Through this novel Kamble, many issues come to light regarding the condition of women in the caste-based and patriarchal setup. Mahar women face domination from fathers, brothers, and husbands, domestic violence, mutilation, and abuse from men. They bear the pain and suffering when they give birth, and this is the time when they go through extreme and unbearable pain, which is life-threatening. Life for a woman is not easy in the Mahar community. She bears all without making complaints.

The narrator starts with the 'Purdah' system in which her mother is not allowed to uncover even her nails. This custom of keeping a woman inside four walls is considered an 'honor' for the community. She is treated like a bird in the cage. This is the first instance of oppression for the narrator. It is mentioned in the following words:

In those days, it was the custom to keep women at home, behind the threshold. The honor enjoyed by a family was in proportion to the restriction imposed on the women of the house. When no one could see even a nail of the woman thus confined within the four walls of the house, then this 'honor' became the talk of the town byword among the relatives and friends in the surrounding villages. Then people would tell each other how one Pandharinath Mistry kept his wife completely hidden in the hose and how even the rays of the sun did not know her. (5) The narrator further narrates that Mahars were not allowed to come in the way when any upper caste was coming from the opposite side. On seeing the people of upper caste coming from the opposite side, Mahars were required to leave the road and walk through the dusty thorny bushes and, while crossing, had to say, 'The humble Mahar women fall at your feet, master.' In this way, they are humiliated, and they have to say this even to the child of the upper caste. And if by chance any newlywed girl does not wish them, then the master would come to the place where Mahars live and scold that girl and abuse her too as how dare she forget to give due respect to the upper castes.

There is discrimination in clothing also. Mahar women were not allowed to wear the sari in the manner that upper-caste women wear. Instead, the Mahar women had to tuck up their saris behind in such a way that the border of their saris should not be seen like the saris of the upper caste. This plight in clothing is narrated in the following words: We used to accompany the women to sell firewood. They would be wearing saris-their sacred stitched out of rags patched up together with the stitches as thick as fingers. Even their rags were made of several patches put together. Their pallav reached to their knees. A veil fell over their forehead. They wore the saris in the traditional way, the front pleats taken through the legs and tucked behind. There were rules even for how one tucked the pleats. Mahar women had to tuck them in such a way that the borders remained hidden. Only high-caste women had the privilege of wearing their saris in such a way that the borders could be seen. (54)

Mahars work for the upper-caste people. They prepare the wood sticks for fire. They were required to check for a single strand on each and every stick. They were threatened not to leave a single strand as it would get the house polluted. And while doing so, Mahars got their fingers injured. It is mentioned as:

"Listen carefully, you dumb Mahar women, check the sticks well. If you overlook any of the threads sticking to the wood, there will be a lot of trouble. But what's that to you? Your carelessness will cost us heavily. Our house will get polluted. Then we will have to polish the floor with cow dung and wash all our clothes, even the rags in the house! Such trouble we'll have to undergo for your foolishness! And how will the gods tolerate this, tell me? They, too, will be polluted, won't they? That's why I'm telling you, check the sticks well!" (55)

One of the greatest pains the Mahar woman bears is the pain of giving birth, and the postnatal period, which was endured, is the one that cannot be compensated. This period is different for women in other communities. It becomes more painful for the Mahar community. There are different layers of poverty, illiteracy, and customs, which make it worse for them.

For Mahar women, the postpartum period used to be very difficult. It is the time for extra care and proper diet. But poverty was the biggest issue that comes as an obstacle for Mahar women. This issue is narrated comprehensively to mention the condition of Mahar women. Mahar women had to bear the levels of obstacles, due to poverty and gender.

To give birth becomes the question of life and death for Mahar women. It is narrated that as per the custom in the community, the girl is sent to her parent's house for delivery. The process of delivery is conducted under the supervision of ignorant midwives. The expecting mother experiences extreme pain; her private parts get

swollen when the midwife checks for the position of the baby by inserting her hands. It results in wounds and cuts.

The writer further mentions the hot bath given to the mother. Father of the girl digs a pit in the corner for the bath. After giving birth, the girl sits in the pit having hot water and is given a massage also without any oil. This continues till she sweats. After this, she has to lie without clothes for twelve days on the dry paddy, which is spread upon the floor. Only a sari is there to cover her body. To keep her bed warm, she is given hot coal treatment by burning the coal around her bed. When it comes to food, she is given a dish made up of cooked crushed *jowar* and some jaggery with oil. The girl eats it quickly as it is needed in the stomach, which requires a lot. She has to bear all this suffering after giving birth. It can be seen that there is no hygiene and proper diet for the women who have just given birth. It is the utmost poverty that doesn't let them get the necessities of life. Their stomachs remain void of food. Their mothers borrow a handful of grains from the neighborhood to give them food.

Condition of women, whether it be any other family of Mahar or the Mahar with sixteenth share is the same. They have to work tirelessly, only difference is that one can get stomach full diet while the other is unable to full her stomach. But the duty or the responsibility of the house rests on women only.

Kamble narrates about the custom of marriage in the Mahar community. Girls of eight, nine, or ten years are married. There is the issue of child marriage, which completely destroys the blooming of the little angels. At this tender age, she says that marriage is a kind of shackle for them. Marriage does not remain a spiritual bond of togetherness rather it is a kind of slavery for them. They are deprived of their due share to live the life of freedom.

As per the rituals, when the newly wedded girl enters her in-laws' house, she has to make bread known as *chakras*. Not one or two. Rather, they had to bake a basketful of bhakris. This making of bhakris is a kind of test that she had to pass to show her culinary skills. This custom is described in an exhaustive manner, and it is full of pain and suffering for the girl. Kamble very minutely mentions each and every activity that happens. It is worth mentioning the narration skills of the author, who tries to present the condition of a child who, at the age of playing with dolls, is making bhakris on the fire. A girl of tender age of about ten years hardly. She is unable to roll the dough and give it the proper shape by rolling. When she put the rolled dough on the pan, some got burnt, and some remained unbaked at some parts. And in doing so, the little hands got fire burns. At this ritual, the mother-in-law calls the neighbors and shows the bhakri to be made by the daughter-in-law. The mother starts calling names as the bhakris are not made perfectly. She asserts that the girl of a gentlewoman has not been brought into her house. It is mentioned as:

...Then the case would call all her friends and neighbors and hold an open exhibition of the tiny burnt bhakris, 'Attyabai, come and see what's happening here. Didn't you think that I'd brought the daughter of a good woman into my house? Look at the bhakris this slut has prepared. She can't even make a few bhakris properly. Oh well, what can one expect of this daughter of a dunce?' (94)

In this way, the responsibility of homemaking falls on the soft shoulders. It can be said that this is the beginning of the journey towards hell. A new bride has to wake up at three in the morning; if she remains asleep, she is dragged by her hair to get up. She does all the household chores at a very early age. She has to grind the grains (*jowar*). Here, it can be seen that there is a matriarchal setup also in the patriarchal setup. A woman has to face both. A woman oppresses another woman. After grinding the grains, the girl has to fetch water from the river. Again, the mother-in-law makes bhakris and checks the quality of the food.

Mother-in-law examines very carefully if bhakris are properly baked; if they remain unbaked, the daughter-in-law is beaten. It is described as:

If the bhakris weren't perfect, her sasu would examine the kneaded flour and slap the girl on the face with the unbaked bhakris, pinch her cheeks, and shower a million abuses on her, 'What's your aai really? Tell me! Is she a good married woman at all? Or does she know only how to run after the pot-maker's donkeys? Didn't she teach you anything? I pamper you a little, and you will take advantage of that! Look what a nice as I am! My own case was a spitfire. Burning coal! Holding a burning coal in one's palm was easier than living with her!' (Kamble 94-95)

Another aspect of the life of Mahar women is also narrated. Their life can be considered hard in comparison to men of the community. Here, the narrator talks about the monthly cycle. Although this is a natural phenomenon for Mahar women, it is like a curse. She recounts the days of monthly periods of Mahar women who go to the river to wash their clothes in two parts while wearing them at the same time. This helplessness of Mahar women is mentioned in these lines:

When the sasu's monthly period started, she would go straight to the river to bathe, as she had no spare sari. There, she would take off half her sari, wrapping herself in the other half. She would wash one-half of the sari first. When that portion was dry, she would wrap it around herself and wash the other half. And that half, too, would be patched up in several places. It would be afternoon by the time she returned home. Till then, the daughter-in-law had to do everything by herself. (Kamble 95) Here, the point that arises is that due to extreme poverty, they have only one sari. Due to the non-availability of cloth or sanitary pads, Mahar women were forced to wash the clothes that they used to wear. Their single sari is mentioned as rags. This shows the harshness of life for them. There are different levels, such as poverty, gender, and

caste, that force them to go to the river. Had they had another sari, they would have stayed home and washed it on the next day.

Mahar women work for families, and their importance is still not counted. Their work is being considered by Dr Kavya B, and she argues in the following words:

Mahar women collected the leftover food from Maratha households by cleaning their animal pens. Every woman of Mahar sang an aspirational song that their future would be bright enough while grinding stone. Her children were left alone as soon as she needed to earn money for her family. Children are brought up without any craning hands of their parents, without any monitoring eyes, and they would hurt themselves. When their mothers return with bundles of firewood on their heads, they will follow. Women who had been drenched with sweat in the scorching Sun many days didn't have anything to eat. (Kavya 37) Domestic violence is another issue that the author narrates. To beat one's wife in the Mahar community is considered a manly job. Mahar women become the victims of mutilation also. One in a hundred can be found with a chopped nose. It is narrated that Mahar men used to beat their wives like beasts and till the sticks got broken. When any woman tries to escape the beating and runs to her parent's house, she's brought back by her in-laws, and then they also beat her. In-laws put a plant or iron chain to the foot of the daughter-in-law. Father tells the story of some relative who cut his wife into pieces. Here, it can be seen that domestic violence is common, and women are prone to it. They couldn't raise their voice.

Not only the husband but the mother-in-law were also involved in the physical and psychological exploitation of the daughters-in-law. Matriarchal setup can be seen with patriarchy. Mothers-in-law can be seen controlling their daughters-in-law throughout the day. They do not let their daughters-in-law take a rest.

To conclude, this autobiography by Baby Kamble raises many issues related to women of the Mahar community. There is discrimination on the basis of gender and caste. Throughout the narrative, women experience pain and suffering. The narrator has seen all this in her home as well. Through her memory, she recounts each and every incident of the community very well. There is control of women from the side of men and women also. Patriarchy as well as matriarchy. There is domination on the basis of caste and gender. Mahar women face discrimination from upper caste people and then in their families on the basis of gender. And they faced all this as they did not have any other option. In this view, Dr Kavya B argues:

Dalit Women are doubly oppressed by being a woman first and then being a Dalit woman. Along with caste-based social, cultural, and economic marginalization. Kamble, as a Dalit Woman writer, tries to assert her rights and strive for self-identity

with a new attitude that aspires to revolution and transformation of Hindu society. Her autobiography is all about women suffering and how they free themselves from the prison of poverty, caste, class, and gender oppression. (Kavya 38)

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