The Prison’s of Poverty, Untouchability and Dalit Patriarchy in Baby Kamble’s: *The Prisons We Broke* - A passage to Assertion from Subjugation

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Abstract:

In the coercive suffocation and political instability of the 1960s when Little Magazines and Dalit Panthers (1972) began to rebel against the established *savarna* literary, linguistic, formal and cultural conventions, Baby Kamble’s autobiography *The Prison We Broke* (original *JinaAmucha* in Marathi, translated by Maya Pandit: 2009) came out as a direct self-assertion as a first Marathi Dalit woman’s autobiography in its type. Dalit writing proceeds from a unique Dalitness experienced by a Dalit writer. The usual classic paradigm of any Dalit autobiography is torn between two extremities of grinding poverty and inhuman casteism. In the narrative of her autobiography, Baby as a Dalit woman reminisces the life and living of her village Veergaon and unravels ‘other’ layer of discrimination, i.e. gender discrimination. This
additional intra-familial struggle against Dalit Patriarchy has made Dalit women doubly oppressed among the oppressed Dalits in India. These three-tier experiences of discriminations in terms of caste, class and gender is captured in the discourse of this Dalit text. Blurring the distinction between Individual autobiography and collective biography, *The Prisons We Broke* comes out as a complete register of Dalit liberation movement where each single Dalit-man or woman- becomes the votary of Ambedkarite principles of “Educate, Agitate and Organize” to secure the Dalits human rights.

**Keywords:** Collective biography, Untouchability, Dalit Patriarchy, epidemic, ill health, drunkenness, superstitions, Ambedkar etc.
Introduction:

Even at the risk of being slighted charged of misquoting or miscontextualizing, I would like to start by citing the often quoted statement made by Jean Jacques Rousseau. Jean Jacques Rousseau’s *The Social Contract* or *Principles of Political Right* (trans. 1913) begins with the proverbial lines "Man is born free, but he is everywhere in chains" (49). This very idea was directed towards the then social order as well as it showed Rousseau’s dissatisfaction to the progress of civilization at the hand of human being away from the lap of nature. If we contextualize the first part of his statement, the Dalits of Maharashtra is not even ‘born free’. The Indian caste system is devised with so complicacies and diplomacies that whenever one is born is born with its caste and the creeds attached to the caste. The Dalits are not and cannot be an exception. Once a Dalit is born, a voluntary worker of nature is born. The caste-Hindus would cease the moment with no delay to condition the new born to Dalithood and to its social specificities and legacy of oppression. Dr. Ambedkar criticized (chapter 19; “Caste in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development” *The Essential Writing of B.R. Ambedkar*. 2011) this formation of Hindu social and caste hierarchies based on “by birth” philosophy. The frustration in the collective consciousness of the Dalits with this overall oppressive and depressive Hindu society regarding caste and poverty has come out in a famous poem by a Marathi Dalit poet Baburao Bagul. In his poem “You Have Made the Mistake”, Bagul writes—

“… That’s why I say-

You have made the mistake of being born in this country…”

*Poisoned Bread*: 81

Then, Far from being Rousseau’s idealization, Dalits, are everywhere in chains and they are not even born free. Within its twelve chapters and 135 pages of volume *The Prisons We Broke* recounts that the lives of the Dalits start with mud and soil (the Sanskrit word *Dala* as a verb means to ground down something with huge presser, The word Dalit is derived from this root word *Dala*) and even after a life of incessant toil and hard work, ends in the same place and condition without at least trace of progress and gain. As Stated by Maya Pandit in the introduction that the important aspect of *Jina Amucha* is Baby Kamble’s Dalit feminist critique.
of patriarchy. She graphically describes the physical and psychological violence women have to undergo in both the public and private spheres. If the Mahar community is the ‘other’ for the Brahmins, Mahar women become the ‘other’ for the Maharmen. Baby Kamble demonstrates how caste and patriarchy converge to perpetuate exploitative practices against women.

Analysis:

As I have chosen the title of my paper, I would restrict my findings to the multi-layered, pervasive ‘prisons’ which Baby Kamble fought against in *The Prisons We Broke*. Interestingly, Baby’s deliberation in pluralizing the word ‘prison’ as ‘prisons’ and avouching the breaking of those prisons confirm her conviction to the cause of Dalit consciousness raising movement. Neither fall in the easy escape route to educate, elite identified Dalit nor failing the dreams of Ambedkar for the empowerment of the Dalitbahujans, Baby kamble remains the pathfinder for the left out masses. And the pluralisation of the subject ‘We’ in “*The Prison We Broke*” (emphasis mine) instead of ‘I’ confirms Baby’s formation of the authentic Dalit individual consciousness filtered through the ‘three-tier oppressed’ collective Dalit consciousness. In the introductory message, Maya Pandit, the translator says regarding Baby Kamble’s engagement with the history of Dalit oppression and the latter’s explicit intention to clinically display that Brahminical Hinduism is at the root of all these rotten, evils of society and it is they who have turned a hardworking, docile mass of people into eternal slaves. In the very beginning, it is important to notice one outstanding writing strategy of Kamble. Most oftenshe has taken recourse to the deliberate omission of any specific proper Noun and the tense she uses is not specified to any single subject position. Syntactical construction is skilfully (mis) handled where the subjects are rather loose agents. Any boy, any girl, more accurately, any Mahar may fit into the occurrence. The verbs are hardly active and definite. ‘Would say’ is used instead of ‘said’. And the ‘voice’ is obviously passive. This special use of writing strategy lends the text an open space for the readers to interact and involved. It also brings to the fore that the Mahars are so deeply hegemonized by the prevailing socialviz-a-vizcaste order that to them poverty, untouchability, humiliation, exploitation and hard work are not occasional occurrence, rather all of these are natural events like the sun, moon, tree, wind and such.

To begin with, describing the ‘difference in location’ is the first thing that any Dalit text begins with. The *savarna* system of social hierarchy is based on the polarization of corporeal purity-impurity. That a Dalit is always impure and polluting is the leading cause to drive away
the Dalit community out of the society of the so called chaturvarna people. To remain cut off geographically from the main stream of social activities entitles the Dalits to remain cut off from history. Hence hidden from history. Be it Bama’s Karukku or Sharan Kumar Limbale’s The OutCaste: Akkarmashi or Omprakash Valmiki’s Joothan: A Dalit’s Life, or Balbir Madhopuri’s Changiya Rukh: Against The Night the Dalits always live far from the central village. Bama lived in the Naiker Street, Omprakash lived far away from the upper caste Tyagis, Balbir Madhopuri could not live with the Jats (upper caste Punjabis) and Limbale lived beside the crematorium ground. All are in the outskirts of the society. Apart from the houses of the sixteenth share Mahars which were in somewhat good condition, the rest of the houses were the poorest of the poor, eternally stricken by poverty. Their houses are hardly abodable. Some stone and mud are erected with a cover of Palmyra tree. Baby Kamble sinks into self-pity when she describes her ‘sweet’ childhood village days. As for their domestic utensils, there would be a big clay pot with a small mouth (keli) kept at the entrance for drinking water. The mouth would be covered with a broken coconut shell (‘decorated’ with three holes at the bottom). It also serves as a cup for drinking the ‘mineral’ water brought from the open stream. And the way to drink the water is almost acrobatic! ‘One had to pour water into the coconut shell, and blocking the holes with one’s fingers hastily empty the shell into one’s mouth’ (07). The hut would have a clay chulha (our oven) near which lay a couple of clay pots, a wooden pali and a (our nonstick) tawa. The tawa must have got a hole in its heart due to overuse and no hope of retirement. A katwat for rolling the dough and a long piece of tin (not a can) for keeping the bhakri while baking it. A grinding stone in one corner, few dust emitting rags used as ‘cushion’, a small platform, bhanwas, with a few clay pots on it. Kamble ridicules, ‘… they matched the overall decor of the house’ (08). The Eco-Activists and the Environmentalists may rest in peace that these Mahar people, far from using plastics and polytechnic product, live a purely Eco-friendly life. Regarding clothes, the second basic need of a human being, one comes to know that “There were no signs of modern civilization and development in the distant rural areas of Chandrapur district. The women did not wear any cloths”. (10)

The first four chapters of The Prison We Broke describe various social evils the Dalit society is fraught with. Superstitions, impawning, possession of women by gods, drunkenness, harassment of bride in the hands of the in-laws and wife beating are few of the examples. These are intra-community back logs a Dalit constantly fighting to dispel. There are the constant curse of untouchability and exploitation at the hands of the upper caste people. Whereas the external
world is speedily coping with the overall flow of development and progress, the Dalits remain cloistered within their own caste boundary delimited by the sons of Manu. Kamble’s frustration for the people of her community comes out when she says:

“Come to think of it, what kind of life did these people really lead? What was there worth living for? Generation after generation wasted away in the senseless worship of stones, in utter misery. Generation after generation perished. But it is a basic human need to hope for change. The tiny sapling of hope was reared in their hearts too. It grew tall, drawing strength from the iron in their souls.” (11)

The inhuman practice of untouchability, though it was made by rule after the Independence of India a punishable crime, pervades the life of the Dalits. How even a small boy of upper caste is conditioned to ‘see’ the Mahars as untouchable and use abusive words to them is clearly depicted by one example:

He (the upper caste shopkeeper) would give the innocent children lessons in social behaviour, ‘Chabu, hey you, Can’t you see the dirty Mahar woman standing there? Now don’t you touch her. Keep your distance.’ Immediately our Mahar woman, gathering her rags around her tightly so as not to pollute the child, would say, ‘Take care little master! Please keep a distance. Don’t come too close. You might touch me and get polluted.’ The shopkeeper would come out and, from a distance, throw the things into her pallav (apron), which she had spread out in order to receive them. She would then respectfully keep her money on the threshold. That of course did not pollute him! (14)

Taking things thrown away from a distance, drinking water in ones cup fistled hands, not to walk on the road in front of any upper caste man or woman, not to sit beside Dalits in bus or train, a barber who even shaves cow and buffalo would not shave a Dalit- are the legacy of the Indian Dalits. In the above quoted text, we find that the upper caste shopkeeper calls the Dalit woman a ‘Dirty Mahar’ in public, whereas the same Dalit woman is so hegemonized and grounded down that she addresses the ‘little’ boy as ‘master… please… get polluted’. So, the prison of untouchability is like an invisible stain which always makes the Dalits feel very uncomfortable and lowly.

Dalit women’s additional physical duties:
In the chapters five to nine, Baby Kamble gives a most unimaginable description of the humiliation of the Dalits. Men in general and women in particular. Dalit women fall the easiest prey of humiliation and exploitation in home and away, day and night. Baby exemplifies each of the structural hurdles- natural or societal- by individual experiences. Few of the choicest hurdles are always especially reserved for the Dalit women. Each Dalit woman has an inborn talent for multi-tasking. Dalit girl of any age is a beast of burden. The question of sending the girls to school was unimaginable. Baby describes the general as well as a particular incident:

In those days, it was the custom to keep women at home, behind the threshold. The honour enjoyed by a family was in proportion to the restrictions 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 ‘honour’ became the talk of the town- a 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 house and how even the rays of the sun did not know her. My father had locked up my aai in his house, like a bird in a cage (Emphasis mine). Whatever money he earned, he would squander away. While his contracts lasted, there would be plenty of food, clothes and fun. But when he was out of work, we had to go without food even (05).

In all the phases of life, a Dalit woman is a stock labour and a being of convenience. As a girl to the parents, a wife to the husband and a mother to the son, Dalit women suffer most in terms of caste, class and gender. But their oppression comes little to light. A Dalit woman works as wage labour and few women work as maid servant to the upper caste families. She has to look after the house hold duties, such as cooking, looking after the children, fire wood collecting, keeping the cattle, fetching water from miles away etc. The usual routine of the Dalit mothers follows:

Around ten o’clock, they would pick up their baskets and brooms and set off towards the Maratha households where they cleaned the animal pens. They would return in the afternoon with a couple of baskets full of leftover food. These leftovers
saw their family through till the next morning, for that’s what they ate for breakfast, lunch and dinner (46).

The narrative sinks into self-pity when baby says:

Such was the condition of our people. We were just like animals, but without tails. We could be called human only because we had two legs instead of four. Otherwise, there was no difference between us and the animals(49).

How many women in the whole world can imagine that for the sake of food for their children, they have to collect meat from the fallen animals due to the epidemic? Sometimes the body gets decomposed and oozed out puss and a putrid, foul smell overpowers the nearby atmosphere. The accuracy with which baby Kamble depicted such areas has a deliberate motive. It is through this narrative of ‘pain and trauma’ that she wants to ‘disturb’ our complacent aesthetic attitude towards Dalit literature (Limbale: *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature, History, Controversies and Considerations*). The episode of the Dalit mother’s collecting of meat is really embarrassing to any reader:

During an epidemic, the house would be flooded with huge mounds of meat. The Mahars considered animal epidemics like diphtheria or dysentery a boon. Every day at least four or five animals would die. The internal organs of the dead animals would decay in stages. In some animals, organs like the liver, for instance, would be as hard as stones; whereas, in other animals, the organs would be nothing but mush, like overcooked rice. The inside of some animals would be putrid, filled with puss and infested with maggots. There would be a horrid, foul smell! It was worse than hell! But we did not throw away even such animals. We cut off the infected parts full of puss, and convinced ourselves that it was now safe to eat the meat… After a woman kept the basket on her head; her children would give the stick to her. The woman would balance the basket on her head with one hand, and with the other, she would continuously ward off flies and birds, all the while loudly chanting ‘ghar, ghar, ghar’. The women started homewards, walking through the village, warding the birds off with their shouts. Their heads would be drenched with blood, puss and other putrid secretions oozing out of the meat. Rivulets of sweat mixed with the blood and puss would run down their faces and onto their bodies, already coated with...
grime and muck. With their arms waving sticks to ward off birds, they would walk, singing the strange chant till their throats dried up. Anybody who came across these women would have easily taken them for a group of hadals (witch)(86).

Even a girl of mere 5 or 6 years, who has not yet come out of her childhood days, can take care of her brother or sister who is only a few months old. She is assigned to so many daily chores. She collects fire wood, helps mother in cooking, takes the cattle to the fields, fetch water from stream and so on.

**Double marginalisation of Dalit women:**

Dalit women are doubly marginalized. Firstly, as a Dalit and secondly as a woman. They are equal to their men in terms of rendering labour, but they remain inferior in terms of societal norms, power and decisions relating to family matters. Dalit Patriarchy confines a woman within four walls. Few of the examples that Baby incorporated in the text unveil the façade of harsh reality a Dalit woman living in. A Dalit married woman is the butt of gender discrimination at the hands of both her father-in-law and mother-in-law. If a hungry Dalit woman sees to the eating of others and wishes to have a part of food before her in-laws have theirs, it would bring stinging words from the sasu (mother-in-law):

Just in case a Sasu noticed this, she would contemptuously throw a morsel at her daughter-in-law, saying, ‘Push that down your throat, you shameless hussy! Aren’t you ashamed to stare so at a child who’s eating? At least let the food get down his throat! Your evil eye will make the child choke. Don’t you know how to behave like a good daughter-in-law? (ibid: 30).

In addition, child marriage is rampant in Dalit community. Girls become pregnant and they have to deliver their child in a most inhospitable manner and the new born baby as well as its mother always suffer from mal nutrition and low vitality. So, both the rate of child death and death during delivery is very high in Dalit communities. Another fact that a reader comes across the text is that at least one woman in a hundred would have her nose chopped off. The answer to the “why” of this incident is the ‘sasu’. A husband brainwashed by the mother-in-law thus ‘teaches’ his wife how to behave in society. Examples where we see that each time an upper caste man comes down the road, if it happens by chance that a Dalit woman is on the road, she
has to cover her whole body and repeat uttering the mantra, “The humble Mahar women fall at your feet master”(52). And if, any newly married woman forgets to do this, it would raise a furore in the locality. Baby particularizes such an incident and the reaction of a Patil:

‘Who just tell me, who the hell is that new girl? Doesn’t she know that she has to bow down to the master? Shameless bitch! How dare she pass me without showing due respect?’ Then the girl’s sasra and other elderly men from the community would fall at the man’s feet in utter supplication, begging for mercy. ‘No, no kind master! That girl is a new animal in the herd! Quite foolish and ignorant. If she has erred, I, her sasra, fall at your feet, but please forgive us for this crime.’

‘No! You Mahars are transgressing your limits. It is all this food that you get free of cost that has made you forget your place, isn’t it? But listen carefully. Next time, if anybody passes by me without bowing, you’ve had it! No mercy would be shown to you any longer. What do you take us for? Are we Mahars like you or do you take us for naïve children? Daring to pass by me without bowing! Think twice before doing any such thing again!’

So, Dalit women suffer not only in the patriarchal bend of society but also in the matrilineal stereotype in their communities. Baby Kamble focuses special attention to the liberation of Dalit women through education and advises her fellow women for setting up a small scale business in the first step. Kamble invokes the Dalit mothers, following Baba Saheb’s message, to get their children to schools for education and to become economically independent. The last two chapters are devoted to B. R. Ambedkar. In Kamble’s opinion, Ambedkar was god-sent. She recounts many public meetings, programmes and agenda led by Ambedkar. She herself was engaged in the Dalit solidarity movement and an active member (later president) of the Mahila Mandala. Technically, by finishing her book with her Himalayan awe and devotion to Ambedkar, Kamble shows her clear allegiance to the modern day super hero. Ambedkar strengthens their backbone. All the Dalits, man, woman took Baba as the milestone and whenever there is any discrimination, they took him as their inner source of strength. Baba was to them, a superhuman entity, almost like the heroes of legendary sagas and cultural texts. She shows her vitriolic disgust against the post-Ambedkarite segregation among leaders for their power mongering. She concludes “I am a product of the Ambedkar movement” (125). So, the
prisons would remain, as Baby Kamble thinks, as far as the Dalits disperse and distract themselves from the true vocation of Baba Saheb- “educate agitate and organize”.

Conclusion:

By the end of her Autobiography, Kamble asserts that “Baba’s words show me the way; I decided to begin my struggle through my writing. I followed Baba’s advice verbatim, to the best of my ability” (ibid: 135). Her promise attests her commitments. Karl Marx asked his follower in chapter-IV of *The Communist Manifesto* that “Workers of the World, Unite. You have nothing to lose but your *chains*!” (Emphasis mine). Dalits have nothing more to lose to the savarna Hindus. Though Baby Kamble throughout her autobiography never mentions any kind of Marxist influence on her, the book has become another manifesto that calls her fellow members to disrupt all the chains catenulating them into eternal slavery and inhuman indignity. She summons the Dalits into action towards the demolition of the ‘prisons’ through education, aggregation, adhering to the principles of Ambedkarite movement, economic independence etc. and, if needed, through ‘war’. To the question, “But people did come together at the time of the Riddles Controversy, didn’t they?” by Maya Pandit to Baby in the interview (rejoined in the 2009 edition of the translation), the latter answered. “Yes only something like that will bring all these groups together.” (*The Prison We Broke*: 153). Baby finishes off in the tune of Balbir Madhopuri’s ‘Mahua formulae’ of ‘humanist slap’ on the face of savarna poet (*ChangiyaRukh – Against the Night: An autobiography*: 198) and Baburao Bagul’s adjuring

“… That’s why I say-

You have made the mistake of being born in this country

Must now rectify it: either leave this country,

Or make war…”

(*Poisoned Bread*: 81).

Endnotes

1. Educate, Organise and Agitate is the most often misquoted slogan of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. The true version is- ‘Educate Agitate and Organise’. Ambedkar’s these three last words have got the proverbial status in the upliftment of the Dalits by the
Dalits. He said these words at the end of his historic speech delivered at the All-India Depressed Classes Conference (July 18-19, 1942 at Nagpur). He Concludes his swaying speech by saying:-

“My final words of advice to you are educated, agitate and organize; have faith in yourself. With justice on our side, I do not see how we can lose our battle. The battle to me is a matter of joy. The battle is in the fullest sense spiritual. There is nothing material or social in it. For ours is a battle, not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom. It is a battle for the reclamation of human personality” (Jaffrelot: Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability).

2. Kanchalalliah, an activist and Dalit thinker in his ground breaking book; “Why I am not a Hindu” (a book that has been compared to Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth) coins the word ‘Dalitbahujans’, whom he defines as ‘people and castes who form the exploited and suppressed majority’ in India (1996: ix).

3. Sixteenth share: The leader of the Mahar community was entitled to 16 percent share of whatever payment the community received from the village head (Patils) for the services rendered. The payment was usually in kind- for example, bhakris.

4. “Position of the Communists in Relation to the Various Existing Opposition Parties”, chapter-IV of The Communist Manifesto ends with the visionary’s harangue “Working Men of All Countries, Unite!”, in the original German is: “ProletarierallerLänder, vereinigteuch!” Thus, a more correct translation would be “Proletarians of all countries, Unite!” The Popular saying runs as “Workers of the World, Unite. You have nothing to lose but your chains!”

5. The ‘Riddles Controversy’ was a hugely generated collective support from the Dalit masses of India for the publication of an essay written by Ambedkarentitiled “Riddles of Rama and Krishna” criticizing the two Hindu Gods. The Government of Maharasstra funded for it, Shiv SenasupremoBalThackrey opposed it diehard. The Congress government had to be retained the chapter and the controversy died slowly.
References


