

**BREAKING THE BONDS: A CRITICAL STUDY OF BABY
KAMBLE'S *THE PRISONS WE BROKE***

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Abstract

Baby Kamble, fondly known as Babytai, belonged to the Mahar caste considered as untouchables in Maharashtra. Kamble's Jina Amucha (The Prisons We Broke) is considered to be the first autobiography by a Dalit woman, not only in Marathi but in any other Indian language. It is written with a strong sense of community feeling by the author. Her engagement is constantly with her people and during the course of the narrative it is the Dalit community of the Mahars which overpowers the author's own life. It is in this sense that the English translator of the autobiography, Maya Pandit calls the The Prisons We Broke more of a socio-biography rather than an autobiography. The present paper makes a small attempt to read the autobiography as a multifaceted text with different issues waiting to be unearthed by the reader. On the social grounds, it is an autobiography of the entire community, but on the political front also the text has a lot to offer. The autobiography in this respect is clearly divided into two parts; the Dalit community of the Mahars before Ambedkar and the condition of the Mahars after Ambedkar loomed large on the horizon. The paper also attempts to examine The Prisons We Broke as a narrative of resistance because towards the end the author celebrates the courage of the dwellers of Maharwada who woke up from the deep slumber of indifference, apathy and subjugation.

Key Words: Autobiography, Dalit, Caste, Identity, Resistance.

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Introduction

Dalit women made their artistic and significant debut in the Dalit literary arena much after their male counterparts because of the obvious and multiple reasons. The term 'triple marginalisation' is specially coined for the Dalit women as it renders a clear picture of their status in the society at large. The Indian society divided on innumerable lines, doesn't seem to acknowledge the existence of a Dalit woman. A Dalit woman first of all bears the age-old curse of being a 'woman'. Secondly as a Dalit, which signifies that she is at the lowest rung of the social ladder; lower than the Dalit men and eventually her humble economic background only rubs salt into her sores. A Dalit woman is just not pushed towards the margin; she is rather brutally thrown beyond the periphery as a loathed object. History holds the record of the unjust treatment meted out to the Dalit women which has left a permanent scar on their psyche. The entire community of the Dalit women had accepted sufferings as a part and parcel of their lives, until Bhimrao Ambedkar emerged as a messiah in their lives. He made them realize that they alone will have to change their destiny. The Dalit women with their diligent efforts, thus realized the importance of self and their individual potential. Hence, when they took to educate themselves at Babasaheb's call, their pent up emotions were channelized and eventually by means of education, they could fulfill the unflinching desire in their hearts of informing the people about their agonized world. One such valiant attempt was made by Baby Kamble, fondly known as Babytai, as she started penning down miniscule details of the harsh and difficult life she had lived and experienced.

Jina Amucha (*The Prisons We Broke*) which is considered to be the first autobiography by a Dalit woman, not only in Marathi but in any other Indian language, was first serialized in 1982 in *Stree*, a Dalit women's magazine released from Pune. The autobiography is written with a strong sense of community feeling by the author. Unlike in a formal autobiography where the author lays bare the experience of one's own life, Baby Kamble re-reads, re-understands and re-creates the life of her Maharwada. Commenting on her autobiography Babytai writes,

... 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* was the autobiography of my entire community. (Kamble, 157)

It is in this sense that the English translator of the autobiography, Maya Pandit, calls the *The Prisons We Broke* more of a socio-biography rather than an autobiography. It is the humble existence of her people, their day to day struggle against the inhuman institution of the caste

system, the bane of untouchability and the subordinate position of women which receive greater attention than her own life. Besides these problems, there are issues of blind faith in Hindu religious beliefs and ceremonies, lack of education and self-motivation, unflinching hunger and abject poverty which also call for earnest attention of a reader. Maya Pandit also suggests,

Baby Kamble's engagement is with the history of Dalit oppression. She does not try to glorify the life of the Dalit community; rather she explicitly states that her intention is to subject the life of her community to critical scrutiny in order to demonstrate how Brahminical domination had turned the Mahars into slaves, forcing them to live in conditions worse than animals. (xiii)

The autobiography begins with a detailed description of the community and its way of life. At first, Baby Kamble mentions that religion played a significant role in the lives of Mahars and it became an instrument of oppression and misery. The author effectively portrays how the people of her community had blindly given their lives to the oppressive practices carried out in the name of religion and thus ruined their lives. She goes to the extent of saying that their preoccupation with the superstitious beliefs and the blind faith in the Hindu religious customs reduced them to the status of beasts. Kamble adds in utter disappointment,

The entire community had sunk deep in the mire of such dreadful superstitions. The upper castes had never allowed this lowly caste of ours to acquire knowledge. Generations after generations, our people rotted and perished by following such a superstitious way of life. (37)

Further she writes that the Mahars were so ignorant that they could not know whether a child suffering from fever was alive or dead. Kamble herself was declared to be dead when she was about one and a half years old as she had fallen unconscious. Instead of giving her medical assistance, prayers were chanted to bring her back to life. She was about to be buried when her body started responding. She adds that the favourite topic of discussion with her people were various gods and also the stories of possession and news about people with extraordinary powers that could exorcise the spirits. The writer believes that the attitude of people is such because the upper caste people coloured the vision of Mahars by forcing them to believe in the rituals which as such have no concrete bearing in the practical life. She remarks,

The upper castes knew quite well that they would be able to control the Mahars only if they were kept on a tight leash...Hindu philosophy had discarded us...Yet Hindu rites and rituals were dearest to our hearts.(18)

Babytai doesn't fail to mention and focus on the incident reflecting the inhuman institution of casteism and the practice of untouchability which continues to be the bane of the Hindu society even today. She relates a general practice when the women went into the village to buy provisions. The shopkeeper availed this opportunity to 'teach' his children the principles and practices of untouchability. The women pulled their clothes closer to their bodies and also told their children to keep a distance from the people of the upper castes lest their touch should

pollute them. The shopkeeper threw the required things onto a cloth from a safe distance, the untouchable Mahars took them and they left keeping the money on the doorstep. Babytai tells that the priest who was invited by the Mahars to perform the marriage ceremonies also observed untouchability in the most stringent way possible. He did not come close to the people but readily accepted the 'raw' eatables from the same Mahars, the cursed untouchables. The author, thus, points the stark hypocrisy embedded in the behaviour of the upper caste Hindus in a very bitter manner,

What a bestial thing Hindu religion is! Does it possess even an iota of intelligence?... you didn't mind if the firewood is soaked in Mahar blood; but you mind if a thread of the Mahar woman's cloth is caught in the sticks...you drink their blood and enjoy and celebrate your life lying on the bed of their suffering. Doesn't it pollute your happiness then? (56)

The most prominent feature in the life of a Mahar was the marauding menace of poverty and hunger. The author rightly says, "The maharwada symbolized utter poverty and total destitution." (80) As such the Mahars survived on the leftover food thrown by the upper caste people but in times of total food scarcity, the women would ask their husbands to gather wild berries for the children to satiate their hunger. Kamble portrays a very heart rending picture of her people who rejoiced whenever there was an epidemic among the cattle. Though the bodies of the sick animals were sometimes rotten, some parts could be retrieved to serve as a meal. However, at other times the men had to think of certain schemes to generate food for their families. They often searched for the unsupervised grazing cattle and would feed them some poisonous substance so that it would die in a day or two then they would bring the carcasses of the dead animals in their vicinity even before the message of the animal being dead reached the owner's quarters. The women without wasting any time, queued up for their share and if there was not enough firewood to cook the meat, it would be eaten almost raw. In fact, at times when children could not stand the fire of hunger burning in their stomachs, they relished eating cactus. She writes, "The cactus was a boon to us poor people...when we went hungry, they supplied us with food." (43) Baby Kamble further adds that due to the consumption of cactus pods, several children also lost their eyesight because of the harmful *kusa*, the hair-like growth on the cactus plant.

In *The Prisons We Broke* a reader can witness a radical feminist in Baby Kamble in a sense that she is very vocal about the status of women. The writer focuses intensely on the life of drudgery, almost a living hell that the women in her community had to live. It is not only the arduous tasks and the back breaking physical labour that the women were compelled to do, they were also subjected to immense physical and mental violence which had become a part of their daily lives. Baby Kamble talks about the heinous practice of wife battering, an everyday phenomenon in her community. This issue gets highlighted even more when the author shares her own shocking experience. Babytai sadly remembers,

In my personal life, I had to suffer like many other women...once we went to Mumbai to attend a meeting, we travelled in a general compartment that was very crowded and

some young men happened to stare at me. My husband immediately suspected me and hit me so hard that my nose started bleeding profusely...I tried very hard to prove my innocence. I used to cry, explain, plead with him...All my life I had to face this violence. (154-55)

Babytai recalls that women were brutally punished for trying to escape the torture they were facing at home. As a result of which at least one in every hundred women in the community had a disfigured or broken nose. Similarly, women with broken heads and backs were also quite common. Some of the younger women, however, chose to break free from the life singularly marked by suffering and pain. At night, when everybody would be fast asleep, they secretly ran away to meet her own family members with a hope that they would surely empathize with them. But to their utter amazement, the moment they reached there all the men in the family ganged up against them. No one paid any heed to them instead they were beaten and forcibly sent back to their in-laws where a special wooden block weighing at least five kilograms, was carved hollow and the woman's right leg was put in it. In addition, an iron rod was inserted through the sides of the block making it sure that she could not take her leg out. The author points out with a heavy heart,

She was forced to work with this device around her leg. Her leg would get wounded and blood oozed out every time she tried to move her leg. She was not a human being for her in-laws, but just another piece of wood. (99)

Unable to bear the beastly treatment meted out to them, some of the women tried to escape even with this block of wood on their foot and when they were dragged back home, people would just crowd around to watch them. They were brought back only to bear the ignominy and disgrace of wearing a block around their right leg like Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's *A Scarlet Letter*, who wore Letter A around her neck. Everyone then targeted the women's character, being helpless and with no one to fall back on, the life of the women in Kamble's community became a long series of incessant labour, violence and agony.

Kamble's life narrative can be read as a multifaceted text with different issues waiting to be unearthed by the reader. In addition to the social matters, on the political front also the text has a lot to offer. It may be noted here that Babytai holds Dr. Ambedkar responsible for catapulting the miserable and agonized lives of the Mahars into a happy and harmonious one. Baby Kamble herself had tremendous respect for Babasaheb Ambedkar as his words were elixir to her, his philosophy the ultimate truth, his actions the only way to model one's action and Ambedkar as a man was god to her. The author, paying utmost reverence to Babasaheb, writes,

The creator gave us a human form and sent us down to earth, and abandoned us...He[Ambedkar] is far greater to us than the maker of the universe...first he gave us life; then he made us human being...He is certainly superior to god.(118)

To exemplify the impact of Dr. Ambedkar's movement, she graphically describes the initial meetings in the 1930s that were organized under the leadership of Ambedkar during religious fairs and the debates that followed in the community. She clearly remembers that

each time Ambedkar addressed the masses his fiery words gave immense courage to the women in particular whose contribution in the initial phase of the struggle remained unrealised. The author, in this context, quotes Baabsaheb's words. He said,

'Our women have had a major role in being superstitious, but I'm sure they will now give up these superstitions and take a lead in educating their children...I have full faith in you, my sisters. Go ahead, educate your children. Let all women take this step. (65)

All those who attended the conferences of Dr. Ambedkar and heard him speak were completely enamoured by him, yet there were some who were reluctant to accept Babasaheb's words. The younger generation, however, was quick in absorbing his ideals be it giving up the practice of eating dead cattle or anything else. The major change came when Ambedkar told them about the need to be educated. Paying utmost regard to Babasaheb's words, women decided to send their children to school, even if they had to bear the wrath of their family. The young boys and girls also did not let the efforts of their mothers and their saviour Babasaheb go waste as they took to the studies eagerly although they received step motherly treatment by their teachers who did not let them enter inside the classroom meant for the savarna.

The text also presents Gandhi-Ambedkar clash as is witnessed in the history. Babytai recalls an incident from her life when her every day tussle with the savarna girls in the school took political edge as their fiery exchange of words turned into a Gandhi versus Ambedkar battle. In the exchange of words that followed the upper caste girls made nasty comments about Ambedkar claiming, "That Ambedkar has educated himself, that's why these dirty Mahars are showing off! That filthy Mahar, Ambedkar, eats dead animals but look at the airs he gives himself!"(109) The Mahar girls retorted with equal fervour, "You shaven widows, how dare you take our Ambedkar's name! You have your baldy, that stupid Gandhi! He has neither a shirt on his body, nor teeth in his mouth!"(109) These fights were an everyday affair as Babytai recalls but she also adds that such incidents could not weaken the spirit of her people who have pledged to write a better tomorrow for themselves by acquiring education.

The Prisons We Broke, thus, is simply not a saga of the writer's personal trials and tribulations; it rather unfolds into multiple layers. Through her gripping narration, Babytai brings alive every event be it social or political. The author also gives her autobiography a psychological edge as the community which remained subjugated for ages learns to assert itself. In the words of Maya Pandit, the autobiography reveals the diverse ways in which the construction of the resistant selfhood and subjectivity of not just a person but an entire marginalized community happens. It also brings to the fore the tremendous transformative potential of oppressed people to change the world. (xv)

The courage of the dwellers of Maharwada, who have finally broken the 'prisons', may be celebrated in the powerful words of SurajBartiya; a Hindi Dalit poet: the vanguard soldiers of dalit youth are chanting the song of freedom hear this song, learn it by heart this is our freedom's anthem a new lesson of our hard, protracted struggle

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