



Research Paper

The Prisons They Broke Reading A Dalit (Woman's) Autobiography

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ABSTRACT: *Autobiographies/memoirs/testimonios in Dalit literature have received much critical attention. They give us a glimpse into the various aspects of the Dalit life-world and help dispel the various prejudices, biases and misconceptions one can hold about it. They are testimonies of the sufferings and pain due to caste and hence social discriminations, and thereby a powerful tool of protest in the hands of the Dalit writers. This paper first discusses the genre of autobiography in general and Dalit autobiography in particular to highlight its uniqueness and then goes on to discuss Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*. Kamble's text is a complex one which brings up varied issues related to gender, caste, social segregation as well as Dalit patriarchy within the community and the strength of Dalit women who not only survive but live to question and protest. An Ambedkarite that she was, Kamble shows the struggle and the emergence of the Mahar community from being traditionally subjugated by caste to embracing a more democratic modern life by rejecting Hinduism. The paper critically looks at these various "prisons" that Baby Kamble, her fellow women and her community broke in their fight against caste.*

KEYWORDS: *autobiography, dalit autobiography, caste, gender, untouchability.*

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Dalit literature and especially autobiographies have of late come to the critical limelight with many of them written in regional languages being recently translated into English. With the outpouring of such autobiographies, Dalit life-worlds have also come to the forefront, much of which till now had remained unknown to the general reading public. This largescale production has yielded positive results: the mainstream world, far removed from the various aspects of the Dalit life-worlds, is introduced to it. Writing of autobiographies especially in the West has been a long-standing practice giving rise to a well-established tradition. In fact, autobiographies are a time-honoured genre of writing also in the Indian literary context, going as far back as the genre of *atmcharita* and *jiban smriti*. That it is so especially among the upper castes and mainstream cultures is evidenced in the famous autobiographies of such political figures as Gandhi and Nehru and such cultural and literary figures as Tagore and Nirad C. Chaudhuri among others. Autobiographies as *atma katha/atmcharita* or personal narratives have also been written by upper-caste women. Such narratives include Rasundari Devi's *Amar Jiban*, Ramabai Ranade's *Reminiscences*, Lakshmibai Tilak's *Sketches from Memories* and Binodini Dasi's *Amar Katha* and *Amar Abhinetri Jiban*. A difference, however, cannot but strike one here so far as the gender difference is concerned. If the autobiographies written by men as instantiated above are generally a narration of the public self, those written by women are more a record and revelation of their private selves. The reasons are not far to seek. They refer to the home-bound and gender-discriminated private realm of the early women as mentioned above, and interestingly for culture's sake this happened to be the nationalist take on the woman question for a long time. No wonder, even the autobiographies written by the upper-caste middle-class women were also about their personal sense of deprivation, suffering and hardship. They generally represent the middle-class life of the time to which they belonged and especially the life they lived with their politically and otherwise famous husbands. Caste hardly ever appeared as an issue in these autobiographies. With reference to such autobiographies, generally written by upper-caste women, Sharmila Rege in her book *Writing Cast/Writing Gender* says:

Caste rarely appears in the autobiography of the Marathi middle class woman and as Pandian (2002) has argued, caste in upper caste autobiography - and in Marathi women's autobiographies - always belongs to someone else

or to some other time, especially to the lower caste women in the mills or vegetable vendors or to a time gone past. In the taken-for-granted categorisation of autobiographies too, caste belongs only to dalit women. (50)

The image of the modern, educated and elite woman that was emerging especially in places such as Bengal and Maharashtra was that of one who was moving forward discarding age- old traditional practices. These women expressed a desire to be modern, educated and rational. At this time, especially in Bengal, with reformations going on in full swing, most women belonging to upper-caste and upper-class families were educated in English. Hence, the modern self that came across was unmarked by caste. Talking of this self, as projected by Marathi upper-caste women, Sharmila Rege rightly observes:

It is this self that claims to be universal, modern, unmarked by caste through its journeys of compassionate marriage, modern institutions and marital discord. Caste is the 'other' of the modern as if it belongs only to Dalit women. This claim of the upper-caste women's autobiography to represent modern Marathi/Indian women serves, on the one hand, to render invisible their complicity in privileges of brahmanical patriarchy; and on the other, it classifies the narratives of women whose self-definition is located explicitly in caste as a rational identity, as if it were the 'other' of modern and feminist. (50)

However, Dalit writing which started much after independence is markedly different from western or even upper-caste form of writing in general. Overlapping of boundaries is the uniqueness of Dalit autobiographies and also one of its most important characteristics. "I" as the self hardly is in the limelight in these autobiographies. What is more forcefully proclaimed is rather the "We" that represents the community. The Dalit individual and her sufferings cannot be separated from those of the community itself. It is evident from what Urmila Pawar says about her mother as she speaks about herself: "I find her act of weaving and my act of writing are organically linked. The weave is similar. It is the weave of pain, suffering and agony that links us" (Pawar, x). Baby Kamble too expresses similar views about her autobiographies *Jina Amcha (Our Lives)* and *The Prisons We Broke* in her interview with Maya Pandit appended to the latter book:

Well, I wrote about what my community experienced. The suffering of my people became my own suffering. Their experiences became mine. So I really find it very difficult to think of myself outside of our community. (136)

Dalit narratives are thus socio-biographies rather than autobiographies of individuals. Having thus broken boundaries and having broken new grounds as against especially the upper-class bourgeois form of writing the genre that has emerged is itself subversive. Many prefer to call Dalit autobiographies *testimonios* because they are testimonies of the past representing a historical shame, the shame of the caste system, a history of pain and suffering, a history which many a time for political convenience the hegemonic government tried to forget. These autobiographies in the form of *testimonios* became an important tool in the hands of the Dalits to recuperate some bits of their personhood. In talking of *testimonios* Debjani Ganguly in her essay 'Dalit Life Stories' says that John Beverley, the Latin American historian, happened to introduce it to literary language in 1992 and defined the *testimonio* as "a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet...form told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or the witness of the events he or she recounts and whose unit of narration is usually a "life" or a significant life experience" (Ganguly 146). Thus *testimonios* have entered the category of a separate genre and has the required subversive strength in it. Since *testimonios* have entered the formal vocabulary in describing Dalit autobiographies, Gopal Guru in his "Afterword" to Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* comments as he refers to Sharmila Rege's usage of the word:

If one chooses to use testimonies, particularly in the context of a legal discourse, then this usage is hardly available for radical reading of the stories...However, one can defend the use of testimonies if it is understood in another rather radical sense. Testimonies can be interpreted as a powerful moral medium against the adversaries both from within and outside. Dalit women's testimonies could be seen as the political initiative to engage with the dalit patriarchy and social patriarchy. (159-160)

In challenging the bourgeois form of writing, Dalit autobiographies or alternatively *testimonios*, as they can be called, have emerged as a distinct and unique form of genre in themselves. Though Dalit literature and especially autobiographies have of late seen a lot of publication, with some exclusive publishers like Navayana taking the lead in this respect to bring about a revolution in Dalit literature, a lot of questions pertaining to the need of bringing to the forefront a hateful past has been raised by intellectuals including some Dalit intellectuals themselves. The question raised is whether focusing back on a past which is degraded and detestable is of any political help at all. Intellectuals like Baburao Bagul claim that 'dalit literature is not defined by anguish, waiting and sorrow alone but is a historical necessity in promoting human freedom' (Quoted in Rege, 12). Concerns such as whether it leads to further dalitization of both the writers and the communities that they represent have also been brought up. Such debates by all means point up the complexities involved in identity politics not to be so easily resolved. However, it can be asserted in the face of the facts that the production of Dalit literature is part of the growing resistance against the caste system and its various atrocities, and it is through Dalit literature and mainly the autobiographies that we get a peek into the past and the reality of being a Dalit and especially a Dalit woman. In this context Sharmila Rege says:

The entire debate on whether the hateful past should be written and brought into the present suggests the complex relationship between official forgetting, memory, and identity. Dalit life narratives cannot be accused of bringing an undesired past into the present, for they are one of the most direct and accessible ways in which the silence and misrepresentation of dalits has been countered. My argument here is that dalit life narratives are in fact *testimonios*, which forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and contest explicitly or implicitly the 'official forgetting' of histories of caste oppression, struggles and resistance. (Rege, 13)

In fact, this new genre of writing is only a necessary part of the new Dalit politics and history that surfaced and developed in the late twentieth century as a reaction against the failure of the Nehruvian democracy and other related issues. As Gyanendra Pandey explains: "The shift followed the gradual collapse of the promise and aspirations of Nehruvian democracy in the wake of independence, the apparent taming (and marginalization) of the philosophical challenge mounted by the mass conversion to Buddhism, and the splintering of Ambedkar's own political movement" (Pandey, 163). As is evident from history, the 1970s saw the rise of a number of political fractions out of this splintering, especially the militant cultural/political one led by a group of first generation of college-educated Dalit intellectuals. Established in 1972, it was called the Dalit Panthers. This movement got further inspiration and support in general from the political and intellectual ambience created by the contemporary New Social Movements all over the world. Dalit autobiographies and memoirs emerged as "a form of protest literature" during this period and as "a means of documenting the Dalit struggle" (Pandey, 163). Dalit autobiographies have had wide impact both on the communities concerned and the nation in general since then. Within the autobiographical model Dalit autobiography is a new kind of a genre with a lot of potential for resistance. As Gopal Guru rightly observes, "Testimonios have the ability to convert what is considered pathological into subversive chemicals. These writings perform a double function; they inflict an inferiority complex in the minds of adversaries by resurrecting dalit triumphalism, and bring out guilt in the minds of the upper castes by recording social wrongs done by the ancestors" (qtd. in Rege, 15). Hence, literary practice, especially these life stories are not only major sources of socio political material, but also a major source of resistance in that counter arguments against the caste system can be found in them. When it comes to life narratives especially by Dalit women, we get a glimpse into their lives and the mechanisms of the caste system which affect them. They bring gender into perspective and in turn critique both Dalit men and the dalit community. Intellectuals have expressed the fear that read uncritically these texts can only become a spectacle of the sufferings of Dalit life. But read as testimonios of caste-based exploitation, they can act as great sources of knowledge about this evil practice. Dalit women's perspective in this respect is even more important. It is a shade different from that of Dalit men. Autobiographies written by them provide great insight into the Dalit communities, their everyday rituals, power relationships within and outside the community and the strategies adopted by Dalit women for their survival. In talking of Dalit life narratives in general, Debjani Ganguly describes them as articulating "an aspiration to personhood through the realization of full citizenship" but, as she observes, registering at the same the awareness of its "impossibility due to a crushing historical legacy – in its logic of abstract equivalence – to address the singular nature of Dalit pain" (Ganguly 148). If this is true about Dalit life narratives in general, this is rendered further complex for the Dalit women who must needs articulate a double voice: one for the community as a whole against the prevailing caste discrimination, and the other as women against their own patriarchy within the community. This is in brief the socio-cultural perspective of the Dalit life writing. What follows is a discussion of Baby Kamble's autobiography titled *The Prisons We Broke*.

Baby Kamble was an activist and took active part in the Ambedkarite movement, playing an active role in society to bring about reforms and changes in her community. Before being published as a book in 1986, *The Prisons We Broke* was serialized in a Marathi magazine. Talking about how she started writing her autobiography, Baby Kamble says that she ran a small grocery shop and generally wrote during the early part of the day when her husband was not in the shop. When Baby Kamble started writing, she was thirty, but she published it after almost twenty years. Till that time she had kept her writing hidden. Her autobiography was discovered by Maxine Berntson, a sociologist who went to stay in Phaltan for her own research. It is to her that Baby Kamble showed her writings. Berntson realized the potential in the writings and showed it to the editor of the women's magazine *Stree*, where it was finally serially printed.

Kamble's story is a movement from the traditional, caste-based and superstitious world of the Mahars to enlightenment and modernity introduced by Ambedkar. The autobiography describes various aspects of the Mahar community, the community Baby Kamble belongs to. Kamble's description is sometimes stark and raw. She makes no efforts to cover the wretchedness of her community. Her description of poverty, and caste-based exploitation is stark and hurts the senses sometimes. But Kamble with all her humour describes even the harshest of realities and her description is absolutely devoid of any self-pity. Apart from caste discrimination that she discusses in the autobiography, she especially describes the life of women. She is all praise of the extreme grit and determination that Mahar women show in leading their lives. Apart from the caste divisions, responsible for the lowly life that the Mahars lead, Kamble's narrative throw light on the plight of the women. She describes women in everyday life and struggle, women as mothers, women as daughters-in-law and also

possessed women. All aspects of her life only show struggle. But it is also these women in Baby Kamble's narrative who are also the agents of change. From her account it is evident that it is the Mahar women who were deeply influenced by the instructions of Ambedkar and played a big role in carrying out his instructions and bringing about changes in society. In her Introduction to *The Prisons We Broke*, Maya Pandit, also the translator, says:

During the course of the narration, Baby Kamble brings alive a world that is constituted by 'difference in location'. The difference is not only in terms of geography. Her world is physically located on the margins of the village and also on the margins of the 'social imaginary', it is at once alienating and alienated by being cut off from the village as unclean, impure, polluting and untouchable. (xiv)

Kamble's narrative is the story of this world, a potential source of pollution for the upper-caste Hindu society, a movement from being totally marginalized to slowly becoming aware of one's identity and subjectivity. Baby Kamble starts by describing the Maharwada, the place where the Mahars stay. Out of the fifteen to sixteen houses, only three or four would be in good condition and the rest would be in absolute poverty. The huts were generally tiny. They were generally just stones piled up on one another with mud coating. Almost all the huts were similar in its embellishment. At one corner was the *chulha*, around which could be found a few clay pots. The *tawa* found in most houses would be burnt in the middle. Above the *chulha* would hang a long string called *walni*. Kamble humorously calls these strings 'our holy threads, the markers of our birth, our caste-like the *janeu* of the Brahmins. These strings had to be there because on these strings we would hang the intestines of dead animals in order to dry them'(8). Kamble's humorous way of depicting the reality makes the autobiography all the more interesting because she does not allow herself to fall into selfpity. With humour and sometimes with playfulness she describes the wretched condition of her people. However, from this wretched condition if there is a saviour, then it is Baba Saheb. Talking of poverty, Kamble narrates an interesting incident. Food in the Mahar households was so scarce that sometimes they did not know the difference between real food and clay. She narrates the story of one Ganpat dada. It was the time of Nagpanchami festival and women made a snake out of mud and kept it in the corner of the house where the gods were kept. In the darkness of the hut, Ganpat thought the *naga* figure made of mud to be jaggery. He added some water to it and served it to the children along with *chapaties* and also ate it himself. They ate this concoction with considerable relish. The children not only licked their fingers but also their elbows where the muddy water trickled down. Such is the abject poverty that the people lived in. Where food itself is scarce, mud itself is tasty. However, it is only during the time of epidemics that food overflowed in the house of the Mahars. The death of an animal means availability of food for the Mahars. The Mahars considered epidemics a boon. During epidemics atleast four and five animals would die and food would overflow in the house of the Mahars. The inside of many animals would be full of puss, blood and foul smell. Kamble says that such animals would also not be thrown away. The infected parts would be cut off and they convinced themselves that it was now safe to eat. After one animal was cut, the women would immediately start transporting it in baskets. They would balance the basket on their heads and walk homewards continuously driving off flies. The scene that she describes is heart rending:

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 (86).

Again talking of the caste discrimination and how the Mahars are supposed to behave in the presence of the upper castes, Kamble says that the Mahars were not allowed to use the regular roads used by the upper castes. When somebody from the upper caste walked from the opposite direction, especially a man, Mahar women would have to cover themselves fully and say, "The humble Mahar women fall at your feet master." (52) This was like a chant which had to be repeated many times, even to a child if it belonged to a higher caste. In case a newlywed failed to follow this out of sheer ignorance, the master would go into a rage: "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?" (53) The whole thing didn't stop here. Sarcastic remarks and abuses flowed from the father-in-law and mother-in-law too. Within the Dalit community, the life of women seems to be even more difficult. Their saris would be stitched out of rags and they had to wear their saris in a way that Mahar women were allowed to wear. If life for them was difficult at home, life outside the home was equally difficult. Mahar women earned money outside their home. Many of them sold firewood. Most of their firewood would be sold at the Brahmin lane. The houses in the Brahmin lane were built in such a way that it not only kept away pollution caused by the touch of lower castes, it also helped to keep their own women within the inner quarters. The platforms surrounding the Brahmin houses were chest high. After the bargaining with the Brahmin "kaki" would get over, the Mahar women still had to do a lot more. The women had to carry the bundles to the backyard and stack them neatly. Then each stick had to be checked for long hair or thread that may be stuck to it from their sari. After this the Mahar women would stretch out their palm with utmost humility

and the Kaki would throw from above some coins to avoid any kind of contact. But even after taking all precautions that they want to take, ironically, they cannot save themselves from pollution. Kamble says that it is Mahar women's sweat that had soaked the firewood. Sometimes, while collecting the wood, thorns would prick them and the firewood would get soaked with the blood that came out of their bodies. Is it possible to save themselves from pollution? Kamble says that, "it was the very essence of the Mahar woman's life that was found sticking to the wood. And yet the Brahmin woman objected to what they found sticking there!" (56).

Further discussing the life of Mahar women, Kamble says how being a mother is also not easy. There would be no food in the house to satiate the hunger of a new mother, sometimes not even the water from the boiled rice. After the baby is born, there is a void left in the stomach. The new mother would just tie her stomach lightly and lie down in hunger. Talking of Mahar women's strength and determination and how they can survive under any circumstances, Kamble compares Mahar women to the black cow which can survive even on thorns. She says, "Our women were like the proverbial black cow. Even on occasions when they had a right to be indulged a bit, they had to fill their stomachs with thorns to stay alive." (57). To further add to their ordeal, most women were married off at a very tender age and by the time they reached their first pregnancy, she is still underdeveloped. The delivery happened at home, generally done by the ignorant midwives. If the girl is lucky, she can have a safe delivery, otherwise, delivery is like a battle with death. The baby that is born with so much trouble too is born with ill luck. Birth itself is perhaps ill luck under such circumstances. Sarcasically Kamble says that all newborn babies in the Mahar community have the same fate. It is as if Barama and Satwai must have made a common stamp for all babies. In anger Kamble says:

Today, if we come across Barama and Satwai, we would like to give them both a sound thrashing and ask, 'Barama and Satwai, you ruined the lives of generation and generation of the Mahars! You wrote our fates, didn't you? Religion must have bribed you quite well to do this. Otherwise why should you have done this? Religion must have handed over a stamp to Barama instead of a pen to Satwai, you kept stealing out fates with your writing! And yet, our simple folks were so loyal to your religion!' (62)

Kamble's description is enough to tell us why Buddhism appeared more attractive to them.

There are further examples of atrocities on women. Kamble says that just because the Mahar community is powerless and suffers atrocities from the upper caste does not necessarily mean that they will not cause harm to people who are more powerless than them. The easiest targets in this case are the daughters-in-law. As Kamble says, "The other world had bound us with chains of slavery. But we too were human beings. And we too desired to dominate, to wield power. But who would let us do that? So we made our own arrangements to find slaves - our very own daughters-in-law! If nobody else, then we could at least enslave them" (87). Kamble tells the story of many women whose noses were chopped off as punishment. Many even tried to run away, but they were again caught and put to greater torture. The mother-in-law, the father-in-law, the neighbours, no one left the young girl in peace. The husband would be instigated against her and the poor girl could do nothing but suffer in silence.

The month of Asadh used to be the favourite month for the Mahars. Women had to do a lot of work at this time. The ritual cleaning of the house would take place. The house would be polished with cow dung, the few pots that they have would be taken out and cleaned, all rags thoroughly cleaned. Women would buy *shikakai* and coconut to clean the bodies of children. Every household offered their eldest son to the goddess as *potraja*. It was a matter of pride to give away the son in the service of the deity. For people who have nothing else to gain from life, this itself seemed to be a great achievement. This was also a time when women of this community would get possessed in a row. According to Baby Kamble, this was nothing but a performance on the part of women. For the kids, it would be a lot of fun. They would rush from one house to the other to look at the spectacle that possessed women created. The possessed women would be seen as powerful goddesses. This perhaps gave the women one chance to feel powerful. Talking of these superstitious practices Kamble says:

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. Yet, we kept believing in your Hindu religion and serving you faithfully. (37)

This is what the pre-Ambedkar era had witnessed. In Baby Kamble's narrative, things changed for the better with the coming of Ambedkar. It was during the 1930s that Ambedkar's presence was felt for the first time in this place. Baby Kamble emphasizes the contribution of women in the movement. Talking of Ambedkar, Kamble says:

From 1930 onwards, his name started reaching villages like a gentle breeze that brings succour in the scorching sun. Our Bhimraja decided to awaken his people who had sunk to the level of subhumans. (62) Ambedkar's first meeting was organised in Jejuri in *Chaitra Purnima* fair. It inspired a whole host of women. Kamble's grand Aunt Bhikaji Aaji immediately climbed onto the stage and gave a fiery speech, "Let me assure you, sisters, what Bhimrao Ambedkar says is absolutely right. We must educate our children. We must not and will not eat dead animals. We must reform our community. Let us resolve to fight along with Ambedkar" (65).

Ambedkar's influence became apparent in the changes in the way of life of the people. Parents started fully dressing up their children in *pajamas* instead of loin cloth which was usually used by them. They started cutting the hair of their daughters and started sending their children to schools. Kamble's grandmother Sitavahini played a major role in leading the agitation for the ban of eating the flesh of dead animals. Kamble's father would read out Ambedkar's speeches to everyone in the village square. The youth of the village made sure that no one ate dead cattle. They cycled long distances to attend these meetings. The struggle for equality reached such a level that Rani Lakshmbai's Mahila Mandal, which consisted of Mahar women also, had to modify the sitting arrangements. Thakubai Kakade made sure that Dalit women were allowed to sit in the first row during these meetings. This is how space which was strictly divided in accordance to caste was democratised.

Thus Kamble's autobiography as a *testimonio* proves to be an extraordinary social and historical document. Gopal Guru in the "Afterword" to the book makes an important comment. He says that Baby Kamble's autobiography "challenges the biased reading of some of the scholars, according to whom dalit conversion to Buddhism was Ambedkar's personal decision...Baby Kamble's reading provides evidence to the contrary reading of the conversion decision"(164). From her narration it is evident that the whole issue was debated by the people. The people met at the *Chawdi* regularly and debated over the issue to decide positively about it. In fact, Baby Kamble herself provides the reason and argument : "Why did Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar convert to Buddhism? Buddhism means good character. The person who preaches Buddhism has to be morally upright and lead a virtuous and uncorrupted life" (117). An activist who calls herself a product of the Ambedkarite movement, Kamble has also proved to be an instrument of change and social revolution, carrying on the legacy of Ambedkar. Her autobiography is not only a relentless exposé and an interrogation of the ill-fated time to which she belonged but also a powerful narrative of the emergence of a voice of protest that she has proved to be, thereby a firm rejoinder to the question "Can the subaltern speak?"

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