



THE POLITICS OF DALIT FEMINISM: A STUDY OF BABY KAMBLE'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY *THE PRISONS WE BROKE*

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ABSTRACT

The present paper aims to focus on various forms of oppression and resistance to it by Dalit Women by making a close analysis of the autobiographies and literary works written by or on Dalit women. Division of society in the community is not restricted to caste division, also exist in gender equalities. Dalit women experience a different degree of oppression from both upper caste Hindu and Dalit men where Dalit Women are still biased by being women, poor and Dalit. The significance of this paper is in that it tries to highlight the powerfulness and celebrate the resistance of the women against multiple power discourses which attempt to govern and rule them.

Keywords: Dalit feminism, Dalit writing, Caste, trauma

INTRODUCTION

The Dalits are the most socially, culturally and economically oppressed people in India. Often the horrendous caste system and the Hindu scriptures are considered as the primary agents that endow the peripheral and inhuman social position to the Dalits. The opening of school doors for the Dalits by the constitutional intervention in 1950 was a giant leap for the Dalits for social mobility through the politics of the upper castes continue to oppress them in all aspects. Education and the English language became the two empowering sources for the Dalits. The autobiography genre is one genre that the Dalits have adopted to critique the society and used it as a form of protest against inhuman practices which they are subjected to.

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However, it would be only partially viable to say that the politics of oppression of the upper caste people are solely responsible for the belittled position of the Dalits and especially of Dalit women. The problem of the Dalits has its roots also in the hierarchal social structure of the Dalit community itself. Though almost all the Dalit sub-communities suffered the humiliation and torture together, the fruit of modern education is plucked only by few communities because of the hierarchy that functions within the Dalit social structure. In Gujarat, the Vankar or the Weavers who are at the top among the Dalit sub-communities have had the benefit of education and social mobility. And not surprisingly it must be noted that the Vankar form the most substantial number of Gujarati Dalit authors. As a consequence, there is a representational dominance of Vankar community in Dalit literature is present, and for various historical reasons, other communities fall outside from this fold of representation.

The hallmark of a good Dalit story was marked by the atrocity inflicted upon a powerless Dalit by upper caste. The common themes are: the impossibility of a cordial relationship between the people of higher caste and a lower caste, the Hindu feudal order as the traditional enemy of all minorities, the hypocrisy of the Hindu upper caste people who propagate that urban city are caste-free and the recurring theme of sexual exploitation of Dalit women by the upper caste. These tropes are typical of Dalit men's autobiographies. Contrarily, Dalit women's autobiographies offer a critique of the Dalit society as oppressive as the upper caste society. Dalit women, in the literary arena, have fostered a counter-perspective dialogue to voice the grievances of Dalit women something which the upper caste women and Dalit men never took up in their writings. This paper has shown Baby Kamble as a radical feminist through a close reading of her autobiography *The Prisons We Broke*. Also, the paper is an attempt to focus on the Brahminical elements within India's feminist movement and the patriarchal features of Dalit politics of resistance itself. It also demonstrates the vivid portrayal of the aesthetic of pain in Dalit literature as the violation of human rights and throws light on the fact that the perpetrators of crimes against Dalit women are not only the Dalit men who occupy the higher position within their social structure but also Dalit women. And finally, it argues how Kamble's humanitarian vision of the social transformation of the Dalit women rests on the attainment of their fundamental rights.

The Prison We broke is a millstone of Dalit women autobiographies in Indian history of Dalit Feminism and to protest against inhuman conditions which have been subjected to Dalit. Some of the social reformers raised their voice against the caste system hegemony and after that Dr Ambedkar who provided the challenges against the caste system. The question raises here is how a child makes differences in human conditions when it comes to consciousness, *The Prisons We Broke* focuses on awareness that makes differences socially, culturally, economically, identity and religion etc. That is how Baby Kamble's autobiography demonstrates the history of the Mahar community's oppression. The political boundary of

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such a critical analysis comes naturally from the radical, self-assertive politics of B. R. Ambedkar is a significant source of inspiration for Baby Kamble. Whereas most of the Dalit autobiographies by men are in a sense written for a mixed readership of Dalit and non-Dalit readers. In contrast, “Baby Kamble asserts that she is writing for her people. Today our young, educated people are ashamed of being called a Mahar. But what is there to be ashamed of? We are the great race of the Mahars of Maharashtra. We are its real original inhabitants, the sons of the soil. The name of this land is also derived from our name. They should love our caste name, Mahar- it flows in my veins, in my blood, and reminds me of our terrible struggle for truth”. (The Prison We Broke. xiii)

“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 she intends to subject the life of her community to critical scrutiny to demonstrate how Brahminical domination had turned the Mahar into a slave, forcing them to live in conditions that were worse than animals. Baby Kamble asserts that “I have described in this book the details of the life of our community as I have experienced it during the last fifty years. The readers should not feel ashamed of this history. I have tried to sketch a portrait of the actual life of the Mahars and the indignities; they were subjected to. I am writing this history for my sons, daughters-in-law and my grandchildren to show them how the community suffered because of the chains of slavery and so that they realise what ordeals of fire the Mahars have passed through. I also want to show them what the great soul Dr Ambedkar single-handedly achieved which no one else had achieved in ages” (The Prison We Broke.xiii-xiv).

An important unique aspect of *Jina Amucha* or *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble’s is the 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 Mahar men. Baby Kamble demonstrates how caste and patriarchy converge to perpetuate exploitative practices against women. It is here that the urge to define the self-becomes most evident in women. She also shows the remarkable dignity and resilience of the Mahar women in their struggle through which they have emerged as the agents of transformation in their community. Kamble recalls how one in every hundred women had a disfigured or broken nose, punishment for attempting to escape the torture at home. Women with broken heads and backs were also, common. But some of the younger women chose to rebel against the violence, and the never-ending labour and some even attempted to escape in the darkness of night. But there was nowhere for them to go. No sooner had they reached their natal home, that the men of the family would band together against them. By the 1990s, Dalit feminism was arguing that it was impossible to understand the sexual violence of Dalit women except as recurrent stigmatization of Dalits. They challenged upper-caste feminists for ignoring the central role

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of caste in regulating female sexuality and sexual access. Sexual violence had thus attained semiotic density as a distinguishing feature of caste violence and a sign of its discursive centrality in framing Dalit identity, even when the meaning and interpretation of violence different from victims to perpetrators.

The politics of a community particular to the group of people having one power over others. A community is a group of people living the same place and practising a common culture, law, social codes, religion, extra. Indian society's composition is staggering regarding religion culture, ethnicity, race, etc. Indian society is predominantly Hindu, and it is characterised as the most rigid and oppressive religion. The principle text Bagvat Gita, Veda and Manusmriti justify the division of the caste in the purpose of the untouchables to serve the upper caste and live in the isolated colonies on the outskirts of villages. India's caste system assigns individuals a certain hierarchical status according to Hindu beliefs. The Hindu population is divided into four castes: Brahmin- Priests and Scholars; Kshatriya- rulers and aristocrats; Vaisya- businessmen and landlords; Sudra- peasants and workers. A fifth caste is a "no-caste" known by several different names: The untouchable higher castes were not supposed to touch them; Dalit is "the oppressed" the politically correct term today for scheduled castes because they are "scheduled" by the government to receive fairer treatment. The Untouchables did the work that the other castes considered unclean: Butchers; latrine cleaners; tannery workers, etc. Untouchables had almost no right; they were often regarded as pollution and had to live away from others.

Despite social and economic development in India during the 1950s and 1960s, Indian society depressingly suffered from the practising of the caste system that has deprived the lower caste of any aspects of development. The constitution of India has abolished untouchability and opened schools for lower caste but education institutions still oppressed with a visit caste practice. Regarding this Omprakash Valmiki's autobiography *Joothan* (2008) demonstrates the inequality in the socio, economic, education institutions in India.

A Dalit Christian is never free from the atrocity of high caste till now, the novel *The God of Small thing* (1997) presented itself as a classic example of conversions and caste frontiers crossing that ends on a fatalistic note.

The Dalit women are marginalized in five ways: 1) because they are women, 2) because they are Dalit and are subjects of casteist oppression, 3) they are victims of patriarchal power system, 4) they are victims because they are economically backward hence they are venerable to be exploited in an upper caste community. And the fifth one is the issue within Dalit feminism, that is the marginalised by their community



The ideas of Audre Lorde can be applied in the Indian context. Throughout history Dalit women are oppressed and sexually assaulted by the men and Dalit men themselves. Mulk Raj Anand *Untouchables* and *The Prisons We Broke* demonstrate the crimes done on women. Even in feminist discourse, Dalit women issues are hard studies along with the writings of upper caste Hindu women, and high caste Hindu has not shown real sympathy for Dalit women in their writing. It is because, for the upper caste Hindu women, the Dalits are less than human, as the Black women are less than human for the White women. Dalit women are considered to be the most underprivileged group left out at the bottom of the hierarchal caste society for centuries. They suffer doubly marginalised one being a Dalit and two being a woman. Being Dalit, they suffer due to caste discrimination and being a woman they are victimised by the patriarchal social order both in their homes as well outside. Dalit women believed to be alienated at three levels: caste, class and gender. The violence against Dalit women continues. Dalit women have been misrepresented in Indian literature and Indian English literature, most of upper caste male writers are biased towards Dalit women. They are portrayed as sex objects for the upper caste men in *Samskara*, and they never resist the sexual advances made by the men, and hence they are the passive partner in sex. They are shown as weak or too sick intellectually to fight against the injustice done to them.

As a conclusion, it can be said that "it is not our differences which separate women, but our reluctance to recognise those differences and to deal effectively with the distortions which have resulted from the ignoring and misnaming of those differences" (Lorde, 122). How Dalit women with their heart-rendering narration have evinced the famine sensibility, which comes out of their angst and protest against the society where Dalit women are still carrying the stigma of being "oppressed" and struggling hard to show their indelible presence in today's society.

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