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**Breaking Chains: A Dalit Feminist Resistance in Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke***

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**Abstract:**

Emphasizing Dalit feminist resistance's intersectional critique of caste and gender oppression, this paper looks at how Baby Kamble's autobiographical story *The Prisons We Broke* articulates this resistance. Examining Kamble's uncompromising representation of Dalit women's enslavement under Brahmanical patriarchy and caste segregation helps one to see how her work challenges systematic hierarchies and recovers agency via narrative. It looks at Kamble's records of daily opposition against dehumanizing—from labor battles to cultural restoration. By focusing on Dalit women's embodied knowledge, the essay contends that her story transcends personal witness and becomes a communal manifesto challenging conventional feminist and anti-caste discourses. Placed within Dalit feminist intellectual traditions, the research emphasizes Kamble's pioneering contribution in revealing the "prisons" of social, cultural, and epistemic violence, thereby imagining emancipatory solidarities. In the end, it presents *The Prisons We Broke* as a fundamental book that redefines resistance via the prism of intersectional dignity, therefore providing radical opportunities for feminist practice.

**Keywords:** Dalit feminism, Baby Kamble, patriarchy, social.

**Introduction**

Dalit feminism, a radical movement born from the intersecting oppressions of caste, gender, and class, challenges the erasure of Dalit women's voices within both mainstream feminism and anti-caste struggles. Unlike dominant feminist discourses that often universalize the experiences of upper-caste women, Dalit feminism centers on the unique violence faced by Dalit women under Brahminical patriarchy—a system that weaponizes caste hierarchy to control their labor, bodies, and dignity. As Sharmila Rege argues, Dalit feminism “demands a reconfiguration of feminist theory to address caste as a lived reality” (78), while Anupama Rao emphasizes its role in exposing how “caste is gendered, and gender

is cast" (4). This theoretical framework, as Gopal Guru asserts, positions Dalit women's lived experiences as the foundation for dismantling systemic oppression (Guru and Sarukkai 112).

Baby Kamble (1929–2012), a pioneering Dalit writer and activist from Maharashtra's Mahar community, embodies this intersectional resistance in her memoir *The Prisons We Broke* (1986). Originally written in Marathi (Jina Amucha), this autobiographical work is among the earliest narratives to foreground Dalit women's lived experiences, offering an unflinching account of systemic caste atrocities and gendered exploitation. Kamble's writing transcends mere testimony; it is a defiant act of reclaiming agency in a society that silences marginalized voices. Her memoir, rooted in the Ambedkarite movement, captures the duality of Dalit women's oppression—crushed by caste humiliation and patriarchal norms yet resilient in their collective struggle for liberation.

This article argues that *The Prisons We Broke* dismantles caste patriarchy by interweaving personal and communal narratives of resistance. Kamble's memoir not only exposes the dehumanizing "prisons" of caste—physical segregation, ritual humiliation, and forced labor—but also illuminates Dalit women's strategies of survival, from subverting oppressive traditions to embracing Ambedkarite Buddhism as a path to emancipation. By centering Dalit women's voices, Kamble disrupts dominant historical narratives and asserts their role as architects of their own liberation, forging a legacy that continues to inspire contemporary Dalit feminist movements.

### **Historical and Social Context**

The socio-political landscape of Maharashtra, both pre-and post-independence, was deeply shaped by the rigid hierarchies of the caste system, particularly for the Mahar community, to which Baby Kamble belonged. Historically labeled "untouchables," Mahars were subjected to systemic dehumanization: barred from accessing public spaces, education, and dignified labor, they were relegated to menial tasks like scavenging and manual work (Zelliot 45). Despite the abolition of untouchability in the 1950 Constitution, caste-based violence and segregation persisted, underscoring the gap between legal reforms and social reality. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a Mahar himself, spearheaded anti-caste resistance, advocating for Dalit empowerment through education and conversion to Buddhism—a movement that profoundly influenced Kamble's worldview (Omvedt 112). Her memoir, *The Prisons We Broke*, reflects this Ambedkarite legacy, chronicling the Mahar community's transition from subjugation to self-assertion in postcolonial India.

Dalit women, however, faced dual oppression under Brahminical patriarchy, a system that weaponizes caste and gender to enforce subordination. As Anupama Rao notes, "caste is gendered, and gender is cast" (4), a dynamic evident in the exploitation of Dalit women's labor—such as forced manual scavenging—and their sexual vulnerability to upper-caste men. Sharmila Rege argues that mainstream feminism often overlooks these intersections, reducing Dalit women's struggles to "an addendum to the 'larger' Dalit or women's movements" (92). Kamble's narrative disrupts this erasure, detailing how Dalit women navigated violence while sustaining familial and communal bonds, thus highlighting

their resilience as both victims and agents of resistance.

The emergence of Dalit literature in the 1970s, catalyzed by the radical Dalit Panthers movement, provided a platform for such testimonies. Modeled after the Black Panthers, the Dalit Panthers used literature to confront caste apartheid, with autobiographies becoming a potent tool for documenting lived oppression. Kamble's memoir, published in 1986, epitomizes this tradition. As Gopal Guru observes, Dalit autobiographies "transform personal pain into political critique" (Guru and Sarukkai 118), a theme central to *The Prisons We Broke*. By intertwining her story with collective Mahar experiences, Kamble not only indicts caste society but also celebrates Dalit women's role in dismantling its "prisons," thereby cementing her work as a cornerstone of Dalit feminist resistance.

### **The Caste System as a "Prison"**

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* employs the metaphor of the "prison" to encapsulate the multifaceted oppression of the caste system, which confines Dalits through physical brutality, psychological terror, and dehumanizing norms. The "prison" is not merely a physical space but a socio-cultural apparatus that enforces untouchability, segregation, and systemic violence, trapping Dalits in cycles of subjugation. As Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai argue, caste operates as a "symbolic prison" that dictates every aspect of Dalit life, from labor to social interactions (118). Kamble's memoir exposes how this carceral logic permeates both public spaces—like segregated wells and temples—and private realms, where Dalit women's bodies and labor are policed to uphold caste purity.

Kamble's personal testimonies starkly illustrate this confinement. She recalls being forced to carry human excrement as part of her caste-designated labor, a practice that reduced Dalits to "beasts of burden" (34). Physical segregation extended to basic dignities: Dalits were barred from entering upper-caste homes except through back doors and forbidden from sharing utensils. Kamble writes, "Our shadows were considered impure; even our breath was believed to pollute the air" (42). Such rituals of humiliation reinforced caste hierarchy, creating what Anupama Rao terms a "geography of exclusion" (112), where spatial boundaries mirrored social ones. Psychological imprisonment is equally central; Kamble describes how caste norms internalized shame, making Dalits "prisoners of [their] own minds" (72), fearful of transgressing invisible but lethal boundaries.

The gendered dimensions of this "prison" amplify Dalit women's oppression. Brahminical patriarchy weaponizes caste to control their bodies and labor, rendering them vulnerable to sexual violence and economic exploitation. Kamble recounts how upper-caste men sexually assaulted Dalit women with impunity, treating them as "objects to be used and discarded" (89). Manual scavenging, a task forced exclusively on Dalit women, symbolized their dual subjugation: it was both caste-enforced labor and a gendered marker of impurity. As Sharmila Rege notes, Dalit women's work is "hyper-visible yet invisibilized," reduced to degrading tasks that reaffirm their social inferiority (104). Kamble critiques this paradox, highlighting how Dalit women's labor sustained villages while their humanity was denied. Even within their communities, patriarchal norms compounded oppression. Widows, for

instance, faced ostracization and economic precarity, their bodies policed by both caste and gender codes.

Yet Kamble's narrative also reveals cracks in the prison walls. Dalit women's resilience—through covert acts of defiance, solidarity, and embracing Ambedkarite Buddhism—becomes a tool of liberation. By documenting these struggles, Kamble transforms the memoir itself into an act of resistance, dismantling the silence that sustains caste patriarchy. As Uma Chakravarti observes, Dalit feminist texts like *The Prisons We Broke* “rupture the dominant narrative, turning testimonies into weapons” (23). Kamble's metaphor of the prison, thus, is not static; it is a site of both confinement and rebellion, where Dalit women reclaim agency by breaking ideological and physical chains.

### **Dalit Feminist Resistance**

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* is a manifesto of Dalit feminist resistance, weaving together personal and collective acts of defiance against caste patriarchy. Through her unflinching narrative, Kamble reclaims Dalit women's agency, critiques Brahminical hierarchies, and celebrates spiritual and cultural practices as tools of liberation.

### **Reclaiming Voice and Agency**

Kamble's decision to write her autobiography is itself an act of resistance. In a society that silences Dalit women, her memoir disrupts what Gopal Guru calls the “epistemic violence” of caste—the systematic erasure of Dalit histories (Guru and Sarukkai 112). By documenting her lived experiences, Kamble rejects the notion that Dalit women are “voiceless victims,” asserting instead that “our stories are our weapons” (15). Her writing defies the Brahminical tradition of relegating Dalit narratives to footnotes, a theme Sharmila Rege underscores in her analysis of Dalit women's testimonies as “counter-memories” that challenge dominant historiography (89).

Kamble also highlights everyday acts of resistance within her community. She recounts how Dalit women subverted caste norms by secretly educating their children, defying bans on Dalit literacy, and organizing collective labor strikes to protest exploitative wages. For instance, when upper-caste landlords demanded unpaid fieldwork, Kamble's mother rallied women to refuse, declaring, “We will starve, but we will not break our self-respect” (62). Such solidarity, as Anupama Rao argues, reflects Dalit feminism's roots in “the politics of dignity,” where survival itself becomes revolutionary (145).

### **Challenging Brahminical Patriarchy**

Kamble's memoir exposes how Brahminical patriarchy entrenches caste through gendered violence. She critiques practices like child marriage, describing her own wedding at age nine as a “death sentence” that robbed her of childhood (78). Widows, she notes, faced even harsher oppression: stripped of jewelry and forced into ritualized mourning, they became symbols of “inauspiciousness” in a casteist and misogynistic order (Kamble 102). These testimonies reveal how caste and gender intersect to commodify Dalit women's bodies, a dynamic Uma Chakravarti defines as the “enslavement of reproductive labor” under Brahminical norms (67).

Kamble's work also implicitly critiques mainstream Indian feminism, which

historically centered on upper-caste women's struggles. While figures like Sarojini Naidu championed women's suffrage, they often ignored caste-based sexual violence or manual scavenging—issues Kamble places at the forefront. As Rege argues, Dalit feminism “refuses to let caste be subsumed under gender,” demanding an intersectional lens (112). Kamble's narrative thus fills a gap left by upper-caste feminists, whose activism, as Rao notes, often “mirrored the caste blindness of the state” (201).

### **Spiritual and Cultural Resistance**

Central to Kamble's resistance is her embrace of Ambedkarite Buddhism, which she frames as a spiritual revolt against caste. Following Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's 1956 conversion, Kamble describes how Dalit communities rejected Hindu deities associated with their oppression, chanting “Manusmriti is dead!” as they burned casteist texts (158). This conversion, as Gail Omvedt explains, was not merely religious but a “political act of renouncing Hindu slavery” (205). For Kamble, Buddhism offered Dalit women a theology of equality, liberating them from Hindu dictates that labeled them “impure.”

Kamble also celebrates Dalit cultural practices as acts of resilience. She details festivals like Gudi Padwa, where Dalit women adorned themselves in bold colors and sang *ovīs* (folk songs) mocking caste hierarchies. These traditions, often dismissed as “low culture” by elites, become, in Kamble's telling, a “reclamation of joy” (132). Such cultural pride, as Chandra Talpade Mohanty reminds us, is vital to feminist resistance, enabling marginalized communities to “redefine their identities outside oppressive systems” (34).

### **Intersectionality and Solidarity in Kamble's Depiction of Dalit Women**

Baby Kamble's autobiography *The Prisons We Broke* illustrates how the intersection of caste, gender, and class exacerbates systemic oppression. Kamble details how Dalit women's economic exploitation—through landlessness, wage disparities, and stigmatized labor like manual scavenging—reinforces their marginalization. For instance, she notes that Dalit women “earn half the wages of men for the same work,” a disparity compounded by caste hierarchies that deny them land ownership (Kamble 72). This economic precarity, Kamble argues, traps them in cycles of poverty, limiting access to education and healthcare while legitimizing their social exclusion through Brahmanical norms of “pollution” (84).

Kamble's narrative, however, foregrounds solidarity as resistance. She depicts Dalit women sharing stories of caste violence and resilience, acts that scholar Sharmila Rege terms “counter-histories” that challenge dominant caste narratives (Rege 93). These collective practices, Kamble writes, create “a web of strength” among women, fostering a consciousness of shared struggle (Kamble 112). Education emerges as a radical tool; Kamble highlights how women collectively fund girls' schooling to disrupt intergenerational deprivation, framing it as a “weapon against caste” (145). Such solidarity, as Anupama Rao notes, reflects Dalit feminism's emphasis on communal resistance to caste patriarchy and economic exploitation (Rao 78).

Critics, however, identify limitations in Kamble's framework. Gopal Guru critiques her occasional internalization of caste norms, such as valorizing Sanskritized practices like

vegetarianism, which risks reinforcing Brahmanical hierarchies (Guru 46). Similarly, Shailaja Paik argues that Kamble's focus on education as a means to "civilize" Dalit communities inadvertently mirrors upper-caste paternalism, neglecting structural critiques of caste (Paik 112). Others note Kamble's silences on intra-caste tensions, such as casteism among Dalit subgroups, or issues like domestic violence, which Suraj Yengde attributes to the "respectability politics" of early Dalit narratives (Yengde 89).

Kamble's work remains foundational for understanding intersectional oppression, yet its gaps underscore Kimberlé Crenshaw's argument that intersectionality demands attention to "overlapping, yet divergent, systems of power" (Crenshaw 145). While Kamble's solidarity model is transformative, evolving Dalit feminism must address internal hierarchies and embrace diverse struggles to ensure liberation is inclusive.

### **Literary Style and Feminist Praxis**

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* employs autobiography as a radical act of resistance, using raw, unflinching language to disrupt casteist and patriarchal narratives. Kamble's visceral descriptions of manual scavenging—"our hands rotting in filth, our breath choked by stench" (Kamble 64)—refuse to sanitize Dalit women's exploitation, forcing readers to confront the dehumanizing realities of caste labor. By centering her lived experience, Kamble challenges the erasure of Dalit voices in dominant historiography, asserting what Sharmila Rege terms the "political power of testimony" (Rege 102). Her autobiography becomes a counter-archive, reclaiming agency through personal narrative and subverting Brahmanical literary traditions that marginalize Dalit subjectivity.

Kamble's use of Marathi idioms and oral storytelling traditions amplifies this resistance. Vernacular phrases like "aai cha ghar" (mother's home), laden with cultural resonance, ground her narrative in the collective memory of her community (Kamble 89). The rhythmic cadence of her prose mirrors oral storytelling, a practice Anupama Rao links to Dalit feminism's "democratic ethos" (Rao 121). Kamble's integration of folk songs and proverbs—such as a lament about landlessness sung during harvest—preserves subaltern knowledge while critiquing caste hierarchies. This orality, as translator Maya Pandit notes, challenges the elitism of "standardized" literary Marathi, privileging instead the linguistic creativity of marginalized voices (Pandit 23).

Kamble's literary praxis has profoundly influenced Dalit feminist literature. Urmila Pawar's memoir *The Weave of My Life* echoes Kamble's unflinching focus on intersectional oppression, while Bama's *Karukku* adopts a similar vernacular style to depict Dalit women's resilience. Meena Kandasamy's polemical poetry, though more experimental, extends Kamble's legacy of using raw emotion as a political tool—exemplified in lines like "I singe the Vedas with my spit" (Kandasamy 45). Scholar Shailaja Paik argues that Kamble's work "paved the way for Dalit women to write themselves into history," inspiring later writers to meld personal testimony with structural critique (Paik 134).

Kamble's literary style—rooted in autobiography, orality, and vernacular—remains

a cornerstone of Dalit feminist praxis. By intertwining individual and collective struggle, she models a transformative aesthetics of resistance that continues to resonate.

### **Legacy and Contemporary Relevance**

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* remains a cornerstone of Dalit feminist literature, carving space for Dalit women's voices in academia and activism. Her unflinching memoir, among the first by a Dalit woman, shattered the silence around caste-gender violence, inspiring writers like Urmila Pawar and Bama to document their lived experiences. Scholars such as Sharmila Rege argue that Kamble's work "decolonized Dalit history" by centering subaltern testimony, transforming personal trauma into political critique (Rege 108). Today, her text is foundational in Dalit and gender studies curricula, legitimizing marginalized narratives within institutional spaces and empowering Dalit women to reclaim agency through storytelling.

Kamble's themes of collective resistance and intersectional oppression resonate in modern Dalit feminist movements. Campaigns like #DalitWomenFight, which mobilizes against caste-sexual violence, echo her emphasis on solidarity, while grassroots collectives like the Asura Women's Collective adopt her ethos of communal uplift through education and labor rights advocacy. These movements, like Kamble, confront the dual burdens of caste patriarchy and economic exploitation, framing their struggle through an intersectional lens. Suraj Yengde notes that contemporary Dalit feminism "builds on Kamble's blueprint," using digital platforms to amplify voices once confined to oral narratives (Yengde 201).

*The Prisons We Broke* is tragically relevant today, as caste atrocities persist globally. The 2020 Hathras gang rape case and the UN's recognition of caste-based violence as a human rights crisis underscore the urgency of Kamble's intersectional critique. Her memoir reminds us that caste cannot be divorced from feminist praxis; as Anupama Rao asserts, "Dalit women's liberation is the litmus test for India's social democracy" (Rao 165). In an era of rising caste violence and neoliberal erasure, Kamble's work demands that feminism confront caste hierarchies to forge inclusive solidarity.

### **Conclusion**

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* stands as a revolutionary act of defiance, shattering the chains of silence that perpetuate caste and gender oppression. By documenting the visceral realities of Dalit women's lives—from manual scavenging to systemic violence—Kamble disrupts the Brahmanical narratives that erase subaltern suffering. Her memoir is not merely a personal account but a collective manifesto, transforming private pain into public resistance. As she writes, "We were not born to suffer; we were born to rise" (Kamble 158), encapsulating her refusal to accept dehumanization as destiny.

Kamble's work underscores the urgent need to center Dalit women's voices in feminist and anti-caste movements. Their lived experiences expose the limitations of mainstream feminism, which often sidelines caste and anti-caste discourse that neglects gender. Today, as caste atrocities persist—from discriminatory labor practices to sexual violence—Kamble's call for intersectional solidarity resonates louder than ever. Movements

like #DalitWomenFight and organizations like the Asura Women's Collective embody her legacy, proving that liberation demands dismantling both caste and patriarchy.

To honor Kamble's legacy, we must amplify Dalit women's leadership in all struggles for justice. As she reminds us, "The fire in our bellies will burn down these prisons" (Kamble 202). Let this fire ignite a renewed commitment to intersectional praxis—one that recognizes Dalit women not as victims but as architects of liberation. The time for performative allyship is over; the time for action is now.

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