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**From Silence to Strength: The Evolution of Dalit Women from Passive Victims to Proactive Leaders in Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*****M. Archana Devi**

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**Abstract**

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (originally published in Marathi as *Jina Amucha*) stands as one of the earliest and most powerful autobiographies written by a Dalit woman in India. The text is not only a record of personal memory but also a collective testimony of an entire community whose voices were silenced for centuries under Brahmanical patriarchy and caste oppression. This paper examines the narrative through the lens of caste-gender intersectionality which emphasizes that systems of oppression do not act independently but interlock to create unique forms of marginalization. In Kamble's narrative, Dalit women are doubly oppressed: by upper-caste structures of purity, pollution, and untouchability, and by patriarchal domination within their own community. The memoir vividly details the bodily humiliations, denial of education, enforced labour, and deprivation of dignity that women endured, while also tracing how the transformative ideas of B.R. Ambedkar offered a route toward liberation. It also highlights the significance of Kamble's plain, collective narrative voice, which resists bourgeois individualism and instead articulates a shared subaltern consciousness. The study explores the transformation of Dalit women's subjectivity in Baby Kamble's autobiographical narrative *The Prisons We Broke*. This book is situated at the intersection of caste and gender. Kamble's life-writing reconstructs Dalit women's identity from passive sufferers of social oppression to active agents of resistance and leadership. By employing an intersectional lens, this study examines how Kamble's narrative articulates a politics of resistance that disrupts hegemonic structures of caste patriarchy and male-dominated historiography, foregrounding Dalit women's voices as central to feminist and Dalit liberation discourses.

**Keywords:** Dalit women, caste-gender intersectionality, Dalit feminism, autobiography as resistance, caste patriarchy

**Introduction**

Dalit women's autobiographies have emerged as some of the most powerful interventions in Indian literature, as they document the layered realities of oppression that mainstream narratives often ignore. Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* is one such text that breaks the silences surrounding caste and gender. Originally written in Marathi in 1986 and later translated into English in 2008, the text provides a rare insider's account of Mahar women's lives in rural Maharashtra. While the genre of autobiography is traditionally seen as the expression of individual subjectivity, Kamble's narrative challenges this notion by presenting a collective voice, a testimony of her community as much as of herself.

The paper focuses on the theme of “double marginalization”—the simultaneous oppression faced by Dalit women on account of both caste and gender. Using intersectionality theory and Dalit feminist scholarship, the paper examines how caste-based exclusion and patriarchal domination interweave in Kamble’s narrative. It further explores how the teachings of B.R. Ambedkar offered a transformative political and spiritual framework that enabled Dalit women to reimagine their dignity. The objectives of this paper are:

- To analyze how caste and gender intersect in Kamble’s representation of Dalit women’s lives.
- To explore the textual strategies Kamble employs to articulate a collective Dalit feminist consciousness.
- To assess the significance of Ambedkarite ideology in overcoming double marginalization.

By situating the text within the broader discourse of Dalit feminism, this study argues that *The Prisons We Broke* exemplifies a literature of resistance and empowerment, one that redefines autobiography as a political act.

Babytai Kamble is the first Dalit woman who pens her autobiography in the Marathi language and, hence, *The Prisons We Broke* emerges as a milestone in the history of writing in Marathi. It is an agonizing narrative of the sufferings of the Dalit Mahar community. The autobiography is originally written in the Marathi language with the title *Jina Amucha*. It was later translated into English by Maya Pandit.

In her memory, the Maharwadas never had a prosperous life. On one side, ignorance and lack of reasoning ruled them, on the other side, the Maharwadas life was dominated by poverty and epidemics. Death rate was high because of the ceaseless starvation and lack of medical facilities for the fatal epidemics. More over superstitions adorned their blindness.

Though Hindu Religion and gods considered Mahars as dirt, Mahar community upheld the Hindu principles and they thought of gods with great sanctity. They smeared kumkum and haldi on the gods. It is believed that they could speak about the future of the Maharwada, and they could bless them with good wishes. So they often practiced the rituals that are taught by the same religion which considered the Mahars as dirt.

Poverty was an unresolved problem among the Mahars. They were fated to eat left-overs. The stale bhakris, and the rotten rotis were their common food. Upper caste considered them as the dirt in the garbage where others throw away their waste materials. Mahars had to fight with the animals like cats, dogs and vultures for their food. They were the masters of the dead animals. The upper caste Brahmins wiped away all the human qualities from the Mahars and converted them into beasts. They considered themselves as untouchables.

The autobiography of Kamble can be studied in two parts. The first part portrays the anguish and pain of Mahar women who face discrimination and exploitation not only by the upper caste people but also by the males of their own community. The second part of the

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autobiography deals with the ideologies of Baba Bhimrao Ambedkar following which Mahar women can observe a kind of transformation in their condition.

As the autobiography begins, the author narrates that she belongs to a Dalit community called Mahar. It is one of the largest Dalit communities in Maharashtra. She was born to her maternal grandparent in Veergaon, a small village in Pune. Out of five issues of her parents, only Kamble and her brother could survive. Since her father was a contractor and her granduncles were butlers for the British people, the economical condition of her family was sound. But because of the generous nature of her father, no savings were managed for the future generation.

As the narrative proceeds, Kamble describes a prevalent belief in the Mahar community that “if a woman has her husband, she has the whole world; if she does not have a husband, then the world holds nothing for her” (41). Such kinds of women are identified as the prototype of ‘Pativrata’ women. She states that the Mahar women regard their existence as totally dependent upon their husbands. The author does not chop up words when she explains the physical, emotional, and psychological anguish of Mahar women.

The Dalit males usually follow and practice the ideologies of the Brahminical patriarchal system as a result they put limitations on women’s freedom, education, and sexuality. Kamble too had to face physical torture at the hands of her husband for no fault on her side. Her husband used to doubt her every time. This domination and physical assault became so common for the women of the Mahar community that they neither complain about it nor raised their voices against it.

Women are oppressed and exploited as daughters, wives, and mothers but they are enslaved as daughters-in-law and face the cruelest treatment not only by the male of the family but also by the females. In her autobiography, Kamble describes various grounds on which women suffer. Marriage at an early age is one of them. The subsequent pregnancies deteriorate her physical health as she falls a victim of malnourishment. During her pregnancy, she gets only stale rotis and jowar as her food. Pregnancy becomes a battle of death for every Mahar woman. They get surely infected with tetanus as the midwives know no medication regarding it.

In the second part of the book, Babytai talks about the influence of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in the memoir. Ambedkar was the light of their life. He asked the Mahars to educate their children, and inspired them to fight against the atrocities. He asked them not to give offerings to the gods who never cared about them. And he also asked them not to eat the dead animals. Baby Kamble and her relatives actively participated in the revolutionary activities. She was very much influenced by Ambedkar. She loved her father also. Her father often told not to work for money. Money is not the ever valuable thing in the world. The value of money will go, when we become poor. But the dignity that we earned in the course of our life will be there to support us. Money cannot always give us a satisfaction to our life. Author and her relatives and some of her friends went to school. They were ill treated by the teachers and others in the upper caste. But they managed to survive. Author is very much

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influenced by the movie 'Sati Savithri'. Ambedkar's speech reverberated in the village, and the villagers reiterated his words. We can also see an influence of Buddha in the text.

The concept of intersectionality was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to describe how Black women in the United States experienced oppression differently from white women or Black men. Crenshaw demonstrated that gender and race are not separate structures of domination but mutually constitutive. This insight is crucial for analyzing the lived experiences of Dalit women, for whom caste and gender combine to form a unique condition of subjugation.

Dalit feminist scholars such as Sharmila Rege, Gopal Guru, and Shailaja Paik have extended this framework to the Indian context. Rege emphasizes that the "Dalit woman" cannot be understood through the universalist category of "woman" in mainstream feminism, nor through caste-focused critiques that ignore patriarchy. Instead, Dalit feminism insists on attending to the specificities of caste, class, and gender as interlocking systems of power.

In Kamble's autobiography, these theoretical insights find vivid expression. The women of her Mahar community suffer not only because they belong to a stigmatized caste but also because patriarchy within their community enforces strict gender roles, often exacerbated by poverty. Therefore, the intersectional framework becomes indispensable in unpacking the narrative. Caste oppression in Kamble's narrative manifests in multiple ways: the denial of access to water, food, education, and basic dignity. Dalits were forced to live outside the village, in segregated settlements (vastis) that spatially marked them as impure. Kamble recalls how upper-caste landlords exploited Dalit labor, subjected them to humiliation, and reinforced the ideology of untouchability.

The body becomes the site where caste is inscribed most visibly. Mahar women were denied access to proper sanitation, forced to work in degrading jobs, and humiliated through rituals of purity and pollution. Kamble's frank descriptions of hunger, lice-infested hair, and torn clothing challenge sanitized narratives of Indian rural life. By foregrounding the material realities of caste oppression, Kamble insists that the struggles of Dalit women must be acknowledged as part of the nation's history.

Alongside caste discrimination, Mahar women faced patriarchal control within their community. Kamble details how women's labor was exploited not only by landlords but also by men within their families. Women bore the burden of domestic work, childcare, and wage labor, often without recognition. Violence against women, including verbal and physical abuse by husbands, was normalized.

Patriarchal norms dictated women's sexuality and reproductive roles. Early marriage, repeated pregnancies, and lack of healthcare made women's bodies sites of suffering. Kamble describes menstruation and childbirth in stark terms, showing how women's biological functions became sources of shame and vulnerability. Unlike upper-caste women, however, Dalit women could not seek protection in purdah or domestic seclusion; they had to labor in public spaces, exposed to further humiliation. Thus, Dalit

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women were doubly oppressed: by Brahmanical patriarchy, which stigmatized their caste, and by intra-community patriarchy, which restricted their autonomy.

The heart of Kamble's narrative lies in showing how caste and gender oppression cannot be separated. For instance, when Mahar women went to fetch water, they were ridiculed by upper-caste men; their gender made them more vulnerable to sexual harassment, while their caste rendered them powerless to resist. Similarly, in marriage rituals, women were expected to uphold patriarchal norms, but their caste status meant that even their marriages were viewed as inferior by society at large.

The intersectional lens reveals that the experiences of Dalit women differ from both upper-caste women (who face patriarchy but not untouchability) and Dalit men (who face caste stigma but enjoy male privilege within the community). Kamble's memoir vividly demonstrates this double bind. Moreover, the text shows how women themselves internalized caste and gender hierarchies, participating in rituals that reinforced their subjugation. This internalization underscores the depth of structural oppression, which could not be resisted without external ideological intervention.

One of the most significant aspects of *The Prisons We Broke* is its portrayal of the transformative impact of B.R. Ambedkar's teachings. Ambedkar's call for education, self-respect, and conversion to Buddhism offered Dalit women a path out of double marginalization. Kamble's text describes how the Mahar community gradually embraced Ambedkarite ideology, leading to improved access to education and greater self-confidence among women.

For Dalit women, Ambedkar's thought was not merely political but also personal and spiritual. Conversion to Buddhism symbolized liberation from the shackles of Brahmanical patriarchy. Education became a means of empowerment, allowing women to question both caste discrimination and patriarchal domination. By embedding Ambedkar's vision into her narrative, Kamble frames her autobiography as more than a record of suffering. It becomes a manifesto for resistance, a call for collective transformation.

### **Early Life and Structural Oppression**

Kamble's narrative begins with the harsh realities of village life, where Dalit women confront systemic injustices embedded in caste hierarchy. They face everyday violence—economic exploitation, sexual harassment, and social exclusion. Within both dominant caste and Dalit communities, women are often subjected to patriarchal norms that confine them to subordinate roles, reinforcing cycles of dependency and silence.

### **The Experience of Double Marginalization**

Baby Kamble's account reveals how Dalit women endure double marginalization—dehumanized by caste hierarchy and constrained by gender norms. Instances of forced labor, denial of dignity, and social invisibility illustrate how caste patriarchy uniquely targets Dalit women, making their struggle qualitatively different from that of Dalit men and upper-caste women.

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Baby Kamble's narrative reframes Dalit women's agency not as an abstract ideal but as a lived, ongoing practice. Through acts of daily resistance—refusing exploitative labor, educating daughters, and asserting bodily autonomy—Dalit women reshape social imaginaries of womanhood, agency, and leadership. Kamble's text thus contributes to a growing corpus of Dalit feminist literature that challenges normative frameworks of Indian feminism often dominated by upper-caste voices.

Kamble's narrative style itself is a political act. She often uses the first-person plural "we," emphasizing the collective nature of Dalit women's experiences. This shift from "I" to "we" undermines the individualistic model of autobiography associated with Western traditions, situating the text within the genre of testimonio. The plain, unornamented style of Kamble's prose also reflects her commitment to truth-telling. She refuses to romanticize poverty or beautify suffering. Instead, her stark descriptions serve as a form of resistance against literary norms that exclude subaltern voices.

Kamble's narrative can be read alongside other Dalit women's autobiographies, such as Bama's *Karukku* and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*. While Bama focuses on Christian Dalit women in Tamil Nadu and Pawar highlights craft and memory in Maharashtra, all three share a commitment to exposing the intersections of caste and gender. Together, they constitute a Dalit feminist archive that challenges both mainstream feminism and caste-blind social critique.

*The Prisons We Broke* stands as a groundbreaking text in Indian literature, offering a Dalit feminist perspective that highlights the reality of double marginalization. Through its stark depictions of hunger, labor, sexuality, and humiliation, the narrative demonstrates how caste and gender interlock to produce unique forms of oppression for Dalit women. Yet the text also affirms the possibility of resistance through Ambedkarite thought, education, and collective solidarity.

By employing intersectionality as its analytical framework, this paper has shown that Dalit women's experiences cannot be reduced to either caste or gender alone. Baby Kamble's autobiography thus becomes more than a personal story—it is a collective testimony and a manifesto of survival and dignity. In calling attention to the double marginalization of Dalit women, *The Prisons We Broke* demands that feminist and anti-caste struggles recognize their interconnectedness. Only through such solidarities can the "prisons" of caste and patriarchy truly be broken. Thus, Kamble pens her autobiography to establish her identity as a writer and at the same time to spread awareness regarding the painful experiences Mahar women undergo because of gender, caste and class discrimination. She also encourages the women of her community to fight against the orthodox patriarchal norms to establish their identity.

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