

SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

Breaking the Prisons: A Study of Select Dalit Women

Autobiographies

Kunal Kumar Halder

Abstract

The existence of Dalit women is spotted and stained by their gender and caste positioning in the patriarchal and hierarchical social order. Dalit writers like Babytai Kamble and Urmila Pawar show how Dalit women fight against the multi-layered pervasive ‘prisons’ expressed in their autobiographies. Dalit women’s voices have been inadequately represented or sometimes completely erased from the literary canon. Other times, Dalit women have been represented in romanticized narratives, without a real examination of their marginalized position in the hierarchy of caste, gender and class. Through their autobiographies, Dalit woman writers have shown the world that a subaltern woman of the lowest caste can speak and even expatiate her individual and social vision. The autobiographies are odyssey of their selves and show their spiritual journey from ignorance to knowledge, from helplessness to courage; from diffidence to confidence and from multiple bondages to emancipation within the patriarchal framework.

Keywords: Dalit, autobiographies, patriarchal, marginalized, literary canon, caste, gender, class.

According to Rousseau in *The Social Contract*, “Man is born free, but he is everywhere in chains” (49). But Dalit women are not born free and they are everywhere in chains too. In this paper, two autobiographies of Dalit women writers are discussed: Babytai Kamble’s *Jine Amuche* or *The Prisons We Broke* (1987) and Urmila Pawar’s *Aaidan* or *Weave of My Life* (1988). The paper examines how the Dalit women fight against the multi-layered pervasive ‘prisons’ expressed in the autobiographies. In Karan Singh’s *Dalitism and Feminism: Locating Women in Dalit Literature* (2011), Arun Prabha Mukherjee refers to the Dalit autobiography to be a description card on the condition of people who are now routinely called ‘Erstwhile Untouchables’ of ‘Ex-Untouchables’ (13). The purpose of these autobiographies is not only to revisit the past things as in the mainstream autobiographies but also to shape and construct them in such a way and fashion to understand the autobiographer’s life and consciousness about the social order that shaped, negotiated the lives of the Dalits in general.

Describing the ‘difference in location’ is the first thing that any Dalit text begins with. The Savarna system of social hierarchy is based on the polarization of corporeal purity-impurity. That a Dalit is always impure and polluting is the leading cause of driving away the Dalit community of the society of the so-called *chaturvarna* people. To remain cut off geographically from the mainstream of social activities entitles the Dalits to remain cut off from history. Hence, they were hidden from history. A baby in a Dalit family is assigned Dalithood and a legacy of oppression as soon as it is born.

We find the multi-layered, pervasive ‘prisons’ that Baby Kamble fought against in *The Prisons We Broke*. Interestingly, Baby’s deliberation in pluralizing the word ‘prison’ as ‘prisons’ and avouching the breaking of those prisons confirm her conviction to the cause of the Dalit consciousness-raising movement. The pluralisation of the subject ‘We’ in “The Prison We Broke” instead of ‘I’ confirms Baby’s formation of the authentic Dalit individual consciousness filtered through the ‘three-tier oppressed’ collective Dalit consciousness. In the

introductory message Maya Pandit, the translator, says that Brahminical Hinduism is at the root of all these rotten, evils of society and it is they who have turned a hardworking, docile mass of people into eternal slaves.

The early chapters of *The Prisons We Broke* describe various social evils the Dalit society is fraught with. Superstitions, impawning, possession of women by gods, drunkenness, harassment of bride in the hands of the in-laws and wife beating are a few of the examples. These are intra-community backlogs a Dalit constantly fighting to dispel. There is the constant curse of untouchability and exploitation at the hands of the upper caste people. Whereas the external world is speedily coping with the overall flow of development and progress, the Dalits remain cloistered within their own caste boundary delimited by the sons of *Manu*. The inhuman practice of untouchability, though it was made by rule after the Independence of India a punishable crime, pervades the life of the Dalits.

Kamble writes about the humiliation, harassment and discrimination not only by her schoolmates but by her teachers too. Most of the teachers were Brahmins who always favoured Hindu students. They had biases against the Mahar students and unnecessarily punished Mahar girls in the school:

We, the daughters of the activists in the movement, were enrolled in school no. 5 for girls. It was basically a school for Brahmin girls, with a few girls from other high castes. There were some ten or twelve Mahar girls spread over in various classes. So each class had only a sprinkling of the polluting Mahars. All the girls in the class had benches to sit except us Mahar girls. We had to sit on the floor in one corner of the classroom like diseased puppies... We were like fiery godflies burning for vengeance. (Kamble 62)

Interestingly Kamble and her Mahar friends in the school were not scared of the Brahmin schoolmates. So, the prison of untouchability is like an invisible stain that always

makes the Dalits feel very uncomfortable and lowly. Taking things thrown away from a distance, drinking water in one's cup-fisted hands, not walking on the road in front of any upper caste man or woman, not sitting beside Dalits in a bus or a train, a barber who even shaves cow and buffalo would not shave a Dalit- are the legacy of the Indian Dalits.

Later in the book Baby Kamble gives a most unimaginable description of the humiliation of the Dalits, men in general and women in particular. Dalit women fall the easiest prey to humiliation and exploitation at home and away, day and night. Baby exemplifies each of the structural hurdles- natural or societal- through individual experiences. Few of the choicest hurdles are always especially reserved for the Dalit women. Each Dalit woman has an inborn talent for multi-tasking. Dalit girl of any age is a beast of burden. The question of sending the girls to school was unimaginable. Baby describes the general as well as a particular incident: *"My father had locked up my aai in his house, like a bird in a cage (Emphasis mine).* Whatever money he earned, he would squander away. While his contracts lasted, there would be plenty of food, clothes and fun. But when he was out of work, we had to go without food even" (Kamble 05).

In all the phases of life, a Dalit woman is a stock labour and a being of convenience. As a girl to the parents, a wife to the husband and a mother to the son, Dalit women suffer most in terms of caste, class and gender. But their oppression comes little to light. A Dalit woman works as wage labour and few women work as maid servants to the upper caste families. She has to look after the household duties, such as cooking, looking after the children, firewood collecting, keeping the cattle, fetching water from miles away etc. The narrative sinks into self-pity when the baby says: "Such was the condition of our people. We were just like animals but without tails. We could be called human only because we had two legs instead of four. Otherwise, there was no difference between us and the animals" (Kamble 49).

How many women in the whole world can imagine that for the sake of food for their children, they have to collect meat from fallen animals due to the epidemic? Sometimes the body gets decomposed and oozes out puss and a putrid, foul smell overpowers the nearby atmosphere. The accuracy with which Baby Kamble depicted such areas has a deliberate motive. It is through this narrative of 'pain and trauma' that she wants to 'disturb' our complacent aesthetic attitude towards Dalit literature (Limbale: *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature, History, Controversies and Considerations*). The episode of the Dalit mother's collecting of meat is really embarrassing to any reader:

During an epidemic, the house would be flooded with huge mounds of meat. The Mahars considered animal epidemics like diphtheria or dysentery a boon. Every day at least four or five animals would die. The internal organs of the dead animals would decay in stages. In some animals, organs like the liver, for instance, would be as hard as stones; whereas, in other animals, the organs would be nothing but mush, like overcooked rice. The inside of some animals would be putrid, filled with puss and infested with maggots. There would be a horrid, foul smell! It was worse than hell! But we did not throw away even such animals. We cut off the infected parts full of puss and convinced ourselves that it was now safe to eat the meat. (Kamble 86)

Even a girl of a mere 5 or 6 years, who has not yet come out of her childhood days, can take care of her brother or sister who is only a few months old. She is assigned to so many daily chores. She collects firewood, helps her mother in cooking, takes the cattle to the fields, fetches water from a stream and so on.

Dalit women are doubly marginalized- at first being a Dalit and then a woman. Poverty makes their condition even worse. They are equal to their men in terms of rendering labour, but they remain inferior in terms of societal norms, power and decisions relating to family

matters. Patriarchy confines a woman within four walls. A poor Dalit married woman is the butt of gender discrimination at the hands of both her father-in-law and mother-in-law. If a hungry Dalit woman sees the eating of others and wishes to have a part of food before her in-laws have theirs, it would bring stinging words from the *sasu* (mother-in-law). In addition, child marriage is rampant in the Dalit community. Girls become pregnant and they have to deliver their child in a most inhospitable manner. The newborn baby as well as its mother always suffers from malnutrition and low vitality. So, both the rate of child death and death during delivery is very high in Dalit communities. We see that each time an upper caste man comes down the road, if it happens by chance that a Dalit woman is on the road, she has to cover her whole body and repeat uttering the mantra, “The humble Mahar women fall at your feet master” (52). And if any newly married woman forgets to do this, it would raise a furore in the locality.

So, Dalit women suffer not only in the patriarchal bend of society but also in the matrilineal stereotype in their communities. Baby Kamble focuses special attention on the liberation of Dalit women through education and advises her fellow women to set up a small-scale business in the first step. Kamble invokes the Dalit mothers, following Baba Saheb’s message, to get their children to schools for education and to become economically independent.

Urmila Pawar’s *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman’s Memoirs* also belongs to the genre of autobiography, which is rarely practised by Indians as compared to poetry and fiction. It problematizes the major issues of class, caste and gender in the Indian context. It highlights the dual oppression or double marginalization of Dalit women on the basis of caste and gender. Apart from recording a woman’s discovery of selfhood and the constitution of her identity through her struggle with poverty, caste barriers and patriarchy, it also offers a background

picture of the Indian (especially Maharashtrian) culture including inter-personal and inter-communal relations, clashes and tolerances.

‘Weaving’ happens to be the central metaphor of the present memoirs. Weaving bamboo baskets, the main profession of the protagonist’s mother indicates their low caste as well as the dire economic poverty. At a higher level, it also suggests the bonding of human beings on a variety of counts. As the author declares, “My mother used to weave *aaydans*. I find that her act of weaving and my act of writing are originally linked. The weave is similar. It is the weave of pain, suffering and agony that links us.” Urmila, the protagonist is born in a very poor family of Mahar caste in a village near Ratnagiri. Due to dire poverty, the women of her village have to go to the nearby woods to collect faggots and sell them at Ratnagiri, facing a number of geographical hazards on the way. They have to struggle so much for their bare survival. So, they curse their ancestors for having chosen that village for permanent settlement.

The problem of poverty is closely linked with her *Dalit*-hood i.e., her caste of Mahars, which is one of the lowest in the Hindu *varna* hierarchy and with the problems of gender i.e., of being born as a woman in the patriarchal Indian society. Throughout her life, she has to struggle against these antagonist forces to assert her selfhood and achieve a sense of fulfilment. The narrator, like most of her community suffers from economic disability. Because of their poverty, they do not have sufficient food, clothing, proper shelter and other creature comforts.

Urmila Pawar describes her dual oppression or double marginalization in terms of her gender and caste and the consequent disabilities and disadvantages in life. She had to suffer in economic, social and gender aspects. Apart from economic disability, her people were also made to suffer due to social disability resulting from their untouchable caste. For example, describing the preparations for the Holi festival, she says how the Mahars were employed to do the toughest manual job and ignored later conveniently.

Although the patriarchal framework of her life does not encourage her to pursue higher education, she fights her battle and succeeds in getting an M.A. degree from Mumbai University. She acquires a new strength and courage to face all the difficulties of her life and she succeeds in asserting her identity and achieves the happiness that she wants. She refuses to remove her *mangalasutra* (marital necklace of black beads) after the death of her husband thereby defying the conventions of the patriarchal society. But she has grown sufficiently hardened and mature to face her life stoically. What is admirable about her is that she has developed the courage to be.

Thus, one may trace an evolution in the life of the protagonist from innocence to experience, from inferiority complex to self-confidence and from passivity to activism. What is admirable in her character is that although she fights against poverty, caste discrimination and gender equality she remains well within the framework of patriarchy, believes in the sanctity of chastity and never has either pre- or post-marital love affairs with men as the modern feminists tend to do as they justify and even glorify adultery as part of their self-assertion as evidenced by the characters of some novelists.

In spite of being the story of her 'self', the *Memoirs* remains an invaluable cultural record of Dalits in Maharashtra as it offers a detailed description of the ethnic specificities like their dress codes, eating habits, joint family code of conduct, rites, rituals, entertainments and distinctive dialect etc., which provide a sharp contrast to those of Hindu Brahmanical ones. She is quite right when she concludes her *Memoirs* by saying, "I expect nothing from the readers. I want them to see that each and every person's life is a social document" (268).

Written in a realistic fictional mode, the autobiographies of Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar are characterized by the honest, frank and bold articulation of a Dalit woman's experiences and may easily be compared with Afro-American women's narratives. There is no attempt to camouflage any bitter truth about her personal, domestic and societal life here. They

have shown the world that a subaltern woman of the lowest caste can speak and even expatiate her individual and social vision. The honesty and authenticity of their experience articulated in her *Memoir* are highly appreciable. The autobiographies are odyssey of their selves and show their spiritual journey from ignorance to knowledge, from helplessness to courage; from diffidence to confidence and from multiple bondages to emancipation within the patriarchal framework. The autobiographies help them to unburden their heart and reclaim their original selves, by offering themselves script-therapy or a sense of relief or catharsis. This self-narrative helps the reader as a “prod to self-understanding, self-improvement and self-healing. The English translation by Maya Pandit is quite successful in bringing out the ethnic flavour of the Marathi original. The Colombia University Press has done a commendable job in publishing the *Memoirs of a Subaltern Indian Woman* by editing it properly for the international readership.

Karl Marx asked his followers in Chapter IV of *The Communist Manifesto* “Workers of the World, Unite” ... and they “have nothing to lose but your chains” (Marx and Engels 44). Dalits have nothing more to lose to the Savarna Hindus. Though Baby Kamble throughout her autobiography never mentions any kind of Marxist influence on her, the book has become another manifesto that calls her fellow members to disrupt all the chains catenulating (arranging in series) them into eternal slavery and inhuman indignity. She summons the Dalits into action towards the demolition of the ‘prisons’ through education, aggregation, adhering to the principles of the Ambedkarite movement, economic independence etc. and, if needed, through ‘war’. At the end of *The Prisons We Broke* she declares “I am a product of the Ambedkar movement” (125). So, the prisons would remain, as Baby Kamble thinks, as long as the Dalits disperse and distract themselves from the true vocation of Baba Saheb- “educate, agitate and organize”.

In the preface of *Dr B.R. Ambedkar and Women's Empowerment* (2017), Narayan Das says:

While addressing largely attended Depressed Classes Women conference on 18-/9 July 1942, he said, “He measured the progress of a community by the degree of progress made by the women of that community. He advised, let every girl who marries, stand by her husband, claim to be her husband’s friend and equal and refuse to be his slave. He advocated avoiding early marriage and producing too many children. Give proper education to your children, so that they live a dignified life”.

Sharmila Rege raises very significant and inflammatory questions about the way autobiographies have become a unique form of articulating the Dalit consciousness. Dalit autobiographies, more specifically, are invariably seen as testimonies in first-person narration by the protagonist who has witnessed the events they describe. Since Dalit writers’ tales involve their first-hand experiences of caste disabilities on themselves as well as people known to them, their linguistic expressions bear an acute poignancy. These depictions are not only emotional exposure of their sufferings, but they are “[s]ociologically illuminating, politically subversive and aesthetically interesting” too (Rege 10). Kamble’s and Pawar’s autobiographies show how poor Dalit women break their silences and invisibility- their prisons and how they dismantle the stereotypical representations of Dalit women.

Works Cited

Das, Narayan. *Dr B.R. Ambedkar and Women's Empowerment*. Centrum Press, 2017.

<https://cloudflare-ipfs.com/ipfs/bafykbzacedmgog4gdoe2tmq6wnpi67ptfi3t2pjgjb3okosnekqgwry2jcch2?filename=%28Writings%20and%20Speeches%20of%20Dr.%20Babasaheb%20Ambedkar%29%20Narayan%20Das%20-%20Dr.%20B.R.%20Ambedkar%20and%20Women%E2%80%99s%20Empowerment-Centrum%20Press%20%282017%29.pdf>. PDF file.

Kamble, Baby. *The Prisons We Broke*. Translated by Maya Pandit, Orient Black Swan, 2009.

Limbale, Sharankumar. *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature, History, Controversies and Considerations*. Translated by Alok Mukherjee, Orient Longman, 2007.

Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*. International Publishers, 1948.

Pawar, Urmila. *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*. Translated by Maya Pandit, Colombia University Press, 2009.

Rege, Sharmila. *Writing Caste/ Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios*. Zubban Pub, 2006.

Rousseau, Jean Jacques. *Social Contract & Discourses*. E. P. Dutton & Co., 1913.

Singh, Karan. *Dalitism and Feminism: Locating Women in Dalit Literature*. Creative Books, 2011.

About the Author

Mr. Kunal Kumar Halder is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Bangabasi Morning College, Sealdah. He completed his Post Graduation in English Literature from Presidency College in 2005. He qualified for UGC NET in 2011. Presently he is a Ph.D. research scholar in the Department of English at Bankura University. His areas of interest are gender studies, partition literature and children's literature. His papers were published in various journals and he also presented papers in national and international seminars. He may be contacted at bmcengkkh2021@gmail.com.