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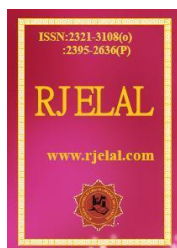
A Dalit Woman- Slave of the Slaves and the Impact of Ambedkarite Movement in Baby Kamble's *The Prison We Broke*

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Abstract

The Prison We Broke is translated from the Marathi *Jina Amucha*, an autobiography written by a Dalit Woman, Baby Kamble. Maya Pandit, who translated it, claims it to be the first autobiography ever written by a Dalit woman not only in Marathi but in any Indian Language. It adds to the protest writing against Caste System and documents the dire realities of life of the Dalit under the Hindu Caste System. The present work is a humble attempt at bringing forth the heart wrenching life conditions of the Dalit women and role of patriarchal social structure making a Dalit woman a slave of the slaves, the impact of Ambedkarite movement on the Dalit women, and their contribution in social reformation.

Key Words: Dalit Women, Patriarchy, Ambedkarite Movement, Caste-System.

The Prison We Broke is translated from the Marathi *Jina Amucha*, an autobiography written by a Dalit writer, Baby Kamble. Maya Pandit, who translated it, claims it to be the first autobiography ever written by a Dalit woman not only in Marathi but in any Indian Language. It adds to the protest writing against Caste System and documents the dire realities of life of the Dalit under the Hindu Caste System. Furthermore, it brings forth the heart wrenching life conditions of the Dalit women and role of patriarchal social structure making a Dalit woman a slave of the slaves. The origin of

Ambedkarite movement in her village, its impact on the Dalits, and specially the Dalit women and their contribution in solidifying Ambedkarite movement are vividly reflected in the book. "It was a head on confrontation with Brahminical hegemony on the one hand and with patriarchal domination on the other. In one sense it is more of a Socio-biography rather than an autobiography." (Pg xii)

A Dalit woman was doubly subjugated in a cast based social structure. "Dalit women face oppression not only from men belonging to oppressor castes, but also from other Dalit

men.”(Narayani) She goes through physical and psychological violence inflicted by a patriarchal system on one hand and by Caste system on the other hand in both public and private spheres. “If the Mahar community is ‘other’ for the Brahmins, Mahar women become the ‘other’ for the Mahar men.”(pg xv). Caste System and Patriarchy, both play pivotal role in perpetuating the barbarous and atrocious practices against women.

Dalit women had been hardwired to accept it as a fact that she is an untouchable and can pollute anybody if being touched. In public places they were supposed to keep the distance from the higher-class people, pull her ‘pallav’ over her face, and beg for something if she needs with utmost humbleness. At a shop she would say, “Appasab, could you please give this despicable Mahar woman some ... Please keep a distance. Don’t come too close. You might touch me and get polluted.” (Kamble,14)

The Caste System had arranged all the possible sufferings, pains and agony for the Dalit. They were cast away into the “garbage pits, on the outskirts of the village” (Kamble,18). They lived in the filthiest conditions possible. Their life was worse than a bullock that could stay at their master’s courtyard after eating bellyful but a mahar could not even stand in the courtyard. “Every house in a Brahmin Lane had a chest-high platform, like a wall, to prohibit the Mahars from directly reaching the door.” (Kamble, 54). Her place was a dump yard where everybody would throw away their waste, where dead animals were thrown and they had to fight with cats, dogs, kites and vultures to claim the flesh of the dead animals.

Even the roads for the Mahars were different from the ones meant for the higher castes and if they find someone from the higher caste coming from the opposite side of the road they had to, “leave the road, climb down into the shrubbery and walk through the thorny bushes on the roadside... they had to say, ‘humble Mahar Women fall at your feet master.’” even if

it is a small child. Pandemonium ensued if a young and naive bride of a Mahar family fails to do that out of ignorance and nervousness. She becomes the object of their fury of Men of high castes on one hand and the Mahar patriarchs on the other. Apart from the in-laws , “even the neighbors and relatives would join in the fray, and abuse the girls to their heart’s content.”(Kamble, 54)

The Dalit women would wear saaries which were just rags put together. But there was rule about the way of wearing the sari by a dalit woman and a high caste woman. They were not allowed to wear a saari in a way that would show the border of the sari because it was a privilege of only a high caste woman. “a mahar woman was supposed to hide the borders under the pleats; otherwise, it was considered an offence to the high castes.” (Kamble 54)

Marriage proves to be the most agonizing chapter of her life as marriage only pushes a girl of tender age into the dark pit of slavery. She is inflicted with a profound and inescapable suffering with hopeless situations. Keeping women behind the walls of house and restricting her freedom would enhance the honour of the patriarchal family. A wife completely hidden in the house and not even touched by a ray of sun was the matter of pride and exemplary thing for the society. “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 let least enslave them.” (Kamble, 87)

Husband beating his wife to a pulp and throwing her out of the house was a common scenario for a Dalit woman. She was an easy prey to torture for everyone. If a completely tormented wife tries to flee to her parent’s house she is brought back and put into shackles. She is charged with adultery and as a punishment for

bringing disgrace to their house her nose is chopped up.

The Mahar women would collect firewood and sell at brahmin lanes standing far off place. After selling it for minimal price the Mahar women had to check each stick carefully lest there remains any hair or the thread of their saari before stacking the bundle of firewood neatly in the backyard. If so, the Brahmin women would threaten them of really bad consequences as their house will get polluted by that. Baby Tai Kamble rightly lambastes higher caste Hindus,

"What a beastly thing this Hindu religion is! Let me tell you, it's not prosperity and wealth that you enjoy-- it is the very life blood of the Mahars! Mahar women's sweat would have soaked the firewood. Sometimes when thorns pricked them, blood trickled and dripped on the sticks... it was the very essence of the Mahar woman's life that found sticking to the wood. And yet the Brahmin woman objected to what they found sticking there!"

They were stopped from acquiring knowledge, their cognitive abilities and thought process were stunted completely generation after generations. Their lives were bogged down by superstitions and they started perishing. Having said that the Hindu rituals, that were throwing them even deeper into the clutches of slavery, were very dear to them and they kept serving them faithfully.

Although the treatment of women at the hands of patriarchy and Hinduism was unbearably inhuman the Dalit women held fast to the Hindu beliefs and rituals. Her husband was her whole world. Her world ends if she does not have a husband and therefore the kumkum they apply in the name of the husband is more important than their lives; "these masters of kumkum generally bestow upon us nothing but grief and suffering. Still the kumkum that we apply in their name is the only

ornament for us. It is more precious than the Kohinoor diamond" (Kamble, 41).

The journey of motherhood of a Dalit women was like a nightmare. The utter poverty and scarcity of food would leave a new mother helpless as Kamble says, "With the hunger gnawing her insides, the poor woman would just tie up her stomach tightly and lie down on rags, her body a mass of aches and pain." (57) Lack of knowledge and understanding of the situations and superposition would cause sufferings that were more than flesh and blood can stand.

With the influence of Ambedkarite movement there was a remarkable change in the thought process of the Dalit. It infused a new hope in their life with new insights and understanding of their conditions. It is even more remarkably surprising that the Dalit women were the ones who were the harbingers of this transformation as "Baby Kamble 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." (Pg xv)

Dr. Ambedkar's message to educate their children and divorce them from God was deeply engraved in their minds. They decided to stop eating dead animals and started educating their children. "They left with his words echoing in the innermost core of their hearts, feeling deliriously happy. The mirage of their aspirations and dreams had taken a real form. His words and his defiant spirit had electrified the women." (Kamble 65)

Baby Tai Kamble and other girls were also influenced by the thoughts of Dr. Ambedkar and grew defiant against the discriminatory Caste system of Hinduism and took active part in the movement to spread Dr. Ambedkar's message to discard slavery. The impact of Hindu Code Bill, Buddhism, Constitution has empowered Mahar Women to a great extent. Baby Kamble and many other Dalit writers are playing a significant role in bringing about a

social change with an earnest urge for solidarity through their writings. Dr. Ambedkar's "work also reflects his massive contribution towards the cause of women's rights. The social movement in 1920s and 1930s helped shape India's modern Dalit feminist theory" (Wikipedia). Dalit women were the ones who propagated Ambedkarite movement more vigorously than men. They pledged to educate their children and ardently followed the message of Dr. Ambedkar. Their role in the upliftment of Dalit life was unfathomable.

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