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## **From Exploitation to Exploration: Gender Study in Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke***

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### **Abstract:**

*The Prisons We Broke*, is considered to be the first autobiography written by a dalit woman in Marathi language. It is originally written in Marathi entitled as *Jina Amucha*. It was serialized in 1982 in a Marathi women's magazine and published as a book in 1986. Autobiography is a conscious act of self-revelation where the uniqueness of the individual is celebrated. But Baby Kamble's autobiography differs from traditional and main stream autobiography. Her autobiography is a collective account of dalit women and their ordinariness. Her autobiography deals with the duality of patriarchal social system and the practice of untouchability. Her autobiography emphasizes on the miserable condition of dalit women who are doubly oppressed. She has portrayed the superstitious beliefs prevailed in her community. It is about the inhuman attitude of men towards women as well as women's cruel intensions towards women. Kamble's autobiography, as I perceive, not only depicts the miserable condition and hapless lives of dalit women but also portrays their firmness and ardor for gaining self as well as communal identity out of patriarchal domination.

**Keywords: Dalit, Untouchability, Patriarchy, Community.**

Society has categorized men and women with certain characteristics. But this categorization is more psychological. 'Gender' is socially constructed ideas about the behavior and role a particular 'sex' performs. In this categorization men are considered to be bold, strong, assertive, independent, aspiring, rational and logical. Women on contrary, considered to be timid, yielding, gentle, dependent, self-sacrificing, emotional, intuitive. Though women qualities are appreciated and they are worshiped for being great but on the contrary women are exploited and humiliated because of these great qualities. Women have accepted this patriarchy and discrimination unconsciously. But education and social movements brought a change within women's conscious. It brought the sense that they should have equal rights. It was the influence of western culture and education that women in Indian came in contact with these changes. For the equal rights and equal opportunities women organized themselves. Women started taking part in social movements for the sake of women. Not only through movements but they also adopted writing

as a medium to protest and demand for equal rights. In this process of writing, Elaine Showalter has divided the writing tradition of women in three different phases. "the Feminine, Feminist and Female state". Showalter calls the first phase as "feminine", a phase of imitation, when women wrote with male pseudonyms; the second as the feminist phase (the phase of protest) when women won voting rights; the third phase as the female phase when women's writing entered a new phase of self awareness. Feminism is not merely a discourse to be analyzed but a method to bring social change. Feminist criticism seeks to expose the mechanism of writing related to gender issues. They study the patriarchal society depicted in works. In this process I have taken *The Prisons We Broke*, an autobiographical work by Baby Kamble to bring forth women issue in literature. An Autobiography is a successful presentation of the 'Self'. Autobiography glorifies the uniqueness of the individual. Autobiography written by men varied from autobiographies written by women. Men deal with the idea of self-glorification and achievements. While women deal with gender politics and patriarchal issues. Autobiography of a woman is a conscious act in which her inner and unrevealed self gets reflect. Women writing give readers their perspective on the situation of inequality and gender discrimination. The idea of writing about the suffering-self is to achieve gender equality and social justice. Sharmila Rege's *Writing caste/ writing gender: narrating dalit women's testimonies*, is a documentation of major dalit women's autobiography. It also emphasizes on the significance of dalit autobiographies. Baby kamble's autobiography differs from traditional women's autobiographies because it is a collective autobiography of Dalit women. Baby Kamble belongs to Mahar community of Maharashtra. Her autobiography differs from tradition women autobiographical writing in the context that it is not only an individual's life narration but also the depiction of physical and psychological violence women of her community went through both in public and private places. On the other hand her autobiography is about self-identity and self-exploration which leads them towards their own world.

Women never had an independent identity of their own. They are considered as a dependent and suppressed being. Women are forced to live restricted life to maintain the prestige of family and society. The politics behind this restricted life is to keep command over women and to keep male default hidden. Baby Kamble demonstrate how gender discrimination and patriarchy converge to perpetuate exploitative practices against women. According to Kamble, in her Maharwada it was the custom to keep women at home. The honour enjoyed by the family was in proportion to the restriction imposed on the women of the house. Her mother was not an exception. Her father had locked up her mother in the house like a bird in the cage. When no one could see even the nail of the women thus confined within the four walls of the house, then this honour becomes the talk of the Maharwada. A father's honour is judged by his son-in law's prestige. It was a common topic in her Maharwada when people gather at a place for exchange of views. Someone would say, "Yesterday, I had gone to leave my daughter at her in-laws' place. She really is most lucky, you know, to get into such a house. What a prestigious house" (9). They had nothing to do with the life of the daughter the only thing they considered about was the

honor and prestige. Women all over the country endure unequal treatment is true in all classes and castes. If the higher caste women themselves are the subject to gender oppression, women from lower caste are doubly suppressed, both for being women and for being lower caste women. Baby Kamble emphasizes how dalit women suffer an unequal treatment. She narrates about an incident where a newlywed girl unaware of the custom of bowing, ignores a high caste man. It becomes an issue, that ignored and disrespected man comes to her community and shouts, “Who, just tell me, who the hell is that new girl? Doesn’t she know that she has to bow down to the master? Shameless bitch! How dare she pass me without showing due respect?” (53). At this the girl’s in-laws and other elderly men from community falls at the man’s feet and beg for mercy. They request him to forgive her. But they ask for forgiveness not for the girl but for themselves also. The mother-in-law requests, “No, no kind master! That girl is a new animal in the herd! Quite foolish and ignorant. If she has erred, I, her sasra, fall at your feet, but please forgive us for this crime.” (53)

Baby Kamble further narrates the differences they had between them and high caste women regarding clothing and accessories. Dalit women were restricted even to copy and use the things in same manner. Only high caste women had the privilege of wearing their saris in such a manner that the border could be seen and a Mahar woman was supposed to hide the borders otherwise it was considered an offence to the high castes women. High caste women though become prey of their male folk. But they don’t support women who belong to low position, even having the same experiences. It is perhaps because of the unequal distribution of power. High caste men keep command over each section whether it’s low caste people or their own women. In this chain of command and domination high caste women keep command over low caste people and further low caste men control their women. Thus the social conditions of these women are worst.

There is duality towards the treatment women are given in their patriarchal society. They are worshipped and considered to be pious and benevolent but contrary as destroyer and malevolent. Women become the centre of all evil and supernatural elements. All the superstitious activities hover around women that can be interpreted psychologically. Baby Kamble, in her autobiography depicts such incident that often took place in her community in the month of ‘Aakhaadh’. It was the month in which the godmen displayed all the tricks and skills of their trade. Women were the forefront of these celebrations. They used to wear clean and fresh saris after their ritual baths, and visit several places, conversation focused on ritual baths and possession by spirits. This was a month in which almost every second women became possessed. The whole act is described by Kamble where all the member of the family and community would participate in this performance and then the possessed woman would slowly come to her sense. Recognizing the presence of the elder men and women in the crowd, she would curse herself and then try to keep her hair in place and cover her forehead. Other women recount stories about the force of the spirit that had possessed her. She is treated like a goddess and worshipped, people

got scared. She receives respect and attention which she can never get at being herself. But this incarnation of being spiritual and godly was only for that day, from next day and onwards the same woman was treated as she ever. Kamble's entire community had sunk deep in the mire of such dreadful superstitions. Generation after generations, her people rotted and perished by following such a superstitious way of life. Women have criticized the so called sacred Hindu scripts and religious institution because of its duality. Bahinbai (1628-1700) is considered to be the first women autobiographer in India. Rajkumar in his book *Dalit Personal Narratives* has traced Indian women's autobiographies. He has found that Bahinbai has attacked the monopoly of the '*Shastras*' and '*Puranas*' that declares women as 'no good'.

Women are enslaved by patriarchal society in every aspect whether as a woman, wife, daughter or mother. But as a daughter-in-law, they are exploited not only by their patriarchy but also by the womenfolk. Kamble portrays the inhuman attitude of men and women of her community towards their young women. Young girls hardly eight to ten years were brought home as daughter-in-laws. These young girls were insulted and enslaved both by men and women. The poor girls have to endure the violence and abuses of everyone in the house as well as out of the house. Sometimes mother-in-laws would become possessed and pronounced the young girls as an evil presence in the house. For being an evil spirit, they were beaten and drive out of the house. The whole village would gather in front of the tortured girls' door that provides some excitement to their uneventful lives. The Mahar women led the most miserable existence. Poverty, humiliation, domestic violence and exploitation made their lives like hell. In those days, as Kamble has depicted, at least one woman in a hundred would have her nose chopped off. Husbands, flogging their wives as if they were beasts, would do so until the sticks broke with the effort. The head of women would break open, their backbones would be crushed, and some would collapse unconscious. Because of these tortures many daughter-in-laws would try to run away. In her community there were many case of such torture where they escaped. If a woman would catch she brought back to her in-laws house, an even worse fate awaited her. The mother would poison her son's mind against the hapless wife. The mother would whisper into son's ear, "Son, what good is such a runaway wife to you? Some bastard must have made her leave you. I suspect that this somebody is from our own community. This bitch will bring nothing but disgrace to us"(99). When she was taken back, her husband would bind her leg with a device so that she could not escape. She was not considered as a human. To make her condition worst they even chopped her nose. Father would encourage his son to be a man and behave like one. If wives cross the line, they should be punished. The Father advocates:

You are a man. You must behave like one! You must be proud and firm. You must walk tall. Twirl your moustache and show us that you are a man...Never mind if you have to go to prison for six months! You must chop off your wife's nose and present it to her brother and father. They mustn't have any respect left to sit with the members of the panch. (100-01)

The obedient son not only cut off her nose but also he would drive the young girl out of the house, with blood pouring from the mutilation. None of her relatives would give her shelter. Then the mother-in-law would happily arrange a second marriage for her son. Thus innocent girl would thus be sacrificed. Actually this is not only an incident that Kamble has witnessed and depicted in her autobiography, in reality such inhuman practices were quite rampant almost till the 1940s as she has recorded in her work. Such was the life of poor hapless Mahar women and young girls. The calamities made their body strong but their hearts and minds cried out against this exploitation.

In her personal life Baby Kamble had to suffer like many other women which she did not mention in her autobiography. According to her what she has experienced and suffered was less than that of the sufferings of the women of her community. She confesses that her husband would beat her for some flimsy reasons. She used to cry, explain and plead with him. Then for a few days everything would be normal, then again it took place. Her husband tries every possible effort to let her keep in control. Even the book we are acquainted with (her autobiography) was written without the knowledge of her husband. Later she also confesses that she had to hide her autobiography for twenty years from her husband because he would not have tolerated the idea that she had taken to writing and the most an autobiography. She kept her writing activities hidden from his eyes. Kamble's autobiography no doubt depicts the miserable and hapless lives of women, their suffering and exploitation, the humiliation they endure but it also portrays their firmness and zeal of gaining self-identity out of the patriarchal domination. They endured all the sufferings for the sake to their family and for others like. Kamble advocates that it is because of women that the conditions of her community have changed. Social reforms brought change in the lives of women. It reduced the evil practices that existed in Hindu society against women. Education brought them at conscious level and it helped them being independent. They became aware of their existence and explored their self-identity. But dalit women were far away from these social changes. They didn't get any benefit from these social reforms. Dalit women got an opportunity to organize themselves only during movements held within their community against caste system. Kamble has mentioned that it was Ambedkar's movement that brought them out from their prison. Dalit women got several benefits from anti-caste movements. they began to attend meetings, started taking active parts in activities, get acquainted with literacy. In her young age when she get acquainted with '*Sati Savitri*' (a legendary woman in Hindu mythology) her inner strength had awaken and she determined to be as strong as Savitri to overcome all the adversities. Kamble was influenced by social movements and Ambedkar's thought. At a very young age she decides to live her life for the sake of justice and equality, for her rights and for other's also. She take education as an essential weapon. She decides to be educated and to be independent. It was not an easy task for her to get education at her time, she was not only a woman but also a dalit women. Education was only given to upper caste people. The boys of her community were taking some grant but not the girls. Kamble was fortunate with schooling and education. Somehow she managed to go to school but another thing awaited her, it was her caste.

She studied in the majority of girls who belonged to high castes. These high castes girls would hurl taunts and abuse at the girls of her community. These things continued till she finally left the school. Though Kamble got married at the age of thirteen, she continued her studies. Ambedkar's movements were taking place and she grew in that changing atmosphere. According to Kamble, girls and their mother, mother-in-laws took education extremely serious. They organized themselves against unjust social system. Kamble emphasizes that it was women and their efforts that they lead the movements ahead. They not only paved a path for themselves but for their men and community. Kamble has mentioned about activists and their speeches that encouraged her women. Once an activist says:

Look, it is women who are in charge of homes. And therefore it is they who have contributed to the superstitious 'god culture'. They are always leaders in such things. It is always women who become possessed by spirits. They have played a big role in making superstitions so powerful. It is the woman who is the real doer. So if women can bring darkness, they can also bring light into our lives. (139)

Baby Kamble's autobiography is not completely an account of her own self. She kept her own life out of her autobiography because she had her women and community to consider. Through her autobiography she has depicted the sufferings of women under patriarchal domination as well women's gradual consciousness against injustice. Just as the Varna system created caste and sanctioned discriminatory practices, patriarchy established the practice of making women dependent on men. Men have therefore dominated women ever since. Her autobiography very minutely observes the cause of women's plight. It is women's dependency and illiteracy that drags them into such miserable lives. Once a woman gets married she becomes responsibility to her in-laws. Women never have their own identity. It is believed 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. Through her autobiography Baby Kamble denies such belief. She has an identity as a writer and social worker. She is independent and out of shackles. Self-identity can only be achieved through self-exploration and consciousness. Thus she has written her autobiography not only to get an identity but to let the world come to know of the painful experiences women undergo because of gender politics as well as it encourage women to fight against patriarchal norms to build their own identity.

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