Suppression to revolution Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke*

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Baby Kamble’s autobiographical work, originally titled *Jina Amucha* in Marathi and translated into English as *The Prisons We Broke* by Maya Pandit, provides a rare opportunity to study how Dalit women construct their own identities and represent their community. They raise their voice against exploitation. It also has depicted the transformation in their life due to Ambedkarite Movement. Dalit Women gave up all the customs and religious beliefs which made them slave for thousand years and they accepted a new way of life which realized their status as Human beings. The rejection of Gods and Goddesses of Hindu religion and self respect is the key feature of this book. It is also a Dalit Feminist Critique. The Indian woman is oppressed by the patriarchal order sanctioned by Hindu religion which kept the woman at the lowest rung of the Varna.

Dalit women constitute a lower section of Indian Society and suffer from dual disadvantages, of being Dalit and being women. These women suffer all deprivations which their caste groups as a whole suffer, besides they have to undergo additional hardships because of their gender. Dalit women have to struggle harder to secure basic necessities of life like food, clothing, fuel, water and education. Hence the quest for identity of Dalit women differs from the quest for identity of women from upper section of society though both are the victims of Hindu Social System. The female Dalit texts narrate the double oppression faced by Dalit women by being a woman and a Dalit. The Dalit women have asserted their identity due to revolutionary movement of Dr.Babasaheb Ambedkar. *The Prisons We Broke*, is a milestone in the history of Dalit writings. It is probably the first autobiography of a Dalit woman not only in Marathi but in any Indian language. Maya Pandit, the translator of the Marathi autobiography *Jina Amucha* of Baby Kamble writes in her introductory note:

Baby Kamble’s Autobiography *The Prisons We Broke* is a direct self-assertion of a Dalit woman. but it also went two steps ahead: it was a head-on confrontation with bramhinical hegemony on the one hand and patriarchal domination on the other. In one sense it is more of a socio-biography rather than an autobiography. (Kamble xiii)

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 In her autobiographical text Baby Kamble has shown how Dalit women were the worst sufferers of superstition, hunger, poverty and the exploitative patriarchal order of Dalit men as well as the men from higher castes. As Deepa Rajput observes:

Dalit women are positioned at the absolute bottom of the social hierarchy .As they faced discrimination, humiliation and subjugated in three ways: first being as Dalits (caste) secondly being a poor (class) and thirdly being as Women (gender). So they are subjugated by patriarchal structures, both in universal society and within their respective family and community. As a result, dalit women are subjected to inhumane living conditions, violence and discrimination which deny them to give opportunities, choices and freedoms in all sphere of their life.( 139)

The male dominance was also prevalent among Dalit men. In her text *The Prisons We Broke* Baby Kamble shows how the custom of keeping women at home, behind threshold was prevalent among Dalit community. It was the mind set of men that women should be kept in four walls of house. It was rather a pride of the Mahar Men to keep their wives behind threshold. Baby Kamble’s mother was locked in a house by his father to keep his male honour. She writes:

In those days, it was the custom to keep women at home, behind the threshold. The honour enjoyed by a family was in proportion to the restrictions imposed on the women of the house. When no one could see even a nail of the woman thus confined within the four walls of the house, then this ‘honour’ became the talk of the town- a byword among the relatives and friends in the surrounding villages. Then people would tell each other, how one Pandharinath Mistry kept his wife completely hidden in the house and how even the rays of the sun did not know her. My father had locked up my aai in his house, like a bird in a cage. (Kamble 5)
Baby Kamble tells that there was a custom to pay respect to the men of higher caste by mahars when they see them. If Mahar woman didn’t show respect to the man of higher caste she had to undergo a great humiliation not only the higher castes but also by the mahar men and women. As slave mentality was deeply rooted in the psyche of mahar men and women. The Kamble also describes such an incident in her autobiography:

We children follow the women, holding their pallav. Sometimes there would be young, newly wed girl in the group and she would fail to join the chant out of sheer ignorance or awkwardness. All hell would break loose then. The master would simply explode in rage. He would march straight to the mahar chawdi, summon all the mahars there and kick up a big fuss. 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. (Kamble 53)

The mahar were superstitious and considered the upper caste people their master. As Banshelkikar Yeshpal Murhari observes:

They were greatly superstitious and obeyed their oppressors. If any Dalit woman happened to break the entrenched practices of the caste system, she would be humiliated not only by the caste Hindus but also by the Mahar people. They were so ignorant that they were not able to lead a common human life. The men would not treat the women folks properly. Women were considered to be the lowest beings in their community. (84)

Mahar women have to wear the clothes spread over the corpse of the high caste people. Still possessing those white clothes were a thing to be adored by Mahars. Mahar girl used to behave like Bramhin women by wearing the white clothes like a sari. Mahar women by wearing white clothes used to imitate the women of higher castes.

A lengthy piece of would be given to the young daughter who would be elated to get it. She would drape it around herself in various styles and perform a kind of fashion show. One moment she would drape it around her shoulder like a Brahmin Kaki and imitate her accent, Hey you, Mahar women, shoo, shoo, stand at a distance. Don’t touch anything. You will pollute us and our gods and religion. The next moment she would a Gujar woman, draping the pallav in the Gujarati style, and finally a Mahar daughter-in-law, pulling the pallav from her head down her nose. (Kamble 80)

Baby Kamble depicted the aspirations of Mahar women to live like a higher caste women. They wanted to live like higher caste women. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar’s call for them to convert and to give up religion which bind them into slavery and superstition brought about an immense change in the attitude of Mahars. They are now in a mood to challenge the authority of Hindu religion and its gods and goddesses. Babasaheb ask Mahars to give up dragging dead animals and eating meat of dead animals. That made a positive impact on the Mahars. He asked his men to “Educate, Agitate and Unite”. Mahars followed Babasaheb’s words and started sending their children to schools. Education brought about a revolution among Mahars and they realized the cause of their slavery. They gave up all the customs, rituals and religion which made them slaves and accepted a way of life which could make them free and dignified human beings. Ambedkarite movement and conversion of Mahars to Buddhism brought about a revolutionary change in their minds. According to Baby Kamble it is important to follow the principles of Babasaheb rather than worshipping. She writes:

I have never worshipped Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar with sandalwood paste, flowers and dhoop sticks. I have never made a public display of my reverence for him. I worshipped, instead, the principles he stood for. I have had to face several adversities in my life and I fought these bravely with the weapons of sheel and satwa. (Kamble 117)

As per the advice of Babasaheb Mahars educated their sons and daughters. The narrator educated all her sons and daughters. She even started an ashram shala for orphans from the backward castes. In her autobiographical work Baby Kamble presented the live picture of Mahars life in past 50 years living in Western Maharashtra. She candidly showed her anger toward the Chaturvarna system of Hinduism as well as against the patriarchal order predominant among Mahars which gave a lower status to their women. The autobiography is a self-critique of the patriarchy and superstitions prevalent among Mahars. It is also a document which recorded the poverty and hunger of Mahars. The autobiography is a social critique of the Hindu Social system as well the patriarchal order of Mahars. Baby Kamble’s self and frank analysis made her autobiography totally different from the autobiographies of higher caste women as well as Dalit male autobiographers where the presence of Dalit women as an independent human being rarely felt. Through in her narration Baby Kamble raise her voice against suppression and exploitation.
WORKS CITED