

CASTE, CLASS AND PATRIARCHY: MULTI-DIMENSIONALITY OF DALIT WOMEN'S OPPRESSION IN *THE PRISONS WE BROKE*

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to examine *Jina Amucha* or *The Prisons We Broke* the autobiography of Baby Kamble so as to understand Dalit women's unique position in Indian society. Until very recently, Dalit experiences had been significantly absent from the mainstream Indian Literature. They occupied textual space only in the works of 'upper' caste writers and sociologists who were driven either by sentimental compassion or social reform in their portrayal of Dalit character. Even when Dalit discourse emerged, it largely confined its attention in exploring the lives of Dalit men and remaining silent on issues related to Dalit women. The vast and complex literature on caste has also neglected the gender dimension. The paper seeks to explore few facets of the interface between caste, class and patriarchy in order to comprehend the peculiarity of Dalit women's suppression.

KEYWORDS: Dalit, gender, caste, patriarchy, oppression, hierarchy

INTRODUCTION

Dalit historiography is the perspective of the marginalized against the hierarchical caste system. It is different from elite historiography in the sense that it relates to the consciousness of minority group having marginalized social importance. The mainstream historiography which was produced by non-Dalit Hindu writers has ignored crucial issues related to untouchables. If they attempted to portray the untouchables' lives, then they were driven either by social reform or sentimental compassion. These authors found it difficult to rise above their own caste position to depict an 'authentic' picture of the Dalit life in India. Often, unwittingly they would illustrate the 'untouchable' as dismal, subservient and pitiful character resigned to the malevolence of caste and destiny. The Dalit autobiographies tend to resist this popular distorted notion by giving them a voice which challenges the mainstream historiography and articulates the silent rage of Dalit's who have been relegated to the bottom of social hierarchies since thirty centuries.

The Dalit women's autobiographies are documents of dynamic dissent which invokes a critical reconsideration of the oppressive caste hierarchies and patriarchal structures in the Indian society. As with all mainstream social science theories, Dalit discourse confined its attention on the issues of Dalit men and ignored the position of Dalit women. The feminist consciousness first appeared in Dalit writing in nineteenth century. Muktabai Salve is the first Dalit woman to write with feminist consciousness in her essay "About the Grief of Mang and Mahar". The essay describes the grief of Mahar women as they delivered children in roofless houses. She critically observes position of Dalit's in general and Dalit women in particular. She depicts how Mang and Mahar were tormented and treated worse than cattle during the reign of Bajirao Peshwa. If a Mang or Mahar mistakenly crossed the gymnasium as a chastisement his body would be cut into two with the sword serving as a bat and head was the ball. She poses several significant philosophical questions. How could a

Dharma perpetuate the closures of castes? She also critically assesses how Brahmins maneuvered religion and poor people to govern knowledge and power relations in the society.

The Dalit women's writings secure room outside the prevailing feminist tradition of India. While examining women's subordination in patriarchal society the fundamental inequalities among women cannot be neglected. Women's oppression should be viewed against variety of social structures and cultural formations. Women in diverse societies including those in obviously male-dominated societies are subordinated but not equally so. In scenario of cultural differences, several post-modernists, post-structuralists, black feminists and Dalit feminists have attacked the tendency of homogenizing and totalizing the category of 'women'.

Though, it is not wise to completely relinquish the category of 'women' but there is definitely a need to modify it. This is best done through historical exploration rooted in structural and cultural analysis that offers us with more sharp understanding and not just universal notion of oppression. All women are not equally subordinated. The hierarchical caste system concurs upper-caste women with more social and cultural power. It constructs the identity of lower-caste women as a derogated female laborer performing menial tasks which are socially indispensable but considered as demeaning and polluting. In stark contrast to 'upper-caste' women who are withdrawn from the public production system, Dalit women are its obligatory part and at its lowest end. The non-Dalit women are left out from the public sphere and confined to the domestic unit where their primary tasks of household service and family care, though are socially exclusionary yet culturally glorified.

The structural and cultural order of purity and pollution leads to particular sexual subjugation of Dalit women. All women especially in India are considered to be sexually subordinated but the sexual exploitation of untouchable women is unique. Due to her status as a public laborer she is considered as free from male control. Thus, the strict surveillance of upper-caste women's sexuality and uncontrollable upper-caste male sexuality which is permitted by patriarchy necessitates the polar opposites of 'upper caste Devi' (goddess) and 'lower-caste' woman with loose morals. She is also sexually abused in order to violate the masculinity and honor of Dalit men and their community.

The Brahmanical patriarchal ideology is fully reflected in the context of family and marriage. Here lies the parallel with non-Dalit women. The labor, sexuality and fertility of Dalit women are not in their own control but in the control of the males of their family. Their primary role as public labor provides no escape from domestic labor. The Dalit women are often subjected to tight sexual surveillance, sexual abuse and violence.

Autobiography of Baby Kamble manifests how Dalit women are theorizing their epistemological location within their community. *Jina Amucha* or *The Prisons We Broke* is very significant in the history of Dalit writing in Marathi. It is the first autobiography by Dalit women not only in Marathi but in any Indian language. *The Prisons We Broke* is an expression of nonconformity to the hierarchical Hindu caste-system which has subjugated the Dalit's for thousands of years to inhuman conditions of existence.

Baby Kamble depicts in her autobiography how Dalit women occupy the lowest rung in the social hierarchy. She writes Dalit women "had no food to eat, no proper clothing to cover their bodies; their hair would remain uncombed and tangled, dry from lack of oil. Women led the most miserable existence" (Kamble, 98). In the first half of the writing, she portrays how Dalit community due to inaccessibility to education is enveloped in religious superstitions. During festivals Dalit women dance wildly pretending to be possessed by Goddess, they eat meat of dead animals and offer their

eldest son as 'pot rajias' to the gods. In the second section she describes how under the influence of Dr. Ambedkar they educated their children and improved their standard of living.

A crucial aspect of *Jina Amucha* is Baby Kamble's Dalit feminist critique of patriarchy. She depicts the psychological and physical violence which Dalit women have to undergo both in private and public sphere. As the Mahar community is the 'other' for Brahmans, similarly, Mahar women are the 'other' for the Mahar men. She exhibits how patriarchy and caste congregate to oppress Dalit women. The worst fate is suffered by the younger women. She portrays how for a young Dalit girl, marriage meant nothing but calamity. Often they are married off by the tender age of nine and at their in-laws' house, they are frequently kept physically in chains and sometimes have their noses chopped off and then turned out of the house for incurring the displeasure of their in-laws. She narrates how the young bride would be expected to make two baskets full of bhakris. If somehow they would burn the bhakris or undercook them, the mother-in-law would abuse her in front of the entire neighborhood. "Attyabai, come and see what is happening here. Didn't you think that I'd brought the daughter of a good woman into my house? Look at the bhakris this slut has prepared. She cannot even make a few bhakris properly. Oh, well, what can one expect from the daughter of a dunce? (Kamble, 94) She would go on to abuse her parents, "What's your aai really? Tell me! Is she a good married woman at all? Or does she know only how to run after the pot-maker's donkeys? Didn't she teach you anything? I pamper you... my own sasur was spitfire. A burning coal! Holding a burning coal in one's palm was easier than living with her!" (Kamble, 95).

Along with the depiction of their oppression, Baby Kamble also portrays Mahar women's noteworthy courage and self-respect with which they have struggled and transformed their community. Baby Kamble further depicts the inspiration that Dalit women derived from Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's speeches. His charismatic words would inspire them to break the shackles of superstitions and oppression which had engulfed them since centuries. She narrates that Babasaheb would organize meetings to which thousands would attend. His speeches would inspire them to break the shackles of religion, custom, tradition and superstition. As he said about the worship of god Khandoda in Jejuri, "the stone steps in front of the god's temple have been worn away by hapless people beating their heads against those steps in utter supplication. But has he ever taken mercy on you? What good has this god ever done to you? Your people have served the village, the upper caste communities, for ages. You clean all their dead filth. And what do they do for you? They feed you with their dead animals. Even then this god does not take pity on you. Do you know something? You don't worship god; you worship your ignorance! Generations after generations of Mahars have ruined themselves with such superstitions. And what have you got in return from this god?" (Kamble, 64) He further says, "From now onwards you have to follow a different path. You must educate your children. Divorce your children from god. Teach them good things. Send them to schools. The result will be there for you to see. When your children begin to be educated, your conditions will start improving. Your family, your life will improve. Your children will bring you out of this hell. We are humans. We, too, have the right to live as human beings. Your children will make you aware of this (Kamble, 65). The autobiography argues for a need to rid the community of the superstitious evils which have become insurmountable blocks in their path of progress. Eradication of such evils is possible only through propagation of education that will create awareness among Dalit community.

In conclusion, it could be said that in a Dalit women's context caste, class and gender oppression all exist in an interwoven way.

The form of caste-patriarchy oppression experienced by Dalit women is remarkably different from that of upper-caste women. Therefore, the intertwined system of caste, class and patriarchy create a multi-dimensionality and intensity of oppression which is devastating for the experience of Dalit women.

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