

VOICING DALIT FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS IN BABY KAMBLE'S THE PRISON WE BROKE

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Abstract

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (Jina Amucha) is a landmark text in Dalit literature that foregrounds the lived experiences of Dalit women trapped within the intersecting structures of caste, class, and patriarchy. As one of the earliest autobiographical narratives written by a Dalit woman, the text challenges the dominant literary and historical discourses that have long marginalized Dalit female voices. This paper examines how Kamble articulates Dalit feminist consciousness through her portrayal of the Mahar community and the multiple forms of oppression endured by Dalit women. The narrative exposes the dehumanizing practices of untouchability, economic exploitation, social exclusion, and gender discrimination that shape the everyday realities of Dalit life. Simultaneously, it critiques the patriarchal norms operating within the Dalit community itself, thereby presenting a nuanced understanding of women's subjugation. Drawing upon Dalit feminist theory, the study explores how Kamble transforms personal memory into collective testimony, giving voice to a community historically denied representation. The influence of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar emerges as a significant force in fostering self-respect, education, and social awakening among Dalits, particularly women. Through acts of resistance, self-assertion, and political consciousness, the text reclaims agency for Dalit women and challenges caste-based hegemonic structures. The paper argues that *The Prisons We Broke* functions not merely as an autobiography but as a socio-political document that records collective suffering and resilience. By voicing the experiences of Dalit women, Kamble contributes significantly to the development of Dalit feminist discourse and redefines the relationship between gender, caste, and identity in Indian literature.

Keywords: Dalit Feminism, Baby Kamble, *The Prisons We Broke*, Caste Oppression, Gender Discrimination, Ambedkarite Thought, Dalit Literature, Identity, Resistance.

Introduction

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (Jina Amucha) occupies a significant place in Indian literature as one of the earliest autobiographical narratives written by a Dalit woman. Published originally in Marathi, the text offers a powerful account of the socio-economic, cultural, and gender-based oppression experienced by the Mahar community in Maharashtra (Kamble 12). More importantly, it provides a rare insight into the lives of Dalit women whose voices had long remained absent from mainstream literary and historical narratives. Through her autobiographical testimony, Kamble not only records the hardships faced by her community but also develops a distinct Dalit feminist consciousness that challenges both caste oppression and patriarchal domination.

Dalit feminism emerges from the understanding that the experiences of Dalit women cannot be fully explained through either mainstream feminism or Dalit movements alone. As Sharmila Rege argues, Dalit women's narratives challenge the upper-caste bias of mainstream feminist discourse and bring caste to the centre of gender analysis (Rege 6). Baby Kamble bridges this gap by highlighting the interconnected nature of caste and gender oppression. Her narrative reveals that Dalit women suffer from a double burden: they face discrimination from upper-caste society and subordination within their own communities.

One of the central themes of *The Prisons We Broke* is the dehumanizing impact of the caste system. Kamble vividly portrays the humiliations endured by the Mahar community under the rigid hierarchy of caste. Dalits were denied access to education, economic opportunities, and social dignity (Kamble 24). They were treated as untouchables and forced to perform degrading tasks that reinforced their inferior social status. Kamble's descriptions of poverty, hunger, and exclusion reveal the structural violence embedded within the caste system. As B. R. Ambedkar observes, caste is not merely a division of labour but a division of labourers that perpetuates social inequality (Ambedkar 81).

Women in Kamble's narrative are portrayed as the primary victims of both social and domestic exploitation. They bear the responsibility of household labour, childcare, and economic survival while simultaneously enduring violence and discrimination. Dalit women often worked under harsh conditions to support their families, yet their contributions remained undervalued (Kamble 37). Through these portrayals, Kamble demonstrates how patriarchal structures operate even within marginalized communities. The oppression of Dalit women, therefore, is not limited to caste-based discrimination but extends to gender-based inequality as well.

A significant aspect of Kamble's Dalit feminist consciousness is her critique of patriarchal customs within the Mahar community. She openly criticizes domestic violence, child marriage, superstition, and the unequal treatment of women (Kamble 52). Men, despite being victims of caste oppression themselves, often exercised authority over women and reinforced patriarchal norms. According to Rege, Dalit women's writings reveal the "multiple patriarchies" that shape their experiences (Rege 21). Kamble's willingness to critique these practices reflects her commitment to gender justice and highlights the necessity of addressing patriarchy alongside caste discrimination.

The title *The Prisons We Broke* itself carries symbolic significance. The "prisons" refer not only to the social constraints imposed by caste but also to the psychological barriers created by generations of oppression. Kamble suggests that liberation requires breaking free from both external domination and internalized inferiority (Kamble 68). Her narrative becomes a testimony of collective awakening in which Dalits gradually recognize their humanity and challenge oppressive social structures.

An important catalyst for this transformation is the influence of Dr. Ambedkar. Throughout the narrative, Ambedkar emerges as a symbol of hope, empowerment, and social change. His teachings encouraged Dalits to pursue education, self-respect, and political consciousness (Ambedkar 113). Kamble portrays the profound impact of Ambedkar's ideas on the Mahar community, particularly on women. Through education and awareness, Dalit women began to question traditional practices and demand greater dignity and equality. Ambedkar's emphasis on social reform provided the ideological foundation for Dalit feminist consciousness.

Another notable feature of Kamble's work is its transformation of personal memory into collective history. Although the text is autobiographical, it extends beyond individual experience to document the struggles of an entire community. Kamble frequently shifts from personal observations to communal narratives, emphasizing that her story is inseparable from the history of Dalit oppression (Kamble 75). In doing so, she challenges dominant historical narratives that have ignored Dalit experiences.

Furthermore, Kamble's narrative functions as a powerful act of resistance against the historical silencing of Dalit women. Traditional historiography in India has largely been shaped by upper-caste perspectives, often excluding the voices of marginalized communities. As a result, the experiences of Dalit women have remained absent from mainstream accounts of social and cultural history. By documenting everyday realities such as hunger, humiliation, labour, and discrimination, Kamble creates an alternative archive that preserves the memories of those who have been systematically excluded from official records. Her autobiography thus serves as a counter-narrative that challenges dominant representations of Indian society and asserts the legitimacy of Dalit women's experiences (Guru 98).

The significance of memory in *The Prisons We Broke* extends beyond recollection of personal events. Kamble employs memory as a political tool through which collective suffering is transformed into collective consciousness. The recollection of painful experiences allows the community to confront its past and understand the structural forces responsible for its oppression. According to Gopal Guru, Dalit narratives provide an epistemological challenge to dominant knowledge systems because they emerge from lived experiences rather than abstract theories (Guru 102). Kamble's work exemplifies this argument by demonstrating how experiential knowledge can reveal dimensions of social reality that remain invisible in conventional academic discourse.

Another important aspect of Kamble's text is its representation of labour. The women depicted in the narrative are constantly engaged in physical work, whether within the household or in the service of upper-caste communities. Their labour sustains both their families and the broader social structure, yet they receive little recognition or reward. Kamble exposes the unequal distribution of labour and highlights how caste and gender combine to intensify exploitation. The physical exhaustion endured by Dalit women symbolizes the broader burden of social marginalization. Through these depictions, the narrative reveals the economic foundations of caste oppression and illustrates how social hierarchies are maintained through unequal access to resources and opportunities (Paik 57).

The question of bodily autonomy also occupies a central position in Kamble's narrative. Dalit women's bodies become sites upon which caste and patriarchal power are simultaneously exercised. Their bodies are subjected to hard labour, domestic violence, and social regulation. However, Kamble does not present the female body solely as a site of victimization. Instead, she portrays it as a space of endurance, survival, and resistance. By narrating experiences that have traditionally been considered private or shameful, she challenges the culture of silence surrounding women's suffering. This act of narration itself becomes a form of empowerment because it transforms personal pain into political testimony (Paik 64).

Education emerges as another transformative force within the text. Kamble repeatedly emphasizes the importance of literacy and knowledge in challenging oppressive social structures. Prior to the spread of education, many members of the Mahar community accepted their inferior status as a natural condition of life. The influence of Ambedkarite thought encouraged them to question these assumptions

and seek opportunities for self-improvement. Education is therefore represented not merely as a means of economic advancement but as a pathway to self-respect and social dignity. As Eleanor Zelliot observes, education played a crucial role in the emergence of Dalit consciousness and political mobilization in twentieth-century India (Zelliot 143). Kamble's narrative confirms this observation by illustrating the profound changes that occurred when Dalits gained access to learning and awareness. The autobiographical mode adopted by Kamble is also significant from a literary perspective. Unlike traditional autobiographies that focus primarily on the achievements of an individual, *The Prisons We Broke* foregrounds collective identity. The narrative voice frequently shifts between the individual and the communal, emphasizing that personal experiences are inseparable from broader social realities. This collective dimension distinguishes Dalit autobiography from many conventional autobiographical forms. As Arjun Dangle argues, Dalit literature seeks not only self-expression but also social transformation by exposing structures of inequality and demanding justice (Dangle xxiii). Kamble's work embodies this objective by linking personal experience to collective resistance.

Religion and spirituality constitute another area of critical engagement in the narrative. Kamble exposes how religious beliefs and practices were often used to justify caste hierarchy and social exclusion. The dominant social order relied upon religious ideology to maintain the subordination of Dalits and legitimize their exploitation. At the same time, the narrative documents the growing attraction of Ambedkar's emancipatory vision, which offered an alternative framework based on equality and human dignity. This ideological shift represents a rejection of oppressive traditions and a movement toward a more inclusive understanding of social relations. The embrace of Ambedkarite values enables Dalits to redefine their identity and challenge centuries of discrimination (Omvedt 45).

Kamble's portrayal of women also complicates simplistic representations of victimhood. Although the narrative records immense suffering, it simultaneously highlights women's resilience and agency. Dalit women emerge as active participants in the struggle for survival, often displaying remarkable courage in the face of adversity. They manage households under conditions of extreme poverty, support their families through labour, and contribute to the gradual transformation of their communities. Their resilience demonstrates that oppression does not entirely extinguish the capacity for resistance. Instead, acts of endurance and perseverance become forms of everyday resistance that challenge structures of domination (Omvedt 51).

The language of the text further reinforces its political significance. Kamble employs a direct and unembellished style that reflects the realities of Dalit life. Rather than conforming to elite literary conventions, she privileges authenticity and emotional truth. This stylistic choice enhances the credibility of the narrative and enables readers to engage more deeply with the experiences being described. The simplicity of the language should not be mistaken for simplicity of thought; on the contrary, it serves as a powerful vehicle for social critique. Through her straightforward narration, Kamble exposes the contradictions of a society that claims moral and spiritual superiority while perpetuating systemic injustice.

Ultimately, *The Prisons We Broke* represents far more than a personal autobiography. It is a collective history, a political intervention, and a feminist critique of caste society. By bringing together issues of gender, labour, education, religion, and social justice, Kamble constructs a comprehensive account of Dalit women's experiences. Her narrative challenges readers to recognize the interconnected nature of

oppression and to acknowledge the voices that have long been excluded from dominant historical and literary traditions. In giving expression to these voices, Kamble contributes to the ongoing project of social transformation and establishes a lasting legacy within Dalit feminist literature.

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