



BREAK OUT FROM THE TRIPLE MARGINALIZATION: CASTE, GENDER AND COMMUNITY IN BABY KAMBLE'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY *THE PRISONS WE BREAK*

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Abstract

Baby Kamble was a radical activist and feminist writer in Dalit literature. She is well-known for her autobiography 'Jin Aamuch' which is the first autobiography written by a Dalit woman in Marathi literature. This autobiography was translated into English as 'The Prisons We Broke' by Maya Pandit. The core of this autobiography is the delineation of the Mahar community in a village Veergaon in western Maharashtra 50 years ago. Through this autobiography, Baby Kamble has told the collective autobiography of her community rather than herself. She narrates the suffering, poverty, oppressive customs and traditions, ignorance, superstitions, etc. of the Dalit community. She also represents the pathetic conditions and suppression of Dalit women in her autobiography. Baby Kamble depicts the caste discrimination which was prevalent in the society and represents the Dalit women face the triple marginalization: Caste, Gender, and Community. On the one hand Dalit women face the oppression and discrimination by the upper class men and women and on the other hand they become the victims of torture by the patriarchal norms of within their own Mahar community. This paper explores the triple marginalization of Dalit women in Caste, Gender, and Community. It also studies how caste systems and patriarchal norms shape the life and characters of Dalit women in the society.

Keywords

Dalit, Caste discrimination, Gender discrimination, Patriarchy, Exploitation, Oppression Customs and traditions etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

Autobiography is a unique literary genre in Dalit literature, through these autobiographies; each author seems to have given an account of the struggle between himself/herself and his/her caste and society. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar motivated to the Dalit community for self-awareness and education. The importance of education was realized and then the young generation of Dalit society started striving to educate. Education made Dalit community aware of their own rights. Then under the guidance of Babasaheb Ambedkar, the Dalit community united against the injustice and oppression being done to them and started struggling to live with dignity as 'human beings'. Then this educated generation took up the pen to depict their experiences, the struggle for survival, and Dalit literature took shape from autobiographies. These autobiographies become the medium of expressing the pain and sufferings of Dalit community in words, it touches the hearts of the reader as there is no scope for imagination.

The autobiographies in Dalit Literature emerged from the annual issue of Milind Mahavidyalaya in Aurangabad. Many young people from the surrounding villages come to study in this college. These young people from Dalit community put their experiences into words in this



annual issue. Dalit autobiographies portray the suffering and exploitation of the Dalit people. The only inspiration behind these autobiographies is to lighten the burden by telling the pains to the others and to change the social system that caused this devastating pain to the Dalit community. These autobiographies are also artistically excellent. There are some important Dalit autobiographies that have received recognition at the National and global levels, they are as follows: *Akkarmashi* written by Sharankumar Limbale, *Uchalyaby* Laxman Gaikwad won Sahitya Academy Award, *Balut* written by Daya Pawar won Ford Foundation's global award and Baby Kamble's '*Jin Amuchan*' which portrays the triple marginalization of Dalit women in caste, gender and community.

Baby Kamble was a feminist writer and an activist in Dalit movement. Her autobiography *Jin Aamuchan* is the first autobiography written by a Dalit woman in Marathi literature. This autobiography was translated into English as *The Prisons We Broke* by Maya Pandit. The core of this autobiography is the depiction of the Mahar community in a village Veergaon in western Maharashtra 50 years ago. Through this autobiography, Baby tai has told the collective biography of her community rather than herself. She represents the suffering, poverty, oppressive customs and traditions, ignorance, superstitions, etc. of Dalit community. Babytai depicts the caste discrimination, gender discrimination, exploitation of Dalit women and the influence of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar on her family as well as on Dalit community in her autobiography *The Prisons We Broke*. This autobiography presents the realistic picture of Dalit community and the patriarchal norms of society where the Dalit women oppressed terribly. She portrays the physical, psychological and emotional violence against women in private and public domains. Babytai was influenced by her father and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar; she understood that the education is the key to solve the problem of poverty and oppression of Dalit people as well as Dalit women. So that she tries to pen her thoughts and ideas in her autobiography and motivated to Dalit women for their own identity and dignity.

Babytai was born in her grandmother's house in Virgaon in Purandartaluka. Her father Pandharinath Kamble was a contractor, since he was benevolent in nature; he used to spend all the money he earned on charity. Therefore, Babytai's family had to live in poverty. But Babytai was influenced by her father. The story of Babytai's birth is narrated in very interesting manner, which reflects how Dalit community becomes the victims of superstitions and ignorance. Babu is Babytai's elder brother, on his back, Babytai's mother had three daughters, but when they were two or two and a half years old, they died. After that, her mother did not have children for a long time, so Babytai's grandmother took a vow to Goddess Kalubai of Harni and Babytai was born. But when Babytai was the one and half year old, she fell ill and one day, thinking that she was dead, people prepared to bury her. But due to her mother's insistence, the burial was delayed a little and everyone realized that Babytai was alive. Here Babytai points out that how superstitions were prevalent in the Mahar community and she also highlighted the customs and traditions of the society where the Dalit women were systematically oppressed. Except for 1-2 such incidents, the entire autobiography reveals the collective voice of the pain of her community rather than herself. Babytai truthfully describes the pain, customs, traditions, festivals, ignorance and the transformation brought about by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar in the Mahar community without any hesitation in *The Prisons We Broke*. This autobiography focuses on the issues of the suppression of Dalit women in the Mahar community, the problem of untouchability, harsh realities of patriarchal norms, Dalit women's triple marginalization, gender discrimination, customs, and traditions of Dalit community. In this respect, the author states that: "The suffering of my community has always been more important than my own individual suffering. I have identified myself completely with my people" (Kamble, 47).



This autobiography describes the suffering and agony of Mahar women who face discrimination and oppression not only by the upper caste people but also by the men and women of their own community. Further it represents the ideologies of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar following which Mahar women can observe a kind of transformation in their pathetic condition. The feeling that they were slaves of the upper castes had become strong in the minds of the Dalits as they continued to endure constant injustice and atrocities from the upper castes. But of course, they were also human beings. They also wanted to live a life according to their own desires. Babytai narrates the incident of her birth and tells that how superstitions and blind beliefs were overpowered in Mahar community. Babytai points out that in Mahar community there is no value for the opinion of women, as her mother is always neglected by her father who was generous in nature and always donate his income for welfare of the society. Here her mother objected on the act of father, but father never listened to the mother so that her family was suffering from poverty. Babytai explains that the Mahar community follows the principles of Patriarchal norms where the women's life is dependent on her husband. Dalit women are tortured physically, psychologically and emotionally by men. The Dalit women never opposed such tortures and exploitation rather than they had accepted this physical torture as their destiny.

Babytai depicts that Dalit women are suffering from triple marginalization: Caste, Gender, and Community. Dalit women not only tortured by male but also exploited by the women in their own community. Then, the power was exercised over the helpless women, especially the daughters-in-law, young girls of 7-8 years old were brought into the house as daughters-in-law at the age of playing and gardening, the burden of household chores and hardships was put on them. From there, the mother-in-law was ready to torture them with the whip of mother-in-law. Once the daughters-in-law came of age, then this injustice and oppression could not be tolerated. She was tortured in various ways; she was beaten by her husband horribly. Sometimes, on the advice of the family, the husband would cut off his wife's nose with a knife such a woman was called *Mudi*. Then the doors of the house were closed to her. Babytai represents the domestic violence and stated that the women were adversely beaten by both men and women in the Mahar community; she represents that Dalit women were oppressed as a daughters, wives and daughter-in-laws in her own community. Sharmila Rege, points out that "Dalit women are subjugated differently from upper-caste women and Dalit men. Rege claims caste, gender, and class identities cause Dalit women's subjugation. In her study, she stated that oppression is caused by several social identities. Dalit women endured oppression differently than upper-caste and Dalit men. Babytai talks about domestic violence in which daughter-in-laws are treated adversely by mother-in-laws. In Mahar community the mother-in-laws' influence on son's marriage was very important. The girls were married early age, after their marriage the exploitation of daughter-in-laws started by mother-in-laws as they fear of their son would not be come under the control of his wife. The husband also harshly treated his wife in Mahar community. The ill-treatment and domestic violence of husbands against the wives narrated by Babytai in following way, she said, "Husbands, flogging their wives as if they were beasts, would do so until the sticks broke with the effort. The heads of these women would break open, their backbones would be crushed, and some would collapse unconscious" (Kamble, 98) Thus the Dalit women become the puppets in the hands of husbands and mother-in-laws in her community.

Babytai describes the health issues of Dalit women in this autobiography. She narrated incident of her birth and when she was ill suffering from fever and become unconscious at that time the people from Mahar community feels that she is no more so that they decides to bury her but her mother opposed it and after few hours she becomes conscious. Here Babytai points out that in Mahar community there is no special attention given on the health of Dalit girls and women. No proper medication and healthcare is offered to them at time of illness. She further



narrates that the pregnancy period is the hell for Dalit women. She is forced to give the birth children until menopause come. In the time of pregnancy and delivery the proper food or medication is not provided to them. Baby Kamble said, “Our women offer their entire lives to the service of Mother Earth. But when they themselves become mothers, what do they get? After having given birth to their children, they have to tie up their bellies and lie down helplessly” (Kamble, 57). Therefore, Babytai explains how Dalit women were ignored in the period of the pregnancy. She was not provided the proper medication and treatment, there is too much ignorance shown by both men and women at time of pregnancy. The proper healthcare and hygiene is not maintained for women in Dalit community.

The autobiography provides a vivid depiction of injustice and oppression on Dalits. The caste system in Hindu religion denied Dalits their right to live as human beings. There were separate areas allotted for the Mahar Community members and also to the lower communities. The problem of untouchability is also discussed by Babytai throughout this autobiography. There are several incidents indicating that how untouchability was prevalent in the society. When a woman in Maharwada goes to the village shop in the month of Ashadh to bring shikkai and coconuts, she would say, Raosaheb...Please give me a coconut and shikakai..from a distance. And the shopkeeper would say to his young son, “Chaboo, the Maharin is standing at the door. Look...go ahead...and don’t touch her!” Since the Dalit community has a deep sense of inferiority and is deeply rooted in their hearts, these poor women say with a guilty feeling, “Come on, come on, little Bapusab, go far...far...don’t touch this Maharin.” Throughout this incident Babytai depicts that how untouchability was prevalent in the society and highlighted that the Dalit woman is treated as an animal. In another incident Babytai explains that the upper caste women buy wooden and grass sticks from the Dalit women at a low price and say, “Listen carefully, you dumb Mahar woman, check the stick well. If you overlook any of the threads sticking to them, there will be a lot of trouble. Your carelessness causes us heavily. Our house will be polluted” (Kamble, 55). The upper class men and women always try to avoid the touch of Dalit women and felt that they are superior to the Dalit people. This description indicates that how Dalit women were treated as animals from upper class men and women and the problem of untouchability is discussed by Babytai.

Babytai discusses about the traditions, conventions, customs, festivals and cultures of Dalit community especially Mahar community in her autobiography *The Prisons We Broke*. In Maharashtra Mahar community is considered as Dalit or lower community which is always neglected and ignored as dirty and impure in the society. This Mahar community has been exploited and tortured from 100 years ago by the upper class. Babytai explained how Dalit people and Dalit women were oppressed in the society from upper class. She portrays the plight and pathetic conditions of Dalit women throughout her autobiography. Babytai explored the subjugation of Dalit women in three folds that is Caste, Gender, and Community. The problem of untouchability is also discussed by Babytai in her autobiography. She represents that the Dalit people and Dalit women become victims of caste system and gender discrimination respectively from childhood stage. Here Babytai narrates that how caste discrimination is prevalent in schools, shops and private as well as public sectors. She further illustrates that how domestic violence was observed against the Dalit women. After the marriage every Dalit woman becomes a victim of domestic violence, all daughter-in-laws expected to do hard work in their house such as cooking, washing, cleaning, caring children etc. If they did mistakes in their works they were brutally beaten by either husbands or the mother-in-laws.

Babytai describes that Dalit women are treated as slave entity and triply subjugated by caste, gender and community. All Dalit women are expected to be obedient to the husband, mother-in-laws and upper class people. In this autobiography Babytai illustrates that the women in



Dalit community are treated as a sexual objects and their husband enjoys the sex whenever he desires, whether his wife is desired or not or her physical and emotional condition is well. The women are treated as children making machine, she is expected to give birth of children until menopause come. In Mahar community Dalit women made available to the upper class people for sexuality. Sometimes husband offers his wife to upper caste master for his sexual satisfaction. S. K. Limbale asserts boldly in his autobiography that her mother was kept by several Patils the chief persons of the village. He also tells that none of his siblings were born of the same father. However the firmly believes that there was nothing wrong in the women itself but it was the inhuman customs and rituals fixed by upper caste sections that degraded Dalit women so low. He says...My mother was not an adulteress but the victim of a social system. I grow restless whenever I read about a rape in the newspaper. A violation anywhere in the country, I feel, is a violation of my mother” (Limbale ix –Acknowledgement).

Babytai explores that how caste system and gender discrimination in schools and public places was prevalent and systematically Dalit girls exploited as they belongs to Mahar community that is lower community. When she came to Phaltan from Virgaon for education, she was sent to school and some children of her community also started going to an English school with her. Babytai narrates how the caste discrimination was prevalent in schools at that time. In schools and public places Dalit girls are ill-treated and neglected. All these children were influenced by Ambedkar's thoughts and ideology. The young children learned to stand up against the injustice done to them. Babu - the writer's brother had composed inspirational songs on Babasaheb. They were being sung in a loud voice in front of the Chavdi. Every good action of Ambedkar started to have a positive impact on the Dalit people and this was the victory of the Dalit community. It was the turning point of the revolution. Even an ordinary girl like Babytai was inspired by Bhima's ideas and joined this storm for the betterment of the society. Here Babytai wants to suggest that the only education can free the enslavement of the Dalit women. So that she writes about the slavery, caste system and enslavement of women throughout her life. She fought for the rights of Dalit women and motivated her community to achieve her own identity and dignity through education

Baby Kamble describes how the influence of thoughts and ideology of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar started on community. She narrates that Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar made the Dalit community aware of their own identity and inspired them to fight for their rights and dignity. That is why Babytai has referred to him as the 'crown jewel of morality'. From 1930, the wind of Bhima started blowing in the Dalit community. For the first time, on the Chaitra Pournima fair day of Jejuri, Babasaheb went there and held a meeting and asked the naive and ignorant people present there, and appealed to all “Worship knowledge instead of God. Make your children wise by educating them. This education will take you out of this hell.” This meeting started the wind of Bhima thoughts blowing in the Maharawada of Virgaon. The Maharawada of Virgaon started to adopt Babasaheb's thoughts. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar had forbidden the Dalit community to eat the meat of dead animals. The author has told an anecdote about this and narrated how her grandmother stopped the eating of meat of dead animals and also forbidden to other family members to eat the meat of dead animals. Here Babytai points out that the waves of the thoughts and ideology of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar made changes and reformation in the community.

The Dalit women sandwiched between caste discrimination, gender discrimination and community. They are treated as animals by their own people as well as by the upper class people. Bbaytai realistically represents the painful and pathetic conditions of Dalit women in the society, who are sufferings from physical, psychological and emotional torture and enslavement. In her autobiography, Babytai illustrates the adversities experienced by Dalit women, which are



predominantly attributed to the caste system, patriarchal structure and customs and traditions of community.

Conclusion:

The Prisons We Broke is not only the story of Babytai but also it is an account of the sufferings and agony of Dalit women. Babytai Kamble narrates the suffering, poverty, oppressive customs and traditions, ignorance and superstitions of the Dalit community. She describes the physical, psychological and emotional tortures of Dalit women very minutely and painfully. She asserts that the sufferings of Dalit women are due to her caste, gender and community. Through this autobiography Babytai has portrayed the pitiable condition of women and also how Dalit society is divided into traditional and modern ideologies. Traditional Dalit community members accepted the old age customs, traditions and superstitions and denied the way shown by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, so that they were tortured and exploited by upper class people. They are illiterate and ignorant so that they become the victims of caste discrimination. On the other hand the second category of Dalit Community follows modern ideologies and the principles of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and admitted their children to school which created a miraculous change in the society. This community raised voice against injustice and inhuman treatment and struggle for their rights and dignity. Babytai Kamble belongs to the second category of Dalit community, her father was a civil contractor and influenced by Dr. Ambedkar, and he admitted all his children to school and forced others to follow the same. Babytai took inspiration from Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and got education and struggle for rights and justice of Dalit women. Babytai realistically portrayed the oppression and exploitations of Dalit women and also asserts the different causes behind these oppressions and exploitations. She mentions that the illiteracy and superstitions are main reasons of the Dalit women's pathetic conditions and her exploitations in the society. Further she asserts that, the education would help Dalit women to achieve dignity and identity in the society. Babytai creates her identity as writer, social worker and activist through education. She fought for justice and rights of Dalit women throughout her life. Her autobiography highlights that Dalit women's triple marginalization: caste, gender and community. So that Babytai appeals to all Dalit women to fight against class, caste, gender discrimination and the orthodox patriarchal norms to establish their own identity and self-respect in the society.

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