

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*: A Saga of Suffering and Humiliation of Dalit Women

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Abstract

Dalit literature is newly emerged genre of Indian literature in English in the post-1950's era. As a new genre, which is also described as Mass Literature, Literature of Action, Literature of Protest etc. in the Indian literary discourse is blossomed world over out of socio-political and cultural transformation during the last few decades. The factors such as feeling of marginality, atrocities of groups other than Brahmin, socio-political challenges, etc. have been responsible for emerging of Dalit literature on the literary scenario of India on the one hand and on the other, it has given expression to the suffering and humiliation of Dalit people especially women who have been doubly marginalized and oppressed. Hence, a strong urge towards self-representation, it has become evident in the writers' who have been discriminated for centuries to come out and speak of their insightful account of their suffering and humiliation through literary expression, is seen. Thus, the paper intends to bring into light how the suffering and humiliation of the Dalit women in India reflected in Baby Kamble's *Jina Amucha*, the Marathi version which is translated as *The Prisons We Broke* by Dr. Maya Pandit.

Keywords: Dalit, Marginalization, Suffering, Humiliation, Oppression

Dalits have always been assigned to subaltern class in India. The word 'Dalit' – literally translated as 'oppressed' or 'broken' – is generally used to refer to people who were once known as 'untouchables', those who were belonging to castes outside the four-fold Hindu *varna* system, which have been originated by the Aryans of northern ancient India. According to the myth of four varnas, the human beings have said to have emanated from the Primeval Being. The Creator's mouth became the Brahmin priests, whose two arms were believed to be formed Kshatriya class, his two thighs were supposed to be formed as Vaishyas where as the Shudras were thought to be born out of his two feet. Since, the Shudras were born out of lower body part of Brahma, they were called as downtrodden or the Untouchables. Here,

it should be noted that the so-called Brahmin, the upper class was born out of the mouth of Brahma and are born great where as the Dalits who are born out of toes are considered as *Shudras*.

This caste system in the Indian socio-religious context became fixed and the hereditary with the emergence of Hinduism, its belief of pollution and rebirth by the *Laws of Manu* (*Manusmruti* or *Manusamhita*) that preach the sanctity of the varnas and uphold the principles of gradation and rank in the Indian Hindu society. They refer to the impurity and servility of the outcastes. They underline the dominance of the Brahmins, who emphasize that the people of the 'lowest' caste belong to the bottom in the caste hierarchy due to their sins in their past lives. Different punishments of torture and death are assigned for crimes such as

gaining literacy or insulting a member of a dominant caste.

As a result, the *Manusmriti* ensured and legitimized social exclusion introducing absolute inequality in Indian social system. The people divided into class and caste based on birth in particular class, caste or religion. Since, the people who belong to the Dalit community, ultimately entitled as lower-class people and thus, used as means of higher-class people. This way, including other communities like non-Brahmin were fallen prey to the so-called higher-class Brahmin and the people who make trade. From centuries past, these people or communities including Dalits were culturally oppressed, subjugated and politically marginalized and the poor non-Brahmins in the others. The principle of untouchability and 'Purity and Pollution' dictated the restricted life of Dalits as well as non-Brahmin poor people. The Dalits, especially, were more oppressed and subjugated easily than other people those who belong to the non-Brahmin class though poor. In brief, the word 'Dalit' is referred to broken, down-trodden people who were subjected to deliberate act of exploitation by those who rank at the top in the socio-hierarchical system in India.

The term 'Dalit Literature' was first used in 1958 at the first ever conference on Dalit Literature in Bombay. Thereafter, this literary discourse brought forth the oppression of socially ostracized and 'Voiceless' Dalits in multifarious genres. The Dalit literature believed in the philosophies propounded by Buddha, Kabir and Mahatma Phule. The encounter with new ideologies and expansion of knowledge; and above all the call of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar played a pivotal role in blossoming of Dalit Literature in all

Indian Languages. By the 1960's, Dalit Literature gave rise to a generation of new writers like Baburao Bagul, Bandhu Madhav and Shankarrao Kharat. In 1981, a little magazine entitled as 'Dalit Voice' started publishing the writings of Dalit writers and the Dalit literature came into existence in a true sense.

Dalit Literature is indigenous that explored the local traits and habitation of people and thus, it is experimental. So, no aesthetic criteria can be applied to assess the literary works of Dalits writers. Hence, Sharankumar Limbale, a well-known Dalit writer made a strong case for the appreciation of Dalit Literature in his book *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations* overthrowing the existing criteria of appreciating the Dalit literature by commenting as: "The Dalit literature has been criticized that it lacks artistic finesse and that Dalit Writers affect a pose when they write" (2004: 34-35). In the initial stage, Dalit Literature was neglected by the hegemonic non-Dalit writers. But the force and exuberance of Dalit literature was so high that the Indian Literature had to take notice of it. Dalit literature opened new doors for creation of new awareness of world and reality. A scholar named K. Satchidanandan in his book *Indian Literature: Positives and Propositions* views as:

'Dalit Literature empowers the marginalized by retrieving the voices, spaces and identities silenced or suppressed by castiest powers.'

Thus, the Dalit Literature came as a revolt against the prevalent ideology and cultural hegemony. It examined the human conditions and provided inspiration for the struggle to the marginalized. The life experience

expressed in the Dalit literature was spirited. In its earlier stages, the critics did not dare to review it. However, it continued to grow and the Dalit literature of protest and Dalit movement went hand in hand and both strengthened each other. The expression among the Dalit writers was so powerful that no theme of revolt was comparable in other subaltern groups. The remarkable features of Dalit Literature emphasized life experiences, anguish, revolt and negativism in the poor, oppressed and neglected people including Dalits in the Indian social milieu. In almost all Indian languages, the Dalits have raised their voices against their exploitation, oppression and marginalization in the socio-cultural strata of India. This helped the non-Brahmin class of people to deny the burden of so-called higher-class Brahmin and to establish a strong bond of humanity among them because of their similar experiences in the Indian socio-cultural strata.

The writers of Dalit Literature have handled all forms of literature such as poetry, autobiography, novels, short stories, critical essays, dramas and street plays. However, the favourite form among them, almost in all Indian languages, is Autobiographical Narratives.

Dalit Autobiographical Narratives:

B. Prasad in his book, *A Background to the Study of English Literature* says, "In an Autobiography the author writes the story of his own life and achievements. Its aim, like that of the Biography, is a successful presentation of personality and, in the best examples of the period to which the author belonged." Similarly, Longfellow, the British poet and critic says, "Autobiography is a

product of first – hand experience, Biography of second – hand knowledge." When the Dalit Autobiographical Narratives are studied in the light of the abovegiven definitions, it is revealed that these are extremely important as inevitable portraits of the social, economic and cultural change among the Dalits in India. They cannot be isolated the individual from his whole historical environment, family, community and society at large.

The Indian Dalit women writers tried to seek inspiration from the atrocities caused to them. This articulated their ardent desire to have their due space in the society and to reconstruct their identities in the patriarchal social system in India. Dalit women writers showed that Dalit woman has doubly suffered and is still suffering in the hands of male-dominated Indian social system. With the spread of education among the Dalits, they understood the reasons behind their suppression and exploitation. They broke the silence of centuries past and came to the forefront giving vent to their own experiences. For this sake, they employed one of the most powerful vehicles of expressing their feelings, emotions, trials and tribulations and thoughts choosing the form of literature as autobiography. Then there started a spate of autobiographies in various languages in India such as Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, Tamil, Oriya, Malayalam, Kannada and many more.

In Hindi, for instance, *Joothan* (1997) by Om Prakash Valmiki, *Tiraskrit* (2002) by Surajpal Chuhan, *Apne-Apne Pinjarey* by Mohandas Namishray and *Ghutan* by Rama Shankar Arya have brought into light the true-life experiences of the Indian Dalit people.

Whereas, in Marathi, *Akkarmashi* by Sharankumar Limbale, *Baluta* (1978) by Daya Pawar, *Upara* (1980) by Laxman Mane, *Taral-Antral* by Shankarrao Kharat, *Vasti* by Vasant Moon, *Gabal* by Dadasaheb More, *Uchalya* by Laxman Gaikwad, and *Athvaninche Pakshi* by P. E. Sonkamble have underlined the plight of downtrodden people of India revolting against existed social system in India. These rebellions have taken a stand against socio-cultural oppressive outlook in the educated class.

Along with the men Dalit writers, women Dalit writers have played a pivotal role in the creation of Dalit literature too. Prominent among them are *Antasphot* by Kamud Pawade, *Dohra Abhishaap* by Kaushalya Baisantri, *Jina Amucha* by Baby Kamble, *Majhya Jalmachi Chittarkatha* by Shantabai Kamble, *Chouthi Bhint* by Urmila Pawar, *Ratra Din Amhi* by Shantabai Dani. These Dalit women writers have given an insightful account of their treatment not only in their families but also in the male-dominated oppressive society through their literary discourse. In a sense, they have rebelled against the socio-cultural practices in their societies in particular and Indian in general. Similarly, in Gujarathi, *Purna Satya* by Keshiram, *Bhandariyan* by Dharma Bhai – Shrimali as well as in Telgu, *Kerrukku* by Bama are some of the notable autobiographies that expose the sad lives of Gujarathi and Telgu women and the realities consequences in their lives.

Besides, the indigenous languages, some of the writers have used to expose their lives in English among them are *Against All Odds* by Kishore Shantabai Kale, *Outcasts* by Dr. Narendra Jadhav, *Things I Never Imagined* by Balasaheb

Suryavanshi, *Endless Filth: The Saga of the Bhangis* by Mari Marcel Thekae, *Kar Viram: Life of Dalit* by Josiane Racine and Jean –In-Racine.

In the light of this observation, the condition of women as described by Baby in her autobiography, is acutely miserable and very inhuman treatment is meted out to them. She has exposed the unending plight of women who belong to Mahar community in her contemporary society. She has further revealed that how these women were reduced to inanimate objects and even were denied to quench their basic needs. Therefore, Baby blames the so-called Hindus as sinners. That is why, she bursts out emphatically as: “What a beastly thing this Hinduism is! Let me tell you, it’s not prosperity and wealth that you enjoy – It is the very life blood of the Mahars”.

Baby Kamble also comments about how Mahar women were made to internalize that what was happening to them was right. For that purpose, the caste Hindus have created various myths and false stories in order to create a feeling of lowliness among the people of Mahar community. She graphically presents the inner world of the Mahar community in Maharashtra. She encapsulates the true nature of people belonging to Mahar community as: “We were just like animals, but without tails”.

In this sense, Baby speaks out for the women of her community, presenting an unflinching portrait of its women, subjected by both caste and patriarchy. In this context, May Pandit’s comment supports this as she says, “A singularly important aspect of *Jina Amucha* is Baby Kamble’s Dalit Feminist critique of patriarchy” (Pandit: XV). The younger women suffer the worst fate as they are

married off at the tender age of eight or nine, physically chained to their husbands or in-laws. Sometimes they are made to quench the physical hunger of the rich in the town when they go to work on their farms. If they did not allow to do this, their entire families were banned from the town and forced to leave their dwelling places. She recalls an incident in which she was expelled from a Hindu temple of along with her friends by the local Brahmin priest in order to 'save' the temple and its god from 'pollution'.

Here, it is significant to note that even Gods get polluted with the appearance of Dalits. This shows that the Dalits were only denied equal access to the Temples but public places such as police stations, government ration shops, post offices, schools, water wells also. That is why, the Dalits had to depend upon the 'goodwill' of the upper caste communities even for their basic needs such as drinking water, eating food, daily wages, shaving their heads, etc. This shows that how the Dalits in the contemporary India of Baby Kamble were given discriminatory treatment at public as well as private business places such as temples, hospitals, cinema halls, food stalls, barber shops, etc.

If one can view the history of Indian social system of class and caste, it is easily noticed that how the Dalits were systematically denied their fundamental rights. Besides the right to property, they were evicted from the core locality and thus, it constitutes a crucial element in their subordination and seclusion as a part of society. They were deprived from the fundamental right of education emphasizing that they were incapable of becoming educated. The upper- class

communities did this deliberately because they thought that the education of the downtrodden people including Dalits will pose a threat to the village hierarchy, power relations and their dominance, too. Here, Baby has brought to light how the downtrodden people were deliberately and systematically kept away from the main stream of socio-cultural system. Thus, while talking about the importance of education, she tells her community as: "I am sure my sisters and mothers will carry out this task with an iron resolve" (135).

Baby Kamble in *The Prisons We Broke* uncovers the suffering and humiliation of the Mahar community in general and the women in particular. She presents an unflinching portrait of women, subjected by both caste and patriarchy. That is why, her autobiography has become a historical document as it traces the evolution of the Mahar community from pre-Ambedkar days to its repaid transformation through education and mass conversion. It signs highly about the man who rescued the downtrodden people from the mire of Hinduism.

Though the narration holds the interest of the reader as a fairy tale, it ends up showing the utter state of poverty in which Dalits lived or were forced to live. Baby speaks of her birth, education, marriage, her children, her *ashramshala* for orphans and the influence of Dr. Ambedkar on her *life* and thinking. She reveals the inner world of the Mahar community very graphically. So, her autobiography, *The Prisons We Broke* doesn't remain as the story of the life of Baby only, but represents the trials and tribulations through which the entire Mahar community had to go.

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