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Dalit Feminism and the Intersection of Class, Caste and Gender in *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble

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ABSTRACT

Dalit feminism emerged as a response to mainstream Indian feminism, which tended to downplay caste related issues. Dalit feminism studies not only the patriarchal oppression of Dalit women at the hands of upper-caste men but also from the members within their own caste. Baby Kamble grapples with this issue as a writer as well as an activist. This paper attempts to study the intersectional impact of caste, gender and class in her work The Prisons We Broke using the Dalit feminist theoretical approach. It attempts to analyse the textual representation of Dalit women's predicament not only through the portrayal of the interlinked complexity of caste, gender and class-based oppressions but also through the intersection and overlapping of these realities within the autobiographical rubric of writing. In her seminal work, Baby Kamble exposes the deprivation of Dalits and the struggles and oppression of Dalit women. Kamble seems to immerse or place herself within the community but does not leave out the complexity of identity for a Dalit woman. Her autobiography thus disrupts the standard concepts of autobiography that place individual at the centre. As opposed to the existing gap among mainstream feminist movement, there seems to be a scope to reshape feminist solidarity among the Dalit feminist scholarship. This paper builds upon the major concerns shared by Dalit feminists within the social structures that assert the subjugation of Dalit women using the lens of caste and gender. It further attempts to extend the theoretical scope and applicability of Dalit feminism by exploring the conceptual specificity of the social reproduction of the social location-based knowledge of Dalit women's predicament.

Keywords: *Dalit feminism, intersections, caste, gender, prison.*

Dalit Feminism: Reconceptualizing Indian Feminist Thought and Scholarship

Dalits have been suffering due to the structured hierarchy of caste that affirms and imposes inequality and maintains the exercise of control over the 'other'. "Dalits are oppressed,

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exploited and discriminated against, and are being methodically erased through graded inequality at every level" (Patil 39). This results in less space for Dalit women in both public as well as private sphere. Moreover, the subjugation of Dalit women worsens because of the complicated overlapping of caste, class and gender. Ambedkar's analysis of caste also suggests that the condition of Dalits should be examined in relation to the political discourse. He also outlined the complex relationship between the structures of gender and caste (Ambedkar 48).

As we examine Ambedkar's views in the context of the current paper, it can be argued that in order to develop a gendered understanding of the hierarchical gap, one requires a rethinking of Dalit narrative and scholarship based onthe Dalit women's interpretation of their realities. This will entail taking into account the prevailing hierarchical system of caste, which operates among Dalit and projects itself as the interplay of power within the community instead of building their collective consciousness against such hierarchies. This can also be seen especially among the Mangs and Mahars in Maharashtra, Madigas and Malas in Andhra Pradesh and other places in India. Additionally, the mainstream feminists' responses to the claims made by Dalit feminists frequently led to substituting one form of oppression and difference with another, emphasizing the superiority of one over the other. Rege has suggested that this process of replacing one difference with another can only result in an increase in differences and leave the tenets of several dominating frameworks unchallenged. (Rege 4). Considering the sociocultural, political, and economic circumstances of Indian women, particularly Dalit women's several factors have necessitated the need to engage through the analytic spectrum of Dalit feminism. The time is apt to elucidate and evaluate the caste-driven factors that are responsible for the suffering of Dalit women. The paper interrogates various ways in which Dalit communities envision the articulations of Dalit women. It will also examine the nature of Dalit feminist research in a time that separates Dalit politics or anti-caste activism as the politics of identity. This will help extend the applicability of Dalit feminist thought to the entire discourse of South Asian solidarity at large.

Mainstream feminist theorists focus on a single kind of marginalized identity, that is gender, while ignoring the interplay of many other operational identities. Dalit feminists intervene here by rejecting the concept of the universal dimension of women's subjugation. Western or Eurocentric feminism, for example, is defined by universalizing white, Western women's experiences and oppression that tends to disregard the other forms of oppression experienced

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by Black, LGBT, and women of third-world countries The majority of Indian mainstream feminists too, tend to have the same approach as western counterparts, believing their cause is generally applicable to all Indian women, regardless of caste. Dalit feminism, therefore, emerged in India as a reaction to mainstream feminism, which failed to acknowledge caste-based exploitation. It acknowledges both patriarchal oppression from outside the caste as well as from within, thus entering the voices of Dalit women experiencing different forms of

oppression. Dalit Feminist Theory and scholarship seek to reorient Indian feminism towards adequate gender justice. From the third-world perspective, there emerge several challenges within this context and we often require more theoretical engagement for the same. One can identify two primary challenges before the Indian feminist thought that one needs to champion, namely: the debate surrounding caste- privileged feminists who have often claimed to represent 'all women's' concerns in India, which is, in fact, problematic; and secondly, the theoretical assertions that a modern theory of gender is impractical because women in India cannot be homogenized (Sunaina 1). This renders women's studies to re-think and re-examine Indian feminist discourse and its theoretical approach in order to find multiple ways to realize the dream of gender justice in India. Therefore, Dalit Feminist theory examines this relationship between gender and caste while taking into account the limited perspective of feminist discourse. It eventually attempts to provide a framework that makes a gender-based inquiry. It also involves theorizing feminism in the Indian context and redefining mainstream Indian feminism from the standpoint of Dalit women. The assimilation and interventions provided by the Dalit feminist thought would fundamentally advance the feminist claims of freedom, justice and equality in India.

Use of Autobiographical Mode in The Prisons We Broke As An Act of Resistance

For generations, Dalit women have been doubly oppressed marginalised, and their voices have never been heard. They have demonstrated resistance against the casteist patterns within the patriarchal societal framework, and one of the ways in which they did this and continue to do so is through their writing. Writing about their lives is an act of resistance in itself as Dalit autobiographies are considered to be a literary tool of social protest and practices. Double oppression of Dalit women is a recurring thematic concern in Dalit women's literature, albeit not restricted to this genre. The contexts of the narratives and themes are varied. This paper

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focuses on the autobiography of one of the major Dalit female writers, Baby Kamble. She deliberately uses the genre of autobiography that allows her to reclaim her own narrative and challenge the marginalization of Dalit voices. By sharing her personal side of life experiences, she asserts her agency as a storyteller, centring the experiences of Dalit women and amplifying their voices. In doing so, she confronts stereotypes and misconceptions, providing a counter-narrative that disrupts prevailing hierarchies and challenges the erasure of Dalit women's experiences.

Kamble often used to read stories and narratives from the books and newspapers she used for packaging at her shop. The lack of representation of the marginalized, particularly Dalit women in those stories led her to write about her own life. Her autobiography was a result of extensive reading and note-taking while hiding it all from her husband. The Prisons We Broke was first written in Marathi as Jina Amucha. It is regarded as an important work in Dalit scholarship and writing and is also possibly the first autobiography written by a Dalit woman in any Indian language, not just Marathi. *The Prisons We Broke*, is a form of protest against the deplorable living conditions that the Hindu caste system has put the Dalits to for hundreds of years. The narration covers her family background, village Dalit culture and customs such as worshipping local deities, superstitions, school education, discrimination, marriage customs, experiences of new brides with their in-laws, exploitation by the upper castes, the influence of Dr. Ambedkar as a Dalit and Kamble's active involvement in Ambedkarite movement. She questions the deprivation endured by the Dalits for ages and how they have also been expected to accept this as their destiny. Kamble describes how the Dalits were forced to merely survive on rotten, dead animals and leftovers of the upper castes. The text also explores and traces the creation of a homogenized Dalit self, which is self-inclusive of the lowest of the lower stratum in society. The issues of Dalit women have neither been amplified by mainstream feminism nor addressed justifiably by the Dalit literary movement. But it found greater scope in works such as *The Prisons We Broke*. Babytai belonged to the Mahar caste which was considered to be untouchable by the Indian caste system. She was a teacher, human rights activist, supporter of women's rights, and entrepreneur. She was one of the ardent followers of Dr. Ambedkar's principles and lived her life in accordance with his principles. Baby Kamble, like many other women from her community, experienced hardship in her own personal life, which she hardly

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discusses in her autobiography. She claims that her experiences and hardships pale in comparison to those of the women in her community.

Her autobiography can be divided into two sections. The first section shows the terrible hardship and pain that Mahar women go through as a result of being exploited and discriminated against not just by upper caste men but also by men from their own community. The next section depicts Bhimrao Ambedkar's ideologies, his influence on various people from the community and her active participation in Ambedkarite movement. It also highlights how Mahar women are able to bring about and see a positive change in their situation after following

Ambedkar's teachings just as she has been able to do. She acknowledges herself as "a product of the Ambedkarite movement" (Kamble 76).

Dalit men typically adhere to and implement the Brahminical patriarchal system's ideals, which places restrictions on women's sexuality, education, and independence. This patriarchal rule established by the men in Kamble's community has an impact on her as well. Baby Kamble said in an interview with Maya Pandit that she, like other Dalit women in her community, had been the victim of physical abuse by her husband without any of it being her fault. Her husband used to be skeptical of her. Men's dominance over women is a patriarchal rule.

This dominance, added with physical abuse, was so common for the Mahar women that most of them did not complain or raise their voices in protest. They had accepted physical, mental and emotional torment as their fate. She had also acknowledged that she was not an exception and had stoically put up with it. She claims it to be an additional reason why she was reluctant to write about her physical assault "It was the fate of most women; I wasn't an exception. So why write about it, I felt" (Kamble 156). In addition to following the traditional practices in upper caste households, such as women eating after the males of the household had finished their meals, Mahar women were subjected to discriminatory practices observed in their communities as well. Dalit women, for example, were forced to bend down and step out of a village path whenever a higher caste man approached.

Later in The Prisons We Broke, she recalls how Brahmin women would not touch them when taking money, and how Dalit girls in schools were forced to sit on the floor so that they would not pollute the classroom or the students from upper-caste families. She claims that power dynamics arising from familial and societal relationships have pitted women against one other.

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This makes their life even more miserable for them. This is exemplified in the text where Baby Kamble gives us a closer look at the condition of women when they are married, a Dalit woman's relationship with an upper-caste woman. She tells the story of an unusually dehumanizing practice in which Mahar women had to carry the faeces of newlywed Brahmin women on their heads due to a Hindu custom which required them to do so. According to Babytai, it was usual in her community for a mother-in-law to falsely accuse her daughter-in-law of performing crimes she would have no clue of due to her tender age, driving the little girl to death and enticing her son into re-marrying. She gives psychological reasons for this

behaviour, such as the woman's inability to project herself. According to her, this tendency is a result of a woman's inability to vent her pent-up feelings, constraints and suffocation, which knowingly or unknowingly leads them to seek satisfaction from subjugating a lesser entity, even if it comes at the expense of her life. In addition to chronicling her own experiences, Babytai Kamble's autobiography also challenges the conventional, casteist depictions of Dalits in Indian literature. This text makes a vital contribution to our understanding of how Dalit women are oppressed because of caste, gender and class. In addition to being a personal account, it also serves as a socio-historical record of Dalit life, notably that of Dalit women. As noted by Maya Pandit in the introduction to the book of Kamble's, it serves as a historical and socio-political document, offering valuable insights into the social, economic, and cultural contexts in which Dalit women navigate their lives. Her narratives contextualize her experiences within the broader Dalit movement and the fight for social justice, contributing to a larger discourse on caste oppression and discrimination (Kamble 13).

Moreover, when comparing Babytai Kamble's work with the autobiographical writings of Dalit male authors like Daya Pawar and Om Prakash Valmiki, we observe that their works share commonalities however there are notable differences as well. In juxtaposition, Babytai Kamble's focus on the life experiences of Dalit women brings attention to the specific challenges they encounter within a deeply patriarchal and caste-conscious society. In contrast, Daya Pawar and Om Prakash Valmiki provide insights into the experiences of Dalit men, shedding light on their distinct encounters with caste-based oppression. Babytai Kamble's emphasis on reproductive labour, gendered violence, and the struggles of Dalit women adds a unique dimension to the broader discourse on Dalit experiences.

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Intersection of Caste, Gender and Class: The Standpoint of Dalit Feminist Theory

Dalit social activist Ruth Manorama writes in her work Background Information on Dalit Women in India:

> "Since the late 1980s, therefore, Dalit women have increasingly felt and articulated the need for a separate platform – created, developed and controlled by themselves – through which they could forge their own identity, fight for their rights and find solutions to their particular problems as Dalits and as women." (Manorama)

Dalit women experience the rigidities of double patriarchal oppression as a result of their poor social, political, and economic standing. The first is Dalit patriarchy, which is when men from the same community oppress Dalit women. The second type is when men from upper castes oppress and exploit Dalit women. Before we analyse the intersection of various experiences in this text, it is imperative to understand the relevance of intersectionality propounded by African American feminist thinkers in the initial phase of the twentieth century. Several experiences lay the foundation for intersectionality and hence it is not a finished product. It must be treated as a theory in the making with the predominant notion of critical analysis within sociology, feminism, black studies, sexuality etc. However, as part of several distinct experiences, multiple knowledge projects can also emerge. And it is here that intersectionality could provide that lens to look through various experiences and generate an interlinked discourse among all identities. Kimberley Crenshaw, the famous African American thinker who is widely acclaimed as the first one to have coined the term intersectionality, has advanced this theoretical framework, focusing more on those people who face discrimination and are subjected to not one but multiple forms of differences and discrimination. Intersectionality, therefore, provides a lens with which one can analyse such discrimination. As a result of the earliest feminist wave being labelled as all white feminism, some black women, indigenous women and women from the third world countries raised their voice against the absence of the voices of non-white women. Criticism arose within feminism and there emerged a need for all different projects to have a common medium and approach to interact with each other, to theorize their experiences and above all, to highlight the multiple ways of oppression for women. Nationality, ethnicity, age, disability are all areas of concern as intersectionality seems to be growing as that common theoretical lens for their study and critique.

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The intersectionality of Dalit women's problems is indeed the central theme of The Prisons We Broke. In the introduction to The Prisons We Broke, Maya Pandit rightly points out:

> "If the Mahar community is the 'other' for the Brahmins, Mahar women become the 'other' for the Mahar men. Baby Kamble demonstrates how caste and patriarchy converge to perpetuate exploitative practices against women. It is here that the urge to define the self becomes most evident in women. 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." (Kamble 2008)

Throughout the course of the narrative, Kamble maintains the same claim that Dalit men regard the women in their homes and communities as the other, just as higher caste Hindus regard the

Dalits as the other. Similar to the disparities within the caste system, there are several social disparities that have an impact on women, particularly marginalized women like Dalit women. Due to particular gender and social conventions that exist within their individual caste community, these women continue to occupy the lowest rung of society. So, it is impossible to treat women's subjugation in Indian society as a single phenomenon. Because of this, the sufferings of upper-caste women differ from those of lower-caste women, necessitating a distinct strategy for developing a structural solution to address the issue. Dalit women are victims of caste, class, and gender oppression, all of which are interrelated with each other. One can also look at the discrimination experienced by non-Dalit women and Dalit women: with the latter experiencing more discrimination. Dalit Feminism thus provides a legitimate space for Dalit women to communicate their distinctive experiences as both Dalits as well as women. One of the major highlights of the text by Kamble is the excellent blend of these interlinked factors which affect a Dalit woman. However, the centrality of intersectionality has been a contentious issue amongst Dalit feminists and feminists who claim to represent 'all women' cause so far. Contrary to the views espoused and promoted by Dalit feminist theorists like Mary E. John and Meena Gopal, Nivedita Menon presented a number of reasons against the necessity of intersectionality in India. Mary E. John criticizes Menon's categorical denial of intersectionality's use in India and calls for interaction with the idea in order to better comprehend gender justice. John writes, "The term intersectionality . . . certainly represents an advance over the more generic use of multiple axes of oppression, double and treble burdens and so on, and is a corrective to the commonly deployed notion of multiple identities. This way of alluding to the effects of 'race, class, gender' (or, in our context, 'class, caste, community, gender') is quite widespread, as I am sure readers are aware. The idea of being 'multiple'

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misleadingly suggests that identities are formed by adding together the various structures or axes that constitute them. In such a view, Black women's identities become a combination of being black and being women." (John 73). Brahmanical patriarchy heavily influences and determines the types of patriarchy that exist in India. This clarifies a particular patriarchal structure that is explained by a series of tiers that are caste-based and discriminatory. In this structure, upper-caste men and women are more privileged than lower-caste men, who are more deprived. More significantly, women from lower castes suffer the most deprivation overall.

They are more likely to experience violence because they are oppressed on many different levels, including caste, class, and gender. They also suffer patriarchal oppression from men both within and outside of their caste and society. Therefore, according to some intellectuals like Uma Chakravarti, the caste issue inside the Indian social structure must also be included in order to fully understand and analyse the gender issue. Furthermore, because the living conditions of Dalit working class women are appalling, Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon have claimed that there is a disproportionate amount of public rather than private violence against Dalit women. Kamble presents various aspects of women's concerns, such as complexities and suffering during and after weddings, the pain of childbirth and care, the load of housework, and the difficulties that Dalit women experience simply because they are women. For example, one of the Mahar community's traditions confines women inside the four walls of their dwellings, concealed beneath the threshold. The limits imposed on women in a household were tied to the family's honour. She continues by describing how her mother was also imprisoned inside the house's four walls. She writes, "My father had locked up my aai in his house, like a bird in a cage" (Kamble 05). Dalit feminism's fundamental tenet is that 'dalit woman' exists at the nexus of caste and gender. In mainstream Indian feminism and Dalit politics, women and Dalit are perceived and defined as two categories that are mutually exclusive based on caste and gender. Because of this, Dalit women's issues are usually overlooked or never addressed at al. Dalit feminism adopts an interventionist stance in an effort to explain how Dalit women's identities are intersectional. Therefore, the concept of intersectionality is used to describe how Dalit Feminism differs from both Dalit Politics and mainstream Indian Feminism. The objective is to map the various ways that the term "women" is being rebuilt within caste-related inequality and regionally distinct patriarchal interactions.

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Because of this, caste and gender intersect to produce a form of experience that neither patriarchy nor caste oppression can fully account for. This work is a concrete example that uncovers the complex intersections of various factors governing the lives of Dalit women.

Conclusion

This study serves as a practical illustration of the intricate interplay between numerous factors influencing Dalit women's lives. Conclusion By addressing a theoretical vacuum in Indian

feminism, this work has attempted to present a comprehensive picture of gender-based inquiry and to prove the necessity of recognizing caste-based differences. By highlighting the disparity between Dalit and mainstream women's lives, it has examined feminist theory and action and worked to create a new conceptual framework for Indian feminist thinking. Amble's work, has therefore been analysed from Dalit feminist standpoint that seeks to critique the stance of a Dalit woman with reference to her caste, class and gender. Themes such as sexuality, marriage, reproduction, equal pay etc. are now widely written upon by Dalit feminists that are vital for solidarity and scholarship of women from marginalized sections of the world. Theorizing the intersection of gender, caste and class, therefore, becomes crucial from Dalit feminist point of view in this regard. Through this contemporary standpoint, the paper has tried to trace the trajectory of Dalit feminist studies by highlighting the complications of a Dalit female at the crossroads of global solidarity. This could also widen the scope for the South Asian feminist sensibility and writings emerging in contemporary times.

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