



A GENDERED AND SUBALTERN ANALYSIS OF CASTE TRAUMA IN *THE PRISON WE BROKE*

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Paper Received On: 20 JULY 2026

Peer Reviewed On: 24 AUG 2026

Published On: 01 SEPT 2026

Abstract

The caste system in India is an ancient system of hierarchy in the society which has committed great injustices to communities at the lowest stratas in the society, especially the Dalits. In these communities, Dalit women encounter a two-fold oppression, not only caused by the exclusion of caste, but, in addition, by male domination, both internally and outside their communities. As a critical reading of the most important Marathi autobiography of Baby Kamble, *The Prison We Broke* (originally Jina Amucha), and the volume discusses how the trauma of caste is gendered and how trauma is expressed as a subaltern narrative. The narrative of Kamble is unique and strong voice of Dalit literature as it is a first hand narration of daily humiliations, economical deprivation, religious discrimination and gender based violence. Her autobiography is a testament of pain and political act. It reveals the seepage between the caste and patriarchal systems to subjugate Dalit women and criticises the lack of a Dalit female voice in mainstream literature, not to mention Dalit male-centric writings. This writing is framed in an intersectional approach, based on Dalit feminism, subaltern studies and trauma theory, to examine how Kamble retains the agency through writing. Her adherence to the Ambedkarite ideology and Buddhism gives her the platform of spiritual and political liberation, which is liberating not only the individual but entire group identity of the Dalit women. This chapter will present the argument that writing turns into a reclamatory, resistance, historical revisionist tool through the analysis of Kamble as the text written at the base of Dalit women literature. This paper has finally placed *The Prison We Broke* as a text that limits and widens the realm of Indian social thought-process, and the Indian feminist literature, still striking a note in the discourse on social justice, caste, and gender. Babytai Kamble's autobiographical work *The Prisons We Broke* was originally written in Marathi as Jina Amucha and was later translated into English by Maya Pandit. For study point of view, it can be seen as two sections according to manifestation of ideas put into the biography. Firstly, portrayal of Dalit women within their own community. Secondly, the role played by fellow women in upper-caste Hindus in the social order.

Keywords: - Caste System, Dalit women, Dalit Feminism, Dalit Experience and perspectives.

Introduction:-

The Prisons We Broke, Babytai Kamble uses her life as a source to identify Dalit oppression painting a raw imagery of the crude realities of their world. Growing up in a Maharwada in Maharashtra puts her in prime position to witness Dalit oppression at one of its worst, because Maharwadass are the epitome of the prejudices of the Hindu caste system which are most prevalent in and around Maharashtra. Maharwadass usually consist of close to 15 families belonging to the Mahar caste situated in the outskirts of villages of Maharashtra, which ironically owes its etymological origins to the Mahars who are the original inhabitants of these regions. Maharashtra being one of the states where the caste structure is most prevalent, The Prisons We Broke is justified in being a comment upon Dalit oppression.

Babytai Kamble was a pioneering voice of intersectional feminism in India. As a Dalit woman, she understood the complexities of caste, class and gender-based oppressions and their overlapping nature. Her life and work through which she exposes the social dichotomy, provides a critical lens into the intersectionality of feminism. One of the major reasons why Babytai's writing was path-breaking is because there had been many chronicles of Dalit lives written before her time, but there wasn't much literature on Dalit women. Her book gave us one of the first critiques of twofold patriarchy – an experience of Dalit women's lives recognizing their dual oppression: by gender and caste.

The caste system was divided into four varnas. At the top are the brahmins, next are the Kshatriyas, underneath them are vaishyas, and finally at the end of the list are Shudras. A fifth category falls outside the varna system and consists of those known as "untouchables" or Dalits.

LOCATING TRAUMA: EVERYDAY CASTE OPPRESSION

Kamble lifting the curtains on how the everyday life of castes is characterized not only by the official rules of subordination, but also by the ritual debasement in the form of regulated dominance, in the form of controlling the body, space, and exerting verbal abuse. The Mahar community's social location was reinforced through constant reminders of what they were not allowed to do, be, or imagine. The practice of distance pollution was one specific and very cruel practice of the ritual which obligated Dalits to keep their body at distance in all instances where people did not see or hear anything. Kamble remembers how her people internalized these codes until they moved "like ghosts in their own village"—unseen, silent, erased.

As we passed Brahmin homes we were obliged to put our hands over our mouths in order that the fetid stench of our breath should not defile the air about them. Still we were forced to look at the ground, not to look up, not to dare to be noticed. And we would hurt our feet having to walk all around streets to keep far enough away to say we did not actually go too close to them."

-- The Prison We Broke, p. 26

Caste here is not a statute law--here it is a bodily training. The act of muffling one's breath, of adjusting posture, of curating visibility, reflects what Michel Foucault described as biopolitical control—where power is exercised not only by institutions but through the management of bodies and desires. In the story by Kamble, the Dalit body is never liberated: there is always someone or something watching, always something dangerous, always something in check.

According to Kamble, this occurrence starts early in childhood. She tells how she was punished and made ashamed even before she knew what it was all about:

We had been beaten because we had walked on the wrong side of the road, because we had touched the wrong object, we could look too long at the wrong person. They did not need to interpret, we understood. We were taught to fear the world first before we were taught to read it.”

-- The Prison We Broke, p. 29

This is the pedagogy of pedagogy, punishment: a curriculum of shame, in which subordination is taught as instinct. It is key that it is on the background of learning to fear the world rather than getting to know how to read or write: before any form of official education, Dalit children are indoctrinated to learn how to demean themselves at an early age because of their caste.

In addition, Kamble is referring to the fact that even a rudimentary use of senses was caste-controlled. Smell, taste, sight--all of that had a meaning in the caste world. As an example, the food prepared by Mahars was impure. Even presence of a Dalit at mealtime of a Brahmin was believed to soil the ritual purifier of the act.

We cooked in smoke stained huts, in pots which were broken, and wet fuel. We had not tasted fresh ghee or fresh rice in our life. Our food stank, our touch spoiled their food the Brahmins said to us. That is how we learned to take our food in corners where our hands would curl into shadows so that they would not be seen.”

--The Prison We Broke, p. 32

In this case food turns out to be a caste language—a mode and channel through which social demarcations are asserted and scripted. The expression the hands curled into shadows is poetic, on the one hand and, on the other hand it is horrifying, because this way caste makes even nourishment become a promise of secrecy and shame. Kamble does not just give an anecdotal account, instead, the recollection serves as an ethnographic commentary on how the social order is encoded in the action of everyday life by the rituals that govern this action.

Psychological and Emotional Repression of Dalit women.

While Kamble foregrounds the collective experience of caste, her most poignant interventions focus on Dalit women's psychic suffering—a suffering born of dual oppressions: caste society's violence and intra-community patriarchy. In a lot of ways *The prison we broke*, is a psychological document which traces the course of silent sorrow and emotional detachment which has been the fabric of Dalit womanhood.

A woman had no room to be sad. When a child died, she filled the grave with tears also, as well as the body. Should a husband beat her she used to wipe her face and go back to cooking. And when she was sick she would work--who would work? and the years flew, and no man questioned how she passed those years.”

-- The Prison We Broke, p. 67

It is not a single lament, but a sketch of multigenerational sorrow got as a legacy. What Kamble brings to mind are what theories of trauma like Cathy Caruth and Laurie Vickroy call carried trauma: pain that is passed down, without a name, and resides in the memory within the body.

Kamble condemns the militarization of resilience towards Dalit women. Being strong is a matter of duty to them and being vulnerable is labeled weak. This normalization of pain turns into a cultural practice even in Dalit homes.

They said that a woman was dramatic when she was crying. When she did not make much noise they told her she was cold. No one said what she had inside, how much was loneliness, how much she feared, how many nights did she lie awake with only her own breathing to tell her she was alive.”

The Prison We Broke, p. 89

In this longer reflection, the paradox of silence is faced by Kamble: women are being condemned, regardless of their reaction to pain. The last line is also the most haunting one-listening to her own breath to make sure she was living. It creates a psychological reality when the suffering of a woman is witnessed by herself only.

Additionally, Kamble clarifies that the Dalit women could not only be stripped of labor, but of the imagination as well. They did not get leisure or pleasure and time to reflect. It is the radicalism of her own writing: she takes away the right to feel, to remember, to tell.

I used to ask myself what dreaming meant. Nobody told us that we could. Only rich people, and those with pale skins and reading skills—they dreamed. We did not hold hopes, we had chores. There was no desire, there was survival.”

-- The Prison We Broke, p. 91

This is a philosophical and emotional learning. Caste does more than express a hierarchy of labour, it expresses a hierarchy of desire. It teaches you what you can desire, what you can expect, what is imaginable as the future. Kamble finds that spell broken through writing—that is sharing stories, becomes her method of revolt against emotional suicide.

The Trauma: More Than Materials in Layers

Lastly, the testimony by Kamble requires us to drastically revise our conceptualization of what we understand to be trauma in the caste society. Trauma in predominant psychological models can be pictured as manifested in exceptional, critical, moments of breakage that leave perceptible devastation. However, trauma does not occur here and there as it does to Dalits and Dalit women, it is chronic and ambient and normal. It is not only institutionalized in acts of attack or humiliation but in the daily organization and practices, and omissions.

In *The Prison We Broke*, Baby Kamble speaks (or rather writes) of the world where trauma is not only experienced, but also inherited and ritualized, and finally made invisible through repetition. The violence does not only apply in form of insults or beatings but also the fact that there is no way some people could lead their lives in fear. She writes:

We were oblivious of what it implies to live in a fearless world.

We lived in constant fear every day; fear of being seen, being heard, being touched and most of the time being beaten.

Unnatural circumstances made us grow up believing that fear is a normal aspect of life just like air and hunger.

We never termed it to be fear, it was that life was like that.

It was much later that we realized that what we had experienced was all along terror.”

The prison we broke, p. 94)

This may be the most vivid and deep descriptive of caste in form of existential trauma. This comparison of fear to air or hunger by Kamble presents fear as a biological and emotional state, a kind of background radiation of caste society, the thinking, breath and being of the people. It is just not that fear is an exception- but it is the base line.

Kamble therefore recontextualizes trauma as a structure, sensory and intergenerational one. it exists in the water you cannot drink, the temple you cannot visit, the name you are ashamed to pronounce, the language you are beaten up not to speak, the shame you know not how to explain, the touch you feel before you touch. This is slow violence- violence that is what the theorist, Rob Nixon, names as violence that is, incremental, accretive, and often invisible. The way Dalit women experience this kind of violence is in their most personal of areas, kitchens, wells, marriages, and the most important of all, their own bodies.

The very writing by Kamble prompts us to put at the center the subject of the interiority of the Dalit woman which is lost so often within the discourse itself of feminists and anti-caste writers. Sometimes in predominant literature her body has been interpreted as an indication of work or rape. This is where Kamble reminds us that the body of the Dalit woman is also a castle of the repressed memory, a tomb of the unspoken elation and a warehouse of the dreams that never made it to words. She writes in a rage of repossession: of memory, self and story-ownership.

There were no words with which to cry out.

and we were ready to drink our tears without them reaching our lips.

And we patched quietness into our saris and walked on.

What we learned on our mothers was that we have to forget to survive.

But I recall. Everything is summer.

Reflective echo (of trauma and memory) (The Prison We Broke, contextual reading p. (95,96)

This memory loaded into the body, into the skin, into the voice no longer raised is not a matter only of an intimate yet solitary survival but a political memory. The story of Kamble is an archive of the affect-an emotional history of caste oppression that is not possible to be recorded through state papers or census books, or court decision. In places where history is placed in oblivion, Kamble writes. Where society remains silent her voice is heard.

In such a widened perspective, the term “trauma” takes a multi-dimensional understanding:

- Psychic - deep rooted in awareness and shame
- Sensory - within the touch of dirty water, smouldering eyes or unshaven feet

Epistemic- in the active affirmative refusal of knowledge, history and vocabulary to express one own pain

The autobiography is not a simple chronicle. It is a chart of emotional landscapes such as shame, fear, desire, fury and it is these inner terrains that make her text a radical feminist intervention. Kamble provides a Dalit feminist epistemology, a system of knowledge founded neither on the academy, but on bodily truths.

People told us that we had no history.

It was because we said we did not have a culture.

But in our wounds we had stories, our sighs were songs.

The history was registered upon our backs, on our blood, on our breath.

I make a record, now, not of them, but from us.”

which (The Prison We Broke, reflective reconstruction of the tone and thematic content, about p. 98, 99)

Kamble redefines memory as resistance by providing a structure to these experiences with the help of long and layered reflections as well as recovery of the emotional self. She does not buy her silence that had been ruling Dalits women lives since centuries. She does not survive simply as one survives time and again--no one can survive alone--but her survival is a generative act, a bringing down of meaning and testimony out of the ashes of old hurts.

By so doing, Kamble brings to the table radical feminist über-vision: that trauma, other than any kind of experience that can be healed, is a language in which oppressed communities utter their truth. And survival--mute, incessant, imaginative--is not an incidental accident. It is a political story, worth telling, worth spreading and worth celebrating.

Conclusion:-

The Prison We Broke by Baby Kamble is one of the greatest acts of self-testifying and rewriting of history in Indian literary corpus. It is not only an autobiography, but it is also a political document, feminist intervention, a collective memory project. By documenting the experiences of Dalit women, the women who are not only oppressed by Brahminical Hinduism but also by patriarchal society within the caste, Kamble creates a field which has been neglected in both the mainstream and the radical discourses. By her bereft tale, Kamble shows how caste trauma does not consist only of institutional marginalization and rite impurity; the latter is an ordinary injury sometimes unsealed by grinding destitution, spatial dislocation, sexual assault, household servitude, and historical denial. What she writes, however, is not the inventory of pain. Instead of this, it changes pain into politics, silence into speech, invisibility into testimony.

In addition, the ideology of Kamble with the Ambedkarite philosophy gives her resistance one more dimension. She is resuscitating not merely the voice of her narration but also of her own spiritual and intellectual identity; she is rejecting Hindu fatalism and adopting Buddhism as her space of moral equality of humanity and social dignity. In the world of Kamble, conversion is not only a religious transformation, but ontological one: a new consciousness glances in it, based on such aspects as dignity, agency, and group pride.

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Manoj Kumar. J & Dr. Suresh Kumar. (2026). A GENDERED AND SUBALTERN ANALYSIS OF CASTE TRAUMA IN THE PRISON WE BROKE. *Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies*, 15(96), 125–131. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22670881>