

## INTERSECTIONALITY, CASTE, AND THE SUFFERING OF OPPRESSED WOMEN IN BABY KAMBLE'S THE PRISONS WE BROKE

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### Abstract:

*This study examines the lived experiences of suffering among low caste Mahar women, who endure systemic oppression imposed by the dominant patriarchal ideology embedded within Brahminism. Baby Kamble critically engages with the humanitarian tendency to overlook social inequality and agony, exhibiting deep sensitivity to the struggles faced by Dalit women. Kamble's exploration of the psyche of Mahar women emphasizes collective solidarity and Dalit femininity over individual suffering. As a writer, she acknowledges her primary responsibility to advocate for women's emancipation and the eradication of untouchability. Through her work, Kamble effectively portrays the wounded selves of Mahar women and their resilience. Employing Paik's theory of Incremental Intersecting Technologies analyzing caste, class, gender, sexuality, and agency this paper explores how the caste system has been critically examined and how intersectional perspectives on Dalit women have evolved over the past two decades.*

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### Objectives:

1. To analyze the representation of caste-based and gendered oppression in *The Prisons We Broke*.
2. To examine Baby Kamble's engagement with intersectionality in the context of Dalit feminist discourse.
3. To explore how caste and patriarchy intersect to shape the psychological suffering of Mahar women.
4. To investigate the implications of Kamble's work in contemporary Dalit feminist thought and activism.

### Hypothesis:

This study hypothesizes that Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* provides a critical intersectional framework to understand the multi-layered oppression of low caste women. The text serves as an assertion of collective identity and resistance, offering insights into the systemic suffering inflicted by both caste and gender hierarchies.

### Introduction:

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* is recognized as the first autobiography written by a Dalit woman in

Marathi and, more broadly, in any Indian language. Kamble emerged as a Dalit writer and activist from an early age, demonstrating an unwavering commitment to the struggles of women in her community. Her prioritization of collective suffering over personal pain establishes her as a fearless and resolute figure. Through her critique of Savarna rituals, Kamble articulates a distinctive form of resistance, infusing her narrative with a tone of defiance. The autobiographical genre, which she adopts, serves not only as a medium of self-expression but also as an instrument for introducing Dalit discourse from an innovative perspective. Her conscious decision to expose the oppressive customs upheld by her community reflects an ethical commitment to social critique.

Within the Indian subcontinent, caste and gender are deeply intertwined, making their separation nearly impossible within the Varna system. This intersection of caste and gender operates in a manner that is both oppressive and violent, rendering escape from its influence nearly unattainable for those subjected to it.

Kamble openly addresses the brutality and violence inflicted upon Mang and Mahar women, both by men within their own community and by members of dominant castes. Analyzing these harrowing experiences reveals the persistent reality of dual oppression, which disproportionately affects Dalit women. For Dalit writers, the autobiographical genre extends beyond personal narrative; it becomes a space for assertion and collective resistance. Kamble's deliberate use of 'We' instead of 'I' challenges the conventional bourgeois form of autobiography, transforming it into a genre where the self is both individual and communal. As Unnisa (2018) observes, "Her (Kamble) description of poverty-stricken lives of the Mang and Mahar does not reduce to pity; rather, she tells it with a sense of humour."

#### **Intersectionality in Dalit Feminist Discourse:**

Kimberle Crenshaw introduced the concept of 'Intersectionality' to explain the complexities of systemic inequality. Helen Lewis defines intersectionality as the idea that "any consideration of sexism interacts with race, class, sexuality, and disability to create unique forms of discrimination" (Lewis, 2020). Similarly, in *The Prisons We Broke*, Kamble employs the term 'prisons' as a metaphor for the dual oppression faced by Dalit women, who must navigate both caste and gender-based subjugation. Originally published in Marathi in 1986 as *Jina Amucha*, Kamble's work foregrounds intersectional factors contributing to the systemic oppression of Mang and Mahar women in India, preceding Crenshaw's theoretical framework established in 1989.

#### **The Psychological Impact of Caste and the Suffering of Mahar Women:**

Caste-based behaviors are not merely social constructs but deeply embedded in psychological frameworks. Jaspal (2011) notes that "members from various caste groups very often position themselves psychologically in relation to the caste system." Pal (2015) highlights

the role of socio-psychological literature in Dalit discourse, emphasizing its significance in understanding social cognition, identity formation, and intergroup relations.

Kamble's work portrays the emotional toll of caste-based oppression, particularly through her mother's experiences. The emotional suppression resulting from societal mistreatment left Kamble's mother deeply withdrawn- "And that must have made her so insensitive, so cruel towards the others. She could never get along with people" (Kamble, 2008, p.6). While her mother internalized suffering, Kamble's father exhibited a contrasting affectionate disposition. The influence of urban life played a crucial role in shaping her mother's perspectives, particularly regarding financial independence:

I wonder whether this was her true nature or whether her poverty-stricken life made her speak in this way. Actually, she learnt to 'speak out' only because she travelled to many cities with my father. It was staying in the cities that had taught her how to live.

(Kamble, 2008, p. 6)

Pal and Swain (2009) identify two primary psychological responses to caste discrimination: aggression and withdrawal. When individuals are persistently denied opportunities and subjected to systemic bias, they may exhibit either resentment and defiance or social withdrawal. Pal (2011) further discusses the long-term consequences of caste-based trauma, noting that such experiences often lead to social alienation, discouraging interaction and fostering a sense of vulnerability and estrangement.

The notion of purity is applied differently to upper-caste and Dalit women. While upper-caste women's sexuality is heavily ritualized and safeguarded to prevent caste 'pollution' through exogamous unions, Dalit women's sexuality is constructed as inherently available and unprotected, rendering them vulnerable to exploitation. Various religious and social

mechanisms have reinforced this disparity, positioning Dalit women as perpetual targets of violence and subjugation. Dutt (2019) further elaborates on this systemic abuse, stating:

*But for Dalit women, their bodies are also where the upper-caste societies deliver abuse and caste violence. When upper-caste men need to remind a Dalit family of their place, they attack and abuse Dalit women. But even when punishment is not the point, upper-caste men feel they are entitled to sexual and physical ownership over Dalit women.*

(Dutt, 2019, p. 142)

This pervasive entitlement underscores the intersection of caste and gender-based violence, demonstrating how caste hierarchies perpetuate systemic exploitation and control over Dalit women's bodies.

### **Conclusion:**

The 1960s marked a significant period in Dalit women's literary and activist movements, with pioneering figures such as Baby Kamble, Shantabai Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Kumud Pawade, Faustina Bama, Kaushalya Baisantri, and Kusum Meghwal producing a substantial body of work. Their writings serve as critical documentation of their lived experiences, detailing not only their suffering, oppression, and struggles but also their aspirations for a unified Dalit identity. These narratives highlight the

systemic denial of social, economic, religious, and political rights to Dalit women while simultaneously illustrating their resistance and evolving roles in society.

A critical examination of the struggles faced by Dalit women provides insight into the enduring intersections of caste, gender, law, education, culture, economic capital, human rights, and the politics of sexuality and labor. Their narratives not only expose historical and systemic injustices but also contribute to the broader discourse on social transformation and resistance against entrenched structures of power.

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