

Locating Freedom of Self in the Community: On Reading Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*

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Reading autobiographies confronts readers with the problem of interpreting experience not just as an individual's testimony but as coming up with certain ideas that also transcend that specific individualistic connotation. Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, even as an autobiography, continually tries to engage with narratives of oppression and resistance both at the level of the larger society and the community. Gopal Guru, in Afterword, writes that unlike the autobiographical self in the west, the self here is partly constituted by the life-story and acquires larger meaning only in the context of the narrative of the community (Kamble 160). Thus, the self is both individual and collective. However, he writes that autobiographies can only form the link between the particular and the universal when there is a theoretical intervention that can convert the individual experience to the social experience. It is the social nature of the experience that would be able to contest the larger structures of oppression in the society (Guru and Sarukkai 119-123). Hence, Sharmila Rege uses the term "testimony" interchangeably with "autobiography" to emphasize how in Dalit women's narratives there exists a dialectical relationship between the self and the community whereby they speak as women in the community, voicing concerns of both gender and the communitarian notion of Dalit community (*Writing Caste, Writing Gender* 13-14).

Therefore, it is necessary that one tries to engage with not only the reality of experience captured in the narrative but also with the wider ideas of resistance that become instrumental in interrogating the oppressive social relations constituted by the patriarchal structures of the society.

In *The Prisons We Broke*, Baby Kamble takes the reader through the experience of living in a society deeply rooted in oppressive caste norms and gradually how they are able to carve out a space for emancipation from it. Here the impediments to freedom are not just other people imposing restraints on the individual but also include the structures of domination in the society that result in these restraints being imposed on some and not on others. The most remarkable aspect of the text is that it situates the notion of emancipation of the self within the context of the community. This self is different from the concept of an abstract individual self which has conventionally been at the centre of most of the liberal theories of freedom. This idea of continuity between the self and the community is what is emphasized by both Gopal Guru and Sharmila Rege when they are talking about the epistemic resistance of Dalit women.

Baby Kamble begins her story with a very personal account of her love for her grandparents. She grew up with her brother in her grandparent's home in Veergaon, a taluka in Pune district of Maharashtra. The residents of Maharwada lived under extreme conditions of poverty. Her father, who worked as local contractor, spent all his money on food, clothes and tea. Due to this, her mother would always feel the pangs of poverty the hardest and the author assumes that this is probably why she became such a difficult person to live with. In spite of being a uniquely personal narrative, this also hints at the larger structure of oppression that women face on a daily basis and such is the entrenchment of patriarchy in society that women also start reproducing those similar oppressive patriarchal norms to which they are being subjected. But what is important here is that the author also tells us about the oppressive social and economic conditions that were forced upon them by the upper castes. She (p57) writes, "Our women offer their entire lives to the service of the earth. But when they themselves become mothers, what do they get? In those days there would be no food in the house, not even the water leftover from boiling rice, to satiate the fire of hunger raging inside the belly of the new mother". In most of these instances in the narrative, she uses "our" instead of "my". The lived experience in this sense is "pluralized" rather than being confined solely to the individual's account (Naik 16-17).

The author writes that outside Maharwada, the Mahar woman had to bow down and declare her servitude to any upper caste man that passed by or else there would always be a

huge uproar that would lead the entire family and the community to get abused and humiliated. The oppressive intertwining of caste and patriarchy is revealed by the way men, upper caste women who lived outside the community, and sometimes Mahar women themselves inflicted humiliating experiences on other Mahar women. Baby Kamble narrates, "...it was the essence of the Mahar woman's life that was found sticking to the wood. Yet the Brahmin woman objected to what they found sticking there!" (56). Thus, she reveals the beastly nature of the Hindu society that laid claim to the work of the Mahar as unpaid "service" but would tremble at the shadow of one.

Rege in a 1998 essay on "Dalit Women Talk Differently" mentions that the rise in caste status in Hindu society was preceded by withdrawal of women of specific castes from the production process of the public sphere and into the private sphere. However, it is evident from the narrative, how Mahar women had to transgress the boundaries of private life along with their children in order to ensure that they survived and the children were taken care of. But, in the public spaces, there were enormous efforts made by the upper castes to control the mobility of Dalit women. The social practice of caste and untouchability had made it acceptable to put Mahar women to work with minimal remunerations. The products of their labour would be bought by the upper caste households, however; they refuse to take it from their hands or if there is any visible speck of their body on those items. Gopal Guru writes that the untouchables were treated as "walking dirt and were segregated to spaces like Maharwada as far as possible. However, the labour of the Dalit was fundamental to the maintenance of socio-economic structure of the society" (Guru and Sarukkai 73, 90-91). Baby Kamble writes, "It was on the Mahar's labour that these parasites lived" (80).

The Mahar woman, unlike the high caste women, could not be relegated into the private domain and their entry into the public was seen as Mahar men's lack of control over their women's bodies as per Rege's 1998 article. There are several instances where this transgression from private spaces into the public by Dalit women has resulted in unthinkable violence meted out to them and their families by upper caste men. The body of the woman here becomes the site of contestation for the dominant castes both because of the identity as a woman and as a Dalit. Baby Kamble writes how the Mahar women were prohibited from wearing saree with visible pleats as it was seen as offensive by the upper castes.

Baby Kamble writes that “The condition of Mahars was no better than that of bullocks, these beasts of burden, who slogged all their life for a handful of dry grass”. The tiny drop of happiness and distraction amidst this lay in the month of Ashadh when rituals of cleaning, bathing, and worshipping the Goddess happened. Sacrifice of a buffalo was made and it was one of those times of the entire year when the whole community would celebrate and dine together. It was believed that women could be possessed by the goddess and thus, they would be treated like the mother goddess by men, women and children alike. Even their husbands would bow at their feet and ask for good omen. The narrator writes that this prison of ignorance was deliberately kept closed due to the upper caste’s domination over education and unwillingness to give the Mahars and other lower castes access to knowledge (Kamble 37). When Mahar children attended school, intense humiliation was also faced by them. They would not be allowed to sit alongside other children or drink water from the same tap. However, it would be a mistake to understand the self or community of the Mahars that Baby Kamble talks about as passive recipients of oppressive structures. They were also constantly trying to resist and subvert these oppressive Brahmanical norms of the Hindu society. In order to subvert this chain of humiliation, sometimes they purposefully touched the upper caste children and ran away. In other times, they fought back by invoking myths glorifying Babasaheb Ambedkar.

Gradually, with the ascendance of Ambedkar in politics and thereafter the emergence of Dalit associations and movements, the lives of the Mahars underwent a certain positive, unprecedented, and effective change. Instances of how Ambedkar’s speeches became the rallying point for the transformation of consciousness of the people in Maharwada are manifold as per the author’s narrative. She writes, how in the community spaces, Ambedkar’s speeches assumed a crucial point of discussion.

Baby Kamble writes that for the first time women came to be a part of most public meetings and had slowly started to fundamentally contribute to the movement. In her interview with Maya Pandita she said, “It is the woman who is the real doer. If she can bring darkness, they can also bring light into our lives” (Kamble 139). She believes that it was only due to the Ambedkarite teachings that even men were bound to work alongside women for the emancipation of the community. Even the older women who were previously steeped in

superstitions now participated in the events organised these associations. For Baby Kamble, the biggest achievement of this movement was the opening up of educational spaces for Mahar children, which enabled them to fight for self-respect as well as work for better material conditions of life.

Therefore, in this text, the idea of freedom as centred on the individual is scarcely deemed to be a path for emancipation from oppression. It is, in fact, in the times when people in the community gathered to celebrate, dine, and work together for the emancipation of the community that they experienced a form of solidarity and solace which one usually seeks in the privacy of one's home. The relationship among these women in fighting against patriarchal oppression that is intertwined with other oppressive structures of caste involved not only resisting patriarchy but primarily resisting the caste norms that dictate patriarchy. In this context, freedom from oppression entailed subversion of the barriers to emancipation that have been imposed on the community as a whole by the caste Hindus. Thus, Ambedkarite movements became central to this journey of emancipation which cemented their sense of solidarity to seek freedom from the oppression of the Hindu society.

Baby Kamble's text, thus, is not just a personal account of life but also a testimony of her own lived experience as situated in the context of the community's experience. This relationship between the self and the community is strongly affirmed through their connectedness with the new emancipatory ideology of the Dalit community emanating out of the leadership of Ambedkar which helps them find a way to freedom from the oppressive ideologies of caste system and patriarchy. Ambedkar had said, "When your children begin to be educated, your condition will start improving. We, too, have the right to live as human beings. Your children will make you aware of this". And in reference to the impact of these ideas on her life, Baby Kamble finally writes, "I followed Baba's words verbatim, to the best of my abilities" (Kamble 64-65, 135).

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