



## Research Article

# “The Humble Mahar Women Fall at Your Feet, Master.” Portrayal of the Psyche and Suffering of Mahar Women in Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke*

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### Abstract

This article delves into the nature of suffering as experienced by Mahar women struggling with the implemented difficulties by the prevailing patriarchal ideology rooted in Brahminism. Baby Kamble dislikes the humanitarian aversion to agony and disparity. She is sensitive to the predicament of Dalit women and conscious of their sufferings. She has managed to dredge into the psyche of Mahar women, prioritizing sisterhood and Dalit femininity over individual suffering. As a woman writer, Kamble concedes that her primary task is to promote women's emancipation and eradicate untouchability. She propitiously manages to portray Mahar women and their wounded selves. Utilizing Paik's theory of Incremental Intersecting Technologies about caste, class, gender, sexuality, and agency as the framework, the paper seeks to answer the questions: How much consideration is given to the caste system, and what intersectional aspects have been integrated into discussions about Dalit women in the last twenty years.

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## Introduction

*The Prisons We Broke* is considered the first autobiography by a Dalit woman in Marathi or any other Indian language. Baby Kamble developed into a Dalit writer and activist at a young age. Her altruistic gesture of prioritizing the suffering women in her community over herself has solidified her reputation as a courageous woman. Her critique of the Savarna ceremonies in her narrative conveys a particular kind of rage. Her writing illustrates how choosing the autobiographical genre had an unexpected result, giving the text a distinctive tone while also introducing Dalit discourse from an innovative perspective. Kamble precisely made an ethical decision involving exposing the harmful traditions her community fervently adhered to.

Within the Indian sub-continent, the much-debated relationship between Caste and gender being complex in character has caused the impossible disassociation of the two under the *Varna* system. The correlation of caste and gender is toxic and violent in nature, and anyone who comes within the capacity of the Caste system finds it inevitable to escape. Kamble has openly talked about the brutal and violent treatment of Mahar women by the Mahar men as well as the superior considered castes. Inspecting the unfortunate incidents leads to the knowledge of ever-existent double suffering, which majorly agonizes Dalit women. The autobiographical genre transcends literature for Dalit writers, who utilize it as a platform for "assertion." By employing 'We' instead of 'I', Kamble's narrative approach has put the bourgeois autobiographical genre to the test. In this genre, the self is both autonomous and communal.

As observed, "Her (Kamble) description of poverty-stricken lives of the Mahar does not reduce to pity, rather she tells it with a sense of humour." (Unnisa, 2018).

The writer offers a thorough analysis of the Dalits' exploitation concealed behind customs and beliefs.

## The Study of Intersectional Elements in Dalit Discourse

Prof. of Law at the University of California, Kimberly W. Crenshaw, coined the term 'Intersectionality' to elaborate on the complications of inequality. Helen Lewis defines Intersectionality in her book *Difficult Women: A History of Feminism in 11 Fights* as,

"means that any consideration of sexism interacts with race, class, sexuality, and disability to create unique forms of discrimination." (Lewis, 2020)

Similarly, the term 'Prisons' in Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* is a metaphor for 'the double struggle' the Dalit women are pressured to go through to achieve the 'unattended double equality'. The text was originally published in the Marathi language in 1986, as Jina Amucha had come up with the intersectional factors responsible for the maltreatment of Mahar women in the Indian subcontinent even before Crenshaw made it a theory in the US in 1989. Attack on Brahmanical patriarchy and its imitative product known as 'Dalit patriarchy' have crucially dealt with the representation of real-life characters throughout the text, which makes up for the elements majorly accountable for slavery and ill-treatment of the Mahar community. Calling out Dalit patriarchy as a mimic also concludes as a need that Dalits feel to fit within the socially

constructed narrative of *the Varna* system to get communal acceptance even if it legitimizes the degradation of Dalit women.

Therefore, understanding of intersectionality has ascribed more seriousness to the circumstances of Dalit women. The theory's primary emergence resulted from the inspection of injustice against Black women. Black feminists contended that their issues and complications are distinctive from those of Black men and White women. Likewise, Dalit women face many obstacles as *Dalit women*, and their uncommon experiences and viewpoints cannot be compared with the perspectives and attitudes of Dalit men and Upper-Caste women. The term explores the interconnection between structures of exploitation, which makes victims the target of duplex abhorrence and unfairness.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, intersectional theory has laid down the basis, which makes it easier to understand the social conditions that are affecting and contributing to the current state of Dalits. It helps expose the dominating positions of groups. (Crenshaw, 1991) brings out the intersectionality approach in the sense of violence against women, a complication that surpasses unique factors such as race, class, and dysfunctionality. In her theory, marginalized women of race and community in the US challenge uncommon systemic hurdles to communicate sexual violence that invades their existence.

Neglecting the intersectional characteristic of such arrangements, we fail to observe the perceptions of distinctive communities of the disregarded women and dereliction aimed at the Caste- privileged women (Upper- Caste, middle class, vigorous, heterosexual). Hypothetically, this indicates how gender functions in society are being deliberately misunderstood. Popularly or socially, it proposes that 'Dalit women' are left out of mainstream feminism even in the contemporary age. Unification of all women under one cover has terribly ceased to function. The Dalit women do not just lack agency outside but within the Dalit households as well, which affects their free representation at many levels. 'The structure of race and gender intersect to create a

'matrix of domination' in which each cell defines a position in the race and gender hierarchy.' (Collins, 1998)

The strands liable for the double domination of Dalit women have been glorified in the mythological or holy texts of Hinduism. (Sharma, 2019) argues that ritualistic tools are put into use to promote Caste through gender. Since women's reproductive ability is natural, it becomes a threat to the 'Caste bearers' of Indian society that was supposed to remain subjugated and controlled for the very existence and performance of the Caste system. Sharma's views also raise concern regarding Hindu women's sexual consciousness. The favored idea of 'Purity and Pollution' within Hinduism has had a strong and unbreakable effect on the psyche of Hindu women as well as Hindu men. The idea of being 'pure' is applied to Upper-Caste and Dalit women differently. Caste women's sexuality is very deeply ritualized because it is accepted to be threatening in nature and needs to be protected from pollution and blending outside one's Caste through various religious practices, whereas Dalit women's sexuality is understood to be 'available' for any man belonging to the upper four *Varnas*. As mentioned,

"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, 2019,142)

The Caste system keeps women and communities ‘pure’ through their own sets of unethical and inhumane notions of piousness. As (Yalman,1963) writes, “The main issue is the concern centering around female sexuality when male sexuality is not necessarily ritualized.”

### **Violence Against Dalit Women**

The systemic violence faced by Dalit women under the euphemism of ‘rituals’ is covered by the authors of *Dalit Women Speak Out* (an investigation into the Caste based violence that Dalit women suffer), interrogated that many women opened up about the horrifying tradition of an upper- caste man raping young Dalit brides on their wedding day. This sexual exploitation continues to exist throughout her life, where she can be raped by any upper-caste man at any point in time.

“When the husband of the woman sees the footwear of an upper-caste man outside his house, it is a sign he must spend the night elsewhere.” (Dutt, 2019,142)

Kamble writes about the use of Casteist slurs and misogynistic comments by the higher castes in Phaltan. The Mahars were forbidden from walking on the usual roads that were walked on by the higher castes;

“When somebody from these castes walked from the opposite direction, the Mahars had to leave the road, climb down into the shrubbery and walk through the thorny bushes on the roadside.” (Kamble, 2008, 52)

The Mahar women had to conceal themselves entirely if they encountered any higher caste person on the way. They often had to chant, “The humble Mahar women fall at your feet, master.” The newlywed woman would often find herself unaware of such practices and be the target of insults and defamation. The higher caste man would then call all the Mahars to the public sphere and say in his loudest tone,

“who, just tell me, who the hell is that new girl? Doesn’t she know that she has to bow down to the master? Shameless bitch! How dare she pass me without showing due respect?” (Kamble, 2008, 53)

The daily social interactions can sometimes strengthen the social hierarchy by causing lower caste individuals to adopt and perpetuate societal perceptions of their caste. (Jodhka, 2004) As they retain their distance and passively submit to higher caste members, they maintain social norms. (Judge & Ball, 2008) However, they are also influenced to engage in these behaviors due to the influence of norms they must adhere to and pass down to their descendants, with no alternative course of action.

The writer takes up the responsibility of Mahar women and does not let their plight go unnoticed. A victim of poverty and limitations gets trapped in a never-ending cycle of humiliation, barbarism, and casteism. In the hierarchy, if a Dalit man belongs to the lowest rung, then Dalit women are pushed even lower. The female Dalit autobiographies unfold an honest portrayal of the condition

of Dalits and Dalit women. Maya Pandit, the translator of Kamble's Marathi autobiography, calls it more of a "socio-biography." Tanika Sarkar defends that it is the Dalit women's autobiographies that baffle the reader in attempting to differentiate between "the word and the world". The accounts of upper-caste women give the impression of 'Bhakti or a devotional song'. The major distinction visible in Dalit women's narratives is the rejection of harmful elements in the path of growing as human: (i) The rejection of religion that hinders mental, physical, and financial independence, whereas upper caste women find it comfortable to survive by the notions of religion because of the superior caste status provided to them with certain benefits. (ii) The exclusion of Dalit women from mainstream Feminism dominated by upper caste women motivated them to produce their own literature where they provided safe spaces to voice the double subjugation faced by them, their mothers, and sisters.

### **Dalit Patriarchy an 'Imitative Product'**

When the scholars began to study women, the first attempt at study was the problem and suppression of 'upper-caste women' and, most importantly, women belonging to the Brahmin community; in the context of Sati Pratha, forcing of widowhood, widow remarriage, child marriage, age of consent. They (scholars) nationalized or popularized the problems of upper caste women as those of every woman, or Hindus and Indians. Through this, some scholars had replaced the 'Indian identity' as 'Brahman identity' for India. As (Paik, 2018) asserts, when upper-caste women became mainstream feminists, they missed out on a lot of things. The reason for their failure was 'not bringing the Dalit women next to them.' Nevertheless, this failure gave rise to Dalit subjectivity, agency, and separate Dalit women's organizations since colonial times. After this, how the Dalit women were perceived as very 'unhelpful' and caused their conventionalizing. The mainstream feminists and women's movements understood or represented Dalit women as more like 'laboring poor' or 'unfortunate and lowly', which highly misrepresented them deliberately, whereas scholars understood Dalit women as 'broken,' 'terribly- thrashed,' or 'brutally battered.'

Kamble addresses the effects of Brahminical patriarchy on the Dalit community, delving into more subtle areas of criticism and ridicule. The Ashadh celebration serves as an appropriate metaphor for the heavy burdens Mahar women carried, which frequently led to internalized misogyny. The offered food to the goddess would be divided among the houses, but the daughter-in-law would hardly receive a crumb,

'with their eyes glued to the food, the poor hungry daughters-in-law would helplessly wait for their turn to eat.' (Kamble, 2008, 30)

The narrator depicts the undervalued hard work of Mahar women: taking care of the children, cooking, and going to fetch the woods in the jungle, then selling them in the cities and, on the way back, getting mentally harassed by the upper caste. It has been observed that when studying Dalit women, a dilemma arises on whether to view them as 'victims' or 'heroines.' (Paik, 2018) argues that Dalit women established their own understanding of freedom, denouncing harmful traditional norms within their community and on a broader scale imposed by the caste- Hindus. They operate both individually and collectively. Higher caste groups utilize downward comparisons as strategies to exclude the lower caste group from social interactions in order to

enhance their own group identity. Additionally, they tend to view caste identity as inherent, established from birth. (Jaspal, 2011; Mahalingam, 2007) This frequently leads higher caste groups to stigmatize and discriminate against lower caste groups in order to enhance their self-esteem and perpetuate the negative social image of lower castes.

Similarly, Kamble firmly unmask the treatment of her mother at the hands of her father,

“in those days, it was the custom to keep women at home, behind the threshold. The honour enjoyed by a family was in proportion to the restrictions imposed on the women of the house. When no one could see even a nail of the woman thus confined within the four walls of the house, then this ‘honour’ became the talk of the town—a byword among the relatives and friends in the surrounding villages.” (Kamble, 2008, 5)

The author’s father used to frequently confine her mother within the house and squander all the earned money, which resulted in circumstances like poverty. She highlights how her mother was affected by the form of treatment, which consequently made it difficult for her to keep up positive relationships with her family.

The author draws a comparison between her mother and father, stating that while her father was respected for his outgoing personality and generosity, her mother experienced oppression, suffocation, and cage, leading to her becoming insensitive and unkind to others.

Kamble has upheld the unspoken bond among Dalit women, who have endured generations of physical and mental harm, by encouraging them to bravely speak out against not only caste discrimination but also against men in their own families and communities. (Charu, 2016) discusses the concept of Dalit masculinity, noting that upper-caste men are perceived as being already physically and mentally developed. Dalit men are encouraged to emulate them in order to reach the same level, reinforcing the idea of upper-caste men as the ideal that should be upheld. Dalit women writers have utilized the ‘technology of self’ to transform women’s subjectivities within the community, addressing gender inequalities and promoting women’s education in order to confront double patriarchy. As referring to the ‘process of Sanskritization’ that,

“as the social status improves, lower castes including Dalits ‘sanskritize’—imitate upper-castes, further constrain women, and become more patriarchal.” (Paik, 2018)

Dalits have simultaneously embraced, taken ownership of, and pushed back against certain rules imposed by higher castes. While opposing oppression, Dalit men only fought against what was detrimental to them or their gender, with Dalit women having no input in the matter.

Kamble’s autobiography sheds light on the living conditions of Dalit women from the Mahar caste in Western Maharashtra. It also illustrates the transition from traditional beliefs that ignored their presence to a dignified life influenced by the arrival of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Dalit women, at the lowest rung of Indian society, face discrimination due to their dual identity as Dalits and women. Physical and sexual violence has become disturbingly common and is impacting the education, economic status, and mental health of Dalit women. In addition to this, the oppressive customs and rituals have further marginalized Dalit women by enforcing traditional practices. Though Upper-caste women lack power and are submissive to male family members, though they still have higher caste status compared to Dalit women. According to (Paik, 2018), controlling women was crucial in enhancing Dalits’ *Svabhimana* (self-respect) and *Ijjat* (honor) as they aimed to assert

their humanity, elevate their social standing, cultivate respect, and push for significant social and political reforms, equality, and citizenship in contemporary India.

The struggle for acknowledgment by Dalit women differs from that of Upper caste women, but both suffer under the Brahmanical patriarchy. Often, the problems faced by Dalit women are ignored and not given much consideration, even when they are spoken about. The notion of using gender control to preserve caste works in both directions. It was not until Phules and Ambedkar that Dalits were able to access education and establish a sense of self. Ambedkar prioritized women's emancipation regardless of their Caste background, as he opposed the laws of Manu that enslaved discrimination. He was instrumental in empowering women by uniting them against caste and gender hierarchies. He encouraged women to pursue education and live independently from their male family members- fathers, husbands, and sons- promoting mutual respect. He recognized the important role women play in shaping the future socio-economic structure through their 'reproductive ability'. Ambedkar noted the factor behind the continuation of caste is 'endogamy', which is only maintained when practiced within sexes considered equal;

"The safeguarding of the caste structure is achieved through the highly restricted movements of women or even through female seclusion. Women are regarded as gateways -literally points of entrance into the caste system. The lower caste male whose sexuality is a threat to the upper caste purity has to be institutionally prevented from having sexual access to women of the higher castes." (Chakravarti, 1993)

### **The Social and Psychological Aftermath of Caste Discrimination**

The social and psychological impacts of discrimination and exclusion stem from the human desire for belonging and the importance of social acceptance in life. Social interactions occur in a structure of relationships where individuals strive for recognition, membership, and approval. The experience of discrimination leads to social exclusion that, as a result, deteriorates mental health. (Rosenthal, Russell & Thomson, 2006) explain that the majority of those who face discrimination and exclusion can be labeled as 'unconnected and stressed,' characterized by feelings of isolation, anxiety, psychological distress, self-harm tendencies, and a proneness to risky behaviors. As stated,

"the personal consequences of alleged Caste discrimination include social isolation, depression, loss of self-esteem, loss of self-confidence and reduced career prospects." (IDSN, 2011)

In 2015, Pal concerned certain forms of discriminatory practices such as segregated eating, restrictions in task allocation, verbal abuse, caste-related derogatory remarks, labeling, degradation of ability, neglect, discouragement, bullying and making fun, and sexual exploitation. The major psychological consequences of these experiences are 1) Anger, 2) Hatred, 3) Retaliation, 4) Social insecurity, 5) Low morale, 6) Low self-esteem, 7) Loss of will to participate, 8) Fighting fear, 9) Feeling ostracism and 10) Living under the reign of terror. Therefore, the positive effects on the identity processes of the higher caste groups result from the exclusion of the lower caste through social and spatial segregation, restrictions on access to resources, and other discriminatory practices. It boosts self-confidence while maintaining the uniqueness and

consistency of their identity. The aim is to uphold cast discrimination and hierarchy in order to perpetuate social perceptions linked to caste, frequently through unjust treatment.

### **Depiction of Psyche and Suffering of Mahar Women**

There is limited discussion on caste as a psychological concept; it suggests that group behaviors related to caste are not only social but also psychological. (Jaspal, 2011) adds, "members from various caste groups very often position themselves psychologically in relation to the caste system." (Pal, 2015) continues to discuss the role of socio-psychological literature in within the context of Dalit discourse as it has aided in comprehending social cognition, social identity, and intergroup relations and their role in understanding the socio-psychological foundations of similar biased group behaviors. The Indian psychological literature on caste explains the origins and outcomes of disadvantage of caste groups but inadequately addresses caste-based discrimination and violence. (Mohanty & Mishra, 2000; Sinha 1994) argue that lower caste groups lack sufficient environmental experiences, leading to psychological deficits, resulting in ineffective coping strategies to overcome their disadvantaged position. As perceived,

"the psychological studies dealing with 'caste' use the framework of 'deficits & differences' to demonstrate that the lower caste groups exhibit deficits in various cognitive attributes but excess in affective problems." (Pal & Swain, 2009)

The impoverished environmental conditions of lower caste groups contribute significantly to the frequent entrapment in the cycle of social exclusion.

The psychological effect that the mistreatment had on Kamble's Aai was in the form of oppression and suffocation. "And that must have made her so insensitive, so cruel towards the others. She could never get along with people." (Kamble, 2008, 6) While her mother became more reserved and an 'emotional creature,' her father contrasted with her and had a loving nature towards the people. Her narrative is enough to represent the significant impact that metropolitan space left on her mother. There would often be warnings by her mother about the importance of money in one's life and the motivation for independence that Kamble remembers,

'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, 6)

They both hail from poverty-stricken backgrounds. (Pal & Swain, 2009) argued two types of psychological impacts of Caste-discrimination: 1) Aggression and 2) Withdrawal; as an outcome of being denied opportunities and facing discrimination, the response is often resentful. (Pal, 2011) discusses the aftermath of negative experiences; such fears often promote the elimination of social meetings and connections with survivance and collective constraint. Many times, segregated people are very much in danger of 'vulnerability' and 'estrangement.'

Women's minds and bodies are kept under constant command to retain caste and gender structure, which often results in "Internalized subjugation.". Kamble describes the festival of Ashadh as a Hindu tradition and ceremony that was thought of utmost importance. The poor



Mahar women would make sure enough availability of 'haldi- Kumkum' in their little cases than any piece of jewelry;

"We desperately tried to preserve whatever bit of Hindu culture we managed to lay our hands on. And yet no one tried to understand us. Our minds somehow kept on hoping against hope-that we too would be able to live like the upper castes, that we also would be able to enjoy wealth like the Patil's wife and practice same rituals as them. But when our very bodies were considered worthless, who was going to spare a thought about our minds?" (Kamble, 2008, 18)

The month of the Ashadh festival plays a crucial role in exposing the casteist treatments of the Veergaon, which find their sanction in the laws of Manu. This festival remains successful in motivating the Dalit community. However, it becomes laborious work for the womenfolk as the responsibility of cleaning the house, bathing children, and preparing meals falls on their heads alone. The Yesker Mahar would carry the cane vessel to a goddess' temple. The whole village gathered around the temple with different meals as gifts to the goddess- curd, rice-cooked bhajis, and some spices. The ration would cover a full three or four baskets. The stock would crack the coconut in the temple, charging enough in vessels. The Mahar men would carry the filled baskets back on their heads, and the divided food would then be distributed among the Mahars. The call for a meal would often create a fuss in the Chawdi, making children run from their houses naked with noses dripping snot. After all, it was the only month where they could prepare themselves for the upcoming torture of eleven months. The community would jump on their meals, fearing they might miss their share, and the poor daughters-in-law would wait dependently for their turn without uttering a single word. If a mother-in-law noticed her, she would scornfully throw a bit at her, cursing,

"Push that down your throat, you shameless hussy! Aren't you ashamed to stare so at a child who's eating? At least let the food get down his throat! Your evil eye will make the child choke. Don't you know how to behave like a good daughter-in-law?" (Kamble, 2008, 30)

There is constant pressure on Dalit women to remain confined within the patriarchy. The daughters-in-law are majorly the targets of their mothers-in-law, who police them every step. It creates a repetitive pattern where the woman, instead of realizing the cruelty of patriarchy, prefers to exercise the exact same misogyny when in the future, becoming the mother-in-law. Hindu women are expected to have no conscience of their own and function perfectly according to societal gendered traits. As Paik suggests,

"the problem lies in the particular incremental interlocking Caste, class, sexual, and gendered technologies, which burden women alone with pressures and consequences of changing norms and Dalit women especially are vulnerable to accusations of 'immorality' and 'vulgarity'. (Paik, 2018)

## **Conclusion**

During the 1960s, Dalit women in various regions of India, including pioneers like Baby Kamble, Shantabai Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Kumud Pawad, Faustina Bama, Kaushalya Baisantri, Kusum

Meghwal, and others, penned and released a substantial body of work. Their writings document not just their suffering, oppression, degradation, and struggles but also their efforts to convey concepts of a vast unified Dalit society, their lack of social, economic, religious, and political rights, and their fight and position in society. Gender discrimination within the Dalit community manifests through various means, such as setting limitations and enforcing moral standards, leading to the promotion of a strict code of conduct centered around decorum and modesty. Unquestionably, Dalits are dominated and dominating at the same time. However, the Dalit radicals portrayed 'new Dalit' women as 'agents of change' or 'subversive figures' in conversations where caste and patriarchy were both oppressing them due to their Dalit status and gender. Examining the problems Dalit women face allows for an analysis of the enduring connections between caste, gender, law, education, culture, capital, human rights, and struggles surrounding sexuality and labor.

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