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Representing the Subaltern in Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* through Dalit Women's Voice Caste Resistance Identity and the Pursuit of Social Justice

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ABSTRACT :

This paper examines the politics of representation in Baby Kamble's autobiography *The Prisons We Broke*, focusing on how the narrative transforms Dalit women from objects of social discourse into speaking, resistant subjects. Using Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's Subaltern Theory the study looks at how Kamble builds a group voice that goes beyond stories to show the shared life of Mahar women. The paper looks at caste and patriarchy as two ways that push Dalit women into subaltern status and shows how these forces together make Dalit women's limits hard to see if you only look at caste or only at gender. By reading the text and focusing on subaltern voice, caste exclusion, gender, group identity and resistance the study says that Kamble's storytelling is itself resistance turning silence into a record of history. The paper ends by saying that Kamble's text goes past just showing hurt; it claims dignity, power and a call, for treatment that comes from Ambedkarite ideas.

Keywords: Dalit Literature, Subaltern Theory, Caste and Patriarchy, Collective Identity, Narrative Resistance, Ambedkarite Consciousness

Introduction

Dalit literature has emerged as a literary and socio-political voice for communities that have long been pushed aside by the caste system in India. Dalit literature questions the literary traditions that have usually shown Dalit lives and experiences through the eyes of those who hold social privilege. As a result Dalit writing focuses strongly on voice, self-representation lived experience, identity and resistance. Among the important styles in Dalit literature autobiography stands out because a personal story gives both literary weight and social proof. Dalit autobiographies turn feelings of humiliation, exclusion, poverty and discrimination into narratives that challenge structures.

Baby Kamble is a Dalit woman writer and her book *The Prisons We Broke* offers a strong look at the lives of the Mahar community, especially its women. Baby Kamble does not limit her story to a life; she adds shared memories and experiences going beyond a simple autobiography and creating a collective picture of marginalised lives. The book shows how caste oppression, gender discrimination, poverty, social exclusion, low education and patriarchal ways all connect. At the time the rise of education and Ambedkarite ideas gives hope for self-respect, resistance and change. Using Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's Subaltern Theory the study looks at how Baby Kamble builds a voice that moves past a single story and speaks for the shared experiences of Mahar women. The paper examines how caste and patriarchy combine as forces that push women to the margins in ways that cannot be understood by looking only at caste or only at gender. With reading of the text organized around subaltern voice, caste exclusion, gender, collective identity and resistance the study says that Baby Kamble's narration itself is a form of resistance turning silence into history.

Research Problem

The central problem addressed in this study is the politics of representing marginalised communities. Historically Dalit communities have frequently been represented by social groups potentially turning them into objects of discussion rather than active voices. Dalit women experience a level of marginalisation because Dalit women's voices are shaped by caste and gender. This study therefore examines how claims story authority and represents Dalit women not only as victims of oppression but as Dalit women able to remember, speak, question and resist. It also investigates whether writing itself functions as a form of resistance, to representational marginalisation.

Research Gap

Current research on *The Prisons We Broke* has looked at oppression the stories of Dalit women, patriarchy, how caste, gender and class are linked Ambedkarite ideas and shared identity. More focus could be put on how people are shown through Subaltern Theory. Specifically, the shift from a person's story to a shared "we," how speaking connects to being shown and how marginalised stories become powerful voices need deeper study. This work fills that gap by studying how Kamble's story pushes back against ways of showing people and builds a shared voice, for Dalit women.

Research Objectives

The study aims to:

1. Examine the representation of Dalit identity in *The Prisons We Broke*.
2. Analyse the construction of collective Dalit women's voice in the narrative.
3. Examine caste and patriarchy as structures that produce subalternity.
4. Interpret Kamble's representation of marginalised experience through Gayatri Spivak's Subaltern Theory.
5. Examine how narrative voice and representation become forms of resistance connected to identity and social justice.

Research Questions

1. How does Kamble represent Dalit identity and Dalit women's experiences in *The Prisons We Broke*?
2. How do caste and patriarchy contribute to the subalternisation of Dalit women?
3. How does Kamble transform literary representation into a form of resistance and a demand for social justice?

The study enhances Dalit literature by pushing a Dalit woman's voice at the center and looking at literature as a space where voice and representation are contested. It shows how autobiographical writing can push back against stories take back identities that have been pushed to the edge and turn personal pain from oppression into shared awareness and resistance. By using Subaltern Theory to analyze Baby Kamble's work the paper also joins discussions about caste, gender, voice, agency, identity, representation and social justice. This paper also argues that Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* challenges the ways of representing people by changing the Dalit woman from a passive object in social discussion into an active, speaking and resistant subject. Through voice, personal testimony, portrayals of caste and patriarchy and a strong Ambedkarite awareness the text shows how subaltern writing can reclaim identity, question powerful systems and call for social justice.

Learning on Dalit literature has made it clear that this kind of writing is deeply rooted in real-life experience, caste awareness, resistance and social change. Writers like Sharankumar Limbale and Sharmila Rege highlight the importance of Dalit autobiography as a way for ignored communities to record experiences that are missing from mainstream literary and historical accounts. Dalit literature therefore questions portrayals of caste, by turning stories of discrimination, shame and exclusion into strong statements of identity and self-empowerment.

Works of Baby Kamble's have examined the text as a Dalit autobiography and a collective account of Mahar society. Studies of this work focus on discrimination, poverty, religious practices, superstition, education and the emergence of Ambedkarite consciousness. Studies have also highlighted Kamble's representation of community life and Kamble's movement beyond an individual autobiographical narrative toward collective memory and identity. Another significant area of intellect concerns Dalit women and intersectionality. Studies have demonstrated that Dalit women's experiences cannot be understood through caste or gender independently. Dalit women's lives are shaped by the structures of caste, patriarchy, economic deprivation and social exclusion. Dalit feminist scholarship therefore challenges both caste narratives and approaches that overlook gender within Dalit experience.

Nonetheless greater attention is required to the politics of representation and subaltern voice in Kamble's narrative. Questions of who speaks, who represents the marginalised and whether representation reproduces or challenges structures of power remain central, to this study. This paper addresses this gap by examining how Kamble transforms marginality into narrative agency.

Theoretical Framework

The study uses Subaltern Theory focusing especially on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" The idea of the subaltern refers to groups who are left out of systems of power-social, political, cultural and representational. Spivak raises questions about representation. She makes a difference between speaking for the marginalised and merely depicting them. Her argument shows how dominant discourse can block or control the voices of the subaltern. When applied to *The Prisons We Broke* Spivak's framework helps us look at how challenges outside views of Dalit women. She takes control of her story claiming narrative authority. Her collective voice turns women from being seen as objects into active speaking subjects. This study argues that Kamble's autobiographical writing is not personal memory, it becomes a way of self-representation, resistance, identity

formation and social intervention. It shows how subaltern literature can question structures and demand social justice.

The study follows an approach using textual and interpretive literary analysis. It uses reading to understand how voice, representation, identity, resistance and social justice are shaped in *The Prisons We Broke*. The text is treated both as a story and as a space where issues like caste, gender, power and marginalisation are expressed. The main text for this study is *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble. It was originally written in Marathi as *Jina Amucha*. Later translated into English by Maya Pandit. The study focuses on Kamble's portrayal of the Mahar community the lived experiences and voices of Dalit women.

The central theoretical framework is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's Subaltern Theory. It highlights the problems of voice and representation for marginalised people within systems. The analysis brings in related ideas such, as subalternity, marginalisation, narrative agency, hegemonic representation and self-representation. These concepts help examine the narrative choices Kamble makes. The analysis is divided into five categories: Subaltern Voice, Caste and Social Exclusion, Gender and Patriarchy Collective Identity and Representation and Resistance and Social Justice. These categories create a structure to explore how personal and shared experiences become powerful literary testimony.

Secondary sources include studies on Dalit literature, Baby Kamble's writings, Subaltern Studies, Spivak's theoretical arguments, Dalit feminist scholarship and relevant writings of B. R. Ambedkar. The study focuses mainly on *The Prisons We Broke*. Does not aim for a full examination of Dalit literature. Subaltern Theory is the framework used while Dalit feminist and Ambedkarite perspectives serve as supporting contexts. The study is interpretive. Does not use empirical surveys, interviews or statistical methods.

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* can be seen as a contribution to the politics of representation. It turns the experiences of Dalit women from marginalized realities into a narrative of voice, identity and resistance. The book does more than caste oppression. It challenges the systems that have long decided who gets to speak whose stories are valued and who has the right to represent those on the margins. From a Subaltern Studies point of view through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's ideas about the subaltern, Kamble's work becomes important. It creates a space where Dalit women appear not as victims but as active subjects with memories, awareness, desires and the power to act.

The silence that has surrounded communities is tied closely to their exclusion from education, social institutions, cultural life and dominant knowledge systems. In *The Prisons We Broke* Kamble shares the struggles of the Mahar community especially the difficult lives of its women. Their experiences of poverty caste-based discrimination, social rules, household duties and lack of access, to education show how social structures keep marginalized people from joining conversations. Yet Kamble's writing breaks this silence. By putting into words what has often been ignored by histories and mainstream literature she takes control of the story. Her writing does not just repeat pain. It turns experience into testimony. In this way narration becomes an act of power. Speaking about what has been silenced questions the idea that only powerful groups can speak for the marginalized. The hardship of Mahar women, mentioned in *The Prisons We Broke*,

I have described in this book the details of the life of our community as I have experienced it during the last fifty years. The readers should not feel ashamed of this history. I have tried to sketch a portrait of the actual life of the Mahars and the indignities, they were subjected to. I am writing this history for my sons, daughters-in-law and my grandchildren to show them how the community suffered because of the chains of slavery and so that they realize what ordeals of fire the Mahars have passed through. I also want to show them what the great soul Dr. Ambedkar single-handedly achieved which no one else had achieved in ages. (Kamble 13)

The politics of the group "we" is very important when trying to understand Kamble's way of showing things. The title *The Prisons We Broke* changes the focus from one person's personal story to a group history. Of showing her life as a single personal journey Kamble links her experiences with those of the whole Mahar community and especially with Mahar women. The group "we" therefore becomes a way to show things. It helps personal memories become memories and private pain become a story that many can relate to. This change makes the way of writing an autobiography more complicated because the individual "I" is usually at the center. Kamble's "I" is strongly connected to the experiences of others including women whose names and personal stories might not always be found in history books. With this group story the invisible group becomes clear. From the point of view of Subaltern Theory this is important because showing things is not controlled by the powerful groups anymore. Kamble is part of showing her group from the inside changing the experience into a way of having power in the story.

Caste is shown in the text not as a series of personal dislikes but, as a system that puts people in a lower position. The showing of untouchability, social separation, work based on caste, poverty being treated badly and strict social rules shows how caste controls life. Dalits are placed outside the social order and not given equal recognition, respect or chances.

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, 52)

The idea of being pure and being polluted helps keep this system in place by linking types of work and certain kinds of people to being less important. Because of this, where people live and what jobs they can have are decided by their caste. Also it decides which workers are seen as valuable and which people are not listened to. Kamble's story shows these systems by taking moments of caste-based unfair treatment and putting them into books. Her way of writing therefore fights against the hidden problems created by the ways society works. It shows caste as a way of having power that affects who people are how they relate to others and how they are treated in society. A scholar, Atul Kumar Takin his article states,

She highlights the oppression faced by her community, their dependence on alms for survival, the harsh realities of women's lives, the impact of superstition and religious beliefs, and the transformative influence of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar on their lives. (Tak 13)

The position of Dalit women makes this situation more complicated because they face what can be called layered or multiple subalternity. Dalit women suffer from caste oppression by groups. At the time they deal with patriarchal rules within their own communities. Their lives cannot be explained by caste or only by gender. Kamble stands for women who deal with poverty, household duties, social limits, unfair work conditions, pressure from norms and little chance to go to school. Their bodies, where they go the work they do and the choices they make are often controlled by customs that favor men. This mix of caste and gender shows that the idea of "Dalit experience" is not the same for everyone. Dalit women are, in a situation where caste and patriarchy strengthen each other. Kamble's story matters because it makes visible the gender-based side of oppression.

Kamble's way of showing patriarchy also stops women from being seen just as people who suffer without doing anything. Even though the story talks about pain it also shows women as people who think and feel. Their fights, their anger, their strength, their connections with others and how they deal with treatment all become part of the story. By telling these stories Kamble gives a voice that questions the idea that women's suffering's normal. "The suffering of my community has always been more important than my own individual suffering. I have identified myself completely with my people" (Kamble 47). The way domestic and social unfairness is shown has two parts: it shows the power of men. Also makes room, for women's experiences to be recognized. In this way writing itself becomes a way to fight back. Kamble does not only talk about Dalit women; she builds a story where their shared experiences get meaning in society and history.

Education plays a role in the emergence of agency. When education is restricted caste and gender hierarchies continue, because lack of knowledge limits the ability to question established structures. In contrast literacy and education create opportunities for awareness, self-consciousness and resistance. In Kamble's narrative education is linked to the development of an understanding of caste and social inequality. The influence of B. R. Ambedkar becomes especially important in this transformation. Ambedkarite consciousness encourages Dalits to reject caste hierarchy seek education cultivate demand equality. Education therefore becomes more than an achievement; education becomes a means of collective transformation. The movement from ignorance towards consciousness parallels the movement from silence towards voice.

Ambedkarite consciousness consequently provides a framework for understanding resistance in *The Prisons We Broke*. Kamble's narrative records not the oppressive conditions experienced by the Mahar community but also the gradual development of awareness that such conditions are neither natural nor inevitable. Ambedkar's emphasis on education, equality, dignity and self-respect offers a vision to caste-based social hierarchy. The text can therefore be read as a narrative of awakening in which marginalised people begin to recognise their collective position and imagine the possibility of social transformation. Resistance emerges not through direct confrontation but through consciousness, education, collective identity and the rejection of practices that reproduce inequality.

Kamble's act of writing itself constitutes a form of resistance. Writing preserves experiences that dominant histories may exclude and challenges representations produced without the participation of marginalised communities. Her narrative makes the invisible visible by documenting caste discrimination women's oppression, poverty and social exclusion. Through this process literary representation becomes connected to intervention. The ultimate significance of *The Prisons We Broke* therefore lies in its movement from suffering towards consciousness and transformation. Kamble's narrative does not remain confined to an account of victimhood; Kamble's narrative asserts identity, challenges representation and demands dignity, equality, education, freedom and social recognition. Read through Spivak's Subaltern Theory the text demonstrates that the politics of representation is also a politics of power: when marginalised people claim the authority to narrate their own experiences literature can become a powerful space for resistance and the articulation of social justice.

The study finds that Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* significantly challenges the politics of representation by transforming marginalised experience into a narrative of voice and agency. First Kamble converts the silenced experiences of Dalit women into a speaking voice thereby challenging their exclusion from dominant discourse. Second the text moves beyond individual autobiography through its emphasis on the collective "we." Individual memory becomes testimony allowing the experiences of Mahar women to acquire broader social and historical significance. Third the

study finds that caste operates as a system of oppression influencing social status, labour, education, dignity and access to recognition rather than functioning merely through individual acts of prejudice. Fourth Dalit women's experiences reveal intersecting forms of marginalisation demonstrating that caste oppression must be examined alongside gender and patriarchy. Fifth Kamble's act of narration itself becomes a form of resistance transforming experiences of suffering and humiliation into testimony and political consciousness. Sixth Dalit identity in the text is not presented as fixed victimhood; instead Dalit identity develops through education, collective memory, self-awareness, Ambedkarite consciousness and resistance. Seventh the narrative moves beyond documenting oppression towards a demand for dignity, equality, freedom and social transformation. Finally Spivak's Subaltern Theory provides a framework for understanding the relationship between voice, representation and power. The study demonstrates that Kamble's collective self-representation challenges forms of discourse by asserting the agency of Dalit women and making their experiences visible, within literary and social history.

Conclusion

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* challenges dominant representations of Dalit life by presenting the experiences of Dalit women through a narrative of voice, memory, identity and resistance. It shows the experiences of Dalit women through stories that speak remember, claim identity and resist. Of only showing marginalized people as victims Kamble gives them a voice and a role. This change questions the ways of writing and of society. Even though it comes from Kamble's life the story goes beyond one person. It shows the shared experiences of the Mahar community, its women. Moving from "I" to "we" challenges the idea of autobiography and shows how one person's memory can become a shared story.

Kamble shows the systems that create subalternity. At the time telling these stories is a fight back. Writing brings into view lives that history has left out. Using Spivak's Subaltern Theory the book shows how personal and shared stories can challenge the power. Finally, *The Prisons We Broke* goes past just writing about pain. It looks forward to dignity, equality, learning, self-respect and freedom. Dalit literature is not, about suffering. It is also a way for marginalized people to speak remember, represent themselves fight against the main stories recover identity and ask for justice.

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