



**Double Oppression of Dalit Women: A Study of the Autobiographies of Baby
Kamble and Urmila Pawar**

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Abstract:

The word 'dalit' refers to the members of those menial castes who are considered outcaste and untouchable. In Hindu caste system, they are physically and socially eliminated from the society because of the impure and polluting works assigned to them. Although untouchability was banned and made illegal in post-independent India, the discrimination and prejudice against dalits still continue. They regularly face struggles and subjugation from the dominant communities. Dalit women in India experience domestic violence, gender discrimination and oppression not only from the outside society but also within their own community. The situation of the women in dalit communities is adverse as they are doubly exploited, first as women and then as dalits. The aim of the present study is to explore the distressing effects of the caste based social system on dalit women from the autobiographies of Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar.

Key words: Dalit Women, Oppression, Gender Discrimination, Patriarchy, Humiliation.

Dalit literature becomes a distinguished part of [Indian literature](#). One of the first dalit writers was Madara Chennaiah, an 11th-century cobbler-saint who lived in the reign of [Western Chalukyas](#) and who is regarded by some scholars as the "father of [Vachana](#) poetry". Another early dalit poet is Dohara Kakkaiah, six of whose confessional poems survive. Notable modern authors include [Mahatma Phule](#) and Dr. Ambedkar who focused on the issues of dalits through their works and writings. They became harbingers in dalit literature. Inspired by them many dalits came to light offering their experiences and expressions in Marathi, Hindi, Telugu, [Tamil](#) and [Punjabi](#). In this regard [Satyanarayana](#) and [Tharu](#) says:

... the real originality and force of dalit writing, which today comprises a substantial and growing body of work, can be traced to the decades following the late 1960s. Those are the years when the [dalit Panthers](#) revisits and embraces the ideas of Babasaheb Ambedkar, and elaborates his disagreements with the essentially Gandhian mode of Indian nationalism, to begin a new social movement. In the following decades, dalit writing becomes an all-India phenomenon. This writing reformulates the caste question and reassesses the significance of colonialism and of missionary activity. It resists the reduction of caste to class or to non-Brahminism and vividly describes and analyzes the contemporary workings of caste power. (21)

One of the important aspects of dalit writing is that they write predominantly the experiences of discrimination, sufferings and exploitation. They have given more poignancy to the exploration

in the form of autobiographies. Dalit autobiographies address various issues related to subaltern section, their protest and effort for political assertion and empowerment.

Some of the influential autobiographies translated to English are Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi (The OutCaste)*, Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan(A Dalit's Life)* and Balbir Madhopuri's *ChangiyaRukh (Against The Night)*. Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Baburao Bagul, Rabi Singh, Namdeo Dhasal, Dutta Bhagat, Lakshman Mane, Neerave Patel, Palamalai, Sudhakar, D. Gopi, T.K.C. Vaduthala (T.K.C. Vaduthalayude Kathakal) and Narayan (Kocharayathi) are the other prominent dalit writers. Like male writers, dalit women also have raised their voice through the autobiographies expressing their angst of deprivation, social exclusion and humiliation. Bama Faustina Soosairaj, Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Kumud Pawade and Janabai Girhe explored their experiences of exploitation, discrimination through their life stories. Bama's autobiography *Karukku* deals with issues of oppression faced by dalits. *Jina Amucha (The Prison We Broke)*, a personal narrative of Baby Kamble visualizes the difficulties of dalit women in a patriarchal community and the feelings and helpless situation of Mahar women in their own society. Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan (The Weave of My life)* describes the struggle of three generations of women. She highlights the complexities of the life of the dalit community especially of dalit women in her autobiography. Pawade's autobiographical work *Antasphot* tells about the obstrucles created by various socio-political institutions in her life and how she overcame them during her life-journey. In her autobiography *Maranakala (Death Pains)*, Girhe focuses on the problems, suppression and oppressions of women of the gokul community. The works of these writers echo the common idea that the dalit women suffer from the double oppression of caste and gender.

Dalit women in India experience domestic violence, gender discrimination and oppression not only from the outside society but also within their own community. The situation of the women in dalit communities is adverse as they are doubly exploited, first as women and then as dalits. In most of the families women are not educated neither exposed to intellectual experiences as in the case of women born in noble families. Hence the dalit women are deprived of all the privileges enjoyed by their counterparts. They even face gender discrimination and male domination in the society as well as within their own family. The present paper analyses the distressing effects of the caste based social system on dalit women. It also highlights the harsh realities of oppression, violence and discrimination against gender and caste faced by dalit women. The autobiographies of Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar are considered for the critical analysis of dalit women as doubly oppressed individuals.

Baby Kamble's autobiography *Jina Amucha* was first published in the year 1986 in Marathi. Later it was translated to English by the social activist and professor Maya Pandit and published as *The Prisons We Broke* in 2008. It is considered as the first dalit woman's autobiography in Marathi. It is a graphic revelation of the inner world of the Mahar community in Maharashtra. As Maya Pandit says, "Like most dalit autobiographies, *The Prisons We Broke* is an expression of protest against the inhuman conditions of existence to which the Hindu caste system has subjected the dalit for thousands of years?" She further states that Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar provided the intellectual and ideological base for a sustained critique of the caste system and that under his leadership, dalit outcry acquired the form and force of a militant political movement and challenged the very foundations of Hinduism. In her autobiography Kamble brings out important issues like caste discrimination, women subjugation and the influence of Dr. Ambedkar on dalit women to get themselves educated and empowered.

Kamble emphasises on the caste discrimination that was faced by the Mahar community in Maharashtra. They were treated as untouchable servants 'yeskars.' They were not even allowed to walk on the road that is used by the high caste people. Her anguish is expressed as, "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 road side"(Kamble, 52). Kamble depicts the pathetic condition of women. She presents an unflinching portrait of the Mahar women, oppressed by both caste and gender. The Mahar women would beg for the mercy of the upper castes. Every new bride had to adopt and follow this custom. If they failed, they would be severely warned by the upper castes as well as Mahars. Kamble writes, "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?" (53).

The situation of women in a dalit family as an important theme is explored in Kamble's autobiography. They have to experience insecurity, domestic violence and male dominance in the patriarchal family system in India. Male children were given importance and many privileges were offered to them as against the daughters of the same family. Regarding this gender discrimination Kamble writes, "The eldest son was the pride of the house. He would be offered to the deity as vaghya or potraja. Fathers had a lion's share in preparing their sons for this role. To offer the son as vaghya or potraja was considered a great honour and prestige for the family. The father very diligently saw to it that his son was properly trained" (18-19).

Another aspect of domestic violence that dalit women suffer in their life is poignantly presented in the narrative. Kamble illustrates the authority of husband and the hegemony of in-laws against women when they enter the bride groom's home. The author writes, "But we too were human beings. And we too desired to dominate, to wield power. But who would let us do that? So we

made our own arrangements to find slaves – our very own daughters in-law! If nobody else then we could at least enslave them”(87). Kamble even touches upon the aspect of child marriage among the dalit families. In this context, the author says, “Thus girl would embark upon a new life that was harsh and arduous. She was a young girl, a child really, still immature. Yet, the poor child had to break all ties of love and go to her in-laws’ house to lead a married life, without even knowing what a husband meant, or what it was to be given away” (93).

The experiences of social discrimination as suffered by the dalit women are graphically portrayed in *The Prisons We Broke*. Kamble writes that a dalit woman has to stand in the courtyard keeping a good distance from the shopkeeper. She needs to beg him with utmost humility to sell the things she wanted, “Appasab, could you please give this despicable Mahar woman some shikaki for one paisa and half a shell of dry coconut with black skin”(13). If the seller’s children run out into the compound for their morning ablutions, he would warn them to keep away from dalit women. Kamble writes her experiences when the shopkeeper says, “Chabu, hey you can’t you see the dirty Mahar woman standing there? Now don’t you touch her? Keep your distance”. Immediately our Mahar women, gathering her rags around her tightly so as not to pollute the child, would say, “Take care little master! Please keep a distance. Don’t come too close. You might touch me and get polluted.” The shopkeeper would come out and, from a distance, throw the things into her pallav, which she had spread out in order to receive them. She would then respectfully keep her money on the threshold. That of course did not pollute him”(13-14). Baby Kamble recounts how the dalit women undergo severe caste discrimination in public places and violence in their own houses.

Kamble’s autobiography narrates the experiences of dalit women in terms of insecurities, violence and domination they suffered in patriarchal community whereas Urmila Pawar

describes her experiences in terms of education, earning livelihood and the emergence of individual identity in the modern world. Pawar's *Aaydan* is translated to English by Maya Padit and published as *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman Memoirs*. The personal narrative was originally published in Marathi in 2003. The word *Aaydan* in Marathi means weaving of cane baskets. Weaving was the main economic activity carried out by the Mahar community to which the writer belongs. Pawar mentions that her mother used to weave baskets to earn the livelihood which indicate their caste as well as their poor economic condition. She describes in her autobiography the long journey from Konkan to Mumbai, bringing out the struggle of three generations women for a dalit modernity. The complexities of the life of the dalit women in a rapidly transforming society, issues of identity, caste and patriarchy are brought to light. By providing sensitive details of caste discrimination and poverty Pawar reveals the limitations of a low caste person. She writes,

The upper caste girls always used words like 'Ladu', 'Modak', 'karanjya', 'Puranpolya'. They brought such novel items in their tiffin boxes as well as at times we went on excursions. However, I never asked myself the stupid question, why we do not prepare such dishes at home? We were aware, without anybody telling us, that we were born in a particular caste and in poverty, and that we had to live accordingly. (93)

This example gives a sketch of dalit's internal suffering of pain and pathos. Pawar explores very minute details of oppression and exploitation of dalit with a special reference to women. The humiliation faced by dalits and poor was so inimical that it is a bitter experience even the reader's sensibility. Pawar narrates a shameful and ignominious situation that she encounters in a marriage celebration. She describes the incident,

Once, I went to attend wedding at my sister-in-law's place, along with two of my nieces. However, when we three spout girls set down to eat and begun asking rice repeatedly, the cook got angry, 'Whose daughters are these anyway? 'He burst out. 'They are eating like monsters' then someone answered 'they are from our'' Sushi's family! Daughters of Arjun master!' On hearing this, the host came forward. 'Oh! Are they? All right, all right let them eat as much as they want! Serve them well!' The cook returned with more rice but being called monster was not easy to digest and we politely declined. (117)

Pawar describes the experiences of gender discrimination in their own family when her father neglects her elder sister after her marriage. Her father never took care of her sister. Consequently she died with her suffering and pain. Urmila Pawar feels that for outsiders and society, her father was a reformist but for his own daughters he has patriarchal approach. She also gives the example of Parvati, sister-in-law, who has no freedom in her house and lives a live like a slave. Pawar portrays the life of exploited and oppressed women who accept the harsh reality of being woman and dalit, exploited both the ways from upper caste people as well as the male counterparts of their own community. There are many incidents of beating the wives at their own homes as well as in front of others. The narration of miserable incident of beating a pregnant woman based on a blind faith is a heartrending as well as startling for the coming generations. Pawar point outs the distinction made to the male female positions and regarding the titles given to them. She says when any man is promoted he would become a 'Bhaushaeb' or 'Raosaheb' but a woman officer will remain only a 'Bai 'without the title of Sahib. As a dalit writer, she felt much as it is an insult to her position and caste. But now a days, all women are called

respectively as 'Madam' without considering their position. This gives rise to the question of self-respect among the women.

Another important issue that Pawar brings up is privileging male child. She describes this by taking the example of her own brother Sahu. The attraction for male child is highlighted when her brother had a son. On the occasion of namkaran, a discussion on the issue of property rights of girls after marriage takes place. Dr. Babasaheb's New Hindu Code Bill which is about women's property rights was also discussed. She writes, "Don't you know that Babasaheb had asked in the Hindu Code Bill to give the daughters their share of property? So come on, get up now!" (289)

Urmila Pawar is very conscious to the issues related to women's assault and makes her earnest efforts to help the helpless women. She strongly feels to have a true liberation day for women as the agenda of both the Dalit Movement and the Women's Movement did not have the main issues of women. She emphatically argues,

The Manu Smriti has imposed many restrictions on women and built the caste system. That is why Babasaheb said that the woman is a gateway of the caste system. It was on 25 Dec. that Babasaheb had burned Manu Smriti to liberate Indian women from the clutches of Manu-wadi culture. Our organisation has been observing 25 December as the Indian women's day of liberation for the last three years. (262)

The author also addresses the conflicting situation of her life that being a Dalit woman she was attracted to the Dalit Movement and as a woman she was supporting Women's Lib, but she clearly understands that there was no coordination between these two movements to solve the real problems of women. However, her memoir recounts three generations of Dalit women who struggled to overcome the burden of their caste. In this sincere and warm personal narrative,

Pawar shares her personal feelings and sufferings undergone during a period of profound change in the society and also brings out her out spoken efforts to fight for the rights of dalit women.

Both Kamble and Pawar provide a detailed account of the subjugation of dalit women in the society, the pain and suffering of these people both as women and as dalits. As Tejaswini says:

In autobiographies written by dalit women one can perceive patriarchal hegemony within and outside dalit community. Moreover they mirror the miserable conditions and subjugation of dalit women and explore new world of experience which is unknown to the world. The violence inflicted on dalit women by high caste men and women on one side, and by dalit men, their husband and other relatives like father, brother, father-in-law, brother-in-law, on the other hand, is conspicuously depicted in dalit women's autobiographies. Even novels have autobiographical touch in the narration. Emotions, violence, bewilderment, rage and poverty take prominent place.

In their autobiographies, Kamble and Pawar expressed how dalit women experienced subjugation from their own community as well the larger society. In the process of protesting the age old oppression, they assert themselves and their lives following with an endeavour to open up their inner world to the readers. The doors to the culture of dalits are opened up through dalit autobiographies. In this regard Sharmila Rege comments the genre as it "...washed out the 'I', an outcome of bourgeois individualism and displaced it with the collectivity of the dalit community..." (323). Hence the narratives of dalit women are portraits of collective consciousness of a community and reveal a complete cultural picture of their respective communities.

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