BABY KAMBLE’S THE PRISONS WE BROKE AND URMILA PAWAR’S THE WEAVE OF MY LIFE: FEMINIST CRITIQUES OF PATRIARCHY

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Abstract

Dalit Autobiographies represent the pain, anguish, and protest against a system which treats them as subhuman beings. Dalit Autobiographies written by Male authors display their anger and protest against the Caste and Varna Order of Hindu social system which gradually put them at the lowest pedestal and poverty-stricken condition but they fail to bring to the fore the issues related to women through their autobiographies. They do not present the real picture of Dalit woman in the Dalit community through their narratives. Woman is considered as the ‘Sudras of Sudra’. The most exploited and most neglected class of the society is of women. The present paper aims to highlight Dalit women’s issues and their awareness about their mental as well as physical slavery. This makes them criticize the patriarchy and social order which are responsible for their slavery. The two autobiographies chosen for the present study are Baby Kamble’s ‘The Prisons We Broke’ and Urmila Pawar’s ‘The Weave of My Life’. Both these autobiographies present the caste oppression at the hands of Savarnas as well as the oppression of Dalit women by the Dalit Men and women who support the Patriarchal social order. Patriarchy which is supported by Bramhanical Social order puts Indian women in great jeopardy. They suffer ideologically, physically and mentally through Patriarchy. The perpetuation and maintenance of caste system is done through systematic imposition of rules on women by they cannot think of inter-caste marriage. It is through ban on the women to choose their marriage partners the system becomes successful in maintaining and rebuilding the caste system in a great way.

Key-Words

Dalit Autobiography, Hindu Social System, Patriarchy, Bramhanical Social Order.

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Dalit Autobiographies represent the pain, anguish, and protest against a system which treats them as subhuman beings. Dalit Autobiographies written by male authors display their anger and protest against the caste and varna order of Hindu social system which gradually put them at the lowest pedestal and poverty-stricken condition but they fail to bring to the fore the issues related to women through their autobiographies. They do not present the real picture of Dalit woman in the Dalit community through their narratives. Woman is considered as the ‘Sudras of Sudra’. The most exploited and most neglected class of the society is of women. The present paper aims to highlight Dalit women’s issues and their awareness about their mental as well as physical slavery. This makes them criticize the patriarchy and social order which are responsible for their slavery. The two autobiographies chosen for the present study are Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* and Urmila Pawar’s *The Weave of My Life*. Both these autobiographies present the caste oppression at the hands of Savarnas as well as the oppression of Dalit women by the Dalit Men and women who support the Patriarchal social order.

Patriarchy which is supported by Bramhanical Social order puts Indian women in great jeopardy. They suffer ideologically, physically and mentally through Patriarchy. The perpetuation and maintenance of caste system is done through systematic imposition of rules on women by which they cannot think of inter-caste marriage. It is through ban on the women to choose their marriage partners the system becomes successful in maintaining and rebuilding the caste system in a great way.
The Prisons We Broke is the English translation of Marathi Autobiography Jina Amucha by Baby Kamble. It is probably the first autobiography of a Dalit Woman not only in Marathi but also in Indian language. Maya Pandit, the translator of the Marathi autobiography Jina Amucha of Baby Kamble writes in her introductory note:

Baby Kamble’s Autobiography The Prisons We Broke is located in this tradition of direct self-assertion. But it also went two steps ahead; it was head-on confrontation with Bramhanical hegemony on the one hand and with patriarchal domination on the other.” (Kamble xiii)

A singularly important aspect of The Prisons We Broke is Baby Kamble’s Dalit Feminist critique of patriarchy. She graphically describes the physical and psychological violence women have to undergo in both the public and private sphere. Baby Kamble shows the remarkable dignity and resilience of the Mahar women in their struggle through which they have emerged as the agents of transformation in their community.

If the Mahar community is the ‘other’ for the Bramhins, Mahar women become the ‘other’ for the Mahar Men. Baby Kamble demonstrates how caste and patriarchy converge to perpetuate exploitative practices among women. In her self-narration Baby Kamble portrays how Dalit women were the worst sufferers of superstition, hunger, poverty and the exploitative patriarchal order of Dalit Men as well as the Men of higher castes.

The male dominance which was prevalent among the men of the higher castes was also prevalent among Dalit men. In her narration Baby Kamble shows how the custom of keeping women at home, behind threshold was prevalent among Dalit Men. It was rather a pride of the Mahar men to keep their wives behind threshold. Baby Kamble’s mother was locked in a house by his father to keep his male ‘honour’ intact. Baby Kamble writes about this tradition in the following words:

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. Then people would tell each other, how one Pandharinath Mistry kept his wife completely hidden in the house and how even the rays of the sun did not know her. My father had locked up my aai in his house, like a bird in a cage. (Kamble 5)

The child marriages were prevalent among Mahars. Baby Kamble narrates the plight of Dalit girls who were married at very young age. The girl married into the family of Mahar of the sixteenth share had to work hard. Regarding the sad plight of the daughter-in-law in
such a family Baby Kamble writes:

The daughter-in-law of that house was kept busy all twenty-four hours of the day. The menfolk would bring loads of meat in big baskets on their heads. The meat needed to be preserved. This was very arduous task. And many a time, the duty fell on the daughter-in-law. More often than not, she would be not more than eight or nine years old. She had to sit down with a sharp knife, cut the huge pieces of meat into smaller ones of about half kilo each, and then stretch these into long snake like strips. (73-74)

Dalits were slaves of Savarnas. But the mentality of enslaving others was deep rooted in the psyche of Dalits too. Hence they used to enslave their daughters-in-law. Enslaving daughters-in-law is an indication of the strong hold of Patriarchy on Dalits. Baby Kamble narrates this tendency in the following words:

The other world had bound us with chains of slavery. But we too were human beings. And 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! (87)

The Dalit women were not only exploited by the caste system but the Patriarchy was also deeply internalized by Dalit women. The mothers-in-law torture their daughters-in-law to take revenge of the tortures they suffered by their mothers-in-law. It gives them satisfaction and pleasure that they could at least dominate someone else.

The practice of chopping off the wife’s nose with the instigation of mother and to fix her foot in a wooden piece weighing around five kilo with iron bar was prevalent among Mahar community. The women were the enemies of their counterpart. In most cases the mothers-in-law act as the agents of exploitative system against their own daughters-in-law (99)

Baby Kamble shows her anger towards the unjust system prevalent in Indian society where patriarchy crushed the womanhood under its strong foundation. Women were regarded as Goddesses but in reality they were not treated as the human beings. She speaks in favour of women and also shows her gratefulness towards Babasaheb Ambedkar for introducing Hindu Code Bill in the parliament to secure rights for Hindu women:

A woman is satwa and sheel incarnate. She can put even her creators to shame. Just as the chaturvarna system created castes and sanctioned discriminatory practices, the cunning creator of the world established the practice of making women dependent on men. Men have therefore dominated women ever since. But a woman is goddess Amba on the earth who gives birth to man and sustains that unjust creature with her very life-blood. After having undergone the ordeal of fire for ages
she finally gave birth to a divine fame. This flame showed the world what true love and affection is. Then it tore off the net in which men had trapped women for ages, and rescued them. This was what is known as the Hindu Code Bill. The man who gave birth to the Hindu Code Bill was my King Bhim, the son of morality, saviour of the world. (102)

In her autobiography Baby Kamble presented the live picture of Mahars life in past 50 years living in Western Maharashtra. She candidly showed her anger towards the Chaturvarna system of Hinduism as well as against the patriarchal order prevalent among Mahars which gave a lower status to their women. The autobiography is a social critique of the Hindu Social system as well as the patriarchal order of Mahars. Baby Kamble’s self and frank analysis made her autobiography totally different from the autobiographies of higher caste women as well as Dalit male autobiographers where the presence of Dalit women as an independent human being rarely felt.

Urmila Pawar’s The Weave of My Life is originally translated from her Marathi autobiography, Aaydan. Urmila throws light on the ‘private’ and ‘public’ aspects of her life. She talks openly about the familial and marital conflicts. She frankly offers a cogent critique of feminist and Dalit politics. The author links her mother’s act of weaving baskets, aaydans, to her own ‘act of writing’. Urmila Pawar’s Memoirs describe the long journey from the Konkan to Mumbai, bringing to fruition the struggle of three generations for Dalit modernity. Commenting upon the autobiography of Urmila Pawar, the translator of the autobiography Maya Pandit in her introduction to the book writes:

Urmila Pawar’s The Weave of My Life is both a continuation of....and more importantly, a significant departure from these dalit autobiographical narratives by both men and women writers. The Weave of My Life also portrays the conditions of a subhuman existence of an entire community, shamelessly exploited by the upper castes, reduced to a status of beasts of burden, extremely marginalized. The Weave of My Life also represents a significant departure from the path trod by other Dalit autobiographies. It is a complex narrative of a gendered individual who looks at the world initially from her location within the caste but who goes on to transcend the caste identity from a feminist perspective.” (Pawar xvii)

Dalit woman is triply cursed first by her gender, second by her caste and third by her class. Urmila Pawar while narrating her childhood memories at her Konkani village, Phansawale describe the exploitation of poor dalit women at the hands of their husbands. The poor Dalit women had to sell various things in the Market of Ratnagiri livelihood. These women even after earning the livelihood for their homes had to suffer at the hands of their
drunkard husbands. Urmila Pawars writes, “There would be at least one woman among them badly bashed up by her husband. She would walk painfully, somehow managing to drag her aching body along the way. If someone asked her what was wrong, her anger gushed out, ‘Let his drinking mouth be burnt off forever. Let his hands rot.’” (5) Manu, the ancient Hindu law giver declared a new rule that killing a woman was only an Upapataka i.e. it was a minor offence. Manu codified this law in chapter XI and canto 67 of Manusmruti: “Liquor, slaying women, Sudras, Vaishyas, or Kshatriyas, and atheists (are all) minor offences.” (Ambedkar 127)

Inspite of earning for her home woman has to be beaten by her drunkard husband as the social order sanctions him a position of God. The chapter V and canto 154 of Manusmruti says: “Though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure elsewhere, or devoid of good qualities, yet a husband must be constantly worshipped as a God by a faithful wife.” (Ambedkar 126)

Author’s father was very concerned about the education of girls. He wanted to make the girls independent through the means of education. Author feels surprised when her father takes a stand against not sending her married cousin Susheela to her in-law’s house. She thinks that there was patriarchal attitude in her Baba’s stand. She writes:

But the same Baba behaved so irresponsibly in Susheela’s case. He never confronted her parents-in-law about their treating her so inhumanly. He never gave her any support. Later she died a very untimely death in Partanvane. Did he believe so firmly in the diktat that a girl has to live the family she has been married into?” (33)

Urmila Pawar also reminds the game they used to play by which the girls got a training to behave very meekly with her respective husbands (62). Author remembers the discriminatory attitude of the family members towards girl child:

I was the youngest child in the family. Yet I was never indulged. In fact, I was an unwanted child because I was a girl. When I was born, my cousin Govinda dada wanted to throw me away onto a dung heap. When I grew a little older, many would beat me. (64)

The female members in Dalit families never got a good food to eat. They have to serve the good food to their husbands and male members of the family and to satisfy themselves with the food came to their way though it was unhealthy for them. Urmila narrates one such thing in her memoir:

Besides rice, fish too was commonly available. The fish season started after Dasara festival. Fishermen returned with abundant fish. Small fish would be sorted out,
dried and stored for lean days. Rich people stored the flesh of sode, tisrya or mule; poor people stored the water in which these fish were boiled. The stock was boiled till it became thick like sauce and was then stored in bottles. This was called kaat. When the menfolk went out and women and girls remained at home, they dined only on kaat....This saar used to be the regular diet for daughters-in-law. The poor things ate it without complaint and naturally faced the consequences. (100)

Urmila Pawar in her narration comments that the marital security is needed more for women than men by giving example of her cousin. Urmila Pawar’s cousin was married to a man who was already married. Both the wives pampered him. There was a competition between them to show who loved him better. He was a trawler and they used to weep when he got into the boat that carried him to his ship. When Urmila was child she used to laugh at them. But today she realized that they wept because they wanted to be able to smile. According to Urmila Pawar it was their desperate attempt to ensure their marital security. (194)

Urmila Pawar reminds the incident when she goes to live with her in-laws after her marriage. Her mother-in-law reminded her to behave with her dirs (Brothers-in-law) with respect. She narrates the incident in the following words:

She was not very sure of me, because I was educated and worried how I would cope with her family, people and their customs. After Harishchandra left, she told me quite a few things to initiate me into their ways of life. Two points were always highlighted. One: ‘Always address your dirs with respect, in the plural. Never call them in the singular form even though they are younger than you!’ But I noticed that she had not included her daughter in this category! A man always has greatness thrust upon him whereas a woman has to achieve it! (196)

Urmila Pawar here highlights the double standard of the society towards men and women. Manu gives a crucial place to women in the whole system for perpetuating the social order and enabling men to gain immortality through their sons. It was articulated by Manu in the following lines:

The production of children, the nurture of those born, and the daily life of men, of those matters the wife is visibly the cause. Offspring, the due performance of religious rites, faithful service and heavenly bliss for the ancestors and for oneself depend on the wife alone.(IX. 26-27) (Chakravarti 71-72)

When Urmila gave birth to the baby son all the family members became happy overlooking the pains she had gone through. For them giving birth to a baby son was like winning a
great battle (210). After having a son Urmila’s husband insisted her to have another as it was a thing of pride to have two baby son. But for women it was an ordeal. Urmila criticizes the casual manner of her husband towards the whole process:

When our son was two, I found myself pregnant once again. I wanted another son so that I could go through the family planning operation. This was common thing to do. Many women went through sterilization after having two sons and showed off their status! But my second child was a girl. So Harishchandra said, ‘Let’s take one more chance.’ But once again it was a girl! I thought how simple and easy it was to have a baby, like saying let’s have one more cup of tea. (218)

In 1970s Urmila Pawar promoted to the post of Branch Manager through reservation policy but she couldn’t get respect as the juniors used to give to the male officers. According to Urmila Pawar it was because of their discriminatory attitude towards a Dalit woman. She narrates her inner pain in the following words, “The moment a man was promoted, he immediately became a ‘Bhausaheb’ or ‘Raosaheb’. But women remained simply, ‘Bai’, without the ‘Saheb’ even after their promotions! Besides I was a dalit! ‘Why should she expect to be addressed as Bai Saheb?’” (235)

When Urmila started studying at the home of a person who she regarded as her brother one woman friend was little upset. She had a problem that Urmila visited a person with whom his wife was not living. Urmila didn’t like the attitude of her woman friend. She feels that such an attitude on the part of women nurtures patriarchy. She says:

After a week, I discovered that my woman friend was a little upset. She said, ‘You know, his wife does not live with him. And yet you go to his house every day! What must people be saying!’ I was simply aghast! How we women nurture and protect patriarchy, like a baby in the cradle! A woman’s character is always on display! Always suspect! Anybody can come, gaze at us with their eyes on our flesh, drool and lick their fingers! (240)

When the author started attending public meetings doing all the household chores her husband still resented her being recognized as writer. On the one hand he was proud of her writing but on the other he hated the idea of emerging his wife as a figure in the public domain. He wanted his wife to be like the village woman who after doing all household chores engages herself in the service of her husband. Sometimes he quarrels with her over her work. She reminds such incidents:

His attitude towards me was full of contradictions. On the one hand, he was proud of my writing; he admitted as much to his friends and relatives. But on the other, he immensely resented my being recognized as a writer, my speaking in public.
programmes and my emerging as a figure in the public domain. Our arguments would invariably end in bitter quarrels. I would say, ‘Please, have a heart! I am a human being too. I too work like you. I too get tired. My work also has the same value as yours.’ But neither my words nor my work had any meaning for him! On the contrary, he would tell me, ‘Look at the village woman. The husband’s wish is law for her. She does not dare to sit down or get up without his permission. Tell me, in that case, how is she able to run her home well?’ Was not the answer implicit in the question itself? (246)

Urmila Pawar got conscious of herself as a free and separate individual human being after she started participating in Women’s movement. She compared women with men not as an inferior one but separate and equal individual one. She expresses her feelings in the following words:

I felt that a woman was also an individual, just as a man was, and was entitled to all the rights of an individual. If man has muscle power, woman has the power to give birth. These are the distinctly different capacities and need to be evaluated differently, not in the same way. On the other hand, the people of my community often confronted me with, ‘Who are those women you are mixing with these days? Take care; they belong to a different caste. Our community does not need their thoughts and values.’ While they said this, their way of saying made me feel as if I had joined some criminal gang. I had realized that I now had a new vision, a new perspective of looking at women. I had lost my fear. The women’s movement had given me great strength to perceive every man and woman as an equal individual. It had taught me to relate to them freely, without any prejudice whatsoever! (248)

The author not only got conscious of the rights of woman as a free and separate individual she started acting against the injustices meted out with the women by their husband. Urmila narrates one such incident where she stopped beating of women by her drunkard husband. (250) When the author got acquainted with the dalit Movement she came to know that all the chairs on the dais were found to occupy by men. She speaks against such secondary treatment to dalit women in the movement in the following words, “Usually in the dalit movement, whenever women’s conventions are organized, men are found to occupy all the chairs on the platform! Naturally, women find it very difficult to express themselves freely.” (259)

There are many examples and incidents through which Urmila Pawar proves herself as Dalit Feminist activist who is vehement critic of patriarchy. Denial of celebrating Bramhanical festivals like Gauri-Ganpati, not organizing Haldi-Kunku programme at home,
celebrating 25\textsuperscript{th} December 'Manusmruti Burning Day' as 'Women's Liberation Day' shows her activism in establishing new symbolism against Bramhanical Patriarchy.

Both Baby Kamble's Autobiography \textit{The Prisons We Broke} and Urmila Pawar's Autobiography, \textit{The Weave of Life} not only criticize the Bramhanical hegemony which created caste and Varna Order but also the Patriarchal order prevalent among Dalit community. These autobiographies look the Patriarchy from the feminist perspective and severely criticize it to bring about the changes in the Dalit community in particular and Indian society as a whole. Hence both these autobiographies prove that they are the feminist critiques of Patriarchy.

\textbf{Works Cited}


