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BABY KAMBLE'S *THE PRISON WE BROKE*: AN ICON OF CHANGE AND REVOLUTION

Dr. Ruchi Raj Thakur

Assistant Professor of English

Himachal Pradesh National Law University, Shimla.

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Abstract

The paper aims to throw light on the deplorable conditions of Dalits, particularly Dalit women of Mahar community. It highlights the social ills which deteriorates their condition. It also elaborates how the stigma of being women and Dalit curb their confidence. It further underscores the role Dr. Ambedkar in the infusion of consciousness in the Dalits about their intrinsic place in the society. A Mahar woman's trial and tribulation and her dependence, both on the men of her family and the people of upper caste society remain the central concerns of this study. The paper discusses the novel as a representation of suffering, resilience, change and revolution.

Keywords

Suffering, Resilience, Change, Revolution, Consciousness.

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Literature is a forum which recognizes all the sections of the society irrespective of caste, class, colour or any other peculiarity which divides the society into various segments. Earlier, it was believed that literature was not an autonomous body but survived on patronage. So, to say literature was controlled by the Kings, Queens, rulers and nobility. As Literature was not for commoners so it was controlled by the higher strata of the society. But in nineteenth century, social realism knocked at the doors of literary edifice. In 19th century, Flaubert and Balzac promoted realism in French literature. In England Ibsen, G.B. Shaw, Harold Pinter, John Galsworthy and George Eliot introduced social realism. In Indian literature, writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Munshi Prem Chand, Aygeya, Jainendra, Yashpal, etc. drifted from allegorical, unreal and utopian world to portray the photographic reality with their artistic caliber. The writers satirized the vices existing in the society by depicting stark and naked realism of life. The social concerns such as blasphemy in the name of religion and castes, widening fissures between the rich and the poor, superstitious beliefs, gender discrimination and many other ugly shades existing in social histories, which remained unheeded, were portrayed in literary writings.

In the contemporary times, the literary writings which voice the crude reality are catching the attention of modern writers. Such themes of writings are close to life. The readers too like to read the narratives of flesh and blood characters as they look so real. It is not wide off the mark to say that the writers paint real situation in their fictitious world while in real world the actual characters are painted by the Almighty. Only that Literature is enticing which ends on didactic note. Premchand categorically states:

I am not of the opinion that anything written is literature. Only that work which reveals the truth is literature, the language of which is mature, refined and beautiful. That which has the qualities of influencing the heart and the mind and these qualities in their completeness originate only when it expresses the truth and the experiences of life. Though Tilismi stories, stories of love and separation might have had influence on us in the past but they do not interest us any longer. (11)

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For a movement to gain momentum, it is essential that it catches the attention of the masses. The role of Literature in the development of any significant movement is intrinsic. Literature is instrumental in giving voice to the unvoiced. The marginalized segment of society is emerging in the writings of many writers, who are writers as well as reformers. A recent spurt in the Dalit writings has been witnessed in the literary circles and intellectual discourses. Discourses on caste disparities, untouchability and the status of Dalit women have gained a huge impetus in the recent years because the writers are conscientiously writings for this segment so as to give voice to the mute and victims of casteism. This paper depicts the pain of the Dalit Women of Mahar community who not only endure exploitation from the world outside but also face suppression from the world inside which she believed was theirs. Through the literary writings, the writers aim to bring to fore the narratives of discrimination, humiliation of Dalits, particularly Dalit women. Furthermore, such discussions serve a constant reminder to the society about the absurdity of relegating Dalits to insignificant position in the social existence and their constant endeavour to fight against irrational caste hierarchies and class stratification.

Unfortunately, the nation is not merely divided into high caste and lower caste but hierarchies within a hierarchy too exist. To be precise, this paper deals with the woes of Dalit women who are battling on various fronts such as caste, class, gender and economic dependence. Albeit much has been heard and said on gender concerns but not much has changed the lives of women. They are the largest segregated groups anywhere in the world. The dire affects of caste system on Dalit men and Dalit women are alike but gender disparity makes the Dalit women more vulnerable. Dalit women constitute the lowest segment in the pyramid of hierarchy but the situation for women is not simple as it looks. Dalit women are not humiliated only by the higher castes but face deprecating experiences within their own communities. Women suffer because they are women and Dalit women suffer because they are women and also because they are Dalit.

Dalit literature gained impetus in early 1970's when the literary activists worked collectively in the social organization named the Dalit Panthers. The initiative was founded by Namdeo Dhasal and J.V. Pawar to articulate the unvoiced section of Indian society. Dalit writers use different genres such as fiction, autobiographies, short-fiction, etc. to deconstruct the irrational divided society. Numerous works have been written on Dalits to reflect upon the anguish and agonies of this community of Mahar. It is noteworthy that Dalit autobiography emerged to protest caste prejudices, discriminated grounded in the Indian history. It challenges the stigmatization, tyranny, and poverty.

There are numerous Dalit male writers but Dalit women writers are very few. It is also pertinent to mention that the phenomenon of patriarchy not only curbed the identity of women but also refused to recognize their writing caliber. Initially, women did not emerge as writers because of unapproachable education system as education was the prerogative of men and women were deprived from it. Later, when they became educated even then they could not pour their expression through writing because of the patriarchal set up. When they began to write they encountered various difficulties. Initially, their expression could not gain much popularity as they were written in their regional language.

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It is worth mentioning that the famous “narrated autobiographies” entail the sorrowful experiences and occurrences in the lives of Sumitra Bhavde and other eight Dalit women. This work was originally written in Marathi and later Gauri Deshpande translated it into English and named it as *Pan on Fire*. But with accessibility to education, each day of literature is witnessing an increase in the number of Dalit women writers who aim to bring to fore their unheard narratives. The forerunner was Shantabai Kamble’s *Mazhya Jalmachi Chittarkatha* translated as *The Kaleidoscopic Story of My Life*. While Urmila Pawar’s *The Weave of My Life* (2009), Bama Karukku (1992), Sumitra Bhavde’s *Viramma: Life of an Untouchable* (1997) and Baby Kamble’s *The Prison That We Broke* attempted to challenge those practices due to which Dalit women suffered an additional burden of gender discrimination, besides that of caste. The genre of Dalit women’s literature has grown stronger with Ushakiran Atram, Ashalata Kamble, Sandhya Rangari, Kavita.

The Prison We Broke is the first autobiographical novel in the Marathi literature. It is originally entitled as *Jina Amucha* and was later translated by Maya Pandit. It brings to surface the atrocious patriarchal social system and the wicked untouchability. This work is the poignant narrative of the triply marginalised. It further brings to fore that the suffering of women is heightened not only because of her fight against the male dominating society but also because of her subjugation by other woman, gender and caste disparities. It further emphasizes the quintessential of life such as dignity, freedom and equality, which Dalit women of Maharashtra are bereft of. Baby Tai’s novel questions democratic hegemony which assures the elevation of women only in words and speeches. In a way this novel further questions the silence of human rights activism on such sorrowful practices which are eroding human security of women in general and Dalit women specifically of Maharashtra Community.

Women need to fight their own battle to gain recognition as human beings. It is unpleasant to see that very often their muteness is misunderstood as their weakness. She had the capacity to speak in past too but they preferred silence to utter turmoil and unrest at home. But today’s woman is assertive and conscious. She claims her identity in society without caring for her acceptance or criticism by the inhabitants of society.

The paper not only questions the age old practices and poses threat to the accepted social norms and beliefs but also depicts the new Maharashtra women who fight for their rights and assert themselves for gaining self and identity in the patriarchal social system. The artistic endeavour of Baby Kamble is an individual narrative but represents the whole Maharashtra community. Her work represents women of Maharashtra as a whole and not an individual. In fact, her narrative is a cacophony of the voices of the Maharashtra Dalit women.

Baby Tai pens her life in the novel to bring out the sorrowful conditions of her community through her story of life. It is seen that the names of women may vary from one hearth to another but the sorrows are similar. She writes, “... for me, the suffering of my community has always been more important than my own individual suffering. I have identified myself completely with my people. And therefore *Jina Amucha* was the autobiography of my entire community” (Pandit 157). Her novel depicts the living of Maharashtra women before and after the appearance of Dr. Ambedkar as the protestor of caste system. To quote Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in the condolence ceremony of Dr. Ambedkar said,

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“Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was a symbol of revolt against all oppressive features of the Hindu Society” (4).

In fact, the inspiring words of Baba Saheb Ambedkar gave her life a purpose. She portrayed numerous social ills which degraded the Mahar community. She kept the ideals of Ambedkar alive by working for the upliftment of her community. She kept the ideals of Ambedkar alive by working selflessly for the betterment of Dalit women. Like him, she also vehemently opposed this discrimination on the basis of caste because it divided the nation into various sections and exploited the lowest strata of the hierarchical caste system. She sought inspiration from him and battled for the cause of the downtrodden particularly women. Baby Tai Kamble gained recognition through her work, *The Prison We Broke*, by voicing the concerns of Dalit Women of Mahar Community.

Baby Kamble narrates the condition of her village before the teachings and influences of Dr. Ambedkar. She recalls her life amidst illiterate dwellers of Mahar village. For them the norms of the community were sacred and unquestionable. She discusses the deplorable conditions of the men and women of her community because of poverty, illiteracy, their own superstitious beliefs and the discouraging religious practices. She narrates various incidents of their sufferings due to extreme poverty. She asserts through her work that poverty was the biggest curse which made them experience the pangs of hunger. The fifteen to sixteen families in the vicinity experienced the harrowing experiences of poverty and survived without food for days together. They survived on the few bread morsels thrown away by the upper castes. Even the left overs were relished by them and would wait for the upper caste people to throw the waste food so that they could lick the food from ground or gather it so as to enjoy the feast with entire family. Otherwise, they fed their children with the wild fruits from forests or would eagerly wait for animals to die so that the meat could be consumed. If the chances of getting meat would be bleak then they would poison them. Baby's work emphasizes the pathetic discrimination between the upper castes and the lower castes by underscoring the harsh poverty of Mahars who did not even have utensils to store water. They not only stored water in clay pots but coconut shells were used for drinking water. Kamble writes, “The cactus was a boon to us poor people...when we went hungry, they supplied us with food” (Pandit 43). Besides, the scarcity of food they were forced to remain naked and their naked bodies endured humiliation of the upper castes and savarans.

The evil zamindari system aggravated the poverty of Dalits. They ploughed and tilled the lands of zamindars and land lords. Feudal system exploited them fully. They toiled day and night and endured humiliation because of their dire need for money. Kamble points out that the Mahar were exploited the most on special occasions like marriages in the upper caste family. They were assigned with the most demeaning jobs like toilet cleaning, collection of firewood for cooking and sweeping the house. The most pitiable condition arose when the girl who was to get married could not go out to defecate after applying the ritualistic haldi. She would defecate in the garbage pit and it used to be the duty of the Mahar to clean it. After working so much, they had to wait for their turn to eat which was possible only after cleaning the whole pandal.

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Baby Kamble brings to fore the fact that Dalits, irrespective of gender, led miserable lives. But Dalit women underwent humiliation inside and outside world. Mohd Nageen Rather states, “The discrimination to Mahar community begins from the very childhood days till end. In the book we come to know that all Mahar girls are neglected in school by upper caste girls because of the fear of getting polluted. Even if upper caste girls pass by them they would cover their nose, and run away as if these Dalit girls are not humans but foul- smelling corpses. One of the upper caste girls says that she was made to have a bath after she reached home from school as her mother did not allow her in because she had come to know that Mahar girls too sit in that class” (2).

Another result of patriarchy was that the Dalit girls of Mahar community were married off at a tender age of five or six to take up the responsibility of her bride groom’s household. Nobody understood that they had yet to understand the meaning of life, value of parents, childhood and the happy union of siblings. The mother-daughter bond too failed to develop due to the practice of marrying off the daughters too early. Regrettably, they covered the distance from childhood to adulthood in the house of their in-laws. Before they attained youth, they used to become mature because of the responsibilities trounced on their backs. As per the rudimentary practice, they had to do prepare bhakris so as to prove the efficiency of their mothers who were supposed to inculcate such culinary skills in their progenies. If the brides failed to prove their prodigies then unending abuses were showered on them. They would often hear such remarks, “what’s your aai really? Tell me! Is she a good married woman at all? Or does she know only how to run after the pot-maker donkeys? Didn’t she teach you anything? I pamper you... my own sasu was spitfire...”(95). In this society, woman is fighting against woman. Why do mother-in-laws intend to take revenge from their daughter-in-laws? Why can’t they stop being vindictive?

Baby Tai Kamble also narrates the woes of these women who were sent to their maternal homes for their first deliveries. The pregnant women would deliver babies without the medical assistance in or around their slums. Many women used to die after or in the process of delivery due to excessive bleeding and the absence of such facilities. Some infants too would die due to severe infections or incurable diseases. To continue the pedigree, Kamble says, “The mothers continued to deliver babies and endure labour pain until menopause” (82). It is an old belief that after giving birth, the mother needs proper nourishment and proper care to keep her body in shape and maintain good health. Their weak body cannot digest hard food but the Mahar women are left with no other option but to swallow the hard food like jowar, which troubles them in the later years of their lives. Baby Kamble highlights that women of Mahar community were devoid of all comforts and care.

In the patriarchal society, a Mahar mother had to survive on the left overs of the upper caste and when sometimes the collected food failed to cater the hunger pangs of the family then the mothers had to sacrifice their urge to eat. Many new mothers had to be hungry. They would lie down, pinning for a few morsels, while hunger gnawed their insides. Mostly women suffered this fate. Labour pains, mishandling by the midwife wounds inflicted by onlookers’ nails, ever gnawing hunger, infected wounds with pus oozing out, hot water baths, hot coals, profuse sweating – everything caused the mother’s condition to worsen and she would end up getting a burning fever” (60).

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Besides this, Baby Kamble also brings to fore the dual standards of the society by discussing of the upper class brats towards Mahar women. The Dalit Mahar women were forced to serve them sexually by their husbands so that they could gain some pecuniary benefits from this influential segment of the society. In the novel, the writer accentuates that though the upper caste abhorred Dalits and called them untouchables yet they did not mind getting intimidated with the women of the same lower caste. This practice brings into the mind only one thought that why touching an untouchable female for the satisfaction of their sexual desire does not defile them? Arundhati Roy remarks, "...Men of the privileged castes had undisputed rights over the bodies of Untouchable women. Love is polluting. Rape is pure" (25). The Dalit women of Mahar would get pregnant by this physical cohabitation and would deliver them. It is highly deplorable that the upper caste men would not then even bother to help the women after that moment of lust.

Mohd Nageen Rather speaks about S. K. Limbale, "that her mother was kept by several Patils. He also tells that none of his siblings were born of the same father. However he firmly believes that there was nothing wrong in the women itself but it was the inhuman customs and rituals fixed by upper caste sections that degraded Dalit women so low. To quote S. K. Limbale, "[...M]y mother was not an adultress but the victim of a social system. I grow restless whenever I read about a rape in the newspaper. A violation anywhere in the country, I feel, is a violation of my mother" (S. K. Limbale ix-Acknowledgement).

Unfortunately, the Mahar women could not refuse. If ever they tried to break the shackles by taking shelter in their parent's house, they were turned out of their houses. Unfortunately, their own parents denied them shelter. They were not even accepted by in-laws. They were verbally, mentally and physically tortured by their in-laws. Their husbands also used to become party to such brutality. They were chided by their in-laws. The mothers-in-law would persuade their sons and husbands to take them to task. She says, "Eloped wife brings shame to family and to her husband. The bitch must have affair with someone. You should cut her nose & don't be eunuch & be a 'man' & proud to be you are son of ours. Bring dignity to your father's name" (58).

Our society does not allow women to express themselves without self-control. They are bound to consider subordination as an indispensable part of their lives. Assertion and freedom are the privileges of men and women cannot claim them as a matter of their right. Society tries to smash their poise by persuading them to accept the fact that slavery and woman's submissiveness as men's command. Such women strongly condemn those women who support patriarchy. They do so because they cannot think of breaking the glass ceiling of sore social ties. They prefer being cowed because they cannot affront the society by demanding autonomy. Neither do they muster courage to swim across the tide nor do they wish other women to do so. Their failure to challenge the rigid patriarchy worsens the lives of other women too. Hence, they heave the unnecessary burden of social norms and sore relationships. They are controlled by their husband but they mutely accept it. In a patriarchal set-up, an ideal woman is one who would always need a man for security in her life; one who would always need a male protection and cannot take a step further without a man's consent. It seems the women who cannot resist the rigidity of the society take vengeance on other women, who do not yield to the

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system. Such women expect all other women to bow down to the set-pattern of society and not to dismantle the traditionally approved model of the Indian women. Simon de Beauvoir holds that the patriarchal conditioning of the society makes the concept of sex and gender convoluted. Society considers sex and gender synonymous, which is an incorrect notion. Sex is a biological aspect while gender is a social theory. Simon de Beauvoir once said, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (496).

Yashpal writes in *Viplava*:

...of course 99% of women encounter the same problems as men do but beside them they have their own special problems. The reason for this is the dual exploitation of the Indian women in Indian society. Man is a victim of the ... unjust economic arrangements but woman becomes victim to these as well as the rituals, customs and also the age old conventional social arrangements. One cannot deny the fact that in this country, despite being the victim, man does not fail to implement the harsh and pain full means to exploit women. Woman suffers because of her dual slavery on one hand, because of the male-dominated society and on the other because of the restrictions imposed by the men. If women want to be free they have to strengthen themselves socially and economically too. This will help them gain awareness both at social and national level. The consideration of women as a mere commodity of pleasure will take the country now here and affect the nation's prosperity. If women ask for equal rights of separation and claim on the ancestral property and wants to lend their own life then men should not have any objection to that. (Translation mine xi-xii)

Baby Tai laments the deplorable state of her Dalit sisters. She recalls her mother's condition no better than an animal. Her mother's movement was confined to her house. Further she adds, "My father had locked up my aai in his house, like a bird in a cage... My aai must have felt so oppressed, so suffocated!" (5-6). This was commonly practiced in Mahar community. Women banged the door and shouted at the top of their pitches but were not heard. Dr. Ambedkar remarked, "A large segment of population was treated beyond human intercourse and were ostracized from the society ..." (1948: 49).

Though gradually things in Mahar changed but the stature of Dalit women did not. Mahar women were allowed to work outside so that the economic condition of the poor families could improve. But in the outside world too they were made to feel her negligible status in society. In the outside world too they experienced humiliation. They not only laboriously attended upon the domestic chores but worked in the fields and wandered in the dense forests to collect firewood. The firewood was used for domestic and commercial purposes. Despite the hardships, they would still slog day and night to mint a meager amount by selling the firewood to the upper castes. In other words, the Dalit women of Mahar community worked more than men but failed to win any appreciation. Their work was considered to be their duties as wives, daughters, daughter-in-laws and mothers. They worked selflessly for sustenance in the exorbitant world. They were belittled by the Brahmin women who sat at an elevated sit out to maintain caste hierarchy. The Mahar women bore the disparaging remarks of the so called twice born caste while the negotiation was done to finalise the cost of the product. She recounts in her novel the behavior of the Brahmin women who used to closely inspect the firewood

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and grass so that not even a strand of thread from their tattered clothes or hair would transfer to their side pollute their hands and their household. They were considered 'Bahar wale' so their entry to the houses of the savarans was forbidden. Infact, after the deal, the negligible due was thrown to them so that they would not come in contact with them because their purity and status could even defiled by their shadow. She retorts, "When Mahar women labour in the fields, the corn gets wet with their sweat. The same corn goes to make your pure, rich dishes. And you feast on them with such evident relish! Your palaces are built with the soil soaked with the sweat and blood of Mahars. But does it rot your skin? You drink and drink comfortably on the bed of their misery. Doesn't it pollute you then?" (56).

Baby Tai mentions that Mahar women did not even have freedom in depicting style of wearing saree. They could not drape sari in such a way that the borders do not show up. It was so because, "Only high caste women had the privilege of wearing their saris in such a way that the borders could be seen. A Mahar woman was supposed to hide the borders under the pleats; otherwise it was considered an offence to the high castes" (Kamble 54). She raised a voice against this and wanted other women too to join her. She aimed to make her community understand that their submission to the caste system will never elevate their status in society. She persuades her community by saying, "Under caste system, the condition of the Mahars was no better than that of bullocks, those beasts of burden, who logged all their life for a handful of dry grass." (Kamble 80).

Unfortunately, this exploitation transferred from one generation to another without a change. "Each generation left their children to serve their oppressors and quietly got wiped off from the face of the earth" (Kamble 104). Depiction of animosity in the savarna children and Dalit children further elaborates the divide prevailing in the premises of schools. To avoid the inevitable clashes between savarna and shudras, the Dalit children were taught in separated rooms so as to keep the difference of status and caste between them alive. Dalit children were not allowed to play, eat or sit with savarna children. Water dispensers were beyond the access Dalit children because the passage was blocked by the children of upper castes. Teachers too supported the system by placing Dalit children at the back. "The upper castes had never allowed this lowly caste to acquire knowledge. Generations after generations, our people rotted and perished by following such a superstitious life" (Kamble 37).

Baby Tai also narrates the Gandhi-Ambedkar clash as witnessed in the history. She feels utter disappointment to narrate how the insensitive caste system is deep-rooted in the human psyche. She had experienced a wide gulf between Savarna children and Dalit's progenies. She narrates her experience of a heated argument between the upper caste girls. It was Ambedkar versus Gandhi battle. The savarna girls commented about Ambedkar that, "It's really too much, that filthy Mahar educated himself! Ambedkar is so vain! Who does he think he is?" (Pandit 109) The Mahar girls responded by saying, "Our Ambedkar looks like a sahib. You know why your Gandhi is toothless? Because our Ambedkar kicked him in his teeth!" (110). Such skirmishes had become a usual practice but she proudly states that such conflicts and clashes could not waiver them from their mission to uplift their community.

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The Dalit women of the community had accepted sufferings and humiliations as part of their existence, until Bhimrao Ambedkar emerged as a messiah in their lives. He motivated them to have faith in themselves and resist patriarchy. Babasaheb said, "My final words of advice to you are, have faith in yourself. With justice on our side, I don't see how we can lose our battle. For ours is a battle not for wealth or power. It is a battle for freedom. It is a battle for the reclamation of the human personality" (Shah 120). Under the influence of Dr. Ambedkar, the lives of Mahar women underwent a drastic change.

The novel depicts the major changes such as the realization to acquire knowledge, education and literacy and to give up rudimentary practices, no submission to exploitation, their underestimation about themselves, etc. that came with Ambedkarite movement. For older generation change was detestable, but out of them too many came forward and inspired others also to give up age-old practices. These women gave up all customary and religious beliefs which made them slaves since their birth to start their lives afresh. They also successfully assimilated in the new world envisioned by Ambedkar. The younger generation followed Babasaheb's ideals and gave up the practice of eating dead cattle. They realized their status as human beings and so also gave the practice to collect the excreta of upper castes. Though, the practice has not eradicated completely but a change can be seen to a great extent. They also realized that lack of education was responsible for their miseries. So, the community decided to provide education to their children. Though, earlier too few families used to send their children to school but the Dalit constituted thin strength. The efforts of Baba Saheb bore fruits as the young boys and girls started excelling in the field of education, despite the unacceptance.

Though Baby Tai was proud of her caste but still envisioned a world of equality and discrimination. She took resolve to make the upper caste acknowledge the potential of Mahar community and the truth that if they disappear, the living standards of upper caste too will vanish. They are dependent upon the Dalits in numerous ways. They are intrinsic to the society. She vehemently states, "I love our caste name, Mahar- it flows in my veins, in my blood, and reminds me of our terrific struggle for truth" (119). The incongruities that exist in the society must be dealt rationally. Through this novel, the writer attempts to make Dalits too understand that they need to reform the system and change their mentality. And also by highlighting the multi-facet reasons responsible for the dreadful conditions of women, she tries to make Dalit men understand that in order to seek respect from the other castes, they need to purge their own society from gender discrimination first.

She was a writer and an activist who devoted her life to the cause of the Dalit women who were pushed to the margins on the basis of caste and gender. It is a journey of Dalit women of Mahar community from the ignorance to enlightenment. Kamble's endeavour does not aim to glorify the lives of Dalit women of Mahar but deals with their unprecedented pain and relentless suffering with deep sensitivity and compassion. Kamble's artistic endeavour raises a war against the caste system, patriarchy and gender disparity and the war will get over only when the society frees itself from such deprecating practices.

Vol. 5 Issue 2 (April 2019)

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www.expressionjournal.com

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