A marginalized voice in The Prisons We Broke by Baby Kamble: A Critical Analyses

Abstract:

The paper focuses on Dalit women’s lifestyle by a close reading of the autobiographies and critical works written by Baby Kamble on the Dalit community, especially Dalit women. This paper presents Dalit literature’s effects on Indian society. Baby Kamble’s autobiography Jina Amucha which elaborates cultural, social, economic, and political situations of the Dalit community in our Indian society. As it is an Indian mentality that women are always in the center to marginalized and subaltern state, but a woman who is born in the Dalit community, they have to face many challenges like, gender, low caste, and financial status.

Jina Amucha is translated by Maya Pandit. Jina Amуча by Baby Kamble reflects the real picture of the brutal caste and patriarchal beliefs of the Indian society. The author has tried to hold a mirror to society by elaborating on the domination of the upper-caste and the Brahmins that turned the Mahar into slaves. The book also reflects the Hindu caste system as crimes against humanity.

Keywords: Exploitation, Subaltern, Violence, Dalit feminism, the Caste system.

About the Author:

Baby Kamble was born in Veergao (1929), she was a Marathi writer and social activist. Veergao is a village which is situated in western Maharashtra. Baby Kamble belongs to the Mahar Dalit family. Formerly, the Mahars were untouchables and they have to live outside the village. Her father’s name is Pandhrinath, he was a contractor and continued with his traditional work. Kamble learned life lessons like disinterest in materialism from her father.

In the Dalit community, girls were denied an education. However, Kamble’s father decided to send her school, under the supremacy of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. Baby Kamble was also inspired by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar’s philosophy of rights of the Mang and Mahar, the untouchable castes. Her autobiography “Jina Amucha” (1986) originally written in her native language Marathi is translated by Maya Pandit “The Prisons We Broke” published in 2008. Kamble explains that she has diligently documented everything in the preface of her autobiography.

“To show my grandchildren the ‘Agni Divya’, the immolation by fire,
That Mahars have had to perform to gain what little status they have today.”

Her autobiography Jina Amucha (Our [wretched] Lives) published in the Pune women’s magazine Stree before it was published as a book in 1986. Kamble is the first Dalit women, who have written an autobiography in Marathi. Baby Kamble passed away on April 21, 2012. She had been involved in the Dalit movement in Maharashtra from a very young age. She had been honored with awards for her work both social and literary collections of her poetry have also been published.

Introduction:

Autobiography is not only showing the author’s own life’s experiences but it also shows the real situation, condition of the particular community, society. In India, the Dalit community is the most oppressed people in all contexts like financially, culturally, and socially. Dr. Ambedkar always inspired
to Dalit community to give education both culturally and socially. Baby kamble was also influenced by Dr. Ambedkar, so, she also has mentioned important issues like women subaltern, cast differentiation and the problems which were faced by the Dalit community.

Jina Amucha is originally written in Marathi and it was translated in English as “The Prisons We Broke” by prof. Maya Pandit. Baby Kamble’s The Prisons We Broke is a millstone among other autobiographies of Dalit women. Text mainly pays attention to the lives of Mahar men and women, the author’s native place Veergao, Maharashtra. Kamble portrays an original scene on caste discrimination, the mindset of Indian society majority of the author’s society.

Baby Kamble asserts that,

“She is writing to her people. Today our young, educated people are ashamed of being called a Mahar. But what is there to be ashamed of? We are the great race of the Mahars Maharashtra. We are its real original inhabitants, the sons of the soil. The name of this land is also derived from our name. They should love our caste name, Mahar- it flows in my veins, in my blood, and reminds me of our terrible struggle for truth.” ( xiii, The Prisons We Broke)

Discussion:

One can read this novel in a feminist critique as well as Dalit literature. Dalit literature, it elaborates on inhuman conditions of existence. As a feminist critique, ‘Jina Amucha’ imitates her misfortune and anxiety for the violence to women from outside forces as well as from the community. Kamble’s autobiography is an exposure of the inhuman treatment of women by women. She depicts this in the 8th chapter where a mother-in-law insulted, oppressed her daughter-in-law. The author narrated various evils like, beating, harassment, drunkenness, and superstitions; which are prevailing in the Dalit society in detail in the first few chapters of the novel.

In the Hindu hierarchal system, the Dalit community is explaining as dirty, untouchable, and its place in the system in the lowest place. Kamble’s autobiography shows how Dalit women sufferings and scolded without any reason. In every situation, they feel that they live in hell, and in a very less condition they feel happy and secure. They are suffering every kind of torture like economic, social, physical, and psychological. Our ancient texts Vedas, Bhagwat Gita, and Manusmriti illustrate the four castes like Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya, and Sudra. Untouchable community comes under the fifth caste which is known as “no caste”.

Joothan (2008) has written by Omprakash Valmiki also elaborates differences in the economic, social, and educational institutions in India. Another novel by Arundhati Roy presented A Dalit Christian in the novel The God of Small Things (1997). In India, Dalit women have been being sexually harassed by men. The Prisons We Broke by Baby Kamble and Untouchable by Mulk Raj Anand, both these novels depicted the crimes done on Dalit women. Kamble elaborates the life of the girls married at a very young age and life of the young bride is not less than a curse. The bride was assigned many works like, grinding, fetch water from the river, make bhakris, etc.

In the book, upper-caste girls stay away from Mahar girls in the school because they feel fear of getting polluted. Upper caste girls also cover their noses. One girl who was belonged to the upper caste, she told that she has to bath after left school because her mother had come to inquire that Mahar girls also study with the upper caste girls.

The situation of the Mahar women was horrible, inadequate and discomfiting women had to perform all the duties like, to earn bread and butter, they have to go for selling wood. Mahar men never took care of new mothers. Women only ate gruel made from jowar. When the time comes for delivery, local village midwives performed duty and they don’t have professional knowledge and equipment. If there
would be an emergency, they were put all efforts on the mercy of God. Kamble elaborates condition of
new mothers like:

“Many new mothers had to hungry. They would lie down, pining for a few morsels while hunger
gnawed their insides. Mostly women suffered this fate. Labor 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 new mothers’ condition to worsen and
she would end up getting a burning fever. ( Pg. 3, Mohd Nageen Rather)

In this text, the author narrates Dalit women as oppressed women. Dalit men gave their wives,
daughters, and daughters-in-law to upper caste people for pleasing sexually. Kamble depicted all the
narration of the Dalit community and also draw attention that how she has changed her life under the
influence of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Baby Kamble does not want to elaborate on the life of Dalit, but she
says that how the Brahminical regime turned the Mahar women into a slave. Baby kamble professes
that,

“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.” ( xiii-xiv, The Prisons We Broke)

Kamble narrates that the poor girl had to undergo the curses of everybody included sister-in-law,
brother-in-law when a girl be matured, mother-in-law exploited ways to keep her alienated from her
husband. Mother-in-law would be scared that her son would be snatched away from her; he would
forget his parents and begin pampering his wife. To stop it all, mother-in-law would also poison the
son’s mind against his wife. The author also gives details of the untouchability angle where her
community was depressed of many concessions by the upper-caste and mainly the Brahmins, and
oppressed at any given opportunity.

Conclusion:

One can say that we have to apply thoughts of Dr. Ambedkar in contemporary period. One can say that
the narrated story helps to understand contemporary casteism as economically, culturally and at the
top in our country called socially. As the author mentioned the great thinker, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, we
can say that the modern youth may become out with the changes of the mindset of the community,
because contemporary youth is more influenced by the thoughts of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.

References

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