



Joothan and The Prisons We Broke: A Comparative Reading

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Abstract: *The paper focuses on the comparative analysis of two autobiographies, Omprakash Valmiki's 'Joothan' and Baby Kamble's 'The Prison We Broke'. Both the works portray the socio-economic, cultural and political condition of a Dalit community. It includes a critical study of both the texts on the three levels of class, gender and time. 'Joothan' portrays a Dalit life from a male Dalit perspective, whereas 'The Prisons We Broke' accounts the community-experience of belonging to a Dalit community from a gynocentric perspective.*

Key Words: *Dalit, Hierarchy, Caste, class, gender, time*

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Introduction:

India's caste system is among one of the world's oldest forms of surviving social stratification. The ancient Hindu religious scripture *Manusmriti*, divides Hindus into hierarchical groups based on their *karma*. And, in this social hierarchy 'Dalit' formed the lowest position in the social stratification. This led to the suppression and discrimination of lower groups by the upper caste people. The select autobiographies, depict the chronicles of the trials and tribulations of Dalit community. *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki and *The Prisons We Broke* by Baby Kamble are narratives of lived experiences of oppression, anger, struggle, sorrow, humiliation, and starvation. They are underprivileged who have survived the dehumanization process. They have deliberately and sensitively critiqued upon the hypocritical ideologies of Indian morality and order.

"Dalit Literature" as a term came into the realm of the Dalit discourse in 1958, after the first ever conference held by Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangh (Maharashtra Dalit Literature Society). Dalit writers and activists in 1972 corroborated and started the 'Dalit Panther Movement', which was directly inspired by the 'Black Panther Party' led by the African-Americans to combat racialism. By calling themselves 'Dalits', they endeavoured to develop an identity and resist the title like 'Untouchables'. It was led by J. V. Pawar, Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle, and Raja Dhale. This emerging field in literature has travelled a long way from

conjectural portrayal of Dalits in the omniscient narratives to the real-life experiences penned in the form of autobiographies. It can be discussed as the literature of the trodden and oppressed. "Through their writings and activities they have been speaking truth to power". (Kumar 1)

Colloquial dialects ushered with slangs and boorish language are deliberate attempts to counter attack the moral official language and "to also assert the legitimacy of their own vocabularies." (Kumar 78) This kind of language coarseness was to provide a realistic account of the brutality and pain that was suffered by Dalits at the hands of the dominant groups.

Joothan: A Dalit's Life

Joothan: A Dalit's Life is an autobiography of Om Prakash Valmiki. It is an account of Valmiki's life that opens up a filthy side of an unequal society. As soon as a person is born, 'caste' determines his or her destiny. *Joothan* is a scaring memoir of a life of a sensitive and intelligent Dalit youth in independent India. It tells us how he overcomes contempt, humiliation, and violence to gain education. *Joothan* refers to the scraps of food left on a plate, destined for the garbage or animals. Valmiki shares his heroic struggles to survive a preordained life of perpetual physical and mental persecution and his transformation into a speaking subject. The text makes a powerful statement against the oppressive caste system which is still prevalent in most part of India. It also symbolizes the struggle for dignity and human rights, and demonstrates that a revolutionary transformation of the society is just not desirable but possible as well.

The Prisons We Broke

The Prisons we Broke is an autobiography by a Dalit female writer, Baby Kamble. It documents the life of Mahar Women of Maharashtra. The title makes a strong statement about the experience of Mahar women being trapped in prisons of patriarchy and religious dogmas. "Her book gave one of the first critiques of twofold patriarchy – by gender and caste" (Intersectional Feminism). Thematically, Kamble focuses on superstition, religion, tradition, caste, poverty, violence, and slavery. We get the instances of women's experiences, their jobs, their everyday lives, their culture

and rituals. The narrative moves from one event to the other mainly tracing the Mahar Dalit women's life and the Ambedkarite movement. Kamble ends the narrative with a sense of loss and encourages the youth to remember their history, their oppressor and their saviour.

Comparative analysis

i. Gender

The Prisons We Broke is a text based on the Dalit revolution against the caste hegemony and it documents the time frame between pre to post independence. While *Joothan* is set in the post-Independent India. Kamble in her autobiography, *The Prisons We Broke* has represented herself on behalf of entire Mahar women community. "Like most autobiographies, Kamble begins her book with her birth and an introduction to her family. But gradually the community takes precedence over the individualistic 'I'" (Sonika 1380x). The narrative carries the plural pronoun 'we' throughout while 'I' is seldom used. 'I' is created by her position in the society and in order to understand the 'I', one must trace it in the 'we' that is her identity; her very own embodiment as a woman and as a Dalit. Thus, the text seems an anthropological read of a culture.

The work narrates the zeal of the Ambedkarite movement, the role of Dalit women in the movement, and its impact on their lives. It also recounts the role of Ambedkar's leadership and bitterly criticises the Hindu religion, in terms of Dalit women's psychological, social, economic, and political suffering. On the other hand, *Joothan* critiques the independent India's policy of education and the condition of human rights promised to Dalits.

In Baby Kamble's text we see a literal representation of women being tied down by iron chains as a punishment for violating the patriarchal norms. Their noses were chopped off, and they were beaten badly; "the heads of these women would open, their backbones

crushed and some would collapse unconscious” (Kamble 98). The Mahar women were married at a very early age so many would not even remember their marriage ceremony. For them married life meant slavery, oppression, domestication, physical violence, public shaming, verbal abuse, disfigurement, inhumane treatment and denial of love and harmony within the household. Mothers-in-laws would plot against the girl and defame her, instigate her son to beat her and chop off her nose. Kamble writes, “.we made our own arrangements to find slaves- our very own daughters-in-laws”(Kamble 87). In *Joothan* too we find the dictates of morality on women of the Tyaga caste. They used to go to defecate in the open exposing their most private parts but were supposed to put veil from head to nose in front of elders.

In Kamble, the religious customs were rigorous. Eldest son of every family was offered to Gods as *potraja* while the first girl child was offered to God Khanderaya as *murali* or as jogtin to Gods. All the custom and daily practices were carried out by women. In *Joothan* these customs are mentioned in passing. He writes, “these deities are worshipped in every house. They are different from Hindu deities and their names won’t be found in any *Purana* even if one searched hard. But go to any family of our clan, and you will find these deities worshipped. Whether it is a birth, a wedding, or a feast for the dead, nothing can be accomplished without worshipping these deities” (Valmiki 26).

Primary education for Kamble came easy, as her father was affluent enough to afford the expenses. He was a political activist in Ambedkarite movement and was a staunch supporter of education. This wasn’t the case in *Joothanas* Valimiki writes, “there was no question of sending our sister to school”, (Valmiki 6) although the zeal to face

adversities with strength is strikingly similar. In Joothan Valmiki’s mother stands up to the insults and humiliation imposed on her for being a Dalit. At Tyaga’s wedding she was offered leftover in a minimal amount and was humiliated for asking more joothan (leftover) for her kids. She shows her resistance in speaking back to the oppressor and vows not to accept Joothan again. Both Valmiki’s mother and his sister-in-law supported him in his education. His sister-in-law sold her pair of anklets to support his education.

Almost similar character of same vigour is found in Kamble’s text. They attend *morchas* and political meetings and took part in the political movement. Life at school was not easy for any of these, both were mocked by students, made to sit in a corner as discards and were beaten by the school teachers. This kind of immediate involvement as a community is not seen in Valmiki’s text. It is rather the struggle of one individual in the academic space only to find out the shallowness of the promises made to Dalits. Valmiki is one of the three Dalit male students who go to school, they are not allowed to use the handpump. The practice of untouchability was broken by Kamble and her friends when they would touch the upper caste girls in response to the abuses or mockery while Valmiki shows no such strength.

Women’s private space is not much talked about in Valmiki’s text. There can be a number of explanations to this but the denial of literary space to women cannot be overlooked.

Health care and women’s hygiene is delineated in *The Prisons We Broke*. The process of childbirth was carried out by the *ignorant midwives* due to lack of money. They would thrust their hands in and out of the woman’s vagina leaving them with pain and infection. Elders of the community would suggest remedies desperately. The health

care and food availability to these women were limited. Tetanus, malaria and typhoid were common deadly infections at the time due to lack of medical facilities.

This was not all, Mahar women had to suffer psychological turmoil. Women would get possessed in the middle of their chores; such episodes of hysteric occurrences were common. Though one exceptional thing that we witness here is that the narrative does not vilify these possessed women, instead they are declared possessed by Goddess and people would show reverence to them. 'The possessed women will "danced to the beats in frenzy till they collapsed in a heap on the floor, their jaws locked" (Kamble 23). They would become prophetic and declared their doomed fate while rest in the crowd would beg her to reconsider.

Jobs that Dalits do are considered to be menial and hence are often poorly paid. Because of which, they cannot afford to have a decent life. They live a life of poor hygiene, starvation and have to suffer humiliation, living off of the discards of upper caste people. Dalit women made clothes out of upper-class shroud clothes, they ate meats of their dead animals and skinning these animals became their profession. The festival of buffalo skin was a time of abundance for the Mahar while Valmiki narrates a similar experience as a torturous experience of skinning these animals. He writes, "That day something broke inside me. I skinned the bullock under chacha's guidance. I felt I was drowning in a swamp. The wounds of the torment that I suffered with chacha on that hot afternoon are still fresh on my skin" (Valmiki 41).

Women of Mahar community enjoyed the month of *Asadh* as it provided them with the opportunity of work. In *Joothan* Valmiki's mother and, sister-in-law worked in cow shed to support the family. Many social critics have

seen such an opportunity to be able to have their own income as an instance of empowerment. Kamble herself worked in her shop selling vegetables and other household items.

It's the labour that is exploited Kamble writes, "the poor daughters-in-laws would serve the household like a slave" (Kamble 98) and "just as the chaturvarna system created caste and sanctioned discriminatory practices, the cunning creator of the world established the practice of making women dependant on men" (Kamble 102). Thus, women were slaves both inside their household and outside to upper castes. While men were slave owner at home. Kamble's main concern is slavery of labour, either under the pretext of superstition or religion. She sees women as doubly marginalised. In *Joothan*, Valmiki too critiques about exploitation of labour. He writes, "What a cruel society we live in where hard labour has no value. There is a conspiracy to keep us in perpetual poverty." (Valmiki 34)

ii. Class

Class is an important aspect of a Dalit life. The lives of Dalits in India are associated with poverty and misery. They all face destitution throughout their lives. Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* represent the Dalit community in Maharashtra, their extreme poverty, the dirt and squalor that was the part of their daily existence, their exploitation by the high caste Brahmins, their customs, their belief system and their cosmology, their superstitions and festivals and their hardy resilience against the vicissitudes of life. The people of maharwada lived in miserable condition. However, Kamble's life was not as miserable as that of her community. Kamble's father Pandharinath was a contractor by profession and was "an expert in his field" (Kamble 35). But "whatever money he earned, he would squander away" (Kamble 5). In her community "people would be covered in thick layers of dust and dirt, a

black coating on their skin. . . . They looked like rag dolls, nibbled and torn by sharp teeth mice” (Kamble 8).

Joothan by Omprakash Valmiki encapsulates the pain, humiliation and poverty of Valmiki’s community, which not only had to rely on joothan (leftover meals of fermented scraps of food) but also relishes it. His community looked forward to marriage feasts in the village where they would gather outside with big baskets. This is the reality of Valmiki’s life. He belongs to the lowest section of the society. Financially, Valmiki and the people of the his basti were very poor. Hunger is the main theme of the narrative. Valmiki mentions in the text that he used to drink mar for his survival during his childhood days. Rice, a basic staple food was a great thing for Valmiki and his community. He says “ the smell of boiling rice permeated the entire baithak. Little children were looking at Ma’s chulha with expected eyes” (Valmiki 22). Valmiki describes the village pond and its environment in great detail in the beginning of his narrative.

iii. Time Period

Kamble’s autobiography encapsulates two major periods in history, the one before independence and the one after independence. She reflects upon the pre-Ambedkarite era of her community depicting the occult realm of living that people were following in the name of customs, traditions, and myths. She critiques upon the barbarous practice of making the eldest son the “potraja” and tormenting the child in the name of custom. She remarks by saying, “Generation after generation wasted away in the senseless worship of stones, in utter misery. Generation after generation perished” (Kamble 11). Kamble through her narrative has pictured Ambedkar as a major source for the revolution of the Dalit movement. She asserted the influence of Ambedkar on her by saying, “I made a firm resolve, at a young age, to lead

my life according the path sketched by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, the light of my life. His principles have exercised a strong influence on me” (Kamble 115).

Omprakash Valmiki on the other hand was born and brought up after the colonial period. Valmiki’s account critiques the inability of the Constitutional provision in eradicating discriminatory practices. He remarked in the beginning itself that, “Untouchability was so rampant” (Valmiki 2). He unlike Kamble was unknown about the very existence of Ambedkar and his struggles until he read his biography by Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu. He said, “Despite my twelve years of studying in Tyagi Inter College, Barla, this name had not come to my knowledge in any way or shape. The college library also did not have a single book on Ambedkar....All the media of communication had been unable to inform people like me about this name” (Valmiki 71). He was greatly influenced by reading the works of the Marathi Dalit writers. The Dalit Panther Movement (1972) helped him to orient his conscious experience through a collective sensibility of belonging to the Dalit community.

Conclusion:

Both the texts are Dalit tale of suffering, pain, humiliation, subjugation. Caste is an identity that cannot be washed off by education or economic boon. It is determined by birth. It has a history of thousands of years of slavery and exploitation. *The Prisons we Broke* is a Mahar women’s tale, it talks about the Ambedkarite Dalit awakening of pre-colonial era and post-colonial decline of the movement. “History has been unkind to Ambedkar. First it contained him, and then it glorified him. It has made him India’s Leader of the Untouchables, the king of the Ghetto” (Roy 27). *Joothan* traces the structural exclusion of Dalits in academic and social spaces even after the promised freedom. While one text is based mainly before 1947 the latter is based after Independence but we do not witness much change in the living conditions, the professions, and the

prejudice that a Dalit has to live with. No matter how progressive the modern age is, caste still survives. Dalits were excluded and lived on the periphery of the localities and it's still the same. Reservation is one social concern with positive discrimination but it is often opposed by the privileged groups. But caste has not improved. In fact, our society has entered a new phase of caste-based discrimination, with a few tokenism and appropriation of Casteism.

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