

## **Breaking the Chains: A Thematic Analysis of Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke***

Ashok Navnath Borude,  
Assistant Professor,  
Department of English,  
Ahmednagar College, Ahmednagar

### **Abstract:**

This paper undertakes a comprehensive thematic analysis of Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, a seminal Dalit autobiography originally published in Marathi as *Jina Amucha*. The work transcends a singular personal narrative, serving instead as a profound "testimony of the entire Mahar community", emphasizing a collective "We" in its portrayal of shared suffering and liberation. The analysis delves into the multifaceted oppression faced by Dalit women, revealing the insidious interplay of caste, gender, and class that subjected them to pervasive untouchability, economic exploitation, and even internalized patriarchal norms within their own community. Despite these immense challenges, the narrative powerfully showcases the remarkable resilience and agency of Dalit women and underscores the transformative influence of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's ideology, which provided a crucial framework for resistance and a pathway to emancipation through education and social reform. Furthermore, Kamble's act of writing itself is presented as a revolutionary act- a powerful means of self-assertion, counter-memory, and a catalyst for social change, giving an audible voice to the historically silenced. The chapter concludes by affirming the autobiography's enduring legacy and its acute contemporary relevance in illuminating ongoing social injustices and inspiring the continuous struggle for dignity, equality, and human rights.

## 1. Introduction:

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, originally titled *Jina Amucha* in Marathi and first published in 1985 or 1986, stands as a foundational text in the landscape of Dalit literature. Its profound significance is rooted in its pioneering status as the first autobiography penned by a Dalit woman in Marathi, and potentially across any Indian language. This groundbreaking work shattered a historical silence, establishing a vital literary precedent for marginalized female voices and providing an unprecedented glimpse into their lived realities. The autobiography's evolution from memoirs initially serialized in the Marathi women's magazine 'Stree' between 1982 and 1984 offers insight into its organic development from fragmented personal accounts into a cohesive narrative, suggesting its initial engagement with a specific female readership.

The English translation of Kamble's work by Maya Pandit, titled *The Prisons We Broke* (2009), has been instrumental in expanding the narrative's reach beyond its regional linguistic confines. This translation has made Kamble's powerful story accessible to a broader, global academic and literary audience, facilitating its integration into international discourses on social justice and human rights. The act of translating *The Prisons We Broke* is more than a linguistic transfer; it represents a deliberate effort to globalize a subaltern narrative. By rendering Kamble's voice accessible to an international readership, the translation allows the profound themes of caste, gender, and resistance to resonate within global conversations concerning social justice, human rights, and intersectionality. This expansion naturally invites new critical engagements, including perspectives from Euro-American literary theories, which can enrich interpretations of the text. However, this process also raises important considerations regarding the faithful preservation of the inherent "Dalit sensibility" and the potential for nuanced misinterpretations when a text deeply rooted in specific cultural and historical contexts is introduced into different academic traditions.

Dalit literature, as a genre, emerged as a revolutionary force, fundamentally aimed at bringing about socioeconomic change and establishing a distinct Dalit identity within society. It functions as a powerful form of self-assertion against inhuman treatment, atrocities, and systemic inequality. This body of work serves as an effective instrument for expressing the perspectives of the oppressed, actively working to dismantle conventional, reactionary, and conservative attitudes associated with the downtrodden in India. Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* exemplifies this, operating not merely as a literary text but as a potent political and social intervention. It provides a crucial platform for marginalized communities to reclaim their narratives, assert their identity,

and directly challenge dominant discourses that have historically silenced or misrepresented their experiences. The very act of writing becomes a direct challenge to Brahminical hegemony and a powerful means to cultivate pride and solidarity within the community. This underscores the genre's inherent activist nature, where literary creation is intrinsically linked to the struggle for social justice.

This chapter undertakes a comprehensive thematic analysis of *The Prisons We Broke*. It explores the autobiography's portrayal of multifaceted oppression, its powerful narratives of resistance, and the transformative influence of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's ideology. Throughout this analysis, emphasis will be placed on the text's unique position as a collective testimony, highlighting how Kamble's personal narrative transcends individual experience to represent the broader struggles of the Mahar community.

## **2. The Autobiographical as Collective Testimony**

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* is widely regarded not merely as a personal life story but as a profound "testimony of the entire Mahar community". Scholars frequently characterize it as a "socio-biography" rather than a conventional autobiography, a designation that acknowledges its expansive scope beyond the individual. Kamble herself explicitly articulates this deep identification with her community's plight, stating, "The suffering of my community has always been more important than my own individual suffering. I have identified myself completely with my people". She further emphasizes this connection, asserting, "I wrote about what my community experienced. The suffering of my people became my own suffering. Their experiences became mine. So I really find it very difficult to think of myself outside of my community". This profound sense of collective identity shapes the narrative's structure and thematic focus.

The autobiography, while beginning with Kamble's personal life, gradually shifts its focus as the narrative progresses, with subsequent chapters largely dedicated to depicting the broader "plight of the Mahar community". This structural choice deliberately prioritizes the collective experience over individual incidents, underscoring the book's communal purpose. The occasional decision to keep characters nameless further reinforces this collective focus, suggesting that their experiences are representative of the community as a whole rather than purely individual.

The very title, *The Prisons We Broke*, deliberately emphasizes "We" over "I," signaling the communal nature of the struggle and the shared journey towards emancipation. This titular choice

directly challenges the established conventions of the autobiographical genre, which traditionally centers on the individual's "I". Instead, Kamble's title posits a collective subject of both experience and agency. This is not merely a stylistic preference but a profound ideological statement about the nature of Dalit experience and resistance. Traditional autobiographies often focus on individual self-creation and personal regeneration. However, Kamble's work, along with other Dalit autobiographies, transcends this individualistic paradigm. These narratives are understood to challenge and "explode popular myths about human values and dignity" by presenting a reality where individual identity is deeply intertwined with communal suffering and collective liberation. The consistent emphasis on "We" in the title and narrative structure is thus a powerful assertion that for historically marginalized communities, individual freedom is inextricably linked to, and indeed dependent upon, collective emancipation. The "We" signifies shared suffering, collective agency, and a communal journey towards dismantling systemic "prisons". This collective identity serves as a powerful form of self-affirmation and identity assertion, actively fostering pride and togetherness within the community. Furthermore, this approach functions as a form of "counter-memory", actively reclaiming Dalit history and identity from dominant narratives that have historically erased or individualistically pathologized their experiences, thereby asserting a collective historical subject.

### **3. Intersectional Oppression: Caste, Gender, and Class**

Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* offers an unflinching portrayal of the multi-layered oppression faced by the Mahar community, particularly its women. This suffering is not singular but arises from the insidious interplay of caste, gender, and class, creating a complex web of marginalization.

#### **3.1. The Pervasive Reality of Caste Discrimination**

Kamble's narrative vividly illustrates the deeply ingrained and "oppressive caste norms" that permeate Indian society, where "everything is organized on the basis of castes". The caste system is depicted as a "confining prison" that systematically restricts the freedoms and dehumanizes Dalits. The Mahar community is shown enduring "utter helplessness, frustration and hopelessness", frequently treated as "untouchables". They faced severe "social exclusion, denial of access to public areas, and untouchability". Kamble recounts her personal experiences of

humiliation, even at school, where classmates and teachers "treated us like lepers". This early exposure to pervasive social ostracization highlights the deeply embedded nature of caste discrimination from a young age.

Economically, Dalits were systematically forced into "menial works", often receiving "minimal remunerations" or even being paid in "Bhakris" (pieces of bread). This economic marginalization is presented as a fundamental component of caste oppression. The physical manifestations of their degraded status are starkly depicted: their appearance, "covered in thick layers of dust and dirt, a black coating on their skin they looked like rag dolls". The use of dehumanizing names such as "Kondakaku" (dust lady) and "Bhikabai" (beggar lady) further underscores this degradation. The autobiography draws a powerful and visceral comparison between the Brahminical sacred thread (janeu) and the strings used by Mahars to dry dead animal intestines, symbolizing their forced, defiling occupations and the inherent hypocrisy of the caste system.

Kamble's narrative profoundly reveals that caste discrimination extends beyond mere social segregation; it is a deliberate and systemic project of dehumanization. The consistent use of derogatory names, the enforcement of degrading labor, and the stark depiction of physical deprivation (e.g., children often roaming naked, bodies covered in dirt) collectively serve to strip individuals of their fundamental human dignity. This systematic dehumanization functions as a crucial mechanism to justify their exploitation and maintain the rigid social hierarchy. By eroding self-worth and perpetuating a "slave mentality", it makes organized resistance incredibly challenging, thereby ensuring the perpetuation of the oppressive system.

### **3.2. The Double Burden of Patriarchy**

Dalit women in Kamble's narrative confront a "double lock" or "dual oppression" arising from their intersecting identities of caste and gender. This unique position results in a "triple marginalization" encompassing discrimination based on gender, caste, and class, which renders their plight distinctly different from that of women from upper castes.

Discrimination from upper castes was a daily reality. Dalit women were compelled to "bow down and declare her servitude to any upper caste man", a ritualistic act of submission that reinforced their subordinate status. Extreme poverty often forced them into "physical surrender to the lustful need of upper-caste men", highlighting their profound vulnerability to sexual

exploitation. The narrative also details various forms of violence, including "beatings, sexual assaults, and vandalism". A particularly harrowing detail is the mention of "gory details of noses being chopped off of women, who falter from in line with the prescribed patriarchal dictum", underscoring the brutal enforcement of patriarchal norms and the severe consequences for non-compliance.

Kamble unflinchingly exposes the "patriarchal norms within their own Mahar community". Mahar men often internalized and replicated "Brahminical patriarchal ideologies", leading to the "domination and physical assault" of women becoming "so common... that they neither complain about it nor raised their voices against it. They had accepted this physical torture as their destiny". Kamble herself recounts experiencing "physical torture at the hands of her husband", demonstrating that even the author was not exempt from this internal oppression. The custom of keeping women "confined under the four walls of the home" or "behind threshold" was prevalent and even a "pride of the Mahar Men", reflecting a deep-seated control over female mobility and autonomy. The belief that "if a woman has her husband, she has the whole world" illustrates the ingrained dependency and limited self-worth assigned to women within their own community.

Kamble's work offers a critical and unvarnished examination of how oppressive structures are not solely imposed externally but are also internalized and replicated within the oppressed community itself. The adoption of Brahminical patriarchal norms by Dalit men, and the subsequent subjugation of Dalit women, demonstrates a complex interplay of power dynamics where the oppressed become agents of oppression themselves. This internalized oppression means that the "prisons" are not just external societal structures but also mental and social constructs deeply embedded within the community. This multi-layered oppression necessitates a "unique approach" to understanding Dalit women's suffering, as their struggle for liberation must contend with both external casteism and internal patriarchy. The stark revelation that "Mahar men treat Mahar women similarly to how upper-caste men treat Dalits" is a particularly poignant and disturbing observation on this replication of power.

### **3.3. Abject Poverty and Entrenched Ignorance**

The Mahar community is depicted as living in "almost hell-like conditions", characterized by "extreme poverty" and "continuous hunger and starvation" from birth. The dire material conditions are vividly illustrated by details such as children often "roam[ing] around naked".

The community is also portrayed as "blinded with superstition" and "sunk deep into the mire such dreadful superstitions". Specific examples include spirit possession, the custom of Potraj, and Waghya sacrifices. Kamble observes that "Generations after generation, our people rotted and perished by following such superstitious way of life". These superstitions were often "nurtured by the upper castes to keep the lower castes ignorant", serving as a deliberate tool of control.

The narrative further reveals that the "prison of ignorance was deliberately kept closed due to the upper caste's domination over education and unwillingness to give the Mahars and other lower castes access to knowledge". This systematic denial of education and awareness led to tragic consequences, such as the practice of burying unconscious children, mistaking their condition for death due to a lack of medical knowledge. Kamble's autobiography thus reveals that the pervasive poverty, deep-seated ignorance, and widespread superstition within the Mahar community were not merely unfortunate circumstances but actively maintained instruments of control by the dominant castes. By systematically denying access to education and actively perpetuating superstitious beliefs, the upper castes ensured the continued subjugation and exploitation of the Mahars. This created a vicious cycle where a lack of knowledge prevented them from understanding their rights or challenging the oppressive system, effectively keeping them "physically and mentally unfit to struggle against the system". The cynical philosophy articulated by Kamble's mother, "Morality! What rubbish... It's only money that matters. Money whitewashes your sins", can be interpreted as a desperate survival strategy or a searing critique of the moral decay induced by an environment of extreme deprivation and systemic injustice.

#### **4. Narratives of Resistance and Emancipation**

Despite the overwhelming oppression depicted, *The Prisons We Broke* is fundamentally a narrative of resistance and the arduous journey towards emancipation. It highlights the enduring spirit of the Dalit community, particularly its women, and the profound influence of transformative leadership.

##### **4.1. Resilience and Agency of Dalit Women**

Kamble's work powerfully demonstrates the "tenacity and fight of Dalit women", their "innate power and dignity", and their "remarkable dignity and resilience" in the face of immense

adversity. They are portrayed as emerging as "agents of transformation in their community". While the narrative acknowledges instances where physical torture was accepted as destiny, it also vividly showcases their "rebellion against the caste system". The very act of survival and endurance under such brutal conditions can be interpreted as a profound form of resilience. Kamble's personal quest for knowledge and her subsequent act of writing are presented as symbolic of this broader collective struggle for liberation.

*The Prisons We Broke* is not merely a chronicle of suffering but a powerful affirmation of Dalit women's agency and their inherent capacity for resistance. Even in the face of overwhelming oppression, they exhibit an "unwavering determination and unceasing battle for equality and justice". This portrayal aligns with the concept of "subaltern assertion of self", where the marginalized actively reclaim their narratives and identities, challenging the dominant discourse that seeks to erase them. Kamble's nuanced depiction highlights that resistance can manifest in various forms, from quiet endurance and everyday acts of defiance to overt acts of self-assertion and the pursuit of knowledge, collectively shaping a more comprehensive understanding of Dalit struggles. The act of writing itself becomes a form of epistemic resistance, asserting their right to define their own reality and knowledge.

#### **4.2. The Transformative Vision of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar**

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar emerges as a pivotal and transformative figure within the narrative, serving as a "trusted role model and leader" who inspired "unified resistance against the caste system". His teachings on "social justice, equality, and the rejection of caste-based discrimination" provided a crucial "framework for comprehending and combating injustice".

Ambedkar's "revolutionary ideas shaped Dalit ideology and intensified the Dalit Liberation Movement". He is credited with "rescuing" Dalits from their dire fate and "making this new life for us". His powerful call for conversion away from Hinduism and the abandonment of oppressive religious beliefs brought about an "immense change" in the Mahars' attitude. Furthermore, his urging Dalits to give up degrading practices such as dragging dead animals and eating their meat had a "positive impact" on their social standing and self-respect.

Ambedkar's ideology is presented as the primary catalyst for the collective "metamorphosis" of the Mahar community. His intellectual and social leadership provided not just hope but concrete pathways—through education, religious conversion, and the rejection of



degrading practices- for Dalits to break free from the psychological and social "prisons" of caste. This ideological awakening fostered a "new emancipator ideology" that enabled the community to find "a way to freedom from the oppressive ideologies of caste system and patriarchy". The text demonstrates that true social transformation requires a fundamental shift in consciousness and a comprehensive rejection of deeply entrenched oppressive norms, both external (caste system) and internal (patriarchy within the community). The crucial Ambedkarite principle that the "annihilation of caste is intrinsically linked with the liberation of women" resonates deeply within Kamble's narrative, highlighting the holistic nature of his vision for liberation.

#### **4.3. Writing as a Revolutionary Act**

Kamble's autobiography is portrayed as a powerful "means of self-examination, self-creation and self-regeneration". It is described as a "boon for Dalit writers" to "vent their anger which was buried deep in their minds" and to "express whatever they have experienced (their painful past)", offering a vital outlet for suppressed trauma and outrage.

Kamble explicitly regards writing as an "effective way to defy the Brahminical hegemony". She articulates her profound motivation: "I have to express this anger, give vent to my sense of outrage... I must write about it. I must proclaim to the world what we have suffered". This act of writing is thus positioned as a direct "means of countering the misinterpretation of Dalit people" and asserting their authentic identity.

Dalit literature, through pioneering works like Kamble's, serves to "generate awareness in their communities" and provoke "series of heated debates and deep penetrative thoughts in the Dalit mass". It is characterized as a "democratic literary movement" fundamentally aimed at "uprooting untouchability, caste and gender discrimination and to demand equal opportunities in every field of life". Kamble's act of writing is a profound act of epistemic resistance. By meticulously documenting the lived realities and "unheard sufferings" of Dalit women, she directly challenges dominant knowledge systems that have historically rendered these experiences invisible, distorted, or dismissed. Her narrative becomes a primary source of truth, creating a "faithful and honest depiction of the contemporary society" that provokes critical thought and fosters collective consciousness among the oppressed. This process of self-narration is crucial for "shaping a more comprehensive understanding of Dalit struggles" and for empowering the community to "reclaim their agency and voice in the face of historical erasure". Thus, writing

functions as a powerful form of counter-memory, actively constructing an alternative historical record from the perspective of the subaltern.

## 5. Conclusion: Enduring Legacy and Contemporary Relevance

*The Prisons We Broke* stands as a seminal socio-biography, transcending individual experience to offer a collective testimony of the Mahar community's multifaceted oppression rooted in the insidious interplay of caste, gender, and class. The narrative powerfully exposes not only external caste discrimination and economic exploitation but also the complex, often internalized, patriarchal norms prevalent within the Dalit community itself. Crucially, Kamble's work is not solely a depiction of suffering but a profound testament to the remarkable resilience and agency of Dalit women, whose struggles for dignity and liberation are intrinsically linked to the transformative vision and teachings of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. The very act of writing is portrayed as a revolutionary act, a powerful means of self-assertion, and a catalyst for social change, giving an audible voice to the historically silenced.

The autobiography remains an "essential book in the collection of stories of Dalit women", providing a "realistic insight into the oppressive caste and patriarchal norms of our Indian society". Its enduring legacy lies in its unvarnished portrayal of the "hard reality faced by the marginalized and 'voiceless' Dalit population". *The Prisons We Broke* transcends its historical context to serve as a powerful and enduring call to action, highlighting that the "centuries old conservative mindset remains immune to all these transformations". Its themes of intersectional oppression, systemic dehumanization, and the ongoing struggle for dignity and equality remain acutely relevant in contemporary India and resonate globally with other marginalized communities fighting for social justice. The text compels readers to confront ongoing social injustices and underscores the continuous need for "unwavering determination and unceasing battle for equality and justice" to achieve a truly "fairer and more inclusive community". Kamble's narrative, therefore, is not merely a historical account but a living document that continues to inspire persistence and hope in the ongoing struggle for human rights and social transformation.

## Bibliography:

### Primary Source:

1. Kamble, Baby. *The Prisons We Broke*. Translated by Maya Pandit, Orient Blackswan, 2009.

## Secondary Sources:

1. Kanwar, Rajni. "Resistance in Dalit Women's Autobiographies: A Study of The Prison We Broke and The Weave of My Life." *VEETHIKA-An International Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2022, pp. 20-24. *VEETHIKA*, <https://qtanalytics.in/journals/index.php/VEETHIKA/article/view/1574>.
2. Khairnar, Dr. P. V., and Dr. S. S. Khairnar. "A Thematic Study of Baby Kamble's The Prisons We Broke." *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities (IJELLH)*, vol. III, no. II, Apr. 2015, pp. 126-32. *IJELLH*, <http://ijellh.com/papers/2015/April/13-126-132-April-2015.pdf>.
3. Khairnar, Dr. S. S. "A Contemporary Perspective on Dalit Literature." *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences (IJELS)*, vol. 4, no. 3, May-Jun. 2019, pp. 757-62. *IJELS*, [https://ijels.com/upload\\_document/issue\\_files/47IJELS-JUN-2019-30-DalitLiterature.pdf](https://ijels.com/upload_document/issue_files/47IJELS-JUN-2019-30-DalitLiterature.pdf).  
Khairnar, Dr. S. S. "Baby Kamble's The Prisons We Broke: A Milestone in Dalit Writings." *International Journal of Research in Humanities, Arts and Literature (IJRHAL)*, vol. 5, no. 11, Nov. 2017, pp. 1-7. ER Publications, [https://www.erpublishings.com/uploaded\\_files/download/download\\_04\\_11\\_2017\\_12\\_36\\_34.pdf](https://www.erpublishings.com/uploaded_files/download/download_04_11_2017_12_36_34.pdf).
4. Khairnar, Dr. S. S., and Dr. P. V. Khairnar. "Caste, Gender, and Empowerment: An Intersectional Analysis of Baby Kamble's The Prisons We Broke." *International Journal of Psychosocial Rehabilitation*, vol. 24, no. 02, 2020, pp. 4001-08. *International Journal of Psychosocial Rehabilitation*, <https://psychosocial.com/PSY/index.php/ijpr/article/download/2964/2727/5474>.
5. Khairnar, Dr. S. S., and Dr. P. V. Khairnar. "GENDER AND CASTE BY WOMEN WRITERS: DAS, ROY, KAMBLE, AND PAWAR." *Research and Reviews in Literature, Social Sciences, Education, Commerce and Management Volume III*, Bhumi Publishing, 2024, pp. 179-85. Bhumi Publishing, <https://www.bhumipublishing.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Research-and-Reviews-in-Literature-Social-Sciences-Education-Commerce-and-Management-Volume-III.pdf>.
6. Khairnar, Dr. S. S. "Locating Freedom of Self in the Community: On Reading Baby Kamble's The Prisons We Broke." *All About Ambedkar: A Journal on Theory and Praxis*, vol. 1, no. 1, Sept.-Dec. 2020, pp. 54-63. *All About Ambedkar Online*,

<https://www.allaboutambedkaronline.com/post/locating-freedom-of-self-in-the-community-on-reading-baby-kamble-s-the-prisons-we-broke>.

7. Khairnar, Dr. S. S., and Dr. P. V. Khairnar. "The Prisons We Broke: A Thematic Analysis of Insults, Structural Exclusion, and Persistence." *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT)*, vol. 10, no. 1, Jan. 2022, pp. 912-16. IJCRT, <https://ijcrt.org/papers/IJCRT2201668.pdf>.

8. Kumar, Amit. "Breaking The Chains: Baby Kamble's Struggle Against Poverty, Untouchability, And Dalit Patriarchy In The Prisons We Broke." *Journal for ReAttach Therapy and Developmental Diversities*, vol. 6, no. 3s, 25 Mar. 2023, pp. 886-89. *Journal for ReAttach Therapy and Developmental Diversities*, <https://jrtdd.com/index.php/journal/article/view/2975>.

9. Mane, Dr. Milind. "Baby Kamble's The Prison We Broke: A Vivid Depiction of her Community." *Literary Cognizance*, vol. III, no. 2, Sept. 2022, pp. 62-65. *Literary Cognizance*, [https://www.literarycognizance.com/images/vol3-issue-2/13\\_DrMilindMane.pdf](https://www.literarycognizance.com/images/vol3-issue-2/13_DrMilindMane.pdf).

10. Syal, Dr. Jyoti, and Mrs. Kamlesh Kumari. "From Agony to Assertion: A Socio-Cultural Critique of The Prisons We Broke." *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR)*, vol. 6, no. 1, Jan. 2019, pp. 167-79. JETIR, <https://www.jetir.org/view?paper=JETIR1901G25>.