



Embodied Resistance: Dalit Womanhood in Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*

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Abstract—The present study explores the representation of the Dalit woman's body as a dynamic and subversive site of protest in Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) an autobiographical narrative that articulates both personal and collective histories of oppression. Grounded in the frameworks of Dalit feminism, intersectionality, and body politics, the study examines how Kamble reclaims the Dalit woman's corporeality from its historical positioning as impure, subhuman, and socially disposable. The narrative dismantles Brahmanical constructs of purity and pollution that have long disciplined the Dalit body and rendered it a locus of social stigma and moral surveillance. Through Kamble's powerful narration of hunger, labour, childbirth, and communal struggle, the body becomes more than a site of suffering—it emerges as a vessel of memory, identity, and defiance.

The paper argues that Kamble's text performs a radical act of self-representation: she transforms the female Dalit body into a medium of political communication that speaks against centuries of casteist and patriarchal silencing. This act of embodied narrations situates *The Prisons We Broke* within a broader continuum of testimonial writing that challenges the epistemic violence of dominant historiography. Furthermore, by connecting Kamble's narrative to present-day discourses on gendered violence, caste discrimination, and the sort of MeToo Dalit movement, the study underscores the enduring relevance of her work. In transforming corporeal pain into political expression, Kamble not only asserts the dignity of the Dalit woman but also redefines resistance as an embodied, affective, and intellectual practice that continues to inform contemporary Dalit feminist consciousness.

Keywords: Body, Dalit, Stigma, Resistance, Politics, Feminist consciousness

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INTRODUCTION

The question of the body has always been central to the politics of caste and gender in India. Within the Brahmanical social order, the Dalit body, and particularly the Dalit woman's body, has been historically coded as impure, polluting, and subhuman. Denied agency, visibility, and dignity, it has been subjected to multiple forms of violence—ritual, sexual, economic, and symbolic. Against this entrenched history of degradation, Dalit women's writing has emerged as a powerful counter-discourse that reclaims the body as a site of speech, memory, and defiance. Among the earliest and most significant of such interventions is Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (originally *Jina Amuchain* in Marathi), which transforms personal suffering into collective resistance.

Kamble's autobiography occupies a pivotal position in the genealogy of Dalit literature in Maharashtra. Written in the 1960s but published later, the text emerges from a socio-political climate shaped by Ambedkarite reform, the decline of feudal structures, and the rise of Dalit consciousness movements such as the Dalit Panthers. The work aligns itself with this

revolutionary ethos yet departs from the male-centered narratives that dominated early Dalit autobiographical traditions. By foregrounding the lived experiences of Dalit women—their labour, hunger, childbirth, and endurance—Kamble reorients the Dalit discourse from external protest to the intimate terrain of the body, where oppression and resistance coexist.

The title *The Prisons We Broke* itself functions as a powerful metaphor for liberation from the multiple enclosures of caste, patriarchy, and poverty. Through her unflinching descriptions of everyday life in the Maharwada, Kamble constructs a literary space where the Dalit woman's body is not merely written about but written through—it becomes both the medium and the message of rebellion. The bruised and exploited body, long denied narrative authority, becomes a living archive of oppression and a text of protest. Kamble's project is thus twofold: she dismantles the ideological apparatus of Brahmanical patriarchy and simultaneously questions the patriarchal hierarchies within her own community that perpetuate women's subordination.

From a theoretical standpoint, Kamble's narrative may be read through the intersecting lenses of Dalit feminism and body politics. Scholars such as Sharmila Rege, Gopal Guru, and Anupama Rao have emphasized that the Dalit woman's experience cannot be subsumed under mainstream feminist or Dalit male frameworks, as her marginalization operates at the intersection of caste and gender. Kamble's text anticipates this intersectional understanding long before it was theorized. The Dalit woman's body in her work is a political entity—it bears witness, it remembers, and it resists. Her physical endurance, often marked by hunger, exploitation, and violence, becomes a performative assertion of survival. As Judith Butler suggests, the body is not merely passive matter but a site of power, inscription, and re-signification; in Kamble's work, it is precisely through corporeal suffering that the Dalit woman articulates agency and defiance. Equally significant is Kamble's refusal to romanticize the life of her community. Her writing is marked by an honesty that exposes internalized hierarchies, superstitions, and gendered injustices within the Mahar community itself. This self-reflexive critique distinguishes her work from many male Dalit autobiographies and situates her firmly within the lineage of radical Dalit feminist thought. The woman's body, in Kamble's text, is neither a symbol of purity nor victimhood—it is an active participant in history, a corporeal text through which the politics of caste and gender are simultaneously contested and rewritten. Moreover, in contemporary times, when caste-based and gendered violence continues to haunt India's social landscape, Kamble's narrative assumes renewed significance. Movements such as #MeTooDalit, Dalit women's collectives, and digital activism continue to expand the politics of visibility that Kamble initiated through her autobiographical act. The body remains central to this politics—it is at once a site of vulnerability and an instrument of protest.

Thus, this paper argues that *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) redefines the Dalit woman's body as a text of resistance. Kamble transforms the abject body—subjected to violence, exclusion, and silence—into a site of historical memory, community consciousness, and feminist assertion. Her work not only reclaims the right to narrate the self but also challenges the epistemic structures that have long rendered the Dalit woman invisible. In reclaiming her body and her story, Kamble symbolically breaks the prisons of both caste and patriarchy, offering a radical reimagining of freedom rooted in embodied protest.

Body as Text: Abjection and Visibility in *The Prisons We Broke*

Baby Kamble begins with a searing portrayal of the Mahar community's physical and moral degradation. Her descriptions—of bodies covered in layers of dirt,

children crawling with lice, women clothed in tattered rags, and entire families living amidst filth—unveil the lived reality of caste oppression. The corporeal imagery here is not incidental; it serves as a powerful socio-political commentary on how caste and gender hierarchies are inscribed upon the body. As Kamble writes, "People would be covered in thick layers of dust and dirt, a black coating on their skin," a statement that transforms dirt from a marker of shame into a historical record of systemic neglect.

Kamble's portrayal of the Dalit woman's nakedness and her struggle for even minimal clothing exposes how the body becomes the first site of caste-inflicted violence. Denied hygiene, privacy, and dignity, these women inhabit what Gayatri Spivak might call the *subaltern body*—rendered visible only through its suffering. Yet, by narrating these bodily humiliations in explicit detail, Kamble refuses invisibility. Her writing constitutes an act of *reclamation*, forcing readers to confront the embodied consequences of caste. In this sense, the Dalit woman's body is not merely the victim of social violence but the medium through which protest is articulated. Furthermore, Kamble's references to local deities and household rituals—where stones painted with saffron are worshiped as gods—reveal a disturbing interplay between superstition, patriarchy, and subjugation. The irony is sharp: the women who maintain these ritual spaces and perform the acts of worship are themselves denied the right to dignity. The worship of goddesses mirrors the symbolic domestication of real women, whose bodies are offered up to the same oppressive structures that claim to sanctify them. By describing these scenes without embellishment, Kamble exposes the deep complicity between caste religion and the policing of female bodies. Yet Kamble's narrative refuses to end in despair. The concluding line of this section—"the tiny sapling of hope was reared in their hearts, drawing strength from the iron in their souls"—marks a transition from bodily degradation to spiritual resilience. The Dalit woman's body, once degraded, becomes a vessel of historical consciousness and moral strength. The very flesh that was once marked by pollution now becomes the source of protest, memory, and transformation. Kamble's act of narration itself thus becomes an Ambedkarite gesture—writing as resistance, body as testimony, memory as protest.

The Dalit woman's body as *alocus of intersecting oppressions*—the site where caste, class, and gender hierarchies converge most violently. Her narrative foregrounds the backbreaking, unacknowledged labour of Mahar women, whose daily routines—caring for children, collecting firewood, cooking, and selling in nearby towns—constitute the invisible infrastructure of both Dalit survival and upper-caste comfort. Yet, these same bodies become the targets of humiliation,

harassment, and sexual exploitation by caste-Hindu men. Kamble's depiction of their corporeal existence is not simply ethnographic; it is diagnostic, unveiling the ways in which the materiality of the Dalit woman's body encodes the politics of caste patriarchy.

The Dalit woman's labour, unlike that of her upper-caste counterpart, is doubly inscribed: it is productive and reproductive, public and domestic, necessary and despised. She inhabits a corporeal paradox—her body sustains the social order while simultaneously being marked as contaminating to it. In this sense, Kamble's representation can be read through Shailaja Paik's (2018) formulation of the *Dalit feminist dilemma*, which oscillates between viewing Dalit women as "victims" and "heroines." Kamble refuses both poles. Her women are neither tragic embodiments of suffering nor mythic figures of valor; they are complex agents whose endurance itself becomes a subaltern epistemology of resistance. Through repetitive, embodied labour, Kamble's women enact what can be termed *anaesthetics of survival*—a politics that operates below the threshold of visibility yet destabilizes the very hierarchies that seek to erase them. Their hands, feet, and backs—sites of exhaustion and pain—become semiotic surfaces on which histories of subjugation are written and rewritten. In depicting these women not as passive recipients of oppression but as bearers of embodied knowledge, Kamble anticipates what later Dalit feminist thinkers articulate as the epistemic value of *bodily memory*. The act of survival, in her text, is not apolitical; it is the first grammar of dissent.

This hierarchical dynamic of caste operates not only at the collective level but also within the intimate sphere of the family, reproducing social inequalities through gendered norms of honour and control. As Jaspal (2011) and Mahalingam (2007) suggest, caste hierarchies are sustained through processes of *stigmatization and symbolic degradation*, whereby dominant castes construct their self-esteem and moral superiority through the denigration of lower castes. This psychological and cultural mechanism of exclusion mirrors itself in the domestic patriarchies of Dalit life, where male authority internalizes and reenacts the very structures of domination that oppress the community from outside. Kamble incisively exposes this internalized patriarchy through her portrayal of her mother's subjugation under her father's rigid sense of *honour*. She writes,

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" (Kamble 5).

Through this recollection, Kamble critiques the patriarchal logic that equates female invisibility with moral virtue, revealing how caste ideology intertwines with gendered seclusion to reinforce women's social erasure. In documenting her mother's entrapment, Kamble does more than narrate a personal memory; she unravels the *microcosm of caste patriarchy* embedded within Dalit households. Her narrative insists that liberation cannot be achieved through caste mobility alone—it must simultaneously confront the patriarchal codes that define women's bodies as custodians of male honour. The domestic threshold, thus, becomes both a literal and a symbolic boundary: it marks the confinement of the Dalit woman, but also serves as the site where her resistance begins to take shape.

In this sense, *The Prisons We Broke* transforms the Dalit woman's body into a discursive battlefield, where the politics of abjection and the poetics of assertion coexist. The physical exhaustion of labouring bodies does not signify defeat but rather inscribes an alternative form of agency—one that is tactile, communal, and transgressive. Kamble's women articulate a politics of freedom that is not premised on abstraction but emerges from the somatic realities of hunger, fatigue, and survival. Their bodies, long relegated to the periphery of representation, become the very medium through which the text reimagines resistance and autonomy.

Kamble valorizes the unspoken solidarity among Dalit women, a collective born out of centuries of shared suffering and silent endurance. Through her narrative, she transforms this inherited silence into a site of articulation and defiance—urging Dalit women to resist not only caste-based oppression but also the patriarchal domination entrenched within their own communities. As Charu (2016) observes, Dalit women's writing performs an act of double resistance, speaking against external caste hierarchies as well as internalized gender hierarchies. This dual struggle destabilizes the conventional perception of Dalit women merely as victims and instead repositions them as active agents of resistance and reform.

Charu (2016) further interrogates the construct of Dalit masculinity, revealing how it is shaped by the aspiration to emulate upper-caste models of manhood—figures perceived as physically and intellectually superior. This imitation, though seemingly a strategy for social mobility, inadvertently reinforces Brahmanical ideals and perpetuates gender subordination within Dalit households. Kamble's text lays bare this contradiction, exposing how the quest for dignity and equality among Dalit men sometimes

manifests in the oppression of Dalit women, who become the symbolic bearers of caste respectability.

Drawing upon Paik's (2018) discussion of the "process of Sanskritization," it becomes evident that as marginalized communities strive for upward mobility, they often internalize and reproduce patriarchal norms from the dominant castes. This phenomenon constrains Dalit women further, subjecting their bodies to renewed moral and social surveillance. In this context, Dalit women writers such as Kamble employ what Foucault terms the "technologies of the self" to reconstruct female subjectivities—asserting education, self-respect, and bodily autonomy as acts of rebellion. Through this process, Kamble transforms the Dalit woman's body from a site of subjugation into a locus of self-fashioning and political protest.

Conclusion

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) reconfigures the Dalit woman's body as a powerful archive of memory, suffering, and resistance. The corporeal becomes political—marked by hunger, labour, motherhood, and violence, yet also by resilience and assertion. Through her unflinching portrayal of the Mahar women's everyday lives, Kamble dismantles both caste and patriarchal hegemonies that have historically sought to discipline and silence Dalit women's bodies. Her narrative transforms bodily experience into a language of

protest, where pain and endurance acquire epistemic value, unsettling the Brahmanical and patriarchal codes that define purity, morality, and honour. Kamble's work reveals that Dalit women's liberation cannot be achieved through caste emancipation alone; it demands a simultaneous critique of internalized patriarchy and gendered subjugation within the community. By exposing the complicity of Dalit men in perpetuating patriarchal violence, Kamble reclaims the Dalit feminist standpoint as distinct from both mainstream feminism and Ambedkarite reform movements. The Dalit woman, in her writing, emerges not as a passive victim but as a *ahistorical subject* who negotiates freedom through the rearticulation of her own body—asserting her right to visibility, dignity, and desire.

In this sense, *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) transcends its autobiographical frame to function as a *collective testimony* of Dalit womanhood. Kamble's act of writing itself becomes an embodied form of protest—a reclamation of voice and space denied to Dalit women for generations. Her text destabilizes the symbolic "threshold" that confined women within domestic and caste boundaries, turning it instead into a site of feminist self-fashioning. Ultimately, Kamble's work invites us to rethink the politics of the body, not merely as an instrument of oppression but as an active site of consciousness, agency, and social transformation..

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