



ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

An UGC Approved Open Access Journal

Vol. 2 No.4/ December, 2017

Editor: Saikat Banerjee

<http://daathvoyagejournal.com>

Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee

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: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

ISSN 2455-7544

www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Vol.2, No.4, December, 2017

Decoding The Act of Oppressive Rituals And Possessed Women In Baby Kamble's The Prisons We Broke

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Abstract: The prisons we broke is an extraordinary masterpiece by Baby Kamble, recounting the horrors of Brahmanical hegemony and patriarchal domination as faced by the Dalit community, particularly 'Mahars'. This paper will analyze the construction of some violent rituals along the lines of suppressing the 'other' gender (here Mahar women) that eventually affects the shaping of one's identity on cultural, social and personal levels. Also, evaluate the tradition of oppressive customary rituals in relation with Mahar women from the explanatory framework of 'functionalist, psychoanalytic, physiological, symbolic, and theatrical' approach. Another imperative discussion area in this paper is the religious practice of spirit possession and the performance of Mahar women's possessed self and body as a method of creating a presence, free space and to display resistance, which they are deprived of in both private and public spheres.

Keywords: Baby Kamble, The Prisons We Broke, Rituals, Spirit Possession, Mahar Women, Oppressive.

Baby Kamble's '*The prisons we broke*' originally written in Marathi as '*JinaAmucha*', is the first groundbreaking autobiography by a Dalit woman, recounting the horrors of Brahmanical hegemony and patriarchal domination. It can be labeled as a social biography of a Dalit woman, taking up an unprecedented endeavor of presenting a self-critical reflection on the life of Mahar community of Western part of Maharashtra as well as capturing the transformation that Ambedkarite movement had brought to their lives. Kamble depicts the structural imposition of hegemonic norms of caste-society on Mahar women often exercised by the people of their own



community, victimized oppressors¹, thus caging them into a vicious cycle of tormentation, and therefore possibly betraying any hope of their liberation. Kamble presents a Dalit feminist critique of patriarchal order by giving a detailed account of the oppressively ritualistic practices performed within Mahar community, reflecting how they are prisoners of their own deceptive faith and its practices. *The prisons we broke* depicts various religious and mundane rituals, practiced by the Mahars before their conversion to Buddhism, strictly cemented around their everyday life experiences. These social rituals of varied nature and complexities which are performed with utmost sincerity by Mahars illustrate for us the oppressive nature of Brahminical rituals with which they were surrounded, and at the same time, their quest for liberation manifested by their participation in Ambedkar's anti-caste movement. As depicted in the book, Mahar women face harsh circumstances and exploitation throughout their lives on the account of their caste-gender location (being Dalit women) and location of their gender (as women) within caste-system as they are triply marginalized and treated as 'Mahar amongst the Mahars'. They suffer myriad types of abuses such as child marriage, domestic violence, patriarchal-subjugation, sub-human existence etc.

The idea of ritual is not restricted only to a religious phenomenon; it can be referred to any repetitive action resultant of conditioned behavior and state of mental indoctrination, all are being the epistemic locations of the dominant groups within the society. As Jack David Eller in his pursuit of providing a flexible understanding of ritual, quotes Thomas Barfield, "In its broadest sense, the ritual may refer not to any particular kind of event but to the expressive aspect of all human activity. To the extent that it conveys messages about the social and cultural status of individuals, any human action has a ritual dimension"(Eller). Further to point out some core characteristic of ritual as an event, and gain a more fluidity in the understanding of its nature, he depicts ritual as habitual, obsessive or mimetic in its making. However, the theoretical explanation of a ritual as an action may differentiate it from various conceptual ideas like belief with which it is intertwined, and can not exist in an isolation. As extrapolated by Catherine Bell, "beliefs could exist without rituals;

¹ The term Victimised-Oppressor here refers to Dalit men. In this context of this biography, it refers to Mahar men as being men; they are often responsible for holding of patriarchal notions and thus subjugating Dalit women. But at the same time Mahar men being the oppressor in the context of patriarchy, they are also victims of Caste system. This very theoretical location of Mahar men is the basis of coinage of the term called Victimised Oppressor.



rituals, however, could not exist without beliefs”(Bell).

It is this *working* of a strong beliefsystem along with a ritual that assures its unhindered continuation in a specific society. It can be divided into two categories of religious and quotidian, in relation with the Mahar women, who stood at the receiving end of an exploitative system that is an amalgamation of caste-based discrimination and domestic violence.

Under the strict normative culture of caste-system, Mahars are made to live deplorable lives in an abject poverty, deprivation, and hunger. The locality in which they used to live was called ‘*Maharwada*’, situated at the margins of the village. In spite of the fact that Mahars were made to lead a life of sub-human, it was the realizationof collective consciousness by them, shaped by their sense of sharing a common chord of pain, became an ostensible working-principle within their community. Everything became social and a community affair. From cooking of the dead animal to the distribution of the collected leftover food into equal share and an active participation in religious festivals, ritual and marriage ceremonies. The community ideals like its customs, beliefs, cultural and social practices which were vital markers of the community identity were treated higher than personal interests. Thus, their individual identity was projected by their communityas well as their collective consciousness and was treated secondary or submissive. They,as untouchables,were thrust into poor socio-cultural-religious conditions being discarded from the society by the Hindu philosophy on the one hand and on the other hand, theywere made to uphold the Hindu religion, customs, rites and gods. In this process, they consider worshipping their gods a *holy* act and they believe that these gods acted as social beings,interfering in the lives of their devotees for their own betterment. These practices were so widespread thateach Mahar house had the figure of gods placed on a raised platform. The importance of religion in their community could be understood from the fact that the size of platform and number of gods stations would become a symbol of prestige and this would determine their family status.The ritual appeasement of their local gods was considered as a holy duty which they take as a magical nostrum to end all their griefs and sufferings.Mahars then believed insupernatural entities and their lives were guided by umpteen superstitious beliefs that they followed before becoming Buddhists in 1956. Ritual



offerings like *murali*² and *jogtin*³, were offerings of a young girl in the service of the local gods and goddesses was the most prevalent practice among Mahars and was considered as an honor. The inhumane nature of treating women as mere objects during these offerings to divine deities is what makes it an oppressive ritual.

The biggest and happiest occasion in their lives was the religious month of *Ashadh*. It was the month of “ritual baths, house cleaning, and polishing of floors with dung... yet it was a month of comfort.... Ashadh was an antidote”(Kamble). It would be a hectic month for women who were expected to perform cleaning rituals regularly and various other domestic chores. After a young Mahar girl transforms into a married woman these rituals become an integral part of her *expected* “gender norms” through which excessive control is exercised and she is exploited during its performance. The compliance offered by the oppressed Mahar women suggest towards their helplessness and practice of self-discipline. Thus, the nature of oppression on the women runs both internally and externally. The internal oppression within Mahar women through their social conditioning tends to exaggerate the conformity with the oppressor's suppressive norms. Mahar women were often seen adopting a self-disciplining behavior where the slightest sense of digression from the prescribed dominant social norm would make them express their anguish to themselves.

Mother-in-laws enjoyed a temporary dominant position in the community with their roles as possessed women. In the midst of religious festivity, the oppressed self of a daughter-in-law would yearn for the sweet food, the rewards they patiently waited for a whole year. They perform a rather passive role in these religious rituals, unlike their mother in laws. Young married women were considered *Suwasini* who would put “*kumkum and haldi*”⁴ on the foreheads of possessed women as a mark of their undying devotion and submission to both the goddesses and to their authoritative mother-in-laws. Possessed women would put up a performance of nonstop dancing, moving freely to the rhythmic beats of drums played by *Potraja*⁵ in front of the whole community. They would go carefree with open hair, wild bodily movements, no pallav over their heads, making loud shrill

²A girl offered to god Khandoba in marriage.

³A girl offered to goddess Bhawani/Ambabai as her ritual worshipper.

⁴Vermilion powder and turmeric powder.

⁵Ritual worshipper of the local god Khandoba and goddesses like Ambabai of the Mahar community



noises, enjoying a temporal sense of liberation they are otherwise not allowed to experience thus registering their protest against the patriarchal hegemony. In this temporary transgression, she literally takes on a dominant personality in the ritual space, uplifted from sub-human level to the level of divinity as devotees fell at her feet. It helps to release out her internal desires and the ability to offer remedies and protection to others that allow her to exercise sufficient authority and social control within that space. This ritual also symbolizes Mahar (possessed) women's ability to regain her autonomy as a human agency as she becomes a matter of divinity and respect during this period. Her dominant position during the ceremony is expressed in the following lines: "The man of the house would then literally fall at his wife's feet. He begged her to have mercy on him" (Kamble). At another instance, the husband says, "I'll even untie my turban and put it at my wife's feet to express my humility. But please don't torture her body" (Kamble). Her descendance to the corporeal world and gaining a sense of consciousness is marked with a return to her old submissive self and marks a willing reinforcement of the repressive norms by her immediate self-monitoring. This is captured in the lines elaborating her action: "Hurriedly, she tied her disheveled hair into a knot and pulled the pallav on her head, becoming, once again, a docile and virtuous wife. Then she exclaimed in anguish, 'oh, is my mamaji here? Oh god, how my pallav has slipped from my head, like a slut, in front of all these elderly people!" (Kamble). A discriminatory behavior is witnessed in Mahar men, assuming a "ritual subordination"⁶ (Michael and Wulf) in front of possessed woman while she is treated as "other" with gaining of her consciousness. Elderly men of the community would also show this selective reverence towards women of the community and its temporary nature, they hurl condescending remarks on them, like, "Hey you, are you women from good families or female donkey? Go and fetch the Kumkum box like a good wife" (Kamble). She is constantly reminded of her ritualistic behavior of a good wife and the submissive roles of 'stridharma' that she should

⁶ I have taken the term "ritual subordination" from the anthropologist William Sax's essay entitled: "Emotional Detachment and expression Garhwali Possession Rituals, where he is referring to the submission shown by an upper caste possessed person (can be male or female) towards the Jagar, who is the sole controller of the possession ceremony and belong to a lower caste. Whereas, I have used the term in the context of gender ---submission during the possession ceremony among Mahars where a dominant male temporarily becomes submissive in front of the possessed women representing the divine spirit in the ritual space.



never forget. The brutality became more severe because these were child brides and sasus⁷ who would slander them for not covering the face with pallav properly. At this point, all the ladies or sasus would defame the young girl, calling her names like “slut”, “bitch”, and “*Kalwatin*”⁸.

Mundane Rituals

The degenerating notion of purity rituals forced Mahars to maintain a safe distance from upper caste men and women. As Uma Chakravarti notes, “Notions of purity were regarded as the most powerful protection against social contamination and efforts were made to erect it as the universal hierarchical principle, and as if it had the consent of all the castes (Chakravati). Mahar women had to take strict care of this purity ritual such as they had to change their path if an upper caste male was coming. While selling firewood or grass to upper caste women they have to take care that they don’t leave behind any hair or thread from a sari. Women were obliged to greet upper caste men with a ritual chant “The humble Mahar women fall at your feet master”(Kamble) and if an oblivious young bride forgets to do so she would have to suffer the wrath.

As Paulo Freire said, “The oppressed wants at any cost to resemble the oppressors. The oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors.” In the same context, if the process of Conscientization⁹ is yet to be taken place, the desire to dominate others is irresistible and Kamble points toward this vicious tendency and deeply rooted slave mentality amongst Mahar community when she says, “The other world had bound us with chains of slavery... And we too desired to dominate, to wield power. But who would let us do that? So we made our own arrangements to find slaves-our very own daughters-in-law! If nobody else, then we could at least enslave them”(Kamble). Among Mahar women, there existed a hierarchy between superior mother-in-law and inferior daughter-in-law which speaks of a struggle in their relationship. Kamble narrates the dehumanizing treatment towards daughter-in-laws:

These sasus ruined lives of innocent women forever. Every day the Maharwada would resound with the cries of hapless women from some house or the other. Husbands, flogging

⁷Mother-in-law in local language.

⁸A dancing woman from the Kolhati caste: also means women artist. The word is also used as a term of insult, signifying a woman with loose morals.

⁹Read Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*



their wives as if they were beasts and would do so until the sticks broke with the effort. The heads of these women would break open, their backbones would be crushed, and some would collapse unconscious. But there was nobody to care for them.

Mother-in-laws uses their 'disguised voluntary possession'¹⁰ as a weapon to instigate their sons against daughter-in-laws and validate their false claims. Eventually, her wicked conspiracy would lead to the involvement of other members of her family, her husband and son would join hands in torturing the young bride. Many times daughter-in-laws would make a futile attempt to runaway from the house in the dark. However, this would turn into a futile escape because even her own maternal family would disapprove of it and showed no sympathy towards her. As Kamble describes, "Even her brother and father would flog her mercilessly and ask the in-laws to take her back" (Kamble, 2009: 99). Later she would be punished with another violent ritual of tying a makeshift device to her leg in order to control her movement. This practice was to restrict her mobility to an extent that it became impossible for her to even think of an escape ever. Sasus' pretentiously crying and virulent speech would make her son furious so much so that he would get ready to chop his wife's nose. After chopping off her nose, she was thrown out of the house in disgrace to roam around with a bleeding nose. Her entrance was barred from the so-called good houses, as her mutilation became emblematic of her ostracized identity. Another ritual is of tying her sari in such a way that its border doesn't show and became a marker of her caste identity. These aforementioned violent rituals were imposed on young girls by the entire community with a collective consent so that the oppressed or victim would have nowhere to go and couldn't find an alternative solution. The rituals become a site of imposed norms, behavior, stereotyped-roles, mannerism and closed-choices upon Mahar women. The violent rituals eventually affected Mahar women at psychological level. In the process of their tormented existence they encounter a lot of savage challenges and ultimately these hapless women were left to embrace an oppressive ideology with the silence against which they alone could not resist. When the violence gets established in a community, with times, the oppressive acts which are monotonously performed tends to become

¹⁰As it was made to believe an involuntary possession and that the agency of the divine spirit has overtaken the medium's body and the spirit is speaking through them.



Kamble recounts how the caste oppression and patriarchal dominance injected and supported by the Brahmanical social order would continue function without any revolt from the oppressed, she writes emphatically, “Each generation left their children to serve their oppressors and quietly got wiped off from the face of the earth”(Kamble). These rituals are obsessive, hierarchal, and hereditary in nature and their practice would leave no space for any protest. Any slightest resistance is met with strict rejection. Since the idea of personal identity among Mahars was directly attached with the phenomenon of the community such that any deviation from its prescribed norms would create a fear of losing one’s identity. Thus, a strong tradition of consent and conformity with regressive practices remained intact, even at the cost of someone's life. Despite all, Kamble reminiscent the stir Ambedkar’s call caused among Dalits to annihilate caste, un-follow humiliating Hindu religion for a collective change in order to transcend the boundaries of caste and patriarchy. Kamble’s expression becomes critique to this very idea of oppressing as she tries to question the very structure of oppression and hegemonic ideology that interpellate people into slaves. *The Prisons We Broke* is in many ways a unique piece of narratives to understand the oppression in India at multiple levels: the systematic structures of oppression and a complex web of caste-system. Coming out from such a complex structure of oppression as a manifestation of articulation of oppression and discursively questioning the very structure of oppression, Kamble’s book can only be viewed as the manifesto of rebel.

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