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The Gendered Cage: Dalit Feminist Consciousness And Corporeal Resistance In Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a Dalit feminist analysis of Baby Kamble's seminal autobiographical narrative, *The Prisons We Broke* (Jina Amucha, 1986). Moving beyond a singular focus on caste or gender, the analysis positions Kamble's work as a foundational text that illuminates the intersecting oppressions structuring Dalit women's lives in pre- and post-Ambedkarite Maharashtra. Employing Elaine Showalter's model of feminist literary criticism—particularly her concepts of the "wild zone" and "gynocritics"—as a dialogic framework, the paper argues that Kamble articulates a distinct Dalit feminist consciousness. This consciousness emerges from the specific material and corporeal experiences of Dalit women, challenging both patriarchal norms within the community and the Savarna-dominated feminist discourse. Through close reading, the paper examines Kamble's documentation of triple oppression (caste, class, gender), her portrayal of the Dalit female body as a site of abjection and resistance, and her celebration of collective awakening catalyzed by Ambedkarite movement. The paper concludes that *The Prisons We Broke* performs a dual act of breaking prisons: it dismantles the silent, "wild zone" of Dalit women's experience by bringing it into literary discourse, while simultaneously constructing a gynocritical tradition for Dalit feminism.

Keywords: Dalit Feminism, Baby Kamble, *The Prisons We Broke*, Elaine Showalter, Gynocritics, Wild Zone, Autobiography, Caste, Gender, Ambedkar

Introduction: Breaking into the "Wild Zone" of Dalit Women's Experience

Dalit literature, since its explosive entry into the Indian literary canon, has fundamentally been a literature of testimony, protest, and the assertion of a denied humanity. Within this vibrant tradition, the writings of Dalit women have carved out a distinct space, forcing a critical confrontation with the overlapping structures of caste patriarchy. Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, originally written in Marathi as *Jina Amucha* (Our Lives) in 1986, stands as a pioneering work in this regard. It is not merely an autobiography; it is a communal ethnography, a historical document, and a fierce manifesto of Dalit feminist consciousness. Kamble's narrative meticulously details the life of the Mahar (now Buddhist) community in rural Maharashtra, capturing the brutal realities of untouchability, poverty, and the specific gendered burdens borne by its women.

To analyze this complex text, this paper employs the theoretical framework of Elaine Showalter, a leading figure in Anglo-American feminist criticism. While acknowledging the vast cultural and historical distance between Showalter's context and Kamble's, her theories provide a useful, if contingent, scaffold. Showalter's concept of the "wild zone"—a space of female experience that remains outside dominant (patriarchal) cultural discourse—resonates powerfully with the pre-Ambedkarite existence of Dalit women, which was marginalized within mainstream (Savarna) society, within Dalit patriarchal narratives, and within early Indian feminism (Showalter 262). Furthermore, her advocacy for "gynocritics"—the study of "women as writers," focusing on the "history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by women"—offers a methodology to center Kamble's literary strategies and her construction of a specifically Dalit female subjectivity (Showalter 128). This paper argues that Kamble's work performs a quintessential gynocritical act: it breaks the silence of the Dalit women's "wild zone," inscribing its raw realities into literary history, thereby challenging both casteist and patriarchal hegemonies. The analysis will proceed by examining: 1) the triangulation of oppression (caste, class, gender); 2) the Dalit female body as a site of discipline and resistance; and 3) the transformative role of Ambedkarite philosophy in forging a collective feminist consciousness.

I. The Triple Prison: Caste, Class, and Patriarchal Entrapment

Kamble's narrative begins by mapping the physical and social geography of oppression. The "prisons" of the title are multiple, interlocking, and deeply material. The primary enclosure is caste. Kamble spares no detail in describing the dehumanizing practices of untouchability: the segregated quarters ("Maharwada"), the prohibition against using public wells, the carrying of pots for spit, the consumption of leftover food, and the constant humiliation (Kamble 23-35). This caste oppression is inextricably linked with crippling poverty—the prison of class. The Mahars are landless laborers, dependent on the whims of Savarna landlords for their meager survival. Kamble describes the relentless cycle of debt (*balutedari*), the pawning of meager household items, and the gnawing hunger that defines daily existence.

Within this double bind of caste and class, Kamble reveals a third, internalized prison: Dalit patriarchy. Dalit women bear the brunt of all three systems. They perform exhausting physical labor in the fields and for the landlords, while also being solely responsible for domestic chores, childcare, and managing extreme scarcity. Kamble writes, "The women had to toil like bullocks in the fields. And after returning home, there was the endless housework waiting for them… The menfolk, after finishing their work, would relax, chat, and smoke" (Kamble 41). This gendered division of labor is compounded by social practices that further subordinate women. Kamble critiques customs like child marriage, the treatment of widows, and the acceptance of domestic violence. She recalls the prevalent attitude: "A husband beating his wife was a common, everyday affair… It was considered a sign of his love for her!" (Kamble 58). This grim irony underscores how patriarchal norms are naturalized within the community, often as a perverse coping mechanism for men emasculated by caste oppression.

Showalter's "wild zone" here is not a space of liberatory potential in its initial state, but one of compounded silence and suffering. The experiences of Kamble and women like her—their specific exploitation by Savarna men and Dalit men alike, their reproductive struggles, their invisible domestic and emotional labor—constituted a realm of knowledge and suffering that remained unarticulated in the broader discourses of anti-caste struggle (often male-centered) and the women's movement (often Savarna-centered). Kamble's gynocritical project is to chart this zone, to name its specific torments. By doing so, she refuses to let Dalit women's oppression be subsumed under a homogenizing category of "caste" or "gender." She establishes the *intersectionality* of their identity decades before the term gained academic currency, demonstrating how the "prison" is architected by multiple, simultaneous forces.

II. The Body in Pain, The Body in Protest: Corporeal Narratives

A central strand of Kamble's Dalit feminist testimony is her unflinching focus on the body. The Dalit female body, in her narrative, is the primary surface upon which the violences of caste, class, and patriarchy are inscribed. It is a body marked by hunger, disease, exhaustion, and violence. She describes bodies deformed by constant labor, children's bellies swollen from malnutrition, and the high mortality rates from preventable diseases (Kamble 45-47). The body is also the site of sexual vulnerability and violence, a constant threat from upper-caste men whose power is absolute.

Yet, Kamble does not portray the body merely as a passive victim. In a crucial dialectical move, she also depicts it as a site of resilience, labor, and eventually, resistance. The very body that is broken by work is also the instrument of survival for the family. The female body's capacity for endurance becomes a form of tacit, albeit painful, agency. This duality aligns with Showalter's gynocritical interest in how women writers inhabit and represent corporeal experience, moving beyond abstract theorization to the visceral reality.

The most potent symbol of this embodied oppression and potential is Kamble's detailed discussion of reproductive labor and health. She talks openly about frequent pregnancies, the lack of medical care, infant mortality, and the cultural practices surrounding childbirth, which were often dangerous and unsanitary. This focus on the *biological and social experiences of reproduction* is a hallmark of feminist gynocritics, as it deals with an area of life historically controlled, interpreted, and often mystified by patriarchal institutions. By bringing these "private" bodily experiences into her public narrative, Kamble breaks a profound silence. She asserts that the politics of caste and class cannot be understood without accounting for how they regulate and exploit Dalit women's reproductive capacities.

The body's transformation becomes key to the narrative of awakening. With the advent of Ambedkarite thought, a new relationship with the body emerges. Rejecting polluting carcass-eating and liquor—practices imposed by the caste system—becomes an act of reclaiming bodily dignity. Cleanliness, personal hygiene, and adopting new styles of dress (like the sari instead of the ragged *lugade*) are not merely cosmetic changes; they are political statements of self-respect and a rejection of imposed filth (Kamble 102-105). The body, once a badge of shame, becomes a project for refashioning a new, self-defined identity. This corporeal revolution is a fundamental aspect of the Dalit feminist consciousness Kamble chronicles.

III. Awakening and Articulation: Ambedkarism as Gynocritical Catalyst

The transformative engine in Kamble's narrative is the philosophy and movement led by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. His arrival on the scene is depicted as nothing short of a messianic awakening. Ambedkarite ideology provides the tools to analyze their oppression systematically and the hope to transcend it. For the women in Kamble's account, Ambedkar's message has a uniquely liberatory dimension. He directly addressed women, urging them to educate themselves, to abandon degrading customs, and to stand as equals alongside men in the struggle for dignity.

Kamble vividly describes how women became the most ardent followers of Ambedkar. They saved pennies for his meetings, absorbed his speeches, and began to question the traditional authority of their husbands and fathers. She writes, "Babasaheb sowed the seeds of revolution in our minds… The women began to understand that they were not beasts of burden but human beings" (Kamble 98). This awakening is intellectual and social. Education becomes a coveted tool for liberation, especially for girls. The fight shifts from mere survival to a demand for rights and selfhood.

This collective awakening represents the moment the "wild zone" finds its voice. The private sufferings of Dalit women become the subject of public discussion within the community, fueled by a new political language. Kamble's own act of writing is the ultimate culmination of this process. Showalter's gynocritics emphasizes the importance of women seizing the means of literary production to define their own

experiences. Kamble, a woman with little formal education, does exactly that. She becomes the historian of her community's transition, and specifically of its women's journey from silent drudges to conscious agents.

Her narrative style itself is gynocritical. It is not a linear, individualistic autobiography focused on a unique inner self. It is communal, anecdotal, and episodic, reflecting an oral storytelling culture centered on women. She uses the collective "we" more often than the singular "I," situating her personal story within the fabric of the community's experience. This formal choice challenges the bourgeois, individualist assumptions of some traditional (Western and Savarna) autobiography and feminism, proposing instead a model of feminist consciousness rooted in community and collective memory.

IV. Dialogues and Dissonances: Dalit Feminism in Conversation

Kamble's work implicitly and explicitly enters into critical dialogues. Firstly, it corrects the male bias in much early Dalit literature. While Dalit male writers powerfully depicted caste humiliation, they often relegated women to symbolic roles—as mothers, victims, or emblems of community honor—rarely exploring their interiority or agency. Kamble centers Dalit women as complex subjects, capable of both complicity in patriarchal norms and of revolutionary change. She praises Ambedkar but also subtly notes the persistence of patriarchy even among the educated Dalit men who joined his movement.

Secondly, and crucially, *The Prisons We Broke* stands as a powerful critique of mainstream Indian feminism of its time. Showalter's description of the "wild zone" helps conceptualize this rift. The experiences of Dalit women—their labor, their bodily sufferings under caste, their relationship to ritual pollution—constituted a "wild zone" that was largely inaccessible and unaddressed by the predominantly urban, upper-caste-led Indian women's movement, which often focused on issues like dowry, sati, and legal reforms from a relatively privileged standpoint. Kamble's narrative demonstrates that liberation cannot be one-dimensional. For a Dalit woman, freedom from patriarchal control within the home is meaningless without freedom from caste-based assault and economic exploitation outside it. Her text thus anticipates and grounds the later theoretical interventions of Dalit feminist scholars like Sharmila Rege, who argued that "Dalit women's feminism *begins* with the critique of both Brahmanical patriarchy and of the unchecked patriarchy within the Dalit movement" (Rege 44).

V. The Aesthetics of Testimony: Form, Language, and the Gynocritical Voice

A gynocritical analysis, as proposed by Showalter, is deeply concerned with the "styles, themes, genres, and structures" particular to women's writing (Showalter 129). Kamble's work demands such an examination, as her literary choices are intrinsically political and constitutive of her Dalit feminist standpoint. *The Prisons We Broke* defies easy generic classification. It is an autobiography, a communal history, an ethnography, a political treatise, and a work of moral philosophy. This formal hybridity is not a

lack of artistic discipline but a strategic necessity. The singular, introspective "I" of canonical Western autobiography is inadequate to convey the collective, intersubjective experience of a subjugated community. Kamble's narrative voice constantly oscillates between the personal and the communal. She writes, "Our lives were of a piece. My pain was not mine alone; it was the pain of every Mahar woman in our *wada*" (Kamble 72). This choral "we" establishes a testimonial authority rooted not in individual exceptionalism, but in shared, verifiable suffering and resilience. This formal choice critiques the individualism inherent in both bourgeois literary models and in some strands of feminism that prioritize the autonomous female subject.

Furthermore, Kamble's language—even in translation by Maya Pandit—retains a visceral, oral quality. The narrative is episodic, structured around vivid vignettes and character sketches rather than a strict chronological plot. This mirrors the storytelling traditions of women, who historically passed on knowledge and history through oral narratives in domestic and communal spaces. Her prose is direct, unadorned, and often brutally physical, reflecting the material reality she describes. There is no attempt to aestheticize poverty or to couch humiliation in lyrical metaphor. For instance, her description of the work is stark: "Our hands would crack and bleed from handling the rough sugarcane stalks in the cold. The *savarna* owner would just watch, sometimes throwing a handful of jaggery as if to an animal" (Kamble 50). This linguistic directness is a gynocritical strategy; it refuses to allow the reader the comfort of detached, intellectual contemplation. It forces a sensory and ethical confrontation with the facts of oppression, a technique that aligns with the Dalit literary commitment to "truth-telling" (*satyagraha* in a literary sense).

Showalter, discussing female tradition, notes that women writers often work within and against the constraints of available genres. Kamble takes the autobiographical form, often used to craft a public persona, and subverts it into a vehicle for communal representation. Her "self" is a conduit for a community's memory. This aligns with what feminist scholar Leigh Gilmore calls "autobiographics"—a mode where the autobiographical act is less about revealing a pre-existing self and more about performing a political identity into being (Gilmore 42). Kamble performs the identity of the conscious Dalit feminist woman, and in doing so, she creates a template and an invitation for others.

VI. Internal Critique: The Patriarchal Prison Within

A hallmark of a mature feminist consciousness, as reflected in gynocriticism, is the ability to turn a critical gaze inward, to examine the complicities and contradictions within the community of women and the larger oppressed group. Kamble's narrative is remarkably clear-eyed in this regard. Her celebration of Dalit community and Ambedkarite solidarity does not preclude a sharp critique of the internal patriarchy of the Mahar community. She avoids romanticizing pre-Ambedkarite life, detailing how women were often the enforcers of patriarchal norms against other women. Mothers-in-law perpetuated the cycle of subjugating daughters-in-law; older women policed the behavior of younger girls. Kamble recalls the harsh discipline:

"If a young bride dared to look up while serving the men, or spoke too freely, the older women would pinch her slyly or curse her under their breath. We were trained to be silent shadows" (Kamble 61).

This internal critique is vital for Dalit feminism. It asserts that the struggle for dignity is not only against the external *savarna* oppressor but also against oppressive structures within the community that limit women's potential. Kamble shows how Dalit men, themselves brutalized by caste, often reproduced patriarchal violence as a means of asserting a shred of power and control. The beating of wives, the insistence on male privilege in food distribution during scarcity, and the resistance to women's education are all documented without apology. This nuanced portrayal prevents the narrative from becoming a simplistic dichotomy of pure Dalit victims versus evil Savarna villains. It introduces a necessary self-reflexivity, showing that liberation is a process that must transform intimate and social relations alike. In gynocritical terms, Kamble is writing a *critical* history of her female culture, acknowledging its flaws and internal hierarchies while seeking its transformation.

VII. The Spiritual and the Political: Rejecting Brahmanical Patriarchy, Embracing Ambedkarite Buddha

A significant portion of Kamble's narrative is devoted to detailing the religious and ritualistic life of the community, both before and after conversion to Buddhism. This focus is another key site of her Dalit feminist analysis. She meticulously describes the degrading Hindu rituals the Mahars were forced to perform—such as the *Maharki* work of handling dead cattle and beating drums for Hindu festivals—and links them directly to the maintenance of caste and gender hierarchy. Brahmanical Hinduism, in her account, is the ideological bedrock of the prison. Its notions of purity and pollution physically and spiritually condemned Dalits, and its patriarchal tenets doubly subjugated women.

Kamble's description of the conversion to Buddhism (Neo-Buddhism) led by Ambedkar is thus framed as the ultimate feminist act of breaking a spiritual prison. For Dalit women, this conversion was profoundly liberating. It meant rejecting the religious texts and deities that sanctified their untouchability and subordination. Buddhism, as interpreted by Ambedkar, offered a philosophy of equality, reason, and self-reliance. Kamble highlights how women embraced this new faith with particular fervor. The act of renouncing Hinduism and chanting Buddhist prayers (*Buddham Sharanam Gachchami*) became a daily practice of asserting a new, self-respecting identity.

This spiritual transformation had immediate social consequences for women. It delegitimized the Brahmanical sanctions for practices like child marriage and the idea of women being inherently impure. Education, championed by Ambedkar, became a sacred duty for all, including girls. Kamble connects the spiritual awakening directly to corporeal and social change: "With Buddha's name on our lips, we stopped drinking liquor. With Buddha's name, we began to bathe daily and wear clean clothes. Our bodies, which

were considered foul, we now cared for as vessels of a new humanism" (Kamble 118). Here, the political (Ambedkarism), the spiritual (Buddhism), and the feminist (reclaiming the body and mind) converge into a singular liberatory praxis. Kamble's narrative establishes that for Dalit women, religious conversion was not an otherworldly matter but a radical this-worldly feminist intervention.

VIII. *The Prisons We Broke* in the Dalit Feminist Canon: Legacy and Limits

Since its publication, Baby Kamble's work has assumed the status of a foundational text. It has paved the way for a rich corpus of Dalit women's writing, including the works of Urmila Pawar, Bama, Gogu Shyamala, and others. Its legacy lies in its uncompromising intersectional lens and its validation of the ordinary Dalit woman's life as worthy of literary and historical record. Kamble demonstrated that the subject of Dalit feminism is not an abstract theoretical construct but the flesh-and-blood woman fighting for survival and dignity in the *wada*, the field, and the slum.

However, a gynocritical reading must also engage with the text's potential limits or silences. Kamble's narrative, for all its radicalism, is largely heteronormative and focused on the experiences of a specific Mahar community in a rural-urban transitional setting. The experiences of Dalit women from other sub-castes, of queer Dalit women, or of those in entirely urban or different regional contexts are not within its purview. Later Dalit feminist scholarship and literature have rightly expanded this scope. Furthermore, while Kamble is critical of internal patriarchy, her narrative ultimately upholds the family and motherhood as central institutions, albeit reformed through education and self-respect. Her vision of liberation, while revolutionary in its context, may not fully align with more radical feminist critiques of the family as a structure.

These limits, however, do not diminish the text's monumental achievement. They instead mark it as a pioneering work that opened a discursive space for more specific and diverse explorations. Showalter's model reminds us that a female literary tradition is not monolithic but evolves through dialogue and difference. Kamble laid the groundwork; subsequent writers and theorists have built upon, complicated, and extended her project

Conclusion: The Unfinished Revolution

Baby Kamble concludes her narrative on a note of determined, yet cautious, hope. The prisons have been broken, but the work of building a new home in the open air remains. This metaphor encapsulates the ongoing project of Dalit feminism. *The Prisons We Broke* is not a story of conclusion but of commencement. By dragging the hidden sufferings and quiet strengths of Dalit women from the "wild zone" into the glaring light of literary and political discourse, Kamble performed an act of revolutionary witnessing.

Using Elaine Showalter's gynocritical framework allows us to appreciate the literary dimensions of this revolution. Kamble crafted a form and a voice adequate to her content: a collective testimonial that is historically specific, corporeally grounded, and politically insurgent. She challenged the silences of mainstream feminism and the blind spots of Dalit patriarchy, insisting on the irreducible specificity of the Dalit woman's condition.

Ultimately, Kamble's work teaches us that liberation is a verb, not a noun. It is the daily act of breaking internalized shame, of claiming one's body and mind, of learning to read, of questioning injustice, and of telling one's own story. *The Prisons We Broke* is both a record of that process and an enduring tool for its continuation. It stands as an indispensable testament, reminding us that in the struggle against intersecting oppressions, the first and most powerful act is to speak—to name the prison, in all its concrete, gendered, and caste-ist brutality, as the essential prelude to breaking it down.

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