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The Broken Prison, the Unbroken Voice: Subversion and Solidarity in Baby Kamble's Life Narrative

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Abstract— *This paper examines Baby Kamble's 'The Prisons We Broke' as a radical act of subversion and collective remembrance that resists both caste-based oppression and patriarchal erasure. Written from the margins of Mahar society, Kamble's autobiography disrupts the sanitized narratives of Hindu social order by foregrounding the gendered experience of Dalit women—those doubly silenced by Brahminical patriarchy and their own communities. The paper argues that Kamble's testimonial functions not merely as a personal life story but as a socio-historical document that critiques systemic violence, recovers lost histories, and forges a language of resistance rooted in shared suffering. Drawing upon Dalit feminist theory, subaltern studies, and Ambedkarite ideology, the study situates Kamble's voice as unbroken and unyielding—emerging from "the broken prison" of caste as a symbol of unrelenting solidarity. Her narrative becomes a space where memory, resistance, and identity coalesce to challenge dominant epistemologies and reclaim agency for Dalit women. In doing so, The Prisons We Broke not only reconfigures the genre of autobiography but also articulates an indigenous feminist consciousness that is both political and transformative.*

Keywords— ***Autobiography, caste, Dalit feminism, resistance, solidarity,***

I. INTRODUCTION

Dalit literature in India has emerged as a powerful counter-discourse that challenges the hegemonic Brahminical narratives which have historically marginalized and silenced the experiences of oppressed castes. Rooted in lived experiences rather than abstract aesthetics, Dalit literature is testimonial in nature—it seeks not just to narrate, but to bear witness. The testimonial mode becomes an act of political assertion, reclamation of identity, and a rewriting of history from the perspective of those who have long been relegated to the margins. In this context, the autobiographical form has served as a vital literary and political tool for Dalit writers. By weaving together memory, suffering, resistance, and collective identity, Dalit autobiographies offer an unflinching critique of caste-based oppression while simultaneously recovering erased histories and forging solidarities across time and space.

Among the earliest and most significant voices in Dalit women's autobiographical writing is that of Baby Kamble. Her autobiography, *The Prisons We Broke*, originally written in Marathi (Jina Amucha) and later translated into English, holds a seminal place in the canon of Dalit literature. Kamble's narrative is a rare and audacious account of the intersectional realities of caste and gender as experienced by a Dalit woman in colonial and post-colonial Maharashtra. Unlike many male-authored Dalit autobiographies that often center on individual upward mobility, Baby Kamble's work retains a collective sensibility, speaking not only of her personal struggles but also of the shared suffering and resilience of the Mahar community, especially its women. She exposes the dual chains of Brahminical patriarchy and internalized male domination, revealing how Dalit women are doubly marginalized—by the oppressive caste system and by the patriarchal structures within their own communities.

The problem that this study addresses lies in understanding this double marginality—the compounded experience of being both Dalit and female. While Dalit narratives have gained scholarly attention, Dalit women's voices continue to be underrepresented, often co-opted into broader discourses that do not account for the specificity of gendered caste experiences. Kamble's text, in this sense, provides a critical entry point into the exploration of the intersectionality of caste and gender, offering a bottom-up feminist lens that is deeply rooted in the material realities of Dalit life.

This paper thus poses the following research questions:

- How does Baby Kamble's narrative function as both a personal testimony and a collective political document?
- In what ways does her autobiography subvert dominant historiographies and gender norms?
- How does Kamble construct a literary space for solidarity and resistance through the articulation of pain, memory, and community?

The title of this paper—"The Broken Prison, the Unbroken Voice"—serves as a metaphorical representation of the central tension within Kamble's work. The "broken prison" symbolizes the oppressive structures of caste and gender that are relentlessly interrogated and resisted through Kamble's writing. Simultaneously, the "unbroken voice" refers to Kamble's unwavering narrative agency—her refusal to be silenced in the face of historical exclusion. Her voice emerges from the rubble of inherited suffering, not as a lament, but as a tool for resistance, remembrance, and solidarity.

To analyze Kamble's life narrative, this paper adopts a multidisciplinary approach that draws from Dalit feminism, Ambedkarite thought, and subaltern studies. Dalit feminism, as articulated by scholars like Sharmila Rege and Gopal Guru, enables a reading of Kamble's text that foregrounds caste and gender as co-constitutive axes of oppression. Ambedkarite ideology, with its emphasis on annihilating caste and upholding human dignity, provides the political foundation upon which Kamble's critique rests. Furthermore, subaltern studies and postcolonial literary theory help situate her voice within a broader epistemological struggle over who gets to narrate history, and how.

This paper contends that *The Prisons We Broke* is not merely a personal memoir but a collective and political text of subversion and solidarity. Kamble's narrative resists the erasures of dominant historiography, reclaims agency for Dalit women, and constructs an archive of casteed suffering that demands to be seen, heard, and remembered. In doing so, she redefines the genre of autobiography and inaugurates a new literary and political vocabulary for articulating the lives of those historically denied subjectivity.

Understanding The Prisons We Broke as a narrative of both subversion and solidarity requires a critical engagement with a constellation of theoretical perspectives that illuminate the multiple axes of marginalization and resistance embedded in Baby Kamble's work. This study draws upon concepts from subaltern theory, testimonial literature, Dalit feminism, and Ambedkarite thought—each of which contributes uniquely to the reading of Baby Kamble's autobiography not merely as a personal story but as a collective political intervention.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" provides a foundational framework for engaging with the problem of voice, silence, and representation in postcolonial discourse. Spivak argues that the subaltern—the socially, economically, and politically disenfranchised—cannot speak within hegemonic structures that inevitably distort or erase their articulation (Spivak 104). In Baby Kamble's case, however, we encounter a moment of rupture within this paradigm. Her voice, emerging from the bottom-most strata of Indian society as a Dalit woman, is not only audible but assertive, refusing erasure. Yet, Kamble's text does not simply seek to "speak" in the Spivakian sense—it aims to restructure the terms of listening, compelling the reader to engage with a consciousness historically excluded from both feminist and literary canons. By situating Kamble within subaltern discourse, the study recognizes her text as a discursive rebellion that demands epistemic attention.

Closely linked to this is the notion of testimonial literature, a genre that has its origins in Latin American political and revolutionary movements but has since found resonance in postcolonial contexts. Testimonios, as defined by scholars like John Beverley, are narratives told by those who have suffered systemic injustice and who speak not only for themselves but also on behalf of a collective historical experience. Sharmila Rege, adapting this framework for Indian Dalit contexts, argues that Dalit autobiographies function as testimonios—political narratives embedded in memory and collective resistance (Rege 14). Baby Kamble's narrative, though personal in tone, constantly returns to communal suffering—particularly the pain of Dalit women—and is thus best understood not as individual confession, but as a testament of a silenced community reclaiming narrative space.

Central to the reading of Baby Kamble's narrative is Dalit feminism, a theoretical standpoint that departs from

mainstream Indian feminism's upper-caste biases and foregrounds the intersection of caste and gender. Dalit feminism challenges both Brahminical patriarchy and the male-dominated narratives within the Dalit movement itself. Kamble's work is especially significant here, as it offers an early articulation of what Rege calls a "Dalit feminist standpoint"—a way of seeing and speaking shaped by both the structural violence of caste and the intimate violence of patriarchy (Rege 25). Kamble exposes the dual burden carried by Dalit women: they are exploited by upper-caste society and invisibilized within their own communities. Her critique is radical because it refuses to isolate caste from gender, thereby demanding a political framework that is intersectional by necessity, not choice.

Equally foundational to Baby Kamble's ideological orientation is Ambedkarite thought, which undergirds much of Dalit autobiographical writing. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's philosophy—particularly his critique of Hinduism, caste hierarchy, and the patriarchal foundations of religious orthodoxy—profoundly shaped the consciousness of Dalit writers in Maharashtra. Baby Kamble's references to Ambedkar are not incidental; they are central to the moral and political vision of her narrative. She frames Ambedkar not merely as a leader but as a liberator, a figure who gave voice to the voiceless and provided a vocabulary for emancipation. Her alignment with Ambedkar's ideology reinforces the text's function as a liberatory document, aimed at consciousness-raising rather than individualistic introspection.

The theoretical concepts of voice and resistance also bear significance in feminist and postcolonial literary studies. Kamble's voice is constructed not as a linear, Western-style autobiographical self, but as a fragmented and collective articulation of memory, trauma, and defiance. Her use of oral storytelling, repetition, and communal references challenges the normative expectations of literary form. In this, she embodies what bell hooks describes as the "oppositional voice"—one that speaks from the margins not for approval, but to rupture dominant narratives (hooks 16). Kamble's resistance is not only thematic but structural; it manifests in how she tells her story, whom she centers, and what she chooses to remember.

Taken together, these frameworks allow for a nuanced analysis of The Prisons We Broke as a multi-layered text that defies simplistic categorization. Baby Kamble's life narrative is not an isolated voice breaking through silence—it is a deliberate, politically grounded intervention that subverts historical forgetting and constructs a space of solidarity for the Dalit community, particularly its women. Her voice, though historically subjugated, remains intellectually unbroken—testifying, resisting, and rewriting the very conditions of its marginality.

II. BREAKING THE PRISON: CASTE, PATRIARCHY, AND SOCIAL STRUCTURES

In *The Prisons We Broke*, Baby Kamble dismantles the deeply entrenched structures of caste and patriarchy through an unflinching narration of her lived experiences within the Mahar community of Maharashtra. Her narrative operates as both documentation and indictment of the multilayered violence faced by Dalit women—not merely at the hands of upper-caste society, but also from within their own communities. Baby Kamble's metaphor of the "prison" is not incidental. It is a structural and symbolic encapsulation of the caste system as a carceral institution, enclosing Dalits within rigid boundaries of social, spatial, and existential exclusion. Within this prison, Dalit women endure a double incarceration, subjected to both caste discrimination and gendered subjugation.

Kamble's critique of caste hierarchies is grounded in her acute awareness of how the Hindu social order naturalizes untouchability and normalizes humiliation. Her descriptions of daily life—drinking water from a separate pot, being denied entry into temples, and cleaning upper-caste latrines—underscore how caste violence is routinized, embodied, and enforced through cultural rituals. The Mahar identity, as Kamble presents it, is marked not only by poverty and social ostracism but also by a systematic denial of dignity. Her tone is unsparing as she details how Brahminical Hinduism—through religious texts, priestly authority, and social customs—has functioned historically as a disciplinary mechanism to uphold upper-caste dominance. She exposes the ideological foundations of caste, revealing it as a man-made and violently maintained social construct, rather than a divine or natural order.

Significantly, Baby Kamble does not spare the internal social dynamics of the Dalit community. She turns a critical lens inward to examine the internalized Brahminism and patriarchal practices that continue to subordinate Dalit women. While Ambedkarite reform promised liberation through education and political assertion, Kamble observes how these emancipatory ideals were often undermined by the persistence of male domination within the Mahar community. Dalit men, having endured their own forms of caste violence, sometimes redirected their frustrations by asserting control over women, demanding obedience and silence. Kamble narrates the ways in which women's mobility, sexuality, and voices were policed—not by distant Brahmins, but by

fathers, husbands, and sons within their own homes. This intersectional critique is central to Kamble's narrative: she makes it clear that the prison is not simply casteist; it is also patriarchal, and its bars are reinforced from multiple directions.

One of the most profound contributions Kamble makes is her treatment of cultural symbols—especially food, clothing, and ritual practices—as registers of both oppression and identity. She vividly describes the extreme poverty of her community, where food was so scarce that eating even the discarded peels of vegetables became routine. The Mahar diet, shaped by deprivation, becomes symbolic of caste stratification; to eat like a Mahar is to eat shame, yet to refuse food altogether is to risk starvation. Similarly, clothing—or the lack thereof—is another site of humiliation. Kamble writes of young girls and women covering themselves with torn rags, denied even the basic dignity of a sari. Through such material details, she demonstrates how everyday objects become inscriptions of caste on the body itself.

Yet these same symbols are not merely signs of suffering; they also become emblems of identity and resistance. Kamble reclaims these embodied practices by narrating them. Her attention to food and clothing is not simply documentary—it is political. In narrating hunger, nakedness, and ritual exclusion, she recovers the untold history of Dalit survival. Moreover, she critiques the hypocrisy of Brahminical rituals, where purity is weaponized to justify pollution, and where gods demand worship from those whom their temples reject. Kamble's subversion of ritual is particularly striking: she aligns herself with Ambedkar's rejection of Hindu orthodoxy and uses her writing to articulate an alternative ethical and spiritual vision—one that centers human dignity over caste purity.

The "prison," then, is not merely a metaphor for external constraints; it also signifies the psychological and cultural conditioning that enforces compliance and suppresses dissent. Kamble's text is an act of breaking that prison—not only by denouncing its architects but by unlearning its logic. Her narrative serves as a space of de-conditioning, where the norms of Brahminical patriarchy are exposed and dismantled. In telling her story, she not only breaks the silence but also ruptures the very grammar of caste society.

Through this radical interrogation of both institutional and internalized forms of oppression, The Prisons We Broke offers a revolutionary epistemology—one that emerges not from academic abstraction but from the lived realities of the most marginalized. Kamble's narrative is a call to consciousness, a demand for rupture, and a blueprint for collective resistance. It breaks the prison not with violence, but with memory, language, and the audacity to name what others have rendered unspeakable.

III. THE UNBROKEN VOICE: MEMORY, RESISTANCE, AND COLLECTIVE SOLIDARITY

At the core of The Prisons We Broke lies an unbroken voice—a voice that not only resists silencing but reclaims memory as an act of survival, rebellion, and reconstruction. Baby Kamble's narrative, situated at the intersection of personal testimony and communal history, mobilizes memory as a political weapon. Her autobiography resists the conventional boundaries of self-narration and instead emerges as a counter-archive, one that writes into existence the stories, sufferings, and solidarities of Dalit women long excluded from mainstream historiography.

Baby Kamble's writing is not nostalgic; it is mnemonic in a political sense. Memory, in her hands, becomes a terrain of contestation—a means through which the past is reinterpreted, re-contextualized, and reclaimed. She recalls, in unsparing detail, the everyday humiliations of untouchability, the hunger and shame endured by Dalit women, and the brutalizing effects of both caste and patriarchy. But these memories are not merely recorded for posterity; they are curated to challenge dominant narratives that either erase or romanticize the suffering of the marginalized. Through her recollections, Kamble reorients the reader's gaze from the abstract to the embodied—from ideology to lived experience. In doing so, she subverts the historical amnesia that caste society depends upon to maintain its moral legitimacy.

The function of memory in Kamble's narrative is not individual but collective. While she speaks in the first person, her account constantly returns to the shared pain and endurance of the Mahar community, especially its women. Her mother, neighbors, and fellow Dalit women appear not as peripheral characters but as agents of resistance—living archives of struggle who embody the burdens and resilience of an oppressed people. This emphasis on collectivity transforms her memoir into a communal document. Kamble's voice carries the weight of multiple generations, each echoing through her prose with urgency and anger. In this way, she constructs a genealogy of resistance, where memory does not simply chronicle suffering but animates solidarity.

Solidarity, in Baby Kamble's narrative, is not imagined through abstract political slogans but forged in the crucible of shared oppression. By giving voice to Dalit women's experiences, she opens up a space for what scholar Audre Lorde terms "the transformation of silence into language

and action" (Lorde 40). Kamble's writing does not seek validation from dominant structures; it addresses the silenced, the excluded, and the wounded. Her audience is not the state, the academy, or the upper castes—it is the Dalit woman who stands at the threshold of silence, daring to speak. This orientation of voice—horizontal rather than hierarchical—enables Kamble to build a politics of inclusion, where gender and caste are not separate identities but entangled structures of power that must be confronted simultaneously.

Writing, for Baby Kamble, becomes a radical act of social activism. It is not merely a form of self-expression but a tool of political pedagogy. Her words challenge, instruct, and mobilize. In writing her life, she reclaims the right to narrate history—not as an object of study but as a subject of knowledge. This act directly confronts the intellectual apartheid of caste society, wherein the authority to produce knowledge has been monopolized by the upper castes. Kamble's narrative thus functions as a literary insurrection, one that defies the structural silencing of Dalit voices and reasserts their epistemic legitimacy.

Moreover, Baby Kamble's unbroken voice is not simply oppositional—it is transformative. It reconfigures what it means to speak from the margins, not as a plea for inclusion but as a demand for justice. Her language is at once intimate and insurgent, offering no comfort to caste privilege. Instead, it offers a radical alternative consciousness—one rooted in the ethics of memory, the urgency of solidarity, and the necessity of resistance. In this way, The Prisons We Broke is not just a narrative of suffering—it is a manifesto of survival, a record of endurance, and a declaration of freedom from the ideological and material prisons that have long confined Dalit women.

IV. SUBVERSION OF GENRE: REDEFINING AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Baby Kamble's The Prisons We Broke resists classification within the conventional literary boundaries of autobiography. While ostensibly a personal narrative, her text upends genre expectations by blending oral tradition, collective memory, and political testimony, thereby redefining what it means to narrate the self from a marginalized location. In contrast to Western autobiographical conventions—often rooted in linear temporality, individual development, and introspective subjectivity— Baby Kamble's life writing is communal, fragmented, and insurgent. Her narrative strategies reflect both her social location as a Dalit woman and her political intent to articulate a shared history of subjugation and resistance.

Baby Kamble draws extensively from oral storytelling traditions, a characteristic feature of many subaltern narratives. Her prose evokes the rhythms of spoken memory rather than the polished introspection of written confession. The influence of oral culture is evident in her use of repetition, digression, and affective intensity. These techniques do not merely reflect stylistic choices but signify a deep-rooted connection to collective remembrance and communal transmission of knowledge. For communities historically denied literacy, oral storytelling has served as a repository of lived experience and historical continuity. Kamble's integration of these forms into her written narrative serves to legitimize oral epistemologies, disrupting the hegemony of written, elite forms of knowledge production.

Furthermore, the non-linear structure of The Prisons We Broke subverts the chronological coherence typically expected of autobiographical texts. Kamble's account moves fluidly across time, juxtaposing memories of childhood with reflections on contemporary caste practices and Ambedkarite reform. This non-sequential narration mirrors the fractured, recursive nature of trauma and resistance, particularly as experienced by those subjected to generational marginalization. Rather than mapping a teleological journey from ignorance to enlightenment—as is often the case in Western autobiography—Kamble presents an unvarnished landscape of cyclical suffering and continued struggle. The temporal dislocation within the narrative thus becomes a political device: it reflects the refusal of Dalit subjectivity to conform to dominant narrative trajectories of progress and resolution.

Integral to Baby Kamble's subversion of the genre is her rejection of individualism as the cornerstone of life writing. While she is the narrator, her life story remains inextricably tied to the collective fate of her community. Her 'self' is always in relation—to her mother, to other Dalit women, to the Mahar community, and to the movement for caste annihilation. In this sense, Baby Kamble challenges the Western autobiographical tradition that often foregrounds the autonomous, liberal subject as the protagonist. Instead, she offers a relational selfhood, shaped by solidarity, shared suffering, and communal identity. The boundaries between the personal and the political collapse in her narrative, reflecting the reality that for Dalit women, private experience is never insulated from systemic structures of power.

This fusion of personal and political gives Baby Kamble's narrative a testimonial character, aligning her with broader traditions of subaltern life writing. Like other testimonial texts, The Prisons We Broke is not aimed at self-promotion or literary achievement; it is a political intervention, intended to give voice to a silenced

collective, bear witness to historical injustice, and mobilize consciousness. Her narrative operates as what Leigh Gilmore calls "limit-case autobiography"—a genre that tests the limits of what counts as life writing by foregrounding voices previously excluded from the autobiographical canon (Gilmore 44). Kamble's work also resonates with what Gayatri Spivak terms "strategic essentialism"—the temporary, collective articulation of identity for the purpose of political action. Through her writing, Kamble affirms the shared experiences of Dalit women while simultaneously exposing the heterogeneity and contradictions within their oppression.

Within the framework of Dalit and subaltern life narratives, Kamble's text emerges as a foundational work that reconfigures both form and function. It does not aspire to universal truths but insists on the specificity of caste and gender as constitutive forces in shaping experience. Her writing resists translation—both literal and cultural—into the terms of elite literary discourse. Instead, it demands the creation of new critical vocabularies that are responsive to the epistemological challenges posed by Dalit women's narratives.

In redefining autobiography, Baby Kamble does not simply insert herself into an existing genre—she reshapes the genre itself. The Prisons We Broke becomes a radical text not only in content but in form, asserting that the lives of the marginalized can—and must—generate their own narrative structures. In doing so, Baby Kamble lays the groundwork for Dalit aesthetics of life writing—one that centers collective struggle, subverts literary hierarchies, and insists that the personal, when spoken from the margins, is always political.

V. CONCLUSION

Baby Kamble's The Prisons We Broke stands as a seminal text that powerfully subverts the traditional frameworks of both autobiography and historiography. Through a voice that is at once personal and political, individual and collective, Kamble breaks free from the ideological prisons of caste and patriarchy to construct a narrative of defiance and remembrance. Her life story does not seek assimilation into dominant discourses but rather disrupts them—asserting the legitimacy of subaltern voices and their capacity to produce knowledge from the margins. By narrating the pain, dignity, and resistance of Dalit women, Kamble's text functions as a testimonial archive, documenting lives that have been systematically rendered invisible in both mainstream literature and history.

Baby Kamble's autobiography is, above all, a literary act of resistance. Her refusal to be silent, to conform, or to isolate her experiences from those of her community reflects a deep political consciousness. In destabilizing Western autobiographical conventions and Brahminical textual traditions alike, Kamble reclaims narrative authority for Dalit women. Her work challenges the reader not only to listen but to rethink the epistemic structures through which caste, gender, and authorship are understood in India. By foregrounding the everyday realities of Mahar women—their labor, their bodies, their memories—Kamble brings forth a counter-history that is as intellectually rigorous as it is emotionally resonant.

Her contribution to Dalit literature lies in the unrelenting honesty with which she exposes the inner mechanisms of caste-based exclusion and intra-community patriarchy. But more importantly, her narrative expands the very idea of feminist literature in India. Kamble's work does not emerge from elite academic discourse or urban activism; it is grounded in lived experience and driven by Ambedkarite principles of justice, dignity, and equality. In this way, she opens up a distinctly Dalit feminist tradition—one that is rooted in material oppression, yet visionary in its political goals.

The critical importance of The Prisons We Broke demands a broader revaluation of Dalit women's autobiographies within Indian literary and socio-political studies. These texts are not merely supplementary to mainstream narratives; they are central to understanding India's modern history, particularly from the vantage point of those excluded from its official archives. Recognizing the epistemic value of such autobiographies compels us to expand the boundaries of literary canons, reconfigure feminist thought, and engage more deeply with the historical specificities of caste and gender.

Future research can build on Kamble's work through comparative studies of Dalit women's life narratives, tracing how experiences of caste and gender operate across regional, linguistic, and temporal contexts. Texts such as Urmila Pawar's The Weave of My Life, Bama's Karukku, or Baby Halder's A Life Less Ordinary offer fertile ground for comparative analysis of intersectional oppression and resilience. Additionally, transnational feminist frameworks can be applied to place Dalit autobiographies in dialogue with Black, Indigenous, and other subaltern women's testimonios around the world. Such readings would enrich our understanding of how global systems of marginalization intersect with local histories of resistance.

In conclusion, The Prisons We Broke is not only a personal act of narration but a collective cry for justice, a rejection of silencing, and a literary blueprint for liberation. Kamble's unbroken voice reverberates far beyond her lifetime, offering scholars, activists, and readers an enduring testament to the power of memory, the

necessity of resistance, and the urgency of solidarity in the struggle against caste and gender oppression.

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