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Internalized Oppression and Lateral Violence : Reading Baby Kamble's Our Wretched Lives

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Abstract—*Baby Kamble's autobiographical Dalit text Our Wretched Lives (originally Jina Amucha) documents agonizing realities, caste oppression, and systematic cruelty faced by women within the Dalit community particulary focusing on the domestic violence young bride endured both in private and public places. This paper focuses on how mother-in-law weaponizes patriarchal norms against newly married women . Baby Kamble's narrative shows the home as a micro-prison where the oppressed woman becomes the oppressor of an even more vulnerable woman. This paper explores through Kamble's narrative how older women internalize oppression, transforming themselves into enforcers of patriarchal system.*

Keywords— ***domestic violence, hawkish gaze, internalized oppression, lateral violence micro-prison, patriarchy***

I. INTRODUCTION

Baby Kamble's *Our Wretched Lives* talks about the lives of Mahar men and women who have to endure all the atrocities and hardships at the author's native place Veergao, Maharastra.

The first half of Kamble's autobiography portrays the oppression and exploitation of the poverty-stricken Mahar community at the hands of the upper class while the second half of the text records the transformation of the Mahar community under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar. Under the influence of Ambedkar's radical ideas , the Dalit are able to challenge the ' varna' order in an affective and aggressive manner.

After reading Kamble's *Our Wretched Lives* one would sit wondering why life after marriage becomes a calamity due to internalized oppression of elderly female women in a Dalit household . Generation after generation it has been found that women are the enemy of women. This paper explores how caste and gender oppression are internalized by Mahar women .In Kamble's narrative after being oppressed lifelong ,very often, internalized oppression takes the form of defence mechanism to elderly Dalit women .

II. RESEARCH FINDINGS

In Kamble's narrative, the mother-in-law is busy in conspiring against the newly married women in her home. She gets satisfactiom in keeping her son away from her daughter -in-law. She gets a distorted sense of power and authority over those who are more vulnerable than her. The reasons of such behaviour of mother-in law can be explained through the theory of Paulo Freire 's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" when oppressed people suffer for generations, they often internalize the ideology of the oppressors. The mother-in-law becomes fierce like a hawk. She treats the young bride very cruelly.

" If the bhakris weren't perfect, the mother-in-law examined the kneaded flour and slapped the girl on the face with the unbaked bhakris, pinched her cheeks, showered a millions of curses on her…my own mother-in-law was a spitfire. A burning coal! Actually one could hold a burning coal in one's hand but staying with her was a far more difficult thing ". (Tharu and Lalita 310)

The imagery of " burning coal" indicates the misery of the young bride. It also talks about 'burning' of the mother-in-law . After burning in domestic oppression , now she

somehow gets peace and mental balance in oppressing others.

The imagery of "hawk" well describes the psychology of the mother-in-law. This imagery precisely captures her hyper-vigilant, predatory nature. She does not want that her son would socialize with her daughter-in-law. She feels insecure. She is always ready to keep watch o them.

" She watched them with the eye of a hawk, and wouldn't let them even glance at each other''. (Tharu and Lalita 311)

III. JEALOUSY AND CONTROL

The mother-in-law acts out of a deep -seated panic. She is terrified that her son will be snatched away by his wife. She stays awake at night, monitors every movement, poisons her son's mind against the young bride, treating the daughter-in-law not as family member but as an existential threat and an enemy.

The merciless , hawkish gaze of the mother-in-law along with constant threat of abuse hurled at the young bride highlights the dark side of human nature. In the household , the mother-in-law's gaze is fixed entirely upon her son and daughter-in-law. Every shared glance, every soft word, and every gesture of affection is intercepted by her watchful eyes.

Kamble's portrayal of women gives light to realities of toxic household dynamic. The narrative depicts how physical, emotional and psychological abuse patterns are passed down from one generation to another generation. A mother – in-law who had been severely mistreated, silenced and subjugated by her own in-laws during her youth never healed from that trauma. In stead of breaking the cycle of abuse , she internalizes the oppressor's role. When she finally gains authority (by becoming a mother-in-law), she unconsciously replicates the abuses she suffered, viewing it as a rightful rite of passage or a standard hierarchy that must be maintained.

In Kamble's narrative it appears that the Mahar Dalit women are the worst victims of patriarchy, caste consciousness, and domestic violence. Kamble describes the pathetic situation of the Mahar women who are supposed to behave like slaves in presence of their upper caste Brahmans .The book narrates that a Dalit woman was always treated as a sexual object and was made available to upper caste men whenever they had sexual urge. Dalit men were supposed to offer their wives to upper cate people to please them sexually in every possible manner.

The condition of Mahar Dalit women was miserable. They were victims of oppression not only by the upper castes but also by their own family members. They had to do all the household duties , and go for selling wood to earn for their daily bread. Poverty was the unresolved problem among the Mahar community. They were fated to eat left-overs. The stale 'bhakris', and the rotten rotis were their common food. The people of upper caste considers them as dirt in the garbage where others throw away their waste materials. They collected all the left-overs from other places to give them to their children. Most of the time women had to go on hunger unendingly. Girls got married at the age of eight or nine. And they became pregnant at a very tender age which created a lot of complications in their first delivery. Dalit men never bothered to provide nutritious and hygienic food to the new mothers. Women had to be forcibly content with only the gruel made from jowar. At the time of their delivery the midwives performed their jobs without any professional skills. Girls have to deliver their child in a most inhospitable manner. So, both the rate of child death and death during delivery is very high in Dalit community. Whenever they needed any sort of assistance they were left to the mercy of god. Besides, they were considered just as child procreating machines. A Mahar woman would continue to give birth till she reached menopause. Generation after generation Dalit women are tortured in the name of marriage, child birth and house hold chores or observations of rituals. Indeed, they lead a pathetic life in their husband's house. If a girl do not do household duties , she was abused by her in-laws.

In Baby Kamble's, *Our Wretched Lives* profoundly exposes the insidious mechanics of patriarchal conditioning, where female oppression is actively perpetuated through internalized misogyny and lateral violence. A striking instance of this is weaponized through the mother-in -law. This dynamic illustrates a tragic manifestation of internalized oppression , where a women who have internalized patriarchal values become active agents of their own subjugation, enforcing the very oppressive structures that victimize them. Furthermore the mother-in-law's use of her own son as an instrument of control exemplifies lateral violence. Instead of fostering solidarity , the patriarchal system pits marginalized family members against one another—turning the husband into a brainwashed extension of maternal tyranny. Consequently, the newly married woman faces a dual assault : direct hostility from a female elder and indirect subjugation through her marital partner, highlighting how deeply rooted patriarchal violence fractures domestic kinship and sustains female oppression within.

IV. AS AN INTERNAL AGENT OF PATRIARCHY

A significant aspect of Kamble's narrative is her portrayal of how mother- in -law with her merciless hawkish gaze at the newly married women. Dalit Mahar women always feel

traumatized and tortured by their day-to- day humiliating experiences. Here we find torture of women by women. Women are found agency of patriarchy . They want that a newly married must be harassed and tortured only because they had been tortured long ago during their youthful stage of life. Perhaps it is the complex human psychology . while going through the narrative by Kamble it appears that women who have suffered torture through out their lives, they now dominate their daughter-in-laws' lives. Kamble's narrative is not only personal autobiography of Baby Kamble but also the autobiography of every oppressed and subjugated women in the world. Baby Kamble here describes the mental and physical violence against women by the public and private spheres. Kamble presents an unflinching portrait of Dalit women, subjugated triply by gender, caste and patriarchy. Especially newly married women suffer the worst fate. Girls are usually married off at the early age of eight or nine. Marriage for them turns out to be nothing but a big calamity. The first duty for the newly wedded daughter -in-law was to prepare 'bhakris'. She had to do all the household chores. They can never expect a compliment in return from their in -laws. If a girl could not do the household duties , she was abused by her in-laws especially if she failed to make 'bhakris'. During ritual observation, there was double work pressure on the women. They had to plaster their house with cow dung, and clean the utensils and the clothes. They lead a very pathetic life in their husband's home. Kamble dexterously depicts how a daughter-in -law is not safe even before a woman of her community. They are always the target of taunts and pul-downs and is frequently physically and psychologically tortured by her in-laws. Their mother-in-law loved to give the same harsh treatment to them as they had received from their own in-laws which tell a lot about their sick consciousness of having to inflict unnecessary pain to the newly married immature younger girls and would even curse their mother if they fail to do a task.

V. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Baby Kamble's narrative shows how the victims consciously or unconsciously identifies with the aggressor. The term 'identification with the aggressor ' was first coined by psychoanalyst Sandor Ferenczi and later expanded by Anna Freud. It is a defense mechanism where a victim adopts the behavior, values , and methods of their abuser. To cope with the powerlessness and humiliation experienced in her youth, the mother-in-law unconsciously identifies with her own tormentors (her in-laws). By becoming the abuser to the newly married bride, she regains a distorted sense of power, control, and validation shielding herself from acknowledging how victimized and helpless she actually was.

In Baby Kamble's narrative the perpetuation of patriarchal bargaining (the " matriarchal enforcer") is well depicted through the portrayal of Dalit women . Sociologist Deniz Kandiyoti termed " patriarchal bargaining ". In societies where women have very little power or autonomy , their security and status within the family traditionally depend entirely on pleasing male family members and successfully managing junior women. In Kamble's *Our Wretched Lives* older women often derive their only source of authority and self -worth within the household by enforcing patriarchal rules over younger women. The mother -in-law act as an agent of the patriarchal system, policing the new bride to secure her own standing , even if it means perpetuating cruelty.

VI. INTERGENERATIONAL CYCLE OF TRAUMA

The mother-in-law has spent her entire life surviving a brutal, male-dominated ,caste-oppressed world. To survive she fully submits to patriarchal and Brahmanical rules. Instead of showing empathy to the newly married bride (who enters the house as an outsider and a child) , the mother-in-law acts as a underdog for the patriarchal system. She enforces purity, obedience and endless labour , treating the young bride the exact same way or worse than she herself was treated. On the other hand, Mahar men are crushed by upper-caste landlords and economic poverty in the public sphere. They come home stripped of power and take it out on their wives. The mother-in-law, completely powerless in society and subjugated by their husbands, have zero systematic power except over the newly married bride. Tormenting the daughter-in-law becomes the only outlet where the older woman can experience a distorted sense of power, authority, and control. This is a lateral violence in action. The displaced rage of systematic oppression is redirected horizontally onto a weaker peer. In Kamble's narrative a newly married woman is given the heaviest workloads, starved, beaten, and emotionally terrorized , often under the guise of " training" her to be a good wife.

Baby Kamble exposes how this creates a vicious cycle; the young bride who is brutalized today, decades later, inherit the position of mother-in-law and inflict the exact same psychological and physical violence on her son's wife. The trauma is passed down generation after generation. And exactly this fact is brought out in Baby Kamble's *Our Wretched Lives.*

VII. CONCLUSION

A home is a place where a person or family lives with feelings of safety, comfort, and belonging. In Kamble's narrative "home" is not a safe place for newly married

women . Instead of finding comfort, the young bride finds herself entering a micro-prison. She is viewed as a low-cost domestic and manual labourer who must prove her worth through endless suffering . The home becomes a place where her physical and mental autonomy is stripped away . Every action, word, and movement is heavily monitored, leaving her in a constant state of fear and anxiety. In Kamble's *Our Wretched Lives* the home transforms into a secondary site of trauma. Kamble suggests that liberation requires breaking free from both external domination and internal inferiority. True emancipation for Dalit women requires not only fighting external caste structures , but also dismantling these internal , psychological chains and cycles of lateral violence within the home.

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