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Gender as Lived Trauma in Autobiographies of Bama and Kamble

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Abstract:
This paper examines the articulation of gender as lived trauma in the autobiographical narratives of Bama (*Karukku*) and Baby Kamble (*The Prisons We Broke*). Both texts foreground the intersection of caste and patriarchy, revealing how Dalit women's identities are shaped by systemic oppression, silencing, and exploitation. Bama's narrative highlights the disillusionment with religious institutions that perpetuate casteist and gendered hierarchies, while Kamble's work documents the collective suffering of Mahar women through poverty, sexual violence, and domestic subjugation. Trauma in these autobiographies is not merely personal but communal, embedded in everyday practices and historical memory. Yet, both authors transform trauma into resistance: Bama through reclaiming her voice in literature, and Kamble through Ambedkarite ideology that reconfigures suffering into empowerment. By situating their experiences within broader frameworks of feminist and Dalit discourse, these autobiographies challenge dominant narratives, foregrounding the resilience of Dalit women and the necessity of acknowledging trauma as a lived, embodied reality.

Keywords: Dalit feminism, Gendered trauma, Intersectionality, Autobiography, Ambedkarite discourse, Lived experience

The Dalit writers have explored radical and unrestrained explorations of their identities in their ongoing examination of existential quests. They have also painted a gloomy image of poverty, illiteracy, gender and caste-based exploitation as prominent subjects in their works. These traumatic issues reflect the multifaceted nature of the trauma they endure in society, closely aligning with Herman's observation about trauma victims, which states that "The severity of traumatic events cannot be measured on any single dimension. In each instance, the salient characteristic of the traumatic event is its power to inspire helplessness and terror" (53). This observation undoubtedly describes the complexity of traumatic events in the life of Dalits that often evoke profound feelings of helplessness and intense fear caused by systematic oppression and violence. Therefore, it would be crucial to research gender-related issues besides caste and class related ones.

The scuffle waged by Bama and Kamble, portrayed in *Karukku* and *The Prisons We Broke* centres on patriarchy. These personal narratives highlight their quotidian struggles in grappling with the Trauma that affects their existence. A well-known feminist psychotherapist, Maria Root, in her essay titled "Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on Personality", discusses that feminist theory proposes a lens through which we can understand Trauma as the brutal life experience a marginalised individual faces every day. According to Root, "Insidious trauma is usually associated with the social status of an individual being devalued because a characteristic intrinsic to their identity is different from what is valued

by those in power" (240). The Trauma experienced by Dalits is somewhat similar to this concept as it arises from the constant devaluation of their social rank on account of their caste identity, which is an inherent part of who they are.

While examining the autobiographical texts under consideration for the study, it becomes clear that of all the oppressions and humiliations faced by these authors throughout their lives, they have mustered the courage to narrate and express their livid experiences as a unique contribution to their entire community with the prime focus to enable the society to feel their existence and redress their plights. This transformation aligns with the notion of Dalit representation as highlighted by Raj Kumar in his work *Dalit Personal Narratives: Reading Caste, Nation and Identity* (2011) that "Writing an autobiography is a special act for the members of this group who use the genre to achieve a sense of identity and mobilize resistance against different forms of oppression" (5), emphasizing that how crucial it is for Dalits to write autobiographies to express their marginalized voice.

Anupama Rao states that the complexity of caste-based oppression has affected the lives of Dalit women more than Dalit men since they often face the intersection of two patriarchal structures, a "Brahminical form of patriarchy that deeply stigmatised Dalit women because of their caste status, as well as the more intimate forms of control by Dalit men over the sexual and economic labour of "their" women" (1). These two structures make Dalit women particularly vulnerable to violence, discrimination and limited opportunities. The restrictions imposed on them by men and women of the upper caste and by their community result in gendered Trauma.

Faustina Soosairaj Bama's *Karukku* talks about the different forms of oppression that Dalits experience from the government (Police), panchayats, members of the higher caste, and the church. Bama talked about the double marginalisation of Dalit women, who are excluded based on both their gender and caste. Tamil Dalit Literature raises essential questions about women's sexuality. Dalit writers talk about how caste-bound culture controls Dalit women's sexuality from the pre-puberty stage until menopause. The female members of the Dalit community are not permitted to return to school following puberty. They endure regular beatings from their spouses, are sexually raped by fathers-in-law or brothers-in-law if they are widows, and are sexually abused by much older husbands. Tamil Dalit Literature encompasses many facets of the Dalit experience, with a particular emphasis on women who are exploited, to realistically depict the picture of Dalit exploitation. Dalit women suffer double exploitation, working endlessly at home and in the fields.

At home, their spouse and kids irritate them. In addition to the landlord's abuse, there is physically demanding labour in the fields. There is barely time to breathe when they get home in the evening. Even after gathering firewood and water, preparing a meal, and feeding their hungry spouse and kids, they are still in such a state of constant pressure that they cannot sleep peacefully until morning. They are forced to indulge their husband's whims night after night. A woman's body may be in excruciating pain, but her husband is solely concerned with his gratification. In addition, women are constantly harassed both within and outside the home, which causes them to become overburdened and crushed by their contempt, weariness, and exhaustion.

Completely impoverished, they are unable even to consider giving their children a quality education. However, getting an education is much more complicated if the child is a girl. Regarding poverty, young girls cannot recognise the sense of going to school, staying at home with the kids, gathering firewood, maintaining the house, and caring for household duties. Bama has the good fortune to have an education at the beginning. However, she is not permitted to pursue further education after passing her eleventh-year

public exams because, in that scenario, "It would be difficult for them to find a husband for me in my community if I went in for further education" (Bama 74). However, she complies when a nun compels her mother to send her to college to continue her education. When Bama writes her father a letter requesting money, her father responds angrily, "You listened to the nuns' advice and joined college; so now ask them to give you the money; go on, go to them" (75). Following her graduation, Bama attempted to secure employment in a school, but her status as a lower-class member prevented her from being hired. She says, "Today I am like a mongrel dog wandering about without a permanent job, nor a regular means to find clothes, food and a safe place to live. I share the same difficulties and struggles that all Dalits experience. I share to some extent the poverty of the Dalits who toil for more painfully through fierce heat and beat ingrain" (78-79). She is completely devastated when denied that position in a Nadar-run school. Thus, to dedicate herself to the education of underprivileged children and their upliftment, Bama decides to become a nun. During a training session, a sister informs her that Harijan women are not welcome to apply to become nuns and that there is another order specifically for them. After a while, her parents propose to her to get married, but she says no, saying, "If I were to marry, I would have to live the rest of my life and even die in the end for the sake of one man" (131). She is also aware of the challenges of being single and trying to make ends meet. She reflects, "There is another excellent difficulty I find in moving about in the outside world alone. If a woman so much as stands alone and by herself somewhere, all sorts of men gather around her, showing their teeth. (119)

The first step in discrimination against women is when the men in their community subjugate and take advantage of them at home. She uses Udan, a fellow member of Bama's community, as an example. Nearly every day, he would publicly beat his wife in the town hall. Although our constitution grants equal rights to men and women, Bama propagates the idea that males always attempt to repress women by limiting their freedom and fundamental dignity in several areas of life. Bama endures great suffering after becoming a nun since she is a Dalit. She observes that while the children of wealthy families from the upper caste enjoy all the comforts, the Dalit children at the convent are mistreated. The convent's nuns live like royalty, and all manual labour is performed by children from lower castes. Although nuns pray for God's blessings daily, there is no correlation between their work and their way of life.

Dalit women do not conceal themselves in houses during conflicts between the Chaaliyar and Parayar communities over the graveyard site; instead, they engage in combat with one another as a show of support for one another. When members of the Chaaliyar group stab the spouse of Izhava, Maama Paralokan calls on the Parayar community to engage in direct combat with other members of the community. Even an older woman named Thavis joins him and calls on the members of her community to engage in combat. This episode demonstrates women's critical role in group decision-making in Bama's Karukku. When there are violent clashes between the two villages, the authorities treat the residents of Parayar differently. Bama investigates how the police administration denies justice to the Dalits, "The police behaved deplorably towards the women as they went from house to house. They used obscene language and swore at them, told them that since their husbands were away, they should be ready to entertain the police at night, winked at them, and shoved their guns against their bodies (40).

Bama, in the novel also draws attention to how Society views her. Parents want their girl offspring married as soon as feasible to escape their duties. However, male children—like Bama's brother—are given more time to pursue their careers and are free to live the lives they choose, whereas female children are rarely given the freedom to make their own decisions. Hence, Bama portrays women as being doubly marginalised since they are still restricted in their options and subject to the rules of Society.

Babytai Kamble's *Jina Amucha* (1986), translated by Maya Pandit in English as *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) makes an effort to investigate how Dalit women are exploited and how the dogmatic patriarchy and the unfair caste system contributed to this. Born into a working-class family, Baby Kamble, the first Mahar woman Dalit activist, had a tranquil and secure upbringing until she was forced to deal with the injustices of gender inequality and caste tyranny. In an introduction to the novel *The Prisons We Broke*, Maya Pandit states, "If the Mahar community is the other for the Brahmans, Mahar women become the other for Mahar men"(v). Besides providing an elaborate account of her birth and the position of the male child in her family, Kamble's writing demonstrates her feminist ideas. She reports on the subjection of Dalit women in Society and the home, in addition to highlighting the socioeconomic status of the Dalit population. She draws attention to the limitations families place and how they affect the family's status. Baby Kamble sheds light on the modern aspects of women's enslavement and how they relate to family honour, "In those days, it was the custom to keep women at home, behind the threshold. The honour enjoyed in the family was in proposition to the restriction imposed on the women of the house. When no one could see even a nail of a 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 the friends in the surrounding villages" (Kamble 5). The passage above describes how Dalit women were imprisoned in their homes like birds in cages and treated like their husbands' personal property. Critics like V. Geetha, in her article "Periyar, Women and an Ethnic of Citizenship" published in *Gender and Caste* (2003) edited by Anupama Rao, observe, "Religion, caste and patriarchy co-exist in a complex and strategic relationship to exploit the gendered caste subaltern" (195).

Baby Kamble mentions in her autobiography the physical and emotional violence associated with Dalit women. It also puts forth the plight of the women of the narrator's community and highlights their struggle to emancipate their rights. According to Gopal Guru, "Baby Kamble, in her narratives of Dalit women's sufferings, brings out the worst form of exploitation and physical torture that the Dalit male inflicted on Dalit women" (166). She describes how women led the most wretched existence, and newly married were the worst sufferers. Young girls of eight or nine years old managed to get married and departed to their in-laws's house, and there they would be assigned to so much work additionally. The newlywed daughter-in-law's first task was to make bhakris to demonstrate her culinary prowess and win praise. She was forced to put up with her mother-in-law, taking advantage of her and using foul words as a method of revenge. This ordeal can be traced in the words of Kamble as:

When the bride arrived at her-in-laws home, she would be asked to make bhakris. Two baskets full!...then the sasu would call all her friends and neighbours and hold an open exhibition of the tiny burnt bhakris… didn't you know that I had brought the daughter of a good woman into my house? She cannot make a bhakri properly. Oh! What can one expect of this daughter of a dunce? (94)

The newlywed women would bear the constant abuses and insults of their mothers-in-law regarding their household management. The torture would not end there only but aggravated more when the young girls attained maturity. During that period, the Sasu [Mother-in-Law] would start poisoning her son against his wife, and this provocation led the men to beat their wives "to a pulp" (97). If she managed to get away and reach her maternal house, she would be sent back and would receive brutal physical violence. Her in-laws would arrange a huge square piece of wood, weighing around five kilos, for the carpenter to make stocks for her. The carpenter would put an iron bar through the sides, making her unable to pull her feet out. That would be so huge and heavy as a large iron tub that she had to drag each time she would move. She had to work with this device around her leg. She was not a human being for her in-laws.

Kamble also portrays the unlimited suffering of physically underdeveloped young married girls who suffer due to the mishandling of the mid-wives while delivering babies. One in every ten would die during pregnancy on account of this kind of ordeal. Things would turn more complicated when, at times, the daughter-in-law receives a thrashing at the hand of the mother-in-law, who further poisons her son's mind, which further prompts the husband to chop off his wife-'s nose. Once done, the mother-in-law will fetch a second bride for the son after the previous one is thrown out of the house. It was prevalent to hear cries of helpless women who would be leashed by their husbands even to unconsciousness. This type of tragic life was considered a part of the lives of married girls, and misfortune was a feature of their destiny.

During the festive season, they would wait for the offerings to be distributed. These offerings would be offered to the males first, and then the daughters-in-law could have them after a helpless wait. The gendered discrimination is further gauged by the fact that there was extreme poverty in the area. The women had to go to the jungle to collect the firewood and would return by noon on a scorching hot day. In their absence, their children would feed for themselves. Kamble narrates that the wood so collected used to be sold to the people of upper castes. They were not allowed to use regular roads, and if they saw a man of upper caste coming, they had to leave the road, "If a young woman, out of sheer ignorance, does not follow the practice, she would have to bear the wrath of the upper caste as well as her people" (Kamble 52-53).

During the month of Asadh, the Mahar females always remained very busy. They had to get up early in the morning, clean their huts and polish the floor and the walls with cow dung. They would clean their pots and precious belongings, wash their rags, and put them in the sun. They used to get all the children bathed and have to go shopping. The upper-class children were not supposed to touch a Mahar woman in the market, and the woman herself persuaded them to maintain a safe distance from them. This discrimination clearly shows the plight and the ensuing Trauma of the Dalit women throughout their lives as they, being females, were supposed to perform all the household work, etc.

Dalit women's main responsibilities were taking care of the household chores and bearing children; they were viewed as machines that produced children. Mahar women had to continue having children until they went through menopause. A Dalit woman rose early in the morning to prepare meals for the entire family in the in-laws' home. She used to go through much pain if she made a mistake. The despotic spouse occasionally forced her to flee her parent's residence. A Dalit girl is assaulted at her parent's house and made to return to her husband's home. Relatively speaking to men, Dalit women suffer far more humiliation, as noted by Bela Malik. She asserts, "While it is true that Dalits in general are oppressed, Dalit women bear the disproportionately higher share of this burden. Given the division of labour within the household, women have to suffer more from the lack of food, water, fuel and other sanitation facilities, exposing them to subjugation, discrimination, violence and humiliation" (323). Dalit women's unaddressed issues included hunger and poverty; as a way to cope, they turned to ghosts and goddesses like Satwai and Mari Aai.

Baby Kamble provides a kaleidoscope glimpse into the life of Mahar women in Veergaon. She has to suffer greatly at the hands of her sasu during her periods. Kamble, in her work, *The Prisons We Broke*, points out, "When the daughter-in-law got her menstrual period for the first time in her life, the case would become agitated and keep a close watch on her daughter-in-law and her son. She would watch them with the eyes of a hawk, and would not let them even glance at each other… she stayed awake at night for fear of their coming together" (95-96). Women were compelled to adhere to the patriarchal social order's ornamental symbols of male possession, marriage, and widowhood at any cost. Dalit women used to wear

mangalsutras and apply kumkum. Women were forced to abide by the standards of conduct, which required them to forgo schooling. They were taught to be dignified, and to uphold that dignity; they had to suffer through everything in silence. Baby Kamble expressed disapproval of the fundamental essence of patriarchy and wittily depicted the feelings of a Dalit woman towards kumkum, "The kumkum symbolising their marriage status on the forehead was the most prized possession for the women. Babytai observes, “We guarded our kumkum more than our lives. For the kumkum we had laid our lives at the feet of the husband- the world exists only if he does, without him the entire world was barren. The husband may have filled our lives with sorrows that last a lifetime. However, the kumkum applied in his name was the only jewel we got in our lives” (40).

Due to limited access to healthcare services, Dalit women often face health disparities. Poor health limits their ability to work, earn and receive education, which further perpetuates the cycle of poverty that also limits their prospects. The poor health of Dalit women can be linked to the outcome of getting married at a younger age because the young girls are more likely to face complications during their pregnancy and childbirth because of their underdeveloped bodies, consequently leading to increased maternal health risks. This inadequate prenatal and postnatal care further increases their Trauma. Kamble defines the wretched state of young expecting Dalit women and mothers in her book; "there would be no food in the house, not even the water leftover from boiling rice, to satiate the fire of hunger raging inside the belly of the new mother" and so they would have to lie down and eat whatever could be scrounged together, hoping to survive (57).

Moreover, they had almost no access to hospitals and had to rely on the uneducated midwives of the low-caste community, who “would keep thrusting their hands into the poor girl’s vagina to see how far the baby had progressed” (58) every time making the method of giving birth more dreadful. The prenatal period was combat with death, and “one in every ten lost their lives during childbirth” (60-61). These happenings are unquestionably traumatic for the tender-aged Dalit women.

Baby Kamble describes in *The Prisons We Broke* that it was customary for the women to stay at home, as "the honour enjoyed by a family was in proportion to the restrictions imposed on the women in the house", and they stayed inside most of their lives, so much so that even "the rays of the sun" did not fall on them (5). Bama expresses the plight that because of their birth as Dalit women, even their struggle to acquire education made them "live a life of humiliation and degradation" until their last breath (26). When the family struggles for one meal in a day, "the girl children cannot see the sense in schooling, and stay at home, collecting firewood, looking after the house, caring for the babies, and doing household chores" (79). Even if the girls were admitted, they were assigned to sweep and clean their schools instead of focusing on their studies. Teenage girls were usually married to older men, which would snap their education, thereby engendering traumatic experiences. Kamble recalls that the moment which brought a change in their life was the speech delivered by Ambedkar, who urged the women to take the first step, ditch their superstitions, and provide education to their children. After this historic moment, the Dalit parents in her village started sending the female children to school, cutting their hair and dressing them up in proper clothes, despite the reservations of the village elders (66-70).

Baby Kamble, in her book, *The Prisons We Broke*, highlights the traumatic experiences of a female and the struggle for liberation from the traditional onslaught of patriarchy and caste discrimination. The Mahar women of Maharashtra were generally influenced by the preaching of B.R Ambedkar and, in masses, converted to Buddhism to get out of the caste hierarchy of the Hindu system. They followed each word of Baba Sahib and educated them and their children, believing that only their education could give them a

better living. They challenged every ritual perpetuated on them for generations and denounced such practices. They developed their self-consciousness of marginalisation, which was given wings by education to narrate their sufferings. The autobiography thus appears to be a complete narration of the traumatic events wherein the author, while reconstructing the events, has tried to provide a complete and vivid description of each event, thereby following the parameters laid by Judith Herman, a trauma theorist that "while reconstructing the traumatic events as a recitation of facts the complete narrative must include a full and vivid description of the traumatic imagery" (242).

Notable Dalit female writers and activists like Baby Kamble and Bama played a significant role in challenging the patriarchal dominance within their community through their literary works and activism, although they faced much criticism from their men. Social norms have significantly affected the education of Dalit girls, whereas gender bias and stereotypes have devalued their educational pursuits. They were also discouraged from pursuing higher education or certain fields of study. However, it was tough and extremely challenging for Dalit girls due to gender-based discrimination, which further limited their access to and continued education after a certain age. It is pertinent to mention here that in the rigid Indian caste system, individuals from upper castes do not support and promote education and empowerment. This opposition stems from historical prejudices that aim to maintain power dynamics. Education can empower Dalits to challenge this long-standing social hierarchy, challenge deep-seated prejudices, and emphasize principles of equality and justice. Therefore, it would be quite appropriate to acknowledge the empowerment gained by these two authors through education who became conscious of their circumstances and tried to get rid of the marginalization based on their Gender and attempted to achieve enlightenment by shedding the age-old superstitious theories communicated to them.

As of now, Dalit women's unique and deeply entrenched form of Trauma, which has been found, is inherently gendered due to the intersection of caste and gender identities. This Trauma is rooted in a history of discrimination, social exclusion, deprivation from receiving education, oppression by women of high caste, molestation, violence, work-related hazards and health. It also manifests itself in various ways, shaping the lived experiences of Dalit women in profound and distinct ways. Then, the Trauma connected into distinct but interrelated forms of oppression like emasculation, infantilization of men of the Dalit community and the brutality of police comes to the fore. A momentous contributing feature of Ambedkar in rejecting the Indian caste system was that "he believed that the caste system advanced itself by controlling women, and one of his major concerns was to make Hindu personal law more equitable for women" (Roy 46). Through the medium of their autobiographies, Kamble and Bama have highlighted that they have accomplished freedom only when they rejected the age-old superstitious theories and religiously endorsed ways of existence imposed on them by the leading Hindu Society.

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