

***Now the Powerless Speaks: A Study of Bama's Sangati and Baby Kamble's
'The Prisons We Broke' From a Dalit Feminist Standpoint***

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Abstract

In the context of the powerful and the powerless in the social formation of India, caste system has been a matter of immense debate and discussion. Continuing for the centuries, (presumably from the time of the arrival of Aryans) caste system has been a parasitical condition prevailing, thriving and continually reforming, throughout India. Being an Indian one cannot but face its grips from the birth. Moreover, due to the recent phenomenon of reservation on the basis of caste, debates have been more frequent than before. In this paper, I intend to focus on dalit women, who are often considered as 'dalits among dalits', as represented in the literature written by them. For my present purpose I have chosen Bama's *Sangati* and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, two seminal novels written by dalit women writers, in order to discuss whether and how the dalit women are affected by the power dynamics functioning not only through the upper caste people (both men and women) but also lower caste men. And we will discover in the course of the study that state, gender, caste, class, religion, and community, each of them form an intersection in order to continue this disbalance of power. And this power here is not just electoral power but a state-generated, religion-fed hierarchy which continues to uphold gender and caste discrimination. And this becomes apparent when we see how the image of dalit women as represented by male writers stand in stark contrast to that of the female writers. A story of helplessness and limitation then becomes a courageous struggle for survival and self-identity.

Keywords: Dalit feminism, Standpoint theory, Power, Survival

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Introduction

Power is commonly understood as a mechanism to control, either through “one actor within a social relationship . . . in position to carry out his will despite resistance. . .” (Weber, 1978, p. 53), or as involving both coercion and consent (thereby leading to Gramscian hegemony), or in terms of Foucault, as “the multiplicity of force relations” (1979, p.92) that takes place through daily interactions between people and institutions. All these definitions harp on a major consensus that power creates binary in social system, where on the one hand there is the powerful, on the other hand, there is the powerless. This flow from ‘upward’ to ‘below’ necessarily results in inequality among people where one side of the scale always remains higher/lower than the other. The concept of power, when analysed through its structures or mechanisms, thus remains limited in the supposition about certain persons exercising power over others.

In context of the powerful and the powerless in the social formation of India, caste system has been a matter of immense debate and discussion. Caste, according to noted historian, Romila Thapar, is a form of social control based on heredity and a ritual observance of fourfold division. According to M. N. Srinivas, a well-known Indian sociologist, relations between castes are governed by the concepts of endogamy, pollution and purity, and maximum commensality. In a caste system, people are divided primarily into four categories: the ‘brahmins’ (or priests), the ‘kshatriyas’ (or warriors), the ‘vaishyas’ (or traders), and the ‘shudras’ (or slaves). A fifth category was added at a later period of the Vedic era comprising of ‘atishudras’ (or untouchables), now also known as ‘dalits’ (literally meaning ‘crushed’). Treated as pariahs, the untouchables were forced to live outside the boundaries of the villages and even their shadows were considered polluting. Continuing for centuries, the caste system has been a parasitical condition prevailing, thriving and continually reforming, throughout India.

The conference aims to explore why and how the vast networks of power relations get transformed into various institutions of state, legislature and religion, and affect the society. But at the wake of the growing influence of dalit studies we need to look at those people who are at the lowest stratum of the society. Our perspective therefore calls for a representational analysis from the standpoint of the lower caste people who get most affected by inequal distribution of power.

For this paper I have chosen Bama’s *Sangati* and Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke*, two seminal novels in dalit literature in order to discuss whether and how dalit women are affected by the power dynamics functioning not only through the upper caste people (both men and women) but also through the lower caste community. And this power here is not just electoral power but a state-generated, religion-fed, and community based hierarchy which continues to uphold gender and caste discrimination. This becomes apparent when we see how the image of dalit women as represented by male writers stand in stark contrast to that of the female writers. A story of helplessness and limitation then becomes a courageous struggle for survival and self-identity.

Underlining ‘Difference’: Dalit Male Writings VS. Dalit Women’s Writings

In a 1995 article titled, “Dalit Women Talk Differently”, Gopal Guru argues that dalit women need to speak ‘differently’ because they face exclusion not only in the political field but also in the cultural field. He writes: “Dalit male writers do not take serious note of the literary output of dalit women and tend to be dismissive of it.” (Guru, 1995, p. 2549) And he mentions three reasons for this attitude: “(1) It is not only caste and class identity but also one’s gender positioning that decides the validity of an event; (2) dalit men are reproducing the same mechanisms against their women which their high caste adversaries had used to dominate them; (3) the experience of dalit women shows that local resistance within the dalits is important.” (Guru, 1995, p. 2549) Two points that come out of his opinion are that: ‘differences’ exist not only among ‘Indian’ women but also within the dalit community based on gender, and that writing becomes a way for dalit women to articulate their struggles and resistances. Although Guru’s argument in favor of an identity based politics for dalit women (where only dalit women can speak for themselves) has been critiqued for a more affiliative approach by Sharmila Rege who argues that in order for dalit feminism to flourish, there needs to be “a transformation of ‘their cause’ into ‘our cause’” (Rege, p. 45), the idea of ‘difference’ pointed out by Guru is of utmost importance.

In dalit male autobiographies women are portrayed as victims or mothers. In Sharankumar Limbale’s *Akkarmashi*, the two major female characters, Masamai his mother, and Santamai his grandmother, are examples of this kind of representation. While Masamai forces the protagonist to go to the village feasts and scolds him for not bringing kheer for her, Santamai feeds him without eating her own share. For Limbale Masamai becomes the obstruction towards self-dignity, a woman who bows down to extreme hunger, and Santamai remains the source of inspiration.

Writings by dalit women, on the other hand, provide a different picture. Containing stories from the daily lives, songs, and folktales, dalit women’s writings present a narrative of survival and protest. Some of the major facets of contemporary dalit women’s writings have been identity, resistance, community, a critique of brahmanical and dalit patriarchy, and a critique of mainstream Indian feminism.

Commenting on what constitutes a ‘dalit literature’, Limbale writes, “Dalit writers believe that Dalit literature is a movement. They see their literature as a vehicle for their pain, sorrow, questions and problems. But when readers read the works of Dalit writers exclusively as ‘literature’, the common ground between the writer and the reader is disturbed.” (2014, p. 105). Limbale thus looks into the context of writing and its representation of the lived experience which does not fit mainstream ‘aesthetics’ and thus violates its parameters. Dalit literature disturbs the ‘pleasure’ value of literature by bringing in ‘disturbing’ images and language. According to Limbale, dalit literature’s engagement with material lived experience poses a challenge towards the canonical notion of ‘aesthetics’.

The two novels subject to study are important because they capture two different moods of two different times. Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* symbolizes the energy and hope of the dalit female autobiography writers of the 1980s who participated in Ambedkarite movements, while Bama’s *Sangati* articulates the pessimism of the 21st century.

The Prisoners and the Prisons They Broke

Terming it as “socio-biography rather than autobiography”, Maya Pandit in the Introduction to *The Prisons We Broke*, writes about a distinct dalit feminist sensibility that appears as a contrast to dalit male writings. She writes:

In her forward to the original Marathi autobiography, [Baby Kamble] asserts, ‘Today, our young educated people are ashamed of being called a Mahar. But what is there to be ashamed of? We are the great race of the Mahars of Maharashtra. We are its real original inhabitants, the songs of the soil. The name of this land is also derived from our name. I love our caste name, Mahar—it flows in my veins, in my blood, and reminds me of our terrific struggle for truth’. (xiii)

It is interesting to see that while on the one hand there is *Joothan*, a well know dalit male autobiography, where the writer Omprakash Valmiki recounts his painful and deliberate attempt to keep his caste identity a secret, on the other hand dalit women writers are proud of their caste origins. Such assertion stemmed from Ambedkar’s call for self-respect. The very fact that the book itself is intricately linked to dalit women’s participation in the Ambedkarite movement, underline the lives of dalit women as a continuous struggle both within the house and outside.

Narratives of Humiliation and Survival

In the sphere of the ‘within’ Kamble describes how her father took pride in keeping her mother at home. She writes: “In those days, it was the custom to keep women at home, behind the threshold. The honour enjoyed by a family was in proportion to the restrictions imposed on the women of the house.” (5). Here therefore, we see an internal patriarchy imitating the upper caste practices of keeping women within the house. However, this intra-patriarchy was not just a reflection of upper caste patriarchy. It had its own workings of patriarchal systems as well. In Baby Kamble’s narrative we hear stories of young girls married off at an early age becoming subject to the verbal torture of the mother in law. Any attempt to escape this situation resulted in heavy physical torture such as beating and chopping off nose. With the mother-in-law fuelling the son with stories of the daughter-in-law’s ‘indecent’, ‘loss of respect’, and her ‘ill-starred’ fate, extreme violence was a daily occurrence for the young mahar women of Baby Kamble’s community.

Segregated both within and outside home, dalit women thus carry a memory of deprivation and repression writ through generations. However, these memories become a way of self-expression, rather than mute acceptance of fate. Baby Kamble writes about one incident during her childhood when Ambedkarite movement was at its peak. In school the upper caste girls would tease the mahar girls by saying: “That Ambedkar has educated himself, that’s why these dirty Mahars are showing off! That filthy Mahar, Ambedkar, eats dead animals but look at the airs he gives himself!” (109). To this, Babytai and her friends would reply: “You shaven widows, how dare you take our Ambedkar’s name! You have your own baldy, that stupid Gandhi! He has neither a shirt on his body, nor teeth in his mouth!” (109). This dialogue appears with a consciousness about differences within women, and the failure of Indian social reformists to meet the needs of the lower caste people. This narrative presents a struggle rather than a silent suffering.

Replete within the caste system is the concept of purity and pollution. In *The Prisons We Broke*, a huge conflict breaks out after a mahar boy touches the idol of god Vitthal. Religion becomes instrumental in continuing the caste discriminations. However, as Rege points out in her article “Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of ‘Difference’ and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position”, these practices were prevalent not so much to keep the polluted lower caste people away as it was to preserve the purity of the upper castes. Such discrimination practiced through religion also raised among the dalits a desire to break the shackles of Hinduism. The religious conversion of 1954 which followed after Ambedkar converted to Buddhism, is recounted in the book with great enthusiasm because it brought hope among the dalits of a change.

In *The Prisons We Broke*, Baby Kamble argues that memories of humiliation and perpetual slavery need to be reiterated because future generations must know the fiery ordeal that the earlier generations have gone through. Threaded within the narrative are occasional recounts of dalit women’s participation in activism. In the novel people gather at the chawde and discuss about Ambedkarite movement, his conversion, and their opinions on these movements. Their writing emphasises on dalit feminism’s claim that their theorization grows out of their activism because they consider mainstream Indian feminism to be elitist and incapable of understanding the true voice of the dalit women. Although this leads us to a broader question as to who can speak for whom and whether dalit women’s identity-based autonomy ultimately puts dalit feminism in the margins, dalit women’s writings become important, as Guru writes in the Afterword to *The Prisons We Broke*, “both for self-interrogation [here the ‘self’ being the non-dalit people] as well as the interrogation of the system that forced Baby Kamble to write her story.” (170).

Stories Not of an Individual, but of a Community

In the acknowledgement to *Sangati*, Bama writes, My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: stories not only about the sorrows and tears of Dalit women, but also about their lively and rebellious culture, their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them, but to swim vigorously against the tide; about the self-confidence and self-respect that enables them to leap over threatening adversities by laughing at and ridiculing them I want to shout out these stories. (ix)

Termed as “autobiography of a community” (Lakshmi Holmstrom, Introduction to *Sangati*), Bama’s *Sangati* holds a unique position among dalit women’s writings because it does not centre around the life of a single protagonist. *Sangati* is truly a conglomeration of ‘events’ where numerous life-narratives converge and get strewn in a tapestry of what we may call ‘dalit women’s collective experience’

Gender/ Caste Roles: Justifying 'Difference'

In Bama's *Sangati*, the narrator as a young girl of twelve learns that boys have different roles to play than girls. And these roles are perpetuated in the form of gender games that they are made to play as children. While kabadi and marbles are meant for boys, girls are supposed to play cooking or getting married, home keeping, and so on. Conversion from one religion to another offers no respite. While Hinduism defines the ultimate form of oppression towards dalits, Christianity does the same. The white nuns, patti tells the narrator, "made a big effort" (30) to teach dalit women how to become ideal wives.

The possibility of the third axis of patriarchy in *Sangati* exists in the devaluation of dalit women's economic liberty. The very fact that dalit women cross the boundaries of home and earn money on their own, gives them a higher credibility and a more privileged position than the Brahmin women who remain economically dependent on their fathers, or husbands, or sons. However, the dalit women face physical abuse on a daily basis from the men in their families. As Paatti surmises the situation of women in her community: "We have to labour in the fields as hard as men do, and then on top of that, struggle to bear and raise our children. As for the men, their work ends when they've finished in the fields. If you are born into this world, it is best you were born a man. Born as women, what good do we get? We only toil in the fields and in the home until our vaginas shrivel" (6-7). Here we have an example of how dalit patriarchy subjugates the dalit women, not by imitating the upper caste men, but by making it into an everyday practice.

Interestingly, lower caste women's participation in social labour has often served as the justification for the upper caste men for the sexual availability of the lower caste women. To provide an instance from *Sangati*: Mariamma, a young woman from the pariah community is assaulted by an upper caste man, Kumarasami, who, in order to hide this incident, accuses Mariamma of having an affair with a lower caste boy, Manikkam. In the end, Mariamma is not only accused of being a 'loose' woman, she is beaten up and forced to pay fine as well. Whereas both Kumarasami and Manikkam are left unquestioned. Two things that are important here are: Mariamma's public humiliation by the upper caste man Kumarasami, and the physical abuse by her father. By shaming Mariamma in public, Kumarasamy proves that low caste women's sexuality becomes accessible because they participate in social labor. Such act also becomes a way to undermine the masculinity of the lower caste men (i.e. lower caste men are not men enough because they cannot save their women). At the intersection of patriarchies, gender ideologies, and caste is therefore the figure of dalit woman who becomes the site where these multiple structures perform their oppression and domination.

According to Ambedkar, endogamy is the root of caste system. In *Sangati*, the fear of an inter-caste union is recounted through the story of pey. A pey is the ghost of an upper caste woman named Esakki who was killed by her brothers for marrying a lower caste man. It is interesting how, even in the lower castes, the community system functions through similar parameters to control their women that the Brahmins employ. Transgression of the boundaries of endogamy, it is feared, would result in pollution. A menstruating lower caste woman who goes out to work is a threat to her society because she raises possibilities of an intercaste union. The very fact that the

dalit men tell the women about how the pey never attacks the Brahmin women because they stay inside the house, show the aspirational aspect of the dalit men who now want to reflect the brahmanical practice of 'purity' among women by confining them within the limits of the house.

Contesting Humiliation Through Language

According to Raj Gauthaman: "Dalits who have for so long been treated as commodities owned by others must shout out their selfhood, their 'I', when they rise up." (97) Using languages exactly spoken by the dalit people, their writings appear with an unmistakable sense of anger which has taken the form of protest against injustice. Such language has been used for various purposes. While in dalit male writing, such usage is directed towards the upper caste men who have kept them in slavery and ignorance, dalit women often use it against their own husbands in order to save themselves from being beaten up. In *Sangati* the narrator writes about an incident she witnessed among Pakkiaraj and his wife Raakkamma. Pakkiaraj was abusing her in a vile and vulgar way, and was just about to hit her. And Raakkamma was replying in equally abusive language in order to save herself from being beaten up. "Even before his hand could fall on her, she screamed and shrieked, 'Ayyayyo, he's killing me. Vile man, you'll die, you'll be carried out as a corpse, you low-life, you bastard, you this you that...'" (Bama, p. 61) In this way dalit writing not only brings a 'shock' value to literature, but also takes the readers out of the comfort zone of reading a 'literature' in the canonical sense.

What is a Standpoint? Why Do We Need Dalit Feminist Standpoint?

Sandra Harding, in her Introduction to *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, writes: "Standpoint theory's focus on the historical and social locatedness of knowledge projects and on the way collective political and intellectual work can transform a source of oppression into a source of knowledge and potential liberation, makes a distinctive contribution to social justice projects as well as to our understanding of preconditions for the production of knowledge." (10)

A study from the perspective of dalit women, therefore, is epistemologically privileging because dalit women, being in the lowest rung of the society, have seen how power functions both among the powerful (in this case the upper castes) and the powerless (the lower castes). The vast network of power relations working through multiple institutions thus gets replicated and invented within the caste categories, and dalit women's writings become instrumental in unfolding the underlying politics of this. This standpoint also brings a radical revision in our understanding of 'woman' as a universal category, instead offering a multiplicity to the term 'women'.

An interesting aspect that these two writings in discussion portray is the transition from hope to skepticism. While Baby Kamble's writing holds a firm faith over the better-future-to-come, following the Ambedkarite movement, Bama's novel is born out of the skepticism about the hope and stability that the Ambedkarite movement had promised. These writings show how caste gets reproduced by modern institutions such as religion, law, and education, in the neo-capitalist India. In *Sangati* the narrator converts to Christianity, gets education, moves to the town but her caste identity does not leave her.

What binds the two narratives together is the spirit of struggle. These writings become important in the way they show how dalit women exist not as silent receivers of violence and brutality, but how they successfully convert their individual suffering into a collective political awareness. This is an awareness achieved through personal experiences and the narratives they hear. And it achieves the position of a standpoint which recovers the dalit woman within the new knowledge system and creates a possibility for a new narrative being written from a dalit feminist perspective.

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