

RECLAIMING PERSONAL IDENTITY THROUGH POLITICAL ASSERTION: A READING OF BABY KAMBLE'S THE PRISONS WE BROKE

J. Samson¹ & M. Angkayarkan Vinayakaselvi²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, India

²Assistant Professor of English, Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, India

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ABSTRACT

*This paper examines Dalit women's sense of political assertion as a means of defining personal identity. The identity construction and self-assertion of Dalit women happen with the identification of Ambedkar's political ideologies. Socio-cultural exclusion, denial of education, religious oppression, economic deprivation, patriarchal discrimination, and political exploitation are different kinds of prejudice against the Dalit people in India. Dalits make use of literary movements as an extension of their emancipatory strategy because their empowerment began through their participation in Dalit's movements. This paper primarily discusses Baby Kamble's autobiography *The Prisons We Broke* as a treatise that represents Dalit women's participation in political movements as an inseparable part of their identity construction.*

KEYWORDS: *Socio-Cultural Exclusion, Denial of Education, Position of Powerlessness-Women*

INTRODUCTION

Dalit literature is a genre of literary writing that represents Dalit consciousness, Dalit lives by Dalit people and it has its independent existence and identity. It is not only a literature of protest but also a literature with a purpose of resisting the age-old prejudices and reconstructing Dalit identity. Dalit writers have experimented with all genres such as poetry, biography, novel, autobiography, short story, memoir, diary, and plays. They have also produced literary prose, intellectual or ideological articles that lay the foundation for the formation of new Dalit aesthetics. According to Arjun Dangle:

Dalit literature is not simply literature. . . . Dalit literature is associated with a movement to bring change. . . . It represents the hopes and ambitions of a new society and new people. At the very first glance, it will be strongly evident that there is no established critical theory or point of view behind them there are new thinking and a new point of view (Dangle vii-viii).

Among all genres, autobiographical writing played a vital role in establishing Dalit aesthetics in India. Dalit writers ever since started to write literary pieces they have been writing autobiographies to construct their history in the literary field. In literary genre, autobiography is an account of an individual's life written by himself or herself. It speaks about the writer's experiences. An autobiography is considered as a self-mode of expression. The term autobiography was first introduced by Robert Southey in 1809 and it has also been recognized since the late eighteenth century as a distinct literary genre. Further,

it has the ideas of authorship, self-hood, representation, and division between fact and fiction. Also, an autobiography truly represents the experiences and achievements in the life of an extraordinary and popular person. In India, autobiography has been written by a small section of people belonging to the upper caste people. Upper caste male/female writers write autobiographies based on the experiences that are traceable along the socio-political and historical lines to construct a history of selfhood. The Dalits and oppressed people had nothing to do with it because they were denied to get the knowledge of writing and the practice of writing the “self”.

Dalit autobiographies differ from the mainstream autobiographies as they redefine the importance of self- portrayal. Autobiography can become the text of the Dalits and oppressed people as they articulate their experience as a representative voice of their community. According to Julia Swindells:

Autobiography now has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and the culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual. People in a position of powerlessness-women, black people, working class people have more that begun to insert themselves into the culture via autobiography, via the assertion of a ‘personal’ voice which speaks beyond itself. (qtd. in Anderson 103)

Autobiography is one of the important genres that influence the lives of Dalit people. Through Dalit autobiographies, the Dalits appeared as a speaking subject in literature. The speaking subjects of these Dalit autobiographies are the erstwhile untouchable to upper caste people. It reflects the individual self as a collective whole. Dalit autobiography is considered as literary forms of social protest and practices. Dalit autobiographers mostly establish themselves as the representative of their community. Dalit autobiographies expose the continuation of caste-based discrimination, the hierarchical power structures of Indian society and belief systems that support the practice of untouchability. It represents the experiences of Dalits such as their ignorance, poverty, discrimination, superstition and their emancipation. The representatives of Dalits use their autobiographies to raise voices for those who are silenced by caste oppression for generations together. Sara Beth writes, “Dalit writers use literary criticism to argue that Dalit literature is fundamentally based on personal experience, in this way they claim that their literature is the only legitimate representation of Dalit life and Dalit experience in contemporary India.”(Sara 217)

Dalit women’s issues are represented inappropriately in Dalit men’s autobiography when compared to those of the upper caste women’s issues in mainstream literature. In the post-Ambedkar period, Dalit women started to use autobiography as a weapon and as a type of movement to counter the mainstream literature. They represent themselves as the triply oppressed section in their society. They are seen as women and as Dalit women. They started to write autobiography not for their own sake but for the sake of their community. Baby Kamble, a Dalit woman autobiographer, in an interview with her translator Maya Pandit, says: “I wrote about what my community experienced. The suffering of my people became my own suffering. Their experiences became mine. So I really find it very difficult to think of myself outside of my community.” (TPWB 136)

Dalit women in India began to write their life narratives as a collective representation. A dalit male writer writes an autobiography about his community or about his subjectivity amidst the upper caste people. Similarly, a Dalit woman writer writes about her life and also writes about the larger patriarchal social set-up of her own community. Unlike mainstream literary writers or Dalit male writers, only a few Dalit female writers have written their autobiographies. Those works have

been written in their regional languages because of their unknowing of English and later they hardly been translated into English. Hence, Dalit women autobiographers are still invisible in the mainstream literary circles and in the field of Indian literary criticism in English.

The socio-political and economic conditions of Dalit women remain voiceless even today. The appearance of Dalit women's literature in forefront shows that Dalit women's collective voice for the voiceless. A number of Dalit women writers have contributed to the growth of Dalit literature. Generally, Dalit women are the most underprivileged as they are at the bottom of the hierarchical caste ladder. They suffer more due to their dual disadvantages as being Dalit and being women. Dalit women believe that they are alienated at three levels - caste, class, and gender. They have been sexually exploited in the workplace by upper caste men and they are beaten up by their husband in their home.

For a Dalit woman personal is always political. The term "politics" represents the life as the public, historic or collective one, whereas "personal" signifies the private, domestic or intimate sphere. The slogan Political is Personal, questions the politics between personal and the public sphere. Feminist scholars consider politics as the largely indistinguishable entity from the personal entity and they are interlinked with the personal issues such as sexuality, reproduction, identity and housework with the political issues of women's oppression.

This paper is based on the argument that political can also be personal. The public and personal spheres of Dalit women's live are always complementary to each other. The public spheres such as education, profession, and political participation play a vital role in defining the personal identity of Dalit women. Similarly, the genre, autobiography, says the story of the self which is personal and has a lot of details related to the public life of the person. This notion is well exemplified in Baby Kamble's autobiography *The Prisons We Broke*.

Baby Kamble is known for her famous autobiographical work *Jina Amucha* which was written in Marathi and later translated into English titled *The Prisons We Broke*. Her writing is one of the best autobiographical accounts of her community that represents triple discrimination faced by Dalit women. The purpose of her writing is to identify herself with her community. *The Prisons We Broke* deals with the problems of the oppression and exploitation of Dalit by upper caste people, the discrimination towards Dalit women in a patriarchal society and the influence of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and his thoughts. It is deeply embedded in the thoughts of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Her work is written from the perspective of Dalit women and also describes the caste and gender discrimination, violence inflicted on Dalit women by the upper caste people and Dalit men. Thus, her work has become the powerful autobiographical writing in her region.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar strived to bring equality in society and wanted political unity among Dalits in India. His treatise on the annihilation of the caste system is intended for bringing equality in India. According to him, Dalit could be empowered only through educating Dalits, converting them from Hinduism and emancipating Dalit women.

Knowledge is the foundation of man's life. The denial of knowledge to Dalits is based on the ideology of the caste system in India. For ages together Dalit people were far away from the knowledge system that was controlled by Brahmins in India. The Dalits were completely prohibited to enter knowledge sphere. The Brahmins keep Dalits under their control through their education. Education and professional system in India were once based on the caste system in India. Only upper caste men were allowed to get education whereas lower caste people and women in all categories were forbidden to get

the education. In Indian society, there was no equality in acquiring education. Due to the lack of education, Dalits became culturally handicapped, economically weak, morally enslaved and socially backward. So Dalit intellectuals choose education as a weapon to resist the ideology of Brahmanism and Caste system in India. Jothira Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar recognized the importance of education and demanded education for sections of society.

Dalit reformer Dr. B.R. Ambedkar directed the Dalits towards education and self-respect to rescue them from the life of misery. He had the mission and vision to eradicate the caste from India, with his slogan of 'Educate, Organize and Agitate'. He gave more importance to educate the Dalits. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar emphasized that educating women is as important as educating men. He was always conscious of Dalit people's education. He convinced the world that only through education Dalits could become aware of their exploitation. In 1924, he founded the Bahishkrit Hitkarni Sabha to promote education among the depressed classes and Dalit people to cultivate them. He was conscious of the need for education in general and especially for Dalit people. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar had viewed education as a means to enlighten human beings to acquire knowledge and to civilize their mind. He knew well that only through education, exploitation could be stopped and equality, justice, and self-respect could be achieved.

Kamble herself thought that education is compulsory for all Dalits especially Dalit women. Education brings awareness among Dalits. She says that the lives of Dalit women can be changed with good education and they can change their community to get free from caste discrimination. Since they were illiterates, they were dominated and suppressed by upper caste people. She quotes Dr. Ambedkar's in her book thus:

You must educate your children. Divorce your children from god. Teach them good things. Send them to school. The result will be there for you to see. When your children begin to be educated, your condition will start improving. Your family, your life will improve. Your children will bring you out of this hell. We are humans. We, too, have the right to live as human beings. Your children will make you aware of this. (TPWB 64)

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar brought a new confidence among the Dalit people in India. He aimed to give them the social and political consciousness. He knew the need of educating the Dalits for the real social and economic progress. His philosophy on education has a social and ethical meaning. Dalits lived in the darkness of ignorance without education. The denial of education for Dalits is political as the education assures Dalits good life and financial independence.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar firmly believed that education brings not only a new consciousness among the Dalits but also brings an egalitarian society and social changes. He delivered speeches in order to awaken the Dalits and women to know the value of education. His philosophy of education is known through his writings and speeches. He wanted to reconstruct the structure of the educational system in India. He considered education as the fundamental source of socio-economic and political revolution. Only education could enlighten oneself and organize social forces against the tyranny of society. Inspired by Ambedkar, Baby Kamble states that the Dalits must educate their children and also, Dalits must divert their attention from god and send their children to schools. When their children are educated, their condition will be changed. So She explores what Ambedkar had told to the Dalits thus:

Our women have had a major role in being superstitious, but I'm sure they will now give up these superstitious and take a lead in educating their children. . . . Go ahead, educate your children. Let all our women take this step. Discard all

such customs that strengthen our ignorance. . . . Let us teach them a lesson. This slavery, which has been imposed upon us, will not disappear easily. For that, we need to bring about a revolution. (TPWB 65)

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar wanted to change the mindset of Dalit people towards education. His views on education were based on the emancipation of oppressed people from their ignorance. Dalit people were systematically considered as untouchables by upper caste people in the name of the caste system and religious hegemony. His views on education is a key to social emancipation which demands equal rights to get the education, and it stands for dignity, self-respect and it also means a social revolution against the social evils of casteism and untouchability. Baby Kamble is strongly inspired by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's thoughts and philosophy on education from her childhood days. Under the influence of Ambedkar's ideas, all parents in her village started to enroll their children in schools. His thoughts brought a major change in the lives of Dalits.

Dalits in her village followed Ambedkar's ideology and his philosophy. When they joined in school they had to encounter caste discrimination both from upper caste students and teachers. The reason for the humiliation is that all schools and teachers belonged to upper caste never encouraged Dalits to get the education. Baby Kamble in her school days was humiliated, harassed and discriminated by her classmates and her teachers also. Teachers gave more preference to upper caste students, Whereas, Dalit students were seated in the door side and the corner place. They were treated as untouchables by the upper caste students. Her school was dominated by high caste and they treated Dalit students as lepers. If upper caste students had to pass by Dalits, they would cover their nose and run as if their lives were in mortal danger. The teacher had allotted Dalits a place in a corner far away from the blackboard near the door from where they could not move.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar recognized that the education could be a useful instrument for movement for liberty and equality. It could liberate from all social evils such as ignorance, poverty, superstition, injustice, untouchability, discrimination and exploitation. According to him, illiteracy and ignorance is the greatest hurdle in the development of humanity. He believed that education is a weapon to annihilate social slavery, and achieve economic development, get political freedom. In his slogan "Educate, Organise, Agitate", education gets the foremost importance because through education only they can organize and agitate against social evils. Through education he wanted Dalits to inculcate the values of freedom and equality. Inspired by Ambedkar's thoughts, Baby Kamble sent her children to school and enabled them to occupy good professional status. She recollects the speech made by Ambedkar:

Educate your children. They, in turn, should spend one percent of their salary in improving a lot of poor children. Only then will their education benefit the community and the generation next to theirs will be educated. Once they are educated, they can organize themselves and find out various ways of directing the struggle. And I am sure my sisters and mothers will carry out this task with an iron resolve. (TPWB 135)

Baby Kamble has taken a pledge to educate her community and critique the superstition of Hinduism. She asks the Dalits to educate their children. Baby Kamble sent her children to school. Her eldest son has done M.Sc and he has become a regional manager in the Bank of India. Her second son has done B.A and got the clerk job in the Bank of India. Her third son has become the officer in the government diary. Her daughter is a block development officer at Baramati. She knows that education has the potential for the liberation of Dalits.

Education is an important weapon for the emancipation of women, especially for Dalit women. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar had great concern for the women's empowerment and their emancipation. He observes education is necessary for women as it is for men. He wanted to liberate Dalit women from their discrimination and their ignorance. He demanded the education system to get educational rights, equality with men and the right to property for women. Through education, women would think independently and achieve intellectual development.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar firmly believes that the reason for the denial of education for Dalit is due to the unequal structure that prevails in Hinduism. He fought a relentless war against Hindu religion for social equality, human dignity and political, economic empowerment. Besides his ideologies on education, he analyses the role of true religion in uplifting the Dalit individual. According to him, religion is for man and not man for religion. It should teach the virtue of equality and liberty. He hated Hinduism because of its social injustice, dishonesty and caste tyranny. Inequality is the soul of Hinduism. Hinduism has stood against the untouchables in India. He prefers Buddhism to Hinduism. There is a great difference between Hinduism and Buddhism. Buddhism means a casteless society based on equal rights. Hinduism is primarily based on the caste system, which encourages division among people, inequality and exploitation. *The Prisons We Broke* is an expression of protest against the existence of inhuman conditions to which the Hindu caste system has subjected the Dalits for generations together. She says that Ambedkar's ideologies provide the intellectual and ideological foundations to protest against the fundamentals of Hinduism.

The Prisons We Broke represents the caste violence as inseparable aspect from religion. As Hinduism is meant for high caste people and caste Hindus, it has not yet reached Dalit people. So, Dalits who follow Hinduism are found to follow superstitious beliefs by offering and consuming liquor during rituals and sacrificing animals. Dalits are not only oppressed within the norms of the caste system but also discriminated within religion. They are denied to enter the Hindu temple because of their lowest status in caste ladder. They aspired for a better life but they were bound by the chains of slavery. Baby Kamble says that her entire community blindly followed the superstitious rituals because of their ignorance. They blindly believed that possession of devil and performing the rituals would relieve the devil from their body. Baby Kamble says:

The entire community had sunk deep in the mire of such dreadful superstitions. The upper castes had never allowed this lowly caste of ours to acquire knowledge. Generations after generations, our people rotted and perished by following such superstitious way of life. Yet, we kept believing in your Hindu religion and serving you faithfully. (TPWB 37)

Dalit people were ultimate victims of the Brahminic hegemony. They believed in the Hindu religion and never dared to challenge them as they considered themselves weak and feeble. They did not have any courage to flow against the tide. Conversion from Hindu religion is one of the major factors that opened avenues for the Dalits to search for alternative forms of social order. The untouchables hoped to find a more democratic egalitarian and liberal social order in these religions. For the outcastes, religious conversion was not just moving into another religion, but a powerful means to demonstrate that they are also human beings with equal status. Dr. Ambedkar refused to remain a Hindu and encouraged Dalits to embrace other religions said that, "To get human treatment, convert yourselves. Convert for getting organized. Convert for becoming strong. Convert for securing equality. Convert for getting liberty. Convert so that your domestic life may be happy." (qtd. in Karunyakara 219)

Baby Kamble follows Ambedkar Dalits to take the path of conversion Dalits to take the path of conversion. Baby Kamble narrates how she and her friends entered Ram temple inspired by Ambedkar's ideology during 1938. She planned to "pollute" (TPWB 130) Ram at least once. She and her friends divided themselves into two groups of six girls each. The group of elder girls entered the Ram temple and the other group kept vigil outside. They all ran towards the temple. Their minds were thrilled that finally, they saw Ram, but at the same time, they were also scared that the god would punish them for their transgression. They visited Ram temple with black bukka mark between their eyebrows to hide their Dalit identity. Their laughter after visiting the temple implies their mockery on Hinduism.

In 1930, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar inaugurated the Kalaram temple entry movement at Nasik. He invited all the depressed classes to come to Nasik for the right of worshipping Hindu Gods because they were not allowed to enter the temple. On that occasion, Brahmins were not allowed Dalit to enter Hindu temples. So Dr. B.R. Ambedkar staged non-violent struggle before the gate of the temple with his supporters. Depressed classes entered the temple as the caste Hindus enter the temples. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar aimed not only at claiming the right to enter the Hindu temple but also to liberate the minds of depressed classes that were filled with blind faiths about religious practices. He believed that temple entry is the first step towards annihilating untouchability. Baby Kamble narrate another similar struggle for temple entry in the Vithoba temple, hotel entry and prohibited public place entry that took place in Phulton. Young boys also organized forced entry into the hotels and it attested the success of Ambedkar's speech.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar renounced Hinduism and embraced Buddhism. His philosophy of religion enabled him to renounce Hinduism and embrace Buddhism. In every walk of his life, he met with insult, humility, and harassment because of religion. His declaration of religious conversion in the Yeola conference in 1936 indicated his foresight. Finally, he abandoned Hinduism because of its imperishable presence within caste system and he followed Buddhism. Buddhism preached social freedom, political freedom, and equality between man and woman. Buddhism brought social changes that untouchable could live a life of dignity. Dhamma has a scientific base, and it preaches equality, liberty, and fraternity. He believed that Dhamma was preached by Buddha that was intended to eliminate the sufferings of people. Dhamma is based on morality. He was attracted to Buddhism for this purpose. The conversion to Buddhism from Hinduism finally took place on 14th and 15th October 1956. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar did not seem to be tempted by other religion such as Christianity and Islam. He considered that these religions have no ties with the ancient tradition of India. He did not believe that these religions in the emancipating untouchables. Baby Kamble followed Ambedkar' ideology of religion and she urges the Dalits to convert themselves to Buddhism. Baby Kamble asked her people to follow Buddhism and to lead a life of "Bhim and the Buddha" (TPWB 123). She instructs them to nurture the values of Buddhism in their children too.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar not only wanted to ensure social equality between man and man but also equal status and dignity between man and women. He believed that men and women differ only at the physiological level but they are one and the same in human aspect and social level. Many reformation movements were launched by social reformers like Rajaram Ram Mohan Roy, Jothirao Phule and host of others in India to empower women. The works of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and his policies on the emancipation of women have special features. According to him, there are two sources that are important for the emancipation of Dalit women. The first source is the thoughts and philosophy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Throughout of his life he accentuated the necessity of awakening Dalit women regarding their dignity, self-respect and their emancipation. The

second source is that a rejection of Hindu religion by reason of Hinduism has degraded women. Hinduism recommends patriarchal system because Manusmriti sustains this. Hinduism treated all women as a Dalit. Women led their life through deprivation, subjugation and also as a slave in Hindu society.

Dalit women have certain primary issues that are different from Dalit men to be addressed. The inequality between men and women in their society has arisen due to religious orders, social and economic factors. Upper caste women and Dalit men do not realize their subjugated position. Baby Kamble mentioned that Brahmin women treated the Dalit women inferior thus “Hey you, Mahar women, shoo, shoo, stand a distance. Don’t touch anything. You will pollute us and religion” (TPWB 80). Baby Kamble highlights the attitude of upper caste women towards Dalits. Besides, she sarcastically comments on the status of Brahmin women within the religious system. Therefore the struggle for the emancipation of Dalit men and women is also a struggle for the emancipation of all women in India. They faced the same calamities that Dalits have been facing for centuries together. So, efforts for Dalit women’s emancipation are efforts for the emancipation of women and Dalit men.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar realized the condition of double bind of Dalit women and he tried to give human dignity to them. For this purpose, he launched an agitation for Dalit women’s emancipation. The patriarchal set up in India made the Dalit women more insecure and dependent on men. Baby Kamble’s autobiography is the experience of insecurity, domestic violence and social violence that Dalit women encountered. She says that:

The other world had bound us with chains of slavery. But we too were human beings. And we too desired to dominate, to wield power. But who would let us do that? So we made our own arrangements to find slaves-our very own daughters-in-law! If nobody else, then we could at least enslave them. (TPWB 87)

Inspired by the thoughts and ideologies of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Baby Kamble identified familial slavery as the primary social issue for the empowerment of Dalit women. She also firmly believes that they can be liberated from their familial slavery. Dalit men are always conscious of their gender and unaware of their subjugation under upper caste men and women. Dalit men do not accept Dalit women as wives who are educated more than them. But they accept Dalit women as wives who are more beautiful than them. Dalit men want Dalit women to be under their control. Baby Kamble clearly shows how Dalit women are viewed as objects. According to Baby Kamble, the movement of Dalit women’s emancipation is a movement to end the subjugation of Dalits irrespective of gender. Dalit families are male-centered. Dalit women are restricted in their house by their male relatives. Even educated Dalit women cannot take decision consciously. They are always worried about how their husbands and male relatives would react if they involve themselves in the public sphere. Baby Kamble in her interview mentions that her husband attitude towards woman as inferior to men. She was aware that her husband would not accept and encourage her writing. So, she kept her journey as a writer as secret. This is a sample to understand the condition of educated Dalit women.

Violence, exploitation, and sexuality are interlinked within Indian society. Sexual division of labor and patriarchy can be the major barriers to Dalit women’s liberation. Child marriage, rape, dowry, violence and atrocities on women are the main issues of Dalit women’s movement. Dalit women are never included in agitations launched by the upper or other caste women’s movement. They have neglected Dalit women. The caste system and Dalit women’s problem are inseparable. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar combined both the caste problem and women’s problem as the fundamental issues of the society. Baby

Kamble inspired by Ambedkar participated in Ambedkar's movement. In this movement, she and her women struggled for Dalit women's rights and she fought with upper caste women for claiming equality. Once Baby Kamble and her women participated in a meeting that was organized in Mahila Mandal, Phaltan. All Brahmin and caste Hindu women occupied the chairs. They did not allow the Mahar women to sit on the chairs. Suddenly a Mahar woman rushed demanded the organizers to arrange seats because Ambedkar had told them to demand their rights.

Baby Kamble understood education as the top priority to liberate and empower Dalit women. Baby Kamble advocates social reforms such as non-Brahmanical movements and Ambedkar Movements to bring social changes in the lives of Dalit women. It reduced the evil practices that existed in Hindu society against Dalit women. Baby Kamble influenced by Ambedkar's thoughts has mentioned that it was Ambedkar's movements and his thoughts that brought them out from their captivity. She decided to begin her struggle through her writing. She followed Ambedkar's advice verbatim, to the best of her ability.

CONCLUSIONS

Baby Kamble established her strong admiration towards the political ideologies of Ambedkar in her autobiography. This entire book is a discourse of her transformation from an innocent village girl to a strong Ambedkarite. As a reflection of it, her autobiography *The Prisons We Broke* crosses the boundaries of the genre by glorifying the ideologies of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. It is not a complete account of Baby Kamble's own self. Apart from representing herself and her community, she establishes the success of Ambedkarian thoughts in her book. The issues that she deals with her book are public and political but she narrates those issues as her personal issues. Thus this narrative represents political as personal.

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