

Trapped in a Vice: A Study of Triple Marginality Encountered by Dalit Women in Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*

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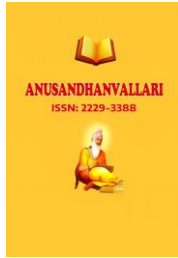
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Abstract

This research paper examines the triple marginality faced by Dalit women as depicted in two significant Dalit autobiographies: Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2009). The concept of triple marginality refers to the simultaneous and overlapping oppressions of caste, gender, and class that together trap Dalit women in a deeply painful cycle of suffering and silence. These three forces do not work separately. They combine and reinforce each other, making the lives of Dalit women uniquely difficult. Using simple and accessible language, this paper explores how both authors use their personal life stories to expose the social injustices they faced from childhood to adulthood. The paper shows how Dalit women suffer not only from upper-caste discrimination but also from patriarchal control within their own communities and from the grinding poverty that leaves them with no resources to fight back. At the same time, both books are stories of resistance. Through education, the teachings of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, and the powerful act of writing, these women challenge the systems that oppress them. The study argues that these autobiographies are not just personal memoirs but collective testimonies that give voice to millions of silenced Dalit women across India. By comparing the two texts closely, the paper reveals how Dalit women slowly break free from their prisons and weave new paths of dignity, self-respect, and freedom.



Keywords: Dalit women, triple marginality, caste oppression, gender discrimination, class exploitation.

Introduction

In India, the word marginality means being pushed to the edges of society. When a person is marginalized, they are ignored, silenced, and denied basic rights. For Dalit women, this marginalization happens not once but three times at the same moment. They are pushed down because of their low caste, because they are women, and because they are poor. This is what scholars call triple marginality. It is like being trapped in a vice that tightens from three different sides at once, leaving no room to breathe or escape.

Dalit women occupy the lowest position in India's caste hierarchy. They are considered untouchable by upper-caste society. They are also considered inferior to men within their own Dalit communities. And they are economically so poor that they cannot access education, healthcare, or legal help. These three forces of caste, gender, and class work together to keep Dalit women invisible and voiceless. As Anandita Pan writes in her academic study, "Dalit women are triply marginalized by caste, class, and gender and their experiences cannot be understood through any single lens alone" (Pan 3).

Two powerful autobiographies bring this reality to life with honesty and courage. Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*, originally written in Marathi as *Jina Amucha* and translated into English in 2008, tells the story of a Mahar woman growing up in a Maharashtra village under the shadow of caste rules and poverty. Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*, originally written as *Aaydan* in Marathi and translated into English in 2009, tells the story of a Dalit woman's journey from a small village to the city of Mumbai, weaving together pain, struggle, and survival. Both books are deeply personal, yet they speak for entire communities of women who never had the chance to tell their own stories.

This paper is divided into six main sections, three for each novel, examining how caste-based humiliation, gender oppression, and class poverty shape the lives of Dalit women in these texts. The paper uses direct quotes from the novels and references from academic papers to support its arguments. The goal is to show that triple marginality is not just a theoretical idea. It is a lived, daily reality for millions of Dalit women, and these two books are among the most powerful testimonies of that reality in Indian literature.

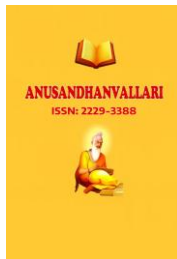
Triple Marginality in Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*

1. Caste-Based Humiliation and the Prison of Untouchability

The first and most visible prison in Baby Kamble's book is the prison of caste. From the very first pages, Kamble describes a world where Dalit children are treated as less than human simply because of the family they were born into. The Mahar community, to which Kamble belongs, was considered untouchable by upper-caste Hindus. This meant that Mahar people could not enter temples, could not use the same wells, could not sit on the same benches, and could not even walk on the same paths as upper-caste people. For Dalit women, this humiliation was even sharper because they were seen as doubly polluted by caste and by gender.

Kamble describes the experience of going to school as a Dalit girl with painful clarity. She writes:

We, the daughters of the activists in the movement, were enrolled in school no. 5 for girls. It was basically a school for Brahmin girls, with a few girls from other high castes. There were some ten or twelve Mahar girls spread over in various classes. So each class had only a sprinkling of the polluting Mahars. All the girls in the class had benches to sit except us Mahar girls. We had to sit on the floor in one corner of the classroom like diseased puppies. We were like fiery godflies burning for vengeance. (Kamble 62)



This quote is deeply significant. It shows that even in a place of learning, caste discrimination followed Dalit girls. They were not allowed to sit with other children. They were made to feel dirty and unwanted. The phrase diseased puppies shows how deeply this humiliation was felt. Yet the phrase burning for vengeance also shows that these girls were not passive. They felt anger, and that anger would later become the fuel for resistance. Aarti Vishwakarma, in her academic paper, notes that Kamble's narrative exposes the systematic dehumanization of Dalit women through the institution of untouchability, which operated in every space from the school to the temple to the street (Vishwakarma 111). This caste-based humiliation is the first and most fundamental prison that Kamble describes.

2. Gender Oppression and Patriarchal Control Within the Dalit Community

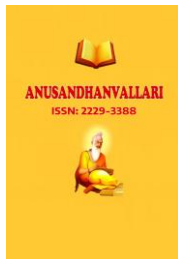
The second prison in Kamble's book is the prison of gender. While upper-caste society oppresses Dalit women from outside, Dalit men often oppress Dalit women from inside the home and community. This internal patriarchy is just as painful as external caste discrimination. Kamble shows how Dalit women are expected to serve everyone including their husbands, their in-laws, and their children without complaint. They are married off young, beaten for small mistakes, and denied any say in family decisions.

Kamble describes how women in her community were treated as property. They had no right to education, no right to choose their husbands, and no right to speak in public gatherings. Even within the Ambedkarite movement, women were often expected to cook and clean while men gave speeches and made decisions. Sanjay Kumar, in his academic paper on Kamble's work, argues that Dalit women face a double burden of the Brahmanic patriarchy of upper-caste society and the internal patriarchy of their own community, and Kamble's autobiography is one of the first texts to name this double oppression clearly (Kumar 45). This observation is important because it shows that caste liberation alone is not enough. Dalit women need freedom from gender oppression too. Kamble's book is brave enough to say this clearly, even when it means criticizing men within her own community.

3. Class Poverty and Economic Exploitation

The third prison in Kamble's book is poverty. The Mahar community was forced by the Watan system into hereditary, unpaid labor for upper-caste landlords. This meant that Dalit families had no economic independence. Women worked the hardest by collecting firewood, working in fields, and cleaning houses but received the least. They ate leftover food, wore torn clothes, and lived in small huts with no clean water. This poverty was not accidental. It was a deliberate result of the caste system, which denied Dalits access to land, education, and better-paying jobs.

Komal Pareek, in her research paper, explains that the economic exploitation of Dalit women is inseparable from their caste and gender oppression, and poverty is not just a material condition for them but a tool of control that keeps them dependent and powerless (Pareek 78). Kamble shows how poverty made it almost impossible for women to escape their situation. Without money, they could not study, could not travel, and could not access legal help. Yet Kamble also shows that Ambedkar's call for education slowly began to change things. Families who sent their children to school began to break the cycle of poverty, and women who got educated began to demand better treatment.



Triple Marginality in Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*

4. Caste Discrimination and the Inheritance of Pain

Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* uses the beautiful and painful metaphor of weaving to describe how suffering is passed from one generation of Dalit women to the next. Just as her mother wove bamboo baskets to survive, Pawar weaves words to tell the story of her community. The book begins with Pawar's childhood in a small village in the Konkan region of Maharashtra, where Dalit families lived in constant fear of upper-caste violence and humiliation.

Pawar describes how caste discrimination shaped every aspect of daily life. Dalit children could not drink water from upper-caste wells. Dalit women had to remove their footwear when passing upper-caste homes. They were called by derogatory names and treated as servants even when they were not working. Pawar writes with great emotional depth about this inherited pain:

My mother used to weave aaydans, the Marathi generic term for all things made from bamboo. I find that her act of weaving and my act of writing are organically linked. The weave is similar. It is the weave of pain, suffering, and agony that links us. Every strand of bamboo she wove carried the weight of caste, the silence of a woman who had no other language but her hands. And every word I write carries that same weight, that same silence, transformed now into sound. (Pawar 12)

This quote is one of the most powerful in the entire book. It connects three generations of Dalit women through the act of creation, weaving and writing. It shows that pain is not just personal but inherited, passed down like a family tradition that no one chose. Rochona Majumdar, in her academic review of the book, notes that Pawar's use of the weaving metaphor is a deliberate literary strategy to show how caste oppression is structural and generational, not just individual (Majumdar 204). This generational dimension of caste discrimination makes it even harder to escape.

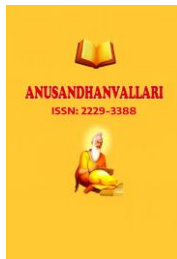
5. Patriarchal Control and the Suppression of Women's Voices

Like Kamble, Pawar also shows how Dalit women face patriarchal control from within their own community. Pawar's own life story is a powerful example. When she wanted to study, her family was not fully supportive. When she wanted to work and write, she faced opposition from her husband and in-laws. The expectation was that a Dalit woman's place was in the home, serving the family, not in the public world of literature and politics.

Pawar also shows how the Dalit movement itself was often dominated by men. Women were expected to participate in protests and marches but were rarely given leadership roles. Their voices were heard only when they supported men's agendas. Manavee Singh and Prachi Priyanka, in their academic paper, argue that Pawar's autobiography is a feminist intervention within Dalit literature, challenging not only upper-caste society but also the male-dominated structures of the Dalit movement itself (Singh and Priyanka 33). This is a crucial point. Pawar's book does not just criticize the caste system. It also criticizes the sexism within the Dalit community, making it a truly feminist text.

6. Class Struggles and the Search for Economic Dignity

Pawar's book traces three generations of Dalit women moving from village to city in search of a better life. Her mother wove baskets to survive. Pawar herself moved to Mumbai and worked in various jobs before becoming a writer. This journey from village poverty to urban struggle shows how class oppression follows Dalit women even when they move. In the city, they face new forms of exploitation including low wages, unsafe working conditions, and continued caste discrimination in the workplace.



Basavaraj Naikar, in his review of the book, observes that Pawar's narrative shows that urbanization does not automatically liberate Dalit women from class oppression, and the city offers new opportunities but also new forms of exploitation, and caste continues to operate even in modern urban spaces (Naikar 156). Yet Pawar also shows that education and writing gave her a way out. By becoming a published author, she achieved economic independence and a public voice. Her book itself is proof that Dalit women can break the cycle of poverty through creativity and determination.

Conclusion

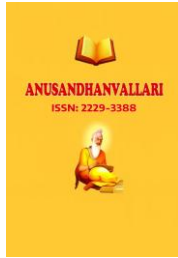
Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* are two of the most important books in Indian Dalit literature. Together, they give a complete and deeply moving picture of triple marginality, the overlapping oppressions of caste, gender, and class that trap Dalit women in a vice from which escape seems almost impossible. Kamble shows how the prison of untouchability, the prison of patriarchy, and the prison of poverty combine to silence Dalit women and deny them basic human dignity. Pawar shows how this pain is woven into the very fabric of Dalit women's lives, passed from mother to daughter across generations.

Yet both books are also stories of resistance and hope. Both authors show that education, the teachings of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, and the act of writing are powerful tools for breaking free. By telling their own stories in their own words, Kamble and Pawar challenge the systems that tried to silence them. They prove that Dalit women are not just victims. They are thinkers, fighters, and creators who refuse to accept the roles that society has assigned to them.

As Shameemunnisa Begum writes in her academic paper, Dalit women's autobiographies are not just personal documents but political acts that challenge the dominant narratives of Indian society and demand a complete rethinking of caste, gender, and class (Begum 89). This paper has tried to show exactly that. Triple marginality is real, it is painful, and it is ongoing. But so is the resistance of Dalit women. And as long as books like *The Prisons We Broke* and *The Weave of My Life* are read and studied, that resistance will continue to grow.

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