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LITERATURE

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"Depressed Sufferings": Reading Dalit Life-Writings as Testimonies of Collective Resistance

Abstract. Dalit life-writings have often been identified as reified spaces of protest against the Brahmanic oppression continuing since centuries in the Indian society. Banished to a space of invisibility, both metaphorical as well as physical margins of the Social Imaginary, Dalits continue to push back boundaries by transforming the 'marginal' space into a space of 'subaltern resistance'. My aim in this paper is to interrogate the methods of collective resistance in the life-writings of Dalit women authors and show how the peripheral spatial geography becomes the central site of resistance. Both Baby Kamble's *The Prisons we Broke* (2008), and Bama's *Karukku* (1992) belong to entirely different historical periods, and therefore, inevitably differ in their plot-narratives and manner of expression. However, they converge in their emphasis on how the Dalit segregated spaces in their village assume an important role in awakening their collective consciousness first – as members of a community, and second – as women.

Both *Karukku* and *The Prisons We Broke* refuse to adhere to the Augustinian definitions of the autobiography as a genre and instead become works which elude generic conventions of the autobiography, anticipating a separate literary genre for themselves. In fact, the closest literary referent of these texts is the Latin American genre of the *testimonio* - social and political narratives of witnessing significant events as a collective - that emerged in the 1960s. Reading these Dalit life-writings as *testimonios* of collective resistance is evocative of the on-going struggle of the Dalits to claim a separate space, both social and literary, while lending a voice to their lived-experiences in a paternalistic society that is essentially casteist.

Baby Kamble and Bama raise pertinent questions against the dominant religious ideology and contribute to a social change in the conditions of women. Thus, my second intention in the paper is to closely look at the resistance offered against religious bias by the two authors. Since the Indian caste system derives its justifications from the Hindu law of divinity that are apparently inalterable according

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to Hindu purists, challenging the '*savarna*' customs and rituals has been a persistent preoccupation within Dalit activism. Foregrounding textual instances of such challenges and resistance shall help us in understanding how a society practices coercion against a community when it comes to something as benign and as personal as man's spiritual connection with the divine force.

Keywords: Dalit women, oppression, *testimonio,* resistance

1. Introduction

The subaltern as gendered subject has been a source of significant scrutiny ever since postcolonial theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak came up with her (in)famous contention that the "The subaltern as female cannot be heard or read" (308). The statement has been subjected to much criticism and Spivak herself has noted that the idea is frequently misconstrued and misread and tends to be sensationalized rather than understood contextually. My contextual reading of her essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', leads me to believe that her conclusive statement, about the subaltern female and her absent agency, is rather interpretive, where Spivak's larger concern is the peripheral space or platform from which the subaltern as gendered-subject emerges to speak, but is rendered voiceless, because her voice of dissent is subsumed within the larger conventions of male discourses[1]. In her later conversations on subalternity, she advocates the idea that the subaltern is not a mere by-product of the colonial native subject, but has been always-already present, occupying a separate space that has been either misrecognized or not considered worthy of recognition. Therefore, what Spivak questions is the adequacy of representation of the margin in relation to the center. This marginal space gets complicated further when conceived in the context of cultural issues such as that of caste or class hierarchy and gender. When these factors intersect and overlap, the subaltern space becomes a complex site of tripartite marginalization (Spivak 1998, 294).

The case of Dalits in India is unique in this context, since the Dalits, as a collective community belonging to the subordinate caste of the Indian social structure, are not only historically placed in the marginal site of censure, but are also denied the chance to make their way through to the Center/mainstream. Nevertheless, boundaries are pushed back constantly, and the dominant culture has been challenged for centuries. The emergence of Dalit life-writing as a separate literary genre of self-expression, self-discovery and self-reconstitution, eliding traditions of the conventional autobiography, is a significant mark of such imminent resistance. The presence of Dalit women as writers in the literary circle mostly dominated by men of the upper-caste communities, with a meagre share given to Dalit men and activists, amounts to no less than a cultural rupture that threatens to explode the hegemonic institutions of the caste-system and patriarchy.

[1] I am grateful to Prof. Keya Ganguly and her class lectures in the Department of CSCL (Fall 2019), University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, that led me towards this direction of thinking.

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My aim in this paper is to interrogate the methods of collective resistance in the life-writings of Dalit women writers and consider the primary texts, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons we Broke* (2008) and Bama's *Karukku* (1992) as works which elude generic conventions of the autobiography and should be read as 'testimonial narratives of resistance' (or *testimonios* of resistance), with the Latin American genre of the *testimonio* as its referent. In doing so, I argue, that the peripheral geography of the segregated spaces reserved for the Dalits in the villages of the respective authors, acts as the central site of resistance.

Baby Kamble and Bama raise pertinent questions against the dominant religious ideology and contribute to a social change in the conditions of women. Both authors have distinct narrative styles of approaching the 'common' problem which comprises of an acerbic opposition of Brahmanical or '*savarna*' injustices. One should know that while Bama belongs to the community of Tamil Dalit-Christians, Baby Kamble belongs to the Mahar community. Both the Mahar community and Dalit-Christians were originally a part of the Hindu caste hierarchy, who later converted to Buddhism and Christianity respectively, with the hope of detangling themselves from the web of historical oppression and humiliation. Thus, my second intention in the paper is to closely look at the resistance offered against religious bias by the two authors. Since the Indian caste system derives its justifications from the Hindu law of divinity that are apparently inalterable according to Hindu purists, challenging the 'savarna' customs and rituals has been a persistent preoccupation within Dalit activism. Foregrounding textual instances of such challenges and resistance prove helpful in understanding how a society practices coercion against a community when it comes to something as benign and as personal as man's spiritual connection with the divine force. While *The Prisons We Broke* is written in an autobiographical format and speaks about the struggles and collective emancipation of a neglected community in a pre-independent village in Maharashtra, driven by the motivation of their leader Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, Bama's *Karukku* is a confessional account of a people's spiritual awakening towards centuries of caste-oppression in the state of Tamil Nadu. As feminist narratives that mirror the historical struggles of the past as continued in the present, the texts can be read together in the light of the Latin-American *testimonio* genre. I shall elaborate upon this in the next section.

One should also remember that both Bama and Baby Kamble belong to different generations and therefore the autobiographies are located in absolutely different timeframes in terms of literary history as well as social circumstances. Baby Kamble was one of the first Dalit women to write an autobiography. Because she writes about the sufferings of the Dalit community in the colonial period, the reader might encounter several practices and incidents described in the text, which do not exist anymore. In one of her interviews with her book's translator, Maya Pandit, Kamble admits how the publication of her book was nothing short of an event of coincidence. Even though *The Prisons we Broke* was published in 2008, it was written some twenty years before that, because the writer had hidden her work, fearing adverse reactions from her hus-

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band and the men of her community (Kamble 148). The very idea of a Dalit woman taking up writing was barely imagined in pre-independent India. Kamble's position as a writer of Dalit oppressions was considered blasphemous. Bama, on the contrary, had to face comparatively fewer challenges in order to write and publish her book in 1991. *Karukku* has enjoyed global readership, appeared in translations across the world and, most importantly, has helped its author and the Dalit feminist movement to gain visibility on the global literary platform.

However, before discussing the ramifications of Dalit women's testimonios as narratives of resistance, it is imperative to gain a historical background of the Dalits as a distinct community in the Indian social structure. The term 'Dalit' originally emerges from Marathi language and etymologically means 'one who is trampled upon/grounded down'[2]. The term Dalit was first used by Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, an influential figure in Indian political economy, the chief architect of the Indian constitution and himself a Dalit belonging to the Mahar caste, foregrounding the oppressive practices of the Caste-Hindus persisting for centuries, and eventually uplifting the Dalit community socially, economically and financially to a great extent. Dr. Ambedkar preferred the term 'Dalit' over other previously-used terms, such as the 'Depressed Classes' or 'Backward Classes,' because 'Dalit' implied a concept-metaphor bearing connotations of the deprivation, social neglect and domination that the people endured, thereby exposing the internal plague within the Indian caste system.

The Dalits as a distinct category of people condemned to menial and lowly work have been long present in the Indian social structure and they predate modern casteism. From the Middle Ages until the country's Independence in the twentieth century, Dalits were required to bear certain distinctive marks of identification to prevent physical contamination of the upper castes; even their shadows cast upon a non-member of the Dalit community was considered to be an act of pollution, let alone physical contact. Unfortunately, decades after untouchability was abolished and they were granted constitutional rights, the Dalit community continues to be relegated into the subaltern periphery of social neglect, that leads Dr.Suraj Yengde, a Dalit scholar at Harvard, to claim in numerous of his intellectual talks, that people's minds continue to reside in a medieval caste-based social structure, while we may be grappling with post-modern forces of neoliberalism. Thus, the marginalization of Dalit women on multiple levels of oppression seldom comes as a surprise. Denied access to basic education and made a constant target of oppression by the patriarchal order both outside and within their communities, Dalit women have endured and continue to endure extreme subjugation.

[2] The Hindu caste system designates them to be of the 'untouchable' class, belonging to the fifth and last category of the caste hierarchy (the first four being: *Brahman* (priest), *Kshatriya* (warrior), *Vaishya* (merchants), *Sudra* (lower caste), making them the 'outcastes'. They live a subhuman existence, justified by the inalterable Hindu laws of divinity, serving their masters for life and renouncing any aspirations towards a better or different life.

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2. Dalit autobiographies as '*Testimonios* of resistance'

Autobiographies came into existence in the time of Augustine and was developed later by Rousseau, as a chiefly masculinist, Westernized literary genre, with the narrator who is also the subject himself articulating his thoughts, desires and lived-experiences that eventually give birth to the distinguished Individual Self or the 'I'. Written chiefly as confessional accounts of the subject's (usually, the intellectual man) times and experiences drawn from life, the autobiography as a literary genre turned out to be a pedantic endeavor, that required inner wisdom and spiritual reflection of thought. If one were to talk about the trajectory of autobiographies written by women in India, they were predominantly written, once again in the first-person, by women of the upper-caste Hindu, Brahmin household. Moreover, Partha Chatterjee astutely shows in his essay, that the 'women's question' which was a central issue addressed in the 19th century nationalist literature, created an ostensible divide between the elite 'New Woman' and the 'lower class female characters' (in other words, the subaltern). (244) This social divide found in literature was a reflection of the real society where the caste-class divide deprived the subalterns to register their experiences. Naturally, one is compelled to conclude, that the autobiographies that exist today by the sophisticated 'New Women' were perhaps the only ones ever written.

When Dalits began writing about their life-experiences, which was much later in time, neither of the above categories of autobiography could accommodate their concerns and aspirations within the generic conventions, simply for the fact that the trajectory of Dalit lives was completely different and alienated from how societies in the West operated and hierarchies within the Hindu caste-system were structured. The notions of particularity of the 'I' and the distinguishing mark of each individual were not something that the Dalits could relate to. The Latin American *testimonio*, sharing a similar generic concern as the Dalit narratives, in terms of engaging in collective struggle, resistance and the fight for survival in an estranged social structure, finally provided that platform.

The lives of Dalit women are particularly problematic to study singularly since their individual narratives are entangled within the power-narratives of either the men of the upper and lower communities or with the stories of the women of their own communities. This is precisely the reason why Baby Kamble and Bama Faustina defy the conventions of feminist autobiographies and re-invent a new confessional genre that resorts to witnessing the oppressive practices meted out to their castes and merge them with their own personal lived experiences. By close reading the two texts as first-hand social critiques of the hegemonic institutions of caste and patriarchy, one aims to show that Dalit testimonies are narrative documents of a community's fight against historical oppression, where the collective self overshadows the individual 'I'.

The *testimonio* as a distinct literary genre emerged around the 1960s in Latin America, even though its precursor can be found in the African slave narratives of women. The *testimonio* however, differs from the slave narratives in that they give voice to the

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marginalized groups while still in the process of struggle, unlike the slave narratives which majorly described the struggles of the slaves after their emancipation. (Beverley 1989, 13) The *testimonio* therefore, can be seen as a historical metamorphosis of the slave narrative, set in a different social and political context. The *testimonio* as a distinct literary genre gained a strong foothold in Latin America after the publication of *I, Rigoberta Menchu*: *An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (1984), considered today as a seminal text in the history of the downtrodden[3]. The author describes the collective oppression of her small Guatemalan tribe and the epiphanic re-ignition of her consciousness, which gave her the strength to resist the perpetrators of oppression. What links the slave narratives of Afro-American women, the *testimonios* of Latin American women and Dalit women's life-writings is the metaphor of witnessing, that shapes their mental trajectory in terms of a collective consciousness instead of individual life-histories. A general overview of women's social existence in any historical epoch is associated with the quotidian, as they are confined within the circle of their gender and granted limited mobility. Thus, the autobiographical writings which emerge from these spaces, essentially address this limited mobility within the feminine sphere, their interwoven histories constituting the crux of the narratives. Testimonial literature, in contrast, is born out of a space of violation of a people and their civil rights, as witnessed by them. This genre of literature, therefore, intends to give voice to those who reside within that violated space. John Beverley, in a similar vein, talks explicitly about the presence of the 'voice' of the margin in *testimonios* as a form of bridging the void that exists between the margin and the center.

Similarly, the attempt to categorize Dalit women's life-narratives as *testimonios* entails bestowing the female voice with a new identity, separate from the mainstream autobiography. In a way, "This presence of the voice, which we are meant to experience as the voice of a real rather than a fictional person, is the mark of a desire not to be silenced or defeated, to impose oneself on an institution of power like literature from the position of the excluded or the marginal" (Beverley 1989, 16–17). This explains why several Indian literary scholars have pointed out the significance of having the *testimonio* as a separate literary genre for Dalit women. Noted Dalit scholar Gopal Guru insists upon the idea of Dalit women 'talking differently' since their collective concerns are radically different from those of the upper-caste feminists or Dalit men (2549). Similarly, Sharmila Rege urges "that 'difference' be historically located in the real struggles of marginalized women," focusing on their different identities, subjectivities and representations (WS-39,40). As opposed to the individual Self which, is mostly the subject of literary autobiographies, the Dalit women's life-narratives emphasize the collective suffering of the community and the story of overcoming or resisting that suffering, with the resistance exhibited in a new language of feminist assertion. *The Prisons We Broke* and *Karukku* advocate one such different and power-

[3] Rigoberta, Menchu, *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala,* ed. Elizabeth Burgos-Debray (London & New York: Verso, 1984).

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ful language of spontaneous resistance, where Dalit women speak openly about their community's extreme subjugation by upper caste people, as well as their positions as oppressed women within their own communities.

3. Social Spaces of Dalit Resistance

Baby Kamble begins her book with a detailed description of her locality, called the '*maharwada,*' or the residential quarters of the Mahar community, located on the outskirts of the village. This locality is not only on the outskirts but is also positioned on the periphery of the Social Imaginary of the village, away from the mainstream upper-caste community that discriminates against the Dalits on the basis of purity-pollution (Guru 1995, 164). While Kamble's caste is topographically limited in their access to the village and its spaces, where they have to take each step carefully lest they pollute anyone with their touch, the 'maharwada' is the only place where this limitation is not applicable. Thus, the maharwada becomes the space for their free and unhindered movement: "In the maharwada of Veergaon, I behaved as if the locality was my personal property… All those fifteen or sixteen houses in our maharwada were like family to me" (Kamble 2008, 7). The '*mahar chawdi'* or the *locus* for open discussions, also the space where men and women discuss the events and concerns of the community, becomes the site for Mahar debates, arguments and counter-arguments to discuss the deliberations of Babasaheb Ambedkar, which cause an apocalyptic change in the consciousness of the Mahar community: "The chawdi resounded with people ceaselessly debating these issues… Gradually the wind of Ambedkar's thoughts turned into a whirlwind. Everybody began to understand, argue and consider" (Kamble 2008, 68–69). The meetings that Kamble writes about develop into the sites where communal solidarity develops, and where the subordinate castes learn to speak, discuss and, subsequently, question the mistreatment that they endure for no fault of their own. Eventually, Ambedkar's vigor infuses the Dalit consciousness and leads the Mahar women of Kamble's community to discover a new life instead of the one with dominating husbands and oppressive in-laws.

Kamble talks about the miserable conditions of lower caste women in the 1940s and traces their and her own, transformation into self-sufficient agents of resistance. That this spiritual transformation at the elementary level of life can be realized only by women of the community was promulgated by Dr. Ambedkar, as women are traditionally considered to be more closely associated with the basic instincts of life, and also due to the fact that women and children, in association with men, constitute the basic family unit, which in turn shapes the social structure of any community. In the course of her narrative Kamble recalls how Dr. Ambedkar appealed rigorously to the women to initiate a social change within their households by sending their children to school, debunking disgraceful jobs that were expected from their community members, as well as disavowing the Hindu customs of marriage by solemnizing Mahar marriages

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without a priest (Kamble 2008, 64–65). Throughout the book, we find these modes of resistance gradually transpiring into the Maharwada, shaping the community's collective strength: "They all worked with one voice and in one mind. That is why the entire community grew in strength. One body with one soul" (Kamble, 113). *The Prisons We Broke* may be treated as a manifesto for the Mahar community, especially its women, in which she advocates the preference for a grassroots transformation of their daily existence over any grand ritualistic jargon capable of bringing about a radical change of destinies.

Bama, in contrast to Kamble, takes us into a much more contemporary sphere, hence *Karukku* can be read as a Dalit *testimonio* which "records current struggles from below," which Indian academic and women's' activist Kavita Panjabi considers to be one of the crucial tasks of the genre (2004, 1). Bama talks about her personal struggles to rise above the stigma associated with her caste as well as the struggles fought by her community. The fact that *Karukku* uses an 'unidentified/unnamed' narrator and that Bama is also the author's pen-name is indicative of her personal defiance against social interpellations of 'naming'. Furthermore, it also illustrates that "while the narrator of *a testimonio* may well be an individual, the subject of the *testimonio*, that the narrator enters, exceeds this individual" (Panjabi 2009, 22). The names of particular individuals seldom matter in Bama's text, since from the very outset she declares that her story is the story of every person of her *Paraya* community. Extending this assertion, she addresses her characters with the names by which they were known to her community, while their original names become insignificant to the narrative. Bama's work is written in a 'confessional mode', which serves to articulate a poignant story of the ineluctability of caste oppressions, even for people who convert into other religions to rid themselves of constant humiliations based on their birth.

The title of the book itself speaks volumes in parsing out the latent emotions of the author. *Karukku*, is the local Tamil word for palmyra leaves, which have serrated edges and are sharp on both sides. Bama's intention behind naming the book after these sharp-edged leaves seems aspirational, implicitly referring to the roles that she envisions Dalits should be playing in the current social structure of India: like the karukku leaves, the Dalit are to cut across the structural conventions of heritability at the basis of their subjugation by the upper-castes, but not let the leaves' sharp edges hurt themselves, overcoming the historical trauma of caste oppression. Furthermore, Bama's translator also informs in the foreword, that the word '*karu'* also means 'embryo/seed,' which implies freshness and newness (2012, xv). Therefore, the title of the book has multiple layers of signification and performs the dual functions of indicating a suffering soul as well as a new beginning that the soul must seek for a fresh start in life. As Bama herself confesses, "*Karukku*, written by a wounded self, has not been dissolved in the stream of time. On the contrary, it has been a means of relieving the pain of others who were wounded" (2012, x). But how does Bama relieve this wound? Like Baby Kamble, she also relies on her memories and the power of witnessing. She draws a mystical sketch of her locality which is separated from the residences of the

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upper-caste people. The nomenclature of her village people, as mentioned before, certainly distinguishes her Paraya caste from the upper-caste Christians, Hindu communities, such as Naicker and Nadar, as well as highlights the hierarchy existing within the lower-caste itself. In a harrowing memory of her community being framed by another lower-caste community, the Chaaliyars, Bama reminisces about the event when the women of the *Paraya* caste single-handedly saved their men from police brutality. Subverting the traditional gender roles of the man being the savior of the household and women and children as his dependents, the young Bama witnessed her village women extending protection to their men by hiding them inside the fields, managing the household without the men's earnings, while risking their dignity as women in the eyes of the police:

> It seems 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. (Bama 2012, 40)

Furthermore, since Bama is writing in the postcolonial period, with the burgeoning capitalism in the country as the backdrop, she brings up some serious eye-openers for her readers to expose the naked truth of Dalit oppression in the modern age. The intersectionality of class and caste complicates the understanding of the Dalit condition and Bama does not shy away from explaining the miserable plight of the Dalit caste to be an extension of their economic disability. She strongly believes that the financial handicap faced by the Dalits is a huge hindrance in their development as proactive citizens of the country. The capitalistic juggernaut ensures that accumulation of wealth and, consequently, power remains in the hands of a selected 'upper-caste' few and Bama explicitly states that as long as the upper-castes have money and power in their control, their authority can never suffer a downfall, which assures relentless exploitation of Dalit labor and merit: "They possess money; we do nor. If we were wealthy too, wouldn't we learn more, and make more progress than they do? But when it comes to it, even if we are as good as they are, or even better, because of this one issue of caste alone, we are forced to suffer pain and humiliation" (Bama 2012, 27). Along the same lines, according to Bama, the right to education is a veritable privilege reserved only for the rich and upper-caste people. As a reflection of this privilege, Bama points out that the local schools where she studied are situated within the main village, which means they are located in close proximity to the houses of upper-caste Brahmins and quite far away from the outskirts, which is where her own caste-people, the Parayas had been segregated.

The narrator of *Karukku* is blatantly honest about the hypocrisy of the society that she encounters, which keep on resurfacing in her life. In one of such instances, she recalls her experience of looking for a job and getting rejected solely on the basis of her Dalit identity: "I didn't get that job. Why? Because I am a Dalit. It was a school that

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is governed and run by the Nadar. It seems they only appoint Nadar women" (Bama 2012, 118). In the next paragraph, she takes up a pertinent question of how Dalit rights are relentlessly violated by the upper-caste in order to impair the Dalit community as a whole. By naming individual schools after the privileged communities in her village, Bama identifies a pattern of state-sanctioned violence upon the oppressed Dalits. Since education and school infrastructure in India fall under the state's responsibilities, which deems education as a basic right for all its citizens, irrespective of caste, class or religion, establishing schools that are regulated by upper-castes, as well as catering to them, while not having a single school meant and run only for and by the Dalits does not seem coincidental. This arrangement also exposes a biased government that is equally responsible for the perpetuation of Dalit subjugation, by making them invisible on the national level: "So it seems that Nadar schools only admit Nadars, and Naicker schools only admit Naickers… I don't know if there is such a thing as a Dalit school" (Bama 2012, 119).

4. Challenging Religious and Casteist Bias in Bama and Baby Kamble

Keeping in mind the collective 'spaces of resistance' in Bama's texts, let us move on to her personal resistance and individual moments of struggle as a Dalit-Christian woman that form the crux of this poignant text. The unnamed narrator conspicuously expresses her moments of religious intrigue as a child, insecurity as a single woman and anguish as a Dalit convert. All of these moments result in a scathing narrative of the hardships encountered by a single Dalit woman in a heteronormative and casteist society. Thus, for instance, Bama expresses her fear of living as a single woman, the danger of which doubles due to her caste-identity:

> If a woman so much as stands alone and by herself somewhere, all sorts of men gather around her showing their teeth. However angry you get, however repelled by their expressions and their grimaces… what can you do on your own? …we are compelled to wander about, stricken and unprotected (2012, 119)

In Bama's case it is doubly ironic that the hyphenated identity of being a Dalit-Christian does not make her an outlier in the project of Dalit oppression. This is because the Catholic schools that are run by the Church are equally ignorant and reluctant to admit Dalit children who are converts into Christianity. Moreover, Bama unmasks the hypocrisy of the Church that refuses to assimilate Dalits within the Order, when the religious conversion to Christianity was meant in the first place for their social emancipation.

Bama belongs to the Dalit-Christian community in Tamil Nadu, a distinctive community which came into existence as a result of the European influence of the evangelical missionaries dating back to the 18th century. Gail Omvedt states that the intrusion of Christianity into the caste-system was seen as a foreign attack on Indian traditions,

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which worked as an escape-route for the oppressed people to climb up the social ladder and form a homogenous community. The homogeneity was, however, an 'eye-wash,' as Bama shows in one of the chapters of *Karukku* depicting the perpetual discrimination meted out towards her community by both the upper-castes, such as the Nadars and Naickers, as well as the Church, with its convents. Bama is radically critical of the religious teachings that the Church disseminates in the name of 'Dalit theology', one that endorses an open and liberating idea of God who is non-discriminatory, kind and charitable towards all humanity. Instead Bama finds herself "intimidated with talks of obedience and faith" while she is part of the Order, working as a nun (2012, 85).

Bama is disillusioned on finding the priests and nuns of the convent leading a luxurious and affluent life, which is contrary to the teachings of Christianity. She neither finds the Church authorities questioning nor trying to improve the conditions of the poor and oppressed: "They never asked why do people suffer, what is the state of this country, what did Lord Jesus actually do for the people…how can we undo these injustices. Such questions never came out of their mouths" (Bama 2012, 111–112). She is particularly emphatic about the social handicap of her community that the Church is responsible for. Instead of mobilizing them to overcome the prejudices that the society nurtures against them, they are infantilized by the Church as weaklings who cannot stand up for their own emancipation and therefore, the Church has to step in on their behalf, "...we are not even allowed to think for ourselves in a way that befits our years. They want to think for us, and instead of us. We are not allowed the independence and rights that even small children are entitled to" (Bama 2012, 113).

Baby Kamble, on the other hand, launches a voice of dissent against the Hindu rituals and practices which she witnessed her Mahar community following blindly. In her book she openly critiques those rituals as retrograde and regressive, highlighting how several generations of the Mahars wasted themselves in a "senseless worship of stones, in utter misery" (Kamble 2008, 11). Kamble recalls how her community was a group of devout Hindus who did everything to respect its customs: "Hindu philosophy had discarded us as dirt and thrown us into garbage pits, on the outskirts of the village… yet Hindu rites and rituals were dearest to our hearts" (2008, 18). Her long monologue challenging the Hindus, who did not cast a merciful glance at their deplorable conditions, is particularly poignant because it compels the Hindu reader to question their own religious biases:

> We never rebelled against you, did we? …You considered the cow holy; we never insulted her, did we? We obeyed every diktat of your Hindu religion; we followed all your traditions – why did you single us out for your contempt? We were the people who lived in your house, yet we dared not drink even a drop of water there…we dedicated ourselves to the service of the civilization and culture that was so precious to you, in spite of the fact that it was always unkind and unjust to us…we considered out terrible poverty as the golden peak of affluence. We dreamt and floated among the clouds waiting for one little ray of hope to lace our dark dreams. (2008, 38)

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Kamble foregrounds how for the lower communities, religious faith is invoked in political circumstances. The decision of the 'maharwada' (residence of the Mahars) to celebrate New Year on Ambedkar's birthday instead of the first day of Hindu calendar, organizing radical speech sessions and meetings on Ambedkar Jayanti (Ambedkar's birthday), and following the path of Ambedkar verbatim, indicates the rise of Dalit political consciousness and the religious conversion of the Mahars into Buddhism. It is ironic to find that Kamble starts the book with narrating how, as a newborn, she was saved by her grandfather's incantation of Hindu chants; a religion she later finds to be extremely prejudiced against the plight of the Dalits, and which she eventually renounces in favor of Ambedkar's humanitarian religion: "I have never worshipped Dr. Ambedkar with sandalwood paste, flower and dhoop sticks (Hindu rituals of worshipping Gods). I have never made a public display of my reverence for him. I worshipped, instead, the principles he stood for" (2008, 117). In a way, *The Prisons We Broke* can also be read as a book tracing the arc of Baby Kamble's spiritual awakening.

The way Bama and Kamble record their experiences with religion and spirituality is extremely nuanced in the sense that it evokes a multifaceted perception of God in the reader's mind, instead of the overt binary of religion as either a healer of the oppressed or a weapon of the oppressor. Bama recalls in her memoir how, as children, they used to be afraid of 'polluting' God by their touch and were being told only stories of the Devil:

> The nuns never seemed to tell us any cheerful stories. It was always stories of the Devil. They told us about the Devil wandering about with a pair of balances, with the sins we had committed in one pan weighed against the merit we had earned in the other. Every time I went near the church, I would be stupefied with terror, imagining the Devil with his balance, yelling above my head. I could actually see my load of sins pulling the pan downwards. (2012, 83)

Later in life, after coming in contact with the Church closely through her vocation as a nun in the convent, Bama's reading of the Bible taught her a different version of God's ways, where God is not one who needs to be 'appeased' and who resides inside the pure human heart and not in the Scriptures:

> I learnt that God has always shown the greatest compassion for the oppressed. And Jesus too associated himself mainly with the poor. Yet nobody had stressed this nor pointed it out. All those people who had taught us, had taught us only that God is loving, kind, gentle, one who forgives sinners, patient, tender, humble, obedient. Nobody had ever insisted that God is just, righteous, is angered by injustices opposes falsehood, never countenances inequality. There is a great deal of difference between this Jesus and the Jesus who is made known through daily pieties. (2008, 104)

Baby Kamble, on a different note, uses myth, folklore and local tales of women getting possessed by different goddesses, which she describes as a spectacular vision

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for the entire community: "It wasn't an ordinary thing, getting possessed. The screams could be heard from a long distance" (22). She unveils the hypocrisy practiced in the name of religion, where the men of the village, including the seniors, would bend in supplication to calm down the possessed women who were believed to be an incarnation of the Goddess. Meanwhile, in reality the same women were constantly made targets of their banter and physical abuse (Kamble 2008, 23). In this way, the author exposes the extent to which the dominant castes would regulate their power over the Dalit community by depriving them of true knowledge and conditioning their minds with shallow divine superstitions:

> 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 a superstitious way of life. (Kamble 2008, 37)

One might wonder where Kamble's community derived so much insight from to see through the falsity of upper-caste Hindu dogmatism, just as Bama derives it from a deep reading of the Holy Scriptures. The answer can be once again found in the influential figure of Babasaheb Ambedkar, who was a radical critic of *savarnization* and protested as well as wrote about it explicitly. In her account, Kamble reminisces about the revolutionary speeches of Ambedkar, one of which challenges the degree of reciprocation of the Dalit's blind faith and hope in Hindu gods. Ambedkar questioned the reason behind the Dalit community's mandatory annual visits to Goddess Khandoba in Jejuri, a place of Hindu pilgrimage: "…you had nothing but a few stale bhakris to eat, yet you kept on walking and finally reached Jejuri. Why? Because you wanted to see your family deity Khandoba. But tell me, did Khandoba see you?" (Kamble 2008, 64). Therefore, both Bama and Baby Kamble's books talk elaborately about how the concept of religion for the Dalit community was predicated on fear of sinning and terror of the gods instead of peace, faith and love.

5. Conclusion

I have tried to show in this paper, how the complex entanglements of spatial positionality, religious prejudices and extreme caste and class hierarchies shape a collective subaltern identity for the Dalits. As a collective community that is subjected to intergenerational social oppression and deprivation based single-handedly on their natal identity, the path of tracing individual lived-experiences do not necessarily prove successful when Dalit writers begin recording their accounts as historical documents. However, this does not justify homogenizing the Dalit community under one umbrella concept. Dalits are a highly heterogeneous community in terms of their social customs, spiritual beliefs and literary creativity. As a result, the texts under scrutiny here should

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not be read as universal accounts of Dalit oppression, for the term itself is multifarious and has wider metaphorical implications. Significant Dalit author and activist Baburao Bagul defines 'Dalit' as a 'name for total revolution' (Ganguly 2005, 180) while, Arjun Dangle points out the sociological implications of being Dalit:

> Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows and struggles of those in the lowest strata of society. It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principle of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary. (1992, 264)

In the context of Dalit women, which is the central focus of this paper, Sharmila Rege has expressed the need to forge a distinct Dalit feminist standpoint, which emphasizes the pluralism of the issues which concern Dalit women as a separate ethnic group, and one that requires a different language, perspective and literary recognition; tasks that remain unattended by mainstream feminism altogether. And this is why when Baby Kamble describes her story as one "of permanent deprivation and suffering", or when Bama appears to be losing her fortitude towards the end of the book, the Dalit *testimonios* should not be regarded as 'sob stories' or, primarily, emotional narratives of an oppressed past. On the contrary, reading them as *testimonios* incites a renewed perspective in the readers, to learn not just about the historical genealogy of collective Dalit resistance, but also unravel the oppressive social apparatus that continues to relegate them to a life of abject misery. The contemporaneity and historical continuity which characterizes the *testimonio* genre in particular, locates Bama and Baby Kamble's narratives as much in the present as in the past. Alternatively, it is the 'witnessing' feature of the *testimonio* and an almost demotic narrative of experiences, stories and anecdotes by the women, which revises the genre of early feminist autobiographies as mentioned in the beginning, that usually give an esoteric demure in their contextualization of the quotidian.

Finally, what sets apart these two feminist *testimonios* from the mainstream autobiography is that they converge on the commonality of extending the private into the public, wherein the authors make an eventful encounter with both their individual selves and the memories of a repressive past which speaks of the collective struggle. While it remains a fact that in a *testimonio* the idea of collective struggle holds more sway than the individual 'I', Bama and Kamble in their narratives rise above the Individual-Collective dichotomy. They merge their individual Self and the collective struggle of the Dalits into a concrete space of resisting the dominant social order. Even though both the authors speak about their respective communities, describe disparate social situations and living conditions, as well as reminisce about different historical times, their narrations rupture the complacencies entrenched in a rigid society. And such a rupture demands from the mainstream, a radical reformulation and redefinition of the Dalit standpoint.

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