

## THE COMMUNAL ‘WE’: BABY KAMBLE’S AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS ETHNOGRAPHY

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### ABSTRACT

*Dalit women’s autobiographies are not merely personal narratives but collective testimonies that challenge dominant historiography. Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* exemplifies this transformation, as her text moves beyond the individual “I” to articulate the communal “we.” This paper argues that Kamble’s autobiography functions as a manuscript of collective memory, documenting systemic oppression while preserving oral traditions and everyday experiences. By analysing Kamble’s narrative strategies, this study demonstrates how Dalit women’s life writing becomes a counter-history, reshaping both literary form and social consciousness.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Dalit Literature; Baby Kamble; Women’s Autobiography; Collective Memory; Oral Tradition; Counter-History; Subaltern Voices; Ethnography.*

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### Article History

**Received: 21 Mar 2026 | Revised: 23 Mar 2026 | Accepted: 24 Mar 2026**

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### INTRODUCTION

Dalit women’s autobiographies mark a radical intervention in Indian literary and social discourse. Emerging from the margins of caste and gender hierarchies, these texts articulate experiences that have historically been silenced or erased. Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* (1986; translated into English in 2008) is one of the earliest and most powerful testimonies of Dalit women’s collective life in Maharashtra. Unlike conventional autobiographies that privilege the individual voice, Kamble’s narrative foregrounds the communal “we,” transforming her personal recollections into a collective ethnography of Dalit women’s struggles.

Her text documents systemic oppression, untouchability, hunger, exploitation, and patriarchal violence, while simultaneously preserving oral traditions and everyday memories. In doing so, Kamble constructs a manuscript of resistance that destabilizes dominant historiography and asserts the legitimacy of subaltern voices. This paper situates *The Prisons We Broke* within the broader framework of Dalit women’s life writing, arguing that Kamble’s work exemplifies how autobiography can transcend individual testimony to become a repository of collective memory and counter-history.

### AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS COLLECTIVE TESTIMONY

Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* resists the conventional boundaries of autobiography by privileging the collective voice over the individual. While most autobiographies are structured around the singular “I,” Kamble’s narrative consistently shifts toward the plural “we,” emphasizing that her experiences are inseparable from those of her community. This stylistic choice transforms her text into a collective ethnography, where personal memory merges with communal testimony.

Kamble records the everyday realities of Dalit women in Maharashtra, hunger, humiliation, and exploitation, as experiences that transcend individuality. For instance, her descriptions of women's labour, whether in fields or households, are not presented as isolated struggles but as representative of a shared condition. In this way, autobiography becomes a vehicle for collective memory, documenting the systemic oppression faced by Dalit women across generations.

The communal orientation of Kamble's text also reflects the oral traditions from which it emerges. Dalit women's stories were historically transmitted through spoken word, songs, and shared recollections. By textualizing these oral narratives, Kamble preserves them as a manuscript of resistance. Her autobiography thus functions as both a personal testimony and a collective archive, ensuring that the voices of Dalit women are inscribed into literary and historical discourse.

This collective dimension distinguishes *The Prisons We Broke* from other autobiographies. Rather than centring the author's individual journey, Kamble positions herself as a conduit for communal memory. Her narrative strategy underscores the idea that Dalit women's oppression cannot be understood in isolation but must be read as a collective experience embedded in caste and gender hierarchies.

### **MEMORY AND MARGINALITY**

Memory in Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* is inseparable from marginality. Her recollections are not nostalgic but confrontational, exposing the brutal realities of caste oppression and gender subjugation. Kamble's narrative demonstrates how memory functions as a collective archive, preserving experiences that mainstream historiography has systematically erased.

One of the most striking aspects of Kamble's text is her depiction of hunger and deprivation. She recalls how Dalit families, particularly women, endured chronic scarcity, with food becoming a symbol of caste-based exclusion. These memories are not presented as isolated incidents but as recurring patterns that define the collective existence of Dalit women. In this way, Kamble transforms personal recollection into communal testimony, ensuring that the memory of deprivation becomes part of a larger narrative of resistance.

Equally significant is her portrayal of patriarchal violence within Dalit communities. Kamble's memories reveal the double burden carried by Dalit women, oppressed by caste hierarchies externally and constrained by patriarchal norms internally. By documenting these experiences, Kamble situates Dalit women's memory at the intersection of caste and gender, highlighting the layered nature of marginality.

Moreover, Kamble's act of remembering itself is political. Memory becomes a tool of resistance, challenging dominant narratives that either romanticize rural life or erase Dalit women's suffering altogether. Her autobiography insists that memory is not passive recollection but active testimony, a means of reclaiming agency from the margins.

Thus, in *The Prisons We Broke*, memory is both personal and collective, both painful and empowering. It functions as a manuscript of marginality, ensuring that the lived realities of Dalit women are inscribed into history. Kamble's text demonstrates that memory, when articulated from the margins, destabilizes dominant historiography and asserts the legitimacy of subaltern voices.

## **LANGUAGE, STYLE, AND ORAL TRADITION**

The language of Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* is marked by its rawness and directness, qualities that distinguish it from mainstream autobiographical writing. Kamble deliberately avoids ornate or Sanskritized prose, choosing instead a colloquial Marathi style that reflects the rhythms of everyday speech. This stylistic choice is not merely aesthetic but political: it asserts the validity of Dalit women's voices in a literary landscape historically dominated by upper-caste norms.

Her narrative style is deeply rooted in oral traditions. Dalit women's stories were often transmitted through spoken word, songs, and communal recollections. Kamble's text captures this oral quality, with repetitions, emphatic expressions, and collective pronouns that echo the cadence of storytelling. By textualizing oral traditions, she preserves them as part of a written archive, ensuring that the voices of Dalit women are not lost to history.

The unembellished style also foregrounds the harsh realities of caste oppression. Kamble's descriptions of hunger, humiliation, and labour exploitation are presented without euphemism, compelling the reader to confront the starkness of Dalit women's lives. This refusal to romanticize suffering underscores the authenticity of her narrative and reinforces its function as collective testimony.

Furthermore, Kamble's stylistic choices destabilize dominant literary aesthetics. By privileging colloquial language and oral traditions, she challenges the elitism of mainstream Indian literature and redefines autobiography as a genre accessible to marginalized voices. Her text demonstrates that literary value does not reside in ornate language but in the power of lived experience articulated with honesty and urgency.

Thus, the language and style of *The Prisons We Broke* are integral to its function as a manuscript of collective memory. Kamble's reliance on oral traditions and colloquial expression transforms her autobiography into a political act, asserting the legitimacy of Dalit women's voices and reshaping the aesthetics of Indian literature.

## **COMPARATIVE ANGLE: KAMBLE, BAMA, AND PAWAR**

Dalit women's autobiographies share thematic concerns—caste oppression, gendered marginalization, and the struggle for dignity—but they diverge in narrative strategies. Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* stands apart for its collective orientation. While Bama's *Karukku* and Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan* foreground personal journeys interwoven with community experiences, Kamble's text is less about the individual "I" and more about the communal "we."

In *Karukku*, Bama narrates her personal journey as a Dalit Christian woman, emphasizing the tension between faith and caste. Her autobiography is deeply introspective, charting her spiritual and social awakening. Similarly, Pawar's *Aaydan* blends personal memory with collective experiences, particularly focusing on women's labour and activism. Both texts highlight the interplay between individual agency and community struggle.

Kamble, however, adopts a distinctly ethnographic approach. Her narrative reads less like a personal memoir and more like a social document of Dalit women's lives in Maharashtra. She records hunger, humiliation, and patriarchal violence as communal experiences, transforming autobiography into collective testimony. This orientation makes *The Prisons We Broke* a manuscript of collective memory rather than a solitary life story.

The comparative angle thus reveals Kamble's unique contribution: she redefines autobiography as communal ethnography, positioning her text as a counter-history that destabilizes dominant narratives. While Bama and Pawar articulate the intersection of personal and collective, Kamble dissolves the boundary altogether, presenting her autobiography as a people's archive of Dalit women's lives.

### **COLLECTIVE MEMORY AS COUNTER-HISTORY**

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* functions as a counter-history, challenging the silences and erasures of dominant historiography. Mainstream narratives of rural life often romanticize village communities or focus exclusively on upper-caste experiences, leaving Dalit women invisible. Kamble's text disrupts this erasure by inscribing the everyday realities of Dalit women into literary and historical discourse.

Her recollections of systemic oppression—untouchability, hunger, and gendered violence—become more than personal testimony; they form a collective archive that documents the lived experiences of an entire community. In this sense, Kamble's autobiography is not simply a narrative of survival but a manuscript of resistance, ensuring that Dalit women's voices are preserved in India's social memory.

The counter-historical dimension of Kamble's work lies in its refusal to conform to dominant literary aesthetics or historiographical frameworks. By privileging colloquial language and oral traditions, she asserts the legitimacy of subaltern voices and challenges the elitism of mainstream literature. Her text demonstrates that history is not only written in official records but also in the memories and testimonies of marginalized communities.

Furthermore, Kamble's narrative redefines the function of autobiography itself. Rather than centring the individual, she positions herself as a conduit for collective memory. This orientation transforms autobiography into ethnography, making *The Prisons We Broke* a people's archive of Dalit women's lives. In doing so, Kamble destabilizes dominant historiography and asserts that the margins are central to understanding India's social and cultural history.

Thus, Kamble's autobiography exemplifies how collective memory can function as counter-history. By textualizing oral traditions and everyday struggles, she creates a manuscript that challenges erasure, reclaims agency, and reshapes the literary canon.

### **CONCLUSION**

Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* stands as a landmark in Dalit women's life writing, not only for its thematic focus on caste and gender oppression but also for its narrative strategy of privileging the collective voice. Her autobiography dissolves the boundary between personal memory and communal testimony, transforming lived experiences into a manuscript of collective resistance.

Through her raw language, reliance on oral traditions, and ethnographic breadth, Kamble redefines autobiography as a political archive. Her text demonstrates that memory, when articulated from the margins, functions as counter-history, destabilizing dominant narratives and asserting the legitimacy of subaltern voices. Unlike other autobiographies that balance personal and collective perspectives, Kamble's narrative is wholly communal, positioning her work as a people's archive of Dalit women's lives in Maharashtra.

The significance of *The Prisons We Broke* lies in its ability to reshape both literary form and social consciousness. By inscribing Dalit women's experiences into the canon, Kamble challenges the erasures of mainstream historiography and reclaims agency for marginalized communities. Her work exemplifies how autobiography can transcend individual testimony to become a repository of collective memory, ensuring that the voices from the margins are not only heard but preserved as part of India's cultural and historical record.

In this way, Kamble's autobiography fulfils the promise of the title: it moves from margins to manuscript, transforming silenced lives into collective memory and resistance.

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