Chapter – II

The Prisons We Broke: Rewriting History

Is *The Prisons We Broke* a Testimonio?

According to George Yudice, a testimonio is “an authentic narrative told by a
witness, one who tries to narrate the urgency of a situation such as war, oppression,
revolution and so on. This witness projects his/ her own experience as being
representative of a collective memory and identity” (1). It is to be noticed that in a
testimonio, the speaker makes no claim to universal representation or emancipation
but looks for freedom and survival within a specific socio-cultural context. Dorris
Sommer in her essay “‘Not Just a Personal Story’: Women’s Testimonios and the
Plural Self,” states:

The testimonial “I” does not invite us to identify with it. We are too
different, and there is no pretense here of universal or essential human
experience. . . . The singular represents the plural not because it
replaces or subsumes the group but because the speaker is a
distinguishable part of the whole. (108)

In the light of the above statement, it is quite understandable as to why
Sharmila Rege has referred to Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* as a testimonio
in her book *Writing Caste, Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women’s Testimonios*
(2006). In the chapter entitled “Debating the Consumption of Dalit ‘Autobiographies’: The Significance of Dalit ‘Testimonios’”, Rege asserts that “Dalit
life narratives . . . historically created the genre of testimonios in which the individual
self seeks affirmation in a collective mode” (14). Pramod K. Nayar has further discussed cogently how testimonio has played an important role in movements for Dalit liberation by advancing the Dalit perspective regarding their lives and aspirations. According to Nayar, it enables the Dalit “to articulate a personal history in and onto the texts of a traditional patriarchal, casteist culture” (97). However, Rege has also cautioned that reading Dalit autobiographical works without understanding the political ideology behind it may jeopardize the aim of Dalit writings. In order to bring “new insights and theories into elite brahmanical institutions of academia” as well as to integrate Dalits into mainstream society, it is imperative that the testimonios of Dalits should be regarded as a medium of “resistance and organized anti-caste struggle” (15).

At the same time, a testimonio has a deeper significance than just being an expression of collective identity or instrument of revolt. According to Nayar, a testimonio asks “the readers/ viewers/ listeners to bear witness which takes place at two levels in a Dalit testimonio: the primary witnessing by the victim and the secondary witnessing by the reader” (91). The primary witness is the victim, a witness to the atrocities committed on her/himself, who engages in a retrospective testimonial act. The primary witness in a Dalit testimonio makes a move from seeing and experiencing to voicing. Witnessing is very essential because it is “about the reconstruction of seen/ experienced events. . . . In short, the witness through her speech/ textualization attains narrative clarity and coherence over the experience” (91).

In Prisons, Kamble engages in primary witnessing, wherein she questions the upper caste patriarchal society regarding the injustices that they had been subjected to
since ages. At the same time, she also points out various strategies through which the Mahars can effectively counter the domination and exploitation by the upper castes. These strategies include re-claiming one’s identity as a Mahar, acquiring education, breaking the barriers of spatial and corporeal segregation and forging a collective identity which in turn would impart a greater momentum to the struggle of Mahars.

The secondary witnessing in a testimonio, according to Nayar, is done by the readers, critics, interviewers, translators and progressive thinkers who help in forging solidarity between them and the Dalit victim who articulates her/ his feelings and thoughts through a testimonio (94). The process of secondary witnessing first of all urges the readers to acknowledge the fact that the readers, as a part of society, have been silent spectators as well as in some cases the perpetrators of atrocities against Dalits. Secondly, it calls upon the readers not to just engage in an intellectual discussion about the plight of Dalits but to try to improve their lot by adopting a positive and empathetic attitude towards them. This solidarity is absolutely essential if one wants Dalits to progress in life and contribute positively towards the construction of a casteless society.

An important question, according to Nayar, that arises in this context is: “how does one read/ respond to such a testimonio of suffering?” (94). The very first step is to respect the “otherness” of the victim. The “crisis of witnessing” is that we “cannot/ should not incorporate the Other into ourselves” (Hesford 114). “Standing in for the victim would mean erasing the crucial difference that is the very structure of their suffering . . . . The solution is for the reader to reactivate and transmit not the trauma but an unsettlement . . . that manifests empathy but not full identification with the victim” (LaCapra 722). Kamble, through her text, also attempts to arouse the empathy
of the readers so that both the Mahars and the upper caste people can unite in an
effort to change the disadvantaged lives of the Mahar community. As such, her
testimonio paved the way for many Dalit women writers to come forward with their
stories of anguish and demand for justice.

Rege has pointed out how Dalit women’s testimonios “agitated their way”
into a literary scene in which “the narratives of the Dalit movement and the Women’s
movement were already in circulation” during the 1980s (74). This entry of the Dalit
women’s narratives into the literary canon hitherto dominated by men was a
remarkable achievement for Dalit women because earlier in testimonies by Dalit men,
Dalit women were presented mostly in secondary roles. Their individuality,
resourcefulness and contribution to the Untouchability Movement were never
acknowledged. It is only when Dalit women started writing their lived experience and
produced their own testimonios that their version of the story came into light. They
forcibly snatched the right to voice their feelings and engaged in a constructive
dialogue with the Dalit/ non-Dalit readers and critics. Considering the importance of
Dalit narratives in both voicing and transforming the lived experiences of Dalit
women, this study has chosen to focus on Kamble’s text which is a pioneering and
representative text of its kind.

Guru has pointed out that later, “in the post-Ambedkar period” when “Dalit
leaders always subordinated and at times suppressed an independent political
expression of Dalit women” these testimonios served and are still serving the
important function of giving voice to the marginalized women (“Dalit Women,”
2549). Even though the writings by Dalit women appeared bizarre and illogical to
many readers and critics in the non-Dalit literary circles, today these testimonios have
become crucial to “thinking and theorizing” in literary as well social context because “they destabilize received truths and locate debate in the complexities and contradictions of . . . life” (Mohanty 244). Testimonio is a vital resource for etching into history, those realities, collective identities and struggles for attaining selfhood that could otherwise be expunged by mainstream society. For Dalit women, writing a testimonio is “a discursive battle to constitute a Dalit identity, not defined in the terms of high castes as filth and absence, but as a proud and powerful presence” (Ramachandran 30).

Caren Kaplan in her book, Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects, writes about “out-law” genres “which disrupt mainstream literary conventions” and constitute “resistance literature” in postcolonial societies (122). It is to be noted that Dalit narratives can also be characterized as “out-law” genres because they are the result of resistance against hegemonic outlook of upper caste society. Further, Barbara Harlow in her book Resistance Literature (1987) uses the term “resistance literature” to describe a body of writing that has been marginalized in literary studies. Bande has also pointed out that “resistance” in literature “involves re-interpretation so as to bring the marginalized into the center; it also recognizes the need to ‘hear voices’ and give consideration to the dispossessed” (1). Hence, it would be pertinent to conclude this section by stating that the main concern of the Dalit writers is to seize a literary space for themselves through a medium of writing which can express their collective concerns. The testimonio serves this purpose very well by emphasizing their collective identity and ensuring their “cultural and personal survival” (Kaplan 132).
**Dalit Feminism**

As already stated in the Introduction to this thesis, in the last few decades, feminist theory has emerged as one of the most challenging areas of thought. Earlier, the feminist theories advanced by Western women were held to be relevant in the case of South Asian women as well. This approach had its drawbacks because it ignored the diverse realities and socio-cultural background of the South Asian women. Even in the case of South Asian women, specifically Indian women, the feminist concerns of urban middle class, upper caste women are not the same as that of the rural Dalit women. The former have to deal with injustices perpetrated against them on account of their gender only but they have sufficient economic independence and partake of the privileges associated with their caste.

On the other hand, Dalit women are routinely crushed under the weight of gender, caste and class. As such, the need is to abandon “the concept of universal sisterhood as a global construct” because it is “based on unexamined assumptions about our similarities. Rather, we should substitute a more pluralistic approach that recognizes and accepts the objective differences between women” (Dill 146). When one talks specifically about Dalit feminism, Guru has pertinently pointed out that it is necessary to take into account that “Dalit women talk differently” and it is “necessary to delineate both internal and external factors” that have a bearing on their feminism (“Dalit Women,” 2548).

As already pointed out, Dalit women’s lives are intersected by variables such as gender, caste and class which have a debilitating effect on their lives. Gender within caste society is “defined and structured in such a manner that the ‘manhood’ of the caste is defined both by the degree of control men exercise over women and the
passivity of the women of the caste. Accordingly, demonstrating control by humiliating women of another caste is a certain way of reducing the ‘manhood’ of those castes” (Kannabiran 254). Ruth Manorma, founder and president of the National Federation of Dalit Women further throws light on the predicament of Dalit women by arguing:

Certain kinds of violence are traditionally reserved for Dalit women: extreme filthy verbal abuse and sexual epithets, naked parading, dismemberment, pulling out of teeth, tongue and nails and violence including murder after proclaiming witch-craft, are only experienced by Dalit women. Dalit women are threatened by rape as part of a collective violence by the higher castes. (qtd. in Brueck 226)

The upper caste men mark out a Dalit woman’s body as a privileged site for all types of control and oppression. And if a Dalit woman happens to be beautiful, then her fate is invariably sealed forever by the upper caste landlords. She has to burn her body and dignity to serve her masters. As Sharankumar Limbale tells us in “The Bastard”: “Beauty is a curse when it blesses one of Dalits, who have a saying: ‘If she’s beautiful, she’s someone else’s wife; mine’s ugly.’ A good looking woman is the target of all men’s desire” (141).

The situation has deteriorated to the extent that most of the women who dare to raise their voice against injustice are silenced forever. Sasi Nirmala in her poem “Muttugudda Kapputunna” writes:

I know

This corpse is mine

that lies soaking in the rain
felled by the blow of caste lust.

While not even be smelt

by the news

The police lathi and the courts eye

have no business with my

stripped naked skin. (qtd. in Challapalli WS-23)

Thus, it would not be wrong to say that “sexual power” of the upper caste men has “sustained caste and racial hegemony” by exploiting Dalit women and this has relegated Dalits to the margins of society (Rao 14).

It is to be noted that the pitiful condition of Dalit women is further accentuated by the overbearing and aggressive behaviour of Dalit men. “Just as the chatuvarna system created castes and sanctioned discriminatory practices, the cunning creator of the world established the practice of making women dependent on men. Men have therefore dominated women ever since” (102) writes Kamble in her testimonio. A Dalit whose self-respect and dignity is blown to pieces by the upper caste members of society on a daily basis, finds it necessary to assert his control over his wife, economically and sexually, in order to satisfy his ego. Humiliating and abusing his wife gives him a sense of being ‘somebody’ in this world – a feeling which his caste status would never let him have. Therefore, Dalit women bear the atrocities perpetrated by both the upper caste master and their own ‘master.’ The following lines from Sasi Nirmala’s poem “Dalituralu” speak of the ways in which the Dalit man satisfies his ego by playing with his woman’s life:

Why blame any other?

my dalit himself
ties me across as a clothesline. (qtd. in Challapalli WS-23)

Kamble in her testimonio also stressed the fact that most of the times elderly women also perpetrated violence against their daughter-in-laws. Feelings of jealousy and hatred of the mother-in-law for the daughter-in-law were very common in all the households. In fact, this jealousy reached such proportions that the daughter-in-law was often tortured and chained to prevent her from escaping to her parents. The mother-in-law so despised the daughter-in-law that she poisoned her son’s mind and made him cut off his wife’s nose. Kamble writes: “In those days, at least one woman in a hundred would have her nose chopped off . . . . It’s because of the sasu, who would poison her son’s mind. These sasu’s ruined the lives of innocent women forever” (98). Thus, life for a young Mahar woman was full of perils and her exploitation was inevitable.

Another factor because of which Dalit women have started organizing themselves into feminist groups and started articulating their feelings and thoughts through literature is caste-based oppression. Caste has permeated into every aspect of the lives of Dalit women. Despite various efforts by the NGOs and government to create equal opportunities for Dalits, caste segregation exists even today and is practiced blatantly by upper caste Indians. Dalits have to face spatial as well as corporeal segregation from the mainstream society on account of their caste. Stalin K. Padma’s documentary film “India Untouched” has realistically mirrored how young Dalit girls in a school in South India are not only made to sit apart in the classroom but also made to sweep the courtyard and clean the lavatories. Out of all the children in the class, they were selected for these menial tasks on account of their caste.
Similarly, casteism exists in religious orders also and functions to thwart the spirit of Dalits. Tamil writer Bama through her autobiography *Karukku*, which was first published in Tamil in 1992 and later translated into English by Laksmi Holmstörm in 2000, highlights the fact that casteism snatches the right to live with dignity from Dalits and religion is unable to emancipate them from the clutches of casteism. Even when she became a nun in order to serve the poor, she found that casteism had poisoned the religious order itself. People became biased as soon as they learnt of her caste and sent her away to a religious order specially made for and consisting of Dalit nuns. The situation deteriorated to such an extent that Bama had to leave the religious order and her job in order to assert her individuality. She realized that her true place was with the people of her community and she did not need to be a nun in order to serve her people.

Education has been considered as a constructive attribute by Dalits which could possibly lessen the effects of casteism. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar had exhorted Dalits to give up out-dated practices and acquire education which would enable them to rise higher in life. Encouraged by his teachings, Dalits especially women strove hard to send their children to school. However, even though education enabled Dalits to become economically well off, it did not change the demeaning outlook of upper caste society. Dr. Kushal Panwar who at present teaches Sanskrit at Jawaharlal Nehru University was confronted head on with this painful fact when the so-called enlightened intellectuals at the university treated her with derision and disrespect. Education enabled her to earn her own livelihood but it could not get her the social acceptance and respect that she had hoped to earn on account of her meritorious performance. At home, Dr. Panwar’s landlord used to make her mother sweep the courtyard in her absence and without her knowledge. The reason is quite obvious –
since Dr. Panwar belongs to the sweeper caste, it was taken for granted that her mother will have to do the tasks which a sweeper generally does.

Such gross disrespect and rude behaviour is testimony to the fact that caste has its vicious hold on the psyche of upper caste Indians. "The structural and individual dimensions of caste are often invisible from privileged positions" (Rege 74) and the upper caste critics of Dalit literature and the society in general will have to make a conscious effort to understand the problems of Dalits and accord them an equal status in society. A huge effort is also needed on the part of youth to end caste discrimination and build a caste free, healthy society.

Dalit feminism has also raised its voice against class-based oppression because "the anti-caste struggle is also a class struggle" (Omvedt 31). In this regard, one must take a look at Marxism in the Indian context. It is a well known fact that economic disparity is the major cause of conflict between classes. "The fundamental credo of Marxism is the merciless crushing of the cruel exploitation unleashed by the privileged and the achievement of full justice for the exploited who have no rights" (Limbale, "Dalit Literature and Marxism," 61). Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, says Limbale, also propounded a similar theory but he considered "Indian Marxism to be incomplete because it did not think about ending caste" ("Dalit Literature and Marxism," 63). In Anupama Rao's view this assertion is quite valid because "the impoverishment of Dalit communities is connected to landlessness as well as their socially stigmatized status" (31).

Many Dalit women manage their household as well as their work. They work at construction sites and also as domestic help. The domestic sphere provides an opportunity for the upper castes to feel autonomous about controlling the domestic
space. The upper castes do not allow the lower castes to come into their house but when the need arises they have no qualms about hiring them as a domestic help in spite of their untouchability. Within the domestic sphere the modesty of the Dalit woman is outraged by the upper caste employer and his wife refuses to express solidarity with the raped Dalit woman. Economic circumstances make the labour of Dalit woman outside the home crucial for survival and as a result their “rape is not even considered a breach of modesty because of the customary access upper caste men have to Dalit women’s sexuality” (Brueck 226). Describing the pain of the raped Dalit woman, Sasi Nirmala writes in her poem Dalituralu:

Do you remember
your words when
your husband plucked me
like a chicken?
Do you know how often
I was cheapened
at your hands
in your house. (qtd. in Challapalli WS-24)

P. Sainath, an eminent journalist, has also investigated the conditions of Dalits across India and arrived at the conclusion that caste-based ideologies render Dalits economically backward and leave no scope for their growth (qtd. in Rao 31).

Thus, “the distinctive cultural codes for upper and lower caste women . . . are closely linked to the appropriation of the labour of the lower castes by the upper castes (Rege 73). As such, we can agree with Satya Mohanty that Dalit women have the right to know “what it would take to change (the world and in) . . . identifying the
central relations of power and privilege that sustain it and make the world what it is” (213). If Dalit women are recognized as part of a workforce and not just “sexual objects” and could earn a decent living for themselves through some respectable work, this would help them in living with self-respect. As such, the responsibility of Dalit women increases manifold in order to achieve equality and rights within the mainstream society.

Hence, it would not be wrong to hope that the literature by Dalit women will lead to consciousness raising of upper caste society by underscoring the exploitation of women on the basis of gender, caste and class. It will not only give new critical dimensions to Dalit movement but also re-define feminism in Dalit context. Dalit literature may help in altering the preconceived notions about Dalits and this in turn may enable the readers to empathize with Dalits and consider them as equal members of society.

**Genesis: Dalit Literature**

It is important to understand the meaning of the word “Dalit” before we can comprehend Dalit literature as well as engage in questions of Dalit agency or lack of it. Different scholars have defined it according to their own understanding and experiences. In her Introduction to Omprakash Valmiki’s autobiography, Arun Prabha Mukherjee writes that the word “Dalit” comes from the Sanskrit root *dal* which means to crack open, split, crush, grind and so forth (xviii). Thus, the genesis of the word “Dalit” very clearly points towards the crushed and abused status which has been assigned to Dalits. Namdeo Dhasal, the founder of Dalit Panthers movement, offers yet another definition of the word Dalit which includes people belonging to various castes, tribal and economically backward people: “Dalits are the
scheduled castes, sub-castes, Buddhists, working masses, labourers, landless farm workers, yayawars and adivasis" (qtd. in Limbale, “Dalit Literature and Marxism,” 75).

Another eminent scholar K.L. Sharma, further distinguishes between the meaning of “Dalit” and “Harijan”/“scheduled castes”. He effectively argues that the term “Harijan” and ‘scheduled castes’ connote ‘socio-cultural’ and ‘legal’ meanings respectively whereas the word ‘Dalit’ symbolizes ‘knowledge’ and ‘power’ of the oppressed people, particularly belonging to the untouchable castes/communities. The word Dalit refers to the origin and expression of their consciousness. ‘Identity’ of the ‘oppressed people’ is central to the term ‘Dalit’” (66). However, with the advent of various social movements started by NGOs and the Government, the underprivileged section of society which is addressed as Dalits have rejected the stigma of helplessness and filth attached to the word “Dalit” and made this word a symbol of “a positive, assertive expression of pride in untouchable heritage and a rejection of oppression” (Joshi 3).

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar clearly perceived the importance of literature for a social movement like the Dalit liberation movement because a movement cannot become strong and grow till it has generated its own literary tradition. Dr. Ambedkar knew that education had the power to transform the lives of Dalits and emancipate them from the clutches of ignorance and poverty. Raj Gauthaman substantiates this point by arguing that “emancipation is not only a liberation from social bondage but also a construction of cultural tools required for alternative modes of thinking. Amongst such tools, urban Dalit intellectuals have created . . . numerous small literary and
ideological journals and poetry magazines” (qtd. in Racine 10). Dr. Ambedkar also felt that the true picture of a Dalit’s pain and anguish can only be captured by a Dalit.

In his address to the *Vidharba Literary Conference* on 02 May 1954 in which representatives from both the Brahmin and Mahar associations had gathered, Dr. Ambedkar stressed the importance of literature in bringing awareness within society:

> We are neglecting our lives, our duties and our culture. . . . That is why I earnestly want to tell the writers manifest in your literary forms the noble life values and cultural values. . . . Do not forget that the world of the exploited, dalits, sufferers in our country is immense. Try to understand their suffering, their problem and strive to bring about improvement in their lives through your literature. There lies the real humanity. (qtd. in Poitevin)

Encouraged by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, many Dalits started acquiring education and entered the field of creative literature. Educated Dalit activists realized that they have to “possess their own literature and their own history as that will help them (re)possess their lives and identities” (Narayan 206). However, for them writing was not a creative act because they did not create literature using their imagination. On the contrary, they transformed their lived reality into a work of art and it was an authentic and faithful representation of their lives. The result of their efforts was the creation of the Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha in 1958 in Bombay. “Its advent and persistent output shook the Marathi mainstream literary tradition to its core by its representation of the lives of the most marginalized – the untouchable communities of the Hindu caste system” (Deo 363). This kind of literature was something new and unheard of.
The very first works of Indian Dalit literature to appear on the literary scene were short poetic writings, life narratives and short stories. One can argue that the autobiography is a logical extension of short stories. Drawing attention to the beginning of Marathi Dalit literature, Deo has pointed out how the Marathi literary reader “heard a new language; a new, direct, angry, accusatory and analytic voice and a literary production that dared to question centuries-old myths, traditions and practices” (363). Thus, the emergence of the identity of the Dalit has created a new social language which aims at bringing the Dalit in the position of the ‘Subject’ rather than an ‘Object’ which is acted upon by social, cultural and economic forces. Dangle has further pointed out that Dalit autobiographies are a delineation of “the social system, communalism, injustice, exploitation and of the lives of people who had been subjected to these evils” (xlii). Hence, it would be relevant to claim that Dalit autobiographies not only enriched Marathi literature but also exposed the injustices suffered by Dalits.

Readers, scholars and critics did not react favorably to this matter-of-fact literature. They had the impression that Dalits are a community of submissive and voiceless people who do not possess any intelligence and initiative. Thus, the literary efforts of Dalits to represent themselves as retaining a sense of their human self and as legitimate part of society were never acknowledged. Guru has drawn attention to the fact that even after prolific discussions, debates and researches on Dalit literature and the various movements associated with Dalits the “themes on Dalits come to be listed at the fag end of a seminar/conference or at the end of a research journal” (“Archaeology,” 54). This shows that the non-Dalit intellectual researcher/ critic/ writer and the common man have still to go a long way to assimilate Dalits and their writings into mainstream literature, life and society.
A Critique of Dalit Literature

Dalit literature has been appreciated by many readers, scholars and critics, mostly Dalit, because it underscores the fact that Dalits "have been oppressed not just economically or even physically, but also ideologically" (Racine 5). Freeing Dalits from this ideological bondage is the aim of Dalit writers. However, at the same time various accusations have been levied against Dalit literature by non-Dalit writers. Perhaps, this is a result of a lack of sensitivity and understanding on the part of non-Dalit scholars, writers and critics or an attempt on their part to thwart the expression of Dalits.

A common accusation which has been levied by some scholars is that Dalit literature is simply one-dimensional i.e. it focuses only on rebellion. However, one needs to understand the fact that this rebellion is actually a form of bold, genuine and resolute quest for identity. Specifically in Marathi literature, a whole generation of Dalit writers has developed autobiography as a narrative of resistance against caste oppression. For them, the art of writing is not a literary exercise; it is an instrument of protest and carries strong militant connotations. The nature of these connotations varies and takes different shades depending upon the writers' personalities, their experiences, changing socio-cultural contexts, motives and inspiration to write.

Dalit literature has also been criticized as being propagandist. It has been alleged by many scholars and critics that this literature expresses only the frenzy of a movement and does not possess neutrality and objectivity. Nevertheless, many critics have argued in favour of Dalit literature saying that this literature appears propagandist because it presents their heart-felt anguish and pain. It presents a set of questions that unsettle the upper caste privileged classes. The pain, the anguish, the
heart wrenching and disgusting experiences are what imparts to Dalit literature as well as the Dalit writer, a truly unique quality. Since Dalit writers see their writing as a means of achieving liberation, expressing outrage is integral to the literature they produce. Hence, intensely lived and felt experiences cannot be called propagandist.

Dalit writers have also been repeatedly accused of using abusive language in their writings and portraying gruesome realities. However, Dalit writers and critics have argued that these autobiographies are replete with filthy abuses only because the writers have been abused and exploited ever since they gained consciousness. Neither can they write poetically about the beauty of nature nor can they depict stories of romantic love in their writing because the basic struggle of survival and dignity are foremost for them.

One can agree with Sharankumar Limbale who opines that Dalit writers want that their literature should be analyzed from a sociological perspective focused on social values rather than on aesthetics. “Rejecting traditional aesthetics, they insist on the need for a new and distinct aesthetic for their literature – an aesthetic that is life affirming and realistic” (“About Dalit Literature,” 19). Certain other allegations like a Dalit writer’s output ends after writing one autobiographical book and that autobiographical writing does not require any talent has also been levied against Dalit literature.

Therefore, it is a major challenge for Dalit writers to portray a true picture of Dalits and their lives in their writings and to make the new generation of Dalits feel proud of their cultural heritage. These writings also “perform a double function – they inflict an inferiority complex in the minds of adversaries by resurrecting Dalit triumphalism and bring out guilt in the minds of upper castes by recording social
wrongs done by their ancestors” (Guru, “Review,” 71). In other words, the Dalit writer intentionally looks back into her/ his past in order to retrieve her/ his roots which will help in building a secure future. Thus, Dalit writing is one of the ways in which “the silence and misrepresentation of Dalits has been countered” (Rege 13), thereby, recording and re-writing Dalit history.

Autobiographical Literature by Dalit Writers

The contribution of Dalit writers to the corpus of South Asian literature is of immense value. In the context of this thesis which examines different forms of autobiographical writing, it would be pertinent to quote Raj Kumar whose words emphasize the importance of autobiographical mode of narration for Dalits. He has pointed out that “people belonging to the oppressed sections of Indian society, especially Dalits, used the autobiographical mode as a sense of assertion of their hitherto neglected selves” and “to achieve a sense of identity and mobilize resistance against caste and class oppression” (157). However, there are certain differences between the autobiographical writings of male and female Dalit writers which need to be taken note of.

One of the key areas of focus in literature written by Dalit men is the critique of varn vyavastha which declared Dalits as the most inferior and untouchable part of society. Their writings also explored how the meaning and usage of certain derogatory caste names denoted historically constructed biases. Some scholars have delved deep into the linguistics of such names in the hope of revealing how language functions as a tool in the hands of the members of upper caste to subdue Dalits. Mari Marcel Thekaekara, author of Endless Filth: The Saga of The Bhangis (2003) explains in her book that the word bhangi is derived from ‘bhang’ or broken,
implying a community whose character is broken or destroyed (54). The members of upper castes call Dalits by their caste names like *bhangi, chamar, chuhara*, etc. and in essence these names stand for their state of untouchability. A large number of Dalits have been engaged in manual scavenging as their traditional occupation. When the children of such castes go to school, they are told to do the work of cleaning and sweeping, instead of studying with upper caste classmates. As a result, most of the Dalit students stay away from school or stop their study at primary level. This exploitation is depicted by Omprakash Valmiki, in his autobiography *Joothan: A Dalit’s Life* (1997).

Another important area of focus in autobiographies by Dalit men is the reclamation and assertion of Dalit identity. For instance, Sharankumar Limbale, another well-known Dalit activist, writer, editor and critic has raised valid questions regarding his identity as a Dalit. His autobiography *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi* (2003), records the first-hand experiences of a Mahar boy who is the son of a Mahar woman, Masabai, and an upper caste landlord, Hanumant Limbale. His lechery reduces Masabai to the status of a divorcee and Sharankumar to the status of a bastard. The questions he raises at the end of his text are relevant in the context of Dalit identity and its affirmation both in life and in literary writing:

> Am I caste – Hindu? But my mother is an Untouchable. Am I an Untouchable? But my father is caste – Hindu. I have been tossed apart like Jarasandha – half within and half outside. Who am I? To whom does my umbilical cord join me? (Limbale, “The Bastard,” 142)

Most of the Dalit autobiographies pose these questions in myriad ways but do not make an attempt to answer these questions. Some of the Dalit writers who have...
contributed richly to the corpus of Dalit literature are Harish Manglam and Mangal Rathod (Gujarati), Mogalli Ganesh, Devanoo Mahadeva and K. Siddaiah (Kannada), Samir Ranjan, Kalindi Chandra and Jagannath Mallik (Oriya), Boya Jangaiah and Akkineni Kutumba Rao (Telugu), Sharankumar Limbale, Arun Kamble, Namdeo Dhasal and Daya Pawar (Marathi), Bhura Singh Kaler, Lal Singh and Prem Gorkhi (Punjabi) and Om Prakash Valmiki, Jai Prakash Kardam and Mohandas Namisrai (Hindi).

Autobiographies by Dalit women examine issues which differ from those analyzed by men. As already explicated upon in the section on Dalit feminism, Dalit women are relegated to the margins even within the Dalit community and this reflects in the works of their male counterparts as well. In the literary writings of Dalits as well as non-Dalits, they are either portrayed as self-sacrificing mothers or victims of sexual aggression of the upper castes. None of the works authored by male writers portrayed Dalit women as bearing the triple burden of gender, caste and class. Literary attention has not been paid to Dalit women’s inner turmoil, feelings, and assertions of ‘self’. Nelavala has aptly pointed out that even though the Dalit movement identified “the caste system as an oppressive and hierarchical structure” and claimed to be “sensitive to the issues of gender,” it failed to “condemn the age old oppression of women” (65). It is because of the above mentioned facts that Challapalli Swaroopa Rani asserts that the Dalit woman “is a dalit among dalits . . . . As in all kinds of history, in literary history too, the story of Dalit and women’s writing has languished in the dark depths of casteism” (22).

Gopal Guru states that since in the works of male Dalit writers, Dalit women have not been portrayed as effectively countering the caste-based oppression, it can
be said that writing their own life stories gives these women a chance to make a first-hand representation about their life. Guru states in the Afterword to *Prisons*:

> The Mahar-Buddhist women developed self-consciousness of their marginalization and exclusion that they make only a guest appearance in autobiographies written by the dalit male.... It is this subordinated image that keeps appearing in the dalit autobiographies that motivates dalit women to write their own authentic story. (Italics mine, 162)

The need to re-claim their identities and to create awareness about the atrocities committed on Dalits, has also motivated Dalit women from different parts and cultures of India to write their life stories. Dalit women writers such as Shantabai Kamble, Baby Kamble and Kumud Pawde (Marathi), Challapalli Swaroopa Rani and Sasi Nirmala (Telugu), Geetha Nagabhushana and B.T. Lalitha Naik (Kannada), Bama and Sivakami (Tamil) have talked about the issues relevant to Dalits.

Dalit women’s autobiographies, unlike men’s, acquaint us with both the spheres of private and family life, religious rituals, ceremonies, daily tasks, and the subtle ups and downs of a woman’s life which remain unnoticed by men. Even though external constraints smother the desires of Dalit women but deep within, dormant internal feelings of dissent are stirred up by the struggle for basic survival. Women wounded by life and overpowered by the strongest social forces are seen drawing upon internal strength, in order to survive with self-respect, conquer odds without bitterness and to eventually die with dignity.

When one talks specifically about Marathi literature, it is in the writings of Dalit women like Baby Kamble, Kumud Pawde, Urmila Pawar, Mukta Sarvagod,
Shantabai Dhanaji Dani, Janabai Kachru Girhe etc. that we see the true picture of Dalit women’s lives. These Dalit women “draw theory in lived experiences and foreground the geographical, historical” and especially caste and class differences between them and the upper castes. Gopal Guru also states in the Afterword to Prisons that “dalit women’s stories, unlike the dalit male autobiographies, are more inward looking as they tend to interrogate the evil practices of dalit community” (160). Their personal testimonies bring about the “points of resistance and recovery” and “begin the healing process” (Armstrong 5).

Dalit women’s autobiographies re-write history by telling us about the submerged aspects of their lives such as their fervent participation in the Untouchability Movement started by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. These autobiographies also reveal how even Dalit men encouraged the women in their families to support this movement and their children to acquire education. Thus, it would not be wrong to aver that “the retrieval of the history of oppression and suppression is of utmost importance to understand women’s silence and invisibility and their efforts to combat the dominant discourse” (Bande 25). This is the most important step which paved the way for the culmination of their journey in self-understanding and self-actualization.

However, verbalizing their pain and humiliation is not an easy task for Dalits. Even the educated Dalit scholars, whose responsibility is to raise voice against injustice, argued against Dalits writing autobiographies and “compared the process to digging out stench from hateful waste bins of the past” (qtd. in Rege 11). These scholars felt that the discussion of their past had the potential of undermining their present as well as future prospects. Hence, the “entire debate on whether the hateful
past should be written and brought into the present suggests the complex relationship between official forgetting, memory and identity” (Rege 13).

Although, it is assumed by many Dalits that the only hope of building a life is in the big cities where casteism is on the wane, still, autobiographies by several Dalit writers reveal that in cities also they are looked down upon by caste Hindus and they live under constant fear of being exposed. The middle and even high class Dalits are now so conscious of their social status that they do not want anyone to know about their caste even though they want to reap the benefits given to them by the government. In this context, the rise of Dalit autobiographies as a source of Dalit cultural identity has acquired immense significance because they challenge traditional notions of the Dalit community as ‘untouchables’ and attempt to re-write Dalit identity in self-assertive terms.

**Exercising Dominance: Spatial and Corporeal Segregation**

Against the above-mentioned backdrop, this thesis would engage in a systematic analysis of Kamble’s testimonio *The Prisons We Broke* in an attempt to examine the ways Dalits were exploited by higher castes, the necessity of collective retaliation against exploitation by Dalits and the significance of the role of women in Untouchability Movement.

How can a Dalit empower him/her self? This question has a significant bearing on the lives of Dalits and Kamble has tried to answer it by *setting an example through her own life*. As a Dalit woman who was under-privileged in many ways, Kamble exhibited sensitivity to caste-based marginalization since an early age which eventually led to a questioning of biased attitude of upper caste society. She
emphasizes the fact that the cause of the inhuman treatment meted out to the Mahars by the upper castes is caste-based oppression which draws its strength from the spatial and corporeal isolation of Mahars. Kamble has delved deep into this issue and questioned the upper caste society about it, instead of being submissive or rejecting her identity as a Mahar.

Kamble’s testimonio brings to the forefront the role which spatial dimensions play in maintaining caste hierarchy. The most stark and visible form of exclusion in the public sphere is the segregation of the Dalit houses from the rest of the community and restrictions on the spatial mobility of Dalits. Gopal Guru also substantiates this fact:

This location of Dalits to the east of the main village has been empirically confirmed by several anthropological studies on India . . . Since the upper castes cannot control the direction of air which flows from the west to the east, they are forced to change the social morphology of the village in such a way so as to situate themselves on the west, while pushing the untouchables to the east. (“Archaeology,” 52)

Most of the Dalit autobiographies clearly state that the Dalit settlements were located outside the boundaries of the village and Dalits were barred by the high castes from using the village roads altogether or were required to step out of the road in order not to pollute the high caste people.

In this context, Guy Poitevin opines: “Symbolically, ostracism is maintained through rituals of avoidance of physical contact . . . the Mahars stand off the door,
they should not touch the decorations of the threshold. The spatial distance marks the denial of human rapports and relations, other than those of servility”. Poitevin’s assertion is corroborated when we go through Kamble’s testimonio. She has written that the houses of upper caste people in Phaltan were designed in such a way so as to keep the polluting Mahars at a safe distance. The exterior of upper caste houses had raised platforms around it and the Mahars were supposed to stand away from it.

Kamble in her testimonio outlines a variety of occasions when the Mahar women were subjected to spatial segregation by the upper castes. When the Mahar women went to sell firewood, they did not use the regular road which was used by the high castes. On the contrary,

when somebody from these castes walked from the opposite direction, the Mahars had to leave the road . . . and walk through the thorny bushes on the roadside. They had to cover themselves fully if they saw any man from the higher castes coming down the road, and when he came close, they had to say, ‘The humble Mahar women fall at your feet master.’ This was like a chant, which they had to repeat innumerable times . . . (52)

If any girl failed to join in the chant out of sheer ignorance, the master would fume with anger and take out his anger on the girl’s family as well as the community. This example clearly illustrates the absolute control that the upper caste people exercised on the Mahars which was enough to break the spirit of the Mahars.

Likewise, selling firewood was a big ordeal for the Mahar women. They had to check each stick for any strand of long hair or thread from their saris that may have
stuck to the wood. Then the sticks would be stacked properly. Finally, the women would wait with utmost humility and the Brahmin kaki would throw a couple of coins in their palms. To make matters worse, the same process would be followed while selling grass. Condemning the biased attitude of upper castes which subjected Mahar women to such misery, Kamble records in her testimonio: "Mahar women's sweat would have soaked the firewood. Sometimes they cut their own limbs instead of the wood and blood poured down, drenching the wood with blood . . . . And yet the Brahmin women objected to what they found sticking there!" (56). The above statement explicitly articulates the feelings of anger and revolt that were stirring up inside Kamble and countless Mahar women like her.

Similarly, the sound produced by the untouchables was also considered a source of ritual pollution. The following statement in Kamble's testimonio aptly illustrates this: "The yeskar Mahar had to carry with him a stick fitted at one end with a small bell. . . . If the men sitting down for their dinner heard the Mahars voice, they would have to discard their meal and get up. But if they heard just the sound of his bell, they could finish their meal. His voice could pollute but not the sound of his bell!" (75). Thus, one may assert that through her writing, Kamble has succeeded in exposing the hypocrisy of the upper castes whose very existence depended on the menial services rendered by the Mahars and yet they refused to give the Mahars that respect which one human being deserves from another.

The role of corporeal segregation in breaking the spirit of the Mahars has also been emphasized in Kamble's testimonio. In this regard, Gopal Guru says:

In . . . understanding untouchability, the idea of touch and skin becomes important. For touch and skin . . . form a primal sense of the
body . . . the notion of untouchability is an essential requirement of brahminhood . . . . Brahminhood, as a part of this requirement, seeks not just the need to outsource untouchability to others, but most importantly, it also involves a philosophical move to supplement untouchability into others. ("Archaeology," 49)

Numerous descriptions of the corporeal occur in Kamble’s text and each bodily image reinforces the exploitation of Dalits. Through her testimonio, Kamble brings forth the point that the upper caste people avoided any kind of bodily contact with them. After making the Mahars work in their house, the Brahmin “kaki would throw from above, to avoid any contact, a couple of coins on each palm” (56) to pay for their menial work.

Kamble very poignantly tells us that the most odious tasks were routinely reserved for the Mahars because none of the other castes would do it. Sometimes when animals died because of epidemics, their masters called the Mahars to dispose off the bodies. At that time, the bid to gather as much meat as possible was symbolic of the fact that the Mahars existence was worse than animals. Kamble writes:

Everyone would rush to the place, as did the vultures, kites and dogs that competed with the Mahars! The Mahars had to pull out the rotting carcasses . . . sweep the pens that were full of rotten flesh, maggots, droppings and the bloody secretion of animals. Once they had finished this task . . . the women would immediately begin to transport the food. . . . Their heads would be drenched with blood, puss and other putrid secretions oozing out of the meat. (86)
There was no difference between their bodies and the rotten meat they carried. Their being coated with muck, grime, puss, blood and sweat was a part of their everyday existence. Such gruesome bodily images reinforce the fact that the upper castes forced the Mahars to do such filthy jobs and at the same time detested them for doing it.

Kamble’s testimonio cites yet another instance which brings out brilliantly the agony that the body of a Mahar has to experience because of the tension between the moment of folding in the non-Dalit space and unfolding in the Dalit space. She tells us that the moment the yeskar Mahar entered the non-Dalit feudal space he was supposed to bend his back in honour of the upper caste. But as soon as he entered the familiar maharwada, his body language would change drastically. He would walk with an inflated chest and head held high. He would become confident and would regain the control on his body. The yeskar Mahar would choose the familiar Dalit space as the moral sphere to dissolve the guilt which he experiences as a result of not being able to retain the freedom of maintaining desired body language across both Dalit and non-Dalit spaces. Kamble is highly critical of the way the Mahars shrink in front of the high castes but nurse their bruised ego by torturing their women folk in order to prove their manhood.

As one reads her testimonio, one experiences the same bitter realization that Kamble had when she apprehended the fact that the Hindu society had not accepted them, even though the Mahars did their utmost to please them. The Mahars kept on yearning for a human status but the upper castes kept on using them. In this regard, Kamble writes in her testimonio: “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. Yet, we kept believing in your Hindu religion and serving you faithfully” (37). Kamble felt embittered and deprived when she realized that the upper caste Hindus never wanted the Mahars to progress in life, thereby, subjecting them to a state of ignorance.

Various other women writers from Maharashtra have also drawn attention to the spatial and corporeal segregation practiced by the upper castes. For instance, Kumud Pawde, in her autobiography Antasphot (1995) experienced the feelings of being inferior when the upper caste mothers of her friends used to warn their daughters, “Be careful! Don’t touch her. Stay away from her. And don’t play with her. Or I won’t let you into the house again.” (qtd. in Dangle 114). In addition to hurting the feelings of the Dalit child, such an attitude unfairly burdens the upper caste child with caste ideologies and as such contributes to the dissemination of casteism. The social barriers are reinforced through prohibitions on the spatial mobility and corporeal self of the Dalit and this pattern of behavior is passed on year after year from one generation to another. However, under the guidance of Dr. Ambedkar, Kamble along with other members of her community made an attempt to re-claim their spatial and corporeal rights in order to live with self-respect.

The Prisons We Broke: Forging a Collective Identity

Kamble’s engagement with questions related to Dalit identity and its assertion on a collective level has enabled her to re-define feminism in Dalit context. Her growth as a Dalit feminist and her engagement with social causes were a result of “the condition of subalternity” which Kamble experienced as a Dalit woman (Bande 12). Kamble’s life sets an example of Dalit feminism in practice in two ways. Firstly,
through the act of writing, Kamble gives a representation to the collective struggle of Mahars. Secondly, a collective socio-political awareness is born in her and the Mahar community through participation in Untouchability Movement started by Dr. Ambedkar. It would be relevant to stress here that in the former situation, Kamble comes forward to speak on behalf of her community. In the latter situation, the entire Mahar community unites to realize the objectives of Dr. Ambedkar’s movement at his call. Thus, the principle of ‘one for all’ and ‘all for one’ comes alive here, thereby, emphasizing the collective identity of the members of Dalit community.

As a feminist, Kamble realized the necessity of practicing “resistance to invisibility and silencing” (Bande 15) both in literature and in life. Kamble’s testimonio Prisons is an apt example of the expression of collective identity through the medium of literature. The observation which one makes after reading her text is that just like Kamble’s life and welfare is linked with the members of her community, similarly, Kamble’s text instead of privileging her own voice, functions as a site for the projection of numerous voices from within her community. Hence, Kamble’s testimonio “reads like an ethnographic account of a community rather than a narrative account of a personalized self” (Kumar, “The Marginal Self,” 208). Kamble’s stories starting with a personal memory often switch to the “collective memory of the larger social group” (Arnold 21). This indicates that Kamble actually stands up for the whole community of Mahars.

Unlike other autobiographical works, Kamble’s testimonio does not explicitly focus on her life and achievements. She has not written about her own marital life, motherhood and family. Rather, a vast portion of the book deals with the lives and struggles of Mahars who experienced the same types of cultural banishment, social
stigma, emotional and economic deprivation. In this context, Sharatchandra Muktibodh states: “It is true that pains and pleasures are lived and experienced by individuals alone but the sufferings of the Dalits are common and are attributable to common reasons. Hence, their content is essentially social” (270). Therefore, Kamble has described those experiences of Mahars which emphasize the collective nature of their suffering and retaliation, thereby, allowing “resistance to be interwoven in the body of the text” (Bande 8). Moreover, by not naming any Mahar, Kamble brings home the fact that the plight of every other Mahar in her locality was the same. In this context, Pandian has pointed out:

To name is to exercise power. But a deliberate refusal to name can enable a politics of collectivity. In this case, the shroud of anonymity frees events, persons and institutions from the possibility of individuation and renders them as general. Anonymity thus becomes a mode of invoking larger solidarities. (“On a Dalit,” 132)

Kamble’s testimonio is traversed by the story of other Mahars at several points in the course of her narration. For instance, Kamble has written about her childhood in a realistic manner in which she describes the anguish they felt collectively as Dalit students. She describes how the upper caste girls in the school treated the Mahar girls with derision. While talking about her school days, she writes: “They treated us like lepers, as if our bodies dripped with dirty blood or as if pus oozed out of our rotten flesh. If they had to pass by us, they would cover their nose, mutter ‘chee, chee’, and run as if their lives were in mortal danger” (108). The contemptuous behavior of the upper caste girls clearly shows that caste consciousness was engendered in young minds from an early age and this was passed on from one
generation to the next. Even the teacher was not sympathetic towards them. The Mahar girls were made to sit in a corner near the door, from where it was difficult to see the blackboard. They were not even allowed to ask questions in the class.

However, Kamble does not show only one side of the coin. She candidly writes about the way the Mahar girls used to retaliate – pulling the plaits of their upper caste classmates, pinching their hands and cheeks and pushing them to the ground. No matter how many times the teacher punished them, the Mahar girls were always ready to teach a lesson to their upper caste classmates. Rather than just showing the Dalit girls being mistreated, Kamble shows the girls battling it out which gives a different perspective to the entire episode. It is a corroboration of the fact that from an early age the Dalit girls were aware of the fact that the upper caste Hindu society was being unjust to them and they will have to retaliate collectively in order to claim their rights. In this context, it would be pertinent to quote Scott who in his book Weapons of the Weak (1985) "discusses the power of the everyday acts of resistance that are seemingly innocuous . . . but pose challenge to domination and the dominator. In course of time . . . these . . . supposedly meaningless acts of dissidence produce conflict . . . in the social order by the refusal of the subordinate to recognize and identify with the interest of the dominant" (qtd. in Bande 14). Kamble cites many other incidents to bring forth the exploitation of Mahars, especially women, on the basis of caste and gender.

As mentioned earlier, participation in Untouchability Movement enabled Mahars to retaliate collectively. Kamble emphasizes the fact that the participation of Dalits in the Untouchability Movement was not limited to a few Dalits. Rather, it was a mass movement which brought about a huge change in the lives of Dalits. Kamble
does not emphasize her role in motivating people of her community to acquire education and participate in the Untouchability Movement at any point in the course of her narration. Instead, through the narration of stories involving other Dalits, she underscores the collective enthusiasm and commitment of Mahars towards social upliftment. In this context, Limbale argues that “just as the anguish expressed in Dalit literature is in the nature of a collective social voice, similarly, the rejection and revolt are social and collective” (“Dalit Literature: Form and Purpose,” 31).

It is to be noted that the contribution of Mahar women to the Untouchability Movement was manifold as compared to their male counterparts. In spite of all kinds of hardships, it was the inherent and collective strength of the Mahar women that enabled them to play a pivotal role in Dr. Ambedkar’s Untouchability Movement. Dr. Ambedkar publicly acknowledged the deep esteem in which he held Dalit women and lauded their contribution to the survival of Dalit communities. Kamble also pays a true tribute to the strength of Mahar women which had kept the Mahar community together since ages, when she writes: “A Mahar woman would continue to give birth till she reached menopause. Perhaps, this became possible because of the inner strength that she had. That is probably why Mahar women could withstand all calamities” (82). Hence, it can be claimed that Kamble’s testimonio stands out as an important work of Dalit literature in which she made a collective representation of Mahars, specifically, the women of the community and her “boldly personal form of writing – critically self aware and analytically and politically sophisticated – provided powerful insights into the ways in which social and personal histories intertwine and inform each other” (Ali 91).
Breaking the Chains: Influence of Ambedkar

The early 20th century saw the emergence of Dalits, especially, women as political activists and leaders who articulated the concerns and identified with the goals of the Ambedkar movement. Women contributed to Ambedkar’s movement by organizing meetings, conferences and engaging in awareness-raising activities. Kamble’s testimonio emphasizes the fact that as a Mahar woman her journey towards self-empowerment started from self-awareness triggered by participation in Dr. Ambedkar’s Untouchability Movement and culminated in engagement with social causes and in artistic expression. It was because of her active participation in Untouchability Movement that Kamble became aware of her rights as a human being and strove to change the social and material conditions of the Mahars. This movement encouraged not only Kamble but hundreds of women like her “to become educated, to be active in public life, and especially to gain that all important quality of self respect” (Zelliot 204). In the process of her transformation from a marginalized, voiceless Dalit woman to a woman with voice, Kamble realized the immediate need to change the outdated practices of their community and also the “need to remake their histories and reclaim their voices” (Bande 5).

Kamble tells us that before Dr. Ambedkar came on the political scene, the Mahars were lost in the maze of superstitions and outdated practices which marked them as untouchables. However, the social and political scenario exhibited signs of change after Dr. Ambedkar’s arrival. Two historic events which witnessed mass participation of Dalits and created an atmosphere of political and social awareness amongst them are the Mahar Satyagraha of 1928 in which Dalits made an attempt to draw water from a public pond “after the Bombay Legislative Council had declared
all public places open to Untouchables” and “the five year long Nasik Satyagraha to enter the Kalaram temple from 1930 to 1935, a massive effort that went on until Dr. Ambedkar declared at Yeola near Nasik that he would ‘not die a Hindu’ and all such efforts to enter the Hindu citadels ceased” (Zelliot 205). This was followed by Dr. Ambedkar and his followers’ conversion to Buddhism. The choice of Buddhism as the new religion for untouchables was also based on its espousal of “social, democratic and humane values and the principle of rationality” (Rodrigues 250). Hence, it can be claimed that Kamble grew up in an atmosphere in which her community was caught in an intense struggle between the pulls of an oppressive yet familiar way of life and the promise of a more dignified yet unfamiliar new world.

Kamble has explicitly stated in her testimonio that education was the gateway to this unfamiliar new world. Inspired by Dr. Ambedkar, Mahars understood the importance of education in their lives as an instrument of “revolutionary consciousness” and “the symbiotic relationship between movement and education gathered more strength” (Velaskar 247). According to Pawar and Moon, “Women’s meetings, big or small, always took up the theme of education, framing demands and passing resolutions for enhancing educational facilities for untouchable communities. Women also organised door-to-door campaigns to collect donations and to motivate parents and children to pursue schooling” (69). This illustrates the commitment of Mahar women towards creating a better future for their children.

Dr. Ambedkar did not want the Mahars to acquire only education but he wanted to infuse in Mahars a desire to give up outdated practices. During the Mahar Satyagraha in 1927, Dr. Ambedkar’s speech clearly stated this aim. Before he uprooted the stigma of being outcastes which had destroyed the lives of Mahars, he
very systematically sought “to prune its branches – various untouchability practices” (Guru, “Archaeology,” 54). Dr. Ambedkar specifically addressed the women in his speech and stated:

You must think and realize that you have as much character and purity as a Brahman woman. . . . Give up your old habits . . . . It is these customs that mark the stigma of untouchability . . . . The way you drape your saris marks you as untouchable . . . . Similarly the neckful and handful of artificial jewellery marks you . . . . (qtd. in Rege 54)

Hence, it is evident that Dr. Ambedkar’s political mobilisation was primarily aimed at “invoking women’s agency in the struggle against caste” (Velaskar 264) and in dispelling superstitions.

In this context, Kamble cites her aaji’s example who unwittingly stopped the people of the Maharwada from eating rotten meat and thus, ending a practice which marked them as untouchables. She states:

. . . my aaji . . . shouted, ‘Anybody who eats a dead animal today will eat a pig!’ No sooner did my aaji utter the word ‘pig’, than people started spitting in disgust and horror. They threw away their share of the meat back on the skin spread on the ground . . . . all the young men who had gathered around were very happy. They congratulated my aaji. (70)

Thus, emulating the practice of vegetarianism by Mahars was an attempt to claim a higher position in the caste hierarchy than traditionally accorded to them. In this context, it is pertinent to quote Bande who states that such “acts of minor defiance
within the limitations of female space defined by the social power structure” can be viewed as “resistance enacted by women, though seemingly insignificant and weak” (9).

According to Velaskar, Dr. Ambedkar stressed yet another way of defying the upper castes. He felt the need to reject Dalit women’s culturally constructed inferiority vis-à-vis upper-caste women. He “advised the bold emulation of forbidden high caste practices, whether in dress code or lifestyle. These seemingly mundane everyday acts were not meant to devaluate Dalit women, but rather to enable cultural resistance and the assertion of social equality” (256). Kamble brings out this point effectively by writing about the custom of Mahars of taking the shroud after the cremation of the dead body. This white sheet of cloth provided clothes for the entire family of the yeskar Mahar. The young daughter was given a lengthy piece of the white sheet which she draped around herself in various styles.

According to the rules of the high castes, the Mahar women were supposed to wear their sarees in a set manner to indicate their social status. In this context, Kamble has pointed out in her testimonio: “Only high caste women had the privilege of wearing their saris in such a way that the borders could be seen. A Mahar woman was supposed to hide the borders under the pleats; otherwise it was considered an offence to the high castes” (54). However, in accordance with Dr. Ambedkar’s injunction, Mahar women started draping the saree like upper caste women. The act of draping the cloth like the Brahmin kaki can be considered as an assertion of Dalit woman’s right to lead a normal, happy life unburdened by upper caste ideological constructs. However, one feels that this attempt to negotiate the barrier between the upper castes and Mahars may have its own drawbacks. This process of
“sanskritization” could have inadvertently helped in proliferating and preserving the caste hierarchy as it “suggests an unwillingness to step out from brahminhood” and proves how “the lower orders instead of rejecting brahminhood seek to perfect it” (Guru, “Archaeology,” 51). Thus, the challenge for Mahars is to give up their outdated practices and imbibe the progressive attributes of upper castes without internalizing a notion of inferiority.

Nevertheless, all these different ways of retaliation did serve to register the anguish felt by Mahars. It signified a change in the outlook of Mahars who wanted to progress in life by challenging the dictates of upper castes. At this point, it would be highly useful to mention D. R. Nagaraj’s argument which accentuates the importance of collective agitation regardless of the mode of agitation. He opines that Dalits have no other option but to organize themselves as a community in order to fight against the prejudiced outlook of the upper castes because “the structure of justice rests on the consensus of the entire village, which could also mean the unchallenged rule of the upper castes” (31). He elucidates by citing an example that if an upper caste Hindu misbehaves in the village, this will be considered as an individual act, involving individual responsibility. However, if a Dalit breaks the norms, he will be perceived first as a member of his group, and the entire Dalit community could suffer retaliation (31). Under such adverse circumstances, a solitary voice of dissent can easily be crushed by the powerful members of the upper castes and the action performed by an individual could have dire ramification for the whole Dalit community. Thus, in order to achieve success in the struggle for social, intellectual and economic liberation, Dalits have to unite, speak and fight as a group.
Assertion: Through the Written Word

Dalits developed various strategies to counter the oppression to which they had been subjected over the ages. Education is one such strategy which became "the site for rejecting caste morality and for asserting the right to progress and develop" (Velaskar 260). As early as 1911, Hirabai Nageshkar, a woman of Kalvatin caste (children born to devdasis) had written in her essay entitled "The Question of Progress of a Very Lowly Caste" that the more wealthy in the caste should generate a fund for the education of boys and girls of the community. She criticized the educated members of the caste community for settling down in matrimony and isolating themselves from their less fortunate caste members (qtd. in Rege 47). Similarly, Kamble and almost all the Dalit writers have stressed the importance of education in shaping their personalities and making it easier for them to reach out to the world.

As stated earlier, Dr. Ambedkar played a key role in altering the thinking of Mahars and in motivating them to become educated. In his speech during Mahar Satyagraha, he stated: "Knowledge and education are not for men alone. They are essential for women too" (qtd. in Rege 54). Dr. Ambedkar not only encouraged Dalits verbally but also offered all possible help to educate the youth especially the girls. In fact, a special bus service was started to transport girls from surrounding villages to the Milind College in Aurangabad. Ambedkar also took time off to address youth and college gatherings, where he would often announce the number of girls enrolled in the colleges of the People's Education Society, which he had founded. (Velaskar 255).

Speaking about Dr. Ambedkar's immense influence on the Mahar community, Kamble writes in Prisons:
Parents now discarded the loincloth for their children and began dressing them up in pajamas .... They began cutting the hair of their young daughters .... Parents began to enroll their children in schools. Gradually, the wind of Ambedkar's thoughts turned into a whirlwind . . . People got charged with the spirit of revolution. (69)

Under the guidance of Dr. Ambedkar, women activists stated their demands in meetings and conferences quite explicitly which included "free and compulsory education for girls, representation in legislative assemblies, self-protection such as karate and the prohibition of child marriages" (Pawar 69).

Dalit women's testimonies have shown that education helped "women to be emancipated from the helplessness and need and walk freely upon the earth which is their birthright but for which they have to fight" (Greer 330). Highlighting the role of Mahar women in making their children pursue education, Kamble has stated in Prisons: "It was only because of women that education became possible for us. Generally men would say, 'Why put our son into school? As if he is going to become a teacher or a clerk! It's better if he starts working as a labourer like me . . . . But women paid no heed to such talk" (138). The women of Mahar community extended complete support to Dr. Ambedkar and played a vital role in altering the future of their children.

The success of Dalit women in acquirng education needs to be applauded all the more because it was a struggle against the upper caste "manuvadi" culture which subjected Dalits especially women to physical and mental torture and did not allow them to take education in order to uplift themselves. Dalit women writers from different parts of India have expressed a similar sentiment. For instance, Telugu poet
Challapali Swaroopa Rani expresses her pain in the following words in her poem *Mankenapuvvu*:

Chasing the far away distant hope  
of an education  
Reaching the shore of the hostel  
Shrinking from the hungry look of  
the warden  
I long to gather my body into  
a fist and fling it into the distance. (WS-22)

The religious scriptures prohibited Dalits from acquiring formal education or any technical knowledge. This was specially enforced with regard to the study of Sanskrit language. The Manusmriti, an ancient Brahmanical legal text, laid down that hot oil should be poured into the ears of those Shudras who dare to listen to the recitation of the sacred Vedas. The irony is brought out in the narrative of Kumud Pawde, a Dalit woman, who not only studied Sanskrit — the sacred language of Brahmins but also became a revered professor of the language.

Like Kamble, Kumud Pawade also made education a potent weapon to carve a niche for herself in the male-dominated upper caste world. Pawade’s autobiography *Antasphot* (1995) is a good example to show how education can bring about a change in the lives of Dalits. When Pawade goes down the memory lane, she reflects upon the role that education has played in her life. She firmly attests that since the beginning and all along her life, education alone saved her from hardship, even though obtaining that education was a mammoth struggle in itself. Her caste seldom allowed her to progress in life without any hurdle. For instance, when she began her
post-graduation in Sanskrit, her own professor disliked her learning Sanskrit because of her caste. Pawade writes:

The Head of Department . . . didn’t like my learning Sanskrit, and would make it clear that he didn’t. And he took a malicious delight in doing so. The sharp claws of his taunts left my mind wounded and bleeding. In a way, I had developed a terror of this great pandit. (104)

However, with sheer will power and grit, Pawade pursued Sanskrit, got a postgraduate degree and started teaching in a college. Education became the key to economic liberation for her even though it could not change the negative attitude of the society towards her. Thus, although such texts emphasize the importance of education for Dalits yet they also make the scholar, reader and critic aware of the fact that the students in India are not evaluated strictly on the basis of merit and that caste discrimination in education still exists.

**Remembering the Past: Role of Memory**

As discussed earlier, memory plays an important role in the writing of an autobiographical work. The retrieval of memories associated with a painful and disturbing past is inevitable in the writing of a testimonio because such memories are testimony to the sufferings of Dalits. Kamble’s act of recalling her past during the writing of her testimonio *Prisons* is “a challenge to conventions of oppressive silence” and allows her to “repossess her life” (Nayar 60). On an individual level, it is a way of “shaping and structuring” the incidents of her life in her text in such a way so as to help her understand her life and “the social order that shaped it” in a better way (Valmiki xxxvi). On a collective level, the act of writing her testimonio can also
be considered a step in the direction of "actively confronting the dominant culture's attempt to destroy and/or neutralize these marginalized cultures through the destruction or appropriation of their collective history" (Singh 26) as well as a way "to arouse a passion for change" in the readers (Valmiki xxxvi). In fact, the "collectivization of memories" (Ali 90) is the core of her text.

As pointed out in the Introduction to the thesis, Kamble has drawn upon two kinds of memories in the act of writing this text – narrative and cultural memory. Kamble makes use of narrative memory to write about those particular incidents which present a vivid and realistic picture of Mahars. These memories portray the routine lives of Mahars and prepare a kind of background for the narration of Kamble's story. Examples of narrative memory include the depiction of her childhood when she used to play with snot-nosed children, of their grueling bathing sessions, of women whose sarees were infested with lice, of the young girls' delight in washing those sarees and killing the lice with stones, of her fight against hunger etc.

Cultural memories, on the other hand, are those specific memories which portray the social and cultural lives of Mahars. Assmann defines cultural memory as the "outer dimension of human memory" (19) embracing two different concepts: memory culture and reference to the past. Memory culture is the way a society ensures cultural continuity by preserving, with the help of cultural mnemonics, its collective knowledge from one generation to the next, rendering it possible for later generations to reconstruct their cultural identity. References to the past, on the other hand, reassure the members of a society of their collective identity and supply them with an awareness of their unity and singularity in time and space – i.e. an historical
consciousness – by creating a shared past (Assmann 30-34). These two concepts may or may not coincide.

In her testimonio, Kamble makes it clear that her memories are a product of her experiences as a Mahar woman, thereby, emphasizing the importance of her cultural heritage which she shares with other members of Mahar community. By drawing upon this source of memory, Kamble has not only brought to life the culture of the Mahars but has linked the past of the Mahar community to their present and future. This act of linking the past with the present and future is important in the context of Dalit writers because often the birth of an “individual in the humiliated communities is not only accompanied by a painful severing of ties with the community, but also a conscious effort to alter one’s past is an integral part of it” (Nagraj 7-8). As such, it is important that the members of the Dalit community should be made to feel proud of their cultural heritage so that they should not try to denigrate their past and ape the upper caste people.

Although, the pain of recalling the past is “comparable to none in the world, being a man-made hardship and not a natural calamity” (Pandian, “One Step,” 1736), still Dalit writer needs to bear this pain because “memory may look back in order to move forward and transform disabling fictions to enabling fictions” altering Dalits’ “relation to the present and future” (qtd. in Yudice 18). In this context, Kamble’s text serves a crucial role because through the act of remembering she has not only “owned” but “objectively reassessed and re-appropriated” past “for an alternative history to be chalked out ahead” (Poitevin). As such Dalit autobiographies play a crucial role in preserving Dalit history and lay the foundation of the future on a critical examination of the past.
Cultural memories have also been employed by Kamble to write about the various ways of retaliation practiced by the Mahars against caste-based oppression. In this regard, Maya Pandit in her Introduction to Kamble’s *Prisons* has pointed out that “memory becomes a device to inculcate the urge for resistance in future generations. It also serves the purpose of bringing to book the Hindu caste system as the perpetrator of heinous crimes against humanity” (x). The memories used by Kamble are related not only to the participation of Dalits in the Untouchability Movement and their struggle for a decent life but also include small acts of retaliation that may go unnoticed for instance, the retaliation of young Mahar girls against their upper caste classmates at school. In this regard, Bande has pointed out: “In daily life . . . acts of resistance go unnoticed but when recorded in literature, they become important agents” to hamper caste ideology and “are valorized” (16).

In addition, Kamble also recalls folk tales that had a deep impact on her and shaped her consciousness regarding the victimization of Dalits at the hands of upper castes. For instance, she critiques the upper caste society through the medium of a folk story. According to the folk story, when a baby was born in the Mahar household, the new mother and her mother had to keep vigil the whole night without even a wink of sleep. No cat was to be allowed inside. It was believed that goddess Satwai and god Barama visited the house at midnight to write the baby’s future on its forehead. However, Kamble becomes critical regarding such prevalent Hindu myths which have no use for the down-trodden Dalits. She questions such practices in the following words:

But didn’t all the babies in the Mahar community share the same fate?

So what was there to write on the forehead of each baby? Actually,
both Barama and Satwai probably give the Mahar household a miss. Or they must have made one common stamp for all the Mahar children! (62)

*Prisons* abounds in such questions which challenge the traditional pattern of thoughts of the Mahars, thus, forcing them to change.

However, it is to be noted that although Kamble supplies connections between the various episodes described in her testimonio through her own subjective remembering, still she does not emerge as a privileged character in the narrative. *Prisons* often engages the Dalit/ non-Dalit reader in angry monologue and makes the transition from social to personal only towards the end of the testimonio when the author speaks of her education, her marriage, entrepreneurial skills, her children and her orphanage. For Kamble “remembering is the process of reclaiming and protecting a past often suppressed by the dominant culture, and in this sense . . . it is essential in the process of gaining control over one’s life . . . it is an act of survival” (Singh 43).

**Journey from Marginality towards Self-Assertion**

**a) Personal Journey**

Kamble’s testimonio draws attention to the journey undertaken by Dalits to achieve equality in all spheres of life and to live with dignity. This journey is multifarious, collective and is indicative of the awareness generated amongst Dalits by Dr. Ambedkar. It is an evidence of multiple acts of resistance practiced by Dalits to counter the marginalization strategies adopted by upper caste society. As a testimonio authored by a Dalit woman, *Prisons* is an attempt to be heard in the non-Dalit space. Kamble’s testimonio is indicative of the fact that “among the many
changes that have occurred in India during the last . . . decades, the social dynamics of self assertion of the so-called lower castes is one of the most significant” (Racine 5).

The journey takes place at two levels – individually and collectively. Kamble’s testimonial writing traces her individual journey from being in the state of acute poverty and abject ignorance to the state of being empowered through education and participation in Dr. Ambedkar’s movement. Through her own example, Kamble has proved that in the Dalit context, empowerment means “the expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them” (Kabeer 437). Dr. Ambedkar enabled Kamble and her community to make correct choices for the upliftment of Mahar community “with the weapons of sheel and satwa” (117). They rejected the “life choices” which were imposed on them by upper caste society and made a claim for their social and political rights. Instead of languishing in the dark maze of outdated rituals and superstitions, Mahars started attending school and many of them secured respectable jobs. The Mahars developed agency and acquired the position of Subject as opposed to that of Object. This change in the outlook of Mahars not only elevated them towards progression but also enabled them to question the upper caste society regarding their marginalization.

b) Literary Journey

The constructive change in the thinking and attitude of Mahars has also been instrumental in enabling women to undertake a literary journey i.e. voice their suffering. This has led to the production of several autobiographies by Dalit women writers. An eminent scholar, de Heering asserts that “the individual’s need to speak out and a sense of duty towards the collective are two major reasons for breaking the silences” (de Heering 43). Kamble’s own words authenticate de Heering’s assertion.
Discussing the reason behind writing her story, Kamble also states: "The humiliations of our former condition were causing me burns . . . . So much had we suffered that I could not drive these memories away. It disgusted me and left me ill at ease . . . . It is the grief that they gave me which pushed me to narrate them" (qtd. in Poitevin). At the same time, Kamble herself says in an interview with Maya Pandit which is published at the end of her text Prisons that it was important to write about her community in order to create awareness amongst the Mahars and non-Dalits: " . . . I thought, I have to express this anger, give vent to my sense of outrage. But merely talking about it will not suffice. How many people can I reach that way? I must write about it. I must proclaim to the world what we have suffered" (146).

However, the process of writing her story was not an easy one. Even though, her husband supported her engagement with Dr. Ambedkar’s movement, he did not encourage her to write because a woman was not supposed to voice her feelings. As a result, Kamble wrote her story while her husband went out to buy provisions for the shop. Kamble shares her predicament in the following words: "Writing was a difficult task. I had to take great care that nobody saw me writing. I used to hide the papers under old newspapers. I used to keep my notebooks hidden in places that nobody bothered about . . . ." (147). Thus, Kamble’s writing also provides an insight into the dominant male psyche of the Mahar men who exercised absolute control over their wives and discouraged expression of their thoughts. This transition from experiencing to voicing/ writing on the part of Dalit women can be considered as a milestone in their literary journey because it helps in breaking the silence regarding their oppression. At the same time, the entire exercise of writing proved to be therapeutic for Kamble because it enabled her to get over the trauma of being humiliated and ill-treated by upper caste society. Writing her own story also gave Kamble the
opportunity to reflect on her life objectively. She lived “these traumatic experiences again but this time in order to go past them by understanding them in an ethical framework and passing judgement on them” (Valmiki xli). Kamble’s testimonio enabled her to establish a new identity for herself and become a part of mainstream society.

Through her text, Kamble also underscored the fact that re-claiming one’s past, being proud of one’s cultural heritage and breaking past the internalized notions of inferiority is essential for emancipation. Kamble’s assertion is also substantiated by Racine who argues: “Emancipation is firstly an internal process. It involves a process of liberation of the self from the old internalized prejudices” (9). Once the Mahars accept themselves as they are, they can re-claim their lost identities and can, thus, take the first step toward resistance and self-construction. Through the medium of this text, Kamble exhorts the younger generation of Mahars to be proud of themselves and asserts in the Introduction, “Today, our young educated people are ashamed of being called a Mahar. But what is there to be ashamed of? We are the great race of the Mahars of Maharashtra . . . I love our caste name, Mahar – it flows in my veins, in my blood, and reminds me of our terrific struggle for truth” (ix). However, it raises a very important question as to whether emancipation should take place “through integration into the mainstream or must it acknowledge a . . . traumatic experience, untouchability and its stigma, which calls for a struggle against the mainstream?” (Racine 6) The answer to this question is elusive because contemporary society is still governed by traditional mindset.

After reading Kamble’s *Prisons*, one might observe that her engagement with social work and writing enabled her “to develop autonomy, self-control and
confidence and, with a group of women and men, a sense of collective influence over oppressive social conditions” (Kumar, *Women’s Empowerment* 61). In this sense, Kamble’s testimonio, particularly, functions as a social document which records the plight of the Mahars which is collective in nature and raises valid questions regarding the *varna vyavastha* which supports such injustice. Janardan Waghmare has pointed out that her testimonio is a “historical necessity” because it advocates “the significance of humanity and liberation” (320). However, even though Kamble writes about the miserable existence of Mahars before Dr. Ambedkar showed them the path of knowledge, her tone does not lapse into self-pity at any juncture during the course of narration. Maya Pandit substantiates this fact by stating in the Introduction to the text, “Outrage against the inhuman conditions of existence and love for her suffering people are organically fused to evolve a self-critical and yet humane and mature tone” (x).

In the end, it would be pertinent to conclude that writing her testimonio enabled Kamble to link her past with her present by documenting the struggles involved in a Dalit’s life, thereby, preserving her cultural identity and also helped in arousing a sense of pride in her community, thereby, paving the way for a bright future. Kamble’s *Prisons* is valuable for both Dalit and non-Dalit writers, critics and readers because it not only gives us an insight into the harsh realities of the lives of Dalits but also into how they survived these hardships and re-gained their agency and autonomy. Through her testimonio, Kamble has *rewritten history* from a Dalit’s point of view and resisted the attempts of upper caste society to condemn them to a life of ignorance and humiliation. Her testimonio is about people rising from “a condition of being victims, objects of history, and taking charge of their history, becoming
subjects, actors in it. History no longer makes them; they make it, write it, speak it” (Perks 501).
NOTES

1 The topic of the tenth episode of a very famous TV series named “Satyamev Jayate” hosted by Aamir Khan was untouchability and its impact on the lives of Dalits in India. In this episode clips were shown from the documentary India Untouched directed by Stalin K Padma, which shows how untouchability, or as it is called in Hindi “chhua chhoot”, is practiced in different ways across India.

2 The first guest of this show, Dr Kaushal Panwar, spoke about the horrors she faced since her childhood because of her caste identity and also of her hard work which led her to the pinnacle of success. Another guest Bezwada Wilson highlighted the inhuman and humiliating practice of manually removing human excreta from houses that exists widely in India till date. Even after a law was passed against it, the Government of India doesn't pay heed and instead employs scavengers to clean the excreta from the railway tracks.
WORKS CITED


