

# Self-Reflexivity in Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*: A Phenomenological Approach

Lois Sara Joice I

School of Social Sciences and Languages, VIT University, Chennai, India

B. Sivakami

School of Social Sciences and Languages, VIT University, Chennai, India

**Abstract**—Space is man-made socially constructed locations, without which they cannot have a comfortable life. Reflecting on the life experiences of the people who exist in the margins of the society, autobiography appears to be the appropriate genre that reflects the lived experiences of the characters as they live through them. It reflects not only the author's personal experiences but also the people whom they meet in their lifeworld. In other words, it is a narration of both individual and collective lived experiences. Dalit writing in Indian literature has become the most controversial topic in recent times, taking autobiography as its predominant form of writing. This paper attempts to explore Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* as a self-reflexive narrative. The characters experience extreme humiliation in the public and private spheres of their lives. The purpose of the paper is to categorise their absolute humiliation experience using Van Manen's lifeworld existentialism and self-reflexivity as a theoretical framework.

**Index Terms**—autobiography, discrimination, dominance, experience, humiliation, marginalization, patriarchy

## I. INTRODUCTION

Initially, the marginalized people of Indian society experienced the worst form of treatment. They were on the verge of losing their identity. That is when Marathi writers of the late 1960s and early 1970s began writing their pain and agony. However, they still lack space both geographically and in the mainstream literary arena (Abraham & Barak, 2018). Phenomenologist and Sociologist Mav Van Manen believes that it is essential to provide people the space they feel they need around themselves to feel comfortable (Manen, 2016). Many research studies have addressed the core issues of these people like discrimination based on caste and gender, oppression, identity crisis, slavery, and so on. Yet, there is a need of research in analyzing their lived experience from a phenomenological perspective.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

*The Prisons We Broke* is a significant work of its kind. Therefore, a broad literature review will provide a profound understanding of the book. Dr. C. Jothi in her research paper depicts how the life of the characters in the book especially the author's drifted from exploitation to exploration and the role of the dominant gender, emphasizing the patriarchal social system. Bringing in women issues in literature, the paper finds that, Kamble denies the fact that women are nothing without their husbands. The central character Baby Kamble gained her identity as an author and social worker, proving the fact that one can achieve identity through self-realization and introspection of the self (Jothi, 2020). Mohd Nageen Rather's research paper finds that women face multilayer suffering from the time of birth, which in the select work becomes the significant theme. (Rather, 2017). Anandita Pan's research article infers that a study from Dalit women's perspective is highly essential because she depicts the actual condition of the society she lives in and her sufferings due to the dominant power structure (Pan, 2015). P. Revathi and Dr. M. R. Bindu in their research paper 'Kamble in a New Horizon: The Prisons we Broke as a Bildungsroman Genre' highlights their finding that, for Kamble writing was a tool for her survival and her autobiography functioned as a gate of freedom to many suffering women (Revathi & Bindu, 2021). Amit Nerula's research represents the collective condition of the Dalit community, highlighting how they equipped themselves to reconstruct an alternate society for themselves. Emphasizing the role of the autobiographical genre in providing a platform for Dalit to enter the public space to voice out their need for freedom and equality, the paper finds that, through their struggle in the public and private sphere, women protested against the power structure and brought a transformation in the society (Nerula, 2019). Kunj Bihari Ahirwar's research paper examines Dalit women's pain and suffering highlighting the double marginalization of women because of their caste and gender. The Hindu religion and its principles are responsible for the pathetic condition of Dalits. Therefore, giving up those customs and rituals is the only way to live a perfectly normal life in this society (Ahirwar, 2019). After a brief analysis of existing research studies in the area of study, the inferred research gap is that there is a need for research in Dalit literature using Van Manen's existential theme and self-reflexivity. Therefore this research paper will take up these two in analyzing the select work. This paper attempts to explore Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* as a self-

reflexive narrative. The characters experience extreme humiliation in the public and private spheres of their lives. Having Van Manen's lifeworld existentialism as a theoretical framework, the paper aims to identify the category in which Dalits experience absolute humiliation.

### III. DALIT WRITING

Dalit writing is a highly controversial genre in Indian writing in English. The Marathi writers of the late 1960s and early 1970s were the first ones to represent their pain, exploitation, and protest in the form of autobiographies, testimonies, narratives, and short stories (Abraham & Barak, 2018). This controversial genre certainly protects the power of narration and indicates that the subject is independent, affirmative, and self-reflexive (Abraham & Barak, 2018). While Sharmila Rege argues about Dalit autobiography, she says that Dalit narratives consciously neglected the principles of the traditional elite, autobiography and began to narrate their testimonies that convey the truth from the past, about how they were vulnerable to poverty during the pre-Ambedkarite period and their constant battling and development in the Ambedkarite period (Abraham & Barak, 2018). They aim to reflect the pain and agony of their people from their perspective. Most of their writings are autobiographical which carries the individual sufferings of the author and collective sufferings of the people. The common feature in these writings is the reflection of the self. The author reflects on the life experiences of the 'self' and of their community. As 'phenomenology is the study of lived experience' (Manen, 2016), the research paper will use this to analyze and reflect upon the lived experiences of the characters in the select work.

### IV. EXISTENTIALISM AND PHENOMENOLOGY

Human existence occupies an important place in Existentialism, a philosophical movement that began soon after the Second World War. According to Martin Heidegger existence means to live along with other beings in the world as one concrete individual (Gualeni & Vella, 2021). Sartre's 'Existentialism is a Humanism' (2007) denotes that being in this world is the base and founding principal condition of every individual (Gualeni & Vella, 2021). Initially, western philosophy is the philosophy of ideas and things where the man gets neglected and existentialism is a response to this feature. Man and his being in this world are given utmost importance. Existentialism focuses on the experiences of a concrete human being rather than the problems of humanity or universal humanity. Traditional philosophy never emphasized this part. Therefore, the primary concern of Existentialism is the lived experience of a concrete man (Cogswell & Lee 2008).

'Phenomenological research is the study of lived experience' (Manen, 2016). In other words, it is the study of lifeworld. The German word 'erlebnis' is translated in English as Lived experience. While looking into the etymology of the word 'experience' in English it does not include the word 'lived'. However, the Latin word 'experientia' means 'experience'. Therefore, the term 'erlebnis' refers to 'living through something', which as well denotes the active and passive life experiences (Manen, 2016). All the human experiences such as the ordinary and extraordinary, the standard and unusual, the monotonous and unexpected, the gloomy and sparkling moments are all the lived experiences of humans as they live through them. Hence, phenomenology explores the lifeworld as experienced in everyday situations. All phenomenological research explores the structure of the human lifeworld or lived experience as experienced in day-to-day life. Thus, phenomenology seeks to capture 'lived experience' (Manen, 2016). Hermeneutic phenomenology is a branch in phenomenology which also explores the lifeworld and studies lived experience with its meaning. Within hermeneutic phenomenology, Van Manen's lifeworld themes serve as a theoretical framework to study lived experience. He identifies four fundamental lifeworld existential which are suitable to everyone, irrespective of the 'historic, ethnic, and societal structure' to which they belong. They are 'helpful guides for reflection in the research processes. They are Lived Space (Spatiality), Lived Body (Corporeality), Lived time (Temporality), and Lived Human Relations (Relationality or Communalities). Van Manen highlights that the four themes 'can be differentiated but cannot be separated' (Manen, 2016). All human beings experience this fundamental existential in different ways because it differs from person to person.

### V. SELF-REFLEXIVITY

In literature, critics gave different roles to self-reflexivity. Some argue that it is a 'practice of self-inquiry through reflection on everyday lived experiences that enable a person to gain insight toward self-realization' (John, 2020). In the field of philosophy, self-reflexivity is 'a discursive, abstract, and symbolic form of communication with oneself' (Agarwal, 2020). Self-Reflexivity according to J. G. Fichte is 'a reflection of the subject onto itself' (Huber et al., 2005). This research has used Niklas Luhmann's definition of self-reflexivity. He argues,

*Self-Reflexivity denotes the ability of the individuals of a social system to reflect on and evaluate both their conception of the system and their role in it and to choose activities from among the available options according to their own personal evaluation (Huber et al., 2005)*

Unlike other definitions of Self-reflexivity, Niklas Luhmann's definition emphasizes the 'concrete individual' which is the significant characteristic feature of existentialism. Therefore this definition is widely used in this research paper. Every individual belongs to a social system and self-reflexivity is the individual's ability to reflect and interrogate the

social system and the role they play within that social system. The social system refers to the space to which they belong. Space is the human-constructed social location and their experience with space 'influences their understanding of the space' (Kumar, 2018). The space in which humans experience a certain phenomenon reflects not only their spatial experience of that location but also the influence of that space over their lived body and temporality. In the Indian concept, the human experience of a particular space or social system is directly related to the cultural setup (Kumar, 2018). To reflect, there is a need for an object, and here it is the lived experience of the 'self'. The 'self' mentioned in this research paper refers to the Dalit 'self'. In this process of reflecting the lived experience of the self, the character will evaluate their notion about the system and their part in it. As Dalits belong to the lowest stratum of the society, the social system to which they belong determines their fate. Therefore, by evaluating their conception of the system, Dalits face caste-based discrimination in the public sphere and gender-based discrimination in the private sphere. And by interrogating the role they play, Dalits are the untouchables in the public sphere and slaves in the private sphere. Baby Kamble wrote about the experience of the people of her community. Their sufferings became her sufferings and eventually, their experience became her experience. Therefore she found it extremely challenging to separate herself from her community (Kamble, 2020). Since the author had also experienced similar sufferings of her people, her experiences and her representation of the community became the experience and representation of the self. Dalit writings uncover the discrimination that exists in the social system which falls under the self-reflexive narrative aiming to explore the spatial, corporeal, temporal, and relational experience of the self.

## VI. ANALYSIS

Baby Kamble in *The Prisons We Broke* reflects on the physical and psychological violence as they experience them both in the public and private sphere. This research paper aims to analyze the lived experience of the individuals in every sphere and identifies the sphere in which they experience absolute humiliation. Since the aim of the paper is to reflect on the lived experience, Max Van Manen's four lifeworld existential elucidate the lived experience of individuals in spatial, corporeal, temporal, and relational categories. As self-reflexivity denotes the individual's conception of the system and their role in it, the paper identifies the self-reflexive features in Van Manen's lifeworld existential and concludes that spatiality is the significant theme because all the other lifeworld experiences occur in the lived space of the individual.

### A. Conception of the System

Evaluating Dalit's conception of the system, they experience caste-based discrimination in the public sphere. The whole village of Maharwada is infested with caste and gender discrimination. Lived Space (Spatiality) is the experience of space in a particular phenomenon (Manen, 2016). It examines the individual's experience of a particular space. Through lived space, one can identify the ways in experiencing the space. Dalit lived in the 'dirty pits on the periphery of the village, like discarded rags, completely ignored by the society' (Kamble, 2020). So eventually, the space in which they lived made them feel unwanted and ignored. Dalit's experience of space they share on the road with the upper caste is excruciating. Walking in such a space itself gave them an untouchable feeling because for generations they have been treated in such away. So the moment they enter that space the body automatically starts behaving in such a manner. Here Manen's theme of Lived Body is profoundly evident. Lived Body (Corporeality) refers to the physical body because it is through this body that one experiences the world. While people meet others in their landscape through their bodies, they reveal or conceal something concurrently. Kamble describes Yeskar Mahar who goes to the village every evening to collect the leftover food. He used to depart from his part of the village with so much pride, that his chest would swell. But the moment he enters the space of the upper caste his chest would deflate like a balloon and he will make sure that he doesn't offend anyone. Manen's concept of 'Home' becomes significant here. The yeskar Mahar felt 'home' while he was at his part of the village. But the moment he entered the caste-infested space, it created a diminishing impact on him. He cannot be whom he wanted to be because the space itself has created a negative impact on him. The physical body experiences a painful compression that affects the psychology of the self as well. The relationship that existed between the upper caste and the lower caste is excruciatingly painful and humiliating. Manen's Lived Human Relations (Relationality or Communitality) refers to the lived relationship that exists among people sharing the same space (Manen, 2016). Kamble painfully declares that animals have a better life when compared to the Dalits in her village. At least animals get good food and someone to look after them, but Dalits don't even have a better place to live. They lived in the ditches and pits away from the village.

In Dalit's conception of the social system, women are highly vulnerable to gender discrimination in the private sphere. The bodily experience of a newly-married girl is a complete disaster. The husband flogged her until she collapsed and if she tried to escape her husband would chop off her nose. They experience 'the worst form of exploitation and physical torture that Dalit men inflicted upon Dalit women. The physical torture not only involved physical injuries but also deep psychological pain, leaving a scar of humiliation in the minds of Dalit women' (Kamble, 2020). Her legs were chained like a slave so that she wouldn't escape. The body experiences tremendous physical pain and agony, which in turn affects them mentally. Kamble questions, 'when our very bodies were considered worthless, who was going to spare a thought about our minds?' (Kamble, 2020). Kamble in her interview with the translator emphasizes that it is not just the Dalit women who are going through these tortures and agony, 'All women are facing

problem' including 'both upper and lower caste' (Kamble, 2020). The bodily experience of untouchability is awful. The upper caste flogged them 'with the whip of pollution' (Kamble, 2020). Manen points out that, the bodily experience occurs in a sensory manner. So the pain inflicted upon them affects them both physically and psychologically. While reflecting the temporal landscape of children, their childhood memories are filled with pain and distress instead of happiness and bliss. Even the tiny tots faced caste discrimination in its worst form. Manen's lived time is apparent here. Lived Time (Temporality) refers to the experience of subjective time in the lifeworld. The three dimensions of time, the past, the present, and the future constitute the temporal landscape of a person. Van Manen avers that 'the past changes under the pressure and influence of the present' (Manen, 2016). The past changes itself because human beings live toward a future which already started taking shape. Gender discrimination in the private sphere affects the victim in multiple ways both physically and psychologically. They have been submissive in the past and today it has taken up an invisible existence. Therefore, the temporal landscape of women is the same in the past and the present. In Dalit families, the mother-in-law treats her daughter-in-law worse than a slave. Manen's lived human relation is evident here. Because of the dominant-submissive relationship that existed between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law, the young Mahar women had to live their life with pain and shame throughout. One can have a view on life still to come through dreams and anticipations or they can even lose such perception of life through their lack of determination to survive (Manen, 2016).

### *B. The Role Dalit Play*

On reflecting and evaluating the role of Dalits in the social system, they are untouchables in the public sphere. The upper caste members of the village followed their Hindu scripts and practiced the ideology of purity and pollution. The author's reflection of the 'self' portrays the role they play in the social system. Dalit plays the role of untouchable throughout the country. Kamble narrates an incident where the Mahar woman enters the Brahmin household to sell firewood. She enters the house through the back door to stack the firewood in the kitchen, after which she checks every stick for any hair or thread from her saree. According to the Brahmin ideology, anything that touches the Dalit body pollutes their house and their Gods. So the moment they enter the Brahmin space they would behave in such a way as to not offend them and their Gods. The Brahmin woman stands on a raised platform and drops the coins for the firewood in the Mahar woman's saree pallav. Similar is their condition in the shop and the Mahar marriage ceremony. The shopkeeper throws the grocery from a distance but never fails to take their money from the threshold. During the marriage ceremony, the Brahmin priest never touches the couple fearing pollution but never forgets his Dakshina or return gift. The Mahars are the untouchables and pollutants among the Maharwada community. As Dalits were considered untouchables, the lived human relationship that existed between them is the purest dominant upper caste and untouchable submissive lower caste. Many lower caste people live in disguise lying about their true identity for survival because untouchability is an invisible never-ending entity. Van Manen asserts that the environment we are in has an impact on how we feel (Manen, 2016). It is highly essential to provide the space people need around themselves to keep them comfortable.

Dalit women play the role of slaves in the private sphere. Women now experience slavery in different forms that are unknown to the outside world. Kamble asserts in anguish that slavery shackles had enslaved them in the other world (Kamble, 2020). Yet, there is a tiny sapling of hope in every Dalit individual that someday in the future their condition would change. Kamble points out that, 'Women are still slaves' (Kamble, 2020). Master-slave is the relationship that existed between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law in the private sphere. The relationship occurs in a corporeal manner in the space that is common for the upper caste and the lower caste.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Niklas Luhmann's definition of self-reflexivity is used in this research paper for analysis. Self-reflexivity, according to him, is the individual's ability to reflect on and analyze their perspective of the social system to which they belong and their part in it (Huber et al., 2005). Kamble deeply reflects on the physical and psychological violence that the Dalits of the Indian social system experience in both the public and private sphere. Baby Kamble through her autobiography has honestly reflected her Dalit 'self' and of the people of her community. The lifeworld existentialism of Max Van Manen perfectly coincides with the self-reflexive features of the select work. By reflecting and evaluating the social system, their conception of the system is caste discrimination in the public sphere and gender discrimination in the private sphere. Considering the role they play, in the public sphere, they are untouchables, in the private sphere, they are slaves, especially women. A thorough analysis of the select work with the concept and theory infers that, in both the sphere Dalit experience equal humiliation. The self-reflexive features are correlated with the lifeworld themes of Van Manen. As Van Manen emphasized, 'they can be differentiated but cannot be separated' (Manen, 2016), the themes intersect and convey the meaning. Spatiality is a significant theme because it is where the individual experience the phenomenon in a corporeal, temporal, and relational manner. Through this research paper, it is evident that 'Spatiality' is significant and it is highly essential to provide 'the space people feel that they need around themselves to feel comfortable' (Manen, 2016).

## REFERENCES

- [1] Abraham, J. K., & Barak, J. M. (Eds.). (2018). *Dalit literatures in India: With a new introduction* (2nd ed.). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- [2] Ahirwar, K. B. (2019, December). *Baby Kamble's The Prisons we Broke: Expression of Pains and Sufferings*. Google Scholar. Retrieved January 14, 2022, from <https://www.ed-intellect.com/2021/08/baby-kambles-prisons-we-broke.html#:~:text=This%20paper%20deals%20with%20the,system%20in%20the%20contemporary%20society>.
- [3] Cogswell, D., & Lee, J. (2008). *Existentialism for beginners*. For Beginners.
- [4] Gualeni, S., & Vella, D. (2021). *Virtual existentialism: Meaning and subjectivity in virtual worlds*. PALGRAVE PIVOT.
- [5] Huber, W., Middeke, M., & Zapf, H. (Eds.). (2005). *Self-Reflexivity in Literature*. Königshausen & Neumann.
- [6] Jothi C. (2020). *From Exploitation to Exploration: Gender Study in Baby Kamble's The Prisons We Broke*. Google Scholar. Retrieved January 14, 2022, from <http://www.autrj.com/gallery/27-aut-dec-4325.pdf>
- [7] Kamble, B. (2020). *The Prisons We Broke*. (M. Pandit, Trans.) (2nd ed.). Orient BlackSwan.
- [8] Kumar, S. (2018). *A Study of Self-Reflexivity in Select Dalit Writings* (thesis). Shodhganga .
- [9] Manen, M. V. (2016). *Phenomenology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research Methods* (2nd ed.). Taylor & Francis.
- [10] Manen, M. V. (2016). *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (2nd ed.). State University of New York Press.
- [11] Matcas, V. (2017). *Existence*. Retrieved February 2, 2022, from <https://www.google.co.in/books/edition/Existence/pgiiDgAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=existence%2Bmeaning&printsec=fro ntcover>
- [12] Nerula, A. (2019). *Exploring the Horizons of Change: A study of Baby Kamble's The Prisons we Broke*. Google Scholar. Retrieved January 14, 2022, from <https://dialog.puchd.ac.in/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/3.Amit-Narula-The-prisons-we-broke.pdf>
- [13] Pan, A. (2015). *Now the Powerless Speaks: A study of Bama's 'Sangati' and Baby Kamble's 'The Prisons we Broke' from a Dalit Feminist Standpoint*. Google Scholar. Retrieved January 14, 2022, from [http://papers.iafor.org/wp-content/uploads/papers/acas2015/ACAS2015\\_12054.pdf](http://papers.iafor.org/wp-content/uploads/papers/acas2015/ACAS2015_12054.pdf)
- [14] Rather, M. N. (2017). *Analyzing the Painful Recountal of Dalit Women in Baby Kamble's The Prisons we Broke*. Google Scholar. Retrieved January 14, 2022, from <https://www.arjonline.org/papers/arjel/v3-i1/17.pdf>
- [15] Revathi P, & M. R. Bindu. (2021). *Kamble in a New Horizon: The Prisons we Broke as a Bildungsroman Genre*. Google Scholar. Retrieved January 14, 2022, from <https://turcomat.org/index.php/turkbilmat/article/view/6824/5626>

**Lois Sara Joice I** is currently doing her PhD at VIT Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India. She is a graduate from Madras Christian College, Chennai. She has great interest for research and her present area of research is Phenomenology and Dalit literature. She is also interested in Postmodernism and Indian Writing in English. She has recently got her paper published in Journal of Language and Linguistics, a Scopus indexed journal. She has three years of research experience in VIT Chennai.

**B. Sivakami** is working at VIT Chennai Campus, Tamil Nadu, India as Assistant Professor of English.

She has secured her Ph.D in English language Teaching and M. Phil in African- American Literature. She secured M.Ed degree in 1997. She has presented many papers at various conferences and got her papers published in different journals. She has recently got her paper published in an International Journal of Language and Linguistics, a Scopus indexed journal. She has under her belt three and more than ten years of school and college teaching experience respectively