

Breaking Identities: Crises of Colour and Caste in Toni Morrison's *God*

Help the Child and Baby Kamble's The Prisons We Broke

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African American and Dalit writings have many similarities and both are very striking in terms of their suffering in the midst of neglect. It is very much evident through Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke*. Both works have emerged as distinctive literary discourses born out of the vivified perceptiveness of the writer. The absence from the mainstream literary tradition and an identity disaster link these two literatures. They share a common ground in their effort to remove the enforced invisibility of Afro-American and Dalits in social, cultural and political dynamics in their respective place.

The two marginalized groups of people, the Afro-Americans and the Indian Dalits, presented in both the novels confront the same realities like devastation, desolation, oppression and abandonment. Morrison and Kamble, in the process of their endeavour for amelioration, pronounce their afflictions and anguishes in their writing. As they have been kept at the fringes of the hegemonic culture, their existence becomes peripheral in literature too. The place assigned to these communities, the Afro-Americans and the Dalits, in the mainstream society is the 'other' inferior and uncivilized. The suffering of Blacks and Dalits were similar in terms of social humiliation. Black American and Dalit communities have had similar experiences of historical marginalization which gave rise to their increasing shame as well as anger. In spite of the immense culture, social and geographical distances between them, Black and Dalit literatures have striking features of similarity.

Both have been the means to protest against injustices through various socio-political and cultural movements. Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* and Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* is based on the emotion that has been formed entirely by social humiliation, experience of identity and oppression. Both the books focus on the degradation and inhuman treatment of the African and Dalit community brought about by slavery and Hindu caste institution.

Toni Morrison and Baby Kable contextualize the condition of their surrounding in which they strongly works to construct the identity of African American and Dalit women. Their novels provide insight into the miserable condition of the suffering and oppression of their people. In *God Help the Child*, Morrison attempt to problematize the dilemma of being Blacks America. Whereas in *The Prisons We Broke*, Kamble problematize the dilemma of being Dalit in India. The discovery of the Black and Dalit identity is the key force that shapes both novels and among many other.

In *God Help the Child*, the Afro-American central character brings out the profound suffering and struggle for countering racism and sexism. Creating an Afro-American women-voice, Morrison counters the mainstream, portraying the abuse, marginalization and dehumanization of her people. Sweetness, the mother of Lula Ann Bride, is a light skinned woman who hates her own black child. She wants to kill or give away Lula Ann to some orphanage. This was because she was ashamed to say that she was the mother of Bride. Her black colour became the reason for her neglected childhood. But in *Prisons We Broke*, there are no neglected childhood memories. In spite of that it is filled with marginalization of the society as a whole. The community of Babytai is considered as a foil to the Hindu society. Even the midst of problems, just like Bride, Babytai also struggled hard to overcome the social barrier. What is common in both protagonists is that, even their family and their own

community became a barrier to their journey. There was nobody to support bride from her family, her mother and father abandoned her. Even though Babytai was lived with her father and mother, the patriarchal society suppressed her constantly. She was surrounded by the hegemonic laws of the upper caste and her own community which is based on the written laws of Manu.

Morrison is a writer to whom stories come spontaneously. This is shown in *God Help the Child*. She has woven this one tale of Bride with many other stories that are reverberating with too much human life. The characters in Bride's life have their own pain, trauma, death, cheat, love and losses. The action of this novel is made intense by these individual stores. One of those is of Booker's, the boyfriend of Bride. The reader comes to know about his past. His brother was abducted and killed after sexual assault. Booker could never let go the anguish of losing his loving brother. He carries the burden and loss of his brother's death since he was eight years. He tries different things in life but could never get normal. It is only by the help of his aunt Queen he decides to move in life.

Then another character Rain, a victim of sexual abuse, Rain was thrown out of her house by her own mother when she bits a boy. Rain also hates her mother who forced her into child prostitution. She calls her family comprising Evelyn and Steve, a fake family. Another character Sofia Huxley, in Morrison's novel, the black teacher sent to the prison by the testimony of Lula Ann, has her own gloomy colours of life. She becomes a tool or a game by an ignored black girl to get some love by her mother and the world. She is shocked by disbelief when Lula Ann points finger towards her in the crowded courtroom. Sofia's own experience in the prison has always been bitter because she was a culprit in child abuse case. She spends fifteen years in the prison. Bride comes to meet her after her release to repair the wounds and make up for fifteen years. She thrashes Bride without any thought.

She cries after that but feels released and relieved of her own burden. There is also a realization of the fact that "... freedom is never free. You have to fight for it. Work for it and make sure you are able to handle it" (7).

In both the novels, authors have created a new understanding of social justice questioning the matters related to African American women and Dalit women and their tragic condition in America and in India. Their preoccupation with idea of loss and the dilemma of Africaness and Dalitness predominates their writing. Racism in *God Help the Child* and Casteism in *The Prisons We Broke* are a type of bias that ideologically ingrained in the mind of white people and Brahmins that may not be easily cured. Despite social obstacles of the protagonists, Bride and Babytai exceed her father, mother, husband and society's borders and strive to live as a bride in the hostile society.

Morrison's frames the series of the protagonist's life, throws light on the central character, Bride, and her relationship with Booker, who loves her then, leaves her before loving her again. As a child, her mother punished Lula for her dark skin that causes the end of her marriage. Sweetness's husband Louis could not afford to love a child with a black skin as Bride's. Sweetness tells "We had three good years together but when she was born, he blamed me and treated Lula Ann like a stranger, more than that, an enemy." (5)

In this novel, Morrison depicts a very strong girl as the central character who struggles with lost innocence and lost identity. Based on Bride's thinking and probing into the mind of her mother, she remembers her joining with a medical student's friend who introduces her to his white family. Racially, she is vividly rejected and driven by the parents to the train stop. Later, in her account of her relation with her lover, Booker, she states "Six months into the bliss of edible sex, free-style music, challenging books and the company of an easy undemanding Bride". She disappointedly further reveals "the fairy-tale

castle collapsed into the mud and sand on which its vanity was built. And Booker ran away” (135). She feels that she loses the only handsome man who knows her and her dilemma of the partiality in the country. She remembers her complaining about her mother’s ill-treatment to her love, Booker and his reply “It’s just a colour, a genetic trait not a flaw, not a curse, not a blessing nor a sin” (143). He adds: “Scientifically there’s no such thing as race, Bride, so racism without race is a choice” (143).

Lula bride illustrates many social and racial aspects. While the mother disgustingly laments the future of her daughter, Bride, teaches her a lesson of boldness and confidence matching her black figure with white dress. Also, the terrible treatment of the mother sketches a significant point to all “what you do the children matters. And they might never forget” (43), that is seen in the negative reaction of the daughter towards her mother. This is an exploration of the deficiency law and regulation that protects only white people. Morrison affirms the diversity of human attitudes towards each other, while Bride’s parents hate her due to her blackness, for instance, the mother dislikes even touching her daughter’s skin for punishment. On the other hand, Bride has been loved by Rain, the mysterious white child with whom she crosses paths to look for Booker. Moreover, Bride’s love story with Booker is significant and considerable.

God Help the Child opens with an abrupt beginning of defiance and self-identification. The novel starts with the voice of the mother, Sweetness, saying: “It’s not my fault. So you can’t blame me. I didn’t do it and have no idea how it happened” (3). She discloses from the beginning a big dispute that happened between her and her husband because of the colour of the child, Lula Bride, that is not in her hands and cannot be individually controlled. The author through the character, Sweetness, believes that racism is a fact that cannot be denied or solved easily. The question of Morrison is why the black

child grows up without love, kindness, care or regret and when people intend to erase the standard of race and social prejudice.

Morrison also locates racism in the past era referring to the story of Sweetness's mother and her suffering, striving for livelihood for her and her daughter working as a slave. In the narration of the mother's experience, the author focuses on discrimination and racism giving example of the two *Bibles* that are for Whites and Africans. The Afro-American has no right even to touch the *Bible* of the White. But at the end of the novel, everything changes, Booker, the White lover agrees to marry the Afro-American girl, Bride after she informs him of her pregnancy by him. Therefore, Bride's aim is to tell the new generation of her marriage with Booker and their new portrayal of success.

Apart from the *God Help the Child*, *The Prisons We Broke* is more collective than personal. It is the personal account of a Dalit woman. Even though it is personal, Babytai, the protagonist of the novel is the representative of the Dalit community as a whole. It describes how Mahar mothers were more concerned with getting their children educated than men. Also, what is more remarkable is that there were no concessions for the downtrodden then, yet they were enthused to get education. Kamble has depicted family life of the Mahars in great detail. She has portrayed more or less everything about her community rightly. She is proud of being a member of her community, Mahar.

The Prison We Broke describes various social evils the Dalit society is caught with. Superstitions, impawning, possession of women by Gods, drunkenness, harassment of bride in the hands of the in-laws and wife beating are the few examples. These are intra-community back logs a Dalit constantly fighting to dispel. There are the constant curse of untouchability and exploitation at the hands of the upper caste people. "Dalit life is usually portrayed against the backdrop of caste Hindu society. The oppressor do not leave much

space for the oppressed” (Nagaraj 210). Whereas the external world is speedily coping with the overall flow of development and progress, the Dalits remain cloistered within their own caste boundary delimited by the sons of Manu.

The inhuman practice of untouchability, though it was made by rule after the Independence of India a punishable crime, pervades the life of the Dalits. How even a small boy of upper caste is conditioned to ‘see’ the Mahars as untouchable and use abusive words to them is clearly depicted by one example:

He, the upper caste shopkeeper, would give the innocent children lessons in social behavior, ‘Chabu, hey your, Cant’ you see the dirty Mahar woman standing there” Now don’t you touch her. Keep your distance.” Immediately our Mahar woman, gathering her rags around her tightly so as not to pollute the child, would say, ‘Take care little master! Please keep a distance. Don’t come too close. You might touch me and get polluted.’ (42)

Taking things thrown away from a distance, drinking water in ones cup fisted hands, not to walk on the road in front of any upper caste man or woman, not to sit beside Dalits in bus or train, a barber who even shaves cow and buffalo would not shave a Dalit – are the legacy of the Indian Dalits. The upper caste shop keeper calls the Dalit woman a ‘Dirty Mahar’ in public, whereas the same Dalit woman is so hegemonized and grounded down that she addresses the ‘little’ boy as ‘master... please... get polluted’. So, the prison of untouchability is like an invisible stain which always makes the Dalits feel very uncomfortable and lowly.

Baby Kamble also gives an unimaginable description of the humiliation of the Dalit women who fall the easiest prey of humiliation and exploitation in home and away, day and night. Kamble exemplifies each of the structural hurdles – natural or societal – by

individual experiences. Few of the choicest hurdles are always especially reserved for the Dalit women. Each Dalit woman has an inborn talent for multi-tasking. Dalit girl of any age is a beast of burden. The question of sending the girls to school was unimaginable. Baby describes the general as well as a particular incident: In those days, it was the custom to keep women at home, behind the threshold.

In all the phases of life, a Dalit woman is a stock labour and a being of convenience. As a girl to the parents, a wife to the husband and a mother to the son, Dalit women suffer most in terms of caste, class and gender. But their oppression comes little to light. The usual routine of the Dalit mothers follows: “Around ten O’ clock, they would pick up their baskets and brooms and set off towards the Maratha households where they cleaned the animal pens. They would return in the afternoon with a couple of baskets full of left over food” (46).

Even girls of mere five or six years, who has not yet come out of her childhood days, can take care of her brother or sisters who is only a few months old. She is assigned to so many daily chores. She collect s fire wood, helps mother in cooking, and takes the cattle to t he fields, fetch water from stream and so on. In addition, child marriage is rampant in Dalit community. Girl’s become pregnant and they have to deliver their child in a most inhospitable manner and the new born baby as well as its mother always suffers from mal nutrition and low vitality. So, both the rate of child death and death during delivery is very high in Dalit communities. Another fact that a reader comes across the text is that at least one woman in a hundred would have her nose chopped off. A husband brainwashed by the mother-in-law thus teaches his wife how to behave in society. Each time an upper cast man comes down the road, if it happens by chance that a Dalit woman is on the road, she has to cover her whole body and repeat uttering the mantra, “The humble Mahar women fall at

your feet master” (52). And if, any newly married woman forgets to do this, it would raise uproar in the locality.

The Prisons We Broke points out that the Mahars were leading their lives in ignorance and object poverty. They were not aware of the human existence as such. They would not dare to go against the social norms and challenge the caste Hindus. They were greatly superstitious and obeyed their oppressors. If any Dalit woman happened to break the entrenched practices of the caste system, she would be humiliated not only by the caste Hindus but also by the Mahar people. They were so ignorant that they were not able to lead a common human life.

The Prisons We Broke exposes the fact that the Mahars were not allowed to have god, dignified and auspicious names. They were supposed to give inauspicious and insulting names to their children. The work presents an embodiment of such names. Dagadu is the name of one Mahar man. Dagadu denotes a piece of stone. Dhondhu is also the name of another Mahar man. Here, Dhondhu means a small piece of stone. Jungalu is the name of a Mahar man. Junglu means jungali man, an individual from uncivilized preliterate community. Kondakaku is the name given to a Mahar woman which means ‘dust sunty’. Bhikabai is yet another name given to Mahar women. The meaning of this word is beggar lady. However, in course of time, the Mahars, especially Mahar women became aware of their inhuman lives and made attempts to come up. Kamble is one of them.

Similar to this, *God Helps the Child* presents readers with female characters whose life and sense of self are directly shaped by internalized racism. The most important part of Lula Ann’s story is the impact of racism. They suffered a great deal from pain in a parent-child tie, so “fault and blame” are effective and strong. In *God Help the Child*, Morrison portrays a world in which her Afro-American female characters suffer from what W.E.B.

Du Bois characterizes as double consciousness a split between the desire to achieve the American dream and the impossibility to fully do so as African American women. As Du Bois explains in his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk*, double-consciousness corresponds to “this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (80). A century after Du Bois famously detailed the power of the gaze and the internalization of racism, Morrison portrays Sweetness as a mother who sees herself and her daughter through the eyes of the racist society in which she lives, describing her own child, Lula Ann, as a “pickaninny” (5). The opening chapter makes evident that the problem of the color line is still the problem of our century. It dictates Sweetness’s behavior, as when she claims, “I had to be strict, very strict. Lula Ann needed to learn how to behave, how to keep her head down and not to make trouble” (7). She does not notice how she is transferring her internalized shame; rather, she sees her harsh education as a survival tool. For Sweetness, policing Lula Ann’s body is imperative to prevent her victimization. In the second chapter where she is the narrator, Sweetness stresses again how she acted out of necessity: “I had to protect her” (41). Trapped between an alluring post-racial myth and her own colorism, Sweetness remains in a state of arrested development.

The parallel between *The Prison We Broke* and *God Help the Child* forces readers to recognize the physical and emotional violence still at work in caste and racial relations in India and America. Whereas in Kamble’s novel, she depicts the down-trodden’s oppressed state in the Mahar community, how superstitions perpetuated amongst them in the name of various small deities; God and Goddesses. Kamble also exposed the plight of the Mahar women.

In *God Help the Child*, centuries later, the reader witnesses a mother who wants to love her child, but she struggle to love her as a mother should. These writings become

important in the way they show how Afro-American and Dalit women exist not as silent receivers of violence and brutality, but how they successfully convert their individual suffering into a collective political awareness. This is an awareness achieved through personal experiences and the narratives they hear. And it achieves the position of a standpoint which recovers the Afro-American and Dalit woman within the new knowledge system and creates a possibility for a new narrative being written from the perspective of the downtrodden and the oppressed.

Like other Dalit students in the past, Kamble was humiliated, harassed and discriminated against by not only her classmates but by her teachers also. However, what is interesting to note is that Kamble and her classmates belonging to Mahar caste would fight against their caste Hindu girl fellow students. The school in which Kamble was getting education was a girls' school. She and her friends were not scared of their classmates at all. But their teachers were in favour of the caste Hindu students and punished Kamble and her friends when caste Hindu students made complaints against them to the teachers. Also, most of the teachers were Brahmins who hated the Mahar students.

Similarly the oppression of women is seen in Morrison's novel. The colored men and women in Africa or America have to endure all the violence and racist behaviour of both White men and women; on the other hand she has to suffer from the hands of Black men. Although it is not easy to get rid of the patriarchal society, they manage to overcome these conditions. Afro-American community itself have lots of obstacles that prevent Afro-American women from realizing their identity. Among these handicaps, there are rape and colorism.

The history of both the Afro-Americans and the Dalits in their respective countries appear same which is filled with physical and mental torture and humiliation. The Africans

were brought and sold in the open market like animals but in India though the Dalits belonged to the same religion of the upper castes they were treated worse than animals and were pushed to the lower strata of society with no basic necessities and rights of their own. Though slavery was abolished legally, the illegal system of racism continues even to this day by treating Blacks as victims. Similarly the Dalits faced the same situation because of the practice of untouchability though it was abolished by the Constitution. *The Prisons We Broke* is a reminiscent of the oppression of Dalit which still continues. Whereas *God Help the Child* is an example that slavery and apartheid still prevalent in the society in various forms.

Both Morrison and Kamble portrays African American and Indian Dalits who occupy a similar bottom position in their respective societies. Indian Dalits as well as Afro-American were considered as the sons and daughters of darkness, journeying through untold sorrows and sufferings. Both writers aimed at promoting ideas of social equality, justice and resistance to suffering, discrimination and economic exploitation.

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