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Bodies at the Margins: Caste, Gender, and the Politics of Representation in Kishore Kale's *Against All Odds*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the representation of Dalit women in Kishore Kale's autobiography *Against All Odds* (2000), a text that foregrounds the lived realities of women belonging to the Kolhati community of Maharashtra. These women earn their livelihood as Tamasha dancers and are doubly marginalized by caste and gender structures. Although the Tamasha is often described as a folk performance tradition, Kale's narrative exposes the brutal sexual economy underlying the practice, where the bodies of Dalit women are simultaneously commodified and stigmatized. Drawing upon concepts such as commodification, depersonalization, and Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, this paper argues that the Kolhati women exist at the violent intersection of caste, class, patriarchy, and sexuality. The paper also interrogates the gender politics within Dalit discourse itself, showing how Dalit patriarchy replicates the oppressive structures of Brahmanical patriarchy. Further, the paper contrasts Kale's representation with Dalit feminist writers such as Bama and Urmila Pawar, who narrate these experiences from within. Kale's text thus becomes a complex site of both testimony and tension—recording the suffering of Dalit women while simultaneously reflecting the limits of male-authored representation. Through this critical reading, the paper ultimately argues for an intersectional Dalit feminist standpoint that

validates the subjectivity, agency, and humanity of women like Shantabai, Jiji, Baby, and Susheela.

Introduction:

Kishore Shantabai Kale's *Against All Odds* emerges as one of the most compelling autobiographical narratives from the Dalit literary movement in Maharashtra. Kale's autobiographical voice is inseparable from the lives of the Kolhati women who raised him, particularly his mother, Shantabai. The autobiography thus becomes a powerful social document, exposing the structural violence embedded in the profession of Tamasha dance. Within this social system, women are required to become breadwinners, while the men survive on the income generated by their daughters and sisters. The Introduction to the text lays bare the economic logic behind this practice, noting that Kolhati men "trained their sisters and daughters in dance and music and lived on their earnings," while abducting wives from other communities and protecting them from the stage (Kale ix). Dance, as performed by the Kolhati women, is therefore never merely aesthetic; it is embedded in a deeply gendered caste economy.

The Tamasha form itself, along with its musical component Lavani, is presented as an erotically charged performance tradition. The sound of the dholak, the rhythm of the ghungroos, and the suggestive choreography combine to heighten male attention (Kale 4). From the perspective of cultural history, Tamasha emerges from a syncretic performance tradition in Maharashtra, but within Kale's narrative it becomes inextricably linked to the commodification of Dalit women's bodies. Commoditization theory becomes a useful interpretive lens here. Once human beings are rendered commodities, their subjectivity is erased and their identity is reshaped by the interests of those who exploit them. For the Kolhati dancers, this is neither metaphorical nor symbolic: the body is literally bought, used, and discarded. Virginity acquires market value; sexuality becomes financial obligation.

The ritual of *chira utarna* exemplifies this process in starkest form. Shanta's first entry into sexual labour takes place through a ceremony that resembles marriage in outward form but contains none of its legal or emotional protections. Dressed in bridal clothing, she is handed over to Namdeorao Jagtap, who pays her family for exclusive sexual rights (Kale 15–16). When he eventually abandons her, she returns to the stage and to the cycle of labour and exploitation. Her physical body is positioned between two patriarchal demands: her obligation to sexually satisfy the patron and her obligation to financially support her family. Her worth, therefore, is determined not by her humanity but by her economic utility.

Dalit feminist theory has repeatedly emphasized that Dalit women suffer a double marginalization. They are oppressed not only by upper-caste men but also by Dalit men who internalize and reproduce patriarchal structures. Sharmila Rege's identification of Dalit women as "victimized sexual beings" is borne out throughout Kale's narrative, where the sexual availability of Tamasha dancers is normalized, tolerated, and even celebrated by the men who depend on their earnings. Internal patriarchy operates powerfully: the very men who are marginalized by caste reproduce domination within their homes.

Intersectionality offers a rigorous theoretical framework through which to locate the Kolhati dancer. Kimberlé Crenshaw's critique of "single-axis frameworks" argues that analyses centring only race or gender inevitably erase the specificity of Black women's experiences (Crenshaw 139–40). A similar erasure haunts both mainstream Indian feminism and Dalit discourse. Feminism that ignores caste cannot account for the structural sexualization of Dalit women; Dalit discourse that centres male experience risks marginalizing gendered realities. The Kolhati dancer experiences oppression not simply as a Dalit or as a woman but as a Dalit woman whose economic survival is tied to sexual labour. Her oppression is intersectional and compounded, not additive.

The male gaze pervades the Tamasha world Kale depicts. Men in the audience often feel entitled to physically approach or insult dancers, signalling that the performing female body is a public resource. Shanta's confrontation with a drunken police inspector who abuses her onstage is an instance where humiliation gives way to resistance, as she hurls a chappal at him and verbally rejects his authority (Kale 28). Her retaliatory language is raw and sexual, echoing Bama's observation that Dalit women employ earthy, explicit speech because their lives afford them neither sexual fulfilment nor social power (Bama 68). These outbursts register a protest that cannot always become organized resistance but nonetheless signals an irrepressible assertion of dignity.

Kale's relationship with his mother reveals another layer of complexity. His resentment toward her absence and his longing for stability are framed by his inability, as a child, to understand the coercive structures governing her life. His sense of abandonment coexists with an adult recognition of her predicament. This emotional ambivalence challenges sentimentalized ideals of motherhood and emphasizes the ways social systems fracture intimate relationships. Read alongside Dalit feminist autobiographies such as Bama's *Sangati* and Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*, Kale's narrative is gendered not only in content but in perspective. While he sympathizes with Dalit women, the experience remains narrated through a masculine lens.

Nowhere is internal Dalit patriarchy clearer than in the figure of Kondiba. He refuses to support his daughters' education, profits from their sexual labour, and physically coerces them into Tamasha. Even when Shanta becomes pregnant, she is forced to continue dancing so that the family does not starve. Similarly, Nana offers Shantabai domestic protection only to later resume his liaisons with other women. Dalit men emerge in the narrative not simply as victims of caste but as agents who reproduce patriarchal power.

The tragedy of Jiji reveals a gendered vulnerability to economic instability. As a childless widow, she becomes dependent on her brother's household, stripped of dignity and autonomy (Kale 8–9). Her gradual physical decline, exacerbated by neglect, becomes symbolic of the immobilizing effects of caste-patriarchal authority. Even when offered medical treatment, Jiji refuses, her obedience so deeply internalized that she cannot imagine life outside patriarchal protection (Kale 191). This is not mere passivity but a survival logic carved by generational conditioning.

Tamasha dancers also bear the stigma of being sexually available. Shailaja Paik demonstrates that Tamasha performers become "socially untouchable but sexually touchable," their bodies positioned at the intersection of caste stigma and erotic consumption. Rambha's bitter observation that actresses in mainstream cinema win awards for erotic performance while Tamasha dancers are shamed exposes the hypocrisy of caste society (Kale 151–52). The erotic is normalized only when performed by upper-caste or socially privileged bodies.

The stigma extends to the next generation. Children often bear their mother's name, formalizing illegitimacy in official records. Kale's embarrassment at being documented as "Kishore Shantabai Kale" reveals the psychic cost of this social inscription (Kale 46). His struggle to access education despite economic hardship and familial disapproval positions him within an Ambedkarite imagination in which education becomes the pathway to emancipation. His eventual success, becoming the first doctor in his community, testifies to the transformative power of learning but also to the structural hostility surrounding it.

At the same time, Kale's account raises important questions about authorship. Does he fully grasp the constraints shaping women's lives? His frustration with Jiji or initial anger toward his mother sometimes risks slipping into judgement. Dalit feminist critics such as Smita Patil suggest that Dalit men dominate Dalit discourse, relegating women's experiences to the margins. Within a Deleuze-Guattarian frame, Dalit women's writing becomes "minor literature" within the already "minor literature" of Dalit

discourse, signifying a double marginalization. Kale's text becomes a site where empathy and patriarchal perspective coexist.

The politics of representation resonate beyond Indian contexts. African women writers like Mariama Bâ and Buchi Emecheta critique patriarchal literary traditions that romanticize womanhood while concealing oppression. Their work parallels Dalit feminist calls to dismantle both caste and patriarchy. Without this dual dismantling, liberation movements risk becoming incomplete.

Ambedkar's critique of caste patriarchy is particularly relevant. His suspicion of Tamasha performance was shaped by the recognition that it institutionalized sexual servitude for Dalit women. By encouraging Dalit women to become teachers, activists, and public figures, he attempted to detach Dalit femininity from sexual availability (Sonalkar 3). His insistence on human dignity — *manuski* — sought to restore agency to Dalit women reduced to commodities.

The lives of Baby, Susheela, and Nili reveal the emotional wounds created by commodification. Each briefly glimpses the possibility of secure domestic life, only to be abandoned, rejected, or exchanged when youth fades. Love becomes a forbidden luxury, replaced by contractual sexuality negotiated through male relatives (Kale 57, 65). Desire is not permitted to them unless it is economically useful.

Elder Kolhati women sometimes become enforcers of tradition, policing younger women's behaviour. This is not betrayal but survival logic shaped by internalized oppression. Still, as writers like Bama and Pawar show, Dalit women resist in overt and subtle ways: through speech, labour, storytelling, collective support, and the refusal to remain silent. Their resistance is not abstract political rhetoric but rooted in embodied experience.

Kale's Ambedkarite awakening pushes him to challenge traditional practices, urging women to educate their children and withdraw from Tamasha (Introduction x). His autobiography, therefore, is not only testimonial but interventionist. Yet its masculinist lens means that it sometimes oscillates between feminist critique and moral-reform discourse.

Dalit feminism insists that Dalit women occupy the most precarious social space. They bear caste stigma, gender subordination, economic exploitation, and sexual vulnerability simultaneously. The Kolhati dancers become emblematic of this condition. Theirs is not a marginal issue but a concentrated form of the systemic violence that structures Dalit womanhood.

Against All Odds thus operates as both documentation and critique. It records the indignity and suffering of Dalit women but also reveals the limits of male narration. When read alongside Dalit feminist autobiographies, Kale's text invites us to reconsider questions of authorship, agency, and voice. Ultimately, the liberation of Dalit women requires not merely economic change but a transformation in cultural consciousness — one that recognizes their subjectivity, validates their narratives, and refuses to reduce their lives to spectacle or labour. Kale's life, shaped by the sacrifices of women and the possibilities opened by education, becomes a call to honour their humanity. Justice begins with listening.

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