

## Depiction of Caste and Gender Discrimination in Shatabi Kamble's Autobiography 'A Kaleidoscopic Story of My Life'



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### **Abstract**

*Dalits and women in India are marginalized under the structure of Varna system. They are dominated just for the sake of hegemonial instincts of so-called high castes. They are treated as subhuman, inferior and sinful in day-to-day life. But, in post-independence period, caste and gender consciousnesses have dominated the socio-cultural, political and economic scenario of Indian society. Now-a-days the deprived sections of society such as Dalit, Adivasi, OBCs and, women are striving for emancipation from the shackles of age-old traditions and unjust social order which is based on the Varna system. In post-independence era there is a great wave of Dalit writing in which Dalit women writers like Babytai Kamble, Shantabai Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Bama, Meenakand Swami etc. are the revolutionary writers who have explored the suffocated voice of Dalit womanhood in India. Shantabai Kamble's autobiography, Maja Janmachi Chittarkata (A Kaleidoscopic Story of my Life) is considered as a prominent Dalit autobiography that explores the suppressed lives of Dalit women in India. The present research paper attempts to highlight humiliating memories of caste and gender discrimination issues through Shantabai Kamble's autobiography.*

**Keywords: Dalit, Cast, Depict, Autobiography, Feminism, Gender, Discrimination**

Dalit writing is a post-independence literary phenomenon. The emergence of Dalit Literature has a great historical significance. It makes us familiar with the age-old existence of oppression and despair of the lives of marginalized class of the society known as Dalits. Arjun Dangle has defined Dalit Literature in the following words:-

“Dalit literature is one which acquaints people with the caste system and untouchability in India. It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary”.

Dalits have always been on the marginalized side of the Indian society. But after long silence and sufferings of centuries, they started raising their voice against their exploitation and social injustice done by the higher castes, demanding a new society devoid of discrimination. The main purpose of Dalit literature is the liberation of Dalits and the struggle against caste system prevailing in India. Many writers have written Dalit Literature with the purpose to highlight the miserable plight of the Dalits. Some of the important writers who have remarkably contributed in Dalit writing are Mahasweta Devi, Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Om Prakash Balmiki, Sharan Kumar Limbale and Santabi Kamble. Dalit literature

is the literature which deals with the sufferings, and exploitation of the Dalits. Sharan Kumar Limbale has stated, “Dalit literature is precisely that literature which artistically portrays the sorrow, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by Dalits. This literature is but a lofty image of grief.”

A well-known Dalit women's autobiography that examines the hidden lives of Dalit women in India is *Maja Janmachi Chittarkata* translated as *A Kaleidoscopic Story of My Life*. The present paper aims to study and draw attention to embarrassing memories of caste and gender discrimination problems in Shantabai Kamble's autobiography.

In the socio-academic sphere, Phule-Ambedkarite feminism, which speaks out against caste and gender injustice in Indian society, has evolved since 1990. It makes an effort to examine Dalit women's triple oppression. The first Dalit woman author in western Maharashtra Shantabai Kamble, who was born in 1923. She is a member of the untouchable Mahar caste and later on become an educator. But she endured a lot of hardship in her social and professional life as a Dalit woman. She chronicles the suffering of Dalit women in patriarchal caste system in India in her memoir (life story), titled "Maja Janmachi Chittarkata" (A Kaleidoscopic Story of My Life). She describes her painful experiences and extreme social

humiliation at home, work, and school in this memoir. She discusses caste, culture, work, and humiliation in her story. Despite the fact that it is her own life story, she also includes the collective voice of her neighborhood.

Shantabai discusses her first memories of a caste-based humiliating experience that traumatized her impressionable mind. When she was in the sixth grade, her teacher instructed her to see Shaku, a Brahman classmate, to check about her attendance. According to Shantabai, "On seeing me, Shaku's mother exclaimed, "Eh daughter of mahar, stop right now! I stood there a little uneasy. "You will stamp on rangoli (colour decoration in yard) at entrance." "Shaku's mother, please send Shaku to school," I pleaded with her. Shaku's mother informed me that Shaku, the mahar's daughter, was calling as soon as I mentioned this. Go to school right away. Shaku and I arrived at school, but Shaku's mother's remarks, "Eh daughter of mahar! Stop immediately (38).

The aforementioned episode in Shantabai's life illustrates how upper caste Brahman ladies consider her as a lesser being because she is a woman. Actually, Shantabai had gone to Shaku's house to encourage her to attend school, but because of her lower caste, she is humiliated. Typically, Dalit women are treated poorly by upper class men and women because of their low caste while also being exploited as women in a patriarchal culture. Even women from higher castes don't exhibit any sisterhood-like ties. Shantabai reflects on her early experiences with caste, untouchability, and humiliation. When she was in the third grade, a teacher by the name of Patil Master would instruct Dalit pupils to sit outside the class and even forbid them from touching him. Shantabai was highly upset at this habit of being untouchable at such a young age and questioned how her contact may contaminate the teacher.

Thus, the humiliation and untouchability she experienced at school, particularly at the hands of the higher caste teacher, left her with very sad memories and gave rise to Dalit consciousness. She experienced numerous embarrassing situations in school during her early years just because of her caste. Shantabai recounts her board exam trip to Pandharpur and the experience she had there. All of the students visited the temple of God Vitthoba before the exam. Jalindar and Shantabai were prohibited of access to God's courtyard because of their caste, whereas the other upper caste kids were permitted to enter the temple.

Instead, they had to pay their respects to Saint Chokaba (a mahar saint in the bhakti tradition).

One of the most exploitative and discriminatory systems in the world is the caste system in India. Not only does it demean the person, but it also denies them their human rights and the freedom to live their lives as independent members of society. In her experience, Shantabai examines the cruelty of caste discrimination; she recalls how she experienced poverty and misery as a youngster as a result of her caste. In exchange for leftover food provided as a gesture of goodwill by the upper caste in the village, the people from the mahar caste were then required to undertake local chores including sweeping the village, decomposing the dead castles of the town, and guarding the village at night. Without any justification, they were forced to carry out village chores as a slave in exchange for some jawar and grain during the taralki harvest season. To Mahars, performing the village chores was required. Shantabai remembers the year when her family and others in the neighborhood shared taralki. "Dada said to me one day, "Naja,"" she writes. The mamalatdar, a revenue official, visited the village today. Can you accompany Gena Ramoshi to ask our taralki for the bhakri in the evening as Appa has left for Tadulwadi?

I said to Dada "Sheela and I will go".

It was night time.

Sheela and I took the basket and went to the ramoshiwada.

I informed Genu Nana, "Nana, Dada cannot come today to request the bhakri. We accompanied Nana. As soon as we arrived at the brhamins' residence, the bhatakairwada, Nana said, "akka provide bhakri to the taral and ramoshi." The brhman woman offered each of us a quarter of bhakri and brought two quarters. Naja, why do you have to beg for bhakri today? she asked me.

This was we asked for the bhakri for taralki.

At that time, I was a seventh stander pass (39)

As a result, Shantabai's memories of having dependence on leftover, stale bread at night for sustenance are unpleasant and long-lasting. In reality, her family could have made a living by working elsewhere, but upper caste members forced them to perform unfair and unpaid village chores, or Taralki, in exchange for leftovers. Despite being educated, Shantabai had to knock on doors to ask for the bhakri due to her caste.

Despite Shantabai's schooling and government service as a teacher, the caste-based humiliation and torment

did not end. In the Solapur district's Kadals village, she was hired as a teacher in 1942. The village's upper caste members warned her to go back or risk being punished the same way the former lower caste instructors had been—beaten up and sent back in humiliation. She nevertheless performed her tasks valiantly. She also had a rather absurd experience while serving. In 1959, Shantabai and Kamble Master, her husband, were relocated to Dighinchi. Shantabai established free adult education classes in the village's buddhawada, the Neo-Buddhists' housing compound, where they taught reading and writing to the underprivileged residents. The class was visited by the Zillah Parish President and Education Officer, who left the group quite impressed and praised the Kamble's efforts. A "higher caste" village leader named Honrao, however, "refused to confer the Gramgaurav Puraskar (a form of honour that represents rural India's pride) on these schools and continued to send requests for the relocation of the Kamble's."

The village's upper caste head was envious of Shantabai and Kamble Master and wanted to transfer them despite the fact that they were performing their jobs honestly and devotedly. In reality, they were performing holy labour by instructing illiterate residents of the same village in a caste-free environment. The popularity of the low castes' instructor, however, was too much for the so-called upper caste leader to handle.

The oppressed are unable to unite together to fight against caste inequality and exploitation because the caste system is so polarizing and discriminating. There is hierarchy in Indian society, even among the lower classes. This is a significant achievement of the Indian caste system. Women from lower castes likewise despise those from higher castes. She describes an occurrence in the following words when discussing such hierarchy:

One day, women and men of our samaj (caste community) went to the gosavi's (one of the lower castes) well to fill water...

The gosavi women said, "The well is mine. So if the maharas touch it, it gets polluted, so I do not allow them to fill water."

The hawaldar said, "I know the well belongs to you."

The gosavi women replied, "I will allow filling when the engine is on but they can not go to the well"(86).

As a result, Shantabai recalls the untouchability that lower caste women experienced with other lower caste women. Hierarchy inside hierarchy can be found

in Indian society in this fashion. Despite belonging to a lower caste according to Hindu tradition, women from the Gosavi caste see themselves as superior and refuse to let women from untouchable castes use their well. She doesn't exhibit any sisterly affinities toward ladies from other castes. Actually, there was no animosity between these two women at all. However, caste hierarchy is the only reason it occurs. Even at the household level, gender prejudice occurs because parents tend to prioritize the education and nurturing of their sons above their daughters. In this regard, Shantabai shares a tale that her mother used to share, according to which her father had been horrified by the birth of a fourth daughter when he learned of the female child's arrival. Even he wished he could bury the young girl alive. The experience was also recalled by her father, who laughed while holding Shantabai and remarked, "The daughter is good; we had two sons right after her. Study hard in seventh grade; my Naja had a nice destiny (39). In this way, women in India gained equal constitutional rights and the chance to pursue an education and assert their individuality thanks to the Phule-Ambedkarite human liberation struggle. And it is clear that knowledge and education can open the door to freedom from enslavement. If a girl studies, she can enlighten her parents' and her husband's households, according to Mahatma Phule, the originator of the social reformation movement in India. The advancement of women in a society can serve as a barometer for measuring the growth of any country, according to Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar.

In brief, it may be concluded that Dalit women face double discrimination due to caste and gender in Hindu patriarchy. Dalit women are oppressed and taken advantage of in the caste system on the one hand, and they are degraded in the female fraternity on the other. Both Dalit women and members of the upper caste oppress her. In her family, she is likewise oppressed by males of her winning caste. The suffering of Dalit women in India's patriarchal caste structure is therefore explored in Shantabai's autobiography, *Maja Janmachi Chittarkata (A Kaleidoscopic Story of My Life)*. The autobiography is a sociography that depicts social reality rather than just being the record of an individual achievement for the readers to be inspired by. In light of the Phule-Ambedkarite human liberation doctrine of social equality and the value of human life. In reality it is a story of Dalit women marching towards human emancipation.

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