



CASTE AND GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN SHANTABI KAMBLE'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY- A KALEIDOSCOPIIC STORY OF MY LIFE

PAWAR KESHAV LIMBAJI

Assistant Professor,
PG Dept. of English,
Chhatrapati Shivaji Autonomous College,
Satara. (MS) INDIA

ABSTRACT

The history of mankind is a saga of an incessant struggle between the oppressors and oppressed and the life of Dalit community in India is a perennial story of agony, anguish and struggle due to the untouchability imposed on them by Hindu Varna system. The Dalits and women in India are marginalized with the of Varna system super structure just for the sake of hegemonial and dominating instincts of so-called higher castes. They are treated as subhuman, inferior and sinful in day today life. But, in post independence period, caste and gender consciousnesses have dominated the socio-cultural, political and economical 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 Four 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 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 women 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 in Shantabai Kamble's Autobiography.

INTRODUCTION

Maja Janmachi Chittarkata (A Kaleidoscopic Story of my Life) is considered as a prominent women Dalit autobiography that explores the suppressed lives of Dalit women in India. The

PAWAR KESHAV LIMBAJI

1 Page



present research paper attempts to highlight humiliating memories of caste and gender discrimination issues in Shantabai Kamble's Autobiography.

Since 1990, Phule-Ambedkarite feminism has been emerged in socio-academic domain that talks against caste and gender discrimination in Indian society. It tries to explore the thrice oppressed Dalit women hood. Shantabai Kamble, (1923) is the early Dalit women writer in western Maharashtra. She came from an untouchable mahar caste and becomes teacher and latter the Education officer. But, being a Dalit and women she had to suffer a lot in her social and service life. She has written a memoir (life narrative) entitled '*Maja Janmachi Chittarkata*' (A Kaleidoscopic Story of my Life) that narrates the suffering of Dalit women in patriotic caste society in India. In this memoir she narrates the bitter experiences and severe humiliation in society at school, working place and even at home. In her memoir she talks about caste, culture, labour and humiliation. Though, it is her won life narrative, she presents the collative voice of her community too.

Shantabai writes about the early memories of an incident of caste based humiliation that disturbed her innocent psyche. When she was studying in sixth standard, she was asked by the teacher to go to Shaku, her Brahman classmate's house to call her in school, Shantabai writes, "On seeing me Shaku's mother shouted, "Eh daughter of mahar, stop right there! You will stamp on rangoli (colour decoration in yard) at door" I stood there a little nervous. I said to Shaku's mother, 'Shaku's mother, please send Shaku to school'. As soon as I had said this Shaku's mother said Shaku the mahar's daughter is calling you. Hurry up and go to school'. Shaku and I came to school, but her mother's words kept ringing in my ears-"Eh daughter of mahar! Stop right there" (38).

The above incident in the life of Shantabi explores that how the upper caste Brahman women being women treat her as a subhuman and inferior. Actually, Shantabi had gone at Shaku's home to intimate her to come to school; however, she is humiliated because of her lower caste. Generally, Dalit women is exploited as a women in the patriotic society at the same time she is humiliated by the hands of uppercase men and women just to her low born caste. Even the upper caste woman doesn't show any affinity as a sisterhood. Shantabai recalls her experiences about caste, untouchability and humiliation in her childhood. When she was in third standard there was a teacher named Patil Master who would tell to Dalit students to sit outside the class and even they were not allowed to touch him. At this very early age, Shantabai was very upset at this practice of untouchability and wonders how her touch pollutes the teacher.

Thus, the experiences of untouchability and humiliation, she got from the very sacred place i.e. school and especially from the upper caste teacher; are very bitter and which brought Dalit consciousnesses in her mind. It was just because of her caste; in her childhood in school



she faced many humiliating incidents. Shantabai recalls her experience when she had gone to Pandharpur for her board examination. Before going to exam, all the students went to the temple of God Vithoba. While the other upper caste children went into the temple, Jalindar and Shantabai being untouchable were not allowed to enter in temple so they had to pay their respect only to Saint Chokaba (a mahar saint in *bhakti* tradition) Thus; even in the courtyard of God also she was deprived because of her low caste.

Caste system in India is one of the world's most discriminatory and exploitative systems. It not only degrades the individual but also deprives from human rights and the right to live as an independent human being in society. Shantabi explores the brutality of caste discriminations in her experience; she recalls her childhood memories about poverty and suffering in her family only because of her caste. At that time the people from *mahar* caste were compelled to perform the village duties like sweeping the village, decomposing the dead castles of the village and to guard the village at night etc, in return to leftover food served in mercy by upper caste in the village. They had to perform the village duties as a slave with no excuse in returns of some *jawar* and corn at the time of harvest which is known as *taralki*. It was mandatory to perform the village duties to Mahars. Shantabai recalls the year, in which *taralki* was shared between her family and others in the community. She writes:

“Dada said to me on one day, “Naja, Today the *mamalatdar* (revenue official) has come to village. Appa has gone to Tadulwadi so in the evening, can you go with Gena Ramoshi to ask for the *bhakri* of our tararlki?”

I said to Dada “Sheele and I will go”.

It was night time.

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

I said to Ggenu Nana “Nana, today Dada cannot come to ask for the *bhakri* . We went with Nana. When we reached the *bhatakairwada* (the residential quarters of the brhamins) Nana began to say “akka give *bhakri* to the taral and ramoshi “The brhaman women brought two quarters of *bhakri* and gave us a quarter each. She said to me, Naja how come you have to ask for *bhakri* today? ...

This was we asked for the *bhakri* for *taralki*.

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

Thus, the above experiences of Shantabai about asking leftover stale bread at night time for their livelihood are bitter and lasting long in her memory. Actually, her family was able to earn the livelihood by working elsewhere; but they were compelled to bear the burden of unjust and unpaid village service i.e. *Taralki* in return of the leftovers by upper caste.

PAWAR KESHAV LIMBAJI

3 Page



Though Shantabai was educated she had to go door to door to ask the *bhakri* just because of her caste.

The humiliation and torture on the basis of caste could not reduce though Shantabai got education or government Service as a teacher. She was appointed as teacher in 1942 at Kadals village in Solapur district. The upper caste people of the village advised her to return back or you will be treated as the former lower caste teachers had been beaten up and sent back in shame. But, she courageously carried out her duties. Another experience she got in service was very ridiculous. Shantabai and Kamble Master, her husband were transferred Dighinchi in 1959. In that village Shantabai started adult education classes in the buddhawada (the residential quarters of Neo-Buddhists) they were teaching reading and writing to the poor people at the free of charge. The education officer and President of Zillah Parishd visited the class and impressed very much and remarked upon the efforts of the Kamble couple. However, an 'upper caste' village leader, Honrao 'refused to confer the *Gramgaurav Puraskar* (pride of rural India a sort of award) on these schools and kept sending application for the transfer of the Kambles .

Shantabai and Kamble Master were rendering their duties honestly and devotedly however, the upper caste leader of the village was jealous and wanted to transfer them just because of their lower caste. Actually they were doing sacred work of teaching illiterate people of the same village at free of caste. But, the so-called upper caste leader could not bear the popularity of low castes' teacher.

Caste system is so divisive and discriminatory that does not allow the downtrodden to come together to fight against caste hierarchy and exploitation. In Indian society there is hierarchy amongst the lower castes also. This is a great miracle of castes system in Indian. The women from lower castes also look down up on to lower one. While talking about such hierarchy she recalls an incident in the following words:

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).

Thus, Shantabai recalls the experience of untouchability practiced be lower caste women with other lower caste women. In this way, in Indian society hierarchy within hierarchy is found. The women from *gosavi* caste though being lower caste lady in Hindu tradition assume

PAWAR KESHAV LIMBAJI

4 Page



herself as a superior and don't allow to fill water of her well to the women from untouchable castes. She doesn't show any affinity to the women from other caste as sense of sisterhood. Actually, there was not any sort of enmity between these two ladies. However it happens just because of caste hierarchy. Even, gender discrimination is made at family level too; as every parent give preference to the education and upbringing son than daughter. In this regard Shantabi tells the story which her mother used to say, when her mother heard the news of female child's birth, her father had been disgusted at the arrival of a fourth daughter. Even he wanted to bury the female child alive. Her father too recall the incident and embracing Shantabai and laughing, said, "The girl is good we had two sons just after her. My Naja had a good destiny ... now study well in seventh standard" (39). In this way, due to Phule-Ambedkarite human liberation movement women in India got equal constitutional rights and opportunity to get education and prove their individuality. And, it is evident that education and knowledge can pave the way for salvation from slavery. According to Mahatma Phule , father of social reformation movement in India if a girl learns she can enlighten the two families i.e. her parents and husband's. Dr. Babsaheb Ambedkar also said that the progress of any nation can be measured by the progress of women in that society.

In a nut shell it can be stated that in Hindu patriarchy the plight of Dalit woman lives in double jeopardy of caste and gender discrimination. On the one hand, Dalit woman is suppressed and exploited in caste system and on other had they are humiliated in women fraternity. She is oppressed by upper caste men and women too as Dalit women. And she is also subjugated by men from her won caste in her family. Hence, Shantabai's autobiography, *Maja Janmachi Chittarkata* (A Kaleidoscopic Story of my Life) explores suffering of Dalit women in patriotic caste society in India. The autobiography is not mere the story of an individual achievement for the inspiration for readers but it a sociography that accounts social reality. It is a saga of Dalit women to march towards human emancipation in the light of Phule-Ambedkarite human liberation ideology of social equality and dignity of human life.

WORKS CITED

Kamble Shantabai, *Majya Janmachi Chittarkatha (Marathi)*, Sugva Prakashan, Pune, 1998. Print.

Ambedkar, Babasaheb 1948,4) *The Shudras—Who they were and How they came to be the Fourth Varna of the Indo-Aryan Society* Govt. of Maharashtra, Mumbai.

...Annihilation of Caste in India, Govt. of Maharashtra, Mumbai.



...*The Untouchables: Who are they? And why they became Untouchables!*, New Delhi: Amrit Book, 1948.

Dangle, Arjun. Ed. *Poisoned Bread*, New Delhi: Orient Black Swan, 2009. Print.

Magdum Ajit, *Comparative Lierature Dalit Poetry and African American poetry*, Roli Book, Kanpur, 2009 Print.

Nimbalkar Waman, *Dalit Literature : Nature and Role*, Prabodhan Prakashan Nagpur, 2007. Print.

Rege Shrmila, *Writing caste / Writing Gender*, Zuban Publication, New Delhi, 2006. Print.