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Ambedkar's Vision and the Rise of Dalit Feminist Literature: A Special Reference to Shantabai Kamble's *The Kaleidoscope Story of My Life*

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Abstract

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, is widely recognized for his pioneering work toward eradicating caste-based discrimination in India. However, his role in advocating for women's rights—especially Dalit women—has not received as much focused scholarly attention. Ambedkar's feminist vision promoted equality, education, and dignity for women, advocating for structural changes that could dismantle both caste and patriarchy. This paper explores how Ambedkar's ideology catalyzed the emergence of Dalit feminist literature, with special emphasis on Shantabai Kamble's groundbreaking autobiography *Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha (The Kaleidoscope Story of My Life)*. Through Kamble's narrative, we see how Dalit women negotiated their identity through writing, reflecting a voice deeply influenced by Ambedkarite values. The study also traces the thematic, linguistic, and socio-political elements of Kamble's work, positioning her narrative as a milestone in the evolution of Dalit feminist literature.

Keywords: Dalit, Feminist Literature, Architect, Eradicating, Discrimination, Dismantle, Patriarchy

Introduction

The intersection of caste and gender in India presents a complex matrix of oppression for Dalit women. While mainstream feminist discourse in India has largely focused on gender within upper-caste frameworks, and Dalit literature often reflects male experiences of caste-based marginalization, the unique voice of the Dalit woman was historically marginalized. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar recognized this early on. He was among the few public intellectuals in colonial and post-colonial India who emphasized that social reform had to include both caste and gender justice. His insistence on the education and emancipation of women forms a foundational pillar for what we now recognize as Dalit feminism.

Ambedkar's writings, speeches, and political actions laid down the philosophical and practical framework that enabled Dalit women to find their voice in literature. This paper situates Shantabai Kamble's narrative within this framework, showing how Kamble's life story was not just a personal memoir but also a political document that challenged systems of caste and gender.

Ambedkar's contributions to feminist thought were grounded in his larger vision of social justice. In his critiques of Hinduism, particularly the Manusmriti, he pointed to religious texts as instruments of women's subjugation. His famous statement, "I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved," underscores his belief that true social development cannot occur without the upliftment of women.

Ambedkar's advocacy for the Hindu Code Bill during his tenure as India's Law Minister is an essential demonstration of his feminist principles. The Bill aimed to grant equal rights to women in matters of marriage, divorce, inheritance, and property. Although the bill faced strong resistance and was only passed in diluted forms years later, Ambedkar's efforts symbolized a radical step toward gender justice in post-independence India.

Moreover, Ambedkar's vision of feminist emancipation was inclusive of all women but particularly cognizant of the layered oppressions faced by Dalit women. His call to "educate, agitate, and organize" was directed at the most marginalized communities, and his speeches at women's conferences—like the 1936 Women's Conference in Pune—show his commitment to creating feminist consciousness among Dalit women.

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Ambedkar's feminist thought was deeply intertwined with his critique of Hindu scriptures and societal norms that perpetuated gender inequality. He vehemently opposed texts like the Manusmriti, which he believed institutionalized the subjugation of women. In a symbolic act of protest, Ambedkar publicly burned the Manusmriti in 1927, denouncing its regressive tenets.

"I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved."

— Dr. B. R. Ambedkar

Ambedkar's commitment to women's rights was evident in his efforts to ensure their inclusion in the Indian Constitution. He emphasized the need for equal rights in education, employment, and property ownership. His advocacy extended to marginalized women, including those subjected to exploitative practices like child marriage and the devadasi system.

As the Law Minister, Ambedkar introduced the Hindu Code Bill, aiming to reform Hindu personal laws to grant women equal rights in marriage, inheritance, and property. Despite facing staunch opposition, he remained steadfast in his pursuit of gender justice. The bill's eventual dilution led to his resignation, underscoring his unwavering principles.

Dalit feminist literature can be described as a body of work produced by Dalit women writers that reflects their lived experiences of caste, gender, and economic oppression. This genre is unique in its ability to capture multiple layers of marginalization. Dalit feminist writing emerged as a counter-narrative to both Savarna feminism and mainstream Dalit male writing. The literature is autobiographical, testimonial, and grounded in the ethics of truth-telling and resistance.

These narratives reveal how Dalit women face exclusion not only from the dominant caste order but also from within their own communities, where patriarchy often goes unquestioned. This literature challenges both the upper-caste portrayal of the 'ideal woman' and the invisibility of Dalit women in canonical Indian literature.

Writers like Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Bama, and Shantabai Kamble became pioneers in this space, creating a genre that was deeply personal and profoundly political. Their stories reflected everyday forms of resistance—going to school, rejecting forced labor, or speaking out against domestic abuse.

Shantabai Kamble (1923-2002) wrote the first autobiography by a Dalit woman in Marathi, which was later translated into English as *The Kaleidoscope Story of My Life*. Her narrative documents her life as a Dalit woman navigating poverty, caste discrimination, and gender bias. Her voice emerged during a time when the act of writing itself was a radical tool for oppressed communities.

Kamble's autobiography recounts her struggle to gain an education—a right denied to many Dalit girls. Despite the scorn and humiliation she faced, her desire to learn was fuelled by Ambedkar's exhortations to Dalits to educate themselves as a means of liberation.

"It was because of Babasaheb Ambedkar that I dared to enter the school... But Babasaheb said we should not be afraid of the world." — Shantabai Kamble

Her story is filled with moments of courage: attending school barefoot, bearing insults from upper-caste classmates and teachers, and confronting gender roles at home. Through these accounts, Kamble not only tells her life story

but also constructs a collective memory of Dalit women's suffering and strength.

Kamble's work is a powerful study in intersectionality. Her autobiography reveals how caste, class, and gender intersect to shape her life's experiences. Unlike Savarna feminist texts that often universalize women's oppression, Kamble's story insists that all women do not suffer the same way. Her father's support in her educational journey provides a nuanced look at intra-community relations, showing how some Dalit men, influenced by Ambedkar, were allies in women's struggles. At the same time, she documents the internalized patriarchy within Dalit households that sought to restrict women's freedom.

Stylistically, Kamble's writing is simple, unadorned, and direct. It draws on oral traditions and memory, making it accessible to a wide audience. According to scholar Sharmila Rege, such texts are not merely literary products but "testimonios"—acts of bearing witness that challenge upper-caste historical narratives.

"These autobiographies are testimonios—acts of bearing witness that combine personal memory and collective suffering." — Sharmila Rege

Kamble's narrative structure resists neat chronology and is driven more by emotional truth than by formal literary conventions. This makes her text an ethical intervention as well as a literary one.

Throughout her autobiography, Ambedkar looms large as a figure of hope and transformation. Kamble consistently refers to him not only as a political leader but as a father figure who gave her the courage to resist.

She recalls public meetings where his speeches were read out to Dalit families, the importance of Ambedkarite books in her household, and how these texts shaped her worldview. For Kamble, reading Ambedkar was a transformative experience—it reshaped how she understood her oppression and envisioned her liberation.

Her decision to write her life story came from a sense of duty to Ambedkar's mission. She saw her autobiography as part of the struggle for social justice—a tool to educate others and to assert the dignity of Dalit women's lives.

Kamble's work has gained significant traction in academic discourse, especially within Dalit studies, gender studies, and postcolonial literature. Her autobiography is often included in university syllabi across disciplines.

Scholars like Gopal Guru, Sharmila Rege, and Susie Tharu have all highlighted the importance of Kamble's narrative in broadening our understanding of both feminist and Dalit writing. Rege's work in particular argues that Dalit women's autobiographies offer a unique perspective that is often absent in Savarna feminist discourse.

The translation of Kamble's work into English has also helped bring her voice to a global audience. It has been discussed in international conferences, journals, and anthologies focused on marginalized voices.

Kamble's narrative opened the doors for many other Dalit women to write and share their stories. Her influence can be seen in the works of Urmila Pawar, Bama, and younger writers like Meena Kandasamy.

In contemporary India, where caste and gender-based violence continues to make headlines, Kamble's voice remains urgent and necessary. Her story speaks to issues like access to education, caste-based exclusion, and the need for intersectional feminist frameworks.

Her courage to tell her story in a deeply casteist and patriarchal society stands as a beacon for current and future generations. As long as structural inequalities exist, the power of testimonial narratives like Kamble's will continue to inspire resistance.

Autobiography in the Dalit context is never merely a personal exercise—it is a revolutionary act. By asserting their subjectivity, Dalit writers claim space in a literary canon that has long excluded them. For Dalit women, this is doubly important. As Sharmila Rege notes, their autobiographies function as “collective testimonies,” and each one “challenges the narrative authority of upper-caste Hindu feminism.” Kamble's narrative is not just an account of one woman's life—it is representative of a silenced community's struggle to speak. Her narrative breaks cultural taboos by speaking about menstruation, poverty, caste humiliation, and her private reflections. Each paragraph of her text asserts that Dalit women are not merely victims but agents of transformation.

Kamble's voice, which trembles yet persists, is a challenge to literary elitism. Her act of writing reclaims dignity, personhood, and intellectual presence in a society that sought to deny all three. Her work can thus be understood not only as literature but also as social protest and historical documentation.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's legacy is deeply embedded in the rise of Dalit feminist literature, and Shantabai Kamble's autobiography is one of its most luminous manifestations. Kamble's story is not just a personal tale of struggle; it is a chronicle of systemic injustice and a tribute to the transformative power of education, resilience, and Ambedkarite ideology.

Her life and work underscore the importance of making space for marginalized voices in literary and academic canons. They remind us that literature is not only about aesthetics but also about justice. In amplifying voices like Kamble's, we move closer to the inclusive vision Ambedkar once dreamed of.

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