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Intersections of sexuality, labour, gender, and caste in Kishore Kale's *Against All Odds*

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Abstract:

In this paper, I first attempt to look at some of the ways in which life narratives by members of subaltern groups, such as *Kolhatyache Por* (translated as *Against All Odds*) by Kishore Kale transcend or transgress the conventions of canonical autobiographies. Second, I offer a close reading of the narrative as a feminist narrative exploring the intersections of caste, gender, labour and sexuality.

Keywords:

Life Narratives, Caste, feminist narrative, revisionist criticism, *Kolhati* community, Kishore Kale.

In this paper, I first attempt to look at some of the ways in which life narratives by members of subaltern groups, such as *Kolhatyache Por* (translated as *Against All Odds*) by Kishore Kale transcend or transgress the conventions of canonical autobiographies. Second, I offer a close reading of the narrative as a feminist narrative exploring the intersections of caste, gender, labour and sexuality. In reading this text, I interrogate some of the foundational tenets of autobiography criticism as laid down by critics such as Gusdorf¹, Olney and others and examine the ways in which writers from subaltern groups such as Kishore Kale appropriate, transgress, contest, and reshape normative autobiographical practices to inscribe the subjectivities of members of such groups. This involves interrogating and rethinking the very terms in which the autobiographical subject has been thought in formative criticism of the genre. If conventions regarding the genre stipulate 'a legitimate class' of autobiographical narratives, focusing on the lives of 'men of lofty reputation,' 'great' and 'extraordinary' men, each of whom constitutes a unique, sovereign, and discrete individual, a valorization of the ideals of autonomy and sovereignty, and the evolution of the individual measured in terms of progress, achievement and material success, then Kale's narrative reveals that the genre is no longer the exclusive province of 'great men' alone; rather it can be used to map 'the lives of the obscure' to use Virginia Woolf's words. Life narratives by members of marginalized communities such as Kale's transcend the singular focus on individual eminence and achievement in the canonical 'great men' paradigm. 'Great men' are, invariably, middle and upper class men who have achieved success according to conventional yardsticks.

Revisionist criticism by critics such as Liz Stanley has critiqued the narrow and exclusionary nature of the 'great men' model. Critically examining the notion of 'greatness' or 'importance' as a precondition for the autobiographical subject, Liz Stanley writes that "it is no accident or coincidence that 'great' and 'important' within modern biography are almost invariably people at the top of stratification systems based on sex, class, race, religion"(9). Taking a cue from Virginia Woolf's exploration of the 'lives of the obscure,' we can see that in cultural and political terms, the lives of the 'obscure' can be as, if not more, significant as those of the famous. Noting the elitism

and classism inherent in the devaluation of the lives of the not-so-famous, Stanley critiques “the presumption that only conventionally important ‘makes a difference’ to social life and the rest of humanity do not” (8). Adopting an approach which is more critical towards the dominant paradigm of subjectivity valorized in canonical autobiographies, we can see that in this model some lives are seen as being worthy enough to be mapped but not others. Life narratives of members of marginalized groups enable readers to question the very notion of who is deemed an apt or suitable subject of the genre and how their life and work is represented. The life narratives of Dalits and other marginalized groups mount a considerable challenge to this orthodoxy by claiming that all lives are intrinsically interesting and valuable.

Summing up the exclusionary nature of this model of subjectivity, Philip Holden says that “The autonomous subjectivity promised by autobiography in which Gusdorf and Weintraub invest so much, is thus predicated on the exclusion of others” (Philip Holden *Autobiography and Decolonization: Modernity, Masculinity and the Nation-State* 20). Smith and Watson, too, emphasized the complicity of Western autobiography in according a hegemonic discursive status to the white bourgeois heterosexual man, “it functions as an exclusionary genre against which the utterances of other subjects are measured and misread. While inviting all subjects to participate in its practices, it provides the constraining template or the generic “law” against which those subjects and their diverse forms of self-narrative are judged and found wanting” (*De/Colonizing the Subject* xviii).

The forms, aims and objectives and material effects of autobiographies differ depending on the cultural context and constituency from which they emerge and toward which they are addressed. A proper understanding of the political uses of life narratives necessitates a consideration of the issues of genre, voice, community, authority and readership. Since the emancipatory politics of these narratives stems from “bringing culturally marginalized experiences out from the shadow of an undifferentiated otherness” (Smith & Watson 435-436), there is an emphasis on the representative status of the autobiographer rather than a unique and ineffable personality and the mapping of subjectivity is rendered complex by the deep connection between the individual ‘I’ and the communal ‘we,’ without the loss of either the individual or the community. Needless to say that life writing produced by members of dispossessed or marginalized groups serves to ‘give a voice’ to the experiences of working class, ethnic minorities, women, colonized populations, gays and lesbians etc. Because the intent of such narratives is overtly political, they focus on events in that individual’s life not in order to highlight the uniqueness of that life or the distinctiveness of those experiences but because they presuppose a communal identity.

Kolhatyache Por, (1994) by Kishore Shantabai Kale, translated in English as *Against All Odds* (2000) is a life narrative by a male member of the Kolhati community, which was originally a nomadic tribe in Rajasthan that subsequently migrated to western Maharashtra. Initially, people of the tribe used to earn their livelihood by performing jugglery and acrobatic acts, but soon turned to the more lucrative business of dance. Kolhatis are a community whose men force their women to earn a living through the occupation of singing, and dancing in *jalsas*, and live as parasites on the earnings of their womenfolk, who are also often sexually exploited by affluent and powerful men amongst the spectators. Research by feminists shows that in all the three

cases, there is an appropriation of the women's art along with a stigmatization of their sexuality.

Kale begins his narrative by giving an extended explanation of the cultural and social norms prevalent in the Kolhati community. The opening pages offer a brief summary of Kale's mother's family. His mother, Shanta, is the eldest daughter amongst the eight children fathered by Kondiba Kale, who belongs to the Kolhati community, which "forces its women to dance to attract male attention" (Kale *Against All Odds* 4, all subsequent references will contain only page numbers to the text) and where "the family survives on the money earned by the women of the family. The men consider any labour below their dignity" (5) and lead an absolutely parasitic existence. It is intriguing that the wives of Kolhati men do not dance; rather, it is their daughters and sisters who are coerced into dancing in *jalsa* parties from a very young age but they are not given any part of their earnings. Given these practices about unmarried women helping to maintain the family economy through their sexual labour, they are socialized into the caste-based profession of the community from a very young age.

Though Shantabai Kale, the author's mother, was a very intelligent and diligent student, keenly desirous of becoming a teacher, her father used physical violence to force her to learn dancing at the age of fourteen so that she could become the lead dancer in a *jalsa* party. Despite pleading with her father about the degrading life facing her in a troupe, he doesn't allow her to go back to school and she is left with no choice but to dance in *tamasha* troupes. Dancing in front of men who are often drunk and who solicit and proposition the dancers after their performances are over, is a degrading and disgusting occupation and Kale writes about his mother, "Shanta stepped out of her secure childhood, straight into a hostile world waiting to exploit her youth and beauty" (10) and that she "was frightened and disgusted by this lifestyle" (13). As Kale grows up into a discerning child, he says, "This was not an educated audience appreciating art; rather they were men out to enjoy an evening of earthy pleasure" (12). While the dancers look upon it as an art form, the spectators, consisting of men who were often drunk and who, in their inebriated state, would stare lustily at them and throw money on the stage. Kale describes the dancer's physical plight—her aching legs and sore muscles-- in repeatedly dancing to the front of the stage to collect the money and the humiliation in being treated as sex objects.

A degrading custom of the community is called '*chira utarna*,' the Kolhati ritual of "selling a virgin girl" (15) to a rich upper-caste man. Whenever any affluent man among the spectators expressed interest in a particular dancer, he would offer all forms of financial help to the dancer's family and she would be made available to him for as long as he desired. The members of her family orchestrate a kind of mock marriage called *Chira Utarana* and the girl, in reality, becomes the concubine of that man. Many a times the dancer is persuaded by the *chira malik* to give up her dancing, only to resume it a couple of years later, having realized the insecurity of being the 'non married keep' of a landlord. The narrative focusses on the predicament of Kolhati girls who are coerced, by the male members of their own families, to live as the mistresses of rich, upper caste married men. That is why most Kolhati children bear their mother's name, a fact that proclaims their illegitimacy and which makes them victims of societal derision. In this community, a 'good' woman is one who selflessly provides for her natal kin. A Kolhati woman cannot marry and any 'transgression' of this norm is punishable by the caste panchayat. Kale's mother, Shantabai Kale is 'given' to three

affluent men, landlords and moneylenders, in succession. Her first *chira malik*, a MLA, who abandons her as soon as she becomes pregnant, is the father of the author. As soon as Shanta Kale, the narrator's mother becomes pregnant, Namdeorao Jagtap, abandons her. Revolted by the commodification of women, the young Kishore insightfully sums up, "In their greed for money, they had truly obliterated the difference between right and wrong" (61). When abandoned by Jagtap, Shanta's father wants the foetus to be aborted because a dancer with a child "is of less value" (17). Her father forces her to dance all through her pregnancy, and Kale sums up her plight, "She toiled all night and travelled from place to place in bumpy bullock carts until she was eight months pregnant" (17). She is forced to rejoin the *jalsa* party when Kishore is barely two months old. A second son is born from the second '*chira malik*' who dies soon after the child is born. Hoping to escape this degrading life and succumbing to the lure of a life of dignity, Shantabai elopes with Nana, her third suitor but despite her unswerving fidelity to Nana, the promise of a secure and dignified life is belied as she is reduced to living in a state of utter penury as his concubine.

Kale, who witnesses his mother's dance from the tender age of four, offers a first-hand account of the composition of *jalsa* parties, the rhythms of their life, their itinerant ways, and exhausting schedules. The brief prologue to the narrative introduces "the dingy world of harshly lit theatres, dusty wooden stages, shabby curtains and crowds of men—men drunk, sweating, laughing, calling out and teasing the brightly dressed women dancing to entertain them" (1). The visual and auditory sense impressions --- the beat of the *dholak* and the *tabla*, the crashing of the *ghungroos*, the thunderous music, the screaming and clapping spectators, the dancer in her nine-yard sari, gold jewellery and flower-bedecked hair, running, hundreds of times, to the front of the stage to collect the rupee notes showered on her by drunken men---imprinted themselves on the psyche of four year old Kishore Kale as he sat in the front row, watching his mother dance. He remembers how at that young age, he felt a sense of tremendous pride and joy in seeing his mother showered with money. It is only after he grew up that he understood "the ache in her legs, the weariness in her heart" (2). This enchanting and spectacular memory treasured by the four year old child soon reveals itself to be a sordid spectacle of women dancing to sensuous songs with double *entendre* in front of debauched men. The *sangeet baree* performances begin late in the evening and continue into the early hours of the morning. Sometimes, special *baithaks* are also organized for an exclusive audience in the afternoon, which means that the dancers are on their feet, wearing their *ghungroos*, weighing around five kilograms, dancing for ten to fifteen hours. As a result, most of the dancers suffer from varicose veins. An important part of the performance is what is known as the *daulat jadda* or the bidding by the audience for the *nachee* (dancer) to perform a *lavani* of their choice. The *daulat jadda* includes *baksheesh* given by the audience to the *nachee*. The highest bidder places the money between his lips from where the *nachee* takes it with her lips and then the money is shared between all the troupe members. Under the male gaze of *savarna* spectators, both the performance and the body of the Kolhati dancer are sexualized. There is an appropriation of their art as well as a stigmatization of their sexuality.²

Shanta's younger sisters too are coerced by their father into joining a *jalsa* party at a very young age and the trajectories of their lives are essentially not very different from that of Shanta Kale. Each of them is sexually exploited by different 'yezman' for a couple of years in exchange for regular sums of money given to their father and subsequently abandoned when she becomes pregnant. Kondiba Kale's behavior in

appropriating his daughters' productive and reproductive labour and disposing these off as and when he can strike advantageous economic bargains, is not an aberration; rather it is typical of the behavioral and cultural norms in the Kolhati community, where the women are not only coerced to continue in their degrading caste-based profession, but their sexuality is also appropriated and peddled to the highest bidder, depriving them of any agency over their bodies, their sexuality, their life choices, and their earnings. Each time there is a wealthy suitor for one of his daughters, Kondiba Kale negotiates the most economically profitable bargain with him and he has no qualms in destroying his daughter's chances at a happy and dignified life. Kale's says "[...] to Kondiba, his daughters were moneymaking machines. That they had feelings, desires, dreams was something he would never acknowledge" (14). At the end of the narrative, Kale describes the utterly penurious and vulnerable state of all the sisters, and their illegitimate children. Susheela *mausi* sums up the plight of Kolhati women in an anguished manner, "Has a woman no right to her own life? Is the only aim of our lives to provide a livelihood for our fathers and brothers" (43-44)? Towards the end of the narrative, Kale describes the plight of all the *tamasha* dancers, "Tears are all that *tamasha* dancers have in their lives anyway" (161). Finally, the three sisters have no option but to set up a *tamasha* party but the changing times and the new modes of entertainment make *tamasha* a far less lucrative occupation than it had been in earlier times. Kishore is filled with rage when he sees the spectators humiliating the dancers by propositioning them. In the midst of their untold hardships, their brothers continue to lead relaxed lives, free from the tension of earning a livelihood. In despair, he describes the Kolhati women "as birds in a cage who have forgotten what life outside the cage is like" (191). Kale's dream that all the dancers would get out of their humiliating lifestyles and lead lives of dignity and joy remains unfulfilled but it continues to haunt him throughout his life.

While there have been feminist investigations of mainstream Marathi theatre, Rege says, "The life histories of *tamasha* and *sangeet baree* performers have remained largely invisible" (25). Exploration of issues as vital as the control of Kolhati women's sexuality, the appropriation of their productive and reproductive labour, and their economic exploitation by Kolhati patriarchs who force them to adhere to their caste-based occupation of dancing as well as their sexual exploitation by *savarna* men renders the narrative unique. Kale offers a trenchant critique of both upper caste men who simply view these women as objects of sexual gratification, promise to marry them, keep them as their concubines and abandon them when they are past their prime and Kolhati men, who exploit their productive and sexual labour to live a life of indolence and debauchery. The narrative also shows how the sexual division of labour operates differently for women of different castes. While upper caste women (the wives of the upper caste spectators) are withdrawn from paid labour to establish the power of caste status, Kolhati and other lower caste women are forced to adhere to caste-based labour. (While anti-caste struggles have protested against the enforced nexus between caste and occupation, the patriarchs, in the Kolhati community continue to force their women to perform caste-based labour). Kale's narrative offers a scathing denunciation of the exploitative ethos and misogyny prevalent both within the Kolhati community and *savarna* society in Maharashtra. Demolishing the myth of Dalit patriarchy as being essentially democratic, Kale offers a vituperative indictment of the stranglehold of Dalit patriarchy, envisioning its tentacles to be as oppressive as those of a caste-ridden social structure. Kale's narrative, despite being a male-authored one, has ideological affinities with Dalit women's narratives such as those by Baby Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Sushila

Takbhaure in that it critiques the shackles of Dalit patriarchy strangulating Kolhati women.

While foregrounding his mother and *maushis*' trials and tribulations as Kolhati dancers, Kale also maps his own turbulent life, most of his childhood spent living with his maternal grandparents. Emotionally vulnerable because of being parted from his mother at the age of four, his constant yearning to live with her is a poignant refrain throughout the narrative. Abused, reviled and exploited continuously by his mother's family, the odds he is pitted against are insurmountable, and yet Kale's resilience and endurance enable him to overcome these.

Endnotes

¹ Georges Gusdorf's work on autobiography was foundational and highly influential in that he was the first one to proclaim it a separate genre with its own conventions and principles. His seminal essay "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" (published in French in 1956 and in English translation in 1980) laid the theoretical foundations of a hitherto neglected genre and marked a defining moment in its criticism. The essay defined the genre, laid down the 'conditions and limits' of its existence, and formulated the criteria which autobiographers had to fulfil for their work to qualify as autobiography. He established a canon which included the works of 'great men'-- from St. Augustine's *Confessions* to Rousseau's *Confessions* to Goethe's *Dichtung and Wahrheit*, and Newman's *Apologia*. Gusdorf linked the rise of the genre of autobiography, in an utterly Eurocentric vein, to a "conscious awareness of the singularity of each individual life" (29) in Western civilization at a particular juncture in history, that is, post-Renaissance Western societies. Describing it as a unique phenomenon in Western culture, he said authoritatively that "autobiography is not possible in a cultural landscape where consciousness of self does not [...] exist" (30) and where "the individual does not oppose himself to all others" (30). In this model of autobiography, the focus is on the 'isolated being,' premised on the belief in the self as a discrete, separate, autonomous, and sovereign being. Unwittingly he also linked it with the colonizing, expansionist impulses of Western civilization. Only men from Western civilization, "gatherer of men, of lands, of power, maker of kingdoms or of empires, inventor of laws or of wisdom" (31) fit into this narrowly circumscribed category of autobiographers: "Famous men," "great men," and 'geniuses' whose exemplary lives contain universal truths and which are written for the edification of posterity. The autobiographer also considers himself a 'great person, worthy of men's remembrance' (31) and the work is devoted exclusively to "the defense and glorification of a man" (36). The lives of these 'great men' are exemplary, "their destiny [considered] worthy of being given by way of example" (31).

²There are three communities in India whose women's labour has been focused on dance and performative traditions: the women of the Kolhati tribe of Maharashtra who perform the *lavani*, the Devadasi traditions in various parts of India which enforced temple-based prostitution of women of lower castes, and lastly, the women of the Bedia nomadic community who also entertain through dancing and who also made up a significant proportion of the bar dancers in Mumbai. Research by feminists shows that

in all the three cases, there is an appropriation of the women's art along with a stigmatization of their sexuality. *Lavani* has seldom been studied as an art form independent of the theatrical tradition of Tamasha. Though its origin is traced back to the 13th century, it is during the Peshwa period that it blossomed because of the patronage of the Peshwas. While the *lavani* performers belonged to the Mahar caste during the Peshwa period and to the Kolhati caste afterwards, the *shahirs* (poet composers) who composed these *lavanis* centring upon the articulation of sexual desires of women were upper caste men. Ambedkar was of the opinion that *lavani* is an exploitative medium through which upper caste men sexually objectified Dalit women.



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