

‘Sexual Objectification’ of Dalit women in Kishore Kale’s *Against all Odds*: A Study in Critical Perspectives

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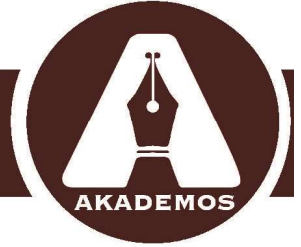
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Abstract

As portrayed in Kishore Kale’s *Against all Odds*, the Tamasha folk dancers under the veil of artistic performance are sexually exploited. They are treated as commodities exploited by upper caste rich people. Their own community people support this practice for their monetary gain. The women thus are crushed by both internal and external patriarchy. They are forced to remain silent. Commoditization theory refers to the transformation of a human being into a commodity. When it happens, the commoditized person comes under the full control of the commoditizer. Naturally the liberty, individuality as well as humanity of the commoditized is lost. The commoditized is used to satisfy the commoditizer. The depersonalisation of women by depriving them of their human characteristics and individuality conceptualizes the forced profession of Kolhati Tamasha dancers as sexual object and not human beings. After being sexually exploited, these dancers are regarded as used and discarded objects. The stigmatized profession of these Dalit women labels them as ‘impure’ and renders them as unacceptable in society. The body of these dancers is for consumption by men. The abhorrent patriarchal society strips off their humanity and their identity becomes dependent on their sexual orientation. The paper will critically focus on the issues of sexual objectification of the Kolhati women as portrayed in Kishore Kale’s *Against all Odds*.

Keywords: Dalit, feminism, patriarchy, objectification, commoditization





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The Kolhati women belong to the nomadic community that form a subgroup of the Banjara people. The Banjara are historically nomadic trading tribe who may have their origins in the Mewar region of Rajasthan. They are now found throughout North Western and Southern India. Traditionally these women are associated with the Kolhati lavani dance which is a form of folk -dance performance. They are the earners for the family. The male members of the family as portrayed by Kale in his autobiography *Against all Odds* encourage the profession of their female counterparts. The former in most cases are used to sit idly at home and spend their time on alcoholism. In the Introduction of Kale’s autobiography the interior family picture of Kale’s household is referred to by the translator of the autobiography Sandhya Pandey: “The women of the community were trained in dance and music and forced to entertain men and earn money, while the males of the community lived on the earnings of their womenfolk.” (ix) The monetary gain of the male members is of utmost importance. Hence, they don’t consider the problems associated with the dancers’ lives.

But does the story end here so simple just by this reference to the profession of the women? The grim fact underlying the so called ‘artistry’ of the folk dance is the acute form of oppression, silencing and marginalization. The artists under the veil of cultural and traditional artistic performance are sexually exploited. The dance performance is merely the eye wash. The reality is something which will freeze the blood in one’s veins. To say it bluntly, it is one form of sexual prostitution. But strangely enough the role of the male members of the family in this regard is not as expected, rather they are the advocates of silencing and jeopardizing the women. The helplessness of these women is referred to in the Introduction of Kale’s narrative, “The

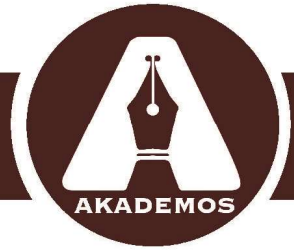




daughters of the community lead a far harsher life. They are sold for their virginity at puberty, and are usually abandoned when they get pregnant. (ix) This perspicuously acquaints one with the 'double jeopardy' of caste and gender of the voiceless dancers. It is nothing but the commodification of the Dalit women. It, at the same time is expressive of the typical iron-fisted treatment that the Dalit women usually undergo. There are some Dalit intellectual thinkers who are very proud and confident about the 'democracy' within the Dalit household with regard to the space of women. But this utopian supposition is far from reality. The external patriarchal force is operative from outside. Mostly the upper caste rich people are engaged in this exploitation. In a mock marriage ceremony called 'Chira Utarana' the 'virgin' dancers are supposed to sexually gratify the highest bidder who will pay a handsome amount to the male guardians of the dancer. Infact they are considered nothing but commodities. Both internal and external patriarchal forces join hands together to deprive the women to have basic human rights for living. They have no space for themselves. Their identity and individuality can't be asseverated. Kale has faithfully recorded the chilling account of his communities in *Against all Odds*:

The Kolhati community forces its women to dance to attract male attention. Young, teenage virgins are given to men in a ceremony called 'chira utarna' with all the tapping of a wedding, but none of its sancity. The man pays a prefixed price for her virginity. As long as he visits her, she does not dance on stage and does not see any other man. But if she is abandoned by the man, she has to go back to the stage and earn money which is appropriated by her father and brothers. A Kolhati family survives on the money earned by the women and the family. The men consider any labour below their dignity. (4-5)

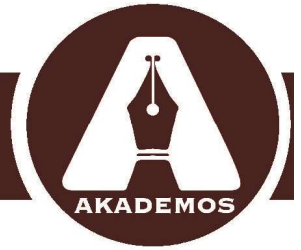
Sharmila Rege, a renowned Dalit-Feminist critic and thinker in her oft quoted essay "Dalit Women Talk Differently-A Critique of Difference and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint" has unequivocally referred to this moot point by referring to them as 'victimised sexual being'. The discriminatory disposition on the part of both 'Brahmanical patriarchy' as well as Dalit patriarchy constrains the Dalit women to follow the dominant patriarchal ideology. The Dalit women dancers are like commodities to be purchased in exchange of money. The conversation between Kale's grandfather Kondiba and an MLA, Namdeorao Jagtap from Karmala district in the narrative avers the objectification of Dalit women, "Name your price, Kondiba, and let your daughter live with me,' he said. 'I will not let her see anybody except you and she will not dance any more, but Shanta will live in my house. You can visit her whenever you wish,' replied Kondiba." (Kale 14-15)



The translator refers to the gaze of the male audience who leers at the tamasha dancers. Without that leering, the dance itself as an artistic form does not hold much importance to the spectators. The 'sexualized gazing' and 'objectifying gaze' transforms the wholeness of existence to that of imposing meaning on body. This is utterly defamatory as it may lead to wrong evaluation and treatment. Kale's mother Shanta had to undergo much humiliation and sexual oppression. In Kale's narrative we find how she was treated as a dancer, "The men who flocked to see the shows did not appreciate Shanta's dance, but they liked to look at her and hear her sing. Much to her disgust many a bold spectator would try to hold and squeeze her hand or touch her. The village dada of Manvat lusted after her and had almost succeeded in kidnapping her." (13) It is immensely ironical that the art form demotes to a form of prostitution. Shanta had to face difficulties from all corners. Her natural talents as a dancer do not proper recognition in society. Without making things sexually appealing, the dance form itself does not hold water. This star-crossed aspect in her life is responsible for her inferiorization by imposing the stigma of sexual promiscuity. This stigma cherishes a common belief that they are available 'sexually'. The art form gets altered to body politics. In the Introduction it is clarified, "The Kolhatis developed a distinct style of dance and song called lavani. (...) The dance itself is designed to attract male attention and it is easy to understand why it is called tamasha." (Ix) This gaze is one of the commonest ways to categorize a woman. (Fredrickson and Roberts, 175) Objectification by looking at the women reduces the 'peak motivational states' of women. When one is self-conscious, the 'peak motivational state' is retarded, for example when one sees oneself before a mirror or through video calling. The women are made self-conscious when they are categorized or internalised from the perspective of their body. (Fredrickson and Roberts 183) In Kale's narrative, the objectification of the body of the Kolhati folk dancers as sexually impure and profane is one of the major ways through which the 'flow' of them is restricted. The stigmatized labour of the Kolhati folk dancers is the categorization which questions their status as human being. Naturally the women are multifariously marginalized. In the Prologue, the author himself has referred to the psychological angst of his mother Shantabai Kale, "It was my mother dancing up there, my mother who was being showered with all that money. I revelled in her success, too young to feel the ache in her legs, the weariness in her heart. Yes, my mother, Shantabai Kale was a tamasha dancer. I am her illegitimate son." (2)

Commoditization is one of the multifarious ways of categorizing women as commodity and the politics of representation creates obstruction in their authentic exploration of their self. Commoditization theory refers to the transformation of a human being into a commodity. When it happens the commoditized person comes under the full control and overview of the commoditizer. (Kopytoff 1986) Hence the individuality of the former does not fully evolve. The





commoditized is used to satisfy the craving of the commoditizer. (Hirschman and Hill 2000) The hierarchical power structure and patriarchal hegemony are always operative within society. Those who hold the privileged position have mostly the natural inclination of exerting control and domination over those who are regarded as voiceless and disadvantaged. The flow of money in the family by the Dalit women dancers must go on interminably. Any breach in this respect is beyond toleration to the male members whatsoever the case is. Kale's mother had the eagerness for education. But patriarchy suppresses her wish. Kale has referred to it in the text:

Kondiba was angry and unhappy to see Shanta home. 'Who is going to feed the family?' he demanded. Shanta told him of her troubles and tried hard to make him understand her disgust at the life she had to live. She pleaded with him to be allowed to go back to school. But to Kondiba, his daughters were moneymaking machines. That they had feelings, desires, dreams was something he would never acknowledge. Shanta felt trapped. Her father would not allow her to pursue her studies and her stint with the tamasha party had already branded her a tamasha dancer, so who would now marry her? Where could she go?" (14)

The depersonalization of women, i.e. the action of deprive the women of their basic human rights and individuality conceptualises the forced profession of Kolhati dancers as sexual objects and not human beings. After being sexually exploited, they are, like objects regarded as inutile, having no worth. Actually, they are then regarded as stigmatized and naturally disparaged and scorn pours on them from all corners. Sometimes it happens that because of that sexual intimacy, they become pregnant. But after the delivery of the child, the male member with whom she had been engaged in sexual intercourse does not take any responsibility of the child.

The body of the Kolhati dancers is for consumption by mostly the upper caste rich people. As human beings, they have no value. Their value depends on their commodification as sex objects to be consumed by the abhorrent patriarchal hegemonic structure. The grim fact is that the humanness of a human being is stripped and identity becomes dependent on sexual orientation. This is obviously the evil side of sexual objectification. How can the 'Dalits among the Dalits' protest their voice against this gross injustice? Existential crisis and economical backwardness retard them from voicing their protest. Dalit internal patriarchal domination plays a central role in silencing the women. From time immemorial this Kolhati tradition of tamasha has been continuing. Kondiba is proud of maintaining the abhorrent tradition, "Kondiba was now a happy man. He had kept up the family tradition. His father had sold Jiji's young body-Jiji, who he had found as a little girl in a corner of a bus stop, and Kondiba had sold his own daughter's youthful body. His heart mellowed towards his young daughter who had brought a shower of money to his house." (Kale16) As a human being, the women have no value. They are



not allowed to stop their earning even when they are pregnant. Kondiba expressed his dissatisfaction over the pregnancy of his daughter. According to him “a dancer with a baby is of less value”. (Kale17) The male members of the family are so callous and irresponsible that they cannot even work. Kale has described it in his autobiography, “None of the men in her family, neither her father nor her brothers, thought of finding some work. They did not work in the fields that had been given to Jiji and it did not occur to them to even beg.” (17) Even in her pregnancy Shanta had to continue with her tamasha performance. Kale said, “So, Shanta continued to dance through her pregnancy. She toiled all night and travelled from place to place in bumpy bullock carts until she was eight months pregnant. When her ninth month began, she returned to Nerla, where I was born”. (Kale17) Shanta was forcefully sent for dancing. She was not allowed to stay at home. She pleaded to her father Kondiba not to send her for tamasha, but to no effect. Even sometimes when they feel exhausted and sleepy for the dance, they have to continue with a smile on their face. Compared with the unhappy lifestyle of the women, the men lead a diametrically opposite life. Men enjoy the fruits of labour of women. In *Against all Odds*, this has been referred to, “While the women deprived themselves of all comforts, Kondiba lived a lavish lifestyle. He ate meat and chicken, and drank to his heart’s content. Kondiba also loved to lend money to his in-laws, so that they would be impressed with his riches”. (32)

The relationship between a daughter and her father in the Kolhati household is not a healthy one. The commodification is even stronger here. Kale’s aunt Baby has gone through unspeakable torture. Baby was sixteen and Shivajirao Henge, the person who has done the ‘chira utarna’ for her was forty. Age difference is not a bar for the Kolhati members. The oppressive patriarchal structure by every possible means tries to exploit women inflicting gendered violence. The inhuman treatment that she undergoes interrogates the status of Dalit women in society. Kale says:

Baby maushi disliked him: she was sixteen and he was forty. But her father loved his money and easy lifestyle, and she was forced to fund it by giving herself to the man who bid the highest for her youthful body. What a travesty it was of the father-daughter relationship. Kondiba ajoba had handed over his young daughter, still on the threshold of her youth, to this forty-year-old drunkard (Kale 63-64).

After a few days, when she got pregnant, she was discarded by Shivajirao. She gave birth to a daughter. Thus, she became the ‘butt of everyone’s malice’. (Kale65) She waited for him, but ultimately, he didn’t come. So, she had no other way but to go back again to the exploitative system of dance performance.



The conversation between Kishore and her aunt Rambha focuses on stigmatization and categorization of the dancers by society. The socio-economic condition of Dalit families is not affluent. Rambha's words in this context are worth quoting:

Kisrya, Kolhati women only dance. Dancing is our business, and our art. But, these days all kinds of women indulge in blatant prostitution under the guise of dancing. If our pallu slips even a few inches off our chest, it causes a commotion. But heroines in movies dance with bodies exposed, with a different hero each time and it is called art. They go to Delhi and win awards for it. It is all a joke played on us by shameless people (Kale 152).

The proposition highly problematizes the issues related to difference between mainstream Feminism and Dalit Feminism. Intersectional Feminism tends to separate itself from White Feminism on the ground of the exploration of differences of experiences of the Black, Dalit and other marginalised women. So, both caste and gender play a predominant role in exploring the marginalisation. According to this school, caste and gender are not monolithic ideas, rather they are interlinked. Definitely it poses a challenge to White Feminism which does not take into consideration the issues of Black and Dalit women. On this ground, Black and Dalit Feminism join hands together to voice protest against the non-inclusion of the problematics of Black and Dalit women. Kale's aunt Rambha's accusation against their bracketing and pigeonholing by the mainstream Feminism. The Dalit women tend to face many problems with regard to their establishment in society. They are not encouraged to have upward mobility in society. Infact the hierarchical power structure has no curiosity to redress the issues of the marginalized women.

Kolhati women have no right to fall in love. This is not encouraged by the family. The family members do not want to lose their earning members. Infact the women have no future, no possibility of the fulfilment of their hopes and aspirations. Their worth is considered only from their use value. Kale says in the narrative, "To fall in love is the worst crime a Kolhati woman can commit because falling in love means breaking bonds with the parents, taking an independent course of action. Kolhati parents cannot allow their earning daughter to leave them for any other man because she is their source of income." (172-173)

The objectification of women tends to have psychological association as an "individual's sense of self is a social construction". (Fredrickson and Roberts 179) The socially constructed self cannot flourish without the good gesture of society. In this context mention may be made of a very relevant phrase enunciated by the self-theorists "looking-glass self". There is a conflict among two groups of critics over the embodied and disembodied views of self. When women look at their own body, they become self-conscious about their body, attractiveness and physical appearance. They tend to have that method of measuring self-worth. But how far is this



applicable to the marginalised women? The “looking glass self” psychological theoretical formulation seems untenable with the Dalit women as well as Black women with regard to the difference between their own evaluation of themselves and the categorization by others. So there is no denying the fact that the self-evaluation and self-formation may in one way or the other prone to be influenced by external categorization of internal self. In this context we may refer to the proposition made by Fredrickson & Roberts regarding the loss of independence of the self of the marginalised women and the internalization of an outsider’s perspective on one’s own self:

This habit of self-conscious body monitoring is far from trivial. We propose that it can profoundly disrupt a woman’s flow of consciousness. (...) That is, significant portions of women’s conscious attention can often be usurped by concerns related to real or imagined, present or anticipated, surveyors of their physical appearance. We posit that in a culture that objectifies the female body, whatever girls and women do, the potential always exists for their thoughts and actions to be interrupted by images of how their bodies appear. This habitual body monitoring, we believe, can create a predictable set of subjective experiences that may be essential to understanding the psychology of women(M. Lewis 180).

The stigmatization of the Kolhati folk dancers by the caste Hindu patriarchy has a detrimental influence on the former. It generates a sense of shame and negative self-evaluation. The internalization of the external hierarchical oppressive structure perpetuates the domination of the Dalit women. The psychological impact seems to be not healthy and positive one. Darwin reflects this negative psychological influence, “It is not the simple act of reflecting on our own appearance, but the thinking what others think of us, which excites a blush” (Darwin, 1872/1965:325).The mechanism of internalization tends to fragment their consciousness. (M. Lewis, 1992) So the fragmented identity worsens their living experiences.

Desire for the body is the desire for the opposite sex, not the human being as such. The ethical-philosophical formulation by the philosopher Kant in his *Lectures on Ethics* deserves mention here:

Because sexuality is not an inclination which one human being has for another as such, but is an inclination for the sex of another, it is a principle of the degradation of human nature, in that it gives rise to the preference of one sex to the other, and to the dishonouring of that sex through the satisfaction of desire. The desire which a man has for a woman is not directed towards her because she is a human being, but because she is a woman; that she is a human being is of no concern to the man; only her sex is the object of his desire (Kant 164).

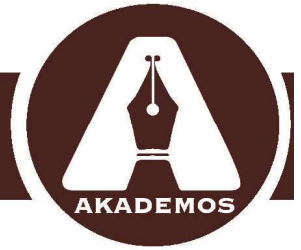


Kantian formulation in a quite direct manner refers to the body politics which tends to have lesser human concerns. The women are turned out to be 'object of appetite', not having any worth as a human being in general. It rather puts its emphasis on the satisfaction of desires either by hook or by crook. The sexual exploitation of the Dalit women testifies to this lack of responsibility on the part of the oppressor. This even interrogates the goodness of human beings. Evangelia Papadaki in her article *Sexual Objectification: From Kant to Contemporary Feminism* says:

Commodification, for Kant, necessarily leads to objectification. Once a woman offers her body to a man and allows him to use it for sexual purposes in exchange for money, she has made her whole person (body and self) 'a thing on which another satisfies his appetite'. And, according to Kant, 'human beings are...not entitled to offer themselves, for profit, as things for the use of others in the satisfaction of their sexual propensities. In so doing, they would run the risk of having their person used by all and sundry as an instrument for the satisfaction of inclination (335).

The Kantian proposition varies to a certain degree with regard to the question of spontaneity or force involved in the dance performance of the Kolhati women. One other very crucial factor in the Dalit families is the economic backwardness. But it doesn't mean that the women will be, in a way, enforced to accept this role. This again interrogates the roles played by the Dalit men as callous, indifferent and irresponsible. In this context, a very pertinent observation is made in Jeroen Vaes, Paola Paladino and Elisa Puvia's scholarly research article *Are sexualized women complete human beings? Why men and women dehumanize sexually objectified women*, "Objectification is not necessarily negative, denigrating, or dehumanizing as long as it occurs in a context of equality, respect, and consent." (774) So, a very pertinent point is consent and respect in respect of the treatment of the Kolhati folk dancers. The Dalit cultural male politics in a very subtle form may try to assert its democracy and impartiality with regard to men-women relationship. But the lived experiences of the dancers hardly establish the Dalit cultural claim of gender equality.

Many Dalit-Feminist critics have critiqued and interrogated the failure of White Feminism in addressing the intersection of caste and gender and to represent the lived experiences of the Dalit marginalized women. Mainstream Feminism tends to focus on woman as a homogeneous category. 'Gender oppression' when linked with 'caste atrocities' involves multiple marginalities. Both the failure of the Mainstream Feminism as well as the emulation of these cultural materialism by the Dalit men showcase peripheral position of Dalit women. In *The*



Gender of Caste, Charu Gupta refers to the upper-casteness of Feminist studies and the presumptive maleness of most Dalit studies of the colonial period and Dalit masculinity:

The implicit conclusion has been that in colonial India most women were upper caste and middle class, while virtually all the lower castes and Dalits were men. However, while in the gendered politics of power women are always subservient to men, in the caste politics of power upper-caste, middle class women often collude with men. So this book questions both the presumptive maleness of most Dalit studies, and presumptive upper-casteness of many feminist writings of the colonial period. It points out how the differentials of caste and gender between women and men, and among colonized women were critical in structuring patterns of domination and subordination. (Gupta 6).

The role of upper caste women in not showing an interest for the Dalit women encapsulates the difference between theory and praxis in the mainstream Feminist agenda. It problematises hierarchy of power structure where an upper caste woman has a very discriminatory attitude towards a Dalit woman. So not only the male caste Hindu men but also women join hands to eternalize Dalit women's oppression.

Urmila Pawar, another very influential Dalit-Feminist writer and critic has critiqued the lack of space of the Dalit women in mainstream writings as well as Dalit writings. Infact they are represented as subsidiary characters having no revolutionary or positive role in effecting a change in society. She voices her protest against this guest appearance of Dalit women in text. She demands for the rights of them. She has enumerated important roles played by them to establish their rights. In this context she refers to Ambedkar's influence in emancipating them from darkness. In her seminal writing *We Also Made History* she critiques the oppressive structure:

Women are often the subject of contempt, humour, and caricature. Women's physical attributes and their mental capacity are a storehouse of subjects for humorous writers. The ideas that men hold a monopoly in intelligence could pass as long as women did not take to writing. The false ideas of a male-dominated society were earlier passed over without comment, but when women began to learn and to write, to display the spark of their intelligence, a certain kind of honesty was brought to writing (173).

Marx has also pointed out the perpetuation of the marginalized women through misrepresentation. He has indicated that the misrepresentation has always an evil intention of exerting coercion on the underprivileged section of society. This is deliberately done because one has always the desire to suppress the others. In order to exercise coercion, the creation of





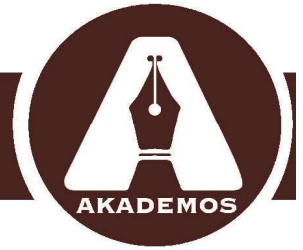
this 'false consciousness' is mandatory. Bill Ashcroft, the noted postcolonial critic said in the seminal book *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, "This misrepresentation of meaning and social relations is referred to by Marx as 'false consciousness' or a false view of one's true social condition something that has a coercive power over the subordinate classes." (221)

Ambedkar gave a call to emancipate women from becoming a prey to sexual objectification. He never supported women's profession as prostitutes. His motif was to bring the Dalit women to mainstream. As a revolutionary thinker, he could understand the loss of humanity implied in the profession. He directly appealed to them to protect their self-respect and assert their identity and individuality. This is truly a revolutionary idea which highly influenced the Dalit women. Different critics and thinkers have voiced their protests against the injustices meted out to the 'Dalits among the Dalits'. The epistemological and theoretical formulations of this inhuman treatment add a new dimension to the problematics of the culture of oppression. The profession into which the Kolhati women are hurled problematises the issues of gender in caste. It opens up different novel vistas in the field of gender studies with its focus on subtle forms of oppression.

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