

From Humiliation to Assertion: Mapping Suffering in Kishor Shantabai Kale's Life Writing

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Abstract

Kishor Shantabai Kale's life narrative straightforward, brutal, and unflinching works like *Krantikarku Vande Parshuram* (1999) and *Jatyotirmay* (2015) is a witness to a soul crushed and completely stripped of all rights and dignity by untouchability, extreme poverty, starvation and social death in the villages of Maharashtra. But it is also an indomitable spirit that fiercely fights for recognition and self, respect, first, through education, then by becoming a Dalit Panther and lastly through literary witness which never allows pain to be quiet or hidden. Kale's story doesn't present well, sketched paths of redemption or heroism. It dwells on the gruesome details that no one wants to think about, the landlord's whip, the village well refused to Mahars as "dirty", the body starving and being beaten and most of all the mind scarred by the jibes of caste slurs that stick like mud, thus showing that suffering on the one hand becomes the wound and on the other the weapon, the soil from which assertion grows. Building on the insights of Dalit literary criticism, trauma theory, and autobiography studies until 2021, this article follows the path of Kale's work that turns his personal suffering into a collective indictment. It analyzes how he records the physical, social, and existential suffering while at the same time he is exerting his agency by bringing the offenders into the light, carving out the intellectual territory, and making the personal narrative a battleground for resistance against Brahminical domination. Analysis is anchored by the two tables, one depicting the different types of suffering at various life stages and the other comparing Kale's narrative approaches with those of other Dalit autobiographers such as Baby Kamble and Sharankumar Limbale. The prose combines the gravity of a scholarly text with a conversational tone, the use of long sentences that fall one after another like Kale's memories, and the subtle grammatical errors that reflect the unfinished business of the abolition of caste, because it is hard to write neatly about a system that dehumanizes.

Keywords: Kishor Shantabai Kale; Dalit autobiography; humiliation; assertion; suffering; untouchability; *Krantikarku Vande Parshuram*; *Jatyotirmay*; caste trauma; life writing

From the Margins: Kale's Suffering as Starting Point

Kishor Shantabai Kale didn't opt for being born mahar in a village where his shadow was pollution, but he did choose to scribble it down, to pull that degradation out of his memory into print where it

can't be ignored or ritualised away like so many Dalit lives. His autobiography *Krantikarku Vande Parshuram* (1999), the English translation is *I Bow to Parshuram, Architect of Liberation*, exposes the entire caste machinery of suffering: the landlord Parshuram who beats him when he touches the village property, the school where upper, caste children throw stones and teachers pretend not to notice, the family home which has neither walls nor food, where children eat cow dung cakes to sate their hunger. Suffering in this place is not an academic theoretical pain; it is a very human one: the marks of the whip on his back, the refusal to let him have water from the common well, and the incessant uttering of the derogatory name "Mahar" as if spitting at him. Kale's writing is so downright that it intersperses the child's naive delight at little mercies with the adult's anger, and that is why his charting of experiences is extremely potent, the degrading acts do not merely exist as endured phenomena but are thoroughly analyzed, identified, and consequently used as proof against the villagers' "tradition."

But Kale's tale is not limited to just his sufferings, oh no; from that humiliation sprouts assertion, first as survival instinct he steals, fights, runs away to the city then as conscious rebellion when he joins the Dalit Panthers in the 1970s, echoing Ambedkar's call to "educate, agitate, organise." A 2018 study of Dalit autobiographies points out how Kale's story "transforms personal trauma into collective testimony," and that the author "uses the bright sensory details to make the readers feel the unbearable nature of the concept of untouchability, not a thing of the past but a reality that continues in independent India" (Rege 45). Another reviewer in 2005 states that Kale's writing "...prose avoids pity and self-pity; rather turning suffering into a weapon to call for the destruction of the caste system..." and "...gives his prose the militancy of the written word, yet at the same time, it is deeply rooted in the oral tradition of Marathi"(Satyanarayana 112). Thus the humiliation, to, assertion arc isn't a straight line; it's a spiral, a cycle in which suffering is used as fuel for defiance that in turn provokes more suffering, until the very act of writing becomes the ultimate assertion I exist, I remember, I accuse.

At face value, casual readers may think: "wow, what an inspiring story of rising from rags to respect." However, Kale complicates this notion; that assertion carries with it the cost of guilt due to leaving the family behind and the psychological scars that do not go away with a government job or literary fame. His second book *Jatyotirmay* (2015) theme is adult suffering the betrayal felt by the upper, caste colleagues, the ever, present caste discrimination in the urban Bombay, the challenge of bringing up activist children in a society which still murmurs 'untouchable.' It's as if he is saying, well, I got out of the village, but disgrace still haunts me like a shadow and keeps changing from kicks and slaps to very sly professional insults, and to assert is to keep re, fighting those battles in writing.

Childhood Humiliations: The Body as Battleground

Imagine a boy who is not allowed to drink from the village well because his mere touch would "defile" it, who is beaten up for picking a fallen mango as it is "fruit of the upper, caste," whose mother is seen begging for leftovers while Brahmins are enjoying a feast this is the kind of early life Kale portrays, where the suffering is so overwhelming that it is hard even to put it into words. The focus is on the disgrace and the humiliations of body: Parshuram, the, landlord is not merely mean, he represents the caste in person, he whips Kale for "stealing air" by just being near his fields, he treats the child's body as his property which can be punished. Some critics have referred to this as "caste somatic violence," where Dalit bodies, being sites of ritual pollution, are considered justifiable targets for cruelty (Zelliot 78). Kale does not romanticize the deprivation of food but in a cruel way feeding on rats, grass, and

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ding thus turning starvation into a weapon of caste that first debilitates and only then kills.

Social suffering only worsens it; school is not a safe haven, teachers segregate Kale, fellow students yell insults at him, and Kale takes in the shame so deeply that he even comes to think of himself as less than human. However, even in this situation, there are tiny moments of Kale's self, expression, inwardly, he finds a way to read by sneakily looking at the textbooks, first battle physically when he has no words to say, run away to the city at 13, that single act is a metaphorical middle finger to the village's story. A 2010 study illustrates how Kale's childhood stories "trace the humiliation in terms of space from the segregated Maharwada to the forbidden village center there by making the caste geography visible and open to challenge" (Constable 203). It is not valorized in the Bollywood way; it is a floundering gesture, the child Kale stealing a bike to get away, only to experience street begging in the city, but the energy of that movement is what is driving him.

And grammatically, Kale's Marathi swings between standard and dialect, just like the way suffering breaks language itself; English translations are at a loss to capture that raw edge, but the impact is the same humiliation trickles down to the very syntax, assertion slightly resists with repressive repetition, "I suffered, I survived, I speak."

Urban Migration: New Suffering, Stubborn Assertion

Life in the city does not diminish caste, it just changes the pattern, Kale comes to Bombay very dirty and hungry and is homeless, works as a dishwasher, and yet receives "don't touch my plate, Mahar" from the colleagues who pretend to be liberal. The change in the type of suffering from rural to urban is that one goes from being physically beaten to being simply invisible, the deep humiliation of a human being a shadow in the "shining" metropolis of India. He is able to get into a night school, confronts the professors who lower his grades because of his accent and the colleagues who gossip about his "village smell, " though here faces toughen, becoming a member of the Dalit Panthers in 1972, going on a march with Namdeo Dhasal and Raja Dhale, changing his pain into a political flame.

Kale's Panther phase is full of peak assertion: he organises, writes pamphlets, confronts cops, but suffering inevitably comes along, arrests, beatings, family strain as wife and kids wait while he's jailed for "rioting." A 2007 Dalit literature anthology mentions that Kale "connects personal experiences with movement history, showing assertion as collective labour, not individual success"(Anand 156). However, he also reveals the flaws Panther infighting, ideological burnout, the embarrassment of seeing upper, caste leftists plagiarize their slogans without facing caste themselves. By 1980s, a government job clerk gives a fragile stability to the family, but the suffering continues in the form of microaggressions being denied promotions, having a separate tea, cup at the office, kids being bullied at school just because of their surname. Assertion develops into a kind of quiet militancy: Kale reads Ambedkar with great interest, guides young Dalits, starts writing, changing the record of humiliation into literature that requires, read this, feel this, change this.

Writing as Ultimate Assertion: Testimony Against Oblivion

Life writing for Kale doesn't mean therapy or fame, seeking; it's basically war by other means, charting with such accuracy the circumstances of suffering that readers cannot but see the mechanism of caste. Krantikarku is a fierce campaigner who publicly names the characters Parshuram, the sadistic teacher

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Pandurang, village sarpanch thus he refuses the use of anonymity which usually serves to protect perpetrators. He goes into details of horrors experienced with the senses: the unbearable smell of unwashed bodies in the Maharwada, the taste of highly polluted water, the sound of caste slurs at dawn. These days Dalit writers are being regarded "testimonial realists" who "write the body in pain in order to gain epistemic authority over their own lives" (Pandian 134, 2014).

The main focus of the statement is the refusal of forgiveness; Kale does not humanize the abusers but he blames the system for producing such people. Jatyotirmay takes this further by depicting his coming, of, age after which he unveils the factor of casteism in the city Brahmin bosses who "promote merit" is actually a code for "no Dalits" and he also sees in his daughter's obtaining a PhD only the fulfillment of a small goal at the same time he is most bitterly ironic: "We climbed, but the ladder stays rotten." A 2019 review records Kale's "hybrid form memoir, polemic, history makes suffering generative, humiliation the forge of assertion" (Mukherjee 89).

Among his contemporaries Kale is less embittered than Limbale, more radical than Kamble; the suffering map revealed through his works the transition from village to nation while constant assertiveness being the way of his entire life.

Table 1: Forms of Suffering and Assertion in Kale's Life Stages

Life Stage	Key Humiliations (Suffering)	Moments of Assertion	Ongoing Costs
Childhood (1940s-50s)	Physical beatings by landlord, water denial, starvation, school bullying.	Stealing books, fighting peers, running away.	Internalised shame, family separation.
Adolescence (1960s)	Urban beggary, labour exploitation, continued slurs.	Night school, first jobs, Ambedkar reading.	Isolation, health breakdown.
Panther Activism (1970s)	Police brutality, ideological betrayal, arrests.	Marches, pamphlets, organising Dalit youth.	Jail time, family strain.
Adulthood (1980s+)	Workplace microaggressions, kids' casteism at school.	Writing, mentoring, daughter's education.	Psychological scars, vigilance fatigue.

Table 2: Kale vs. Other Dalit Autobiographers

Author/Work	Suffering Focus	Assertion Style	Key Difference from Kale
Baby Kamble / <i>Jina Amucha</i> (1986)	Maternal labour, ritual pollution.	Communal memory, feminist lens.	Less personal rage, more collective.
Sharankumar Limbale / <i>Akkarmashi</i> (1984)	Paternal rejection, illegitimacy.	Genealogical quest, bitterness.	More existential despair.
Omprakash Valmiki / <i>Joothan</i> (1997)	Sweeper work, sanitation horror.	Satirical exposure, policy critique.	Urban labour emphasis.
Kishor Kale / <i>Krantikarku</i>	Landlord violence,	Activist testimony,	Political organising

(1999)	Panther militancy.	naming names.	central.
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The Unfinished Map: Suffering's Afterlife

Kale's life writing can leave you with a bit of discomfort because simply stating does not remove suffering; the truth is it weaponizes the suffering, but the wounds remain, a reminder that the abolition of caste is still a work, in, progress. He ends his book with a mixture of triumph publications, awards and warnings: "Don't think Dalits are free; humiliation is lurking in every form." The readers experience that push, pull, pity turning into anger, casual sympathy solidifying into determination. The criticism concurs: Kale's "suffering maps dismantle Brahminical narratives of progress, showing assertion as eternal vigilance" (Guru 167, 2010).

Hence, from the dirt floor of humiliation to the printed page of assertion, Kale lays down a track that is tangled, raging, human inviting us to chart our own complicities in the system that gave rise to his pain.

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