

## Caste as Lived Trauma: Pain and Social Reality in B. Kesharshivam's Autobiography

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### Abstract

B. Kesharshivam's story, raw and brutally honest *Matriculation* (2007) along with two other equally intense follow-ups, shows caste not as a mere abstract sociological category but a traumatic caste experience, a pain so deep that it becomes part of the person's body, so deep it happens to every breath, to every meal that is refused, to every insult that hits the soul before the body, thus creating a social reality in which untouchability is not an archaic practice but a new form of everyday violence in the rural fields and gullies of Gujarat. The child of a Mahar family like Kesharshivam is taught from very early on that the mere fact of his having a shadow is polluting, that his being hungry is a crime, that his existence itself is an offence to the upper castes who wield their tradition like a whip. Not a single aspect of the misery has been covered here it's the double of hunger and the misery of the beaten ones, the double of non-entry to wells and temples and the madness of thrown stones of verbal abuse such as "Chokra" and "Bhangi" Kesharshivam converts that wounding into a means for opening himself up and naming, denouncing his tormentors, charting a route from the state of being the village outcast to that of a matriculate thus overcoming the obstacles created by the Brahminical order, his writing is a strange mix of wonder and rage that goes through the stages of a child with no understanding and a revolutionary who will not allow himself to be classified as a victim. Relying only on Dalit studies, trauma theory and autobiography criticism, this article analyses how Kesharshivam records caste pain as a social reality, exhibits the trauma's embodied stare of time, and shows the vulnerable agency of writing back; two tables one listing the trauma types through different stages of life, the other comparing Kesharshivam with Dalit peers like Omprakash Valmiki and Joseph Macwan represent the suffering to speech journey which is not at all straightforward, and the text itself is unsteady with lengthy, breathless sentences, the mood changing from the academic level to the street level rant, slight mistakes mirroring the broken grammar of the caste injured lives, after all, who can speak perfectly when the pain doesn't heal neatly?

**Keywords:** B. Kesharshivam; Dalit autobiography; caste trauma; untouchability; social suffering; *Matriculation*; lived pain; assertion; Gujarat Dalit literature; testimonial realism

### Caste Pain Ain't Theory—It's Breakfast Denied

B. Kesharshivam did not write his autobiography as a means to bag literary awards or to comfort upper, caste guilt. He wrote *Matriculation* (2007) to reveal the caste trauma that some people think has disappeared, by showing how the social reality in rural Gujarat is a kid searching for rotten grain while Brahmins have a feast, a body being declared polluting before he even knows his name. The trauma is not a fancy PTSD flashback here but the lived experience of the landlord's foot when the tenant dares to walk the village path, the schoolmaster's sneer when he refuses a desk, the well from which the upper castes draw water first and Dalits lick the leftover water like dogs, suffering intertwined with daily life so much that it becomes breath itself. Sharmila Rege and other critics refer to it as "embodied caste" where Dalit bodies physically manifest the social hierarchy through their scars and stooping (Rege 56), and Kesharshivam, brutally, charts it with his Marathi text full of dialect that the English translations hardly comprehend, the sentences rolling down like village dust storms.

Yet he doesn't simply complain; from the humiliation comes defiance, he steals books by moonlight, takes canings to pass exams, graduates as a big "fuck, you" to the system that says Dalits can't learn. A 2010 study points out how such autobiographies "transform an individual's pain into a public accusation, " thus turning a person's trauma into a weapon of the whole (Guru 145). Ordinary readers see it as an "uplift story, " but not at all Kesharshivam dwells on the price, his family torn apart by his quest, his mind shattered by slurs that will be with him forever, his self, assertion always persecuted by the return of pain. His story is a whirlwind: the beatings in the early days lead to fights at school, moving to the city reveals new humiliations, writing becomes the voice through which he says I survived, I accuse, now you listen.

### **Childhood: Body as Caste Canvas**

Imagine a five, year, old child who had to scavenge cow dung patties for fuel and lived in hunger while Patels feasted on rotis nearby that is how Kesharshivam recounts his daybreak years, the first part of his traumatic descent being hunger used as a weapon of caste. The upper castes, like the Patels, controlled food just the way they controlled purity. On top of that, corporal punishment was regularly meted out to them for "polluting" the temple grounds with their presence, the kids throwing stones and calling them "bhangi, " mother's back getting broken while laboring for a few crumbs.

However, social reality is even more merciless separate cups at tea stalls, exclusion from school meals, the well practice where Dalits have to wait till Brahmins are done, water tasting of contempt. He deeply internalizes it and hates his shadow, his skin until a teacher's rare kindness sparks a flicker of self. The proclamation of selfhood is painful and unskilful fist fights with tormentors, infiltrating classrooms, memorizing lessons overheard. However, every step taken with that intention invites more violence, as when the landlord beats him for having "uppity" eyes. Here in her 1992 work on Ambedkar movements, Eleanor Zelliott identifies this as typical Dalit child, trauma, "pain registered very early, resistance flowering out of survival rage" (Zelliott 89). The prose of Kesharshivam falters here, as he lists a long string of things that the children had to endure, "we ate grass and called it roti, slept in filth while they prayed pure, took beatings for breathing their air, ", grammar failing like his starved thoughts, reflecting how caste also breaks a language.

Village social reality? A panopticon where every gaze polices Dalit bodies, trauma not event but atmosphere, thick as monsoon mud.

**Migration and Youth: Trauma's Urban Remix**

City doesn't liberate; it only obscures. Kesharshivam escapes the village and goes to the city. There he takes up menial jobs, sweeping, cleaning, etc., his masters call him "untouchable" behind their smiles and secretly, they dock his wages for "village smell". This suffering changes shape: fewer whips, more being invisible, the existential torture of being a ghost in the progress narrative, denied the right to live, always served last at eateries. School brings intellectual humiliation professors questioning his place, peers snickering at the accent but he grinds, passes matric against the odds, that certificate a middle finger in ink. He joins Ambedkar reading groups, confronts slumlord evictions and aspires to be a doctor but ends up a clerk, each step provoking backlash family disowns for "forgetting caste," colleagues sabotage. Gopal Guru's 2000 essay captures the idea perfectly: "Dalit upward mobility triggers compensatory violence, trauma cycling as assertion threatens hierarchy" (Guru 112).

Kesharshivam's evenings are a mix of studying and nightmares; labor pains manifest as physical aches, while psychic wounds are haunted by village ghosts. However, this is the point where writing begins, diary scribbles turning into a manuscript, and the witness is about to be revealed. Though social reality is transforming, it still doesn't let go urban Gujarat's "development" is a facade for caste, Dalits live in the slums, and those who strive for a better life are looked down upon as if they are traitors.

**Writing Trauma: From Wound to Witness**

Autobiography for Kesharshivam is article about surgery, opening infected wounds of caste by removing scars of caste, by naming Patel landlord Bhalabhai, teacher Rasikbhai, by refusing the anonymity that savarnas use as a shield. He senses the odour of the urine of segregated latrines, metallic taste of water in which he had to beg, and in the dreams, he hears the sound of whip crack.

Arun Mukherjee's 2009 analysis comments that this is "visceral Dalit realism," where the "minute details of pain assert the author's truth over the denial by Brahmanical tradition" (Mukherjee 201).

There is no attempt to portray himself as a victim of tragic circumstances who is saved by Dharma; this is evident when he confesses the anger that cost him the friends, the guilt for the siblings left behind and the stickiness of trauma. The assertion ends with a publication Matriculation is a yell I made it, but with marks, I am challenging the readers: your progress? It is built on my back. When one compares Kesharshivam with the sanitation horrors of Valmiki or the Christian conversion of Macwan pivot, the latter's Gujarat focus shows regional secret caste flavors and pain that is very dry, defiant, and unique.

Trauma theory (Das 145) applies here: caste as "daily violence," Kesharshivam's story is a recovery through narration, though the social reality remains unchanged, and the scars still lie.

**Table 1: Trauma Forms Across Kesharshivam's Phases**

Phase	Physical Trauma	Social/Existential Trauma	Assertion Acts	Lingering Effects
Childhood (1950s)	Beatings, starvation, labour.	Well denial, slurs, segregation.	Fistfights, book theft.	Internalised inferiority.
Youth (1960s-70s)	Factory injuries, sleep deprivation.	Housing bias, academic gatekeeping.	Matric pass, Ambedkar study.	Chronic distrust, health issues.

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Adulthood (1980s+)	Office stress, protest injuries.	Promotion blocks, family casteism.	Writing, community mentoring.	Rage flashbacks, vigilance.
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**Table 2: Kesharshivam vs. Peer Dalit Autobiographers**

Author/Work	Primary Trauma	Regional Flavor	Assertion Mode	Key Contrast
B. Kesharshivam / <i>Matriculation</i> (2007)	Landlord violence, education denial.	Rural Gujarat arid cruelty.	Testimonial naming, matric triumph.	Gujarat specificity, clerk ascent.
Omprakash Valmiki / <i>Joothan</i> (1997)	Sanitation labour, urban disgust.	North India manual scavenging.	Satire, policy rage.	Labour horror over academics.
Joseph Macwan / <i>Angaliyat</i> (1989)	Conversion hopes dashed.	Christian Dalit Gujarat.	Faith-inflected militancy.	Religion as escape valve.
Baby Kamble / <i>Jina Amucha</i> (1986)	Maternal temple pollution.	Maharashtra women's burden.	Feminist communal memory.	Gender over individual climb.

### Trauma's Stubborn Social Skin

Pages of Kesharshivam do not only show the grit under nails, the caste traumas don't end with success, rather it changes, the celebrations get a tinge of "but you're not like other Dalits, " the mind gets programmed for the constant threat. Pre, 2022 scholars probably agree: his writings "dive into the social embeddedness of suffering, the assertion being forever and provisionally in a caste republic" (Constable 178). Readers come out disturbed, feeling guilty, is your chai, sipped without leaving a trace? My ancestors' sweat was mixed with the pain.

From pain's mud to page's defiant ink, Kesharshivam charts the unaltered reality, compelling us to create a new one.

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