

# Exploring the Intersection of Caste and Gender Politics in *Kusumabale*

Dr Sangeeta

Lucknow, UP, India

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## Abstract

*This research delves into the intricate interplay of caste and gender politics within the narrative of Kusumabale. By closely examining the novel's portrayal of characters, events, and societal dynamics, the study aims to unravel the complex web of relationships shaped by both caste and gender influences. Through a nuanced analysis, the research explores how caste identities intersect with gender roles, impacting the lives and struggles of characters in the narrative. Additionally, the study investigates the ways in which the author, Devanoor Mahadeva, navigates and challenges traditional norms through the lens of caste and gender, contributing to a deeper understanding of societal structures within the context of the novel. This exploration not only sheds light on the intricacies of caste and gender politics in Kusumabale but also provides broader insights into the complex dynamics of identity and power within contemporary literature.*

**Keywords— Gender politics, marginalization, Dalit literature, resistance, liberation**

India's caste system, rooted in Hindu traditions, has fueled inequality, marginalizing Dalits throughout history with economic disparities and cultural neglect. Today, the liberation of the Dalit community is intertwined with India's overall freedom. Dalit literature, expressing their experiences, dates back to the 11th century with vachana sahitya in Karnataka, highlighting oppression and social issues. Notably, writings like Vachana sahitya weren't initially considered Dalit literature, continuing with Dasa sahitya.

Dalit literature emerged in the 1960s, inspired by Ambedkar and Phule, spreading to languages like Kannada and Telugu. It encompasses poetry, short stories, and autobiographies, revealing societal realities and showcasing resilience. Satyanarayana and Tharu credit the post-1960s growth to the Dalit Panthers, challenging caste norms and colonial influences. It vividly analyzes caste power, resisting reduction to class or non-Brahminism, unraveling historical darkness, and becoming integral to social and political movements. Arundhati Roy emphasizes the importance of Dalits telling their stories, exposing unnoticed apartheid and challenging contemporary literature's selective focus.

In the backdrop of Indian literature, Dalits faced marginalization in Kannada, Tamil, and Telugu, enduring derogatory stereotypes perpetuated by both Dalit and non-Dalit writers. Dalit literature, akin to black and feminist literature, emerged in the 1960s, challenging the prevailing

narrative and advocating for Dalit liberation. Deliberate and profound, it encapsulates the Dalit experience, exploring collective identity and addressing oppression through natural, emotionally charged expressions.

Beyond individual tragedy, Dalit literature symbolizes a community's collective struggle against marginalization and hierarchical structures. It serves as a political catalyst, disrupting the Varna framework of Hindu society. Linguistically, Dalit literature challenges the established order, introducing disruptive force through the Dalit lexicon. This rebellion against linguistic norms seeks to reclaim authenticity, reflecting the Dalit experience in a language that resonates with decency from their perspective. It is a transformative act, breaking free from historical linguistic subjugation.

The influence of Kannada Dalit writing traces its roots to a confluence of intellectual currents, drawing inspiration from the writings and movements spearheaded by luminaries such as Ambedkar, the Afro-American literary tradition, the Black Panther movement, and notably, the ideological tenets of Marxism in the Indian context. In Kannada literature, this influence manifests in the works of literary stalwarts like Devanoor Mahadeva, Siddalingaiah, Aravinda Malagatti, and others. Despite a comparatively modest literary output, Devanoor Mahadeva's writings endure, spanning short stories, novels, and essays. His renowned work, *Kusumabale* deftly engages with the

intricate issues of caste and gender, artfully blending lucidity with a vibrant colloquial hue.

Susan Denial, an accomplished freelance writer, has boldly embraced the formidable task of translating *Kusumabale* from Kannada to English. In her introductory remarks, she articulates the enormity of the undertaking, acknowledging it as a profound challenge to render into English the seminal text of a Dalit novel. Prithvi Datta Chandra Shobhi, in a compelling article featured in the Indian Express Newspaper, expounds on the poetic prowess inherent in the works of Devanoor Mahadeva. Shobhi delves into the intricacies of Mahadeva's poetic capacity, shedding light on the profound artistic dimensions encapsulated within his literary oeuvre.

The release of the Kannada classic *Kusumabale* marked a pivotal moment in the history of Kannada literature. By its composition in 1984, the Dalit-Bandaya (Rebellion) school had firmly established itself, with Devanoor Mahadeva, its author, already acknowledged as the most gifted Kannada writer of his generation, despite a relatively modest literary output. Together with other early Dalit writers, Mahadeva had successfully made the life worlds of Shudras and Dalits fitting subjects for literary exploration, shaping a new literary language to depict them.

However, *Kusumabale* despite emerging from the mainstream of Dalit literature, represented a significant departure by challenging the very form of the novel. In this concise work, Mahadeva ventured into imagining the political through the aesthetic, thereby reversing a fundamental tenet of Dalit literary imagination. Prithvi Datta Chandra Shobhi offers a discerning reassessment of Mahadeva's literary prowess, particularly commending the depth of his Dalit literary imagination. Shobhi also recognizes the writer's skill in navigating the complexities of scrutinizing the caste-based societal milieu prevalent during the nineteen-eighteen era.

Given the intricate fusion of caste, gender, and Dalit aesthetics within *Kusumabale* the act of translation becomes a formidable challenge. Susan Daniel, however, rises to this challenge with remarkable finesse, seamlessly amalgamating these multifaceted elements without compromising the inherent sensitivities. Shobhi specifically praises Daniel's translation for its adept preservation of Mahadeva's poetic aesthetics.

Mahadeva's most significant and perhaps controversial innovation was his use of the spoken language of the Chamarajanagar region, not just for dialogues but for narrative purposes as well. This choice alienated some Kannada litterateurs, some of whom insisted on translating *Kusumabale* into standard Kannada. However, in dismissing Mahadeva's linguistic innovation, his critics

overlooked how a regional dialect had been transformed into a literary language.

The narrative threads intricately woven into the fabric of *Kusumabale* have not only inspired burgeoning writers in the Kannada language but have also left an indelible imprint on the works of both emerging Dalit and non-Dalit authors. The literary techniques pioneered by Devanoor Mahadeva have become a template evident in the contemporary landscape of Kannada novels.

Mahadeva's narrative ingenuity is distinctly manifest in his writings; notably, the novel commences with a dialogue between a lamp and a mat in the nocturnal hours. By personifying these inanimate objects, he invokes reader interest from the very outset. The narrative further unfolds through the lens of a four-generation family, spearheaded by the resilient Akkamahadevamma, navigating the challenges of a caste-based society. While she emerges as a metaphor for unwavering strength, the subsequent two generations, represented by Yada and Somappa, project comparatively feeble identities within the novel. This deliberate dilution of male characters subtly underscores a democratization of feminist perspectives.

The introduction of Somappa's daughter, Kusumabale, marks a significant narrative shift, underscoring her pivotal role and importance in the story. Susan Daniel's translation showcases her discerning and sensitive approach, expertly preserving the essence of colloquial language in English. *Kusumabale*, despite her upper-caste background, becomes a poignant metaphor for the erosion of identity within the rigid confines of caste-centric society, grappling with societal constraints and losing her Dalit lover.

Devanoor Mahadeva's insightful narrative fractures and disturbs the Dalit identity, exploring it through a discerning Dalit sensibility. The novel, translated under Daniel's mastery, earns international acclaim, navigating the complexities of caste and gender. Mahadeva employs innovative narrative techniques, elevating the discourse surrounding Dalit aesthetics and contributing significantly to Kannada and Indian literature.

The ensemble of characters in *Kusumabale* reveals a distinctive social stratification, with Kusumabale occupying the upper caste and Channa as an untouchable. The upper-caste spectrum traces its lineage back to Kusumabale's great-grandmother, Akkamadevi, whose narrative arc unfolds with familial history, revealing moral contradictions and setting the stage for intertwined destinies. Akkamadevi's success in the tea-stall business becomes a precursor to the family's complexities, explored through successive generations with nuanced exploration of time and focus.

Yaada, dissatisfied with inheriting his mother's business, pursues livestock, intertwining destinies with another family line. The novel skillfully navigates short chapters, encapsulating the essence of successive generations, as the familial tapestry extends with marriages and aspirations, providing a multifaceted exploration of caste and societal dynamics.

Kusuma, the "only daughter in a line of seven sons," emerges as a central figure within this expansive family saga. The narrative also introduces Parsada, colloquially known as "God's gift," born with intellectual disabilities. While he remains a bystander of sorts, Parsada's presence permeates the novel, functioning as an innocent, blank-slate character in stark contrast to the more purposeful figures surrounding him. Devanoor Mahadeva utilizes this juxtaposition to craft poignant scenes, such as Parsada's persistent calls, unheeded by others but evoking varied emotional responses from passerby's smiles or grief, each according to their perspective.

A parallel tableau of the untouchables unfolds, providing glimpses into Channa's struggle to carve out a space and identity for himself. Despite his earnest attempts at pursuing education, the culmination of his endeavours leaves him rudderless. The absence of a coveted BA degree becomes emblematic of his predicament, rendering him adrift and purposeless. Fretful that his once-swaggering gait might betray the pangs of hunger, Channa resigns himself to lingering in the periphery, subsisting on the meagre leftovers brought home by his brothers engaged in bonded labour.

Among the narrative episodes, there is the account of Channa's uncle, Garesidda, summoned to justify his appropriation of sixteen coconuts, a discourse entangled in the intricacies of whether it constitutes theft or is deemed justifiable. This serves as a poignant illustration of the pervasive class disparities and conflicts within the narrative. The ongoing struggle between the haves and the have-nots, underscored by their disparate interpretations of what is considered right and proper. This theme, woven in various iterations, remains an underlying motif throughout the book.

This conflict is profound and intricately entangled, as underscored in the observation regarding the upper-caste men, a sentiment that extends into contemporary times. Their knowledge is not an autonomous acquisition; it is deeply ingrained in their being. It is essential to bear in mind that the very essence of their lineage carries the recollection of bygone eras, an indelible imprint of generations past. Even if they harbour a desire to cast aside these memories, one must contemplate whether their very blood, the vessel of remembrance, is inclined to acquiesce.

The tension pervades the narrative, skillfully managed by Mahadeva. From nearly the inception, the anticipation lingers that the circumstances leading to the demise of Channa will take center stage. However, the intricacies of his relationship with Kusuma and the ultimate outcome are not overtly emphasized in the novel. Instead, the narrative allocates more space, such as the trial and consequences surrounding Garesidda and his acquisition of the coconuts, redirecting the spotlight onto these episodes.

In conclusion, the exploration of caste and gender politics in *Kusumabale* reveals a rich tapestry of complexities and nuances. The analysis has uncovered the intricate ways in which caste identities intersect with gender roles, shaping the experiences and struggles of the characters within the narrative. Devanoor Mahadeva's portrayal skillfully navigates and challenges traditional norms, offering a thought-provoking commentary on the dynamics of power and identity in society.

The novel serves as a compelling lens through which to view the broader implications of caste and gender politics, both within the context of the narrative and as reflective of societal structures at large. The characters in *Kusumabale* become vessels through which the author explores the intersections of privilege, oppression, and resistance, providing readers with valuable insights into the complexities of identity within the socio-cultural landscape. As we conclude this exploration, it is evident that *Kusumabale* not only contributes to the understanding of caste and gender politics in literature but also prompts a deeper reflection on the societal norms and power structures that influence the lives of individuals. The novel's resonance extends beyond its immediate narrative, inviting readers to engage critically with the broader implications of caste and gender dynamics, making it a significant and thought-provoking work within the literary landscape.

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