

Unveiling the Pangs of Dalits in Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste*

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Abstract

Literature is appraised as the mirror of the society in which it is written. Hence the Dalit writers utilized their words to expose the evils against them. Dalit writers considered autobiographies as the potent weapon to illustrate the dreadful pains of a Dalit's world. Hence Dalit autobiographies occupy a unique place in Indian literature. Sharankumar Limbale is deemed as the most prominent writer of contemporary literature. His works aimed to expose the cruelty of the upper-class in Maharashtra. Limbale's autobiography, *The Outcaste* portrays the writer's life as an outcaste. The narrator's self reflects his life and the life of the community in general. This paper attempts to portray the sufferings endured by the writer and his people for their existence and survival. It also focuses the double oppression faced by Dalit women and their longing for a better life with love and care. Further it deals with the question of identity of Dalits, their humiliations, feelings of hatred, hardships and humaneness.

Keywords- *Autobiography, Outcaste, Identity, Humiliation, Humaneness*

Introduction

Dalit Literature emerged as a distinct part of Indian Literature. It is considered as the voice of the oppressed. It was firstly commenced in Marathi literature as the voice of the protest against the injustice in social system. Dalit literature is acclaimed as a literature which highlights caste discrimination, exploitation, oppression, struggle and protest against the age-old system in Indian Society. These writers expressed their experience in a realistic manner using their native language. Their language sketched pictures of their experiences rather than their observations. Dr. C. B. Bharati claims, "The aim of Dalit Literature is to protest against the established system which is based on injustice and to expose the evil and hypocrisy of the higher castes. There is an urgent need to create a separate aesthetics for Dalit Literature, an aesthetics based on the real experiences of life" (*The Aesthetics of Dalit Literature*).

Hence Dalit writers considered autobiographies as the most efficient weapon to portray their humiliations. Autobiographies are generally written by famous personalities towards the end of their lives. But Dalit autobiographies were penned at an early age. It was also noted for its depiction of painful past that has affected the history of a community.

Sharankumar Limbale is regarded as the most prolific writers of contemporary literature. He is a Marathi novelist, poet and literary critic. He has penned more than forty books and is well known for his autobiographical novel *Akkarmashi* (1984). The English translation is published by Oxford University Press with the title *The Outcaste* (2000). His critical work *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature* (2004) is considered amongst the most important work in Dalit literature. According to Limbale, Dalit Literature is “ that literature which artistically portray the sorrows, the tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by dalits, the anguish and the burning cry of untouchables against the injustices of thousand years, collectively expressed” (*Towards An Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* 15).

Limbale’s *The Outcaste* was penned at the age of 25. It depicted his life as a Dalit and an individual of Mahar Community. In the preface to the first print of *The Outcaste*, he wrote as:

Every time the dominant classes attack and exploit the weak, they violate their women. The sexual exploits of the men among the wicked exploiters draw legitimacy from their authority, wealth, society, culture and religion. But what of the exploited woman? She has to carry the rape of her womb. The rape has to be borne, fed and reared. And this rape acquires and lives a life. My autobiography holds in it the agony of such a life. My experiences are my words. What will remain there if you take experience away from a life? A living corpse. (xxiii)

The *Outcaste* mirrored Limbale’s birth and life. Thus the autobiography of Limbale portrayed the writer’s rootlessness, poverty, segregation in educational system and inequality in the society. Hence while focusing the suffering endured by him, he also questioned the torments and this made the readers of the work to be an active participant of author’s pains and tortures.

The word *Akkarmashi* meant a person’s whose birth was illegitimate. In this autobiography, Limbale claims himself as an outcaste. Mahar Community claimed him an outcaste because his father was an high caste man and the high caste people called him an untouchable because his mother belonged to Mahar Community. In the author’s note, Limbale said:

I regard the immorality of my father and mother as a metaphor for rape. My father had privileges by virtue of his birth granted to him by the caste system. His relationship with my mother was respected by society, whereas my mother is untouchable and poor. Had she been born into high caste or were she rich, would she

have submitted to his appropriation of her? It is through the Dalit movement and Dalit literature that I understood that my mother was not an adulteress but the victim of a social system. I grow restless whenever I read about a rape in the newspaper. A violation anywhere in the country, I feel, is a violation of my mother. (ix)

This shows how Mahar women were sexually exploited by the upper caste Marathas. It also portrayed the fate of the child borne because of such a relationship. Hence the central theme of *The Outcaste* was the problematic author's identity.

Limbale had portrayed himself as a victim of an oppressive social system which deprived him of his identity. According to him, this rootlessness made him "to live with the burden of inferiority" (x). Because of birth as an outcaste, he had to become a subject of ridicule at many instances. When he was in the seventh standard, he was teased by Maula's son as "the base born" (15). At an instance, in his autobiography Limbale questioned his identity as:

My father and his forefathers were Lingayat. Therefore I am one too. My mother was Mahar. My mother's father and forefathers were Mahar, hence I am also a Mahar. From the day I was born until today, I was brought up by my grandfather Mahmood Dastagir Jamadar. My grandfather in the sense he lives with my grandmother, Santamai. Does this mean I am Muslim as well? Then why can't the Jamadar's affection claim me as Muslim? How can I be high caste when my mother is untouchable? If I am untouchable, what about my father who is high caste? I am like Jarasandh. Half of me belongs to the village, whereas the other half is excommunicated. Who am I? To whom is my umbilical cord connected? (38-39)

In *The Outcaste* at an instant, Limbale himself signed the application form instead of his parent's signature. As he couldn't claim either of them as his parents, he felt, "I am an alien. My father is not Mahar by caste. In the Maharwada I felt humiliated as I was considered a bastard; they called me akkarmashi. Yet in the village I was considered Mahar and teased as the offspring of one" (62). He often dreamt about his father. He doubtly arose questions like, "Suppose I go to Baslegaon would my father allow me into his house? Would the mother there give me food? My father lives in a mansion, my mother in a hut, and I on the street. Where will I die? Where are my roots exactly?" (62). But his dream came to an end when his so called father Hanmanta Limbale, Patil of Baslegaon protested against enrolling Sharan's name as Sharankumar Limbale. But Hanmanta has to give up his violence and so Limbale said, "I owe my father's name to Bhosale, the headmaster" (45).

Like Bhosale, Santamai too exposed Limbale's identity. Inorder to break Limbale's friendship with Mang boys, she shouted, "Are you born from the seed of a Mang that you keep their company? You are the son of a village head. You must eat and play like a prince. You are son of a Patil..." (20).

When the Village Chief refused to sign his freeship application form, Limbale's mother aroused in angry. She forced Limbale to proclaim his identity by announcing the Chief that "She was the Patil's whore" (60). Limbale felt happy about his mother's proclamation without knowing the meaning of the word. But when he was grown up he felt afraid to expose such identity and he wanted to escape from the thread of identity to which he was tied. So he claimed, "I was afraid of my caste because I couldn't claim my father's cate or religion. In a sense I was not a Mahar, because high-caste blood ran in my body. Could I drain this blood out of my body? My own blood nauseated me" (82). Out of fury against his lack of identity, Limbale proposes, "We were ashamed of our past. We hid ourselves as a leper hides patches of rash on his skin" (105).

Thus Limbale in *The Outcaste* portrayed his experience of life as a man who cannot be related with anyone. He compared his life with a sparrow and he portrays, "I felt like the sparrow who suffers because its nest is destroyed. Who should I go to? Who would claim me when both my mother and father rejected me?" (64). Even though he had no inherited identity at all, he found consolation in his mind by claiming, "But I too was a human being" (59). By inheriting this true identity which equates oneself with the mankind no one can deprive of this from him.

The Outcaste also thrown light on the torments a Dalit had to undergo in the society. Limbale had painted the histories of humiliations underwent by a dalit through his grandmother Santamai. She claimed, "Life is not the same. We suffered more injustice in our days" (78). Santamai's recitations of injustices from history made Limbale to equate her with Jijabai, the grandmother of Shivaji, the great warrior. She also claimed, "Injustice done to me was not just today's phenomenon but had a long history. The roots of this injustice went deep into history, for many thousand of years" (79). Through her experience she shared her memories of the sufferings underwent by the Dalit women. She proposed how the women were restricted from grazing their cattle and how they were badly insulted. She portrayed the suffering of women as, "Dalit women were badly insulted. They were beaten as if they were slaves. Some farmers even harassed them sexually, pulled them into the crop, and raped them" (79). She also described how her forefathers and their families were cheated by the Patils. She said:

Our forefathers used to be security guards at this Patil's mansion. Whenever the Patil had to go away to town on official work my forefathers would protect the mansion. Our forefather's were so naïve that they didn't consider even once, the possibility of seeing the beautiful face of the Patil's sleeping wife. On the contrary they sacrificed their daughters, wives, sisters and daughters-in-law to dark nights in the Patil's mansion. They were sacrificed like animals are at the time of laying the foundation

stone of a building. Our forefathers were proud to be fed on the leftover food given to them by the Patil. (79)

Limbale also described the idea of untouchability that prevailed in the society. He traced the reason for untouchability and segregation as caste and said, “Our caste had been thrust up on us even before we were born”(76). He presented the consequences they had to face because of caste. They were given separate tea cups in the shops. They had to construct houses in the place where other villagers used as latrines and they had to move aside to make way for the high caste persons. He even noted the aluminum tumbler kept for them to drink water in Shivram’s shop. He even picturized how dalits were denied of drinking water even though it was constructed by them for Narayan Patil. Limbale while portraying his childhood, remembered how the barber refused to shave his head as his mother is a Mahar. So he questioned himself, “How could this barber, who used to shave buffaloes in the village, refuse to shave my head” (22).

Limbale also presented his agony of refusal of brides for his marriage. The brides were rejected for him by claiming that he doesn’t come from a pure blood. So he said, “ It was better to stay unmarried”(92). While presenting the evils of the society, he also portrays the traces of child marriage through the marriage of his sisters Vani, Pami and Indira. His protest against child marriage was also presented in the autobiography, showed him as a refined, educated being.

As the chain reaction of the social evil and lack of identity, Dalits were subjected to face the effects of Poverty. Poverty was the complete lack of basic needs of an individual in a society such as food, clothes and shelter. In *The Outcaste*, Limbale had sketched the hardships endured by the Dalits to quench their basic needs in life. Limbale had depicted the life of the Dalits as, “We are the garbage the village throws out. The umbilical cord between our locality and the village had snapped, as if the village torn asunder, had thrown us out of it. We had grown up like aliens since our infancy. This sense of alienation increased over the years and to this day my awful childhood haunts me” (5). Through this presentation, Limbale had drawn the pathetic situation of his society.

In the beginning of his autobiography, Limbale had presented how his friend Harya was deprived of education because of poverty in his family. He was forced to undertake the work of grazing the cattle in Grimallya’s farm and thus he became “an asset to the family” (2). Limbale had described the pains of starvation as, “Starvation was written in our lot from the moment of our birth. Most of the time all my sisters went to sleep without eating anything. I at least ate something. Mother gulped only water. Dada satisfied his hunger by smoking bidies. At the sight of my sisters who had gone to sleep hungry, I lost my appetite and couldn’t sleep” (21).

The Dalits were used to eat leftovers. Limbale was taught by his mother that, “Leftover food is nectar” (3). *The Outcaste* had recorded the reaction of the dalit children on receiving the leftover

food from the high caste as, “ We had never tasted food like that before. We were all really gluttonous. Our stomach were as greedy as a beggar’s sack” (3). Through this portrayal, Limbale had mirrored that only the needy can estimate the real value of a thing. At this instant he remembered his grandmother eating Bhakaris prepared by the grains collected from the dung. Limbale was also subjected to hungriness and he defined it as, “Hunger is bigger than man. Hunger is more vast than the seven circles of hell.... Hunger is more powerful than man. A single stomach is like the whole earth” (50). While describing the painful state of hungriness, he also pointed out aftermath of hunger on man as:

Since then man has been striving to satisfy his stomach. Filling even one stomach proved difficult for him. He began to live with a half filled one. He survived by swallowing his own saliva. He went for days without eating anything. He started selling himself for his stomach. A woman becomes a whore and a man a thief. The stomach makes you clean shit, it even makes you eat shit. (8)

Thus the dalits in order to appease their stomach stimulated eating unhygienic food. Limbale illustrated such incidents in his autobiography and he mirrored it as, “ Sometimes there were dead cockroaches in the curry kept in clay pots. We threw the cockroaches away and ate the curry” (43). He had also noted the incident at which himself and Mallya were forced by hungriness to eat fungus ridden food. It had even made them to gather leftover food from the garbage. Limbale had figured his experience of gathering used tea powder from Ghenappa’s tea-stall. While describing his starvation, Limbale also imagined the starvation of the society as, “The Maharwada survives on just a few morsels of bhakari and a little water. That is their staple food” (25).

The people were drawn to malpractices like stealing in order to appease their hunger. He questioned such odd practices as, “Who steals out of habit? The poor steal for the sake of hunger. If they had enough to eat would they steal?” (21). Limbale had pictured the incident of Vani being beaten by a fruit vendor for stealing a banana. This scene shifts the readers to shed their tears by the portrayal of Vani and Limbale eating the discarded skin of banana to satisfy their stomach. But these humiliations of poverty had really moulded him to climb the upstairs of the ladder of social order. He recognized the boon it brought to him as, “The pain of poverty is so deep that it is limitless. It makes a man a man. Only if the umbilical cord that connects one with pain is colossal does one become strong” (83).

While describing the evils of hunger, the novel also points how the dalits are deprived of clothes to cover their bodies. Limbale had pictured the torn, patched dresses worn by himself and his family members. Limbale had characterized the dalit’s lack of shelter and other basic necessities. He had illustrated this by portraying bus stand as the place of shelter for himself, Santamai and Dada. He

was once ashamed of taking his friends to his village for a festival and his inability to provide them proper shelter. Limbale, through this work portrayed the job undertaken by the dalits to run their livelihood. He had presented how they begged for alms in the markets and from upper class society. Limbale had presented the jobs undertaken by his grandmother Santamai and Dada for his welfare and to overcome poverty. He presented it as, "Dada lit the street lamps, worked as a porter, distributed newspapers, went to school carrying tiffin for the pupils" (53). Limbale also portrayed his grandmother as a sweeper and midwife. He even depicted the practice of selling liquor in Maharwada. By painting the pathetic condition of Suni who was poisoned while gathering woods, Limbale had portrayed the dalits risked their life to earn for their existence.

The Outcaste highlighted the segregation endured by the dalits in the field of education. Limbale illustrated his experience of separate seating arrangement for dalits and high class students at a school. On seeing the high class students sharing their food with their teachers, Limbale arose many questions and he distinguished dalits with high class students as, "Dare I offer my chutney-bhakari to my teacher? Would he eat it? Bhakaris of the high caste were of course of a better quality. Their mothers had given them fried food, whereas we had just pieces of dry bhakaris which were hardly enough to satisfy the cave of hunger" (2). He also observed the distance the teachers kept with dalit students and their closeness with high class students. Limbale had illustrated the duties assigned to the dalits by the teachers. They are prompted to smear the floor and walls with cow dung paste and were made to seep the floor. Limbale had shared his bitter experience of being forced to sit at the entrance of the Marwari's mansion, while the high caste people are allowed to sit at the platform.

While portraying the segregations that dalits had to endure in the society, the author also focused on the restrictions they had to face in religion. The unlawful restrictions proposed by the so-called high class people made a heart breaking influence in the minds of the dalits even in their infancy. So Limbale portrayed the saying that "Child are the flowers of God's abode, but not us. We are the garbage the village throws out" (5). *The Outcaste* also presented the suffering that Parshya and the author had to encounter for prostrating directly before the God. So Limbale illustrated, "We are supposed to say our prayers from the steps outside. Our entering a temple will make God impure. The untouchables must not enter a temple"(62). This prompt him to question God's attitude. He asks, "What kind of god is this that makes human beings hate each other? We are supposed to be the children of god, then why are we considered untouchable?" (62).

Besides portraying the social evils faced by the dalits, Limbale had concentrated to paint the pangs of the women of his community. At one place higher class people maintained distance from the untouchables in order to prevent them from getting impure by touch but at the same time they consider dalit women as objects to gratify their lust. Upper class men sexually exploited dalit women

and are compelled to please them in the name of charity. Limbale in the middle of narration of his autobiography had described the situation of Mahar women as:

The Patils in every village have made whores of the wives of the Dalit farm labourers. A poor Dalit girl on attaining puberty has invariably been a victim of their lust. There is a whole breed born to adulterous Patils. There are Dalit families that survive by pleasing the Patils sexually. the whole village considers such a house as the house of the Patil's whore. Even the children born to her from her husband are considered the children of a Patil. Besides survival on the charity of a Patil what else can such a household expect. (38)

He had opined the life of his mother as , "What sort of life had she been living, mortgaging herself to one owner after another and being used as a commodity? Her lot has been nothing but the tyranny of sex" (59). On observing the other side of the coin, the lascivious look towards upper caste women by a downtrodden is considered as a crime. Limbale's women characters in *The Outcaste* were all subjected to serious complications in their life such as widows, childless women, and deserted women by their husbands. He had also described the jobs undertaken the women characters to achieve basic needs in their life.

Limbale's autobiography had shown life experience of a Dalit and it also described author's pathetic situation of not having an identity, a home or a place of belonging. Though Limbale faced rootlessness and segregation, he had created his own identity by equating him with great mythical heroes like Karna and Eklavya. Thus Limbale through his autobiography portrayed the social evil encountered by every dalit. He had also painted his own experiences through his words and equated his pains with the pains of millions in India.

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