

Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste*: A Narrative of Repression and Resistance

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Abstract

Though the development of the Indian nation pivots around the ethos and doctrine of Unity in Diversity, it has a dearth of inclusivity. Indian society is indeed caste-centric in which the upper-caste hegemony operates on the lower-caste community in all spheres of life. Dalits or untouchables occupy the most subservient stratum in the Hindu caste system and despite constitutional laws to protect them; they still endure extensive discrimination and humiliation. Against this background, Dalit writers attempt to foreground the aspirations and dreams of the stigmatized section of the casteist society with full of pathos often camouflaged in anger and frustration. The present paper will focus on *The Outcaste (Akkarmashi)*, a representative Dalit Autobiography by Sharankumar Limbale that narrates his anguish, exploitation and social injustice encountered through his birth, childhood, education and his marriage. Born out of wedlock between a high-caste Patil and a low-caste Mahar woman, he was doubly marginalized- for being an untouchable as well as an illegitimate child. The paper strives to explore multiple paradigms of the abhorrent social order inflicted by the caste system through Dalit lens. It will analyze how Limbale successfully begins to resist the repressive social structures owing to his education to liberate himself and his community from caste-based oppression. This paper further aims to illuminate how Limbale is unsettled and insecure about his social position till the very end of his self-narrative despite his endless resistance against the scourge of untouchability.

Keywords: Autobiography, Caste System, Illegitimacy, Repression, Resistance, Untouchability.

Introduction

Though the development of the Indian nation pivots around the ethos and doctrine of Unity in Diversity, it has a dearth of inclusivity. Indian society is indeed caste-centric in which the upper-caste hegemony operates on the lower-caste community in all spheres of life. Dalits or untouchables occupy the lowest stratum in the Hindu caste system and are naturally in a most disadvantageous situation. Pointing out the atrocious nature of this system, B.R. Ambedkar mentions that no other system of social organization is so degrading as the caste system (1). Under this structure, the upper-caste has all the power and authority while the lower communities continue to be subdued. Despite laws to protect them, Dalits still face extensive discrimination and humiliation in India (2). They have been suffering the stigma of untouchability for ages. They encounter significant social, economic, political, cultural and religious challenges due to centuries-old discrimination and marginalization. They lived as per the codes, norms and culture decided by the orthodox and

repressive social order. Based on purity and pollution norms, Dalits in India are physically and socially excluded and alienated from the mainstream society.

With the emergence of Dalit literature in the larger perspective of Indian writing, Dalits began to become speaking subjects (3). Dalit writers often portray the lived experiences, struggles and aspirations of Dalit individuals and communities in their writings. They used to raise awareness that caste is the root cause of all social discrimination and the dichotomy between the upper-caste and the lower-caste has ensued (4). They begin to challenge the hegemony of the upper-castes and make way for the assertion of the marginal self. They question the marginalization and exploitation of the Dalit community from the social mainstream. Dalit literature represents Dalit life in a realistic mode highlighting the predicament and social stigma of a Dalit. The thoughts of Dr. B.R Ambedkar, the ideals of Buddhism and the struggles of Jyotiba Phule against caste domination have provided the theoretical foundation for Dalit

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literature (5). It is a voyage of marching towards understanding the essence of life and self-identity. As it attempts to dismantle the discriminative mental set up, Dalit literature is social and revolutionary in nature. It is a literature of a commitment towards a just and equitable society where everyone has a fair share of opportunity and justice. In one of Sharankumar Limbale's interviews with Alok Mukherjee, Limbale states that there are two dimensions of Dalit literature. The first is to educate Dalits that they have been subjugated for centuries. They are also human beings and to fight for the rights of a human being is their sole responsibility and right. The second dimension is to persuade the caste Hindu society about the rights and privileges of Dalits and assure them that there is the urgent need for them to change (6).

Being one of the most popular genres of Dalit literature, Dalit Autobiography has been the perfect medium and platform for Dalits to express themselves with genuine audacity. Historically, Dalits have been voiceless and misinterpreted in mainstream narratives. Autobiography allows them to reclaim their narratives and assert their identities. By sharing personal experiences of discrimination, repression and exclusion, Dalit autobiography enquires the prevailing Brahmanical ideology and exposes the injustices faced by Dalit communities (7). It provides a counter-narrative to hegemonic accounts that perpetuate caste-based discrimination. It is basically an actual picture and mirror of the lives of Dalit communities which are unspoken and unrepresented by the mainstream literature. Dalit Autobiography resolutely reacts the canonical Indian literature that never considered a Dalit as a protagonist in its writings. Raj Kumar comments that the members of Dalit community have been using the writing of autobiography to attain a sense of self and organize resistance against caste and class despotism (8). So, Dalit Autobiography becomes a form of resistance, protest, self-realization and a new direction toward a meaningful life against the various paradigms of oppression. A Dalit autobiography primarily reveals the clash between the peripheral individual and the predominant society which Dalits continue to fight against (5). A Dalit autobiographer, instead of celebrating the self, has to vehemently portray all his pent-up feelings and

emotions connected with community consciousness through his writings. Altering the conventional ideas of realism and subjectivity in Indian literature, Dalit autobiography focuses on Dalit lived experiences, challenges the Brahmanical notions and asserts a collective rather than individual self.

The Outcaste is a representative Dalit Autobiography originally written in 1984 in the Marathi language titled as *Akkarmashi* by Sharankumar Limbale. It is widely acknowledged all over the globe after the translation into English by Santosh Bhoomkar in 2003. Limbale wrote it when he was only twenty-five. It is an emotionally brutal autobiography of a half-caste growing up in the Mahar community that narrates his anguish, exploitation and social injustice encountered through his birth, childhood, education and his marriage (9). He was born out of the illegal sexual union between a high-caste Patil, Hanmanta Limbale and a low-caste Mahar woman, Masamai. For being an untouchable as well as an illegitimate child, he had been doubly marginalized. He condemns himself as an Akkarmashi and is unable to locate his space in either of his parents' communities. In Marathi, the meaning of Akkarmashi is an illicit child, offspring born out of a socially unacceptable relationship (10).

Methodology

The study of Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste* (*Akkarmashi*) provides firsthand insight into the lived experiences of Dalits and his personal confrontation with social exclusion and injustice. This study examines caste-based oppression, identity formation and the assertion of dignity and thus, it is used as a tool of social protest and liberation. It considers caste, class and religion as structural systems that produce and maintain repression, while highlighting resistance as a social and political response. In addition to this, the paper also examines the language, tone and narrative structure to comprehend how Limbale articulates protest and subversion against the dominant caste order.

The present study applies a qualitative and descriptive research approach to explore and interpret Sharankumar Limbale's autobiography *The Outcaste* (*Akkarmashi*) through the lens of Dalit discourse. The study is a form of textual analysis and utilizes theoretical and critical

frameworks of caste theory and Ambedkarism supplemented by socio-cultural contextualization. The study further contributes to uncovering how a personal narrative reflects systemic repression and acts of resistance within Dalit autobiographical writing to provide a comprehensive understanding of the fundamental themes in Sharankumar Limbale's work.

The following are the crucial elements of the present investigation:

- Unveiling the upper-caste hegemony: The present study explores how Limbale brings out Caste system as a tool of upper-caste hegemony exploiting the Dalits in various paradigms of life. It also highlights how Limbale examines the rigid maintenance of the hierarchy of the Indian caste system through socio-cultural practices.
- Exposing the systemic repression of Dalits: The present study examines how Limbale attempts to highlight caste, class and religion as structural systems that produce and maintain repression. It provides an experiential insight into the harsh realities of Dalits confronting marginalisation and injustice in the Indian society primarily through Limbale's birth, childhood, education and marriage.
- Resisting the dominant caste order: The paper highlights how Limbale and his community resist the hegemony of the upper-caste Hindu society with the help of the Dalit Movement, the thoughts of Ambedkar and the ideals of Buddhism. It further examines how Limbale transformed himself into a strong and assertive character through his education.
- Voicing the demands of the Dalits: The study investigates how Limbale, being a successful man with an education, experiences insecurity about his social position till the very end of his autobiography, thereby voicing the demands of the Dalits for their rightful and respectable place in Indian society.

The study involves a close reading and in-depth textual analysis of the autobiography, situating it within a larger socio-cultural landscape. It includes meticulous and multifarious additional sources on Dalit literary theory, as well as scholarly articles, academic papers and interviews or autobiographical commentary by Limbale to enhance and arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the main thematic components. The present research pursues the objective of

contributing Dalit literary studies by offering a critical retrospection of Limbale's autobiography as a site of both suffering and agency.

Results and Discussion

In Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste*, repression and resistance are central themes that deeply influence the narrative. It sketches the harsh realities faced by the Dalit community, particularly in Maharashtra, exploring their experiences of oppression and their efforts to resist and assert their identity and dignity. Repression is portrayed through the systematic discrimination and marginalization faced by Dalits in Indian society. This includes exclusion, pervasive violence and prejudice through the intersectionality of caste, class, illegitimacy, gender and religion. Limbale illustrates how these forces shape the life of a Dalit from childhood onward, creating a cycle of hardship and disadvantage. Resistance, on the other hand, emerges as a response to this repression. Various forms of resistance undertaken by Dalits to challenge and subvert the dominant caste system are depicted. This can range from individual acts of defiance to collective movements aimed at achieving social justice and equality. Through these acts of resistance, Limbale highlights the agency and resilience of Dalit communities in the face of adversity.

In his autobiography, Limbale captures the struggles and challenges that he faces as he navigates through a society that marginalizes and discriminates against him based on his caste identity. The upper caste men follow caste rules for their convenience but would neglect in indulging in carnal pleasures by exploiting the dignity of the lower caste women. Most of the elite castes had undoubted rights over the bodies of untouchable women. It seems that love is polluting but rape is pristine (1). His mother was actually a scapegoat of the caste system. After Hanmanta Limbale made Masamai divorce her husband Ithal Kamble, his mother Masamai became a keep of Hanmanta. Hanmanta not only uprooted her from her family but also sexually exploited her and thus, Masamai gave birth to Limbale. The lust of Hanmanta becomes a catastrophe in the life of Masamai. She has no opportunity to be excused by the caste council. She could not be neither protected nor saved herself from further calamity. A woman's life

after rape becomes gloomy but Masamai's husband Ithal has remarried. Sharankumar opines that unlike a man, a woman cannot eat paan and spit as many times as she likes. Restoration of her chastity could never be entertained once it is lost (11). Hanmanta has abandoned both the mother and the child and does not accept fatherhood. Being an upper-caste Patil, he felt that it would defame his purity. In this regard, both the high-caste people and his community humiliate him for being an untouchable as well as an illegitimate child. Born as a Dalit in a caste-centric society is an accursed but his illegitimacy within the Dalit community makes him dually accursed (12). Limbale becomes an untouchable among the untouchables and he suffers from social repression, generating a complex trauma. He inquired how he belongs either to a high-caste or a low-caste. He felt like Jarasandh (11).

Masamai and Limbale's grandmother Santamai are the two important female characters in the autobiography who become the victims of the dominant social order (13). They have to submit themselves to the upper-caste not for being adulterous but for their survival. Limbale portrays the predicament and anguish for Dalit women through the character of his mother. Besides, the caste- ridden society made Santamai's life restricted as she lives with a Muslim whom Limbale called Dada. She led a harsh life by begging and sweeping to run her family. Their agency is limited by the patriarchy and the caste-based repression. Theirs is not one of rebellion but rather a stubborn persistence in the face of dehumanization (14).

Limbale's autobiography encapsulates the deeply internalized pain of being labeled an illegitimate child (15). He asked why his mother accepted the rape which brought him into the world and why she put up the fruit of the illegitimate intercourse to make him grow in her foetus. He also feared to rethink about the humiliation of his mother when people considered her a whore (11). Generally, the members of a family become joyful when a child is born. Nevertheless, it is considered to be a sin that the infant is born to a woman disowned by her man and the child is branded as an impure blood. There is no merrymaking at the birth of such a child, instead, it would be a shame for the family. The family, relatives and society should have an inequitable outlook to the newly born child. His

shame is not simply individual but it is socially produced. By narrating shame and humiliation into the public domain, Limbale transforms private pain into political protest. It becomes a weapon of truth-telling, resisting the upper-caste monopoly on narrative and moral authority (6).

Born as a half-caste, the author confronts the most infamous problems of discrimination and thereby pushes him to hapless situations. In Indian society, a child is usually identified by the name of his father, but not by his mother (16). When Limbale got the scholarship after joining the new school at Chungi, his parents and the village sarpanch had to sign his freeship application. The sarpanch refused to put his signature on the freeship application form based on his split identity. Besides, he could not accept his grandmother Santamai as his guardian because she lived with a Muslim whom Limbale called Dada. Finally, he accepted and put his signature by the recommendation of Bhosale Guruji, the headmaster. In fact, Limbale has psychological affliction and urges himself to be recognized as a human being. Limbale laments that recognition of a man in this society is made by his religion, caste or his father but he had no inherited identity in any respect (11). He was insulted and humiliated even at home by his siblings for they had different fathers sharing the same mother. Hence, his sister Nagi sometimes annoyed him by saying that he had no connection with them. Due to his fractured identity, he could not even get married to a Dalit girl. His lack of identity forced him to break off his love for Shewanta, a girl whom he was crazy about at his school days (17). With a government job and education to cushion him, it is still difficult for Limbale to get a wife. He never enjoyed the prospect of selecting a wife of his choice. In the end, an alcoholic man offered him his daughter but later refused to send her knowing Limbale's background. This reflects the fact that an outcaste is lower than that of a Dalit.

Childhood formation is very essential for a person to become an enlightened human being. Tragically, Dalit childhood is impaired by constant abuse and by silence (18). School is considered as a doorway of education and education has perhaps been treated the most important and powerful weapon to bring about a revolutionary change in society in general and an individual's success in life in particular. The upper-caste teachers always neglect Dalit students and they often consider

them as dull and unteachable (19). They address the Dalit students with insulting and derogatory language such as son of a bitch, pig and whore which demean and hurt their self-respect. Being a member of Mahar community, Limbale unknowingly accepts the disparity between the high-caste and the low-caste students. He came to realize this fact because of the imposed segregation and exclusion in various aspects like dressing style, eating habits and even in the games of children. Dalit homes have one culture and the schools have another culture. The gap between the two is mammoth. These two cultures are actually poles apart (18). It shows the caste-based discrimination executed even at the Indian educational institutions.

In the context of traditional Hindu society, Dalit status has often been historically associated with occupations such as butchering, skinning of animals, and removal of rubbish and animal carcasses. They work as manual labourers for lighting lamps of the village streets, carrying loads, and cleaning streets and latrines (20). Despite their hard work for the upper-caste, they could not get respect and support from the dominant caste. Their efforts are always rewarded by abuse and humiliation. They let the purity of upper-caste community and become impure in the affair (6). Because of poverty, Limbale repeatedly describes his inability to get food, his mother's desperate barter for survival and the dehumanizing dependence on upper-caste landlords. It chronicles the material deprivation that accompanies caste oppression. As a political tool, hunger is employed as a symbol of exploitation and the author represents it as an effect of structural inequality.

Public places such as restaurants and tea stalls are also not neglected from discrimination since the owners of these stalls offer them tea but never allow them to sit inside the shop (5). At the tea shop owned by Shivram, a cup and saucer were kept separately for the untouchables. They also had to wash the tumblers after having tea and pay the bill for the tea without touching the owner's hands. Even they are forbidden to fetch water from the public well inspite of the fact that the well was dug and constructed by them. Moreover, when the high-caste pupils like Wani and Brahmin got into the temple of Ithoba, Limbale and other Mahar students sat outside or sometimes at the temple

doorway. At the village wedding too, Dalits are denied to sit for dinner together with the upper-castes. Another experience of untouchability was that the barber refused to cut Limbale's hair on account of his caste marginality. He who forbade cutting the hair of a human would shave buffaloes in the village. Ambedkar, therefore, remarks that there is no possibility of democracy and equality in Hinduism (21).

Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste* is a landmark text in Dalit literature that dismantles the power and authority of the Brahmanical narrative- the dominant Hindu social and cultural ideology that justifies caste hierarchy and marginalization of Dalits (22). The Brahmanical narrative centres on the ideas of ritual purity and pollution to maintain caste boundaries. Limbale's life as an akkarmashi becomes a direct challenge to this system. He is a union of high-caste landlord and a Dalit woman that the Brahmanical law would condemn. His very existence denies the notion of purity, showing the hypocrisy of upper-caste men who exploit Dalit women sexually while preaching caste purity. He calls himself akkarmashi not as a mark of shame but as an act of defiance, asserting that his identity comes from his lived experience, not from Brahmanical classification. Thus, his autobiography becomes both an act of protest and a reassertion of humanity, transforming the outcaste into a symbol of resistance.

The acts of rebellion are undoubtedly portrayed in the oppressed life of Limbale after joining a new boarding school at Chapalgao. In his childhood days, he became fascinated by Dada's namaz, Santamai's worship of Ambabai or Laxmi and Kaka's recitation of mantras from the holy texts. However, as the majority of the boys at Chapalgao were Dalits, all had changed and he slowly came to know about Buddhism and it gave him a sense of self-respect. His education made him aware of the caste subjugation that his people had and started hating the idea of untouchability. A sense of dignity developed in him through his education. He felt that they were made aggrieved by the casteism. When he came across the discrimination against the Dalits at Shivram's tea shop, Limbale and the other Mahar boy Parshya made a complaint against Shivram to the police. Limbale frightened him that they were going to write to the Prime Minister (21). Because of the influence of Dalit Movement, Limbale stopped saying 'namaskar' and started

saying 'Jai Bhim' instead. He narrates his agony in the college over the reservation facility by demanding their own Dalitsthan if such facilities have to be cancelled (21). He condemned all who criticized reservation as he powerfully declared that he could adopt higher education because of the reservation facility. He got first class in the school's final examination and stood second in his class. In the year 1978, he became one of the two who could complete graduation from his community. Limbale's achievement in his higher education is itself a step to resist, making a pathway to empowerment and liberation from caste-based oppression (23).

Limbale's act of defiance against the Hindu caste system can also be seen in the event of his marriage with Maryappa Kamble's daughter Kusum. He feels that the genesis of all maltreatment and brutality against the untouchables is the Hindu caste system. This idea made him crave to take refuge in Buddhism to ascertain his new identity as Buddha did not prevent people irrespective of any caste or class from becoming his followers (5). So, he conducted his wedding ceremony according to Buddhist rituals, not in Hindu rituals despite all opposition. The wedding hall was decorated with the icons of Buddha, Phule and Ambedkar. A photograph of Dr Ambedkar was printed on the invitation cards. Limbale asserts that their ideology is anti-caste. The caste system pivots around the division of humans based on discrimination and hence, is entirely demonic. Influenced by the movement and the philosophy of Dr. Ambedkar, they could realize their exploitation and slavery (24). Limbale firmly resolved to give up religion, God and everything that ostracizes human beings.

In *The Outcaste*, the narrative technique plays a crucial role in expressing resistance against the systemic oppression endured by the Dalit community in India. The autobiography is written in the first person providing an intimate and personal account of Limbale's experiences and struggles. By giving voice to the Dalit experience directly from the individual's perspective, the narrative resists the marginalization and dehumanization imposed by the dominant caste society. Through this personal narrative, Limbale demands their rights; not pity (24). Limbale also incorporates local dialects and colloquialisms in

his autobiography as an act of rejection of the cultural dominance of upper-caste language and aesthetics. The uncouth- impolite language of Dalits is blended as it is the oral language of them (6). Employing the authentic language of the Dalit community, he resists the erasure of the Dalit voice and experiences from the mainstream literature, thereby asserting the value and authenticity of Dalit culture and identity. Moreover, Limbale does not make a romanticized and imaginary portrayal of Dalit life but represents the brutal realities of the Dalit community such as poverty, social exclusion and violence which have been experienced for thousands of years because of the caste system. This stark realism challenges dominant narratives that often downplay or ignore the severity of Dalit oppression.

Unfortunately, the struggle for his social exclusion has even continued after Limbale got a job as a telephone operator at Ahmedpur. No matter where one is placed in life professionally or otherwise, the stigma of being born as a Dalit still remains. He could not reveal his own identity with confidence. He settled at Ahmedpur by hiding his caste from others. Because of his name Limbale, the high-caste Hindus identified him as a Lingayat, an upper caste. He hid the photographs and books of Dr. Ambedkar in his trunk and started reading novels and detective stories. He had a fear that his caste would be disclosed. He realized that if the savarna came to know his caste they would drive him out of the house he had rented from a high-caste landlord. He would not only be beaten badly but they would also torture his wife (11). His caste always followed him wherever he went like an enemy. When he was transferred to Latur, he confronted the problem of finding a new house. He found that people in such a big city also had a casteist mentality and attitude towards the Dalits. He could not manage to a rented- house in a decent locality and had to reside near the cremation ground. In her outstanding autobiography *Karukku*, a Dalit writer Bama observes that if we are born into a low caste in this society, we are forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation until our death. Even after death, caste difference does not disappear. No matter however much we study or whatever we take up, caste discrimination stalks us in every nook and corner and drives us into frenzy (25).

Conclusion

The Outcaste is an influential work that delves into the complex interplay between repression and resistance in the lives of Dalit. Unlike conventional autobiographies, it does not focus on an individual achievement yet it sheds light on the collective lived experiences of Dalit community, highlighting oppression, struggle and a fight against all odds within the caste-ridden fabric of Indian society. In his autobiography, Limbale raises several troubling questions on caste, religion and the hegemonic social system and attempts to transform his experience of pain into a narrative of resistance. Getting aware of the humanitarian ideology of the Ambedkarite Movement and Buddhist philosophy through his education, he commendably begins to overcome many hurdles to establish his identity by resisting the repressive social structures and rooting out his marginalized and subordinated position in society wherever he goes. In spite of that, the series of humiliations increases even after he has become a successful man with an education. He is unquestionably unsettled and insecure about his social position till the very end of his self-narrative. It is a grievous misfortune that the development of India as a country and nation is seen, but the development has less positive effect on the Dalits. Thus, Limbale, through his autobiography, voices the demand of the Dalits for their rightful and respectable place in the society.

Abbreviations

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Naorem Cha Yaollen: collected the research materials, structured, analysed, written the original draft, Dr. Sangeeta Laishram: guided the research. She has further reviewed and provided feedback on the research.

Conflict of Interest

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