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Shrankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste Akkarmashi*: A Frantic Quest for Caste Identity

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Abstract:

Cruelty of caste rigidity has enjoyed a rather long history in India. Dalits have been the worst sufferers from time immemorial. Even more than seven decades after the Independence of India, no expected amelioration in their conditions seem to be in view. Dalits have become more conscious than ever before about their identity. Dalit literature being written these days in diverse Indian languages bears testimony to this fact. But regretfully speaking, Dalits along with Dalit literature especially by Dalit writers are regarded as untouchable by Lalit (caste-Hindu) writers. Outcastes feel alienated from the social ambit. Their struggle for their caste identity still continues. No doubt, caste identity gives vent to social identity. This paper aims to explore social curses meted out to the protagonist in Shrankumar Limbale's autobiographical endeavour *The Outcaste Akkarmashi*, translated from Marathi by Santosh Bhoomkar. It also highlights the reasons for his indignation at his identity crisis, trying to draw the attention of the mainstream society towards the plight and predicament of his likes. The protagonist brings to public the poignant realities of Indian society and intends to arouse awareness among the outcastes deprived of their identity. Thus even to date Limbale 'The Outcaste' (2003) retains its own relevance for the exemplary depiction of the stark reality of our society.

Keywords: Outcaste, caste rigidity, identity crisis, alienated, stark reality.

"India is generally known as the classic land of castes and creeds. Caste is said to be in the air, and even Muslims and Christians have not escaped infection." The phrase 'even Muslims and Christians' shows that the followers of Sanatan Dharma have been strictly maintaining and retaining the rigid caste system from time immemorial. We can easily experience that a man having no caste identity is good for nothing from a socio political point of view. And if a person has no intervention in social as well as political affairs, then he or she can't be treated as a

socially human being in the real sense of the term. Thus we find that caste plays a vital role in the formation of the personality of an individual. Caste factor ensures an individual identity especially in the Indian perspective. Our economic status, political grip and social identity depend on our caste acquaintance. Caste here in India is more than a human being as well as more than a social being. A man feels dehumanized in case of his not belonging to any specific caste. Being an outcaste he suffers from indignity, humiliation, exploitation, suppression, oppression, atrocity and what not from the cruel hands of the badly well-organized Lalit class people who blindly represent the centuries' old Brahmanic hegemony.

The word 'outcaste', as per The Concise Oxford Dictionary's definition means 'a person who has no caste, esp. in Hindu society' or 'a person who has lost his or her caste.' In case of ShrankumarLimbale's *The Outcaste Akkarmashi*, the unification of these two definitions- a person who has lost his or her caste esp. in Hindu society- sounds more befitting and appropriate. An outstanding autobiographical endeavour, *The Outcaste Akkarmashi* tells of an untold plight of one of the worst Dalit sufferers who is none other than the protagonist himself. Limbale pungently acknowledges". My mother is an untouchable while my father in a high caste from one of the privileged classes of India. Mother lives in a hut, father in a mansion. Father is a landlord; mother, landless. I am akkarmashi (half-caste). I am condemned, branded illegitimate." (IX/TO) What is more, he poignantly postulates further deepening his own agony,"High-caste people look upon my community as untouchable, while my own community humiliated me, calling me akkarmashi . . . It is the pain of millions in India"(ibid). This personal pain is not personal in itself but of the millions of his likes who remain unnoticed and unacquainted. It is because unseeability and untouchability are the hallmarks of the identification of the mute sufferers who drag their lives out of the mainstream society. R K Naik writes, "Almost every fourth Indian is a Dalit and is easily identified. He may be a beggar near a temple or a church, a permanent squatter, a prematurely old person in the forties, a child labourer in a factory, a pauper in a village, child domestic help, a porter a rickshaw puller in a city, a bonded labourer, and a migrant slum dweller. And a Dalit women is always ill clad, a bag of bones, often with a malnourished child in her arms, a temple Devdasi. Although they constitute a significant number of the country's population, they remain unseen and unnoticed. . ." Sad to say that as many as more than thirty crore Dalits, if estimation is true, are accursed to live marginalized life. They are required to be brought back to the centre from the periphery for the harmonious social structure.

Isn't it improper that on the one hand the technological innovations have brought about tremendous world-wide changes whereas a sizeable majority of Dalit population in India feels forced to live 'cats' and dogs' life on the other hand? Pejorative and derogative connotations are labeled against Dalits, such as Chandal, Rakshas, Malechhh, Antyasj, Panchama, Harijan, Schedule caste and Schedule Tribe and so on, aggravate their woes and agony to a great extent. Dr. Ambedkar, in his book 'Ostracized Bharat', writes, "Dalithood is a kind of life condition that characterized the exploitation, suppression and marginalization of Dalit people by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper caste Brahmnical ideology."

De facto, it is the Brahmnical ideology that Kanchallaiah, a Dalit activist and writer of a wide repute, terms as 'intellectual goondaism'. In his recent book 'Post-Hindu India' Kanchallaiah explicitly views, "Though the concept of 'goondism' appears to be modern, it existed all through even since the Indian society began to operate as a civil society." He holds Lalit (upper) class people responsible for keeping up their hegemonic attitude that causes damaging effects to the very interests of productive Dalit masses. Kanchallaiah continues, "In India, the modern democratic state has been seized by the intellectual goondas". . . who "have done more damages to the socio-economic, political and civil societal life processes in India than the street goondas could do." However, economic crisis is supposed to be the root cause of social evils galore to a great extent. It breeds many a problem.

The dearth of money forces a man to drudge and to clean shit for satiating his hunger. Hunger drives one to do some immoral and unethical deeds as well. Most of the time it is felt that economic crisis is shrewdly created by the Lalit class people in the various forms of exploitation, by flexing their muscles and displaying the power of wealth. Dr. Amartya Sen rediscovers that the reason behind starvation is nothing but the unequal distributing system. It is not that the equal distribution of the needful is not possible. The predators have deliberately maintained status quoism just in their own interests.

However, it is the hunger that drives Masamai to satisfy the physical desire and sexual deliberation of the Patil of Baslegaon, Hanumnta Limbale, whose son the protagonist himself is. Sarankumar Limbale avers, 'My mother was once the keep of Hanumanta, whose son I am and at present she is Kaka's kept woman' (31/TO). An already married Masamai divorced her own husband Ithal Kamble because her alluring beauty caused a lustful Hanumanta to get

attracted towards her, and she was infatuated by him. Limbale very rightly remarks, 'To be born beautiful among Dalits is a curse' (37/TO).

The *Outcaste Akkarmashi* depicts the awfulness of hunger with intense feelings, creating pathos and sympathy among readers. Such depiction of hunger is really rare in other literary work. Originally written in Marathi by Sharankumar Limbale and later translated into English by Santosh Bhoomkar, the narrative leaves an indelible impression on the mind of readers for its exemplary portrayal of the protagonist's plight. 'Murdahiya', a Dalit Hindi autobiography written by a well-known Dalit writer, Tulsi Ram, also deals threadbare with the harsh realities of the life the Chamar (tanner) community he also belongs to. But the intense depiction of hunger shown in *The Outcaste Akkarmashi* has outclassed the same in *Murdahiya*.

However, it is due to his being an illegitimate child that Limbale felt humiliation and denial of self-dignity right since his early boyhood. He had to suffer a lot and felt dehumanized almost everytime, everywhere. It is the identity crisis that compels him to be assertive for caste identity. Frankly speaking, his mother's sleeping with the high caste Patil of Baslegaon happens to sow in the young mind of the protagonist the seeds of indignation at the prevalent social behaviour of Indian society. And like fish out of water, he feels about himself among the people of his own community as well as other ones. The binding nature of the bitterness of casteism makes him realize that man without social identity is just like a rudderless boat. Expressing his extreme hatred towards the very idea of untouchability, he poignantly remarks, 'We hated the very idea of untouchability. With our education, there grew in us a sense of pride. Casteism made us bitter' (76/TO). Education plays a liberating force while illiteracy causes a binding stigma. The qualified enjoy real self-esteem. Realization of unusual inner strengths depends upon self-dignity and self-esteem. Only the spread of education among the uneducated or illiterate Dalits can make them free from the bondage of life. Good education also brings an independent social recognition to an individual. Limbale has 'realized that self-esteem has unusual strengths'(76/TO).

Throughout the narrative, Limbale asked a plethora of pointed questions that remain unanswered and unresponded till date. He recalled his schooling days and felt alienated as he had been unlike other children. Not to speak of the social environment, even the school environment was poisoned with discriminatory attitude and behaviour among the students of different socio-

economic background having various caste identities. Limbale found himself in the school just like the garbage thrown outside. "There is a saying, children are the flowers of God's abode' but not us. We are the garbage the village throws out. There are so many caste factions in our school...We had grown up like aliens since our infancy' (5/TO). Limbale is absolutely right when he remarks that 'It is man who is hindrance to religion' or caste. Right from birth to death in the caste ridden Hindu society, there is no escape from rites and rituals on various occasions such as after-childbirth celebration, marriage ceremony, mundan (head shaven) sanskar, after-death ceremonial rites and rituals and so on. Religious dogmas and spiritual fascist forces cause disintegration in the existing social setup in India.

What is more, in lack of caste identity even the village barber Ishunath refused to have his hair cut or shave his head. Even Shivram, a teastall owner, displayed social discrimination in his small shop, 'There was a small tea shop in our village owned by Shivam where separate cup and saucer were kept for Mahars and Mangs....Everywhere we were condemned...our caste was thrust upon us even before we were born' (76/TO). To his utter dismay, he failed to enjoy the social harmonious life in lack of caste identity and of socially valued hierarchy. He seemed not to be even a human being, not to speak of his being a social being at all. Limbale expressed his agony very indignantly, 'But a man is recognized in this world by his religion, caste or his father. I had neither religion nor a caste. I had no inherited identity at all' (59/TO). Hutton holds the similar positive view about caste and caste identity. He opines, 'Caste is a good institution which has proved its worth and should be reformed not rooted out...the broken poisoned finger should be amputated, not the whole hand.' In the worst-established social pyramid, there is no room for those living on the periphery. What Limbale, as a school going boy, might have felt about his non-identity caste, can be easily understood. Once Limbale had to go to the sarpanch for getting certain papers signed for school. The sarpanch refused to sign the papers because he could not properly identify his caste through his mother or father. Limbale honestly expresses his agony, saying that no one could accept his grandmother as his guardian because she lived with a Muslim.

In the social pyramidal structure, Brahmins who form the least number of the total population sit on the top. Just below them come Kshtriya, further followed by Vaishyas. Shudras stand on the lowest stratum. Among the conventionally recognized four varnas, outcastes have

no place at all. The protagonist very deeply feels the pain of being excluded from the caste system. The life of man who suffered not only through this caste system but also through the pain of not even being allowed into the caste system. He was an outcaste, below everyone else!

In India caste plays a key role from electing a village sarpanch to forming the government, state and central. For strong social bastion one must be the essential part of caste or class, lower or middle or higher so that (s)he might not only exercise his/her franchise with pride but also live a societal life properly. Needless to say the caste equation plays a vitally decisive role in Indian politics. The significant role of caste identity establishes the fact that one's self-respect always remains on the wane in case one fails to assert oneself with no identity crisis. Limbale found himself in suspension in absence of his social and caste status. He would like to know, asking a volley of questions that are still unanswered.

'She (Masamai) will die blemished, an object of someone's lust, but what about us? Will anyone marry my sisters? Will society accept us? When we die, will people from the Maharwara undertake our funerals?' (64/TO).

Truly, if the question of caste identity gets its proper solution only then we will be able to cure many social diseases easily. But it appears to be a pipe dream in the existing sociopolitical circumstances of India. Limbale, worst-acquainted with the ruthless rigidity of caste system in the Hindu society and the riotous attitude between Hindus and Muslims, took his refuge under the calm and serene shade of Buddhism. Inspired from the revolutionary ideology of Dr. B R Ambedkar, Limbale not only embraced Buddhism but also took active participation in the Dalit Panthers Movement to awaken the people of his likes. He explicitly revealed, "I was afraid of my caste because I could not claim my father's caste and religion. In a sense I was not a Mahar, because high caste blood ran in my body. The agony I lived through is my own as much as that of my village" (82/TO).

Who, other than Limbale himself, an outcaste, can understand the humiliation in terms of marriage when no one of his community was willing to give his daughter away to him? 'When there came time for marriage, he could not get even married to an outcaste girl because his blood is not pure. Eventually a drunkard who had offered Limbale his daughter would allow her to leave after the wedding because of Limbale's background.' Limbale expresses a dig at

Hindus' social morals and behaviour. He is dead against solemnization of his own marriage, following Hindu rituals and customs. He candidly opines, 'I don't believe in Hindu rituals. We are going to be wedded according to Buddhist rituals' (99/TO).

After having got a job as a telephone operator, Limbale faced a lot of problems in finding a house on rent in a new town for his accommodation. Casteism chased him there too like his foe. In his own words, 'I faced the problem of finding a house in a new town and my caste followed me like an enemy....Every town and person was caste conscious. This casteism has dehumanized me everywhere' (106/TO).

When Kusum, his wife, informed him that she had given birth to a male baby, Limbale, as if predetermined, christened his child with Anarya. This is really a culmination of his anger and indignation at the hegemony of the elite of the Indian society. He avowed, 'I got news that my wife Kusum had had a baby boy, I have already thought of a name for him. It was Anarya' (112/TO).Limbale wants the coming generation not to suffer the brunt of caste discrimination and oppression because caste is a prominent status marker in the Hindu society.

However, The Outcaste *Akkarmashi* tells an untold tale of a Dalit who rose from penury to privilege. The struggle of the protagonist instills in other Dalits radical thoughts to wage a silent war against the rotten stinking caste system that has maimed and paralysed the cordiality and harmony among the people in general.

To conclude, such a noteworthy autobiography has not only helped enrich and strengthen the sensibility and consciousness of Dalit literature but it has also set a new trend in post-Independence India. Moreover, Dalit literature, in the form of English texts and translation works, has attracted a much wider global readership towards itself by forging its analogy with Afro-American Black Literature, and by forming the essential part of world literature.

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