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The Dalit Vision and Voice: A Study of Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi*

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Writing is a form of therapy: sometimes I wonder how all those who do not write, compose, or paint can manage to escape the madness, the melancholia, the panic fear which is inherent in the human situation. (Graham Greene 9)

Sharan Kumar Limbale is an illustrious Dalit writer in India who has authored extensively up to forty books including his autobiography *Akkarmashi* (*The Outcaste*) and is currently Professor and Regional Director of Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University and his creative interest rests on the Dalit struggle and identity.

Dalit Literature is a new literary canon with an evident disregard for form, content and style, and a vibrant expression of the newly awakened sensibilities which distinguishes it from the mainstream literary traditions. It is a Literature of protest against all forms of exploitation based on class, race, caste or occupation. It rejects both the Western and Eastern theoretical conceptions like Freud's Psychoanalysis, Barthe's Structuralism and Derrida's Deconstruction together with the Indian theories of Rasa and Dhawani. The very foundations of Indian Mythology are questioned and de-constructed by the Dalit writers. They consider the legendary figure Ekalavya as their forefather and Shambooka - another Dalit in Ramayana who was killed by Rama at the behest of Vasishta, is worshipped by the Dalits. These writers express their experiences in stark realistic manner by using their native speech. Their language as well as images comes from their experiences instead of their observation of life. Dr. C.B. Bharti 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*)

This unique branch of aesthetics is most expressive in autobiographies as the experiences they portray are peculiar only to the communities in which they are born into. Autobiographies are generally written by eminent personalities towards the end of their lives and who have got much to evidence before the world, while Dalit autobiographies are penned at an early age when the author is neither distinguished nor eminent but noted for its depiction of a poignant past that has affected the history of a community. These autobiographies deal not only with the caste system as oppressive but also depict how economic deprivation and poverty are handmaids with caste discrimination.

Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi* penned at an age of twenty five depicts the meta-realistic accounts of his life as a Dalit in particular and which can be extended to the life of any individual of Mahar community in general. In the text, the narrator moves back

and forth between the individual 'I' and the collective 'We'. The experiences of exclusions and ostracizations of both the self and the community are the creative and critical sources used to "create testimonies of caste-based oppression, anti-caste struggles and resistance" (Rege 14) offering a distinct world view. Limbale in an interview notes:

The span of my autobiography is my childhood. . . I want write about my pain and pangs. I want write about the suffering of my community. So I cannot give importance to my personal life. I am writing for social cause. . . . My autobiography is a statement of my war against injustice. (The Criterion)

This paper centres on the depictions of the "self"; the split identification; untouchability; poverty; education and language as evidenced in *Akkarmashi* and would argue that Limbale's suffering is intensified on the account of he being an akkarmashi or illegitimate. To be a Dalit in a caste-ridden society is a curse and to be an illegitimate within the Dalit community is to be doubly cursed. Dalits are "outcasts" to the society but a "half-cast" of an "outcast" is much less than being a human. It is the record of "the woes of the son of a whore" (ix).

The paper also makes an attempt to understand the vision and voice of the Dalits as the texts speak for the "outcasts" and are therefore rendered from voiceless and passive objects of history to self-conscious subjects who procreate alternative modes of knowledge and knowing. Limbale projects before the readers an objective and disinterested account of his life from birth to adulthood, carefully creating the image of his community in conflict with the contemporary social and cultural conditions. The narrator's self reflects his life in particular and the life of the community in general. Toni Morrison observes:

Autobiographical form is classic in Black American or Afro-American Literature because it provided an instance in which a writer could be representative, could say, 'my single solitary and individual life is like the lives of the tribe; it differs in these specific ways, but it is a balanced life because it is both solitary and representative'. (327)

A Dalit has no personal life of his own but is dissolved in the engulfing whirlpool of his community. *Akkarmashi* works as the mouthpiece of the community, it depicts their togetherness in triumphs and tribulations as "the self belongs to the people and people find a voice in the self" (Butterfield 3).

As a Dalit Intellectual, the narrator experiences split identification at various levels – as an illegitimate; as a Mahar and even as an educated Dalit who has advanced in social order than his community but at the same time forbidden to step up the established social order by the caste Hindus. Limbale talks about his birth:

My first breath must have threatened the morality of the world. With my first cry, milk must have splashed from the breasts of every Kunti.

Why did my mother say yes to the rape which brought me into the world? Why did she put up with the fruit of this illegitimate intercourse for nine months and nine days and allow me to grow in the foetus? Why did she allow this bitter embryo to grow? How many eyes must have humiliated her because they considered her a whore? Did anyone distribute sweets to celebrate my birth? Did anyone admire me affectionately? Did anyone

celebrate my naming ceremony? Which family would claim me as its descendants? Whose son am I, really? (36-7)

In another account, Limbale relates how he owns his name to a sympathetic teacher:

The teacher decided to enroll my name in the register after I attended school regularly for four to five days. When he was convinced that I was serious about my schooling he asked me my father's name. I did not know my father's name. Strange that I too could have a father!

. . . . The teacher Bhosale by name would sarcastically call me the Patil of Baslegaon. I felt good as well as bad to be called Patil. The name of Hanmanta Limbale, the Patil of Baslegaon, was added to my name in the school record. When Hanmanta came to know this he arrived with four or five rowdies. . . . But Bhosale, the headmaster, was an upright man. . . . Hanmanta tried all his tricks desperately. He even pleaded. Finally he had to go away unsuccessful. I owe my father's name to Bhosale, the headmaster. (45)

Born of a high caste father – a Patil and an untouchable mother – a Mahar, Limbale became an “akkarmashi”, as his parentage was unacknowledged through the legitimacy of marriage. This curse of being “fatherless” followed Limbale all throughout his life. It became the most heinous of obstructions, a hopeless situation – being tortured for being an *akkarmashi* within his family and extended to the most decisive moments in his life as seeking an admission in school or college and the prospect of getting married. More than the general shocking life of Dalits, where one suffers in groups, what affects Limbale is his isolated stigma of being an *akkarmashi*. Limbale is reminded now and then by the society – his position within the position less group of outcasts. He laments, “. . . a man is recognized in this world by his religion, caste, or his father. I had neither a father's name, nor any religion, nor a caste. I had no inherited identity at all.” (59). Is not this lack of inherited identity, his real identity? The stigma of “*akkarmashi*” hurls around it intolerable humiliations.

The narrator-protagonist is someone more inferior to a Dalit. It is surprising to note that he is an untouchable among the untouchables. His identity is that of an “*Akkarmashi*” and this is what the narrator tries to present through the many episodes of his life. “*Akkarmashi*” in Marathi means eleven it needs another one to complete itself, to become twelve, a dozen which signifies completeness. With a government job and education to cushion him, Limbale still finds it difficult to get a wife. Limbale never enjoyed the prospect of selecting a wife of his choice. A single attempt at bride-viewing ends in disaster. At one point the reader suspects Limbale to be satisfied with any woman for a wife. He does not make a choice. He gets a wife out of sympathy and his occasional bribing his would-be father-in-law with alcohol. He notes, “The girl I married needed to be a hybrid like me to ensure a proper match. A bastard must always be matched with another bastard. No one else will marry their daughters to a bastard like me” (98). The text becomes the eye witness account of the horrors of the lives of a particular subaltern community.

However, Limbale does not succumb to the pitiable existence but acquires liberation and freedom from his purgatory of caste through education. The knowledge he had acquired from books, had taught him to think differently. He understood that the sufferings of their lives were based on the false concept of superiority. He has imbibed a

“Dalit Consciousness”, a consciousness of their own slavery (TADL 71), an understanding of their experiences of exclusion, subjugation, dispossession and oppression down the ages. It is this knowledge that liberates him. Limbale notes in his critical work, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, “The conditions that I have written about, the environment that I have written about, no longer exist in my house, because of the position that I happened to hold today” (156). He further explains:

Now, after twenty-five years, my past has been so destroyed that I have been cut off from it, I’ve been completely separated from it. Neither have I gone home, nor does my mother see me as I was before. ‘Some big officer has come, some VIP guest has come’: thus will she offer me water. I no longer have the same attachment to my colony, my relatives, my language. Everything has changed. And because of that change, I am done writing about the history that I had to write about. (155)

The past does not lure him with its wonders of nostalgia as there is nothing to be nostalgic about. Limbale’s social protests and the subsequent redemption serve as inspiration for other members in the community to use education to overcome their economic and social conditions.

Dalit Literature abounds in genuine descriptions of untouchability and poverty in an uncouth day-to-day spoken language. The insurmountable challenge faced by Limbale and other Dalits as young children is hunger. The writer has dwelt on this basic need of man over and over again all throughout the book, philosophizing on the evident need of food:

God endowed man with a stomach. . . . 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. (*Akkarmashi* 8)

The Caste Hindus in Indian society used to exploit the Dalits by making them do the most menial jobs the whole day just for a piece of bread. The text is replete with incidents of hunger which is projected before a class of readers who are blissfully unaware of such undercurrents. The Dalits are treated worse than animals. Their presence is usually banned from upper-class localities. They were made to hang pots from their necks to avoid polluting the streets by their spittle and had to carry brooms tied to themselves to wipe away their footprints from the “upper caste” streets. In P.I. Sonkamble’s *Athavaninche Pakshi*, the narrator Pralhad, an orphaned boy relates an incident of throwing away a dead dog:

Somehow I controlled my mind and held the tail of the dead dog. As it was completely decomposed, that part of the tail gave way and came into my hand. Though it had a stinking smell, I continued with the job as I had a craving for a small piece of bread which I hoped to get after finishing it. (87)

Daya Pawar in *Baluta* evokes a similar feeling, the narrator reflects:

What a coward I am? Who made me such a coward? My life was similar to that of any crawling object in the street which even cannot hiss at the children who poke at it with a stick. Sometimes I used to feel that I have lost all my self-respect just for a morsel of food. (72)

The Dalits ousted to the village outskirts lead an inhuman life. Eternally deprived with no money, no land, no work and no education these people falter in darkness with no realisation of human worth. What is evident from the text is that, they never think; rather accept this suffering as their lot. They depend on the Savarnas in the village for work and food. They do not think beyond these basic needs. Men are drunkards and women are exploited by the villagers. From this perspective it is a collective past, Limbale is each and every Dalit deemed untouchable.

Dalits are being exploited physically, mentally and socially in the caste ridden society. Though India is politically free with her own Constitution proclaiming liberty, equality and fraternity spearheaded by a Dalit himself, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, it is still difficult for backward classes to lead their lives peacefully. Dalit Intellectuals operate their modes of resistance creatively in Dalit literature, the most powerful being Dalit autobiographies. Dalit Literature is an arduous endeavour from the canonical to the marginal, from mega-narratives to micro-narratives, from the virtual to the real, and from self- emulation to self-affirmation.

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