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Sharankumar Limbale's Autobiography *The Outcaste (Akkarmashi)*: A Powerful Embodiment of Dalit Reality and Experiences

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Abstract:

Dalit literature is the recorded experience of pain and agony of the down trodden people who are ruthless victim of the caste discrimination. It is also a powerful means of revolt and resistance against untouchability. The exploitation of the Dalits in all walks of life inculcates in them a firm resolution to bring about the change in the society by grabbing the hopes and aspiration of these marginalized people. This paper attempts to highlight the picture of suffering and resistance of the Dalits through the analysis of Sharankumar Limbale's famous life-narrative 'The Outcaste'. This paper will also aid in understanding how a Dalit autobiography becomes an important means of assertion of Dalit selfhood and to emerge out from the inferiority complex of "to be a Dalit". Dalit writers, through the narrative of their story, aspire to achieve a new cultural identity, a sense of belonging and they also strive to create a space of their own. This paper also demonstrates Sharankumar's autobiography "The Outcaste" as a historical social narrative which presents the prevalent caste discrimination in the society, the hypocrisy of the upper caste Hindus, the heart-rending poverty, the exploitation of the Dalit women and the quest for identity.

Keywords: Caste, Gender, Identity and Marginalization.

One day someone dug up a twentieth century city
And ends on this observation.
Here's an interesting inscription:
"This water tap is open to all castes and religions".
What could it have meant:
That this society was divided?
That some were high while others were low?
Well, all right, then the city deserved burying -
Why did they call it the machine age?
Seems like the Stone Age in the twentieth century.
-"The city", by DayaPawar.

Though India has made a tremendous progress in all walks of life, yet it is the same country where caste system still dominates for centuries. Dalits and the upper caste Hindus are living

within the same periphery since ages, but Dalits are opposed, antagonised and even their presence is banned near upper caste Hindus. Dalits are exploited, butchered, kicked, raped, burnt, killed, refused minimum wages and are considered to be cursed. The condition of the Dalits in Indian society is well depicted by Gurram Jashuva in his poem "Gabbilam" where he voices his grievances against the atrocities meted out to the untouchables. He says, an owl is believed to bring bad omen. But even a bat can enter a temple whereas a Dalit is denied admittance. The emergence of a Dalit in this social arena is entirely responsible due to the caste system and this so-called caste system in India is based on birth and not on aptitude. The word 'Dalit' finds its origin in the purusukta of Rigveda where the caste system has been clearly mentioned. According to Hindu mythology, the Brahmans were born from the mouth of Lord Brahma, Kshatriyas from his shoulders, Vaishya's from his thighs and Sudras from his feet. So, Brahmans are considered to be the upper caste and Sudras are the lowest caste, down trodden and marginalised people. Even the Muslims and the Christians did not able to escape the fate of caste system in India.

The term 'Dalit' has several connotations as per defined by the Marathi dictionary. They are: ground, broken or reduced to pieces etc. Dalits are insulted by various baser names in different parts of India, such as dasa, raksasa, asura, avarna, chandala etc. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, champion of the underdog coined the term 'Untouchable' for the lower caste Hindus in 1909. The Britishers' referred to them as depressed class. During 1933-34, Mahatma Gandhi raised his voice against untouchability and renamed them as Harijan. Rabindranath Tagore used the term 'outcaste' for these downtrodden people instead of calling them untouchables or harijans. After India was declared as a Republic country, a new term 'scheduled caste' has been used to denote the entire deprived community. Dr. S.K.Paul in his article "Dalitism: its growth and Evaluation" has mentioned the fact that the term 'Dalit' has gained currency or becomes acceptable during the year of 1980. He further goes on to say that the Dalits are the scheduled caste or scheduled tribes, neo Buddhists, marginal poor people who have been deprived of social, political, economic rights and brutally tortured by the upper caste Hindus in the name of religion. Dr.Tripathi has made a research on the contemporary state of Dalits in India and in Orissa particularly. His study of the villages Jari and Kesharpur shows the deplorable state of these down trodden mass who are being exploited in all walks of life such as -in living wages, share cropping, money-lending, drawing water from public wells, entry into the temples, priest community feast and marriage with caste Hindus and in all kinds of services. Sometimes their shadows are considered ominous in the upper caste locality. Sharankumar Limbale in his autobiography also highlights the fact that how Dalits and the upper caste Hindus are inter-dependent on each other. A Dalit is born to do all kinds of menial jobs which an upper caste Hindu would have loathed to do. In return, Dalits are bestowed with left-over foods or other such stuff.

The exploited mass tends to unleash themselves from the tyranny of the oppressors. Like Black literature, Dalit literature too emerged as a protest literature to expose all the inhuman treatments, humiliations and the caste prejudices in the society; to realize their hopes and aspirations; to instil a new cultural and social consciousness and to establish a separate identity of their own. Dr.Babasaheb Ambedker along with Mahatma Phule called for a

political movement for creating equilibrium and promised the untouchables to provide all those rights of which they have been deprived of since ages. Writing is a strong weapon for protestation against all forms of suppression and oppression. Veteran non-Dalit writers like Rabindranath Tagore, Saratchandra Chatterjee, Taru Dutt, Daya Pawar etc. hold their pen with an egalitarian spirit to raise their voices against injustice with the servile caste and to create a social awareness. Many Dalit writers such as Bama, Sharmila Rege, Narengra Kumar, Jagadhar, Namade Dhanshal, Sharankumar Limbale have come up with their autobiographies to share their unpleasant experiences of being a Dalit and also to present the wounded psyche of the Dalit community.

Sharankumar Limbale is an editor, Dalit activist, writer, critic and the author of 24 books. He through the narrative of his life in his ground breaking work 'Akkarmashi' originally published in Marathi in 1984, shapes the spirit of Dalit literature. Later his autobiography has been translated in English as 'The Outcaste' by Santosh Bhoomkar in 2003. Sharankumar has beautifully captured the plight of the negligence in his work and his prime motif is to prove his mother innocent. In this book, Sharankumar raises several troubling issues regarding the caste system and the identity of a Dalit, but most of his questions go unanswered.

Sharankumar Limbale in his autobiography shows how caste discrimination and its attendant social stigma follow a Dalit everywhere. The identity 'to be a Dalit' becomes a curse to them. A Dalit cannot move freely or interact with upper caste Hindus. Sharankumar acquaints his readers with the upper caste Brahmin and Wani students who use to play their games far away from the untouchables. The Mahar and Mang boys play their own games among themselves. The sitting arrangement in the school was divided along the caste lines. The front row of the temple was reserved for the Brahmin and Wani students. Further down in the temple hall, seats were allocated for the students from the cobbler communities. The caste Hindus show mercy towards the students of the Dalit communities by leaving space for them at the entrance. Apart from education, the duties allotted to the Dalits which they used to happily perform was to gather dung to smear the wall and the floor with it. The irony lies in the fact that the high castes abstain themselves from the mere touch of a Dalit but they did not desist from sitting on the floor smeared by a 'base born'. The entry of a Dalit into the temple was banned and there were separate water reservoirs meant for the different communities. The upper caste got the privilege of filling their water pots and to wash their clothes from the upstream river. The Kumbies collected water from the downstream river for domestic purposes. They also used to wash themselves, their clothes and their cattle from the same reservoir. The 'untouchables' were allowed to use water only from the lowest end of the river. Sharankumar presents one instance of humiliation that a Dalit has been undergoing for centuries.

"I used to stand in the river, collect water in my cupped palms and drink it. One day some mother had washed her baby's clothes that sent a lump of shit floating towards me. But is there anything purer than water? The water flowing down from up the river had already entered my stomach. I felt sick."(07)

Even the Dalit community is also fragmented along the caste lines. The author speaks about two separate castes among the Dalits. These are Mahar and Mangs who drink water from two separate water reservoirs. Once Sharankumar's Santamai beats him up and warns him to avoid the company of a mang boy which is considered to be even a lower caste as compared to Mahars. "If you play any more with the Mang boys, I will stop feeding you."(20)

Dalit autobiographies are the narratives of pain and their dreadful experiences in life. The anguish of a Dalit is well captured in Sharankumar's words,

"We are the garbage the village throws out. There were so many caste factions in our school. 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."(05)

All lowly jobs that are allocated to the untouchables by the higher authorities are- smearing the hall with dung paste, lighting the village street lamps, sweeping the village street, skinning the dead animals, selling dead skin. Once an animal dies in the village, the upper caste Hindus give a certain amount of grain to the Mahar to take the dead animal away. Ironical, though it may be, yet it is a fact that the very animal these people worship (that is the cow in this case), they abhor even touching it after its death.

Caste system extricates a Dalit in all spheres of life. Even a barber who shaves the buffalos in the village refuses to shave a Mahar's head. A Mahar has to decide a long way to get his head shaven. The cobblers do not repair the broken strap of a Mahar. Separate cups and saucers are kept in a tea stall for the Mangs and Mahars. Latur is a big city in the Maharashtra state with huge buildings and bungalows yet there is not a single room for rent to a Mahar or a Muslim. Limbale questions the very concept of untouchability in the Hindu society.

"I used clean clothes, bathed every day and washed myself clean with soap, and brushed my teeth with toothpaste. There was nothing unclean about me. Then in what sense was I untouchable? A high caste who is dirty was still considered touchable! This city was made of herds of castes. Even localities were identified by castes."(107)

In a Dalit family caste discrimination and poverty go hand in hand. Sharankumar Limbale depicts two kinds of hunger here- hunger for food and hunger for lust. Most of the time a Dalit has to remain half fed or starved. It is commonly said that a Dalit is fated to be starved. Little Sharan could not bear to suppress his hunger and his Santamai used to leave for the village to beg some 'bhakaris' (unleavened bread made of millet). His sisters never made fuss about hunger and they sleep without having a morsel to eat. Out of starvation, poor Dalits were driven to steal food to satiate 'the cave of hunger'. If they were caught in the act of stealing, they were liable to corporal punishments. Limbale's outburst regarding this issue is

well captured in the following line, “Black-marketeers become leaders, whereas those who are driven to steal by hunger are considered criminals.” (21).

Dalits were dependent on the upper caste people for leftover food. For a Dalit, ‘Leftover food is nectar’.(03) Sharankumar shared the event of school picnic where Hindus were enjoying a variety of foods and the poor Dalits could manage to have only few dry ‘bhakarīs’. Later the leftover food of the caste Hindus were given away among the Mahar boys and they jumped into it like hungry vultures. Starvation made them to eat stale, rotten unhygienic foods. Limbale’s grandmother collected grains from the cattle’s dung and made ‘bhakarīs’ out of it. These ‘bhakarīs’ stank of dung, nauseating and were hard to gulp down. Limbale rightly blurts out, “The stomach makes you clean shit, it even makes you eat shit.”(08)

Excruciating dearth in a Dalit family can move anyone to tears. Sharankumar’s family was driven into the degrading liquor business due to utter poverty. Sharankumar used to live in a poor condition in the bus stand along with his grandfather and grandmother as the crowd in the buses were their only means of sustenance. They waited for the bus in the same way as a prostitute waits for her customers. They spent their days and nights under the tin roof of the bus stand. Sharankumar depicts the hurdles that they usually had to face during the rainy season,

“The village bus stand had large windows, the front almost open. Its roof was made of tin. The rain dripped in through the holes in the roof and drenched us. The chill wind made us shiver. The rain dripped on us throughout the night. Thunder roared and lightening flashed through the wet village...The water becomes streams. In the morning we saw water all over, our village looked as if it had had a bath. Whenever it rained I slept under the bench. Santamai sat shivering in a corner, wrapped in rags. She suffered from rigors. She felt something churn in her stomach.” (51)

Sharankumar Limbale is doubly deprived in the society due to his identity: first for being born in a Mahar community and secondly for being born out of wedlock. His Dalit identity estranges him from the upper strata of the society while his second identity of an illegitimate child separates him from his own community. He is ill-treated because he is born of a ‘keep’. He finds it inconvenient in getting himself enrolled in the school. He was not able to marry the girl he loved due to his illegitimate identity. Later, after a lot of hardship he manages to get a girl for marriage. In a patriarchal society like in India and in its sub-continent, a child inherits his father’s surname and his identity. But an illegitimate child is denied both and bequeaths the legacy of a poor fate, humiliation and curse from the society. And being born from an illicit relationship in a Dalit family further aggravates the grief. The agony of bearing such an identity is excruciatingly painful.

“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 descendant? Whose son am I, really?" (37)

Sharankumar Limbale's identity is divided. He condemns the high caste people who shrink at the mere touch of a Dalit; yet they keep preying on the Dalit women to appease their hunger of lust. And the child born from such illicit relationship is denied to paternal love and identification due to the 'unbridgeable gap' between the father and the son. A father's honour would be at stake to give him his name and place in this society. The feeling of alienation and rootlessness makes him mentally frustrated, "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)

When Limbale wrote this book, he was just 25 years old. Being a youth, his craving for identity is more intense. He establishes a kinship with Kunti's legendary son Karna. He realizes that a man in this society can only be identified by his religion, caste or by his father. Having neither of them in real sense, he belongs to nowhere. He was ostracized from the community hall in Maharwada because his father was from another village, Balsegaon and other boys in the Maharwada used to slander him as 'akkarmashi' which means an illegitimate child or an outcaste. He is an 'akkarmashi' (impure or an illegitimate child), this is the only identity he could manage to have.

The beauty of a Dalit woman cannot be judged by keeping Shakuntala's concept in mind rather her beauty reflects radiantly in the web of perspiration while she works in the sun. Sharankumar depicts his grandmother, Santamai, an old lady whose skin gets wizened and dry due to continuous exposure to the sun. Her mouth smells of foul breath and her teeth gets darker due to use of herbal powder, "Perspiring, Santamai looked like a blacksmith in the light of the stove's fire." (11)

A Dalit body is marked by caste, class, gender, age, sexual orientation and other identities. But all Dalit bodies are not same, neither all female bodies are same. The Dalit panthers mark a distinction between a 'Dalit' and a 'woman'. Dalit ideologues did not want to include Dalit women in the movement as they thought women's sexuality would pose a threat to the Dalitmen. They also assumed that the inclusion of Dalit women may divert the attention from larger concern of the movement. But the propaganda of Dalitism remain unaccomplished without referring Dalit women who are marginalized in three fold manner such as along the class, gender and caste lines. In understanding the position of a Dalit woman, Gail Omvedt can be quoted, "Men are at the top and women of that caste are on the bottom like crushed and wasted powder. And at the very bottom are the Dalits and below them are the suppressed Dalit women."

Many Dalit women writers have emerged on the horizon and gives literary expression to their deep feelings in their autobiographies. Sharankumar Limbale in his autobiography expresses his deepest sympathy towards Dalit women. He further sheds light on the marginal and victimized condition of the Dalit women of which his Masamai (mother) and his

Santamai (grandmother) are glaring examples. His Masamai and Santamai are independent women, working outside their homes to earn their livelihood. Santamai wakes up early in the morning to sweep the village street. And Masamai sets up a homemade liquor business and serves liquors to the customers.

Being beautiful in a Dalit community is a curse. It is customary among the high caste Patils to make whore from Dalit community and to bring children into this world from a Dalit Woman out of wedlock. His Masamai is a victim of such oppression and has been caught between the games of lust and hunger. Hanmanta Limbale, a Patil wrecks her home; separates her from her loving husband and suckling babies and makes her his 'keep' to satiate his lust. She gives birth to a baby and later on he leaves her. Later another Patil from another village, Yeshwantrao Sidramappa accepts her as his concubine and they have eight children out of wedlock. After getting divorce, Masamai debases herself from the status of a wife to a 'whore' to have a family and to serve them food because a divorced Dalit woman is never allowed to remarry while her divorced husband can remarry for multiple times. This gender politics is very beautifully explained by Limbale in the following lines,

“A man can eat paan and spit as many times as he likes, but the same is not possible for a woman. It is considered wrong if a woman does that. Once her chastity is lost it can never be restored.” (36)

The upper caste Hindus objectify a Dalit woman's body as a sexual plaything. Limbale's writing exposes the hypocrisy and corruption of the so-called high caste people and the lascivious misdemeanour of the land lords and priests in the garb of religion and caste. A Dalitman even goes to the extent of sacrificing his woman to the dark night of the Patil mansions. It is a tradition among few Dalit communities to dedicate a girl child to the god. These girls devote rest of their life in worshipping gods or in performing certain rituals. Such women are known as 'devadasis' (a dancer-prostitute dedicated to the deity and the patrons of a temple). Later they are branded on the thighs of the priest and the children, borne out of 'devadasis' are considered as child of impure blood.

Even the farmers sometimes beat up the Dalit women and sexually harass them if their cattle trespass the boundary of grazing. These downtrodden women wail for emancipation but their desperate cry remains heedless. 'Rape' is a common phenomenon among the Dalits, whether the women are raped by the high caste landowners or by their own men. Sharankumar gives an instance of a Dalit woman Dhanavva, whose father deliberately rapes her after the death of her husband. That shameless man does not have any feeling of remorse rather he boastfully acknowledges his deed, "I have sown the seed from which she has grown as a plant. Now why shouldn't I eat the fruits of this plant?" (67)

Same kind of ruthless torture can be witnessed among the Blacks as depicted by Toni Morrison's in her famous novel, 'The Bluest Eye' where Pecola gets raped by her own father:

“We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust or despair” (5).

Limbale shares a glimpse of the political activism and the formation of militant groups among Dalits in 1972. Dalits worship Babasaheb Ambedkar like a god and instead of saying 'namaskar' they greet each other with 'Jai Bhim'. They protested to rename the Maratha Wada University as Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar University and were successful in doing so. During this time a large number of Dalits were converted to Buddhism as Buddhism condemns the unequal code and believes in the doctrine of egalitarianism. Sharankumar being a Dalit activist, married according to the Buddhist rituals and actively participated in Dalit Panther Movement.

The primary aim of Dalit Literature is to create social awareness among the Dalits so as to bring about a revolution. Sharankumar Limbale's autobiography is indeed an escape valve of his pent up rebellion against the caste oppression. In this book he presents the unpleasant picture of caste discrimination, its resultant poverty, the quest for identity and the plight of Dalit women. As the Black literature deals with the pain and sufferings of the Negroes, Dalit literature creates a space of its own by reflecting on the problems and sufferings of the marginalized groups in their native languages. Sharankumar is the representative of the collective resistance of his community which copes with difficulty in each and every step and emerges with dignity. Through the publication of his autobiography he has been succeeded in rebelling against the degraded Hindu set up, its relentless caste prejudices and also in constructing a Dalit selfhood. Sharankumar Limbale's autobiography is not only a story of an individual, but the history and the present status of Dalit community itself form the plot of the story. Thus, Sharankumar Limbale's autobiography is a delightful exposition as well as a powerful embodiment of Dalit society in the present context.

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