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## **Representation of Dalit Women in Painting and Text: A Study of Godna Painting and Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi***

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### **Abstract:**

Dalit women have been, through history, a repressed group with subjugation operating at multiple levels; i.e. gender, caste as well as economic limitations. While numerous writers, artists and Dalit activists have sought to make a difference in the prevailing conditions, incidents of casteism, violence and suppression continue into modern times. The objective of this paper is to examine the representation of the Dalit female figure through paint and text, analysing instances from a seminal Dalit text, Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi*. This is conflated with a study of Godna/Mithila art by this community of women, which seeks to express their interior life and potential for resistance against a patriarchal society. I have investigated these objectives through a close reading of Limbale's text, along with an inclusion in the paper of specific Godna paintings by Dalit women. An analysis of these paintings has been undertaken in the light of the role of artist within the confines of a discriminator society. It is evident after research that Limbale offers a profound critique of caste and gender oppression, with the Dalit woman as 'outcaste' even within her own milieu. Godna art, taking this further, becomes the voice of this marginalised group and a symbol of protest. This paper thus concludes that the Dalit female figure, while triply subjugated, offers intelligent resistance through various forms.

**Keywords:** Dalit women; subjugation; Godna art; Mithila art; Madhubani painting; Dalit female artist; Limbale; *Akkarmashi*; Marathi literature; feminism.

### **Methodology**

This paper combines primary as well as secondary research. A survey of Godna, Madhubani and Mithila paintings has been conducted, in the various locations around the city where they are now exhibited for artistic as well as commercial purposes. The paper discusses

numerous critical analyses by art curators and critics in their exploration of Dalit women's painting. A close reading of Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi*, with emphasis on the women characters, examines the book in the light of the triple subjugation of Dalit women through gender, caste as well as financial constraints. My research also includes secondary readings on the novel, by critics who discuss it in the context of Dalit history, women's oppression and politics of resistance.

## **Literature Review**

Dalit women's painting has been examined as a form of creative expression as well as protest by Megha Malakar, who studies Godna painting in intricate detail. Aditi Narayani discusses how this community has made creative use of art to express their identity. She further points out how natural materials like flowers and cowdung are used for these paintings, which make them so organically a part of the Dalit experience. Chandrika Sahai in *The Art and Culture of Dalits of India* shows photographs of Godna paintings, commenting on the vibrant use of colours and designs. Anuradha Goyal in her 2015 article is deeply interested in a particular artist - whom she calls Mithila's Madhubani artist Ganga Devi. Bharti Varun concludes that art is a means of crossing caste boundaries and contributes towards the feminist movement in India. This paper deals with one primary text - Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi*, along with its context and surrounding critical debates. Chhaya Datar talks about feminism in Maharashtra and the degree to which it moves beyond mainstream Brahminism to express the marginalised communities. T.J. Gajarawala elucidates the multiple ways in which Dalit history has suffered erasure and silencing, and the need for re-writing this dominant historical perspective. E. Zelliott views literary representations of Dalits such as in Limbale's book, in the light of Ambedkar's politics, vis-a-vis the empowerment of women. S. Rege and G. Guru specifically look at Dalit women and their position as outcasts even within their own culture. While there has been progress in scholarship on Dalit art and literature, it is still a relatively unexplored area. In particular, there is very little extant material on Dalit women's painting. This paper seeks to investigate and critically analyse this extraordinary creative expression by this hitherto silenced community.

## **Introduction: The Dalit Women Community and its Prevailing Conditions**

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. (Limbale, 2003, p. 36)

The purpose of this study is to discuss the way in which Sharankumar Limbale represents the doubly subjugated Dalit woman figure and the way in which the same figure is represented and expressed in Dalit women's painting. I would like to argue that Limbale's critique of her condition takes two directions. On the one hand, he depicts their sufferings at the hands of patriarchy; but on the other, he desists from victimizing them by creating strong, resilient woman characters with solid, concrete personalities. The Dalit female figure occupies a troubled position; she is not just subjugated on the basis of caste or by virtue of being Dalit or Mahar, but also entangled within the patriarchal structures that exist within the parameters of Dalit culture itself. She thus functions as an 'outcaste amongst the outcastes', as it were.

The condition of Dalit women is a subject that needs to be brought into the forefront mainly because, until recently, this particular group has been largely ignored and has not noticeably been part of social reforms or resistances against Dalit oppression. Bela Malik brings out the still- problematic condition of this community through a statistical study. She identifies their discrimination not just in intellectual terms but also in terms of lack of access to basic amenities such as water, sanitation, fuel, decision-making processes and legal redressal (Malik, 1999, p. 323). Chhaya Datar agrees with this in her essay *Non-Brahmin Renderings of Feminism in Maharashtra: Is It a More Emancipatory Force?* She remarks that Dalit feminism needs to be combined with many other movements. It needs to be a part of everyday life and not just focus on class exploitation but on matters as basic as access to resources, finance and property in order to make any real difference (Datar, 1999). Gopal Guru illustrates this conceptually and this becomes a rubric for what I wish to explicate in this chapter. In his essay *Labouring Intellectuals: The Conceptual World of Dalit Women*, he begins with a description of a conference that was held in the district of Karnal, Haryana. What Guru chooses to focus on is the very significant alignment of the attendees of the conference. He mentions that Dalit women labourers were involved in an intense, active discussion inside the tent. The male Dalits were outside the tent, and seemed to be disinterested in the proceedings going on inside. This is deeply symbolic of the structures of power that inform the Dalit community. They cannot be homogenised into a long-suffering, oppressed group; there exist within themselves regressive attitudes and power dynamics that seek to relegate women to the margins.

The attitudes did reproduce inner/outer dimensions in the Dalit public sphere. This ambition to control the outer indicates the paradox within Dalit imagination. At one level, they would like to fight their own marginalisation, as produced by the upper caste public sphere, but, at the same time, they are also required to reduce Dalit women to the margins so that they

occupy their own 'centre'. They require Dalit women to create this margin so that they can enjoy their centrality within the space (Gopal Guru, 2013, p. 55).

Dalit males, while oppressed by the caste system, still enjoy autonomy and domination in their respective space over the women in their community. Limbale's book is effective in bringing out this problem, and also in the expression of a collective sisterhood of oppressed women who in this very togetherness, form resistance against patriarchal structures. *Akkarmashi* is thus not just a list of torments and sufferings undergone by Dalits. It aims at creating realistic characters and redefines the autobiographical form into a complex, multi-faceted novella which takes into its corpus the women characters as well.

### **Reworking the Autobiographical Form: Limbale's Narrative Style**

Autobiographies appear to have been the preferred mode of Dalit writing, mainly because of the relegation of personal experience that this genre makes convenient. Limbale employs a deeply personal, confessional technique in his first-person narrative. That said, merely listing the wrongs he has suffered would make the writing repetitive and redundant. The method of general storytelling would make the book sound like a diary entry. Within these sub-genres, the author interjects and repeatedly asks disturbing questions following every single personal experience. It is left ambiguous exactly to whom he addresses these questions; the reader, the Patils, the upper castes; perhaps even society and history. At the same times, he outlines the futility of these questions. They have no answers and they question an entire system, a way of being, especially with regard to women. They seem expressly designed to be uncomfortable for the reader. Thinking of his mother, Limbale asks in the book:

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? (Limbale, 2003, p. 37)

The narrator himself is, as is evident from the articulation of these questions, a complex character. On the one hand, he is conditioned by the system that forms his upbringing and is deeply informed by social roles and psychologically embedded views about women. On the other, there is a constant questioning of the system. The narrator's frustration extends not just to his own plight but to the other gender as well. He uses the autobiographical genre, extremely common in current Dalit literature, to outline the humiliation and suffering of the Dalits and

becomes a voice of resistance and protest. The refusal, however, to sentimentalise or universalise this experience, and the emphasis on women's experience as infinitely more difficult, reflects Toral Gajarawala's views on this genre of literature:

...despite the continual assertion by writers and critics that the individual figure in Dalit texts always represents a collectivity and that Dalit humanism is essentially transposable across Dalit communities, this writing is marked by a conscious historical and cultural specificity and is hardly interested in the time-and-spacelessness characteristic of other forms of futurism. Dalit literature therefore insists on its own historicity by other means. That historicity is tied up with conceptions of authenticity and lived experience and articulated through an allusive referentiality as well as a formal, yet iconoclastic, realism (Gajarawala, 2012, p.576).

In other words, Limbale's book presents an individualised experience through an everyday, realistic style, moving beyond undue eulogization.

### **Female Characters in *Akkarmashi***

The women characters in Limbale's autobiography play possibly the most important role both in his writing and on his psyche. On the one hand, he shows them as targets of intense suffering, physical violence, abuse and rape. However, there are multiple ways in which he leans towards a feminist approach in his portrayal of their resilience, inner strength and spirit. All his female characters are marginalised owing to both their caste and gender, discarded by society but yet unconventional and selfless. Their qualities are intensified by way of comparison with the male characters, who are presented as a contrast because they are essentially unpleasant and insipid. What the reader notices is the negativity and violence of the upper caste Patils and the deepest impression is left behind of the women who counteract this negativity. While Limbale's attitude towards women is also governed by his conditioning, he makes his stance clear in the Acknowledgements:

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 the 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 (Limbale, 2003, p. ix).

Limbale's stance is made even clearer through the fact that the book is dedicated to his mother, a conscious and feminist act of support.

The book itself takes great pains to describe the high-caste privileged Patils and their relationships with the women they enslave. Possibly the most positive female character is that of Santamai who is a stalwart and the backbone of the whole family. She is always seen working and in movement- picking up lumps of dung, grinding seeds, drying grains in the sun, foraging for food for the family and sweeping the village streets. Gopal Guru remarks, 'In India, among labouring women, Dalits and Tribals form the most vulnerable sections...they work almost round the clock. Their work, like rag-picking and scavenging, is also morally demeaning, resulting in drudgery and wretchedness' (Guru, 2013, p. 58). Santamai is instrumental in labouring for and managing the household. She is always linked with self-effacement and sacrifice, putting the family and the children before herself. She is uncomplaining in all this and her grandson describes her as singing alongside her work in a melodious voice. 'Santamai made bhakaris which we ate, squatting. Santamai herself ate the bhakari made from the jowar collected from the dung, but for us she made bhakaris from the flour she had collected as alms' (Limbale, 2003, p. 10). Santamai is a well-rounded character and is not defined by her poverty or hardship. She is keenly traditional and rooted and has some unshakeable beliefs that supersede hunger or need. An instance is when she is furious with Sharan when he collects jowar from near a corpse on the way to burial (Limbale, 2003, p. 12). She also redefines gender roles and occupies a liminal space between what is stereotypically seen as masculine or feminine. She chews tobacco, gets drunk and in fact, deals with the liquor business herself. Added, there is a reversal of roles in the relationship between Santamai and Dada. 'Sometimes Santamai too got drunk, and if on that day Dada was drunk, there would be a fierce quarrel between them. Santamai sometimes even boxed Dada' (Limbale, 2003, p. 33).

An even more complex character in the novel is Limbale's mother, Masamai. She has an illegitimate child, and is an outcaste in more ways than one within her community. It is through her character that Limbale truly dismantles the acutely embedded patriarchy and misogyny that pervades the Dalit community. Masamai's suffering is profound in the novel. She is separated from her children because of the centrality of the prevailing high-caste male domination. However, the author emphasizes Masamai's innate sense of independence. She refuses to be victimised or pitied. She manipulates the power systems to her own advantage. She refuses a job as a singer and instead, lives with the Patil who has exploited her openly, possibly for revenge or as a challenge to the judgemental milieu that seeks to segregate her.

She protests against objectification and has a profound sense of honour and self-respect. When Kaka tries to force her into sleeping with Hanmanta, she hits him with a chappal and drives both men out of the house (Limbale, 2003, p. 61). Masamai's lot leaves the deepest impact on Limbale; nowhere is his agony more evident than for his mother. 'Now Masamai was kept by another Patil. 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' (Limbale, 2003, p. 59). Both the central female characters in Limbale's novel can be seen as feminist, rebellious and unconventional, but also prisoners of an oppressive system, especially in their relationships with men. An instance of unconventionality is that Santamai and Dada are not married and live together; added, Dada is part of the Muslim community. Despite all this, their relationship is a positive force in the book.

The feminine principle pervades the book; even the similes used are all associated with women. '[The bus] came and went empty without passengers, like the foetus of a barren woman. Yet we kept our hopes alive like a womb cared for after an abortion' (Limbale, 2003, p. 41). The feminine is consistently linked with nurture, positivity, nature and protection. Masamai, shunned by society, finds haven only in her mother's home. 'Only a mother and the earth can accommodate and stomach everything' (Limbale, 2003, p.37). The supportiveness of the text vis-à-vis the feminine principle is also through the comparison with the male characters. The relationship between Dada and Santamai is discussed throughout the book but Santamai is clearly a far stronger, more resilient character than the mild Dada. Masamai's husband, Ithal Kamble is described indirectly as a weak-minded man who deserts his wife when she is pursued by Hanmanta Limbale, despite taking financial help from the latter previously. There is a distinction, a far from positive one, drawn between mother figures and father figures throughout the text. Kamble and Hanmanta are absent and indifferent to their children's fates; in fact, Hanmanta Limbale is ashamed of his son and refuses to acknowledge him. The mother figures, however, are always present and deeply devoted in the text. Women are seen as all-encompassing foundation stones for the family and the individual. Each female character is not generic but unique and takes on multiple roles and personalities. Along these lines, Sharmila Rege points out the many problems with feminist studies of Dalit literature and culture. She says there is always a danger of homogenisation- all women are 'conceived as 'victims' and therefore 'Dalits'' (Rege, 1998, p. 42). She adds that therefore 'the Dalit women remained encapsulated firmly in the roles of the 'mother' and the 'victimised sexual being''. This is, to an extent, not entirely true of *Akkarmashi* because the writing elides such rigid categorisations of any of the women. Rege's point is that the Dalit corpus should not be lumped

under a sweeping mass or group. Within Brahminism, there exist multiple patriarchies which cannot be universalised and it is thus important to see the individual Dalit woman's experience.

Despite the centrality of the women characters and their individualised experiences, identity in *Akkarmashi* is linked to father figures even though it is actually Limbale's mother and grandmother who are the nurturers and who have been responsible for his upbringing. When the schoolteacher decides to enrol Sharan's name in the attendance register, it is the father's name he requires (Limbale, 2003, p. 45). It is ironic that Masamai and Santamai do not form any part of his identity in spite of being the backbone of the family. This evidence of the absence of any form of identity intensifies the marginalisation of women as reiterated in the book. Alongside this, there are disturbing incidents of violence against women throughout the text.

Once a Dalit youth dared to look lasciviously at a high-caste woman from the village... The whole village turned against the young man and attacked the Maharwada. Later the whole village went to court against young Dalit men who were sentenced to prison for a year. When they returned after serving their term, every man's wife had had a baby. The Dalit women had been raped when their husbands were in prison (Limbale, 2003, p. 71).

The conquest of any community or area is performed through the conquest of the women who become collateral damage. The narrator himself seems to have internalised the violence; when he goes to see Kaka's house and feels angry at the latter's neglect, he remarks that 'I felt like raping his mother' (Limbale, 2003, p. 46). Violence against women is normalised in this society and becomes a means for revenge, control and assertion of power. At the same time, the importance of the maternal is reiterated again and again in the narrator's emphasis on motherhood and its role in children's lives. These conflicting views are possibly intended to reflect the views of society in general that seeks to worship and pedestalise women while at the same time treating them with aggression and violence.

The chief victims of this misogyny are some of the minor women characters of the book. Sharan's classmate, Shobhi, appears very briefly, but even in that moment is the target of vindictive sexual aggression. Sharan and Parshya, his friend, think of avenging her insults to them in school by way of rape. After their verbal abuse of her, they retract and are frightened. Their thoughts are along the lines of, 'What would happen if anyone had seen us? Or if she told people in her village or someone in her house when she went back? What would the fate of our sisters be now?' (Limbale, 2003, p. 71) The battles of the men in the book in particular and in society in general always seem to ultimately boil down to revenge on women and the

conquest of them. Added, the choices available for women in general are limited. There is a preoccupation throughout the book about the marriage of Limbale's sisters. It seems that the only choices available to women and girls in Dalit society seem to be between marriage or becoming the keep of a Patil. Another minor character, Limbale's wife, Kusum, is mainly seen in her role as wife and mother to his children. Further, the novel brings to light, both through the conditioned responses of the author, as well as various incidents peppered through the text, the disturbing discourse around chastity. They are constantly subjected to the male gaze, commodified and seen as objects of lust; by strangers and relatives alike. The narrator himself at various points thinks of revenge for the outrage of the so-called honour of his mother or grandmother. Such internalised responses indicate that women are seen within a set of normative, defined qualities- helpless, victims of lust and pitiable. They are barely seen as separate from their expected core values of chastity and purity. By way of comparison with another significant Dalit text, *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki, one can see the differences as well as overlaps in the treatment of women. *Joothan* focuses on the trials and tribulations of a male character and women are largely absent. The ones who are described are seen merely in their roles as wives to the main characters. Women in literature are thus often stereotyped and the discussed texts also face the danger of fitting into this paradigm. However, while the *Akkarmashi* narrative brings out all these serious problems, Limbale's stance is evident throughout. G.N. Devy remarks:

The most memorable element of Limbale's life story is his attitude to women. There are many women characters in it, and not one of them without a serious complication in her life. There are widows, childless women, deserted women, and as the ultimate of all this divine and social injustice, Limbale presents his own mother who has been cheated again and again, exploited most blatantly in every relationship she strikes, burdened with a roll call of children and their upbringing (G.N. Devy in Limbale, 2003, p. xxiv).

The author's position comes out in strong support and empathy for the women in his life. The text also makes sure to point out the essential strength and creativity of these characters in the way in which they find new ways to alleviate and relieve the everyday existence of their families. Santamai tries to discover new and innovative ways to provide nutrition to her family, and both she and Masamai are described as possessing melodious singing voices. The text highlights the creativity and talent of Dalit women despite their circumstances. On this note, the next section will discuss Dalit art over recent years. Similar to literature like *Akkarmashi*, it aims at providing a voice and identity to this community.

### **Dalit Women's Art: A Means of Resistance and Creative Expression**

Over the years, there has been lack of access to education for Dalits, especially women. They have consistently been assigned tedious, menial jobs and sometimes hard labour in the fields. However, it is interesting to note that they used this time not for playing the victim but for creating unique ways to express themselves. They have, over the years, evolved modes of expression other than writing, such as tattooing, painting and folk poetry. In fact, they have appropriated art as a form of articulating their own narratives as well as that of protest. An example of this is Mithila painting, a consciously distinct, regional style that picks up scenes from mythology and legend, as well as deities and religious themes. It has been primarily developed in Mithila, Bihar, particularly by the women of Dusadh and Chamar communities. Through these paintings, the artists subtly involve themselves in a cultural heritage and history that has hitherto marginalised them. Another popular form of art specifically developed by Dalit women is Godna art, a genre of tattoo paintings. Tattooing has always been a symbol of rebellion and radicalism. Guru discusses this in his essay in some detail: 'As a number of studies show, Dalit women have invented a language of their own. Dalit women from Bihar have also tried to make conceptual sense of their pain and used Godna as an idiom to make an elevated sense of Dalit emancipation, which they explain in terms of annihilation of caste and the restoration of *manuski* (dignity to themselves)' (Guru, 2013, p. 60).

Godna art incorporates subtle resistance in multiple ways. It was originally inked onto the bodies of prisoners by Dalit women. Although they were seemingly following orders of authority, they expressed themselves by drawing creative designs. Moreover, in the very act it challenged the paradigm of untouchability since tattooing involves touch and etching.

However, the history of Godna also lies in the discrimination suffered by Dalit women, who were forced to wear ornaments of iron and other inferior material only, as prescribed by the Manu code. Tattooing was in a way a flouting of that prescription. Godna, thus, became for Dalit women not just the inversion of markers of identification, but also an attractive medium for forms of subaltern expression (Aditi Narayani, 2018, *Mithila Paintings*).

The colours in these forms of painting were from their own life and narratives- they used earthy colours, natural and made from leaves, vegetables, cow dung and flowers. They evolved a distinct style that has played a significant role in giving a voice and creative space to this community. In Fig. 1, the recurring motifs of this style of painting are fairly evident. The colours are earthy, the design intricate and complex. The artist's closeness to nature can be acknowledged through her artwork. The painting appears to emanate a sense of life and growth, not just through the image of the tree but also the layered, three-dimensional effect.



Figure 1: The Tree of Life, by an unidentified Mithila artist; from a set of photographs taken by William G. Archer between 1936-1940. British Library, London. (Source: Chandrika Sahai's *The Art and Culture of Dalits of India*. Retrieved from dalitfoundation.net)

According to Guru, 'Modern Dalit painting also suggests the shift from the body as the site of cultural imagination, to Ambedkar as the symbol of social revolution, that has been a new development in Bihar' (Guru, 2013, p. 67). Indeed, these works of art express an untamed riot of colours, hitherto suppressed by their adversities. Figure 2 is even more complex, with deeply intricate designs and motifs from the artist's surroundings. It consists of a lively mix of colours, but consciously blended together harmoniously similar to the way they exist in nature. The rows and rows of leaves are drawn with materials taken from the natural environment and the surroundings of the village community. The colours are mostly soothing, earthy browns, oranges and greens.



Figure 2: Untitled, by an unidentified Mithila artist; from a set of photographs taken by William G. Archer between 1936-1940. British Library, London. (Source: Chandrika Sahai's *The Art and Culture of Dalits of India*. Retrieved from dalitfoundation.net)

The next painting is significant because its subject is the varied facets of the female gender. The artist gives a variety of expressions to the women, granting an individualism and personality that is otherwise denied to the members of this community. Moreover, the natural colours used serve to link women with nature, harmony and equipoise, a similar method to that which is used in *Akkarmashi*. The complex nature of the design instantly links with the complex nature of the figures in the painting, and can be likened to the intricate women characters in Limbale's novel. The materials used in all the given figures is symbolic of the lifestyle of the Dalits and their surroundings. According to Chandrika Sahai:

These paintings were largely composed of rows and concentric circles of flowers, fields, animals, figures and spirits drawn with a pointed bamboo pen and lampblack ink. This style was adopted by many Dusadh women and soon was further innovated to include the use of bamboo brushes and a range of colours made from flowers, leaves, barks, berries etc. The theme of the paintings also expanded and they came to include complex scenes from their daily village life and ritual practices (Chandrika Sahai, 2018, *Godna Painting*).



Figure 3: Untitled, by an unidentified Mithila artist; from a set of photographs taken by William G. Archer between 1936-1940. British Library, London. (Source: Chandrika Sahai's *The Art and Culture of Dalits of India*. Retrieved from [dalitfoundation.net](http://dalitfoundation.net))

The Dalits create an alternate form of art, expressing the marginalised voices that have been denied space. The materials used are from natural sources such as turmeric, flowers, leaves and bark. Meghna Malakar comments that this form of art has a 'unique artistic aesthetic'. She goes on to say, '...people continue to paint in the Godna style because there is a deep aspect of resistance to this art. The artform of tattoo painting by Dalit women not only became a form of expression of subaltern art but also a symbol of annihilation of caste and oppression' (Malakar, 2021). The vibrancy and energy of these paintings can be seen in Figure 4, where a pregnant woman paints on a huge canvas, highlighting the infinite varieties and opportunities present to women, along with the rich inner life of the artist. It also brings forth the idea of woman as creator in multiple ways. Figure 5 is by innovative Mithila artist Ganga Devi, who painted on canvases formed from her school notebooks. This painting is rich in mythological lore through its depiction of the killing of Ravana.



Figure 4. Manav Jivan Series- Pregnant woman lying on the floor painting, by Ganga Devi. (Source: Inditales.com)



Figure 5: The Killing of Ravana, by Ganga Devi. (Source: Inditales.com)

### Findings and Conclusion: The Current Milieu

Limbale's mention of the Dalit Panthers at the end of the book signifies a ray of hope and an intimation that such movements contribute greatly in alleviating oppression. This group, like Limbale himself, questioned the hitherto accepted position of the oppressed classes and consciously brought forth a dissenting voice. What was significant about this movement was that it enveloped all castes and genders in its folds, without prioritizing any specific section. Women were included and counted as the main targets of exploitation and patriarchy. Untouchability was seen as a universal problem, regardless of gender. Limbale shares similar concerns. As has been discussed so far, his creative expression is not limited to his own gender, as it may very well have been. A major part of his novel describes his frustration, worry and empathy for the women in his life and the limitations they are put through. This also serves the

purpose of eliding homogenisation and universalisation, especially vis-à-vis the individual variety of his characterisation. B.R. Ambedkar, the Dalit Panthers and Limbale himself all have recognised that the Dalit problem is multidimensional and the word itself has a much broader meaning than has been accepted so far. The aggression and violence too includes and in fact targets the female gender. The violence described in *Akkarmashi*, in a disturbing sense, is reflective of violence that has continued outside in society as well. It is very likely that any leader who has fought for this community and voiced their plight has suffered arrest, torture and legal redressal. An example of this is the Marathwada riots, in response to the Namantar Andolan in 1994. While the revolution was eventually successful, it came at a price. The riots were particularly significant because those who suffered violence were women and children in large numbers. Women thus played a major role in the movement. This proactive stance by these women and other activists such as Shantabai Dhanaji Dani contradicts the dichotomous view of Dalit women that has been the case so far. They have mainly been viewed in two opposing lights; one of pitiable victim of oppression and discrimination, and the other as prostitutes of male high-caste Brahmins without identity. In Limbale's autobiography, some of the helplessness and entrapment is certainly described, but many of the women do not fully subscribe to the defined and conventional roles set out for them.

Social reforms and efforts towards the empowerment of Dalit women have only recently begun to gain momentum. Dalit women artists have turned symbols of their oppression, i.e. what Bharti Varun calls 'ornaments of iron and inferior materials' (Bharti Varun, 2020) into a challenge to the social, political and patriarchal forces that oppress them. There has been the rise of many new Dalit women writers as well, especially through the autobiographical mode. Authors such as Baby Kamble, Mukta Sarvagod and Kumud Pawde provide indispensable portrayals of the restrictions and censorship in their lives at every turn. There are others such as Urmila Pawar who combine both writing and activism, thereby playing a multi-faceted, resistant role. Pawar's writing is not just socially active, but also in a direct, confessional style similar to Limbale's, that has the effect of evoking empathy and compassion in readers. Dalit women have thus consciously and against all odds, begun to assert their identity and voice. They have also faced much criticism because of being pioneers in their fields as well as due to the relentless and truthful style of their writing, uncomfortable for many readers who may have either faced similar discrimination or been part of the society that caused it. The rebellion and vision for change may have started, but clearly, the community has a long way to go before it has fully rid itself of the shackles of history and patriarchy. The movement needs to be activated further and this community encouraged to express more and more. In the

words of Eleanor Zelliott, 'It is up to Dalit women themselves to explore ways to control the patriarchy they face both within and without the Dalit family. It is up to all who care about human rights to work for freedom, equality and justice for women' (Zelliott, 2007, p. 329).

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Figure 1. *The Tree of Life*. From *The Art and Culture of Dalits of India*, by Chandrika Sahai. Retrieved from <https://dalitfoundation.net/godna-paintings/>.

Figure 2. Godna Painting. From *The Art and Culture of Dalits of India*, by Chandrika Sahai. Retrieved from <https://dalitfoundation.net/godna-paintings/>.

Figure 3. Godna Painting. From *The Art and Culture of Dalits of India*, by Chandrika Sahai. Retrieved from <https://dalitfoundation.net/godna-paintings/>.

Figure 4. Devi, Ganga. *Pregnant woman lying on the floor painting*. From *Mithila's Madhubani Artist Ganga Devi and her Paintings*, by Anuradha Goyal. Retrieved from <https://www.inditales.com/madhubani-artist-ganga-devi-mithila/>

Figure 5. Devi, Ganga. *The Killing of Ravana*. From *Mithila's Madhubani Artist Ganga Devi and her Paintings*, by Anuradha Goyal. Retrieved from <https://www.inditales.com/madhubani-artist-ganga-devi-mithila/>