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UNDERSTANDING THE DALIT PSYCHE: READING OF SHARANKUMAR LIMBALE'S AKKARMASHI

***Navya Chandran**

Chandrakantham (H), Collectorate P.O., Kottayam, Kerala

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ABSTRACT

The inclusion of Dalits in the Brahminical discourses adopted the strategy of “reformist – liberalism”. Having entered into it, Dalit literature has not merged into it, but has changed it. Through Dalit literature, the Dalit subaltern has now appeared in literature as a speaking subject but this subaltern’s speech is not interpellated by the dominant group’s voice, language, tone, style or tradition. Limbale moves on to compare Dalit literature with that of Black and feminist literatures. Implicit in every work of literature is a serious critique of the society within which it takes birth. A literary movement of significance strikes at the heart of a social issue in a manner that it becomes impossible for any sensitive reader to return to the old values with any sense of comfort. Dalit literary movement has made Marathi society think afresh about religion, justice, dignity and social relationships, the single most important concern on which it has expended its energy has been ‘caste’. It is the experience of unique Dalitness that dalit Limbale has been challenged to represent authentically.

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INTRODUCTION

Alok Mukherjee, in his essay “Reading Sharankumar Limbale’s *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*” states that, Indian literary history and theory, as well as the teaching of Indian literature, are spectacularly silent about Dalit Literature. Yet Dalit cultural and critical productions make a significant critical intervention in the thinking and writing about Indian society, history, culture and literature. It was Babasaheb Ambedkar and Mahatma Jotirao Phule, who influenced Dalits greatly by interrogating the dominant casteist constructions of Indian identity. Through his examination of Indian society and caste myths propagated by Hindu sacred texts such as *Manusmriti*, Ambedkar made a powerful case for a distinct Dalit identity. His revolutionary ideas stirred into action all the Dalits of Maharashtra and gave them a new self – respect.

Gayatri Spivak poses her famous question “Can Subaltern Speak?” with reference to the coloniser – colonised framework within which much of the theorising about postcoloniality and subalternity emanating from Indian society has taken place. Limbale explores this binary to expose to theorise Dalit subalternity and the different contradictions it conceals. According to Limbale, Subalternity is not evident from the colonial structure, but a caste-based social, cultural and economic structure of Hindu society.

Dalits are the upper caste Hindu’s Other. Dalits do the work, live their life, eat their food and wear garments that the upper caste Hindus will not. They draw water from separate wells and cremate their dead in separate spaces. The society needs Dalit labour for posh survival, but does not wish to be reminded of it. Scriptural authority was invoked to designate that Dalits are polluted and they are untouchables. The inclusion of Dalits in the Brahminical discourses adopted the strategy of “reformist – liberalism”. Unable to imagine the Untouchable Other out of existence, Brahminical literature now sought to confine it within a discourse marked by ‘sympathy’ and ‘compassion’, to use Limbale’s terms. Dalits were still not ‘speaking subjects’, they were not characters with self-pride. Critics besides Limbale have been troubled by the treatment of Dalit characters in the writings of Premchand and Mulk Raj Anand. In their view, these representations do not show Dalits as they are, but as helpless and child-like people who cannot make their own decisions or take action. For e.g.) in Mulk Raj Anand’s work *Untouchable*, Bakha, instead of opting for radical action, submits to Gandhi’s pacifism.

Limbale traces the evolution of Marathi Dalit literature within the history of Marathi literature. He credits the contemporary progressive non-Dalit writers for opening the door for Dalit literature to appear. With the appearance of Dalit literature, the horizon of Marathi literature and criticism has expanded and preferences have changed.

***Corresponding author: Navya Chandran,**
Chandrakantham (H), Collectorate P.O., Kottayam, Kerala.

Many new social strata have awakened and made literary contributions because of Dalit literature. Having entered into it, Dalit literature has not merged into it, but has changed it. Through Dalit literature, the Dalit subaltern has now appeared in literature as a speaking subject but this subaltern's speech is not interpellated by the dominant group's voice, language, tone, style or tradition. Limbale moves on to compare Dalit literature with that of Black and feminist literatures. When Dalit Literature started emerging in the 1960s, Marathi literary taste was dominated by narcissistic tendency that foregrounded merely formalistic, non-confrontationalist and titillating works. One of the central debates of the era was focussed on an 'art for art sake' or 'art for life sake' kind of issue. In 1960s, the little urban magazines started challenging the urban-biased and excessively individualised mainstream writing. The earliest writing of Dalit writers were published in these magazines. A blend of pathos and protest became the defining feature of Dalit literature. Dalit poetry combined the rebellion against social injustice with dreams of a life of dignity for the oppressed. The first major Dalit autobiography is Daya Pawar's *Baluta*. Laxman Mane's *Upara* is the most popular of Dalit autobiographies.

Implicit in every work of literature is a serious critique of the society within which it takes birth. A literary movement of significance strikes at the heart of a social issue in a manner that it becomes impossible for any sensitive reader to return to the old values with any sense of comfort. Dalit literary movement has made Marathi society think afresh about religion, justice, dignity and social relationships, the single most important concern on which it has expended its energy has been 'caste'. The phenomenon of caste as a social marker has probably been the most unique feature of Indian society. It is a lived social experience rather than a mode of social classification. As its source has been a series of scriptural sanctions unfortunately read without their original metaphysical content.

The social stratification and injustice arising out of the concept of caste attached to the accident of birth have been faced and questioned repeatedly by thinkers and social reformers throughout the history of India. In the Indian tradition, all functions involving labour, leaving aside the function of governing, learning, and trading were reserved for Shudras. The menial nature of work, the exclusion from the forms and institutions of learning, the perverse notion of pollution attached to occupations in which Shudras were engaged in, the perpetual economic inequality, all of which continued to exist for centuries, made the life of Shudras a relentless story of suffering and injustice.

It is the experience of unique Dalitness that dalit literature has been challenged to represent authentically. A great deal of Dalit writing is in the genre of life writing. Not only has there been a preponderance of Dalit autobiographies, fictional writings too, have used autobiographical form to narrate Dalit experiences. These narratives seek to capture the authentic Dalit experience through a minute chronicling of smallest details of daily life in a language that is crude, uncivil and impure. It is as if, by capturing each detail, and reproducing it deliberately in a language that is opposite to the language of the upper class, the Dalit writer will convey the essence of Dalitness.

It is to be noted that works like Limbale's *Akkarmashi* bears similarities to the life of the author, but the protagonist is a composite character. The events and experiences that the character narrates are real but they actually happened not necessarily to the author. By making them part of Sharan's authentic experience, Limbale seem to suggest that each Dalit person's life partakes of the lives of all Dalits. Dalit literature does not always represent the pleasant side of Dalit life or the oppression they had to face in the hands of upper caste men but Dalit literature is an unflinching portrayal of the seamier side of Dalit life. There is in it ignorance, sexism, violence, internal rivalry and conflict, competition for survival, drunkenness and death. Authentic Dalit literature thus involves an unromanticized and un pitying reflection in literature of the materiality of Dalit life in all dimensions. Dalit autobiographical and fictional narratives and poetry does not romanticise anything. The people that inhabit these texts are not objects of pity. Their life is often miserable, humiliating and filled with daily reminders of their impurity and pollutedness. These are signified by the wretchedness of living conditions, their lawless or criminal pursuits, internalisation of oppressive ideas and habits of the Hindu caste society. At the same time, representation of Dalit life in literature is not limited to excessive self-pitying narration of the misery and wretchedness of people who are incapable of acting, but it is about a group of people who have a life, they survive, struggle and often succeed.

Limbale characterises Dalit literature as 'purposive' and describes its purpose variously as 'revolutionary', 'transformational', and 'liberatory'. Contemporary Marathi Dalit Literature emerged from a political movement – the Dalit Panthers – which many of these writers had been instrumental in founding. Dalit writers in other languages, though not involved in founding similar movements in their regions, also see themselves as a part of a transformational movement. Dalit literature explicitly rejects the Brahminical literary tradition i.e. following of Indian Aesthetics to evoke various emotions and feelings. Nor does Dalit literature share the other-worldly concerns of devotional literature. Dalit literature is neither a pleasure giving literature of fine sentiments and refined gestures nor a narcissistic wallowing of self-pity. Dalit literature is once and for all the body of literature that narrates Dalit reality and experience. Arjun Dangle, the Marathi Dalit writer says "Dalit Literature is marked by revolt and negativism, since it is closely associated with the hopes for freedom by a group of people who, as untouchables, are victims of social, economical and cultural inequality". Dalit literature is nothing but the literary expression of this awareness.

Upper caste writers not only avoided Dalits from their literature, but also made sure that they did not speak in the language of Brahmins. Dalits were prohibited from learning Sanskrit, the language of gods and so the ultimate trope of Brahminism. Dalits did not render their works in high language as approved by high castes but they used the vernacular language of common people. The power and impact of their works were such that those whom Limbale calls "the high priests of literature" could not ignore them. They had to be acknowledged in literary history. The Dalits no longer remains invisible.

The representations in Dalit literature pollutes and contaminates the previously unpolluted sites of savarna Hindu, and forces their occupants to come face-to-face with and recognise a reality that they brought into existence. This is a deconstructive enterprise. Dalits are no longer people without history, much less the subalterns of society's history, its demonised Ravana, or violated Angulimala, Ekalavya or Surpanakha. In this sense, the central purpose of Dalit literature is to enable development of a new consciousness and identity among Dalits. Dalit writers believe that their literature should be analysed from a sociological perspective focused on social values than on beauty. An exclusively aesthetic consideration of Dalit literature will disregard Dalit writers' fundamental role, and hence is not acceptable to Dalit writers. Rejecting traditional aesthetics, they insist on the need for a new and distinct aesthetic for their literature – an aesthetic that is life-affirming and realistic.

Akkarmashi is Limbale's autobiography which tell us the candid story of his childhood and growth as an unsired person, and in its power to disturb, it is compared with Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and Jean Genet's *A Thief's Journal*. The agonies of being a single parent child, the life of abject poverty, discrimination and separation are described in great detail in this work. The most memorable element in Limbale's life story is his attitude to women. There are many women characters 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.

While Dalit men are victims of caste and class oppression, Dalit women find themselves as the victims of double oppression – by the upper caste men as well as by the men of their own community. Limbale presents his own mother who has been cheated again and again, exploited most bluntly in every relationship she strikes, burdened with a roll call of children and their upbringing. Their struggle is, on one hand, for existence and on another to protect them from the hostile social environment. This hostility pervades all spheres – at home as well as outside. The biggest handicap of a Dalit woman is her lack of education. The author however shows remarkable understanding of their suffering. There is no cursing or blaming them in this narrative. There is not even a tone of pity for them in it. He has learnt to accept the plight of life as such. It is this depth of response that makes Limbale's Akkarmashi stand out in the genre of Dalit autobiography.

Limbale condemns the hypocrisy of the Indian upper caste men who for their own convenience follow caste rules but would never mind in indulging in carnal pleasures by exploiting the dignity of the lower caste women. His critique of the Indian caste system is worth quoting: People who enjoy high caste privileges, authority sanctioned by religion, and inherit property, have exploited the Dalits of this land. The Patils in every village have made whores of the wives of Dalit farm labourers. A poor Dalit girl on attaining puberty has invariably been the victim of their lust. There is a whole breed born to adulterous Patils. There are Dalit families that survive by pleasing the Patils sexually. The whole village considers such a house as the house of the Patil's whore. Even the children born to them from her husband are considered the

children of Patil. Besides survival on charity of a Patil what else can such a household expect?. It was rather a strange practise in Maharashtra that Dalit girls, immediately after attaining puberty, were kept by landlords as concubines to satisfy their lust. It was almost a customary service for all Dalit families to "give" their daughters to the upper caste Patils. In return, these women were given shelter and a few provisions to live. The children born to them remained half-caste or Akkarmashi as Sharan calls them in the novel. The entire novel focuses on the identity crisis faced by a half caste man, who happens to be an illegitimate child born to a Mahar mother and Maratha father.

Sharankumar Limbale's autobiography was penned at the age of 25 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. While constructing 'self' through his narrative, he goes to the root of the Indian caste society questioning its very foundations which are based on religious order. 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'.

The central theme of Akkarmashi or The Outcaste is the problematic of author's identity. As stated by Limbale in his Author's Note, he has no claims for great ancestry. All he knows about his family line is that it ends with his mother and grandmother. His mother was an untouchable and his father was from a privileged caste in India. His mother lived in a hut whereas his father lived in a palatial mansion. His father was a landlord whereas his mother was landless. So Limbale was an Akkarmashi or a half-caste. He was condemned, branded illegitimate. It was through Dalit movement and Dalit literature that Limbale understood that his mother was not an adulterous but the victim of an oppressive social system.

Limbale's primary aim in writing Akkarmashi was to announce his woes as the son of a whore. High caste people looked upon him as an untouchable whereas his own community humiliated him by calling him 'Akkarmashi'. He lived with the burden of inferiority. 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 the "outcasts" of a society but a "half-caste" among the outcaste is less than being human. A Dalit has no personal life of his own but it 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".

The narrator's self reflects his life in particular and the life of the community in general. A Dalit has no personal life of his own but is dissolved in the engulfing whirlpool of his community. *The Outcaste* is an account of Sharankumar Limbale's life-time suffering. As he puts it in an *Acknowledgement of The Outcaste*, 'My history is my mother's life; at the most my grandmother's. My ancestry doesn't go back any further.

My mother is an untouchable, while my father is a high caste from one of the privileged classes in India. Mother lives in a hut, father lives in a mansion, father is a landlord; mother, landless. I am an Akkarmashi. I am condemned, branded illegitimate'. Sharankumar was identified as illegitimate by his community, because he was born of a sexual relationship outside marriage, between an upper caste man and a Dalit woman. The usage of the word illegitimate is not specific to the circumstances of Sharankumar's birth alone, but also encapsulates a significant facet of the Dalit situation of marginality. Therefore the questions such as who is Sharankumar? A Mahar, Lingyat or Muslim? What kind of culture is his? Is it Akkarmashi or Dalit? All these can be carefully tackled by observing the life of Maharwada.

While trying to explain the life in Maharwada, Limbale describes how Dalits mostly lived in huts outside the village. Limbale's family had no land or house to live like villagers. They spent most of the time inside the bus stand in Hooner. To quote him, "to us the bus stand was like home... we lay like discarded bus tickets. We had to get up in the normally or risk annoying the driver and conductor. Once they actually thrum or sheets and rugs out on the road?" When it came to basic amenities such as food, Dalits had to beg for food and they ate at hand. Most of them couldn't afford two full meals a day and mostly they had to wait for leftover food by wealthy villagers. As Masamai says "leftover food is nectar".

The undefeatable challenge faced by Sharankumar as a child is hunger. He describes discriminatory incidents in his public school. During his school days, Sharankumar and his friends used to wait for leftover food from upper caste children. They were also not allowed to use water from public wells lest they 'pollute' the well, but instead had to wait for higher – caste children or teachers to draw water for them and pour it into their hands or cups, without touching them. Sharankumar dwelt on the basic need of man over and again throughout the life.

There are many other incidents of poverty which completes the autobiography. Sharankumar admits that he himself had to steal food to fill his stomach. He had to beg whenever necessary and his grandmother had to tell lies for food. The poverty even makes them to eat what animals ate when there is no way to have food. Sharankumar's sister Vani had to eat banana peels to satisfy her hunger. Therefore it is not wrong to state that Dalits in India often had to eat second-hand food. Dalits were completely prohibited from doing any mainstream jobs. Granny of the narrator Santamai swept the village street, went around begging, worked as midwife and massaged the bulging stomachs of pregnant women. Dada Dastgir lit the street lamps, distributed newspaper, and went to school carrying Tiffin for students.

They were never payed any money but were satisfied with the little leftover food they got. Though marginalised from the mainstream social life, the Dalit population lived with the little they got. Limbale specially focuses on how liquor making is an important routine and industry among Dalits. To quote, "our house was always crammed with customers. Sometimes they continued drinking late into the night and we went to sleep while they were still there. Sometimes there was quarrel.

. . They continued to sit unmoved and shameless, taking no notice of her scolding.' It shows that such environment has become the reason of their weakness and demolition. The caste council played a very important role in Dalit social life. There is a difference between the village council, that solves the problem of the entire village and the caste council that is particularly meant to solve the issues of people belonging to a caste. Dalits followed the customs and tradition of Hindu religion. They followed many religious taboos like throwing coins at the dead body and strict maintain of fast. It was also a custom of the Dalit society to offer a child to god. If a daughter was born after offering a vow to the goddess, the girl was named Ambabai and if it was a son, he was named Ambadas. These children left on the name of god or goddess never married. Their prime duty was to serve God and temple. The girl children turned out to be *Devadasi*, the servant of god. The children born to *devadasis* are considered impure and they are forced to isolate themselves from the village folk and live by begging.

Limbale found his identity in flux. He was an illegitimate, a Mahar and an educated Dalit all at once. But his identity as a half-caste was prominent for the Mahar society he lived in. Though Limbale's mother Masamai was married to Ithal Kamble and bore his two children, she had an illicit relationship with Hamanta Limbale, a Patil of Basalegaon out of which Sharankumar Limbale was born. Limbale inherited none of the identity of his father or in other words he had no claims for his father's identity. His identity was that of an 'Akkarmashi'. "Akkarmashi" in Marathi means eleven it needs another one to complete itself, to become twelve, a dozen which signifies completeness.

With the intervention of Bhosale, the headmaster of the school, Limbale gets his father's name added to his name in the school record. He faces a problem of his identity when he applies for freeship and wants to have a signature of Sarpanch on freeship application form. The Sarpanch refuses to sign the form of Sharan, on the pretext of not knowing the real husband of Masamai. He disproves the name 'Masamai Hanmant Limbale'. Sarpanch further points out that Limbale's grandmother Santamai lives with a Muslim. With a government job and education to cushion him, Limbale still found it difficult to get a wife. Limbale never enjoyed the prospect of selecting a wife of his own choice. His single attempt at bride-viewing ends up in a disaster. He gets a wife out of sympathy and his occasional bribing of his would-be father-in-law with alcohol.

Even when Limbale gets associated with the people in the Dalit Panther Movement, he feels an alienation from the people participating in this movement because his low and impure blood keeps him away. Limbale does not succumb to the pitiable existence but acquires liberation and freedom from his purgatory of caste through education. He feels that Hindu religious system is the root of the exploitation of his mother. It grants permission to the high caste men to sexually exploit the women of low caste and brand children born of their relations as illegitimate without any stigma on their exploiters. The knowledge he had acquired from books had taught him to think differently. He understood that their suffering was based on a false concept of superiority.

He has imbibed a “Dalit consciousness”, a consciousness of his own slavery, an understanding of their experiences of exclusion, subjugation, disposition, and oppression down the ages. It is this knowledge that liberates him.

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