

Dalit Autobiographies and Representation of Women A Reading of Sharan Kumar Limbale's *The Outcaste*

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Abstract

The proposed paper/article explores and analyses the representation of Dalit women in the caste-ridden Indian society and the relationship between the two, as depicted in Sharan Kumar Limbale's *The Outcaste* (2003). It focuses on how gender and caste roles are determined culturally and socially. Gender refers to socially constructed characteristics of women and men, such as the norms, values, and separate roles they play in the patriarchal set-up. It creates a disparity between women and men and forces them to adhere to the set norms, values, roles, and relationships between them. Caste is a product of the human psyche. It is a hierarchical division of labourers. It discriminates and exploits the lowest in the order based on their traditional occupational association. Therefore, caste has become the most significant barrier to social interaction and the holistic development of humans. Apart from being the most important characteristic of Indian society, the psychic notion of caste has not only become the marker of identity for the Dalits in their daily lives, but it has also become the most used weapon for the established to exploit and oppress the Dalits (both men and women). It is the root cause behind all the injustices thrust upon them by the dominant sections. It has been a lived social experience and one of the most burning issues in India for centuries, wherein a person cannot be freed from the shackles of caste even after death.

Keywords: Dalit Women, Caste, Identity, Autobiography, Exploitation, etc.

The Author and *The Outcaste*

The Outcaste (*Akkarmashi*) was originally written and published in 1984 in Marathi by a well-known Dalit writer, prominent thinker and activist, Sharan Kumar Limbale, at the age of twenty-five. Santosh Bhoomkar has translated it as *The Outcaste*, and the OUP, New Delhi, published its English version in 2003. The author worked as a Regional Director and Professor of Marathi at YCM Open University, Nashik, Maharashtra. He has been an active member of the Dalit Panthers' Movement and worked sincerely for the upliftment of Dalits. He has contributed significantly to Marathi Dalit literature in particular and Dalit literature in general. His literary works range from novels to poetry, from short stories to translations and

from literary to social criticisms. His autobiographical narrative - *Akkarmashi* and *Dalit Sahityache Saundaryashastra*, have been translated into English and several other Indian languages, such as Gujarati, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and Hindi. He has also received various honours and awards for his contribution to Dalit literature and the Dalit movement.

What is a Dalit Autobiography?

Dalit autobiography is a popular literary form of Dalit expression, which is about Dalits and written with Dalit spirit by Dalit writers only. The trend of writing Dalit autobiographies started in Marathi in the nineteen seventies; many other Marathi Dalit writers began writing their autobiographies. Since then, Dalit writers have written Dalit autobiographies throughout the country. They are not only published in different Indian languages but are also being translated into English and other European languages. These translations have created a vibrant recognition of Dalit literature nationally and internationally. It is an account of Dalit life and a tool through which Dalits can claim their denied fundamental human rights. It creates a solid public stage for a Dalit writer to speak against the dominating and prejudiced social order. It is not just an intellectual formation of the self but a historiographical discovery of the entire Dalit community he belongs to. It is powerful, defensive, conscious, and rational writing whereby a Dalit writer acts as a 'historian' of his own life. Hence, instead of speaking about the life of self and community, he writes about the life of the self and the community. The concrete proof of the Dalit life raises specific empirical facts to the broad truth. Their attempt to recall the past is meant to remember their ancient days and propose a powerful political philosophy. It acts as an agency for their liberation from their historical suppression and questions the history of the established. Hence, the act of questioning itself is the beginning of the history of the oppressed.

Women and Dalit Autobiographies

Dalit autobiographical writings have played a vital role in sensitising, voicing, locating, and analysing the day-to-day plights of the Dalits in India for the last four decades. Also, it has become one of the primary debates and an essential part of the academic discourse in Dalit studies in India and abroad. Gender and caste-based identities have been important contents of Dalit autobiographical writings. The autobiographers believe Dalit women have been India's most exploited and discriminated section. They are unaware of their fundamental human rights due to the lack of proper education. Their sexuality and the ability to give birth are in men's hands. They are not allowed to work in public places even if they get an opportunity because their husbands doubt them being disloyal to them. They are not even accepted as human beings. They have no legal approach; therefore, they become victims of physical and domestic violence. Their husbands are habitual in taking drugs and drinking liquor. To maintain the household and look after the kids, they work in the upper caste houses to sweep and clean the floors and grind the spices. Since they are physically considered weak, they cannot work in public places as labourers. They are paid significantly less than men if

allowed to work elsewhere. Since they are untouchables, they are not permitted to draw water from the public wells and ponds; they cannot enter the temple or maintain their self-respect and dignity in society. It is not only the Dalit patriarchy that violates their fundamental human rights but also the upper caste Brahmanical patriarchy, which continuously perpetrates violence against them. Being women and Dalits, they are easily targeted by the upper caste Hindus for their sexual satisfaction.

An Overview of Dalit Women in Indian Society

What is the location of Dalit women in the caste-structured Indian society based on gender and caste identities? What is the relationship between Dalit women and men in the patriarchal set-up? These are some of the essential questions that we need to address ourselves. Dalit women are dual victims of discrimination, oppression, and exploitation compared to Dalit men based on their gender and caste identities. **Firstly**, they are women and, hence, victims of patriarchy within and outside the house. Patriarchy has not believed in women having equal rights and roles compared to men in the family and society since time immemorial. Historically, like non-Dalit women, Dalit women too have been forced to remain under the control of the patriarchal social structure. Right from birth to childhood, childhood to adulthood and from adulthood to the age of marriage, girls always remain under the control of their parents. Their delivery is considered an inauspicious thing in the family and is not celebrated compared to boys. They are treated and taught differently in comparison to boys in the family, such as how to talk to the family members and guests, how to walk and talk with the people outside the house, where to go and when to come back, and how and where to sit, what to wear, how much and what kind of medical care they should be given, which school/college/university they should be sent and what type of education if their parents at all wish to provide, they should be given, when whom and where they should get married. Their grandparents, parents and relatives decide all these things. They are not allowed to become autonomous in their decision-making until they are unmarried. Whereas boys are treated reversely to what has been said, they are free from most of these restrictions for girls.

After their marriage to the persons of their parent's choice, their life gets confined to caring for the house, husband, and children within the boundary of the house's four walls. In contrast, men must work outside the home and fulfil the family's financial needs. They are treated as an unpaid labourer. They are harassed in the name of dowry by their husbands, and if they fail to fulfil their material demands, they become a constant victim of mental and physical torture, resulting in suicide. They have no decisive roles to play in the issues and matters of their daily life, such as domestic, social, cultural, economic, and religious. That means the real decision-making power lies in the heads of their husbands, and therefore, they do not question it. When their husbands are dead, they are left with their sons, if any, who look after them as their bodyguards if they are alive. Moreover, if they do not have a son(s), they become helpless and live with the anxiety of being non-protective. They are not remarried in specific communities even if their husbands die early. Patriarchy does not allow

them to be autonomous in their financial matters. They are not allowed to be part of marriage and funeral processions. Despite having legal rights, they are denied an equal share of their parent's property. They are neither willingly given a stake in their parents' property nor demand the same from their parents just because they fear getting disconnected from their parents and brothers in the future. Hence, women are always taught and advised to adhere to patriarchal structures, customs, values, and other male-dominated practices.

Secondly, Dalit women are constant victims of the caste system outside their house, not simply because they are women but because of their being Dalit as a sub-identity that locates them at the bottom of society. Sexual and physical abuse are much associated with their everyday life. It is a curse upon them to be born as low-caste women. Caste is an incurable mental disease and divisive factor that divides humans based on their labour and treats them indifferently. Like patriarchy, the caste system does not believe in socio-cultural and gender equality between Dalit women and non-Dalit women and Dalit men and non-Dalit men. The caste system strongly believes Dalit women are poor, weak, dirty, uneducated, uncultured, and have a lower social position than upper-caste women. It is the irony of our time that no one practices untouchability regarding sexual relations. Rape is a common phenomenon in the lives of innumerable Dalit girls and wives. They are raped under the wrap of caste custom or village tradition. According to many Dalit activists, Dalit girls have been forcibly sexually molested by village landlords. Another custom is the Devdasi system, a kind of forced prostitution in the name of god and religion. Girls have been forced to become prostitutes for upper-caste patrons and village priests. The prevalence of rape in villages contributes to the greater incidence of child marriages. Early marriage in the pre-teen years persists mainly because of Dalit girls' vulnerability to sexual assault by upper-caste men; once a girl is raped, she becomes unmarriageable. Early marriage also gives parents greater control over the caste into which their children are married. The rape of Dalit women is considered a form of retaliation by higher-caste males. Thus, they face a double burden of caste and gender.

Representation of Dalit Women in *The Outcaste*

Sharan Kumar Limbale, in his autobiography *The Outcaste*, highlights the agony and humiliation of his mother and his own life, reflecting the relationship between gender and caste identities. Why did Limbale use *Akkarmashi*, a Marathi abuse, as the title of his autobiography? In the author's note, the author writes,

My history is my mother's life and my grandmother's. My ancestry does not go back any further. My mother is untouchable, while my father is a high-caste one from the privileged classes of India. Mother lives in a hut, and father in a mansion. The father is a landlord; the mother is landless. I am an *Akkarmashi*. I am condemned, branded illegitimate. I regard the immorality of my father and mother as a metaphor for rape. My father had privileges by the caste system birth granted to him. Through the Dalit

movement and Dalit literature, I understood that my mother was not an adulteress but the victim of a social system. I grow restless whenever I read about rape in the newspaper. A violation anywhere in the country, I feel, is a violation of my mother. High-caste people view my community as untouchable, while my community humiliates me, calling me *Akkarmashi*. This humiliation was like being stabbed over and over again. I have always lived with the burden of inferiority (Limbale ix-x).

Limbale was born to a Dalit mother and an upper-caste father who was the head of the village and kept his mother as a keep. This was Santamaria, Limbale's maternal grandmother, who brought him up. She lived a life of poverty. Limbale does not get any love from his birth mother, Masamai, whose upper-caste master deserts and now has seven-eight children from the village Patil. The village Patil never accepts her as his wife, so she remains his concubine throughout her life. In *The Outcaste*, he frequently says that caste plays a vital role for a Hindu; it controls his whole life, including the food he eats, the garments he wears and the person he chooses as his life partner. Limbale, in his life, suffered not only the pain of the caste system but also the dilemma of not even being included in any one-fold of the caste system. He remains an outcast, and this label forces him to live his entire life under the stigma of being an illegitimate progeny.

Limbale's mother, Masamai, happens to be the only daughter of Santamai. Masamai is married to Ithal Kamble, a feeble man who works as a bonded labourer on the plantation owned by Hanmanta Limbale, an upper-caste rich man. He provides financial support to Ithal Kamble whenever he is in a critical situation. While helping Ithal Kamble, Patil's intention changes. He plans to ruin Ithal Kamble's family by forcing the Mahar caste council to get Masamai divorced from Ithal Kamble. Her husband, Ithal Kamble, divorces Masamai. Now, she becomes a free woman with nothing of her own. Immediately after her divorce from her legitimate husband, she is lured by Hanmanta Limbale, the Patil. He provides her with rented accommodation, which she accepts. Now, Patil enjoys his sexual desires by controlling her like a sexual object. Masami becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son. Though he never wants this to happen, the child becomes a reality. At any cost, the Patil does not acknowledge this child as his offspring and deserts Masamai as his concubine. Finally, Masamai and her child stay with Santamai and live her whole life as excluded. This is the story of Masamai as a beautiful Dalit woman and many who become victims of the upper caste people's sexual desire in their everyday lives. The author writes,

To be born beautiful among Dalits is a curse. A famous saying is that the neighbour's wife is always more attractive than one's own. Everyone in the village chases a beautiful woman. Masami was beautiful, and she suffered for it. She was divorced by her husband, after which Hanmanta enjoyed her and then deserted her. I never received her wholehearted love. People who want high-caste privileges, authority sanctioned by religion, and inherit property have exploited

this land's Dalits. The Patils in every village have made whores of the wives of Dalit farm labourers. On attaining puberty, a poor Dalit girl has invariably been a victim of their lust. There is a whole breed born to adulterous Patils. Some Dalit families survive by pleasing the Patils' sexuality. Even the children born to her from her husband are considered the children of a Patil (Limbale 37-38).

It was Santamai, Limbale's maternal grandmother, who brought him up. She lived a life of penury. Limbale does not get any love from his mother, Masamai, who is deserted by her husband and now has seven children from the village Patil. The village Patil never accepts her as his wife. After Hanmanta Limbale abandons Masamai, Yashwantrao Sidaramappa, the Patil and the head of the village named Hanoor, shows his authorial power on Masamai to become his keep. Though she is a free woman, she cannot regain the status of wife. For a woman, once her chastity is lost, it can never be restored, whereas, in the case of a man, it is possible to get remarried as many times as he wants. There is nothing to eat in her house, and she is searching for food and shelter. Finally, Patil successfully attempts to attract Masamai to become his concubine. The Patil does not provide her with any shelter within the premises of his house. Therefore, Masamai lives in her own semi-Maharwada, and the Patil regularly visits Masamai to satisfy his sexual desire. Masamai has seven children from this Patil, which the Patil denies. Limbale thinks his mother and the Patil are husband and wife. Once, his mother tells him that the Patil has a son, a wife and parents, and they all live in the mansion. This baffles him too much. The author writes,

Hanmanta had been responsible for wrecking Masamai's married life. It was because of him that Masamai was divorced, and since then, she had been Hanmanta's keep. This is almost a tradition—a Patil, always a big landowner, has a Dalit woman as his whore. There is at least one such house in every village. Children born to such a whore have no legal father because there is an unbridgeable gap between such a father and son. I never wanted 'Masamai Hanmanta Limbale' named as my guardian in the official record, obviously, because Hanmanta had deserted Masamai these last eight to ten years. Now, Masamai was kept by another Patil. What sort of life she had been living, mortgaging to one owner after another and being used as a commodity? Her lot has been nothing but the tyranny of sex (Limbale 58-59).

Whenever Limbale thinks about the plight and the future of his mother, he becomes upset because he does not see any sign of dignity and self-respect in his mother's life. He realises that after her divorce from Ithal Kamble, she sold herself to the Patils, and every time, she was deserted after her sexual exploitation. Sometimes, he even grows wild with rage about the adultery that his mother has committed, which resulted in his birth. He consoles himself by thinking she is not the only victim of social exclusion and sexual lust of the upper caste Hindus. The dark future of Limbale's sisters troubles him a lot more than his own. He writes,

Our villagers have provided us with bread, so we owe much to them. They did provide bread but, in exchange, satisfied their lust with our women. I can't bear to think of Masamai caught between bread and lust. Who will rescue my mother? She will die blemished, an object of someone's lust, but what about us? Will anyone marry my sisters? I am a man, so even if nobody marries me, I can find relief with a whore, but what about my sisters? Will society accept us? When we die, will people from the *Maharwada* undertake our funeral? Are my sisters going to rot like this? They say that every human being is born with his or her match. If so, where are their bridegrooms? Are they going to be victims like my mother (Limbale 64-65)?

Conclusion

Sharan Kumar Limbale's autobiographical narrative, *The Outcaste*, has been acknowledged as one of the most important literary contributions to Dalit literature. *The Outcaste* has created a global platform and inspired many young Dalit writers to articulate their everyday sufferings. Courage and honesty are the most essential features of Dalit autobiographies, including *The Outcaste*. It blatantly describes the wretchedness of the everyday lives of Dalit women under the shackles of patriarchy and the severity of the caste system. Firstly, they are women and secondly, their low caste identity in the caste-structured society. *The Outcaste* exemplifies that in rural areas, most Dalit women are illiterate, poor, and helpless to resist any oppression and exploitation imposed on them by the upper caste people; that is why the upper caste people easily target them for their sexual yearning. They are never accepted as the wives of the upper caste people. They do not even acknowledge the children born out of their sexual intercourse with them. They are used as sexual objects, exploited, and later, when the exploiters are bored with them, they are abandoned for nowhere. Thus, *The Outcaste* becomes a crucial literary means of representing the wretched lives of Dalit women in India.

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