

A Black Boy and The Outcaste: A Comparative Study

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Abstract: *The paper comparatively presents a study of social, economic, cultural and political scenario of the Black and the Dalit society through the autobiographical novels— ‘A Black Boy’ by Richard Wright and ‘The Outcaste’ by Sharankumar Limbale. Both the autobiographies give the socio-economic-political picture of society of the time when the Blacks, the Dalits suffered humiliations, difficulties while striving for equality after the declaration of independence of the respective countries—America and India. Similarly, both autobiographies give the picture of sufferings from the writers’ early childhood to their youths. Though, times, places and the reasons of discriminations are different, there are some similarities in the nature of socio-economic-political background of the Blacks and the Dalits—such as lowest socio-economic position, inhuman treatment from the suppressors, being conscious of slavery, want of human rights, movement for equality as humans, voicing agonies through literature etc.*

Keywords: autobiographies, Richard, the Blacks, the Whites, slavery, America, Sharan, the Dalits, the Upper Castes, untouchability, India, after independence, etc.

Introduction: It is said that literature is a mirror to the picture of society; and, it is true in the concern of the Black and the Dalit literature. So, before going to go through the selected literary works, it would be significant to have a glance over the socio-economic-political scenario of the Blacks and the Dalits.

The history of the slavery of the Blacks is of 400 years. Since 1619 Blacks were brought to America from Africa by the Whites. The Whites made them slaves and exploited their labor. The Blacks were not considered as untouchables, but they were given separate places of dining, living (ghettoes), separate sitting arrangement in buses and trains, and the servants in the master’s house were confined to the limited place. But, the Blacks were intentionally slaves and not the untouchables. On the other hand, Dalits had been experiencing slavery from ancient time. Aryans invaded the Anaryas’ country (India) and defeated them. They structured such a social system in which all the defeated society was placed below the Brahmins. The society itself was split into a number of castes. They made such a caste hierarchy in which every caste had no right to imitate the other upper or lower caste. The lowest of this hierarchy was known as the untouchable. Intentionally, a class of society was given menial jobs to do which in turn made them beg and live in a disgusting way; and, by the way, they were considered as untouchables. But, like the Blacks, the labor of the untouchables was also used as of the slaves. Dalits lived

slave-like life; but they were not the slaves in the sense of the Blacks in America. The Whites used the Blacks as their animals (possessed) and also fed them as owners do with the animals. In India, the Upper Castes exploited the labor of the Dalits; but they didn't take the responsibility of feeding them. The Dalits had to beg for food or live on the leftovers of the upper castes. We can say that, Dalits were like slaves; and the Blacks were like untouchables and not the same. The same thing was that, both—the Blacks and the Dalits, were treated worse than the animals; because, even the owners of the animals does not treat them so cruelly.

Neither racism nor castism was the original reason of the slavery, but to give ideological support to slavery, racism and castism came up. On the contrary, the original reason of the racism and the castism was the want of exploitation for ones' own benefit. Like racism in America, castism in India also had origin in the race—Arya and Anarya. But, it was not so distinct as the race of the Blacks. The Blacks couldn't/cannot hide their color. Dalits were identified with the way of living which was disgusting and pitiable. Both, the Blacks and the Dalits were deprived even from the basic human rights. The Blacks were made to believe in racist ideology that they were secondary citizens. Dalits were made to believe that they were born in untouchable caste to suffer for their sins in the past life (previous birth); and they had to bear it without complaint. Their socio-economic condition was automatically made pitiable as they were denied to step towards self-development. In the concern of the Dalits even their touch would make the others impure. So, like Blacks, they had to keep proper distance and were not allowed to the common places. They lived outside of the village. Despite of British education policy in British rule, education was not allowed to the Dalits according to the law of Manu. Jyotiba Phule was the first to dare to encourage the Dalits for education. In later period of 19th century, Dalit students were permitted to sit outside of the classroom.

The Whites in America took care that the Blacks should not be integrated. So, the Whites broke the families of the Blacks. Men were taken away from their families under the name of the works at different places. The Whites were fearful of that the united Blacks might revolt against the Whites' rule. On the other hand, Hindu religion was (is) split into a number of castes and the distinction among them was made (by the law of Manu) so intense that even among untouchable castes, one was supposed to be separated from the other. Sharankumar gives it in *The Outcaste*:

“As children we played a game in which one of us pretended to be a dead animal. The others, about ten or twelve of us, played the role of vultures..... Our playmates included a Mang boy who also was a ‘vulture’, but who, even as we played, kept his distance as he was not supposed to mix with us. (The Outcaste, 15)

The Upper castes didn't need to separate, isolate the Dalits. They had made the Dalits believe that their present suffering was the result of the sin of their previous birth and God had placed them to the situation to take penance to be forgiven; and, only the sufferer might be permitted the birth in the upper rank in next birth (after death).

The Declaration of the Independence of America stated that all men were equal, and the Civil Rights Act of 1866 was passed; but the Whites were not to really let the Blacks do as per the Declaration and Act. So, the Blacks had to struggle for equality even after the freedom which was legally offered to them. There was a feeling of ownership and superiority in the Whites. On the other hand, there was a feeling of slavishness and inferiority in the Blacks till a certain time (after independence). But, when the Blacks started to be conscious of the slavery, the voice against the masters became more and more powerful. The same way, after the independence of India and the acceptance of the Constitution of India in 1950, it was legally cleared that even Dalits had the same value as any Upper Caste; and, whoever breaches the Act of the Constitution, would be considered as doing criminal act. But, the Upper Castes were not ready to accept that immediately after the legal declaration. Time had to be passed to change the minds not only of the suppressors but the suppressed also. Dalits had to strive bitterly to enjoy the rights offered by the Constitution. The changes happened with the Dalits are of the same nature as of the Blacks.

Real Portrait in the Autobiographies: Both autobiographies—*A Black Boy* and *The Outcaste*—show how the literary works of the writers are the natural product of the circumstances of their life. Both simply present the facts as in non-fiction.

Socio-economically, the Blacks/the Dalits were so degraded that these people couldn't afford to take care of their children properly as humans. Naturally, the children want to live freely; but the picture in *A Black Boy* and *The Outcaste* shows that the children were easily taught and trained to think that they were born to live cheap life and they can't be free, respectively, as the Whites and Upper Castes. Physically, they looked hideous, so mentally they were. It is seen in their use of undignified, slang language. If the natural instinct made them mischievous to break the social norms, they would be beaten and made to follow the norms slavishly. So, slavery was cultivated from both sides—the Whites/the Upper Castes and the Blacks/Dalits. In *A Black Boy*, the character of Shorty shows that the people like him couldn't even think of dignity. They would even enjoy the insulting treatment. Richard felt disgust looking at such people. The economical condition made the Blacks/the Dalits socially immoral. Thievery was a common thing among the Blacks. They didn't feel ashamed of it, but they considered it as essential to sustain. The Blacks knew that stealing would cause to send them to unbearable life of jail; but, the unbearable hunger encouraged them to steal. The other black boys used to call Richard as a 'dumb nigger' for his fear about stealing. When Richard told them that one must not steal, they responded, "How in hell you gonna git ahead?" Richard was once involved in corruption while doing his duty at theatre. He tried it to earn money enough to go to North, and not to be rich. Sharan's sister was skillful in stealing. Once, she was bitterly abused and beaten by a vendor when caught stealing. As the writer, Limbale, says that thinking about the morality was not affordable to the Dalits. The hunger had made them thieves.

Both, Richard and Sharan had improper contact in little age. They got used to drinking in the childhood. First time, the customers at the saloon made Richard to drink and speak slang

words just for fun. Then Richard got addicted to it so much that he started to wander at the saloons and beg for the drinking. To earn money to go to North, Richard also did a job as a bellboy to the prostitutes at a hotel. He was waiting for the chance to steal money and run away. At the same, he got habit of seeing prostitutes naked. In case of Sharan, his mother used to produce wine at their own house. The house had become the place of the drunkards who talked with undignified manners.

In *A Black Boy*, it is seen that the food the Blacks got from their white masters, was inadequate, stale and unclean. When Richard got chance to have tasty and ample food on the table, he wished to compress it in his stomach how much it was possible and preserve some of it for next time. Richard's mother was diseased and so thin that she looked to Richard as "a symbol of poverty and the gathered days of hunger". In *The Outcaste*, Sharan always felt half-fed. Whatever was served to him, he found it inadequate to fill his stomach. He would finish his own meal earlier and stare at the plates and mouths of the other members of his family. He would be scolded for it. Sharan's mother thinks of the leftovers as a nectar. After having a school trip, when all the students were asked to write an essay on trip, nothing comes to Sharan's mind, but just the picture of the leftovers served by the Upper Caste students and how they enjoyed it, and how his mother craved for the leftovers as she was deprived of it. Moreover, Sharan's grandmother, Santamai, would wash the grains even from the cow dung which tasted and smelled very bad. In her lifetime she would not get even that. So, Santamai had got the ability to bear and digest such inedible food of which Sharan could not gulp a single morsel.

In his introduction to *The Outcaste*, Limbale says that he lived as an outsider on his own native soil (India) and was feeling alienated not only with the other caste Hindus but also with his own caste people. For his being born as illegitimate—born from a Dalit mother and a Upper Caste father—his own caste people insulted him as impure and made him feel alienated. Nobody was ready to have legal relationship with Sharan as son-in-law. Mallya was Sharan's close friend and his mother also was very fond of Sharan; but, when it came with the issue of marriage between her daughter and Sharan, they rejected Sharan for his impurity (illegitimacy). Lastly, bribing a girl's father, Sharan got married with one, but he was greatly insulted by his in-laws for his illegitimacy. In case of Richard, America was not native land to him; he was the outsider whose ancestors were brought as slaves from their native place, Africa. In his own house, Richard felt alienated with his grandmother due to her white color. But, in the comparison of Sharan, Richard was very fortunate in case of marriage. Without any effort he found that he was loved and respected by a girl and her mother. They treated him with very good manners. Richard felt it as a force and he wanted to make his life partner not so suddenly but thoughtfully. Richard, who couldn't find affection at his own home (with the exception of his mother), was surprised with such unexpected affection. He liked it; but, he had to sacrifice it for the freedom (to go to North).

Both the writers' fathers deserted them and their mothers in their childhood. But, the reasons were different for both. Richard's father, being a slave had to leave family not for his will, but, he was carried away by the white master for the work at another place. Actually, it was the conspiracy to disintegrate the black families. Where Richard's father left, he got there another woman as his life partner and didn't mind to take responsibility of his former wife and children. As a child, Richard thought of his father as cruel and selfish, and hated for that. But, when Richard saw his father after years, he did not blame his father for leaving his wife and children. Richard then realized that the Whites' tyranny had turned him to that situation. On the other hand, Sharan had an attachment for his real (though, illegal) father, for he (as a child) couldn't understand tyranny of the Upper Caste. Later, as a mature youth, he felt no attachment, but a burning with anger for the illegal father and the whole system. The conspiratorial and inhuman treatment had made them behave beastly even with their family members. Here, Sharan's father (legal) had left him and his mother for her virtue was destroyed by Hanmanta Limbale (an Upper Caste). Situation of Sharankumar was inverse to Richard's. To be beautiful was a curse for the Dalit women. Sharan's mother was one of them. His mother was taken away (lured) from her legal husband by Hanmanta Limbale. Sharan was a illegitimate child from Hanmanta Limbale. Hanmanta Limbale didn't take responsibility of Sharan and Sharan's mother. He considered it as a part of his upper caste authority. Enjoying their authority was the suffering of the Dalits.

Like all the Blacks, Richard experienced humiliating and inhuman treatment from the Whites. Like all the Dalits, Sharan experienced the same kind of treatment from the Upper Castes. But, unlike Richard, Sharan experienced humiliation from his own caste (Dalits) also due to illegitimacy of birth. Hybridization (birth from the parents of different races/castes) had set a problem in the families of both—Richard and Sharan. In the concern of Richard, himself was not illegitimate like Sharan, but, his grandmother was a white woman (hybrid). Richard's grandmother was not only physically white but she also lived her routine like the Whites. She forced Richard to be religious according to the Christian faith. Richard didn't like such compelling way of grandmother and hated her. More distinctly, her white color was the problem with Richard that let not create any attachment between them. With the exception of his loving mother, the overall atmosphere made Richard to feel to run away from family. Unlike Richard, Sharan had great attachment with his grandmother; because, she was motivative to him and loved him with no condition. Sharan's grandfather was Muslim, but he treated Sharan humanly. This way, Sharan's family relations were more complex than those of Richard's.

Both the writers asked the questions—why are they in such situation? Are they themselves responsible for it? Or is it conspiracy? The writers wanted to express their feelings and let the others to know about it. The expression of agonies against exploitation is similar in *A Black Boy* and *The Outcaste*. Both, Richard and Sharan question their existence—who am I? Both had realized that they had no individual existence or identity; but they were just a part of society having collective identity—the Blacks/the Dalits. And, if anybody tried to do different from the

collective identity, would be suppressed not only by the Whites/the Upper Castes, but also by one's own race/caste people (especially, one's own family). One had to behave according to the norms fixed by the Whites/Upper Castes; otherwise, one would not be the lonely sufferer, but one's own race/caste people also had to suffer. It is seen in *A Black Boy* that Richard's mother wildly beat him for he should not be pampered and should be able enough to bear the occasional beatings by the Whites. Richard was treated brutally and tyrannically at his own home for he should become submissive as the white people's code of conduct said. Similarly Sharan's revolutionary acts were suppressed not only by the Upper Caste people but also his own caste people for it might create trouble for all the Dalits in the village. When Sharan and his friend complained to police station against separate cups for the Dalits at tea shop, the Dalits as well as the Upper Castes united against them.

The Whites and the Upper Castes had imposed a degraded living, respectively, on the Blacks and the Dalits. No opportunity, no hope they could see to raise themselves from the degraded situation. Parents, too, taught their children to be so as per the norms put by the Whites/Upper Castes. In such condition, a revolutionary spirit is found in both the writers—Richard and Sharankumar, though in different ways. To get relief from slavery, Richard had to move from South to North America. He had listened that life in North was better than South. The Whites, who knew it, tried to hinder Richard from going to North. They never liked any Black to go to North for it meant freedom to the Blacks. In South, he found that opposing the tyranny of the Whites was not so easy; and he would lose his life. Here, Sharan had no way to go somewhere, where he could find better place to live. Everywhere in India was the same situation with little difference; or, there was no way to leave India. The Dalits had to agitate at the same place, from where they had no chance to escape.

Unlike common Blacks/Dalits, education was the power to make the both writers—Richard Wright and Sharankumar Limbale—revolutionary. Richard's mind was haunted by the revolutionary ideas. He started to dream about those things which were stated by the State as wrongs and considered as taboos by the schools. Richard's classmates and teachers felt that he was doing something wrong. They would respond, "Why do you ask so many questions?" or "Keep Quiet." Richard's friend, Griggs, was a representative of the group of the Blacks who also hated the tyrannical Whites, but they thought that it would not be practical to go openly against the Whites. Once, Griggs responded to Richard's revolutionary attitude: "*When you are in front of white people, think before you act, think before you speak. Your way of doing things is all right among our people. They won't stand for it.*" (*A Black Boy*, 186). Richard knew it well that his attitudes and actions might cause death to him, but the fear of death was surpassed by the resent against the tyranny and the atmosphere of revolution. While doing job in the house of a white woman, Richard's changing attitude surprised her. The white woman, with an old mindset about the Blacks, gave stale and unclean food to Richard. Richard, being conscious of self-esteem, denied to eat that food. Though he was hungry, he lied that he had no hunger. He lied for the both, to maintain his dignity and to conceal his objection on food. The white woman was

surprised again, when she came to know that Richard was studying at school and wanted to be a writer. She expressed her surprise in the words, “*You will never be a writer. Who on earth put such ideas into your nigger head?*” Richard’s consciousness of self-esteem made him feel humiliated. So, he left the mistress’ house for not to return to it again. In *The Outcaste*, Sharan was inspired by the Ambedkarite thoughts. It changed his style of living. He would walk with pride in his village by which the villagers would be surprised. In his literature, Sharankumar voices against the unjust social system set and conducted by the law of Manu.

While doing job, Richard had no way to hide his race, for his race (based on color) was not possible to be hidden. So, when he was sent to an orphanage, he wished that his mother should come to meet him at orphanage. Her presence at the orphanage didn’t make him feel difficulty but an ease. The Whites had no problem to be in touch of them. The matter to be hidden was that, the Whites shouldn’t know about Richard’s consciousness of slavery. Richard thought that there would be least or no trouble in the city (Memphis) in comparison of the small town (Jackson). But, the trouble had to pursue his color even in city. In Memphis, Richard had to conceal even his reading from library. Not only he stealthily brought the Menckens’ books from library, but also carefully concealed his knowledge from the Whites. On the other hand, if clad in neat and clean dress, there was nothing to identify one as a Dalit. The matter to be hidden was, that the Upper Castes shouldn’t come to know anyway that one was from lower caste. If it was exposed, the person would be beaten to death. So, unlike Richard, Sharan could hid his identity (caste). So, when Santamai came to meet him at the hostel, he didn’t like it. Sharan could hid his caste from his friends; and, he feared that the lowly living standard of Santamai would expose his identity as Dalit. He felt ashamed of her. While walking towards hostel, he kept some distance from her to show others that he had no connection with her. He then scolded Santamai that she should not meet him at hostel.

The incident of complaining to police against the untouchability at tea shop shows that, Sharan could not only express his revolutionary feeling but also agitate. Comparatively, Richard was far away from this position. The cruelty of the Whites resented Richard; but, he feared that even facial expression of his secret feelings (resent) might anger the Whites to kill him. He tried to suppress it, but even it would differentiate Richard from the common Blacks; the Whites would realize it on his face. Due to this Richard was expelled many times from the jobs. Such an incident in *A Black Boy* that happened once:

Each day in the store I watched the brutality with growing hate, yet trying to keep my feelings from registering in my face. When the boss looked at me I would avoid his eyes. Finally the boss’s son cornered me one morning.

‘Say, nigger, look here,’ he began

‘Yes, sir,’

‘What’s on your mind?’

‘Nothing, sir,’ I said, trying to look amaized, trying to fool him.

*'Why don't you talk and laugh like the other niggers?' he asked.....
'I don't like your looks, nigger, now get!' he snapped. I picked up the money and did not count it.
I grabbed my hat and left. (Wright, 184)*

Richard would join the Blacks, who would gather at one place for lunch after working hours. Having safe distance from the Whites, the Blacks would talk about the ways of the Whites with a sense of violence; but, finding any white man, they would stop to talk and express smile on their face as if they were innocent towards the tyranny of the Whites and weren't talking about them. In *The Outcaste*, Sharan is found to be influenced by the Dalit movement. Like Richard, he also thought that concealing his revolutionary attitude and caste in some situations would be practicable for the safety. So, at the time of the movement for the nomination of Aurangabad university, he concealed his caste as he did job and lived among the Upper Caste people.

Richard didn't believe in God from his childhood despite his religious family background and the force of his white grandmother. He had no problem to go into Church; but he felt no attachment for God as well as the Christian faith. He felt futility in it. The question came always to his mind that why the God allow such injustice in the world. In his youth, Richard was very impressed by the writing of Mencken. On the contrary, Sharan felt some attraction towards God in his childhood. He always wanted to go into the temple despite of the ban on entry. But, as he grew up, his view of God was changed with a question like that of Richard—why God allow such injustice in the world. The conversion movement created the attachment in his mind towards Buddhist faith which was based on justice and humanity. The Ambedkarite thoughts inspired him to live with dignity.

There is an exception to the cruelty of the Whites. Fortunately, Richard came into contact of a white man, Mr. Crane, whose heart was full of humanity. Being boss, he tried to defend Richard from the tyranny of the white employees. The employees didn't like the facial expression of Richard; so, they tortured and threatened Richard for he should leave job from the place. Mr. Crane intimidated the employees; but it was difficult for Richard to continue his job after complaining against the two employees. Like Richard, Sharan also found a kind-hearted and upright headmaster (an Upper Caste) at school. When the headmaster came to know that Sharan had the problem in having the name of his father, he helped him to get the name of his real father (Hanmant Limbale, Patil of Basalegaon). Hanmant Limbale brought with him men with sticks and threatened the headmaster for giving his name to a illegitimate Dalit one. But, the headmaster didn't fear of the threatening. These incidents, respectively, from *A Black Boy* and *The Outcaste* are presented here to show that there were always some exception to the exploiting communities, may it be, the Whites Or the Upper Castes or any other in the world. No man or community in the world was/is naturally cruel in a whole. But, it is also true that the exploiters would not be the frontiers to emancipate the exploited; it needed/needs the exploited to be conscious of self-esteem and come ahead to throw away the exploitation for their own emancipation.

Conclusion: In movements and literatures, the Blacks and the Dalits questioned their situation, roots, social system, norms, traditions, religion which justified the injustice of the Whites and the Upper Castes. Black writers used their pen against racism, to reject their stereotype image, to expose their Black history and richness of civilization. Dalits writers also wrote against castism, to reject their stereotype image in society, to expose the history of uncivilized society of India. Both, Richard and Sharan, could learn the lessons of life through suffering. Richard had the attitude to endure the difficulties. The experiences made him skeptical of everything, tolerant and critical against the intolerant attitude of the Whites. Suffering like other Blacks, he got an insight to look and feel of the sufferings of others. Experiences created in him love for diving into psychology, to be interested into realistic arts, to be loyal with the rebellions. Sharankumar also became bitterly critical against the whole unjust social system. In his theoretical work, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, he criticizes the established Marathi Literature and advocates for a separate theory for Dalit literature as Dalit literature can't be judged with the established theory of aestheticism.

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