

Search for Identity and Social Equality in Sharankumar Limbale's Akkarmashi

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Abstract

This study examines Sharankumar Limbale's autobiography *Akkarmashi* (The Outcaste) as a seminal text in Dalit literature that foregrounds questions of identity, caste oppression, gendered exploitation, and social exclusion. The narrative transforms lived experiences of hunger, humiliation, and illegitimacy into a powerful critique of the Hindu caste system and its moral hypocrisies. Limbale's autobiographical self is shaped by multiple layers of marginalization-being Dalit, illegitimate, and economically deprived-revealing how caste structures deny dignity even after education and economic mobility. The text particularly highlights the systematic exploitation of Dalit women, embodied in the figure of Masamai, whose life exposes the intersection of caste patriarchy and sexual violence. Hunger emerges as a central metaphor, structuring both individual suffering and collective social formation. Through a direct, interrogative style, Limbale challenges dominant narratives of morality, purity, and social order, asserting autobiography as a form of resistance and political intervention. *Akkarmashi* thus functions not merely as a personal life story but as a social document that articulates Dalit consciousness, critiques entrenched inequalities, and calls for a humane, egalitarian reimagining of Indian society.

Keywords: Dalit autobiography, caste oppression, identity and illegitimacy, gender exploitation, Dalit women, caste patriarchy, resistance and Dalit consciousness.

Introduction:

In recent decades, there has been a significant rise in publications addressing the Dalit condition in India. Dalit autobiographies are particularly important among them because they not only describe actual experiences of oppression but also track the development of a unique Dalit consciousness that serves as a parallel intellectual framework. These autobiographies,

which are expressed through particular social settings, memories, and language practices, are potent centers of rage, protest, and resistance.

As a literary genre, autobiography tells the story of the author's life and represents the self. It has grown to be one of the most powerful mediums for Dalit writers, allowing them to portray an honest and unvarnished image of the Dalit life. Dalit autobiography, which has just recently gained popularity in India, is now a key component of Dalit literature. In order to comprehend and interpret one's existence under a hostile social system, memory must be intentionally shaped rather than just being recalled. Therefore, Dalit literature uses clear, expressive language that links individual narrative with more general societal meaning to depict lived human experience.

Dalit autobiographies are characterized by their ability to turn suffering into resistance. Dalits, who have historically been shut out of mainstream public and literary settings, discovered a way to get into the literary public sphere through autobiography. Autobiography became one of the most important forms of Dalit literature, which saw tremendous development throughout India starting in the late 1980s. Autobiography serves as an institutional route into literature and social critique, since many Dalit writers started their literary careers by recounting their life stories.

Dalit autobiographies can be seen as "narratives of pain," in which individual lives are bound into an imaginary community of shared oppression and one experience is connected to another through suffering. Dalit life is portrayed by authors like Dr. Narendra Jadhav, Omprakash Valmiki, and Sharankumar Limbale as being severely damaged by rejection and humiliation. However, rather than trapping Dalits in a state of victimization, their suffering serves as a catalyst for opposition to the brutal and inhumane caste system.

Autobiographies of oppressed cultures place more emphasis on ordinary life than extraordinary accomplishment, in contrast to autobiographies of famous people. Dalit autobiographers frequently show themselves not as distinct persons but as representatives of their society. Therefore, a complicated interaction between the individual self and the group Dalit identity shapes subjectivity in these writings. The mere validity of Dalits as authors has frequently been disputed, and these stories are the result of protracted fights for social stability and the freedom to speak.

By claiming that lived experience and Dalit identity are crucial standards for crafting and assessing Dalit autobiographies, Dalit writers overcome the difficulty of narrative authority. Autobiography is established as a privileged genre by the assertion that only those who have experienced caste discrimination can truly recount it. In contrast to poetry or fiction, autobiography gives Dalit authors an unquestionable voice since identity becomes a source of legitimacy. In addition, many autobiographers defend their stories as reactions to the Dalit community's collective need for representation rather than as attempts to gain notoriety for themselves.

Daya Pawar's *Balutha* marked the beginning of the Dalit autobiography genre. Later works that depicted the harsh reality of disadvantaged populations included Laxman Mane's *Upura* and Laxman Gaikwad's *Uchalya*. Dalit autobiographies gained popularity in 2003 thanks to significant works like Limbale's *Akkarmashi*, Valmiki's *Joothan*, and Jadhav's *Outcaste*, which influenced a new generation of authors.

In general, Dalit writing is a protest against centuries of exploitation that gives voice to those who have been silenced for a long time. It chronicles battles for equality, fairness, and dignity while opposing an unfair societal structure based on caste discrimination.

Sharankumar Limbale is a well-known Dalit author in India who has written up to forty books, including his autobiography *Akkarmashi* (*The Outcaste*). He is currently a professor and regional director at Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University, where he focuses on Dalit identity and struggle.

Akkarmashi by Sharankumar Limbale debuted in 1984. Many autobiographies written by Dalit authors had previously been released by the time Limbale's was released. Therefore, it was inevitable that Limbale's work would struggle to fit in with them. But as soon as it was published, *Akkarmashi* was acknowledged as a modern masterpiece.

Sharankumar Limbale portrays a severely damaged self in *Akkarmashi* as a result of ongoing humiliation from the affluent upper-caste society. The story is heavily influenced by what may be called the "politics of evil" ingrained in caste systems, which routinely deprive individuals on the periphery of dignity. Limbale's identity struggle stems from the fact that he was born into an illicit relationship between a Dalit mother and an upper-caste Lingayat father, making him socially unacceptable and continuously ostracized.

Limbale's early years as an unwelcome and rejected person are starkly and candidly described in the autobiography. Its intense emotional content brings up important social ethical issues, especially those pertaining to the essence of morality. Limbale challenges the definitions of morality and immorality, as well as the ideals they uphold. The work effectively illustrates the suffering and pointlessness of pursuing justice under a morally reprehensible societal structure, even while it admits that there are no definitive solutions.

In Limbale's social and cultural environment, being a single parent can cause severe hardship, even if it might not seem terrible to many readers. Extreme poverty, when existence depends on obtaining barely enough food, exacerbates this suffering. *Akkarmashi* is a very unpleasant story because of Limbale's depiction of deprivation, which is characterized by emotional reserve and reveals forgiveness, compassion, and the capacity to lay aside personal animosity.

The autobiography's delicate depiction of women is one of its strongest points. Limbale depicts widows, abandoned and childless women, and most importantly, his mother, who is frequently taken advantage of and oppressed by social and economic injustice. The author gives the book moral dimension by showing sympathetic empathy and acceptance of their suffering rather than criticizing or feeling sorry for them.

Due to his uncertain parental validity, Limbale is labeled a "Akkarmashi" and is excluded from many aspects of life, including marriage and schooling. The stigma of being "fatherless," which deprives him of an ancestral identity, is more isolating than the communal suffering of Dalits. Paradoxically, this absence becomes his distinguishing characteristic and the main theme of the story.

Indian Dalit author Sharankumar Limbale is well-known for his over forty volumes, which include poetry, fiction, critique, and his seminal autobiography *Akkarmashi* (The Outcaste). Limbale's writing, which is mostly in Marathi, focuses on Dalit identity, struggle, and opposition to caste discrimination. He became well-known both domestically and abroad when his autobiography was first published in Marathi and then translated into many Indian languages including English by Santosh Bhoomkar. Limbale's critical essay *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature* is considered a basic text in Dalit literary criticism, and he has won several prizes for his literary and social accomplishments.

Akkarmashi is a collective account of the horrors inflicted upon the Mahar people by the caste system rather than just a single life narrative. The autobiography uses earthy, rustic language to convey the psyche of both oppressor and afflicted, and it is written in a straightforward yet impactful way. The author's lifetime quest for identification is highlighted by the title, which captures the dynamics of caste and illegitimacy. Limbale's story explores a personal search for identity that is inextricably linked to the Dalit community's history, revealing the cruelty of societal norms that uphold prejudice. The work's candid portrayal of prejudice within Dalit communities is a noteworthy feature.

The autobiography describes how Hanmantha Limbale, an upper-caste landowner, exploited Masamai, Limbale's mother, and her husband, Ithal Kamble. Social power, sexual exploitation, and economic reliance cause Masamai's family to fall apart and her marginalization to persist. Limbale is branded as a "Akkarmashi," or outcaste, growing up as a result of this unequal connection. Akkarmashi offers a potent critique of caste discrimination via these firsthand accounts, demonstrating how structural injustice affects both individual lives and the communal identity of Dalits.

"Once, in summer as usual I was playing with Arjya, a Mang., because by allowing me to drink water from reservoir for Maang he was responsible for contaminating" (Limbale 19-20).

The narrator, a Dalit intellectual, feels conflicted identities on several levels: as an illegitimate, as a Mahar, and even as an educated Dalit who has outperformed his community in social classification while being prohibited by the caste Hindus from moving up the social hierarchy.

In the author's note of *The Outcaste* Limbale writes: "My history is my mother's life, at the most my grandmother's..... I am an Akkarmash (half-caste). I am condemned, branded illegitimate" (Limbale ix).

Sharankumar Limbale reveals the brutal reality of the Dalit life in *Akkarmashi*, especially the systemic abuse of Dalit women. The Patil family treats his mother, Masamai, like a throwaway commodity, denies her acceptance or care, and abuses her on a regular basis. Through this autobiography, Limbale wants acknowledgement of fundamental human dignity within a strict traditional community rather than pecuniary demands or possessions from his biological father.

Upper-caste males frequently disrespected Dalit women, and the majority of these incidents went unreported. As a result, infants were born without a caste, class, or paternal identity. Limbale bravely exposes the moral hypocrisy of caste authority by revealing these suppressed realities. Both Dalit groups and mainstream culture rejected these kids, including him, exposing a multifaceted marginalization. Caste councils, religious taboos, and customs like the Devadasi system that strengthened social isolation and exploitation are also described in the book. Limbale's identity is still erratic; he is educated, Dalit, and illegitimate, but the stigma associated with being a "Akkarmashi" is what most strongly defines him.

“We were all of one womb and blood..... whose name was Yeshwantrao Sidramappa Patil the head of the village named Hanoor” (Limbale 38).

Masamai's existence, which is dominated by the local Patils, reveals how Dalit women are sexually exploited and how impoverished Dalit families are often destroyed. She and her kids were forced to live in Maharwada without social recognition since, as a Mahar lady in a relationship with a Patil, she did not completely belong to either group. Throughout Limbale's *The Outcaste*, this state of exclusion and "hyphenated" identity return. In villages like Akkalkot, Sholapur, and Latur, the autobiography documents frequent humiliation and relocation. Masamai was kept in a leased home in Akkalkot and was purposefully kept apart by Hanumantha Limbale, who took advantage of her physique and denied her caste or familial membership, making her a permanent outcast.

Hanumantha Limbale lured Masamai. She was given a rented house at Akkalkot,...Who's the father of this boy? Hanumantha didn't want any of this to happen, but who can disown a child? A child is a reality” (Limbale 36).

After Limbale was born, Hanumantha had been trying to avoid them and there were quarrels everyday as he didn't acknowledge Limbale as his offspring. Further Sharankumar notes: “Finally my mother and I come to stay with Santamai, my grandmother. Only a mother and the earth can accommodate and stomach everything? (Limbale 37).

Leaving Akkalkot, Masamai went to Hanoor where Santamai, Masamai's mother was living with Jamadar, a Muslim. Sharankumar Limbale calls Jamadar Dada who works as a porter in Hanoor bus stand. In Hanoor, Limbale went under caste discrimination. The untouchable children were not allowed to sit in the class and asked to sit on the platform. Dalit children sat amidst the footwear flung all around them. Limbale states: “During the

short interval, the other boys threw stones at me and teased me calling aloud Mahar” (Limbale 6).

Limbale’s experience at the Barbar’s shop is moving tale. The Barbar was stubborn and not accepted to cut Limbale’s hair. Limbale states: “I was a school boy, and wanted a haircut like that of other boys in the school. So, I went to the barber for the first time”.....“How could this barber, who used to shave buffaloes in the village, refuse to shave my head?” (Limbale 22).

Limbale’s family had not had home to live and spent most of the times inside the bus stand in Hanoor. Limbale writes:“To us the bus stand was like home...We lay like discarded bus tickets. We had to get up early in the morning or risk annoying the driver and the conductor. Once they actually thrum our sheets and rugs out on the road?” (Limbale 42).

Sharankumar Limbale’s *The Outcaste* offers striking illustrations of shame produced by caste hierarchy. An early episode recounts a school picnic where upper-caste children share abundant food with teachers, while Mahar children survive on tasteless leftovers. Hunger becomes a recurring motif, intensifying humiliation when a teacher abuses Limbale as a “beef-eater” and demands an essay he cannot write. Later, during his schooling at Chapalgaon, Limbale gains exposure to Buddhism, which fosters self-respect and critical awareness. Incidents such as being denied cobbler services due to caste further deepen his consciousness of untouchability. Education thus sharpens his understanding of caste oppression and fuels his rejection of its dehumanizing logic.“ Casteism made us bitter. ...We also had to move aside to make way for high - caste persons while passing on the road” (Limbale 76).

The Outcaste focuses on Dalit identity via experiences of humiliation, rage, perseverance, and empathy, all of which are interwoven to give Limbale's autobiography remarkable energy. It serves as a potent social document that exposes caste discrimination and is in line with the broader transformational movement of Dalit literature, making it more than just a literary work. The story details several crimes committed by Hindus from higher castes, especially the sexual abuse of Dalit women, which leads to their systematic isolation. Limbale depicts women in the text—widows, abandoned, and destitute characters—with empathy rather than sympathy, and they represent social pain rather than individual incidents. *Akkarmashi* is an experienced classic of protest and resistance because of his probing,

introspective manner, which is characterized by pointed ethical issues directed to upper-caste hypocrisy.

“Why did my mother say yes to the rape which bought me into the world? ...Which family would claim me as its descendant? Whose son am I really?” (Limbale 37).

Akkarmashi brutally exposes the sexual exploitation of Dalit women by influential members of the Dalit society as well as by higher castes. Limbale illustrates how beauty can turn into a burden since religious practices like devoting girls as temple dancers permit abuse in the guise of devotion, and rural Patils frequently retain Dalit women as mistresses. Due to Limbale's illegitimate birth, which challenges patriarchal ideas of female "purity," the narrative is especially sensitive to gender inequity. Although his gender allows him academic mobility, his illegitimacy exposes him to continuing social disgrace. His anguish at his mother Masamai's life, which was marked by exploitation, desertion, and loss of dignity, reinforces the text's denunciation of caste-patriarchy and shattered community membership.

Dalits were discriminated in the schools as well as at the public places. One day when Parshya and Limbale were on their way to pluck the fruits of a toddy palm, they saw Shobhi an upper caste girl face each other in a narrow path. Shobhi asked them to stay and let her pass. She felt authoritative in voice when Parshya argued. She said ,Mahars have become bold these days. They now dare to walk straight up to you: “Can't you see I am carrying drinking water? Your touch will make it impure” (Limbale 70).

In this regard, Limbale shows that social acceptance could not be obtained by economic mobility, education, or job; caste stigma remained even in metropolitan areas. The pervasive harshness of caste dominance was shown by Dalits' continued exclusion from social life and collective punishment based on baseless allegations.

“Whenever an animal in the village died, the villagers grew annoyed.We had reached a dead end. Such humiliation was agonizing” (Limbale 78).

Limbale's narrative rejects nostalgia, as his past offers only deprivation and hunger. His social protest and faith in education inspire collective uplift within the Dalit community. Through stark, everyday language, Dalit literature records untouchability and poverty, with hunger recurring as the most fundamental and relentless challenge shaping Limbale's experience. “ God endowed man with a stomach. . . . A woman becomes a whore and a man a thief. The stomach makes you clean shit; it even makes you eat shit” (Limbale 8).

Limbale feels alone despite being a part of the Dalit Panther Movement because of the stigma connected with his "impure" origins. Refusing to be humiliated, he achieves intellectual independence via study and begins to see Hindu religious dogma as essential to both his own illegitimacy and his mother's exploitation. He can see caste superiority as a myth thanks to reading. Limbale demonstrates how Dalits are forced into menial work and hunger-driven survival due to the denial of land and resources, further connecting economic hardship to social degradation. His description of Maharwada as "a heap of jowar grains at a corpse's resting place" effectively conveys this widespread poverty.

As the autobiography draws to a close, Limbale challenges the societal structure that still marginalizes him. He observes that his upper-caste associates treat his writing on Dalit concerns with contempt, attributing this rejection to his status as a "outcaste," always existing beyond the social barrier. The story concludes by restating the collective Dalit experience of marginalization, which is influenced by interrelated elements including gender, caste, religion, and illegitimacy. As a result, the term "outcaste" becomes a metaphor for several levels of marginalization that obstruct any chance of complete social integration.

Limbale's choice to give his baby a name that denotes social inferiority is a symbolic representation of this unresolved desire for identity; it simultaneously challenges prevailing value systems and highlights the continuation of denial. In the end, Limbale's main ethical dilemma remains unanswered in the autobiography: what moral standards should he adhere to if his birth is considered illegitimate? The caste-based moral system itself is shown to be empty when there is no response.

A vivid document of the brutality of India's caste system, Limbale's *Akkarmashi* expresses deep resentment and dispossession. The story promotes societal change to challenge long-held notions that uphold inequity. Masamai's abuse by wealthy men serves as a metaphor for the collective pain of Dalit women, who suffer from caste and patriarchal power structures. She is denied family life, social standing, and acknowledgement of her motherhood because she is Dalit, impoverished, and illiterate; instead, she is treated like a sexual object. However, she is the epitome of perseverance and stoicism. Through these depictions, Limbale asks for a societal structure based on fairness and human dignity and criticizes post-independence India's inability to remove caste.

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