

Dalit Identity and Identity Crisis in Sharankumar Limbale's
The Outcaste (Akkarmashi)

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Abstract

The present paper “Dalit Identity and Identity Crisis in Sharankumar Limbale’s *The Outcaste (Akkarmashi)*” of Dalits in Indian society and the search for identity of the author of the Dalit Autobiography. Sharankumar Limbale examines the hypocrisy of the age-old caste system and how its self centered followers commit crimes for their material comforts and luxuries and victimize the so-called untouchables. Dalit literature is the forum and the medium of expression of the experiences of the communities that have been excommunicated, marginalized, exploited and humiliated for ages in the Indian caste-ridden Hindu society. Dalit literature reflects dalit experience and sensibility, attempting to define and assert dalit identity from a primarily dalit point of view. It is a protest literature which faithfully mirrors the stark realities of the dalit situation and becomes an important weapon to strengthen the dalit political movement. Dalits are discriminated against, denied access to land, forced to work in degrading conditions, and routinely abused at the hands of the police and of higher caste groups.

Akkarmashi is the original Marathi version written in 1984 and it was translated into English entitled *The Outcaste* in 2003. Limbale became well-known and popular after his autobiography was published. *The Outcaste (Akkarmashi)* has portrayed the enslaved, exploited and harassed life of a Dalit woman and her children, who are born from different caste Hindu men. *The Outcaste (Akkarmashi)* shows that Dalits have been poverty-stricken people and the system is indeed imposed poverty on them, thrown away to periphery which has almost been completely neglected. Poverty makes the poor to steal eatables, makes them to beg and makes them to tell lies. Limbale writes that he himself had to steal food to fill his stomach, to beg whenever necessary and his grandmother had to tell lies. Poverty even makes them to eat what animals eat when there is no way to have food. For instance, Limbale’s sister had to eat banana peels to satisfy her hunger. Caste Hindus wholeheartedly

love and sympathize with animals, but they are not shown sympathy with the Dalits when they indeed need it. Dalits are regarded as inferior even to animals. Limbale has disproved the system and identified it as hypocritical and guilty. Therefore, he has dared to go against it even if it is extremely powerful and deeply entrenched. However, the very structure of the caste system is quite rigid and has yet to be dismantled forever for the equal social order and wellbeing of all the people in the society. He has created awareness in the minds of radical Dalits in the history of the revolutionary transformation of the caste system by breaking the principles of the caste system.

Key words: identity, crisis, discrimination, marginalized, exploited and humiliated.

The present paper “Dalit Identity and Identity Crisis in Sharankumar Limbale’s *The Outcaste (Akkarmashi)*” of Dalits in Indian society and the search for identity of the author of the Dalit Autobiography. Sharankumar Limbale examines the hypocrisy of the age-old caste system and how its self centered followers commit crimes for their material comforts and luxuries and victimize the so-called untouchables. It further discusses how the victim and protagonist Limbale disproves the system itself, and challenges its long-held beliefs unequal and discriminatory practice against the downtrodden in India.

Dalit literature is the forum and the medium of expression of the experiences of the communities that have been excommunicated, marginalized, exploited and humiliated for ages in the Indian caste-ridden Hindu society. Dalit literature reflects dalit experience and sensibility, attempting to define and assert dalit identity from a primarily dalit point of view. It is a protest literature which faithfully mirrors the stark realities of the dalit situation and becomes an important weapon to strengthen the dalit political movement. Dalits are discriminated against, denied access to land, forced to work in degrading conditions, and routinely abused at the hands of the police and of higher caste groups. *Akkarmashi* is the original Marathi version written in 1984 and it was translated into English entitled *The Outcaste* in 2003. Limbale became well-known and popular after his autobiography was published. *The Outcaste (Akkarmashi)* has portrayed the enslaved, exploited and harassed life of a Dalit woman and her children, who are born from different caste Hindu men. Sharankumar Limbale is the son born to a Dalit woman from a caste-Hindu man. According

to

the social system, he is an illegitimate offspring, casteless and he does not belong to any of the castes and religions. He is fatherless though he has a father, and has no identity. Limbale`s mother belongs to the Mahar caste of Dalits in Maharashtra and his father is Lingayat caste. In fact, his parents are not married as such. Limbale has pointed out in his autobiography that Indian society in general and Hindu society in particular has been extremely conservative, traditional, superstitious, illogical and hypocritical. *The Outcaste Akkarmashi* reveals that since the social order in Hinduism is hierarchical, the members of it at the lowest rung are bound to suffer and get victimized in a variety of ways by the higher rungs of society. Dalits are forced to live life of obedient and submissive slaves who are never supposed to disobey their oppressors. According to the caste system, they cannot try even to meet their basic needs if it is against the system.

The Outcaste (Akkarmashi) shows that Dalits have been poverty-stricken people and the system is indeed imposed poverty on them, thrown away to periphery which has almost been completely neglected. Poverty makes the poor to steal eatables, makes them to beg and makes them to tell lies . Limbale writes that he himself had to steal food to fill his stomach, to beg whenever necessary and his grandmother had to tell lies. Poverty even makes them to eat what animals eat when there is no way to have food. For instance, Limbale`s sister had to eat banana peels to satisfy her hunger. As a result, Dalits in India often have to eat second-hand food, to wear second-hand clothes and footwear and they have to starve. Dalits in Limbale`s locality have to often eat discarded and stale food and they have to eat what is not edible for human beings. Most of them are as good as beggars. Limbale records how his sister and he had to eat discarded peels of bananas as, “By evening the market dispersed. Vani had collected banana skins which people had discarded after eating the fruit. She sat by the street and ate the skins. I hit Vani. I snatched the skins and threw them away to stop her from eating them. Suddenly, though, I changed my mind. I collected the banana skins and wiped them with my shirt as they were soiled. Then I went to the river, sat in a corner and started eating them. When I saw our teacher approaching, I threw away the skins. It was as if I was throwing away my stomach with hunger in it.” (Sharankumar 22)

He writes that sometimes they have to tell lies and some other times they have to steal eatables. Limbale does not mind stealing eatables when it becomes a need. Since they do not have a regular income, paid less than what they deserve to get for their work, they have to depend on their oppressors and everything regarding the life of the Dalits is determined and controlled by the caste Hindus. Dalits are treated as bonded labourers in the social system of Hinduism which is completely unequal and unfair. So, throughout their lives they are made

limited to basic needs of their stomachs because the system is always discriminatory against the Dalits. Sharankumar Limbale, the protagonist is haunted by his fractured identity? 'Am I an upper caste or an untouchable?' Providing rare insights on the question of identity, *The Outcaste* is considered a milestone in Indian literature in translation that helped publicize the Dalit cause. *The Outcaste (Akkarmashi)* presents dark aspects of the Indian society. Dalits and non-Dalits practice untouchability, the powerless and ignorant Dalits are subjected to maltreatment and excruciatingly humiliation. No one finds any logical behaviour and the supporters of untouchability do not strictly follow it. Limbale records as, "This is Narayan Patil's well. Last year the Mahars dig and built it. The spades and shovels of Mahars were used to dig the well. The Mahars gave their sweat for it. They also used explosives. They, the Mahars, are the reason why there is water in the well. But now the same Mahars are not allowed to draw water from it, not even drinking water." (Sharankumar 81-82)

Caste Hindus wholeheartedly love and sympathize with animals, but they are not shown sympathy with the Dalits when they indeed need it. Dalits are regarded as inferior even to animals. Limbale documents: "Hindus see the cow as their mother. A human mother is cremated, but when a cow dies they need a Mahar to dispose it of. The owner weeps when one of her animals dies. The cow-pen looks sad." (Sharankumar 14) Dalits are given inhuman treatment by caste Hindus. If any Dalit lady is good looking and happens to be ignorant, and powerless, she is bound to get sexually harassed and victimized by them. As a consequence, she is hated and discriminated against not only by the caste Hindus but by the so-called untouchables. Masamai is one such victim who has to suffer at each and every step in her life because she has been made to lead a kind of life which is completely against her wish. *The Outcaste Akkarmashi* portrays how the behavior of caste Hindus is quite illogical and hypocritical. Caste Hindus practice untouchability, and unabashedly discriminate the Dalits on the basis of the caste system; they look down upon them because they have a superiority complex. The *Outcaste Akkarmashi* points out that Dalits live in unequal, discriminatory, undemocratic and indifferent. Caste-Hindu men often try to have illegal sexual relationship with Dalit women, "Dalit women were badly insulted. They were beaten as if they were slaves. Some farmers even harassed them sexually, pulled them into the crop, and raped them." (79) Limbale asserts that Dalits are branded as inferior human beings in the names of gods, goddesses, religious scriptures, and such metaphysical phenomena. He exposes the illogical code of conduct followed by the members of the caste system: "I used clean clothes, bathed every day and washed myself clean with soap, and brushed my teeth with toothpaste. There was nothing unclean about me. Then in what sense was I untouchable? A high caste who is dirty was still considered touchable!" (Sharankumar 107)

According to him, Dalits have been forced to live outside the boundaries of the localities of caste Hindus. But when caste Hindu men want to have sex with the Dalit ladies, they openly disobey the social norms as long as they need such ladies for their material comforts and pleasure. Limbale`s caste Hindu father disobeyed the practice of untouchability to have illegal sexual relationship with his Dalit mother. However, he could not go against the caste system and did not look after her and his own son Limbale himself as a responsible husband and father. *The Outcaste Akkarmashi* reveals that in fact it has been a part of caste Hindu men`s lives to use the communal influence and force Dalit women to fall a prey to their sexual lust. Limbale narrates that Masamai (Limbale`s mother) was well settled in her married life with her husband. She was a beautiful woman. Her husband Ithal Kamble was a servant on the farm of Hanamanta Limbale, a caste Hindu married landlord. Kamble`s life was weak in almost every sense because Dalits have been supposed to do only slavish and menial works. Kamble was deprived of every necessary thing to live a human life. He was following the system in a submissive manner. He was an ignorant, poor, and powerless man, working just like a slave for Limbale`s family. Limbale writes: “He was one of the beasts that toiled on the farm. The animals in the shed he looked after were no different from this bonded labourer.” (Sharankumar 35)

The entrenched caste system has determined and maintained the nature and function of the life of the downtrodden. It has made their lives completely dependent on caste Hindus. The root cause of the pathetic condition of the Dalits lies in the unfair structure and nature of the caste system. Being a caste Hindu, Hanamanta Limbale transgresses the code of conduct set by the caste system. He establishes an illegal sexual relationship with Kamble`s wife Masamai, who easily falls a prey to his cunning strategies. As a result, the caste panchayat forces Kamble and Masamai to get a divorce. Now, Masamai is left alone and free. Hanamanta Limbale lures her and keeps her as his concubine. He keeps her using for his sexual lust for a number of months. Hanamanta Limbale does not practice untouchability with Masamai for his sexual hunger. But when a son is born to them, he immediately and blatantly disowns his son, Sharankumar himself. Hanamanta Limbale is not an obedient and true follower of the caste system, but he pretends to follow it. he cannot go against the system, he directly states it is not his son, but someone else`s. That is how he rejects to take responsibility to bring up his own son. He is portrayed as a hypocrite and he is not a true lover of Masamai either. But he pretends to be so and exploits her. He is never concerned about the pathetic condition and poverty-ridden life of Masamai. Masamai and her all children have to suffer from malnutrition. Sharankumar Limble is his son, yet he never cares

for him even though he is a landlord. His activities show that he is a cunning and wicked man. But the system has branded him as someone superior to the Dalits.

Limbale reveals that another caste Hindu married landlord called Yeshwantrao Patil, who produces eight children with Masamai illegally, does not shoulder the responsibility of bringing up the children. All the children go hungry all the time, but Patil is not worried about them at all. He is an irresponsible, selfish, and cunning person. But just because he is born in a caste Hindu family, he is considered to be superior to the Dalits. Hanamanta Limbale and Patil are adulterers and criminals, they are not seen being punished because the system is in their favour. Not only Hanamanta Limbale and Patil are hypocrites but the system itself functions as a hypocrite.

Even the tenets of the entrenched system are not just enough to follow to lead a human life, especially for Dalits. Dalits begin to doubt the sincerity of the caste system and the hypocritical nature of the caste Hindu followers and the system itself. Limbale points out that most of the literate people in India are branded as educated. The highly and well-educated caste Hindu is not able to detach themselves from the influence of the upbringing of the caste system. Most of the time injustice, ill-treatment and atrocities are perpetrated against the so-called untouchables in the rural areas. However, even metropolitan cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, are no exception to it. Whenever a Dalit happens to search a room for rent, he is asked his caste by the non-Dalit house owners. If he tells his caste, which is untouchable, he will not be given a room for rent. In such circumstances the Dalit has to wander here and there in search of a rented room. If he does not get it, he has to go to the Dalits` locality in the city, rent a room live in an unclean locality. At times, they have to tell lies and hide their castes. The author narrates such an incident, “However, I went to Latur. I faced the problem of finding a house in a new town and my caste followed me like an enemy. Latur was such a big place with huge buildings, houses and bungalows, but I was turned away wherever I went. They said frankly, ‘We don` t want to rent out our house to Muslims and Mahars.’ Should I put this town to the torch? Such a big town-but I could not get a single room. Every town and person was caste conscious. This casteism has dehumanized everyone.” (Sharankumar 106).

There is always an impossibility of the termination of casteism and untouchability which is a destructive phenomenon for Dalits it has enabled people of certain castes to be parasites and have privileges, and made people of other castes suffering masses and victims. Limbale focuses that Dalits are ignorant, powerless and unaware of the nature of the truth. They are exploited, subjected to suffering, humiliation and abuses by the caste-Hindus. The non-

Dalits always hate the Dalits because they have no fellow-feeling. Consequently, the downtrodden are reduced to the level of beggars to fill their stomachs struggling for their whole life to earn their bread and butter. So they have no time to think of good or bad, right or wrong phenomena in the life. Limbale is one of the victims of the caste system, which is based on the concept of god, yet he is not completely a staunch atheist. He says that he does not approve of this religion, this country and this god. But throughout the autobiography one can find that hardly any character in it is an atheist. It is extremely difficult for the Dalits to get rid of the clutches of harmful elements.

Limbale describes the Dalits students at school who are victimized by his non-Dalit, especially caste Hindu, teachers and schoolmates. In Indian schools it has been a tradition for non-Dalit teachers and students to harass and insult the Dalit students, and subject them to the works, which are supposed to be done by peons. Dalit students are made to work all the while rather than to make them learn how to study. It can be stated that they are deliberately misguided and their attention is diverted from their studies. It is extremely important to bring about a revolution among non-Dalit teachers so that they would stop discrimination and subjecting Dalit students to dire atrocities and injustices. *The Outcaste (Akkarmashi)* displays that Dalits are treated very badly and subjected to humiliation even to reject humiliation and maltreatment inflicted upon them. They are addressed in an arrogant, disrespectful manner and made to adopt inauspicious names for Dalits in this Dalit autobiography such names as Kacharuajja, which means dust grandfather.

Dalits are helpless and powerless masses. Hence they have to do certain things in secret. People in the world eat non-vegetarian food. But, when Dalits eat it, they have it very secretly because the caste-Hindus consider it wrong though they themselves eat it stealthily and it must be commented the hypocrite nature of non-Dalits. *The Outcaste (Akkarmashi)* exposes that the inferiority complex of Dalits and superiority complex of non-Dalits. As Dalits get comforts, they start suffering. In this connection Limbale documents: "The Hindu community was hurt, because with the facilities given to them, Dalits were getting an education and becoming aware of their rights. A generation of militant youths generated by the movement also threatened the Hindus and the thought of untouchables being contented lives with jobs made available to them, irritated. Dalits refused to do the lowly jobs that they once did for Hindus. Such changes in the Dalit community occurred with their conversion to Buddhism. The thought that the community which had lived the life of cats and dogs for thousand of years was now behaving as equals was unacceptable to the high-caste Hindus. I thought safer to be secretive about my caste in such a terrible situation." (Sharankumar103).

Dalits have to hide their caste identity in order to escape from the calamity brought about by the caste conscious society. They are unable to confront the discriminatory forces in the society, the rejection of the caste Hindus to the reservation policy and they cannot understand the suffering of the Dalits.

Limbale`s life story is quite different from those by other Dalit writers. *The Outcaste (Akkarmashi)* describes that he had to suffer not only at the hands of caste-Hindus but at that of the Dalits because he was born to a so-called untouchable mother and a so-called touchable father. He is a pitiable victim in the caste society. Dalits and non-Dalits have equally subjected him to extreme humiliation and suffering. Limbale narrates one such story in which his in-laws insult him. "That evening my father-in-law came home drunk and picked a quarrel with me. My mother-inlaw was already annoyed with me. Whenever I quarreled with my in-laws, Kusum my wife became tense. The problem of pure and impure blood meant nothing to her. Maryappa Kamble said, 'My son is the president of the Dalit Panthers. He is highly respected by his followers. You say that you are a relative of that Muslim. You are the cause of humiliation for us among our own caste. We have told everyone that you are of pure blood. You must have some self-respect; otherwise don't enter our house.' I felt insulted." (Sharankumar 101).

Though Dalits are the worst sufferers of the caste system, they are unable to discontinue following it. Limbale`s wife comes under the category of exception who with no difficulty accepts him as her husband because for her it does not matter if her husband belongs to an another caste. In other words, she disobeys the extremely powerful system.

When the educated Dalits in the twentieth century, they sometimes directly and indirectly disobey the system. Limbale points out in his autobiography that as he got mature, enough to go against the societal norms and practices which were totally illogical and anti-human. Dalits are not allowed to enter temples, his friend and he himself entered the temple in his village when they were young boys. When they were served tea in separate cups meant for Dalits at a village hotel, they complained against the hotel owner to the police. Dalits have not been considered to be addressed with respect, according to the system. But Limbale began to respect those Dalits who were really respected. He remembers: "I stopped saying 'namaskar' and started saying 'Jai Bhim' instead. I substituted Babasaheb for Ambedkar since it sounded less formal and more respectful." (Sharankumar 86) He criticizes the system and convention. He disowns his father`s caste and wants to get married according to the Buddhist rituals. He realises the importance of the innovative and radical act such as inter-

caste marriages. In his autobiography the author asks a number of questions regarding irrational and inhuman beliefs and practices

The Outcaste (Akkarmsh)i has proved itself as an eye opening autobiography by Limbale. It has depicted that Limbale has emerged as a revolutionary and awakening intellectual. It can be remarked that Limbale has disproved the authenticity of the existing caste system. His autobiography points out that the human beings only are enemies of human beings. Through his continuous struggle against all discriminatory forces, however, he has set an example of overcoming such evil trends in the society. Limbale has disproved the system and identified it as hypocritical and guilty. Therefore, he has dared to go against it even if it is extremely powerful and deeply entrenched. However, the very structure of the caste system is quite rigid and has yet to be dismantled forever for the equal social order and wellbeing of all the people in the society. He has created awareness in the minds of radical Dalits in the history of the revolutionary transformation of the caste system by breaking the principles of the caste system.

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