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SHARANKUMAR LIMBALE'S *THE OUTCASTE (AKKARMASHI)*: PORTRAYAL OF A
DALIT'S LIFE

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ABSTRACT

Like other Dalit autobiographies Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste* reveals the self of a dalit, he has to suffer because of the hypocrisies and the prevalent traditions of the upper caste (Patil). In spite of the provisions in the constitution which safe guard the interest of the Dalits, they have to suffer because of the well defined social hierarchy based on caste, has existed in India from the time of antiquity. The present paper will bring out the life of the Dalits in the post independent India, the economic discrepancy, prevailing caste system, identity of a dalit and practice of untouchability.

Key Words:- Outcaste, Untouchable, Identity, Dalit

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India is known for its peculiar form of caste system. It has stratified the society differencing human beings into upper castes and lower castes. This division has certain religious sanctions, based on which sociologists explain concepts such as 'purity' and 'pollution' (Louis Dumount). These sanctions help the caste system to renew its legitimacy even after they have been challenged over time. Raj Kumar believes:

The caste system - with its myriad variations of superordination and subordination, its confusions and contradictions, rites and rituals, vices and virtues, dogmas and doubts, professions and protests - is able to sustain itself across different regions of India in Varying degrees of rigidity. (Kumar,115)

The untouchables, today known as the Dalits occupy lowest place in the social heirarchization and have been suffering systematic neglect and ostracization in the Indian Society for ages. With the emergence of Dalit literature, which is a part of Dalit liberation movement (Dalit Panther,1972) , the Dalits are now conscious of their being and are ready to interrogate and challenge the hegemony of the upper castes and classes. Autobiographical narratives constitute a significant segment of Dalit literature. Some of the prominent Dalit autobiographies are; Omprakash Valmiki's *Jhoothan : A Dalit's Life*, Laxman mane's *Upara*, Bama's *Karukku*, Narenra Jadhav's *Outcaste; A Memoir*, Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste* etc. Most [of these narratives are tales of personal sufferings of the Dalit writers fused with their interpersonal response and community feelings which they experience in a Hindu society.

Sharankumar Limbale (1956) is an author of Marathi language, a poet, and a literary critic. He has written more than forty books, but he is well known for his autobiographical novel *Akkarmashi*. *Akkarmashi* has been translated into many languages of Indian and in English as well. Santosh Bhoomkar has translated it into English and got it published by Oxford University Press with the title *The Outcaste* in 2003. Limbale's critical work *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations* is accepted as one of the most important work in Dalit literature. The title *The Outcaste* signifies the position of Limbale in contemporary Indian society of 1960s. Society considers him an untouchable, a half caste, and an impoverished man because Limbale was born as the illegitimate son of higher caste Patil and a landless, poor untouchable mother who belongs to Mahar caste.

The objective of the present paper is to bring out the portrayal of a dalit in general with the account of Limbale's *The Outcaste*. It will focus on the situation of the Dalits in an independent India on three major issues; discrimination on the basis of caste, identity crises and economic disparity. Limbale's *The Outcaste* is a frighteningly candid story of his childhood and growth as a person of an outcaste. It is the shattering experience to see in Limbale's graphic depiction of the want and the woes of a Dalit child and later his saintly forgiveness, compassion and detachment. It is this aloofness, and the ability to turn away from the personal, that makes *The Outcaste* a distressing life narrative. In the middle of the narration of humiliation and hunger, Limbale suddenly assumes the tone of a philosophical questioner, who is trying to deconstruct the cosmos:

Bhakaari is as large as man. It is as vast as the sky, and bright like the sun. Hunger is bigger than man. Hunger is more vast than the seven circles of hell. Man is only as big as a bhakari, and only as big as his hunger. Hunger is more powerful than man. A single stomach is like the whole earth. Hunger seems no bigger than your open palm, but it can swallow the whole world and let out a belch. There would have been no wars if there was no hunger. What about stealing and fighting/ if there was no hunger what would happened to sin and virtue, heaven and hell, this creation of God/ if there was no hunger how could a country, its borders, citizens, parliament, Constitution come into being? The world is born from a stomach, so also the links between mother and father, sister and brother. (Limbale,50-51)

The opening pages of Limbale's *The Outcaste* describes the primary school life of Sharankumar which make him aware of being an untouchable/ a Dalit as he belongs to the Mahar community. Here, unknowingly he accepts the difference between the higher caste students and him (a student of Mahar community) because of segregation and imposed differentiation every aspect like eating habits, dressing even in the games.

The Wani and Brahmin boys played kabbadi. Being marked as Mahar we couldn't join them. So Mallya, Umbrya, Parshya, all from my caste, began to play touch and go. We played one kind of game while the high caste village boys played another. The two games were played separately like two separate whirlwinds. (2)

The discriminations and differences towards the Dalits are born out of the Indian caste system. The prevailing caste system in contemporary India is so deeply rooted that it cannot be demolished despite the various constitutional provisions of protective discrimination policies. Dalits still suffer the stigma of untouchability, even after even after caste discrimination has been declared an offence under law. Caste system follows certain religious sanctions and imposes many prohibitions by considering the higher caste as sacred or the Masters and Dalits as untouchable or profane, the service provider. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the prime architect of Indian constitution who championed for the Dalits also considers caste system to be the reason for dividing human beings. By quoting Ambedkar Zakir Abedi mentioned:

Ambedkar strongly states that Brahmins have succeeded "to idealize the real and realize the ideal". "Caste is divine, Caste is sacred". Caste system is not merely division of labour, it is also division of labourers. (Abedi,204-05)

Dalits have been ostracized being stamped impure. A Dalit gets the tag of 'untouchable' categorically on his birth in the low caste and all forms of humiliations become the legacy that he inherits. Limbale describes instances where Mahars are not allowed to enter the temple, not touch the public well or draw water from it

to quench their thirst despite of well dug by them. Limbale writes "the spade and shovels of Mahars were used to dig the well. The Mahar gave their sweat for it...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." (80-81) There are certain sanctioned traditions to which the Dalits are compelled to follow and to which they cannot overcome within the frame of Caste discrimination. Limbale depicts the treatment of higher caste Shivram for a Dalit Rambaap in a scene of Shivram's tea shop in his autobiography. He writes:

Rambaap used to drink water as well as tea and he had to wash the tumblers too before he put them back in their place. He had to put the money for the tea on the ground or drop it from a height into the hands of the owner because for a Mahar or Mang to hand money directly to anyone was a sin. When Rambaap noticed me watching him do all this, he said, 'We are low castes. What you have seen is a long tradition that has come down to us from our forefathers. What can we do about? How can we go against the village customs/' (76)

Most important issue with regard to the fowls of caste system is the treatment of the Dalit women in the society. The hypocrisies of higher caste people are evident with regard to Dalit women. At one place higher caste people maintain distance from the untouchables in order to prevent them from getting impure by touch but at the same time they consider Dalit women as commodities, objects to gratify their lust. Upper caste people sexually exploit Dalit women and are compelled to please them in the name of charity. Limbale in the middle of narration of his autobiography describes the situation of Mahar women as:

People who enjoy high caste privileges, authority sanctioned by religion, and inherit property, have exploited the Dalits of this land. The Patils in every village have made whores of the wives of Dalit farm labourers. A poor Dalit girl on attaining puberty has invariably been a victim of their lust. There is whole breed born to adulterous Patils. There are Dalit families that survive by pleasing the Patils sexually. The whole village considers such a house as the house of Patil's whore. Even the children born to her from her husband are considered the children of a Patil. Besides Survival on the Charity of a Patil what else can such a household expect? (38)

Limbale has portrayed very pathetic image of Dalit women by describing his mother Masamai. Life of Masamai was ruined by Hanmanta Limbale, a Patil who made Masamai to divorce her Husband Ithal Kamble, which later on made Masamai a keep of Hanmanta so as she cannot marry again as man does. Sharankumar Limbale describes the tyranny of sex in perspective of his mother as: "Ithal Kamble remarried. A man can eat paan and spit as many times as he likes, but the same is not possible for a woman. It is considered wrong if a woman does that. Once her chastity is lost it can never be restored" (36) . Further he discussed the cause for being a concubine of a higher caste Patil as to save her children from starvation. Limbale writes:

Masamai and Satamai are not the only examples. They sold themselves to be loved and cared for by someone. They hadn't sold their bodies to appease their lust. Do we exist just for the sake of hunger? Beyond hunger lies a vast life. There is life beyond bread. And yet I had no experience of life beyond this ghetto. (64)

The next focus in Limbale's *The Outcaste* is on the Identity of a Dalit. In general a dalit is identified by the roles assigned to him by the society, the roles here stands for the menial works and as a service provider to the higher caste without any wages. A Dalit is like a slave to the upper caste people they can order him/her according to their wish and Dalit has to execute the same without any resentment. Moreover the critical analysis of Limbale's *The Outcaste* defines the identity in reference to four major aspects. First by birth, second by father's name and lastly by the caste to which he/she belongs.

Throughout his narrative Limbale presents the crises of identity and always look puzzled regarding his existence. Birth defines the identity of a person in a very first stage but Limbale believes that his birth is the curse for him because he was born out of an illegitimate sexual relation of his mother with Hanmanta.. Limbale writes:

My first breath must have threatened the morality of the world. With my first cry at birth, milk must have splashed from the breasts of every Kunti...

Why did my mother say yes to the rape which brought me into the world? Why did she put up with the fruit of this illegitimate intercourse for nine months and nine days and allow me to grow in the foetus? (36-37)

Limbale describes identity formation of a person by his/her Father's name. It is surprising that upper caste Hanmanta Limbale possessed Masamai "like a pet dove" (36) but didn't want to accept her child. He did not acknowledge Sharankumar as his offspring. Later on Hanumanta deserted Masami and Sharan becomes a child who has no name of his father. The society recognizes one with respect to his father rather than a human being. In an incident when Sharankumar Limbale needs a certificate from Sarpanch, he questioned on Limbale's identity:

The Sarpanch was in a real fix about how to identify me. But I too was a human being. What else did I have except a human body but a man is recognized in this world by his religion, caste, or his father. I had neither a father's name, nor any religion, nor a caste. I had no inherited identity at all. (59)

Limbale's *The Outcaste* it is the caste which lends him his identity. The caste designates the position of every person in the society. It is the caste only which tells the history, about the forefathers. The construction of an identity of a person is not possible without the history because it locates the person in contemporary society with his religious and traditional sanctions. Limbale suffers identity crises with reference to caste too. He writes:

My forefathers were Lingayat. Therefore I am one too. My mother was Mahar. My mother's father and forefathers were Mahar, hence I am also a Mahar. From the day I was born until today, I was brought up by my grandmother, Santamai. Does this mean I am Muslim as well? Then why can't the Jamadar's affection claim me as Muslim? How can I be high caste when my mother is untouchable? If I am untouchable, what about my father who is high caste? I am like Jarasandh. Half of me belong to the village, whereas the other half is excommunicated. Who am I? To whom my umbilical cord connected? (38-39)

With all these references the question arises why Sharankumar Limbale is in such a dilemma with regard to his identity? Why he has suffered the situation of without being an identity? It is due to the belonging of his mother to a dalit community. She has been oppressed and sexually exploited because of being a dalit which further destructed the life of her own child (Sharan), who suffered the humiliations and taunts of higher caste people as being an illegitimate untouchable (outcaste) of the society.

Next, major issue in Limbale's *The Outcaste* is the economic deprivation of a Dalit. The Dalits are landless and follow the traditional occupation, which hinders any kind of economic upliftment in the life of the untouchables. They work as labour in the fields of high caste for a small amount of grain. By such prevailing oppression the Dalits have to face hunger and starvation. For them food is god. A Dalit agrees for any type of work to fill his/ her stomach. Limbale in his *The Outcaste* writes:

Every bus meant bread and butter for us. We waited at the bus stand for a bus as a prostitute waits for her customers. The Moment I saw a bus at a distance I became excited hoping that this bus would provide at least a few annas and Dada could buy me a cup of tea. (41)

Further Limbale writes about the pathetic situation of the Dalits because of hunger:

Our village has 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 bear to think of Masami caught between bread and lust. Who will rescue my mother? She will die blemished, an object of someone's lust.(64)

With this Limbale's *The Outcaste* also broaches the question on the Hindu caste system and its religious sanctions, which excludes the Dalit from the main stream of the society proclaiming them as the untouchables. Dalits have been treated worse than animals; they are exploited in every possible ways under the nomenclature of being outcaste. Limbale questions:

How a person born with his caste? How does he become untouchable as soon as he born/ How can he be a criminal by birth? From his feet Brahma gave birth to a vast low-caste community. Since then the community has been living as untouchables. (82)

Further he also questions:

What kind of religious burden do we carry like a porter his load? Why is this burden of religion thrust upon us? Why can't we discard it? How has man lost himself under this huge tree of caste, religion, breeding, family? (105)

In a nut shell by questioning the society, Limbale wants to mark out the Dalits' life in the post independent India of sixties which is full of humiliations and sufferings. It highlighted the hypocrisies and mentality of those who call themselves higher castes; despite of safeguard measures in the Indian constitution the Dalits have been exploited and oppressed due to their low caste, they are socially frail, economically needy and politically powerless. However with the course of time the conditions of the Dalits have improved due to reservation policies. Now they are becoming economically independent and professionally strengthened their position under government patronage but question remains the same till when will they remain downgraded and unaccepted socially? When will the society overcome from the stigmatized identity of the Dalits? These questions are still unanswered even today.

Toward a conclusion it is well observed that autobiography is the awakening consciousness of Dalit identities from his marginalization. It can be said that it's an urge for liberation of humanity from all kind of suppression. Like the other Dalit writers Sharankumar Limbale calls for the humanism, humanity for the Dalits. He speaks for the equality and human dignity of the untouchables. By his autobiography, he wants to establish an egalitarian society which is casteless and classless, where a person recognized as a human being not by his caste or any other differential measures.

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