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SPATIAL DISTANCES AND BINARY OPPOSITIONS IN SECTION ONE OF SHARAN
KUMAR LIMBALE'S *AKKARMASHI*

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ABSTRACT

A good number of Dalit writers have embarked on a mission to narrate the unparalleled experience of living on the edge of Indian villages as untouchables. Living on the edge not only signifies physical segregation but apartness on many levels and kinds. This distancing, casting away is the defining principle of dalit life and identity. And hence, their narratives, poetry, fiction or autobiographies are woven around that leitmotif of distancing. Unlike African Americans where the segregation is based on physical features peculiar to their race the Dalit segregation is based on 'graded inequality' supposedly sanctioned by Hindu scriptures. Occupying the lowest place in the Hindu hierarchical order, the Dalit communities are treated as the 'polluting other' of the upper caste 'unpolluted' Hindus. They are to live on the peripheries of the villages, do all sorts of menial work for the upper castes to enable their 'purity'. In the process, the Dalits are polluted where even their touch, shadow or sight pollutes the upper castes. It is a neat oppressive social, cultural and economic arrangement making these untouchable communities, living on the boundaries of the villages, a sort of collective property of the upper castes. They had to clean the filth, sweep the villages, remove the dead animals but get a pittance to do these 'polluting' work and hence are often forced to beg or steal. They are what the upper/savarna caste Hindus are not. They do what the upper castes do not do. This subaltern condition puts them entirely at the mercy of the upper castes. Hence the rhetorical strategy of their narration is based on what rhetoricians call antithesis and the structuralists call the binary opposites.

KEY WORDS: Dalit Literature, Binary Oppositions, Slave Narratives, Dalit Aesthetics, Caste System, Untouchability, Dalit living experience, Exploitation and Discrimination.

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INTRODUCTION

It is difficult for them (foreigners) to understand how it is possible for a few untouchables to live on the edge of village consisting of a large number of Hindus; go through the village daily to free it from the most disagreeable of its filth and to carry the errands of all and sundry; collect food at the doors of the Hindus; buy spices and oil at the shops of the Hindu Bania from a distance; regards the village in every way as their home – and yet never touch or be touched by any one belonging to the village.

- (*Waiting for a Visa* by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar)

To be born and grow up in the Dalit community is a unique experience of pain and humiliation unparalleled in the human history. To a large extent the ageless subaltern condition could find no expression in Indian literature. Cast/e away to the boundaries of the village, the 'peripheral' presence is entirely written off in the 'Savarna Literature'. Even if it did, rarely, as in the Bhakti Cult (abhang literature in Marathi), the degrading condition was turned into an abstract metaphysical dialogue. The dehumanizing every day material life hardly found any expression until after the colonial period.

The nationalist ideals that brought independence to the country under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi were less successful in challenging entirely the stigma attached to those, who are now being called 'the Scheduled castes'. The village ethnographies of the 1950s, as Ramachandra Guha says 'confirmed that the practice of untouchability continued as before. The Scheduled Castes still owned little or no land, and were still subject to social and in some cases sexual abuse (375). But the oppression did not go unchallenged, as these communities stirred to consciousness by Ambedkar, refused to accept mutely the age old ostracism. The expansion of school and college education and the reservation of seats for these communities opened up new avenues which were unimaginable a few years back. A good number of students found their way to universities and eventually to government jobs.

Dalits, especially in Maharashtra, moved to urban centres like Bombay and were exposed to institutional learning. The 'little magazines' published from such urban centres became the platform to re/present their suffering in the form of literary genres like poetry and fiction and non-literary genre like autobiography. If Dalit poetry challenged the conventional style of writing poetry, while finding suitable forms to narrate their grief, it is the autobiography that could authentically portray the life led by the untouchables at the boundaries of villages. Taking cue from Ambedkar, who challenged Gandhi's romantic notion of micro democratic villages, the dalit writers could successfully reveal the miserable life they led in the villages in their autobiographies.

It was the European Enlightenment's stress on writing as the most visible sign of the ability to reason that encouraged the African Americans to produce literature and demonstrate their capacity for artistic creation and imaginative thought. The very act of writing is a political statement in the African American context. The slave narratives evolved as part of the African American community's liberation struggle. They are the unique product of the historical necessity of not only documenting the physical and spiritual horrors of the author and his fellow blacks but were produced to promote the abolitionist mission in the early 1820s. Same is the case with Dalit writing. The coordinates of pain and suffering, of living a Dalit in India, is comparable in all respects to the life of a slave in the racist America. The two narrative styles adopted by these communities to narrate their lived experience- slave narratives and dalit autobiographies, stand as testimonies to their respective suffering. The slave narratives served their purpose and now scholars trace the narrative's patterns and images in diverse writings at much later period like *Their Eyes were watching God* (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston and in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). Ostracized and distanced for ages Dalit autobiographies appear to remain the only authentic means to prove their presence as humanity. They have the potential to become the sub-text for the entire Dalit literary tradition.

EVOLUTION OF DALIT LITERARY TRADITION/AESTHETICS

Inspired by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's writings, the post-independence period saw a substantial Dalit Literature take shape from the 1960s as part of the Dalit liberation struggle. It was, in a way, a response to Ambedkar's call to 'educate, organize and agitate'. It was a literary form of social protest but certainly not in

the conventional sense. Contesting the traditional notions of literary writing the dalit autobiographies never aimed at aesthetic performance expected in verbal art forms. Because, locating the suffering in a symbolic structure would have transferred the oppression to a metaphysical realm. To do so would have led the narration to accept the age old Hindu 'karma' theory that propounds hereditary which Ambedkar vehemently opposed throughout his struggle. Sharan Kumar Limbale asserts in his book *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*:

Dalit writers cannot forget that Hindu religious literature has nourished the unequal caste system. Therefore they have decided not to use religious symbols and metaphors of Hindu sacred literature. (34)

The everyday pain and suffering cannot be presented in some abstract symbolic structure as the pain is not merely individual. Dalit autobiographies are never individual life testimonies but 'life writing' collective documents. They are what Babasaheb Ambedkar wanted them to be:

The problem is best to give an idea of the way the untouchables are treated by the caste Hindus. A general description or a record of cases and of the treatment accorded to them are the two methods by which this purpose could be achieved. I have felt that the latter would be more effective than the former. In choosing these illustrations I have drawn partly upon my experience and partly upon the experience of others. I begin with events that have happened to me in my own life. (661)

These texts have no "problematic hero"; rather what is showcased through the story of an individual is "a problematic collective situation" (Beverly 95). M.S.S. Pandian citing Bama's narrative says that it "refuses to be her own but that of others too" (130). As Pandian continues "It is as though the autobiographical 'I' does not have an autonomous life outside the collective 'we'" (130).

In her essay on "Dalit autobiography," Ganguly perceptively reconsiders the neat opposition posited in this scholarship between "individualistic" and "collectivist" genres, whereby the individualist genres are seen as "proxies for privilege and power" and as "expressive modes of the dominant majority", and the collectivist genres are "seen as products of marginalization and oppression" and as "expressive modes that draw the readers in as witness to suffering and that aspire to circulate in a communal context of healing, amelioration and resistance" (434). Unlike conventional autobiographies, which are products of bourgeois individualism where the narrator individual carves out his own subjective identity in opposition to the context, the socio-historical conditions in which he lives, the dalit autobiographical narrator/actant speaks as one among the family and community he lives. Hence, these autobiographies helped characterize the term 'dalit' by giving a vivid description of systems of ostracism and its complex effects on communities of people who are pushed historically to the margins of Indian society. Further, the key motif of the slave narratives, literacy and freedom finds significant expression in all Dalit autobiographies making the act an exemplary to his community. The struggle to escape oppression through access to school and education, and then employment is not merely the performance of an autonomous individual but as a member of the community that shares the oppression.

Presenting it in a symbolic structure will amount to locating the source of oppression outside the hierarchy of evil caste system. This would have defeated the purpose of the autobiography as texts of social intervention and counter discourse. The objective of the autobiography, it appears, is not so much to narrate as to convey a message – the message of revolt and refusal. They are not texts of self-pity but a vehement rejection of their subjection. They are life affirming in the face of total negation of their humanity. Dalit autobiographies, like slave narratives, functions as a single sign (Gates 231). As the subalternity is located in the caste-based social, cultural and economic structure of Hindu society, Dalit scholarship rejects the dominant Savarna Hindu aesthetics of Satyam, Sivam and Sundaram (Dalit Aesthetics 20). Stating that 'any aesthetic consideration of Dalit literature must be based on Ambedkar's thought' Sharan Kumar Limbale questions how those concepts of Satyam, Sivam and Sundaram apply to their life and literature.

Stating that these aesthetic concepts (*Satyam, Sivam and Sundaram*) are 'fabrications used to divide and exploit ordinary people' they are actually 'untruth', 'unholy' and 'unbeauty' for the dalits (Dalit Aesthetics 20-21). Limbale's autobiography proves that these 'foolish' aesthetic concepts are inapplicable to Dalit

literature as they are not social and material. For him, a 'discussion' of equality, liberty, justice and fraternity are essential elements of Dalit aesthetics (Dalit Aesthetics 22).

The condition of untouchability is a host of experiences that are something unique and distinct. Alok Mukherjee, Limbale's translator of *Dalit Aesthetics* finds Indian Literary theory with its emphasis on emotions and feelings (*rasa*) or contemporary western theory with its focus on unstable individual identity not suitable for the purpose of Dalit literature (10). The 'authentic' experience of the Dalits is seemingly unalterable and quite unlike any other group of community like the poor, the colonized or the ethno-racial minority who can hope to alter their condition (Mukherjee 10). Being part of the Hindu society, the Dalits are apart from it. They are the upper caste Hindu's 'other' living on the periphery of Indian villages. Mukherjee says, Dalit settlements are not only apart from the upper caste Hindu settlements, they are actually outside the boundary of the village. This physical segregation signifies other segregations (10). So antithesis is the rhetorical strategy that Limbale like other Dalit autobiographers uses to take on the segregation.

Binary Oppositions in Section One of *Akkarmashi*.

Binary opposition, the fundamental principle of language formation, the elementary logic which is the smallest common denominator of all thought according to Claude Levi Strauss serves Limbale's purpose of proving the humanity of the Dalits against the inhumanity of the caste system. Gates quotes Frederic Jameson's *The Prison House of Language*, to bring out the usefulness of this technique:

"the binary opposition is . . . at the outset a heuristic principle, that instrument of analysis on which the mythological hermeneutic is founded. We would ourselves be tempted to describe it as a technique for stimulating perception, when faced with a mass of apparently homogenous data to which the mind and the eyes are numb: a way of forcing ourselves to perceive difference and identity in a whole new language the very sounds of which we cannot yet distinguish from each other. It is a decoding or deciphering device, or alternately a technique of language learning. (232)

It means, as Jameson concludes, these relationships embody a tension in which one of the two terms of the binary opposition is apprehended as positively having a certain feature while the other is apprehended as deprived of the feature in question (Gates 232). Derrida has demonstrated that every binary conceals within it an implied hierarchy of values which he strove not to reverse, but, more radically, to undo both the opposition and its implicit evaluation of one term as superior. Like Douglass *Narrative* Limbale's *Akkarmashi* cleverly puts to use the binary opposition as a decoding device. As Gates explains, the technique allows the two opposing terms to be brought together by some quality that they share and are then opposed and made to signify the absence and presence of that quality (232). That happens when two terms are set in opposition to each other, the reader is forced to explore qualitative similarities and differences, to make some connection, and, therefore, to derive some meaning from points of disjunction (232). In the case of Dalit autobiographies this device is used to explicate 'distancing', the physical segregation, which is the defining principle of 'untouchability'. The first chapter of *Akkarmashi*, like Douglass *Narrative*, brings out the entire 'system of signs' that portray a village (the metropolis of discrimination) and its rigid practice of caste hierarchy. In short Limbale's conception of the world is the function of a system of binary opposites imposed by the Hindu Caste System. Following Ambedkar's autobiography that describes his childhood journey and the humiliation he underwent in school the first chapter of Limbale starts with his school life. The school picnic was an event to explain the barrier of caste that separates the children:

The Wani and Brahmin boys played Kabbadi. Being marked as Mahars 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 boys played another. The two games were played separately like two separate whirlwinds. (2)

By noting this separation among boys, and the games they play in the picnic, Limbale shows how caste hierarchy is inculcated from childhood that separates them all along. Picnic is usually an excursion to the countryside by the members of a group (school, office, associations, clubs etc), who take a day off from the routine where all the members irrespective of hierarchy are supposedly to come together, share food and

involve in activities of entertainment. Boys of an age group or of a school tend to come together to play in a picnic. But that is exactly where they are groomed to develop apartness based on caste. Even the games the two groups play are different – Kabaddi by the upper caste and touch-and-go by the untouchables.

Spatial distancing is an important signifier of the grotesque practice of untouchability. The untouchable children are made to sit separately under a ‘tattered tree’ which hardly gives shade, while all the high caste boys and girls, about a hundred or so sit under a banyan tree. The large canopy of the cool, shady, and protective banyan tree under which the teachers, boys and girls of upper caste sit is like their upper caste status. The sign that Banyan tree is India’s National tree cannot be ignored here. The untouchable boys have to sit under a nameless tattered tree that hardly protects them from the waves of hot air that hit their faces. Picnic is an important social occasion for bonding among children but in the life of an untouchable child it becomes a grim remainder of his low and separate status. Limbale’s narrative strategy seems to be this: He brings together the common contexts that the children share – school, picnic, boyhood, and playing; but then makes the contexts signify the inflexible barrier of caste and its meaning. The caste code that the village imposes defies the natural, social and moral order.

After the play comes the food. While the high caste children ate ‘a variety of fried and tasty food’, the untouchable children had just pieces of dry bhakarīs, which were hardly enough to satisfy the *cave* of hunger’ (2). The high-caste children could offer their tasty food to the teachers but can the untouchables dare offer them their dry –bhakarīs, questions Limbale. Satisfying hunger is not a natural process for the Dalit child, nor is it merely the consequence of poverty but another occasion for dehumanization of Dalit communities. Limbale notes with pain:

The high-caste girls from our village offered us their curry and bhakarīs without touching us. The thought that they might have seen our food upset me. I was ashamed of my food and felt guilty eating it. (3)

Hunger, in the Dalit context is not merely the sign of poverty but the result of structural discrimination based on caste. Denied any land to grow their own grains the caste system forces them to live on the garbage and the leftovers of the village. What G.N.Devy, says about Laxman Gaikwad’s *Uchalya* about hunger is true about ‘the narration’ of all Dalit autobiographies that these texts are ‘acutely informed by what may be called the politics of hunger’ (xxii). Limbale says:

My stomach was like a way to the graveyard that continuously swallows the dead. My mother Masamai used to shout angrily. ‘what is it you have, a stomach or Akkalkot? There seems to be a gizzard in your stomach. Why don’t you go around with a big bowl at your mouth? I always felt half-fed. Whatever was given I ate greedily and nothing was ever enough. Everyone in my house needed food so how could I alone think of eating till I was full? I had searched for every bit of leftover food in the house to make up my tiffin. I felt I had swallowed the whole land and was chewing stones. (3)

The stomach which takes food to give life becomes a graveyard that swallows the dead for the Dalits. This painful reality of the living/dead condition of his community is enacted during the picnic of the children when the teacher asks the high caste boys and girls to collect the leftovers on a piece of paper and give it to them (3). While the high caste boys and girls are laughing and joking the dalit boys attention is on the bundle of leftover food. They follow the bundle like ‘vultures’. Limbale’s language and the metaphors and images he invokes are something that are diametrically opposite to that used in savarna literature. Unlike the gentle pigeons and the colorful peacocks of upper caste literature the ‘Mahar boys, are like hungry vultures that follow the left over bundle of food given by the high-caste boys and girls. Vulture, the bird that scavenges the dead carcass or bats (Joshua a telugu Dalit poet uses it as the title of his seminal work – Gabbilam) become part of the imagery of Dalit writings. The similes and metaphors used by Limbale should be noted not for their novelty but for their appropriateness, because they are closely associated with the life the Dalits led. Vultures have shared the dead carcass of the village cattle that the Dalits are compelled to eat. The ‘stomachs’ of the dalit children ‘were as greedy as a beggar’s sack’ or the graveyard that continuously swallows the dead (3). The close resemblance of the sack and the stomach and the act of taking the leftovers ‘gluttonously’

amounting to begging are all poignant comparisons. One cannot evade the contextuality of the simile as the Dalit boys have just gulped a variety of leftover food given by the high-caste boys and girls like the beggar receiving a variety of leftovers.

Finally, the teacher asks the boys and girls to write an essay on the picnic. When Sharan was found not writing the teacher abuses him as a 'son of a bitch' and compels him to write. In the following pages of the autobiography the reader comes to know that Sharan is the illegitimate child of an uppercaste father and a Mahar mother. The father who exploits the Mahar woman's poverty for pleasure (Sharan calls it rape) is not obliged in any manner to acknowledge the offspring. This privilege is granted to him by the caste system. Here comes the perversity of the caste order. The high caste society ordains that even the touch or sight of the Dalit pollutes them but permits illegitimate relationship between a high-caste man and a Dalit woman. This shows that all the signs associated with caste order are only arbitrary and not fixed. The very fact of illegitimate relationship between the 'pure' upper caste man and the 'polluting' Dalit woman belies the metaphysical suppositions on which is based the caste order. This offspring of the illegitimate relationship, half Mahar and half Lingayat not only contests the caste order but proves that the entire structure is arbitrary.

The compelling teacher representing the society forces the Dalit boy to narrate his experience of picnic. Limbale closes the section with the question, 'How should I start writing the essay my teacher had asked for?' (4). The following pages of the autobiography is the essay the teacher/high-caste society had asked for. The 'untruth', unholy' and unbeauty' of the caste code that oppressed the Dalits for ages gets revealed. Limbale's autobiography is the complex mediator between the world as the teacher would have it (the pleasant experiences of the picnic) and the world he knows it really is:

I didn't know how and what to write. I kept thinking of how we had squatted in a circle under a tree in the forest, eating. I remembered the hands of high caste boys and girls offering us their leftovers, the withered tree in whose shade we sat, the bundle of leftovers, the question my mother had asked, and the teacher calling me a son of a bitch and a beef-eater. (4)

CONCLUSION

Compelled to write Limbale's linguistic paradigm reveals a mnemonic series of 'unbeauty' signs like vulture and owl, famine, beggars sack, beef eater, son of a bitch and graveyards. It is up to the teacher and the high-caste society he represents to wake up to the reality of the symbolic code of the caste order that created false oppositions. The 'unbeauty' aesthetics of Dalit writing is the result of the 'unholy' 'untruths' imposed on a section of humanity by the caste order. However, Limbale's aesthetics of 'unbeauty' is not a mere reversal of signs in the binary unit but serves to undo both the opposition and its implicit evaluation of one term as superior. Finally, his language of 'unbeauty' signifies the presence and absence of something – in this case, humanity. It helps him explicate his understanding of himself and of his relation to the world through the system of perceptions that defined the world the caste Hindus imposed on him and his community. Indeed, the text and its language helps the writer to transform his (Dalit) mother as an object of lust to a sublime identity as human being and subject.

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