

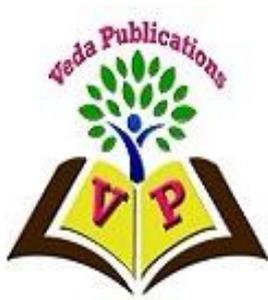


## RECONNOITERING THE EXPERIENCES OF DALITS IN SHARAN KUMAR LIMBALE'S *AKKARMASHI (THE OUTCASTE)*

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### ABSTRACT



Dalit autobiographies are an integral part of Indian Dalit Literature. Some Dalit autobiographies are written in English language while other are written in regional languages and later were translated into English. The exploitation, suppression and marginalization of Dalits are dominant themes in almost all Dalit autobiographies. As Dalits belong to poor marginalized categories, the upper caste people never hesitate to exploit them whenever they get opportunity. Dalits work under them and even after the hard-work throughout the day, they cannot ask for their wages. Dalit writers have taken to writing autobiography for they see it as the most potent weapon to portray the dreadful and humiliating events of a Dalit's world and thus to dismantle the caste-system responsible for their untouchable status and to rebuild society on the principles of human dignity, equality and respect. Sharan Kumar Limbale's autobiography *The Outcaste* is one of such Dalit autobiographies in which the saga of sorrows, miseries, poverty and hunger has been very deftly explained. The present research article is an attempt to study the life of dalits in post independent India, the economic discrepancy, prevailing caste system, identity of a dalit and practice of untouchability.

**Keywords:** *Dalit, Caste System, Autobiography, Oppression, Discrimination.*

### Citation:

- APA** Saini, R. (2016) Reconnoitering the experiences of Dalits in Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi (The Outcaste)*. *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature- JOELL*, 3(4), 6-10.
- MLA** Saini, Rajni. "Reconnoitering the experiences of Dalits in Sharan Kumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi (The Outcaste)*." *Veda's Journal of English Language and Literature-JOELL* 3.4(2016):6-10.



## INTRODUCTION

Literature, since the time it has been written, has tried its best to entertain the readers and it also mirrors the evils like casteism and untouchability. Literature is considered as the mouth piece of the society in which it is written. So, it was the power of words that empowered Dalits to put across their voice, so that people may understand what wrongs have been done to them. Words are used as weapons to express their trauma as well as anger against the wrongs and ill-treatment meted out to them. The aim of Dalit Literature is to protest against the established system which is based on injustice and to expose the evil and hypocrisy of the higher castes.

There is an urgent need to create a separate aesthetics for Dalit literature, an aesthetics based on the real experiences of life. (The Aesthetics of Dalit Literature) The Indian writers in English have ignored the Indian reality for a long time. But on the other hand the regional writers, writing in their own languages present a comprehensive and crystal clear picture of her community.

Sharankumar Limbale is regarded as the most prolific writers of contemporary literature whose literature aimed to expose the brutality of the upper class in Maharashtra. Limbale is a socially committed novelist has produced a good deal of literature. He has written articles and essays on a number of subjects. His novels fall into two categories namely social and autobiographical novels. He focused his attention on the sufferings, misery of the Dalits as a result of the exploitation of the downtrodden class of the Indian society. Caste discrimination, hypocrisy, caste system, the place of Dalits in the society, poverty, hunger, exploitation and protest are his common themes. *Akkarmashi* is an autobiography written by Sharankumar Limbale, it was first published in 1984. It was translated into English by Santosh Bhoomkar as *The Outcaste* in 2003. It puts forth Limbale's life as an outcaste. The word *Akkarmashi* is a Marathi word which means a person whose birth is illegitimate or one who is an outcaste, Mahar community calls him *Akkarmashi* because his father is a high-caste man and the high-caste people call him an untouchable because he is

Mahar. It is about an untouchable family in general and community struggles in particular.

The author narrates about how an innocent Dalit couple Kamble and Masamai are discriminated and exploited an upper caste landlord Hanmantha Limbale for whom the poor couple used to work day and night. Ithal Kamble, Masamai's husband is a farm worker on a yearly contract to Hanmantha Limbale and it was a job worth seven or eight hundred rupees. Ithal Kamble toiled on the farm of Hanmantha and was helped by him during hard times. Hanmantha Patil ruined the poor family and it led to the separation of Ithal Kamble and Masamai forever. After the divorce with Masamai, Kamble left the place with two sons Suryakant and Dharma and remarried a woman who is also a widow. Masamai remained a keep of Hanmantha Limbale and gave birth to Sharan Kumar Limbale. Masamai was given a rented house at Akkalkot. Limbale writes:

After my birth the mansions of the Patil community must have become tense. 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." (Limbale 36)

Limbale states that to be born beautiful among Dalits is a curse. As Masamai was beautiful, she was lured by Hanmanth. She was made separate from her husband and suffered a lot in her post-widowed life. Though Hanmanth enjoyed the beauty Masamai, he was self-conscious that Masamai was a Dalit and tried to avoid her. He also commented that the newborn child was looked after by Bhondya, the potter. Limbale writes, "Finally my mother and I come to stay with Santamai, my grandmother. Only a mother and the earth can accommodate and stomach everything?" (37)

The upper caste men in every village had made whores of the wives of Dalit farm labourers and Masamai was one among them. After divorced from Ithal Kamble, Masamai gave birth to Sharan Kumar Limbale. Limbale's birth is the result of Masamai's private and helpless relation with Hanmantha Limbale, the village Patil. After Sharan Kumar and Nagi, Masamai gave birth too many children that include, apart from Sharan Kumar and



Nagi, Nirmi, Vani, Suni, Pami, Tamma, Indira and Sidramma. Limbale writes:

“We were all of one womb and blood. We shared a common mother but different fathers...I was born from her affair with Hanmantha Patil. Masamai had Nagubai, Nirmala, Vanmala Sunanda, Pramila, Shrikant, Indira and Sidram from Kaka, whose name was Yeshwantrao Sidramappa Patil, the head of the village named Hanoor.”

“A life is not mine but it is a slavery imposed upon me”. This negative attitude is the central idea of Sharankumar Limbale's autobiography, *The Outcaste*. Sharankumar was identified as illegitimate by his community, because he was born of a sexual relationship outside marriage, between an upper caste man and a Dalit woman. The usage of the word illegitimate is not specific to the circumstances of Sharankumar's birth alone, but also encapsulates a significant facet of the Dalit's situation of marginality. That makes him *Akkarmashi: The Outcaste*. Due to Limbale's fractured identity, the narrator suffered his entire life was the fact that he had no identity, no home or place of belonging. He could not get certain papers signed for school because he could not properly identify his caste by his mother or father, and they would not accept his grandmother as his guardian because she lived with a Muslim. When it came time for marriage, he could not even get married to an outcaste girl because his blood was not pure; he was not wanted anywhere. The clouds of doubt and identity hung over this poor outcaste boy his entire life. However, in several acts of incredible strength and bravery, he did not allow these socially constructed walls to stop him from getting an education and eventually publishing his story. He came to realize the depth of division caused by the conflict between Hindus and Muslims and chose a separate path for him in what he considered to be the warm embrace of Buddhism.

The opening pages of Limbale's *The Outcaste* describes the primary school life of Sharankumar which makes 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) 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, is 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.” (Limbale80-81)

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 him 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?’ (Limbale76)

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? (Limbale38)

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. (Limbale 64)

Limbale also relates how he owns his name to a sympathetic teacher:

The teacher decided to enroll my name in the register after I attended school regularly for four to five days. When he was convinced that I was serious about my schooling he asked me my father's name. I did not know my father's name. Strange that I too

could have a father! . . . . The teacher Bhosale by name would sarcastically call me the Patil of Baslegaon. I felt good as well as bad to be called Patil. The name of Hanmanta Limbale, the Patil of Baslegaon, was added to my name in the school record. When Hanmanta came to know this he arrived with four or five rowdies. . . . But Bhosale, the head master, was an upright man. . . . Hanmanta tried all his tricks desperately. He even pleaded. Finally he had to go away unsuccessful. I owe my father's name to Bhosale, the headmaster. (Limbale45)

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 way 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. (Limbale82) 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? (Limbale105) Dalits help in maintaining the purity of the upper caste Hindus. While performing this very task they pollute themselves.

Limbale belongs to „Mahar“ community. Limbale himself writes: “My mother is an untouchable, while my father is a high caste from one of the privileged classes of India... Father is a landlord; mother landless. I am an akkarmashi (half – caste). I am condemned, branded illegitimate.” (Akkarmashi, pg. IX). As a Mahar child he faced the hostile treatment and antagonistic attitude of his upper – caste classmates and friends. Even the teachers asked him to “smear the floor and walls with crowding paste” (Limbale 9). Such innocent kids suffer from the pangs of alienation. Limbale's expression of this feeling needs the special attention of readers when he writes “We had grown up like aliens since our infancy. This sense of alienation



increased over the years and to this day my awful childhood haunts me." Whenever his school was held in Marwari's mansion, mahar boys of his community "had to sit on the floor whereas the other boys sat on a raised platform." About his friends he writes: "Heaps of garbage, tin shades, dogs, and pigs were our only companions." The callous attitude of his school-mates was intolerable. He had many brothers and sisters. Sharing the same mother they all had different fathers. At times Nagi (his sister) used to say that "You have no connection with us. Nobody knows where you come from". Such words pierced his heart. He himself writes that "The feeling of alienation weighed heavily on my mind". (Limbale63)

### CONCLUSION

Dalit literature looks at the things from the Dalit's point of view. It aims at creating awareness among Dalits and so-called untouchables to rebel here to against the oppression and injustice perpetrated on them. The Dalits ousted to the village outskirts lead an inhuman life. Eternally deprived with no money, no land, no work and no education these people falter in darkness with no realization of human worth. What is evident from the text is that, they never think; rather accept this suffering as their lot. They depend on the Savarnas in the village for work and food. They do not think beyond these basic needs. Men are drunkards and women are exploited by the villagers. From this perspective it is a collective past, Limbale is each and every Dalit deemed untouchable. As a Dalit Intellectual, the narrator experiences split identification at various levels – as an illegitimate; as a Mahar and even as an educated Dalit who has advanced in social order than his community but at the same time forbidden to step up the established social order by the caste Hindus. *The Outcast*, as an autobiography exhibits all the features and qualities of a true life story. But the relevance of this work is beyond the boundary of an autobiography since it stands as a symbol for the untouchable or Dalit community. As a result it could be placed on the high pedestal of Indian literature. Limbale's struggle described so graphically is symptomatic of the extent of the challenges involved in the process of reclaiming dignity for himself and his community.

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