

# ECHOES FROM MARGINS: ISSUES OF SPLIT IDENTITY AND MARGINALIZATION IN SARAN KUMAR LIMBALE'S AKKARMASHI

Indu A S  
Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham (Deemed University)  
Kollam, Kerala, India

*Abstract:* Dalit literature, generally considered as the literature of the Dalits, by the Dalits and for the Dalits aims at the liberation of Dalit folk from the oppressive structures and marginalized status in the Hindu society. Writing acts as powerful catalyst for the dalits to reveal their experiences and sufferings and a spirit of protest against the upperclass in a provocative language. Dalit literature narrates a prevalent level of exploitation and life condition of Dalit community in a very intensive and extensive manner. Sarankumar Limbale's Akkarmashi or The Outcaste is an emotionally violent autobiography of a marginalized growing outside the territories of the Hindu caste as a half-caste. He suffers the anguish of being torn between two castes, not fully belonging to any. This paper makes an attempt to understand the voice of the dalits, the problems of fractured identity, untouchability and education as pictured in the Akkarmashi, the autobiographical narrative. Limbale projects before the readers the social and cultural conditions of his community and the humiliation they experience from the privileged class and their hopelessness and helplessness.

Index Terms: oppressive structures, half-caste, anguish, fractured identity

The word Dalit is often referred to broken downtrodden people who become deliberate victims of exploitation by the upper class people in a hierarchical social order. Writing has become a tool for Dalits to describe their experiences and a spirit of protest against the upper class thereby sharpening the Dalit assertion through mobilization and building of an identity. Dalits have succeeded in creating a specific genre in Indian literature across several languages through their continuing demands for equality and human rights. Dalit literature is essentially a protest literature that strongly opposes social evils prevailing in the society, like discrimination and untouchability as the ground realities of the Dalit community. It attempts to generate a new sense of literary aesthetics with a high level of thinking that reflects the changing nature of the community and provides meaningful insights to analyze and understand the nature of Dalit consciousness. In its initial stages, Dalit literature was identified as specific reactions against everyday humiliations that individual dalits and dalits as a community were facing. Later they have challenged the hegemonic conventions and value systems that deny 'space' for the untouchables within the boundaries of the uppercaste discourse. Dalit literature poses a major challenge to the dominant episteme by insisting presentation and a representation of socio-cultural and political reality.

The greatest efforts that the modern Dalit writers brought to academic discourse are their living experiences written by themselves. Dalit autobiographies attempt to re-arrange the traditional paradigms by shifting the right of representations to the Dalits themselves.

Such a representation has been made in Sharankumar Limbale's autobiography *The Outcaste* (2003) which is translated into English by Santosh Bhoomkar from its original Marathi book *Akkarmashi*. *Akkarmashi* projects before the readers a clear picture of the extremely conservative, traditional, superstitious and hypocritical Indian Hindu society and at the same time a shocking picture of the Dalits who are forced to live the life of submissive slaves who could never disobey their lords. They cannot even try to meet their basic needs, if it is against the caste system. Limbale through the narrative highlights the level of exploitation, the terrible face of untouchability, the pain of hunger, the sufferings due to

discrimination and humiliation etc. which is inherent in the caste system, and above all reflects the traumatic experiences he had owing to a fractured identity in the society. Born of a high caste father Hanmantha Limbale, a Patil and a low caste mother Masamai, a Mohar woman, Limbale becomes an “Akkarmashi”.

Akkarmashi in Marathi language means eleven. It needs another one to complete a measure which is made up of twelve units. The curse of being an Akkarmashi follows him throughout his life especially in his most decisive moments in life like seeking an admission in school, taking bank accounts, proposals for marriage etc. Sharan narrates how he faced a dilemma of being fatherless when he went to open an account in a bank. He did not know what to write when he had to write his father’s name in a column. Hanmantha Limbale, the Patil intentionally ruined the poor, but happy family of Masamai, who used to work for the Patil day and night. Hanmantha Patil’s aim was to keep Masamai as his concubine. He enjoyed and exploited the beauty of Masamai, but when a son was born to them Hanmantha Limbale was not ready to acknowledge the baby as his offspring. He did not want to own the paternity of a Dalit woman’s baby. He even commented that the new born baby looked like Bhondya, the potter. Thus Sharan was denied his identity even by his own father.

Sharan had to suffer this agony throughout his life since childhood. At the time of his highschool admission, he could not get certain papers signed for school because he could not properly identify his caste either by his mother or father. In fact he was having a split identity. He could not nominate his grandmother as a guardian because the authorities could not recognize her as a Hindu as she lived with a Muslim. Sharan laments:

“I am also a man. What else do I have other than a human body? A man is recognized in this world by his religion, caste or father. I do not have a father’s name, a religion or a caste. I had no inherited identity at all.” (59).

As he was born to an upper caste Patil Sharan could have been an uppercaste. But he cannot claim to be so when his mother belongs to Mahar caste. Limbale writes “...whom am I? To whom is my umbilical cord connected.” (39). This trauma of being casteless deprived him of any identity and he was considered to be an outcaste or Akkarmashi, even in his own community.

Sharan was humiliated not only by the society but also by his sisters as well. Nagi, one of his sisters once got annoyed and abused him, “You have no connection with us. Nobody knows where you come from... Our fathers are not the same.” (63). On hearing these words Limbale felt a burning within. He laments “Nagi’s words pierced my heart. The feeling of alienation weighed heavily on my mind” (63).

He was not allowed to sit in the Dalit community hall, as it was not his father’s community hall. He felt humiliated in the Maharwada and was considered a bastard. “I am an alien..... they called me Akkarmashi”. The problem of fractured identity haunted Sharan when certain proposals of marriage came. He was rejected by all because he was not of pure blood. After his marriage also he felt such insult from his in laws for being fatherless and thereby having impure blood.

The experience of exclusion and untouchability highlights as the text projects the segregation of Dalit houses outside the boundaries of the village. The Dalits are not allowed to enter the temple in which the uppercaste would go for worship. Their entrance to the temple would pollute the God. Limbale laments: “We are supposed to say our prayers from the steps outside. Our entering of the temple will make God impure” (62). Limbale wonders why Dalits are kept away from other human beings: “Why this discrimination between one human being and another? After all isn’t everybody’s blood red?” (62). The curse of untouchability and discrimination followed the dalits at public places as well. They were asked to stay away when they come face to face with uppercaste people at public places. Limbale narrates an incident that made a blow of insult upon him and his friend Parshya when an uppercaste girl Shobhi scolded them for not staying away from her path. She asked, “Can’t you see I am carrying drinking water? Your touch will make it impure.” (70). The girl appeared to them as a symbol of caste system.

*Akkarmashi* reveals the pathetic conditions of the Dalits who are forced to live and work as submissive and obedient slaves who are never allowed to disobey their masters. They never realized what self-respect is, and what self-redemption is. They were cruelly punished by their masters by attributing petty reasons like killing an animal. Limbale quotes his grandmother Santamai’s words:

Whenever an animal in the village died, the villagers grew annoyed. They consider the Maharwada responsible for it. They tied us to a pole and beat us like animals. They accused us of having poisoned the animal. Our women and children cried and shrieked. All the men in the Maharwada were very badly beaten.... We were denied

any provision at the shops though we had the money and were ready to pay. We had reached a dead end. Such humiliation was agonizing (78).

Even water was under the control of the high caste people. The village wells were dug and built by Dalit workers, but they were not allowed to fetch water from the same wells. Limbale records: "The spades and shovels of Mahars were used to dig the well. The Mahars 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" (81/82).

Even as school children, the Dalits were subjected to humiliation and suffering. They were harassed and insulted by the teachers and their schoolmates. They were made to work rather than learn. Dalit students were not allowed to sit with the upper caste students. They were made to sit on the platform, amidst the footwears flung all around them. Limbale writes: "During the school interval, the other boys threw stones at me and teased me calling aloud Mahar" (6).

Another experience of untouchability was when the barber refused to cut Limbale's hair even though he was offered the money. The reason was that he did not want to cut the hair of Dalits. He used to cut the hair of buffaloes but could not even think of cutting the hair of a human who is considered an untouchable. This incident reveals the fact that the dalits are treated inferior even to animals.

*Akkarmashi* points out that even well educated people are not able to detach themselves from the influence of the paradigms of caste system. Mostly in rural areas are seen injustice, ill-treatment and humiliation perpetrated against the untouchables. Limbale laments that the metropolitan cities like Mumbai, Delhi are no exception for it. When a Dalit comes to such a city and looks for a house on rent, he will not get it. He had to turn away hearing the remarks, "We don't want to rent out our house to Muslims and Mahars." (106). When he got a job and settled at Ahmedpur he hid his caste from others. He states the reason: "If they came to know my caste, they would drive me out of the house that I had rented from a high caste landlord. I would be beaten badly. They would even torture my wife." (104)

*Akkarmashi* further portrays instances where the dalits especially dalit women are subjected to severe exploitation and excruciating humiliation by the conservative and hypocritical uppercaste society. Limbale laments that to be born beautiful among dalits is a curse to women. If a dalit lady is good-looking, ignorant and powerless, she is bound to be a victim of sexual harassment by the high-castes. They are kept by the landlords as concubines and are used to satisfy their sexual lust. As a result she has to suffer hatred, humiliation and marginalization even from her own community as well. Limbale's mother Masamai was such a victim who had to suffer each and every moment in her life. She had to live a life which is totally against her wish. The high-caste people openly ignore the practices of untouchability whenever they want to exploit the dalit ladies for their physical pleasures. Masamai and her husband Ithal Kamble used to work all day for their landlord Hanmantha Patil. But the Patil intentionally ruined their poor family and it led to the divorce of the couple forever. Likewise a number of uppercaste men often tried to have illegal sexual relationship with dalit women. "Dalit women were badly insulted. They were beaten as if slaves. Some farmers even harassed them sexually, pulled them into the crop, and raped them." (79)

The dalits were not able to realize that they were being exploited. They only want to satisfy their stomach and for that they work hard. *Akkarmashi* depicts certain situations which made the poor to steal eatables. Otherwise they had to beg for food. Limbale remembers he himself had to steal food to fill his stomach. Poverty even made dalits eat what animals ate when there was no way to get food. The dalits often had to eat discarded and stale food. They used to eat the left-overs of the high-castes. Sometimes they had to eat what is not edible for human beings. Limbale remembers that his grandmother had made incredible sacrifices for him and his sisters but she could never erase poverty from their house. He remembers the poverty stricken life of the dalit students which forced them to live with limited facilities in the hostel.

Our poverty didn't allow us to enjoy the luxuries of college life ... We continued

Our education amidst great poverty... There were so many Dalit students like us.

This pain of poverty was not just mine. We all existed like grains crushed in a stone grinder. (83)

Though he gained self-esteem and honor through education the discrimination he had to face was the same everywhere. As he grew older he wanted to go against the social norms and superstitions which were

totally illogical and anti-human. He wanted to free his fellow men out of their marginality, helplessness and dependence. When his friend and he were served tea in separate cups meant for dalits at a village hotel, they complained against the owner of the hotel to the police. Though they were treated in an arrogant and disrespectful manner by the police inspector they did not lose courage. Limbale was terribly angry against the customs. He writes:

While studying in college, I was mutually a flame. I was growing amidst a conflagration. The roots of the moment were settling more firmly. Injustice towards us was assuming a new meaning. We were awakening under a new consciousness which was becoming more pervasive day by day. (83).

Limbale wrote Akkarmashi autobiographically at the age of twentyfive. It is quite unusual for anyone to write an autobiography at that young age at which one doesn't earn much experience of life. But Limbale had experienced enough and more by that time and he wanted to express the excruciating pain he suffered and he thought the autobiographical style would serve his purpose best. The agony of being an Akkarmashi- only the word Akkarmashi will express the shameful position he was in; "outcaste" will not suffice- was beyond words. As he grew older and more educated he clearly saw the pitiable situation he and his community were in and every inch of his being revolted against. But the most painful part was that he was an outcaste in his own community. Being born of a low caste mother and a high caste father he did not have a caste identity. His father had just forced himself upon his mother and Sharan was an unwanted product. Since his mother changed hands as cattle would change hands he did not have a mother for himself. His mother and father were Santamai, his grandmother and Dada the muslim who lived with her. Santamai was a Hindu and Dada who loved and cared for him as a father was a Muslim. So he did not have a religious identity. There have been occasions when he was marginalized because his grandmother lived with a Muslim. He did not have a proper household because he along with Santamai and Dada lived in a bus-stand. His siblings did not acknowledge him as their brother because they were supposed to have different fathers. He grew up in the Maharashtra- Karnataka border regions and so he was neither a Kannadiga nor a Maharashtrian. There are dalits and marginalized communities and they have their sufferings of being oppressed and ill-treated. But Shrankumar Limbale's was a singularly painful experience. Akkarmashi though not a literary work by conventional norms amply portrays the agony, helplessness, exasperation, revolt and evolution of a human being who was always treated worse than an animal. Limbale has used words to echo the marginalization of his being and the crisis of his identity.

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