



Self-Narrative of Caste, Gender and Oppression: a Critical Study of Akkarmashi by Sharankumar Limbale

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Abstract:

Dalit literature persists mainly in autobiographical forms. Writing their life journey is a way of asserting their identity and is perceived as a counter-narrative to resist mainstream hypocrisy. The hierarchical order of the Hindu culture gave the lowest position to Dalits. These lower castes have had to suffer immensely due to the bigotry and oppression of the upper caste on social, economical, psychological, educational, and ontological fronts. By using this influential genre, Dalit authors intend to represent the true life events and struggles of their life. This paper tries to highlight the pain, agony and resistance of a Dalit's life through the study of an autobiography Akkarmashi, English title The Outcaste, penned by Sharankumar Limbale. This memoir as a historical and social narrative depicts the miserable conditions of Dalits due to extreme poverty, caste discrimination, women exploitation, upper caste hypocrisy and the quest for identity. This research paper also helps in understanding how these kinds of narratives work as a weapon of self-assertion, encouraging Dalits to emerge out from the inferiority complex and protest against their victimization and demand for the equality as well.

Keywords: Caste, Gender, Dalit, Discrimination, Oppression, Pain and Protest

Introduction:

Caste system has been prevalent in India for ages. It has divided the society into upper caste and lower caste and humiliated human beings on another level. This hazard has been created by religion and by the society as well. The concept of 'purity' and 'pollution' helped the caste system to foreground deeply in people's mind even after they have been challenged time and again. The caste system according to Raj Kumar:

“with its myriad variations of super-ordination and sub-ordination, 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 prodigy of caste as a label always has been the most quirk feature of Indian culture. The manifestation of such a rigid caste system has been reasoned out because of its complicacies and biasedness. Yet Indian society has maintained this caste convention alive due to the series of scriptures sanctioned (Varna System). Many massive changes have been done to demolish this caste factor but the caste culture is airing no signs of ending inequality arisen due to the discrimination of certain castes.

During this insistent suffocation in the 1960's, some radical Dalit writers emerged to pour out their marginalization, frustrations, anguish and outrage. They started to challenge the set aesthetic norms to give a closure to this age old convention of caste. Dalit writings bloomed with the coming of Dalit autobiographies. Several well-known Dalit autobiographies include- Against All Odds by Kishore Shantabai Kale; Joothan by Omprakash Valmiki; Bama's Karukku, Outcaste: A Memoir by Narendra Jadhav; Baluta by Daya Pawar. These autobiographies do not glorify their community rather these narratives subject the lives of Dalit community and critically scrutinize the order of the Brahminical domination which has turned them into slaves and forced them to live a life worse than an animal. M.S.S. Pandian in "Writing Ordinary Lives" also argues in favor of Dalit autobiographies because it helps in perceiving the ground realities that how relationships were being divided amidst self and society. Dalit narratives are to be: "A shift from the discourse of causality to the discourse of participation" (40).

Self-narrative

Akkarmashi is a milestone in Dalit literature penned by Sharankumar Limbale. This memoir was translated into English from Marathi language by Santosh Bhoomkar with the title “The Outcaste” in 2003. The Marathi word *Akkarmashi* means a person who is an outcast, impure or imperfect or whose birth is illegitimate. It is an autobiography written by Limbale at the age of twenty five. People usually write autobiographies in the late years of their life to share their experiences, hardships and adventures. But at twenty five Limbale had undergone so much struggle, pain, anguish and misery that he wanted to share his plight with the world. The book increase the awareness of the little things we often take for granted in our life. Sharankumar Limbale's narration reflects the terrible conditions and outrage against the pathetic conditions of existence but with the human and mature tone.

Caste

This narrative depicts the darkest culture of Indian society. The darkest culture means the hypocrite culture of the society which humiliates and subjugates people on the basis of their caste. The author focused on the victimization of Dalit people by upper caste along with the discriminatory behavior of his own caste with his family due to him being a ‘half-caste’ or illegitimate child. He shows that how they are not treated equal in society and are stigmatized as outsiders. He fell prey to the brutal and intact norms of the existing caste culture. He writes:

“The high caste people look upon my community as untouchable, while my own community humiliated me, calling me ‘*Akkarmashi*’. This humiliation was like stabbed over and over again. I have always lived with the burden of inferiority” (Limbale X).

Very often, Dalit families had to sleep without food because of extreme poverty and acute starvation. These lower caste people had to do the menial tasks to earn money and appease their hunger. Sometimes they had to steal food from the shops with a fear that if caught, they will have to bear the brutal beatings by the vendors. Hunger is a very prominent theme in Limbale’s autobiography as he states,

“A woman becomes a whore and a man a thief. The stomach makes you clean shit, it even makes you eat shit. I realized that God had made a mistake by endowing man with a stomach” (Limbale 8).

His grandmother ‘Santamai’ had to collect the undigested grains of Jowar in cattle’s dung,

“she picked up such lumps of dung...washed the dung in the river water...ground the dried Jowar grains into flour...she make bhakris from this flour...it stank of dung. As I chewed it, I felt I was actually eating dung. It was difficult for me to swallow it” (Limbale 10-11).

This is really tragic that his grandmother was used to eating such kind of food. The waste material that is being excreted is being scavenged by the old lady to find anything to eat. It is like having garbage in one’s stomach to appease the fire of hunger.

Gender

Sharankumar Limbale, the author of this piece of work is born to a lower caste mother and an upper caste father. His father’s caste is considered as one of the privileged castes of the Indian society, so he is known as a man of mixed blood. Basically, he was stamped as a half-caste that is growing up in his Mahar community. He expresses his agony against all forms of insult and repressions existing in the society. As he writes,

“Why did my mother say yes to the rape which brought me into the world? Why did she put up with the fruits of this illegitimate intercourse for 9 months? Why did she allow this bitter embryo to grow? How many eyes must have humiliated her because they considered her as a whore? Did anyone admire me affectionately? Which family would claim me as its descendant? Whose son am I, really?” (Limbale 37)

Beauty is said to be a curse for a Dalit woman. His mother was beautiful because of which she suffered a lot. She had been divorced by her husband due to the evil intentions of a Patil, his father. Hanumanta Limbale enjoyed her and then left her alone. Although the Dalits are called Untouchables by the upper caste men, their touch is considered “impure” and “polluted” but they will have no qualms in touching the Dalit women.

High caste people enjoy all the power, privilege and exploit the Dalits at every extent. These rights have been sanctioned to higher caste by religion. Those Patils had the right to make whores of the wives of Dalits. Poor Dalit women have invariably been the victim of upper caste men's lust. There was a whole breed born to these kinds of adulterous Patil's. Dalit families had to survive by fulfilling the sexual desires of such Patils.

Limbale asks, "Had she (his mother) been born into the high caste or were she rich, would she have submitted to his (father) appropriation of her" (Limbale IX).

This written text reveals that Limbale projected his mother and grandmother as the victim of the social structure of the nation. They were doubly marginalized. First as Dalit and second as women. In terms of caste, class, and gender hierarchies, they are viewed as the lowest members of the society.

Oppression

Dalits lives were full of obstacles and it is difficult to find a solution to these traumas and put an end to their struggle. Even education is also not free from it. Dalits used to face limitless hurdles in getting education. They were forced to sit in the last of the classrooms and had to face physical and mental harassment from upper caste students and teachers. Similar incident has been talked about by Omprakash Valmiki in Joothan where he was verbally and physically abused by his Brahmin teacher and was ordered to sweep the school compound instead of studying. Dalits were destined to live their life as slaves. No place remained where discrimination was not practiced by the upper caste people.

Limbale was deeply shattered with the conventions of caste system. Lots of questions were arising in his mind. Are Dalits not humans? What is that they are lacking? Why a man is identified in this country by his religion or caste? And why is it important to have a father's surname to live a dignified life in this society? Why people cannot live their life based on the inherited qualities only?

He mentioned that Dalit people were not allowed to enter the temples and worship because they were considered impure. He blames God for this and said it's not our fault. God made one man upper castes and the other lower caste what can we do in this. Human beings have so much hatred for each other due to caste and still all of us are the supposed children of

God. He states that, “We don’t approve of this God, not this religion, nor this country because they ostracized us” (63). It is claimed that children are the flowers of God's home, but not us. The village discards us like trash.

Conclusion

In obvious terms, there was no peace and respect in the life of Dalits. Limbale is a person who is determined to show the real picture of society to his people so that they can change their fortune, they can raise their voices against exploitation. As a famous quote of William Shakespeare, “We know what we are but know not what we may be.” Same is with other people if they disapprove all kind of business and work on the awakening of their consciousness they will be able to fight this caste consciousness. He stated that it will force the society to rethink and restructure the ethics and norms of this country. He said, “Someday we ought to rebel, how long we can mutely suffer all this? How many times are we going to be born and live thus against our wish?” (Limbale 76)

It is only education that can help the lead to uplift themselves rather than mourning or complaining to others. Only then they can demand a casteless order for themselves to prove their skills and get equality in the society. Limbale revealed various forms of exploitation and compels us- upper and lower caste communities alike – to introspect our course of actions in issues related to caste. It is the time to challenge the multifaceted victimization of half-caste or downtrodden people. This memoir vehemently contends the call for making a casteless society without any prejudices. Limbale as a self-aware individual boldly confronted the existing exploitative structure of caste. As he writes, “I am a human; I must receive all the Rights of a Human Being” (Limbale 51).

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