

# Innovation The Research Concept

## Revisiting Dalit Discourse through the Lens of Sharan Kumar Limbale's *The Outcaste*

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### Abstract

This study aims to investigate Sharan Kumar Limbale's work, *The Outcaste*, to re-examine the Dalit discourse and the dialectics of oppression and emancipation of dalits who have been subjected to the scourge of untouchability. Initially considered merely a protest, Dalit discourse has acquired a recognizable identity with its content, form and style. Now through the pens and lenses of writers like Baburao Bagul, Sharan Kumar Limbale, Omprakash Valmiki, Neerav Patel, Sivakami, Bama, Kumud Pawde, Daya Panwar, Baby Kamble, Shanta Rameshwar Rao and many more, it has procreated new literary ethos by using a language differing from the usual language of the long established literary canons. The study finds that Sharan Kumar Limbale, a prolific writer, depicts the annals of suffering, humiliation, mental anguish, self-realization, rebellion, retaliation, and rehabilitation that are the life spirits of Dalit literature. In his work, *The Outcaste*, the individual identity gets assimilated into the larger social milieu, however later to be seen as reincarnated and rehabilitated with the access of self, identity and assertion.

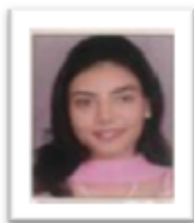
**Keywords:** Identity, anguish, community, self, retrospection.

### Introduction

Dalit discourse in the hands of great fiction writers, poets, auto-biographers and essayists has created new vistas. Apparently, the last decade of the twentieth century has noticed a dynamic and progressive change in Dalit consciousness. The process of organizing Dalits has been initiated to recast the social relations demanding social mechanism to nullify the oppressive and discriminatory practices. Their declaration to demand the valid share in the political power and social integrity has been accompanied by the retrieval of Dalit culture, rituals, beliefs and history. Now, Dalit discourse cannot be undermined to merely an engagement with victimhood. Laxman Gaekwad (*The Branded*), Bama (*Karukku and Sangati*), Naredra Jhadav (*Untouchables: My Family's Triumphant Journey Out of the Caste System in Modern India*), Sharan Kumar Limbale (*The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*), Joseph Macwan (*The Stepchild*), Om Prakash Valmiki (*Joothan: A Dalit's Life*), Baby Kamble (*The Prisons We Broke*) and Iyamam (*Beast of Burden*). Kumud Pawde, Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Namdeo Dhasal, Lakshman Mane, Neerav Patel, Perumal Murugan, Palamalai, Sudhakar, D. Gopi, T.K.C. Vaduthala (T.K.C. Vaduthalayude Kathakal) and Narayan (*Kocharayathi*) have sought to awaken the consciousness and forge their identities. These writers have firmly fortified themselves in the frontline of contemporary Indian literature with their own parameters.

Dalit literature in Maharashtra, Eleanor Zelliot observes, "...was unique in its quality, variety and aesthetic considerations and its sense of being a movement and its ties to social action" (1). In the words of Arjun Dangle, "It is no coincidence that the Dalit literary movement began in Maharashtra, the birth place of Dr. Ambedkar's movement...gave them a new self-respect. Dalit literature is nothing but the literary expression of this awareness" (xxiv). The prolific Dalit writings of Maharashtra emulate the ideological commitment to Ambedkarism. The poems by Namdeo Dhasal, Meena Gajbhiye, Daya Pawar, Baburao Bagul, Trayambak Sapkale, Arjun Kamble, Arjun Dangle, short stories by Anna Bhau Sathe, Avinash Dolas, Bandhumadhaw and autobiographies by Sharan Kumar Limbale, works by many other writers have established Dalit voice in the literary scenario of Indian literature.

Initially taken just a protest, Dalit literature acquires a recognizable identity towards the middle of the twentieth century. Now in the hands of writers like Baburao Bagul, Sharan Kumar Limbale, Neerav Patel, Sivakami, Bama, Kumud Pawde, Daya Panwar, Baby Kamble, Shanta Rameshwar Rao and many more, it has procreated new literary ethos by using a language differing from the usual language of the long established literary canons. It has established itself as a new mode of literary /aesthetic imagination and writing characterized by a change in its content, form and style.



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### Aim of the Study

The present study is an attempt to show how a specific literary text gives the reader a clear image of the society and dialectics of oppression at a particular period of time. The research work would try to find out how Dalits are forced into ghettos and also reveal the rigidity and narrow mindedness born out of casteism in India which is extant even today. Such an analysis might lead to the visualization of social change, revolution, retaliation and rehabilitation out of crippled and crushed identities. Analyzing Limbale's *The Outcast* will give a clear image of various strata of Indian society and unfold the struggle as well as the self-making process of Dalits in this social structure.

This research work aims at answering the following questions: 1. What are the atrocities inflicted upon the peripheral existence of Dalits? 2. Do these inflictions bear any retrospective connotations in Dalit discourse? 3. What perspectives does Limbale's *The Outcast* provide to reassess the Dalit discourse?

### Textual Analysis

The textual analysis requires the analytic method to illustrate the target object of study. In *The Outcast*, setting, characters, language, images and many other technical devices help us understand the social differences and economic and political conditions of the Dalits. The genesis and evolution of self-making sense proceed further as the narrative moves on. The scanning of Limbale's work provides a first-hand account of what was and still is, to a large extent, the daily life, the joys and sorrows, beliefs and the psyche of millions who share the life and the views of these characters –Masamai and Shantabai in *The Outcast* by Limbale; and Limbale himself. The story of the life of the author and characters sheds light on the dialectics of oppression and emancipation of those who for ages have been subjected to the scourge of untouchability.

### **AAkarmashi: The Outcaste: Marginalized ghetto**

Sharan Kumar Limbale, a prominent Dalit writer-activist, has written a revolutionary autobiographical work, *Akkarmashi* translated in English as *The Outcaste*. Hailed from Maharashtra, Limbale is the author of novels, story collections, and the editor of anthologies of Dalit literary criticism. He has won numerous awards and honours for his contribution to Dalit literature as a writer as well as a critic. His deep insight has extensively helped to reshape the contour of Dalit literature in the present time. Limbale has discussed segregation and discrimination (caste based and gender discrimination) in his literary opus. His writings unfold how Dalits are forced into ghetto and also reveal the rigidity and narrow mindedness born out of casteism in India which is extant even today. The oppressive structure of Indian society comes out in the form of the practice of untouchability and its stigma. The issues aroused from this oppressive structure are not only social and economic, but also cultural and political. Presumed to be impure by the so called twice-born castes, Dalits have been pushed to the fringes of social, cultural, economical, and geographical spheres of life. They are prohibited to enter the so-

called pure regime of caste bound sphere especially in much of rural India. They have to live in the outskirts, away from the main villages whose temples they are not allowed to enter and are forced to lead the life of castaway.

Sharan Kumar Limbale's narrative *The Outcaste* is swarming with incidents of starvation and hunger, of the abandoned entry of Dalits to upper-class localities and being homeless, "to us the bus stand was like home...we lay like discarded bus tickets. We had to get up in the normally or risk annoying the driver and conductor. Once they actually thrum or sheets and rugs out on the road?" (Limbale 42). His work depicts the inhuman practices of society to compel Dalits to carry pots hanging from their necks to avoid polluting the path by their saliva and to tie brooms to them to clean their footprints. The pain of being outcaste is squeezed out in these words of Limbale, "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). The narrator experiences the tormenting experiences of being a Dalit and an illegitimate. His status remains still subjugated even when he has been educated; he is not allowed to enter a temple. It infers his no entry in the mainstream of society. It leads him to question this discriminating social order, "Why are we ostracized? Why are we kept away from other human beings? Why are we kept out of our own selves? Why this discrimination between one human being and another? After all, isn't everybody's blood red?"(62). He moves back and forth between the individual 'I' and the collective 'We'. The ordeal of relegation and refusal inspired the author to tell the tale of his exclusion. Sharmila Rege finds this first-hand experience of extermination as the source to generate "testimonies of caste-based oppression, anti-caste struggles and resistance" (14). Limbale in an interview notes, "The span of my autobiography is my childhood...I want write about my pain and pangs. I want write about the suffering of my community. So I cannot give importance to my personal life. I am writing for social cause...My autobiography is a statement of my war against injustice" (Limbale, Interview).

### **Individual Identity**

In Sharan Kumar Limbale, the individual identity gets assimilated into the larger social milieu. In *The Outcaste*, the narrator, his mother, grandmother and sisters do struggle for their distinct identity as a human being. They have to face persistent torture in the form of being considered as a privileged space for all types of control and oppression to exercise on. Social and cultural systems amalgamate to crush their psyche (existence), and in the case of women their mind, body and soul. The title of his work, *The Outcaste*, refers to a person who is void of any identity be it, individual or collective. Limbale, in his writings, speaks of the pain of being Dalit. His words pour out suppressed fury and rage buried in his consciousness through the series of painful memories. He narrates the story of his life and

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through it the agony of being Dalit as he could never forget the lifelong sufferings those kept on scratching his consciousness. Generally, Dalits struggle for their identity and their existence as equal status in the caste based hierarchical social system. But in case of Sharan Kumar Limbale, he bears the burden of being rejected not only by mainstream people but by his own community also as he was born as a result of illegitimate relationship between a woman from a Mahar community and a man who belongs to so called high caste, hence a question mark on his identity. Limbale explores his identity of being *aakarmashi* i.e. outcaste or half-caste which has been attributed to him by the social system. While examining this unjustified social system, Limbale searches for himself and finds it crushed, trampled and injured in the hands of an exploiting and humiliating community. Through his autobiographical narration, he describes the pathetic condition of caste based oppression and struggles of a *Mahar* caste person in the state of Maharashtra. Limbale acknowledges it in his work, "High caste people look upon my community as untouchable, while my own community humiliated me calling '*akkarmashi*'. This humiliation was like being stabbed over and over again" (Limbale ix-x). He has always lived with the burden of inferiority. The mother of narrator Masamai's life is the tale of a victim of a social order which makes Dalit women as easy dupe of the licentious upper caste landlords, "What sort of life had she been living, mortgaging herself to one owner after another and being used as a commodity?" (Limbale 59).

### Crippled Identity and Sense of Self-making

Masamai, in *The Outcaste*, is treated as a commodity without any dignity or self-esteem. She receives the caste based patriarchal treatment and assimilates this treatment devoid of sensitivity and sense of respect for women. She does not seek for justice or dignity, rather merges her identity by the act of submission to exploitation and harassment not voluntarily but a forced compulsion. As a result, her existence is delimited to a property or commodity. Masamai is left with no other option but to surrender her to a person like Hanmanta after her desertion by her husband, Kamble. Her womanly beauty becomes a curse for her as instead of feeling self-gratified, she feels abused on her being exploited by all those who could afford to have her as a concubine. The caste council forced Masamai to divorce Kamble and leave her toddler baby and four year old son Dharma. There is no heed to the fact that "The relationship between a husband and a wife can come to an end but what about the relationship between a mother and her sons?" (Limbale 37).

This situation portrays the fact that a Dalit woman doesn't have the right to even bless her children with motherly care against the wishes of social practices which bar them to practice autonomy in the matters as crucial as child care, family planning, divorce, remarriage and other crucial issues affecting her life significantly. Like a typical Dalit women, Masamai remains a victim of one man or the other throughout her life. This is Santamai, her other, who supports during her

deserted condition as Limbale writes, "Only a mother and the earth can accommodate and stomach everything" (37). Shantamai represents the image of a Dalit woman who sacrifices her comforts, pleasures and most importantly her identity at every being conscious of the vicious circle that has forced her to suffer. The forfeit and sacrifice of Dalit women is recalled through Santamai's character. Like most of other Dalit women in the vicinity, Santamai used to collect dung for making cakes of dung to sell them. She feeds her grandson first and merely survives with leftover food. The Dalit women are not only a prey of the lechery of so called upper caste men, but their own men are equally responsible for their humiliation in social life. Even after being treated as 'others', these women carry a strong sense of commitment, sacrifice and dutifulness. Like Santamai has always been denied love, affection, care or graceful treatment in a patriarchal social set up but at the news of her husband's death, she bursts into tears and is grieved for the person who is the cause of her suffering. This subjugated situation leaves women devoid of essential human dignity, freedom, human rights, realization of the self, opportunities to assert her identity and the consciousness about her rights. Thus, Limbale, in *The Outcaste*, highlights how the identity of women fades away amid these too hard realities to exist and in the patriarchal setup and mindset of society. Through narrating the account of their exploited existence, Limbale asserts the need to erase the faded identity marking their life with self-respect, self-dignity and self-assertion.

### Conclusion

In *The Outcaste*, Sharan Kumar Limbale transposes between the individual (I) and the community (We) depicting the pangs faced by him. In an interview, Limbale says, "I want write about my pain and pangs. I want write about the suffering of my community...I am writing for a social cause" (Bolleddu 2). This identification of self with community leads to the individual to self-conscious approach from voiceless and passive attitude. And Limbale, here, passes through the stage of self-identification and further moves to self-affirmation. As Limbale adds, further, "My autobiography is a statement of my war against injustice" (Bolleddu 2).

To conclude, in this narrative, the subjects/narrator moves back and forth between the individual 'I' and collective 'We'. This narrative can be labelled as a retrospective narrative, where the primary focus of the author is upon his own life as an individual, whereby he traces out the voyage of the self. It shows his journey from the condition of victims to the realization of personal autonomy or even creativity. Here the depiction of the narrator's experience becomes the mouthpiece of the community and depiction of the self-connects to the image of his community. Limbale is sought after to find out his identity in the mainstream as well as in his subaltern community and his narrative depicts the journey of suffering, humiliation, mental anguish, self-realization, rebellion, retaliation, and rehabilitation that are the life spirits of Dalit discourse. These findings of study also pave the way for further research to find out the compatibility

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of Dalit discourse with other literary discourses based on Limbale's theory of Aesthetic of Dalit literature propounded by him in his work, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*.

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