

## DYNAMICS OF UPPER CASTE PARAMOUNTCY AS EXPRESSED IN DALIT LITERATURE: A READING OF SHARANKUMAR LIMBALE'S *AKKARMASHI*

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### **Abstract:**

*Dalit literature is a kind of literature that evolved after independence. The beginning of Dalit literature has a great historical relevance. Similar literature exploring the lives and the pathetic existence of the marginalised and downtrodden sections exist in other parts of the world as well.*

*Arjun Dangle has defined Dalit literature as one which familiarises the readers with the age old caste system and untouchability in India. As we know, Dalits have always been relegated to the marginalised 'other' side of the Indian society; in other words they were completely excluded from the social mainstream. So when they began protesting after centuries of silence, a new kind of literature came to the fore that depicted an assertion of human rights, self esteem, revolt against social oppression, stories of personal and collective suffering, and put forth a vision of a new society sans any discrimination. The word Dalit is not new; it was in use in the 1930s as the Hindi and Marathi translation of 'Depressed classes', a term the British used for the present day Scheduled Castes.*

*The main aim of Dalit literature is the emancipation of the Dalit community. Sharan Kumar Limbale has said: "Dalit literature is exactly that literature which aesthetically captures the trauma, sorrow, embarrassment, humiliation, ridicule and sufferings confronted by the Dalits". Some of the important Dalit writers whose writings will find a place in the resistance literature the world over are: Mahasweta Devi, Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Perumal Murugan, D.Gopi, Neerave Patel, Poomani, Basudev Sunani, Sachi Rautray and Mangal Rathod.*

**Keywords:** *Dalit literature, Untouchability, Depressed classes, Scheduled castes, Resistance literature.*

### **Dalit Literature: Definition, scope, politics**

Dalit literature is marked by its condemnation of the caste system and all sorts of discrimination and by its exhortation for the elimination of social hierarchies. It is the literature of a commitment towards an egalitarian society. It questions the marginalisation and exclusion of the Dalit community from the social mainstream. It can also be conceived of as a literature that upholds equality, self-esteem and human dignity. The Dalit writers are of the view that the main purpose of creating literature is to bring about a change in the social milieu rather than amusement or pretentious display of literary scholarship. According to Baburao Bagul: "Dalit literature is not a literature of revenge and hatred. It primarily upholds man's dignity and freedom and because of this very reason, it is an historic necessity.....Frustration, anguish and dejection alone do not characterise Dalit Literature. We need a literature full of life and verve for the building of a new society". All Dalit literature can be said to be more realistic rather than romantic and stands unified in their mode of depiction of oppression and exploitation. Dalit writers are severely condemning of the reticence of the mainstream literature about the harsh social realities and their romanticisation of the Indian society. Even though upper caste writers have produced literature voicing concern for the Dalits, they are usually viewed as condescending in nature and targeted at making the Dalit resistance less powerful. As such, the writers like Mulkraj Anand or Arundhati Roy who authored several

works illustrating the trauma of the Dalits were not seen as representative of genuine Dalit sensibilities and mindscape. Dalit writers have employed such language, slang and vernacular expressions which are normally viewed as unacceptable and colloquial by the connoisseurs of mainstream literature. Dalit writers have also started to evolve theories of literary criticism from Dalit viewpoints. Dalit literature has an inclination towards the Marxist and Ambedkarite ideologies with regard to its thematic content.

Even though Dalit literature as a new mode of literature could make an identity for itself only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it doesn't mean Dalit characters were absent in Indian literature; of course they also found wide depiction in our literature. *Gitanjali* authored by Rabindranath Tagore, deals with how the untouchable communities have been put to humiliation in our society. Yet another work *Sadgati* (1931) by Premchand focused on the oppression, exploitation and slavery confronted by the Dalits through its protagonist Dukhi, a lower caste man. There are numerous other instances of well-known writings depicting the Dalit population and their mindscape; however the problem lies in the fact that most of these writers belonged to upper caste communities. In other words, even before the arrival of Dalit literature as a distinct genre in India, the Dalit characters were represented in literature, but by upper caste writers. This is exactly where the debate of sympathy and empathy gains relevance. A majority of the Dalit activists believe that only a person born as Dalit can realistically portray the plight of the community; according to Ramnika Gupta, "only ash is aware of the sensation of burning".

It is worthwhile to say that Dalit literature in India has grown both in quality and quantity, capable enough to pose a serious challenge to the so-called mainstream literature. It has successfully tackled the Brahmanical hegemony in our social landscape and literature and enabled the Dalits to assert their rights and give vent to their long-suppressed anguish; to put it simply, it has given the Dalits an identity of their own.

### **Narrativising Hegemony**

*Akkarmashi* is Sharankumar Limbale's autobiography which sheds light on the story of his childhood and growth as a half-caste, and in its power to evoke empathy, it is often talked about in the same breath as Sterne's *Tristram-shandy*, and Jean Genet's *A Thief's journal*. The miseries of being a single parent child, the life of severe poverty, caste-based discrimination and separation are described in minute detail in the work.

*Akkarmashi* written when Limbale was 25 years old, portrays the meta-realistic vignettes of his life as a Dalit in particular and which can be extrapolated to the life of any individual born into the Mahar community in general. While conceptualising 'self' through his narrative, he delves into the grassroot level of the Indian caste hierarchy, repudiating its very foundations which thrive on religious dogmas. In the text, the writer oscillates between the individual 'I' and the collective 'we'. The experiences of oppression and boycott of both the self and the community are the critical sources used to create 'testimonies of caste-based exploitation, anti caste uprising and resistance movements'.

The introductory chapter of Limbale's *Akkarmashi* describes his life during his primary school days, when he takes cognisance of the fact that he was an untouchable since he belonged to the Mahar community. Here, he unconsciously comes to accept the disparity between the higher caste students and him because of imposed segregation and differences in eating habits, dressing and even in the games. Limbale writes: "The Wani and Brahmin students amused themselves playing Kabbadi. Being branded as untouchables, we were not supposed to join them. So Mallya, Umbrya, Parshya, all from my caste, started playing touch and go. We played one sort of game whereas the upper caste boys indulged in another. The two games were played separately like two separate whirlwinds"

Dalits have been boycotted and branded as impure. A Dalit is tagged 'untouchable' on account of his birth in the low caste and all kinds of harassments become the legacy that he inherits from his predecessors. Limbale narrates instances where people from his community are not allowed entry into temples; also they

were not supposed to touch the public well or take water from it inspite of the fact that the well was dug by them. Limbale writes: “The spade and the axe of our community were used to dig the well. We sweated it out day and night for it.....The Mahars are the reason why there is adequate water inside the well. But presently, the same Mahars are not supposed to take water from the well, not even to quench their thirst”. There are some customs and tradition which the Dalits are forced to follow and against which they can't express their resentment within the framework of a caste based society. In his autobiography, Limbale depicts the treatment meted out to a Dalit Rambaap by an upper caste man named Shivram in a scene of the latter's tea shop. He writes:

Rambaab used to drink tea from Shivram's shop. After having tea, he had to wash the glass and put it back to its proper place. He had to put the money for the tea on the table or drop it from a height into the hands of the owner because as far as a Mahar was concerned, handing money directly to anyone was considered a sin. Rambaap would notice me watching him do all this and he would say that we belonged to the lower castes and what I had seen was a long tradition that we had inherited from our predecessors. He would rue the fact that it was not possible to do anything about it, since we were not supposed to go against the village customs.

The most conspicuous aspect in Limbale's autobiography is his attitude towards women. There are many women characters who go through some serious complications in their lives; in fact, in the narrative, we come across widows, childless women, abandoned women and concubines. While Dalit men are victimised on the basis of caste and class, Dalit women face double oppression- by the upper caste men as well as by the men of their own community. Limbale introduces his own mother who has been cheated and exploited in every relationship she is involved in and burdened with the responsibility of looking after children and their upbringing. Their struggle is, on one level, for survival and on another to safeguard themselves from the unfavourable social milieu. According to Limbale, the greatest handicap of a Dalit woman is her lack of education. The author, however, exhibits a commendable understanding of their miseries; there is no cursing or reproaching them in this work. There is not even a tone of pity for them in the narrative, which is because of the obstinacy of the author regarding their portrayal; he wants to depict them as strong and powerful human beings who fight against all odds rather than as those who surrender meekly to gender and caste-based discrimination. It is this depth of character sketch that makes Limbale's *Akkarmashi* unique in the genre of Dalit life narratives. Limbale denounces the hypocrisy of the upper caste men who distort caste rules so as to indulge in carnal pleasures by exploiting the dignity and self-esteem of the Dalit women. His critique of the Indian caste-system is noteworthy:

Those who enjoy high caste privileges, authority granted by religion, and inherit property, have subjugated the Dalits of this country. The Patils in every village have forcibly made the wives of Dalit farm labourers their concubines. A poor Dalit girl on attaining sixteen years of age has fallen prey to their lust. There are Dalit families who eke out a living by offering sexual favours to the Patils.

It was rather a bizarre custom in Maharashtra that Dalit girls, as soon as they attained puberty, were kept by landlords as concubines for their sexual gratification. It was a customary service for all Dalit families to “offer their daughters to the high caste Patils”. In return for their sexual favours, these women were given shelter and a few other provisions to live. The children born to them remained half caste or *Akkarmashi* as Limbale addresses them in the novel. The whole work focuses on the identity crisis confronted by a half caste man, who happens to be an illegitimate child born to a Mahar mother and Maratha father.

The underlying theme of *Akkarmashi* is the identity crisis faced by the author. As mentioned by

Limbale in his Author's Note, he doesn't claim to have a great pedigree. All that he knows about his family line is that it ends with his mother and grandmother. His mother was an untouchable Mahar and his father belonged to a privileged caste in Maharashtra. His mother lived in a cottage whereas his father lived in a big mansion. His father was a landlord but his mother was landless. Hence, Limbale was an *Akkarmashi* or a half caste. He was condemned, taunted, ridiculed and branded as illegitimate. It was through Dalit uprisings and Dalit literature that Limbale discerned that his mother was not an adultress but the victim of an oppressive and exploitative social system.

Limbale's main aim in writing *Akkarmashi* was to reveal his woes as the son of a whore. Upper caste people treated him as an untouchable whereas his own community ridiculed him by calling him *Akkarmashi*; hence he lived with a feeling of inferiority. To be a Dalit in a caste-ridden society is a curse and to be an illegitimate within the Dalit caste is to be doubly cursed. Dalits are the "outcastes" of a society but a "half caste" among the outcaste is destined to live a subhuman existence. *Akkarmashi* acts as the mouthpiece of the community, revealing the inner self and mindscape of a Dalit, who is destined to suffer because of the hypocrisies and the malignant customs and traditions of the upper caste. In spite of the constitution offering many provisions that safeguard the interests of the Dalits, they still have to live a life of suffering, because of the well defined social hierarchy with caste at the center, that has thrived in India right from ancient times.

The next topic of discussion in *Akkarmashi* is on the identity of a Dalit. In general, a Dalit is identified and recognised by the roles given to him by the society, the roles here stands for the menial works and as a service provider to the upper castes without any wages. A Dalit is like a slave to the upper caste Patils; they can command him/her according to their will and Dalit has to carry out the orders without showing any resentment. Moreover a critical study of Limbale's *Akkarmashi* defines a Dalit's identity with regard to three aspects: First by birth, then by father's name and finally by his/her caste. Throughout the narrative, Limbale tells about the crises of identity and always looks confused regarding his existence. Birth is the criteria defining the identity of a person in the very first stage but Limbale is of the view that his birth is a curse for him since he was born out of an illegitimate relationship his mother had with a Patil. He writes:

Why did my mother say yes to the rape which brought me into this world? Why did she carry the fruit of this illegitimate sexual relationship for nine months and nine days and allow me to grow in the foetus? Why did she allow this bitter embryo to grow? How many eyes must have humiliated her because they considered her a whore? Did anyone distribute sweets to celebrate my birth? Did anyone admire me affectionately? Did anyone celebrate my naming ceremony? Which family would claim me as its descendent? Whose son am I really?

Born of a high-caste Patil and an untouchable Mahar, Limbale became an 'Akkarmashi', as his parentage remained unacknowledged through wedlock. This curse of being 'fatherless' haunted Limbale throughout his life. It became the most heinous of obstacles and pushed him to a helpless situation, being reproached for being an 'Akkarmashi' within his own family and extended to the most crucial moments of his life like seeking admission in college and the prospects of marriage. Every now and then, Limbale is cruelly made to take cognizance of his position within the positionless group of untouchables, by the sadistic society. He laments: "A man is identified in the society by his religion, caste, or his father. Sadly, I don't have any of these markers of identity. I don't have any inherited identity at all".

The next major issue in Limbale's *Akkarmashi* is the economic deprivation faced by Dalits. The Dalits are landless and follow the traditional occupation which hinders any kind of economic mobility in their lives. They work as labourers in the fields of rich landlords in exchange for a small amount of grain. In the wake of such economic exploitation, the Dalits have to face hunger and starvation. For them food is

God. A Dalit agrees to perform any type of work to fill his/her belly. This said, there was no guarantee of getting work on a regular basis and a Dalit had to remain unemployed for long durations. Limbale writes: "Every bus meant bread and butter for us. We waited at the bus stand for a bus just as a prostitute waits for her clients. The moment when I saw a bus coming, I became elated hoping that this bus would provide us at least a few annas and Dada could buy me a cup of tea". Further, he goes on to write about the pathetic condition 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 carnal desires with our women. I can't bear to think of my mother Masami caught in an entanglement between bread and lust. Who will save my mother? She will die tainted, an object of someone's sexual pleasure".

Limbale's autobiography also takes up the question of the Hindu caste system and its religious dogmas, which ostracize the Dalits from the mainstream society, tagging them as untouchables. Dalits are forced to lead a subhuman existence, being treated worse than animals and exploited in all possible ways by the institutions of caste and religion. Limbale protests: "How does a person become untouchable as soon as he is born? On what basis can he be a criminal by birth? From his feet Brahma begot a vast low caste community. Since then we have been living as untouchables". He further questions: "What sort of religious burden do we carry as a porter his load? Why are we being tortured by thrusting this burden of religion on us? What on earth prevents us from discarding it? How come man has immersed himself under this diabolic tree of caste, religion, breeding and family?"

However, Limbale does not admit defeat to his pathetic existence but acquires freedom and liberation from the predicament of caste through education. The knowledge he garnered from books, enabled him to think differently. He realised that the suffering of Dalits were based on some false, preconceived, prejudiced and stereotypical notions that existed in the society and that the Dalits themselves were, in no way, responsible for it; it is this realisation that liberates him. Limbale writes in his critical work, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*: "The conditions that I have written about, the socio-cultural milieu that I have written about, ceases to exist in my house now, because of my firm convictions and the position that I happen to hold today".

### Conclusion

From the perspective of a collective past, Limbale is each and every Dalit deemed untouchable. As a Dalit, he experiences split identification as the product of an extramarital affair, as a Mahar and also as an educated Dalit who has moved forward in social order than his community but at the same time forbidden from stepping up the established social order by the upper caste Hindus. As an autobiography, *Akkarmashi* displays all the features and qualities of a true life narrative. But the significance of this work is beyond the narrow confines of an autobiography since it acts as a mouthpiece for the entire Dalit community. As such, it can be placed on the highest pedestal of Indian literature. Limbale's travails portrayed so vividly is indicative of the magnitude of the challenges involved in the process of reclaiming dignity both for himself and his community.

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