

Outcry from the Margins: A Critical Study on Sharankumar

Limble's *The Outcaste*.

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Abstract:

Sharankumar Limble is considered as the most prolific writer of the contemporary literature. His works exposes the sorrows, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by the Dalits in the society. The present paper throws light on the social injustices encountered by the Mahar community. It also expresses the writer's portrayal of himself as a victim of the oppressive societal norms which deprived him of his identity.

Keywords: Contemporary, degradation, Mahar community, oppressive, societal

Literature is the reflection of the life in all its varied forms and shapes. Literature is the mirror to life and society. It depends upon the writer where he places the mirror. From time to time writers have been exploring the various dimensions of the relationship between man and society. Social evils are issues which in one way or another affects members of a society and is often considered controversial or problematic in terms of moral values. Some of

the most common social evils would be alcoholism, racism, (child) abuse, organized crime and inequality.

Indian history witnesses several kinds of people starting right from the primitive hunters and food gatherers, nomads of different types, settled agriculturists, artisans, and intruders like Aryans, and immigrants like Jews. The many important religions of the world—Hinduism, Christianity, Jainism, Islam and Buddhism are found in this mystique land. All these things form a bewildering variety of the Indian culture and consequently, Indian society has acquired a composite cultural pattern characterized by its plurality.

This variant has formed stratifications in terms of language, money, religion, colour, caste and the like in the contemporary scenario of Indian social structure. Among these strata, casteism seems to be the oldest surviving structural pattern in the modern Indian society regardless of the type of habitat of people: city, town and village with its myriad forms of subordination and super-ordination. Whereas casteism, as stratification, unleash violence and captivates the people even in urban areas where it is common to find a number of educated people; it unveils hierarchy of people. From time immemorial, sociologists and anthropologists work on the caste system and are fascinated by its antiquity. The social hierarchy imposed by the caste system is wholly internalised in the Hindu society, though “the identification of the Indian subcontinent with a single person whose religion is Hinduism was only made in the recent history . . .” (Omvedt 1).

The origin of caste dates back to the “*Purushasukta* myth” embodied in one of the Vedas, the *Rigveda*, and the myth authenticates the creation of humankind in Hindu perspectives. *Purusha* is considered as a Hindu deity and a monstrous primeval being with “a thousand heads,

a thousand eyes and thousand feet” (*Rig Veda* 10.9.1)). The text says *Purusha* has been sacrificed and out of him the four fold categories of Indo-Aryan society have been born, these categories are technically called *varnas*. “His mouth became the Brahman, his arms were made into warrior, his thighs the people and from his feet servants were born” (*Rigveda* 10.9.12). The *varnas* are named as Brahmans, Kshatriyas, *Vaisyas* and *Sudras*. The Brahmans, as they are assumed to be born from the mouth of the primeval body, are considered as intellectuals and have become the preachers and priests; the warriors, as they are believed to be born from the chest have become the warriors and rulers; the *Vaisyas* are considered to be born from the thighs and they have become the business men and the *Sudras* are born from the feet of the primeval body which is the lowest part; they are made as servants and are considered as the lowest caste in the hierarchy within the *varna* stratum. Though the myth is the Brahmanical document, it promptly unveils the birth of casteism into the Indian subcontinent.

As far as the social status of these four fold categories is concerned, the first three in the hierarchy—Brahmans, Kshatriyas and *Vaisyas* are the Indo-Aryan race and are considered as Dvija—twice born groups—born first at physical birth and as second time when initiated into varna status. The Shudras were the fourth varna; they were from outside the Indo-Aryan group and were the progeny of unions between the Indo-Aryan and the Dasa (the pre-Aryan inhabitants of the land). They were emerged as cultivators, but were denied twice-born status. Outside this fourfold vertical varna structure there was a fifth group—*Avarna* or *Panchama*—whose ethnic status was so low and their occupations so degraded and polluting(Dube 6)

The fifth category of people are known by the term, “outcaste” and are segregated from society and any physical touch between people of *varna* and *avarna* seems to be prohibited. Within these

five categories one can find many divisions based on their occupation; these myriad divisions have come to be known as “*Jatis*” (Caste). *Varna* and *jati* are the functional aspects of casteism.

According to Chandra, “Demarcation between man and man is man-made: this can't be the law of God. God's gateway of union is wide, but man because of his depravity narrows it and creates the barrier stronger: it is man who makes room for filth and sin in God's world” (115). The Aryan social stratification has witnessed to exist from ancient to modern period of Indian History. When the constitution drafting committee had been formed, the committee analysed the social status of people of various strata and all the castes belonging to the *Avarna* stratum and some castes from the *Sudra* stratum, whose condition has been economically weak have been included in the list of Scheduled Caste. Most of the people of this group are fond of calling themselves as Dalits.

Caste is everything. Caste holds the people like a creeper. People are identified with their caste in Indian society. Hence casteism plays a vital role in Indian society and is considered as a part of the people's lives; it gives identity to all people in Indian society. Casteism invariably allocates the status of hierarchy at birth itself. This casteism makes many people ‘untouchables’ who are subjected to innumerable atrocities by the members of the so called higher castes. Though many people like Gautama Buddha, Mahavira, Bharathiar and others oppose the operation of caste system, the caste system continues to prevail in various forms. In that system Dalits are the most affected that they do not find any place devoid of ostracism, humiliation and oppression by the name of caste. “Dalits in India have been socio-economically oppressed, culturally subjugated and politically marginalized for centuries” (Shah 14).

Dalits are denied access to many places like common wells, schools, hospitals hotels, temples, etc., because of caste discrimination that perennially exist in Indian society, despite the constitution of India prohibits the practice of untouchability by any form. The most disturbing experience of individuals in a society torn by different conflicts is the feeling of estrangement or isolation. In an atmosphere of moral and cultural decay, people find themselves cut off from their roots, alienated and lost.

Sharankumar Limbale is regarded as the most prolific writers of contemporary literature. According to Limbale, Dalit Literature is “ that literature which artistically portray the sorrows, the tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by Dalits, the anguish and the burning cry of untouchables against the injustices of thousand years, collectively expressed” (*Towards An Aesthetic of Dalit Literature 15*).

Limbale’s *The Outcaste* was penned at the age of 25. It depicts his life as a Dalit and an individual of Mahar Community. In the preface to the first print of *The Outcaste*, he wrote as:

Every time the dominant classes attack and exploit the weak, they violate their women. The sexual exploits of the men among the wicked exploiters draw legitimacy from their authority, wealth, society, culture and religion. But what of the exploited woman? She has to carry the rape of her womb. The rape has to be borne, fed and reared. And this rape acquires and lives a life. My autobiography holds in it the agony of such a life. My experiences are my words. What will remain there if you take experience away from a life? A living corpse. (xxiii)

The *Outcaste* mirrors Limbale’s birth and life. Thus the autobiography of Limbale portrays the writer’s rootlessness, poverty, segregation in an educational system and inequality

in the society. Hence while focusing the suffering endured by him, he also questions the torments and this makes the readers of the work to be an active participant of author's pains and tortures.

The word 'Akkarmashi' meant a person's whose birth was illegitimate. In this autobiography, Limbale claims himself as an outcaste. Mahar community of his mother claimed him an outcaste because his father was a high caste man. Meanwhile the high caste people called him an untouchable because his mother belonged to Mahar community. In the author's note, Limbale says :

I regard the immorality of my father and mother as a metaphor for rape. My father had privileges by virtue of his birth granted to him by the caste system. His relationship with my mother was respected by society, whereas my mother is untouchable and poor. Had she been born into high caste or were she rich, would she have submitted to his appropriation of her? It is through the Dalit movement and Dalit literature that I understood that my mother was not an adulteress but the victim of a social system. I grow restless whenever I read about a rape in the newspaper. A violation anywhere in the country , I feel, is a violation of my mother. (ix)

This shows how Mahar women were sexually exploited by the upper caste Marathas. It also portrayed the fate of the child borne because of such a relationship. Hence the central theme of *The Outcaste* reveals the problematic author's identity.

Limbale had portrayed himself as a victim of an oppressive social system which deprived him of his identity. According to him, this rootlessness made him "to live with the burden of inferiority" (x). Because of birth as an outcaste, he had to become a subject of ridicule at many

instances. When he was in the seventh standard, he was teased by Maula's son as "the base born" (15). At an instance, in his autobiography Limbale questioned his identity as:

My father and his forefathers were Lingayat. Therefore I am one too. My mother was Mahar. My mother's father and forefathers were Mahar, hence I am also a Mahar. From the day I was born until today, I was brought up by my grandfather Mahmood Dastagir Jamadar. My grandfather in the sense he lives with my grandmother, Santamai. Does this mean I am Muslim as well? Then why can't the Jamadar's affection claim me as Muslim? How can I be high caste when my mother is untouchable? If I am untouchable, what about my father who is high caste? I am like Jarasandh. Half of me belongs to the village, whereas the other half is excommunicated. Who am I? To whom is my umbilical cord connected? (38-39)

In *The Outcaste* at an instant, Limbale himself signs the application form instead of his parent's signature. As he couldn't claim either of them as his parents, he feels, "I am an alien. My father is not Mahar by caste. In the Maharwada I felt humiliated as I was considered a bastard; they called me akkarmashi. Yet in the village I was considered Mahar and teased as the offspring of one" (62). He often dreamt about his father. He doubtly arose questions like, "Suppose I go to Baslegaon would my father allow me into his house? Would the mother there give me food? My father lives in a mansion, my mother in a hut, and I on the street. Where will I die? Where are my roots exactly?" (62). But his dream came to an end when his so called father Hanmanta Limbale, Patil of Baslegaon protested against enrolling Sharan's name as Sharankumar Limbale. But Hanmanta has to give up his violence and so Limbale said, "I owe my father's name to Bhosale, the headmaster" (45).

Like Bhosale, Santamai too exposes Limbale's identity. In order to break Limbale's friendship with Mang boys, she shout, "Are you born from the seed of a Mang that you keep their company? You are the son of a village head. You must eat and play like a prince. You are son of a Patil..." (20). When the Village Chief refused to sign his freeship application form, Limbale's mother aroused in anger. She forced Limbale to proclaim his identity by announcing the Chief that "She was the Patil's whore" (60). Limbale feels happy about his mother's proclamation without knowing the meaning of the word. But when he was grown up he feels afraid to expose such an identity and he wants to escape from the thread of identity to which he was tied. So he claims, "I was afraid of my caste because I couldn't claim my father's caste or religion. In a sense I was not a Mahar, because high-caste blood ran in my body. Could I drain this blood out of my body? My own blood nauseated me" (82).

The marginalized people try to hide their identity in order to survive in the society and entertain a fear about it. At times, they try to pretend, due to the inner conflicts that occur in their minds. Sometimes, when their identity is revealed, they would be pushed to a state of desolation. At an instance, out of fury against his lack of identity, Limbale proposes, "We were ashamed of our past. We hid ourselves as a leper hides patches of rash on his skin" (105).

Thus Limbale in *The Outcaste* portrays his experience of life as a man who cannot be related with anyone. He compares his life with a sparrow and he portrays, "I felt like the sparrow who suffers because its nest is destroyed. Who should I go to? Who would claim me when both my mother and father rejected me?" (64). Even though he had no inherited identity, he found consolation in his mind by claiming, "But I too was a human being" (59). By inheriting this true identity which equates oneself with the mankind no one can deprive of this from him.

The Outcaste also throws light on the torments a Dalit had to undergo in the society. Limbale had painted the histories of humiliations underwent by a dalit through his grandmother Santamai. She claimed, “Life is not the same. We suffered more injustice in our days” (78). Santamai’s recitations of injustices from history made Limbale to equate her with Jijabai, the grandmother of Shivaji, the great warrior. She also claims, “Injustice done to me was not just today’s phenomenon but had a long history. The roots of this injustice went deep into history, for many thousands of years” (79).

Through her experience, Santamai shares her memories of the sufferings underwent by the Dalit women. She proposed how the women were restricted from grazing their cattle and how they were badly insulted. She portrayed the suffering of women as, “ Dalit women were badly insulted. They were beaten as if they were slaves. Some farmers even harassed them sexually, pulled them into the crop, and raped them” (79). She also describes how her forefathers and their families were cheated by the Patils. She said:

Our forefathers used to be security guards at this Patil’s mansion. Whenever the Patil had to go away to town on official work my forefathers would protect the mansion. Our forefather’s were so naïve that they didn’t consider even once, the possibility of seeing the beautiful face of the Patil’s sleeping wife. On the contrary they sacrificed their daughters, wives, sisters and daughters-in-law to dark nights in the Patil’s mansion. They were sacrificed like animals are at the time of laying the foundation stone of a building. Our forefathers were proud to be fed on the leftover food given to them by the Patil. (79)

Limbale also describes the idea of untouchability that prevailed in the society. He traces the reason for untouchability and segregation as caste and said, “Our caste had been thrust up on

us even before we were born” (76). He presents the consequences they had to face because of caste. They were given separate tea cups in the shops. They had to construct houses in the place where other villagers used as latrines and they had to move aside to make way for the high caste persons. He even noted the aluminum tumbler kept for them to drink water in Shivram’s shop.

He even picturizes how dalits were denied of drinking water even though the well was constructed by them for Narayan Patil. Limbale, while portraying his childhood, remembers how the barber refused to shave his head as his mother is a Mahar. So he questions himself, “How could this barber, who used to shave buffaloes in the village, refuse to shave my head” (22).

Limbale also presents his agony of refusal of brides for his marriage. The brides were rejected for him by claiming that he doesn’t come from a pure blood. So he says, “It was better to stay unmarried”(92). While presenting the evils of the society, he also portrays the traces of child marriage through the marriage of his sisters Vani, Pami and Indira. His protest against child marriage is also presented in the autobiography and it reflects him as a refined and educated being.

As the chain reaction of the social evil and lack of identity, Dalits were subjected to face the effects of Poverty. Poverty was the complete lack of basic needs of an individual in a society such as food, clothes and shelter. In *The Outcaste*, Limbale had sketched the hardships endured by the Dalits to quench their basic needs in life. Limbale had depicted the life of the Dalits as, “We are the garbage the village throws out. The umbilical cord between our locality and the village had snapped, as if the village torn asunder had thrown us out of it. 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” (5). Through this presentation, Limbale had drawn the pathetic situation of his society.

In the beginning of his autobiography, Limbale had presented how his friend Harya was deprived of education because of poverty in his family. He was forced to undertake the work of grazing the cattle in Grimallya’s farm and thus he became “an asset to the family” (2). Limbale had described the pains of starvation as, “Starvation was written in our lot from the moment of our birth. Most of the time all my sisters went to sleep without eating anything. I atleast ate something. Mother gulped only water. Dada satisfied his hunger by smoking bidies. At the sight of my sisters who had gone to sleep hungry, I lost my appetite and couldn’t sleep” (21).

The Dalits were used to eat leftovers. Limbale was taught by his mother that, “Leftover food is nectar” (3). *The Outcaste* had recorded the reaction of the dalit children on receiving the leftover food from the high caste as, “ We had never tasted food like that before. We were all really gluttonous. Our stomach were as greedy as a beggar’s sack” (3). Through this portrayal, Limbale had mirrored that only the needy can estimate the real value of a thing. At this instant he remembers the most pathetic plight of how his grandmother eats Bhakaris prepared by the grains collected from the dung.

Limbale was also subjected to hungriness and he defined it as, “Hunger is bigger than man. Hunger is more vast than the seven circles of hell.... Hunger is more powerful than man. A single stomach is like the whole earth” (50). While describing the painful state of hungriness, he also points out the aftermath of hunger on man as:

Since then man has been striving to satisfy his stomach. Filling even one stomach proved difficult for him. He began to live with a half filled one. He survived by swallowing his own saliva. He went for days without eating anything. He started selling himself for his stomach. A woman becomes a whore and a man a thief. The stomach makes you clean shit, it even makes you eat shit. (8)

Thus the Dalits in order to appease their hunger ate unhygienic food. Limbale illustrated such incidents in his autobiography and he mirrored it as, “Sometimes there were dead cockroaches in the curry kept in clay pots. We threw the cockroaches away and ate the curry” (43). He had also noted the incident at which himself and Mallya were forced by hungriness to eat fungus ridden food. It had even made them to gather leftover food from the garbage. Limbale had figured his experience of gathering used tea powder from Ghenappa’s tea-stall. While describing his starvation, Limbale also imagined the starvation of the society as, “The Maharwada survives on just a few morsels of bhakari and a little water. That is their staple food” (25).

The people were drawn to malpractices like stealing in order to appease their hunger. He questioned such odd practices as, “Who steals out of habit? The poor steal for the sake of hunger. If they had enough to eat would they steal?” (21). Limbale had pictured the incident of Vani being beaten by a fruit vendor for stealing a banana. This scene shifts the readers to shed their tears by the portrayal of Vani and Limbale eating the discarded skin of banana to satisfy their stomach. But these humiliations of poverty had really moulded him to climb up the stairs of the ladder of social order. He recognized the boon it brought to him as, “The pain of poverty is so deep that it is limitless. It makes a man a man. Only if the umbilical cord that connects one with pain is colossal does one become strong” (83).

While describing the evils of hunger, the novel also points how the dalits are deprived of clothes to cover their bodies. Limbale had pictured the torn, patched dresses worn by himself and his family members. Limbale had characterized the dalit's lack of shelter and other basic necessities. He had illustrated this by portraying bus stand as the place of shelter for himself, Santamai and Dada. He was once ashamed of taking his friends to his village for a festival and his inability to provide them proper shelter.

Limbale, through this work portrays the job undertaken by the dalits to run their livelihood. He has presented how they begged for alms in the markets and from upper class society. Limbale has presented the jobs undertaken by his grandmother Santamai and Dada for his welfare and to overcome poverty. He presents it as, "Dada lit the street lamps, worked as a porter, distributed newspapers, went to school carrying tiffin for the pupils" (53). Limbale also portrays his grandmother as a sweeper and midwife. He even depicts the practice of selling liquor in Maharwada. By painting the pathetic condition of Suni who was poisoned while gathering woods, Limbale has portrayed how dalits risked their life to earn for their existence.

The Outcaste highlights the segregation endured by the dalits in the field of education. Limbale illustrates his experience of separate seating arrangement for dalits and high class students at a school. On seeing the high class students sharing their food with their teachers, Limbale arose many questions and he distinguishes dalits with high class students as, "Dare I offer my chutney-bhakar to my teacher? Would he eat it? Bhakar of the high caste were of course of a better quality. Their mothers had given them fried food, whereas we had just pieces of dry bhakar which were hardly enough to satisfy the cave of hunger" (2).

He also observes the distance the teachers kept with dalit students and their closeness with high class students. Limbale has illustrated the duties assigned to the dalits by the teachers. They are prompted to smear the floor and walls with cow dung paste and were made to sweep the floor. Limbale had shared his bitter experience of being forced to sit at the entrance of the Marwari's mansion, while the high caste students are allowed to sit at the platform.

While portraying the segregations that dalits had to endure in the society, the author also focused on the restrictions they had to face in religion. The unlawful restrictions proposed by the so-called high class people made a heart breaking influence in the minds of the dalits even in their infancy. So Limbale portrays the saying that "Child are the flowers of God's abode, but not us. We are the garbage the village throws out" (5).

The Outcaste also presents the suffering that Parshya and the author had to encounter for prostrating directly before the God. So Limbale illustrates, "We are supposed to say our prayers from the steps outside. Our entering a temple will make God impure. The untouchables must not enter a temple"(62). This prompts him to question God's attitude. He asks, "What kind of god is this that makes human beings hate each other? We are supposed to be the children of god, then why are we considered untouchable?" (62).

Besides portraying the social evils faced by the dalits, Limbale has concentrated to paint the pangs of the women of his community. At one place higher class 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 objects to gratify their lust. Limbale's women characters in *The Outcaste* are all subjected to serious complications in their life such as widows, childless

women, and deserted women. He had also described the jobs undertaken the women characters to achieve basic needs in their life.

Poverty or environmental factors are strong determinants of conflict. The supremacy of the upper class creates conflicts among the marginalized section. The Dalits quietly slip into a state of physical and mental degradation due to exploitation, injustice and discrimination committed by the oppressors. They wallow in a state of alienation or despair.

Limbale's autobiography has shown life experience of a Dalit and it also describes the author's pathetic situation of not having an identity, a home or a place of belonging. Though Limbale faced rootlessness and segregation, he has created his own identity by equating himself with great mythical heroes like Karna and Eklavya. Thus Limbale through his autobiography portrays the social evil encountered by every dalit. He has also painted his own experiences through his words and equated his pains with the pains of millions in India.

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