

The Image of Hunger as Construction of Dalit Identity in Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*

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Abstract

Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste*, exposes the atrocities faced by the Dalits, and the anger that boils within them as a reaction to these prejudices. He projects before the readers an objective and disinterested account of his life from birth to adulthood, carefully creating the image of his community in conflict with the contemporary social and cultural conditions. This personal account uncovers the untouchable's quest for dignity and the recognition of their human worth. The entire work seems to revolve around the pivot- 'hunger'. A careful reading of the text brings out the different dimensions of the image 'hunger' that depict the plight of Dalits. In the present study, the image 'hunger' is analyzed in two ways- firstly, as the identity crisis of Dalits and their hunger for asserting their identity and secondly, as the hunger that dominates the lives of Dalit women. Limbale's Auto Narrative anticipates that, all people should be respected and treated as human beings irrespective of their caste.

Dalit literature is a creative and intellectual literary expression which transforms the social realities in various literary genres. It was an offshoot of Indian literature and represented an emerging trend in the Indian literary scene. Dalit literature is primarily a social and human document, which deals with the people who had been socially and economically exploited in India for hundreds of years. But, there is a good sign of social equality slowly entering in India. Credit goes to all concerned activists and to Dalit literature.

Now-a-days, Dalits give voice to their identity through literature, and it has become a powerful medium for the detail glimpse of the inherent identity crisis and the resultant quest for identity. Sharankumar Limbale's '*Akkarmashi*' serves the purpose to a farther extend, for it effectively deals with the question of identity and the yearning for asserting an identity. The miseries and crisis that the narrator underwent are common to the whole Dalit community. So he can be a representative, and can claim that his solitary and individual life was same as the lives of the community. So it is both representative and solitary. Caste discrimination and the question of identity are the major themes of Limbale's autobiography. He presents Dalit's constant battle with „hunger“ as the dominating theme throughout the book. It is not merely the physical hunger and the author elevates it to a higher plane. When associated to the lives of Dalits, hunger can be interpreted as the identity crisis and the resultant hunger for ascertaining a specific identity in the society . Ghanshyam Shaw writes in this regard:

Identity is concerned with the self esteem self image of a community – real or imaginary –dealing with the existence and role: “who are we?” “What position we do have in society Vis-a- vas other communities?” “How are we related to others?” Nothing standing differences in the nature of Dalit movements and the meaning of identity, there has been a common quest – the quest for equality, self-dignity and eradication of untouchability”(17).

The identity crisis of the protagonist begins from the birth itself. Limbale was tormented firstly by the mishap of birth. The very title "*Akkarmashi*" itself focuses to the identity crisis of the author, as he was an offspring born out of a socially inadmissible relationship. His mom Masamai, who belonged to Mahar community, had him out of the wedlock with the Patil (Chief) of a village Baslegaon, Hanmantha Limbale who had a place with the high caste Maratha community. The birth itself ended up being a shame. That is the reason he says "my first breath more likely than not debilitated the profound quality of the world" (36). Since his dad was not a Mahar by caste, Mahar people saw him as a charlatan, half-caste (*akkarmashi*) and as his mom had a place with Mahar community, he was an untouchable for the village individuals. Accordingly he got to be unsuitable, outsider to all.

To be a Dalit is a curse, but to be an illegitimate within the Dalit community is a double curse. Being a half-caste of an outcaste, he was considered much less than a human being. He suffered not only through caste system, but

also through the pain of not even being allowed into the caste system. Normally one is identified by the father's name, caste or religion. But the protagonist had inherited none of these. So the lack of inherited identity became his real identity. He was ashamed of his past and was extremely sad about his low birth. He identified himself with the mythological characters „Jarasandha' and 'Kara'.

In the family, he was not free from anguish. He had a divided self even in his own family. His father lived in a mansion, mother in a hut and he on streets. His father always tried to avoid him, and he could not acknowledge Sharankumar as his offspring. This made Limbale to call his autobiography "the chronicle of a fatherless being" (27). He always regretted of the destiny to bear the fault for the sin of his parents, and of not having the pure blood. He was insulted even by his siblings, as their father was another man. His Dada was a Muslim, grandmother being a Mahar woman. So he could not make out his real identity from his own lineage or family tree.

Being the reason for her miseries, his mother rejected him as a stepmother does. The prestige of father kept him away from paternal love. And when his grandparents denied their role as guardians, he felt like a sparrow whose nest is destroyed. He had a feeling of alienation even from his own siblings, they being born to his mother from another man. Later when he met his father, he could not recognize the Patil. In school records, he got the surname 'Limbale' after many struggles with his father and community and the struggle was supported by his teacher. He could not get certain papers signed for school, because he could not properly identify his caste based on his complex family history.

As he grew older, his love and marriage proposals were broken down, due to his mixed origin. For him being a hybrid, his bride also was needed to be a hybrid. He found out a solution for all his problems, in education. But it gave him an identity crisis of a different level. As he progressed in education, he no longer had the same attachment to the colony, relations or language, and he sought for upward mobility. But he was in no way allowed to enter into the established social order by upper caste Hindus.

At this point, he became aware of the fact that the status of an individual is determined by his birth, and it had nothing to do with individual talent, aptitude or abilities. It also accounted for the alienation, loss and longing among young, urban, educated generation of Dalits. They in turn navigated a rupture of family and community as a consequence of their political awakening. His perpetual struggles forced him to hide his mixed identity, "like a leper hiding patches on skin" (60).

For Dalits, hunger was not merely a physical need; instead it was a struggle for survival. The detestable poverty forced them to live in limitless pain and agony. The entire Maharwada survived on a few Bhakari (bread) and a little water. Most of the time, they spent their lives in utter poverty. And this pathetic condition was a social construct, which enabled the high caste to force them to do menial labour like sweeping, cleaning the latrines and thereby declaring them to be polluted and untouchables. For this pitiful labour they were given meager wages in the form of leftover food. In order to fill their stomach, they took up the task of removing the carcasses of cattle, which provided them enough meat, even though it subjected them to further humiliation. Children were considered to be the asset of a poor family. Their struggle for survival further led them to anti-social activities of stealing, poisoning the animals for meat, selling liquor, even selling their own bodies. Deprived of money, land, work, education, they had to depend wholly on the high caste for their survival. This pathetic condition is explained by Limbale's comparison of Maharwada "to a heap of Jowar grains gathered at the resting place of a corpse"(12), and its representation as the „garbage that the village throws out'. The instance of Santamai, eating the Bhakari made of the grains taken from the cow dung, makes the reader heavy hearted. Limbale observes 'hunger' as the sole reason for their pitiable plight. His always half fed stomach proved to be a 'graveyard that swallows the dead'. The life of Dalit was directed by hunger even from his childhood. Thus the economic identity was a major threat they had to face, in their whole life.

Religious identity is of utmost importance. It was the religious sanction that strengthened the caste based segregation and oppression. As indicated by K.M Panikkar, "the Dalits were the submerged base of Hindu society, but the self assertion of the upper caste and the spiritual aspect enabled them to preserve their autonomy over the Dalits" (21). The Dalits, conscious of their outsider status and exploitation in the name of religion, called it as a

terrible monster and gave the ironical account of rituals and faith. This made them aware of the need to come out of the shackles of the religion. The conflicts between different religions added fuel to the fire. The realization that the religion tears people and families apart, forced them to break away from the traditional customs. The superstitions, degeneration of man through religious practices, different God cult for Dalits, associated with caste consciousness, forced the Dalits to break away from religion, and to claim a superior identity. That is why Limbale asks: "If you cut out his religion, a man is still a man Why does religion hinder them? Why is man imprisoned by conventions?" (102).

Even though being a part of Hindu religion, Dalits were thrust outside the temple, and from religious rituals, as they were considered polluted and subhuman. But they could not make out the reason for segregating human beings on the basis of 'mishap of birth' followed by the caste and religion. Thus the religious identity became a crucial question before them.

The question of social identity holds an important position in the lives of Dalits. Social identity deals with a question 'who are our own people?' The lives of India's lowest citizens are completely controlled by the society around them, and the caste acts as a powerful tool for social segregation and the caste identity is the occasion only for victimization. According to Limbale, "the caste of a Hindu Indian determines everything about his life-dress, marriage and even food". (TADL, 28). The stratification devised by Manu was effectively utilized by the upper caste, for not including Dalits into the mainstream of society. Traditional Indian society did not allow the low caste people to realize their self as their self identity which was a threat to the smooth functioning of social, political and religious institutions. So, they created obstacles in the path of self thereby deviated them from positive growth. Swami Vivekananda therefore observes caste "as a crystallized social institution, which fills the atmosphere of India with stink" (Panikkar, 16).

Caste as a regressive factor in society spread the stigma of inferiority, and marginalization. Inter caste marriages were a threat to the propagation of caste. So 'Varna Sankara -themixture of castes-, which strikes at the root of caste organization, was considered the greatest of all social evils. The purity was enforced by the prohibition of social interaction. Social justice, violence, discrimination and segregation are the daily experiences of millions in India, even today.

Limbale explains these points through his bitter experiences from childhood onwards. The Dalit children were kept away from the noble; even the games played were different. At school, they were forced to sit at the entrance, along with others' chappels. The leftover food by the high caste was like elixir for them. The high caste children often teased and threw stones at them. At first, Sharankumar could not accept the logic of humiliation and wondered what sin he had done for being exposed to such experiences. Even though they cleaned the entire village, they were considered polluted. So they had to suffer the injuries and soars caused by the discriminations and atrocities perpetuated by caste Hindus, and the sub animal status imposed on them.

This pathetic situation carried them further downwards. They were forced to kill and eat animals, collect leftover food by begging, take up the cleaning jobs, and all other kind of works. And for the sake of stomach they started to steal, sell liquor and even themselves. The life at the outskirts of village, unavailability of pure water in the name of untouchability, ignorance, all made them unhygienic. Even though they dug the well, they could not take the water. They were allowed to use the river water polluted by the upper caste. In order to escape from this humiliation, all including women and children took to drinking liquor and engaged in quarrels and immoral deeds.

And within the low caste itself, there were numerous divisions and hierarchy. Thus a miniature caste system was established within the lower castes, with innumerable sub castes each divided again and again, including 3000 major units rigidly exclusive and claims superiority over the other alien in the social life. They practiced untouchability among themselves. Limbale gives evidence to this while recalling an incident, when his grandmother scolded him for giving water and mingling with a friend who belonged to Mang community which was even below Mahar. He was deeply touched by this and asked: Is one's caste more important than one's friend? How could he make pure water impure by merely touching it? Our minds were

divided like separate reservoirs of water. Our minds were not only divided they were also contaminated.
(20)

Even economic or political progress, could not support their social up gradation. Even if one was economically forward, politically strengthened, enlightened by education he cannot claim the status of social forwardness. Even though one forgets his caste identity, those around him do not. Limbale became aware of the fact, when he was segregated on different levels by the high caste, after his Degree and even after a he got a permanent job, and became economically well-off. So when he was transferred to city he was forced to hide his identity.

Being a half caste, he had to bear an additional burden of impure blood. He was humiliated both by the high caste, and by the Mahar community. Being an 'Akarmashi' was the most miserable condition he had to face. He was brutally segregated and humiliated. In this way, he had to face the crisis of social identity at different levels throughout his life.

The very concept of identity involves domination, which is a major issue of politics. Imposed segregation by the high caste asserts their domination over the lower caste. It presumes sameness, excluding differences. So the lower caste, being different, was excluded at all levels. The only solace for them was education, which made them aware of their indignity. Limbale explains it through his life, when knowledge ignited his mind to fight for his rights. He narrates an incident of protest when he revolted against the segregation at a tea shop, and he described it as a political protest. The violence meted out to women, by the upper caste was a weapon to inflict political lessons. When Dalits protested, the high caste used retaliatory violence as a weapon to assert power over them. In fact it was a kind of relation between colonizers and colonized, where the colonizer uses oppressive methods to politically subjugate the colonized. Here the high caste played the role of colonizer and made the low caste colonized. Thus they were left without a distinct political identity.

It is a universal fact that a crisis would definitely lead to the craving for its solution. This is same in the case of Dalits too. When they were exposed to crisis- individual, familial, religious, social, and political, they had a quest for building up an identity of their own, in all these fields. The different facets of this quest or „hunger“ for establishing identity are elucidated in the text.

At an individual level, the quest was not expressed in the form of violent revolt, but as a denial of traditions and taboo using the weapon of silent endurance. The use of highly philosophical language, in Limbale's writing like a saint's quest to understand the meaning of the world, signifies this. And in the familial dimension, he tries to conform to his atmosphere. In the case of religion, Dalits took up a revolutionary step. As they were denied a space within. Hinduism, they took to massive conversion to Buddhism. Buddhism treated them as human beings, allowed them to worship, and freed them from the shackles of superstition and caste, which dehumanized them with the burden of segregation. In the political atmosphere, drastic changes were brought about by collective revolt. The crisis of political identity led to the formation of protest groups and political mobilization. The identity politics led to the emancipation of Dalits at different levels, like reservations in education and job. Dalit Panther Movement and the struggle for renaming the Marathwada University as Babasaheb Ambedkar University gave Dalits an enlightenment regarding the strength of their collective political identity. In order to gain economic identity, they resorted to all sorts of jobs. They found work as a partial solution for all the problems. For them, it was not a hateful thing, but the creation of system. They considered economic independence as a part of their up gradation. An attempt to create social identity was made by the process of Sanskritization, with the slogan educate, organize and agitate. Education played a major role in opening their eyes and making them aware of their rights. Marginalization to the point of exclusion, forced them to conduct social movements, that supported their craving for upward mobility and to create a social identity.

The Dalits are destined to face identity crisis at all levels, and the resultant hunger to fill the voids in their identity. The identity crisis was a social construct whereas the solution arose from within the community, which could effectively reduce the hunger for identity. Limbale asks: "How has man lost himself under this huge tree of caste, religion, breeding, family? Why this labyrinth of customs?" (105). These questions are sharp enough to prick the

conscience and pierce the heart of a sensitive reader and thereby spearheading the movement for a change in the identity of Dalits- individual, familial, religious, social and political satisfying the hunger for identity.

Dalit women are victims of 'the hunger' The identity of a woman in Indian society is constructed by the collective efforts of family, caste, religion, culture and society. Women are the gateways of caste system and crucial pivot on whose purity- sanctity axis, the caste hierarchy is constructed, and the women themselves are the worst sufferers of the system. When it comes to Dalit women, the problem becomes more complex.

To be a Dalit woman, is a great calamity in Indian society. According to the famous Dalit activist Ruth Manorama, "Dalit women suffer discrimination-not single, double but of triple fold- class, caste, gender" (Bhagawat, 5). Dalit women constitute a distinct social group, and cannot be masked under 'women' or 'Dalits'. They are the Dalit of Dalit Indian society, being oppressed victims of centuries-old social, political, economic, cultural, and religious pressures inflicted by the collective forces of feudalism, casteism and patriarchy. Their problems are of inexplicable intensity. Being illiterate, superstitious and victims of social torture, they suffer first in family as a woman and then have to face the society as a Dalit, Even though they are the bread- winners; they have no right to the money and are obliged to do domestic work in addition. Their social discrimination is due to the vulnerable position in male social order in general and Indian cultural life in particular. With most formidable occupations, and lifelong suffering and torture, they face more harassment, oppression and exploitation than upper caste women. Still, the advocates of 'sisterhood' in women's movement failed to recognize their pain.

Even Dalit literature, constructed Dalit women in the similar patriarchal framework of 'glorification of motherhood' and subjugation of women. But Sharankumar Limbale marks a clear deviation from this trend, through Akkarmashi. Here he describes the precarious existence of Dalit women, combining abject poverty with grinding labour. Also, he questions the doubly silenced condition of subaltern woman, with no control over their lives, earning, even their own bodies.

In the selected work under study, Limbale depicts the women as the victims of hunger at various levels- the sexual and exploitative hunger of the high caste, oppressive and looting hunger of low caste men, the hunger of customs for existence, the physical hunger that forced them to hard work and social degradation, and their own hunger for a better life with love and care.

Women from the lower castes were considered too low and degraded in life that their body was a free terrain of colonization. "Even in caste conflicts, Dalit women fell as the first victim, to be a political lesson of subjugation" (Das,261). Dalit women were raped, when their husbands were imprisoned for protests against the high caste. Apart from this hunger for suppression, the women were subjected to sexual hunger of the high caste men. It seems highly ridiculous and paradoxical that the high caste men, the upholders of caste system and preservation of purity, openly disobey the social norms as long as they needed low caste women for their material comforts and pleasures. Before the sexual hunger, there was no question of untouchability. Dalits - being the watchdogs of their masters - were forced to sacrifice their daughters, wives, sisters and daughter-in laws in the Patils mansion. The hands that beat the wife become paralyzed when humiliated this way. There were families which survived by pleasing the Patil"s sexually.

The high caste men used crooked ways to satisfy their hunger, as exemplified by Limbale from his mother's life. Masamai's happy life with her husband Ithal Kamble was destroyed by Hanmantha Limbale, their land owner, owing to her attractive beauty. When she was desolated and helpless, Hanmantha worked out his plan, lured her, and enjoyed her for several years. When Sharankumar was born from their alliance, Hanmantha came to his true colour and left her isolated, thereby her life forever. This kind of illegal temporary marriage was common among them. The woman, the prey of this trap was stamped as a prostitute or whore, while the upper caste men saved their face. Limbale points out this fact: "A man can eat paam and spit as many times as he likes, but the same was not possible for a woman. It is considered wrong if a woman does that. Once her chastity is lost, it can never be restored" (36).

Patils followed a tradition of holding a Dalit woman as their whore. That is how Sidramappa Patil, came to Masamai's life. Thus she subjected herself to the curse to be born beautiful among Dalits and to the tyranny of sex, mortgaging to one owner after other. In this way, she was burdened with a roll call of children and their upbringing,

in which the caste Hindu father was reluctant to shoulder the responsibility. But Limbale does not attempt to criticize his mother; instead he views her as the victim of social order, which makes Dalit woman an easy prey to the upper caste.

The Dalit men have played a significant role in making women's life miserable. "When the low caste men were denied their urge for assertion and domination, owing to the oppression of the high caste, they try to fulfill their desire of assertion and revolt in their family and most probably on the women"(Ahmad,27). They try to express their male chauvinism through drinking liquor and beating their wives and children. Being fulltime drunkards, they are reluctant to take up the family responsibility. In addition, they take away the hard earned wages of their women, for liquor and prostitution. The community gave them right to marry as many times as they want and to discard the wives on trifle reasons or without any. It is evident from the lives of Santamai, Limbale's grandmother and Masamai, his mother. Marriages were broken up like a game of dolls, leaving behind a large number of deserted young wives as was the fate of Limbale's sisters. Extra marital affairs and polygamy fell on women as a burden, thereby turning their own husbands as their worst enemies.

Women were invariably ruled by the physical hunger. "Around 80% of the Dalit women in India are below minimum subsistence level and they strive not for gender equality, but for their survival" (Bhagawat, 4). This life of indignity and uncertainty force them to hard work and menial labour as scavengers, landless labourers and eventually to degrade themselves as liquor sellers, beggars and prostitutes. They are completely dependent on the non-Dalits to fill their stomachs. "They are helpless to collect the discarded food of the non-Dalits to satisfy the hunger" (Anand, 25). When faced with the problem of hunger almost daily, they sacrifice sometimes with the daily diet of the leftover of the family meals-inadequate in quantity and inferior in nutritional quality- and sometimes with constant starvation. The utter poverty and the family responsibility force them to sell their bodies in exchange of bread. Even though they work hard as scavengers, they are never given adequate wages except stale food or old clothings. The most pitiful expression of their poverty becomes clear when Limbale narrates incidents of Santamai's fasting on almost all days, her eating bhakaris(bread) made from grains collected from cow dung, which had a stink of cow dung and her remaining starving after giving Sharankumar the only left bhakari convincing him that she had eaten earlier. Thus the life of Dalit women was always governed by hunger.

They were also subjected to the shackles of superstitious customs. Devadasi system was the most important among them. Here a girl dedicated to God, is never allowed to marry but was exploited in various ways. Thus "a religious colour was given to the ritual prostitution" (Murahari, 305). If they married, children born to them were considered outcaste. Child marriage added fuel to the fire, leaving behind a large number of child widows and discarded young wives which gradually led to their exploitation. In their struggle for survival, they could not even dream of education and its prospects and this ignorance aggravated the level of exploitation and superstitions that encircled them. They had a rare predicament to rise above the gendered roles of a submissive and male dependent entity because of their partner's inability or irresponsibility, but still condemned for transgression. Thus the customs, sought their existence, by making women obey, uphold and propagate their ways. Above all, they were ruled by the hunger for a better life. And this quest gave them sheer perseverance and made them strong fighters. They had a desire for normal, happy life which led them to different paths for its fulfillment. Limbale states it clearly when he says "they (Dalit women) sold themselves to be loved and cared for by someone, not to appease their lust" (64). This hunger for love can be seen from Santamai's grief at the death of her husband who discarded her, married another woman and threw her life to miseries and Masamai's devoted nursing of her sick husband who had left her accusing her as unfaithful and was responsible for her pitiable existence, when he returned after many years to atone his wrongs. They were ready to starve in order to feed the children and were ready to put themselves out to give education to the children. They dreamt of a bright future for the next generation and toiled all their lives for the purpose. The hope for a better life made them dynamic, gave them strength to carry on the struggle for survival single handedly. This refusal to surrender themselves to the degrading conditions, desire to live and move forward gives them a sense of tragic dignity, which is evident from Limbale's depiction of the women characters, including his mother Masamai and grandmother Santamai.

Limbale clearly depicts the women as being subjected to hunger all through their lives. This hunger is both external-inflicted on them from outside- as well as internal- that emerges from their own lives. Whatever be the source,

their lives are always ruled by the multifaceted hunger, and they are destined to fall victims to the magical spell of this hunger. 'Hunger' as an image appears throughout the work. And this image goes far beyond a physical need, and acquires a philosophical dimension. On viewing from a broader perspective, the life of Dalits can be identified as directed by hunger for identity- individual, familial, religious, economic, social, and political. And their miseries and toil can be viewed as the result of the hunger of the high caste community which leads to exploitation at all levels, with the victimization of women -for the satisfaction of this hunger - being the most pathetic. Their yearning for survival and recognition add to this. In this sense, the life of Dalits revolves around the pivot -hunger.

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