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SEARCH OF IDENTITY IN SHARAN KUMAR LIMBALE'S 'AKKARMASHI: THE OUTCASTE'

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ABSTRACT

Sharan Kumar Limbale is a well-known Dalit activist writer, editor and critic. He speaks and writes in Marathi, Hindi and English. Mostly he writes in Marathi and is later translated into English and other languages. He has worked with several literary genres and is the author of more than 40 books. Dalit struggle and identity is the theme of most of his writing. He is well known for his poetry, short stories, including his most acknowledged masterpiece self-narrative 'The Outcaste' (2003). He is equally well known for his critical work, "Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations" (2004). Limbale got many awards and won the wider acclaim from the public for his literary talents. He is also a member of many academic, cultural and social organizations.

'The Outcaste', by Sharan Kumar Limbale, primarily deals with the question of identity of a young man, who happens to be an illegitimate child born to Mahar mother by a Maratha father. He wrote this book when he was 25 years old. Being young his search for an identity is more intense and passionate. He criticises the hypocrisy of the Indian upper caste men who for their own convenience follow caste rules but would never mind indulging in carnal pleasures by exploiting the dignity of the lower caste women. This paper attempts to analyze Sharan Kumar Limbale's painful story of his life and shows the resistance and agitation against the caste hegemonic society through his self-narrative.

Keywords- Identity, Humiliation, Suppression, Resistance.

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'Akkarmashi' is a self-narrative written by Sharan Kumar Limbale in Marathi in 1984. It was translated into English by Santosh Bhoomkar as 'The Outcaste' (2003) and caught the attention of the readers. It is also translated into Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Punjabi and Tamil. The word, 'akkarmashi' means 'impure, incomplete or an illegitimate child'. Limbale is an illegitimate child because he was born out of the illegitimate relationship between his mother Masamai and an upper caste Maratha Hanmanta. His mother Masamai belonged to Mahar, a low caste while his father Hanmanta Limbale came from Lingayat, a high caste. Previously, Limbale's mother Masamai was married to Vithal Kamble of her own community who worked as a bonded labour in fields of Hanmanta, who was the patil of the village named Baslegaon. Hanmanta succeeded in breaking their marriage. The divorce from Ithal Kamble to Masamai seems to be a banishment of Sita by her husband lord Rama. Hanmanta Limbale then keeps physical relationship with Masamai. Masamai gives birth to a son. Hanmanta disowns the child and mother. Consequently, Masamai left Baslegaon and started living with her mother Shantamai because "Only a mother and the earth can accommodate and stomach everything". (p. 37).

The protagonist Limbale remarks: "after my birth the mansions of the patil community must have become tense. My first breath must have threatened the morality of the world. With my first cry at birth, milk must have splashed from the breast of every Kunti." (p. 36)

Limbale was called inauspicious by the society and he compares himself to Karna, the legendary character of the Hindu epic 'Mahabharata'. Karna was also an illegitimate child and had to live his whole life disgraceful and disrespectful due to his non-belongingness. Thus, 'The Outcaste' primarily deals with the question of identity of a young man. Limbale wrote his autobiography when he was twenty-five years old. Being young, his search for an identity is more intense and passionate. While constructing a 'self' through his narrative he goes to the root of the Indian caste system questioning its very foundations which are based on a religious order. He condemns the hypocrisy of the Indian upper caste men who for their own convenience follow caste rules but would never mind indulging in carnal pleasures by exploiting the dignity of the lower caste women. His critique on the Indian caste system is worth quoting:

"People, who enjoy high caste privileges, authority sanctioned religion, and inherit property, have exploited the Dalits of this land. The Patils in every village have made whores of the wives of Dalit farm laborers. A poor Dalit girl on obtaining puberty has invariably been a victim of their lust. There is a whole breed born to adulterous Patils. There are dalit families that survive by pleasing the Patils sexually. The whole village considers such a house as the house of the Patil's whore. Even the children born to her from husband are considered the children of Patil. Besides survival on the charity of a Patil what else can such a household expect? (p. 38)

Limbale's cry for social justice, perhaps, has no match in any literature. His voice is definitely loud, but it has its own justification. As a direct victim of such a heinous practice, his anger is so much violent that it cannot be contained in words. The stigma of being an illegitimate gnaws at the heart of Limbale and he raises some basic questions to him-self:

"Why did my mother say yes to the rape which brought me into the world? Why did she put up with the fruit of this illegitimate intercourse 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?" (p.37)

Limbale also highlights the hypocrisy of Indian Caste system which grants permission and status to a high caste Patil to develop extra-marital relationship. He is not branded as immoral whereas the woman with whom he keeps extra-marital relations is branded as a whore. In the Author's note of English edition of 'The Outcaste', Limbale remarks:

"My history is my mother's life, at the most my grandmother's. My ancestry doesn't go any further. My mother is an untouchable, while my father is a high caste from one of the privileged classes of

India. Mother lives in a hut, father in a mansion. Father is a landlord; mother landless. I am an 'akkarmashi' (half-caste). I am condemned, branded illegitimate. 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 Dalit movement and Dalit literature that I understood that my mother was not an adulterous but the victim of a social system." (p. x)

Limbale also comments on his fractured identity. He writes:

"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, Shantamai. Does this mean I am Muslim as well? 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 belong to the village, whereas the other half is excommunicated. Who am I? To whom, is my umbilical cord connected?" (pp. 38-39)

Limbale's struggle for the identity begins with his entry in school. The teacher asks Limbale his father's name. Limbale does not know his father's name and he thinks, 'Strange that I too could have a father!' (45). The teacher Bhosale sarcastically calls him a Patil of Baslegaon. He feels good as well as bad to be called Patil. The name of Hanmanta Limbale, the Patil of Baslegaon is added to Limbale's name in the school record. When Hanmanta came to know about it recalls Limbale:

"He arrived with four or five rowdies. His relatives too joined him and they all went to the headmaster. In those days the salary of the teacher was only seventy rupees a month. Hanmanta tried to bribe the headmaster by offering him a hundred rupees. Next he threatened the headmaster at gun point. But Bhosale, the head master was an upright man. He wouldn't yield either to bribery or to threats. He said boldly, 'The mother of this boy will say who the father is; I will register only that name in the record.' There was a quarrel. Hanmanta tried all his tricks desperately. He even pleaded. Finally he had to go away unsuccessful. I owe my father's name to Bhosale, the headmaster." (p. 45)

One day all the boys and girls went to picnic. Limbale and some other Mahar boys also joined the group. But all of their excitement remained for a short while when they had to experience the worst kind of discrimination by the upper caste students and teachers. Limbale writes:

"The Wani and Brahmin boys played kabbadi. Being marked as Mahars we couldn't join them. So Mallya, Umbrya, Parshya, all from my caste, began to play touch and go. We play one kind of game while the high-caste village boys played another. The two games were played separately like two separate whirlwinds. Plays over, we settled down to eat. Boys and girls from the high castes like Wani, Brahmin, Marwari, Muslim, Maratha, Teli, fishermen, goldsmiths and all the teachers, about hundred or so sat in a circle under a banyan tree. We, the Mahar boys and girls, were asked to sit under another tree. The high-caste ones said a prayer before eating, which didn't make any sense to us." (p. 2)

Limbale continues to narrate the feeling of humiliation:

"The high-caste boy and girls from the village were eating together. The girls sat close to the teachers. They were all chatting and we sat like owls watching them. We had before us only the crumbs of bombil. With each morsel, I chewed the lips of the laughing girls. At last we finished eating. The teacher asked the high-caste boys and girls to collect the leftovers on a piece of paper and give it to us. .... It contained crumbs of different kinds of food and their spicy smell filled the air. We squatted in a circle and stuffed ourselves greedily. We had never tasted food like that before." (p. 3)

Dalit students get their education under many psychological disturbances. Caste discrimination is an everyday experience for them. Educational institutions are no exception to such a kind of discrimination. The teachers play major role in practicing of caste-based discrimination among the students. It is the moral duty of the

teacher to behave equally with the students. Instead of it they arrange separate rows for the students of different community. Limbale reminds us the incident of his school days:

“Our school where the pupils came from high castes like Wani and Brahmin, was run in the temple of Ithoba. The girls sat in a separate section. Further down the temple hall sat boys and girls from the cobbler community, and then at the entrance sat we, the Mahar boys and girls. Arjya, a mang never sat with us. On Saturdays the teacher asked us to smear the floor and walls with cow dung paste. The teacher had a particular admiration for me because I was an expert in gathering dung and smearing it evenly.” (p.4)

As a schoolboy, Limbale also wanted a haircut like that of other boys in the school. So he went to the barber but the barber refused to cut his hair as he was a Mahar. So the Mahars had to walk for miles to distant villages in order to hide their identity to get their head shaved. Sometime later, Shrimantana lodged a complaint in the police station against the barber. Since then, the barber has been shaving their heads.

After completing school education, Limbale got admission in Dayanand College Sholapur. He felt free in the new environment. This new atmosphere was encouraging and made him enthusiastic. But his enthusiasm remained short lived when the clerk in the college enquired about his caste and religion. His quest for identity again began to haunt him. He writes:

“I was afraid of my caste because I couldn’t claim my father’s caste and 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 body nauseated me. The agony I lived through is my own as much as that of my village. The life of my village was mine. I was wounded by this landlord’s mansion.” (p. 82)

Though the Mahars are branded as untouchables, they too belong to Hindu Religion and have their faith in Hindu Gods. Yet they were not allowed to enter to the premise of the temple. Limbale reminds us the famous saying, ‘Children are the flowers of god’s abode,’ (p. 5) but the children of Mahars are not even treated as human beings. Limbale writes of the condition of his community:

“We are the garbage the village throws out. There were so many caste factions in our school. 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.” (p. 5)

In the month of Shravana a week’s long festival was observed for God Mahadeo in Hanoor village. One day, Limbale and his friend Parshya entered the temple and prostrated directly before the god. Parshya’s father, who was sitting at the stairs near the entrance of the temple and listening to the recital, saw what they had done. He didn’t like the rebellious behaviour of Parshya and Limbale; and thrashed Parshya very badly when they returned home and warned him to give up Limbale’s company. Limbale writes about the angry behaviour of Parshya’s father, ‘He was really angry, because entering a temple is a crime. We were supposed to say our prayers from the steps outside. Our entering a temple will make god impure. We were expected to behave responsibly. The untouchable must not enter a temple.’ (p. 62)

Many questions raised in the mind of Limbale. He narrates, ‘God discriminates between man and man. He makes one man rich and the other poor. One is high caste, the other untouchable. What kind of god is this that makes human beings hates each other? We are all supposed to be the children of God, then why are we considered untouchable? We don’t approve of this God, or this religion, or this country because they ostracize us. Why are we ostracized? Why are we kept away from other human beings? Why are we kept out our own selves? Why this discrimination between one human being and another? After all isn’t everybody’s blood red?’ (p. 62)

Most of the times the Dalits used to hide their caste identity; for the mere sake of their livelihood. Limbale reminds a girl, Shevanta, from his village who was married to someone from Sholapur. They lived in a dreary slum and among utterly poor people. Shevanta worked as a maid in the bungalows around her slum. Whenever Limbale met her on the road she gave him ten paise and would say, ‘We have met on the road.

How can I offer you tea here? Take this ten paise coin and drink tea as though I offered it to you.' (p. 83) This incident suggests us what history Limbale could read on her face.

Getting education amid dire poverty and suppression made Limbale harsher in his thought about high caste people. Whenever he heard that reservation facilities for Dalits were about to be cancelled, it used to scare him. He openly challenges the high caste people, 'If these facilities are cancelled, give us our own Dalitsthan. We are educated only because these facilities exist....Those who say that facilities must be cancelled should first face caste-ism themselves. They must share the life of the untouchables. Let them live outside the village, ostracized like us. They should experience what it means to study while your father is lying drunk beside you. They wouldn't then protest against injustice.' (pp. 89-89)

Thus the search of identity haunted Limbale throughout his life. His mother had once been properly married, but her husband had left her and taken their two sons. She began sleeping around, especially with the high caste men of the village. Limbale was born with a Dalit mother and a father who was the chief of a village. He could not get certain papers signed for school because he could not properly identify his caste by his mother or father, and they would not accept his grandmother as his guardian because she lived with a Muslim. When it came time for marriage, he could not even get married to an outcaste girl because his blood was not pure; he was not wanted anywhere. Eventually, a drunkard who had offered Limbale his daughter would not allow her to leave after the wedding because of Limbale's background. The clouds of doubt and identity hung over this poor outcaste boy his entire life. He writes:

"I am twenty five years old now and cannot recognize my own brothers --- nor my father. They are all alive. We may not recognize each other even if we happened to travel in the same bus. That's what this journey of life is like." (p. 91)

However, in several acts of incredible strength and bravery, he did not allow these socially constructed walls to stop him from getting an education and eventually publishing his story. He came to realize the depth of division caused by the conflict between Hindus and Muslims and chose a separate path for him in what he considered to be the warm embrace of Buddhism. He also accepts the influence of Dr. Ambedkar and Dalit Panther Movement changed his life thoroughly. He was not the only Mahar to overcome the repressive system; his friend Mallya also prevailed, and both men live happily today despite the horrors they faced as children and young adults.

Thus we can sum up in the words of Tromila Wheats:

"Limbale's autobiography is a good quick read that would interest any students taking a course on modern India. It is an objective work that shows little bitterness or remorse. The author includes an excellent introduction that introduces the caste system to the Western reader. We can experience the humiliation of the Dalit community at the hands of an unthinking privileged class and the hopelessness of the situation of people born in lower castes."

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