

Akkarmashi: A Saga of Existential Fears of an Outcast

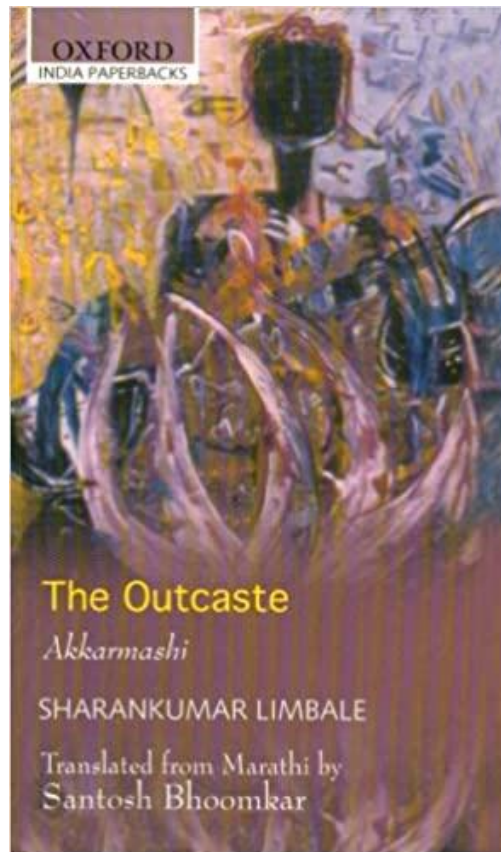
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Courtesy: https://www.amazon.com/Outcaste-Akkarmashi-Sharankumar-Limbale/dp/0195694066/ref=sr_1_2?dchild=1&keywords=Akkarmashi+English&qid=1634878242&s=books&sr=1-2

‘Subaltern’ is a term Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak borrows from the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci to signify the oppressed class (271). In the essay “Subalternity and the Mirage of Social Inclusion, Rajan Joseph Barret opines that Subalternity in India is a complex of a number of factors such as class, caste, race, religion, gender, age, education location, etc. (229).

This Study attempts to analyze *Akkarmashi* which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by Dalits. The cumulative aftermath is reflected in the identity crisis of its protagonist who asks countless number of questions to the society regarding his identity as a fatherless Mahar. The identity crisis of Sharavankumar Limbale stems from his abominable status as a fatherless child of a Mahar woman. The predicament of the protagonist exposes the hypocrisy and double standard attitude of the society and the poignant lives of a section of marginalized people stigmatized by the social laws. The uniqueness of *Akkarmashi* is: It is a Dalit autobiography of objective truth than mere subjective reality narrated sans emotional clamour. The focus of the study is to analyze the impact of the social scourge on the protagonist as a conscious and enlightened human being who undergoes a series of cataclysmic changes caused by the rigours of life and power structures. The study reviews the impact of the Indian caste system: its implications on Indian society, in a microcosmic level in the family of Sharavankumar Limbale and himself.

In the essay “Reading Sharankumar Limbale’s Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: From Erasure to Assertion” Alok Mukherjee asserts that “The central concern of Dalit literature is how best to represent the ‘authentic experience’ of Dalits (10). G. N. Devy in his Introduction to *Akkarmashi*, addresses Dalit autobiographies as “Social epiphanies” for their startling revelation of the stratified Indian society brought through Marathi literature (xxii). Dalit autobiographies reflect the exploitations, mistreatment, exclusion, and disownment and cruelty they suffer at various realms of the society and remind us about the countless numbers of lock up deaths, murders, honour- killing occur in our country. The Dalit writers attempt to reveal to the outside world about the despicable life led by them upon the fringes. The life of woe and want that seems to be their onus since birth has strengthened them to proclaim the hard realities from their rooftops to the humanity.

In the essay “The Marginal Self: Dalit Men’s Autobiographies” Raj Kumar opines that Autobiography was a favourite medium of self- expression for the upper class men and women in India but writing of autobiography was a powerful tool for the Dalits to achieve a sense of identity and to mobilize resistance against the social oppression (43). The autobiography as a literary genre is generally considered as a work of immense magnitude by the most privileged and the exemplary in the society. It tells the grand saga of a noble man and his heroic escapades in life. Dalit autobiography is an exception to this principle, since the work is a sincere portrait of the relentless efforts of a nameless, faceless human bring to make his footprint amidst those who try to tread him down. A Dalit narrator in his personal narrative record a life which is full of pain and suffering because of the caste system. The act of writing the autobiography make the Dalits mobilize their resistance to fight against all forms of oppression which they have been experiencing for ages.

This phenomenon is evident in *Akkarmashi*, the autobiography of Sharavankumar Limbale as a record of the startling self-realization of the hard realities of life of the protagonist during the course of his twenty six years of his existence as an outcast. Arjun Dangle opines that “Dalit literature is marked by revolt and negativism, since it is closely associated with the hopes for freedom by a group of people who, as untouchables, are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality” (1) *Akkarmashi* reveals the protagonist’s search for his identity, recognition and understanding of his Self and his reactions to the socially imposed onus on him.

In the essay “Understanding Subalternity, Exclusion and Social Change in India”, Ashok K. Pankaj and Ajit K. Pandey state:

While for most of the Subalterns, the primary social aspiration is the quest for dignity, equality, freedom and voice in social relations, the dominant social groups are motivated to retain their dominance, control and power and to deny equality, freedom and voice to the subalterns” (9).

One of the early memories of Limbale’s existence as a school student as revealed in *Akkarmashi* portrays a series of stark denials and discrimination. Being a Mahar, he was not allowed to sit with pupils of the high- caste families:

At home I wouldn’t do even the smallest chore, but in the school on Saturdays I was made to do this duty that was allotted to me. A man from my community had to carry out such duties in the village for the high-caste people” (Limbale 4).

The hard reality of life as a Mahar is experienced by the protagonist as a student at school when he was assigned with the task to smear the walls and floors of his classroom. The acceptance of the oppression is evident in his words. The hard life of denial and oppression experienced by an untouchable is revealed further as he was bullied by his classmates who pelted stones at him calling aloud ‘Mahar’. The frequent bullying and humiliations were part of his early life which made his formative years miserable. The agony and fear of a young boy is revealed in his words:

I felt suffocated. It was like the sky pressing down on me. Ramya Jalkote hit me in the face. My mouth opened, gasping for breath. After that the boys ran away. For many days after this event, whenever I saw Ramya Jalkote, I was scared (Limbale 6).

Limbale acknowledges his former headmaster Bhosale for having insisted on entailing him with his first name against the strong admonitions of his father. Though Hanmanta Limbale tried to bribe the headmaster and imposed a life threat on him, he boldly resisted the reproach by his response: “The mother of this boy will say who the father is, and I will register only that name

in the record” (Limbale 45). The stern decision of the headmaster enabled him with a first name which later became a scourge in his life.

Limbale reflects on the social discrimination he suffered from in various spheres of his life such as social, religious, and domestic spaces. He reveals the hypocrisy of the society as well as his relatives that stem from queer religious practices and stringent social norms and the subsequent identity crisis he suffers from.

Though a Hindu by faith, he was forbidden to visit a temple. Limbale asks an open ended question “There is a saying, ‘Children are the flowers of God’s abode,’ but not us. We are the garbage the village throws out” is a bold portrayal of the discrimination meted out at Mahar community (Limbale 5). Another startling observation of irony is: “Hindus see the cow as their mother. A human mother is cremated, but when a cow dies, they need a Mahar to dispose it of” (Limbale14). In the month of Shravan, Parshya and Limbale visited the temple of Ithoba and became the object of anger of the villagers for defying the temple. The untouchables were not expected to enter the temple. Limbale comments: “What kind of God is that makes human beings hate each other? We are all supposed to be the children of God, then why are we considered untouchable?” (Limbale 62). The cordial relationship between Limbale and his dada a Muslim makes him ponder over the role of religion in sustaining human relations:

Neither his religion nor my caste was a hindrance to us. Is it man who is a hindrance to religion or is it the other way round? Is the premise of religion greater than man’s? Is religion made for man or man made for religion? Does man cause religion to degenerate, or is it religion that degenerates man? Can’t man exist without religion and caste” (Limbale 40).

The protagonist reflects on the extent of social discrimination practiced in social spaces too. Even the water bodies are earmarked for the various castes. The high-caste villagers collected water and washed their clothes upstream and downstream is reserved for Kumbies and shepherds. “The water at the lowest end was meant for us” (Limbale7). Even during festive occasions in the village, the Maharwada was also invited to wait outside until the elite relished the feast.

A starting experience of Limbale as he was chastised by his mother Santamai for offering water to Arjya, a Mang boy reveals the sectarian nature practiced at his own home:

I was upset because I couldn’t give water to a friend. Is one’s caste more important than one’s fiend? Is caste more important than thirst? Wasn’t Arjya a human being? If so, how could he make water impure by merely touching it?” (Limbale 20).

The marginalized were denied even the right to have a haircut. The barber makes a stark denial to shave his head as he approached him for a tonsure:

I showed him my money in order to convince him. A customer from a different village who was getting his hair cut felt some sympathy for me. He asked me to sit down and take my turn. At that the barber, Isunath, got wild, ‘He is a Mahar. Let him go’. How could this barber, who used to shave buffaloes in the village, refuse to shave my head?” (Limbale 22).

The protagonist makes a keen observation of the double standards of the stratified society. Santamai and Masamai, mother and grandmother of Limbale ran a brewery at home and the household flooded with customers from all castes and creed which makes the author ask a pertinent question: “Drunkards accepted liquor from the house of a Mahar but not water. They had affairs with Mahar women but wouldn’t accept the food they cooked” (Limbale 35). Limbale speaks about the bizarre destiny of the Mahars who dig the wells for upper caste who are later forbidden to drink water from it:

“We were lucky that no one saw us drinking water otherwise we would have been badly beaten. What is so peculiar about our touch that it pollutes water, food, houses, clothes, graveyards, tea shops, God, religion, and even man?” (Limbale 81).

The web of illicit relations in his domestic space baffles him as he knows about Kaka having yet another wife and children: “The whole thing baffled me. Kaka always sneaked into our house. Whenever he visited us he sat with us, spoke and laughed with us. He behaved like the man of our house. To us Kaka was like a father” (Limbale 46).

But when he spotted Kaka in his mansion with the help of the pointers given by his mother, he shut the door at once. Limbale asks:

Whenever Kaka visited us, he behaved as if he were our father. Then why did he behave like a stranger now? Why didn’t he speak to me? It was difficult for me to think of Kaka as my father. I was angry with him. I felt like raping his mother someday. I was livid with rage” (Limbale 46).

When Masamai, Limbale and Nagi visited the ailing Sidram at Kaka’s mansion, he saw Masamai bent down to touch the old man’s feet as if he were his daughter-in-law but neither Kaka nor his wife received them warmly. Limbale gets so flustered by the occasion:

We were born to a Patel and yet we couldn't claim to belong to this mansion. Why doesn't this mansion accept us? Why is this mansion dumb? Why are its jaws locked? Why is its tongue tied?" (Limbale 55).

In *An Introduction to Cultural Studies*, Pramod K. Nayar defines Identity: "The identity of a person is for Cultural Studies, dependent upon the roles played by that person, the signs that designate that person" (25). Identity is thus socially produced. Closely related to the theme of identity in Cultural Studies is the question of agency. Agency – the capacity and power to determine one's action and life – is also socially produced. An individual's ability to act is limited by the contexts in which she/he lives. (Limbale 26)

The predicament of Masamai as a divorcee who had to bear the brunt of the society as a separated woman shows the exploitative and misogynist society which scrutinizes the identity of a person based on the social role. The illicit relation between Masamai and the high-born Hanmantha Limbale was the reason for the village council forcing Masamai to divorce her husband Ithal Kamble. Therefore she is forced to revoke her legitimate marriage to become a concubine of the upper-caste Hanmanth Patil. Though Ithal Kamble remarried, Santhamai lost her dignity in life as a free woman. Limbale remarks on the double standards of the society: "A man can eat *paan* and spit as many ties as he likes, but the same is not possible for a woman. It is considered wrong if a woman does that. Once her chastity is lost it can never be restored" (Limbale 36).

The exploitation of Dalit women by the high-caste men of the village and the privileges enjoyed by the high-caste which are sanctioned by the authority and religion is out rightly revealed in the autobiography by Limbale:

A poor Dalit girl on attaining 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 Patil sexually. The whole village considers such a house of the Patil's whore. Even the children born to her husband are considered the children of a Patil. Besides survival on the charity of a Patil what else can such a household expect?" (Limbale 38).

The young protagonist is shredded by the identity crisis as a fatherless being. The ignominy he suffers as a sire less being follows him like a shadow from birth to his adulthood. The psychological trauma and insecurity is obvious in his words of existential crisis. Limbale asks a heart renting question regarding his very existence as a fatherless child born out of wedlock:

Why did my mother say yes to the rape which brought me into 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?" (Limbale 37).

The existential fears spring from the web of contradictory relations shreds Limbale's conscience to pieces as he strives to find his own identity as a human being:

I was born from her affair with Hanmanta Patil. Masamai had Nagubai, Nirmala, Sunanda, Pramila, Shrikant, Indira and Sidram from Kaka, whose name was Yeshwantrao Sidramappa Patil, the head of the village named Hanoor. Because of the rigid caste norms neither the Ligayat community of the fathers nor the Mahar community of the mother could accept the offsprings as a part of their communities.

Therefore Limbale expresses his existential anguish as a fatherless child:

How can I be the 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 code connected?" (Limbale 39).

Masamai could cajole and get two acres of land from Kaka for her seven children born to him. Later she got deserted by him and she became the keep of another Patil. "What sort of life she been living, mortgaging herself to one owner after another and being used as a commodity? Her lot has been nothing but the tyranny of sex" (Limbale 59).

Limbale struggled to fill his application form for availing freeships. The Sarpanch was against his entering the name Hanmanta Limbale Patil of Baslegaon as his father. Bhosale guruji came to his aid again. The ignominy suffered made him compare him to Karna, the illegitimate son of Kunti in Mahabharata. He felt a strange kinship with him.

The identity crisis is reflected in his poignant words:

I was 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" (Limbale 62).

The identity crisis continues to baffle him as a student of collegiate education at Dayanad College when an office clerk asked him for his caste and religion. The insurmountable nature of religion as a power structure shatters him. He replied that he was a Hindu, Mahar. He replied because of his fear for his caste since he could not claim his father's caste and religion. He ponders: How can a person born with his caste? How does he become untouchable as soon as he is born? (Limbale 82).

Limbale speaks confides: “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.” (Limbale 91).

The poignant words harnessed by the reins of self-restrain express the detached state of mind of the protagonist caused by the irrevocable onus dumped on him and his community. As Devy rightly observes “It is this depth of his response that makes Limbale’s *Akkarmashi* stands out in the genre of Dalit autobiography *Akkarmashi* Symbiotic relationship between Literature and Society throws light on how Dalit Autobiographies evolved from Dalit Literature to act as a platform exclusively for a section of society, for its empowerment, self –revelation and fulfillment. Dalit literature is therefore wholly alluded to the Lotus, which is a flower of national, philosophical, and religious significance in India. The fact that this ethereal flower of beauty and splendor derives its strength and grace while rooted upon the mire reminds about the Power and glory of the Dalit literature which springs from the mire of the caste conscious Indian society sans tolerance and justice.

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