

Mirroring the Margins: Portrayal of Dalit identity in Limbale's *The Outcaste*

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Abstract

Dalit literature emerged as a distinct genre in literature only during the post1960s with the awakening of Dalit consciousness. The Dalits in India were oppressed and brutally humiliated because of their belongingness to low castes. Denial of any kind of education and social acceptance kept their stories and experiences only in the oral form. Accessibility to education was the initial step for realizing the rotten politics of the caste system under which these people were exploited for centuries by the caste people. The emergence of Dalit writing helped them to express their suppressed feelings, gradually the marginal literature grabbed the attention of the literary world. In most of their narratives, reflections of their quest for identity can be seen. Dalit autobiographies are the vehicle for assertion of their identity. This paper attempts to analyse the Dalit consciousness in the text and it searches how a Dalit autobiography is different from other autobiographies. It attempts to trace out the challenges and struggles the narrator faced in his life for attaining an identity in the society.

Keywords: *Autobiography, Dalit literature, Dalit consciousness, Identity, Dalit historiography.*

I. Introduction

Literature, with the upcoming of excellent autobiographies, has turned even more realistic in the process of shaping the Dalit historiography. Dalit literature emerged as an important genre in 1960'S in the post independent India. Inspired and influenced by Black movements and protests in America, Dalit movements were raised in India. The term Dalit literature was first used in 1958, at the first conference of Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sanga, which was held in Mumbai. It began as a literary movement after some years as part of the deliberate actions led by Dr. B R Ambedkar. There were poems, stories, novels and then during 1970's Dalit autobiographies were beginning to emerge in this genre. They were entirely different and difficult while comparing with the other autobiographies in literature. Writing an autobiography was actually a form of powerful self-expression for the writers, also they were considered as important documents tracing the hidden history a community. The margins grabbed attention of the literary world and subaltern heroes were emerged which happened never before in literature.

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The reconfiguration in the depiction of real-life stories went on to prove that these autobiographies have a major part to play in understanding the politics of the hierarchies.

For a Dalit Writer, writing an autobiography is actually a process of tracing and documenting a consciously hidden history of his/her community. A Dalit autobiography is neither an entity for pleasurable reading nor can it relish our senses. It indeed inculcates in the minds of the readers an awkward feeling towards his/hersociety. It is a deliberate attempt to shake the readers out of the stupor induced by the happily ever after plots of the genre. It jolts us into reflection and introspection and leaves a long sigh at the end. It disturbs the thoughts about the entertaining nature of literature, shadows the myths about the beautiful and precious Indian tradition. It haunts the credibility of a glorious past Indian literature often boast about.

The lives of the Dalits found no space in the literary sphere of India till the half of the nineteenth century. Mahasweta Devi, Mulk Raj Anand, Premchand and other writers have taken efforts to create a space for the untouchables in their literary works, which could arouse people's sympathy towards the marginalized. Their words had the power to foreground the harsh realities of the downtrodden masses and to bring forth their pathos and pleas. These writers penned and created a space for the literature of the marginalized. But all these narrations were more fictional as they did not culminate from the writer's own experiences. This was the major drawback that pulled the genre from finding a unique space in literature. It was all a second-hand experience which is not that intense but desultory in manner. The subaltern voices were transcribed, translated and recorded according to the standards of the popular literature of the elite class.

Mulk Raj Anand's "Untouchable", Thakazhi Sivasakarapillai's "The Scavenger's Son", Sivaram Karanth's "Chomana Dudi" are some of the significant novels that discuss Dalit lives. These works created a Dalit sensibility in literature, but as Gayathri Chakravorthi Spivak has pointed out, the subaltern was never able to speak up. Many anthropologists, historians and novelists wrote about Dalit lives in India, but they never attempted to give a space for the Dalit to speak up for themselves. Inspired by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Marathi Dalit writers started to narrate their own lives. They could represent the nuances of Dalit historiography, transfer the same to the literary space and hence seized the world's attention to the margins of the society. It is at the post-independent India that Dalit writers began to write their autobiographies as a form of protest. It was an act of political resistance; years of long suppressed and oppressed Dalit feelings outpoured in the form of burning letters that really made scars in the minds of the readers. The first major Dalit autobiography in literature was Daya Pawar's "Baluta". Then comes Laxman Mane's "Upara" followed by Laxman Gaikwad's "Uchalya". These autobiographies bind the Dalit experiences together, making the community realize that irrespective of their place and language, their identity crisis and other tribulations are analogous all over India.

Sharankumar Limbale, a prominent voice in Marathi Dalit literature wrote his autobiography in 1984 at the age of twenty-five. The fact to be significantly noted here is that within such a short period of time he had to live through bitter experiences of life probably the sum total of all the sufferings a person can endure throughout his

whole life. “Akkarmashi” startles the Marathi readers with its plain but traumatic narrative of a man from Mahar caste. The work got translated into many Indian languages, and also to English with the title “The Outcaste”. The much-celebrated unity and equality of all religions in India collapsed with the publication of Dalit autobiographies especially “The Outcaste”. The people who adore and love cow as a member of the family, ill-treats their fellow humans wretched than dogs in the streets just because they belonged to the lower caste. When Black people in the western world were subjected to all kinds of atrocities in the name of racism, the Dalits in India are ill-treated because of their caste, which is a social construct, a man-made evil.

“The Outcaste” is not merely an autobiography of Limbale, but it is the biography of a place, a caste, and of many people who were silenced in the name of their caste for centuries. It is an attempt to retrace every peep, split and shakes of an untold history of a caste. Therefore, reading the same is never going to be an easygoing one. In order to depict the protracted and painful struggle of his community, he uses the same dialect of Mahar community. It is not because of his inability to handle literary Marathi language but he uses it as a weapon to convey the authenticity of his life, as a Mahar. The filthy abusive words in the text capture the feel of a stark reality in the original sense. Using that rude and impolite language in this text rather than writing it in the elite Marathi, itself attributes to the politics of writing a Dalit autobiography. The age-old suppression and exploitation haunted them with shame, suffering, pain and helplessness. These mixed negative feelings made their lives and language very uncouth and indecorous.

A quest for identity is a much-repeated theme in most of the Dalit writings. That quest is indicated in all their thoughts and actions. Dalits were not given space in the society to have an identity of their own. For every living creature, a space is needed to develop into itself. A constant denial of their identity moved the Dalits into the margins. Roland Barthes in his essay “Towards a psycho-sociology of contemporary food consumption” clearly indicates that our food habits do always have a connection with our identity. Culture, identity and food have close relationship with each other. In “The Outcaste”, Limbale gives a detail description about the food habits of Mahar. His family considers leftover food as nectar. In many of the Dalit autobiographies, there are references to the Dalits' claim over the leftover food. Tamil writer Bama in her autobiography “Karukku” mentions how her grandmother always regarded leftover food as something they deserve from the upper caste people. Om Prakash Valmiki's autobiography is named as “Joothan” which means scraps of food left on a plate. The Dalit community is forced to eat the same, without ever regarding it as waste. The elders in their family told them to accept their fate as their karma (fate). Meanwhile the educated young minds of the same family tried to destabilize their own inferior identity. They wished for fresh food, which was rather a clear indication of craving for their own identity.

Female characters in the “The Outcaste” are depicted with real life touch. Limbale's mother Masamai is a strong woman who becomes a victim of social evils. The helpless mother addresses herself as Patil's whore. Sanatmai, his grandmother is an epitome of suffering and sacrifice. The plight of his sisters and many other women in his village hints at the atrocities women faced in the clutches of caste politics. Limbale says “only a mother and

the earth can accommodate and stomach everything” (37). They were thrice oppressed in the society. He even adds that for a girl being beautiful among Dalit is a curse, because in their village each Patil chases a beautiful woman. The only identity a woman possess is her body and beauty, which were exploited by the high caste people.

Limbale criticizes his community also; he finds that the superstition and some of the age old bad customs prevailed in his community should be banned to get them out of the darkness. Limbale's *Outcaste* is an open-ended autobiography, and it does not end with a note of hope for tomorrows. More often the autobiographies of upper class /caste people end up with a thought of gratitude for their life on earth or with expressing their satisfaction in their much completed successful life; Whereas, a Dalit autobiography concludes with uncertainties of the future of the author and of his/her community.

Revealing the Dalit identity before the world is an actual crisis. Limbale declares himself as an outcaste because he is torn in between two extreme opposite identities. Being the illegitimate son of a high caste Patil and an untouchable Mahar woman, he is a bastard in the society and impure for his community. So he never belongs to any caste. Limbale says “... a man is recognized in this world by his religion, Caste, or his father. I had neither a father's name, nor any religion, nor a caste. I had not inherited identity at all.” (59). At school, he told his teacher that his father and mother are dead to clear all the doubts about his identity with one answer. All his friends gotperplexed with his answer. However, he had no other option to clear out the puzzle of his life.

When he got a job and moved to another place from his village, all his efforts were to hide his Dalit identity. His surname Limbale helped him to credit himself as a caste Hindu and he enjoyed the privileges of being a human at that time. The terrible confounding fact about Dalit identity is that in those times it was better to have no identity than having a Dalit identity. Later he sensed the true spirit and essence of his identity. He then accepts his Dalit identity and reveals it through his autobiography.

He let the world know the turmoil he faced throughout his life as an untouchable Mahar. Identity crisis is a state in which a person feels uncertain about their own self and the purpose of their life. After declaring his Dalit identity, he is accepted as a writer and a prominent figure in Dalit literature. The writer found out an identity of his own completely ignoring what the society tried to thrust up on him. Intellectual reconstruction of the Dalit actually helped them for the culmination of a new identity.

Retracing the Dalit historiography is a major problem as there are no visible roots for Dalit community. The strong roots of these communities were removed and thrown into oblivion by the caste Hindus; may be because of fear of the former community. Pradeepan Pambarikunne in his essay “What did literary histories say to you” opines that the blue prints of upper caste markets are the literary histories and he adds that the history writing is also a kind of marketing. So it is rightly pointed out that each and every Dalit autobiography is an attempt to fill the gaps in the dilemma of the history of a community. They challenge the grand narrative of national historiography while shaping their past. When mainstream writers are interested in the depiction of an aesthetically qualified world, with a

protagonist with all the heroic qualities, Dalit writers exposed the life they lived in the society as untouchables, and explained their struggles in the dark tone.

Only with an account of a credible history, Dalits can ensure their belongingness in the society. Without having accessibility to their rights, they live as subalterns in the society. Dalit autobiography narratives preach the Dalit people to deal with their identity crisis. They provide insights into the concept of Dalit consciousness and Dalit identity. The personal narratives of the Dalit writers speak about the challenging expedition of their entire community for attaining freedom, confidence and empowerment. Personal history becomes the history of a community in this process of writing. A powerful thrust towards the phantasmagoric outer world is needed to break the shell. "The Outcaste" is a Dalit autobiography that is powerful enough to distort the existing notions of society towards the Dalit and it traces the factual details of Dalit historiography. There is enough hope with the warm reception of these marginalized autobiographies. Indeed the true-life documentation of ferocious Dalit experience creates an empathetic world. This realization definitely helps the society to dismantle the walls that have kept between each other, for a better world.

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