



Fragmented Selves: Identity Crisis and the Quest for Selfhood in Sharankumar Limbale's the Outcaste (2003)

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Abstract

Sharankumar Limbale's *Outcaste* (Akkarmashi) is a seminal Dalit autobiography that foregrounds the intertwined struggles of illegitimacy, caste stigma, and the search for dignity. This paper examines the identity crisis that shapes Limbale's life, where his birth as an "akkarmashi" or half-caste positions him as an outsider both within and beyond caste boundaries. Hunger, poverty, and exclusion serve not only as lived experiences but also as metaphors for the systemic deprivation of Dalits. At the same time, *Outcaste* demonstrates how writing becomes an act of resistance, transforming personal humiliation into collective assertion. By situating Limbale's work within the broader tradition of Dalit autobiographies, the study highlights how his narrative redefines autobiography as a social testimony rather than individual expression. Ultimately, the paper argues that Limbale reclaims selfhood through solidarity with Dalit consciousness, showing that the pursuit of identity is inseparable from the larger struggle for justice and social transformation.

Keywords: Dalit autobiography, identity crisis, illegitimacy, resistance, selfhood

Introduction

In India's history of Dalit autobiographies, Sharankumar Limbale's *Outcaste* (Akkarmashi, 1984) has a significant position. In addition to autobiographies like Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (1986) and Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (1997), Limbale's story serves as a social witness that highlights the shared experience of Dalit communities rather than just a personal tale of pain. Because they prioritize actual experience, authenticity, and resistance over creative embellishment, these memoirs challenge prevailing literary aesthetics and emerged in response to the marginalization of Dalit voices in mainstream Indian literature, especially in the Marathi canon. *Outcaste* is more than simply a chronicle of one man's struggle in this way; it is a statement of the humanity of a disenfranchised group and a reflection of structural injustice.

Limbale's autobiography is intricately linked to the identity issue. The stigma of illegitimacy, which is inextricably linked to the caste system, has shaped his life from the start. He was destined to live in constant marginalization since he was born to a Dalit mother and a high-caste Maratha father. He states,

"My mother is an untouchable while father is a high caste from one of the privileged classes of India. Mother lives in hut, father in a mansion. Father is a landlord; mother landless. I am an Akkarmash (half-caste). I am condemned, branded illegitimate." (Limbale ix)

The existential rift that characterizes his identity is captured in this statement. Akkarmashi, which literally translates to "half-caste" or "illegitimate," serves as the author's identification identifier and is a source of humiliation, isolation, and mockery for the rest of his life. He is excluded from both his mother's community and his father's caste, illustrating how caste and illegitimacy combine to create a double marginalization.

According to Limbale, writing is an ethical and political act of representing his community rather than a means of expressing one's own self in the traditional autobiographical

sense. He maintains that Dalit writing is a type of collective witness rather than a collection of isolated tales. As he articulates in his critical work *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature* (2004): "Dalit autobiography is not a narration of individual's life but a collective experience of a community" (Limbale 02). According to this claim, *Outcaste* is reframed as a story that goes beyond the individual to depict the historical suffering of Dalits, especially their battles with social exclusion, poverty, starvation, and humiliation. By doing this, Limbale subverts the conventional literary canon, which either romanticizes rural life or obscures caste realities, and instead emphasizes an unavoidably brutal realism.

Thus, Limbale's identity issue in *Outcaste* is not unique to him; rather, it represents a larger societal reality in which Dalits struggle with institutionalized oppression and labels. The story veers between the agony of marginalization and the need for a true self that is based on decency and defiance. Therefore, the main goal of this study's analysis of *Outcaste* is to investigate how Limbale deals with caste stigma and illegitimacy, how these factors mold his shattered self, and how he starts to recover a sense of selfhood that is both personal and collective through the act of narrative.

The Identity Crisis: Illegitimacy, Caste, and Social Stigma

Sharankumar Limbale highlights the agonizing realities of growing up as a child who is both caste and illegitimate in *Outcaste*. Society problematizes his entire existence, and his story of identity crisis is shaped by this sense of shattered belonging. Akkarmashi, which literally translates to 'half-caste' or 'illegitimate' in Marathi, is an insult in and of itself that was used as the title of the autobiography. It indicates the stigma the author bore with him throughout his life—not as a personal issue, but rather as a societal label that other people placed on him. His friends made fun of him from a young age as "Akkarmashi", a term that connoted rejection,

humiliation, and disgrace. He was unable to forget his outsider position because of this continual reminder of his illegitimacy. The harsh language of caste society defined his identity rather than him. Limbale addresses the stigma directly by making this slur the focal point of his autobiography, turning it into a literary and political statement.

Limbale's marginalization is exacerbated by the intersection of the strict caste structures and the stigma of illegitimacy. Despite being born to a Dalit mother and a Maratha father from a higher caste, he was not allowed to join either society because of their connection outside of marriage and social acceptance. While his mother's group saw him as contaminated by his paternal connection to caste Hindus, his father's caste denied him legitimacy, inheritance, and acknowledgment. Limbale was therefore caught in what is often referred to as double exclusion. The two groups that influenced his birth were not ones he could identify with. In *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* (2006), Sharmila Rege refers to this fragmented identity as the "metaphor of Dalit existence." For Rege, Limbale's illegitimacy is a position characterized by marginalization, isolation, and denial, and it goes beyond simply being a specific biographical reality to represent Dalit identity itself.

Another aspect of Limbale's identity problem is the sense of hunger. In *Outcaste*, hunger is not just a physical affliction; it is a symbol of the caste-based deprivation and humiliation. Horrible accounts of scrounging through trash cans for food, pleading for leftovers, or subsisting on thin gruel abound throughout the autobiography. Limbale highlights the systematic denial of Dalits' dignity by recalling times when meals consisted of decaying bread fragments or grains dug out of the ground. Thus, hunger turns into a metaphor for Dalit life, which is characterized by perpetual desire and denial. Limbale writes:

"The teacher asked the high-caste boys and girls to collect the leftovers on a piece of paper and give it to us. I and Parshya carried the bundle of leftover food on the way back... Mallya carried a bundle of bhakari on his head and we, the Mahar boys, followed him excitedly like hungry vultures. At last, we gathered in Girmallya's farm and opened the bundle. It contained crumbs of different kinds of food and their spicy smell filled the air. We squatted in a circle and stuffed ourselves greedily. Our stomachs were as greedy as a beggar's sack." (Limbale 03)

This emphasizes how caste turns physical demands into places of humiliation in addition to the dehumanization experienced by Dalits. Dalit hunger is caste-specific and influenced by untouchability, landlessness, and resource deprivation, in contrast to hunger as a universal human feeling.

A severe identity crisis is one of the psychological effects of this multi-layered isolation. The question, "Who am I?" comes up over and over again for Limbale. He lacks a father's name because he is illegitimate, dignity because of his caste, and stability because of his poverty. This results in what Gopal Guru has referred to as "ontological insecurity," a state where Dalits are compelled to face their inherent frailty (Guru, 1993) [2]. For Limbale, this fear encompasses not just social rejection but also the internalization of guilt and the decline of self-confidence. The autobiography shows how insults like 'Akkarmashi' shaped his concept of

self by permeating his awareness rather than becoming outward labels. A fractured identity resulted from the humiliation of illegitimacy, the ongoing estrangement from peers, and the struggle to find one's place in a community. However, by recounting this predicament, he challenges the caste society's insistence on silence and starts to regain his voice.

Outcaste illustrates the various ways Dalits are deprived of a cohesive sense of identity by contrasting starvation, caste marginalization, and illegitimacy. The autobiography compels readers to recognize that caste is an internalized system that undermines a person's sense of self, rather than just an exterior social framework. Limbale's experiences vividly illustrate Guru's point about ontological instability and Rege's claim that illegitimacy is a metaphor for Dalit existence. His broken sense of belonging, characterized by mockery, isolation, and deprivation, is indicative of a state that goes much beyond the individual; it mirrors the predicament of Dalit communities as a whole, whose existence is characterized by rejection and denial. Limbale's story therefore turns his personal struggle into a more comprehensive indictment of the caste system as a whole.

The Quest for Selfhood: Resistance and Reclamation

Writing itself turns as a means of resistance in *Outcaste*. Limbale uses autobiography to make his presence known in a society that has traditionally marginalized Dalit voices, rather than to indulge in personal history. The daring act of turning what had been a pain into a source of strength is indicated by his decision to call the autobiography *Akkarmashi*, a word of abuse that labeled him as illegitimate and half-caste. He turns the insult into a statement of identity by absorbing it. By making readers face the harsh social realities that caste society imposes, this naming act is an act of resistance rather than passive acceptance, resisting the erasure of the Dalit experience. As Eleanor Zelliot observes in her work on Dalit literature, "Dalit life-writing is both a personal and a political act" (Zelliot, 1992) [7]. Limbale's autobiography embodies this dual function, speaking from his fractured self but always addressing the collective silences imposed on his community.

The transition from personal shame to collective resistance is central to the autobiography. Limbale insists that his story is not only his own but also that of his community: "My life is my community's life. My hunger is my community's hunger" (*Outcaste*, trans. Santosh Bhoomkar, 2003) [1]. It is evident from this comment that his autobiography defies interpretation as a single story. Rather, it places itself in the context of Dalit life, where feelings of scarcity, starvation, and humiliation are shared circumstances rather than unique occurrences. By using this perspective, the act of narrating becomes a collective declaration of humanity rather than a personal quest for acceptance. The autobiography serves as a vehicle for converting personal anguish into group strength, and Limbale's voice becomes the voice of people oppressed by caste systems.

An essential part of this path to self-awareness is education. Limbale saw education as a reminder of long-standing inequality as well as a moment of dignity. On the one hand, schooling provided him with a feeling of possibilities that extended beyond his immediate social boundaries, as well as ideas and language. However, the educational system itself perpetuated caste divisions, as students and instructors

reminded him of his untouchability and illegitimacy. Despite this dual experience, he was able to express his experiences and finally write his autobiography via schooling. He maintains in *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Writing* (2004) that the very fact that Dalit writing is rooted in actual experience gives it its distinctive authenticity. Through education, he was able to turn his personal humiliation into a creative tool that made tyranny understandable to a wider audience. As a result, even if caste society denied him a sense of belonging, education allowed him to express both rejection and resistance, allowing him to create a new, assertive self.

A key component of Limbale's politics of selfhood is the body itself. In *Outcaste*, he faces hunger, humiliation, and physical pain repeatedly, but instead of being reduced to quiet, these events serve as testaments to his resilience. Hunger is described in vivid detail, including living in chronic hardship, relying on discarded leftovers, and scouring through trash piles for morsels. These accounts of physical misery are meant to highlight the structural brutality of caste society, not to arouse sympathy. The Dalit body, characterized by agony, turns a text unto itself, an unavoidable repository of misery. According to Gopal Guru, Dalit autobiographies reveal the "ontological insecurity" that caste imposes (Guru, 1993) [2]. Limbale goes one step further by turning the anguish of the body into proof of an unfair social structure. In writing, the Dalit body, which has been degraded in life, is elevated as a testament to reality.

Limbale's claim of selfhood is consistent with other Dalit autobiographies, demonstrating that his search was a component of a larger cultural movement rather than an isolated occurrence. Limbale's frequent experiences with hunger are similar to the embarrassment of eating food that upper-caste homes had thrown out in Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (2003) [6]. Both authors highlight how caste-based deterioration occurs around food, a basic human necessity. In a similar vein, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) [8] emphasizes the group struggles of Dalit women, where caste oppression intersects with gender, work, and hunger. Like Limbale, Kamble connects personal pain to a larger social past by framing autobiography as a means of collective assertion. These intertextual resonances highlight the fact that Dalit autobiographies aim to establish a common narrative of resistance rather than promoting individual conceit.

Limbale agrees with Zellig that Dalit life-writing blurs the lines between the political and the personal by redefining his life as witness. His autobiography is an intervention in history rather than merely a recitation of humiliations. It maintains that knowing Dalit experiences is essential to comprehending Indian society and should not be seen as incidental. In *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature*, Limbale explicitly states that "Dalit literature is marked by authenticity because it is born out of lived experience." Dalit autobiography's radical potential stems from this authenticity; it draws its power from embodied truth rather than abstract theory.

As a result, *Outcaste's* journey for selfhood does not end with a solitary, personal declaration of identity. Instead, selfhood is recreated in conversation with the collective as it arises through solidarity with Dalit awareness. This movement is exemplified by Limbale's appropriation of the word *Akkarmashi*, his assertion that his hunger is his community's hunger, and his conversion of humiliation into

protest. He helps create a communal identity that upholds dignity in the face of caste violence by recovering his fragmented self. As a result, the concept of selfhood is reinterpreted to reject the caste-based classifications and to reinforce identity by collective struggle and resistance.

Conclusion

Outcaste by Sharankumar Limbale focuses on one of the most basic inconsistencies in Indian society: that the limits of humanity, dignity, and belonging may be determined by one's birth, which is outside of one's control. A severe identity problem resulted from the inflexible systems of caste discrimination and the illegitimacy associated with his birth. He was in a constant state of in-betweenness because of his fractured existence, which was neither completely acknowledged by his mother's group nor cherished by his father's caste. However, Limbale decided to tell the story instead of letting this fracture stop him. Writing itself turns into a kind of rebellion against the things that made him feel inferior.

Limbale restores a degree of dignity that caste society had taken away from him by turning his personal suffering into public testimony. *Outcaste* declares that Dalit life, with all of its hunger, humiliation, and tenacity, must be documented in literature and history. It is not only a tale of personal pain. Despite being based on his own experiences, his voice carries the weight of a whole community's hardship. His autobiography therefore turns into a political act, a means of reaffirming Dalit identity in the face of oblivion and obscurity.

The power of *Outcaste* to transcend the individual is exactly what makes it significant. Numerous more people who experienced the same hardship and humiliation can be identified with Limbale's narrative. His lack of ancestry serves as a metaphor for Dalit life in general, as identity is always contested, denied, and denigrated. However, by taking back the name *Akkarmashi*, which was originally intended to cause pain, Limbale turns it into a symbol of defiance. His rejection to be constrained by the labels of caste society is demonstrated by the transformation of what was once a source of humiliation into a source of strength.

In the end, Limbale's contribution is to redefine autobiography as a societal witness tool rather than a personal vanity project. His experience illustrates how Dalit life writing is inextricably linked to collective history and how claiming one's identity is linked to claiming one's community. *Outcaste* demonstrates how the quest for selfhood is closely tied to the fight for equality and justice rather than being a single endeavor. It serves as a reminder that selfhood for marginalized people can only be attained with tenacity, unity, and the unrelenting pursuit of acceptance.

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