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## **Karukku and Akkarmashi: Subaltern reflections of Indian society**

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### **Abstract**

The study intends to analyze the unique and converging points of *Karukku* and *Akkarmashi*, two classic Dalit autobiographies written by two Dalit writers: Sharan kumar Limbale and Bama of varied genders, religions and locales in order highlight the universal nature of the marginalization suffered by the Dalits in India in order to reveal the haunting similarities: The two writers consider education as a means for social liberation, their initial setback in lives and phase of dereliction they undergo despite their tireless efforts in life, the writers confessional mode of revealing their despicable life rooted in penury and disdain to the mainstream society and the revolutionary undertone of the texts which exhort the oppressed on the fringes to gather as a vibrant force against the oppressors.

**Keywords:** *Akkarmashi, Karukku*

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### **Introduction**

In the essay "Reading Sharan kumar 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." (Mukherjee10) A Dalit narrator in his personal narrative records a life which is full of pain and suffering because of the caste system. The act of writing the autobiography makes the Dalits mobilize their resistance to fight against all forms of oppression which they have been experiencing for ages since he writes from the core of his experiences and along ideological and political lines. The study intends to analyze the unique and converging points of *Karukku* and *Akkarmashi*, two classic Dalit autobiographies written by two Dalit writers: Sharan kumar Limbale and Bama of varied genders, religions and locales in order highlight the universal nature of the marginalization suffered by the Dalits in India in order to reveal the haunting similarities: The two writers consider education as a means for social liberation, their initial setback in lives and phase of dereliction they undergo despite their tireless efforts in life, the writers confessional mode of revealing their despicable life rooted in penury and disdain to the mainstream society and the revolutionary undertone of the texts which exhort the oppressed on the fringes to gather as a vibrant force against the oppressors.

### **Methodology**

This study attempts to compare the two texts in order to analyze the similar thought patterns and experiences of the Dalit writers. Francois Jost in *Introduction to Comparative Literature* rightly commented on artistic similarity that epoch- making doctrines rarely stems from one genius alone.

They usually appear simultaneously in more than one cultural area – though often disguised in varying intellectual garb – and their complex growth furnishes fascinating material for literary inquiry (41).

A close reading of the two texts by bringing together the converging elements of the literary texts enable the reader to

understand the universal nature of social oppression experienced by the authors of dissimilar gender, religion and milieu.

### **Discussion**

The emergence of the Dalit autobiographies as a literary genre reflects the self - realization of the Dalit community as a part of the Dalit liberation movement. In the Introduction to Sharan kumar Limbale's *The Outcaste/ Akkarmashi*, Devy traces the emergence of Dalit literary movement as a critique of society. Devy states that "when Dalit literature started emerging in the 1960s, Marathi literary taste was dominated by a narcissistic tendency that foregrounded formalistic, non- confrontationist and titillating works" (41). B.V. Bhosle affirms that "The term 'Dalit Literature' first appeared in a Dalit literary conference in 1958 organized by Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha. It was a resolution no. 5 passed in the conference mentioned that writings of Dalits and other non- Dalits concerning the Dalits are called as Dalit Literature. In 1960s there was Little magazines Movement in Maharashtra which aimed to fight against polite modes of writing (*Sociology of Dalit Literature* 3). A blend of pathos and protest were the defining feature of Dalit literature and the Dalit poetry opened a rebellion against social injustice as it fostered the burning desire for a life of dignity for the oppressed.

This phenomenon is evident in *Akkarmashi*, the autobiography of Sharan kumar 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. *Karukku*, an autobiography written by Bama in 2000 in a similar way reveals many events that cut and bleed her like *Karukku*, the social structures that plunged her into ignorance and suffocated her to desperation (Bama xxiii).

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). 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 seem to be their onus since birth has strengthened them to proclaim the hard realities from their rooftops to the humanity.

In the essay "The Public Self: Indian Upper Caste Men's Autobiographies" Kumar states the autobiographies written by men outnumbered women's autobiographies (4). Dalits started writing their autobiographies only after India's independence, since compulsory education and universalization of knowledge enabled them to embark on life writing. 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). Raj Kumar adds that reading of an Indian autobiography is complex since "Indian autobiographical tradition is diverse and therefore, while studying it one has to bear in mind the issues centering on caste, class, culture, religion, gender etc." (The Marginal Self 44)

In his Introduction to his book *Life as a Dalit: Views from the Bottom on caste in India*, Subhendra Mitra Channa reflects upon Dr. Ambedkar's initial apprehension while presenting the Indian constitution about whether the social climate would enable non-discriminatory dealing a reality in India "...the post-independence scenario of the last more than six decades that has seen the Indian democracy mature indicates that his apprehensions were correct. At the three levels of social justice, political equality, and intellectual domain we find that those marginal mainstream societies are yet to find equality." (xiv)

Raj Kumar in the essay "Caste, Culture and Politics: Towards a Definition of Dalit Autobiography" points that the irrepressible caste system has systematically neglected and ostracized the Dalits by branding the stigma as untouchables (115). Ruth Manorama in her essay "Dalit Women in Struggle: Transforming Pain" into Power states that according to the Purusha Myth, God created the four varnas: The Brahmin (the priestly caste) from the head, the Kshatriya (warrior caste) from his arms, the Vaishya (trading and artisans) from his thighs and Shudra from his feet (256). The menial nature of the work for livelihood followed by Sudras in comparison with the Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya made the members of this caste excluded from the forms and institutions of learning, the perverse notion of vendetta aggravated their perpetual economic inequality.

### Findings

*Akkarmashi* by Limbale portrays a poignant story of the author's search for personal identity at a young age of twenty five years. The autobiography unravels the injustice and sexual promiscuity that prevails in the Maratha society which demands the Dalit girls to be harboured in the Maratha families for the sexual gratification of the rich men. Limbale presents the dismal images of his mother, grandmother and women in his Mahar community who got exploited by the Maratha men.

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 (Limbale6).

Bama was born in 1958 as Faustina Mary Fatima Rani in a Roman Catholic family belonging to the Paraya community from Puthupatti in the then Madras State. She chose to take the holy orders to escape caste-based discrimination, and also to further her mission of helping in the advancement of poor Dalit girls. In Karukku, Bama reveals the peril of her Paraya community. She too firmly believed that education will be the only means to attain dignity and equality in her life. Her brother's words were a constant motivation: "So study with care, teach all you can. If you are always ahead in your lessons, people will come to you of their own accord and attach themselves to you. Work hard and learn." (18).

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).

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.

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).

In a similar way, *Karukku* portrays double standards of the society is observed by the keen observing Bama:

Everyone seems to think Harijan children were contemptible. But they didn't hesitate to use us for cheap labour. So we carried water to the teacher's house: we watered the plants. We did all the chores that were needed about the school (18).

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).

Karukku discusses the social injustice meted by Bama who thought that she would be relieved of her caste stigma when she commences her higher education in college. But she was harassed by her Principal and warden by not giving her permission to go home to attend the first Communion of her brother and sister. Bama saw the officials granting permissions to wealthy students but not to her. "But I managed to get it at last by insisting that there cannot be different rules for different castes, only the same rule for everyone" (22). Though the discrimination prevailed Bama could successfully outshine the adversaries and oppressors on her way with confidence when she studied the B.Ed. course: Whatever the situation, I held my head high. And I completed whatever I took up, successfully. So both teachers and students showed me a certain affection, respect in this way, because of my education alone I managed to survive among those who spoke the language of caste-difference and discrimination (Bama 22).

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).

Bama was mistreated and harassed by Telugu nuns which inspired her to resign her job as a teacher and become a nun to create revolutionary changes in the congregation. Bama reveals her realization: "It was only after this I began to understand, little but little, that in that order, Tamil people were looked upon as a lower caste. And then, among Tamils, Parayar were a separate category." (24).

When she realized that discrimination on the basis of caste and creed prevailed even in the congregation "She lamented inwardly that there was no place that was free of caste divisions" (25).

### **The burdensome life of a Dalit woman is revealed in her words**

If you are born into a low caste, every moment of your life is a moment of struggle. People screw up their faces and look at us with disgust the moment they know our caste. It is impossible to describe the anguish that look causes" (27).

The young protagonist is shredded by the identity crisis as a fatherless being. The ignominy he suffers as a sireless 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". (Limbale 38). 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).

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 confidant: "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).

Bama too struggled to cope her conflicts in the convent. Her poignant words express her personal crisis as a Dalit woman denied of her self-respect:

The more I watched this, the more frustrated I felt. My mind was disturbed. My conscience was battered and bruised. At last I asked myself, is this life for me? I left the convent and went home, utterly weary and dispirited" (Bama 78).

The poignant words harnessed by the reins of self-restraint express the detached state of mind of the protagonists caused by the irrevocable onus dumped on them and their communities.

When Limbale got a job as a telephone operator at Ahmedpur he hid his identity from others: "If they came to know my caste they would drive me out of the house I had rented from a high-caste landlord. I would be beaten badly" (Limbale 104). Therefore Limbale is tortured by the burden of his identity as a Dalit: What kind of burden do we carry like a porter his load? Why is this burden of religion thrust upon us? Why can't we discard it? How has man lost himself under this huge tree of caste, religion, breeding, family" (Limbale 105).

When he got transferred to Latur, he found difficulty in getting a rented house because his caste was his enemy. He was not given a place of stay except at Bhim nagar, which is a graveyard of the Marwari community. The autobiography ends with the vexing question: "Why this labyrinth of customs? Who has created such values of right and wrong, and what for? If they consider my birth illegitimate what values am I to follow? (Limbale 113). Bama too is haunted by the stigma of her caste which made her the butt of ridicule of her class mates, teachers, colleagues and nuns in her nunnery. She also finds uncertainty as her future as a Dalit in an intolerant and stratified society is precarious. But her concluding words are a blend of despair and hope: "Yet I believe it is possible to live a meaningful life, a life that is useful to a few others. I comfort myself with the thought that rather than live with a fraudulent smile, it is better to lead a life weeping real tears." (Bama 122)

### Conclusion

Dalit autobiographies are sincere portraits of the relentless efforts of nameless, faceless human beings to make their footprints amidst those who try to tread them down. Though Dalit Autobiographies lack the linguistic perfection and narrative splendor of the non-Dalit autobiographies which offer a glorified image of the protagonists these literary pieces pulsate with the anguish and despair of human sufferings. The Dalit autobiographies, attempt to reveal to the outside world about the despicable life led by them upon the fringes.

The present condition of the Dalit community is reflected in the recent incidents of brutality hurled on them. The gruesome honour killing murder of Shankar an MBA graduate at Udumelpettu on March 13, 2016, of Jisha a Law graduate in Kerala, the dismal fate of Rohit vemula of Hyderabad become immortal life narratives written in blood that are reminders of the unpardonable crimes done to the Dalit community in the recent times. A close reading of the ill fates of these Dalit victims should remind the human society that it is high time to think beyond caste, creed and religion and start living as conscientious human beings in order to be all-embracing instead of preening over exclusivity by being sectarian in practices.

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