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The Image of Hunger in Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi* (*The Outcaste*)

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Abstract

This article intends to analyze the image of hunger in the work *Akkarmashi* by the renowned Dalit writer Sharankumar Limbale. The study identifies two kinds of hunger. The first is the Dalit's hunger for creating an identity- individual, familial, religious, economic, social, and political. The second is the Dalit women's predicament of being the victim of hunger at different levels- the sexual and exploitative hunger of the high caste, oppressive and looting hunger of low caste men, the hunger of customs for existence, the physical hunger, and their own hunger for a better life with love and care. Thus the article intends to give a new outlook on the work.

Keywords

Dalit Hunger for Identity; Dalit Women as the *Victims of Hunger*; *Akkarmashi*.

Introduction

Dalit literature, according to Sharankumar Limbale, “is the burning cry of untouchables against the injustices of thousand years” (*Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* 15). Dalit literary history is intricately woven within the history of caste ridden Indian society. A great deal of Dalit writing is in the genre of life writing. They use biographical or autobiographical form to narrate Dalit experiences, in an authentic way, through minute chronicling of the smallest detail of daily life. They can be described as ‘social epiphanies’, expressions of a never before mentioned intensity.

Sharankumar Limbale, one of Maharashtra’s pre-eminent Dalit writer-activists, is the author of several novels and story collections. *Akkarmashi* (*The Outcaste*), is Limbale’s groundbreaking autobiographical work. The Marathi word ‘Akkarmashi’ means ‘outcaste’, which signifies the condition of the author, a half-caste – born of a high caste Marathi Patil and an untouchable Mahar woman – condemned by both the high caste and the Mahar community. An acknowledged masterpiece, *The Outcaste* is the emotionally violent autobiography of a half caste, growing up in the Mahar community, and the anguish he suffers from not belonging fully to it. It is the numbing account of a community at the hands of an unthinking privileged class. It finds relevance as a voice for those deemed outcaste, be it the illegitimate child of the commercial sex worker, or the *akkarmashi* as Limbale records.

Apt to the mental agony and pain of the writer, *The Outcaste* has no chronological direction or structure and instead is a rumble-jumble of Limbale’s experiences, at times yoked together by two recurring images of hunger. Above all, the most significant feature of the book, is the writer’s philosophic detachment or objectivity, which shows little bitterness or remorse. The outburst is not of a hungry man bounding for meals; it is more a saint’s quest to understand the meaning of the world, which is read in the alphabet of hunger and want.

'Hunger' as an image appears throughout the work. And this image goes far beyond a physical need, and acquires a philosophical dimension. On viewing from a broader perspective, the life of Dalits can be identified as directed by hunger for identity- individual, familial, religious economic, social, and political. And their miseries and toil can be viewed as the result of the hunger of the high caste community which leads to exploitation at all levels, with the victimization of women –for the satisfaction of this hunger – being the most pathetic. Their yearning for survival and recognition add to this. In this sense, the life of Dalits revolves around the pivot –hunger. The aim of the article is to explore the different dimensions of the metaphor of 'hunger' that dominates the entire text.

Quest for Identity

Limbale presents Dalit's constant battle with 'hunger' as the dominating theme throughout the book. It is not merely the physical hunger and the author elevates it to a higher plane:

Bhakari is as large as man. It is as vast as the sky, and bright like the sun. Hunger is bigger than man. Hunger is more vast than the seven circles of hell. Man is only as big as a bhakari, and only as big as his hunger. Hunger is more powerful than man. A single stomach is like the whole earth. Hunger seems no bigger than your open palm, but it can swallow the whole world and let out a belch. There would have been no wars if there was no hunger. What about stealing and fighting? If there was no hunger, what would have happened to sin and virtue, heaven and hell, this creation of God? If there was no hunger how a country, its borders, citizens could, parliament, constitution came into being? The world is born from a stomach, so also the links between mother and father, sister and brother. (50)

When connected to the lives of Dalits, hunger can be interpreted as the identity crisis and the resultant hunger for ascertaining a specific identity in the society. Here, the author shares a collective hunger of Dalit community in general, also holds a special case of identity crisis, with different dimensions and craving for it, in particular. The 20th century Developmental psychologist Erik Erikson describes identity as “ a subjective sense as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in sameness and continuity of same shared world image” (Maya 65). Identity crisis may occur at any time of life, especially in periods of great transition. Identity crisis is an internal conflict and search for identity. Experience is the source of identity, and all the experiences are socially constructed. Our ability to understand fundamental aspects of our world will depend on our ability to understand social, political, economic consequences of our identity.

According to Dennis Wrong, “the terms ‘identity’ and ‘identity crisis’ have become semantic beacons of our time, for they communicate verbally the discontent prevalent in our modern life and society” (Bhargava 78) . And this is absolutely true in the case of Dalit community. For them, the identity crisis is shaped by shared experience of institutionalized segregation and differences, leading to discrimination, powerlessness, voicelessness and refracted by class and gender. So, ‘Dalit’ is not indicative of caste, but of constructed identity. Their attempt to assert their collective identity is faced with strong resistance from higher caste through inhuman torture and atrocities. But they cannot remain mute for long, they would find an outlet for their tears and fears, anger and anguish, and the best examples for this are Dalit literature.

Limbale’s *Akkarmashi* effectively deals with the question of identity and the yearning for asserting an identity. Here the experience of the writer is not an isolated one, as it has a collective dimension. The miseries and crisis that the narrator underwent are common to whole Dalit community. So he can be a

representative, and can claim that his solitary and individual life was same as the lives of the community.

The identity crisis of the protagonist begins from the birth itself. Limbale was tortured firstly by the accident of birth. The very title *Akkarmashi* itself points to the identity crisis of the author, as he was an offspring born out of a socially unacceptable relationship. His mother Masamai, who belonged to Mahar community, had him out of the wedlock with the Patil (chief) of a village Baslegaon, Hanmantha Limbale who belonged to the high caste Maratha community. The birth itself turned out to be a stigma. That is why he says “my first breath must have threatened the morality of the world” (36). Since his father was not a Mahar by caste, Mahar people viewed him as a bastard, half-caste (*akkarmashi*) and as his mother belonged to Mahar community, he was an untouchable for the village people. Thus he became unacceptable, alien to all.

To be a Dalit is a curse, but to be an illegitimate within the Dalit community is a double curse. Being a half- caste of an outcaste, he was considered much less than a human being. He suffered not only through caste system, but also through the pain of not even being allowed into the caste system. So the lack of inherited identity became his real identity. He was ashamed of his past and was extremely sad about his low birth.

In the family, he was not free from anguish. He had a divided self even in his own family. His father lived in a mansion, mother in a hut and he on streets. His father always tried to avoid him, and he could not acknowledge Sharan as his offspring. This made Limbale to call his autobiography “the chronicle of a fatherless being” (27). He always regretted of the destiny to bear the fault for the sin of his parents, and of not having the pure blood. He was insulted even by his siblings, as their father was another man. His Dada was a Muslim, grandmother being a Mahar woman. So he could not make out his real identity from his own lineage or family tree. Limbale says:

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. I was brought up by Mahmood, who lives with my grandmother, Santamai. Does this mean I am Muslim as well? How can I be high caste when my mother is untouchable? If I am an 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?
(39)

Being the reason for her miseries, his mother rejected him as a stepmother does. The prestige of father kept him away from paternal love .And when his grandparents denied their role as guardians, he felt like a sparrow whose nest is destroyed. He had a feeling of alienation even from his own siblings, they being born to his mother from another man. Later when he met his father, he could not recognize the Patil. In school records, he got the surname 'Limbale' after many struggles with his father and community and the struggle was supported by his teacher. He could not get certain papers signed for school, because he could not properly identify his caste based on his complex family history.

As he grew older, his love and marriage proposals were broken down, due to his mixed origin. For him being a hybrid, his bride also was needed to be a hybrid. He found out a solution for all his problems, in education. But it gave him an identity crisis of a different level. As he progressed in education, he no longer had the same attachment to the colony, relations or language, and he sought for upward mobility. But he was in no way allowed to enter into the established social order by upper caste Hindus.

At this point, he became aware of the fact that the status of an individual is determined by his birth, and it had nothing to do with individual talent, aptitude or abilities. It also accounted for the alienation, loss and longing

among young, urban, educated generation of Dalits. They in turn navigated a rupture of family and community as a consequence of their political awakening. His perpetual struggles forced him to hide his mixed identity, “like a leper hiding patches on skin” (60).

The economic identity plays a crucial role in the lives of Dalit community. The image ‘hunger’ acquires full strength on this aspect. The social condition led to Dalit’s pitiable economic condition, which in turn forced them to take up menial jobs that accentuated the social stigma. So it has direct connection with the social condition.

For Dalits, hunger was not merely a physical need; instead it was a struggle for survival. The detestable poverty forced them to live in limitless pain and agony. The entire Maharwada survived on a few Bhakari (bread) and a little water. Most of the time, they spent their lives in utter poverty. And this pathetic condition was a social construct, which enabled the high caste to force them to do menial labour like sweeping, cleaning the latrines and thereby declaring them to be polluted and untouchables. For this pitiful labour they were given meagre wages in the form of leftover food. In order to fill their stomach, they took up the task of removing the carcasses of cattle, which provided them enough meat, even though it subjected them to further humiliation. Children were considered to be the asset of a poor family. Their struggle for survival further led them to anti-social activities of stealing, poisoning the animals for meat, selling liquor, even selling their own bodies. Deprived of money, land, work, education, they had to depend wholly on the high caste for their survival. This pathetic condition is explained by Limbale’s comparison of Maharwada “to a heap of Jowar grains gathered at the resting place of a corpse”, (12), and its representation as the ‘garbage that the village throws out’. The instance of Santamai, eating the Bhakari made of the grains taken from the cow dung, makes the reader heavy hearted. Limbale observes ‘hunger’ as the sole reason for their pitiable plight. He says:

God endowed man with a stomach. Since then man has been striving to satisfy his stomach. Filling even one stomach proved difficult for him. He went on days without eating, anything. He started selling himself for his stomach. A woman becomes a whore and a man becomes a thief. The stomach makes you clean shit; it even makes you eat shit. (8)

His always half fed stomach proved to be a 'graveyard that swallows the dead'. The life of Dalit was directed by hunger even from his childhood. Thus the economic identity was a major threat they had to face, in their whole life.

Religious identity is of utmost importance. It was the religious sanction that strengthened the caste based segregation and oppression. According to K.M Panikkar, "the Dalits were the submerged base of Hindu society, but the self-assertion of the upper caste and the spiritual aspect enabled them to preserve their autonomy over the Dalits" (Panikkar 21). The Dalits, conscious of their outsider status and exploitation in the name of religion, called it as a terrible monster and gave the ironical account of rituals and faith. The realization that the religion tears people and families apart, forced them to break away from the traditional customs. The superstitions, degeneration of man through religious practices, different God cult for Dalits, associated with caste consciousness, forced the Dalits to break away from religion, and to claim a superior identity. That is why Limbale asks: "If you cut out his religion, a man is still a man....Why does religion hinder them? Why is man imprisoned by conventions" (102)?

Even though being a part of Hindu religion, Dalits were thrust outside the temple, and from religious rituals, as they were considered polluted and subhuman. But they could not make out the reason for segregating human beings on the basis of 'accident of birth' followed by the caste and religion. Thus the religious identity became a crucial question before them.

The question of social identity holds an important position in the lives of Dalits. Social identity deals with a question 'who are our own people?' The lives of India's lowest citizens are completely controlled by the society around them, and the caste acts as a powerful tool for social segregation and the caste identity is the occasion only for victimization. According to Limbale, "the caste of a Hindu Indian determines everything about his life- dress, marriage and even food" (*Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* 25). The stratification devised by Manu was effectively utilized by the upper caste, for not including Dalits into the mainstream of society. Traditional Indian society did not allow the low caste people to realize their 'self' as their self-identity was a threat to the smooth functioning of social, political and religious institutions. So, they created obstacles in the path of self thereby deviated them from positive growth

Caste as a regressive factor in society spread the stigma of inferiority, and marginalization. Inter caste marriages were a threat to the propagation of caste. So 'Varna Sankara'-the mixture of castes-, which strikes at the root of caste organization, was considered the greatest of all social evils. The purity was enforced by the prohibition of social interaction.

Limbale explains these points through his bitter experiences from childhood onwards. The Dalit children were kept away from the noble; even the games played were different. At school, they were forced to sit at the entrance, along with others' chappals. The leftover food by the high caste was like elixir for them. The high caste children often teased and threw stones at them. At first, Sharan could not accept the logic of humiliation and wondered what sin he had done for being exposed to such experiences.

And within the low caste itself, there were numerous divisions and hierarchy. Thus a miniature caste system was established within the lower castes, with innumerable sub castes each divided again and again, including 3000 major units rigidly exclusive and claims superiority over the other alien in the social life. They practiced untouchability among themselves. Limbale gives

evidence to this while recalling an incident, when his grandmother scolded him for giving water and mingling with a friend who belonged to Mang community which was even below Mahar. He was deeply touched by this and asked:

Is one's caste more important than one's friend? How could he make pure water impure by merely touching it? Our minds were divided like separate reservoirs of water. Our minds were not only divided they were also contaminated. (20)

Even economic or political progress, could not support their social up gradation. Even if one was economically forward, politically strengthened, enlightened by education he cannot claim the status of social forwardness. Even though one forgets his caste identity, those around him do not. Limbale became aware of the fact, when he was segregated on different levels by the high caste, after his Degree and even after he got a permanent job, and became economically well-off. So when he was transferred to city he was forced to hide his identity.

The very concept of identity involves domination, which is a major issue of politics. Imposed segregation by the high caste asserts their domination over the lower caste. It presumes sameness, excluding differences. So the lower caste, being different, was excluded at all levels. The violence meted out to women, by the upper caste was a weapon to inflict political lessons. When Dalits protested, the high caste used retaliatory violence as a weapon to assert power over them. In fact it was a kind of relation between colonizers and colonized, where the colonizer uses oppressive methods to politically subjugate the colonized. Here the high caste played the role of colonizer and made the low caste colonized. Thus they were left without a distinct political identity.

It is a universal fact that a crisis would definitely lead to the craving for its solution. This is same in the case of Dalits too. When they were exposed to crisis- individual, familial, religious, social, and political, they had a quest for building up an identity of their own, in all these fields. Now let us analyze the

different facets of this quest or 'hunger' for establishing identity, as narrated in the text.

At an individual level, the quest was not expressed in the form of violent revolt, but as a denial of traditions and taboo using the weapon of silent endurance. The use of highly philosophical language, in Limbale's writing signifies this. And in the familial dimension, he tries to conform to his atmosphere. In the case of religion, Dalits took up a revolutionary step. As they were denied a space within Hinduism, they took to massive conversion to Buddhism, which treated them as human beings, allowed them to worship, and freed them from the shackles of superstition and caste. In the political atmosphere, drastic changes were brought about by collective revolt. The crisis of political identity led to the formation of protest groups and political mobilization. The identity politics led to the emancipation of Dalits at different levels, like reservations in education and job. Dalit Panther Movement and the struggle for renaming the Marathwada University as Babasaheb Ambedkar University gave Dalits an enlightenment regarding the strength of their collective political identity. In order to gain economic identity, they resorted to all sorts of jobs. They found work as a partial solution for all the problems. For them, it was not a hateful thing, but the creation of system. They considered economic independence as a part of their up gradation. An attempt to create social identity was made by the process of Sanskritization, with the slogan educate, organize and agitate. Education played a major role in opening their eyes and making them aware of their rights. Marginalization to the point of exclusion, forced them to conduct social movements, that supported their craving for upward mobility and to create a social identity.

The identity crisis was a social construct whereas the solution arose from within the community, which could effectively reduce the hunger for identity. Limbale asks: "How has man lost himself under this huge tree of caste, religion, breeding, family? Why this labyrinth of customs" (105)? These

questions are sharp enough to prick the conscience and pierce the heart of a sensitive reader and thereby spearheading the movement for a change in the identity of Dalits- individual, familial, religious, social and political satisfying the hunger for identity.

Dalit Women: Victims of ‘The Hunger’

The identity of a woman in Indian society is constructed by the collective efforts of family, caste, religion, culture and society. Women are the gateways of caste system and crucial pivot on whose purity- sanctity axis, the caste hierarchy is constructed, and the women themselves are the worst sufferers of the system. When it comes to Dalit women, the problem becomes more complex.

To be a Dalit woman, is a great calamity in Indian society. According to the famous Dalit activist Ruth Manorama, “Dalit woman suffer discrimination- not single, double but of triple fold- class, caste, gender” (Bhagawat 5). Dalit women constitute a distinct social group, and cannot be masked under ‘women’ or ‘Dalits’. They are the Dalit of Dalit in Indian society, being oppressed victims of centuries-old social, political, economic, cultural, and religious pressures inflicted by the collective forces of feudalism, casteism and patriarchy. Even Dalit literature, constructed Dalit women in the similar patriarchal framework of ‘glorification of motherhood’ and subjugation of women. But Sharankumar Limbale marks a clear deviation from this trend, through *Akkarmashi*. Here he describes the precarious existence of Dalit women, combining abject poverty with grinding labour. Also, he questions the doubly silenced condition of subaltern woman, with no control over their lives, earning, even their own bodies.

In the selected work under study, the women are depicted as the victims of hunger at various levels- the sexual and exploitative hunger of the high caste, oppressive and looting hunger of low caste men, the hunger of customs

for existence, the physical hunger that forced them to hard work and social degradation, and their own hunger for a better life with love and care.

Their body was a free terrain of colonization. “Even in caste conflicts, Dalit women fell as the first victim, to be a political lesson of subjugation” (Das 261). Dalit women were raped, when their husbands were imprisoned for protests against the high caste. Apart from this hunger for suppression, the women were subjected to sexual hunger of the high caste men. It seems highly ridiculous and paradoxical that the high caste men, the upholders of caste system and preservation of purity, openly disobey the social norms as long as they needed low caste women for their material comforts and pleasures. In the face of sexual hunger, there was no question of untouchability. Dalits – being the watchdogs of their masters –were forced to sacrifice their daughters, wives, sisters and daughter-in laws in the Patil’s mansion. There were families which survived by pleasing the Patil sexually.

The high caste men used crooked ways to satisfy their hunger, as exemplified by Limbale from his mother’s life. Masamai’s happy life with her husband Ithal Kamble was destroyed by Hanmantha Limbale, their land owner, owing to her attractive beauty. When she was desolated and helpless, Hanmantha worked out his plan, lured her, and enjoyed her for several years. When Sharan was born from their alliance, Hanmantha came to his true colour and left her isolated forever. This kind of illegal temporary marriage was common among them. The woman, the prey of this trap was stamped as a prostitute or whore, while the upper caste men saved their face. Limbale points out this fact: “A man can eat paan and spit as many times as he likes, but the same was not possible for a woman. It is considered wrong if a woman does that. Once her chastity is lost, it can never be restored” (36).

Patils followed a tradition of holding a Dalit woman as their whore. That is how Sidramappa Patil, came to Masamai’s life. Thus she subjected herself to the curse to be born beautiful among Dalits and to the tyranny of sex,

mortgaging to one owner after other. In this way, she was burdened with a roll call of children and their upbringing, in which the caste Hindu father was reluctant to shoulder the responsibility. But Limbale does not attempt to criticize his mother; instead he views her as the victim of social order, which makes Dalit woman an easy prey to the upper caste. That is why he says:

Every time the dominant classes attack and exploit the weak, they violate their women. The sexual exploits of the men among the wicked exploiters draw legitimacy from their authority, wealth, society, culture, and religion. But what about the exploited woman? She has to carry the rape in her womb, and has to be borne, fed and reared. (xxiv)

The Dalit men have played a significant role in making women's life miserable. "When the low caste men were denied their urge for assertion and domination, owing to the oppression of the high caste, they try to fulfill their desire of assertion and revolt in their family and most probably on the women" (Ahmad 27). It is evident from the lives of Santamai, Limbale's grandmother and Masamai, his mother. Marriages were broken up like a game of dolls, leaving behind a large number of deserted young wives as was the fate of Limbale's sisters. Extra marital affairs and polygamy fell on women as a burden, thereby turning their own husbands as their worst enemies.

Women were invariably ruled by the physical hunger. "Around 80% of the Dalit women in India are below minimum subsistence level and they strive not for gender equality, but for their survival" (Bhagawat 4). This life of indignity and uncertainty force them to hard work and menial labour as scavengers, landless labourers and eventually to degrade themselves as liquor sellers, beggars and prostitutes. They are completely dependent on the non-Dalits to fill their stomachs. The utter poverty and the family responsibility force them to sell their bodies in exchange of bread. Even though they work hard as scavengers, they are never given adequate wages except stale food or

old clothings. The most pitiful expression of their poverty becomes clear when Limbale narrates incidents of Santamai's fasting on almost all days, her eating bhakaris (bread) made from grains collected from cow dung, which had a stink of cow dung and her remaining starving after giving Sharan the only left bhakari convincing him that she had eaten earlier. Thus the life of Dalit women was always governed by hunger.

They were also subjected to the shackles of superstitious customs. Devadasi system was the most important among them. Here a girl dedicated to God, is never allowed to marry but was exploited in various ways. Thus "a religious colour was given to the ritual prostitution" (Murahari 305). If they married, children born to them were considered outcaste. Child marriage added fuel to the fire, leaving behind a large number of child widows and discarded young wives which gradually led to their exploitation. In their struggle for survival, they could not even dream of education and its prospects and this ignorance aggravated the level of exploitation and superstitions that encircled them. They had a rare predicament to rise above the gendered roles of a submissive and male dependent entity because of their partner's inability or irresponsibility, but still condemned for transgression. Thus the customs, sought their existence, by making women obey, uphold and propagate their ways.

Above all, they were ruled by the hunger for a better life. They had a desire for normal, happy life which led them to different paths for its fulfilment. Limbale states it clearly when he says "they (Dalit women) sold themselves to be loved and cared for by someone, not to appease their lust" (64). This hunger for love can be seen from Santamai's grief at the death of her husband, - who discarded her, married another woman and threw her life to miseries- and from Masamai's devoted nursing of her sick husband- who had left her accusing her as unfaithful and was responsible for her pitiable existence- when he returned after many years to atone his wrongs. They were ready to starve in order to feed

the children and were ready to put themselves out to give education to the children. They dreamt of a bright future for the next generation and toiled all their lives for the purpose. This refusal to surrender themselves to the degrading conditions, desire to live and move forward gives them a sense of tragic dignity, which is evident from Limbale's depiction of the women characters, including his mother Masamai and grandmother Santamai.

Limbale clearly depicts the women as being subjected to hunger all through their lives. This hunger is both external- inflicted on them from outside- as well as internal- that emerges from their own lives. Whatever be the source, their lives are always ruled by the multifaceted hunger, and they are destined to fall victims to the spell of this hunger.

Conclusion

Sharankumar Limbale is best known for the true depiction of the woes of the Dalits in a heart rending way, which can be experienced through his debut work, *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*. The entire work seems to revolve around the pivot- 'hunger'. A careful reading of the text brings out the different dimensions of the image 'hunger' that depict the plight of Dalits. In the present study, the image 'hunger' is analyzed in two ways- firstly, as the identity crisis of Dalits and their hunger for asserting their identity and secondly, as the hunger that dominates the lives of Dalit women.

The Dalits face identity crisis at different levels- individual, familial, religious, economic, social and political. Their quest or hunger for identity, has led them to the path of progress at all the levels. Then we come across the pitiable condition of Dalit women. The study shows that Dalit women fall victims to a wide range of hunger- including the sexual and exploitative hunger of the high caste, hunger for suppression by the low caste men, the existential hunger of customs, the physical hunger that led to manifold miseries and their own quest for better life and recognition. Thus, the detailed analysis provides a new insight regarding the use of the image 'hunger' as a powerful tool to

recount the deplorable predicament of Dalits. In addition to this, the reading of the selected work under study in a different angle is an eye opener to the manifold anguish of the entire Dalit community, rendering valuable outlook on life in general and the life of the marginalized in particular.

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