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Troubles and Triumphs of Dalit Women: A Study of Sharakumar Limbale's Autobiography *The Outcaste*

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Abstract:

Dalit literature reflects the frank and honest experiences of Dalits. Dalit autobiographies discuss not just the life of the individual but also the experiences and lives of entire communities. Men's and women's Dalit autobiographies differ in terms of the emotions they convey, the style of storytelling, and the sense of community and family they represent. The autobiographies of Dalit men vividly show the subjugated situation of women and their total marginalization. In contrast to the majority of Dalit autobiographies written by men, Dalit women are given a voice in Sharankumar Limbale's autobiography, *The Outcaste*.

The autobiography brings to light the troubles and triumphs of Dalit women in India through caste prejudice, economic hardship, and sexual exploitation. The autobiography features many female characters; widows, childless women, deserted women and none of them are without a major life issue. By presenting them, Limbale attempts to highlight the troubles and triumphs of Dalit women, who face discrimination from both their men and the wealthy upper castes. For Limbale, the tragedy of her women characters is a common feature of Dalit life. This article examines the female characters in the autobiography to highlight the troubles and triumphs of Dalit women in Sharakumar Limbale's autobiography *The Outcaste*.

Keyword: experiences, triumph, troubles, women, exploitation.

Introduction

Dalit literature embodies the genuine experiences of Dalits living in India. In addition to discussing the lives of an individual, Dalit autobiographies also discuss the experiences of the entire community. The emotional content, narrative style, and sense of family and community

that are expressed in Dalit autobiographies of men and women differ. The autobiographies of Dalit men blatantly depict women's subordination and total marginalization. Sharankumar Limbale's 2003 autobiography *The Outcaste* gives Dalit women a voice, in contrast to the majority of Dalit autobiographies written by men. According to Limbale, the majority of the Dalit women in his community share his mother's sorrow because all Dalit women have similar experiences. In order to draw attention to the mistreatment of Dalit women and expose the hypocrisy of upper caste society, this article examines the female characters in the autobiography to highlight the troubles and triumphs of Dalit women in Sharakumar Limbale's autobiography *The Outcaste*.

Dalit Women: Troubles and Triumphs

Dalit men and women autobiographies differ in terms of the emotions they convey, the style of their storytelling, and the sense of community and family they represent. The autobiographies of Dalit men vividly show the subjugated situation of women and their total marginalization in society. In contrast to the majority of Dalit autobiographies written by men, Dalit women are given a voice in Sharankumar Limbale's autobiography, *The Outcaste*. Though the main theme of the autobiography is the identity crisis of Sharankumar Limbale, an illegitimate child but the whole story revolves around the Dalit women and their sufferings as they are part of Indian society.

The autobiography brings to light the troubles and triumphs of Dalit women in India through caste prejudice, economic hardship, and sexual exploitation. The autobiography features many female characters; widows, childless women, deserted women and none of them are without a major life issue. By presenting them, Limbale attempts to highlight the troubles and triumphs of Dalit women, who face discrimination from both their men and the wealthy upper castes. For Limbale, the tragedy of Dalit women is a common feature of Dalit life. Dalit women are unfortunate to continuously struggle due to poverty, hunger, caste discrimination, gender bias and economic exploitation rape etc.

Numerous facets of Dalit existence have been revealed by the autobiography. In India's caste-based culture, Dalits are subjected to physical, psychological, and social abuse. When a Dalit is a woman, the situation deteriorates. Dalit women are subjected to sexual exploitation, which takes this abuse a step further. A Dalit woman must deal with caste prejudice, gender obligation, and sexual exploitation. However, the question of why a Dalit woman is subjected to caste and gender-based oppression emerges? Why do the men from the upper caste take

advantage of her sexually? In what ways does she find it difficult to define herself in the patriarchal society of today? How does she overcome her troubles and turn them into triumph?

In order to provide light on the troubles and triumphs of Dalit women, this paper will examine the female characters in the autobiography. In Marathi, the term “akkarmashi” refers to an outcast or someone whose birth is illegitimate. Sharan’s life as an outcast is depicted in the autobiography. The protagonist, Sharan, was conceived after Masamai, a poor Dalit woman, was raped by Patil, a wealthy Basalegaon landlord, Hanumant Limbale. Like Sharan’s mother, the majority of Dalit women experience the same tragedy. The autobiography highlights Dalit woman’s troubles and how she overcomes it and turns them into her triumphs.

Economic Hardship

In India, the majority of Dalit women are poor and illiterate, but they frequently provide their family instead of their husbands, who waste all of their money on drinking. Many are wage workers without land and have limited access to resources. Due of the low wages of the high caste, they are constantly undernourished, famished, and treated with indifference. Sometimes, Dalit woman find it challenging to fill even one stomach. Masamai is the only one who makes money for her family, and she and her nine children constantly go hungry. They frequently go to bed without eating anything because there isn’t even a grain to eat in the house.

When Sharan tells Masamai that he ate the food scraps that the high caste boys and girls had given him, she responds saying, “Why didn’t you get at least a small portion of it for me? Leftover food is nectar” (Limbale, 3). His mother’s response to the food scraps highlights the harsh truth of their difficult financial situation. Severe poverty and hunger forces Masamai to live with multiple males without marriage. She needs money to survive and as a destitute woman, her only option for making money is to give consent to her sexual abuse and endure more exploitative days. She accepts her exploitation and struggles to survive. She never gives up because she has to look after her children and feed them.

Santamai’s struggle to acquire food is a harsh reality of her existence. For example, she gathers and cleans the dung lumps and gathers the jowar grains that the cattle have passed undigested in the excrement. After drying these grains, she grinds them into flour. But instead of giving it to Sharan, she consumes the bhakari made with this flour. One day, he happens to eat such bhakris and remarks, “It stank of dung. As I chewed it, I felt I was actually eating dung. It was difficult for me to swallow it. Somehow forcing myself to gulp it down, I returned the remaining bhakari to Santamai” (11). Despite her age and poverty, Santamai face many

troubles in her life but she uses her vulnerability to her advantage. She would rather eat dung-smelling bhakarīs than rely on begging to survive.

When Limbale arrives from Sholapur, Santamai prepares meal for him and his friends. Sharan is really hungry the following day when his guests depart, and there is only one bhakari left. Santamai shows him that she had enough bhakri to eat by bringing the tin box of flour. When Sharan picks up the box, she notices that it is heavy and assumes that it contains flour. He gulps down the bhakari. After Santamai leaves, Sharan examines the box and discovers that Santamai has misled him by adding a large stone to make it heavier. To feed her grandchild, she stifles her own hunger. Santamai and Masamai have a hard time getting food. Because of their strength, these women can overcome any obstacle. Despite the troubles they face, they are not demoralized by the dire circumstances instead, they triumph against all odds.

Caste Prejudice

The evils of Hindu caste system physically and socially expel Dalit due to the dirty and filthy jobs assigned to them. A Dalit woman faces discrimination at the village water well, at the neighbourhood tea shop, and is prohibited from entering the temple or upper caste homes. Even in situations where she is meant to be equal, she is made to feel inferior and dirty. She is the target of oppression, exploitation, brutality, and atrocities brought on by the caste system. The social evil of caste system forces Dalit women to experience caste and gender oppression. Sharan explains the higher castes' perception on Dalit women and writes, "[Higher caste] 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" (35). This demonstrates the contradiction of caste Hindus, who accept alcohol from their homes and have affairs with Mahar women while holding the lower castes in contempt.

Sharan's grandma Santamai, frequently paid him visits while he was a high school student in Chungi and Chapalgaon. Someone visiting the temple forgot the pair of broken old chappals she brought with her one day. To have the old chappals repaired, she went to the cobbler who was near the bus stop and he refused to fix this chappal. Sharan writes, "The cobbler beside the bus stand refused to repair it as he knew Santamai was a Mahar" (75). Even the farmers forbade members of the Mahar group from approaching the boundaries of their land. The farmers pushed the women of the Mahar village away when they tried to graze their livestock near their land. Sharan writes "Dalit women were badly insulted... Some farmers even harassed them sexually, pulled them into the crop, and raped them" (79). The farmers and

cobblers are not from the upper castes, but whenever they find a chance to humiliate Dalits, they do not spare that chance.

Sexual Exploitation

According to the autobiography, Dalit women are the most oppressed group among the downtrodden. As Ruth Manorama writes, “Almost all Dalit spokesmen (and most, in fact, are men) clearly recognize women to be the most oppressed of their groups, the ‘Dalit among the Dalits and the downtrodden among the downtrodden’, as it is sometimes put” (Manorama 450). They were oppressed twice: first by their husbands and second by the high-caste people. Ithal Kamble is a poor man who is married to Sharan’s mother, Masamai. He has an annual contract with Hanmanta Limbale, a landlord, to work as a farm labourer. Masamai’s husband filed for divorce from her and took away both of her sons.

One of the most prevalent and regular crimes committed against Dalit women in India is rape. Masamai is the victim of rape by the upper caste landlord and the man of his caste community when she is raped by Hanmata. Masamai falls victim to the passion of the upper caste landlord. Hanmata Limbale avoids Masamai after satisfying his own lust, and she is accused of being a whore. This incidence demonstrates how a man from a higher caste can sexually abuse a Dalit woman without facing any consequences for his immoral behaviour, while the woman is labelled a whore. Since birth, the innocent child has been marked as illegitimate, and the mother and child are socially despised. Masamai fights for her child’s survival despite being labelled a whore. She focuses on her universe, which she finds in her children, rather than the outside world. She struggles in life, but she does everything in her power to provide for her family. This demonstrates that modern women are strong and competent enough to endure and deal with all the challenges of life.

Almost every historical period has seen women being subjugated by men, and this practice is still frequent throughout a significant portion of the world. In India, it takes a severe form due to the potent tool of religious traditions that have influenced social customs. As stated by Uma Chakravarti, “A marked feature of Hindu society is its legal sanction for an extreme expression of social stratification in which women and the lower castes have been subjected to humiliating conditions of existence” (Chakravarti 579). The root cause of all the evils practiced against Dalit women is Hindu Scripture which allow the upper castes to take advantage over Dalit women.

Women experience gender prejudices in the same manner as non-Dalit women, but they are further disadvantaged by caste and class. When a Dalit woman is abandoned, not just her

community but the entire world views her negatively. Due to the Patils' pursuit of every attractive lady in the village, Masamai's beauty ends up being a curse. Hanmata enjoys Masamai after her husband divorces her, but he also deserts her. According to Sharan, in every village, Patils have turned the spouses of Dalit agricultural workers into whores. When they reach puberty, a poor Dalit girl is always the victim of their lust. A complete race is born to adulterous Patils in the village. Sharan writes, "There are Dalit families that survive by pleasing the Patils sexually" (Limbale 38). For the Patils to satiate their lust, Dalit women inevitably turn into whores. They are regularly victimized by men who have strong patriarchal beliefs. They do not fear to take advantage of Dalit women sexually because they are aware that they would not be questioned.

Upper-class men feel comfortable taking advantage of Dalit women. Yeshwantrao Patil, the Patil of Hanoor, also sexually abuses Masamai, as a result she gives birth to eight children. After considering her mother's state, Sharan remarks, "What sort of life had 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" (59). Masamai is vulnerable to sexual abuse. She persists in spite of her damage and men treat her as if she were a sexual object. Her love for her children is the reason she lives. She must look after her nine children. Life has presented her with obstacles that she must overcome in order to move on from her sufferings. Masamai and Santamai find it grim to survive in the patriarchal society but they patiently and firmly accept their struggle as their fate.

Conclusion

Masamai's life demonstrates how the patriarchal system destroys impoverished Dalit households and oppresses defenceless Dalit women. She experiences sexual exploitation, economic hardship, and caste prejudice, like most of the Dalit women in her society. Due to their lack of literacy, low income, numerous mouths to feed, and the fact that they are the only provider for their family, they are forced to live in abject poverty and starvation. These women were ridiculed, raped, and insulted, but their right to life was unaffected. Despite the several occasions that society crushes Masamai and Santamai, they manage to survive. They define themselves in the modern world of patriarchal rule and view their fight as a challenge. They accept and successfully fight against the challenges life puts before them. They triumph all the troubles of their life and emerges as a victorious woman.

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