



## FINDING TEXTUAL SPACE: STUDY OF TWO DALIT AUTOBIOGRAPHIES ; THE OUTCASTE BY LIMBALE AND MOTHER FOREST BY C.K. JANU

**SOYA JOSEPH**

Lecturer in English  
ICA Colleg,  
Thozhiyur,Thrissur



**SOYA JOSEPH**

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### ABSTRACT

Dalit autobiographies are a recent entrant in what is a long standing debate on the right to represent the Dalit community socially, politically and textually. This paper explicates two Dalit autobiographies- Outcaste by Sharan Kumar Limbale and Mother Forest by C K Janu- the former by a male Marathi Dalit and the latter by a Malayali Dalit woman. Being from two cultural contexts, they identify certain cultural and social difference. But they put forward certain seminal and vital similarities which can be identified with cultural position of Dalits in India

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### INTRODUCTION

Dalit is a term that is today more accurately applicable to those sections of the Indian society whose liminality is a result of a caste-based hierarchical order that inscribes them as perennially polluted and thus untouchable. Dalits have found occasional mention in the cultural and literary traditions of the country, but largely from the 'high' caste dimension. Dalit autobiographies seek to rearrange the traditional paradigms by shifting the right of representation to the Dalits themselves. However, the non-conformism of these autobiographies cannot be understood in its entirety without the knowledge of the representational orthodoxy of the 'upper' castes.

Dalit autobiographies occupy a vital position in the repertoire of Dalit literature. This can partly be attributed to the debate over the agency of representation of the Dalits in media and literature. Dalit autobiographies have an advantage over fiction and poetry in the sense that one should have lived the life of a Dalit to represent it through the medium of discourse. However, several Dalit critics have extended this argument to include the entire body of Dalit literature, and have asked for the whole-sale exclusion of Dalit-centered writings of non-Dalit authors from the body of Dalit literature.

Dalit literature is necessarily a literature of revolt and inalienable from a commitment to a structural transformation of the society. Its polemics

and irreverence towards the established Hindu beliefs, texts and deities is a part of its efforts to present an alternative episteme, a system of knowledge and beliefs that had been brutally suppressed and erased from the public memory. The relationship of Dalit literature with the regional literature replicates the conflicted relationship of Dalits with the mainstream Indian society. Dalit literature, like the Dalits themselves, is a part, and yet apart from the establishment. In order to preserve its radicalism, it must resist the temptation of endorsing totalizing practices like essentialism and normative identities. It must also guard against the tendency of being insistent on the exclusive authority of a subaltern voice, as there are no innate and enduring categories of liminality. Only thus will Dalit literature succeed in its vision of revolutionizing society and establishing an egalitarian social and cultural system.

#### Identifying Self

"A life is not mine but it is a slavery imposed upon me". This negative attitude is the central idea of Sharankumar Limbale's autobiography *The Outcaste*. Sharankumar was identified as illegitimate by his community, because he was born of a sexual relationship outside marriage, between an upper caste man and a Dalit woman. The usage of the word illegitimate is not specific to the circumstances of Sharankumar's birth alone, but also encapsulates a significant facet of the Dalit's situation of marginality. That makes him Akkarmashi: *The Outcaste*.

Due to Limbale's fractured identity, the narrator suffered his entire life was the fact that he had no identity, no home or place of belonging. He could not get certain papers signed for school because he could not properly identify his caste by his mother or father, and they would not accept his grandmother as his guardian because she lived with a Muslim. When it came time for marriage, he could not even get married to an outcaste girl because his blood was not pure; he was not wanted anywhere. The clouds of doubt and identity hung over this poor outcaste boy his entire life. However, in several acts of incredible strength and bravery, he did not allow these socially constructed walls to stop him from getting an education and eventually publishing his

story. He came to realize the depth of division caused by the conflict between Hindus and Muslims and chose a separate path for him in what he considered to be the warm embrace of Buddhism.

Akkarmashi describes in detail the exploitation of Dalit women by the 'upper' castes as well as by the Dalits themselves. Limbale states that every village Patil had a Dalit woman as a mistress, and that beauty is a curse for the women of the community. He also mentions the existence of the practice of devoting daughters as temple dancers in the Dalit society that sexually exploit women in the name of religion. Interestingly, Akkarmashi, among all other autobiographies by men in this study, is most sympathetic to and aware of the problems facing women as a result of gender inequality. Being an illegitimate child, Limbale's mother's sexuality crosses domestic spaces. Limbale, as a man who challenges patriarchy by the virtue of the very conditions of his birth, is ideally situated to demystify the agents of sexism that victimize women. He too has an ambivalent relationship with his community: while, as a man, he is allowed to pursue educational and professional career without any ado on the part of the community, yet his illegitimacy disrupts his smooth integration with his society.

Limbale has to bear the barbs of social insult each time the endorsement of the father's name is required for official purposes (as in school), and when he was searching for a bride for himself. Thus, it would not be inaccurate to claim that the individual's relation with the community is not a homogenous terrain. Like all aspects of social life, our integration with the society too is determined by our location in the network of communal relationships. Although the writers shy away from including the negative aspects of their culture, yet they refuse to accept the line of argument that claims that the Dalit cultural milieu provides extremely low motivation and incentives for achievements and accomplishments. Alcoholism in the community is a perennial problem, and it often leads to quarrel. Other factor that hails the Dalits as untrustworthy and incapable of progress in the eyes of the 'upper' castes is the popularly held opinion of them as thieves. In Akkarmashi, Limbale declares of

his sister Nagi that she was a born thief who would steal food from the stalls in the market. Then he goes on to defend her actions by stating that one is not born a thief, but is driven to it by poverty and discriminatory social structures that safeguard the crook and punish the deprived. He also informs the reader of a relative of his who would steal poultry from unsuspecting farmers and poultry owners, or even resort to poisoning animals for their meat on the unavailability of food. Thieving becomes the weapon of the subaltern for survival, and not an example of the moral depravity of the much-maligned Dalit culture.

There is a minimal or restricted participation in the primary institutions of the society as a condition of marginality, and even a cursory survey of Dalit autobiographies reveal that most Dalits have an extremely limited role to play either in the development of, or in the utilization of the social structures. Dalit leaders were discouraged from participation in the political life of the country through threats and coercion, particularly if the contest was against a 'high' caste opponent.

Just as in politics, the Dalits were excluded from the educational system as well. Writers devote considerable space towards describing their and other Dalit students' struggles for literacy. The problem is compounded by unsympathetic and prejudiced school teachers and head masters who prefer to regard the Dalit students as free labourers than scholars, and devise ways to keep them out of the classroom. Limbale used to regularly smear the classroom walls with cow-dung. The teachers would also use the Dalit students' mistakes as excuses to indulge in caste-centered abuse. Limbale was denounced several times by their teachers as pork and beefeater, irrespective of the fact that many 'upper' caste men too clandestinely ate pork in the cover of the night, and practiced caste discrimination in the light of the day. In addition, Moon had to withdraw from a Sanskrit class and join woodworking as no other Dalit student opted for it. In what was once very overt, and has more recently become merely covert, Dalits were and are still being discouraged from acquiring scholarship in Sanskrit. This discouragement of the Dalits from Sanskrit scholarship places them in a minority, and

the consequent disproportion constitutes a major cause for perpetuating the numerical and scholarly asymmetry between the 'high' and the 'low' castes in Sanskrit studies. The Dalit writers also find it enormously difficult to publish their articles and literary works in mainstream magazines and journals as they are the bastions of the 'upper' castes.

These autobiographies belie the common perception that the presence of the factors commonly seen as a part of Dalit culture is detrimental to the success of the Dalits in society. Although poverty does indeed inhibit the social advancement of the Dalits, this poverty is evidently a result of the prejudices of the caste system that forbids the Dalits from holding land or any other form of property, and reduces them to the level of landless, wage labourers.

Limbale's autobiography ends by reiterating what he has tried to present as the overwhelming experience of his and his community's life — their status as outcasts. The conclusion brings to the reader's notice the various kinds of factors that determine a person's position as an outcaste, including religion, caste, gender and illegitimate birth. 'Outcaste' becomes a metaphor for the numerous kinds of exclusions that disrupt an individual's harmonious integration with the society, and Limbale's continual omission from the social privileges is powerfully reflected in the name that he gives to his new-born son. He chooses to call his son Anaarya, which means lowborn and of mean social stature. Although it is possible to read this gesture as a rebellion against the hegemonic value system by a celebration and assertion of one's difference, yet the name remains a potent symbol of liminality and dispossession.

Writing an autobiography is a political activity. Writing an autobiography by a Dalit and woman is indeed a more political revolution. The marginalized groups, especially Dalit try to identify their self in a textual space through self-narratives have much relevant in the cultural context of Kerala. One of such self-narrative is Mother Forest by C K Janu. Although Dalit autobiographies celebrate the community spirit, yet there is an important difference in the women's autobiographical account

of their experiences with the larger community and the men's. The dialectic of the individual and the society inclines more in favour of men, and women define their subjectivity considerably in opposition to the community spirit and values. This comparative aloofness of women from the community is primary due to the ideological and structural nature of the society, which is overwhelmingly patriarchal. Dalit women have frequently been called 'thrice Dalits' as they are exploited by the forces of caste, class and gender. Women have to struggle more than the men in their families to study and develop a career. Marriage is considered central to a woman's life.

Janu was born in Thrissilery in Wyanad district of the southern Indian state of Kerala. She belongs to the Adiya tribe, one among the thirty five tribe clans in Kerala which together constitute 3.5 lakh of population. She shares reminiscences about her childhood, how it is deeply associated with nature, forest and soil and then how the interference and transactions of the civilized society have changed everything, and how the Zemindari system makes the real owners of land mere dependents, what is the role of political parties in their life, why they are attracted towards it and the ways through which the party operates and marginalizes them within. She does not have an initial and the Literacy Programme Coordinator has given the initials at the age of eighteen. The marriage and such practices have less importance in their community and she has got her man at the age of eighteen, but she does not want to be a married woman and left him.

She believes in the strong bond among women in her community and she shares the hope that only through them the changes will occur. She reiterates the need for the land and their inevitable relation with the land throughout the text, but the main drawback of the text is that it fails to establish it reasonably. It seems to give importance to romantic notions and the wild imaginations rather than the real problems faced by an Adivasi.

The book also gives a wonderful account of forest life. Janu talks about the beetles on gingli flowers, their blowing into the bamboo reeds to make music. The tribesmen are one with the jungle,

they associate with it, thus their life and livelihood, i.e., agriculture, cannot harm the jungle. They care for the jungle, for they understand the life inside it. For example, Janu says, when trapped in front of an elephant, one should always run downhill as the elephant's tongue (trunk) hangs out and it cannot run. Through her struggle, Janu talks about their fight against civil society, which doesn't understand the tribesmen's need to work closer to their land. The life, culture and laws of civil society are different from the tribesmen's, but the latter have a balanced life, which is threatened when their land is snatched from them.

Janu says civil society may find the life of the tribesmen different, but they were once one with nature. Janu's cry is a voice to leave the tribesmen alone with nature. The huts where they lived initially were not convenient, but these lay in the lap of nature from which the little ones would learn lessons. "Time and seasons could be told from the chirping of certain birds. The months could be counted when the leaves fell from the trees. From the darkening clouds descending on the hilltops and forests, we could gauge the direction of the wind."

Janu speaks about the policies of government towards Adivasis and non-implementation of distribution of land. She says: "At Wayanad, the Mission had identified only the land meant for adivasi projects, and there was no effort to identify other lands. The panel for rehabilitation of adivasis had suggested to the Planning Board that adivasi land be included in Schedule Five of the Constitution, without which tribal lands cannot be protected. Nothing has been done in this regard so far."

#### **CONCLUSION**

Though the autobiographies are from two contexts, they possess certain similarities and dissimilarities. Kerala, being a literate state the cultural humiliation towards Dalits is mild than illiterate caste ridden Madhyapradesh. But the economic conditions of both are pathetic. In The Outcaste, the narrator-protagonist is someone more inferior to a Dalit. He is an untouchable among the untouchables. His identity is that of an "Akkarmashi" and this is what the narrator tries to present through the many episodes of his life. Dalit Literature

abounds in genuine descriptions of untouchability and poverty in an uncouth day-to-day spoken language. The insurmountable challenge faced by Limbale and other Dalits as young children is hunger. The writer has dwelt on this basic need of man over and over again all throughout the book, philosophizing on the evident need of food. Dalits are being exploited physically, mentally and socially in the caste ridden society. Dalit Intellectuals operate their modes of resistance creatively in Dalit literature, the most powerful being Dalit autobiographies.

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