Countering the Hegemony: A Study of Sharankumar Limbale’s

The Outcaste

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Abstract

The ‘mainstream’ culture in India evolved around Savarna discourses nourished by the caste ideology. Caste ideologies were successfully manipulated to establish Brahminic hegemony and dalit voices were relegated as the ‘other’. Sharankumar Limbale’s autobiography The Outcaste critiques the hegemonic caste system that legitimizes exploitations of the Mahars of Maharashtra. It records the author’s assertion from an illegitimate child to an established writer with dalit consciousnesses. This article, in the light of Gramscian thoughts, focuses on
Limblae’s registration of protest and projection of alternative socio-cultural life of the Mahars as dalit cultural strategy of resistance and subversion of the ‘mainstream’ culture.

Keywords: Dalit, Hegemony, Brahminism, Exploitation, Subaltern

Sharankumar Limbale’s autobiography The Outcaste critiques the hegemonic caste system that legitimizes exploitations of the Mahars of Maharashtra. It records the author’s assertion from an illegitimate child to an established writer as a journey from ‘negative consciousness’ to a fully grown ‘dalit consciousness’. This paper focuses on Limblae’s registration of protest and projection of socio-cultural life of the Mahars from the Gramscian point of view to understand the dalit cultural strategy of resistance and subversion of the ‘mainstream’ culture.

Sharankumar Limbale’s (1st June, 1956) autobiography Akkarmashi (1984), written in Marathi, was translated into English by Santosh Bhoomkar in 2003 and was published by the Oxford University Press with the title The Outcaste. Limbale was born as an illegitimate son of a high caste Patil and a poor, untouchable mother. The Outcaste, that records Limbale’s miserable life of an untouchable, half-caste, and impoverished man, is a testimonio of community struggles in general. It reflects on the conditions of the Mahars about half a century back and at the same time gives a true and realistic picture of the darker side of the Indian society.

Gramscian concept of ‘subalternity’ denotes the subordination of a group or groups of people by other group or groups. Gramsci’s maintains in The Prison Notebook:

A class is dominant in two ways, i.e. ‘leading’ and ‘dominant’. It leads the classes which are its allies, and dominates those which are its enemies…there can and must be a ‘political hegemony’ even before the attainment of government power, and one should not count solely on the power and material force which such a position gives in order to exercise political leadership or hegemony. (55)
Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony argues that consent of the ruled is achieved by the dominant group by the spread of ideologies-beliefs, assumptions, and values through social institutions such as schools, churches, courts, and the media etc. He observes in *The Prison Notebooks Volume 2*, “A popular belief often has the same strength of a material force and, as such, it is very significant” (20). The Gramscian concept of cultural hegemony gets a religious ratification in the ideology of caste system in India. In Indian context the subjugation and enslavement of the untouchables have been justified through the theory of *Karma*, the precepts of Hindu religion which has been accepted by the subjugated untouchables for centuries as the natural processes of divine retribution. The ‘consent of the ruled’ or what Gramsci terms ‘hegemony’ was earned through the ritualization of caste ideology. Economical, physical and cultural exploitations of the dalit-subalterns were naturalized through the mechanism of caste ideology. Gramscian prescription to fight subalternity is ‘progressive acquisition of awareness of one’s historical identity’, i.e. ‘the spirit of cleavage’.

Dalit literature in Maharashtra emerged as a protest against the ‘mainstream’ literature. Limbale observes in the book *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature*, “Ancient and modern Martahi literatures do not portray the actual life and struggle of the Marathi people: rather, they reflect the influence of the erotic and romantic aspects of Sanskrit and English literatures” (26). Quest for identity has been one of the primary objectives in dalit literatures. Laura R. Brueck observes in this regard: “Since its origin as a modern form of social resistance literature in Maharashtra in the 1970s, Dalit literature has been principally concerned with community identity formation” (151).

Limbale’s autobiography portrays his pathetic situation of not having an identity, a home or place of belonging. High caste people looked upon his community as untouchables, while his own community humiliated him by calling him ‘akkarmashi’. Limbale felt like
hiding his identity like a patch of leprosy. He admits, “I was a split and lost personality as far as town, language, mother and father, caste, and religion are concerned” (6). However, the autobiography ends with his assertion and registers his strong protest and struggle in resisting the stigmatizing identity of a bastard and low caste Mahar imposed and appropriated by the Hindu scriptures.

Limbale’s use selection of the title ‘akkarmashi’, meaning ‘bastard’ or ‘illegitimate child’ is very symbolic of his plight. The author recollects his childhood days of grinding poverty as a dalit living in the Maharwada. The condition was such that people of his caste were forced steal, beg, sort grain from dung, fetch dead animals and eat them in order to appease their hunger. The narrator cites multiple incidents of people suffering from hunger, never found in Indian literature before. The author’s eating discarded peels of bananas collected from the market ground project is one of the true pictures of dalit sufferings. Limbale’s mother Masami’s comment, “Leftover food is nectar” (Limbale 3), and the author’s use of unfamiliar imagery, “My stomach was like a way to the graveyard that continuously swallows the dead” (2), appear unprecedented and bitter truth of dalit predicament.

Dalits- subaltern- are victims of upper caste hegemony that naturalizes their economic exploitations. Rajni Kothari observes in the introduction of the book Caste in Indian Politics, “When villagers were more or less locked into their traditional occupations, those from the lower status groups were entangled in material relationship of dependency upon prosperous castes of higher castes” (XXVI). The Mahars were victims of economic exploitations by the upper castes. Their displacement from the centre the village appears a strategy to deprive them from material facilities and drive them to menial professions. They were bound with a contract named ‘padewarki’, or ‘baluta’, meaning work on yearly contract and getting grains with minimum cash as return. Ithal Kamble, who worked in Hanmant Limbale’s farm, was
given a poor wage of seven or eight hundred rupees a year. Santamai swept the village street, went around begging and often massaged the bulging stomachs of pregnant woman to earn her livelihood. Whenever an animal died in the village, its owner came to the ‘Maharwada’, to ask to remove the carcass of the animal with the only payment of the hide.

Domination and exploitation of the dalits is a bitter truth of Indian society. Professor Kancha Ilaiah observes:

Through the ages, it (the Brahminism) has done this by two methods: (i). by creating a consent system which it maintains through various images of Gods and Goddesses, of whom have been coopted from the social base that it wanted to exploit; and (ii) when such consent failed or lost its grip on the masses, it took recourse to violence. (Qtd. in Pathak)

Limbale’s mother Masamai was a victim of dirty village politics. To be born beautiful among the Mahars is a curse. Both Chandamai and Masamai were exploited sexually by the village Patils. Hanmanth Limbale plotted with the ‘Caste Council’ to separate Masami from her husband her suckling babies and ultimately forced her to be his keep. Bound by the cobweb of caste ideology Masami’s husband Ithal Kamble couldn’t protect his wife. The author reflects, “The upper caste men in every village had made whores of the wives of Dalit from labourers and Masamai was one among them” (37). Driving one out from work was very common. When Ram became the Sarpanch, he started taking decisions against the dalits. He removed Dada from his work and appointed his own people instead. After losing his job, dada became alcoholic and abusive.

The superiority of the upper castes established by the institution of caste was did face chalange due to the working of hegemony. The Mahars accepted their oppression as inevitability of fate and learnt to internalize their victimization. They lived as turmoil of the society and were hardly conscious of their rights. The author himself once received rebuke
from his family members for protesting Patil’s son’s sexual liaison with Negi, his sister. The victimization of dalit women in the hands of Patils was accepted as legitimate and normal. Girls from dalit Mahar families were often offered to the service of the temple. Such girls were known as Devdasi, which means maid servant of God. Devdasis were often exposed to sexual exploitations of the preachers. The children born to the Devdasis were considered impure and were compelled to live on begging. Limbale’s registration of protest in the autobiography, “What sort of life had she been living, mortgaging herself to one owner to another and being used as a commodity? Her lot has been nothing but the tyranny of sex” (59), is indicative of the asserting dalit consciousness in him.

Untouchability goes hand in hand with the dalits. Limbale comments in his book of dalit literary criticism, Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature, “Dalit literature is born from the womb of untouchability” (29). Untouchability was thoroughly practiced in the village Limbale was brought up. Caste people never dined with the Mahars or exchanged food. The Mahars were not allowed to draw water from public wells lest they ‘pollute’ water. Whenever a dalit happens to come to cities to rent a room, one faces uncomfortable questions regarding his caste identity by the house owner. Limbale recollects: “I went to Latur. I faced the problem of finding a house in a new town and my caste followed me like an enemy. Latur was such a big place with huge buildings, houses and bungalows, but I was turned away wherever I went” (106). However, the Mahars, except the author and his friend never protested against this. They used to drink tea in separate cups allotted for them or stood calm in the queue of the dalits while collecting water.

Anand Teltumbde observes, “In the life world of Dalits that embedded their exploitation, oppression and humiliation, there was no shock and therefore no stories until the last century that awakened them from stupor” (XIX). Emergence of ‘lower-caste’ intellectuals, the universalisation of communication, the proliferation in number of English
and vernacular newspapers, journals, books, magazines, erosion of mainstream cultural tradition paved the way for emancipation of dalit voices. Education has been one of the main reasons responsible this. Ambedkar observed:

The education received by the Untouchables in the army…gave them a new vision and a new value, They became conscious of that the low esteem in which they had been held was not an inescapable destiny but was a stigma imposed on their personality by the cunning contrivances of the priest.

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However, the path of education was not easy for them. Limbale’s autobiography portrays the difficulties Mahar students face in the academic institutions. The Headmaster was not ready to admit him in the school. He was beaten several times by the upper-caste students. Teachers neglected him and often abused him with dirty words, “You son of bitch, come on, start writing! You like eating an ox, don’t you?” (4). He remembers the school picnic, whereas upper caste boys played with teachers, the narrator and his dalit friends were busy to play touch and go among themselves. Their coarse food brought from home was hardly enough to save them from hunger and shamefulness.

Gramsci believes that the struggle against the power that perpetuates subalternity needs to be directed against ideological front; hence, the proper strategy is not a frontal attack, but a ‘war of position’ on the terrain of ‘civil society’. In The Prison Notebooks Gramsci emphasizes the resistant nature of the subaltern consciousness. The images, symbols, diction and tone of the subordinated castes spring from their centuries-old experience of exploitation and discrimination. The Outcaste reveals Limbale’s inner trauma as well as the collective voice of the dalits. Socially constructed walls could not to stop Limbale from getting his education and eventually publishing his story. His drinking tea from the cup of the upper castes, getting haircut from the barber reserved only for the upper-castes
and deliberately entering into the temple are some instances of crossing the caste lines. His question to Sobhi, “Your water gets impure if we touch it, if that’s so then why doesn’t this river turn impure? If a human being becomes impure by our mere touch then why didn’t your color change to green or yellow, as it happens when someone is sick or poisoned?” (71), expresses his explicit anger and voice of resistance. His attempt to problematise the existence of God: “What kind of God is this that makes human beings hates each other? If we are all supposed to be the children of God, then why are we considered untouchables? We don’t approve of this God nor this religion or country” (62), parallels the voice of Tatitya Kamle in his fiction Hindu a Novel: “Why do you stay in a religion that does not allow you to enter the temple? Why do you stay in a religion that does acknowledge your humanity? Why do you stay in a religion that that does not allow you even water?” (Limbale 87)

Culture formation is one the various strategies adopted by dalit movements in its tirade against social exclusion. “Among the Dalits, there is a powerful movement for cultural autonomy. It reflects their long-standing disenchantment from Brahmanical caste-Hinduism” (Sing 71). Dalit literature tries to critique the Sabarna discourses by representing dalit culture- dialect, food, cloth, ideology, superstitions, customs etc. Zene observes, “Over the years, Dalit authors have performed very much like Gramsci’s ‘integral historian [who] must record, and discover the causes of, the line of development towards integral autonomy, starting from the most primitive phases” (91). Limbale’s autobiography refers to God and Goddess such as Khandoba, Masoba, and Mariaai whom the Mahars worship. Sharankumar remembers, “Every year our village suffered from an epidemic of cholera. We called it Mariai’s wind, believing it to be the curse of the goddess” (46). The author happily reflects on the festival Vitthoba. Dalit culture became impure with time as it in many ways imbibed and imitated the ‘mainstream’ culture. Santamai fasted on Tuesday in the name of the Goddess Ambabai and on Friday for the Goddess Laxmi. A corner her room was dedicated
for the Goddess Ambabai. Dalits often begged alms in the name of the Goddess. Dalit critic Gopal Guru observes:

As the social history of Dalit assertion shows, repeated attempts have been made to subvert the tormentor through imitating the tormentor’s cultural symbols; the subaltern seeks to annoy the master through the imitation of the master’s lifestyle. Imitation denies the dominant an exclusive hold over the cultural power that flows from cultural symbols. Thus, the emergence of negative consciousness is the initial subjective condition needed to challenge the hegemonic class. (95)

The author surfaces the turmoil of his lived experiences in an unfiltered language. The Mahars’ family disputes, anxiety, anger, use of explicit words, drunkenness as well as pictures of the family bonding, simple village life, use dung paste in daily household etc. have been portrayed minutely. The superstitious nature of the Mahars, resulting from illiteracy and poverty gets literary representation. When Masamai gave birth to a newborn baby Chandamai said: “A ghost could follow our footsteps” (Limbale19), and she took many precautions to save the newborn. The Mahars believed in black magic and someone would throw stones at the Maharwada, Santamai used to abuse the stone palter because there was believe that “such abuse afflicts the one who performs black magic” ( Limbale 48).

Many eminent Dalit critics like Baburao Bagul, Arjun Dangle etc. are of the opinion that dalit writers should give up myths and symbols associated with destiny, Hindu gods and goddesses and Hindu culture. They feel that they should make use of new words, myths, and symbols in their literature in tune with their Dalitatva. Dalit writer Om Prakash Valmiki observes, “Karna, Eklavya, Shambuk, Sita have become the symbols of Dalit’s desire to live and protest. The burning conditions of Dalit life have been projected with the help of myths from Ramayana and Mahabharata” (88). Limbale being a well read has employed various myths to bring out dalit alienation, ostracism, and question of identity in an effective manner.
Due to the peculiar circumstances of his birth, he could identify himself with Karna, the deprived and neglected lowborn character of the *Mahabharata*, “I was growing like Karna in the Mahabharata” (Limbale 37). Masami has been depicted as Sita or as unwed mother Kunti. He has employed Buddhist myth in his reference to Mayadevi, Siddhartha’s Mother.

Gramsci observed:

> Revolutions are consciously prepared and made by humans who, having gained a deep awareness of their value and worked hard at cultural transformation, succeed in organizing fellow humans and inculcating in them the same ideas and values so that they can establish a new social order. (Qtd. in Buttigieg 39)

Dalit literature is not simply literature; it is associated with a movement that aims to bring about a socio-cultural revolution in India. Thus, in Limbale’s words, “We are the vanquished. We are fighting another battle against convention. Though we may be defeated in this, there will be yet another battle in which we never surrender” (92), the counter-cultural note of his narrative is strongly underpinned.

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I declare that this research article is original and unpublished work of mine.

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