

Identifying Self with Community in Dalit Autobiography : A Study with Reference to Baby Kamble's Jina Amucha & Sharankumr Limbale's Akkarmashi

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Abstract

This work attempts to show that the Dalit Self -Narrative transcends the limit of the self. Baby Kamble's self – narrative Jina Amucha deals with the problems and sufferings of not only the self but the sufferings of the family, community and society at large. Akkarmashi is Limbale's autobiography which tells us the candid story of his childhood and growth as an undesired person, The agonies of being a single parent child , the life of abject poverty, discrimination and separation are described in great details in this work. This in fact is not any individual life story but the saga of a community. The most memorable element in Limbale's life story is his attitude to women. There are many women characters and not one of them without a serious complication in her life. There are widows, childless women, deserted women, and as the ultimate of all this divine and social injustice. While Dalit men are victims of caste and class oppression, Dalit women find themselves as the victims of double oppression - by the upper caste men as well as by the men of their own community. Limbale presents his own mother who has been cheated again and again, exploited most bluntly in every relationship she strikes, burdened with a roll call of children and their upbringing. Their struggle is, on one hand, for existence and on another to protect them from the hostile social environment. This hostility pervades all spheres - at home as well as outside. The biggest handicap of a Dalit woman is her lack of education. The author however shows remarkable understanding of their suffering. There is no cursing or blaming them in this narrative. There is not even a tone of pity for them in it. He has learnt to accept the plight of life as such. It is this depth of response that makes Limbale's Akkarmashi stand out in the genre of Dalit autobiography.

Key words : Ak karmashi , Baby Kamble Dalit Women, Mahar Community, Self Narrative.

The Self-Narratives of dalits not only demonstrate the ordeal of individual dalit man & woman but depicts the sorrows, sufferings, subjugation and exploitation of dalits at large. The aim of this paper is to explore in detail the merging of self and community in dalit autobiography. For this I have picked Baby Kamble's *Jina Amucha* and Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi*. *Jina Amucha* is probably the first autobiography by a dalit woman not only in Marathi but in any Indian language. It is translated in English by Maya Pandit as *The Prison We Broke*.

The dalit autobiographical narratives never narrate any personal problem which is distinct from his family, community and society at large. Such narratives as M.S. Pandian argues, are "a Shift from the discourse of Causality to the discourse of participation" (Pandian 40). Gopal Guru in the Afterwords of the translation *The Prison We Broke* points out that the autobiographical self is "like the self in the West is not disembodied and is deeply rooted in the mores of the community. This self is partly constituted by the life story and acquires larger meaning only in the context of the narrative of the community. This self is both the individual and collective. This self in the dalit women's autobiographies is historically located and sociologically constituted" (Kamble, 160). Baby Kamble asserts in her interview with Maya Pandit that "I wrote about what my community experienced. The suffering of my people became my own suffering. Their experiences became mine. So I really find it very difficult to think of myself outside my community" (Kamble, ix).. She further tells : for me, the suffering of my community has always been more important than my own individual suffering. I have identified myself completely with my people. And therefore *Jina Amucha* was the autobiography of my entire community, (Kamble, 157). Limble in *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* says in a similar tune. "A unique feature of Dalit literature is its collective aspect. The experience described in Dalit literature is social, hence it is articulated as collective in character. Therefore, even when the experience expressed in Dalit literature is that of an individual, it appears to be that of a group. For this reason, it is alleged that there is no individual in Dalit literature." (Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* Pg 36).

The ignominy and the humiliation which the dalits faced in the society was not any discrete or individual incidence but an organized, collective social and political phenomenon. Though Baby Kamble was well-placed among the Dalits due to her father's earnings, she realized intimately the pain of the women of her community. Her empathy is evident in the way she depicts their ordeals. She understood that dalit women were doubly tortured and exploited first as dalit and second as women.

Kamble criticizes the ways the high-caste Hindus enjoy the whole share of the corn which the dalit women produce with hard works and efforts. At that time they consciously forget of getting polluted by dalit touch: "When the Mahar women labour in the fields, the corn gets wet with their sweat. The same corn goes to make your pure, rich dishes. And you feast them with such evident relish" (Kamble, 56).

At the very outset the writer describes how her father restricted the movement of her mother: "In those days, it was the custom to keep women at home, behind the threshold. My father

had locked up my *aai* in his house, like a bird in a cage My *aai* have felt so oppressed, so suffocated!" (Kamble, 5-6). Kamble poignantly depicts the plight of pregnant dalit women. It is said that giving a birth to a child is the rebirth of the mother and dalit men were unable to provide food to the new mother:

They would lie down, pining for a few morsels while hunger gnawed their insides. Mostly women suffered this fate. labor pains, mishandling by the midwife wounds inflicted by onlookers' nails, ever gnawing hunger, infected wounds with pus oozing out, hot water baths, hot coals, profuse sweating - everything caused the new mother's condition to worsen and she would end up getting a burning fever. (Kamble, 60).

In the beginning of chapter VIII, Kamble delineates the sufferings of little daughter- in-laws of Mahar community. The Mahars treated them like slaves: "The other world had bound us with chains of slavery. But we too were human beings. And we too desired to dominate, to wield power. But who would let us do that? So we made our own arrangements to find slaves-our very own daughter-in-laws!" (Kamble, 87). Further, "The poor girl had to endure the abuses of everybody in the household, including her haughty sister-in-laws and her lousy brother-in-laws" (95). The degradation of these poor, famished lot is complete at the time of lunch:

They were worried whether any food would be left for them at all, stared anxiously at the quickly depleting mixture on the plate. Since they were daughters-in-laws, decorum demanded that they eat only after the children had finished. The poor souls could do nothing but just stare at the plate, licking their lips, hoping against hope that some food remained for them. (Kamble, 27).

The afore-mentioned incidents are some of the glimpses of endless sufferings the dalit women have undergone throughout the ages. It is not the saga of any single woman but the narrative of the whole community of dalit women. This is what Kamble tries to focus in her autobiography. In fact, the experience articulated in Dalit literature is collective in character. Even when individual experience is depicted, the individual actually becomes a representative of an entire community. In lieu of focusing solely on the suffering and empowerment of the Dalit protagonist, true Dalit literature aims at raising consciousness for the liberation of the entire oppressed and deprived Dalit community. From this perspective, Kamble's autobiography is a successful and authentic Dalit narrative.

Sharankumar Limbale's autobiography *Akkarmashi* was published in 1984 and received critical acclaim. It was translated into English as *The Outcaste* by Santosh bhoomkar in the year 1997. In the acknowledgement of the book Limbale says : 'I have put in words the life I have lived as an untouchable... There is a Patil in every village who is also a land owner. He invariably has a whore . I have written this so that readers will learn the woes of the son of a whore.' (Limbale Pg IX). The author was twenty-five years old at the time. Written in a dialect of the Maharas, *Akkarmashi* was considered a path-breaking milestone in dalit autobiographical writing in Marathi. A rather slim volume, it records the agony and struggles

faced by the author, born to a Patil father and a Mahar mother. It also documents the social success achieved by the author on the strength of his hard work and academic achievements as well as the numerous sacrifices made by his mother, grandmother and her live-in partner.

A dalit autobiography, in fact, is a narrative not of the self alone but also of the protagonist's community. Limbale's autobiography comes very close to undermining the notion that a dalit person writes as a spokesperson of his/her community. Limbale, constantly questions the very nature of his identity that has been thrust upon him. Condemned as half-caste (an Akkarmashi) he remains a social outcaste unable to locate his space in either of his parent's community. He observes, 'There is a Patil in every village who is also a landowner. He invariably has a whore...My mother is an untouchable, while my father is a high caste. Mother lives in a hut, father in a mansion. Father is a landlord; mother landless. I am an Akkarmashi...condemned, branded illegitimate. (Limbale Pg-IX)

Unfortunately the author is a bastard of Patils. He revolts against this, loudly questioning the denial of privileges that befit a Patil's son. In the process, he wishes to be accommodated into the very system that has given rise to innumerable Akkarmashis like himself. As Mangalam comments : 'Limbale's autobiography rambles along unharmonious terrain and tone.' (Mangalam, *A Distrribing Tale.*, The Book Review Literary Trust, October 14, 2019.) His portraying of helplessness of poor farm hands is both graphic and gripping: 'People who enjoy high-caste privileges, authority sanctioned by religion, and inherit property have exploited the dalits of this land. The Patils in every village have made whores of the wives of dalit farm laboureres. 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 Patils sexually. Besides survival on the charity of a Patil what else can such a household expect?' But such moments of critical insight are far and few. What is more interesting is a embarrassment which is faces in his early life and schooling :

I went to the sarpanch with seven or eight other boys for his signature on freeship application forms. The village chief signed everyone's form, except mine. I was annoyed. Bhosale guruji arrived at the same time. They talked over the matter for some time. Bhosale guruji tried to convince the sarpanch of the merit of my case and recommended that he sign my form, but to no avail. The sarpanch refused to sign because he was confused about who Masamai's real husband, my father, was. He said, 'I don't approve the name Masamai Hanmanta Limbale.' Obviously he was on the Patil's side and concerned about his prestige. After all, the Patil was a powerful man. Bhosale guruji then proposed my granny's name, 'Santamai Rama Balshankar,' but the sarpanch refused because he knew that my grandmother was living with a Muslim, whose name was Mahmood and whom we called Dada. The sarpanch was in a real fix about how to identify me. But I too was a human being. What else did I have except a human body? But a man is recognized in this world by his religion, caste, or his father. I had neither a father's name, nor any religion, nor a caste. I had no inherited identity at all.

The sarpanch eventually signed my freeship somehow, because of Bhosale guruji. I was annoyed at what had happened. Can everybody guarantee that he is the offspring of the father whose name is added to his name? Has anyone seen who sowed his seed? Has anyone seen the intercourse of his parents that resulted in his birth?

When I returned home, Masamai was squatting at the entrance. I started crying the moment I saw her. The humiliation I had faced was intolerable. My mother tried to console me with kisses. We embraced like two meteors clashing. The next day while submitting my application form, our class teacher asked me, 'Don't you have a father?' I replied.

'He is dead.' He asked next, 'What about your mother?' I replied, 'She too is dead.' The boys from my village, who knew it wasn't true, stared at me like vultures. The classroom fell dead silent like the calm after a big storm. But I was swinging like a snapped kite in the storm that went on tossing in my mind.

I used to ask my mother about my father: What was his name? Where did he live? What did he do? Why didn't he come to me? What was my relationship with Kaka? What was the relationship between Kaka and my mother? Who was Nagi and Nirmi's father? What was my relationship with Nagi and Nirmi? And so on.

Instead of answering me, my mother clammed up like Kunti. At such moments I felt a kinship with Karna. I felt we were brothers. Many times I felt I was Karna myself because, like him, I too was drifting with the flow of the river. My mother asked me to tell my teacher that she was the Patil's whore. This made me very happy and I thought that the next day I would certainly tell my teacher. I didn't know the meaning of the word 'whore', I thought it meant 'father'. But what a venomous word it is. It implies an impure, foul vagina. Who would willingly enter the gigantic gate of that vagina? (Limbale, Pg.59-60).

Unlike other dalit autobiographies where documentation evokes strong anger in the protagonist and the readers alike. Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi* is a disturbing tale. G. N. Devy in the introduction rightly says :

Limbale's autobiography is a frighteningly candid story of his childhood and growth as an undesired person; and in its power to disturb it compares well with Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* or Jean Genet's *A Thief's Journal*. It has the same intensity of narration that raises the ultimate question in social ethics, namely, 'What at all is morality? The autobiography concludes with these questions: 'Why has this complex of moral establishment been created at all? Who created morality and immorality? Why? If my birth and life are being branded as immoral, what morality do I follow?' The author knows that there are no answers to these questions. Limbale's autobiography is an intense narrative, pointing to the futility of these questions and the agony and frustration in searching for their answers. To be a single-parent child

may not appear much of a problem to a western reader and even to many Indian readers of this English translation of Limbale's autobiography. Yet, for the community to which he belongs and within the semirural context where he spent his childhood, this same condition can make life excruciating. The agony was compounded in his case by the abject poverty which forced and those who brought him up to spend a lifetime thinking of nothing beyond the ways of getting half a plate of gruel for a meal. It is a shattering experience to see in Limbale's graphic depiction of the want and woe, a simply forgiveness, compassion and detachment. In the life narrative, one finds that whereas the narrator should be boiling with anger. he is meditating on the very fundamental issues related to social relationships and ethics. it is this detachment, and the ability to turn away from the personal that makes Akkarmashi a disturbing life narrative. (Limbale Pg. XXV).

If dalit men are victims of caste and class oppression, Dalit women find themselves as the victims of double oppression - by the upper caste men as well as by the men of their own community, which is also evident in Kamble's novel. Limbale presents his own mother who has been cheated again and again, exploited most bluntly in every relationship she strikes, burdened with a roll call of children and their upbringing. Their struggle is, on one hand, for existence and on another to protect them from the hostile social environment. This hostility pervades all spheres - at home as well as outside. The biggest handicap of a Dalit woman is her lack of education. .Navya Chandra writes : 'The author however shows remarkable understanding of the dalit women's suffering. There is no cursing or blaming them in this narrative. There is not even a tone of pity for them in it. He has learnt to accept the plight of life as such. It is this depth of response that makes Limbale's Akkarmashi stand out in the genre of dalit autobiography'. (Chandran Navya, *Understanding the Dali Psyche: Reading of Sjarankumar Limbale's Akkasrmash*, IJDR, March, 2016.)

Limable slams the hypocrisy of the Indian upper caste men who for their own convenience follow caste rules but would never mind in indulging in carnal pleasures by exploiting the dignity of the lower caste women. His critique of the Indian caste system is worth quoting: People who enjoy high caste privileges, authority sanctioned by religion, and inherit property, have exploited the dalits of this land. The Patils in every village have made whores of the wives of Dalit farm labourers. A poor Dalit girl on attaining puberty has invariable been the victim of their lust. There is a whole breed born to adulterous Patils. There are Dalit families that survive by pleasing the Patils sexually. The whole village considers such a house as the house of the Path's whore. Even the children bom to them from her husband are considered the children of Patil. Besides survival on charity of a Patil what 'else can such a household expect ?. It was rather a strange practice in Maharashtra that dalit girls, immediately after attaining puberty, were kept by landlords as concubines to satisfy then lust. Itt was almost a customary service for all dalit families to sacrifice their daughters to the upper caste Patils. In return, these women were given shelter and a few provisions to live. The children bom to them remained half- caste or Akkarmashi as Sharan calls them in the novel. The entire novel focuses on the identity crisis faced by a half caste man, who happens to be an illegitimate child born to a Mahar mother and Maratha father.

Sharankumar Limbale's autobiography was penned at the age of 25 depicts the meta-realistic accounts of his life as a dalit in particular and which can be extended to the life of any individual of Mahar community in general. While constructing 'self through his narrative, he goes to the root of the Indian caste society questioning its very foundations which are based on religious order. In the text, the narrator moves back and forth between the individual T and the collective 'We'. The experiences of exclusions and ostracizations of both the self and the community are the creative and critical sources used to create 'testimonies of caste based oppression, anti-caste struggles, and resistance'!

A dalit has no personal life of his own but it is dissolved in the engulfing whirlpool of his community. Akkarmashi works as the mouthpiece of the community, it depicts their togetherness in triumphs and tribulations as "the self belongs to the people and people find a voice in the self". The narrator's self reflects his life in particular and the life of "the community in general. A dalit has no personal life of his own but is dissolved in the engulfing whirlpool of his community. As discussed already this is equally true for Kamble *Jina Amucha*.

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