

It will not be a cliché to state that Sharankumar Limbale's Dalit narratives, unlike many such narratives of identity-induced social exclusion, are effortlessly and unapologetically focused upon the interstitial psycho-social spaces and hyphenated existences that the contingencies of human identities perpetually struggle with. They inhabit some unacknowledged ontological spaces of the Dalit predicament that both caste Hindu gaze and hasty anti-caste activism often overlook. This was the hallmark of his autobiographical narrative *Akkarmashi*, and it continues, perhaps even more tellingly, in this recently published anthology of short stories—*The Dalit Brahmin*. The title, as the eponymous story substantiates, reveals the social fissures that constitute the caste societies we live in and canvasses 'a slice of life' that explodes the uninhabitable hyphenated spaces Dalits are forced to inhabit in caste-ridden Hindu social order. The stories in this collection are almost always about how caste is inextricably linked with multifarious and fluid registers of social existences—gender, sexuality, class mobility, social animosity, resentment, bitterness among close friends and contemporary politics, especially the politics of Hindutva. In other words, *Dalit Brahmin* offers a wide spectrum of the Dalit predicament where it is left open beyond the insularity of reductive perceptions and the banality of suffering that is usually on sell in the neoliberal guilt play of the urban English-educated caste Hindu-dominated civil society. In 'Ganapati Bappa Morya!', the protagonist, in order to cement his much valued upward social mobility, befriends caste Hindus like Mr Joshi and starts staying in a neighbourhood of upper-caste Hindus, despite the usual taunts of his Ambedkarite friends and an unending series of everyday humiliations his family has to endure due to the casteist behaviour of their *savarna* neighbours. The celebration of Ganesh Puja marks the apotheosis of such affronts on the protagonist's self-esteem and forces him to be initially enraged and eventually despaired. Unlike the tragic outcomes of hyphenated tenuous existences of upwardly mobile Dalits in stories like 'The Harijan Master' and 'The Steps', the protagonist of 'Ganapati Bappa Morya' takes refuge in a Dalit friend's enraged Ambedkarite activism. Dinesh Kamble, this friend of the protagonist, is more like Limbale's alter ego who inhabits and confronts all those registers of scorn, humiliation and resentment that the Dalit predicament consists of. While many of these characters in the aforementioned stories represent the hyphenated relationship Dalits share, despite their trajectories of upward socio-political mobility, there are narratives that are underscored by an emphatic fervour of Ambedkarite anti-caste ethos. Like Dinesh Kamble, the protagonist of 'The Mausoleum', Kotwal Sabne represents such Ambedkarite rage against the Hindu religious legitimization of social inequalities based on caste. Despite Sabne's brutal murder by the goons appointed by caste Hindu custodians of the village and the posthumous deification of Sabne that is reminiscent of the Dalit Saint Chokhamela, Sabne's experience of self-esteem ignited by Ambedkarite anti-caste ideology shows possibilities of spectral lives in many more Sabnes of posterity. This insurrectionary spirit encapsulated in Ambedkar's own preferred word *uchhced*, as the Marathi equivalent of 'annihilation' in Aishwary Kumar's reading (2015),

finds its reverberations in characters like Trimukh in 'Sunflower'. Trimukh's father gets incarcerated after murdering the political rival of the village headman Shivaji Patil. This assassination executed by Trimukh's father is then 'rewarded' by Patil in the form of food, clothes and other material needs provided to his family. After his mother's death, Trimukh is advised by Patil to go to Benares and perform the last rituals and rites of his deceased mother on the *ghats* of Benares. But, Trimukh's journey to Benares is interrupted by a Buddhist–Ambedkarite festival at Bhimnagar, and Trimukh turns to Ambedkarite anti-Hindu, anti-caste rituals to be performed on the eve of the inauguration of Ambedkar's statue in Bhimnagar village. While Limbale's stories are mostly marked by the brutal everyday violence that Dalit upward mobility often meets with, there are such moments of a resilient, insurrectionary force that is contained in Ambedkar's messianic presence in the everyday lives of India's Dalits. To that extent, Limbale's narrators or characters like Dinesh Kamble and Trimukh do not simply let us be engulfed by representations of the frustrated status of a Dalit-Brahmin, nor are they contained in some simple liberal discomfort with the politico-religious forces of Hindutva. These are narratives that are often scornful, ironic and brutal critiques of the sheer banalities and paradoxes of Hindutva forces, like the narrative of 'Cow Slaughter', as well as phenomenological critiques of practised everyday Hinduism. In 'Vows', the ritual of *dhadka*, performed in front of the temple of Mahisubai or Mahishasuri, brings about the death of Parshya's wife and his son as the narrative serves as a metonymy of how quotidian Hindu religiosity, more often than not, sustains itself by sacrificing the 'beasts of burden'—Mahars, Mangs and other Dalit castes. Their ritual impurities are, as it were, purged and then transformed into a sublime, transcendental dimension that is then inserted into the vicious moral circle of the Hindu social order. As is evident in these stories, the immense resilience of caste manifests its spectral presences even amidst the apparent 'carnavalesque' mood wherein social hierarchies, Bakhtin (2009) suggests, are supposedly suspended. It seems that even the Hindu social order's everyday practices of religiosity cannot entirely escape the apparitions of caste. In many of these stories, Dalit suffering is ideologically camouflaged as it gets eulogized into the logic of morally valued suffering on the path to some nebulous and yet propelling enough metaphysical emancipation. The everyday sufferings of Dalits as they perform these bloody rituals are to be compensated by their spiritual elevation in the after lives of Hindu *janmatarbad* or after-birth theory.

Limbale's Women

Anand Teltumbde, in his introduction to *The Dalit Brahmin*, makes an accusatory statement about Limbale's 'one-sided' depiction of the upper-caste female characters in the stories in this collection. According to Teltumbde, most of the caste Hindu women portrayed in Limbale's stories in *The Dalit Brahmin* are hard hearted, indifferent and even cruel and insensitive to the emotional plights of the first-person Dalit male narrators with whom they are amorously involved. Teltumbde, then, contrasts these depictions with Limbale's treatment of the Dalit women in stories like 'Soni' or 'Ratna' in order to show how Dalit women have been treated with much greater quantum of narrative empathy. However, such binaries look far more convenient, than the narrative complexities with which Limbale weaves into the texture of his stories. 'Madhavi', 'Sunita' and 'Sujata' are certainly narratives replete with the final silence on the part of the caste Hindu women who were in amorous relationships with the Dalit first-person narrators. While one has to agree with Teltumbde that these moments could be better portrayed by staying more with the narrative focus on the caste riots that these stories otherwise depict and how these women were rendered helpless amidst such inter-caste violence, one must also discern that the narrators in these stories also focus on the subtleties of Dalit masculinity that negotiate with these

forbidden love relationships with upper-caste women. In another story 'Rajani' that depicts the Dalit narrator's relationship with an upper-caste girl Rajani, the relationship is overshadowed by the tensions emerging out of the inter-caste marriage of his own parents. While his Dalit father continues to participate in Ambedkarite anti-caste politics of the Marathi Dalit Panthers, and there are unbridgeable chasms between his relatives from the maternal and paternal sides, the narrator does not entirely miss out on the complex and often precarious location of an upper-caste woman who follows the patriarchal codes of domesticity even after her marriage to a man placed beneath her in social ritual ranking:

Activists from the Dalit Panthers had come to the house. They wanted a donation from Papa for the march. The activists' features resembled those of my father. But Vinay, Shashi, my mother and I were very different from this crowd. I could well understand their discussions, their questions.

My mother made tea for everybody. In her parents' home these activists (Dalit) would not even gain admission.

Juxtaposing such nuances with Limbale's simultaneous critique of the Ambedkarite politics in Maharashtra reveal how radically quotidian these narratives are. Teltumbde, notwithstanding his criticisms of the recalcitrance of Dalit activism to engage with questions of class differences, does agree that Limbale's narratives also focus on the limitations of Dalit politics in stories like 'The Cobra's Hood' or the futility of Dalit activism in another story 'Sunita'. Teltumbde's observations on Limbale's treatment of women in his stories also seem hasty when we take into account his portrayals of Dalit women like Ratna or Soni. While Teltumbde opines that Limbale's presumably Dalit first-person narrators often assume a self-righteous tone, we must also recognize how his stories are scathingly realistic in cataloguing Dalit men who regularly beat up their women and subject them to psychological, physical, emotional and sexual torment. Just as there are righteous Dalit male voices in some of his stories, there are characters like Soni's husband who epitomize aggressive masculinity. However, these references do not conveniently imply that Dalit masculinity can only be seen through the prism of either a self-righteous tone of a victim of caste violence or through such models of toxic masculinity. While there is a Dalit resentment that often assumes the form of an aggressive, reactionary and less empathetic masculine voice, this has to be underscored by our sensitivity to a shared and yet, tremendously differentiated womanhood that embodied sufferings of Dalit women like Soni or Ratna exhibit, in contrast with their caste Hindu counterparts. If one attempts to have a critique of Dalit masculinity in Limbale's stories, it has to take into account such unavoidable ambiguities that constitute Dalit masculinity.

Stories on Dalit Literature: An Immanent Critique

Sharankumar Limbale's *The Dalit Brahmin* serves as both an example of Dalit literature and an immanent critique of some unexplored and often unacknowledged network of emotions and actions that constitute the politics of canon formation of Dalit writings. The first story 'The Weevil' is a tale of frustrations of an aspiring Dalit writer who looks for aesthetic validation from his professor and eventually learns how his life story based on his own experiences had been hijacked by his apparently benevolent caste Hindu professor in his newly published novel. 'The Weevil' is weaved into a continuous narrative as we move onto the next story 'A Life Lived' and 'Enlightenment'. While Professor Khanolkar is at the receiving end of the Dalit narrator's ire in the first story, the narrator encounters a series of humiliating experiences with many of his Dalit professors who bad-mouth against each other and are shown to be ultimately bowing down in front of Professor Khanolkar's academic hegemony. These professional academics have very little in terms of insights to contribute to the budding Dalit writer in the story, and yet, all of them

pose as the most radical anti-caste activist voices. If the first among these three exposes how *savarna* academic *jajmans* cunningly hijack the ‘authentic’ ‘lived experiences’ of the Dalits in order to create fictional narratives out of them, the second one reveals the infinite ideological contradictions Dalit academic discourse suffers from due to competing claims of Ambedkarite radicalism from various stakeholders. The third story ‘Enlightenment’ is a revelation of the disdainful attitude middle-class liberals show towards the Dalit aesthetic perspectives and sensibilities. Just as Namdeo Dhasal’s poetry is often perceived as unnecessarily and annoyingly garrulous and full of spite, scorn and rage, Dalit literature, in general, is perceived as an unacknowledged contestation of the upper-caste aesthetic, literary and artistic sensibility that constitute the caste Hindu cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2010). Thus, Dalit aesthetic sensibility, about which Sharan Kumar Limbale has so much to say in his pioneering opus, *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature*, is seen as unpalatable for the caste Hindu genteel sensibility that marks the coordinates of *savarna* habitus as distinctively different from the Dalit predicament.

These stories, in depicting the contradictions, limitations of contemporary Dalit politics and activism or in jarringly canvassing the violent impediments posed by caste Hindus, are narratives that are brutally honest. If there is a hallmark of Limbale’s creative oeuvre, then it has to be his enormous creative courage to tell stories about aspects we shy away from. Just as his *Akkarmashi* is not only an indictment of exploitations of Mahars at the hands of the dominant Lingayats but also how Mahars would not recognize him as one of their own, this book remains a scathing critique of those liminal spaces in Dalit identity formation. Because of his own location at a cultural crossroad of identity, Limbale is perhaps best suited among the Indian Dalit authors to better depict such infinite ambiguities and inexhaustible series of oxymoronic existences one is forced to inhabit in a caste society. Such was the brutal honesty with which Babasaheb Ambedkar had introduced his revolutionary anti-caste politics, and Limbale’s narratives are Ambedkarite insofar as they remain unapologetically realistic. It is this that makes this collection a radical weapon in the revolutionary arsenal of Ambedkarite politics that is forever aware of the Brahminical counter-revolutionary possibilities that try to contain the Dalit literary discourse within the hallowed canonized corridors of the literary and academic mainstream at a time when the outside slowly but decidedly moves into the inner precincts of the teaching machines named universities.

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