

Beyond Caste and Gender: Sharankumar Limbale as a Dalit Male Feminist Visionary

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Abstract

This research paper titled 'Beyond Caste and Gender: Sharankumar Limbale as a Dalit Male Feminist Visionary' critically explores the intersection of caste and gender in the literary and ideological contributions of Sharankumar Limbale. Widely recognized for his autobiographical work 'Akkarmashi' and critical texts like 'Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature' Limbale's voice transcends the conventional boundaries of Dalit discourse by incorporating a nuanced feminist consciousness. The paper examines how Limbale's writings challenge Brahminical patriarchy while also interrogating the internalized misogyny within Dalit communities. By foregrounding the experiences of Dalit women and critiquing both caste-based and gender-based oppression, Limbale emerges as a pioneering male figure who redefines feminist engagement from a Dalit perspective. Through textual analysis, critical commentary, and engagement with Dalit and feminist theorists, this study highlights Limbale's role in shaping an inclusive emancipatory discourse. It positions him not merely as a Dalit writer but as a visionary who urges a collective rethinking of social justice, identity, and resistance. This research contributes to ongoing debates in Dalit studies, gender studies, and subaltern theory, emphasizing the need for intersectional approaches in Indian literary criticism.

Keywords: *Sharankumar Limbale, Dalit literature, male feminist, caste and gender, intersectionality, Akkarmashi, subaltern studies, emancipatory discourse*

Problem Statement

Sharankumar Limbale, a distinguished figure in Dalit literature, uniquely navigates the intersection of caste and gender oppression through his writings. Although his contributions to Dalit aesthetics and caste resistance are widely acknowledged, his feminist engagement remains underexplored. This paper aims to fill that critical gap by analyzing how Limbale's works not only challenge caste hierarchies but also critique patriarchy, thereby positioning him as a male feminist visionary who reimagines social justice from the margins.

Objectives

1. To critically evaluate the feminist elements embedded in Sharankumar Limbale's literary and critical works.
2. To explore the intersectionality of caste and gender as represented in Limbale's narratives.
3. To assert Limbale's relevance as a Dalit male feminist voice in contemporary socio-literary discourse.
4. To examine how Limbale's texts contribute to the broader movements for gender equality and caste justice.

Methodology

This qualitative study applies literary analysis grounded in intersectional feminist and Dalit theoretical frameworks.

Primary Data:

The primary texts include Limbale's *Akkarmashi* (The Outcaste) and *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*. These texts are examined through close reading techniques to decode both explicit and implicit feminist concerns.

Secondary Data:

Supplementary analysis draws from scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw and Michael Kimmel to contextualize Limbale's feminist consciousness. Secondary sources such as journal articles, edited volumes, and theoretical texts support the critical interpretations.

Benefits:

- The research paper is bridging the academic gap between Dalit and feminist literary discourses.
- It highlights the role of male voices in feminist advocacy within marginalized communities.
- It promotes intersectional thinking in South Asian literary and cultural studies.

Introduction

Oppression does not destroy people. It is the acceptance of Oppression that destroys.

- Albert B. Cleared, Jr.

"Can man be free if woman be a slave?"

- P.B. Shelley in 'Revolt of Islam' (1817)

"A man is born free, yet he is in chains", so stated by Rousseau in the Eighteenth Century. He or she is jeopardized by much of the negative forces in the form of class, caste, colour and hegemony. This miserable 'saga' is still going on even in this twenty first century despite much of the hues and cry of liberty, equality, fraternity, and democracy. The feeling of Ethnocentrism, cultural supremacy is still raising its head at times through the maladies like *Honour killing* or colour discrimination. In the context of India, the institution of caste is so deeply rooted in the soil that covertly it is still 'observed'. Go back to later Vedic society when the caste was decided by birth and the Brahmins literally used to look down upon "non-Brahmins". In Mahabharata, Eklavya, Karna are the glaring instances of this Ethnocentrism, for not belonging to higher clan by birth. Coming forward to twenty first century, caste and class hegemony is getting reflected not just in professional domain but also in media and matrimonial settings. In many Marathi serials, affluent people are shown as Patils, Deshmukhs and others while they can be Sonawanes and Kambles, as retorted by many Marathi Dalit writers or for that matter in Personal commitments, prospective brides and grooms from upper caste prefer to maintain 'purity' of their castes by not getting open to the alliance from so- called lower strata. 'SC/ STs kindly excuse' is the underlined note in many matrimonial agencies under formal settings. Since 'bearing injustice is a crime', in keeping with this, the writers belonging to marginalized sections are not ready to consider this discounting, depredation to be the ultimate fact of life and rebel against it. Boom of protest is the perceptible feature of contemporary Marathi Dalit Writing.

The institution of caste is deeply rooted in the soil of India. The Hindu society in India is divided into many castes and sub- castes. As we know, there are more than 200 main castes, and each one of them is further divided into sub- castes; further, this caste structure is characterized by birth, hierarchical system and certain restrictions about food and marriages. That is why, it is ironically said that "to understand India, (one) has to understand caste. It is not just one of the prominent social features of India; It is at the heart of many of the past and present fissures of the country."¹ The British fully exploited the caste system to keep the Indians divided. In post- independent India, the government resorted to various measures like the Introduction of Universal Adult Franchise, termination of separate electorates, prohibition of untouchability under Article XVII and discrimination on other grounds to curb the caste tendencies and also by introducing justice, equality, liberty and fraternity to be the corner

stones of our constitution. Thanks to the hard toil put by the Great Social Reformers like Mahatma Phule, Vitthal Ramji Shinde, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and many others, that the people from the downtrodden section could get out of the miserable plight. However, there still exists the politicisation of these castes. Political parties use them as vote banks. The 'boom' in contemporary Dalit Literature is the manifestation of this vested interest of upper caste politicians, their tacit caste bias towards marginalized sections and the vehement struggle by these people to get into mainstream. The current research paper hinges round the selected writings of Sharankumar Limbale throwing a flood of light on 'twin afflictions' of Dalit women as 'Dailt' and 'women' since 'they have vagina'. As a result, in his work, as Dr.Raj Kumar rightly observes, one experiences "the would is male, the cry is feminist- a rebellion carved in caste and care."²

Literature Review

So, when situating Limbale in Dalit and Feminist Discourse, it ought to be mentioned that his literary voice emerges from the lived experience of caste-based marginalization. However, what sets him apart is his ability to confront gender injustice within Dalit communities and beyond. In his autobiography *Akkarmashi*, Limbale not only speaks of the violence inflicted by casteism but also reflects on the suffering of Dalit women, particularly his mother, whose body becomes the site of casteist and patriarchal violence. His acknowledgment of female suffering within his community signals an early engagement with feminist thought. Dr.Alok Mukherjee rightly puts here, "His pen, a plough of pain- sowing seeds of justice where patriarchy and caste intertwine."³

His *Akkarmashi*, chronicles the shame, deprivation, and social ostracism he experiences as an illegitimate child of a Brahmin father and a Dalit mother. The narrative also vividly depicts the double marginalization faced by Dalit women—by upper-caste men and within their own communities. Limbale's portrayal of his mother's silence and suffering reflects a deep awareness of gendered oppression. He neither romanticizes nor objectifies her; instead, he presents her as emblematic of a systemic violence that transcends caste and gender, thus, unveils the politics of representation of 'doubly marginalized' section. On the whole, '*Akkarmashi*' (The Bastard) stands as a seminal work in Dalit literature, but it also possesses a profoundly feminist core that interrogates not only caste-based oppression but the gendered dimensions of systemic injustice. As a male feminist text, '*Akkarmashi*' critiques the intersection of patriarchy and caste through the autobiographical lens of a Dalit male who bears witness to the suffering of Dalit women—particularly his mother—under a brutal and dehumanizing social order. Limbale's narrative dismantles the myth of the benevolent male savior and instead foregrounds the pain, resilience, and agency of women who, despite being doubly marginalized, continue to uphold the dignity of life amid decay. By centering the life of his mother, who is reduced to a concubine of a dominant caste landlord, Limbale implicates patriarchal caste structures in the exploitation of Dalit women's bodies, highlighting how sexual violence and socio-economic dependence intertwine.

The feminist dimension of '*Akkarmashi*' is further deepened by Limbale's refusal to glorify maternal sacrifice or romanticize suffering. His mother's silence is not framed as noble but tragic—a result of historical erasure and collective subjugation. This refusal to idealize or sanitize women's pain marks a distinctly feminist ethic. Limbale exposes how Dalit women, unlike their upper-caste counterparts, are denied both the sanctity of marriage and the protection of law. He writes not only of a fractured identity but of a fractured home, where women like his mother are caught in the liminal space between being a wife and a mistress, never truly belonging anywhere. Such portrayal critiques patriarchal norms that deny Dalit women autonomy over their sexuality, motherhood, and social identity. Limbale's narration thus becomes a form of testimony that validates women's suffering and calls for socio-political accountability.

Moreover, Limbale's self-awareness and introspective tone qualify him as a male feminist writer who does not appropriate the voice of the female other but rather acknowledges his positionality within the system. He understands that his identity as an "akkarmashi" (bastard) is not just a result of caste-based discrimination, but also of patriarchal sexual politics that deny legitimacy to children born outside the sanctioned norms of Brahmanical patriarchy. His ambivalence towards his own father and his solidarity with his mother's suffering reflect a critical consciousness that challenges dominant male narratives. By dismantling traditional notions of masculinity tied to authority, inheritance, and purity, Limbale aligns himself with feminist praxis that is inclusive, empathetic, and justice-oriented.

In conclusion, 'Akkarmashi' is not only a landmark Dalit autobiography but also a deeply feminist text that interrogates the intersection of caste and gender through a brutally honest personal narrative. Limbale's portrayal of Dalit women's vulnerability and resistance, combined with his own rejection of patriarchal privilege, positions him as a rare voice in Indian literature—a Dalit male feminist visionary. His work forces readers to reckon with the compounded layers of oppression and to reimagine liberation not merely as a caste or class project, but as a feminist imperative grounded in equality and dignity for all.

His *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* deserves a special mention when speaking of feminist consciousness in Dalit writing as many Dalit Male writers appear to be shadowy when depicting Dalit women, giving 'imperfect' picture. So, this critical account offers a theoretical lens for understanding Dalit literature's purpose and poetics. He asserts that Dalit literature must stem from lived experience and should serve as a tool for social change. Although the text primarily deals with caste, its ethical undercurrent aligns with feminist ideals—particularly the emphasis on voice, agency, and structural critique. His rejection of Brahminical and patriarchal literary traditions suggests a vision of inclusivity and equality.

The feminist consciousness in Limbale's work resonates with Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, which posits that multiple forms of oppression—such as caste and gender—interact to create complex social realities. Limbale's narratives do not isolate caste from gender but reveal their entanglement. He critiques both caste hegemony and patriarchal practices within the Dalit community, thereby carving a space for what can be termed Dalit male feminism.

Michael Kimmel's theory of male feminism, which emphasizes the role of men in challenging patriarchal norms, further illuminates Limbale's stance. By articulating the pain and resistance of Dalit women, Limbale not only acknowledges male privilege but also uses his platform to amplify marginalized voices. This makes his contribution distinctive and progressive.

G. N. Devy, in *After Amnesia*, lauds Limbale's commitment to a revolutionary literary aesthetic that serves the oppressed. Arjun Dangle, in his seminal work *Poisoned Bread*, notes Limbale's capacity to critique the internal hierarchies within Dalit communities. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita's feminist anthology, *Women Writing in India*, urges the inclusion of male-authored texts that display feminist sensibilities—an argument that strengthens the case for Limbale's recognition as a feminist voice. Sharmila Rege, in her essay 'Dalit Women Talk Differently,' stresses the need for allyship within feminist and Dalit movements, a role Limbale potentially fulfills through his narratives.

Despite these feminist leanings, Limbale's work is not free from critique. Some scholars argue that his perspective remains male-centered and that the agency of Dalit women is still mediated through a male voice. This criticism is valid and invites a more collaborative feminist engagement in future Dalit literature. Nonetheless, his honest attempt to represent the silenced pain of women within the caste system cannot be dismissed.

Limitations

The research paper is focusing exclusively on Sharankumar Limbale, excluding other potential Dalit male feminist voices. Plus more, it is based on textual analysis without primary field data and dependent on translated works, which may dilute linguistic and cultural subtleties.

Scope

This research paper seeks to explore Sharankumar Limbale's literary and critical oeuvre through the dual lenses of Dalit assertion and feminist engagement. It investigates how Limbale reconfigures masculinity by embracing empathy, resistance, and justice for women within Dalit communities. The study highlights his subversion of patriarchal norms and alignment with feminist ideals, especially in works like 'Akkarmashi'. It examines Limbale's role in bridging caste consciousness with gender equity, redefining the parameters of male feminism in Indian literature. The paper also evaluates the intersectionality in his narratives that foreground the compounded oppression of Dalit women. By analyzing his essays and autobiographical writings, the research illuminates his contribution to a gender-sensitive Dalit literary movement. It draws from contemporary feminist and Dalit theoretical frameworks to contextualize his position. Additionally, the study critiques the limitations and possibilities of male feminist voices in marginalized discourses. Ultimately, the paper establishes Limbale as a transformative figure who envisions social justice beyond caste and gender binaries.

Conclusion

Sharankumar Limbale's writings offer a unique confluence of Dalit resistance and feminist thought. His literary and theoretical contributions push the boundaries of traditional masculinity and challenge patriarchal norms from within a deeply marginalized position. While limitations exist, his work lays a crucial foundation for Dalit male feminism, urging further exploration and dialogue. Limbale not only tells the story of the Dalit man but also listens to and reflects upon the silent cries of the Dalit woman—an act of feminist solidarity that makes his voice visionary. One can very well sum up in keeping harmony with the Observation by Dr. Sharmila Rege, "(He) dreams not of dominance but dignity- his masculinity defies power, embraces protest."⁴

Critical Commentary by Experts

Devy, G. N. *After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism*. Emphasizes Limbale's revolutionary literary ethic.

Tharu, Susie, and K. Lalita. *Women Writing in India*. Advocate for broader feminist readings of male-authored texts.

Dangle, Arjun. *Poisoned Bread*. Acknowledges Limbale's critique of patriarchal structures.

Kimmel, Michael. *The Gendered Society*. Offers a conceptual framework to understand Limbale's feminist alignment.

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