

AN INTERFACE WITH SHARAN KUMAR LIMBALE

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Sharankumar Limbale is one of the most acquainting face of contemporary Dalit writing. He is a well known Marathi Dalit writer, a critic, a historian, an activist, an academician and the regional director of Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University for Pune region. He has authored about forty books including his autobiography *Akkarmashi (The Outcaste)* which has been translated into a number of languages. He has also written poetry, short stories and most importantly a critical work on Dalit aesthetics -*Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*. This interview aims to focus on his views about the growth and evolution of Dalits and their literature.

Q. Who according to you is ‘Dalit’?

A. Whoever is exploited and oppressed in the name of caste, class and creed is Dalit whether it is Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, Dalit women or any other underdog of the society. Dalits do not belong to one nation or one culture only, they are found everywhere in different forms. They are relegated to the periphery by the dominant forces of the society and remain excluded from the mainstream culture.

Q. Who is a Dalit writer, and what do you think about Dalit literature or how do you define it?

A. One who is Dalit by birth and writes with Dalit consciousness is a Dalit writer. He writes about the Dalit predicament. He speaks about the atrocities being inflicted upon them by the power structures of the society and thus becomes a voice for a whole section of the society which has been silent for centuries. Dalit literature aims to bring a positive change in the society for those who have always been deprived even of their very human existence. By generalizing his own experiences he reveals the tortures of a whole community. The essential elements which determine the basic characteristics of Dalit literature are- a literature about the Dalits, by the Dalits and an inseparable Dalit consciousness running throughout it.

Q. The journey of Dalit literature has been very difficult and varied. Would you trace its evolution?

A. In the beginning phase of the Dalit movement when a few Dalits started documenting their unfortunate lives, their writings were severely criticized and rejected on the ground of being abusive and vulgar. The upper caste intellectuals of the society found them grotesque and refused to consider these writings as a part of literature at all. We were never entitled to education. They had always put us under their shoes but after the emergence of Babasaheb, a

few of us managed an access to education which gave us a new consciousness and a sense of dignity. We started questioning our social system and finally rejected it. But such reaction of us was totally intolerable for the upper caste people of the society and they began to dissuade the people from reading our literature by floating a misconception that Dalit literature was anti-social and anti religious. They tagged our writings as gutter literature- a literature of slums which spoke about the ugly experiences of the ugly people. They alleged Dalit writers of using a language and style which was crude and coarse, totally unsuitable to literary purposes. They denied the literary worth of Dalit literature and found it deviating from the norms of an established canon of literature. Moreover they prejudiced that the revolting nature of Dalit literature would create a turbulence and anarchy in the society while we were only depicting the pain and agonies of our lives to make rest of the world aware of our miseries because there was a need for it. We noticed that the non-Dalit writers never focused on the problems of the Dalits in their writings. They always presented the Dalit characters as the underdogs of the society who did not possess any identity of their own. That was what which made us feel that we need to pen down our actual position in the society. We proved that Dalit literature was not a gutter literature, it had human values and human rights in its centre, the pain and pangs of a deprived section of the society. Since the upper caste hegemonic literature was unable to portray the accurate picture of the Dalits and didn't have our questions, our anguish, and our experiences, we formed our own separate literature which was later recognized as Dalit literature. It was a historical beginning. The upper caste left no stone unturned to discourage us but we baffled their efforts. We struggled a lot to establish Dalit literature as a separate canon of writing and after many controversies regarding its objectives and functions, Dalit literature came into existence.

Q. You have lived an era of Dalit movement. What are the basic differences that you notice between its past and present?

A. The basic difference is that of the education and awareness. Earlier education was limited to the territory of the upper caste and most of the literature being written then belonged to them only. They were writing to cater the taste of a particular class of readers. Even the literature was hegemonic having no place for a Dalit who was only a mass of ignorance for them. The upper caste literature has its own subjects, its own interests and its own lives to discuss.

But gradually due to the efforts of Babasaheb, education was made available to the Dalits. People came to realize the importance of education and now there is a whole new literate generation of Dalits which knows what is right and what is wrong for them. They are knowledgeable and enlightened. They can differentiate between what is being taught to them and what should be taught to them. They want to explore their literature. They are curious to read the books which offer them the account of their own history. They are aware of their rights and have their own perceptions.

Q. Dalit literature, today, enjoys a unique place and position. Even the non-Dalit intellectuals are interested in exploring the themes of Dalit literature. What would you say on this?

A. Since Dalit literature is getting popular day by day, a number of books are being published everyday. A big section of literate population wants to read it and publication houses are also getting a wide readership.

Even as a part of academic, Dalit literature has much to offer and if a non-Dalit scholar is also willing to work on it, it is just because there are fresh themes and subjects in Dalit literature which are worth discussing. Previous literature holds no more charm for him because the themes and topics there are repetitive. However it may be difficult for a non- Dalit scholar to explore and understand a literature that speaks against a whole system, a system which was established by his own ancestors. This literature questions his own culture, beliefs and even his gods and goddesses. He may find it challenging to work on such a literature which makes him stand against his own people. But if he studies this literature with an unbiased approach and goes through the history of Dalits, he may have a sense of guilt in his heart for what his ancestors did to the others. This feeling may add up some new dimensions to academic studies and it may also help to fill the gap between the dominant and the dominated so I think that any new approach should be welcomed even though it comes from the dominant class. Both Dalits and non Dalit scholars have their own perception behind their studies of Dalit literature but their ideologies should be given equal importance as we do not believe in making discriminations in the field of literature. Everybody's view is valuable and may open up some new horizons of thinking.

Q. It is said that a Dalit writer writes out of his experience while a Non-Dalit out of his observation. What is your opinion about it and what would be your statement for a non-Dalit writer?

A. We welcome non-Dalit writers sketching the lives of the Dalits but it should be real and accurate. They must write with Dalit consciousness because it was this consciousness which gave birth to Dalit literature. It lies in the very core of Dalit literature. It is not only in the case of non-Dalit writers, the same applies on Dalit writers too.

Unfortunately in most of the writings done by the upper caste, a tendency has been noticed that Dalit characters never rise to the height of a hero, he always remains a degraded soul and never emerges as a central figure. A non-Dalit can sympathies with him but cannot glorify him or make him a hero with all his imperfections.

Apart from it a non-Dalit writer writes out of his observation and imagination. He has never been to the slums; he has never experienced the humiliation of being a Dalit. He has never seen the bleakness or their lives while a Dalit writer always bases his writing on his personal experience which makes his work more authentic. Whenever a Dalit will write about his experiences, he will be able to describe them in his own language he will not have to make efforts to depict his pain in his writing, it will come out naturally. There would be no affectation because that humiliation, that insult, that feeling of non-existence and those indignities are fixed in his blood which flows in his whole body. He is filled with that thing from head to toe.

Q. What would you say about Dalit aesthetics? Do you think that the parameters to analyze a Dalit text should be different from those applied to the mainstream literature?

A. Of course, the aesthetic parameters for Dalit literature should be different from the mainstream literature because both of these have their own distinct purposes of writing. The mainstream writer would create his literature with a view to entertain his reader. It is read to derive pleasure out of it. The sense of beauty and pleasure lies at its centre whereas the Dalit literature has its own social and literary worth. A Dalit writer always tries to achieve a sense of freedom in his writing and for a Dalit reader this sense of freedom replaces the idea of beauty

and pleasure. The reader as well as the writer wants a liberal social system and this is what forms the basic objective of Dalit literature. Mainstream literature advocates the continuation of an unequal and unjust society. It justifies its own religious values and concepts of gods and goddesses. It cannot deliver justice to us. It does not show the ugly realities of the society. It is very shallow and has no depth in it. It supports inequality. There is no similarity between us. We have different fashions, different ideologies, different languages, different eating habits, different residential places and different castes and this difference is very old. So Dalit literature must have its own critique on its aesthetic and that should be framed by the Dalit critics only. The upper caste literary dictatorship should not be tolerated anymore. Therefore we cannot allow our literature to be analyzed by the parameters of such a literature which functions differently and is written only to please the interests of a particular class and has beauty and pleasure as its main objectives.

Q. Which question should be more enhanced in Dalit literature ‘Art for Art’s sake’ or ‘Art for Life’s sake’ and why?

A. I would go with ‘Art for Life’s sake’ rather Art for social cause because Dalit literature has its own social responsibilities. The ideology of Art for Art’s sake aims to amuse the senses but to expect the same from Dalit literature is utter foolishness. The reader should be inspired and assured after reading a Dalit text whether it is *Joothan*, *Akkarmashi* or *Karukku*. He should feel enlightened and motivated towards the demolition of the unjust social practices. The objective of freedom is far bigger than the objective of achieving aesthetics. Freedom is a revolutionary idea. People have laid their lives to gain freedom but nobody would do the same for the sake of aesthetic pleasure. The desire of liberty may lead to a revolutionary change in our society.

Q. Do you find any similarity between Black literature and Dalit literature?

A. Yes, I do find many similarities between Black literature and Dalit literature because the Blacks in America also fought for the justice, equality and brotherhood like us. Their literature also has a sense of rebellion and rejection as Dalit literature has in it. Their literature reflects the mental trauma and physical torments they went through due to the wide spread of racial discrimination in America. They too demand a social and individual identity as Dalit do in India.

It is not about one country or one place rather whoever is oppressed irrespective of his caste, class, creed and nationality is writing to have an equal social status, a sense of belongingness to his own land. All the periphery literatures are creating a turmoil among the established territories of intellectuals. This fourth world literature is working towards a universal justice for every marginalized of the world.

Q. Dalit literature, too, like the mainstream literature, has been the constituency of men only, please comment.

A. It is true that the first generation of Dalit writings totally belongs to Dalit men because earlier Dalit women did not have any access to education, only a few women who came from a privileged background were literate.

But now the picture is different. People are ready to change their minds. Even the slum-dwellers are sending their girls to school. More number of women are getting educated but their presence at the literary platform is very less because out of a lakh women only 10 or 12 women

are able to think intellectually. Many of them follow the non-academic professions where they are not much concerned about these issues.

But this is the one side of the coin, the another side shows that now there are number of Dalit women who are contributing to Dalit literature. In Maharashtra alone almost hundred Dalit women are engaged in writing. To name a few we can mention- Baby Kamble, Kumud Pawde, Shantabai Kamble, and Urmila Pawar. Apart from Maharashtra there are Dalit women from South India, Gujarat as well as from North India who are writing. Bama is said to be one of the most representative Dalit women writers. So the things are changing and they should be changed. Dalit women will have to share this intellectual struggle with their male counterparts and claim for their rightful position in the society.

Q. What do you say if we state that Dalit woman are doubly marginalized?

A. I do agree that Dalit women have been the victim of double marginalization but it has a concrete reason behind it.

As far as the Dalit patriarchy is concerned, it is same in the Dalit community as it is in the upper castes. Dalit male is very much similar to that of the upper caste male. His mind is also occupied by that typical Hindu patriarchal ideology since it has been there in our society for thousands of years and it is very difficult for him to be completely free from it. Besides, his illiteracy also contributes to his ignorance and never let him understand that woman is not secondary rather an equal to man.

But this issue of double marginalization should not be propagated because the new generation of Dalit men is trying to change its approach towards its women. Like our boys, our girls are also going to the school. If the earlier male generation is unable to accept this change instantly, it is just because that Hindu patriarchal ideology has been ruling his mind for thousands of years though I support the view that he should try to eliminate this thought from his mind otherwise he cannot be considered as an Ambedkarite. He would be very much a follower of Hinduist culture. So first we will have to come out of the impact of the laws and codes established by the upper caste Hindus. We should not let them regulate our minds and this objective can be achieved only by an equal participation of Dalit men and women.

Q. Do you think that the things would ever change in our society? If yes, then what is your vision for it?

A. Change is a gradual process. Nothing can be changed overnight however the things have changed much by now. The acceptance has increased. *Akkarmashi* has been published in a number of languages because people from every corner of the country want to read it. Earlier when I was a student, I was made to sit out of the class but now I roam in the whole country in flights. We are getting the privileges though I agree that there should be more dialogues between us, a realization for them of what is right and what is wrong, realization of human and inhuman treatment and when they will realize this, we can hope for a change. When a Brahmin of India goes abroad, he is also treated the same way because he is not one among them but when he comes back to India, he does not want to learn from his experiences and becomes the same typical upper caste to the underdogs of the society as he was earlier. So this attitude should be changed and he should not forget the pain of exclusion which he had to go through while living abroad and this realization of feeling the pain of others can bring a positive change in the society.