

Between Exclusion and Assertion: Belonging in Limbale's *The Outcaste*

M. Mahalakshmi¹

Research Scholar, Department of English, Erode Arts and Science College, Erode.

Dr. K. M. Kamalakkannan²

Associate Professor and Head, Department of English, Erode Arts and Science College,
Erode.

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Abstract

Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste* (Akkarmashi) is one of the most powerful Dalit autobiographies in modern Indian literature. It explores the experience of illegitimacy, hunger, shame, and marginalization faced by those denied belonging within caste society. Limbale's narrative portrays belonging not as a natural right but as a contested condition, repeatedly revoked by caste ideology. This article examines the dilemma of belonging in *The Outcaste*, analyzing how the autobiography exposes the fault lines of lineage, food, education, and labor. Belonging is represented not as inclusion but as conditional acceptance, which often comes at the cost of dignity.

The narrative suggests that the Dalit subject cannot truly belong within a caste order that is structured to expel and stigmatize him. Instead, Limbale offers assertion, memory, and testimony as ways to reframe belonging on self-determined terms. By combining personal memory with social critique, *The Outcaste* provides a framework for understanding how caste denies legitimacy yet produces powerful voices of resistance. The article argues that Limbale's autobiography remains central to Dalit studies because it documents not only oppression but also the persistent struggle for dignity and recognition, turning personal pain into a collective resource for social transformation.

Keywords: Dalit autobiography; belonging; caste; legitimacy; hunger

Belonging is often imagined as a natural part of human life. It implies being accepted into a family, a community, a nation, or a culture. For Dalits, however, belonging is always contested and fragile. Limbale's *The Outcaste* is a striking text that dramatizes how the Dalit subject struggles to belong to both family and society but is systematically denied this acceptance. The narrative opens with the fact of his illegitimacy, a child born of a Mahar mother and a dominant caste father. From the beginning, his very existence is cast as a violation, a disruption of caste boundaries. He recalls the pain of being forced to carry an identity that is not chosen but imposed:

I am an Akkarmashi, an outcaste. I do not have a father's name. This is my only identity. Every time I am asked to fill out a school form, every time I am forced to write the name of a father who will not claim me, I feel my mother bleeding through my pen. My birth itself is a wound that will not heal. No wall, no house, no community calls me its own. (Limbale 2).

This passage sets the tone for the entire autobiography. The narrator is made to feel like an outsider in every space that promises inclusion. Lineage, which should provide belonging, becomes instead the most visible marker of exclusion. For Limbale, even the bureaucratic act of filling forms becomes a reminder of social rejection. His existence is permanently questioned because belonging, in caste society, is not based on humanity but on bloodlines and purity.

Another central register of belonging in *The Outcaste* is food. Food does not merely sustain life; it signals one's place in the social hierarchy. For the Dalit child, food is rarely nourishment; it is humiliation. The act of eating becomes a ritual of exclusion, for the food itself is stigmatized as leftover, impure, or untouchable. Limbale recalls moments of extreme hunger, when discarded scraps became the only means of survival:

We used to eat the bread thrown at us from a distance, as if we were dogs. Sometimes it was stale, sometimes it was half-burnt, but hunger does not allow questions. Each piece carried not only the taste of grain but the insult of caste. Even in my stomach I could feel the weight of humiliation. Food was never given to us as food; it was given as a reminder that we were less than human. (Limbale 31).

Here the dilemma of belonging becomes visceral. Eating is one of the most basic human needs, but for Dalits it becomes a social spectacle of degradation. To be fed in this

manner is not to belong to a community of eaters but to be tolerated at its margins. Bread becomes both a symbol of survival and of exclusion, forcing the child to internalize his outcast status with every bite.

In these scenes, Limbale shows that belonging cannot be measured merely by physical presence within a society; it is measured by the dignity with which one is permitted to exist. The autobiography insists that food and family, which are meant to provide safety, instead become instruments of rejection. The narrator is both inside and outside part of society but never allowed to belong to it with dignity. Continuing the dilemma of belonging, Limbale shows how education, which should promise mobility, becomes another stage for exclusion. Schools are spaces where children are supposed to find common ground, yet caste seeps into even the chalk and slate. The narrator recalls being marked as different, not only by teachers but also by classmates who treated him as inferior. He writes:

When I tried to sit on the bench, other children moved away. My body was treated as a source of pollution. Teachers too looked at me with suspicion. Even when I studied with all my energy, I was reminded that my mind was not expected to learn. Every book I touched was turned into a mirror of my caste. The classroom, which should be a temple of knowledge, was a battlefield where I was wounded every day. (Limbale 55).

The irony is clear. Education, often celebrated as the path to liberation, is presented here as another mechanism that reminds the Dalit student of his illegitimacy. He is not allowed to belong even in the supposedly universal space of learning. Each lesson becomes another occasion to experience exclusion.

Beyond the classroom, the question of lineage continues to haunt the narrator. Lineage is supposed to give stability, to connect one to a community, but for Limbale it is the very source of instability. Born of a Mahar mother and a high-caste father, he finds himself neither fully accepted by the Dalits nor by the dominant caste. His very body embodies the contradiction of caste society:

My mother's people did not fully accept me, for I carried the blood of the high caste. My father's people despised me, for I carried the blood of the Mahar. In every gathering I was reminded that I belonged nowhere. I was not allowed to forget my body, for it was the evidence of a sin I had not

committed. My lineage was a scar written across my existence. (Limbale 72).

This confession highlights the cruel paradox of caste. Belonging is promised by blood, yet blood is also the mark of exclusion. Limbale becomes a stranger in both worlds, carrying the curse of mixed parentage in a society obsessed with purity. His autobiography exposes how caste society weaponizes bloodlines, producing identities that are impossible to reconcile.

The theme of labor further complicates the dilemma of belonging. Work should provide dignity and place in society, but for Dalits, labor has always been tied to stigma. Limbale recalls his childhood when his community was forced into degrading forms of labor that ensured their dependence and humiliation:

We carried carcasses, we cleaned excreta, we did the work others refused to touch. Each task was accompanied by words of insult. Work did not give us identity; it erased it. When I carried dead animals on my back, I felt I was carrying the weight of centuries of caste on my shoulders. My sweat did not earn respect; it earned only more names of abuse. (Limbale 101).

In this passage, belonging is denied not through exclusion from labor but through enforced participation in it. The very act of working becomes a reminder of caste hierarchy. While other communities celebrate labor as achievement, the Dalit worker is trapped in labor as destiny.

Taken together, these episodes show how the autobiography transforms private pain into social critique. Limbale's *The Outcaste* is not merely the story of one man but the testimony of a community systematically denied belonging. His narrative redefines belonging as a political question rather than a personal one. To belong, for the Dalit subject, is not to be passively accepted but to actively resist exclusion and claim dignity.

In conclusion, *The Outcaste* demonstrates that the dilemma of belonging is central to Dalit existence. Limbale's life illustrates that caste society does not permit Dalits to belong fully not to family, not to community, not to school, not to labor. Yet by narrating this condition, he creates a new form of belonging: belonging through testimony, through literature, through solidarity. His autobiography turns exclusion into assertion, suggesting that true belonging can only emerge when caste itself is dismantled. In this way, *The Outcaste*

continues to speak not only for its author but for generations of Dalits who have lived at the margins, demanding recognition and dignity.

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