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Hunger as Lived Trauma in "Akkarmashi" & "The Prisons We Broke"

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Abstract:
Dalit autobiographies foreground hunger as a central axis of lived trauma, exposing the intersection of caste, poverty, and systemic exclusion. Sharan Kumar Limbale's Akkarmashi (The Outcaste) and Baby Kamble's The Prison We Broke articulate hunger not merely as bodily deprivation but as a profound marker of social humiliation and existential marginalization. Limbale's narrative situates hunger within the fractured identity of illegitimacy, revealing how caste hierarchies inscribe deprivation into the psyche of the individual. Kamble, conversely, emphasizes the collective suffering of Mahar women, portraying hunger as a generational inheritance that intertwines with gendered oppression and domestic subjugation. Read together, these texts demonstrate how hunger functions as both metaphor and material reality, shaping Dalit subjectivity and resistance. This paper argues that hunger in Dalit life writing transcends biological need to become a discourse of memory, identity, and protest, thereby challenging dominant literary canons and foregrounding the embodied violence of caste.

Keywords: Dalit autobiography; hunger; trauma; caste oppression; lived experience; resistance; identity; gendered marginalization

This paper seeks to elucidate the theme of hunger explored in these selected autobiographies, which are not isolated occurrences but rather interconnected strands woven into the fabric of Dalit life. In the selected autobiographies, the theme of hunger also emerges as a central motif, illuminating the multifaceted dimensions of the trauma of Dalit existence.

The first narrative under examination is Limbale's "The Outcaste", written at the age of twenty-five, which offers a moving representation of his own experiences as a Dalit and provides a nuanced examination of the power differentials that exist not only between the upper castes and Dalits but also among Dalits belonging to different sub-castes. (4-5). Limbale's autobiographical narrative suggests that the severe blows received by the author regarding his caste identity dissuade him from submitting to despair and, in its place, uses education as a medium to escape from the confines of caste oppression. Dalit narratives often present candid accounts of untouchability, poverty, and hunger, which stand out as a pervasive issue that Limbale and other Dalit writers faced from childhood. Through The Outcaste, the author repeatedly explores this fundamental human need as a stark reality for Dalit communities in Maharashtra, symbolising the collective economic deprivation of the Mahar community. In the autobiography, the writer reproduces the undeniable requirement of food, stating, "God endowed man with a stomach. So, man began to enjoy eating and drinking" (8). Harsh Mander's investigation in 'Ash in the Belly: India's Unfinished Battle Against Hunger' demonstrates:

The hunger of socially discriminated groups is no doubt produced, reproduced and sustained by the fact that they constitute the large majority of unorganised workers, artisans, slum dwellers, and landless, marginal and small farmers in rain-fed areas. However, the social barriers to their food rights are rarely addressed in public policy and civil society action (Mander 62). Therefore, according to Mander, the ongoing hunger that Dalits experience stems not only from poverty but also from deep-rooted prejudice and social structures. Limbale recounts instances of hunger and deprivation that punctuate his childhood, from scavenging for food scraps to enduring the indignity of hunger; Limbale's narrative lays bare the structural inequalities that perpetuate poverty and deprivation among Dalits.

While narrating his traumatic life experiences, he states that the abject poverty made the children leave school and take on working for the rich and affluent to earn a paltry sum of a hundred rupees a year. Caste discrimination was so prevalent that it entwined with the remembrance of hunger and food. Limbale mentions that even during school picnics, all the lower caste students were made to sit, eat, and play separately and were barred from joining their schoolmates of the upper class. When the upper caste students would finish their meals, the leftovers were collected and given to the lower caste students. Even that seemed very tasty to them and was consumed happily like nectar (Limbale 2-3).

Limbale's autobiography accounts for growing up hungry and never having enough food to feel gratified. G.N. Devy suitably remarked in the introduction of The Outcaste that the autobiography is a "narration of humiliation and hunger" (Devy, xxv). This is evident from the lines…

"I always felt half-fed…our stomachs were as greedy as a beggar's sack" (Limbale 3), "I realised God had made a mistake by endowing man with a stomach" (8), "The teacher asked the high-caste boys and girls to collect the leftovers on a piece of paper and give it to us" (3), and "Hunger is bigger than man. Hunger is more vast than the seven circles of hell. Man is only as big as a bhakari and only as big as his hunger. Hunger is more powerful than man. A single stomach is like the whole earth. Hunger seems no bigger than your open palm, but it can swallow the whole world and let out a belch. There would have been no wars if there was no hunger'' (50).

These lines greatly assist in highlighting the point about trauma literature, which examines the fallout from traumatic experiences, particularly in personal narratives. Through writing about the trauma, the narrator moves towards healing and recovery. Cathy Caruth believed that it was hard to express trauma in words, but various trauma theorists later disagreed with her. While the earlier literary trauma theorists, including Caruth, believed that the sufferer of a traumatic experience might afterwards tend to completely forget it and become incapable of describing it in words, now it is believed that "traumatic amnesia is a myth" (Caruth 334). Various trauma theorists, based on extensive research, believe that "proponents of traumatic amnesia conflate an unwillingness to think about trauma with an inability to do so" (337). While the memory of the event(s) can be altered in the aftermath, it cannot be altogether forgotten. The expressiveness of all the authors in expressing their traumatic narratives, like their continuous, bothering hunger, thus proves the hypothesis of trauma theorists like McNally and Pederson that trauma is certainly a more memorable thing than can be described. The trauma of hunger and poverty caused Dalits to be dependent on dead animals most of the time. Thus, they could not afford to be vegetarians; to satiate their hunger, they had to eat beef.

According to Gopal Guru, non-vegetarian food like beef not only serves as a major source of sustenance for low-caste communities but also a means of resistance as he argues: Dalits use non-vegetarian food, particularly beef, as a potent source to counter the nationalist construction of Indian Thali. The Dalits

have used non-vegetarian food, particularly beef, as a powerful cultural medium to undercut the culturally superior status of the upper castes, which seeks to chain the Dalits to a 'Savage Identity' (15). The author shares in his account the traditional jobs given to Dalits, such as skinning dead animals, hunting, and many more. In his village, whenever a cow died, the Mahars would be called by upper castes to get rid of the same, but they were ridiculed for eating the beef. This aspect is related to the age-old idea of purity and pollution, as during the rule of the Gupta kings, all the subjects were banned from eating beef, although the Dalits continued to eat beef for their sustenance. It was because of their handling and eating of dead cows that they were forced to live on the outskirts. Sharmila Rege, in the book 'Isn't This Plate Indian? Dalit Histories and Memories of Food' verifies:

Eating habits and foods starkly mark the boundaries between the pure and the polluted, as well as between the upper and lower class, male and female, human and God. Conversely, what kinds of food are 'permitted', tolerated' and 'enforced' for consumption and the ways in which they are consumed are structured primarily by the caste, class, and gender inequalities in society (Rege 63).

Her analysis reflects the relationship between caste and food, an essential aspect of understanding the culinary customs within India's Brahminical setup. The enforcement of dietary restrictions highlights the discrimination done to the untouchables based on their caste.

Limbale narrates how hunger commands a Dalit's life. He writes, "For the sake of food, a woman becomes a whore and a man a thief" (8). The impression that Dalits were considered so "polluted" that the people from the upper caste wouldn't touch them while providing them with their leftover food and pouring them water is appalling. Dalits have all along been treated worse than animals. Because of the adverse and hostile factors within the society and the community's economic conditions, the only important life goal for the lower caste people was to strive hard to live each day, hoping that something better would come their way. They struggled hard to get any type of work and didn't hesitate to receive stale and unhygienic food, including leftovers. Limbale's experiences have been the worst. He narrates that his grandmother, at times, used to bring kheer to the house, which was dried in the sun, and lumps were made of it. These lumps were stored, and they used to eat them whenever they were hungry (9).

Of all the menial work that the Dalits were required to perform to earn their day-to-day food, collecting animal dung was also considered a good source of living. There would be dung hunting, and all the dung collected in a basket would be dried into dung cakes, which would be sold to earn a living. The author states, "During the harvest season, the animals used to pass undigested grains of jowar in their dung. His grandmother used to collect the clean grains, dry them up and grind them to make flour" (10). Afterwards, she would make bhakris out of the flour, but eating such bhakris made them realise that they were gulping the dung. The experience was nauseating, but the hunger was greater than that (11).

When animals die, there would be plenty of meat to eat, and if no animal died, they would either steal or poison an animal to quench their hunger. He writes, "But a month in which no animals died passed with great difficulty, like the intercalary month. At such times, an animal was usually poisoned to death" (14). He narrates his trauma connected with hunger by recalling, "Those were the days when we starved. Sometimes we got a little to eat, but most of the time almost nothing. I used to be very hungry and constantly cried for Bhakari" (21). He highlights that he always struggled for food to satisfy his hunger. He never felt satiated. During the hard days, his grandmother had to beg for bakhri to satisfy his hunger, while she used to satisfy her hunger by engulfing water (21). Another very traumatic revelation made by the author in the narration is how the trauma of hunger has been embedded in their psyche that they

regard it as something inscribed in their fate. He describes, "Starvation was written in our lot from the moment of our birth" (21).

One can easily analyse the trauma in Limbale's narrative as the entire narration is full of instances which depict lifelong trauma, particularly that of hunger, which always remained associated with the author's family. So was the case of the entire community. People used to eat banana peels and skins to quench their hunger. Limbale shared another very traumatic experience of consuming the collected banana skin by his sister Vani. He narrates, "Vani had collected banana skins which people had discarded after eating the fruit…I wiped them with my shirt as they were soiled. Then I went to the river, sat in a corner and started eating them" (22). The author used to accompany his grandmother whenever she would go to sweep the village, and while sweeping, they even had to beg. People used to give them leftovers, while others would give them some paisa, onions, chillies, rotten fruits and vegetables. (24)

Limbale narrates in his autobiography that he sometimes used to climb the bus to collect jaggery that had melted on the rooftop. He writes, "The heat had melted the jaggery, and it had spread and stuck to the top. I scraped it off in flakes. There was quite a lot for me to gather. That jaggery would see us through for four days" (45). Once the melted jaggery was collected, they would collect the tea powder thrown by the tea stall owner, which would be dried. He says, "I went there and gathered the discarded tea powder" (45). All these ingredients would be enough to prepare the tea to satisfy the hunger. The story of hunger amongst them was not a new one. They used to catch fish and crabs, smash honeycombs, catch birds, and roast pigs and squirrels to reduce the fire of hunger burning in their stomach. They used to break the toddy palm for its nastier pith than a coconut (65).

On analysing the texts, it appears that the instances of hunger seem to be biased, which has affected Dalit women more than men. As he mentioned, "Suppressing hunger had become a habit with her" (10). The narrative shows that his grandmother would suppress her hunger for her grandchildren's sake and eat dry bhakris; "it was like pushing garbage into a furnace" (11). His mother and sisters always went to bed hungry. Harsh Mander, in this regard, focuses on the discrimination against girls and women; his analysis of gender, social exclusion, and food suggests that "Hunger is produced and reproduced in families that discriminate against girls and women in matters of food and health care: by the discrimination against single women; by the venal practice of untouchability caste and religious discrimination" (Mander 39).

Limbale, while emphasising the importance of hunger in a Dalit's life, narrates that "the filling of the stomach was the main concern for the lower caste people, and it was the stomach which converts women into whore and a man into a criminal. He writes how his mother scolds him for lacking shame and urges him to steal food from the wedding feast for her. In a moment of despair, he contemplates whether he could trade his mother like "...junk in exchange for salted gram" (9). The Mahar used to wait for an invitation whenever there was a wedding in the upper caste people. They will be served at the end, where they can eat their stomach full but are not allowed to take away the food. Once, the author tried to sneak away the food but was badly thrashed. Besides the problem of hunger, the current chapter looks at how Dalits, who are excluded while adhering to superstitions, cope with this issue in their daily lives. In the Introduction of Poisoned Bread, Arjun Dangle posed a very significant question to the Dalit writers – "should they be lost in a false world of feeling or consider man a helpless puppet in the hands of the supernatural?''(xliv). The superstitious beliefs that Dangle questions could lead the writers of the Dalit community towards helplessness and fatalism. The trauma doesn't end here. The feeling of hunger is "not only physical and anthropological but also psychological and narratological" (Hichri 195), which is

apparent in Dalit narratives. As per Asma Hichri, the theme of hunger is related to the experience of deprivation, of course, but also contains within itself patterns of appropriation and "domination devised by their enslavers". This experience of deprivation, therefore, can be extended to the theme of hunger in the Dalit autobiographies.

Similarly, in "The Prisons We Broke", Baby Kamble vividly portrays the trauma linked to the hunger of her community as she poignantly describes the anguish of hunger, recounting instances where her family had to eat leftovers to stave off starvation. She highlights India's urgent need for socio-economic reforms that can address the root causes of hunger and poverty. By amplifying the voices of Dalit women who have been silenced by society, Kamble demands justice and recognition for those who have been marginalised and oppressed. The prevalence of hunger underscores the total neglect and economic exploitation faced by Dalit communities, perpetuating cycles of intergenerational poverty. The theme of hunger serves as a poignant metaphor for the systemic deprivation faced by Dalits in India.

Hunger emerges as a stark reality for Dalit communities in Maharashtra, symbolising the systemic deprivation and economic exploitation they endure. Kamble vividly depicts the harsh realities of poverty, where access to food becomes a daily struggle for survival. She also narrates her childhood experiences of hunger and malnutrition and the pervasive economic exploitation faced by Dalit families. She states that survival was dependent upon the work period. When there was work, there was plenty to eat, but when the work ceased, they had to starve themselves. As she narrates, "But when he was out of work, we had to go without food even" (5).

She describes how they lived in a state of "ever hunger", and only in one month of the whole year, which was considered holy, did they manage to eat well (28). Kamble recounts the eagerness of the people of Maharwada for celebration in Asadh weeks, during which the whole community assembles to offer supplications and food to the deity. However, in the midst of the festivity, the writer encapsulates the bitter truth of the hunger of her people, depicting their excitement while collecting their share of offerings. She records, "People would literally pounce upon their share. Children jumped up and down to snatch food from their parents' hands. Half the food would get over the way home, and the remaining food did not last very long either" (30). While addressing the trauma of hunger and poverty of Tulsa and Kasa, living in front of the author's house, she highlights the severity of their survival and sustenance. She quotes:

Around ten o'clock, they would pick up their baskets and brooms and set off towards the Maratha households, where they cleaned animal pens. They would return in the afternoon with a couple of baskets full of leftover food. These leftovers saw their family through till the next morning, and that's what they ate for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. (46) The author's portrayal of hunger and access to food intensely captures the extreme struggle for the wherewithal experienced by low-caste people. She pens at the close of her work, "Anyway, 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" (157). The dependence on the leftover food from the upper castes for their existence emphasises the acceptance of their downgraded position. The narrator's grandfather is confronted by the chief of the Mahars, Karbhari, who declares in the narration, "Listen, we are born for this work. That's our sacred duty" (67). Kamble also compares the pitiable plight of the Mahars to far worse than the animals, as she mentioned in the narrative, "We were reduced to a condition far worse than that of the bullocks kept in the courtyards of the high castes" (49). As per the narrator, the only difference was that the animal had four legs and they had two. The animals would be given stomach full of grass but they would be given

only the leftovers. They had to fight for the dead animals to have their share of the carcass" (49). Kamble states further how the young daughters-in-law of the household had to wait for everyone else to finish eating their food before they could eat and how pregnant women had to suffer because of not having anything to eat after giving birth, "not even the water leftover from boiling rice to satiate the fire of hunger raging inside the belly of the new mother (57). The writer depicts the helplessness of Mahar women who consider Hunger as destined in their fate. She narrates that these women contemplate that "Goddess Satwai had stamped hunger on our foreheads. How many times did we have to go without food!" (82). Kamble then talks about how the consumption of cactus plants satiated the cravings of her people, particularly the children. She quotes:

"When children could not endure their hunger cramps any longer, the woman would beg her husband, "Listen, the kids are starving. They haven't eaten anything for the last three days. They look like living corpses. For how long can they survive on water? Let's go and collect some cactus pods. At least we can eat that" (82).

Hunger has been so cruel to the community that even during the festive season they would wait for the offerings to be distributed and even at the time of such offerings, the males would be given first and then the daughters-in-law. Very often the children would go to the town to beg with their begging bowls and in turn would get stale food and rotis. This stale food would be brought as booty to their homes where the lady of the house would boil the said food and provide it to everybody.

Based on the autobiographical account of Limable and Baby Kamble, it can be inferred that hunger was not just a physiological experience but also a metaphor for the insatiable deprivation faced by Dalits. One thing that is distinctively observed in the selected Dalit autobiographies is how the life of a Dalit, especially the childhood, is characterised by grave hunger. Hunger, as such, can be branded as one of the major themes that is reflective of Dalit trauma. The autobiographies vividly depict the harsh realities of poverty, where access to food was a daily struggle.

Food and hunger have all along remained one of the ways that the upper castes used to keep the caste system in place. The descriptions made by the authors show that they willingly went through the abuse and humiliation process throughout, as they depended on the generosity of the upper castes for food.

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It thus manifests clearly that the authors have incorporated myths and superstition in their autobiographies to distinguish between their earlier lives and the lives after they became familiarized with the ideas of Ambedkar and other like-minded thinkers including the religion of Buddhism. While writing these autobiographies and re-living their trauma, their community's ridiculous beliefs in superstitions give them immense pain. For instance, Limbale narrates about the time when he realized that casteism was a long tradition that had come down for them from their forefathers.

The situation started changing after B. R. Ambedkar emerged in the socio-political life of India. He was considered to be a messiah for the downtrodden who brought gradually an end to the suffering of millions of people and thus turned beasts into human beings. He awakened the people who had sunk to the level of sub-human. Yet there was resistance to the change as people were not ready to give up their

work, religion and customs which they had been following for generations. They believed that the new culture promoted by Ambedkar would bring them close to Christianity.

Analysing African-American households, the researchers have shown that Food insecurity and hunger "disproportionately affect female-headed households, households with children, and people of colour" (Chilton 116). This analysis can be safely applied to Dalit households also. It is pertinent to mention that the Dalit experience is specific to its time and place, as a result of caste-based oppression in India, but while drawing parallels with the experiences of other oppressed groups, the problems of Dalits can be equated with the global outline of power and oppression.

The thematic exploration of themes like trauma of hunger and poverty, Dalit autobiographies serve as powerful experiences of a marginalised community grappling with intersecting forms of oppression. Through these narratives, authors such as Limbale and Kamble confront societal injustices head-on, demanding recognition, dignity, and social change. As readers engage with these powerful narratives, they are challenged to confront their complicity in perpetuating systems of oppression and to actively work towards a more just and equitable society.

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