

Caste and Violence: A Critical Study of the Selected Short Stories from Sharankumar Limbale's *Dalit Brahmin and Other Stories*

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Abstract

Thomas Paine claimed that "all men are born equal, and with equal natural rights," highlighting the fundamental concept of human equality (43). Nevertheless, this notion clashes with the socio-cultural realities present in Indian society, where individuals are categorized into more than three thousand castes based on their birth, leading to established hierarchies that rank some as superior and others as inferior. The Dalits, among the most disadvantaged, continue to face sufferings in the form of social ostracism, discrimination, humiliation and violence due to their lowest status in the caste hierarchy, which proclaims them impure and inferior. In this light, the present paper critically examines the portrayal of violence in the selected short stories from *Dalit Brahmin and Other Stories* by Sharankumar Limbale. It will use the writings and speeches of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Jyotirao Phule, and Periyar as a theoretical framework to analyse the text.

Keywords: Caste; Violence; Suffering; Dalit; Equality

Introduction

Violence, in its many forms, is a significant societal issue that hinders human progress and the stability of communities, as it causes both physical and mental harm and prevents individuals from reaching their full potential. Johan Galtung characterizes violence as any force or system that obstructs individuals from achieving their complete potential. He expands upon the conventional understanding of violence as solely physical harm and

includes the concept of structural violence, which refers to the systemic disparities that limit access to vital resources such as education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. In his perspective, violence is present when individuals experience conditions that are worse than what could be attained given the available knowledge and resources (168). Caste represents a form of socio-cultural violence that impacts the daily lives of three hundred million Dalits. According to the NCRB (2023) reports, approximately fifty thousand cases of Dalit atrocities are registered under the SC/ST Act, with an incident occurring every eighteen minutes (David). Recently, a Dalit boy named Saksham was brutally killed by an upper-caste family due to an inter-caste marriage (Bhardwaj 2025). The caste system has also tainted educational institutions, where Dalit students encounter discrimination, humiliation, and threats to their lives. As a result, students like Rohit Vemula (a Research Scholar at Hyderabad University), Darshan Solanki (IIT Bombay), and Anil Kumar (IIT Delhi), who were studying at esteemed institutions, took their own lives. Similarly, Dalit women are facing exploitation and harassment from men of higher castes, with their bodies perceived as less human and more susceptible to violence compared to women from upper castes.

Caste is a distinctive aspect of Indian culture that categorizes individuals into approximately three thousand caste groups based on birth, which dictates their social status, profession, and interactions within society. It has undermined the democratic principles of equality, freedom, and brotherhood in Indian life and obstructs social endosmosis and integrity. Caste system can be traced back to the *Purushukta* hymn of the Rigveda, which presents the concept of the divine origin of humans divided into four varnas, originating from different parts of Brahma: the Brahmin (priestly class) from the mouth, the Kshatriya (warrior class) from the arms, the Vaishya (merchant class) from the thighs, and the Shudra (servant class) from the feet. The lawgiver Manu established the Chaturvarna system in his text, *Manusmriti*, which formalized a legal and penal structure rooted in the idea of graded inequality, where the status of each varna is deemed superior to that of the one preceding it by birth. Additionally, individuals labelled as untouchables, referred to as Dalits, were excluded from the Varna hierarchy, suffering inhumane treatment and being denied fundamental human rights. For centuries, they have been forced to endure a marginalized existence characterized by profound

humiliation and exploitation. Consequently, their bodies are marked as stigmatized and polluted, facing systemic exclusion and discrimination as outlined in the laws of *Manusmriti*, which legitimized the discrimination and structural violence against the Dalit community. It articulates that

A Brahmin could extract work from the Sudra paying or without paying. Brahma has created the Sudra only to work for the Brahmins. (8.V.413)

If a Sudra talks ill of a Brahmin his tongue should be cut off. (8.V.270)

“They (Chandalas) must live outside the village; their property must be dogs and donkeys. Their clothes must be the garments of the dead, and they must eat from broken dishes. They should not walk about in villages and towns at night.” (10.V.51)

Similarly, the *Gautama Dharmasutra* in the twelfth chapter proclaims that

Now if he (Shudra) listens intentionally to (a recitation of) the Veda, his ears shall be filled with (molten) tin or lac.

If he recites (Vedic texts), his tongue shall be cut out.

If he remembers them, his body shall be split in twain.

Thus, the law books conferred a divine status upon the Brahmin while pushing Shudras and Ati Shudras to the sidelines, thereby perpetuating structural violence against them. Nonetheless, this notion faced strong opposition from social reformers such as Buddha, Ravidas, Nanak, Kabir, and Chokhamela, who challenged the caste system and condemned the discriminatory practices and traditional beliefs that led to inequality and unjust social conditions. Their ideas became the foundation of the anti-caste movement, which was further advanced by Phule, Periyar, and Dr. Ambedkar, who critically examined the caste system both academically and socially, advocating for the establishment of equality, liberty, and fraternity to eliminate caste from the societal framework. Dr. Ambedkar was successful in obtaining fundamental rights for the Dalits at the Poona Pact. He led the Bahujan movement further and succeeded in getting electoral rights for untouchables in 1932. He was instrumental in the formation of the Indian constitution, ensuring that all individuals receive equal treatment, liberated from discrimination and oppression, and united by a sense of brotherhood, justice, and mutual respect. He envisioned that

An ideal society should be mobile, should be full of channels for conveying a change taking place in one part to other parts. In an ideal society there should be many interesting channels for conveying a change taking place in one part to other parts.

In an ideal society there should be many interests consciously communicated and shared. There should be varied and free points of contact with other modes of association. In other words there must be social endosmosis. This is fraternity, which is only another name for democracy (57).

The anti-caste movement and academic discussions fostered awareness among Dalits regarding their rights, leading to the emergence of an educated class that began to articulate their experiences through literature, reflecting their sufferings, pains, and quest for freedom. In 1972, Raja Dhale, J V Pawar, and Dhasal established the Dalit Panthers, who were not only talented writers but also conveyed their revolutionary perspectives through essays and poetry. This movement brought Dalit literature to the national stage, which confronted the biased perspectives of upper-caste writers. Notable authors like Baby Kamble, Bama, Omprakash Valmiki, Sharankumar Limbale, Baburao Bagul, Meena Kandasamy, Urmila Pawar, and Daya Pawar explored themes of grief and resistance, sharing their stories in protest against oppression. Recently, writers from the Dalit community have started creating short stories that effectively critique Brahmanism and delve into the various dimensions of Dalit existence. Edgar Allan Poe defines the short story as “it is a story that concentrates on a unique or single effect and one in which the totality of effect is the objective. A short story may be concerned with a scene, an episode, an experience, an action, the exhibition of a character or characters, the day’s events, a meeting, a conversation, or a fantasy”. Dalit authors have skilfully utilized this genre to convey and express their truths through storytelling.

Sharankumar Limbale, a notable figure in Dalit literature, released the short story collection *The Dalit Brahmin and Other Stories* in 2018. These narratives explore various aspects of Dalit life, which are often filled with pain and sorrow. They illustrate how the bodies and minds of Dalits are regarded as inferior by others within the social hierarchy, rendering them victims of caste-based violence and oppression. Through his short stories, he portrays a vivid depiction of caste brutality and repression while capturing the everyday experiences of being a Dalit writer and living as a Dalit in society. He sheds light on the entrenched mechanisms of caste through these narratives.

The first story, “The Weevil” discusses the hypocritical upper caste professor Khanolkar, who duped the Dalit student narrator by using his real-life story in his novel. The narrator

shares his harsh life experiences during the discussion, and he wants to publish them in the form of an autobiography. But his hopes turned down when he read lines from Khanolkar's novel "Sir I am the son of a prostitute. She sold her body to pay for my education. We were happy when customers came to her; for that night we had food to eat. Sir, why do only Dalit women become prostitutes?" (4). These lines have been spoken by him during a discussion. He goes directly to Khanolkar's home to ask him why he did this. But he claims these lines as imaginative. It divulges the violence that hinders the Dalit mind from actualizing its full potential. Jyotirao Phule states in this context in his book *Gulamgiri*:

We know perfectly well that the Brahmin will not descend from his self-raised high pedestal and meet his Coonbee and low caste brethren on an equal footing without a struggle. Even the educated Brahmin who knows his exact position and how he has come by it, will not condescend to acknowledge the errors of his forefathers and willingly forego the long cherished false notions of his own superiority (49).

Caste carries the violence for ages with its structure. The baggage of caste is passed from one generation to the next through the dogmatic beliefs written in ancient texts that justify the untouchability and violence against Dalits on moral grounds. The practice of endogamy has also played a great role in sustaining the structure of caste. Its violation causes caste violence in the name of an honour, known as an honour killing, when a Dalit boy falls in love with an upper caste girl, or he gets married to her. Such actions are deemed a breach of caste norms and a threat to the honour of upper-caste individuals. Consequently, countless innocent lives are lost each year as a result. In the story titled "Sunita", the high caste girl is in love with a Dalit boy and their love is discovered. She is tortured mentally and forced to be confined in the room by her family. Her father uproars, "You are ruining our good name. You are walking around with a low-caste boy." Then all the village calls an assembly and decides to teach a lesson so that nobody can cross the caste boundaries again (74). Then all the people attacked the narrator's house and killed his five brothers before his eyes. One Muslim man tried to save his family, but he was also killed. Hence, in the name of caste pride, the whole family is massacred. A practice of Inter-caste marriage could help to build a casteless society, but it is not acceptable to the ethics of upper caste men, which lead to the massacre depicted in the story. Dr. Ambedkar states

that “Caste System is not merely division of labour. It is also a division of labourers” (Vol 1 62).

In another story, “Ganpati Bappa Morya”, Limbale examines the deep-rooted casteism in the minds of caste Hindus who pretend to be humanitarian, yet they are part of the system that enforces the caste violence. The narrator of the story lives in the colony of Brahmins with his family. When Ganpati or Shiva’s festival happens, they feel fear of the Hindutvawadi mob, as he describes his fear “A Satyanarayan puja is in progress in front of the idol of the deity. We can hear the loud chanting of the puja ... There is rap on the door. I open the door; a group of eight to ten young men is standing there to ask for a contribution to the Ganpati puja. If we don’t give it, these young men would tease or harass my daughter” (49). It is not easy to live in the Bamanwada; stones are thrown at his house often, but he couldn’t speak anything against it because it is their only house in the brahmin’s colony. Later, his fear came to realization, during the festival, when his daughter was harassed by some workers of the mandal. His neighbour Samir Joshi, who claims to be his good friend and an anti-caste intellectual, sympathises with him but in the end takes his step back and refuses to speak against his people in the pandal. In this context, Dr. Ambedkar writes that

Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible. A Hindu’s public is his caste. His responsibility is only to his caste. His loyalty is restricted only to his caste. Virtue has become caste-ridden, and morality has become caste-bound. There is no sympathy for the deserving (56).

Caste is an inhuman institution that dehumanizes Dalits and inflicts violence upon them. It has segregated society into thousands of fragments, which has destroyed the feeling of brotherhood among fellow human beings for each other. As in the story “War,” the notion of caste provokes corollary violence on the Mahar family. Bhagwan’s family is doing caste work at the mansion of Deshmukh. Even after getting a job in the Army, her father and sister Bhagirathi still go to do cleaning and other manual work daily. When Bhagwan comes back home after getting injured in the Indo-Pak war, he gets a job in a bank. He goes to the mansion and asks Deshmukh to relieve his father from the caste duties, but he states, “Bhagwan, it was I who paid your expense of your education. When you went into

the army, I paid your train fare. You are young. There is no quarrel between us. I have only one thing to tell you. Don't stop your father's village duties. If Mahar stops doing their work, then who will do it? You must also think of the village" (122). He compelled his family to work despite his economic mobilisation in class status. Eventually, his sister Bhagi becomes pregnant by Deshmukh's son Sadashiv, who refuses to accept her as his wife. To protect his caste's reputation, Deshmukh resolves to eliminate them all. He storms into Bhagwan's home with thugs and sets fire to the huts, resulting in the deaths of Bhagirathi, her father, and Bhagwan's wife being burned alive before his eyes. The impact of caste has severely damaged Indian society.

"Caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire which prevents the Hindus from co-mingling and which has, therefore, to be pulled down. Caste is a notion; it is a state of the mind" (Ambedkar 68). It has created feelings of communal hatred among the people towards the other caste, especially towards the untouchables. In another narrative, "Yeshkar's Bakhri" Limbale highlights the tragic plight of the untouchable communities, who endure lives marked by deprivation and discrimination. One such individual is Nama, assigned the role of nightwatchman; he patrols the area during the night and sleeps during the day. In exchange for his service, the upper caste family provides his household with their leftover meals. One day, a thief stole something from the homes of the caste Hindus, and as a result, Nama was unjustly accused of the theft and severely beaten by the Patel and other upper caste members at the village council. The narrator says, "When night fell, Satva Mahar brought Nama home and left him there. Nama was swollen all over. His mouth was twisted and swollen. His head was wounded. There were bloodied weals all over his arms and legs. Nama was moaning" (113). He was beaten brutally in a way that left him hopeless, and he committed suicide in the end. Suraj Yengde reflects on violence, "As much as caste is cultural, social, political and economic, caste nurturing is also bio-individualistic. It is a performance of individually managed acts conspired to execute violence upon the 'Otherly' body. This is done to produce pain upon beings who are considered lesser" (34).

In the short story "Womb of Darkness", a pregnant Mahar woman is buried in the foundation of the mansion just to perform the Shanti puja by kshatriya men. A Dalit life is so cheap in the eyes of upper caste people. They have created other subhumans in the form of the Dalit body to define their complete self in Indian society. Another instance is in the story "Procession," where an educated youth, Diwakar, raises awareness among

people about Jyotirao Phule and Dr. Ambedkar. On the occasion of Dr. Baba Saheb Ambedkar Jayanti, their celebration has been stopped, and all the Mahars are beaten ruthlessly by a mob of upper caste men. Thus, these stories highlight the socio-cultural violence that happens with Dalits in day-to-day life. Guru Gopal in *Humiliation: Claims and Context* writes on the Dalit body that

The top of the twice born have created in Dalits a social leper or walking carrion which is sociologically dangerous and hence needs to be physically quarantined. The ideology of purity-pollution helped the top of the twice born to transmute the human body as an aesthetic idea into a “filthy reality”. (213)

Conclusion

This paper has critically examined the caste-driven violence depicted in selected narratives from Sharankumar Limbale's anthology, *The Dalit Brahmin and Other Stories*, and reveals how the caste system undermines the ideals of equality and liberty in society and fosters systemic disparities and violence. These stories illustrate the brutal consequences of discrimination and prejudices born out of caste, which is a threat to human dignity and fraternity. Ultimately, Limbale's short stories act as both a documentary source of Dalit pain and a bold demand for the dismantling of Brahminical systems, compelling readers to acknowledge the moral failure of a society that allows such brutality. By emphasizing the Dalit perspective, these stories challenge dominant narratives and imagine routes toward true liberation.

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Caste and Violence: A Critical Study of the selected Short Stories from Sharankumar Limbale's *Dalit Brahmin and Other Stories*

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