

Rethinking the Animal: A Critical Study of Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*

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Abstract

Animal Studies has encompassed every field from the humanities to social sciences but has often missed Dalit literary traditions. In the last few decades, animal studies has expanded its horizons to consider intersections between humans and animals. However, the larger canon of the literary field of animal studies does not acknowledge the depictions of animals in Dalit autobiographies. Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi* (2003) is a pain-narrative about the oppression of Dalits inflicted by the dominant castes. While this 'narrative of pain' depicts a series of painful experiences of untouchability, oppression and discrimination faced by the Dalit community, there is a much more complex narrative at play. This paper is an attempt to understand that this personal account is also about the oppression of nonhuman animals by the hands of humans. The paper deploys critical animal studies to analyse Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi* in order to rethink theorizations of casteism in connection with speciesism. *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi* has been selected because its depictions of human and nonhuman animal relations have not been discerned by critics till date. This paper aims to exhibit the latent embodiments of speciesism within discourses around Dalit identity. By derailing speciesist views, this paper addresses the lacuna in Limbale's autobiography engaging with casteism, inferring that speciesism is a form of oppression instilled within the hierarchical categorizations of human identity.

Keywords: Animal Studies; Caste; Dalit autobiography; Oppression; Speciesism.

Introduction

In recent decades, animal studies has recognised the importance of exploring the intersections between humans and animals. This expansion has led to a deeper understanding of the complex relationships, ethical

considerations, and cultural significance associated with human-animal interactions. In his 1975 book *Animal Liberation*, Peter Singer addresses our ethical obligations to animals and introduces the term “speciesism,” arguing against disregarding animal interests based on species alone. He compares speciesism to racism and sexism, advocating for equal consideration of interests across species.

Tom Regan’s *The Case for Animal Rights* expands on this by emphasising the inherent rights of animals. He considers the use of animals in every situation unethical as it violates the individual rights, diverging from Singer’s utilitarian approach. Cary Wolfe, in his three books *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (2003), *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (2003), and *What is Posthumanism?* (2003), triggered the ‘Animal Turn’ in Posthumanism. Donna Haraway’s *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People and Significant Otherness* (2003) and *When Species Meet* (2008) critique human exceptionalism. Haraway argues that we live in a “cyborg culture” where the binaries of nature/culture and human/nonhuman are continually transgressed. She introduces the concept of animals as “companion species” and explores the non-hierarchical entanglement between humans and animals, proposing that dismantling these binaries reveals a grey area with multiple interpretations.

Intersectionality has become a central analytical approach in exploring how different forms of oppression are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Lisa Kemmerer emphasises that “social justice activism in the twenty-first century must address intersectional oppressions” (6), encompassing speciesism, sexism, racism, etc. However, despite this progress, the mainstream literary canon of animal studies has yet to acknowledge the presence and portrayal of animals in Dalit autobiographies. This oversight becomes particularly evident when examining the depictions of animals in Dalit autobiographies. The paper thus seeks to highlight a significant gap within the field of animal studies regarding its engagement with Dalit literary traditions.

Engaging with Dalit autobiographies and recognising the representation of animals within them is crucial for a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of human-animal dynamics. It challenges the dominant narratives and ensures that marginalised voices and experiences are included in scholarly discussions. By expanding the literary field of animal studies to encompass Dalit literary traditions, it amplifies Dalit voices within animal studies and provides new insights into the intersections of

caste, oppression, and the human-animal relationship.

The paper deploys critical animal studies to analyse Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi* (2003) in order to rethink theorizations of casteism in connection with speciesism. This particular text has been selected because its depictions of human and nonhuman animal relations have not been discerned by critics till date. *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi* (2003) is a pain-narrative about the oppression of Dalits inflicted by the dominant castes. While this 'narrative of pain' depicts a series of painful experiences of untouchability, oppression and discrimination faced by the Dalit community, there is a much more complex narrative at play. This paper is an attempt to understand that this personal account is also about the oppression of nonhuman animals by the hands of humans.

This paper aims to exhibit the latent embodiments of speciesism within discourses around Dalit identity. By derailing speciesist views, this paper addresses the lacuna in Limbale's autobiography engaging with casteism, inferring that speciesism is a form of oppression instilled within the hierarchical categorizations of human identity. The paper thus aims to challenge or disrupt perspectives that prioritize or discriminate based on species. This analysis may be seen as an attempt to draw parallels between different forms of discrimination and highlight the interconnectedness of oppressive systems, in this case between casteism and speciesism.

Symbiotic Realities: Dalits and Pigs in India

In his autobiographical narrative, *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*, Limbale offers a glimpse into the harsh realities and lived experiences of individuals growing up in a marginalised community. He describes his village as "We hardly knew what a village actually meant as we played and grew up only in the Maharwada", where a Maharwada refers to a segregated settlement inhabited by the Dalit community (5). The term "Mahar" refers to a specific Dalit sub-caste and "wada" translates to a dwelling or settlement. Maharwadadas emerged as separate settlements due to caste-based segregation and discriminatory practices prevalent in Indian society. These settlements were often located on the outskirts of villages or in isolated areas, reflecting the marginalisation of Dalits within the broader community. As Dalits have historically been relegated to living on the outskirts of villages, such environments inherently attract animals, specifically stray dogs and pigs, due to their scavenging tendencies for sustenance. Consequently, this phenomenon gives rise to a gradual blurring of the demarcations between human and animal spatial domains. Narayanan further expounds

on the idea, asserting that “Both pig and Dalit bodies, historically and contemporaneously, are located at the margins of caste geographies in India” (1). In his autobiographical narrative, Limbale articulates this observation, stating, “Heaps of garbage, tin sheds, dogs, and pigs were our only companions. We spend most of our time on Jaganath Patil’s garbage, playing, where we found bits of waste paper and sandals” (5). This depiction offers valuable insights into the symbiotic relationship between marginalised communities and animals, accentuating the nuanced relationship of social dynamics and the ecological setting in which they coexist.

The pig, considered impure and unclean in Hinduism, becomes a symbolic representation of the marginalised communities’ relegated position as the ones responsible for handling and disposing of society’s waste. The reference to “heaps of garbage” and the children playing and looking for things like waste paper and sandals on Jaganath Patil’s garbage underscores the link between Dalits and the practice of scavenging waste generated by the upper-caste Hindus. This aligns with Bellewinkler-Schempp’s observation that “both [Dalits and pigs] of them scavenging, removing garbage, dirt and faeces of the savarna” caste Hindus (202). On a similar note, Narayanan remarks, “Segregating and disposing off this [upper-caste] waste was “low” caste labor, both human and animal” (12). This comparison underscores the parallelism in the marginalised position of both Dalits and pigs in society, as they are both relegated to similar roles related to scavenging and waste management.

Yamini Narayanan’s personal encounter contributes to a poignant dimension to this comprehension, as she narrates, “Ilai and I walked toward the dumping yard, where the twin livelihoods of the Dalit community, waste picking, and pig farming, converge” (11). Her experiential account offers a vivid portrayal of the lived experiences of the marginalised communities and the convoluted relationships they have with the pigs they raise and the waste they handle. Additionally, this association between pigs and Dalits sheds light on the complex dynamics of caste, occupation, and the symbolic meaning attached to certain animals in Indian society.

Moreover, Limbale offers a detailed and vivid narrative of pig hunting within the context of the Dalit community, shedding light on the role of Manakunna, a pig herder responsible for rearing and occasionally slaughtering pigs. The author’s portrayal of the pig hunting process emphasises its inherent brutality, capturing the distressing cries and struggles of the captured pig as it is subdued and prepared for consumption. He writes, “When a pig was caught in the noose it shrieked horribly... Manakunna

...tied the captured pig's legs and Harya then removed its testicles" (66). His account includes the act of castrating pigs, a practice intended to hasten their weight gain before slaughter (Narayanan 12).

Additionally, Limbale describes the pig's final moments, recounting, "The creature first fell down shrieking and wriggling, and then, lay still" (66). Reflecting on the pigs, he contemplates:

I thought how these pigs eat human shit, they run around to save their lives, they fall down when hit with a stone, they struggle and fight to save their lives, they die with their feet tied up, they are roasted, their eyes fall out when they are roasted. Then, my mouth, teeth, throat, stomach, intestines, blood, my whole self nauseated me (66).

The last line, where the author expresses personal discomfort and nausea, reflects the emotional impact of confronting the realities of animal suffering and the complex moral dilemmas surrounding human-animal relations. Through this introspection, the author raises questions about the dehumanising implications inherent in the practice of pig hunting and slaughtering as well as about the need for ethical considerations and compassion towards animals. It further encourages a critical examination of the treatment of animals and the recognition of their inherent value in the society, prompting a rethinking of the portrayal of animals in literature to foster greater empathy and understanding of their experiences.

Ethical Contemplations: Cow-exploitation and Empathy

Limbale's autobiographical narrative also illuminates the multifaceted and intricately woven attitudes towards animals across diverse cultural contexts. Specifically, he accentuates the contrasting treatment of deceased human mother and cows in the matter of disposal. The author observes, "Hindus see the cow as their mother. A human mother is cremated, but when a cow dies they need a Mahar to dispose it of" (14). This statement underscores the deeply ingrained cultural belief of cows being revered as mothers, while drawing attention to the distinct practices associated with the disposal of their remains. The juxtaposition of funeral rituals for human mothers and the reliance of a designated individual from the Mahar community for the removal of dead cows offer an intriguing insight into the intricate interplay of cultural traditions and human-animal relationships. This prompts critical contemplation of the symbolic significance attributed to cows, the historical roles designated to specific communities

in handling animal remains, and the broader implications for cultural perceptions towards animals and their treatment within societies.

Within this context, the author draws attention to the contrasting treatment of cow's urine and oxen's urine, emphasising the perceived sacredness and ritual significance attributed to the former. The author mentions, "There were so many oxen around, but an ox's urine was not permitted" (19). The distinction between cow and oxen urine showcases how certain animal products are elevated in cultural beliefs while others are marginalised. The notion that cow's urine possesses transformative and purifying properties reflects the reverence and veneration bestowed upon cows in specific cultural contexts. Additionally, the author's account of "tease[ing] a cow's vagina to make her urinate" (19) reveals the instrumentalisation of animals in religious practices. This practice, intended for the collection of cow's urine for ritual purposes, raises ethical questions about the treatment of animals and the ethical implications of using animals instrumentally while assigning distinct values to different species.

In this context, Narayanan's critical observation adds another layer of complexity about the cow being obscured by a conceptual portrayal as a "goddess", while her vulnerability as a "dairy" cow is overlooked. The repeated forced impregnation of cows and the separation of their biological infants becomes invisible when animals are conceptualised through mythological or cultural lenses.

In *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*, Limbale vividly presents a distressing scenario wherein individuals named Shrimantanna and Umbrya create an effigy of a dead calf in an attempt to deceive the mother cow into producing milk. The calf's demise had likely led to the cessation of milk production, prompting these individuals to exploit the mother-offspring bond by crafting a lifeless effigy. The author describes the scene, stating, "The cow would see the effigy of her calf and yield milk. It was stuffed with hay, its legs supported by wooden sticks. They were stitching the carcass with a big needle as if it was a sack of grain" (110).

This explicit portrayal of deception and manipulation disregards the emotional trauma and grief experienced by the mother cow, reducing her maternal instincts to a mere tool for human benefit. The act of making an effigy and using it to deceive the cow demonstrates a deeply problematic view of animals as instruments or resources to serve human needs. This utilitarian approach disregards animals' intrinsic value and agency as sentient beings, promoting a callous disregard for their welfare and

emotional experiences.

Furthermore, Adams's concept of "feminized protein" sheds light on the oppression of female animals in the context of dairy production. In this context, Adams writes, "Female animals become oppressed by their femaleness, and become essentially surrogate wet-nurses. These other animals are oppressed as *Mother* animals" (112). Gaard also points out that, "excluding the oppression of nonhuman animals from feminist and ecofeminist analyses can only give us analyses that are, at best, incomplete" (113). In line with this exploration of exploitation, Limbale's work offers an explicit portrayal of the deception and manipulation involved in the treatment of a mother cow. This utilitarian perspective exemplifies a callous disregard for the cow's intrinsic value and agency as a sentient being. The act of using an effigy to deceive the mother cow serves as a poignant illustration of how animals are often perceived and treated as instruments or resources for human needs, perpetuating a system of oppression. As Aavik and Kase states, "The animal industrial complex is operating as a patriarchal institution, where female animals' capacity to reproduce and lactate is exploited" (96). Limbale further contemplates:

Even an animal is full of affection. The mother cow shows her affection to her calf even if it is only stuffed and lifeless. Seeing the effigy the mother moos, licks her calf, and her milk oozes. Man then puts the effigy away and milks the cow. Man is but an effigy. (110)

His contemplation on the cow's affectionate response to the effigy emphasises the importance of recognising animals' capacity for emotions and affections. The provocation in the statement, "I think we would be able to understand the mooing of a cow for her calf only if we skin a newborn child, stuff it with cotton and rags, patch it up, and hand it over to the mother to feed it," challenges the normative ideas and cultural practices that lead to speciesist attitudes (110). The cows are used as a means to obtain the desired substance, reflecting a utilitarian view of animals as providers of specific products or services for human needs.

Through such critical commentary on speciesism and comparative ethics, the author seeks to dismantle the prevailing unequal treatment of animals compared to humans. The empathetic stance towards animals and the willingness to challenge cultural norms reflect a perspective that is sensitive to the ethical implications of human-animal relations.

Cultural Complexities: Dead Animals in Limbale's Narrative

Limbale masterfully portrays the complex relationship of cultural practices and attitudes towards the consumption of dead animals in his autobiographical narrative. As children, they used to play a game in which one of them "pretended to be a dead animal" (15). The game played by the children, where one pretends to be a dead animal and others act as vultures, reflects the normalised interaction with death and the association of animals with scavenging creatures. The description of poking and prodding the boy playing the "dead animal" and screeching like vultures points to a desensitisation towards the suffering of animals and a casual attitude towards their exploitation.

The author recounts an incident from his school days where the consumption of dead animals, specifically Maula Jamadar's young ox, is the central theme. The author vividly describes how the Mahars ensured the utmost utilisation of the animal's body, leaving no part to waste. The author's narrative goes as follows: "Maula Jamadar's young ox died. [...] One day, soon after this, when I reached school, Ismillya, Maula's son was teasing Umbrya calling him 'a base born'. As I reached there he said, 'Here's another base born who swallowed our ox.' [...] I ran away, the ox dashing against the insides of my stomach" (15-16).

The confrontation faced by the author at school, where he is accused of swallowing the ox, showcases the complex link between social dynamics and cultural beliefs surrounding animal consumption. The accusation adds to the discomfort experienced by the author, symbolised by the feeling of "the ox dashing against the insides of my stomach", evoking a sense of guilt and unease (16).

In a different context, the author articulates:

I developed an aversion to dead animals and detested those who ate their flesh. This hatred spread like an epidemic among our gang boys. Whenever an animal was being skinned we deliberately went there and grabbed its legs. When it was skinned we pissed on it, threw soil and dung on it so that no one would eat the meat. We felt that no one should eat the meat of a dead animal. (19)

Examining this from the perspective of animal studies, the author's deep aversion towards dead animals and his strong disapproval of meat con-

sumption demonstrates a profound ethical consciousness and emotional connection to animals. Moreover, the dissemination of the author's aversion among the gang boys signifies a shared sentiment towards animals, exemplifying the influence and diffusion of attitudes within a social group. This collective aversion hints at the potential for empathy and compassion to be nurtured and cultivated among individuals who share similar experiences and perspectives.

Furthermore, the author's purposeful intervention during the skinning of animals, aimed at obstructing meat consumption, showcases a proactive stance against the commodification of animal bodies. The act of urinating on the carcass and covering it with soil and dung can be seen as a form of protest against the devaluation of animal life solely for human consumption. It signifies a rejection of the societal normalisation of exploiting animals for food, concurrently challenging the anthropocentric perspective that perceives animals as mere resources for human use.

Limbale's autobiographical narrative offers a poignant exploration of the harsh realities of life faced by marginalised individuals involved in the unsettling task of handling dead animals. Through the character of Harya, the author scrutinises and censures the grim reality of dealing with dead animals and partaking in their consumption. The probing question, "What sort of life was this? Drag dead animals, skin them, and then eat their flesh. For the first time Harya felt hurt and hated his lowly work" unveils a profound contemplation and discontentment enveloping Harya's circumstances (53). The author's choice of words, "drag dead animals, skin them, and then eat their flesh," vividly portrays the unpleasant and distressing nature of this task involving animal carcasses.

Moreover, the portrayal of Harya's emotional awakening and inner conflict reveals his growing aversion to the "lowly work", highlighting the toll that such practices can take on individuals engaged in animal exploitation. This portrayal indicates the author's sensitivity to the psychological burden and moral dilemmas faced by those involved in activities encompassing the handling and consumption of animals. The author's discerning approach delves into the complexities of human-animal relationships, exposing the emotional and moral repercussions of participating in practices that exploit and commodify animals.

Overall, Limbale's narrative presents a compelling challenge to the normalisation of animal exploitation, encouraging critical reflection on the ethical dimensions of human-animal relationships. His work demon-

strates an empathetic stance towards animals and raises awareness about the complex web of cultural beliefs and practices that shape human interactions with the animal world.

Conclusion

This paper thoroughly explores the intricate interactions of human-animal relationships portrayed in Sharankumar Limbale's autobiographical narrative, *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi*. By engaging with Dalit autobiographies and recognising the representation of animals within them, the paper has attempted to highlight a significant gap in the field of animal studies, where the voices and experiences of marginalised communities remain largely overlooked.

Limbale's narrative offers a poignant exploration of the symbiotic realities between Dalits and animals, particularly pigs and cows. Through the vivid depictions of scavenging environments and the manipulation of animals for human benefit, the author challenges cultural norms and draws attention to the ethical complexities surrounding human-animal interactions. The author's perspective, as portrayed in the text, is unabashedly critical of the prevailing treatment of animals. With an unyielding determination, the author exposes the consequences of anthropocentrism, questions cultural norms, challenges speciesism, and demands a profound ethical shift in the human-animal relationship. He passionately advocates for a radical transformation of the human-animal relationship, emphasising the need for ethical accountability in our interactions with animals. The scathing critique demands a fundamental re-evaluation of societal norms, cultural practices, and attitudes that perpetuate the subjugation and exploitation of animals.

In conclusion, the paper calls for a more inclusive approach in animal studies, one that includes diverse cultural contexts and marginalised experiences. The intersections of caste, oppression, and speciesism demand critical examination and re-evaluation of how humans perceive and treat animals in society. By bridging the gap between animal studies and Dalit literature, we can gain new insights into the complexities of human-animal relationships and foster a more compassionate and just world for all living beings.

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