



Dalit Aesthetics and Resistance: Exploring Limbale's Principles through Select Poems from the Poisoned Bread

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Received: 20.03.2026; Accepted: 09.04.2026; Available online: 10.04.2026

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Abstract

The "Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature" by Sharankumar Limbale puts forward a new literary principle that is quite different from traditional beauty-centric aesthetic and prioritises truth, suffering, and resistance as core principles. He argues that Dalit literature must authentically reflect the lived-experiences of the oppressed and engage in political resistance. Conceptualising this philosophy as the core argument, this paper examines select poems from the Poisoned Bread, a pioneering collection of Dalit anthology.

In Namdeo Dhasal's poem "Hunger," hunger is not merely described as a physical need but as a metaphor for the socio-political deprivation endured by Dalits. Also, its unfiltered, gritty language reflects Limbale's philosophy that Dalit narrative must express raw truth, the anger and suffering of the oppressed community. Jyoti Lanjewar's poem "Caves" expresses same principle; infect her hostility of the land itself-

*"How did we ever get to this place
this land which was never mother to us?
which never gave us even
the life of cats and dogs?"*

perfectly underscores the demand for equality and social recognition. Through direct, evocative language, she reflects Limbale's idea that Dalit literature must engage with both caste oppression and also the quest for dignity. Methodologically, relying on the close reading of these selected poems this paper argues Limbale's aesthetic framework that unravels the revolutionary potential of Dalit writing to challenge deep-rooted social hierarchies and promote justice and equality.

Keywords: *Sharankumar Limbale, Dalit Aesthetic, Poisoned Bread, Arjun Dangle, Caste Oppression, The Poetry of Resistance, Social Justice*

Introduction:

The traditional framework of Indian aesthetic is mainly rooted in the concept of *satyam* (truth), *shivam* (goodness), and *sundaram* (beauty) which celebrates harmony and beauty fails to reflect the truths of suffering, deprivation, and resistance that define the Dalit experience. It has historically overlooked the realities of the marginalised communities, particularly Dalits who have endured caste-based oppression and systematic exclusion. Dalit literature arose as a response to it. It aims to authentically represent Dalit voices and challenges the

social structures that perpetuate their marginalisation. In *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature History, Controversies and Considerations*, Sharankumar Limbale tries to establish a new aesthetic theory that emphasises on truth, suffering, and political defiance while prioritising the lived experiences of the oppressed. In the section, 'About the Dalit Literature' Limbale's rejection of the 'Satyam, Shivam, Sundram' triad is not merely a critique of beauty, but a demand for a 'human-centric' ethics. He shifts the locus of aesthetic value from spiritual harmony to the material realities of equality, liberty, and justice (Limbale 19).

The aesthetic principle propounded by Limbale redefines the purpose of literature for Dalits. It also insists that Dalit writing should server as a mirror to the lived experiences of the oppressed and as a medium for political and social resistance. This concept provides the foundation for examining work within the Dalit canon where the expression of pain and anger replaces traditional Indian literary standards. In the anthology, *Poisoned Bread* Dhasal's *Hunger*, for example, transforms physical deprivation into a powerful metaphor for socio-political marginalisation; while Lanjewar's *Caves* uses stark, direct language to confront caste-based injustices. Thus, by depicting the stark realities of Dalit lives and challenging the entrenched hierarchies within Indian society these works portray the core essence of Dalit aesthetics.

The present study applies Sharankumar Limbale's Dalit aesthetic principles on the pomes like - Namdeo Dhasal's *Hunger*, Jyoti Lanjewar's *Caves*, Daya Power's *Blood-Wave*, Prakash Kharat's *The Sky with its Eyes Closed*, L.S. Rokade's *To Be or Not to Be Born*, B.S. Hate's *The Stains of Blood*, Meena Gajabhiye's *Light Melted in Darkness* from the anthology *Poisoned Bread*. These poems address the realities of caste-based oppression and deprivation while asserting the Dalit community's demand for dignity and equality. They also reflect the experiences of marginalised individuals and serve as a collective voice of resistance through vivid language and powerful imagery. Applying close reading methodology and focusing on the themes, language, and imagery this study attempts to reveal how Dalit literature diverges from conventional Indian aesthetics and serves as a medium of truth-telling and political resistance. Limbale's concepts of Dalit aesthetics for literature upholds the authentic experiences of Dalits; and prioritise truth, suffering, and defiance over traditional literary beauty and pleasure. As Prof. Rajkumar poignantly remarked, "The very act of writing is an act of resistance as they speak the truth that has been continuously ignores, challenged or silences" (Rajkumar 74). The poems mentioned above exemplify a literary tradition that is committed to express unfiltered truth and resistance; at the same time these works do not seek to fit within the norms of mainstream Indian literature but instead challenge those norms. And, they present an aesthetic which is rooted in the voices and struggles of the marginalised as expounded by Limbale.

Theoretical Framework: Limbale and *Towards a Dalit Aesthetic*

Dalit Literature emerges by the writings of the early thinkers like Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and Jyotirao Phule. They felt an urgency to articulate the lived experiences of India's most oppressed and marginalised communities, especially those who are bounded by rigid and oppressive structures of caste and propagated a distinguished framework for social and economic justice through their work. Early writers of Dalit narratives like Baburao Bagul and Namdeo Dhasal, inspired by Ambedkar's this philosophy, begun documenting the struggles, sufferings, and resilience of the oppressed communities using literature as both a mirror of their experiences and a form of resistance against caste-based exploitation with

their raw and unembellished language. Thus, they successfully captured the harsh realities of Dalit lives and resultantly a new literary corpus emerged. This new literary narrative is quite distinguished from the traditional Indian literary aesthetics which are encapsulated in the triad of *satyam*, *shivam*, and *sundaram* (truth, goodness and beauty) prioritising beauty, harmony, and spiritual ideas. These classical values, outlined in foundational texts like Bharata's *Natyashastra*, emphasise grace, form, and emotional resonance. Critics like Limbale argue that Indian aesthetics does not align with the realities of Dalit lives. It rather tends to elevate art's spiritual and emotional impact. Limbale opposes this traditional aesthetics which focus on abstract beauty and spirituality. He further opines that it fails to address the deep-rooted injustices experienced by Dalits as "*Dalit literatures reject spiritualism and abstraction, its aesthetics is materialist rather than spiritualist*" (Limbale 116). He strongly advocates the necessary to construct a new distinct aesthetic framework which would represent Dalit literature not as a source of pleasure but as a force for social transformation. In *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, he introduces this new framework of Dalit aesthetic which rejects conventional notions of beauty as inappropriate and insufficient for a real Dalit expression. Dalit literature, as he proposes, should be evaluated not by standards of beauty or pleasure, but by how honestly it portrays the truths of Dalit suffering, the urgency of resistance, and the reality of social struggle. He furthers his argument by saying that Dalit literature must convey unfiltered experiences using literature as a tool to reveal and resist the structures that maintain caste-based oppression. Then it will be impactful. Thus, truth and authenticity are prioritised over stylistic concerns. Besides, Dalit literature's value lies in its capacity to provoke discomfort, challenge the reader, and instigate change. Therefore, we can argue that Limbale's aesthetic is centred on three core principles: the portrayal of suffering as a testament to lived experience, the resistance against oppressive forces, and a commitment to truthfulness over artistic form.

Arjun Dangle's the *Poisoned Bread*, a revolutionary Dalit anthology illustrates Limbale's Dalit aesthetic. In his collection Dangle gathers a collective voice of Dalit experience. These narratives truly represent the unembellished reality of Dalit existence. Namdeo Dhasal's *Hunger* and Lanjewar's *Caves*, for example, demonstrate these principles which Limbale believes as central to Dalit literary expression. Dhasal's portrayal of hunger as a metaphor for social and economic deprivation and Lanjewar's depiction of caste-based exclusion align with his emphasis on unfiltered expression of pain and anger; other poems in the anthology, such as Daya Pawar's *Blood-Wave* and Prakash Kharat's *The Sky with its Eyes Closed*, use straightforward language to communicate the collective suffering of Dalit communities. Each of these works captures the core aspects of Limbale's aesthetic principles, exhibiting suffering and resistance with honesty and immediacy rather than seeking to fit within mainstream Indian literary values.

In essence, Limbale's Dalit aesthetic theory reframes literature as a means to confront and resist caste-based structures and allows Dalit literature to act as both an artistic and political movement. Dalit aesthetics, unlike traditional Indian aesthetics, reject superficial beauty and advocate for literature that truly reflects social realities and promotes justice.

Limbale and Dalit Aesthetic Principles: Analysis and Discussion

Sharankumar Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* sets forth an aesthetic philosophy that diverges fundamentally from traditional Indian literary values. Limbale

asserts that Dalit literature must prioritise truth, suffering, social critique, and the pursuit of justice over conventional beauty and emotional pleasure.

Truth as the Foundation of Dalit Literature:

Limbale underscores the truth of Dalit existence over traditional beauty as he argues, "Dalit literature is not pleasure-giving literature.....(it) cannot be based on the principles of an aestheticist literature that privileges pleasure derived from beauty" (Limbale 116). He further argues "Dalit literatures have been birthed from the womb of Dalits' pain" (Limbale 31). This philosophy of truth demands a commitment to depict the brutal realities of Dalit lives without aesthetic embellishment. Namdeo Dhasal's *Hunger* seamlessly mirrors this principle. He portrays hunger as a perpetual, soul-consuming force rather than a temporary physical state. In the line "Hunger/ a fruitless thing," Dhasal's choice of a 'fruitless' metaphor deliberately parodies the lush, fertile imagery of traditional Marathi nature poetry. He enacts Limbale's principle of 'unfiltered truth' - where the lack of linguistic polish becomes the ultimate signifier of socio-political deprivation by stripping the language of its ornamental 'beauty.'

Lanjewar's *Caves* shifts Dhasal's aesthetic of physicality of Dalit suffering expressed by the metaphor of the stomach toward the psychological architecture of oppression-

Their inhuman atrocities have carved caves
In the rock of my heart (Dangle 22).

This image of 'inhuman atrocities' carving 'cave' in the 'heart' encapsulates not only pain but also the lasting wounds of social exclusion. Her line-

How did we ever get to this place
This land which never gave us even
The life of cats and dogs? (Dangle 22)

typifies not only the social but also psychological alienation experienced by Dalits who live as perpetual outsiders. Her depiction of truth upholds Limbale's view that Dalit literature should communicate the depth of exclusion that defines Dalit life and compels readers to confront these harsh realities without further romanticisation.

Suffering as an Aesthetic Value:

One of the core principles of Dalit expression is suffering. It is the primary truth of Dalit existence. Limbale asserts this principle as "If pleasure is the basis of the aesthetics of Marathi savarna literature, pain or suffering is the basis of the aesthetics of Dalit literature" (Limbale 114). This principle of suffering is evident in Daya Pawar's *Blood-Wave-*

...waves of blood swelling out
From a body fulfilled

.....

As our generations gave lifelong battle... (Dangle 62).

This poignant image of 'blood' symbolises the collective trauma of Dalits and becomes a communal symbol of suffering. This intense imagery further reinforces the idea that suffering is not merely personal but a collective experience rooted in generational caste oppression and contends Limbale's idea that Dalit literature should communicate shared pain as-

...it is not the pain of any one person, nor is it of just one day - it is the anguish of many thousands of people, experienced over thousands of years. Therefore, it is expressed collectively. The

anguish of Dalit literature is not that of an individual but of the entire outcast society. (Limbale 31)

The poem *Light Melted in Darkness* by Meena Gajabhiye further embodies this philosophy by portraying the psychological toll of caste oppression. Her description of 'light melted in darkness' as-

Their venomous hiss
Turns my day into night
And when I reach out for sunray
It recedes far away... (Dangle 53).

reflects the erosion of hope and identity. It also exemplifies how systematic discrimination impacts Dalits' sense of self when 'reach out' for 'sunray' of education, dignity but only to see it 'recedes far away.' Gajabhiye's portrayal of this immutable othering adds another layer of psychological suffering that supports Limbale's argument of suffering that should replace conventional beauty as a central aesthetic and provide an honest representation of the impact of caste-based exclusion on individual lives.

Social Critique and Defiance:

Limbale insists that Dalit literature should act as a weapon of resistance that critiques and challenges the social structures sustaining caste discrimination. In *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, he mentions Sharad Patil who refers to aesthetics as "a weapon, and believes that revolutionary literature must acquire this weapon" (Limbale 113). This principle of resistance is vividly illustrated in Prakash Kharat's *The Sky with its Eyes Closed* where Kharat uses the metaphor of a 'closed sky' to critique society's indifference toward Dalit suffering as -

.... The sky does not burst into torrential monsoon rains.
The sky does not give birth to a flaming thunderbolt.... (Dangle 11).

The image of a sky that refuses to open symbolises mainstream society's passivity towards Dalit community. Kharat's poem aligns with Limbale's notion that Dalit literature should not merely depict suffering but also resist societal complacency and urges readers to confront their complicity in maintaining caste hierarchies.

L.S. Rokade's *To Be or Not to Be Born* further embodies Limbale's concept of social critique by questioning the ethical foundation of a society that denies dignity to its members. Rokade's line-

"Do I want to be born -
Do I want to be born at all
in this land?
Where all paths raced horizonwards
but to me were barred...." (Dangle 1)

challenges the caste system itself. It functions as a radical rejection of the nationalist mythos and questions the very desire for biological existence with this 'land' which is 'barred' for Dalits. Moreover, it illustrates Limbale's belief that Dalit literature should attack the very roots of a social system that sustain untouchability as he argues ".....Dalit literature has established its own tradition with anti-caste or untouchable thinkers like Buddha, Kabir, Phule, and Ambedkar as its signposts" (Limbale 10). Rokade's existential questioning of life within such a society forces readers to reflect on the moral implications of a system that

perpetuates inequality also resonates with Limbale's view of Dalit literature that must inspire a re-examination of societal values.

Freedom and Justice as Aesthetic values:

Limbale redefines essence in Dalit literature as "equality, freedom, justice and love are the basic sentiments of people and society.....the literature that promotes equality, freedom and justice is revolutionary, and it emphasises the centrality of the human being and society" (Limbale 119). Unlike traditional aesthetics that prioritise emotional pleasure, Dalit literature's 'essence' lies in its commitment to advocating for social justice and human dignity. This principle is poignantly illustrated in B.S. Hate's *The Stains of Blood* where the poet exposes the systematic discrimination that masks age-old cruelty as natural law. The 'stains' are 'admired volubly.' The metaphor of bloodstains is used as evidence for the historical sufferings that Dalits have been subjected to for 'centuries'-

"Today, if you pause here in the middle of the twentieth century,
you will observe the wounds
that have festered and bled for centuries:
They are stains
that you have admired volubly as historically inevitable" (Dangle 38).

The line "you may observe, beneath the footprints, / the stains of blood" (Dangle 38) equally reflects a society that has normalised violence against Dalits who 'bled for centuries.' Hate's portrayal of blood as a symbol of justice and social recognition challenges conventional 'pleasure' centric aesthetics by positioning the struggle for dignity and recognition as the ultimate measure of beauty in Dalit literature.

Lanjewar's *Caves*, too, reflects Limbale's notion of beauty grounded in justice. The metaphor of 'caves' 'carved' into 'heart' symbolises not only trauma but also the strength to resist dehumanisation. By transforming suffering into resilience, her poem echoes Limbale's assertion that beauty in Dalit literature is derived from its commitment to equality and justice which offers readers an alternative aesthetic that prioritise dignity over formal beauty.

Conclusion:

The study of the above discussed poems from the *Poisoned Bread* through the lens of Sharankumar Limbale's Dalit aesthetic principles highlights the distinct and powerful role of Dalit literature in Indian society. These poems document the pain and struggle of Dalits using unfiltered language and intense imagery. They also demand recognition and justice. They effectively embody Limbale's vision of literature as a vehicle for social change as he opines "Literature is tool of revolution" (Giri 299). The analysis also substantiates his belief that Dalit literature should serve as a form of protest, making visible the injustices endured by Dalits and holding society accountable for their marginalisation. From Dhasal's *Hunger* to Gajabhiye's *Light Melted in Darkness*, it reveals the power of literature to confront and dismantle oppressive systems. The impact of these poems goes beyond literary appreciation. Additionally, they resonate as expressions of defiance, strength, and hope. Moreover, they urge readers to engage with the realities of caste oppression and to participate in the ongoing fight for equality. Ultimately, the core truth of Limbale's Dalit aesthetics reminds us of the profound ability of literature to inspire, challenge, and transform while remaining true to the lives it represents, as he himself said in an interview with Dipak Giri: "Dalit Literature will be forever. This is a Literature of human rights. It has no end."

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