

SUBDUED VOICES, STIFLED DREAMS: A STUDY OF DALIT LITERATURE

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Abstract

Dalit Literature is the medium to present subdued voices and stifled Dreams of the communities that have been marginalized, exploited, suppressed and humiliated for ages in Indian caste ridden society. Dalit literature reflects dalit experience and sensibility, attempting to define and assert dalit identity from a dalit point of view. In many ways, it is a protest literature which faithfully mirrors the harsh realities of dalits and becomes an important weapon to strengthen the dalit liberation movement. Sharan Kumar Limbale calls it as the burning cry of untouchables against the injustices of thousands of years. Dalit Literature is revolutionary, liberational and transformatory as its purpose is the realization of the full humanity of the dalit. It asserts dalit agency, selfhood and history. With the advent of dalit literature, dalits are no longer portrayed as a people without history and culture. This is the deconstructive enterprise that forces the upper caste people to negotiate the realities foregrounded in dalit literature. The present paper intends to critically examine how dalit writers following the legacy of Mahatma Phule, Babasaheb Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi present in their discourses the different dimensions and aspects of dalit consciousness that make dalit identity, a site of contestation and conflict.

Keywords: *Dalit, Identity, Conflict, Injustice, Experience.*

Introduction

Dalit literature being mirror of the oppressed, reflects pain, suffering and hope for liberation of dalits. The ultimate function of dalit theology is two-fold: to act in solidarity and to act for liberation. Dalit writers in their writings represent and critique the condition of dalit communities and highlight their collective resistance to reconstruct a new social order based on the Ambedkarite vision of liberty, equality and fraternity. India is a caste ridden society where caste is placed above everything else. In fact, even after sixty years of independence we have not been able to erase the curse of untouchability from our society. The writings of dalit writers have begun to emerge discursively as powerful visible form of protest against a chequered history of exploitation. Through struggle and resistance, dalit writings have tried to throw away the yoke of their enslavement.

The main purpose of dalit literature is to dismantle the caste system and remove untouchability from society. When humiliation, ill treatment and trauma became unbearable,

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the dalit writers who found the suffering of their brethren unbearable decided to resist and struggle to achieve equality and justice for them. Their struggle and resistance also makes it clear that the downtrodden are no longer vulnerable to the trouble, miseries and torture that have been inflicted on them rampantly.

Dalit literature refers to the literature of and about the people who are silenced for centuries by caste prejudices and social oppressions. It is a blot on Indian society that a Mahar or a Paraya is treated as untouchable, not allowed to worship with Hindus. It is an irony that a high caste touches a common animal or worships it but he believes that touching a low caste is a sin. Thus, dalit literature aims at celebrating new subjectivity, identity and psychic struggle to remove the socially imposed disabilities on the untouchables. As we know dalit literature is the expression of the experience, feelings, views of dalit about life in the form of written texts. The primary condition of dalit literature is that the literature should be produced by dalits and about dalits. Mainly dalit literature is the product of post-independence period. To be more specific, it is the product of the development after the chief architect of Indian constitution Dr. B.R. Ambedkar embraced Buddhism on 14th October 1956 at Nagpur with lacs of his followers. The dalit literature is the realistic literature not romantic or fictional. In the early part of the 20th century, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar emerged on the Indian socio-political scene as the outstanding leader of the downtrodden. It was Dr. Ambedkar who led dalits to a new awakening and a realization of their state of deprivation among the other sections of the 19th century when a social reformer and revolutionary in Maharashtra, Mahatma Jyoti Rao Phule used it to describe the 'outcastes' and 'untouchables'. He defined the term as the oppressed and crushed victims of the Indian caste system. Phule describes the history of brahmin domination in India. He writes how they originally settled on the banks of Ganges and in order to keep a better hold on the people, the device of ordination of castes and the code of cruel and inhuman laws was established-the like of which we can hardly find anywhere. He writes:

The institution of Caste, which has been the main object of their laws, had no existence among them originally. That it was an after-creation of their deep cunning is evident from their own writings. The highest rights, the highest privileges and gifts, and everything that would make the life of a Brahmin easy, smooth-going and happy everything that would conserve or flatter their self-pride were specially inculcated and enjoined, whereas the Sudras and Ati-

Sudras were regarded with supreme hatred and contempt and the commonest rights of humanity were denied to them. Their touch, nay, even their shadow, is deemed as pollution. They are considered as mere chattels and their life is of no more value than that of meanest reptile; for it is enjoined that if a Brahmin, kill a cat or an ichneumon, the bird Chasha, or a frog or a dog, a lizard, an owl, a crow or a Sudra, he is absolved of his sin by performing a fasting penance. (Phule 1873:16)

The term 'Dalit' was first used in the 1930s as a Hindi and Marathi translation of 'depressed classes'. The British used the term for the scheduled castes. But in 1970s the term expanded its reference to include scheduled tribes, poor peasants, women and all those being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion. Hence now it is obvious that dalit is not a caste, but a symbol of change and revolution. The prime aim of dalit literature is the liberation of dalits. In this sense, dalit literature is revolutionary as it advocates the establishment of a casteless society based on the values of liberty, equality and fraternity. The agonizing experiences of discrimination, oppression and exploitation endured by the marginalized sections of Indian society on the basis of caste and colour paved the way for dalit literature to assert itself as a literature of resistance.

An increasing number of poets and writers of the dalit communities in various Indian states have been producing literary works, such as poems, short stories, novels, dramas and autobiographical narratives representing the themes of caste oppression, untouchability, poverty, repression and revolution in 1960s and 70s. Their writings also contain a powerful denunciation of and fierce attacks on the caste system and on Brahmanical Hinduism. Dalit literature is considered to be a unique genre of modern Indian literature because for now untouchables themselves are using the traditionally-denied weapon of literacy and exposing the conditions under which they have lived, as well as directly rebelling against the Hindu institution, which has brought to them their perpetual subordination in the caste system. This is the main thrust of dalit literature. It is also worth mentioning that dalit literature has arisen from cultural conflict. Since the 'downtrodden' has no place or hardly any place in the established canonical literature of India, dalit writers call it "Hindu Literature" and challenge its hegemony. In the words of Baburao Bagul :

The established literature of India is Hindu literature. But it is dalit literature, which has the revolutionary power to accept new science and technology and bring about a total transformation. 'Dalit' is the name of total revolution; it is revolution incarnate. (Bagul 1992:289)

The principal philosophy of dalit literature is to bring complete revolution in society. The Hindu society believes in the varnashrama system with its religiously-oriented concepts such as the age old *Granthas*, Gods, priest-hood, etc. which perpetuates slavery, discrimination and suffering. Dalit literature denies this Hindu mentality and affirms humanitarian freedom. Tarachandra Khandekar, a dalit writer, puts it :

Man is the centrifugal force in the philosophy of dalit literature. Man is supreme. He is above all God, sacred books and science. It is man who can make and unmake anything. Dalit literature believes that nothing is permanent. Everything is subjected to decay. With every decay there is resurgence, new creation. It, therefore, does not accept the maxim 'Satyam, Shivam, Sundram.' On the other hand it proclaims that nothing is true which is not applicable for man's sublime freedom, nothing is good if it is not useful for man's welfare, nothing is beautiful which is not useful for beautification of mankind. (Khandekar 1994:6)

Generally, dalits writers are not against any groups, individuals, caste or communal groups but against the establishment, the government and the social system which, in their view, keeps them depressed and deprived. Dalit literature aims at creating an alternative culture and a separate identity for the dalits in the society. In other words, the search for identity is a basic dynamism of dalit literature. So, the issues related to poverty, powerlessness, untouchability, hypocrisy and several other corrupt social practices have generated a variety of responses among dalit writers. These responses are basically forms of protest aimed at bringing about social change through a revolution. This has been vehemently opposed by the establishment in our country. It is very unfortunate that some critics of dalit literature do not accept it as creative art and term it as personal, reactive and propagandistic. Dalit writers refute these charges by arguing that all literature for that matter is propagandistic because all writers follow a certain philosophy while writing something. The difference between non-dalit and

dalit writings is that in the first case one insists on the so-called literary values and in other, on values of life. Arjun Dangle, an eminent dalit thinker argues :

... A tradition is born and lives on the strong foundations of thoughts and principles and it is these thoughts or principles, which enrich or sustain a tradition. The base that a tradition gets is subject to the then existing social system and the sum total of the conditions. The established class always tries to establish a convenient tradition that does not damage its vested interests. The weak groups in society are tied to this tradition. In fact, all our traditions so far, whether religious, social, literary or cultural, have been imposed on the majority by a handful. (Dangle 1992:262)

The dalit literary writings increased immensely in 1960s. Conferences and seminars were held almost every year. *Asmitadarsh*, a journal devoted to literature was founded by Professor Pantawane contrary to the more general type of magazines. In the 1970s, individual volumes of poetry began to appear namely, Cokha Kamble's *Pimpalpan* (leaf of the pimpal tree) with an introduction by Durga Bhagwat, who was elected President of the Maharashtra Literary Conference; Namdeo Dhasal's *Golpitha* (a slum area of Bombay) with an introduction by the dramatist Vijay Tendulkar; Waman Nimbalkar's *Gaokushabaheeril Kavita* (poetry from beyond the village boundary); Daya Pawar's *Kondwada* (cattle pen); Trymbak Sapkale's *Surung*. All of these were published by the Maharashtra Buddhist Literature Committee, Asmitadarsh Press or the Marxist Magova Press. Gangadhar Pantawane's book of essays, *Mulyavedh* (The Perception of Value) appeared in 1974 and a volume of biographical sketches of "opposition writers", including Annabhau Sathe, the folk singer Waman kardak, N.R. Shende, Kisan Fago Bansode, Shivram Janba Kamble, Shankarrao Kharat and Bandhu Madhav (Modak), a writer of the 1930s, which appeared earlier in the popular monthly *Amrit*. The work of the proletarian poet, Narayan Surve, began to appear on standard curriculum of Postgraduate studies reading lists in several Maharasthrian universities. Baburao Bagul's volumes of the 1960s were printed, his novella, *Sud* (Revenge) appeared and Keshav Meshram's work was published. As these volumes appeared, Marathi criticism followed-praising, scorning, serious, frivolous. Dalit literature was to be found in every book-store in the Marathi-speaking area and had become surely part of the Maharasthrian literary scene.

The life of dalits is of main concern in dalit literature. The style and content vary, however, from the suffering tinged with hope of the village mahar in Shankarrao Kharat's stories to the gaunt, stark brutality of life in the Bombay slums described by Baburao Bagul in prose and Namdeo Dhasal in poetry. Shankarrao Kharat, the son of a village Mahar who described the dalit, in British records reads as that of the "inferior village servant"—cutting wood, carrying messages, bringing fuel to the burning ground, working on other's lands, dragging out dead cattle. Kharat managed to get education and obtained a degree in law. His childhood experience and the life he saw in the slums are the subjects of his fictional writing, although he does have other books on Buddhism and Ambedkarian subjects and also wrote a history of the Mahars. His first book, *Bara Balutedar*, took all twelve village servants as subjects for stories and he continued to deal with characters from many different communities, generally the lower castes in a dozen volumes.

Conclusion

This research paper is significant because it attempts to understand how dalits have used dalit literature as a means of assertion of dalit identities against oppression and exploitation. This paper elucidates the powerful narrative agenda of dalit literature which contests both the basis of caste dissemination as well as the institutional claim that caste no longer function as a social force in modern India and also study as to how the dalit narratives critique some of the potent paradoxes emerging within the domain of dalit discourse itself. The paper highlights how dalit narratives have been used by dalit writers as a form of political assertion by providing entrance into the public sphere and a reassertion of control over the construction of dalit selfhood—which is far from being a homogeneous and monolithic construct.

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