

Dalit Literature : Issues and Trends

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Abstract:

In this paper, I am, in the beginning, planning to draw the historical circumstances that produced the Dalit Literature. Dalit Literature is, in fact, the writings that are about dalits. The Dalit movement is a contention against anti-caste movement to build a modern democratic and secular Indian identity. The term Dalit literature dates back to the First Dalit literature in 1958 in the state of Maharashtra in India. The word 'Dalit' came into manipulation after Independence, which means down-trodden, subjugated or broken, it was used in the 1930s as a Hindi and Marathi translation of 'depressed classes'. The word classically used was "Untouchable" or "Shudra". Dalit, we can say, is not a caste but a symbol of change that can bring revolution in the so called 'Society'. It includes schedule tribes, poor peasants, women (who are considered lower than men), and all those who are being exploited politically, economically in the name of religion. They live dangerously insecure existence, avoided by much of society because of their ranks as "untouchables" or "Dalits".

Key words: Dalit literature, anti-caste movement, secular Indian identity, Maharashtra, post-Independence.

In my paper the most noted thing is that, it was abolished under India's constitution in 1949, but the inflicting of social disabilities and inability remains very much a part of India till today. Till now they are being maltreated by the higher caste people to an extent. The Dalits are treated worse than animals.

Their presence is usually banned from upper-class localities. Infact they were not treated properly in schools, colleges or any public place. This injustice was, however, justified by the Bhraminical classes through religious sanctions, but people like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar played a major role in unfettering such people from pain, agony and hardships .He was a colonist in many fields and among his coexistent. He stands out as one who never trembled in his search for truth, equitableness and justice. He was of the views that there should be separate electoral system for the Untouchables and lower caste people. He also approved the concept of providing reservations for Dalits and other religious communities. Ambedkar started finding the ways to reach to the people and make them understand the disadvantages of the widespread social evils. He launched a newspaper called "Mooknayaka" (leader of the silent). In modern times, because of the patrimony of Mahatma Phule and Babarao Ambedkar, Dalit literature got propulsion in Maharashtra, who brought forth the issues of Dalits through their works and writings. This started a new trend and revolution in Dalit writing and inspired many Dalits to come forth with writings in Marathi, Hindi and Punjabi.

"Who Were the Shudras?" is a book written by B.R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar dedicated the book to Mahatma Jyotiba Phule (1827—1890). As Ambedkar opines about Mahatma Jyotiba Phule that he is "the Greatest Shudra of Modern India who made the lower classes of Hindus conscious of their slavery to the higher classes and who preached the gospel that for India social democracy was more vital than independence from foreign rule". In this book Ambedkar contends that the Shudras were initially Aryans associated to the Kshatriya class. Ambedkar further argues that the Brahmins brought about the degradation of the Shudras. Relations have also been drawn between the wide acceptance of Mahars in Hinduism as outcasts and untouchables due to their affirmation to Buddhist practices. Shudra were of two kinds, "pure" or "not-excluded" (aniravasita) and "excluded"

(niravasita). The latter were quite outside the pale of Hindu society, and were virtually indistinguishable from the great body of people later known as “Untouchables”. According to the brahmanical textbooks the chief duty of the pure shudra was to wait on the other three classes. He has to eat the remains of his master’s food, wear his cast-off clothing, and use his old furniture. Even when he had the opportunity of becoming wealthy he might not do so, “for shudra who makes money is distressing to the brahmans”. He had few rights and little value on his life as set in law. A brahman killing a shudra performed the same penance as for killing a cat or dog. The sudra was not allowed to hear or repeat the vedas. A land where shudras were numerous would suffer great misery.

Dr. Ambedkar is the best example in front of many Dalits in India. Dr. Ambedkar’s thought philosophy of life, and sacrifice and commitment for bringing a revolutionary change in life of the weaker section of the society. He made important endeavours at giving political rights and social liberty to Dalits. However, till date, members of Schedule Castes continue to face caste prejudices and biases. Untouchables are very poorly compensated for their labour and thus forced to live a pressurized life. Their diet is poor; their clothes are few and rarely clean; their homes are small, fragile and unhealthy; and they are hopelessly overwhelmed with debts. Poverty and indebtedness means bondage to and dependence on the village strong man of the moment. Social distance and exclusion are common in both villages and cities, and news reports about horrific atrocities against the dalits surface periodically. In my research paper, I have come across many instances in which social distance and exclusion translate into active discrimination in access to government services and employment.

Literature in the first place cannot be certainly occupied by Hindus but because due to the prejudices of not only the caste Hindus but the Muslims, Christians, and the majority of the Sikhs they could not attend school and colleges for several

years. Illiteracy therefore becomes a major blundering block in their interconnection with literature. Even where Dalit are literate and defining a new India, the majority are not highly educated or have a way to higher education. The Dalit writer must take nobility of such great people and write as a result of their responses, anticipate situations where their work would be heard as much as read. Amartya Sen in his book *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, says that “ identity-based thinking, as it is in the case of Dalits, can be subject to ‘brutal manipulations’. If dalit identity has its limitations and luxuries, provides comforts to its community, it also invites violence and terror from aggressive opponent groups that have a different identity and set of competing interests”.

Poems, short stories, novels and autobiographies written by Dalit writers provided useful discernments on the question of Dalit specification. Now the subaltern communities found a new name by coming together with the outlook that ‘Dalit is dignified’ thereby refusing the sub-human status levied on them by the Hindu social order. Dalit literature, being the most powerful form of literary expression today, has acquired a prestigious position in Indian English literature. It focuses on writing that includes Dalit characters, or descriptions of Dalit life and experiences. Influenced by post-modern literary movements, it questions mainstream literary theories and upper caste ideologies and explores the invisible twilight zones of neglected issues. The literature is essentially against exploitation, and made use of writing as a method of propaganda for the movement.

If we talk about the Dalit poetry then it has become popular, primarily through poetry readings and alternative media such as small magazines and posters and billboards and creative collective. Birds of a feather from other states of India were inspired by the liberating spirit, style straight, strong, poetic and moving images. Great poets like Narayan Survey, Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar, Arun Kamble, Macqwan Josef, Limbale Saran Kumar, Arun Dangle, and many other poets

wrote poetry Indian incredibly new in the sixties and seventies. It portrays the life and struggles of the lower strata, the lower caste. The importance of Dalit poetry in modern poetry in India is undoubtedly great. The emergence of a distinct Dalit poetry, literary participation and the creation of "texte of resistance" and "protest" literature" not only reflected changing consciousness but also symbolised the intensification of the Dalit quest for dignity and social justice. Movements could consolidate numerous socio-cultural and ecological in postcolonial India. Still, it's great and powerful even though some of its leaders were abducted at the power games of the ruling parties of the political class in India. Dalit poetry tends to invoke symbolic figures such as Shambuk, Eklavya, Buddha and of course Ambedkar, and to address broad themes of socio-political freedom, appealing to the revolutionary spirit of the reader (or hearer) to rise, Dalit short fiction reflects the reality of Dalit life in caste society. The scale of its subjects is less grand, often focusing on the struggles of the Dalit 'everyman', fighting for survival and respect in a casteist society, rural and urban.

Here I am describing about Mahatma Jyotirao Govindrao Phule, who occupies a scintillating position among the social reformers of Maharashtra in the nineteenth century. Without his efforts and endeavours Dalit class could not be reformed. While other reformers condensed more on reforming the social institutions of family and marriage with special significance on the status and rights of women, Jotirao Phule rebels against the unfair caste system under which millions of people had suffered for centuries. In particular, he courageously upheld the cause of the untouchables and took up the batons for the poorer peasants. He was a militant advocate of their rights. Mahatma Phule was an excellent writer, great scholar and philosopher. It is very clear that he had very revolutionary ideas and he expressed his ideas through his books. He had written many books namely *Tritiya Ratna* (1855), *Brahmanache Kasab* (1869), *Gulamgiri* (1873), *Shetkaryancha Asud* (1883),

Satsar Vol.1(1885), Satsar Vol. 2 (1885), Ishara (October 1,1885), saravajanik Satyadharma Pustak (this book was published posthumously). So in all, he worked whole life for achieving his motives i.e. compulsory universal education, women education and uplifting of lower caste people. He severely criticized the caste system through the books *Gulamgiri* (Servitude) and *Brahmananche Kasab* (Skill of the Brahmin). JyotiBhaPhule's writings sowed the seeds of development of the masses and propounded the spread of rational thinking, rejecting the need for a Brahmin priestly class as educational and religious leaders. His book 'Slavery' was dedicated 'to the good people of the United States as a token of admiration for their sublime, disinterested and self-sacrificing devotion in the cause of Negro Slavery'. He is regarded as the most important figure of social reform movement in India. He is regarded as the father of Indian social revolution.

The fact that Dalits have the intellectual ability to creatively reflect on and analyse their conditions historically, sociologically and in their own language has been missed out. Thus, the efforts of dalits and their self-perception to represent "themselves to themselves and to others" in their own terms needs explanation and elucidation. Furthermore, the emergence of well informed Dalit thinkers, commentators, etc. affords ample opportunity to examine the way in which Dalitssymbolise their experience of oppressive subjugation and struggle to create new socio-cultural identities and ideological bases for autonomous reflection and self-action. It must be stressed that the literary representation of Dalit resentment and anger towards upper caste dominance as the manifestation of their self awareness, consciousness and imagination has been a historical phenomenon.

Joothan by OmprakashValmiki is one such work of Dalit literature, first published in Hindi in 1997. It's written from the personal experiences of dalit who rises to prominence from his marginalized presence. Omprakash Valmiki's voice is today

recognized as an empowered voice of a writer who works on behalf of Dalits. Himself born in a desperately poor family in North India, the lowest caste in Indian society, a community of the illiterate Untouchables, he describes from his personal experiences the torments of the Dalits who even have no right to fight for education or food. He describes how these people are subject to an institutionalized slavery. It is a memoir of growing up 'untouchable' starting in the 1950s outside a typical village in Uttar Pradesh. Told as a series of piercing vignettes, *Joothanis* also a remarkable record of a rare Indian journey, one that took a boy from extremely wretched socio-economic conditions to prominence as an author. A social critic "*Joothan*" literally means scraps of food left on a plate, destined for the garbage or for the family pet in a middle-class urban home. It is related to the word "jootha," which means polluted and such scraps are characterized as "joothan" only if someone else eats them. India's untouchables have been forced to accept and eat "joothan" for their subsistence for centuries. *Joothan* begins by a detailed description of the poor living surroundings of the Chuhra community, where poverty reigned supreme. The lack of civic amenities, and poor sanitation facilities were the curse of that dwelling place. Animals like pigs and human beings shared the same living place as there no other place to go. The writer's childhood was spent here and it had a formative influence on his character, as he wanted to liberate himself from it at any cost. The word encapsulates the pain, humiliation, and poverty of this community, which has lived at the bottom of India's social pyramid for millennia. As a document of the long silenced and long denied sufferings of the Dalits, *Joothan* is not only a contribution to the archives of Dalit history, but a manifesto for the revolutionary transformation of society and human consciousness. In order for any progress to be made, the government must take a stand and enforce the anti-caste discrimination laws currently in place. Dalit must also be afforded equality and proportional representation in society, government and each state organ

with due consideration to Dalit women.

According to Omprakash Valmiki, perhaps the most well-known scion of the Hindi Dalit literary sphere after the English translation and publication of his autobiography *Joothanin* 2003, Dalit consciousness is elemental in opposing the cultural inheritance of the upper castes, the notion that culture is a hereditary right for them, and one that is denied to Dalits. He suggests, "Dalit consciousness is deeply concerned with the question, 'Who am I? What is my identity?' The strength of character of Dalit authors comes from these questions." In Valmiki's sense of the term, Dalit consciousness is what gives Dalit literature its unique power. There are those, however, like Anita Bharati, who challenge that Dalit 'consciousness' as it has thus far been defined and applied to literature occludes the feminist consciousness of Dalit women, one which frequently finds affinity with the broader Indian feminist movement. Further, as many urban, educated Dalits climb the ladder of social class, they have had to struggle to fit their narratives of modern alienation and crises of identity into the rubric of a literature of oppression that finds its most salient expression in the narratives of atrocity and exploitation in the village. For many Dalit writers today, these are simply no longer their personal experiences.

Dalit literature represents a powerful, emerging trend in the Indian literary scene. Given its overarching preoccupations with the location of Dalits in the caste-based Hindu society, and their struggles for dignity, justice and equality, this literature is by nature oppositional. With the growing translation of works by Dalit writers from various regional languages into English, Dalit literature is poised to acquire a national and an international presence as well as to pose a major challenge to the established notions of what constitutes literature and how we read it. It has indeed created its own alternative aesthetic by redrawing the map of literature, by discovering and exploring a whole new continent of experience that had so far been left to darkness and silence, by helping literature

overcome stagnation through a cleansing renewal, by disturbing the sterile complacency of the dominant social groups, and by challenging their set mores and fixed modes of looking at reality, their stale habits of ordering knowledge, beauty and power and their established literary canons, bringing to focus neglected, suppressed or marginalised aspects of experience, vision, language and reality and forcing the community to refashion its tools and observe itself critically from fresh and different angles.

The other towering personality that am going to discuss in the paper is Sharan Kumar Limbale. Sharan Kumar Limbale is an illustrious Dalit writer in India who has authored extensively up to forty books including his autobiography *Akkarmashi* (The Outcaste) and is currently Professor and Regional Director of Yashavantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University and his creative interest rests on the Dalit struggle and identity. As he says that “Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar’s thoughts and movements inspired me to write. The pains and pangs of Indian Dalits are subject of my literature. I stand for human dignity. The world of oppressed is the battlefield for me”. *Sharankumar Limbale's Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature : History, Controversies and Considerations*, is the first critical work by an eminent Dalit writer to appear in English, is a provocative and thoughtful account of the debates among Dalit writers on how Dalit literature should be read. It is considered as most resourceful book on Dalit criticism. The aim of Dalit Literature is to protest against the established system which is based on injustice and to expose the evil and hypocrisy of the higher castes. There is an urgent need to create a separate aesthetics for Dalit literature, an aesthetics based on the real experiences of life. (*The Aesthetics of Dalit Literature*) This unique branch of aesthetics is most expressive in autobiographies as the experiences they portray are peculiar only to the communities in which they are born into. Limbale projects before the readers an objective and disinterested account of his life from birth to

adulthood, carefully creating the image of his community in conflict with the contemporary social and cultural conditions. Dalit Literature abounds in genuine descriptions of untouchability and poverty in an uncouth day-to-day spoken language. The insurmountable challenge faced by Limbale and other Dalits as young children is hunger. The writer has dwelt on the basic need of man over and over again all throughout the book. When asked if he was being unhappy with the prefix 'dalit', he shook his head. "I take pride in being called a dalit writer. Our literature is not a form of art, it is a movement. I identify myself as a writer of the movement. It is not written to entertain or amuse. It is a literature of pain and struggle. We'll lose our identity if we are referred to as just writers," he said. Limbale is against assessing dalit literature with the same criteria used for mainstream literature. "The criteria should not be the same as our style, our problems, our ideology is different from the mainstream. It can't be judged by a person belonging to a different class." The English translation of Limbale's work, titled 'The Outcaste' and 'Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature' are considered one of the most important works on dalit literature. On the progress made in the dalit movements in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, the author said he was averse to sub-categorising dalits. "Our pains and problems are the same. They compel us to come under the common umbrella of being a dalit irrespective of whether we are Tamil, Marathi or Punjabi. Language is often a barrier, but our problems help us surmount the hurdle," he said.

Now, am writing a little about the Hindi Dalit literature, whose narratives exhibit a dominant style of melodramatic realism, often using a sort of exposé storytelling style that at once reveals the insidious exploitation of Dalits while speaking in a highly emotional register. Hindi Dalit literature, in its social-activist role, orients itself towards two specific target audiences: a Dalit audience among whom it intends to foster political consciousness, and a non-Dalit audience for whom it endeavours to reveal the 'reality' of caste society. Navaria

colourfully compares the realist aesthetic of Dalit literature to the necessity of lancing a cyst on the body of Hindu society; while the material that such a cyst releases may be off-putting, its cathartic release is necessary for the healing of the social body. Recent development in Dalit short stories explores accounts of alienation, loss and longing among a young, urban, educated generation of Dalits who must navigate a rupture of family and community as a consequence of their political awakening.

These brief survey aptly show that the primary business of a writer of fiction is to attack the social snobbery and prejudice, superstitions and untouchability. They seem to urge for an attitude full of love and sympathy for the millions mass living under the poverty line and leading a life worse than an animal.

Finally, it is important to stress that Dalit literature is not simply a body of disparate texts that address similar themes of marginality and resistance. Rather, it is a living, breathing literary movement that is intent on establishing itself as an integral part of the field of Indian literature. The fundamental goal of Dalit writers in establishing and carefully guarding the boundaries of their own emerging literary genre is to exercise control over their own representation: in history, literature and the public imagination.

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