
Dalit Literary Discourse : Mapping the Journey from Pain to Tale

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ABSTRACT

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The Present paper traces the journey of Dalit Literature in India and representation of Dalit Characters in the works of Indian Writers. Dalits, the marginalized, *outcastes*, have undergone a long period of hard sufferings and travails till Dalit Literature has come of an age in Post- Independence Era with some canonical Indian texts by the writers like Premchand. Dalit Literature in India emerged for the first time in Marathi and from thereon it went on in other Southern states and then to Northern regions of India. The paper also interweaves in it the famous Dalit Characters like Gangi, Velutha, Bakha of the Untouchables Chamar family of *A Fine Balance*; Dalits Portrayed by Bama. *Towards An Aesthetics of Dalit Literature* is a famous critical work in the area of Dalit Literature by Dalit writer Sharan Kumar Limbale. The literary works voiced the community's pangs and it became united resultantly to find a better treatment in the society and became united for their cause. Its aestheticism lies in the challenges and pains borne by the Dalits. Dalit works are an emancipation of the community.

India is the largest democracy of the world but being caste structured society, there are certain classes of people which have been marginalized in history or altogether excluded from it. These are basically Dalit people.

Dalits have waged a long arduous and bitter struggle against oppressive caste discriminations, economic exploitation, marginalized political participation and an unjust social order. Dalit movement in India has a history of one hundred years. Many social workers for example Mahatma Jyotirao Phule dedicated their whole life for Dalit's cause. Some thinkers and revolutionary leaders such as Dr. Ambedkar emerged as an icon for them and did a great deal for their upliftment.

Through his examinations of Indian history, mythology and the sacred texts of Hinduism, Ambedkar made a powerful case for a distinct Dalit identity. His work enabled future generations of Dalits to assert themselves as subjects through political activism, organizing and literacy and critical writing. Inspired by the work of Ambedkar, writers like Limbale have produced an important body of literature that narrates Dalit reality and experience.

Arjun Dangle, the Marathi Dalit writer, editor and activist, traces the origin of Dalit literature to Ambedkar. His revolutionary ideas stirred into action all the Dalits of Maharashtra and gave them a new self-respect. Dalit literature is nothing but the literary expression of this awareness. It is the resurgent voice of this considerable section of Indian society which has been marginalized in history or altogether excluded from it. It is a literature of protest, of dissent, of demythologizing and of the search for lost identity. It is in an important sense, the insider's report of the actual condition of deprivation, misery, indignity and exploitation in which the Dalit

community has been compelled to live for centuries.

The portrayal of Dalit characters is found rarely in Indian literature written till 1970. Dalit literature first emerged in Marathi. It was natural that Dalit literature exploded in Marathi, because of the movement started by Phule, Ambedkar and Shahu Maharaj in Maharashtra whereas in other languages they lack such heritage of revolutionary leaders. The three leaders tried to prove through their ideas, actions and movement that it is with the scriptures, social system and the inequality in the system that we disagree. It is a challenge for us to come out of evil customs, icons, outmoded outlook and age old scriptures. So Dalit literature in Marathi started with human values and this is what nourishes or generates literature. It is natural that Dalit literary movement started in Maharashtra.

There are certain other reasons why Dalit literature did not emerge strongly in other languages of India. The depressed or the rejected classes of society have the potentiality but they were deprived of the opportunities. In other states Dalits were educated and jobs were reserved for them and they shifted to cities. In Maharashtra Dalits are found aggressive to hunt for the opportunities in every field of life. By the 1970s, a sufficient corpus of Dalit Literature had developed so that, according to Dangle, 'thinking Dalit critics began to theorize on Dalit literature and its role':

Dalit literature is not simply literature. Dalit literature is associated with movements to bring about change. At the very first glance, it will be strongly evident that there is no established critical theory or point of view behind them i.e. [Dalit writings], instead, there is new thinking and a new point of view. (Dangle vii-viii)

Being 'purposive', Dalit literature is, to use an old phrase, a literature of commitment. Contemporary Marathi Dalit Literature emerged from a political movement the Dalit Panthers which many of the Dalit writers are instrumental in finding it. Sharan Kumar Limbale is one of them and one of Maharashtra's prominent Dalit writer-activists, author of several novels and story collections about Dalit life. His *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*, is the first critical work by an eminent Dalit writer to appear in English. Here Limbale argues that Dalit literature serves its radical function through its authentic representation of the Dalit reality. The Dalit no longer remains invisible. In the process of creating their authentic representations, Dalit writers expose and deconstruct those manufactured versions and process of history and society that have been invoked through the centuries to legitimize the caste system.

Limbale argues that Dalit literature is 'unique' and 'distinct'. The relationship of Dalits to the upper caste Hindu society is unparalleled. It is a relationship of domination subordination, constituted by invoking the power of sacred texts. The literature that Dalit writers have created emerged from this relationship and is an integral part of the political struggle to overturn it. In a profound sense, then, this literature engages with the Foucauldian Power knowledge paradigm. Limbale defines Dalit Literature in these words:

By Dalit literature, I mean writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness. The form of Dalit literature is inherent in its Dalitness and its purpose is obvious to inform Dalit society of its slavery, and narrate pain and suffering to upper caste Hindus. (Limbale 19)

Dalit writers believe that their literature should be analyzed from a sociological perspective focused on social values than on beauty. An exclusively aesthetic consideration of Dalit literature will disregard the Dalit writer's fundamental role and hence is not acceptable to Dalit writers. So Dalit literature is precisely that literature which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by Dalits every human being must find liberty, honour, security and freedom from intimidation by the powerful elements of society. These values are now being articulated in a particular kind of literature its name being

Dalit literature. Recognizing the centrality of the human being, this literature is thoroughly saturated with humanity's joys and sorrows. It regards human beings as supreme and leads them towards total revolution. There are certain exceptional literatures who tell about the life of the downtrodden community including Dalits.

It first began in Marathi and then in other regions of India in 1985. Omprakash Valmiki published his autobiography *Joothan* which started Dalit literature in the region. Omprakash was a clerk in a central government office based in Maharashtra. From there he came into contact with Dalit movement in Maharashtra. He understood what Dalit literature is and from this got inspiration to write his autobiography. Marathi Dalit Literature has developed in multiple ways. Nearly all literary forms including novel, poetry, drama, short story, and autobiography have expressed dalit awareness, but in Hindi only through autobiography novel and short stories has Dalit sensibility been expressed. In Marathi Namdev Dhasal's poetry is unparalleled in expressing Dalit consciousness. Others such as Daya Pawar, Sharan Kumar Limbale, Yashwant Manohar, Waman Nimbalkar and a dozen others contributed to Marathi Dalit poetry. Such range and depth is not found in other languages of India. In Eastern India they do not have the tradition of literature in written form but in Assme the sufferings of the Dalit have been powerfully expressed in creative literature. West Bengal & Kerala both these states were under the influence of leftist. Marxist philosophy is focused on the theory of economic inequality as being the base of social inequality. In Bangla and Malayalam literature the life of the working class community has been projected. Arundhati Roy, a Malayalam Bengali novelist, wrote the novel *The God of Small Things* in English and won the Booker Prize in 1997. The conflict between the upper class Christian has been portrayed in this novel at the micro level. In Malayalam Dalit sensitivity has been clearly revealed through drama, novels, short stories and poetry.

Kannada and Telugu Dalit literature originated through contact with Marathi Dalit literature. Mahatma Baseweshwar is considered as the second great leader after Buddha who revolted against the 'vedic' and 'varna' system of religion. About the validity of the principles set forth in the scriptures, U.R. Ananthamurti raises many questions in his novel *Samskara*. But until 1980s there was no distinctive type of literature in Kannada called 'Dalit literature'. The movement of Dalit literature started in Telugu after 1980. It drew inspiration from the ideas of Dr. Ambedkar and from the creative vitality of Marathi Dalit literature. Instead of autobiography, poetry and novel have registered remarkable achievement. Kannada Dalit writing was influenced by the philosophy of Ambedkar, Lohia, Marx and the leftist movement. Outstanding Kannada Dalit writers such as Siddalingaiah, Chennanna Waiker and Devanur Mahadev have produced original works.

Gujarati and Marathi are closely related. So the innovative trends that occur in the literature, culture and dramatics of one language affects the other. It is sure that the movement comes to Gujarathi Literature through Marathi. In Punjab, there are the followers of Sikh religion. As the religion is based on the principle of equality there could be no movement of Dalit literature in Punjabi.

Acute expressions of Dalit sensibility are not visible in Oriya literature also.

In the Hindi speaking states such as Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Haryana, and Himachal Pradesh and even in the newly formed states like Uttarakhand or Chhattisgarh, the inspiration was from Kabir.

Dalit literature is based on reality of Indian society. It has come of age now, though it's roots were laid very early during the Bhakti Period of Hindi literature. Poets such a Meera Bai, Kabir gave voice to it in their writings. It was openly voiced by the pioneering figure of Modern Hindi Literature, Premchand (1880 – 1936), whose writings were very realistic. He raised this Dalit

issue in his renowned work *Godan* where here is a depiction of Dalit life. There are so many Dalit characters e.g. Hori, his wife Dhaniya, his son Goverdhan and many others. His story the 'Thakur's Well' exposes the cruelty of caste-ridden society. In this story when Gangi went to bring water for her ailed husband Gangu, he said:

You'll come back with your arms and legs broken, that's all. You'd better just sit down and keep quiet. The Brahman will give a curse the Thakur will beat you with a stick, and that money lending shopkeeper takes five for everyone he gives. Do you think people like that are going to let, you draw water from their wells. (Premchand 52).

Gangi suddenly felt very angry,

why was she so low and those others so high? Because they wear a thread around their necks? There wasn't one of them in the village who wasn't rotten. They stole, they cheated, and they lied in court. Then how were they so high and might? (Premchand 53).

It was the reality during Premchand's time. After Nineteen forty-seven Dalit literature was established as a stream by Hindi writers such as Omprakash Valmiki, Mata Prasad, Jagdish Chandra etc.

Our Nation father' Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) has envisioned a casteless India. It is not so Bama also responded in an interview, that people of other countries think that there is no untouchability in India as Gandhi has abolished untouchability. 'It is not true Even today it exists. May be in different forms. But it is there,' Bama opines. Today our politicians seem keen in dividing our society on the lines of caste. This, they believe, will help them garner minority votes. This time caste-based census since the common man was against this bill.

Buddhist Dalit writer Kancha Illaiah in his essay, excerpted from the eponymous book, '**Why I am not a Hindu**' tells the reader about the wide gulf that exists between, Dalit children and upper caste children in terms of their life at school, their viability to identify with what they are taught and the value systems that are prevalent in their communities. It ends with a call for a change in ways of thinking, the recognition of the need to write a new version of history and the need to change the social fabric of Indian society.

Tamil Dalit writer Bama's works are about the various as-pects of Dalit people's lives and also portray differences. In her work *Sangati* she adopts feminist persona and depicts the fights between men and women of Dalit community. About this, she was asked a question, then she said in *Sangati* that Dalit woman is doubly oppressed and the Dalit man let her down before the non-Dalit. When asked what, is the role of Dalit men for the empowerment of Dalit Women? Then she responded:

... a Dalit men should encourage Dalit women, treat them as equals and hold on to Dalit culture again. Dalit women do not actually depend on Dalit men because they are equally earning members, face the same problems and are very bold whether there is a man or not, that is not a big thing for them really. As I had written, this tying of the thali, considering marriage as a sacred thing is not our culture. If he is dead, okay he is dead and gone. Let me live my life that is the mentality. Otherwise he is gone that is the end of my life. No, nobody thinks like that among Dalit women. (Interview with Bama)

In *Vanmam* she talks about the two groups of same community and their internal strifes. *Karukku* deals with the tension between the self and the community, the narrator leaves one community (of religious women) in order to join another (as Dalit woman). The story collection *Harum-Scarum-Saar* deals with general life happenings of Dalits.

The present day Dalit Literature get momentum in 1990s and Bama's works are also of this era. Although in Hindi and Marathi it began in 1960s. We can trace the journey of modern Dalit literature with Manu Joseph's debut novel *Serious Men*. It is about the sly scheming Dalit

Buddhist Ayyan Mani who almost gets away with passing off of his partially deaf son.

An undisguised contempt for women and Dalits goes hand in hand with the ancient Brahminical book of social codes, the *Manusmriti*, and Joseph decidedly lives up to his first name.

Indian diasporic writer Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, published 15 years ago, chronicles the travails of a Chamar family in a north Indian village and follows two characters, uncle Ishwar and his nephew Omprakash.

There is no mention of a figure like B.R. Ambedkar or of Dalit movements, neither in the 1940s, where the novel's past is set nor in the Emergency period of the 1970s. Mistry follows the road charted by predecessors like Raja Rao (*Kanthapura*) and Mulk Raj Anand (*Untouchable*) or in Hindi, by the likes of Premchand. Sixty years after Premchand, Mistry's literary imagination seems stuck in the empathy realism mode, trapping Dalits without any respect for themselves. Mistry happily continues the broad stereotypes of the Dalit as a passive sufferer, without conscious of caste politics. Dalit movements were also active during the backdrop of Mistry's novel. Ambedkar's birth anniversary was being celebrated in faraway Hyderabad in the 1930s, as the Dalit historian P R Ventakaswamy notes in *Our Struggle for Emancipation* published in 1995. In the northern belt Swami Achutanand of Kanpur, who ran the newspaper *Achut* in the early 20th century, was considered as an architect of Dalit consciousness. Around the same time, Chandrika Prasad Jigyash, a Lucknow chamar, was reconstructing Ravidas, a revered ascetic born in the Chamar caste. By the turn of the 20th century, in other words, Dalits and lower order Shudras in much of Northern, Southern, Eastern and western India were in protest mode, resisting the overtures of the congress led nationalist anti-colonial movement and waging struggles more pertinent to their own liberation. In fact such challenges began emerging in the mid-19th century across the sub continents. Jyotirao Phule (1827-90) who viciously attacked the congress, Brahminical nationalism and established the Satyashodhak Samaj (Truth-Seekers Society).

Non-Dalit writers also wrote about Dalits. They portrayed their characters in different way as Arundhati Roy's Velutha in *The God of Small Things*, Amitav Ghosh's Fokir in *The Hungry Tide* and more recently his Kalu in *Sea of Poppies*. Here the writers seek to bestow agency on their Dalit characters, but again their portrayals do not keep pace with an awareness of the history of the evolving realities of Dalit politics, specifically, the assertion of Dalit identity and the consciousness of caste oppression.

It is not that Non-Dalit writers do not have the enlightened right to portray Dalits, there cannot be any literary policing on such a subject. But, as K. Satyanarayana who pioneered the teaching of a Dalit Studies course in the English and Foreign languages university in Hyderabad, observed, "Despite their serious commitment Non-Dalit writers miss the dreams, desires and visions of Dalits and objectify them either victims or romanticize them as great people. This continues to be a serious problem."

In popular and academic usage, 'Dalit' has come to function as a politically correct substitute for terms like Scheduled Caste, Harijan, Untouchable or the Depressed Classes. But Dalit has an emancipatory potential which caste and jati categories like Chamar and Brahmin do not; Dalit is not a caste, but an anti-caste subjectivity that someone born into untouchability occupies by rejecting caste.

The political and literary ferment of the 1970s remained confined to the Marathi context throwing up names like Namdeo Dhasal, Narayan Surve, Baburao Bagul, Hira Bansode and Daya Pawar.. It was only after 1990 Ambedkar centenary and the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations that a Dalit literary upsurge began in Tamil, Telugu,

Kannada, Hindi, Punjabi and Malayalam. This coincided with the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party, founded by Kanshi Ram and now led by Mayawati, which gave nationwide currency to the term Dalit.

It is not as if Dalits were not writing previously but literature by Dalits with an anti-caste consciousness seemed to need the charged atmosphere of the 1990s. In its early phase, poetry, and the short story and autobiography remained the chosen mode of expression. But in the past five to ten years Dalit literature appears to have taken a new term veering away from the first generation writing that over emphasized politics and protest. The work of this new generation, however, is not easily or frequently translated into English and sometimes even resists the process. It is the journey of these writers that needs our attention today.

The journey of modern Dalit literature has been a difficult one. But even though it has not necessarily enjoyed the support of members. We must engage with what Dalits are writing not simply for reasons of authenticity, or as a concession to identity politics, but simply because of the aesthetic value of this body of writing and for the insights it offers into the human condition. In a society that is still largely unwilling to recognize Dalits as equal, rights bearing human beings, in a society that is inherently indifferent to the everyday violence against Dalits and their near total ghettoisation in various spheres of social and cultural activity, in a society unwilling to share social and cultural resources equitably with Dalits unless mandated by law (as seen in the anti-reservation discourse) Dalit literature has the potential to humanise non-Dalits and sensitize them to a world into which they have no insight.

Today the transformative power of Dalit literature seems to primarily lie in its ability to humanize non-Dalits. The time has come when readers can choose how they wish to know Dalits, as Joseph's Conman Ayyan Mani and his dim son Adi, as Mistry's pitiable Dukhi and Omprakash or as Rao's Ruth, Yellai's Kakka or Kali Parha. The choice exists.

Dalit literature in Tamil until 1980s was regarded as a literature written by the Dalits for the Dalits. Later, it has developed itself into a genre that speaks for all the oppressed including women and protests against all traditional social establishments. While doing so, Dalit literature consciously creates a counter culture and politics. Dalit writers make use of literature to express their sufferings, cultural exploitation and also their political positioning. The self-expressive writings by Bama, especially her novels *Karukku* (1992) and *Sangati* (1994) in Tamil, unravel the miseries of a Dalit woman in the Christian nunnery. In this sense like any progressive literature. Dalit literature is also a cultural phenomenon that craves for social recognition for the Dalits.

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