
Mapping the Advance of Dalit Literature: An Outline

Dr. Shweta Mishra

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Maharaja Bijli Pasi Government P.G. College, Ashiana, Lucknow

ABSTRACT

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Dalit Literature is an ever-burgeoning branch of literary aesthetics. Dalit writers realised that their experiences are extremely painful and there is a stark distinction between their perception of life and its events, and the perception of the hegemonic groups, and so the mainstream literature can in no way match their experiential journey of trauma, psychological setbacks, poor self-esteem, self-doubt, self-hate and self-negation. It has taken several years for them to realise, stand and fight against the unfair treatment and injustices. Thus, no canonical space can adjust to their literary theme, pattern, language, structure, soul and melody. Theirs is a unique work of art and should have different aesthetic standards to calibre and to present a critique about it.

Corresponding author :

drshweta1578@gmail.com

The present paper aims to study the evolving of this branch of marginalised literature called Dalit Literature, focussing from the origin of the caste-structure, the sanctioning of it by the higher castes, by making it a law that those born into Dalit families are the unfortunate ones to be shunned as outcasts for the entire life and to be bound to menial jobs for good, to discussing about the key writers and key characteristic features of Dalit literature.

'Dalit', the existence of this term, and the fact that this term refers to a certain group of people, who have been suppressed in the name of caste, tribe, poverty, raises a question on humanity, and on the very basics of humanitarianism.

The Dalit is one ... who has been pronounced socially unsuitable by the *savarnas*. The meaning has also been extended to include the Marxist meaning of dispossessed. Thus the meaning expands beyond untouchables, backward castes and classes, Buddhists, converts to include even women and all those who are situated in the bottommost rungs of society. Some Dalit writers have taken the definition of Dalit to include all those who are mentioned in the list in the Indian Constitution, of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, including nomadic peoples. People who have been notified criminals because they belong to a particular tribe, the *Adivasi*, who is exploited and forced to remain in the forest, the nomads who have no space to call their own, are all Dalits. (egyankosh.ac.in/)

These are the marginal sections of the human society and their history, stories, and, narratives have evolved as an important branch of study within Literature. The journey of suppression always finds a turn towards resistance, rebellion, and self-realisation. And, then begins the process of assertion and the shift from margin to centre. With the growth in subaltern

studies and researches on the concept of marginality, there has been a natural inclination towards the understanding of Dalit writings and this interest is revealed in the discourses related to its etymology and its epistemology.

Prior to venturing into the important Dalit writings and the pioneering works done in this field, it is necessary to delve into the Vedic texts and scriptures that have mentioned the term “*shudra*” or have talked about the division of society into *varnas*. It is a different matter altogether, and debatable, that the scriptures have been criticised for propagating the idea of division, but parallel to this blistering wave there have been positive interventions and arguments that support the scriptures and disseminate the idea of misinterpretation, misreading and distortion of these verses by social groups to serve self-vested interests.

Ideally speaking, no Supreme power will maintain or design unequal laws. The accusation of this action lies entirely with humanity. As told by Plato, any concept is perfect till it has not got a physical form or structure, and, the moment it gets a form the scope for pollution and corruption increases manifold.

In Yajurveda, chapter 31, verse 11, reads as follows:

ब्राह्मणोस्य मुखमासीद्वाहू राजन्यः कृतः ।
ऊरु तदस्य यद्वैश्यः पदभ्याँ शूद्रोऽजायत ॥

(vedicscriptures.in/)

Bhraamanoasya mukhamaaseed, baahoo raajanyah kritah I
Ooru tadasya yad vaishyah, padbhyaam shoodro ajaayata II

(greenmesg.org/)

The above verse can be translated as follows:

*From his mouth came forth
The men of learning
And of his arms
Were warriors made
From his thighs came
The trading people
And his feet gave
Birth to servants*

(ramanuja.org/)

(His, here, refers to the *Virat*, that is the iconographical form of the Supreme Lord, the Omnipresent Being, the Divine and Cosmic form of God)

This means that the human body and so the system of this world has been so established that just as the different parts of the body have different functions to perform and together they all optimally function for best results, similarly, the human society with thinkers, philosophers, warriors, soldiers, government officials, businessmen, farmers, workers, all function in a societal machinery for optimum results.

In *Shrimad Bhagwad Gita*, chapter 18, verse 41, Lord Krishna says to Arjuna,

ब्राह्मणक्षत्रियविशां शूद्राणां च परन्तप

कर्माणि प्रविभक्तानि स्वभावप्रभवैर्गुणैः ॥ ४१ ॥

*brāhmaṇa-kṣhatriya-viśhām śhūdrāṇām cha parantapa
karmāṇi pravibhaktāni svabhāva-prabhavair guṇaiḥ*

(www.holy-bhagavad-gita.org/chapter/18/verse/41)

This means:

Of scholars (brahmanas), of leaders (kshatriyas), and of traders (vaishyas), as also of workers (shudras), O Parantapa, the duties are distributed according to the qualities born of their own nature.

(shlokam.org/)

And, in chapter 4, verse 13, Lord Krishna says to Arjuna,

चातुर्वर्ण्यं मया सृष्टं गुणकर्मविभागशः ।

तस्य कर्तारमपि मां विद्ध्यकर्तारमव्ययम् ॥ १३ ॥

*chātur-varṇyam mayā sṛiṣṭam guṇa-karma-vibhāgaśhaḥ
tasya kartāram api mām viddhyakartāram avyayam*

(www.holy-bhagavad-gita.org/chapter/4/verse/13)

This means,

The four categories of occupations were created by Me according to people's qualities and activities. Although I am the Creator of this system, know Me to be the Non-doer and Eternal.

(www.holy-bhagavad-gita.org/chapter/4/verse/13)

Thus, on the basis of *guna* (qualities) and *karma* (activities), (not on the basis of birth), this social division has been done.

The term 'Dalit' has been derived from the Sanskrit word '*dal*' which means "oppressed", "downtrodden", "crushed" or "broken to pieces". Thus, etymologically 'dalit' ('*dalan*' in Hindi), hints towards that group of people who have been ostracised, humiliated and exploited and whose egos have been crushed to dust time and again. The literature that delves into the pangs and sufferings of these people falls in the category of Dalit literature and is regarded as the voice of those marginalised groups or communities who have been subject to discrimination and have not been allowed to live an equally respectful life and who have been forced to do menial jobs and not allowed to come at par with the mainstream society. Significant thinkers, philosophers and social reformers who are associated with the coining of this term or who have done pioneering work in the field of fighting for the rights and voices of these subjugated people are Jyotirao Phule and B.R. Ambedkar. The term was chosen with widespread acceptance over Gandhian *Harijan*.

The rejection of the *Gandhian Harijan* is indeed the beginning of our understanding of a Dalit identity. Gandhi thought of the untouchables as an intrinsic part of the Hindu

community. The appellation of *Harijan* or people of *Hari*, gave them in his eyes, a special place as god's chosen people. He made several statements about how he himself was a *Harijan* by choice and opposed the demand for separate electorates for the Dalits with a fast unto death till the English and Ambedkar catapulted in the Poona Pact of 1932. The Dalits resent Gandhi's pressure and the consequent denial of separate electorates for them that kept them out of political power for decades. They reject the Hindu pantheon and its exploitative and discriminating icons. (egyankosh.ac.in/)

The Hindus followed a traditional caste or varna system; under this hierarchical division of castes, the topmost slot was occupied by the *Brahmins*, the next in importance were *Kshatriyas*, followed by *Vaishyas*, and at the lowermost step of this ladder were the *Shudras*. It is maintained that the Dalits were those unfortunate beings who did not belong to any of these varnas and were even below the shudras, out of this power structure and thus their subjugation was justified. The stigmas that are associated with Dalits exist because of the so-called society-imposed multiple lacks which seem ineffaceable. Apart from socio-economic reasons that declare them poor, illiterate, filthy (due to the kind of jobs they have to resort to for survival or because society does not let them into the main flow for a better living standard, better education, better health facilities, and so on) but they are also grounded down or ostracised for the reasons that are beyond their power to select, beyond their hands to choose, like the choice of birth, the choice of caste, the choice of family. This way, no matter what creative genius, moral genius or any other craftsmanship or leadership traits he or she might have, being a 'dalit' brings about an end to all the potential abilities and reduces the individual to a base existence where he or she has to survive with a sense of worthlessness and no self-esteem.

Distinguishing between *jati*, that is, caste, and *varna*, it has been explained thus: "The concept of *jati*, refers to the experience of caste in the concrete and factual domain of everyday social life. *Varna*, on the other hand, is a scheme of only four symbolic archetypes – propounded in certain Hindu sacred scriptures – which transcend specific regional associations, and which are most commonly understood as a ranked order of precedence of idealized human callings." (www.globalministries.org/)

Interestingly, not just in India, even globally, there have been communities that have been subject to oppression for ages, and thus fall in the category of Dalits. In India, from the constitutional abolition of slavery to the policy of 'reservation', and other legislative measures, there have been steps taken to uplift the weaker sections of society, but the age-old problem of marginality and exclusion cannot be removed easily because there are other layers to it, like, psychological and emotional turmoil, which cannot be ignored. The deep incorporations on the mind that scar the psyche for several generations are an irredeemable harm.

Finding no room in canonical literature, Dalit literature rejects the established system of literary tradition claiming that mainstream literature nourishes the privileged and higher castes and classes. In the Dalit literary meet (*Dalit Sahitya Sammelan*) of 1958 in Bombay, Anna Bhau Sathe (regarded as the founding father of Dalit Literature) in the inaugural speech asserts the need to have Dalit literature:

The representation of dalits in literature is like a shadow seen in a wavy lake: shaky and distorted. This dalit is the heart of the society. This heart beats permeably. It has joyous, sorrowful, tender and hard feelings in it. Nobody takes cognisance of how and where these feelings are materialized. Unless a writer understands why this exploited person has to put in such painful manual labour he will not be able to create literature for and of Dalits. To understand the unfathomable life of a dalit, the writer has to have an ethereal

vision. He has to be devoted and impersonal to that social group. And he has to believe in the reasonable struggles for justice and ultimate triumph of the dalits. Thus, this writer has to be an idealist and has to have this kind of imagination. (Speech translated by Dr. Anil Ashok Sonawane; *New Man International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*)

Dalit literature is revolutionary and speaks about equality, liberty and justice. Writings of leaders like Jyotiba Phule, S.M. Mate and Dr B.R. Ambedkar paved the way and inspired many Dalit writers. Under the influence of U.S. Dalit Panthers and Bhimrao Ambedkar, educated youth from the slums of Mumbai, started the Dalit Panther Movement in June 1972. The co-founders of Dalit Panther Movement were poets and writers Namedo Dhasal, Raja Dhale, J. V. Pawar, and Arun Kamble, who came up with poetry and short stories that challenged the established norms, were infused with revolutionary ideas, and talked about atrocities on Dalits, and their strife for change. The identity of Dalit literature lies in its efforts to make the downtrodden aware of the servitude that they have been subject to since ages and to raise a voice for their rights and to voice their pain and sufferings.

The Indian aesthetic system is founded on the ground of *Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram*, that is, Truth, Goodness and Beauty, but Dalit literature does not find a consolation in this ideal structure owing to its vast background and history of oppression. Sharankumar Limbale's magnum opus *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations* (2010), is his seminal contribution on Dalit aesthetics. "It conveys a poetics that is subversive and resists canonical logic. The canvas offered is experiential in nature and the language used engages one, being poetic, counter-hegemonic and counter-brahmanical." (Shruti Das)

Limbale comments that the traditional values of Satyam, Shivam and Sundaram, are not applicable in context of Dalit aesthetics as they are fabrications used to exploit common people. This aesthetic trinity only benefits the upper caste and has been formulated to suppress the lower ones. This concept should be replaced with a more social and material concept. Limbale then posits some counter values to Satyam, Shivam and Sundaram that Dalit Literature espouses. He considers viewing human beings, first and foremost as humans irrespective of their class and creed as Satyam; the liberation of human beings as shivam and humanity of human beings as Sundaram.

He at last gives aesthetic measures which form the foundation of Dalit Literature, which are equality, liberty, justice and fraternity. (criticalaesthetics2015.wordpress.com)

Dalit writers reject the Indian as well as western literary concepts on the ground that these concepts and theories fail to explain and incorporate the experiences of Dalits; and that, the voice of Dalit, the narration, the point-of-view, the metaphors, the analogies, the imagery, are all born from the vast history and hard-hitting reality of Dalits.

There have been debates on the point that one need not be a Dalit to write about the experience of dalits. The argument comes from the *savarnas* of the society that if one is sensitive towards the sufferings of the oppressed then too one can produce literature about it and it will be a part of established canonical writings. However, dalits assert that those who have been forced to live outside the village owing to their caste, backwardness, and the filthy nature of their jobs, those whose destinies have been defined by the lawmakers and even distorted as per the verses written in holy texts, those who have been subject to deprivation, humiliation and degradation, and who have never been able to develop a sense of pride in their

being, who have no sense of self-esteem and their identities are that they are outcasts and untouchables (the experience of being an untouchable has not been experienced even by those who have been lowest in the hierarchy in the world, for instance, the Blacks in white America), this experience of Dalits is unique and extremely demeaning, and, so, only a dalit can truly portray and write about dalits. Consequently, Dalit literature can be written solely by Dalits.

Dalit literature received its momentum in Maharashtra, and before it gained its full swing in the northern belt of India, it was already an established stream in Marathi language.

Rasa theory that talks about nectar, juice and the taste of literature or the purpose of literature which, according to it, is to provide to the readers pleasure, a work of art that can be relished, is rejected by Dalit writers, and the pioneer Dalit literature critic Limbale points out that Rasa theory propounds arts for arts' sake but Dalit literature is arts for life's sake, that is lending voice to the voiceless that is going to be painful, shocking, rebellious, revolutionary and disturbing and in no way is going to lend any sense of relaxation or consolation to the readers. The writers of this literature are strongly inclined towards bringing to light the traumatic experiences of their lives and the repression of many decades will surface like hot magma exploding out of their inner volcanoes.

Summing up the features of Dalit aesthetics, which distinguish it from mainstream canonical writings, Limbale lists them as follows:

1. Social commitment
2. Life affirming values present during artistic creation.
3. Promotion of equality, freedom, justice and fraternity.

Dalits, after ages of subjugation and harassment, tended to internalise their sufferings and believe that they were not worthy of living a respectful life. To pull them out of this acceptance of suffering, it was essential to propound a different framework of aesthetics which was not about truth, goodness and beauty, but was about equality, liberty and fraternity. This framework provided immense scope to challenge the dominant groups' hegemonic rule and disintegrate the inhuman system of subordination and atrocities.

Some of the notable writers in Dalit literature who strived to make room for this branch of literary aesthetics are: B.R. Ambedkar, his writings on caste, society, and politics have had a profound influence on Dalit literature; Omprakash Valmiki, who is known for his autobiography *Joothan*, that explores the themes of caste discrimination and identity; Sharankumar Limbale, an eminent Marathi Dalit writer known for his novel *Akkarmashi* and his seminal work *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies, and Considerations* in Marathi, in 1994, which was translated by Alope Mukherjee in English in the year 2004; Daya Pawar, a prominent Marathi writer, whose autobiography *Baluta* is famous for the portrayal of struggles that he goes through due to caste oppression; Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd is prominently known for his book *Why I Am Not a Hindu* and has written extensively on caste, identity, and social justice. Though not a Dalit himself, Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable* is a poignant account of the lives and struggles of Dalits in pre-independence India; Chandra Bhan Prasad is known for his writings on Dalit entrepreneurship and economic empowerment; and, Perumal Murugan whose *One Part Woman* touches upon caste issues and the marginalization of Dalits. These are some of the well-known writers in the field of Dalit literature. Among the prominent women writers who represent Dalit voice, we have Mahashweta Devi, a Bengali writer who depicted marginalized communities, and her

narratives are about Dalits and their struggles against oppression, and Baby Kamble, an important Dalit feminist writer, her autobiography *The Prisons We Broke* provides a powerful account of her life as a Dalit woman, and many more.

Dalit literature, owing to its history of domination by the higher castes and subjugation at the hands of the privileged class, and owing to the painful experience of living as an untouchable, physically as well as psychologically, due to deep internalisation of this divide practised by those slated above in the hierarchical order, because indoctrination of minds happens not just with the victim but also with the victimizer, has certain key features that are unique to make it different from the so-called canonical literature. Dalit literature is primarily about giving voice to the marginalised Dalit communities; it is about their sufferings, their experiences and looking at things from their perspective. There are various kinds of discriminations across the globe based on race, gender, colour, language, region, and many others. Caste-based discrimination and the hierarchical division, that is, the structural sub-division of castes, and the consequent prejudice and intolerance that follows, is the focus of discussion among Dalit writers. The recurrent human traits that are celebrated in Dalit literature are resistance against injustice, resilience and self-assertion. Autobiography becomes one of the most coveted forms of writing among the Dalit writers. To record the events of social exclusion and the consequences of hunger, poverty and extremely low living standards, becomes achievable through relating it as personal narratives. Beyond the narratives of discrimination, emerge the experiences of their fight against the system, their fighting all odds, and their movement towards self-realisation, growth and empowerment. Fight against inequality and caste-based discrimination are the major concerns and recurrent themes in the works of Dalit writers, for which they employ linguistic devices ranging from diction to imagery and metaphors that are less flowery and are more direct and powerful. To achieve this purpose, the dismantling of the previous mythological references, the chosen heroism by the canonical writers, the turning away from the sacred religious texts, all this became not just an immediate urgency but an integral part of setting new parameters and showcasing new perspectives, that were real, disturbing, distressing, and were offering a challenge to existing power structures. To link the two, the past and the present, comes naturally to the Dalit writers, and this becomes a common feature – linking the historical consciousness and the contemporary complexities, in the writings of the Dalit writers.

In conclusion, it becomes important to ascertain that Dalit literature has been a precursor in establishing and adding perspectives to subaltern studies, colonial and postcolonial studies, feminist theory, dalit feminism, cultural studies, literary aesthetics and Dalit aesthetics. These are various critical theories that delve into the issues of caste-based discriminations, struggle for self-assertion and empowerment, social identities and the reshaping of these identities, resistance movements, power dynamics, social exclusion, and cultural hegemony, challenging stereotypes and causing transformations, patriarchal structures within Dalit communities and the experiences of oppression of Dalit women. Dalit literature challenges hegemonic power structures and domination, and has the potential to bring about social change. Thus, Dalit literature has a purpose of eradicating caste-based discrimination to create a more inclusive and equitable society for all.

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