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## Listening to the Unheard Voices: Appreciating Indian Dalit Narratives

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### ABSTRACT

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This research paper is about the Dalit narratives produced by Indian Dalit authors in different regional languages and translated into English. The paper tries to analyze the concepts of “Dalit Consciousness” and “Dalit Identity” with reference to the selected narratives. The individual identity of the narrator merges with that of the respective Dalit community and retells the truthful account of the people and their communities. Some writers include B. R. Ambedkar, Mahatma Jotirao Phule, Periyar, Bama, Sharankumar Limbale, Urmila Pawar, Baby Kamble and Arjun Dangle.

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Dalit literature is at once the expression of a “Dalit consciousness” about identity (both individual and communal), human rights and human dignity, and the community, as well as the discursive supplement to a ground-level sociopolitical movement that seeks redress for historically persistent oppression and social justice in the present. While its origins are often coterminous with the movement dating back to the reformist campaigns in several parts of India during the 19th century, contemporary researchers have found precursors to both the Dalit consciousness and literary expression in poets and thinkers of earlier eras ...”, writes the well-known Indian academician and literary critic namely Dr. Pramod K. Nayar in his essay “Dalit Literature: An Annotated Bibliography” (2021). In the Introduction to the essay, he further adds: “Dalit literature thrives in Indian languages, and in multiple forms, although oral narratives and stories that are popular in gatherings and meetings remain largely uncollected. New forms such as the graphic novel have energized the field in recent years. (Nayar 2021)

The word “Dalit” is derived from the original Sanskrit word “dalana” from which the adjective “dalita” has been created by earlier human beings to be used for people who are oppressed, poor and down-trodden, exploited economically and untouchables socially. According to *Manusmriti*, the Hindu society of India was divided into four distinct “Varnas”. They include Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. The fourth Varna can be the “ati-shudras” as a sub-category. Each Varna was associated with a profession, family profession for generations. The castes and sub-castes that make the hierarchy of the Indian society are under these four Varnas. Brahmins used to be learned people and worshippers of gods and goddesses. Kshatriyas had to fight in battle fields and assist the ruler in administrative affairs. Vaishyas

used to do trading and farming of different goods used by the general public. The last Varna that is Shudras has to do all kinds of menial labours under the other three Varnas. In villages, they had their shelter outside the border of the village and the upper castes treated them as untouchables, unclean and impure. The dichotomy of purity/impurity, cleanliness/dirtiness, upper-castes/lower-castes was used for classification of human beings in Indian villages by orthodox and conservatives. The Shudras were banned from entering Hindu temples, collecting water from village ponds and wells used by the upper-castes. Gradually they were kept away from education and other provisions available to others in the society. During the British Raj, some initiatives were taken to improve their conditions. Some children from this backward class could join schools and got higher education. They got government jobs and led their lives in a better condition. The post-Independent India followed the laws of the land and believed in Democracy. The Constitution was drafted and all were labelled as “Scheduled Castes”. They were given fundamental rights and duties like others in the country. Due to some rigid protests from the upper-class people, these could not be effective entirely in villages of India. The manipulations of all kinds were done by them to suppress and oppress the lower-class people belonging to the Scheduled Castes. As a result, we could see a divide among people of India. The untouchables and the socially-exploited people from the backward class in Maharashtra preferred to use the label “Dalit” under the influence of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Gandhiji used the word *Harijan* (children of God) for Shudras of India. Dr. Ambedkar used the term Dalit in his fortnightly published under the title of *Bahiskrit Bharat*. These people are “broken” socially, politically and economically. Their life conditions are characterized by exploitation, oppression and marginalization. Dalit Panthers following Black Panthers of the USA formed a convention that revived the term during the 1970s. They also included poor farmers and women in this convention.

Gangadhar Pantwane, the founding editor of *Asmitadarsh* (Mirror of Identity), describes Dalit as follows: “To me, Dalit is not a caste. He is a man exploited by the social and economic traditions of this country. He does not believe in God, rebirth, soul, and Holy books teachings, separatism, fate and Heaven, because they have made him a slave. He does believe in Humanism. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution.” (Agarwal et al 4) Gopal Guru, another scholar of Dalit activism, states: “Dalits cannot aspire for securing respectable jobs. The Dalits are overwhelmingly found in the sanitary section of Indian society. They are scavengers, sweepers, rag pickers, coolies; they do other kinds of jobs which are not only considered to be unimportant but also a sense of wretchedness and filth based on the notion of purity-pollution that is attached to them” (113).

Nalini Pai in her article on “Dalit Literary Narratives” states: “Literature about Dalits and by Dalits is a huge body of writing today. Autobiographical accounts as well as testimonies by Dalit writers from all over India have already been looked at as genres that locate personal as well as the suffering of a mass of people within the larger discourse of human rights” (15). She looks at Dalits as an oppressed class and Dalit women as victims of double marginalization.

Anju Bala, a research scholar of Dalit literature, states that “the term 'Dalit' is synonymous with poor, exploited, oppressed and needy people” (36). She further adds that the Dalits are “deprived of their fundamental rights of education, possession of assets and right to equality”. She considers that Dalit literature “emerges to voice for all those oppressed, exploited and marginalized communities who endured this social inequality and exploitation for so long”. In her article, she writes: “The major concern of Dalit literature is the emancipation of Dalits from this ageless bondage of slavery. Dalits use their writing as a

weapon to vent out their anger against the social hierarchy which is responsible for their degradation” (36).

The editors of *Dalit Voice* (2018) have stated that the main objective of the Dalit literary movement was “to bring in awareness in society so as to restructure it into a society based on equality and liberty” (9). The reviewer mentions that the word 'Dalit' does not signify a single group of people with a single culture and set of interests: it is a collective term that can indicate many very different groups of people, all of whom possess their own distinct cultural values, practices, knowledges, struggles and strengths, yet are united through shared (...) experiences of subjugation, and thus a shared struggle towards a fairer world” (3).

In an interview with Jaydeep Sarangi, the Dalit author Bama Faustina Soosairaj shares her memories of her childhood, her relationship with her grandmother, and how experiences of oppression drove her towards literature as a means of activism. She reflects on Dalit literature as “the literature of oppressed people, telling about their pains, agonies, disappointments, defeats, humiliations, oppressions and depressions. It also speaks about their vibrant culture, dreams, values, convictions, and their struggle for annihilation of caste in order to build a casteless society. It reveals their resistant and rebellious character, their strength and stamina to live amidst all odds and their resilient nature to love life and live it happily. It brings out their inborn tendency to celebrate life and to fight against the caste-ridden society by breaking through this inhuman system without breaking themselves. It liberates them and gives them their identity. It heals them and strengthens them to fight for their rights” (273).

The primary texts that one needs to go through for an understanding of Dalit consciousness include B. R. Ambedkar's writings and Speeches, the writings of Jotirao Phule and Periyar. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* is a pioneering work on the prevailing caste system of India, the social relations, the political and economic inequities, and the discriminations among Hindu communities. His argument is against the so-called Hindu reformers who fight for political freedom from the British Raj but do not entertain any reform in social customs and religious beliefs, rituals, superstitious practices in several communities. Ambedkar's Writings and Speeches in several volumes gives us the details of the Dalit movement in India, the religion and its mythography, the political suffrage, education system, Gandhi's ideology, Marxism and Buddhism. He also hints at the English Constitution, the Indian National Congress and the Hindu Code Bill in his speeches and writings. E. V. Ramaswamy (Periyar) has published a book entitled *Why Were Women Enslaved?* (translated by Meena Kandaswamy). First published in 1942, the book deals with the caste system, the religious and gender inequality found in India. Jyotirao Phule's books such as *Slavery* and *The Cultivator's Whipcord* discuss the caste system, the dominance of the Brahmins as a powerful race, the enslavement of the lower caste people by the upper castes, the hierarchy in the Varna System, the Hindu myths and their presentation of social, political and religious hierarchies in Indian society and culture, the caste-based agricultural labour and professions, the women workers across castes, etc.

Apart from Dr. Ambedkar and Mahatma Phule, some of the major Dalit writers from Maharashtra include Arun Kamble, Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar, Sharan Kumar Limabale and Baburao Bagul. Similarly, we will find some Dalit writers from Uttar Pradesh including Kanwar Bharti, Mohandas Nemishray, Sheoraj Singh Bechain, Om Prakash Valmiki, Suraj Pal Chauhan and Dr. Jai Prakash Kardam. The writers from Karnataka include Prof. B. Krishnappa, Dr. Siddalingiah, Devanooru Mahadeva, Deviah Harave and Prof. Aravinda

Malagatti. The Dalit writers from Tamil Nadu are John Ratnam, K. Appadurai, Rettamalai Srinivasan and Periasamy Pulavar. Some Telugu writers include Gurram Jashuva, Kusuma Dharmanna, Boyi Bheemanna, Kalakaluri Enoch and Shiva Sagar. When another woman activist working for Dalit consciousness and Dalit justice namely Anita Bharti was asked a question whether non-Dalits can write something called Dalit literature, she very categorically replied: “The only literature produced by Dalits can be named Dalit literature, because it comes from their specific experience as Dalits. This experience is not available to non-Dalits”. However, she suggests that non-Dalits can write about the conditions and life-struggle of Dalits and this would be a great contribution to both Dalits and literature in general. The writings of non-Dalit about Dalit life and conditions cannot be called Dalit writing. The label must be reserved for writers belonging to Dalit class only. The Dalits have a sense of victimhood that is prevalent over other aspects including positive things in Dalit life. According to Dr. Vivek Kumar, Dalits constitute a distinct element in Indian social life. Dalits experience the humiliation and inferiority that none other than them experience in life. The ill-treatment of the upper-class/caste Hindus, whether done consciously or unconsciously, is taken seriously and brought out in the pages of literary works including stories, memoirs, autobiographies, novels, poetry and plays.

Bama has written three books about Dalit consciousness and Dalit identity. They include *Sangati*, *Vanman*, and *Karukku*. Lakshmi Holmstrom has translated the first and the third, whereas the second one has been translated by Malini Seshadri. *Sangati* (Events) published in Tamil in 1994 presents the theme of violence against Dalit women who have an extraordinary power of compassion and solidarity. Some characters including the mothers and grand mothers represent different generations of Dalit women who are exploited sexually and socially. The Tamil text *Vanman* (Vendetta) published in 2003 depicts the Pallars and the Parayars who compete for the Dalit label in order to identify themselves. One Pallar character mentions in the text: “It seems 'Dalit' means only them [Parayars] not us. We are better than them” (p. 54). The upper caste Naickers divided them into two distinct groups and “bitter enemies”. The Tamil text *Karukku* published in 1992 is the first autobiography of a Dalit woman. It presents the childhood and school days of the narrator-protagonist. She discovers the label of caste as a child even she is educated at a Christian convent. She becomes an activist and discovers the Babasaheb's concept Dalit identity. She states: We who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us. We must not accept the injustice of our enslavement... We must dare to stand up for a change” (25). *Karukku* grows up into a matured Dalit person who is inspired by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. She becomes a social activist and stands up as a leader of her people.

Namdeo Dhasal was working as a taxi driver when he published *Golpitha* in 1972. His family had migrated from Khed taluka to the Dhor Chawl in Arab Galli near Golpitha. The word represents a red-light area in Mumbai. It is the “black hole”, the world populated by small-time smugglers, drug-traffickers, *supari* (contract) killers, thieves, loan-sharks' henchmen and goons living on protection money. Dhasal as a pioneer of the Dalit Panther Movement started the little magazine *Vidroh* (protest/revolution) in 1968. Gangadhar Pantawane edited another one titled *Asmita* in 1963 (and renamed it as *Asmitadarsh* that included several writings of the Dalit Panthers in Mumbai. Anupama Rao in her essay “The word and the world: Dalit aesthetics as a critique of everyday life” (2017) writes: “Dalit writing is a form of imminent critique that addresses the changing relationship of caste, capital...” (147). She quotes the following passage from Dhasal and Chitre's book: “This is a world where the night is reversed into the day, where stomachs are empty or half-empty, of desperation

against death, of the next day's anxieties, of bodies left over after being consumed by shame and sensibility, of insufferably flowing sewages, of diseased young bodies lying by the gutters braving the cold by folding up their knees to their bellies, of the jobless, of beggars, of pickpockets, of holy mendicants, of neighbor-hood tough guys and pimps" (10). This passage depicts the oppressive life of Mumbai streets but it is also the Dalit life in every city of India. Dalit life was "street life defined by the lack of privacy and proximity to shit and garbage" (147).

Urmila Pawar, the award-winning Marathi author wrote her life narrative entitled *Aaydan* and translated into English under the title of *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoir* by Maya Pandit in 2008. Pawar narrates about her oppressed life and struggle to have education. She describes how she became a member of the literary community. She observes that the people treated women "in the same discriminatory manner" (235). She admires Babasaheb Ambedkar and his leadership and how he gave a formal shape to the Dalit Panther Movement. According to her, Ambedkar "was giving a form to a community that had suffered nothing but humiliation and ignominy" (312).

Baby Kamble, the Dalit author from Maharashtra, wrote the book under the title of *The Prisons We Broke* translated by Maya Pandit in 2008. The work makes a realistic portrait of the narrator who writes her daily life spent in her community. The Mahars, though dehumanized, are depicted as "the most devoted children of Maharashtra" (37). The narrator states: We were just like animals, but without tails. We could be called human only because we had two legs instead of four" (49). As she argues in the text, the upper castes destroyed their ability to think and imagine. She is proud to declare herself as "a product of the Ambedkar Movement" (12). She describes the social as well as the political mobilizations of Dalits in her locality (or state).

The Marathi Dalit writer Arjun Dangle in his essay titled "Dalit Literature: Past, Present and Future" writes: "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 doesn't damage its vested interests. The weak groups in society are tired of this tradition. In fact, all our traditions so far, whether religious, social, literary or cultural, have been imposed on the majority by a handful" (261). Another Marathi writer namely Baburao Bagul states: "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 out a total transformation. "Dalit" is the name of a total revolution; it is a revolution incarnate" (289). The hegemony of the Hindu religion and literature is challenged by both these writers. Baburao Bagul's stories were initially published in Marathi in 1963. Jerry Pinto translated them into English in the anthology titled *When I Hid My Caste* (2018). The narratives highlight the caste discrimination and the exploitation of the lower-caste Mahars by the upper-caste landlords. In a story titled "Dassehra Sacrifice", the narrator remembers a bull-fighting event where the bull represents the upper-caste landlords and the lower-caste Mahars are severely injured in the fighting. The narrative of Om Prakash Valmiki entitled *Joothan* is always referred to for the analysis of Dalit narrative. Suraj Pal Chauhan's *Tiriskrit* and B. R. Jata's *Meri Safar aur Meri Manzil* are other Hindi Dalit narratives to be mentioned. Many Dalit writers could not focus on urban middle-class educated and employed Dalits in metro cities earlier due to their concerns such as identity



and struggle for survival. Contemporary Dalit writers are aware of their rights and empowerment sanctioned to them by the Constitution. They can freely and openly demand for social justice and fight against injustices in social media and political platforms including the state assemblies and both Houses (Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha) of the Parliament. Modern Dalit literature produced by contemporary elite Dalit writers would portray the Dalit life and predicaments more clearly and meaningfully.

Contemporary Dalit literature includes not only literary forms such as poetry, drama, short stories and novels and prose but also films, theatrical productions, oral tales, electronic materials, autobiographical experiences and multimodal texts in this age of Information and Technology. Arjun Dangle is regarded as an activist for Dalit causes in India. His childhood life motivated him to seek social change and raise awareness among Dalits through his writings. Some of the widely read Dalit writers include Laxman Gaekwad, Bama, Narendra Jadhav, Joseph Macwan. Their works including *The Branded*, *Karukku* and *Sangati*, *Untouchables: My Family's Triumphant Journey out of the Caste System in Modern India* and *The Stepchild* are available in English translation. Narendra Jadhav, the head of economic research at the Reserve Bank of India earlier published his autobiographical narrative under the title of *Outcaste: A Memoir* (2003). He is a Dalit and “untouchable” being an employee of the RBI. The narrative mentions about three generations of his family that belongs to the bottom rung of India's centuries-old caste system. His book can be treated as “an act of both political and literary assertion.” (Das 2005). As the essayist quotes the author who states: “It is the story of my family, but at another level it is a story about the enormous social changes of the past 90 years and how it has liberated minds.” (Jadhav 2015) As Das has written, “Mr. Jadhav's book is at the crest of a growing wave of Dalit writing that has been translated into English from various Indian languages and offered by mainstream publishers.” (Ibid.)

Sharankumar Limbale, the modern Dalit voice from Maharashtra and the recipient of Saraswati Samman for literature in 2020, describes Dalit literature as “the burning cry of untouchable against the injustices of thousands of years.” (Dasari and Raju 2015, 64) The work that has received the most critical acclaim is Sharankumar Limbale's autobiographical narrative entitled *Akkarmashi* (Bastard) that tells the narrator's plights and sufferings in life. He being a Dalit prefers to use the derogatory term as the title because that was used by the society to address him due to his birth from an extra-marital relationship. He stayed in Marathwada where he was teased with the above insulting and abusive term. The public awareness was necessary for such an issue. It has been translated into other Indian as well as foreign languages.

Andrew Buncombe in his essay “The rise of 'Dalit lit' marks a new chapter for India's untouchables” (2010) writes about new Dalit writers including Ajay Navaria who states: “I chose to write about Dalit consciousness. I have felt myself treated like this many times .... Writing is not my profession, it is my passion.” He further adds that caste is very important. One cannot imagine India without caste. If a person says that he is a Hindu, then he will have a caste. Being a Dalit and an untouchable, he teaches Hindu ethics and scripture in an Indian university. He laughs reflecting on the nature of his teaching job and believes that it would have been an offence for him to learn and teach about Hinduism before a generation. He states: “Fifty years ago it would have been a crime. I think about this and think that if I had touched those scriptures I would have been killed.” He acknowledges that it has been possible because of Democracy that has given him power and has allowed Constitutionally for such a venture. Democracy has empowered his people and community. Buncombe in his essay writes: “In his way, Navaria is at

the spearhead of a quiet cultural revolution sweeping India's literary establishment" (2010). Navaria's first novel is entitled *Udhar ke Log* (People from That Side).

Kancha Ilaiah, one of the contemporary Dalit writers and activists, published his manifesto entitled "Why I am not a Hindu?" (1996). This work put his life under risk of death. He considers Hinduism as spiritual fascism that promotes the caste-system. In modern times, the social hierarchy of any kind based on class or caste like India is not possible. According to him, the Dalit writers are building a new image for themselves. English being the global language has enabled these Dalit writers to reach the wider audience internationally. It has been the greatest vehicle for their liberation and social justice. The Dalit population represents one fifth of the country. This is politically very active and united as a strong power block. In a state like Uttar Pradesh, Mayawati Kumari belonging to the Dalit community and a member of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) became the Chief Minister. They demand for social justice and equality through their literatures and for a better future ahead. P. Sivakami, a Tamil Dalit writer, published her novel titled *Grip of Change* in 1988, translated into English in 2006. According to her, being a creative writer is the most noble job and "words can generate consciousness". (Krich 2010). The caste system is a kind of evil and it has to be fought off. She became a legislator and fought for all kinds of discrimination.

To conclude this essay, it can be stated that the Dalit voices are no longer neglected by readers of literature. They are taught in different university programmes as a unit of English Studies and Cultural Studies. Many scholars take up projects on Dalit writings for research. Dalit literature is not a unified body of literature. It was produced with a definite purpose for demanding social liberty, justice and equality. Dalit literature originated as a literature of protest and resistance to the upper-class/caste hierarchy, but recently it is for presentation of many issues including life, love, marital relationship, man-woman relations, education as a tool for social upliftment, discrimination, Constitutional rights, Identity and consciousness. The untouchables are supposed to be respected as they belong to a nation that believes in liberty, equality and fraternity. The discrimination of any type including social, political, economic and cultural should never be practiced by the upper-class or wealthy people. The tags of untouchability and impurity or dirtiness should not be attached with fellow human beings because they also are to be included in the new hegemony called "*Vishwagurus*". The nation as an entire entity has to have a spiritual dimension of life and should believe in "*vasudheva kutumbakam*" (the whole universe is my family). Lord Buddha's preaching may come to the rescue of the entire humanity. He is regarded by Dalits of India for his teachings and thoughts. Let his messages inspire all human beings globally. The marginalized is to be at the center sooner or later.

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