

Significance of Dalit Literature: A Study

Dr.K.Arjuna Rao, Teaching Associate, Dept. of English, Agricultural College, Bapatla

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Abstract:

The literature usually associated with a diverse group of people historically considered the lowest among the Indian population, known as '*Untouchables*' is called Dalit Literature. Dr. Ambedkar, the champion of the Dalits whose ideology is basic for Dalit literature, was from Maharashtra. So Dalit Literature was first born in Maharashtra. The Dalit literary activity commenced in Gujarat around 1960. Dalit consciousness was first stirred in 1975 with atrocities against Dalits, and it gained expression in Dalit literature. Dalit literature is the outcome of the social revolution brought out by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar during the second half of the 20th century. Since then, the stream of Dalit literature has been enriched by the contribution of eminent Dalit scholars, poets, fiction writers, and dramatists. The aspirants of the nation's development should encourage dalit literature which helps to bring national integrity and social justice. Still, Dalit literature in India continues to receive step-fatherly treatment by mainstream literature. Dalit literature is a mass movement, a cultural revolution against Brahmanic superiority. As encouraged by Babasahed Ambedkar, Dalit writers strive to cleanse the stated values of life and culture and bring progress in the lives of the ignored classes through their literary creations.

Keywords: dalit, literature, untouchables, lives etc

'Dalit' means broken, reduced to pieces, ground or crushed, and, therefore, depressed. No other word is as appropriate as the Dalit, the other words like untouchable, scheduled caste, depressed class, and Harijans do not carry the same inherent depth as the word 'Dalit'. Untouchability, a much prevalent social evil in Indian society, has deservedly been conferred a thematic status in creative writing. Untouchability, an ancient form of discrimination based on caste, is a complex and pervasive problem within India, although its practice is not limited to India alone. Untouchability means pollution by the touch of certain persons because of their birth in a particular caste.

The roots of the caste-based social structure and the humiliation of Dalits can be traced back to the *varnavyavastha* (caste system) or *chaturanga* (fourfold). In the *purushasuktha* of *Rigveda*, one can find the earliest reference to the caste system.

The hymn dictates:

Brahmanoasayamukhamasti

Bhurajanyahkruta

Uru Tadasay Yadavaishya

Padabhayam Sudra Ajayat. (Beena, Neeta,5)

According to the abovementioned hymn, the Hindu social structure is based on the theory of *Chaturverna* that divides the Hindu society into four parts: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. The highest castes are the Brahmins, of whom the books of the Hindus tell that they were created from the head of Brahma. They were teachers and priests. Kshatriyas, who were made from the shoulders, protect the creatures created by God. The Vaishyas were made from the thigh, and they were expected to meet the community's material needs. The Shudras were created from the feet and were supposed to serve all other groups. Manu Smriti, the law book of the Hindu religion, also echoes the same views about the origin of the caste system. The Manu Smriti propounds:

For not by years, nor by grey hair, not by wealth,
nor kindred (is superiority); the seers made the
rule--- Who knows the Veda thoroughly, he is
great among us. Of Brahmins, goodness is by
knowledge, but of Kshatriya by valor, Vaishya by
reason of property and wealth, and Sudras by age.
(Rajesh, Pankaj, 23)

There have been several debates about the authenticity of the hymn, as mentioned above. Dr. Ambedkar believed that the *Purusha Sukta* was an interpolation in the Rig Veda by the Brahmin caste because they did not want any authority to challenge their supremacy in the hierarchy. He also opines that the caste system originated from the Brahmin requirement of endogamy to preserve its purity and was spread to the lower caste. Untouchables, Ambedkar held, had been Buddhists isolated and despised when Brahmanism became dominant in the fourth century.

Dalit literature, as such, practically did not exist before 1975 except for a few flames of anger and protest that made their appearance only occasionally. They were far and few between and had little effect on the Dalits. Dalit literature found its inexhaustible inspiration from the inspiring speeches and writings of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Dalit literature has been gathering its strength from different parts of India. Autobiographies – genuinely personal experiences of the most humiliating nature of the

writers – appeared. Bama's *Karukku*, Om Prakash Valmiki's *Jonathan*– Jadhav's *Outcaste: A Memoir* – Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi* autobiographies have one thing in common; there is a tone of protest as an undercurrent throughout these autobiographies. One may interpret 'protest' as a subdued rebellion. All great revolutions in human history which burst out with volcanic eruptions began with ongoing probes. And Dalit revolution is no exception to this general observation.

The literature, usually associated with a diverse group of people historically considered the lowest among the Indian population, known as '*Untouchables*' is called dalit literature. Dr. Ambedkar, the champion of the Dalits whose ideology is basic for Dalit literature, was from Maharashtra. So dalit literature was first born in Maharashtra. The Dalit poems that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s became more effective and powerful, and gradually the Marathi dalit literature became stronger. This Dalit literary trend, over time, had become more robust. It broke the barriers of the languages and spread to all other regions like Gujarat, Karnataka, Tamilnadu, and United Andhra Pradesh. The Dalit literary trend today is a part of the national literary trend.

The Dalit literary activity commenced in Gujarat around 1960. Dalit consciousness was first stirred in 1975 with atrocities against Dalits, and it gained expression in Dalit literature. The two anti-reservation agitations of 1981 and 1985 were responsible for the volcano-like eruption of dalit writing on the literary scene. The Dalit writer Joseph Macwan's *Angaliyat*'(1986) is a milestone in the Dalit novel in Gujarati. It is the story of the weavers of the Khada district of Gujarat. Dalapa tChowhan's '*Malak*' presents the relationships of a Dalit with other castes; due to the tyranny of the upper-class people, the Dalits have to leave their homes, but they do not lose hope saying, "The world is big enough." Harish Mangalam's *Tirad* and *Chokiare* short novels.

Autobiographies are the best line to understand the varieties and complexities of Dalit literature. It endeavors to present Dalits as members of one particular caste group and as all socially and culturally marginalized and suppressed castes and groups. R.P Singh says: "Every Dalit autobiography is the clarion call to break the satanic hand of oppression perpetrated in the name of superiority and inferiority of castes, and thus envisions a future free from discrimination between man and man." (R.P.Singh, 17)

Dalit literature is the outcome of the social revolution brought out by Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar during the second half of the 20th century. Since then, the stream of Dalit literature has been enriched by the contribution of eminent dalit scholars, poets, fiction writers, and dramatists. Dalit literature often reflects upon the life of those who used to stay at the lowest stairs in the staircase of caste hierarchy. It is always written to bring about a positive change in the attitude of Dalits and non-Dalits. It represents hopes and ambitions for a new society devoid of caste discrimination. To abolish the curse of untouchability from the division of caste in Indian culture, several great thinkers and

leaders contributed a lot. A few noted are Swami Dayanand, Jyotiba Phule, and Dr. Ambedkar.

The theme of untouchability still catches the attention of writers, and several times, it has become a significant theme in contemporary fiction writers' writings and the autobiographical writers of India. The works of the mainstream writers like R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Tagore, etc., describe the condition of the suppressed and marginalized classes of society. Arundhati Roy, Narendra Jadhav, and Rohinton Mistry are also famous for expressing the plight and predicaments of this marginalized section of society. V.S. Naipaul is not an exception to it. He has written '*Half a Life*', a story of a Brahmin and a low-caste woman.

It is argued that Dalit literature lacks artistic canons and aesthetic paradigms. Still, it is a deep-felt voice of humanity to enlighten the life of those who have been dragged behind the invisible identity. It is not a literature of caste but of specific consciousness that deprives innocent individuals of their fundamental rights. Dalit literature attempts to reconstruct the socio-political and socio-psychological mechanism of resistance against the defective and prejudiced conventions recommended and sanctioned by the Hindu religion.

Arjun Dangle also denies the idea of 'untouchability' and 'Caste' as the basics of Dalit literature. Going beyond the existing prejudice, he has tried to frame a new definition of Dalit. To quote:

Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experience of joys, sorrows, and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of society. It matures with the sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion, and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary. (Dangle,267).

Sarat Chandra Muktibodh, in his speculative essay entitled "*What Is Dalit Literature*," emphasized that the state of being Dalit is a state of the revolution of the anguish of exploitation and exploitation humiliation. It is not a literature of caste but of consciousness, "Dalit literature is the literature produced by the Dalit consciousness." He further elaborates his views on dalit consciousness and states:

The nature of Dalit consciousness is not subjective. Pains and pleasures are indeed lived and experienced by individuals alone, but the sufferings of Dalits are common and are attributable to common reasons. Hence their content is essentially social. (Muktibodh, 267)

A more comprehensive definition of Dalit in contemporary usage has been given by Gangadhar Pantwane, a professor of Marathi and founder-editor of *Asmitadarsha* who says:

To me, Dalit is not a caste; He is a man exploited by this country's social and economic traditions; he does not believe in God, Rebirth, soul, holy books teachings, Separation, fate, and heaven

because they have enslaved him. He does not believe in humanism. Dalit is a Symbol of change and revolution. (Beena, Neeta, 4)

The literature produced before 1975 was the literature of Dalit sympathizers, and the Dalit literature that came out after 1975 was quite different from the earlier one. Before 1975, the Dalit sympathizers produced some characters taken from Dalit society. Dalit literature after 1975 is connected with 'Dalitism' and 'Ambedkarism'.

Now the soul of Dalit has been awakened to make a cry of protest. They have the authentic experiences of being exploited. They express all their anguish, agony, and untold misery in a language charged with irrepressible emotion that spring from the abysmal depths of their heart and soul. They use literature as the medium to tell the story of the misery and cruelty committed them. They describe it with satire and anger; they highlight the contemporary reality as they have visualized it. In their expression, their sufferings emerge as the protest. At the end of the 20th century, the non-dalits became more active, so it has been visible since the beginning of the 21st century. This literary trend is becoming the primary literary trend. This may happen because Harish Mangalam hopefully says, "The fragrance of humanity is at the root of the Dalit literature. It is the story of ordinary human beings. There is the blood flowing of 80% population of our nation. This fellow feeling becomes all of ours." (Amarnath,145)

The aspirants of the nation's development should encourage Dalit literature, which helps to bring national integrity and social justice. Still, Dalit literature in India continues to receive step-fatherly treatment by mainstream literature. The binary opposition is between Dalitism and Brahmanism. Alok Mukherjee rightly observes:

Indian literary history and theory and the teaching of Indian literature are spectacularly silent about Dalit literature. Yet, Dalit cultural and critical productions are crucial in the twinkling and writing about Indian society, history, culture, and literature. (ibid, 173)

Central stream literature is written to entertain whereas dalit literature is written to mobilize awareness. Significant stream literature reinforces notions of

caste; on the contrary, Dalit literature opposes ideas of caste. To protect Varna System, Brahmins have written eighteen *Puranas* and thirty-six *upapramanas*. Some of them praise Brahma, some praise Vishnu, and some credit Shiva, but all of them take a Brahmin to the highest pedestal. Mainstream literature is influenced by Hindu mythology, Sanskrit literature, and western literature, whereas dalit literature is influenced by Ambedkarite ideology, Jyotiba Phule, and Buddhism. Central stream literature is for the people, but Dalit literature is for the people. Mainstream literature is Brahminical, while Dalit literature is nonbrahminical in nature. Central-stream literature ignores the commoner, but Dalit literature glorifies the commoner.

Dalit literature is a mass movement, a cultural revolution against Brahmanic superiority. As encouraged by Babasahed Ambedkar, Dalit writers strive to cleanse the stated values of life and culture and bring progress in the lives of the ignored classes through their literary creations.

The Dalit literature reflects the sorrows and protests of the downtrodden and outcasts. Dr. Ambedkar passionately struggled to lift untouchables to a status equal to other higher castes of India. He used various tactics. He encouraged attempts to join religious festivals, enter temples, and perform marriages through Vedic rites. In the epic battle against the vile and complex caste system, he single-handedly served different roles as a researcher, reformer, theoretician, organizer, journalist, politician, leader, etc.

Ambedkar discards the burden of discrimination and asserts that a person's power depends on physical heredity, social inheritance, and efforts. He encourages people to have the idea of intellectual awareness and unconventional professional skills. Expanding the mental horizon can restore the power and confidence to rekindle the slumber of obscurity from the life of untouchables.

While recasting the destiny of Dalits, Ambedkar categorically accepts the power of literature. He gives a clarion call:

...through your literary creations, cleanse the stated values of life and culture. Don't have a limited objective. Transform the light of your pen so that the darkness of the village is removed. Do not forget that in our country, the world of Dalits is ignored and is extremely large. Please get to know their pain and sorrow intimately and try through your literature to bring progress (and enlightenment) in their lives. True humanity resides here. (Beena, Neeta,6)

Besides literary texts, the writings and teachings of Bhima Rao Ambedkar revolutionized the entire stream of Dalit consciousness. Still, the fact cannot be ignored

that the term dalit literature is often looked down upon as something horrible and contemptuous. But in the contemporary context, it has emerged as the literature of protest that includes victims of all the communities and marginalized, the marginality based on class, race, caste, or occupation. Breaking all the principles of aesthetics, Dalit literature makes a man its nucleus, speaking of human freedom with all its breath.

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