

SHIFTS FROM MARGIN TO NUCLEUS: THE SURGE OF DALIT LITERATURE

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Literature is not a collection of myths and imaginary stories, but rather a representation of the pulses and vibrations that circulate within the wide framework of society. Since literature is the mirror of the society, society is always viewed in the light of the condition of the people. But unfortunately, for many centuries the other side of this mirror never came to light. The white, the male, the affluent and upper castes graded themselves as superiors and exalted their status as infallible *Subjects* of the *Other*. They have wielded the pen like a sceptre so far because of their easy access to economic and intellectual arena, and literature primarily remained an elite concept: literature of the elite, for the elite and by the elite. But recent centuries have witnessed the emergence of resistance literature that breaks all barriers and shatters all shackles. The rising voice of the *Others* gave vent to their age-old muted and mutilated psyche.

Exploitation or oppression of weaker by stronger is as old as mankind itself. The Indian history has been a vibrant record of conflict and dialectic between two opposite forces like exploiters and exploited, coloniser and colonised, powerful and the powerless. The notion of a complete monolithic Indian society connected through religion is completely broken in India as there is a huge campus of religion in the country. The social structure of India is stratified, with inbuilt inequalities and injustices, based on the caste-system sanctified by Brahmanic-Hinduism. Although social stratification exists in almost all societies, the caste system is quite unique to the Indian society. There are four major caste divisions in India: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. The lowest caste people came under Shudras and are regarded as Dalits. These people are suppressed, humiliated, exploited, discriminated and marginalised in every sphere of life.

The word 'Dalit' comes from Marathi language, and means 'ground, crushed or broken to pieces'. It was first used by Mahatma Jyotirao Phule in the 19th century. The word was popularized by the Dalit Panther Movement, when they adopted this term as an act of confident

assertion, rejecting the nomenclature of Harijans - children of god- as used by Mahatma Gandhi to identify the former untouchables.

The word 'Dalit' gained currency with the emergence of Dr.B.R.Ambedkar, the father of Dalit Movement, on the Indian socio-political scene. He pioneered the cause of the Scheduled Castes in the first part of the 20th century and led these sections to a new awakening. He encouraged and stirred them into action on many fronts. Dr. Ambedkar, rejected the notion that caste system is God made. He, along with Mahatma Phule, started a political movement for the freedom and equality of Dalits. This movement played a very significant role as the shaping spirit of Dalit literature. The purpose of this movement was to create a new space for the Dalits. They were not satisfied with the political and economic equality sanctioned by the government as a token of centuries of sufferings. They also demanded religious and creative equality. They rejected all role models, traditional literature, Eastern and Western critical theories and dedicated to create a literature of their own, an identity of their own.

Dalit literature is the body of literary responses to the exhortations of Dr.Ambedkar, who inspired and initiated the creative minds of India to enforce the socio-cultural upsurge for the total emancipation of the Dalits; to fight for their freedom from the shackles of slavery, inequality, poverty, illiteracy and other such socio-economic and cultural injustices. Given its overreaching preoccupation with the status of Dalits in caste-based Hindu society, and their struggle for identity, human dignity, justice and equality, this literature is by nature oppositional.

Dalit literature aims at celebrating new subjectivity, identity and psychic struggle to remove the socially imposed disabilities on the untouchables. The main object is to produce social awakening among the downtrodden. Arjun Dangle, the Marathi Dalit writer and activist says:

Dalit literature is not simply literature...Dalit literature is associated with a movement to bring about a change. ...At the very first glance, it will be strongly evident that there is no established critical theory or point of view behind them (ie., Dalit writings) instead, there is a new thinking and a new point of view(Dangle 266).

Experiences of multiple oppressions, critical awareness of the underlying causes or their hunger and their never ending thirst for dignity and justice inspired them to give rise to Dalit literature. The Dalit Literature, though written in different languages, in different geographical

backgrounds, share the common themes, the common sufferings, discrimination, exploitation, and injustice. Shame, anger, sorrow and indomitable hope are the identity of Dalit literature, because the motive and focus of this literature is the liberation of Dalits, their struggle against casteist tradition. It emerges out of an attempt in seeking a new identity, name and place for themselves.

Though at the initial stage of its development, the yardsticks of sensitive, pious, artistic and aesthetic sense were applied to justify its negligible and substandard status, yet with the passage of time, the committed followers of the stream got success in establishing it as a new genre with the contribution of their realistic poems, fictions, autobiographies, memoirs and plays. The first essential characteristic of Dalit literature is that it does not aim at achieving an aesthetic performance in literature as an art, but it serves purposes of social intervention and accordingly carries strong militant connotations. The main concern is of self-assertion and protest, and the ways of a quest and construction of an identity of one's own, on the part of those who have been denied a full human dignity, and whose consciousness was made to forcibly internalize patterns of cultural depreciation and social subalternity.

Initially there is a view that a complete good Dalit work can be written only by a Dalit and not by any non-dalit writer. As the saying goes, 'only ash knows the experience of burning', only the Dalits know the experience of burning- burning in the fire of sorrows, hatred, injustice, disrespect, inequality and untouchability. Non-dalits do not have this experience. Dalits have specific experiences of life and only Dalit writers can express their experiences in an authentic manner. Non-dalit writers may be sympathetic to the Dalits, they may be their well wishers, but their experiences about Dalits were not self-experiences. They are the observers of torture and exploitation, but not the sufferers. This difference of experiences between the Dalits and the non-dalits makes the difference between their writings also. Hence Dalit literature is the literature of Dalits based on their own experiences, ie., written with a Dalit consciousness.

Dalit literature brought a consciousness among Dalits and they started realizing that words could create a change, more powerfully than weapons could. Shame, anger, sorrow and indomitable hope are the stuff of Dalit literature. Because of the anger against the age-old oppression, the expressions of the Dalit writers have become sharp. Hence Dalit literature is replete with the bitterness suffered by them for more than three millennia.

Today, the Dalits in the country has reached a stage where they are no longer willing to fight for their cause with weapons. Now they are fighting through books”(Kaul 65).

Literature is a potent medium to articulate the voice of those who are voiceless. The socio-cultural relevance of a text can't be ignored. “A literary work is not mere individual play of imagination, the isolated caprice of an excited brain, but a transcript of contemporary manners”(Taine309). It signifies that human consciousness moves with innumerable social variables and it can transform human experiences in a work of art to perpetuate them.

It questions from different perspectives the validity of existing caste based social order and at the same time gives vent to the anger and anguish of Dalits over the inhumanities and injustices meted out to them for centuries. Hence Dalit literature, by exposing the foibles and prejudices of high caste society towards Dalits, instills in them a new consciousness and prepares them for a change of heart.

Dalit literature seeks to transform Savarna society to bring about change in the heart and mind of the high caste individual. Dalit literature has two dimensions: One will be to familiarize Dalits with their past, to explain to them that they are enslaved, to show them that they are human beings and it is their duty and right to fight for the rights of human beings. The other dimension of Dalit literature involves working on the heart of Savarna society to persuade them about the rights and entitlements of Dalits to make them see that they too are human beings and have been suppressed and convince them they must change(Limbale123).

For their writings, Dalit writers have used the language of the quarters rather than the standard language. Standard language has a class and Dalit writers have rejected the class of this standard language. Cultured people in society consider standard language to be the proper language for writing. To Dalit writers, the language of the basti seems more familiar than standard language. Besides, the ability to voice one's experience in one's mother tongue gives

greater sharpness to the expression. Dalit writers have chosen violence as a strategy by presenting it through characters who take to violent means for settling the scores or exercise verbal violence by choosing such expressions that border on obscenity. The language used in Dalit writing is caste and community oriented. Hence they have their own aesthetics. They used their own terminology in literature to express their inner trauma and they selected burning topics directly related to the lives of the poor ordinary people of India.

Even when a Dalit writer is writing about a Dalit subject, the work cannot be called Dalit literature if it presents the subject in a cheap, popular way. It must contain the Ambedkar's thought, the thought that teaches the Dalits the feeling of self-respect, and the language of rights and entitlements:

The Dalit consciousness in Dalit literature is the revolutionary mentality connected with struggle. It is a belief in rebellion against the caste system, recognizing the human being as its focus. Ambedkarite thought is the inspiration for this consciousness. This makes the slaves conscious of their slavery. Dalit consciousness is an important seed for Dalit literature, it is separate and distinct from the consciousness of other writers. Dalit literature is demarcated as unique because of this consciousness(Limbale 32).

Dalit literature aims at the articulation of human sensibility and therefore Dalit oriented literary texts are the tools for the reconstruction of the aesthetics of human grandeur against the aesthetics of artistic canons. Dalit writers escape the worlds of romantic fantasy to expose the areas of darkness that consistently echo anguish along with the craving for freedom, equality, justice and human compassion. They are in search of a new aesthetics that can be acknowledged as the breath of real human suffering beyond the dynamics of religion, myths, ethical commitments and artistic canons.

The Dalit writers have used those images and symbols in their literature that are appropriate for relating experiences. Since they firmly believe that Hindu religion has

nurtured and nourished the unequal caste system, they have decided not to use religious symbols in their writings. They construct new myths instead of using the existing symbols and images. When they did employ religious symbols, it was to deconstruct them, infusing them with new meaning and purpose(Limbale34).

Dalit consciousness has made them aware of their identity as human beings and inspired them to revolt against the unjust and prevalent caste-system and to establish a new social order free from caste distinctions, based on the values of liberty, equality and fraternity. The presence of the element of this consciousness in Dalit literature results in a realistic portrayal of Dalit pain and anguish. Dalit consciousness draws a line between Dalit literature and mainstream literature. It also draws a distinction between works by Dalit writers and non-dalit writers on Dalit issues. It is increasingly becoming a tool to measure the dalitness of a Dalit work.

How can he sing songs of romance and the beauty of nature in a spoilt and meaningless world where even the little luxuries of life and even the fundamental rights are denied? The mainstream writers are interested in the depiction of physical beauty and the heroic qualities of their characters, hence their language is complex and far from reality. Dalit writers express their experiences in the most realistic way by using their native speech. Their language as well as images come from their own experiences instead of their observation of nature. Since Dalit literature rejects canonical literature, it also rejects established standards of evaluating literature, ie., the aesthetics. Dalit literature rejects Western theories like Freud's Psychoanalysis, Barthe's Structuralism or Derrida's Deconstruction theory; it also rejects Indian theories of Rasa and Dhvani.

The writers of Dalit movement did not care for any convention of literature. They do not want to look back and pick up some models to express their ideas. They believed the fact that, when we have no place in the history why should we look back towards the history of the people who rode on the back of the Dalits and pushed them into the inferno from which they cannot come out. Hence they wanted to create their own history and establish their own identity in the society. In the process of creating their authentic representations, Dalit writers expose and deconstruct those manufactured versions and processes of history and society that have been invoked through the centuries to legitimize the caste system. Dalit writers started creating their own myths in their literature and tried to break all established myths believed by the casteists, ie.,

they de-mythified the reality and tried to re-interpret the history. The inner urge of their explosion is a concern over building a new society and the strong intolerance of the existing social inequality

Dalit literature is not pleasure-giving literature. Consequently, the aesthetics of Dalit literature cannot be based on the principles of an aesthetist literature that privileges pleasure derived from beauty. This is why there is a felt need for a separate Dalit aesthetics. Dalit literature is a journey from mainstream literature to marginal literature, from grand narrative to little narrative, from individual identity to group identity, from ideal to real, from vertical literature to spiral literature, from self-justification to self-affirmation.

Having remained silent for so long, their muted anguish finds no alternative until the unbreakable experience of humiliation sensitizes their identity and urges them to make themselves move from invisibility to visibility. This move signals the breaking of age-old silence, an act of self-assertion as well as self-perception. The journey from anonymity to presence, though very hard, is a rewarding one for the marginalised self. Such a journey is remarkably announced in Dalit literature.

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