

Evolution of Dalit Literature

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Abstract: This paper presents the evolution of Dalit literature.

Keywords: Dalit, politics, emancipation, power structure, literature.

1. Introduction

“Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows and struggles of those in the lowest strata of society. It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary.” - Arjun Dangle. Dalit literature is rather a revolutionary form of assertion, a part of the movement aiming to annihilate caste; it is a celebration of dignity of the hitherto marginalised. The usage of the term ‘Dalit literature’ was first noticed in the Bombay Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha conference in 1958. With the establishment of the organisation called Dalit panthers in 1972, the term rose to prominence.

2. Dalit Literature

Dalit term is synonymous with oppressed, broken, downtrodden or untouchables and indicate that this discrimination is not self-imposed but is imposed by others, historically the upper castes. The term untouchables finds its genesis in the Purusha Sukta of Rig Veda which designates them the status of an outcaste community. Even though there have been a few Dalit scholars and writers during the eleventh century like Madara Chennaih, Kalavee, Sant Kabir and others, the modern development for Dalit writing in India started from Maharashtra and in Marathi language during the 1960s when the Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangh was laid out as an alternative stage to the mainstream Marathi writing. It was motivated by the philosophy of Jyotiba Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar. The development of the African Americans driven by Martin Luther King and exercises of black panthers and "Little Magazine" movement motivated resistance writing of Dalits in India. As a point of fact, even before the 1960s, journalists like Baburao Bagul, Bandhu Madhav, Shankarao Kharat, Narayan Surve, Anna Bhau Sathe were communicating Dalit concerns and issues in their literature. Baburao Bagul is considered as a trailblazer of Marathi Dalit writings in Marathi. Litterateurs like Laxman Gaekwad, Laxman Pawar, Daya Pawar, Waman Nimbalkar, Tryambak Sapkale, Arun Dangle, Umakant Randhir, Bhimrao Shirvale and so on became unmistakable voices of Dalit composing in Marathi. A

significant number of the Dalit compositions have additionally been translated into English and distributed as a part of Dalit works. The development for Dalit writing has later spread to Gujarati, Kannad, Punjabi, Hindi, Malayalam and Bengali.

Dalit writing is the expounding on and of Dalits or abused. This writing reverberates the pain of the experiences of untouchables. It portrays the humiliation and segregations caused by the upper caste people. It imparts the political awareness that is focused on the fight for self-respect and regard for the community. "Dalit" writing has a recuperating ability to fix the injuries of the past.

Sharankumar Limbale in “Dalit Literature: Form and Purpose” suggests certain pivotal traits to discern the form of Dalit literature and has explained some of the basic reasons behind this paradigm shift in the literary sphere of Indian literature. He says, “Rejection and revolt in Dalit literature have been birthed from the womb of Dalits pain. They are directed against an inhuman system that was imposed on them. Just as the anguish expressed in Dalit literature is in the nature of collective social voice, similarly, the rejection and revolt are social and collective. 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. 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.”

This consciousness for possibilities for their emancipation in modern democratic cultures activates them to protest and the ideological, organizational set up of the movement along with the course of action was provided by Dr B R Ambedkar in the 1920s. He realized that the only way of creating a separate socio-cultural identity for them would be by moving away from the Hindu-fold and he went to convert to Buddhism and so did the Mahar community as a way of protest against the Hindu tradition and to establish their social position. The Dalit Sahitya Movement was a by-product of the endeavour of protest and to create literary and intellectual traditions as components of the socio-cultural ethos of their group. It is a social movement for liberation. ‘The Dalit Sahitya (literature of the oppressed) movement in Maharashtra seems to be unique — not in the phenomenon of former Untouchables writing literature, but in the quality of writing, its variety, its aesthetic considerations, its sense of being a movement, its tie to social action, and in the serious attention it receives as a school within me Marathi

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literary traditions.’ This movement calls the Dalits the ‘social proletariat’ and the writers identify their interests with the Dalit masses. The writers focus on accelerating the emancipation of the community and universal humanism. They use history as a tool to glorify their past by giving evidence of being the original ruling inhabitants of the land. Dalit literature depicts the dalit man and his hard life as the centre of their writings and intellectual deliberations in form of protest in their essays, poetry, drama, stories, autobiographies etc. The literature with ‘Dalit sensitivity’ regards the hindu intellectual tradition as the main source of their sufferings as it betrays human dignity. The ideas that Dalit writers create are manifestations of their social consciousness determined by the real factors of their social existence. The literature tries to evolve a communication system and a dialogue among Dalits to foster awareness and propagation of their ideology and commitments. Dalit Sahitya Movement is an extension of the liberation movement of the Dalits and is also a protest literature to stir conscience and a sense of guilt in minds of the oppressors. The philosophical, scholarly and hypothetical sources of Dalit writing are chiefly acquired from AfricanAmerican writing, Harlem Renaissance, Dalit Panthers Development, the battle for laying out or demonstrating identity as an individual, marxist social struggles, class battles, the battle against untouchability, looking for education and ideological and philosophical attributes chiefly of Buddha, Charvaka, Jyotirao Phule, Lord Shahu, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and the subaltern view of identity. Dalit writing is a democratic literary movement arisen to eradicate untouchability, caste and gender segregation and to request equivalent opportunities in each field of life. Dalit Panthers and a few other Dalit associations are the models for the perpetrators of change. Dalit writing that initiated as a dissent writing has mellowed to join humankind and justice. It has developed a new personality over the years. Dalitness in the writing is not anymore a monotype.

Dalit caste organizations like ‘Dalit Panthers of India’ in Maharashtra, ‘Dalit Mahasabha’ in Andhra Pradesh, ‘Dalit Sangharsha Samiti’ in Karnataka, and ‘Arundhatiyar’ in Tamil Nadu were formed in response to the discrimination faced by the community. They primarily ask for equitable shares in opportunities and reservation. Dalit literature stands for humanitarianism, linguistic directness and plurality; it is a literary movement for social change. Dalit literature stands against the rigidity of caste system which snatches the opportunities of equality in every field of life and thus becomes an instrument of exploitation and an integral part of the Dalit culture. Dalit literature is also distinct in terms that the writer and the text cannot be separated. A reader’s interpretation may be varied on the basis of either he or she belongs to Dalit community or elite caste. Focussing on Dalit liberation in particular and liberation of the oppressed in general, the literature has become a cultural activity coming under the broad movements of Dalit political liberation. It is cultural politics which takes the form of protest. The language of the Dalits becomes the most crucial constituent of Dalit literature and they have a different vocabulary and speech. Writing and reading, as a Dalit, are political practices. The language of Dalits is decent

for Dalits and the ‘decency’ of the oppressors is ‘indecent’ for Dalits. In context of Dalit writer, Dalit is the person using the power of expression is born and brought up in Dalit caste and having experienced of exploitation through the means of caste, class, gender, patriarchy etc. He or she has assumed a certain role of social reformation through literary expressions. It is full of texts which talk about the plight of Dalits and one of the most acclaimed poems is ‘Habit’ written by F M Shinde. I would like to present an analysis of the poem to substantiate the paper’s main theme of Dalit literature.

‘Once you are used to it you never afterwards feel anything;
your blood nevermore congeals
nor flows
for wet mud has been slapped all over your bones.
Once you are used to it
even the sorrow
that visits you
sometimes, in dreams,
melts away, embarrassed.
Habit isn't used to breaking out in feelings.’

Dalit poetry focusses on the central theme of ‘protest’ and tries to bring the subdued anger and agony of the Dalit community to the fore. The poem is all about the idea that Dalits would have become so habituated of the injustice and oppression faced by them and they continue to face it even today. It illuminates how the Dalits might have become so adjusted to their oppression that they cease to feel embarrassed and keep on enduring the embarrassment and harassment without even a hint of dissent. The artist compares the Dalit to a clay sculpture, inert and quiet, unequipped for dissent or obstruction.

The study of Dalit literature is significant in the era of 21st century because it has distorted the canon of literature and literary critical theory in India and abroad. The voices of the subsidiary and deprived communities from all over the world and their appearance through writing should be given space since writing is all about ‘individual’ and it is the job of writing to offer human culture an equivalent stage and destroy the stains of brutality on the premise of caste, ideology, religion, race, identity, etc. Dalit transgender people, who find themselves at the intersection of their caste identities and their diverse notions of gender often addressed as “other” Dalits and the silence about them is located in an emerging legal moment in which transgender persons are compared with “untouchable” Dalits but there is no legal understanding of persons who are both transgender and Dalit. The knowledge that comes from examining overlapping vulnerabilities would help strengthen tools, instruments, and rhetoric designed to address violence, discrimination, and social disempowerment globally.

The first-generation Dalit women like Baby Kamble, Shantabai Dani, Shantabai Kamble were adherents of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and dynamic members in his movement. They had absorbed and spread his message: educate and agitate. They were keenly aware of the amalgamated structures of caste and patriarchy that built up hierarchies among labourers along

the caste and gender axis. This was a sign of their political consciousness. In Baby Kamble's words, the Dalit movement, for them, addressed the 'battle for Truth' that Babasaheb had started. This 'Truth' addressed recollections of hunger and food, embarrassment and degradation, labour practices and cultural traditions of their communities, which they denounced. The most striking aspect was their pride in their Dalit Mahar woman identity and their strong challenge to Hindu traditional practices and the caste oppression it gave rise to. Altogether, they were very different from men, both in the view of gender inequalities and a feeling of agency. Unlike the men, these women investigated their culture in a more nuanced way, investigating myths, superstitions and lived practices against which Babasaheb had requested that they rebel. Scholars like Prof. Kumud Pawde, Jyoti Lanjewar and Urmila Pawar, represented the strong sense of political and cultural identity as educated middle class Dalit women. Their language was dynamic and the resistance was more profound. They questioned the Varna framework and proposed a critique of patriarchal ideologies and practices in their own communities as well as in the society around them. They were unequivocally 'feminist' and in that they were unmistakably not the same as their men or the privileged upper caste women.

"Dalit literature is marked by revolt and negativism, since it is closely associated with the hopes for freedom by a group of people, who as untouchables, are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality" As a literary movement, it continues to grow as new individual keep on adding their voices to the collective outrage of resistance against caste based discrimination and humiliation suffered for ages. A new generation of writers are transforming Dalit literature from merely a narrative of humiliation and exploitation to include issues such as feminism, literary self-consciousness, individual introspection, while tackling with the question of how mainstream this literature may become without losing its authentic Dalit identity. Dalit literature is an outcry of those who were left on the margins: the outcaste, the oppressed, landless, indigenous groups. Raj Kumar in 'Dalit Literature and Criticism' criticizes the upper-caste Hindu writers of the twentieth century who in their novels have tried to portray the lives of 'untouchables' with the aim of bringing about social reform or by sentimental compassion. He argues that these novels belong to genre of 'emotional' literature rather than Dalit literature because these characters are presented from the perspective of upper caste writers. Dalit literature upholds equality, freedom and justice; it emphasizes the centrality of the human being and society and therefore it is revolutionary. Suffering and revolutionary awakening are the basis of Dalit literature. Dalit literature has also begun to give space for

separate sub-category of women writers from Dalit communities.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper has focused upon how Dalit writing in India has developed both in amount and quality and had adequate effect to stir up the mainstream literature. The realities and experiences of ordinary people have been hallmarks of Dalit literature. It has effectively challenged the Brahmanical hegemony in society and literature and empowered the Dalit masses for asserting their rights and for expressing their anguish. In this sense, it has contributed not just to literature but also to identity formation at societal level.

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