

A Critical study of Dalit Literature in India

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In this paper, the writer, at the outset, intends to delineate the historical circumstances that produced the Dalit Literature. Dalit Literature is, in fact, the writings that are about dalits.

Dalit (Oppressed or broken) is not a new word. Apparently, it was used in the 1930s as a Hindi and Marathi translation of 'depressed classes', a term the British used for what are now called the Scheduled Castes. In 1970s the 'Dalit Panthers' revived the term and expanded its reference to include scheduled tribes, poor peasants, women and all those being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion. So Dalit is not a caste. It is a symbol of change and revolution.

The Primary motive of Dalit literature is the liberation of dalits. Dalit struggle against casteist tradition has a long history. For example, in Kannada, it goes back to the first Vachana poet of the 11th century, Chennaiah, the cobbler. The 12th century Dalit saint Kalavve challenged the upper castes in the following words:

“Those who eat goats, fowl and tiny fish:
Such, they call caste people.
Those who eat the Sacred Cow
That showers frothing milk for Shiva:
Such, they call out-castes”.

In modern times, because of the legacy of Mahatma Phule and Babarao Ambedkar, Dalit literature got impetus in Maharashtra. But before the name came into being in the 1960s, such people as Baburao Bagul, Bandhu Madhav, Shankarao kharat were already creating Dalit literature. In its formal form it sprouted out of a

progressive movement called Little Magazine which was a kind of rebellious manifestation of the educated youth of those days against the establishment. These Dalit youths found inspiration in the movement of blacks in the distant land of North America; their black literature and Black Panther became the role models of sorts for them. This protest gained its first expression in the form of a new literature called Dalit Literature.

Poems, short stories, novels and autobiographies written by Dalit writers provided useful insights on the question of Dalit identity. Now the subaltern communities found a new name by coming together with the perspective 'Dalit is dignified' thereby rejecting the sub-human status imposed on them by the Hindu social order.

In this paper also a 'content analysis' of select Dalit writings is to be provided to acquaint the reader with some of the dominant and non-dominant themes recurring in them. The important writers whose writings will find a place are: Mahasweta Devi, Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Sachi Rautray, Rabi Singh, Basudev Sunani, Bama, Abhimani, Poomani, Imayam, Marku, Mangal Rathod, Neerave Patel, Perumal Murugan, Palamalai, Sudhakar, D. Gopi and others.

While dealing with the trends of Dalit literature, the writer will make an humble attempt to point out the core issues of its ideology. In this context it can be said that Dalit literature questioned the mainstream literary theories and upper caste ideologies and explored the neglected aspects of life. Dalit literature is experience – based. This 'anubhava' (experience) takes precedence over 'anumana' (speculation). Thus to Dalit writers, history is not illusionary or unreal as Hindu metaphysical theory may make one to believe. That is why authenticity and liveliness have become hallmarks of Dalit literature. These writers make use of the language of the out-castes and under-privileged in Indian

society. Shame, anger, sorrow and indomitable hope are the stuff of Dalit literature. Because of the anger against the age-old oppression, the expression of the Dalit writers have become sharp.

In their search for alternatives, Dalit writers have rediscovered the low caste saint poets of the Bhakti movement. Even they found relevance in Buddhism. Referring to folk lore, they make an assertion that Dalits were members of an ancient primitive society and were uprooted by the alien Brahminical civilization. These writers make a fervent plea for a complete overhaul of society. As Arjun Dangle, the Marathi Dalit writer put it, “Even the Sun needs to be changed.”

Thus the contribution of Dalit literature has been immense:

- (i) First and foremost, it effectively threatened the Brahmanic hegemony from literature
- (ii) Second, is consented Dalit masses for assertion, protest and mobilization.
- (iii) Third is stirred up thinking in Dalit intellectuals and catalyzed creation of organic intellectuals of Dalits.
- (iv) Fourth, given that the level of literacy been particularly low among Dalits, the emergence of Dalit literature where both the writers and readers are mostly Dalits, is itself an evidence of a profound change taking place in Indian society.

However, in the context of the increasing significance of Dalit literature there is a great need to address major theoretical issues connected with it. The important questions which will be addressed in this paper are the following:

- (i) How far and in what measure the Dalit writings have transformed the full dimension of the

cruelties and humiliation they had suffered into literacy expression and experience ?

- (ii) What are the similarities and differences between the efflorescence of Dalit literature in different languages ?
- (iii) How have the Dalit writings extended the scope of mainstream literature in terms of content ?
- (iv) Where do the present trends in Dalit literature lead to ?
- (v) Are Dalit writings falling into a stereotype ?