



## Dalit literature: From Marginalization to Quest for Identity

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### Abstract

Dalit literature is concerned about the assertion of equality, human-rights, self-pride, justice and depiction of personal and common sufferings. It is in fact an urge for dignity and a quest for identity. It is the voice of those who have been humiliated and ostracized because of their birth in the so called lower castes of the Hindu social order. After centuries of exclusion and discrimination, when dalits started writing about their miserable life it came to be recognized as Dalit Literature. In this article an effort is made to explore dalit literature-its genesis, content, objectives and its socio-political impact; to analyze the output of voices of resistance and struggle for identity of the most marginalized section of the society.

**Key Words:** Dalit Literature, suffering, resistance, marginalized, Quest for identity.

Rivers break the banks.  
Lakes brim over  
And you, one of human race  
Must shed blood  
Struggle and Strike  
For a palmful of water  
I spit on this great civilization...(2)

This lyric of the Marathi poet L. S. Rokhade, 'To Be or Not To Be Born' originally written in Marathi and translated into English by Shanta Gokhale is a desperate cry, a mute suffering-the suffering of yet to be born. Dalit literature is one which acquaints people with the caste system and untouchability in India. According to Sharan Kumar Limbale, "Dalit literature is precisely that literature which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by the dalits. This literature is but a lofty image of grief." (30) .It is a form of

rebellion, a discourse which represents dalit agony. Jaydeep Sarangi considers dalit literature as a culture specific upheaval in India giving importance to dalit realization, aesthetics and resistance.

This literature provides an insight into dalit concerns. Dalit literature is not simply literature. It is associated with the movement to bring about change. It represents the hope and aspirations of a new society and new people. For this purpose selected works have been analyzed to derive its impact on the Indian society. The term Dalit Literature was used at the First Conference of Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha in Mumbai in 1958. Although, this event, went unnoticed by the sociologists as well as writers. The history of dalit consciousness and sympathy for the most degraded people witnessed very few icons in its ancient and medieval times. Buddha in ancient India, social reformers and saints of Bhakti Movement in medieval India and the pre-independence phase raised voice against the social and religious evils in general, but none represented the 'untouchable' dalit issue exclusively. The thought of Jyotiba Phule and Dr. Ambedkar stimulated the dalit consciousness all over India and more prominently in Maharashtra. Amongst the non-dalit writers who deserve mention include Premchand, Mahashweta Devi and Mulkraj Anand.

Until the sixth decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the dalit writings primarily appeared in the regional languages-marathi and tamil. Dalit writers were scattered and came out with personal experiences and limited expression –expression very subtle and sublime, grieving and lamenting mutely. After the sixth decade, the nature and content of dalit writings turned assertive, revolutionary - raising voice against the inhuman practices and atrocities faced by the marginalized. With the advent of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the dalit literature entered into a new phase addressing the dalit issues seriously. The Constitution has abolished untouchability yet it exists in the psyche of the upper castes. Constitutional provisions and safeguards have not been able to free the marginalized of their caste stigma. Dalits are now educated, they have acquired jobs other than their ancestral menial works, still they are considered as inferiors of lesser merit by the mainstream. Majority of uneducated and backward dalits are still in the same turmoil in which their ancestors have been.

Dalit literature in Maharashtra is characterized by angry, self-assertive voices. It narrates the historical injustices and looks at the way the social structure has marginalized certain people on the basis of caste. It is about seeking what has been denied to them.

Dr. Naamvar Singh observed that dalit writing is possible only by dalit writers because when a dalit writes, he writes what he has suffered but when a non-dalit writes, he writes what he has observed. The pain and anguish of the dalits portray the real environment in which they are born and brought up. The translations of marathi and tamil works in English prepared ground for Hindi writers to write

on dalit consciousness which has become means of social struggle against the established order. S. K. Limbale has correctly observed:

Rejection and revolt in dalit literature have been buried from the wombs of dalits pain. They are directed against the inhuman system that was imposed on them. Just as the anguish expressed in dalit literature is in the nature of a collective social voice, similarly the rejection and revolt are collective. It is a belief in rebellion against the caste system, recognizing the human being as its focus. Dalit consciousness is a seed for dalit literature; it is separate and distinct from the consciousness of other writers. (31-32)

It is interesting to explore dalit literature which has influenced the socio-political scenario very deeply in India. It has immense sociological connotations-dealing with the value system and mindset of both-the marginalized as well as the mainstream. It helps to analyze the voices of those who have been excluded and discriminated for centuries and how this expression articulates the Indian political system. Political democracy is incomplete until social democracy is achieved.

The ideology of Phule and Ambedkar had a strong influence on the excluded marginalized. Ambedkar who himself underwent miserable experiences of humiliation despite being such a learned scholar and a personality of high profile due to his capability and knowledge, dedicated his life to the well-being of dalits. His work *Who Were the Shudras* and *The Annihilation of Caste* are masterpieces of the social analysis- an example of the deep study and scholarly approach of his genius. He also stimulated the people through his articles and public speeches. He remained an activist throughout his life. As an architect of our Constitution he contributed substantially for the well-being of the scheduled castes and the scheduled tribes. Abolition of untouchability, right to equality and safeguards and provisions for such backward sections of society has been instrumental in bringing about social change.

Perhaps the first known writer on discrimination is J. B. Phule who wrote *Gulamgiri* in 1873 and dedicated the treatise to the Negroes in America thus showing concern to the marginalized in any social order. Phule was a social reformer of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a thinker and an activist whose work extended to eradication of untouchability, caste- system and women's emancipation.

Amongst the early Marathi writers Baburao Bagul's portrayal of a cruel society through his work *Jevha Mi Jaat Chorali* published in 1963 and translated to English by the title *When I Concealed My Caste* deserves a special mention because his words rebelled against the social system and

brought it to a jolt. Besides this he also wrote stories which gave a great momentum to the dalit literature and eventually to dalit consciousness and awakening.

We cannot miss the name of Mulk Raj Anand when we talk of dalit issues and concerns. His novel *Untouchable* brought into light the dehumanizing practice of untouchability along with the contradiction of Indian society intertwined with the search of a just, equitable and forward looking India. *An Anthology of Dalit Literature* edited by M.R. Anand and Eleanor Zelliot, published in 1992 is a very heart-touching expression comprised of works by contemporary dalit writers extending to almost all genres of literature. It is in fact an account of the passionate protests of the rejected.

Baby Kamble, a veteran dalit writer and an activist, contributed a lot in dalit movement. Her autobiography *The Prisons We Broke* is the saga of dalit women's pathetic condition-emphasizing on the need and importance of education. Similarly Urmila Pawar's autobiographical work *Aayadan*, translated to English by Maya pandit with the title *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* is an account of her miseries as a dalit woman. "My mother used to weave Aayadans, the Marathi generic term for all things made from bamboo. I find that her act of weaving and my act of writing are organically linked. The weave is similar. It is the weave of the pain, suffering and agony that links us" (Preface, ix). Pawar recounts three generations of dalit women who struggled to overcome the burden of their caste. Besides this work, she wrote short stories in which impossibly rebellious acts are all made imaginable. Her characters are so lively; we can trace them in society around us.

Daya Pawar wrote his autobiography, *Baluta*, a combination of revolt and introspection. He recollects the experiences of an untouchable struggling for peaceful existence, a character mentally tormented but incapable of retaliation in word and deed- a transparent and realistic picture of the ethos around him. Such touching works affect the belief system of the readers and readers seek to be more humane henceforth in life. Creating new kinship among mankind and free the society from

artificial bonds is the intent of good literature. His articles and short stories also conveyed the similar message but the effect which is felt in his poetry can be seen in the following lines:

The hand was crushed under the stone yet no outcry was heard

I have seen this tree tremble in pain...! (Wikipedia)

His collection of poems *Kondvada* deeply expresses personal sufferings. Daya Pawar received Padmshree in 1990 for his contribution to society.

To mark the need of education Waman Kardark's poem 'Send My Boy to School' can be cited as a plea of mother keen to send her child to school.

We may be terribly poor

Famine may knock at our door

I'll see that he gets to school

Send my boy to school, to school. (*Poisoned Bread*, 8)

This urge extends to the necessity and importance of education for those who have been deprived of it for years and years. Education is a strong means of emancipation. Almost all dalit writers and dalit literature in one way or the other has conveyed this message to stir dalit consciousness and stand up for their rights.

The desire to have positive changes around is very well expressed in Anna Bhau's poem, 'Take a hammer to change the world'. To quote Bama, "Dalit writers bring about a chaos in the hierarchical relationships between the dominant and the dominated." (Shiva Prakash, H.S., 98)

The dalits feel themselves segregated and excluded in their own motherland; their humiliation is well expressed in these words:

"Must I call this land mine?

Love it, sing its glory" (*Poisoned Bread*, 3)

This question is raised in the words of Lokhade. A similar sentiment is expressed by Avinash Dolas in his work, *The Refugee* where the character feels very isolated and his position very dehumanized.

Avinash Dolas has written, a low caste is worse than a refugee, at least a refugee can appeal for protection but a low caste cannot.

In 1992 was published the autobiographical novel of the famous Tamil dalit feminist Bama by the title *Karukku* depicting the sorrows and problems of being a dalit. It won the Crossword Book Award in 2000.

Shankar Kumar Limbale's autobiography, *Akkarmashi* is a journey of his suffering. It was translated to English as *The Outcaste*. His critical work, *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*, published in 2004 is a noteworthy work on dalit concerns raising questions on the traditions, caste and the harsh realities of our society.

Another representative of dalit voice who truly expressed Ambedkar's ideology through his works is the eminent writer Narendra Jadhav- recipient of 67 national and international awards including four D.Litt. degrees. He has 37 books to his credit in Marathi, Hindi and English. His volumes on *Ambedkar Speaks* and other works highlighting Ambedkar's philosophy and ideology are very instrumental in dalit awakening. *Outcaste: A Memoir* and *Untouchable: My Family's Triumphant Journey Out of the Caste System in Modern India*, are works depicting the despair of the untouchables placed at the bottom of our social order. These works are compelling and deeply passionate, illuminating chronicle of one of the most important moments in Indian History that gives the readers an insight into the lives of those whose struggle for equality continues even today.

Another writer who reminded the dalits of the dreams of Ambedkar is Jaiprakash Kardam. His thoughts find expression in the form of essays, novels and poems. His poetry collection *Goonga Nahi tha Main* and *Tinka Tinka Aag* is all about the grief and agony of this marginalized section of

society. He edits the yearly magazine *Dalit Sahitya Varshiki* to address dalit concerns through literature.

How humanity gets shattered due to this caste system can be very well judged by the lines of Raman Vaghela's poem:

“Unfortunate is our life, Oh fellow human,  
hard is our existence  
We inherited the wound, unfortunate is our  
life fellow human.”

“The moment of ours remains away from  
the happiness  
Here is no medicine to remove the pain.”

This poem raises serious questions about humanity, equality, justice and democracy in our country.

Another autobiography which emerged as a document of the long –silenced and long –denied sufferings of the dalits is that of Omprakash Valmiki's, *Joothan*. His works, *Dalit sahitya Ka Saundaryashastra*, 2001 and *Safai Devta*, 2009 are worth mentioning as milestones in dalit literature. His collection of poems *Sadiyon Ka Santaap* , *Bas Bahut ho Chuka*, and *Ab aur Nahin* truly represents the dalit voice. As the titles themselves convey, these poems express the torment faced through ages, a call to stop this discrimination and exclusion and a note of rebellion-such works are in fact a call for the revolutionary transformation of society and human consciousness.

The dalit voices were plainly but strongly expressed in all the genres of literature. *The Poisoned Bread* is an Anthology of dalit writings published in 1992, edited by Arjun Dangle- a major dalit writer and an activist of ‘Dalit Panthers’, an organization working for the dalits. This effort to anthologize dalit literature in English inspired a vibrant movement. It was the voice of dalits raised by Baburao Bagul, Namdeo Dhasal and many more. It recognized the literary value of writings by dalit writers giving them a platform and creating an ideological bond. It created a literature of protest which still flourishes. It became a landmark in motivating and stimulating the dalits to stand up for their respectful place in Indian society. Dalits listened to their inner voice and registered courage to pen down their experiences. This motivated the newer generations to change the system. The force behind these writings was the anger- anger generated due to the social denial and suppression of the rights and status which is guaranteed by the Constitution. Activists working as dalit panthers

believed that the system can be changed only by political methods. Activists and writers actually represented the socio-political aspirations of the deprived ones. 'Bread' which is the symbol of life turns to 'poisoned bread' due to the poisonous treatment of society. It then becomes the symbol of social inferiority, slavery and rebellion. *The Poisoned Bread* speaks through its characters.

Dalit literature has become quite extensive today and has become a means of dalit awakening and consciousness. It explores existential questions. Its creation is inevitable until the structure of social change is acquired. There has been a paradigm shift in writings of new generations which is due to the changing socio-political scenario. A growing number of dalit youths have now entered the Universities and Colleges and have been subjected to newer forms of exclusion and discrimination. Dalit narratives have till now unearthed the accounts of pain and suffering, exploitation and humiliation. It aimed to protest against the established system which is based on injustice and to expose the evil and hypocrisy of the so called higher caste people. There is an urgent need to create separate aesthetics of dalit literature- an aesthetic based on the real experiences of life. Newer areas have been explored by new dalit writers. The issues of dalit women, patriarchy within dalits vote-politics, human rights and unprejudiced social status are now sought after very keenly. Young people have access to critique and language and their expression has thus sharpened. Social media has proved to be an important platform- social discussions, comments, blog writing all show that the marginalized wish to articulate oppression and defiance with a new hope and aspiration. Dalit literature has travelled a long way, from autobiographical writings to new vistas of socio-political aspects. It has moved ahead with times incorporating new technology and new realities that have come with globalization. This indicates that with substantial change in the nature, content and treatment, the dalit literature still exist to be instrumental in the construction of a just and equitable society.

While we analyze the language and style of the dalit literature we find it very simple, realistic and native. These writings are not the work of art and beauty in the traditional sense rather they are narration of one's experience as a dalit and the call for change in their degraded and dehumanized status. Therefore it challenges the established traditional standard of aesthetics of the mainstream literature. Dalit literature portrays the vision and ethos of dalit life but even for this, being a dalit and having a dalit insight is not enough, an intellectual and aesthetic approach is required to portray

the dalit life which can further create impact- the vision has to be transformed into an aesthetic vision.

Now let us have a look at the various dimensions of the impact created by the dalit literature. When the subaltern started speaking it aimed to create a new world- a world where they can live with the same honour and dignity with which their mainstream fellow humans live. As Arjun Dangle puts:

1. The dalit literature threatened the hegemony of higher castes in society.
2. It motivated the marginalized to assert, protest, and seek dignity.
3. It stimulated the dalit intellectuals and
4. It established the necessity of education and thinking for their rights.

Dalit writings create a social and political reaction. There has been no place for dalits in the glorified art, history, culture and literature of our society. Neither has he been considered worthy of any kind of social or political activities. The untouchable has remained neglected in all walks of life. As Arjun Dangle says, "This man has no place in Brahminical Literature". Hence, when dalits started writing, their outrage and exasperation lead to revolts aimed to establish equal social order. Restructuring of different groups, forms of struggle, changing socio-political equations, caste- based vote politics in Indian democracy are some of the noticeable impacts of dalit literature. The fundamental Constitutional provision of social justice and equality is the basic aspiration of dalit writings and dalit consciousness. Unfortunately despite much stirring the desired still seem unattainable. In fact, integration and assimilation of the marginalized seems to be an impossibility and no amount of personal up gradation can bring about even a bare amount of minimal equality and fraternity which the dalits strive for. The inherited status has a strong influence- it brings about the latent contradiction of the socio-economic and political nature. Dalit writers are writing with new hope and aspirations. Newer issues and new forms of exclusion are being raised through their literature. The educated ones are responsible for the emancipation of their still backward kith and kin. Hope the power of pen fulfills the desire and aspirations of the excluded and the long desired humanity and dignity become a reality for them. Political will and social commitment together can bring about the desired transformation.

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