

Dalit Literature: An Intervention in ‘Caste’ and ‘Literary Aesthetics’

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Abstract: In the contemporary socio-cultural and political scenario, ‘caste’ has taken the centre stage in critical analysis. Writings on caste and about those suffering as the result of this hierarchical and discriminatory system have entered the mainstream academia under the rubric of ‘Dalit Literature.’ These writings have not only challenged caste system, but have provided a new dimension to the understanding of the aesthetic value of literature. Noted Dalit writers such as Om Prakash Valmiki, Namdeo Dhasal, and Baburao Bagul have broken the conventional understandings of ‘literature’ by including disturbing images and languages in their writing. Most importantly, they have portrayed the Dalits as subjects of analysis rather than objects of interpretation. Studies have been conducted on the thematic and structural aspects of Dalit literature, and a major attraction about Dalit literature has remained its ‘activism’ aspect. But how far has it influenced our views about caste and about literature? Do we see Dalit literature as invoking a self reflection among non-Dalits about their perception/assumptions about Dalits? Or, does Dalit literature remain in the arena of ‘by Dalits and for Dalits’? In the light of these questions this study aims to investigate the effectiveness of Dalit literature in bringing about a change in society as well as in the understanding of the aesthetic value of literature.

Keywords: Dalit Aesthetics, Caste, Dalit Standpoint, Resistance Literature

Commenting on what constitutes ‘Dalit literature,’ Sharankumar Limbale in his seminal book, *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature* (2004) writes,

Dalit writers believe that Dalit literature is a movement. They see their literature as a vehicle for their pain, sorrow, questions, and problems. But when readers read the works of Dalit writers exclusively as ‘literature,’ the common ground between the writer and the reader is disturbed. (105)

Dalit literature disturbs the ‘pleasure’ value of canonical literature by bringing in ‘disturbing’ images and language. Hence, the common understanding of ‘literary aestheticism’ as referring to ‘beauty’ and ‘artistry’ is violated by Dalit literature.

Popularised by the Dalit panthers such as Namdeo Dhasal and Baburao Bagul, Dalit writings have entered the mainstream academia under the rubric of ‘Dalit Literature.’ Studies have been conducted on the thematic and structural aspects of Dalit literature, and a major attraction about Dalit literature has remained its ‘activism.’ But how far has it influenced our views about caste and about literature? Do we see Dalit literature as invoking a self-reflection among non-Dalits

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Often marked as a 'discourse of pity' (Limbale vii), literary and cultural representations of the lower castes and tribals have mostly been based on writings by Mulk Raj Anand (in his novel, *Untouchable*), and Premchand (in the short story, "Kafan"), both of which depicted lower castes as either victims or heartless brutes. In the contemporary scenario, when Dalit studies has become part of the mainstream academia, these authors' writings have not only come to be critiqued because of their stereotypical representations of the lower caste people, but also due to their upper caste identity which removes them from the 'reality' of caste oppression. Thus, questions have not only been raised as to whether the Dalits can speak for themselves, but also about who can speak for them.

Dalit literature draws its components from Jyotiba Phule and B. R. Ambedkar who, through their extensive writings and actions, promoted a massive resistance to the institution of caste. However, as Arjun Dangle in *The Poisoned Bread* points out, the Dalit voices during the Ambedkarite period were expressed mostly through traditional oral folk arts such as songs, *tamasha*, and *jalsa*. It was during the 1950s when the first batch of Dalit youths graduated from college and set up a literary body, the Siddharth Sahitya Sangh that Dalit voices emerged through writing. Access to education, therefore, becomes instrumental in building a voice of dissent through literature. One of the major issues raised by Phule and Ambedkar was how Brahmanism, by restricting knowledge to specific castes, prevents lower caste people from having access to education. Phule by establishing schools for lower castes and for women, and Ambedkar by becoming a living manifestation to show how knowledge gives power, emphasized the importance of education for the socio-cultural and political emancipation of Dalits. They argued that until and unless people of the lower caste know what scriptures and *shastras* are about, they will not be able to formulate resistance against the oppressions they face. They also pointed out that this education should be influenced by western methods because traditional Sanskrit education is imbued with brahmanical ideals. In his short story, "Mother," Baburao Bagul shows how brahmanical education imparted in the Sanskrit language, causes epistemic violence. Such education not only promotes brahmanical ideals and strongly establishes the caste system, but also makes the knowledge and language of Dalits invalid.

The Dalit literary and political boom in the 70s and 80s thus brought a vehement challenge for these brahmanical standards. Their writings, full of slang and everyday language, forced the readers to recognize the existence of caste system which seems unfamiliar in the contemporary urban setups, but is very much present in our daily lives. Dalit literature arose out of such discontents where it sought to challenge not only the caste system but also literary representations of Dalits. Thus, Dalit literature became a mouthpiece of voice resistance.

This 'resistance' does not simply create a separate body of literature. The aim of Dalit literature is to intervene into the existing hegemonic literary canon and revise it so that multiplicity of forms, styles, and languages are accepted as 'literature.' It is the hegemony of Brahmanism and its claims of superiority of knowledge that Dalit literature, both in real life and in the literary sphere, aims to challenge. In fact, the very term 'Dalit,' coming from Marathi, suggests those who are oppressed or ground down. Underlying the term, therefore, is a sense of political awareness, rejection of state-created categorization, and rejection of caste system where caste-names perform a major role in determining and perpetuating caste hierarchies. This rejection also challenges the originary concept which links caste to birth and profession. By adopting the term 'Dalit,' it is at the same time presenting a critique of essentialist nature of categories and proclaiming conscious political resistance.

For Dalits, therefore, literature and activism go hand in hand, and literature becomes a tool to voice dissent. Sharmila Rege in *Writing Caste/ Writing Gender* argues that "the intention [of Dalit testimonies] is not one of literariness but of communicating the situation of a group's oppression, imprisonment and struggle" (13). While I would like to go one step further and claim in the line of Limbale that Dalit literature has challenged the concept of 'literariness' as understood in the canonical sense, what becomes apparent through Rege is that literature for the Dalits is nothing short of activism.

In a memorial lecture delivered in IIT Kanpur, Ritu Menon, the editor of Women Unlimited, a leading feminist publishing house in India, called our attention to dissenting voices as instrumental in challenging hegemonic systems pervading our society. In protest against the Dadri lynching, a number of eminent Indian writers gave up their awards given by the government. Commenting on the right to dissent and the right to life, Nayantara Sahgal emphasized that intellectual life is not about abstract ideas. An intellectual life provides an interior view of the social structures that often remain repressed. Dalit writers perform the function of organic intellectuals in creating political consciousness among the masses. Their writings are wrought with political agenda.

Bama in *Karukku* points out how writing is an act of personal and political struggle. Emphasizing the necessity of collective resistance, Bama writes

There are other Dalit hearts like mine, with a passionate desire to create a new society made up of justice, equality and love. They, who have been the oppressed, are now themselves like the double-edged *karukku*, challenging their oppressors. . . . Instead of being more and more beaten down and blunted, they must unite, think about their rights, and battle for them. (xxiii-xxiv)

What is important is the recognition of their voices. Rather than representing the Dalits as mute victimized others, it is necessary to identify the locations and instances of resistance. Moreover, the portrayal of their daily lives becomes instrumental because for Dalits, every day is a struggle

for survival. It also challenges the canonical notion as to what counts as subject matter of literature. Speaking from the standpoint of Dalits, Dalit literature challenges literary expectations and posits them as subjects of the narrative rather than objects.

But what are some of the characteristics of Dalit literature? Limbale in *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature* critiques the triadic concept of ‘satyam’ (the true), shivam (the sacred), and sundaram (the beautiful), which have remained a benchmark to assess aesthetic value of literature in the Indian literary sphere, while underscoring its brahmanical nature. These concepts construct a system of knowledge that is rooted in Brahmanism, and promotes sankritization. In this process, not only are Dalit people’s lives and languages marked as unworthy of use, they are marked as invalid.

Pointing towards the subversive capacity of Dalit literature, Raj Gauthaman puts forward his argument with reference to the use of language by Dalits. He argues that it is a conscious attempt to disrupt the upper caste language proprieties and to expose and discredit the existing language, its grammar, its refinements, and its falsifying order as symbols of dominance. The poems by Namdeo Dhasal take a mutinous stance by using slangs, colloquial language. In “Hunger” he writes:

Hunger
Which came first, seed or tree?
Hunger you make things too difficult
Hunger just tell us what breed this monkey is
And if you can’t
Then we will screw
Seventeen generations of you
Hunger, you and your mother . . .

This articulation is very different from the romanticised portrayal of pain by Mulk Raj Anand. Dhasal’s poem hits us. It hits the hegemonic assumptions that one’s caste, acquired through birth, is an unchangeable factor. What Dhasal shows is that caste, in fact, is a dynamic social construct, created and historically perpetuated by the dominants to serve their purpose. Thus this poem challenges the literary criteria as well as the system of caste. Rather than portraying Dalits as mute victims silently bearing pain, this poem shows active resistance which arises from political consciousness. This resistance is not an individual revenge. It is a collective challenge towards the very structures that dictate the inequalities in our society. Moreover, it gives prevalence to the colloquial form of language.

Laura Brueck, in *Writing Resistance: The Rhetorical Imagination of Hindi Dalit Literature*, comments that Dalit literature is marked by realism. The purpose of Dalit literature in using realism “is to get their readership to acknowledge the ethical conflict at the heart of [the stories] and then to recognize it reflected in the world around them and ultimately transform it

into a new reality of a just society” (99). This argument of realist representation ironically goes back to authenticity claims fixing Dalit literature as the expression of Dalits by Dalits. The claim of authenticity is dangerous because it posits Dalit literature as having a separatist agenda and puts the responsibility of talking about caste only on those who are born as Dalits. The approach presents Dalit literature as ‘another’ form of literature. Such additive methods prevent Dalit literature from having any effect on the existing literary practices and social structures. By making ‘Dalit’ an identity-based, given category, it falls into the very trap it tried to challenge, i.e., the originary concept provided by Brahmanism. It also prevents any coalition from happening between different groups for a more effective politics. Moreover, simply narrating experiences is not a political act. One needs to understand that experiences are deeply rooted in the social and the ideological, and are constructed by them. Hence, we cannot take the experiences at face value. We need to question how those experiences are created, and what the implications are.

Therefore, I see Dalit literature as promoting a Dalit standpoint, a perspective from the point of view of the Dalits. Sandra Harding defines standpoint as a conscious political position which examines how knowledge and power are related. Arguing that dominant epistemologies provide only a partial view, Harding believes that the standpoint of the oppressed provides a more holistic view because it takes into account both the oppressor and the oppressed. In her Introduction to *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader*, she writes:

Standpoint theory’s focus on the historical and social locatedness of knowledge projects and on the way collective political and intellectual work can transform a source of oppression into a source of knowledge and potential liberation, makes a distinctive contribution to social justice projects as well as to our understanding of preconditions for the production of knowledge. (10)

Dalit literature not only intervenes into dominant brahmanical epistemologies by proving Dalit experience as a valid source of knowledge, it tries to redefine the socio-cultural and the academic definitions of what counts as ‘knowledge.’ The Dalit standpoint thus unfolds the power politics operative in structures of caste and literature. In both cases, the systemic brahmanical control determines who can have control over caste and literary expression and what is worthy of articulation. Thus, to bring Spivak’s concept, it is not that the Dalits cannot speak. The structures are built in a way so that their voices are never heard. Dalit literature through its ‘unconventional’ methods is building scope for the formulation of a new aesthetic and making space for the unheard voices to speak out.

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