

A Study of Dalit Literature: Giving Voice to the Unvoiced

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Abstract:

The word "Dalit" connotes people who are impoverished, oppressed, abused, and in need. The origin of the Indian caste system is not a widely accepted theory. There are several forms of inequality that give rise to social prejudice in every civilised community. Additionally, it is dressed in "Casteism" in India. The subaltern literary voices of the tribals, Dalits, and other minority groups were absent from discourses tailored to the tastes of the nobility. The dalits are denied their basic rights to equality, property ownership, and education. Dalit literature thus arises as a voice for all those marginalised, oppressed, and exploited populations who have long suffered from societal injustice and exploitation. The liberation of Dalits from this never-ending slavery is the central theme of Dalit literature. Dalits, who feel that the social order is to blame for their downfall, utilise their works as a weapon to express their rage. They have finally awakened from their extended sleep and are aware of their identities as humans. The Dalit awareness of their identity and self-realization has been a major theme in a variety of colourful and diverse creative writings. It is also highly praised in the works of many other authors, including Mahasweta Devi, Bama, Arjun Dangle, D. Gopi, and many more. The suffering that the Dalit writers depict is not unique to them; rather, it is the suffering of the entire marginalised community. The main goal of this article is to demonstrate, how Dalit writers break the taboo around the unreported exploitation of Dalits in our nation through their literary works. And how these silenced voices are now being unleashed through Dalit literature. This paper attempts to understand the vision and voice of the Dalits and their transformation from silent, helpless objects of history to active, self-aware subjects. The reasons behind the growth of Dalit literature, its effects on contemporary society, the socioeconomic status of Dalits in India, and how they create their own history will all be examined in this paper.

Keywords: Subaltern, Self-realization, Identity, and Exploitation.

Introduction:

The oppressed people who identify as "Dalits" are one group in our culture that has drawn the interest of numerous academics and activists over the past ten years. The Sanskrit term "Dalit" means "suppressed," "crushed," "ground," or "broken to pieces." The term Harijans, which means "Children of God," was coined by Gandhiji to honourably name the untouchables. The official names used by Indian government documents to refer to the untouchables and tribes are "Scheduled Castes" and "Scheduled Tribes." Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, a well-known Marathi social reformer, previously referred to untouchables and outcasts as the downtrodden and crushed victims of the caste system in India, when he used the name "Dalit." It is also thought that Dr. B. R. Ambedkar was the one who initially came up with this usage.

However, the phrase gained popularity in the 1970s when the Dalit Panther Movement's followers in Maharashtra used it as a constant reminder of their long history of oppression, signifying both their social deprivation and the people who are exploited. However, in the modern era, the name "Dalit" refers to individuals, who have been viewed as "outcasts," meaning they do not merit recognition within the four categories of the class system. The Manu Smriti, a holy text, describes the "Varna system" of society. It is a four-tiered Varna system that includes four social classes that were created from the body of Lord Brahma.

This legend states that Shudra was born from the feet, Vaishya from the abdomen, Kshatriya from the arms, and Brahmin from the head. Shudra was the main focus because he was born without feet and was forced to live in servitude. They were typically prohibited from religious events because they were thought to pollute society. They were forced to work in menial jobs like slaughtering, leather work, or picking up trash, animal corpses, and waste. They were poor people who lived on the fringes of the community and subsisted on the leftovers, or "Jhoothan," of the wealthy. These people did not have access to public facilities such as rivers, wells, marketplaces, or schools during the beginning of the 20th century.

Movement Requirement:

Previously, the Dalits were not acknowledged as a separate group and no efforts were made to improve their social standing. They lacked any property or productive resources from an economic standpoint. They held no positions of political authority in the government. Any form of social discrimination results in deprivations for the discriminated party, which makes them resentful of their rights, self-respect, esteem, and even money gain that they are denied. And that is the case of the untouchables in India, who have endured centuries of social prejudice and disadvantage. It's not that the Dalits can't adapt to the changes; rather, it's the wealthy segment of society and their social standing that stand in Dalits' way. And the only thing left to do for the Dalits is to launch a social movement against the existing social structure in order to demand equal social status and their inherent rights to a decent education, a job, and even their identity as human beings. Several reform movements got their beginnings in our nation's various states.

History of the Movement:

Lord Gautama Buddha preached the abolition of untouchability and is credited as being the first Dalit reformer. During the 1800s, Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, and the Ramakrishna Mission played a significant role in the Dalit liberation movement. Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, and U. R. Shinde spearheaded a number of Dalit reform campaigns in Maharashtra. Chaitanya Prabhu started the "Namoo Shudras Movement" in West Bengal, which altered public perception of the untouchable people. The objective of each of these revolutions was to free the Dalits from the systems of oppression that exist within Indian society. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar had a significant impact on the Dalit movements that originated in the Indian subcontinent. The three basic tenets of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's philosophy are equal status for these untouchables, the abolition of exploitation, and the caste system. Dalit writers were so impacted by these movements that they started to recognise who they were. They were formerly anonymous individuals who didn't give a damn about how they were portrayed in books. They were destined from birth to work as bound labourers and serve as a target for feudal landlords who might take advantage of their wives and daughters. These overly embarrassed and crushed creatures have no right to speak. They contend that there

is no point in looking back at history if they themselves have no place in it. These are the people that wish to record their own past.

They express their strong feelings against the upper-class individuals that push them to the peripheral or fringes due to societal ill-treatment and exploitation. According to Sathiana than Clark, "the subordination and subjection that characterise Dalits' lives in India give them the shape of a particularly contextual assembly of subalternity." (Clark.6) The definition of subaltern in the dictionary is an officer of lower rank. It appears that the field of subaltern studies, which focuses on the oppressed and disadvantaged people on the planet, is relatively new. This group includes the landless peasants, lower castes, and downtrodden classes. The phrase is typically meant in opposition to a privileged class of elites. While their lower caste brethren had no official representation in history, the upper caste, bureaucrats, and feudal landlords were given plenty of space. Following India's independence, the framers of the constitution deliberated and incorporated clauses specifically addressing the socio-economic advancement of Dalits and other underprivileged groups. Therefore, the Dalits' current socioeconomic and political status should be attributed to their consistent combined efforts and the numerous actions the government took following the nation's independence.

Dalit Writings:

The untouchables were long denied access to formal education, which would have energised and inspired them to launch a legitimate literary movement in opposition to the established literature's monopoly. Some educated "Untouchables" came into contact with contemporary education during the post-Independence era, and they saw they needed to adopt a new way of thinking. The birthplace of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the champion of the oppressed, is where this literary movement got its start. Thus, in the early 1970s, "Dalit Literature" gained popularity and quickly expanded to surrounding states like Gujarat, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and many more. In Dalit literature, the Dalits themselves convey their rage and bitterness towards those who they hold accountable for their current situation. It calls into question the standing and circumstances surrounding the Dalits. Hira Dom's poem is regarded as the earliest work of Dalit literature, and Swami Achyutanand's writings and social activity exposed an oppressive societal framework. Dalit reality is portrayed in Dalit literature. With this portrayal, the untouchables subvert the upper class's purported purity and speak out loudly throughout the caste-ridden society.

Since the 1970s, a large number of poets and writers from Dalit communities have been producing poems, short stories, novels, and autobiographies brimming with themes of caste oppression, identity issues, poverty, untouchability, and revolution. Now, these subaltern communities are using the traditionally denied weapon of literacy on their own, and they are exposing the conditions under which they have survived as well as directly flouting the sub-human status imposed upon them by the Hindu social order. The central goal of Dalit literature is the liberation of Dalits. This anger and resentment of Dalits against social inequality comes out in the form of Dalit literature. Dalit writing questions and challenges the hegemony of mainstream literature, which they refer to as "Hindu literature." Hindu literature is the recognised literature of India, according to Bahurao Bagul. However, Dalit literature possesses the revolutionary ability to embrace contemporary science and technology and effect a complete metamorphosis. "Dalit" is the name of a complete revolution, a revolution brought to life. Bagul, 289 The main goal of Dalit literature is to transform society through a "total revolution." Dalit literature rightfully

challenges Hinduism's ages-old conceptions of the Vedas and Granthas, which uphold the Varna system. This Hindu worldview is refuted in Dalit literature, which maintains that society is comprised entirely of people. In the philosophy of Dalit literature, man is the centrifugal force, as Dalit writer Tarachand Khandekar puts it. The human race is superior. Above all gods, holy texts, and science. This man has the ability to create and destroy anything. Dalit Literature holds that nothing endures forever. Everything is prone to deterioration. Every deterioration gives rise to a new creation. As a result, it rejects the dictum "Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram." Conversely, it asserts that nothing is true that does not apply to man's supreme freedom, nothing is good that does not advance man's well-being, and nothing is beautiful that does not advance human beauty. (Khandekar, 6) The narrative of the centuries-long complex struggle that led to these so-called "Untouchables" renouncing their identity and choosing to identify as Dalits. A broad variety of literary styles are covered by Dalit literature. Dalit poetry is widely available and has a strong sense of protest. However, the protest is directed towards society as a whole rather than any specific person or organisation. According to a Dalit poet from Orissa:

*They are rage now [sic]
They are awakened
Awakened from this mass slumber
They will burn down the establishment
For their bread and butter
They have already given a call
And are ready to shed their blood
With red tears (Nayak.20)*

The current era saw the emergence of a new generation of Dalit poets who rebelled against the oppressive conventional restraints. Among the well-known poets of the early Dalit literature was Narayan Survey. His "Vidhyapith" poem is well-known. The other poets, such as Namedeo Dhasal's "Golpitha" (The Red Light Zone), Daya Pawar's "Kandwads" (a suffocating enclosure), Keshav Meshram's "Utkhanan" (Excavation), and so on. A significant amount of Dalit literature is composed of autobiographical writings. Every genre, including poems, short stories, novels, and critical prose works, has a "Confessional Characteristic" that the author has created.

These writers, in general, do not express their disapproval of any one group; rather, they see themselves as cut off from both the government and the social structure, which they believe keeps them impoverished and debased. Stated differently, the pursuit of identity is fundamental to Dalit culture. Because of this, Dalit writers have responded in a number of ways to issues relating to poverty, hypocrisy, injustice, social discrimination, and other social practices. These answers are kinds of protest meant to bring about a revolution in order to bring about social change. The primary distinction between Dalit and mainstream literature is that the former rejects the long-standing Indian customs of caste, class, and religion while the latter maintains that customs cannot be completely disregarded. According to the Dalit writers, a particular class has been using the word "tradition" as a "safeguard" for their own purposes. Regarding this, Dangle states:

A tradition is created and nurtured by ideas and ideals, and it is these ideas and principles that give rise to and maintain a tradition. A tradition's foundation is determined by the overall set of circumstances as well as the social structure in place at the time. The privileged elite is constantly looking to create a useful custom that protects its interests. The weaker segments of society are sick of this custom. In actuality, a small number of people have forced all of our traditions—religious, social, literary, and cultural—on the majority. (Dangle, 261).

Comparably, Bama, a Tamil Dalit fiction writer, has created incredibly valuable works about gender, caste, and marginalised groups in society. She pens the first autobiography by a Tamil Dalit woman. Her books, which have been translated into English and several other Indian languages, include *Karukku*, *Sangati*, and *Vanman*. She reveals the shame of religious conversion and the caste system in *Karukku*. Her work effectively highlights the issue of Dalit consciousness. She fiercely opposes the caste-based Indian society in general and the Roman Catholic Churches in particular for their practice of untouchability.

Conclusion and Discussion:

Generally speaking, Dalit literature is that which creatively depicts the hardships—such as shame, exploitation, grief and suffering, dehumanisation, mockery, and poverty—that Dalits have endured for a very long period. The authors are working to reject religious and cultural conventions and to achieve self-respect and identity. This is a fresh and distinctive vein in Indian literature. Now that Dalit writing has advanced to this point, it is clear that it is no longer limited to denouncing the "other" and is instead examining and empowering readers to achieve empowerment. In summary, there has been a surge in Dalit literature, with numerous writers addressing various topics in their writings. Gender-related concerns, which were previously disregarded, are now being discussed by many writers. Numerous Dalit women authors speak about their place in the patriarchal social structures that both exist inside and outside of their communities. These days, people are expressing themselves in a variety of ways and writing about oppression that extends beyond caste to include issues of class, gender, and religion. The increasing number of Dalit texts being translated into English is encouraging. Dalit studies have now been launched in a number of Indian and international colleges. Even while there have always been instances of resistance to different forms of injustice, these instances are now more noticeable, and the untouchables and Dalit community seem to be following them with greater vigour, resolve, political support, and adherence to the law. It is evident that they now have a distinct identity, but they still have a long way to go before they fully integrate into democratic society and lose their distinct identity as Dalits or members of the Scheduled Class in that civil society, which is still developing. Dalit writers today have both political backing and an ideological basis for their writing. As a result, Dalit literary production is increasing daily. And maybe one day it will become recognised as a major hub for world literature.

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