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Contextualizing caste, Gender and Religion in Dalit Literature

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Abstract

Dalits are a product of caste system. From castes to last, the dalits are necessary. Their oppression was fortified by the religious scripture of Hinduism both with its operative rules and with the rationale for the caste system in terms of its theories of Karma and re-birth. The paper therefore focuses on understanding the essential features of caste system, its origin, its comparison with Dalit literary narratives and also the comparison between its victims. The spiritual reason for the change of religion of dalits is just exploitation. This is a literature which acts like an image of social realism, i.e. it is a reflection of the shadow of reality rather than depiction of the solution to reality. Secondly, there are books written by dalit writers themselves, and these occupy the amphitheatre of modern discussion centering on the growth and evolution of dalit literature or communities. They are designed to be debated so as to carve out a new identity for a new genre of dalit literature through their writings. The dalit women described in paper are victims of Hindu social order. Different historical events, situations and turns have brought about significant changes in the growth of dalit aesthetics. It also discusses how the dalits articulated their struggles for emancipation.

Paper

Dalit consciousness has articulated itself in various literary forms. The enterprise of discovering origins of dalit literature is self-defeating for obvious reasons. One, like all 'origin studies' it would end up being speculative and tentative. Two, any attempt to foreground it in the mythical would undermine the pronounced this-worldliness of the dalit movement. Since the agency of the dalit has been recognized of late, any attempt to locate dalit writing as clearly



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defined and demarcated alternative discourse in the pre-historic ancient past would be extremely notional and therefore empirically untenable too.

As far as writings by the low-caste writers are concerned, it is held that many of the ancient brahmanical texts were authored by low-caste writers. One such well-known text is *Ramayana* which was authored by a low-caste writer named Valmiki. But whether such texts can be described as 'dalit' would be a matter of vehement debate for mere caste of the author cannot solely determine the character of the text. Dalit literature as has been defined above has to be by dalit on dalit issues. So mere dalit-authorship is not sufficient; what is required along with this is the consciousness of dalit.

On the other hand, the Dalit writer is honest to his life and to his experience and feels that his vision and experience must be translated into art honestly, in its raw undistilled form, without euphemism.

Before the evolution, aesthetics and character of this distinct genre is mapped out, it is critically imperative to understand the significance of the term of 'Dalit'.

Interpretation of the Terms Dalit, Dalit Writer and Dalit Literature

The dispute over the interpretation of the term Dalit has created factions and splintered the movement. Initially, a great controversy raged over the term, for some thought it was derogatory, it symbolized all that was base. Some felt that the word denoted the community and did not have a pejorative flavor anymore. While some writers like Bagul, Wankhede and Dhasal included under the term Neo-Buddhists as well as the downtrodden and oppressed everywhere and in all occupations, Adsul, Dhale and others created a separate category of literature, Boudha Sahitya, limited only to that written Neo-Buddhists, as they felt that their inclusion in the wider category of Dalits would be humiliating and extremely detrimental to them. According to them, Neo-Buddhists are no more Dalit, a derogatory term which connotes the meaning prevalent in traditional Hindu society. They asserted that their fight is against 'Dalitatwa', that is, against



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untouchability and other social handicaps. They further alleged that persons insisting on the use of the word Dalit were encouraging casteism and classism through this literary movement (Lata, 54). In the post-Dalit phase of caste politics, a new movement namely 'Bahujan' has gained political currency. *Bahujan* is distinct from *dalit* in many significant ways. While retaining the radicalism of the term *dalit*, *bahujan* goes a step further. Bahujan as the term suggests stands for greater number of the oppressed people as against the smaller number of the privileged Brahmins. Unlike the dalits, the *bahujanvadis* seek to ascend up the social hierarchy through their numerical strength which they believe would fetch them greater success in Parliamentary democracy. Bahujan consciousness "represents a reformist strand that has adopted the Parliamentary path of gradual social transformation" (Pai, 12). *Bahujan* as a term gained political mileage after the Mandalization of Indian polity in mid-80s.

However, according to some Dalit writers like Gangadhar Pantawane, editor of *Asmitadarsh*, the actual experience and to share experience are both important. There is always a difference between self-experience and sharing of the experience, yet the sharing is significant too and there are some non-Dalit writers who have interpreted the Dalits and their problems in a realistic manner. The caste Hindu writers also seem to have accepted this distinction. In fact, ironically, most of them do not like to be clubbed together with Dalit writers.

Contemporary Dalit Writings

The modern phase of Dalit writings began with Annabhau Sathe and Shankarrao Kharat, Sathe's famous novel *Fakira*, is a heart-breaking story of a rebellious youth of the Matang caste (known as a 'criminal' caste). Though it depicts a picture of the downtrodden, there is a romantic haze about his characters and his leftist leanings are evident. Today's Dalit literature is rich in poetry too. *Golpitha*, a collection of poems by Dhasal, is a furious indictment of contemporary society. He is so deeply incensed at the plight of his people that he says: "Innumerable suns lit up



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in my blood to set fire to rotten society, so that in the new one, man will sing only of man.” His second collection titled *Mhataryane Dongar Halwile* (1975), won much acclaim too.

Namdev Dhasal, in one of his poems, squarely criticizes this condescending attitude of the ruling elites, saying: ‘Their traditional pity is no better than the pimp on Falkland Road’ (Dhasal 1975). Another poem is equally condemnatory of such paternalistic attitudes of those at the higher pedestal. It says:

The very intelligent people...
those who don't even know
the darkness under their asses
they should poke their noses
like fifty-cent prostitutes
even today
at men who are burning.
(qtd in Ghanshyam, 222)

Dalit literature upholds the view that this vast majority which is vulnerable and poor, untouchable and isolated, must be brought together. And to bring them together, they must be made conscious of their capacity as creative and worthy members of humanity. It is not a matter of shame or indignity to be a Mahar or Mang, Dhor or Chamar, Berad or Kaikadi, Christian or Muslim. Caste or community does not pollute or criminalize the society. It is rather the other way round; it is society, meaning its social (economic) institutions and the underlying cultural system, which upgrades some members at the cost of others, i.e., by degrading them, by dehumanizing and marginalizing them. And one must not always willingly subject oneself to an oppressive social system or its culture. One must also must courage and enter the battlefield with determination to conquer, some Dalit writers urge. Baburao Bagul implores:

Those who by mistake were born here
should themselves correct this error



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by leaving the country! Or making war!

(Zelliot, 281)

Baburao Bagul, a leading Dalit intellectual, asserts that 'Dalit sahitya (literature) is not a literature of vengeance. Dalit sahitya is not a literature which spreads hatred. Dalit sahitya first promotes man's greatness and man's freedom and for that reason it is an historic necessity. He had further expanded this point at the Dalit Literature Conference held in Nagpur in 1976 . Thus there is clear evidence that Dalit literature is deeply concerned with identity formation and its assertion to regain the self-confidence and self-worth of the marginalized sections in our society. Most of their creative imagination is structured around these premises. Theirs is an agenda of rebuilding society on values which promote honour and dignity, justice and equity. Tryambak Sapkale's poem 'Mother India' expresses this sentiment poignantly.

Don't despair.

This day will depart too.

Now, this day is pregnant with day.

Our day is not far away.

Look, from the day is born the day

(zelliot, 286)

We have seen how, in its initial phases, Dalit literature began with the agenda for upliftment of Mahars and crusade against untouchability. But that frontier is now expanding and new; hitherto invisible and voiceless groups are entering with their own complex set of social, economic and cultural questions, including a question of identity and humanism. Ex-untouchable converts who suffered disabilities similar to SCs demanded reservations. But only Sikhs and in 1990, Buddhists were given the same treatment as SCs, not Muslims and Christians. However, if the converts were to revert to Hinduism, they automatically became eligible for reservations. It was argued that the notions of purity and pollution as they are manifested in the caste system have the sanction of Hindu religion. Untouchability is a typically Hindu Phenomenon. Therefore, only those untouchables who continue to be Hindus suffer from



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disabilities stemming from the idea of pollution and hence are eligible to be regarded as SCs. A few Dalit Christians have reverted to the Hindu fold on account of discriminatory legislation by the state.

While revealing dalit experience these writers relentlessly expose the inhumanities and prejudices of a caste society and plead for a new social and cultural consciousness.

After Ambedkar, it was the Dalit Panther leadership which awakened the slumbering community of Dalits again. They tried to remove the lethargy which had spread in the community during the RPI leadership. They galvanized the Dalits into action, made them stand with raised hands and clenched fists. The militancy of their leaders made the Dalits aware of their latent power. Though the leaders could not stop the atrocities committed against the Dalits, they were successful in attracting the attention of the authorities and society towards their plight. The leaders took a radical, militant and anti-establishment stance in place of a parliamentary-democratic one. It was a distinct and qualitative break from the earlier political strategy of the RPI.

However, the revolutionary ideology, though accepted in principle, could not be put into practice, as the leaders lacked the revolutionary characteristics of commitment, sacrifice and the requisite resources. The unexpected fame gained from the Worli incident went to the heads of the leaders, resulting in infighting, which led to an organizational split. The desperate but interacting leaders established their separate camps after the Worli riots. The leaders, who were out to annihilate the caste system and establish a casteless and classless society, were themselves caught in the whirlpool of narrow intra-caste rivalries.

Gender and Religion Portrayed in Dalit Literature

The Dalit woman depicted in Dalit literature by Annabhau Sathe down to this day is envisioned as a rebel only. But the forms of her rebellion are many and different. One encounters rebellious heroines in Dalit literature women, who seeing the mud thrown on her honour, injustice perpetrated on her as poor, lover or husband fighting for society, the betrayal of nation or society, the injustice being inflicted, or likely to be inflicted on her as Dalit, more so as female



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Dalit, gnash their teeth in rage and are ready to charge. The woman one comes upon in the novels of novelists like Bandu Madhav, H. G. Bansode, Haribhau Pagare, N. B. Jadhav, Shankarrao Suradkar, Shankarrao Kharat, Baburao Bagul, Arjun Dangle and others has been depicted as one who is combative by nature, takes an aggressive stand, inflamed by injustice fights and is immersed in struggle.

Dalit woman, featured in some very recent novels, has been portrayed as extremely forceful. In the novels of Madhav Kondvilkar, B. S. Shinde, Bhimsen Dethé, Uttam Bandu Tupe, Yogendra Meshram, Sharankumar Limbale, B. S. Hate, Sudhakar Gayakawad, Namdeo Dhasal, Keshav Meshram, Nivritti Sheshware, Ashok Vatkar, Aravind Sonvale and others, Dalit life and Dalit woman's pain – her plight have been expressed. In the novels of some prominent novelists of Marathi Dalit literature, woman does not come out solely as a creature of sympathy. She comes rather as harbinger of struggle. Women in Annabhau's novels forsake tradition and emerge with strength to fight against adverse incidents. Whether she is Radha, mother of "Fakira" or "Vajjayanta" who loves art more than life, or Chandan who, tying a 'remindful knot' "Who stops, is finished", casting of her weakness, leads a life that is crushed by circumstances and rendered lonely by widowhood, or Durga of "Makadicha Mal" ("Monkey's Hill"), the familial social and mental conflict of all these women has been responsible for the birth of revolt.

By nature, a Dalit woman is rebellious, change-oriented and thoughtful. She is not the one who herself sets her own goal and herself discovers her own path. In spite of this, even today, quite many Dalit women appear to be beyond the reach of the pen of these writers. Rural Dalit women are dealt with in the stories and novels. But urban Dalit women, employed women, educated Dalit women caught in the vortex of old-new ideas, the handful of women participating in meetings, conferences, processions, demonstrations etc. and, in this context, the attitude of society towards them, her social, familiar conflict, problems of educated Dalit women, the agony of Devdasis, 'andhashraddha' ('blind faith'), the revival of old customs and morals, ignorance, tribal women, Banjara ('a tribal community') women, women in rural and urban areas toiling in sundry work, female village level workers, nurses, teachers etc. in the rural areas – the life of all



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these women has become insecure and problem-ridden. There is a need to give justice to these women through their writing. Dalit writers have not until now touched many such themes. Only injustice, atrocities, rape have been painted. Even today, her combative spirit, her aggressive stand and her rebellious encounters have not been presented amply in the literature. A tigress is also brave like a tiger, when hungry she does not eat grass and is in the forefront of fight. There is need for Dalit writers to be aware of this. From this point of view, the limited writing of Dalit women has been proved to be several times more valuable than that of Dalit men.

Dalit women have been portrayed as suppressed and shattered. Dalit writers, with a few exceptions, have not paid attention to the fact that a Dalit woman's life is worth contemplation. Because women have not got the justice they wanted, the autobiographies of these Dalit writers have become self-centered. In the development and shaping of every man, a woman has a very major and important share. She comes in the form of wife, beloved, colleague, mother, etc. But in the autobiographies of Dalit men, nowhere there is a mention of her different identities, of her capability, her inner and outer conflicts. He expresses an awareness of how a Dalit male was made, how he struggled, how he advanced. But there is no expression of how, because of wife or beloved, he reached that stage. On the other hand, the character of 'Mother' has been unduly glorified. In some autobiographies even when then there was ample scope, a limited and conventional picture has been presented; for example, Shashi of Laxman Mane's 'Upara' ('Outsider') Shashi, a caste Hindu, who loves and later marries Laxman belonging to a Kaikadi tribe, is really extremely, daring. She gives unstinted cooperation to Laxman. She endures anguish and humiliation. There is no true depiction of her conflict on the personal or social plane and the rebellion emerging from it. On the other hand, all the four autobiographies of Dalit women have done justice to Dalit men. They have delineated the support received from men in their relationship as father, husband, colleague, etc., in succession and candidly. That is why Dalit men's autobiographies have proved spacious. They have accorded justice, not to women, but only to themselves. In their autobiographies, there is no social message which can give an impetus to society. Kumud Pawade's 'Antasphota' ('Inner Explosion'), Mukta Sarvagouda's



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‘Mitaleli Kavade’ (‘Closed Doors’), Bebitai Kamble’s ‘Jeen Amucha’ (‘Our Living’), Shantabai Kamble’s ‘Mhajya Jalmachi Chittarkatha’ (‘The Disjointed Story of my life’), in all these four autobiographies, while narrating how they fought with the circumstances, they have given an inspiring message to the society. In all these four autobiographies, the women emerge riding conflicts on different planes. They have developed philosophy of life of those respective characters. Their life itself has become their philosophy. Autobiography is an honest attempt at looking, from settled life, at the past life with detachment and seeing as far as the sight goes. Dalit autobiographies discover the past along with the present and penetrate into the future. From this point of view, though the literary output of Dalit women is scanty, it is precious. Clarinda argues on the condition of Dalit women as competition between Dalit men is played out through the control of women while competition between dalit women is played through claims to their own respectability (Still, 224).

Let us review the different ways in which the issue of violence against women has been addressed in the last two hundred years in India. The basic questions that rise then are those pertaining to the forms of violence, the location of individuals and groups addressing the issue and the specific contexts of their addressal. The missionaries, the orientalist, colonial administrators, social reformers and the post-independent Indian nation-state have all addressed the issue of violence against women as a part of either their ‘civilizing mission’, ‘revival or modernization of Indian tradition’ or ‘women as weaker sections’ projects (Jogdand, 18).

Shurpanakha

“Shurpanakha” is Ravana’s sister. She is a Rakshasi. When she sees Rama, Lakshmana and Sita in Dandakaaranya forest she asks Rama why he has come there to her land, with wife and brother. She enquires in a friendly manner. (Aagata Stav miman Desam...) She wants to know the matters out of curiosity. Rama replies her and in turn asks about her. He continues his dialogue without waiting for the girl’s answer. He says “because you are not having nice features I think you are a Rakshasi” (Jogdand,101).



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One can see the pride of Rama and the degrading attitude. This is the attitude of upper caste people towards lower caste women. Ramayana says that Shurpanakha wanted to marry Rama; and Rama did not agree for the proposal. Instead he recommended Lakshmana for marriage. Both the brothers made a fool of Shurpanakha when she realized it, she tried to hurt Sita. Then the two brothers caught hold of her, and cut her nose and ears. They knew that it is sin to attack woman; but did it.

Aayomukhi

There is one more woman 'Aayomukhi'. According to Ramayana, she comes to Lakshmana and asks him to marry her. She too is of Rakshasa background. She too gets the same punishment and a bit crueler. The two brothers Rama and Lakshmana cut her nose, ears and breasts. This is a barbaric, inhuman punishment indeed.

These two Rakshasa women Shurpanakha and Aayomukhi were given cruel punishments so as to frighten the society and there on to establish a firm trend in the observance of Varnasrama Dharma. Shurpanakha is described as a powerful and independent natured woman. She tells Rama that she is, "Prabhava Sampanna... Swachanda bala gamini..." i.e. having much power and freedom as to go anywhere according to her will. She introduces herself to Rama". Aham Surpanakha naam Rakshasi kama rupini... frank. She says she is "Kamrupini", capable of changing her appearance at will. When she is having that power of changing the appearance, she must have approached Rama with pleasant and good looking features. Any woman naturally desires to approach people with good looks. But here it is not so. She did not intend to impress Rama. That is evident through Rama's words. These incidents of Ramayana need critical study.

Mandodari

There is one more character 'Mandodari' in Ramayana. She is wife of 'Ravana'; and daughter of 'Maya' (the architect of Asuras). She used to play chess with Ravana and is the founder of the game. Valmiki portrayed her character with much care. In Yuddha Kanda – when the war between Rama and Ravana was going on, Ravana started puja to gain more strength. At that time the vanaras (Rama's army) wanted to divert Ravana's attention. They brought Ravana's queen



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Mandodari to the place of puja, dragged her by her hair and ill treated her. She was insulted in front of her husband. After much humiliation she requested Ravana to save her and his concentration was thus disturbed. Ramayana describes this incident in detail.

Though 'Sita' was kidnapped and kept in 'Lanka' in Ravana's 'Ashoka Garden' for such a long time, there was no ill-treatment towards her. She was looked after with great respect. But Mandodari was ill treated by Rama's soldiers. Surpanakha and Aayomukhi were ill treated by Rama and Lakshmana. It clearly shows the outlook of society towards lower caste Dalit women.

These are the few characters chosen to show the trend of Hindu caste based society towards Dalits. Even in modern literatures Dalit characters are not given proper treatment.

The mainstream mindset is essentially casteist and full of vengeance and disregard for the lower castes including the ex-untouchables and their basic needs. Religious scriptures, in their view, condition and manipulate the behaviour of the people and help to perpetuate the forces of oppression and unfreedom. (Shah, 218).

Conclusion

Although abundant in literature containing self-expression of the dalits, North India lacks in producing an established mode of dalit literature acceptable to the educated and professionally well placed population in the same segment of society. The social and intellectual dynamics have to their inclusion in the discourse concerning evaluation and prohibited cognition of dalit mobilization. Further, in the oral tradition, dalit expressions have assumed many forms, for example, songs, drama, caste-oriented history but their acceptance too, has been discouraging. These kinds of literature have been constantly knocking at the door but have always been refused entry even into the amphitheater of the established and recognized arena of articulation. The terrain of Dalit literature is so well tailored and designed that unless writing corresponds successfully to its demands, it has no chances of inclusion; iconoclastic forms are hardly encouraged. As Basu says: "More curiously, Dalits became victims of their own dalit



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consciousness which, instead of transcending caste and caste based hierarchies, strengthened as untouchable because of their low caste status ” (Basu, 361).

As revealed by the political events of the recent past, the dalits have succeeded in developing their own political culture, influencing the political behavior of the members of their community. Their urge for identity formation and expression has led to the formation of a political group which, if not at the centre, is always in a position to have its effect felt there. No vote bank in North India has succeeded in immunizing itself to the Brahminical political culture and the dalits, and narrating in the form of small booklets have played a highly significant role in the formation of such political culture affecting their political behavior.

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