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## Giving Voice to Voiceless: A Study of Dalit Literature

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### Abstract:

The term 'Dalit' is synonymous with poor, exploited, oppressed and needy people. There is no universally acclaimed concept about the origin of Indian caste system. In every civilized society, there are some types of inequalities that lead to social discrimination. And in India, it comes in the garb of 'Casteism'. The discourses catering to the gentry tastes did not include the subaltern literary voices of the tribals, Dalits and other minority people. The dalits are deprived of their fundamental rights of education, possession of assets and right to equality. Thus Dalit Literature emerges to voice for all those oppressed, exploited and marginalized communities who endured this social inequality and exploitation for so long. The major concern of Dalit Literature is the emancipation of Dalits from this ageless bondage of slavery. Dalits use their writings as a weapon to vent out their anger against the social hierarchy which is responsible for their degradation. After a so long slumber now, they have become conscious about their identity as a human being. This Dalit consciousness and self-realization about their identity has been centrally focused in various vibrant and multifarious creative writings and is also widely applauded in the works of Mahasweta Devi, Bama, Arjun Dangle, D. Gopi and in many more. The anguish represented by the Dalit writers is not that of an individual but of the whole outcast society. The primary concern of present paper is to show how Dalit writers shatter the silence surrounding the unheard exploitation of Dalits in our country in their writings? And how Dalit Literature has become a vehicle of explosion of these muffled voices. The paper makes an attempt to comprehend the vision and voice of the Dalits and their journey from voiceless and passive objects of history to self-conscious subject. The paper will also make a study of the reasons behind the development of Dalit Literature with its consequences on our society, social condition of Dalit in India and how they write their own history.

**Keywords: Self-realization, Identity, Exploitation, Caste, Subaltern**

### Introduction

One section of our society that has attracted the great attention of various scholars and activists during the last decade are the abased people who call themselves 'Dalits'. The word 'Dalit' hails from Sanskrit language, meaning, suppressed, crushed, ground or broken to pieces. Gandhi Ji coined the word Harijans meaning 'Children of God' as a way of reverentially identifying the untouchables. The term 'Scheduled Castes' and 'Scheduled Tribes' are the official terms used by Indian government documents to identify the untouchables and tribes. Earlier, a renowned Marathi social reformer Mahatma Jyotirao Phule used the term 'Dalit' to describe outcastes and untouchables as the oppressed and crushed victims of the Indian cast-ridden society. It is also believed that this usage was first devised by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. But the term got its prevalence

in 1970's when the supporters of Dalit Panther Movement of Maharashtra used this term 'Dalit' as a continuous reminder of their age-old suppression, representing both their state of social deprivation and people who are exploited. But, at present time, the term 'Dalit' stands for those people who, have been considered 'outcaste', because they are not deserving enough to be included in the fourfold classification of class structure. In the religious scripture 'Manu Smriti'; the 'Varna system' of the society is provided. It is a four graded Varna system incorporating four kinds of people of the society borne out of the body of Lord Brahma, the supreme God. According to this mythology, Brahmin was born out of head, Kshatriya was born out of arms, Vaishya was born out of abdomen and Shudra was born out of feet. It focused on Shudra to live a life of servitude; because he was born out of feet. They were seen as polluting the society and were generally banned in religious ceremonies. They were demoted to menial occupation such as leather work, butchering or removal of rubbish, animal carcasses and waste. They lived in the outskirts of village and fed on the left over's or "Jhoothan" of the affluent class. In early twentieth century these people had no access to public amenities like wells, rivers, schools and markets etc. Their entry was forbidden in the temple. All this depicts that Dalit had been living a life of animal in those society for many centuries.

### **Requisite of Movement**

The Dalits were neither recognized as an entity in the past nor were any such endeavour undertaken in the earlier time for uplifting their social status. Economically, they had no resources of production or property. Politically, they had no power position in government. Social discrimination of whatever kind it may be; leads to deprivations of the discriminated one, which results in sulkiness about their rights, self-respect, esteem and even material gain from which a person is deprived. And the case of untouchables in India is the one; where they have socially prejudiced and underprivileged for many centuries. It is not that the Dalits are unable to get along with the changes instead; it is the affluent section of society and their social gradation that come in the ways of Dalits. And the only option left for the Dalits to get equal social status and their natural rights to have good education, employment and even their identity as a human being it to go for a protest and to start a social movement against the social arrangement. Many reform movements started in different states of our country.

### **History of Movement**

The earliest known Dalit reformer was Lord Gautama Buddha, who gave preaching of eradicating the untouchability. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj and the Ramakrishna Mission actively participated in the liberation of Dalits. Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, U. R. Shinde, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar started several reformation movements of Dalits in Maharashtra. In West Bengal Chaitanya Prabhu initiated a movement called 'Namo Shudras Movement' which changed an attitude towards untouchable community. The aim of all these movements was to liberate the Dalits from the oppressive forces in the Indian society. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's influence was immensely great on Dalit movements which started in Indian sub-continent. The main principles of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's theory are elimination of caste, eradication of exploitation and equal status for these untouchables. These movements influenced Dalit writers to such an extent that they become conscious of their identity. Earlier they are faceless people, who never bother about their representation in literature. They, just born with a destiny or fate to become a bonded labourer, a prey for feudal landlord, who can exploit their

wives and daughters. These over humiliated, crushed creature should remain voiceless. These Dalit movements provide strength to these people to voice themselves. The Dalit writers do not adhere to any conventional rule of writing. They do not look up for any models to write down their ideas. According to them, when they have no place in history, so what's the use of looking back towards history? These people want to write down their own history. The social ill-treatment and exploitation persuade them to express their strong feelings against the upper-class people, who dragged them towards periphery or margins.

Sathianathan Clark remarks that “the subordination and subjection that marks the lives of Dalits in India bring them into the contours of a particularly contextual assemble of subalternity. (Clark.6) An officer of the inferior rank is the dictionary meaning of word subaltern. The field of subaltern studies, studying the exploited, underprivileged wretched of the earth, is apparently of recent origin. The oppressed-classes, the lower-castes, and the landless peasants come in this category. In common understanding the term is usually understood in contrast to privileged group of elites. The upper caste, the bureaucrats, the feudal landlords, were given ample place in the history, while their low caste brethren lacked any formal representation. After Independence, the issues pertaining to socio-economic upliftment of the Dalits or subalterns were discussed and embodied by the constitution framers and special provisions were included in the constitution of India. So, the credit for the present socio-economic and political position of the Dalits should be given to their constant composite efforts and many steps taken by government after the Independence of the country.

## **Dalit Literature**

For a long time, the untouchable didn't have any formal education which would invigorate and encourage them for a proper literary movement to register a protest against the monopoly of the established literature. During the post-Independence phase, that some educated 'Untouchable' come in the contact with modern education and a realization for a substitute of thinking dawn upon them. This literary movement was started in the homeland of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the crusader of these downtrodden. Thus 'Dalit Literature' came into prominence in early seventies, which subsequently spread to the neighbouring states of Gujarat, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and many more. Dalit literature is one which the Dalit himself expresses his anger, resentment against those people, who are responsible for their present state. It raises questions about the status and situation of the Dalits. The poem of Hira Dom, is considered the first Dalit piece of writing and Swami Achyutanand's social movement and writings revealed a given oppressive social structure. Dalit literature is the representation of Dalit reality. Through this representation, the untouchables articulate loudly across the caste-ridden society and destroy the boasted purity of upper-class. The primary aim of Dalit Literature is the liberation of Dalits. This anger, resentment of Dalits against the social inequality comes out in the garb of Dalit Literature.

Since the 1970's, vast number of poets and writers of Dalit communities have been producing poems, short stories, novels and autobiographies beaming with the themes of cast oppression, question of identity, poverty, untouchability and revolution. Now, these subaltern communities are using the traditionally denied weapon of literacy by themselves, and 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. Dalit Literature questioned the mainstream

literature which they call as 'Hindu Literature' and challenges its hegemony. In the words of Bahurao Bagul,

The established literature of India is Hindu Literature. But it is Dalit Literature which has the revolutionary power to accept new science and technology and bring about a total transformation. "Dalit" is the name of a total revolution; it is a revolution incarnate. (Bagul.289)

The major purpose of Dalit Literature is to bring about a 'total revolution' in society. Dalit Literature rejects the Hindu's beliefs in the Varna order with its age-old concepts of Vedas and Granthas outrightly. Dalit Literature denies this Hindu mentality and affirms that man himself is society and society is nothing other than human beings. As Tarachand Khandekar a Dalit writer, puts it thus:

Man is the centrifugal force in the philosophy of Dalit Literature. Man is supreme. He is above all Gods, sacred books and science. It is a man who can make and unmake anything. Dalit Literature believes that nothing is permanent. Everything is subjected to decay. With every decay there is resurgence, new creation. It, therefore, does not accept the maxim 'Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram.' On the other hand, it proclaims that nothing is true which is not applicable for man's sublime freedom; nothing is good if it is not useful for man's welfare nothing is beautiful which is not useful for beautification of mankind. (Khandekar.6)

The transformation of the denounced identity of these so called 'Untouchables' to a self chosen identity as Dalit is a story of composite struggle waged over centuries. The style of Dalit literature covers a wide range of literary genres. There is a plenty of Dalit poetry expressing a feeling of immense protest. But this protest is not against any individual or group but against the society as a whole. As one Oriya Dalit poet writes,

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 new generation of Dalit poetry appeared in the contemporary period as a protest or rebellion against the oppressive traditional shackles. Narayan survey was one of the prominent poets in the early Dalit literature. His famous poem was 'Vidhyapith'. The other poets like Keshav Meshram- "Utkhanan" (Excavation), Daya Pawar- 'Kandwads' (suffocating enclosure), Namedeo Dhasal- 'Golpitha' (The Red Light Zone) and so on.

A large portion of Dalit Literature is written in autobiographical form. All different genres, whether it is poetry or short stories or novels or critical prose pieces all carries a 'Confessional Characteristic' made by author themselves. Generally, these writers do not register their protest against a particular group but they are estranged from the social system and the government, which in their view keeps them debased and deprived. In other words, the quest for identity is a basic dynamism of Dalit Culture. That's why issues pertaining to poverty, hypocrisy, injustice, social discrimination and various other social practices have produced a variety of responses from Dalit writers which are forms of protest directed at bringing about a social change through a revolution.

The major difference between mainstream and Dalit Literature is that Dalit Literature rejects the age old Indian tradition based on caste and class with its religious beliefs, while the non-Dalit held the opinion that tradition cannot be rejected outrightly. The Dalit writers believe that the term "tradition" has been used as a "safeguard" by a certain class for their vested interests. In this regard Dangle says:

A tradition is born and lives on the strong foundations of thoughts and principles and it is these thoughts or principles which enrich or sustain a tradition. The base that a tradition gets is subject to the then existing social system and the sum total of the conditions. The established class always tries to establish a convenient tradition that doesn't damage its vested interests. The weak groups in society are tired of this tradition. In fact, all our traditions so far, whether religious, social literary or cultural, have been imposed on the majority by a handful. (Dangle. 261)

Similarly, there is a Tamil Dalit fiction writer, Bama, who has produced works of immense value on gender, caste and marginalized section of the society. She writes the first Tamil Dalit woman autobiography. Her novels include *Karukku*, *Sangati*, *Vanman*, which have been translated into English and various other Indian Languages. In *Karukku*, she exposes the hypocrisy behind the caste system as well as religious conversion. She brings out the theme of Dalit consciousness in her work very beautifully. She ardently criticizes the practice of untouchability in the Roman Catholic Churches in particular and in caste-ridden Indian society in general.

## Conclusion and Discussion

Dalit literature is basically that literature which artistically delineates the trials and tribulations humiliation, exploitation, sorrows and sufferings, degradation, ridicule, and poverty experienced by Dalits for a age old time. The writers are engaged in achieving self-respect and identity and the rejection of traditions and religious norms. It is a new and different stream of Indian literature. Now, it has reached a stage where Dalit literature is obviously moving beyond anger

and resentment and is not just conjoined to castigating the 'other' but exploring and emboldening to attain empowerment.

To conclude it we can say a spurt in Dalit literature has emerged with so many writers, talking about different issues in their works. Many writers are talking about gender-related issues, which had been ignored earlier. Many Dalit women writers are writing about their social position in patriarchal social setup that exists within their communities and outside. Now, they are articulating themselves in various forms and writing about oppression related to class, gender, religion etc. other than caste. It is encouraging that more and more Dalit writings are now being translated into English. In the mean time, Dalit studies have been introduced in several universities in India and abroad. Though the occurrences of opposition against various forms of injustice were noted even earlier, yet such opposition continues more conspicuously now and the untouchables and Dalit section appears to follow these with more strength, determination, political support and defense of law. Obviously, they have acquired a different identity, but they have still to go a long way towards becoming a part of democratic society to be evolved so that their unique identity of Dalits or Scheduled Class gets dissolved in that civil society; which is supposed to be still in the process of making. Today, Dalit writers have their literary foundation with ideology and have political support also. Thus, the output of Dalit literature is growing day by day. And, we can hope, one day, it will establish itself as a most significant part of world literature.

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