

Dalit Literature – Concept, Origin and Features

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Abstract:

Dalit literature in India over the past many decades has emerged as a separate and important category of literature in many Indian languages. It has provided a new voice and identity to the communities that have experienced discrimination, exploitation and marginalization due to hierarchical caste system. Dalit literature has also made a forceful case for human dignity and social equality. In the light of the growing importance of the study of Dalit literature, this paper attempts to explore the origin, concept and contributions of Dalit literature in India and brings out its significance and key features.

Keywords:Challenged, Communities, Dalit literature, Dignity, Equality, Exploitation, History of Dalit Literature, Socio-political commitment, Untouchable

Dalit literature has established itself as a separate category of writing in many of the Indian languages. Several writings under this category have emerged as a strong voice of Dalit communities in different literatures over the last five decades. The impact of Dalit writers and writings has also compelled the literary associations and akademis to recognize as a separate category of literature and reward it through several means. All major universities in India have given place to Dalit literature in its curriculum and research agenda of literature departments. It is, therefore, pertinent to explore the concept, features and origin of Dalit literature in India.

However, in order to understand the nature and contributions of Dalit literature, it is necessary to clarify the meaning of the term 'Dalit'. The word Dalit is derived from Sanskrit

language and, etymologically, it means “ground”, “suppressed”, “crushed” or “broken to pieces”. Hence, by connotation, the term Dalit is used as an adjective or noun to describe the people or communities that have remained down-trodden or at the margins of society throughout India’s long social history. The famous 19th century social reformer and protagonist of the interests of Dalits in Maharashtra Jyotiba Phule first used this term in the context of the exploitation of the people who were conventionally called ‘*shudra*’ and ‘outcaste’ Hindus. Even as the term Dalit refers mainly to such caste groups; essentially, it is not a caste-indicative term. It only refers to such people and communities that are historically and structurally suppressed and excluded from the mainstream of society. Dalit is not a caste but a socio-economic category of discriminated people belonging to many castes and social groups speaking many languages.

The word Dalit was also used later as a Hindi and Marathi translation of the official term “depressed classes” that the British government used to describe what is now called the Scheduled Castes. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar used the term to give a new, respectful and empowering identity to the so-called “untouchable” castes in preference to the term '*Harijan*' (children of God - a word borrowed from the Bhajans of the medieval Gujarati poet Narsinh Mehta) suggested by Gandhi and which was found to be a patronizing word. However, the term Dalit came into widespread use only in the 1970’s with reference to the political mobilization by parties representing interests of the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and all other such groups that were discriminated and exploited on the basis of birth-based identity or economic reasons. A more expanded idea of Dalit also includes classes like landless labour, minorities and all others who are poor. However, such wide definition of the word Dalit is likely to make it irrelevant for social analysis.

Literature written by the members of the Dalit communities or the literature that is specifically written to represent the typical social, historical and cultural aspects of the Dalit communities is described as Dalit literature. It is the literature of explicit social commitment aimed at promoting ideas of social equality, justice and resistance to suffering, discrimination and economic exploitation.

History of Dalit Literature:

Though there have been several Dalit writers and poets during the medieval times (11th century Kannad poet Madara Chennai, Dalit saint Kalavee, Sant Kabir and others), the modern movement for Dalit literature in India began from Maharashtra and in Marathi language in the 1960s when the Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangh was established as an

alternative platform to the mainstream Marathi literature. It was inspired by the ideology of Jyotiba Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar. The movement of the African Americans led by Martin Luther King and activities of black panthers as also the “Little Magazine” movement as the voice of the marginalised proved to be a background trigger for resistance literature of Dalits in India.ⁱ

Even prior to the 1960s, writers like Baburao Bagul, Bandhu Madhav, Shankarao Kharat, Narayan Surve, Anna Bhau Sathe were expressing Dalit concerns and issues in their literature. Baburao Bagul (1930–2008) is considered as a pioneer of Marathi Dalit writings in Marathi. His collection of short stories titled Jevha MiJat Chorali (When I Concealed My Caste) published in 1963 shook the traditional foundations of Marathi literature with its radical depiction of social exploitation. Subsequently, Namdeo Dhasal (who founded an organization called Dalit Panther) further consolidated and expanded the Dalit literature movement in India. Litterateurs like Laxman Gaekwad, Laxman Pawar, Daya Pawar, Waman Nimbalkar, Tryambak Sapkale, Arun Dangle, Umakant Randhir, J. V. Pawar, Tarachandra Khandekar, Yogiraj Waghmare, Avinash Dolas, Kishore Shantabai Kale, Narendra Jadhav, Yogendra Meshram, Bhimrao Shirvale etc. became prominent voices of Dalit writing in Marathi. Many of the Dalit writings have also been translated into English and published as part of the anthologies of Dalit writings.ⁱⁱ

The movement for Dalit literature has later spread to other languages like Gujarati, Kannad, Punjabi, Hindi, Malayalam and Bengali. Dalit literature has used all literary forms – poetry, short stories, novels, plays and autobiographies in various languages. Nirav Patel, Joseph Makwan, Dalat Chauhan, Harish Mangalam, Mohan Parmar, B. N. Vankar, Yashwant Vaghela, Chandu Maheria etc. in Gujarati, Bama in Tamil, Omprakash Valmiki in Hindi and many more have contributed to the Dalit literature.

Features of Dalit Literature:

Dalit literature is characterized by its fundamental criticism of the caste system and all kinds of discrimination and by its call for destroying social hierarchies. It is the literature of social and political commitment that challenges the status quo. It is the literature of questioning the exclusion from the mainstream of society and culture. It is the literature that promotes equality and human dignity. Most Dalit writers also believe that the principal purpose of writing literature is to bring about social change rather than recreation or mere intellectual sophistry. As Baburao Bagul wrote, “Dalit Sahitya 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... Anguish, waiting, pronouncements of sorrow alone do not define Dalit Sahitya. We need literature heroically full of life to create a new society." By its very nature, Dalit literature remains at the margin as it challenges mainstream. This literature is more realistic than romantic and is unified in by the portrayal of discrimination and exploitation. Dalit writers are severely critical of the silence of the mainstream literature about surrounding social realities and their romanticisation of Indian society and its hierarchies. Even when higher caste writers have voiced concerns about Dalit communities, they are seen as condescending in nature and aimed at blunting Dalit resistance and amalgamating Dalits in mainstream society. Hence, writers like Mulraj Anand, Sane Guruji, or Sivshankar Pillai who wrote works dominantly highlighting Dalit anguish were not considered representative of genuine Dalit consciousness and purpose. Dalit writers have used such language and slang expressions that are generally considered unacceptable and colloquial by the mainstream writers. Dalit writers have also begun to theorise and evolve ideas of criticism of literature from Dalit perspectives.ⁱⁱⁱ Dalit literature reflects both Marxist and Ambedkarite ideological influences in its content.

Overall, one can say that Dalit literature in India has grown both in quantity and quality and made sufficient impact to shake up the mainstream literature. The realities and experiences that have not been reflected in other literatures find a central place in Dalit literature. It has effectively challenged the Brahmanical hegemony in society and literature and empowered the Dalit masses for asserting their rights and for expressing their anguish. In this sense, it has contributed not just to literature but also to identify formation at societal level. Dalit literature has also begun to give space for separate sub-category of women writers from Dalit communities. However, at the same time, the critics believe that in asserting the realities of society Dalit literature has become stereotypical and predictable. Also, it is seen as excluding itself from some of the valuable trends and aesthetic aspects of mainstream literature that deals with more universal human emotions and their creative expression.^{iv}

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