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Dalit Literature: A Song of the Nightingale

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Abstract

The word 'dalit' has been derived from the Sanskrit root word 'dal' which means to crush, so 'dalit' word as an adjective describes that section of society which has been crushed, trampled, mutilated and humiliated by the dominant hegemonized society over the years. The Paper searches the genesis of subaltern and dalit literature in dalit consciousness-an offshoot of postmodern alternate narratives in the lines of feminist literature and others dealing with themes such as homosexuality etc. after World War II. In this scenario, the emergence of these voices which find a place for themselves to be heard and written about in competition with master narratives is a proof and sign of shifting paradigms. It has given rise to a new form of literary studies-dalit and subaltern studies. The subtitle of paper somehow connotes nightingale and its song metaphorically as dalit writer and dalit literature-outpourings of their existential anguish and agony, anger and revulsion, isolation and suffering as a result of centuries long subjugation and subordination, marginalization and discrimination by the normative and brahminical ideologies after Manusamriti.

Keywords- Dalit Literature, Marginalization, Postmodern, Hegemony, Subaltern, Discrimination

Introduction

At the outset it can be hypothesized that Dalit Literature is for dalits by dalits and of dalits. Apparently to see and study literature with reference to the above statement might be a narrow, but a very critical interpretation of any piece of literature at a very different level. On my personal level, literature cannot be left to get choked in the compartments of a particular language, region or community. It has to outgrow its local environment and culture which, though, have been responsible for its sprouting and full growth.

Structure of Paper

Let me say that the present paper has been divided into three segments

1. Dalit Literature.: literature of protest and negation
2. Dalit Literature: literature of celebration
3. Future of dalit literary movement

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With all its history and associated exponents, the present dalit literary movement has its origin in dalit consciousness and its thorough internalization almost on the same lines as said by Chinua Achebe, a famous Nigerian writer.

"The nationalist movement in British west Africa after the second world war brought about a mental revolution.... It suddenly seemed that we too might have a story to tell..... At the university I read some appalling novels about Africa....and decided that the story we had to tell could not be told for us by anyone else no matter how gifted or well intentioned."

This spirit of self assertion and denial of others had to become the voice of history making and rewriting of history. The voice which had been unheard of and unwritten about was all agog to usher in a new morning and herald a new era. This spirit which has been pushed to the margins by now, wanted to take to the center stage with all enthusiasm and energy. It was ready to confront anything or anybody to unearth its own past, enjoy its present and create its future while demystifying the history to create its own myths and history. The advocates of this voice were there to challenge and question everything whether it was myths, history, literature, culture, or any other traces of their past. As a result, a body of literature came into being which had anger, revulsion against the system as its muse. The ages-old humiliation, suppression and subordination had led to the simmering discontent and frustration which forced an outlet in the form of putting together the alphabets of pain and poverty, scarcity and deprivation, lack of choice and freedom. To quote a few lines from a poem 'One day I cursed That....God' by Keshav Meshram:

Would you wipe the sweat from your bony body?

With your mother's ragged sari?

Would you work as a pimp

To keep her in booze?

O, Father, oh god the father!

You could never do such things

First You'd need a mother.

One, no one honors.

One who toils in the dirt?

Who gives and gives of her love.

The inhuman treatment and ages-old oppression has led dalits to be nothing more than the shattered and depressed selves, living half a life without any fault from their sides. To be born in a dalit family was not their choice. There is nothing wrong if they also want to have and enjoy the sense of attachment, fulfillment and be part of the mainstream while not having any burden or baggage of belonging to a dalit suppressed class. The casteism is so much entrenched in the psyche and consciousness of elite class and it is being floated in the system so much so that the dalits are rarely left free in their fullest own. Despite having got the modern English medium, liberating and enabling education, the ghost of belonging to low class is haunting them everywhere. Chinnaaswamy's poem 'If I was a tree' explains this.

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As it is well known that nightingale pours her heart out because of her loneliness and tragic atmosphere. She is not singing out of happiness as it is taken to be. The suffering of the dalit people is not just the suffering of the individual and there is nothing romantic about it. Their problem is neither ideological nor philosophical. They do not seek poetic beauty because their problem is too real to be portrayed in beautiful ornamental language. Similes, metaphors and symbols are not important. The reality is too hideously shocking beyond the capacity of fantasy or imagination. The following lines from a folklore are shocking to visualize.

They strip naked my mother, my sister'
My own daughter's virtue is looted in public
My eyes look on, my blood shakes'

The physical violation of female folks is a common motif for both dalit and non-dalit writers as Barkha of Mulk Raj Anand's '*Untouchable*', Puni of Gopi Nath Mohanty's '*Harijan*' or Baba's wife of Sameer Rajan's short story '*Man Turns into an Anthill*' have faced physical and emotional defiling.

Unlike Barkha or Puni, who are voiceless or fatalistic, the characters of Sameer Ranjan are very assertive and proud of their identity and are ever protesting in nature.

"Hey! Like you sandal paste smearing pundits, bloody, running after many untouchables women on the sly like dogs. After the heat of your body cools down, you pull your moustache to show your upper caste by saying-get lost, get lost, don't you see; and you chase them away. Only to cover up those sins you commit, you take the names of gods and deities, religion and duty; and you pretend to recite the rosary. What type of good men are you?" (16)

The dalits cry hoarse at the highest possible pitch to make the people at the top realize that their problem needs immediate redressal and long lasting treatment. The theoretical variety of revolutionaries cannot even imagine the predicament these wretched people live in. Namde Dhasal endorses this.

This world's socialism,
This world's communism
And all those things of
Theirs,
We have put them to the
test
And the implication is this—
Only our shadows can
cover our own feet.

The desire for revenge among the dalits is a natural instinct and expected outcome of years-long maltreatment. A poem '*You Wrote From Los Angeles*' by Daya Pawar:

In the stores here, in hotels, about the streets,
Indians and ours are measured with the same

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Yard—stick,

"Nigger! "Black! This is the abuse they fling on
me.

Reading all this, I felt so damn!

Now you've had a taste of what we've suffered

In this country from generation to generation.

Undoubtedly, dalits have suffered a lot of ignominy and apartheid in their own native land. Direct protest is something which is a natural outlet of wronged feelings and hurt souls. Om Parkash Valmiki cries out:

What would you do?

If you

Have to swim against the current

To open the doors of pain

And do battle with hunger

If you

Are denied in your own land

Made slave labor

Stripped of your rights

The pages of your glorious history

Torn into shreds

And thrown away

What would you do?"

In such a situation, to fight against the establishment to demand one's long overdue rights is inevitable, as said by Paulo Freire: "Dalit will not gain liberation by chance but through the praxis of their quest for it, through their recognition of the necessity to fight for it".

To lodge a protest against something unreasonable and unsavoury is one thing, but to denigrate and cut something into short pieces deliberately to derive sadistic pleasure is altogether different and condemnable. That is what Kancha Ilaiah seems to be doing in 'why I am not a Hindu.' To castigate the whole system of beliefs at one poor stroke by false representation of the facts does not credit one any kudos and serves nothing but reflects one's callous and reactive approach towards life. Much more remains there in our surrounding which deserves to be celebrated and rejoiced. That's what the poets like Govindayya seems to be saying in the poem 'A, B, C, and ...' Though the poem records the systemic nature of oppression, the inhumanity of such a treatment however has not robbed his mother and father the ability to find joy. The world continues to be inhuman, yet the dalit life-world celebrates the little joys of success, strength and freedom. Saddalingayya's autobiography 'Ooru Keri' (neighbourhood) stands out in one particular aspect that it celebrates the power of Dalits to struggle hard to forge new ways to give meaning to life and so has a larger importance for dalit literature as a whole. This book is less a record of pain and suffering than of joy and

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success. Dalit solidarity & struggle become frequent motifs here. While the main narrative does not trivialize the experiences, it nevertheless does not become a record only of the power of victimizers but tells how dalits wrest power for themselves without losing their share of joy and fun. It shows the determination and commitment of the dalits to shape their own destiny even when they are caught in highly subjected situations. Life should not be taken so seriously that it ends up being nothing but negation of hierarchy; rather it should be a celebration of what is easily accessible according to one's deserved place and power and one should keep striving hard for better placement in society... Damages of past, undoubtedly, cannot be undone but the future should not be held a captive of the past.

Literature as an important entity of a vibrant and progressive society has its role to play to set the things right. That's why dalit literature has been christened as a literature with some difference while giving voice to the marginalized, neglected and subordinated class of society in its ultimate objective of striving hard towards the- formation of an egalitarian society where everyone should have some breathing space irrespective of caste, class, gender etc. By virtue of this literature, a pan Indian dalit cultural identity has emerged with its repuditions of untouchability, oppressive caste system and any normative ideology resulting in a collective consciousness and global society where differences will be given due importance as a part of whole and not discriminated against. Let us conclude with the hope that the dalit literature will continue its search for freedom, affirmation of life and above all humanism and complete its journey defying the statement we began with.

But a mute question which still stares at us and remains to be answered-is this new nomenclature 'dalit or subaltern' good enough for the assertion of a one more form of literature representing a neglected and marginalized life in ghetto or is it bound to perpetuate a tag which ironically will not let it be a part of mainstream life or literature, for that matter?

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