



Dalit literature : A Retrospective Vista



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Abstract :

Dalit literature of today tends to be more realistic as it is the expression of the first-hand experiences, which the dalits had been confronting in their life. These experiences are drawn from real life therefore; it is parallel to life. It opposes exploitation and oppression and craves for social equality and economic justice. It is a movement to bring about social change. Dalit literature acquaints people with the evils of caste system and untouchability in India. Dalit literature is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and champions the cause of humanity and equality among men by raising voice against the evil customs of discrimination prevalent in society. Thus, it also tries to undermine the caste system in India and is revolutionary in nature. One must admit that it has left an indelible impression on the Indian literature in general.

Keywords : Dalit, exploitation, realistic literature, elite, marginalized, privileged.

Research Paper :

This paper attempts a retrospection of Dalit literature in India and highlights its salient features. The Dalit literature has spread today across the nation and it is now growing in almost all Indian languages. Mulkraj Anand's novel *Untouchable* may be cited as an example. However, its beginning took place in Marathi language in Maharashtra. The credit for the upliftment of the dalits and fostering in them a sense of self-respect goes in the first place to Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar who was from Maharashtra and the dalit masses there supported him loyally and unflinchingly. The literary manifestation of this social awareness is Dalit literature. Anna Bhau Sathe, Shankarrao Kharat, Baburao Bagul, Namdeo Dhasal, Raja Dhale, Daya Pawar, Waman Nimbalkar, Arjun Dangale, Yogiraj Waghmare are some of the exponents of Dalit literature who gave an impetus to it in Maharashtra.

At the very outset, one should take into account the real implication of the word 'Dalit'. The word 'Dalit' does not refer to only Buddhists and backward classes but to all those who have become victim of exploitation, oppression and discrimination on the part of society. This definition complies with that given by Baburao Bagul in the Dalit literacy conference at Mahad. He says :

Dalit literature takes man as its centre. It participates in man's joys and sorrows and leads him to a just revolution. It teaches equality to the mass of humanity, that is society. It considers man noble. Dalit literature does not spread hatred among men but love.

This is analogous to the preaching of Lord Buddha who also believed that love has great power and people can be united only by the bond of love. Lord Buddha and his disciples believed in the equality of men at all levels. Thus, Buddhist preaching is parallel to the principles of Dalit literature in which the suppressed voices of the marginalized groups find expression.

The Dalit literature comes to enclose all that writing which is either written by a Dalit writer or focuses dalit people. There is peculiar 'uniqueness' of Dalit literature as the languages, experiences and heroes of dalit literature are unique. The term "Dalit literature" came in vogue in this century after the first Dalit literacy conference in 1958. However, a precursor of the dalit consciousness and dalit identity had been present in the stories from Buddha's Jatakakathas, poems of Chokhamela and the writings of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule.

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule was the trailblazer revolutionary to use the word Dalit in the context of caste system. Dr. Ambedkar ran the heritage forward and brought the miseries of Dalits to the foreground by dint of his writings. His works inspired a number of Dalit writers in several Indian languages.

Dalit literature portrays the hopes and aspiration of the exploited masses, their miserable plight, and their struggle for survival, their day-to-day predicaments, their humiliation and traumatic experiences as well as their outlook towards all these events. In order to understand the reason of the wretched condition of these dalit populace one should go back to the history of social caste system in India. According to the ancient Hindu *dharmashastras* there were four varnas : The Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas and the Shudras. The Brahmins propagandized the theory that the caste system is not man-made but God-made and it is a divine decree. In the following ages, Manu the staunch champion of caste system codified it in his seminal monograph *Manusmruti*. The Hindu caste system was based on birth and transfer from one caste to another was strictly prohibited. In this rigid caste system, shudras were considered downtrodden and untouchables and they were subjected to exploitation by the upper caste i.e. the elite section of society. This dominance of dalits by elites is noticeable in the history of Hindu Society. For ages, the dalits were kept silent in the name of religion and God until Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar rose to refute the so-called divine decree that caste system is God made.

In the traditional caste-ridden Indian society, shudras were the labourers who were assigned menial works of inferior kind. These shudras were relegated to the lowest stratum of the society for they were supposed to have emerged from the feet of Lord Brahma. They lay at the bottom in that hierarchy which came to be known as class system. They were denied the privileges enjoyed by the upper classes and were asked to perform the duties assigned to them. The voices with a complaint were suppressed and at a later stage, they came to be regarded as untouchables. The dalits of today are the untouchable shudras of yester years.

The humiliation and injustice meted out to Dalits, the trauma of untouchability, the exploitation of Dalits by elites are the themes noticed in Dalit literature. The dalits are ever exposed to stark reality surrounding them which is reflected in their writings too. Their battered consciousness has found expression in Dalit literature. Consequently, Dalit literature has streaks of realism. Dalit literature is based on the realistic view of life whereas

the mainstream or upper-caste literature presents the romantic and idealistic view of life. Sharankumar Limbale chastises this vainglorious idealism of main-stream literature in the following manner :

Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram is a foolish aesthetic concept. There is no truth and beauty, in the world comparable to that, which is found in human beings. Therefore, it is essential to discuss the equality, liberty, justice and fraternity of human being (p.22)

In this context, one can notice that dalit literature explored the neglected sections of society and at the same time put the mainstream literary theories and elite ideologies under inquiry. Since dalit literature reflects the stark reality of dalit experiences, authenticity and honesty have become the hallmarks of dalit literature. In the quest of literary substitutes, Dalit writers have re-discovered the marginalized voices of low-caste saints. They found relevance in Buddhism, which celebrates equality among men. Through the folklores they calimed that Dalits were members of an ancient primitive society and were relegated to subordination by the upper class civilization. Dalit literature is now audaciously challenging the upper class hegemony of literature. The emerging force can challenge the ‘Sanskritized and elitist Indian literature. In fact, Dalit literature is in the real sense Post-Hindu literature, which dares to dispense with Sanskrit symbolisms. This process was initiated by none other than Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar who looked down Sanskrit language as essentially casteist languages, which was known to only a handful of people in society, almost all of them belonging to upper castes. The contemporary dalits are using books and pens to champion their cause. Dalit literature possesses the potential of changing social structure but Indian society is yet to see through and realize that potential. In present scenario, a multitude of publications is devoted to the delineation of Dalit situation in India. A separate body of literature termed as *Dalit literature* has successfully emerged and made its presence felt. Thus, Dalit literature has diverted the course from privileged to marginalized, idealistic to realistic and has left an indelible print in its journey so far. It has grown into a literary force that is here to stay.

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