

## Dalit Literature: A Critical Perspective

### Abstract

In India, there is a vast majority of castes and sub-castes. Their literature is a reflection of their woes and miseries. THE Dalits are the most poor marginalized, oppressed, ostracized and exploited people. They have been deprived of many rights since ages. Dalit Literature acts as a powerful tool to create social, political awareness, thus becoming an important social, political awareness, thus becoming an important social, political and cultural document in the process. For researcher, we might introduce students to various critical approaches like structuralism; post structuralism post colonialism, modernism etc. The study of Indian text can be approached through a Dalit perspective.

**Keywords:** Dalit Literature, Caste, Sociologist. Dalit Studies, Dalit Texts, understanding of Literature, Cultural Tradition, Aesthetics, Art and Creativity, Dalit Autobiographies, Authenticated Facts etc.

### Introduction

Dalit Studies may be considered by many as the latest entrant knocking at the doors of literature for admission. For reasons that need no specific mention. Dalit Studies has experienced more of a problem of being admitted and has taken much longer to gain entry. In the form in which it has now been admitted, it may be described either as the inclusion of a text or two of the Dalit writers in the courses on Indian Literatures or on a course like Indian Writing in English, or as the addition of a separate optional paper which only some students take, much like the entry of courses on Women's Writing some years ago. What purpose would be served by its admission into the 'discipline' of Comparative Literature by a simple addition of Dalit texts in the curriculum of various courses or even a separate course such as Dalit Studies or even Comparative Dalit Studies? Should one not aim rather at the development of a theoretical or conceptual category of 'caste' in the discipline of Comparative Literature? Let us consider what the theorization of caste might mean for research in the area of Comparative literature. It is possible that in the course work for an MPhil, or PhD, in Comparative Literature, we might introduce students to various critical approaches like Structuralism, Poststructuralism, Postcolonialism, Marxism, Feminism, New Historicism, etc. There would now be a need to develop a 'Dalit approach' to the study of Indian texts. What we are familiar now in India is a study of Dalit literature in comparison with texts from the African or African-American context, texts that deal with the study of the related concept of race. This has given rise to comparative studies of the forms of oppression in the two contexts or comparative studies of literary forms such as autobiography and personal narratives.

Apart from these now familiar nodes of comparison, we must add the development of theoretical tools for the analysis of texts. Such an attempt may begin from a study of significant texts such as Jyotirao Phule's *Gulamgiri*, Ambedkar's *Annihilation of caste*, Kancha Ilaiah's *Why I am not a Hindu* and Sivakami's *Author's Notes to The Grip of Change*. Caste as theoretical critical tool for the analysis of texts may need to be developed from our understanding of these and similar texts. We are quite excited about deriving concepts in Theory from a Freud, a Fanon, a Foucault, a Derriada and a Said. It is unfortunate that there is no such attempt with regard to Dalit theorists, except for Sharan Kumar Limbale and his towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature. The debate on the question of caste from a Dalit perspective could, of course, be seen in relation to other conceptions of caste, made by sociologists like M.N. Srinivas or in relation to Marxist notions of labour, production and Class struggle. For instance, one may take up Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and show how differently it can be read using a Marxist framework and a Dalit Studies approach or, consider a well-known Telugu text, *Malapalli*, whose author, Unnava Lakshminarayana was charged of inciting sedition. Questions of the nation in this text may now be considered from different perspectives including the



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Dalit Studies perspective. The Dalit Studies perspective will also have to negotiate the gender perspective within it. What would the implication of the development of the category of caste be for the study of literature? Let us take the example of literary histories. Acceptance of the category of caste in our understanding of literature would bring in a serious consideration of hitherto neglected literary forms, forms practiced by the untouchable castes. The discovery of such literary forms that have always existed question the terming of certain periods in literary history as *ksheena yugas*. A serious consideration of the neglected forms will make way for the revision of our notions of 'high' and 'low'. Another category that may need to be revised is the very concept of the modern in Indian literary histories that is inevitably linked up with the advent of prose and the novel through our contact with the West. All these will also pave way for the redrawing of the makers of literature in each language.

Let us consider our concept of the nation as largely an upper caste, middle class phenomenon. We may need to modify this when a segment of the society is left behind. The question, whether social reform must precede political reform, which Dalit intellectuals have seriously raised complicates the way Nation has been imagined in literature. (Predictably, Literature from across the country, focusing on social reform, has confined itself to the aspects of social reform of the upper castes. Even the social novel that concerns itself with the issues of caste in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries confines itself with the problems concerning the upper castes.) Someone like Gurram Joshua in Telugu re-imagines the concept of the Nation by re-writing Klidasas's *Meghasandesam*, where he employs a bat as a messenger (which has the enviable position of flying close to Lord Shiva when the Brahmin priest is away) to pour out its woe (instead of the pangs of love). The description of the bat's flight across the length and breadth of the country ends up in the question of the place of the Dalit in independent India.

The Gandhian conception of India would have us believe that India lives in its village as he said India is a country of villages. Literature that concerns itself with the idea of the independence of the country would highlight, among other things, the Harijan temple entry propounded by Gandhi. Dalit Literature that focuses on this aspect would like us to consider the real plight of the Dalits who continue to live in segregated geographical spaces to this day in villages. The segregation of the village as *ooru* and *palle* that we find in *Oora Bavi*, an early short story by Kolakapuri Enoch in Telugu, which represents the separation of the touchable and the untouchable castes, is a phenomenon that has its parallels in most literatures of India. In this story not only do the untouchables live in different geographical spaces, but they also have separate wells for drinking water. How then does one conceptualise a united India that lives for the most part in its Villages when the temple entry for the Dalit was merely a symbolic?

Kolakpuri 'Enouch's *Oora Bavi* revolves round the consequences of Dalits having to depend, for drinking water, on the well of the upper castes when their well goes dry. There are detailed descriptions in the story of the profession of leather work practiced by a sub-sect of the Dalits called the Madigas. The entire process of skinning the dead carcass of the bull, drying the skin and getting it ready for making footwear and the detailed process of making chappals bring in a host of terms that, in turn, represents the complexity of their culture and the professions they practice. Our appreciation of the finished product needs to be complemented, thus, by an appreciation that must come from the experience of going through the minute details of the profession of a leather worker. Such an experience is bound to allow us to rethink Aesthetics, Art and Creativity as we come face to face with an experience which is alien to most people.

There are *Dalit* texts from across the country that deal with the rich cultural traditions they represent. The folk art form of drama and theatre, and the oral culture and patterns of story-telling offer a whole range of new texts that require the development of new aesthetics and ways of understanding. Kalyana Rao infuses oral mode of story telling into his *Antarani Vasantam* (Untouchable Spring), an autobiographical novel on the lives of generations of Dalits. He calls for a need to appreciate *Urumula Natyam*, an earlier form of dance and theatre practiced by the Dalits that has been appropriated by upper caste for form like the *Andhra natyam*. This autobiographical novel is also an attempt, like many Dalit autobiographies across the country, to respond to and re-write the so-called 'authentic' histories from the perspective of an untouchable community. In our Translators Note to *Untouchable Spring*, we raise a few questions that may be relevant to similar texts from other parts of India.

What happens when a narrative circumscribes several other narratives within it, each of them presented in an oral mode? What happens when a text, which contests written histories wherein the entire life and cultural heritage of a people have been neglected, derives its authenticity from, besides neglected written church records, intergenerational memory? What happens, when in such a narrative, the narrators are informed, not so much by what happens to them in actual fact, but by what they experientially feel about actual facts? What happens when a Dalit Community, pushed into the crevices of mainstream history, surfaces to tell its stories, by inventing an in-between genre that simultaneously interrogates "objective" histories and "Self" driven autobiographies? such an attempt would perhaps result in something like Kalyana Rao's *Antarani Vasantam* (Translators Note, *Untouchable Spring* 275). The "crisscrossing of the boundaries of the oral and the written modes, the emphasis on intergenerational memory, rather than on the considered judgements of a single individual who writes autobiography/history, the unique validation of

felt experiences and memory rather than on authenticated facts, make such autobiographical narratives carve a special niche for themselves for they inevitably force us to approach them, not as texts belonging to a single discipline, but as texts encompassing several disciplines. Let us return now to one of the question we have raised at the beginning: Can we justify a comparative studies approach that would replace the earlier practices of studying literature not so much as a discipline?

### **Aim of the Study**

The aim of this paper is to discuss the conceptual category of caste in the discipline of comparative literature.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, it can be said that we have tried to argue how Dalit Studies can lead us out of a critical impasse the discipline of comparative Literature has reached now. The way out of the impasse also presupposes a definite departure from the stranglehold of Literature and from its standard literary, critical and pedagogic practices.

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