

Revisiting Indian Society Through the Dalit Poetry

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Abstract - Dalits of India are farthest from power and hence belong to the lowest stratum of caste hierarchy. The marginalization is based both on the religious principle of pollution and purity and the cultural construction of power. Dalit literature reveals the collective consciousness of people whose voice has been suppressed through long ages of history. It is a protest against the establishment and a commitment to order. This revolutionary aim was rooted in anger and sorrow- the two crucial emotional stimuli of all Dalit writing. Dalit poetry is also marked by these emotions. They are based on everyday experience without pompous words and ‘poetic aesthetic’.

Index Terms - Dalit, poetry, aesthetic, body, struggle.

INTRODUCTION

Sharan Kumar Limbale in his essay describes Dalit literature as writings about Dalit sufferings by Dalit writers, born out of their Dalit consciousness. The purpose of this literature is to spread awareness amongst the Dalit society about their slavery and narrate the pain and suffering of the same to the rest of the society.

He further asks whether it is justified to expect pleasure or beauty from a Dalit text which has primarily been written for social transformation and is a narrative of pain and suffering. Its focus is to spread awareness and not be analysed on the already established aesthetic measures. Hence, Dalit literature rejects traditional aesthetics and demands new yardsticks for evaluating the aesthetics of a Dalit text. Dalit poetry shares the same goal and the same means. It transfers the themes of isolation, protest, revolt, and struggle for survival, freedom from all sorts of bondage and exploitation, apathy, estrangement and uprootedness – a search for identity and a longing for human dignity (Deshpande, 2001,60). One of the South Indian Dalit poets, M.R. Renukumar says,

It never fits

Into circles or squares;

It never falls

Into rhythms or tunes.

How could poetry get fixed

Into a frame

As life is like this?

Literature reflects life. The Dalits experience constant pain and suffering thus, they cannot write a beautiful poem with a proper structure. In the autobiographies, short stories, novels, poems by the Dalits they prefer to use confessional mode. Their status as previously untouchable still proves to be a barrier. Their trauma is definitely of historical importance. According to Manu Smriti, four kinds of people in society borne out of the body of Lord Brahma, the supreme God. According to this mythology, Brahmin was born out 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.

For a long time the untouchables did not receive any formal education which would encourage them for a proper literary movement to register a protest against the monopoly of the established literature. Since 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 caste oppression, question of identity, poverty, untouchability and revolution.

The Dalit poetries are a public exposure of their private and collective trauma. most Dalit texts, in one way or other, address the politics of location. There is careful attention to the village geography, the delineation of space and its relation to power and so on. Sukirtharani opens the poem Portrait of My Village as:

Our bare feet are drenched

By the 'pain of caste that drips from our lips'

As we drink tea from palm-leaf cups,

Standing at an untouchable distance,

While the portrait of our village

Frames itself at a place of double existence,

Always vigilant. (Sukirtharani2013)

This image of village is not a romantic one but more realistic representation. The double “existence” of the penultimate line gestures at the schizophrenic condition of a village of great natural beauty as well as horrific social realities, where the latter are not always inscribed or visible.

The woman body has been depicted as the site of violence. Dalit woman are double marginalized in the society because of their gender and caste identity. Rajkumar, one of the Dalit poets depicts in Untitled Poem I:

*Hoping that merit would accrue
To the family in the hereafter,
They fed the Brahmin a bellyful
Of rice, and then forced
The girl they'd brought from Kollam, who
Was cleaning vessels in the backyard, to
Sleep with him.
After he- having feasted
And then enjoyed
Coitus with the girl- left...*

This poem is an embodied aesthetic of suffering. The girl has been exploited as a house help and a sexual object. The girl is untouchable but her body is accepted for intercourse. The register stays firmly close to the material realities of poverty- stricken lives of pain, dirt, and corporeal suffering. The trauma here is scripted directly on her body.

Slowly but steadily the Dalit consciousness emerged to address their experience of social exploitation as well as physical and epistemic violence. The Dalit poets have made it a point to record these experiences of oppression and deprivation through their attempt to reconstruct their individual as well as social history. They are trying to challenge the social system thus, K.K.S. Das narrates in The Black Dance

*O black girl
You reap the paddy fields
You reap everything with your sickle
Come along o come along
Come along with the wrath of Kali,*

Kali is the deity of Hindus. She is associated with rage and power. The Dalit girl is compared to Kali. She is compared to Kali. The blackness of skin is considered as impure and ugly traditionally but here the black girl has potential to bring change.

The assertion of Dalit identity is a recurrent theme of their poems as a strategy to resist the normative codes of the mainstream values and make a critique of the

hypocritical stance of the high caste people the hierarchies prevalent in social structure, and the Brahminical and of the casteist ethics that essentially govern every aspect of social order. Thus, the Dalit poetries are formidable examples of subaltern narrative of the self.

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