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The Subaltern Writings in India: An Overview of Dalit Literature

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The term, Subaltern, derived from Latin word 'Subalterns; as a noun, means, an officer below the rank of captain, specially a second lieutenant ; at its adjectival level, it means of inferior rank, the later meaning is applicable so far as literature is concerned. Obviously, the term covers the subject, the masses, the deprived and neglect section of the society. It seems that the term 'Subaltern' has come into effect in the post-colonial era. Ranjeet Guha has worked on the project entitled *Subaltern Studies*; but his project deals with post-colonial history. Gayatri Spivak, in her controversial essay, *Can the Subaltern Speak*, brought the term under its special effect, as far as literature is concerned. But her essays about the subalterns are specially associated with the females.

The term subaltern comprises not only the women but those people who have been deprived of liberty, equality fraternity and justice. The group of Indians that has been deprived of this all is called Dalits and their writing Dalit literature. As Dalits are deprived of the rights to live, their writing is marked as a revolt against the social system, and the efforts to establish social justice. Arjun Dangle, an eminent Dalit writer and activist rightly points out.

“ Dalit literature is marked by revolt and negativism, since it is closely associated with the hopes for freedom by a group of people who, as untouchables, are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality.”

Differentness and revolt are the special qualities of Dalit literature. In comparison to the mainstream literature , Dalit literature is different in case of language, experience, and hero. While the mainstream literature is merely for entertainment, Dalit literature puts the heart- rending stories of Dalit life. Dalit hero suffers too much in life and fights to get his inborn right to live, and social justice. Sharankumar Limbale turns down the hollow idealism of upper- caste literature.

Satyam Shivam, Sundram 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. (Ibid.22)

There are different views about the beginning of Dalit literature, Buddha, Saint Chaokamela and Mahatma Phule are supposed to be its originators. Of course, the social reformation movement started by Mahatma Phule and Dalit Panthars movement have a great impact on Dalit literature. But the place of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar can never be denied as the originator of Dalit literature, therefore, it is called Ambedkarian literature as well. Arjun Dangle writes;

There are numerous theories about the origin of Dalit literature. Buddha (6th century BC), Chokhamela (14th century AD), Mahatma Phule (1828-90) and Prof.S.M.Mate (1886-1957) are variously held to be its originators. But these theories are too far-fetched. Although it is true that these great men were deeply concerned about the plight of the untouchables, history shows that it was Dr.Ambedkar who was the pioneer or Dalit literature. (Dangle, xi)

The role of *Milind Sahitya Parishad* and *Asmitadarsha*, a literary journal ed. by Gangadhar Pantavne is important because they used to provide a platform to Dalit writers who were neglected by upper-caste publishers

Arjun Dangle's *Poisoned Bread: Traslations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* and Sharankumar Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, Gangadhar Pantavne's *Sahitya; Prakurti aani Prawruti' (Literature: Nature and Form)* Dr.Sada Karhade's *Dalit Sahitya Chikitsa (Dalit Literature:A Critical Study)* are important books that provide a deep insight into Dalit literature. There are also other books by eminent Dalit writers that help to study the nature and history of Dalit literature.

The writers who contributed to Dalit literature are Anna Bhau Sathe, Shankarrao Kharat, Baburao Bagul, Daya pawar, Waman Nimbalkar, Namdeo Dhasal, Arjun Dangle, Yogiraj Waghmare, Manohr Jilthe, P.I. Sonkamble, Yogendra Meshram, Bhimrao Shivrale, Avinash Dolas, Yashwant Manohar, Keshav Meshram, etc. Obviously, an inspiration of all these writers is Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, an originator of Dalit literature.

Anna Bhau Sathe, a twinkle star in the sky of Dalit literature, was born on 1st. August, 1920. He wrote novels, dramas, short stories, poems, powadas, folk dramas, film stories and a travel narrative. The quality and quantity of the writing of Anna Bhau Sathe is so high that no mainstream writer could ever reach. His famous novels are *Fakira*, *Warnecha Wagh*, *Makdicha Maal*, *Sangharsha*, *Chitra*, *Vaijanta*, etc. The Characters of Anna Bhau Sathe are so alive that the rattle of sword of *Fakira* and the sound of dancing bells of *Vaijanta* dwell in the memory of readers forever. Anna Bhau Sathe has succeeded in creating alive picture of the plight of contemporary lower castes. He, in his famous novel *Fakira*, projects the life of Dalits and their strong will to live on with self respect. *Fakira*, the protanonist, revolts against the rural orthodox system and British rule to save his community from utter starvation. He loots the godown of grains and distributes it among the depressed people. However, his family, the relatives and whole community are arrested and tortured by the British officers. He, eventually, surrenders and is hanged to death. But his strife becomes a memorable treatise of self respect and sacrifice to his community.

The writing of Anna Bhau Sathe was followed by a series of Dalit autobiographical narratives like Daya Pawar's *Baluta*, P.I.Sonkamble's *Athwaninche Pakshi*, Shankarrao Kharat's *Taral Antaral*, Laxman Mane's *Upara*, Laxman Gaikwad's *Uchlya*, etc. Shankararao Kharat created a reliable Dait life through his writing. Sonkamble's *Athwaninche Pakshi* and Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi* are heart rending stories and Daya Pawar's *Baluta* is noticeable. The incident of fight for a piece

of flesh of dead animal between Parlu (P.I. Sonkamble) and a dog in *Athwaninche Pakshi* shows the struggle of Dalits for life. Laxman Mane's *Upara*, originally written in Marathi and translated into English as *An Outsider* by A.K.Kamat, focuses on the problems of Dalits living in the slums, valleys, on the pavements, the outskirts of villages, hills and rocky planes. They have no work, opportunities, facilities, support, shelter and protection. They do not have even two meals a day. Mane also depicts the miseries, helplessness, diffidence, inability and exploitation of women who are exploited in three ways that is caste, class and sex.

Dalit men autobiographical narratives are followed by Dalit women autobiographical narratives like Baby Kamble's *Jina Aamucha*, Shantabai Kamble's *Majya Jalmachi Chitarkatha*, Kumud Pawade's *Antasphot*, Mukta Sarvagaund's *Mitleli kawade*, Shantabai Dani's *Ratrandian Amha*, Urmila Pawar's *Aaydan*, Yashodhara Gaikwad's *Mazi Mi*, etc. All these women writers write seriously about the Dalit social life, status of Dalit women in general and their own plights and sufferings in particular. Baby Kamble's *Jina Aamucha* does not remain an autobiographical narrative only but the narrative of Dalit social life before and after conversion. She reveals that Dalits have to be awake and fight not only the caste conscious people but the male chauvinistic one. For that she tries to bring about awareness in Dalit society. She points out that some of educated Dalits are dishonest and they show off their pseudo-dignity. Urmila Pawar is a well known activist in Dalit and feminist movement. Her autobiography, *Aaydan*, translated into English as *The Weave of My Life* by Maya Pandit, portrays the condition of Dalit community exploited by the upper caste and being extremely marginalized.

The poem played an important role in the growth of Dalit literature and Dalit social movement as well. Like other forms of Dalit literature, Dalit poetry also is marked with revolt against the social system. Dalit poetry throws away the bondage of mainstream literary tradition and proves the distinctness of Dalit sensitivity. Dalit poetry began in the 1960s with the anthologies *Esa Ga Mi Brahma* (1962) and *Maze Vidhyapitha* (1966) by Narayan Surve. Although the poem of Surve does not reflect the inspiration and thoughts of Dr. Ambedkar, it moves around the workers and Dalit life and the man is at centre of his poem. Dalit poetry flourished with Namdeo Dhasal's *Golpitha* (1972), Daya Pawar's *Kondwada* (1973) and Keshav Meshram's *Utkhanan* (1977). Dhasal's poem is marked with an overflow of revolting Dalit mind against an injustice for years. Daya Pawar's *Kondwada* stands before the readers as a 'Kondwada' of neglected Dalit life. Keshav Meshram's *Utkhanan* succeeds to prove its distinctness for a new purport. The other poets who enriched Dalit poetry are Yashwant Manohar – *Uthangumpha*, Tryambak Sapkale – *Surag*, Pralhad Chendwankar- *Audit*, Jairam Pawar- *Nakebandi*, Arun Kale- *Rock Garden*, and Arjun Dangle. The poem has dominant position in Dalit literature in present era. A number of emerging Dalit poets write on different issues aggressively related to Dalit life like the suffocation of Dalits in modern age, specially in globalization era, disloyal educated Dalits with Ambedkarian thought and mission and rambling Dalit social and political movement.

The mainstream critics accuse that Dalit literature lacks in literary merit from the viewpoint of universal criteria. They assert that Dalit writers are divisive and sectarian

that use abusive and disrespectful language to assess Hindu divinity. They also doubt literary ability in Dalit writers. But Dalit writers lived so painful and struggling life that they use aggressive language to put forth their bitter experiences and the language they use is their natural language as they lived a neglected life. Sharankumar Limbale writes:

Unlike classical literature, Dalit literature needs to be studied from sociological perspective. If we look for classics in Dalit literature today, we won't find any. This literature deals with social problems, social order and social movement. And today, instead of teaching our youth classics, it is more important to teach them what a social movement is, what the social order is, and what our social problems are. (Limbale, 146)

1) To conclude, it can be said that Dalit literature needs to be studied from a sociological perspective rather than as a mere entertainment. Because it has its own particular pulchritude and it takes the readers not to the imaginary fairyland, but to the real world of neglected people.

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