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Defining Dalit Aesthetics

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Abstract:

Dalit literature being post-independence literature has a new form and purpose. Dalit literature is the literature of exploited people and is primarily concerned with their “search for freedom, and giving expression to it.” In Dalit literature, the idea of freedom is considered to be an aesthetic component. “The sentiment of freedom is present in Dalit literature not only as its life essence, but also as beauty.” Thus, Dalit literature, being revolutionary in nature, promotes equality, freedom and justice.

In their search for freedom and justice, Dalit writers reject the traditional standards of evaluating literature, i.e. the aesthetics. The mere purpose of traditional aesthetics is to provide aesthetic pleasure or beauty whereas Dalit literature is based on the reality of Dalit lives. Such attempts of Dalit writers to challenge India’s hegemonic literary tradition and deconstruct the existing or dominating categories of aesthetics aroused many controversies about the literary merit of Dalit literature. Savarna critics considered Dalit literature artless, as it lacked upper caste traditional aesthetic values. For them literature was not “an arena of affirmative action” where Dalits can demand equal representation.

In this paper, I try to argue that as compared to the Savarna literature that glorifies pleasure and gives central place to pleasure seeking aesthetes, Dalit literature emphasizes the centrality of the human being and the society. If “joy and sympathy” is aroused by pleasure-giving literature, self-respect is awakened by revolutionary Dalit literature. And thereby highlighting the four aesthetic components of Dalit literature. First, an artist’s social commitment; second, the life affirming values present in Dalit literature; third, the ability with which Dalit literature arouses reader’s consciousness (Dalit Chetna) toward values like liberty, equality, freedom and justice. Finally, Ambedkarite thoughts that occupy a central place in constituting Dalit aesthetics.

Keywords: Dalits, Dalit Literature, Aesthetics, Pleasure, Beauty, Art, Pain, Revolution, Freedom, Reality.

The Dalit Literary movement has a long history, which goes back to the eleventh century first Vachana poet, Madara Chennaiah. It is a movement that unfolds the struggle against casteist tradition in India. Writings and works of great leaders like Jyotiba Phule (1828-90), S.M. Mate (1886-1957) and Dr. Ambedkar (1891-1956) brought Dalit issues to the realm of literature and inspired many Dalits to write for their emancipation. Though, Dalit literature has a long history, it remained unrecognized until 1960 (Dalit Panthers) when a group of

young educated Dalit writers like Baburao Bagul, Bandhu Madhav and Shankarao Kharat, inspired by the Black Panther movement started the *Little Magazine* Movement in Maharashtra. They brought a new, angry, revolutionary and powerful voice in the realm of literature.¹

At the first conference of Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha in 1958, the term Dalit literature came into use.² After independence, Dalits found that the political and economical equality promised to them by the government was unable to bring about any change in their social condition. In order to bring about a change in their social condition they need social, cultural, religious and creative equality. Thus, they rejected literary conventions and language rigidities of the classical literature of upper castes and decided to create a literature of their own that may help them carve a new identity for themselves.

Dalit literature forms a different but important part of Indian literature, it analyzes the past and the present from Dalit perspective, provides a space to the silenced and suppressed voices, and an opportunity of social, political and cultural development. Dalit literature also provides a space to Dalits for the outburst of their feelings and an opportunity to question the discrimination. Sharankumar Limbale and Darshana Trivedi discuss Dalit literature as one that help people understand the Hindu caste system and untouchability in India, it's terrifying nature and exploitation. In other words, "Dalit is not a caste, but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows and struggles of those suppressed in the society." It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to reason, thus finally ending in revolution. Dalit literature is based on experience, thus the history depicted in Dalit literature is not unreal or illusionary but real and authentic. It reflects Dalit experience and sensibility, attempting to define and assert Dalit identity from primarily a Dalit point of view.³

The reality depicted in Dalit literature is different, so is the language used to depict this reality. It uses uncouth, impolite spoken language, specific to Dalits of a region. Shame, anger, pain, sorrow, suffering, indomitable hope and rebellion are the subject matter of Dalit literature. These expressions are sharp because of the age-old oppression.

Dalit literature being post independence literature has a new form and purpose, even the subject matter is different. Earlier kings and queens used to be the subject matter of literature, but in Dalit literature, the poor, helpless people living on the periphery of the villages have become the subject matter. Dalit literature is concerned with the pain and suffering of these people and their revolt and struggles to carve a place for them. Its intention is to make readers restless and angry. Its lifeblood is "Dalit consciousness" that is revolutionary as is based on the social values like "equality, liberty, justice and solidarity

¹ "Marathi Dalit Literature - Welcome to Muse India." 2011. 14 Dec. 2012
<<http://www.museindia.com/regularcontent.asp?issid=40&id=2976>>

² "Marathi Dalit Literature - Welcome to Muse India." 2011. 14 Dec. 2012
<<http://www.museindia.com/regularcontent.asp?issid=40&id=2976>>

³ Shankar, S. "Flesh and Fish Blood: Postcolonialism, Translation, and the Vernacular" 2012.
<<http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/89w4d6vh.pdf>>

rather than pleasure".⁴ In the process, it also rejects the traditional standard of evaluating literature, i.e. the aesthetics, as the mere purpose of traditional aesthetics is to provide aesthetic pleasure or beauty. Though the traditional aesthetics is based on the principles of satya, shivam and sundaram, they are never realistic. Whereas Dalit literature is based on the reality of Dalit lives.⁵

Even the identity of a Dalit writer is a debated one. Can we consider anybody writing about Dalits a Dalit writer? Upper caste writers like Mahasweta Devi, Mulkraj Anand and Premchand narratives are centered on Dalit lives and experiences yet are not authentic narratives as they are the product of the imagination of the writer. Whereas Dalit literature is based on the reality of Dalit existence, and these writers never undergo the experiences of Dalit existence. Thus, Dalit literature is exclusively the domain of writers who are born as Dalits.⁶

Now comes the question, is Dalit literature the literature of only those born into Dalit caste. Initially the discussions in Dalit literature were centered on (Mahar) Buddhist youths as they led the movement (Dalit Panthers 1950-70). But, when Dalit literature, emerging from various parts of India and from different castes began to be talked about, a number of doubts were raised as to its nature. Sharankumar Limbale in the essay "Dalit literature and Aesthetics" says that while some believed that any such new avenue could not be opened, some others considered it communal. Some observed timidity in its unity.⁷ Soon it was realized that while defining Dalit literature, Dalit writers, activists and intellectuals like Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and Dr. Ambedkar had clearly stated that "it was not the literature of a particular caste or class".⁸ Their stand from the beginning is broad-based and well-developed. Baburao Bagul, a Dalit activist and writer, defined Dalit literature as "Dalit literature takes man as its center. 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."⁹

With reference to the Dalit literary movement, the term "Dalit" is not used in its traditional sense, but has added a new dimension and content to it. Here we can redefine the word Dalit as representing the masses, which are exploited and oppressed economically, socially and culturally in the name of religion, caste and other factors.

Such attempts of Dalit writers to challenge India's hegemonic literary tradition and deconstruct the existing or dominating the category of aesthetics aroused many controversies about the literary merit of Dalit literature. Savarna critics considered Dalit literature artless, as it lacked upper caste traditional aesthetic values. For them literature was not "an arena of affirmative action" where Dalits can demand equal representation, even though they do not

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Nath, Amar. *Dalit literature: a critical exploration*. "Dalit literature"

⁶ [http://www.scribd.com/doc/47224066/DALIT-LITERATURE\(7/nov/2012\)](http://www.scribd.com/doc/47224066/DALIT-LITERATURE(7/nov/2012))

⁷ Limbale, Sharankumar. *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*. Trans. Alok Mukherjee. New Delhi: Orient Longman. 2004

⁸ Dangle, Arjun Poisoned Bread editor, Orient Longman Limited 1992

⁹ <http://www.scribd.com/doc/47224066/DALIT-LITERATURE>

have equal talent. They charge them “for being divisive and sectarian, with using disrespectful and offensive language towards Hindu divinities and revered figures and with engaging with distortion of pre and post independence Indian history.”¹⁰ They accuse Dalit literature of being “carried away by the frenzy of the movement, without being objective or neutral, so much so that it ends up being propagandist.” They find in all Dalit writings a common ideological view thus being “univocal and monotonous.” They accuse Dalit literature for its “sociological viewpoint”, because such a tendency in Dalit literature helps in erasing the individual. Finally, Dalit literature is accused to be full of resentment.¹¹

Limbale in his work *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature* argued that Dalit Literature being a new literary canon disregard the traditional form, content and style. “A vibrant expression of the newly awakened sensibilities distinguishes it from the mainstream literary traditions. It is a kind of protest against all forms of exploitation based on class, race, caste or occupation. It rejects both the Western and Eastern theoretical conceptions like Freud’s Psychoanalysis, Barthe’s Structuralism and Derrida’s Deconstruction together with the Indian theories of Rasa and Dhawani.”¹²

Dalit Literature deconstructs and questions the very foundation of Indian mythology and constructs a new story. To take an example Dalit writers focus on the legendary figures of Ekalavya and Shambooka rather than the Pandavas and the language used is their native speech. Dalit literature is an outcome of their experiences rather than being a mere observation of Dalit lives. Dr. C.B. Bharti claims: “The aim of Dalit Literature is to protest against the established system which is based on injustice and to expose the evil and hypocrisy of the higher castes. There is an urgent need to create a separate aesthetics for Dalit literature, an aesthetics based on the real experiences of life,”¹³ As Dalit writers assert that they are concerned with a different purpose and audiences, thus the literary and aesthetic standard they are following cannot be the same as dictated by the Savarna critics. Furthermore, it is because of the traditional Hindu religious literature that untouchability and caste system flourished in India. Hence, Dalit writers rejected the ancient literary standards and deconstructed the dominant literary values.¹⁴

There was no discussion about aesthetics in Dalit literature until 1988, when Sharad Patil wrote *Abrahmani Sahityanche Saundaryashastra*. In this work, he argued that since Dalit literature has no aesthetics of its own, it is relying on the Brahminical aesthetics. He asserted that aesthetics is like a weapon and every revolutionary literature has acquired it.¹⁵

¹⁰ Krishnaswamy, R. "toward world Literary Knowledges - Comparative Literature." 2010.

<<http://complit.dukejournals.org/content/62/4/399.full.pdf>>. 1-jan-13

¹¹ Limbale, Sharankumar *Towards and Aesthetics of Dalit Literature* in English Orient Longman (translated by Alok Mukherje)2004, ISBN 81-250-2656-8.

¹² Babu, M. "The Dalit Vision and Voice: A Study of Sharan Kumar Limbale’s Akkarmashi", 2013.

<<http://www.the-criterion.com/V3/n4/Mini.pdf>>

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Limbale, Sharankumar. *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*. Trans. Alok Mukherjee. New Delhi: Orient Longman. 2004. pp 34.

¹⁵ Krishnaswamy, Revathi. "Toward World Literary Knowledges: Theory in the Age of Globalization." *Comparative Literature* 62.4 (2010): 399-419.

Patil challenged Dalit writers to develop “their own theoretical weapon.” Omprakash Valmiki, Sharankumar Limbale, and other Dalit writers took up this challenge and tried to develop a different and new aesthetic theory for Dalit. “An ‘artless art’ that offers novel experiences, a new sensitivity, a distinct vocabulary, a different protagonist, and an alternate vision.”¹⁶ In his pioneering work on Dalit aesthetics, Sharankumar Limbale asserts that the idea of aesthetics in traditional literature is based on the “principle of beauty.” This concept of beauty is not concerned with the form or the ideology of an object of art but rather with the “feelings of pleasure and empathy aroused” by it.¹⁷ Thus, an artist makes extra efforts to beautify his work in a way that suits the tastes or liking of the aesthetes. This makes another point very clear that in traditional literature the reader occupies a very prominent place above the artist and the artwork.

N.G. Chapekar opined “to experience beauty, a cultured mind, health and enthusiasm are necessary.” Chapekar state that although everyone has a sense of beauty, only a few has the aptitude to taste beauty and fewer with the ability to create or imagine that beauty. The aptitude of creating and enjoying this beauty is a gift of “high culture.”¹⁸ Thus, he concluded that the Dalits and their literature are unable of either enjoying such beauty or creating it as their culture is termed inferior. Moreover, the principle of beauty followed by the Savarna critics is accepted as a universal value, but it is important to understand that “beauty related experiences are object specific, person specific and situation specific”.¹⁹ Thus, it is difficult to formulate a general or universal concept of beauty.

Limbale rejects the efforts made by some critics to accommodate the different emotions expressed in Dalit literature to the existing rasa theory. Critics like Yadhunath Thatted and Acharya Jawdekar have proposed to incorporate or introduce “revolt” as tenth rasa and “cry” as eleventh rasa in the existing rasa theory. Dalit writers and critics rejected such an introduction to rasa theory because to them such addition highlights the inadequacy and insufficiency in the rasa theory. Thus Dalit writers and critics rejected the rasa theory altogether as it is incompetent to do full justice to the Dalit consciousness.²⁰

As gathered from the above discussion Dalit literature is not a “pleasure giving literature.” It rejects the traditional aesthetics based on the principle of pleasure derived from beauty. Hence, it became important for Dalit critics to set up new standards of aesthetics in order to evaluate Dalit literature. It was impossible to judge Dalit literature and its commitment to revolt and rejection by following traditional Savarna values or standard of aesthetics. Sharankumar Limbale in the chapter “Dalit Literature and Aesthetics” discusses various aesthetic values, principles and standard established by Dalit literature.

¹⁶ Ibid.399-419

¹⁷ Limbale, Sharankumar. *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*. Trans. Alok Mukherjee. New Delhi: Orient Longman. 2004.

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Krishnaswamy, Revathi. "Toward World Literary Knowledges: Theory in the Age of Globalization." *Comparative Literature* 62.4 (2010): 399-419.

First, the traditional aesthetic principle of beauty is “abstruse and spiritualistic.” According to this principle, the beauty of a piece of art depends on its “expression of universal consciousness or otherworldliness” whereas in Dalit literature the beauty of a work of art lies in its rendering of reality and rejection of abstract ideas and beliefs. Thus, Dalit literature formulates a new aesthetic component called “materialistic aesthetics.”

Second, revolutionary Ambedkarite thoughts are the inspiration behind Dalit literature. However, this does not mean that any Dalit work which express Ambedkarite ideas become beautiful. Rather the aesthetic standards depend on how well an artist expresses Ambedkarite thoughts in his work and “how much and in what ways” does these ideas affect the readers. Thus, a great or good work will be the one, which arouse a Dalit consciousness in readers.

Here, it is important to understand that the concept of beauty followed by Savarna critic is considered to be of universal value, though the idea of beauty or pleasure differs from person to person. Thus, we cannot accept the Savarna idea of beauty as universal. But, at least in Dalit literature we can say that Ambedkarite inspiration found in all Dalit literature is of universal value.

Third, the artist, the artwork, and the reader or aesthete form the basis of aesthetic criticism. In Savarna criticism, the aesthete occupies the prominent or a crucial place above the artist or artwork and his response to the artwork is the sole criteria for judging an artwork. Aesthetic criticism examines how an artwork influences the mind and the heart of the reader. This primacy to the reader’s preference is very important. “Enjoyment of any literature is related to proximity, and that depends on the mind and the heart of the reader. The art that entertain the connoisseur does not cause the problem of preference”. But, Dalit literature contradicts tradition and thus obstructs the process of enjoyment “by casting a shadow on the conscious and unconscious prejudices and assumptions held by the reader”. Dalit writers engage with the problems of society rather than providing mere enjoyment to readers. They express Dalit experiences and feelings in their literature. They do not create literature with savrana or high culture readers in mind. Their effort is to bring the high cultured aesthete-readers down to their own level of experience. Moreover, as Dalit literature does not focus on aesthete reader, traditional aesthetic values, which are aesthete-centered are not applicable for the evaluation of Dalit literature. On the other hand, Dalit aesthetics will depend on the impact a Dalit work or artist will make on its reader's mind or consciousness. It may arouse anger in some readers and disgust in others.

Fourth, traditional aesthetic principle gives us an impression that human beings are concerned only with beauty and pleasure. However, this impression seems to be misleading, because many people around the world have sacrificed their lives for social values such as “freedom, love, justice and equality”. They considered these social values more worthy than their lives. Moreover, nowhere in the world, we have seen revolutions happening for the sake of beauty and pleasure.

Dalit literature being revolutionary in nature promotes equality, freedom and justice. As compared to the Savarna literature that glorifies pleasure and gives central place to pleasure seeking aesthetes, Dalit literature emphasizes the centrality of the human being and the society. If “joy and sympathy” is aroused by pleasure-giving literature, self-respect is awakened by revolutionary Dalit literature.

Finally, Dalit literature is the literature of exploited people and is primarily concerned with their “search for freedom, and giving expression to it.” One can find all the aspects and dimension of freedom in it. In Dalit literature, the idea of freedom is considered to be an aesthetic component. “The sentiment of freedom is present in Dalit literature not only as its life essence, but also as beauty.”²¹ Thus, we can say that the three values of life- “equality, freedom and solidarity” are the constituting elements of beauty in Dalit literature.

We can thus conclude by highlighting the four aesthetic components of Dalit literature. First, the artist’s social commitment; second, the life affirming values present in Dalit literature; third, the ability with which Dalit literature arouses reader’s consciousness (Dalit Chetna)²² toward values like liberty, equality, freedom and justice. Finally, Ambedkarite thoughts occupying a central place in constituting Dalit aesthetics.

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²¹ Limbale, Sharankumar. *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations*. Trans. Alok Mukherjee. New Delhi: Orient Longman. 2004

²² Valmiki, Omprakash. *Dalit Sahitya Ka Saundaryashastra*. Delhi. Radhakrishna: 2001.

Valmiki, Omprakash. *Dalit Sahitya Ka Saundaryashastra* .Delhi. Radhakrishna: 2001.