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The Shattered Visage: Delving Dalit Narratives

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Abstract:

Dalit literature as a corpus grew out of the Dalit movement and is an ongoing progression that influences the contours of literary production. It conveys the timbre of Dalit movement and registers a strong protest against the frames of caste, race and tribe. The Dalit writers through their writings, rips off the false facade of the society, looks into its hollow eyes and ignites myriad queries for people to muse on. The Dalit movement seeks a transformation of the oppressive structure of the society and propels Dalits towards an egalitarian existence that encompasses social justice, dignity, fraternity and economic progress. Dalit literature promotes an outline for reconstructing the society on the values that encourage fair play among the marginalised sections in the society. Decades of the wall of silence and denial have broken only through Dalit writing. Tryambak Sankale's poem 'Mother India' (Times Week The Supplement, 25th November 1973) expresses this sentiment poignantly. 'Don't despair. This day will depart too. Now, this day is pregnant with day. Our day is not far away.' This paper examines the portraiture of Dalit writers who faced the malaise of hegemony inflicted by the upper caste members of the society and depicts the commendable attempts to improve their situation in the caste ridden society through the means of education.

Keywords: Dalit writing, marginalized, castes, hegemony, Untouchables, education.

Caste system has been structured in India from the Vedic times and plays a central role in the social structure. 'Each caste had a specific place in the hierarchy of social status.' The privileged segments of the society were referred as 'uppercastes', while the disadvantaged sections were called the 'lower castes.' Traditionally there are four principal castes namely Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Dalits also known as untouchables are literally outcastes; a fifth caste or Varna who still suffer odious discrimination at the hands of the upper caste members.

Caste discrimination has been defined as ‘discrimination based on work and descent’ by the UN Sub-Commission on the promotion and protection of Human Rights. Discrimination based on work and descent is defined as ‘any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on inherited status such as caste including present or ancestral occupation, family, community or social origin, name, birthplace, place of residence, dialect and accent that has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise on an equal footing of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.’

Literature has always played a powerful role in the representation and denunciation of systematized oppression and injustice. It has been an effectual means of stirring upheavals and this fact is evident in the social movements like Dalit Liberation Movement. Dalit literature has now burst onto national consciousness with its avant-garde zeal and has initiated the process of interrogating the dominant discourse.

Dalit literature breaks away from the narrow confines of regional and national boundaries and can be considered a universal narrative of protest. The term Dalit was first used in 1958 at the first ever conference of Dalit literature in Bombay. Its aim was to dissect the angst of servitude inflicted by the Varna system or caste system. Many prominent leaders like Gandhi and Tagore condemned the exploitative Indian society. Tagore wrote: ‘my wretched country, those whom you have crushed and trampled, deprived of their rights, made them stand and wait and never drew them close, share you must their indignities and sufferings.’ (Tagore qtd. in Das 302)

The word ‘Dalit’ means a member of the caste that is considered the lowest. Dr. Ambedkar never liked the use of the word ‘Dalit’ and instead preferred the word ‘Depressed classes’. Dalit writer Sharankumar Limbale says: ‘By Dalit literature, I mean writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness. The form of Dalit literature is inherent in its Dalitness, and its purpose is obvious - to inform Dalit society of its slavery, and narrate its pain and suffering to upper caste Hindus.’ (Limbale/Mukherjee 19)

Dalit literature tells us the story of collective suffering of the whole community and does not revolve round the vicissitude of an individual’s life. Renowned writer Mohandas Namishray defined Dalit literature as ‘Literature of suffering and struggles.’ He remarked that ‘Dalit literature is not only for Dalits but for all those people who are struggling against atrocities.’ Thus, the word ‘Dalit’ encapsulates the idea of bringing together all those who have been facing exploitation and deprivation. A picture of caste discrimination and oppression emerges in the one of the works of Mulk Raj Anand. In the novel *Untouchable*

Anand lucidly narrates how Bakha's life gets stigmatized because of his low-caste identity. The lines from the novel elucidates the condescending attitude of the upper castes when they retort- 'Keep to the side of the road, low caste vermin! He suddenly heard someone shouting at him, why don't you call, you swine and announce your approach! Do you know you have touched me and defiled me, cock-eyed son of a bow- legged scorpion! Now I will have to go and take a bath to purify myself.' (Anand qtd. in Das 316)

S. P. Punalekar opines: 'Dalit writers themselves are either victims or witness to social inequalities and violence. Some have direct or indirect links with social, political and cultural organization of Dalits. A few among them are staunch social activists and use literature as a vehicle to propagate their views on Dalit identity and the prevailing social consciousness. (Punalekar qtd. in Rai 41) Kashiram Singh a Hindi author argued against a Dalit identity for literary production and remarked, 'You don't have to be a horse to write about a horse!' In retaliation to this statement the Dalit writer Omprakash Valmiki replied: 'Yes, you can write about the horse, his external contours, his canter and neighs but when at the end of the day the same horse, having done his share of labouring, exhausted and hungry, stands tied to a post in the stable, what can you write about how he feels or what emotions he harbours towards his master or about his inner pain?' The concern here is the verbalization of a different order of experience and perception.

Dalit literature is not 'art for art's sake' but the literature of lived experience. Babasaheb focused on the transformative power of literature and urged novelists to write on themes that promoted humanistic ethics as he realized that no societal movement could grow stronger unless it generated its own literary tradition. He advised 'Through your literary creations cleanse the stated values of life and culture. Don't have a limited objective. Transform the light of your pain so that the darkness of villages is removed. Do not forget that in our country the world of the Dalits and the ignored classes is extremely large. Get to know intimately their pain and sorrow, and try through your literature to bring progress in their lives. True humanity resides there.'

The kernel of a Dalit perception is evident in the poems and songs of saints and devotional poets. The poem of Hira Dom, the first Dalit piece of writing and the writings of Swami Achyutanand exposes the repressive social composition. Many Dalit writers Harit, Mataprasad, Mansharam Vidrohi unleashed their creative flair under the influence of Gandhi. The epoch publications of Babasaheb such as Mook Nayak, Bahiskrut Bharat, archives the repression, atrocities, faced by the people of low stratum of the society and spread the message of self esteem. The progressive ideas of Jotirao Phule and the scholarly leadership of

B R Ambedkar inspired Dalit writing in Marathi and pioneered an awakening against caste system. But there were other voices, equally strong and effective, that helped to set this movement in motion like Mukta Salve, Omprakash Valmiki and Savitribai Phule.

Mukta Salve (Muktabai) studied at the school in Pune founded by Savitribai and Jyotiba Phule. She wrote an essay *Mang Maharachya Dukhavisayi* (About the grief of the Mangs and the Mahars) in 1855 when she was fourteen years old. This piece was published in an Ahmednagar journal named Dnyanodaya (Rise of knowledge). The essay was reprinted in the Dnyanodaya Centenary volumes, edited by B.P.Hivale in 1942 and was also translated into English and published in Susie Tharu and K. Lalita's 'Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to Present' in 1991.

It is probably the earliest surviving piece of writing by a Mang woman, an 'untouchable.' Through her vivid and acerbic polemic, she confidently addresses the pundits (High caste Brahmin priest) 'O learned pundits, wind up the selfish prattle of your hollow wisdom and listen to what I have to say.' Through her writing, she raises the voice of those who are marginalized and voices the need of her community to rise against the discomfiture of myriad forms of violence, torture and subjugation. But her work goes far beyond simply documenting the practices prevalent during that time. It was a clarion call to surge forward and carve out a new path amidst the derision and contempt of the upper castes.

Mang Maharachya Dukhavisayi (the Grief of Mahar and Mangs) highlights the carnage unleashed against the Mahar and Mang communities. She analyses how the upper-caste Brahmins manipulated religion to control the power structure within the society, by depriving the Mangs of their basic necessities. Mukta bemoans the predicament of the subaltern voices suppressed by the privileged sections of the society. 'The Brahmins have degraded us so low; they consider people like us even lower than cows and buffaloes.... Did they not consider us even lower than donkeys....? You beat a lame donkey, and his master retaliates. But who was there to object the routing thrashing of Mahars and mangs?'

Mukta questioned the authenticity of Hinduism, a religion she had no access to, but was expected to follow. She states 'If one attempts to refute, on the basis of the Vedas, the arguments of these Brahmans, the great gluttons who consider themselves to be superior to us and hate us, they counter that the Vedas are their own property. Now obviously, if the Vedas are only for the Brahmans, they are absolutely not for us. Teach us, O God, your true religion so that we all can lead our lives according to it. Let that religion, where only one person is privileged, and the rest deprived, perish from the earth and let it never enter our minds to proud of such a religion.'

A similar thought is recounted by Omprakash Valmiki in his autobiography *Joothan: A Dalit life* when he remarks ‘...if I were really a Hindu, would the Hindus hate me so much? Or discriminate against me? Or try to fill up with caste inferiority over the smallest things? ... I have seen and suffered the cruelty of Hindus since childhood. Why does caste superiority and caste pride attack only the weak, why are Hindus so cruel, so heartless against Dalits?’ Mukta recounts how the Mangs were at the mercy of the upper castes especially during the rule of Bajirao Peshwa. ‘These people drove us, the poor Mangs, and Mahars, away from our own lands, which they occupied to build large mansions. And that was not all. They would make the Mangs and Mahars drink oil mixed with red lead and buried our people in the foundations of their buildings, thus wiping out generation after generation of our poor people.’

During the Peshwa rule, Mukta narrates that even thinking of education was a luxury. ‘When any Mang or Mahar would learn somehow to read or write, and if Peshwa Bajirao came to know about this, he would say, Education of a Mang or Mahar amounts to taking away a Brahman’s job.’ He used to say, ‘How dare they get educated?’ ‘Do these untouchables expect the Brahman to hand over their official duties to them and move around with their shaving kits, shaving the heads of widows?’ With such remarks he would punish them.’

Muktabai writes to embody the struggle and encapsulates the pain, indignity which the community suffered as untouchables. ‘Do the merciless hearts of these Brahmans, who strut around in their so-called holy clothes, ever feel even a grain of pity for us when we suffer so much grief on account of being branded as untouchables? We have to endure miseries because we do not have any money.’

The misery of the Mangs especially the affliction of women is further elucidated, when Muktabai remarks, ‘When our women give birth to babies, they do not have even a roof over their heads. How they suffer in the rain and the cold! Please try to understand it from your own experience. If they get some disease while giving birth, where will they get money for doctor or medicines? Was there ever any doctor among you who was human enough to treat such people free of cost?’

Years of suppression and subjugation makes the Mangs reticent and docile and Mukta as the torch bearer of her community seems to cry out in anguish. ‘The Mang and Mahar children never dared to lodge a complaint even if the Brahman children threw stones ...and injured them seriously. They suffer silently because they know

they have to go to the Brahman's house to beg for leftover food. Alas! O God! What agony this! I will burst into tears if I write more about this injustice. ‘

Muktabai believed that gaining knowledge could shift these power structures and create a better future for the Dalit communities. ‘Oh! Mahars and Mangs, you are poor and sick. Only the medicine of knowledge will cure and heal you.’

The role and importance of education is also explicated in Omprakash Valmiki's, autobiography *Joothan: A Dalit life*. The children from Basti, Chuhra community were not allowed to enrol for studies. However Valmiki's father wanted his son to be educated .He begged the headmaster stating that, ‘I will be forever in your debt if you teach this child of mine a letter or two’.

The branding of the lower castes always followed them inspite of Gandhiji's resounding call for emancipation of the ‘children of God’. The frequent word that Omprakash Valmiki heard from any Tyagi (upper castes) was ‘How much ever you study...you will still remain a Chuhra’. However, he was always emboldened by his father who kept reminding him that: ‘You have to improve the caste by studying.’ These words of his father inspired him to surge forward in his quest to negate the impact of being labelled a lower caste.

There is another noteworthy incident that Omprakash Valmiki states in ‘*Joothan: A Dalit life*’. Once his teacher narrated the story of Dronachraya and Ashwathama from the epic *Mahabharata*. The teacher highlighted the poverty of Ashwathama that instead of milk he was given flour by mixing water. Valmiki questioned his upper caste teacher that ‘Ashwathama was given flour mixed with water instead of milk, but what about us who have to drink mar?’ His classmates mocked and stared at him for raising such an insignificant query. The teacher yelled at him stating, ‘Darkest Kaliyug has descended upon us ...an untouchable is daring to talk back.’

Another Dalit writer and the first feminist icon in Indian history who managed to stand up for the rights of the marginalised and made an impact particularly when the Indian society was plagued with the evils of the worst order was Savitribai Phule .As an educational reformer Savitribai Phule, opened three schools by 1851 and provided education to 150 female students. In a letter written by Savitribai in October 1856 to her husband Jyotiba Phule she discusses about her interaction with her Bhau (brother). Her Bhau asked her ‘Why do you teach those Mangs and Mahars? I can't bear it when people criticise and curse you and create trouble for you for doing that.’

Savitribai replied that, ‘The lack of learning is nothing but gross bestiality. It was the possession of knowledge that gave the Brahmins their superior status. Learning has a great value. One who masters it, loses his lowly status and achieves the higher one...Jyotiba confronts the dastardly Brahmins, fights with them and teaches the Mahars and Mangs because he believes that they are human beings and must be able to live as much. So they must learn. That is why I also teach them. What is so improper about it ?...The Brahmins believe that this will create problems for them and therefore they chant the mantra “Abrahmanyam”(unholy)and go on reviling us and poisoning the minds of people like you.’ In the end, Savitribai makes a resolution: ‘...to devote every moment of her life to teaching people, making them self-respecting ...’

In the poem titled, *Go, Get Education* Savitribai wrote:

‘Be self-reliant, be industrious
 Work, gather wisdom and riches,
 All gets lost without knowledge
 We become animal without wisdom,
 Sit idle no more, go get education
 End misery of the oppressed and forsaken,
 You’ve got a golden chance to learn
 So learn and break the chains of caste.
 Throw away the Brahman’s scriptures fast.’

Frederick Douglas rightly remarked that ‘where justice is denied ,where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails and where anyone class is made to feel that that society is an organised conspiracy to oppress ,rob and degrade them ,neither persons nor property will be safe.’

Delving the narratives of Dalit writers reveals that education is the only way to gain dignity in the society. The Dalit narratives are a clarion call to the oppressed sections of the society to unite and fight for their constitutional rights. It’s time that we as ambassadors of change rework the tapestry of the society removing the manacles of casteism and pray like Tagore ‘Into that heaven of freedom let my country awake’-a country that promotes an egalitarian society ,a country that provides socio-economic emancipation to all citizens.

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