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Varied Thematic Concerns in the Select Dalit Narratives

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Abstract:

This research paper analyzes four autobiographical extracts written by different dalit authors that examine the Dalit dilemmas, oppression, struggles and subsequent awareness and realization which is characteristic of the whole corpus of dalit literature. Dalit literature becomes a voice of dissent and revolt against social injustice prevalent in India. It becomes an instrument/mode through which the individual and collective suffering is depicted. In today's scenario when India boasts of democratic republic status caste system is still widely practiced despite the strong resistance in the past few decades. In a caste based hierarchical structure of the society the lower strata become the most vulnerable section. It is ironical but true that the ideology based on the theological assumptions can have detrimental impact on the social, economic, and political structure of the society. The ideology promulgated by the powerful becomes the nation's ideology thus disregarding and eliminating the interests of the sections bordering on periphery. The extracts are studied as the narratives of 'writing resistance'. The present study explores the nuances of 'dalitchetna' and how it has been instrumental in countering injustice and changing the perspective of the masses.

Keywords: Dalit Chetna, Dalit Panthers, Varna System, Displacement, Caste Consciousness, Feudalism.

Postcolonialism is not an offshoot or byproduct of colonialism as some critics have argued rather these are the two parallel movements that have their own repercussions. Colonialism manifested itself as a coercive practice when the ambitious policies of the British empire began to have direct or indirect bearing on the lives of the folks living in the remote continents. Colonialism and imperialism are two different but interlinked terms where imperialism becomes the driving force behind colonialism. The dominion over foreign lands presented Britishers with viable opportunities which resulted in the adoption of unfair means and subjugation of the people residing in these countries and exhausting all their economic

resources. Postcolonialism which is normally perceived as a reaction against the strategies adopted by British empire stirred a feeling of revolt among the colonized. The antecedents of postcolonialism were evident in the crusades which initiated the process of decolonization. "The term postcolonialism is also sometimes used to refer to the struggles of indigenous peoples living in many parts of the world" (Iverson, web). The very idea of being colonized gave impetus to the liberation movements happening at different places. Colonialism had racial undertones which implies control that people of one race exerted over the 'other' in the name of superiority of whites. The non- whites were considered inferior in every respect. Colonialism exerted a detrimental impact on the physical as well as mental wellbeing of the 'orientals' leaving them broken, shattered, and displaced with a fluid and hybrid identity. Colonial oppression did not end with the end of British rule in India. Rather it continued in the form of economic and social policies framed and adopted by the dominant section of the society. Many of the international principles and instruments guided the behaviour and response of the so-called superior section of the society which aggravated the internal feuds within the country. Dalit narratives are such which clearly reflects the sad plight of a particular section of the society which is no doubt reminiscent of colonial rule.

Dalit literature is written for and about Dalits and generally by a Dalit. The word is derived from Sanskrit word 'Dalita' meaning 'oppressed'. Though Dalit writings were in print as early as 1914 the term Dalit literature gained currency in the 1950s, the early years after India got independence. Dalit literature as far as its approach is concerned aligned with the political movements fighting for freedom from the clutches of the obnoxious caste system prevalent in India. It was the political movements spearheaded by stalwarts like B.R. Ambedkar and E.V. Ramasami Naicker which contributed to voicing the concerns of the "Depressed Classes". On the literary front it was the collective efforts of the literary activists called 'Dalit Panthers' who brought it to the forefront. They mainly wrote in Marathi. The principles of African- American movement Panther Party seem to have served as an inspiration for the movement which was engineered by Namdeo Dhasal in India. The movement triggered a feeling of revolt among Dalits to challenge the age-old caste based discriminatory practices. Literature became a potent tool in the hands of revolutionaries like Dalit Panthers. The sentiments of hurt, angst, injustice and anger which had been lying suppressed started simmering and were evident in the life writings of dalit authors. Dalit literature forms a significant portion of traditional literature now but the term *dalit* used in conjunction with literature makes it a separate entity. (Singh and Jain, web). The word 'Dalit'

becomes the base on which the superstructure of Dalit literature thrives. It is the consciousness entrenched in the word 'dalit' that gets oppressed and 'depressed' classes to embrace it when it comes to defining their identity. (Singh and Jain, web). The word is used as a synonym for the scheduled castes and tribes but the connotation of the word makes it a broader term that includes anyone or everyone who is segregated economically, socially, politically and above all on the pretext of religion. Jugal Kishore Mishra writes in this context " In the 1970s the Dalit Panthers revived the term and expanded its reference to include scheduled tribes, poor peasants, women and all those being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion. So dalit is not a caste. It is a symbol of change and revolution "(Kishore,2). India is a geographical entity where the people of same ethnicity were divided into different classes. India becomes a microcosm of the world which is divided into two halves that is the 'oppressors' and the 'oppressed'. India has had a rich cultural heritage and background but the *varna system* practiced since ancient times is a blot on the fair name of this democratic republic. The word 'dalit' becomes as symbol of awareness and realization which aims at bringing about transformation and revolution. Dalit writers with their narratives challenged the mainstream traditional literature which had monopolized the literary scene. Arjun Dangle defines Dalit literature "Dalit literature is not simply literature. It is associated with the movement to bring about change. It represents the hopes and ambition of a new society and new people."(Dangle, 266)

Dalit literature does not aim at providing aesthetic pleasure. (Limbale,116). The concerns it seeks to address are much larger in scope and much more realistic in nature. Dr. C.B. Bharti writes in this context in his article "The Aesthetics of Dalit Literature": "Dalit writers express their experiences in the most realistic way using their native speech, their languages as well as images come from their observation of nature" (Bharti,10). Dalit literature has wrongly been labeled as literature of revolt only. The key objective of Dalit literature is to present a 'new perspective for the study of India'. Expressing his views on Dalit literature in this context Sharat Chandra Mukti Bodh comments, "a feeling of rebellion is invariably accompanied by an extreme psychological commitment as dalit sensibility seeks to bring about compatible changes in the social consciousness, it is rebellious as well as fundamentally optimistic and revolutionary" (Bodh quoted by Dangle, 267).

Dalit literature becomes a voice of dissent and revolt against social injustice prevalent in India. It becomes an instrument / mode through which individual and collective suffering is depicted. It envisions a possibility of creating a caste-based discrimination free society.

In today's scenario when India boasts of a democratic republic status, caste system is still widely practiced despite the strong resistance in the past few decades. Ideology based on theological assumptions can have a detrimental impact on the social, economic and political structure of the society. In a caste based hierarchical structure of society the lower strata become the most vulnerable section whose image is constructed through the eyes of the perceiver. The condition of Dalits has not improved much after the independence. In the colonial India they were subjected to. The possession and control of the resources concentrated in the hands of the powerful forced the dispossessed and the unfortunates to live a miserable life. The prevailing political scenario also contributed to and exacerbated the unequal distribution of the resources. It is ironical that ideology promulgated by the powerful becomes the nation's ideology thus disregarding the eliminating the interests of the sections bordering on periphery. Dalits have been in the lowest position in the hierarchical structure of the society. The marginalized section remaining on the periphery has never been allowed to step into the centre which is the domain of the privileged. Though after some reformation movements many dalits have access to resources and right to representation in different fields, the question of untouchability still dominates. It has not mitigated the impact of physical and mental trauma. The coercive practices manifest anti-Dalit sentiment and anti-Dalit policies are framed to refrain them from becoming a part of the universal cultural and religious ceremonies. They still retain the status of being social outcast. They still retain the status of being social outcast. In the rural areas, the age-old tradition and customs inform the behaviour of the individuals who harbor grudges against them. The euphoria of power, the feeling of superiority reject any attempts at equality with the master and retaliated with vindictive measures.

Dalits who “constitute about 15% percent of the population or 150 million people” (Encyclopedia Britannica,135) have been effaced from the cultural and social history. In the mainstream literature if the presence has to be shown they are depicted as mute witnesses to the shaping of their own destiny. They are treated as the surplus section of the society which can be done away with at any moment without harming the socio-economic structure of the society.

Dalit literature especially through the life narratives seeks to rewrite its cultural and social history by questioning and challenging the hegemonic ideology and the framework of traditional literature. As a social document its role becomes all the more important as it aims to reconstruct the image of a dalit from a dalit perspective. Dalit consciousness gives an impetus to 'writing resistance'. The rebellion that has been a perennial feature of dalit writing seeks to bring a radical change in the socio economic and political intricacies of the society and the status of Dalits and ensure their visibility in public domain.

Dalit life narratives invoke a world which is torn apart by prejudice and hatred. In an autobiography the whole focus of the author is to define self but dalit autobiographies defy this traditional norm. Dalit author through their life narratives question and challenge the authority of the dominant classes and attempt to subvert the societal, cultural, and epistemological norms and the ideology espoused by the so-called upper classes. Dalit literature irrespective of genre it is written in a woeful account of the human exploitation the common thread that binds all these narrative to one another is the 'embedded consciousness' (Singh and Jain, web) of being a 'dalit' and the experiences that follow. The unpleasant experience and the subsequent agony form an indispensable part of the entire corpus of dalit literature. Shankar Rao Kharat's *Corpse in the Well* is a distressing account of his lived experiences. The division of work amongst the members of a society is a key to its effective functioning. But in a caste-ridden society like India assigning of the menial and the most toiling tasks to a particular section and thereby segregating them on the basis of it presents the vilest picture of a system. Such malpractices formed the core of dalit literature. It aims to promote the interest of the privileged section of the society in which Dalits hold no place of any significance. Narrator's father Anna being a Mahar along with a Rimoshi is asked to guard a dead body floating in the village well. He refuses to eat anything until the body is disposed off. While guarding the dead body he and Rimoshi make all the arrangements for the officer and his horse he is supposed to be riding. The fear of rank looms large in a dalit's life. Such is the plight of a mahar that he becomes subservient to their animals too. The hegemonic forces operational at various levels in the society always target the powerless. It is clearly discernible in the ways Mahars are treated in the society. If explored the basic reasons behind this kind of inhuman treatment and exploitation is lack of knowledge and power on the oppressed's part. Ignorance becomes the root cause of all evil, suffering, and oppression. Knowledge is a like a lighthouse which guides one in foggy weather and one steers clear of

all the odds. Knowledge equips one to put up a fight against injustice. Here it becomes quite apt to mention what Foucault says in the context of power and knowledge:

"Power and knowledge directly imply one another, that there is no power relation without the correlative constituency of a field of knowledge, or any knowledge that does not pre-suppose and constitute at the same time power relations (Foucault ,1977).

Anna was asked to jump into the well and take the dead body out. Anna mustered up courage to say 'no'. It infuriated the officer who said, "You lump of dirt! Are you going to jump or do I have to whip you?" (Kharat, 3). Anna did not utter anything. The silencing of destitute is what the oppressor gives power over the oppressed. Whenever there is protest from dalit quarters insults are hurled at them in order to crush any visible signs of self-esteem and it initiates the process of their being turned into subjects.

"Seeing that the head constable was enraged, he did not open his mouth. The constable and the village chief started bombarding Anna with threats and curses... In those days the oppressive power and prestige of the head constable were tremendous. Against this power a Mahar was a mere wisp of straw" (Kharat,3).

There was a snake in the well. Anna had no other option but to go down into the well and perform his duty. The question of security is rendered irrelevant here. All this leaves an indelible mark on the innocent mind. Not realizing the intricacies of defiled social set up the narrator ruminates:

"Whose dead body is this anyway? Whose well? Why should my father have to be cursed and threatened because of them. This was rank injustice to my father, .. Why do Mahansdo this kind of work. (Kharat,3-4)

The narrative concludes on an optimistic note that education/knowledge is the only way to counter injustice in any of its form.

Son Eat your Fill an extract from life narrative *Baluta* by Dagdu Murti Pawar throws ample light on the status of a dalit woman who is doubly marginalized in the society. The plight of a dalit woman is far worse than that of a man. Though the non-observance of the practice of doing 'purdah' affords some freedom to dalit woman she was at the same time exposed to the fury of storm blowing in the internal as well as external world.

"Some women washed the clothes of the prostitutes in the nearby brothels. Some would cook *bajribakhris* and *barbaat* for the whores who were bored with eating *Kheema* and bread. On occasional quarrelsome brothel customer would demand one of these women. At such a time they would with difficulty guard their honour, fragile as glass and escape him." (Pawar,8)

Dalit woman becomes a victim not only a society but her own household too. The living conditions of these people are 'wretched'. Their dwellings in metropolitan city like Mumbai are no better than the pigeon holes. Their primary occupation is garbage collection. Ignorance lies at the roots of oppression. Their woeful tale begins with ignorance and ends at it. Aji, the narrator's grandmother worked in the dog's dispensary. There have been numerous reasons behind their mobility from rural to urban. Aji also has her own. It was Aji's bitter experiences at her native village which resulted in displacement and the change of geographical location for her Aji's recounting of the painful incident arouses in the reader a sense of helplessness and disgust for the system and the people who have degenerated into soulless masses.

"Once the Patilsent me to cry out proclamation in the village. It was the Holi season ...He stood in my way and said catch hold of this Mahar Woman. Tie her up in the square. Has she gone mad? ...I couldn't sleep all night. I thought hard. I didn't want to stay at that place. I took my sons and come to Bombay. (Pawar,11-12)

Even the new place did not offer any respite to any migrants. People of upper classes treated them like dirt. They can't bear the idea of a physical contact with them. Even the shadow of a dalit would invite frowns from them. It is the repetitive encounter with the humiliation that gets imprinted on the minds of these people thereby lowering their self-esteem fits them into the mould of subjecthood. For all the negativity that surrounded Aji's life she did not lose the inherent goodness of which a woman is, in the real senses, an epitome.

'*We are kings!*' is another extract from '*Baluta*' which while eulogizing the 'Mahardom' of the Mahar as delves deeper into the concept of structural inequality of which Mahars have been victims for centuries. The narrative highlights that despite having a glorious tradition of unparalleled loyalty and honesty they are treated like dirt. They are forced to indulge in perpetual drudgery and still accused of being parasites. The Mahars are

growing fat on our labour! (Pawar,16) The privileged leaves no opportunity to exploit the disempowered. An old woman forgets to take the receipt after paying the 'patti'. The Brahmin clerk who has no humanity left in him remains silent when she is tried for embezzlement. "He maintains a complete blank about what has happened." (Pawar,16) The old woman makes piteous laments and invokes the village goddess. But no one has mercy on her. She is handcuffed and brought to the taluka town. The crime of embezzling the village 'patti' is established in the court. The clerk washes his hands off this affair and goes scot-free. She serves a two or three-month sentence and returns.

The confluence of unequal relations in terms of decisions, roles, occupations, rights and opportunities widens the gulf between the oppressor and the oppressed. The narrative problematizes the issues concerning the conflicts between the privileged and the destitutes. Like upper castes lower castes were also divided on some issues. Chamars never sided with Mahars in their fight against injustice. "The Chamars never drank from our well. They would have lost caste by doing so. The women of Chamar families used to sit for hour after hour by the Maratha's well to beg a potful of water (Pawar,18).

The narrative also hints at the revolutionary ideas that were gaining ground in the Mahar quarters. Once a Mahar and Woman's shadow falls on the idol the god *Maruti* the whole village is up in arms against Mahars. The villagers leave no stone unturned to make Mahars lives hellish. The closing of the road for Mahars gets them to unite and raise their voice in protest. The Mahars, though on the receiving end, choose to put up a fight rather than being the passive victims of the fate. It is this sense of consciousness that instills a sense of revolt to counter injustice. The narrative offers a sharp, contrast to Bama's karukku when a Christian 'Mamlatadar' a former Mahar becomes the driving force of the narrative "Once a Mahar became a Christian, he no longer polluted a village. And if the Christian was an official, there was no question about it all. The whole village was alert to serve him. (Pawar,18-19). The narrative depicts how 'Dalit Chetna' plays a crucial role in claiming their lights and equality by decentering the supremacy of feudalism.

The story of My Sanskrit an extract from *Antasphot* by Kumud Pawde is another thought-provoking narrative that gets the reader to question the discourse of Human rights and knowledge. The right to education is not a privilege. It has been recognized as a human and constitutional rights. The story becomes an agonizing tale of colossal injustice perpetrated by the upper castes on the underprivileged. The narrative though not large in

dimensions takes the form of a bildungsroman. It becomes a poignant narration of challenges and hurdles literally thrown in the way to achieving the desired goal. The goal of studying 'Sanskrit' by a dalit, however unconventional it may appear becomes the eye sore to the so-called brand ambassadors of the mainstream culture. Sanskrit language which is considered a 'Dev Bhasha' has been the monopoly of the 'Brahmins'.

The narrative beautifully captures the inspiring and at the same time heart breaking journey of a girl who aspires to be a professor in 'Sanskrit'. The euphoric feeling that comes after being praised is something the narrator was not accustomed to, and it always led to awkward situations and encounters. Mixed reactions of people further added to her discomfiture. Actually, the mere idea of a dalit studying 'Sanskrit' was revolting to the traditional/orthodox mind. People of upper caste in whose opinion it was a heresy always looked with suspicion "that a woman from that is lowest of the low should learn Sanskrit and not only that also teach it – is a dreadful anomaly to a traditional mind." (Pawde,26). The narrative paints a very dismal picture of the academic world. Her encounter with some people leaves her feeling aghast.

The academic world which should be fountain head of learning and enlightenment becomes the storehouse of corruption and moral transgression. The scholars who are known for their academic excellence join the illiterates in their march to express anti-dalit sentiments. After completing her studies her expectations increased. "A high paid job would come to me on a platter from the government. For I must have been the first woman from a scheduled caste to pass with distinction in Sanskrit." (Pawde,33). All her hopes were dashed to ground.

The narrative highlights the narrow mindset and attitude of civilians, officials and academics that abets not rejects the anomalies prevalent in social, economic and academic world. It is not until her marriage to an upper caste Hindu and the adopting his surname that she succeeds in realizing the dream despite putting up a fight against the corrupt system.

Dalits belong to that unfortunate section of the society which has been rendered most vulnerable due to their caste affiliations. Every single human being living on this planet is entitled to have certain inalienable rights. But the norms of the Indian society are constructed in order to flout and undermine the universal tenets of humanism. Bifurcation of the society in the name of caste and colour and ignoring the plight of the deprived and their exclusion

from the mainstream culture pose certain question which need to be addressed. Humanity which should be the guiding principle in their approach towards society at large is at stake when the dignity of a human being is shredded to the pieces. The entire structure of the society is shaken to the foundation when a human being loses his life at the sacrificial altar of the orthodoxies / rituals and customs. The rigid and inflexible caste system of the society leaves no place for the blossoming of a human heart. The baseless superstitions and rituals guide the destiny of the people towards an ever-widening rift created by the misleading mental set-up of the individual. The country which should be reveling in its diversity falls prey to the narrow constraints of the prejudices of baseless kind.

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