

Origin of Dalit Literature: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract—*The ancient classics and the religious literature of hindus have identified four major varnas which are further subdivided into many subcastes. The lowest strata in this hierarchy is that of the untouchables which in modern linguistic terminology is known as 'Dalits'. The origin of this word can be traced back from the Sanskrit word Dalitita' which means oppressed as far as the social advantages are concerned.*

This paper focuses on the fact that dalits did not have their own culutre, traditions, rites, music, knowledge of different skills etc. This is in contrast to the basic assumptions of the upper Hindu castes that dalits have no cultural institutions. Much of the literature does not reflect the traditions and culture of dalits. It focused only on the oppression faced by this lower strata by the privileged ones. Here I would like to present my views on the basis of the information and facts from works such as Mulkh Raj Anand's 'Untouchable'.

Keywords: Dalits, Varnas, Subaltern Literature, Dalit Literature, Indian Writing in English, Vaishyas, Shudras.

1. INTRODUCTION: ETYMOLOGICAL ORIGIN OF THE WORD DALIT

The lowest strata in the hierarchy of Indian caste system is that of the untouchables 'Dalits'. The term Dalit has its roots in Sanskrit where 'dal' means to split, crack, open. This term has come to mean things or persons who are split, broken or torn. By co-incidence, there is in Hebrew a root, dal, meaning low, weak, poor. In Bible, different forms of this term have been used to describe people who have been reduced to nothingness or helplessness. The present usage of the term Dalit goes back to the nineteenth century, when a Marathi social reformer and revolutionary, Mahatma Jyotirao Phule used it to describe the outcastes and untouchables as the oppressed and the broken victims of our caste-ridden society.

In fact, the first systematic exploration of anti-caste ideas were traced in Buddhist works. Later the Bhakti Movement poetry of the fourteenth century attempted mention of the castes and the outcastes. Dalit literature, in the modern era, received its first impetus with the advent of leaders like Mahatma Phule and B.R. Ambedkar who projected the dalit conditions powerfully. The Dalits are called by different names in different parts of the country. These names were given by the caste people as expressions of contempt. They include Dasa, Dasya, Raksasa, Asura, Avarna, Nisada,

Panchama, Chandala, Harijan, Untouchable. Each of these names has a history and a background. By the British, the Dalits were named 'the depressed classes' and 'the scheduled castes' in the scheduled caste Act of India in 1935. Mahatma Gandhi named them 'Harijans' which means 'children of God'. But this name was not welcomed by the Dalits because it did not adequately describe their condition.

Exploitation or oppression of weaker by stronger is as old as mankind itself. The Indian history has been a vibrant record of conflict and dialectic between two opposite forces like exploiters and exploited, colonizers and colonized, powerful and powerless. Dalits have always revolted against the class people commonly called as savarna. Despite the fact the untouchability was abolished under India's constitution in 1950s-the imposition of social disabilities on persons by reason of their birth in certain castes-remains very much a part of rural India. Talking in Indian pretext, religion lies in the society. In the hierarchy, the lowest caste people are regarded as dalits. They are humiliated, exploited, discriminated and marginalized in every sphere of life. Untouchables may not cross the line dividing their part of the village from the occupied by higher castes. They may not use the same wells, visit the same temples, drink from the same cups in tea stalls, or lay claim to the land that is legally theirs.

An individual needs to be recognized, respected and identified with his group or community. Not respecting an individual's community – its peculiarity and its values – means not respecting the individual as well. For instance, not recognizing a community's culture and difference from that of other communities translates into not recognizing the individual's particular identity and his cultural needs as well. Cultural recognition is a central concern to contemporary political theory. After the end of the cold war, culturalism and identity politics emerged as two important areas. Issues of religious and ethnic identity have come to the forefront, pushing back economic and other social issues. Here again, in the case of Dalits, they do not form a distinct cultural community, but a 'community' with an identity that is an imposition; rather than a choice.

Thus, the issue of 'Recognition' in political theory seriously challenges the accepted notions of equality, justice, cultural and other important values. In case of Dalits, the value

of Recognition further complicates the issue. Here 'cultural context' does not provide due recognition to them. It was 'misrecognition' which they actually experienced.

2. POST-COLONIAL TEXTS

Postcolonial literature often addresses the problems and consequences of the decolonization of a country, especially questions relating to the political and cultural independence of formerly subjugated people, and themes such as racialism and colonialism. It is the literature of the countries that were colonized, mainly by European countries. Post-colonial literary texts represent a particular culture in which a particular text is produced. As time passes by, this text is eventually deteriorated and people turn to new modes of life which are influenced by industrial revolution and science. The colonial texts have an urge to represent or conceptualize colonialism and its effects and to re-establish the culture of the natives. This is cultural determinism. The early stage post-colonial texts have foregrounded the differences in perception between the colonizer and the colonized. Post-colonialism in literature includes the study of theory and literature as it relates to the colonizer-colonized experience.

In many works of literature, specifically those coming out of Africa, the middle-east, and the Indian subcontinent, we meet characters who are struggling with their identities in the wake of colonization, or the establishment of colonies in another nation. For example, the British had a colonial presence in India from the 1700s until India gained its independence in 1947. So the characters in Indian novels must deal with the economic, political and emotional effects that the Britishers brought and left behind. This is true for literature that comes out of any colonized nation.

3. THE SUBALTERN LITERATURE

Dalit literature is actually a form of the subaltern literature which stands for the writings on Dalits from an insider perspective and an outsider perspective too. As a postcolonial nativist movement, Dalit literature voices the concerns of various subaltern castes and communities in India, oppressed and marginalized for centuries within the Hindu social framework. India is a country which has a composite culture and multiple diversities in cultural and traditional values. The literature of this country represents the hybridization and the hybrid identities which have given a uniqueness to the literature as "Subalternism". Here the writers tried to portray the differences between the oppressed and the oppressor in their works and to re-establish or regain their identity through their literary texts.

The literature of this kind endeavours to portray the oppressed who want to relieve themselves from the tyrannical clutches of the oppressor. In the last two decades of the 20th century, subaltern Studies, postcolonial theory and criticism gained momentum, especially, as a corollary to globalization in the Third World countries. 'Subaltern' is a term denoting a

subordinate or inferior position. So the subaltern literature is seen as protest literature. As a means of constructing a greater historical picture of society, the subaltern's story is a revealing examination of society; the perspective of the subaltern man and woman, the most powerless people who live within colonial confines.

The British have colonized the people and have subjugated them. They have empowered everybody irrespective of the social class that were created by the Aryans: Brahmins, kshatriyas, vaishyas and shudras. And the literature produced during that period has portrayed this subaltern status of the Indian race. Mulkhraj Anand's 'Two Leaves and a Bud' is one of the finest examples of this kind of writing. It brings out the evil effects of imperialism, capitalist economy and exploitation of helpless labourers.

Peeping into the history of pre-colonial India gives the same image where the emperors, kings and queens did the same thing to their subjects. The lower castes suffered at the hands of the upper castes. Anand's 'Untouchable' proves this fact. Infact, the colonial rule paved way for the education of the women folk and the rise of many men and women reformers in India.

Non-dalit writers also contributed to Dalit Literature and a significant novel produced by a non-dalit conformist is Mulkh Raj Anand's 'Untouchable' which portrays the life of a sweeper boy, Bakha. It is an eloquent testimony of dalit life. Untouchable is an impassioned plea for social justice and equality. Various aspects of the evil effects of untouchability have been exposed in this novel. It also talks about conversion to Christianity. The protagonist Bakha, in a moment of frustration and anger against the social structure thinks, "Yessuh Messih must be good." (Anand, Untouchable 130). The suffering of the lower caste people presented in the novel purgates the mind of the readers. Anand has very vividly described the individual feeling of despair which Bakha undergoes when he is not able to fulfill his passion of leading a life like an Englishman. Very often we witness Bakha's repeated attempts to materialize his dreams to lead an Anglo-Indian life getting shattered. He tried to copy the white sahibs in everything right from their clothing to their behavioral patterns as he felt that copying the whites made one a sahib too. By creating such an atmosphere in this novel Anand gives a psychological perspective on the atrocities of caste discrimination. There is no representation of the dalit culture.

Bakha's survival does not rely much on his strength as an individual, but on the action of the other individuals of higher caste standing. Charat Singh determines the survival of Bakha depending on the degree of pity he would dispense at any particular moment. In the opening pages of the novel the reader identifies himself with Bakha's search for an identity. He did not want to accept his identity tagged to him at birth as the son of a sweeper. Strong and able-bodied, he is fascinated by the life and ways of India's English colonizers. He wanted to be like the Tommies whom he saw everywhere in the

village. He attempts to adopt the fashion of the Tommies, becoming possessed with an overwhelming desire to live their life. His position as an untouchable has resulted in high levels of self-deprecation and depression. His assertion of identity fails to produce the desired results. Instead, Bakha looks silly and becomes a mere amusement.

Writers like Ananda only can portray the character of Bakha and expose his existential crisis and alienation from the society, his fellow-men and family too. The importance Anand places on Bakha's quest for identity leaves the readers questioning the viability of Bakha as a most appropriate figure to challenge the abuses of untouchability. The ending of the novel stops short of adequately answering the basic question welling up from the discourse of the novel – how to alleviate the oppression of the untouchables. Anand chooses to answer this question vis-à-vis the three choices presented to the untouchable class. Bakha's choices are – conversion to Christianity, the rhetoric of Gandhianism, the flush system. However all the three options fail to prove adequate as they remove the option for untouchables to take action against their own oppression.

Anand in his novel attempts to indicate a change in the society which is polluted by fragmentation among its members. But the society is intensely diseased by internal conflicts and strains. Bakha is a wandering figure amongst the flowing flux of oppression. He is disenchanted by the confines that the class system has imposed on him and attempts to appropriate himself amongst the ruling English class. This produces a state of double-alienation. As a result, he is rejected both, from his own culture as well as the other. Therefore, Bakha exists on the peripheral lines of both worlds but belonging to none in the true sense. Bakha's life is full of alienation that results in identity crisis. His alienation occurs in every stratum of his life.

Alienation is the basic form of rootlessness. It is a condition in social relationships reflected by a low degree of integration and high degree of distance or isolation between individuals, or between an individual and a group of people in a community. Untouchability reduces a man of the lower strata of society to nothingness. As Bakha is an untouchable, he is a forbidden entity, not a human being. He can touch nobody except the people of his own community. Thus severe lack of belongingness occurs in Bakha. He feels dispossessed and dislocated wherever he goes. So he has developed a split personality because of a big gap between the subaltern ideology and the mainstream ideology.

Bakha is not dull at speculating over the incidents happening around him. He is fully conscious that he belongs to a lower strata of Indian society which gives no recognition to the position he has. He is also able to comprehend the fact that Sahibs and Muhammadans have no objection in touching

these people. The problem lies with the the high-caste Hindus. So problem is not inside not outside. Atleast Bakha is able to discover this fact. He feels that this is a social lesion that would grow for long and ultimately would have no cure. Moreover, the state of alienation being suffered by the Dalits should be erased and deleted from the society as a duty of the high-castes on humanitarian grounds. The existence of an alienated man is no existence. Bakha has been suffering with this alienation throughout his life which shatters him within. In this novel, Bakha is a universal figure to show the oppression, injustice, humiliation to the whole community of the outcastes in India. The anguish and humiliation being faced by him are not his alone, but of the whole outcastes and underdogs.

4. CONCLUSION

Dalit literature has acquired a prominent position in Indian English literature today having carved an important niche for itself as the most powerful form of literary expression. It focuses on writings that includes dalit characters, descriptions of their living conditions and experiences. The process of developing of Dalit Literature into a powerful tool that contests the claims of the upper caste hindu society is in progress. Historicizing the Dalit literature is actually self-actualization and self articulation.

Dalit writings are preparing a strong rebellion against the upper-caste presumptions towards the Dalits with a subtle motive of enjoying privileges in society. They are breaking their age old silences and trying to sensitize the society through their writings. Now the Dalit writings have become an all-India phenomenon. These writings reformulate the caste question and reassess the significance of colonialism and of missionary activity. It resists the reduction of caste to class or to non-Brahminism and vividly describes and analyzes the contemporary workings of caste-power.

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