

Marginalized Voices to the Mainstream: A Study of Selected Dalit poems

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Subalternity/Marginality refers to the unequal power equations that stratifies the society into a pyramidal structure of binary poles of opposite groups. “In post-colonial theory, the term ‘subaltern’ describes the lower classes and the social groups who are at the margins of a society – a subaltern is a person rendered without human agency, by his or her social status”(Young 32). This unjust system of classification created a great, unbridgeable divide between the privileged and the deprived. The apex of power retained the limited but the powerful groups became the centre of authority. The powerless multitudes were pushed to the periphery of the lowest levels of the social ladder. The male, the rich, the caste superiors, the colonial masters and the racial whites thus occupied the covetable space of power and authority, while the woman, the poor, the untouchables, the colonized natives and the coloured races were marginalized.

Recently in India the term ‘subaltern’ is generally used synonymously with the term ‘Dalit, especially focusing their attention on the oppressive structures of caste in the Indian context, which divided people as superiors and inferiors, touchables and untouchables or upper castes and lower castes. “The subordination and subjection that marks the life of Dalits in India bring them into the contours of a particularly contextual assembly of subalternity”(Guha 7). The term subaltern has added significance in India, as India was a subaltern as a British colony and also the people are subjected to the subordination based on class, caste and gender. Thus the extent of hopelessness is compounded by the fact that they were the doubly dispossessed and marginalized. In India the term ‘Dalit’ is widely used in the academic circles than the word ‘Subaltern’ and it signifies the oppressed sections of the society, who are subjugated by the ruling class.

Dalit Literature means writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness. Dalit consciousness is the revolutionary mentality connected with struggle. Ambedkarite thought is the inspiration for this consciousness. Dalit literature is demarcated as unique because of this consciousness. Like the pulsating, robust and yet, angst-driven African-American literature in the US, Dalit writing was characterised by a new level of subaltern pride, militancy, fiery strength, dissent and search for lost identity and above all, the use of pen as weapon.

Dalit literature is characterized by the authenticity of experience and the agonies of life. Therefore, the language of the oppressed is lively and illuminating. Poetry born out of

experience(anubhava), and not speculation(anumana) personifies hunger, embodies pain, loss of basic human rights and dignity. Always prominent in their writings is the idea that certain notions have to be revolted against, some values have to be rejected, and some areas of life have to be strengthened and built upon. Dalit writers write out of social responsibility. Their writing expresses the emotion and commitment of an activist. That society may change and understand its problems – their writings articulate this impatience with intensity. Dalit writers are activist-artists who write while engaged in movements. They regard their literature as a movement.

There is a strong school of Dalit writers who firmly believe that only writings by born Dalits must qualify as Dalit literature. Their argument is that only ash knows the experience of burning. This means that Dalits know the experience of burning- burning in the fire of sorrows, hatred, disrespect, inequality and untouchability. Only Dalits can express their woes in an authentic manner, but not others, who are mere observers. This difference in experience between the Dalits and non-dalits marks the difference between the writings of Dalits and non-dalit writers. The fire that we can see in the writings of a Dalit is absent in the writings of a non-dalit because only a Dalit knows what it is to be a Dalit.

After centuries of silence, when the Dalit writers felt the need to express themselves, they could only turn inward and talk about their own experiences. As far as the modes of expression are concerned, poetry is the most common and powerful mode.

Primarily Dalit writings sought to bring out the trauma and suffocation experienced by the untouchables in the hands of the so called superiors.

*If I was a tree
the bird wouldn't ask me
before it built its nest
what caste I am
When sunlight embraced me
my shadow wouldn't feel defiled (Bagul 23).*

The horrendous state of the untouchables becomes all the more grim when we note what it has done to their psychological state. It has been deeply impaired through the mishmash of a sense of imposed shame. The strength of mind of the untouchables has been battered and mortified, and their self confidence has been deeply eroded. The deep inner pain in the face of poverty, destitution and the humiliation they suffer is reflected in the following lines: “God, make me a beast or a bird but not a Mahar (untouchable) at all”(Bhansode12).

There are a number of questions burning in the minds of the Dalit writers. If we all are the children of the same God, then why are we subject to discrimination on the basis of some man-made rules?

Cane is crooked, but its juice is not crooked,

*Why be fooled by outward appearance?
The bow is crooked but the arrow is not crooked,
Why be fooled by outward appearance?
The river is twisting but its water is not crooked,
Why be fooled by outward appearance?
Chokha is ugly, but his feelings aren't ugly,
Why be fooled by outward appearance? (Chokkamela 52).*

Arjun Dangle gives a harrowing picture of their wretchedness in the poem entitled *Revolution*:

*We fought with crows
Never even giving them the snot from our/ noses
As we dragged out the Upper Lane's dead
Cattle,
Skinned it neatly
And shared the meat among ourselves,
We warred with jackals- dogs-vultures-kites
Because we ate their share.
They used to love us then (12).*

Jyoti Lanjewar speaks of the "inhuman atrocities which carved caves in the rock of the hearts" of the dalits:

*How did we ever get to this place
this land which was never mother to us?
Which never gave us even
the life of cats and dogs?(22).*

The Dalit poets captures the existential dilemma of their very birth in their poems. Unable to bear the brunt of the grave atrocities meted out on these down trodden, they even wonder why they were born or rather to be or not to be born. In the poem '*Why were you born*', Jyoti Lanjewar is bothered about the birth of a dalit in their tragic plight :

*And why were you born
in this ghetto
of rotten lampposts
dust-choked streets
and stumps of trees
with elephantiasis*

why were you born? (12).

In 'To Be or Not To be', L.S.Rokade laments:

*Sorry, mother, but truth to tell
I must confess I wondered
Should I be born
Should I be born into this land? (2).*

The lower castes are totally confused as to what to think? What to say? what to do? Arjun Kamble raises a very vital question: "Now I ask you/Which Language Should I Speak?"(54)

In a country where they are segregated as untouchables, as even their shadows will defile others, they are writhing in anguish. The protest in his mind takes the form of a question. Baburao Bagul in *You Have Made the Mistake* rages:

*What's an untouchable like? What does he look like?
Does he look like the very image of leprosy?
Or like the prophet's enemy?
Does he look like a heretic, a sinner, a profligate, or an atheist?(70).*

The central purpose of Dalit poetry is to enable the development of a new consciousness and identity among Dalits. Dalit poets incite their fellow beings to unshackle themselves and to gather the courage to seek a better treatment from the society. They are now not going to rely upon this discourse of pity but to speak vehemently. This dire need to pen down one's own experiences into heart rending words has started shaking the inner most layers of human conscience resulting into a revolution.

Chodyakkadalaasu (Question Paper) raises some poignant questions which explicitly aims at the poverty-stricken life of the Dalits. The little boy in the poem asks a series of questions which torments him:

*Why are there no
doors to the house that
birds may
knock upon
or wind push open
Why is the first page
of the first lesson missing?
Why is the sky visible
through the corner of the slate? (No Alphabet 582).*

The excruciating angst of the miserable plight of the dalits is again evident in these lines:

*Why are the button-less clothes
and the bottom-torn knickers not
cut to my size?
Why did fingers crinkle in shame
when they dipped into the pocket?(582).*

By raising these questions from a child's point of view, Renukumar not only draws our attention to the pitiable lives led by the Dalits, but also to the hegemonic forces that keep the Dalits in perpetual exploitation and subjugation. Even though the mother in the poem consoled her son that he will get answers to all these questions when he grows up, the Dalits of today are groping in darkness for answers to such and a whole lot of similar questions which have been burning in their minds for ages and ages. The poems and songs sung by these Dalit poets are the answers they have found to retain their identity and dignified existence.

Dalit writers have chosen violence as a strategy by presenting it through characters who take to violent means for settling the scores or exercise verbal violence by choosing such expressions that border on obscenity. In poems of some Dalit writers abuses are used to shock the sensibility of the readers. It urges them to search for their own identity and instills in them a feeling of self-respect, self-pride and dignity. Dalit consciousness has made them aware of their identity as human beings. It revolts against the unjust and prevalent caste-system and desires to establish a new social order free from caste distinctions and based on the values of liberty, equality and fraternity. The presence of the element of this consciousness in Dalit literature results in a realistic portrayal of Dalit pain and anguish. Dalit consciousness draws a line between Dalit literature and mainstream literature. It also draws a distinction between works by Dalit writers and non-dalit writers on Dalit issues. It is increasingly becoming a tool to measure the dalitness of a Dalit work.

Direct protest is the message of much Dalit literature. In one of his poems, "*What would you do?*" Om Prakash Valmiki not only questions but also cross-examines the oppressors in Indian society,

*What would you do?
If you
Have to swim against the current
To open the doors of pain*

*And to battle with hunger
If you
Are denied in your own land
Made slave labour
Stripped of your rights
The pages of your glorious history
Torn to shreds
And thrown away
What would you do? (9-10.)*

The lies in Hindu mythology which had perpetrated the caste system have always been a topic of constant attention in their writings.

*You said
The shudra is born from the feet of
Brahma
And the Brahmin from his head
And they did not ask you
Where was Brahma born from? (Valmiki 4-5).*

The writer stands confidently and is so sharp and aggressive so that his words pierce the listener's ears ,

*Listen , supreme man
You listen too, Dronacharya!
We despise you
We spit on your past
And your belief (Singh 5).*

A kaleidoscopic variety of images of darkness and light , rebellion and revolt, and of crushing the existing structure of exploitation pervade dalit literature-

*The sun of self-respect has burst into flames,
Let it burn up caste (Sabnis 183).*

Though it is the poetry of the oppressed, the reverberations of a rebellious soul can be heard “ *In every inch of the rising struggle,/ I stand erect*” (Pawar 116).

Dalit writings as a whole rebels against the assumptions of Hindu ideologies and the passionate rejection of Hindu culture is reflected in this poem

*I reject your culture
I reject your Parmeswar-centred tradition
I reject your religion based literature (Karlekar 83).*

Another significant aspect of Dalit literature is self-criticism or self-protest. It is always easy to protest against our enemies, but it is a very difficult thing to protest against ourselves. They attack inferiority complex among themselves as the attack on complex will help to alleviate their slave-psychology. As a result of this the inferiority complex had disappeared and now their dalitness is a source of confrontation and resistance. In their words one can see the potential of their total entity:

*In the horizon I will erect
the rainbow arch of mankind
I am conscious on my resolve
The worth of the blood of Ekalavya's broken finger
I stand today at the very end
of the twentieth century (Nimbalkal 80).*

The creation of Dalit literature is inevitable until the structure of society changes and as long as exploitation exists. Self-assertion is seen in these lines:

*No! No! No!
A triple rejection
to your economic, social, political ,religious,
moral and cultural pollution.
I am a new sun
Independent, self-luminating,
possessed of a new spirit
I may bend but I won't break (Karlekar 83).*

Shankar Kharat says that what they demand from this world is nothing but their basic rights:

*I do not ask
for the sun and moon from your sky
your farm, your land,*

*your high houses or your mansions
I do not ask for gods or rituals,
castes or sects
Or even for your mother, sisters, daughters.
I ask for
my rights as a man (64).*

The poet continues:

*I want my rights, give me my right (64).
the spirit of revolution is evident in these lines:
I have been silent all these days
listening to the voice of right and wrong
But now I will fan the flames
for human rights (22).*

At the peak of protest, the poet Sharan Kumar Limbale challenges:

*You'll beat me, break me,
loot and burn my habitation
But my friends!
How will you tear down my words
planted like a sun in the east?
I'll uproot the scriptures like railway tracks.
Burn like a city bus your lawless laws
My friends!
My rights are rising like the sun.
Will you deny this sunrise? (64-65).*

The speaker in Yashwant Manohar's poem *I'm Ready for Revolt* is indeed ready to wage a war against injustice and inequality.

*I'm burning with a feeling of revolt
and I call out to you
I will write the poem of revolt on your sword
Today I have become a storm-come with me!
I reach out to you- give me your hand!
I have become the sun, my friend- sing with me!*

*I have become the fire, today I am afire with fire
give voice to the volcano within you! (8).*

The echoes of a rebellious soul can be heard in these lines in *I Have Become a Tide* by J.W.Pawar:

*I'm now the sea; I soar; I surge.
I move out to build your tombs.
The winds, storms, sky, earth.
Now all are mine.
In every inch of the rising struggle
I stand erect (19).*

Another remarkable poem of this period is *Karumadi Nritham* (Dance of Karumadi) by K.K.S.Das which urges the downtrodden to master mind a revolution:

*Blood for blood
For beheading us
For stripping and raping our women
For burning down our cottages
For making us flee
We will destroy your citadels and mansions;
Blood for blood. "We will break your back and bastion;
We will avenge for all this
We will take revenge on you for certain. (Writing in the Dark 28).*

Karumadi is the deity of the Dalits. The black woman is asked to go to the forest, pluck berries and return with the spirit of Kali. "O Black girl/Come along O come along/Come along with the wrath of Kali." (27) He exhorts the black men to muster courage and to equip themselves with swords and arrows to retaliate for the offences meted out on them: "The black ones roar/ We will pay back for sure/We will pay them back." (27). These lines echo what Changampuzha had envisioned years ago in his *Vazhakkula*: "Ithinokke prathikaram cheyyathadangumo pathithare ningal than pinmurakkar? (Oh depressed! For all these, there would be a vendetta/ from your own generations to come} The blacks should break the hearts and fortresses of their enemies and destroy them for ever:

*Let the tormented arms be raised to avenge the wrong
Let the uprooted tongues boil up to become flames
Let the oppressed rise up to pay back the old debts (29).*

The future of Dalit movement in poetry seems to be sharing the concerns and dreams of all the exploited and socially oppressed toiling masses of the world. Their dreamland will be an ideal place where newly born innocent dreams will not have the feelings of born in a graveyard, a place where the poison of discrimination will not exist', and where the poet firmly believes and ideally dreams. In short, Dalit literature expresses the anxiety, desire and pain of centuries of caste struggle, and the creative visions of social justice put forward by the writers of the Dalit movement.

In this connection we are reminded of I.K.Raveendra Raj who in his poem *Karutha Sooryan*, glorifies the black power and beauty and exhorts the dalits to learn a new language for expressing their feelings. Everywhere the white values have tortured and tormented the blacks. So they should learn a new language to sing the songs of freedom. "*We reject your mantras/ Let it be with you/ Your dirge/ We wait for the birth of a new sun.*" (12).

What the Dalits envision for themselves is beyond the comprehension of their tormentors and it may even shock them:

*Ekalavya is chopping of Drona's thumb
With an axe.
With a smile on his face,
Shambooka is killing Rama.
Bali is trampling Vamana
With his small feet to hell.
Manu is piercing his eyes with needles,
Cut his tongue,
Pouring lead in his ears
Is tossing and turning in the cemeteries (Hingonekar 34).*

Dalit literature is the legendary phoenix which is born from the ashes of the anguish, anger of the social system and is an expression of agony suffered by the deprived groups. It is an attempt to establish an independent identity challenging the traditional literary values, ideologies and aesthetics which turned a deaf ear to the angst of the oppressed. Dalit literature is aimed at awakening the slumbering consciousness of the down-trodden for forging their identities, giving voice to the voiceless and word to the wordless and to warn the privileged class to give them their due. This is not the end of the horizon, it is an ever widening horizon where the marginalized and the deprived are very particular about their quest for identity and assertion of individuality.

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