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Dalit Literature in India: Some Features

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Abstract :

Dalit Literature in India or Indian Dalit literature is found in many native languages-Marathi, Tamil, Malayalam, Gujarati, Punjabi, Hindi, etc. The majority of the writers are Dalits themselves. Even some non-Dalits have started contributing to the literature of the oppressed or the exploited. Their intentions are good ; their expressions are authentic; but as far as their experience is concerned, it is purely vicarious. Only Dalits can put down their social and economic problems much better. They have suffered a lot and are suffering at the hands of the upper caste groups even today casually .

But they are all Indians; they are critical of age long existing social hierarchy or the caste-based hierarchy. Dalit writers are in quest of human dignity. They write with a vision and a cause. Dalit literature stands for humanitarianism, linguistic directness and plurality; it is a literary movement for social change; and Dalit panthers are optimistic of social reforms.

We can co-operate with them by changing our hearts and our minds. The situation is far better now. The credit goes to social reformers , Dalit leaders and intellectuals who condemned caste based violence , caste based inequality or discrimination or injustice . They left no stone unturned to bring about a change in the Indian Society .

Even Dalit women are sharing their vision with us and are expressing their experience whatever they have in contemporary society. It is a healthy sign for the country. Some of them have written works of high merit. Since much of the literature is read today in English translation, we should be eager to compromise on the relative loss of the beauty of the original texts. But in the countries ,like India , where there are lots of languages and literatures, translation is more relevant . Here people are natural translators ; they have the innate potential to adapt and adopt; they can mix and match easily .

In the last fifty years or so , Dalit writing has come of age ;but it has a long way to go to fulfil its mission , that is , total transformation in society .It is a tough task but not an impossible one for Herculean Dalits who wish to establish a new fair social and cultural order for the betterment of mankind itself. They dream of a just society , justice for all .

Key words : Humanitarianism, Hierarchy, Panthers, Plurality, Chaturvarna

1. Introduction

Dalit literature is concerned with the emotions and aspirations of the Dalits. It is a particular brand of literature in which a particular community is free to speak its mind in literary works such as poems, short stories, novels, dramas and autobiographies .

2. Lets Enlist Some Salient Characteristics of Dalit Sahitya (Literature)

An expression of anguish and anger;- Dalit writing is an expression of anguish and anger of a community (that is, Dalit community). It protests against social injustice, inequality, cruelty and economic exploitation based on caste and class. Poetry seems to be the dominant mode of Dalit voice or expression. Dalit literature symbolizes humanitarian cause.

3. No Linguistic Frontiers

Writers of this literature defy linguistic frontiers . F.M. Shinde is a non-Dalit Marathi poet. He writes to motivate Dalits to rise above the inferiority complex. N.T. Raj kumar is a Tamil Dalit poet. O.P.Valmiki, a Hindi writer, is well-known for his autobiographical work "Joothan" (1997).Mulk Raj Anand (1905-2004), a major Indian novelist in English, published his first great novel" untouchable" in 1935. Most Dalit writers employ a very direct language to highlight the cause of the fellow Dalits.

4. Motivational Legacy

Dalit literary voice is true to the motivational legacy bequeathed by the great humanitarians like Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890) and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956). They fervently condemned the Indian caste system or the Hindi Chaturvana: Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. They did a lot for the upliftment of the Shudras-lower groups. Untouchability is constitutionally abolished in all forms. Phule founded the Satyashodhak Samaj (that is, society of Truth seekers) in 1873. The purpose of this organization was to protect Dalits from cunning Brahmanas and their biased books .He struck at the root of caste

hegemony. Ambedkar, an untouchable himself, gave the slogan to the Dalit Community of 'Educate-Agitate-Organize.' He is called the Father of the Indian Constitution. He fought all life for the restoration of dignity and self – esteem. He also encouraged inter-caste marriage.

5. Literary Panthers

A group of Dalit writers formed an organization called the Dalit panthers in 1972. They were mostly from Maharashtra. They include Namdeo Dhasal (1949-2014), Raja Dhale (1940-) and others. They use literature as a weapon to bring about social change. They are poets themselves; protest atrocities against the Dalits. Similarly in America we hear of the Black Panthers who fight against racial discrimination.

6. Religions Conversion

A number of prominent Dalits embraced Buddhism or Christianity. B.R. Ambedkar became a Buddhist in 1956. Bama, a Tamil novelist, is herself a Dalit Christian. Religious conversion is not a new phenomenon in the country. But Dalits become Buddhists or Christians out of social and economic compulsions. As far as Buddhism is concerned, it believes in casteless society and is a reaction to the rigidity of the Hindu caste system and unnecessary superstitious irrational rituals; propagates peace, non-violence, fraternity and equality in society and the world. The stigma of being born untouchables remains in society whether they convert to Buddhism Christianity or Islam. Sometimes they lie about their true identity or they feel forced to do so for their very survival.

7. The Emergence of Women Writers

Dalit literature has produced women writers of high quality. Their writing is based on firsthand experience of being Dalits and what it means for them in Indian society. But they are small in number and choose to write in regional languages. Bama (1958-) is remembered today for her Tamil autobiographical novel *Karukku* published in 1992. She describes her poverty and her plight and that of her community in the book. She further informs us of the power, influence and mindset of the upper caste people. Hira Bansode (1939-) a woman Dalit poet, writes in Marathi. Her poetry collections include: *Pournima*, *Phiyad* (1984) and *Phoenix* (2001). She champions the cause of Dalit women and has contributed a lot for the recognition of Dalit Poetry. Through her poem *Bosom Friend*, she points out the hypocrisy of upper caste friends who hate Dalits in their hearts while they pretend to regard them as equals. Sumitra Bhavé's *Pan on Fire* (1988) deals with life stories of eight Dalit women in Marathi.

8. The Uniqueness of Personal Narratives

Dalit personal narratives or Dalits' autobiographies are unique in terms of sincerity, boldness and frankness. It does not matter whether they are recognized or remain unrecognized, rewarded or remain unrewarded. Dalit autobiographers use the literary genre of autobiography to assert their identity in the world of literature and in society. Hazari is perhaps the first Dalit autobiographer; he wrote his life story in English and called it *Untouchable: The Autobiography of an Indian Outcaste* (1951). This book is so unconventional, so realistic in terms of expression and style. Ultimately he turned to Islam - a belief system attaching more importance to brotherhood. The other Dalit autobiographers in English are D P Das, Balwant Singh, D R Jatava, and Shyamlal. But Laxman Mane, Sharan Kumar Limbale, Narendra Jatav, Vasant Moon, etc wrote their narratives in Marathi and they have been translated into English. O P Valmiki's Hindi autobiography is being read in English translation - *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*. His story is very touching; he painfully states some hard facts prevailing in Indian society. In the eyes of the upper caste groups Dalits are virtually worse than dogs and cats; the Dalit community is perhaps the most disadvantaged, the most marginalised social group.

9. Contribution to the Mainstream Literature

Dalit writing in prose and verse is an invaluable contribution to the mainstream literature of the country. Translation of Dalit literary pieces into the major world languages and reading of them and availability of them worldwide ensure or at least offer solutions to the contemporary social, economic or cultural issues. In other words, Dalit literature is of the national and international potential or significance.

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