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Research Article

Dalit Literature: Situating Aesthetics in the Realm of Political Challenge

Dr. Gautam. C.

Assistant Professor, Department of English, PVP First Grade College, Mallathahalli, Bangalore
Corresponding Author: Dr. Gautam. C.

Abstract
Dalit writing, ever since its emergence, it has been met with censure. The major objection and flaw that has been pointed out time and again is that falls woefully short of aesthetics. Dalit literature has largely been inspired by the ideas of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, who, the Dalit writers and critics proclaim, as the 'Father of Dalit Literature' (Dangle xxii). Largely aimed at articulating the hopes of emancipation of group of people, Dalit writers firmly believe that their writing has a purpose and must draw attention to the searing social reality and engage with it in an aggressive manner. Thus their writing has been termed 'political' and 'propagandistic'. The present paper is an attempt to argue that terming the corpus of Dalit writing as 'political' is indeed not only arbitrary but also untenable. The paper suggests that for a proper understanding of Dalit literature it is imperative to foreground its context.
Keywords: Propagandist literature, Dalit literary aesthetics, Realism, Dalit novel.

Though Dalit writing had emerged in the second half of the previous century, it has been remarked that it did not attract internationally a sustained critical attention till as recently as 2015 (Abraham & Misrahi-Barak 1). This is hard to understand since much of Dalit literature in the 1970s was greatly influenced by African American writing. The difficulty arises from the fact that while African American writing travelled from America to India, Dalit literature has not been able to travel anywhere outside India even with the arrival of postcolonial studies. One of the most important cornerstones of postcolonial studies has been the idea of subalternity and yet the lack of interest in the subjugation of Dalit literature is all the more surprising.

However, within India, as a fall-out of most universities offering courses on Dalit literature, a fair amount of criticism had started surfacing indicating a need to redraw the Indian literary landscape. Even a cursory glance at the tenor of critical engagements with Dalit literature shows a strong tendency to view Dalit texts as social, political and economic documents rather than as literatures in their right. Consequentially, these engagements have turned out to be largely exegeses on Dalit *studies* and less of literary studies.

The tendency of the critics is understandable when seen in the light of the fact that Dalit literature cannot be disassociated from the contexts from it which springs and is foregrounded in. Misrahi-Barak, Satyanarayana and Thiara in their introduction to *Dalit Text: Aesthetics and Politics Reimagined* observe that Dalit writing is actuated by a generation of assertive Dalits for whom the humiliation and discrimination was a part of their everyday lived experience (2). This observation is endorsed by Manoranjan Byapari, the well-known Bengali Dalit writer who in an interview has stated that he wrote because he cannot kill and he does not know how else to deal with the anger welling in him against the enemies of the society (Sipra Mukherjee 16). The militancy in the Dalit writers that leads to the creation of what Gail Omvedt in her prefatory note to Poisoned Bread terms the 'Literature of Revolt' (ix) comes from the acquisition of Dalit consciousness, a part of which is to

contest the imposed identities upon them. In fact, the very term "Dalit" connotes a political self-identification that counters imposed identities. The literary works informed by Dalit consciousness that aims at reclaiming autonomy over self-identification provides a new perspective which reconfigures power relations in the society.

The contextual situatedness of Dalit literature, with its explicit accent on the Dalit anguish and struggle for emancipation, indicates that it is in very obvious terms political literature. In this sense, it can be seen as providing a theoretical and structural framework for critical analysis and evaluation, also determine the coordinates of these exercises.

The entrenchment of the Dalit texts in their material contexts undoubtedly furnish the critics with templates, but raise concerns over the literary merit of the texts. As has been pointed out often the Dalit text's conscious predilection to be rooted in the social and political contexts diminishes its literary worth, reducing it to a mere propaganda. Sipra Mukherjee notes that '[a]esthetics has been an area within which Dalit writers have been repeatedly cornered and accused' and their writing 'termed unaesthetic, monotonous, evocative only of the strain of misery' (21).

The objective of the present paper is to make an attempt to investigate briefly the factors that relate to continued socio-cultural subordination and subjugation, and the consciousness of being and writing as Dalits and how it shapes the contours of Dalit writing. Consequently, the paper advances the argument that circumstances of production demand a realignment in the reception. In the opinion of the paper, an exercise like this is critical to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the aesthetics that visits Dalit writing.

The paper would like to suggest that for a Dalit writer who cannot express her/his protest in forceful terms such as 'with fists raised' (Gupta 39), writing remains the only option. It is for this reason that the entire corpus of Dalit writing emanates from lived experience and documents the anger of exclusion and erasure of identity while standing testimony to an experience that is collective. However, there is also an awareness in the Dalit writers that there can be no literature with only Dalit characters for there is no place where only Dalits live as Cho. Dharman, the Tamil Dalit author posits (Azhagarasan and Arul 48). Cho.Dharman's remarks are endorsed by another Dalit writer Des Raj Kali, the author of several short story collections and the Nar-Natak series of novels which includes Praneshwari (2008) and *Shehar vich Sahn honn da Matlab (Meaning of Bull in the Town, 2018).* Kali states that though he has undergone the experience of being a Dalit in socio-cultural and philosophical terms, nothing happens in isolation. He emphatically observes:

> You cannot segregate Dalits, or for that matter any other social category from other societal segments. 'Dalit' is a historical and cultural construct. If you completely isolate them from others, the question of caste discrimination does not arise. Dalits are an integral part of Indian society but they have been systematically downgraded, deprived and incapacitated. […] My literature is conceived from this though and perspective. (Hans 64).

The paper would like to point out that any writing that emerges from this perspective is inevitable engaged in an attempt to wake up a sleeping reader and not just entertain her/him as it is closely related to depiction of social reality and 'is not imaginary or entertainment-oriented' (Dangle xlii). It is also for this reason that Dalit writing predominantly deploys the realist mode for both perception and writing. This need for the realist representational mode conflated with communicating an individual's experience as that of a community may explain Dalit writers' preference for the genre of autobiography, after poetry in the initial stages when they took up prose (1972 – 1978). D.R. Nagaraj notes that since the philosophical bedrock of realism is erected on the principles of rationalism and empiricism, the Dalit writers' need to articulate an anti-caste worldview found the realist mode a handy narrative vehicle in representing their social experiences effectively (224-5).

The preference for penning autobiographies was popular among writers since the form did not restrict itself to the life of Dalit. Owing to the built-in advantages the genre provided them ample latitude, as Arjun Dangle remarks, to delineate 'the social system, communalism, injustice,

exploitation and of the lives of people who had been subjected to these evils (xlii). While the autobiographies accentuated and enriched Marathi literature, in which the autobiographies first started emerging, by the virtue of not downplaying any facts, brought to light the several aspects and features of social system in India that actively promoted socio-economic injustice.

The irony is that it is exactly for these reasons that Dalit literature which views the 'scorching social reality' and responds to it with some amount of aggression and bitterness, is branded 'loud and propagandist' (Dangle xlvii). It is difficult not to notice that Dalit autobiographies in the process of vociferously critiquing reconfigured the field of hierarchized culture and vested interests of the upper castes. By embarking on an egalitarian project that involved 'writing a revolution' (Kumar 60), the Dalit autobiographical narratives unsettled the margins, frameworks and ideologies of the elite class.

The paper would like suggest that Dalit literature was forced to effect a course correction not only in the Indian society but also Indian literature and literary canon since it had, irrespective of the language, either misread or misrepresented the idea of caste and inaccurately depicted Dalits. In this context, D. R Nararaj observes that 'usually anger, pity, and melancholy are the dominant feelings in the literature on Dalits written by non-Dalits' (61). And it was only with the arrival of Dalit writing that fresh perspectives on representation, caste, class, religion and ethnicity began to emerge in the society and literary discourses.

When Dalit writing with its mission to denounce the hegemonic caste practices started appearing on the Indian literary landscape, it elicited two kinds of responses from literary critical establishments that were dominated by upper-caste critics. The first, as mentioned above, termed the writing 'propagandistic' to which Dalit writers, critics and intellectuals countered by asking why a writer whose thinking was oriented towards seeking an egalitarian society called a 'propagandist'? Arjun Dangle forcefully notes that '[a]ll literature for that matter is propagandistic, the difference being that in some cases one insists on the so-called literary values and in others, on values of life' (xlix).

The second kind of response came from critics who empathized with the suffering of the Dalits and highlighted the pain that surfaced in Dalit writing. And, as Raj Kumar aptly points out, these critics in foregrounding pain were misreading the texts or at any cost only engaging with them at the surface level (64). Their superficial reading becomes evident in the suggestions that they offer to redress the problem. They suggest the conferment or extension of material benefits to the Dalit by both the society and state. What these critics failed to understand was that the Dalits through their writing were not demanding for material benefits but to a life of 'dignity, self-respect and the right to be treated as human beings' (Kumar 64).

It can be inferred that the second set of critics' tendency to view 'caste' and 'class' as synonyms leads them to frequently conflate the two. The consequence of such a warped reading comes in their way of seeing the cultural tropes or philosophy embedded in the Dalit lifeworlds (Kumar 65).

Though the criticism leveled against Dalit literature has been convincingly countered by the Dalit critics, it is possible to notice a change coming over Dalit writing. After the initial flush of autobiographies that poured out of the Dalit pens in what Arjun Dangle calls, 'the period of autobiographies' (xli), the Dalit writers are making a foray into genres that demands more than nuanced deployment of the realist representational mode. It can be seen that in the recent times Dalit writers are showing an inclination towards fictional representations of the Dalit life as is evidenced by the appearance of a comparatively increasing number of short stories (e.g.*Ajay Navaria's Unclaimed Terrain* [trans 2013] and Gogu Shymala's *Father may be an Elephant and Mother only a Small Basket, but…[*2012], novels (e.g., Joseph Macwan's Stepchild [Gujarathi, 2004], Sharankumar Limbale's *Hindu- A Novel* [Marathi, 2010] and Meena Kandaswamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* [English, 2014] and plays [e.g., Premanand Gajvee's *The Strength of Our Wrists* [2013]) in comparison to the autobiographies.

An observation like the above may be seen as presumptuous in the absence of extensive studies. But its chief value is as a working hypothesis since it provides a direction and possibility of a new insight with regard to Dalit literary preferences and aesthetics.

Though the Dalit writers appear to be writing more fictional works, their grounding is in social realism. Moreover, it is an indication of the Dalit creativity that has ceaselessly engaged in exploration of and experimenting with literary genres in order to perpetuate the 'dialogical imagination' of human freedom (Kumar 75). It may be recalled that even with the genre of autobiography, the writers ensured that it would not be a mirror image of the upper-caste works by showing the autobiographer as still being best with insecurity at the end of the narrative vis-à-vis the fulfillment espoused by the works of the counter-parts.

As with autobiographies, the Dalit fictional works do not replicate the tone and tenor of similar upper-caste works notwithstanding the fact that they are imaginary. A nuanced social realism permeates the Dalit text conferring on it a uniqueness absent in the fictional writing of the elite caste as D. R. Nagaraj illustrates in his analyses of U. R. Anathamurthy's Samskara (1966) and Devanuru Mahadeva's Kusumabale (1988) – both anti-caste in their philosophical thrust (225). Nagaraj goes on to posit that the difference is not merely indicative of the aesthetics of a narrative, but philosophy and ideology (229).

The shift to fiction writing, though not very pronounced as yet, but still perceptible, may also been attributed to a necessity to overcome the limits imposed by a West-informed model of realism which cannot provide 'full justice to the collective psyche and worldview of the lower classes' (Nagaraj 229). Moreover, as Cho. Dharman, points out, the novel form, when handled skillfully, allows a writer to represent the different dimensions of the upper-caste-Dalit relationship, which though is filled with tension, cannot always be reduced to the question of caste (Azhagarasan and Arul 48).

By the way of illustration, the paper would like to briefly examine the narrative technique that the Punjabi writer Des Raj Kali's novella *Shanti Parav (The Book of Peace,* 2009) employs. The novella stands mid-way between fiction and non-fiction, redefining the narrative norms. It can be noted that the short novel straddles two texts – the mainstream that forms the super text and Dalits occupy the sub text. In fact, the novel has also been called a loose assemblage of over a dozen short stories. A distinguishing stylistic feature of the novel is the layout of the page which contains two narratives seemingly unconnected. Neeti Singh, the translator remarks that 'the stories in the upper text provide us with an experience of the lived dalit reality, the literature in the under text provides us with the reasons that have led to it'.

Kali traces the growth of the Dalit consciousness through the character named Bhagmal Pagal – a Dalit leader who displays an intense awareness of his ancestry and the history of his community. Having listened to the champion of Dalits, Ambedkar in his younger days, Pagal has decided to pursue knowledge and activism. His ideology is interwoven with his personal history while, on the other hand two other characters in the novel, the Comrade and the Professor with their monologues are found to hang in there with their ideologies (Hans 66). The absence of meaningful utterances has led to some critics accusing Kali of turning intellectual discourse into 'rambling monologues' (Hans 66).

However, it is possible to view these 'rambling monologues' as a literary device that hints at 'the tragedy of the marginalized people whose only recourse is to talk to themselves as crazy people' in the absence of any meaningful dialogue between the debating intellectuals and' uneducated sharks', as Kali clarifies (Hans 66).

At first glance, the narrative strategy of the novel using the upper text and under text gives the impression that the characters in the under text are fictional but Kali insists that they are 'not-non-fictional' and that it is a conscious literary device that he adopts to transform the non-fictional to fictional. He insists that there are no fictional characters in the text and that it is 'a ploy, a play with readers' (Hans 66).

Dalit writing has been engaged in depicting the real word, but there is also a growing realization in them to move beyond what appears to be real and true since 'truth' is not unchanging and a given forever. This awareness behooves a Dalit writer to 'penetrate the visible' and 'travel beyond the established nomenclature' in order to make an attempt to 'catch the truth' which is formless (Hans 66).

The paper would also like to note that Kali's Shanti Parav is not the only Dalit novel that explores the possibilities of stretching and extending the limits of realism and while offering the suggestion that reality is conceivable at multiple levels. D. R. Nagaraj in his analysis of Devanuru Mahadeva's *Kusumabale* also shows how the writer resets the framework of realism by deploying elements of folktales. The novel gains its significance by its 'capacity to counterpose the personal and political realms' (228).

By the way of conclusion, it may be noted that the argument that Dalit writing with its heavy leaning towards the political is propagandist and so devoid of aesthetics is farmed in binary terms which views the politics and aesthetics as mutually exclusive. Sharankumar Limbale's comments are pertinent in this context:

> In India, there are tremendous differences in levels and processes of taste. What is tasteful to one may not appear to be so to another. In these circumstances, it will be wrong to insist on fixed standards. Like literature, criticism, too, is apt to change. […] To assert that someone's writing will be called literature only when "our" literary standards can be imposed on it is a sign of cultural dictatorship. (107).

Moreover, even if the Dalit texts cannot be totally alienated from the contexts of their emergence and are purposive, it still does not necessarily diminish or devalue their literary merit. Additionally, there is no reason why politics and aesthetics cannot co-inhabit a text.

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