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Dalit literature: The quest for emancipation

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Abstract

Dalit literature is a body of text produced by writers whose caste background used to be referred to as “Untouchable” or “Scheduled caste”, and whose writing engages with caste, caste discrimination, and Indian life from a Dalit point of view. Dalit literature is one of the most important literary phenomena in post-independence India that is trying to restore dignity to a community that has been wronged for ages. Their struggles relating to their stigmatized identity as “untouchables” finally being acknowledged.

Keywords: Emancipation, dignity, hegemony, empowered, stigmatized

Introduction

India is considered the most stratified or divided of all known societies in human history. The structures of Indian society are based on caste, whereby caste and power go hand in hand. There are two different views concerning the origin of the caste system. One is the historian's view which is generally centered on the Aryan invasion theory and the consequent social oppression and enslavement of the native population, and the other is the brahmnical view of religious theory which sees caste as a result of divine sanctions, with its origin mainly in *Purusha sukta*, a part in *Rig Veda* in which the concept of "*chaturvarna*"(four classes) is introduced. It says the creator Bramha produced the first community (the brahmins) from his mouth, the second (the kshatriyas) from the shoulders, the third (vaishyas) from the thighs and the last (the shudras) from the feet. Dalits were excluded from this four fold varna system of Hinduism and seen as forming a fifth varna also known as *Panchama* and this bottom of the caste gradation is identified as untouchables.

The practice of untouchability seems to have begun during *Pushyamitra sunga's* rule (187 BCE onwards). *Pushyamitra* was a Brahmin and the commander-in- chief of the last Mauryan king *Bruhadatra*, who was a shudra by caste. Pushyamitra is believed to have killed *Bruhadatra* and established a brahmin rule which continued till 800 CE. Fearing that the shudras would organize a revolt against his actions, he asked *Manu*, a Brahmin Pandit of his time, to do him a favour. In order to suppress the potential revolution, Manu codified a number of inhuman and unethical laws against the shudras in the name of religion which was later known as the *Manushutra* or *Manusmriti*. It is with the *Manusmriti* that the full elaboration of the caste hierarchy can be seen and this seems to have been the beginning of Brahminism.

Due to the caste system, more than 250 million Dalits are being constantly and methodically humiliated, neglected and ostracised for centuries. Untouchability is a deeply ingrained consequence of the caste system and is an unacceptable and hurtful practice. It was abolished when the Indian Constitution came into effect in 1950. In spite of its legal abolition, Untouchability continues to be practiced in different forms and degrees in almost all parts of India even today and the term 'Dalit' symbolises this group of people who were earlier known as 'untouchables'. The etymology of the term 'Dalit' can be traced to the root word *dal* in Sanskrit, which means to Crack, split, be broken, down trodden, crushed and destroyed. The term 'Dalit' therefore, is an act of rebellion used by the former untouchables to acquire a new identity, which stands for pride and self respect. It was Jyotiba Phule and B.R Ambedkar, the early anti- caste intellectuals who brought the term 'Dalit' in the public sphere. Later the Dalit Panthers of Maharashtra popularized this term through their writings. The emergence of Dalit consciousness was the main reason for the rise of Dalit movement and Dalit literature.

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Dalit writings can be understood as a voicing of the hopes and aspirations of a group of people who were earlier voiceless under the caste system. For them Literature became one of the form of Dalit resistance, through which they have expressed their voice for their basic human rights. Dalit literature has arisen from cultural conflict, since the downtrodden have hardly any place in the established literary Canon of India. Dalit writers tend to call the existing Canon as Hindu literature and seek to challenge its hegemony. It's important to note at this juncture that Dalit literature has emerged as a new area of study and indeed is part of curricula not just in India, but all over the world. Whether it's poetry, Novels, short stories, Memoir or Autobiography, Dalit writings came into almost every genre of literature.

Autobiography is the most commonly used genre in Dalit literature. The very emergence of Dalit autobiographies is an act of resistance because Dalits use this as an opportunity to assert their identities through their writings. Hazari's autobiography 'Untouchables: The Autobiography of an Indian Outcast' begins with a protest note, which contains a subtitle called 'karma'. The autobiography is about life of the author who is born to a rural family and suffers from the day he is born. He narrates his burdensome untouchable childhood. He concludes "the child of an untouchable is a father before he is a child". Sharankumar Limbale in 'The Outcast' narrates how the Mahar women being sexually oppressed by the upper castes Marathas. There was the practice that the upper caste landlords kept the young Dalit girls to fulfill their lust and the Dalit families had to obey the customs. Limbale's autobiography portrays how his mother and grandmother being Dalit were the victims of the social evil. Through his autobiography Limbale shows how Dalit women are triply exploited on the basis of caste, class and gender. Omprakash valmiki's 'joothan' which is written in hindi and later translated into english is a life story of an individual and also of the entire chuhra or chamar community who have been degraded and dehumanized by the caste system for ages. Valmiki by composing his autobiography thus delivers a great service to the upliftment of his community. Bama's 'Karukku' the first autobiography of a Dalit women writer raises multiple questions against the caste system. She entered the convent to become a nun where she realizes that most of the church authorities are from upper caste who deliberately discriminate against the lower caste people. Bama herself was humiliated in the convent because of her Dalit status.

Dalits bold step of challenging and interrogating the upper caste hegemony in the new emergence of Dalit literature can be seen in recent times in autobiographies like 'My childhood on my shoulders' which is a english translation of 'Mera Bachapan Mere Kandho Par' by Sheoraj Singh Bechain and 'Murdahiya' by Tulsiram. In his autobiography Bechain narrates his struggle against the social disabilities imposed on him by material circumstances of his 'Outcaste' family and succeeding in his quest for education. Born in 1960 into a family of 'chamars' (tanners), and therefore stigmatized by the prevalent pollution norms maintained in his village community, Bechain was constrained to bear, all through his childhood, the burden of acute economic hardship. Despite being sold-off by his stepfather to serve as a bonded labourer at a brick kiln, after his rescue he remains a self-supporting individual throughout his childhood, earning through odd jobs like polishing shoes and serving in

hotels. All through this time, he never gave up his aspiration for learning, for reading, and writing, and after much struggle, managed to get enrolled in formal schooling. Rendered in the folk idiom of western Uttar Pradesh, the author's native region, Bechain's autobiography, throws light upon the dismal lot of all those who grow up disenfranchised in free India.

Professor Tulsiram's Autobiography 'Murdahiya' is an amalgamation of profound knowledge, thoughtfulness and spontaneity in which the author gave a deep account of his personal experiences. "*Illiteracy was my innate legacy*" the opening lines of the autobiography makes it very clear that there is a close association between poverty, superstition and illiteracy in the author's life. Tulsiram believed that "not any piece of writing or literary creation could make its real existence until the so-called socio- moral beliefs were destroyed". In his autobiography Tulsiram exposes the double standards and hypocrisy deeply embedded in Hindu society and culture.

Conclusion

In an autobiography it's a normal trend to glorify the self and boast about the extraordinary quality of oneself. But it changes at the hands of writers, it's about denial of opportunities, even to live as a normal human being. The self becomes the representative of all other Dalits who were crushed down and kept down because of their dalit identity. That's why Dalit writing is not a work of an individual but their personal experiences instead of being individualist, encompasses the general condition of the whole Dalit community. Dalit literature, apart from trying to negate caste inequalities and injustices, has more ambitious project in mind: to bring marginal voices to the center and complete emancipation of the oppressed and deprived communities. This is definitely a difficult task and to some extent, Dalit writers have been successful in their efforts. Dalit literature is therefore, an empowered, rebellious and literature of dignity.

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