

Dalit Literature: Interpreting Theory and Aesthetics**Arup Kumar Mondal**

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Abstract

Dalit literature is literature written by the Dalits about their lives. It forms an important and distinct part of Indian literature. It emerged in the 1960s, starting with the Marathi language and soon appeared in Hindi, Kannada, Telegu, Bengali and Tamil languages, through narratives such as poems, short stories and autobiographies, which stood out due to their stark portrayal of reality and the Dalit political scene. The mainstream literature didn't mention the abject poverty-stricken lifestyle of the Dalits and the utter oppression of the Dalits by the higher castes. It is often compared with Subaltern literature, Afro-American literature, especially in its depiction of issues of racial segregation, untouchability and injustice as seen in slave narratives. Dalit literature is a critic of literature, a kind of identity literature. It portrays the agonizing experiences of the indigenous people and expresses the radical revolt against the age-old, defective traditions, conventions and dogmas of Hindu religion. It cuts at the very roots of the tenets of Hindu religion and philosophy, namely the theory of Karma and Varnashramadharma. The Dalit Literature omitted the 'Shivam' in the traditional concept of 'Satyam Shivam Sundaram' and believed in the theory that anything whatever is 'Satyam'(True) must be 'Sundaram'(Beauty). They emphasized on empathy which is highly necessary to write true Dalit Literature. Infact Dalit literature is a type of neo-realism. It matures with a sociological point of view and is related with the principles of rebellion, negativity and loyalty to science, thus finally ending in revolutionary.

Keywords: Dalit, aesthetic, reality, literature, Ambedkarite.

Dalit literature is literature written by the Dalits about their lives. It forms an important and distinct part of Indian literature. It emerged in the 1960s, starting with the Marathi language and soon appeared in Hindi, Kannada, Telegu, Bengali and Tamil languages, through narratives such as poems, short stories and autobiographies, which stood out due to their stark portrayal of reality and the Dalit political scene. If pleasure is the basis of the aesthetics of the mainstream Savarna literature, pain or suffering is the basis of the aesthetics of Dalit literature. Dalit writers have presented faithfully Dalit life, Dalit milieu and Dalit culture in their writings. Human beings and humanity are the base of this literature. Society and surroundings come first than individual in such writings. So writers and critics have presented rational and sociological aesthetics for Dalit literature. It is a literature that focuses on necessity to make the readers restless or angry. The revolutionary Dalit consciousness is based on the ideas of equality, liberty, justice and solidarity rather than pleasure and entertainment. This is why it is important for the Dalit critics to change the imaginary of beauty. In every age, the imaginary of beauty is linked to prevailing ideas. At one time, for example, kings and emperors used to be the subjects of literature. But today, the life lived in huts and cottages situated outside the boundary of the village has become the subject of literature. It has become necessary to transform the imaginary of beauty because it is not possible to investigate the creation of Dalit literature and its commitment to revolt and rejection within the framework of traditional aesthetics. Dalit literature is a new literary stream of the post-independence period. Not only is it new, its form and purpose too are different from those of mainstream literature. Therefore, it cannot be appraised using traditional aesthetics.

In formulating the aesthetics of Dalit literature, it will be necessary, first of all to explicate the concept of beauty. Is such an explication possible? The traditional theory of beauty seems abstruse and spiritualistic. According to this theory, the beauty of an artistic creation lies in its expression of world consciousness or other-worldliness. This concept is mostly universalistic and spiritualistic. On the other hand, the aesthetics, which proposes that the beauty of a work of art is its artistic rendering of reality, is materialist and scientific. Rational and sociological aesthetics are the focal point here. Sharankumar Limbale, Omvedt Gail, Om Prakash

Valmiki, Harish Mangalam, Manohar Mouli Biswas, Joydeep Sarangi and other Dalit writers, critics and scholars have rejected the aesthetics of the mainstream literature. Limbale said: “Equality, freedom, justice and love are the basic sentiments of people and society. They are many times more important than pleasure and beauty”. (Towards 116) Sharatchandra Muktibodh has presented the unique characteristics of Dalit literature and aesthetics in his essay *What is Dalit Literature?* He has carefully explained the distinctive elements of Dalit aesthetics and Dalit literature in it: “Dalit literature is the literature produced by the Dalit consciousness. Human freedom is the inspiration behind it... As Dalit sensibility seeks to bring about compatible changes in the social consciousness, it is rebellious as well as fundamentally optimistic and revolutionary”. (Muktibodh 267) Dalit literature rejects spiritualism and abstraction, its aesthetics is materialist rather than spiritualist. Dalit literary art contradicts tradition and thereby, casts a shadow on the conscious and unconscious prejudices and assumptions held by the reader.

Ambedkar’s thought is the inspiration for Dalit writers. All the Dalit writers are inspired by revolutionary Ambedkarite thought and articulate life-affirming values in all their creations. The standard of a work of art lies in the fact that how much it affects the readers. The Dalit writers try heart and soul to infuse the Ambedkarite thoughts into their writings. The primary focus of such a writer is to arouse Dalit-consciousness in the mind of the readers. The artist, the artistic creation and the reader- the trio are the important components. The artist’s personality is reflected in the work and the reader’s personality is unified with this reflection. The artist and the reader become one in the artistic creation. This meeting of the two depends on their possessing common values. The intensity with which Dalit readers will feel the Dalit writers’ experience of anger, rejection and rebellion, will not be shared by non-Dalit writers. On the other hand, there will also be a difference in the degree to which non-Dalit and Dalit readers will find the Dalit writers’ experience unique, because the experience is a part of the Dalit readers’ daily life. It should be kept in mind that while the concept of beauty in Dalit literature cannot be a universal one, the Ambedkarite inspiration expressed in it can be of universal value. Mahatma Gandhi had also a great role to play in eradicating the evils of untouchability. But though he fought against untouchability, he held the firm view that varna system must remain. But Ambedkar had a starkly opposite view. According to Ambedkar, Varnashramdharma scheme is unnatural and

inhuman. A Dalit work of art pleads for the annihilation of caste system and integration of the Dalits in the mainstream. In a conversation with Alok Mukherjee, Sharankumar Limbale has presented rational and logical argument to present Dalit aesthetics. He said: “*Ambedkarite thought is the aesthetics of Dalit literature...I have written that this literature cannot be evaluated on the basis of either Sanskrit aesthetics or Western aesthetics. The aesthetics of this literature can only be based on the thinking of Ambedkar and Phule*”. (Towards 147-48)

The three values of life-equality, freedom and solidarity-can be regarded as constituting the essence of beauty in Dalit literature. It promotes equality, freedom and justice. If pleasure-giving literature arouses joy and sympathy in people, revolutionary literature awakens consciousness of self-respect. The writings of Rousseau, Voltaire and Karl Marx caused revolutions. The writings of Phule and Ambedkar caused to emerge strong mass movements. The aesthetics of Dalit literature rests on: first, the artists’ social commitment; second, the life-affirming values present in the artistic creations and third, the ability to raise the readers’ consciousness of fundamental values like equality, freedom, justice and fraternity. It is a consciousness against slavery, injustice, inequality, casteism. It is the inspiration for emancipation and the essence of identity.

Dalit literature is not based on sympathy but survives on empathy. Only the sufferers can describe the sufferings and pangs of their lives in a real, natural and spontaneous manner. The fact is that one can reiterate the fact that one can write using imagination and sympathy, but art created through empathy was of a different kind altogether. It is important to realize that when the author and the fictional character are made out of the same clay, the writing assumes a different perspective and form. One of the best known novelists from the Bengali Dalit community was Adwaita Mallabarman (1914-1951). One story from his life is interesting to mention here. It was in the early 1950s when he prepared the manuscript for *Titas Ekti Nadir Nam* and wanted to publish it from the publisher Puthighar. The author’s relationship with the proprietor of Puthighar professor Subodh Chaudhuri, was quite intimate. Chaudhuri read the manuscript and asked Adwaita whether his book would sell at a time when Manik Bandyopadhyay’s *Padma Nadir Majhi* also featuring a river, was doing so well in the book

market. Mallabarman had replied that “Subhodhda, Manik Bandyopadhyay is a great artist, a master artist, but he is a Brahmin’s son, a romantic. And I am the son of a fisherman”. What he wanted to focus on is that one can obviously write using imagination and sympathy, but art created through empathy was of a different kind altogether.

In this respect we may also refer to Omprakash Valmiki, a reputed Dalit writer who had questioned the short story of Premchand’s *Kafan* where the writer has shown that father and his son had bought country liquor in exchange of the paisa which they had begged on the street to buy a piece of cloth (kafan) to wrap the son’s dead wife at home, but instead they spent it on drink. Omprakash counters by saying that this is not possible; Dalits are human beings and they are not so inhuman as Munsiji has depicted in the story. Omprakash spoke from the Dalit angle and the other from the mainstream.

The aesthetic of Dalit literature doesn’t match with that of conventional, mainstream literature. The mainstream literature put focus on the doctrine of Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram. In the New Realism enunciated by the Dalit literature, the concept of ‘shivam’ is omitted. The idea here is that whatever is ‘satyam’ or ‘true’ is necessarily, ‘Sundaram’ or ‘beautiful’. So there is no need of ‘Shivam’. Therefore this is considered another new era after the Kallol era. After the Kallol era there has been no single radical movement that was as organized as the Dalit literary movement. The motto of Dalit literature is ‘one caste, one religion, one God’. Buddha’s atheism, rejection of soul, scientific temper and his opposition to pietism and ritualism are of utmost importance.

Another characteristic of Dalit aesthetics is that it is free from Western theories of literature. Darshana Trivedi remarks: “T.S. Eliot’s theory of objective co-relative or experimental use of the myth and allusions is not found in the Dalit poetry”. (*Literature* 5) Caste is one of the barriers for Dalits to progress. The social system like religion, religious literature is perpetuating the exploitation of the Dalits. The soul of the Dalit literature is the human being and humanity. Thus man is even more important than God for the Dalit writers. Likewise humanity is more important for Dalit writers than spirituality. Similarly, love for human is more important for them than religion. Dalit writers reject the theory of ‘sinful origin’ and that of ‘karma’. They also discard myths accepted by the Hindu religion. They cannot accept Rama as their ideal, because

Rama killed Shambhuka, a shudra who was practicing penance. The injustice meted out to Eklavya and insults heaped on Karna are also taken into account.

Dalit literature evolves out a new sense of beauty. The mainstream literary theories of Bharata, Dandin and Anandavardhana are questioned by the Dalit literature. In this respect mention may be made of differently-led life of a large number of people living in the bustee, existing at the fag-end where the Calcutta Tramways ends. Their livelihood is different in nature and as such these people every morning go out of their bustee in search of any type of work they find to maintain their livelihood. Sometimes a woman, aged eighteen or nineteen years, has a baby, six or seven months old, wears a tattered sari, a cheap blouse to fight with the cold of winter and goes out with the baby clinging to her chest. She goes to the garbage-vat area, where every day morning, huge amounts of garbage accumulate from the vast locality of Calcutta. This woman goes there to eke out her everyday livelihood out of his garbage-vat. It is very natural to her, but unnatural to many a people. Every human being feels sorrowful for her but on the other hand a heavenly ecstasy plays into the heart of his woman; nobody from the outside can measure the ecstasy of this mother for her child. This ecstasy is a kind of aesthetic in Dalit literature. This 'anubhava' (experience) takes precedence over 'anumana' (speculation). It is a post-colonial phenomenon that is grounded on the social reality; no fantasy is involved or works behind it.

If we call the aesthetics of mainstream literature a 'thesis', then perhaps the aesthetics of Dalit literature is an 'antithesis' and both negotiate a meeting point what may be called the 'synthesis'. The greater beauty lies in the body of the synthesis. To exemplify this fact we may mention the fact that in most Hindu Bengali families Durga puja festival is the greatest festival. In some parts of tribal/Dalit locality, of West Bengal at the time of Durgautsab, the Dalit people observe the 'Hoodur Durga utsab'. There they pay their respects to Mohi Asur, a great hero of the adivasi clan. In this way they excavate a history of their own.

Arjun Dangle, a well known Marathi Dalit writer has remarked about features of Dalit aesthetics in his *Poisoned Bread*, an edited work of Marathi Dalit literature. He has tried to explain the difference between Dalit literature and mainstream literature: "Dalit is not a caste but a realization...It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary".(Dangle 264-

65) The Dalit writers gave vivid self-experienced expressions of sufferings, humiliation, pains, agonies, trauma, miseries, poverty, atrocities etc into their own writings. They demand for the casteless egalitarian society. The soul of Dalit literature is “Dalit life”. In his article Gujarati Dalit Poetry, Pathik Parmar has quoted notion of Harish Mangalam: “The fragrance of humanity is the root of the Dalit literature. It is the story of ordinary human beings. There is the fresh air of natural world”. (Parmar 144-45) The Dalit literature represents ancient-old trauma, centuries-old exploitation, ages-old pain and saga of sufferings of the Dalits. Baburao Bagul in her “*Literature of their Own: Dalit Literary Theory in Indian Context*” said: “Dalit literature is not a literature of vengeance. Dalit sahitya is not a literature which spreads hatred. Dalit sahitya first promotes man’s greatness and man’s freedom and for that reason it is a historic necessity”. (3) Arjun Dangle in his article Dalit Literature: Past, Present and Future says: “Dalit literature is not simply literature. It is associated with a movement to bring about change. It represents the hopes and ambitions of a new society and new people. (Dangle 266).

Language also plays a vital role in Dalit literary theory and aesthetics. The Dalit people have little scope to move to urban centres, or to modernize their lives and imitate urban consciousness. With the spread of education and to some extent, in change of their economic condition, a small section of these people went to the city. Most of these writers come from remote villages; socially, economically backward classes, people away from the soul of urban sophistication. They create a new ‘rasa’ through their own speaking language. Through their regional language they voice their protest. Their life though associated with suffering and harshness carries an aesthetic sense.

Dalit literature is a journey from mainstream literature to marginal literature, from grand narrative to little narrative, from individual identity to group identity, from ideal to real, from vertical literature to spiral literature, from self-justification to self-affirmation. This is the celebration of difference.

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