

A Study of Dalit Consciousness in Gautam Vegda's Poetry

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Abstract

Dalit literature drew inspiration from the anti-caste movement led by Dr. Ambedkar, Jotiba Phule, and Periyar, which challenged the limited worldview of progressive writers who emphasized class while ignoring caste issues in Indian society. In contrast, Dalit writers cultivated “a belief in rebellion against the caste system,” recognizing “human beings as its focus” in literature. They played a major role in making Dalits conscious of their wretched state (Limble 32). In this light, the paper critically examines Gautam Vegda's poetry collection *Vultures and Other Poems*, published in 2018, which explores Dalit lived experiences and redefines Dalit identity. It uses the writings and speeches of Dr. Ambedkar as a theoretical framework to analyze the structural dimensions of caste oppression and hegemony in the selected poems.

Keywords: Dalit, caste, consciousness, inequality, poetry

Introduction

The term Dalit means ‘broken’, ‘torn into pieces’, ‘suppressed’, ‘ground’, ‘oppressed’, and ‘exploited’. It denotes marginalized people considered untouchable and impure due to their lowest birth status in the hierarchical caste system introduced by Manu. In response to oppression, Dalit consciousness emerged with the anti-caste movement as an emancipatory force

that made Dalits realize their bondage and free them from the shackles of injustice. The anti-caste movement began with Gautam Buddha, who established the first democratic society based on the philosophy of equality, liberty, and fraternity. Nanak, Raidas, and Kabir carried it forward by promoting equality and fraternity in the Bhakti period. Later in the 19th century, Jotiba Phule, Ambedkar, and Periyar adopted this vision and fought rigorously against social injustice to secure rights for untouchables. Dr. Ambedkar proposed a path to liberation through his mantra, “educate, agitate and organize,” for the downtrodden.

Dalit literature emerged with the establishment of the Dalit Panthers in 1972, a social and political mobilization of Dalits formed to raise awareness of Dalit identity and rights. The movement was strengthened by Marathi writers Namdeo Dhasal, J.V. Pawar, and Raja Dhale, who, through their poetry and essays, expose the limitations of Indian progressive literature and caste hegemony. The purpose of Dalit writers is to critique and fight against caste injustice, as Kanwal Bharati writes that “the writer of Dalit literature joins social concerns and makes efforts to measure the discords of life, religious discrimination, incoherence, artificial motives designed for exploitation and the gap created between man and man” (Valmiki 27). In recent times, Dalit writers such as Yashica Dutt, Yogesh Mailreya, Suraj Yengde, Kancha Illaiah, and Sharankumar Limbale have explored Dalit lived experience and challenged caste hierarchy through literary writings. Om Prakash Valmiki, in his book *Aesthetics of Dalit Literature*, comments:

A Dalit writer, possessing indomitable curiosity in order to fight against ignorance penury, and inferiority of his community, creates literary works despite all miseries, caused by the poor condition, and diversities. His experience itself is his expression, and the words created in the toughest moments of life are important for him. He values all the thoughts akin to human concern – those thoughts that teach man to live with dignity. (Valmiki 98)

Gautam Vegda is an anti-caste poet and research scholar at the Central University of Gujarat. His poetry addresses caste, environmental justice, and human-animal relationships. He has published poetry collections *Vultures and Other Poems* (2018) and *A Stranger Case of Flesh and Bones* (2019). His first collection, *Vultures*, is a form of self-expression and a narration of his struggles, representing the collective voice of the downtrodden. It raises a voice against oppression that Dalits have faced for centuries and depicts their lived experiences, marked by

suffering, pain, and horror. In his first poem, “Mother,” he portrays a picture of his mother, who toils every day to feed them without caring about herself. For her, every day is the same:

New Year Party?

My Mother raised her eyebrow

Doesn't even know what that is.

She follows the lunar calendar

Where each day brings toiling for her. (Vegda 1)

Through this poem, Vegda shares his views on the economic exploitation of poor Dalits, which has made their lives difficult. They have to work all day to earn enough for food. It is the story of every Dalit mother who works hard to support her family and is among the most oppressed in society. He exposes the feudal and capitalist casteism that utterly exploits the downtrodden. Vegda is concerned about the plight of Dalit labour, describing it as “Indulging in the pile of capitalism, where thorns of the field are jabbed in my mother's feet,” highlighting the harsh conditions and the deprivation of Dalit labourers. They are enduring systematic exploitation and suffering due to social and economic inequality. Labour is the only means of survival for Dalits. In another poem, “Nausea,” he shows how poverty and starvation are passed from one generation to the next. It is about the wedding day when his mother comes to her in-laws, but because of poor circumstances, she is deprived of the stable life she had hoped for. After the marriage, the tractor carrying her home stopped in the fields first, and she started working immediately that day:

The tractor gets distracted to barren land,

The land where men are machines

Hoe, pickaxes and mattocks being used.

The bride is asked to get off and toil

And she does exactly with. (Vegda 3)

It is the utter poverty that forced her to kill the dreams she had imagined. It was the web of hunger and despair in which her mother lived. Caste is not just a social identity; it is a set of cultural and economic forms of dominance inherited from the previous generation and passed on to the next. On the exploitative nature of caste, Dr. Ambedkar said, “Caste System is not merely a division of labourers which is quite different from division of labour—it is an hierarchy in

which the divisions of labourers are graded one above the other” (Ambedkar 47). The caste system does not give freedom to choose your occupation and creates an atmosphere that stops them from achieving something high in life. That is a hurdle in progress.

In his next poem, “Tobacco Causes Cancer,” he discusses the stigma of untouchability and exposes the casteist mindset of Swarna men towards untouchables. He writes:

They believe in pollution,
Avoiding touches, shadows, physical exchanges.
...
What about mud and garbage inside of their brains?
If they're asked, they will campaign
Tobacco causes cancer (Vegda 12)

The poet questioned the irrational and rigid behaviour of upper-caste people who think physical touch with Dalits will pollute them. So, untouchables have been segregated and forced to live on the periphery of the village. Hence, the caste system has destroyed the feelings of fraternal love among Hindus, as Dr. Ambedkar notes:

Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible. A Hindu's public is his caste. His responsibility is only to his caste. His loyalty is restricted only to his caste. Virtue has become caste-ridden and morality has become, caste-bound. There is no sympathy to the deserving. There is no appreciation of the meritorious. There is no charity to the needy. Suffering as such calls for no response (Ambedkar 56).

Therefore, to preserve their privileges, the caste system is upheld by the upper castes because they enjoy a comfortable life from it. In the poem “Great Teachers,” Vegda critiques the dominant caste for its discriminatory acts. The deep-seated stigma of untouchability and caste hegemony is depicted through visual imagery of the Butterfly (untouchable) and Wasp (dominant higher caste). Wasps attack the butterflies and force them to migrate in search of peace. They asked God for help against the tyranny, but no gods come to save them:

The butterfly believes the god will
Come, rescue and punish them all
Ultimately, no god comes, not at all

The butterfly passes away falls lifeless
 A wasp comes forth and say, you trash
 The untouchables, should die like this
 You don't have right to live with peace
 We really thank human being
 For teaching discrimination among. (Vegda 34-35)

Through the imagery of wasps and butterflies, Vegda highlighted the hatred of the dominant caste for untouchables and the god's indifference towards atrocities committed against Dalits every day. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (2023), approximately fifty thousand cases are filed under the SC/ST Atrocities Act.

Vegda was treated as an outsider in the classroom; despite dressing well, no one befriended him. One such incident he recounts in his twenty-seventh poem, "Miserable Fall," occurred when he was threatened by his classmates simply for touching the bicycle of a Swarna boy:

They abused and humiliated me
 Tears rolled down across my cheeks
 Heartbeats were felt from head to toe
 Oh! Shivering legs, unable to stand
 They threatened and let me go
 My frightened eyes drowned in tears. (Vegda 50)

The stigma of untouchability always remained tied to his identity, and he repeatedly realized his place in society. This is because higher-caste children imbibed a discriminatory attitude from their families and practiced it in schools. The poison of caste and egoistic notions of high and low are instilled during childhood. Therefore, it becomes impossible for a Dalit child to escape from caste abuse in Indian society. Caste identity is imposed on a man since his birth, and it remains with him till his death. It is expressed in the poem "Stinking Scars," where a Mano Chamar is recognized only by his caste, not by his duty as a soldier, and is not seen as a patriot serving the nation. So "Caste-terrorists slew him" and they "call him a Dalit-Martyr" (Vegda 54). Dr. Ambedkar states in his speech, *Annihilation of Caste*:

Caste is not a physical object like a wall of bricks or a line of barbed wire which prevents the Hindus from co-mingling and which has, therefore, to be pulled down. Caste is a notion, it is a state of the mind. The destruction of Caste does not therefore mean the destruction of a physical barrier. It means a notional change. Caste may be bad. Caste may lead to conduct so gross as to be called man's inhumanity to man. (Ambedkar 68)

Therefore, caste must be eradicated to establish equality and liberty in society. Mano chamar is dehumanized by the caste system and deprived of dignity due to his low caste. His service to the nation is ignored, and people do not respect his status as a martyr. Thus, untouchables are treated with contempt and considered inferior by people in society.

In life, it is difficult to secure an equal place for untouchables, but in death, discrimination persists due to the stigma; untouchables are denied access to the funeral ground. Recently in Patna, a ninety-one-year-old Dalit woman's body was cremated on the road by the Dalit community because the village's cremation ground was denied by the upper castes (Chaurasiya 2026). The poem "Graves" reverberates the unsaid sorrow of Dalit tribes:

Deads are awaited to be entombed
They proclaim equality but share
No land for deads,
We are landless,
How can our corpses
Own land?
Our graveyard is devastated. (Vegda 64).

He raises the concern of Dalit marginalized labourers who do not even have a place to bury their dead, and if they decide to cremate, they are denied access to the jungle to cut wood. Vegda criticizes the Varnashrama principle, under which the Dalit class was excluded from the Gurukulas and forced into skinning and manual scavenging. He writes in his poem "Dagger and Skin,"

You burden us with Varnashrama,
Hand over the daggers to rip
The skin of dead cattle,

And repulsive ropes to tug
them to arid land,
Manipulate us to stick
to the skins and stinks,
Kids find no books
And pencils in their tiny hands,
But get those hands covered
With cold and clotted blood. (Vegda 66).

Varnashrama has degenerated Indian society into a prison where untouchables have been trapped for an eternal time. Because, according to it, they will never be considered sentient, equal beings and will be forced to do their caste duties. For instance, in the Mahabharata, Guru Dronacharya refused to educate the Dalit boy Eklavya and later asked for his thumb as Gurudakshina; after that, he could never use a bow and arrow. In this way, Dalits are kept far from receiving education. Guru Gopal, in his book *Humiliation: Claims and Context*, says that

The top of the twice born have created in Dalits a social leper or walking carrion which is sociologically dangerous and hence needs to be physically quarantined. The ideology of purity-pollution helped the top of the twice born to transmute the human body as an aesthetic idea into a “filthy reality”. (Guru 213)

Conclusion

The paper has critically examined Gautam Vegda’s selected poems and revealed Dalit consciousness that challenges social, psychological, economic, and political exploitation of Dalits. By addressing issues of poverty in “Mothers,” untouchability in “Graves,” “Dagger and Bones,” “Miserable Fall,” and “Stinking Scar,” and the caste system in “Nausea” and “Tobacco Causes Cancer,” his poetry exposed Brahminical hegemony, which has forced Dalits to live in utter poverty and humiliation. His poetry not only narrates suffering but also rejects the hierarchical order of subjugation and calls for social justice.

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