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A critical analysis of Dalit literature and its development with special reference to Yogesh Maitreya's flowers on the grave of caste

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Abstract

The Paper aims to do an analysis of the development of Dalit literature and its related movements. The Dalit writing in India not only provides a narrative of pain and exploitation but has also helped in the formation of new aesthetic values. Dalit writers and critics hold different opinion about literature as compared to the literature practised by the mainstream writers. Their exclusion from elite historiography, derogatory representation and overall subjugation demands for a radical and revolutionary form of literature. Dalit literature has developed a lot from its inception and new trends have followed the movement. The writer would talk about these changes with the help of Yogesh Maitreya's short story collection titled, "Flowers on the Grave".

Keywords: Dalit literature, caste hierarchy, aesthetics, mainstream literature

Introductions

The emergence of Dalit writing in India not only provides a narrative of pain and exploitation but has also helped in the formation of new aesthetic values. Dalit writers and critics hold a different opinion about literature as compared to the literature practiced by the mainstream writers. Their exclusion from the elite historiography, derogatory representation and overall subjugation demands for a radical and revolutionary form of literature. Dalit literature, unlike the main stream literature focuses on the social evils within the country and tries to achieve consciousness in the mind of readers against the exploitation of caste system. According to Dalit writers and critics the main stream Indian literature lacks functionality and more or less derives it's meaning from parameters of beauty and pleasure.

This preoccupation of mainstream writers with aesthetics of beauty and pleasure side- lines the prevailing inequality in the country. The Savarna aesthetic formula of *Satyam (truth)*, *Shivam (goodness)*, *Sundaram (beauty)* fails to represent Dalit atrocities and subjugation. The critique of caste system by Dalit writers and their representation of heroes, themes and thoughts transgresses the very idea of beauty and pleasure endorsed by the Savarna group of writers. Baburao Bagul a prominent Marathi Dalit writer in one of his essays argues that "the established literature of India is Hindu literature" which fails to provide the true representation of Dalits in their writings. Dalit writers like Sharankumar Limbale, Arjun Dangle, Omvedt Gail, Om Prakash Valmiki, Harish Mangalam and many more has expressed their incredulity and dissent towards the literary enterprise of mainstream Indian literature. According to them, the main stream Indian literature whenever plans to retaliate, it only ends up criticizing the British colonial rule. Hence, they only propagate agendas of anti-colonial consciousness, struggle of Independence, conflict between tradition and modernity, championing of the Indian civilization and likewise. On the other hand, marginalized communities perceive the colonial rule in many different terms which evades the general understanding of mainstream writers. K. Satyanarayna in his book *The Exercise of Freedom: An Introduction to Dalit Writing* states that marginal communities have a different point of view regarding the colonial rule as they "...did not oppose colonialism or think of it as anti-Indian rule. They adopted a strategic view of colonialism as a movement of structural reorganization of Indian society" (Satyanarayn 10). The description of national movements portraying different sections of Indian society uniting and mobilizing for a single cause of freedom in reality, ignored and obscured the prevailing inequalities within the nation during the time of colonial rule.

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Therefore, Dalit literature in many ways is different, because it aims to bring change in the society and hence it did not start as a literary discourse but rather it has its origin in social movements. The Dalit social movements as well as literature associated with it derives its ideas from Babasaheb Ambedkar's magnum opus *Annihilation of Caste*, *Dalit Panther Manifesto* and other similar works. The official nationalist history, according to them is biased failing to recognize the contributions of the lower caste and marginal communities resulting in their subordination. At the time of Independence Mahatma Gandhi did make some effort for obliterating social evils but unfortunately his labelling of Dalits as *Harijans* (people of God) further problematized the situation. As according to Dalit leaders, the act of simply renaming Dalits as 'people of god' tends to obscure the actual plight of Dalit community. Several leaders who followed Gandhian ideology gave importance to Independence but Dalit leaders like Ambedkar argued that social equality in India is as important as independence. Demands for giving priority to social equality by Dalit leaders and writers were often dismissed as 'anti-national' by the people in power. This conflicting attitude of majority against Dalit resistance and transgression continues to threaten the lower caste in the modern times. Recently many contemporary Dalit writings has managed to voice modern problems of Dalit communities. Dalit Literature has also developed a lot and it has corpus available in various regional languages such as Marathi, Bengali, Hindi, Punjabi, Oriya, Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and many more. Rich regional heritage of Dalit writing brings to notice that there are numbers of difference in struggles of Dalit communities living in different provinces of the country and hence it is important to look for individual solutions instead of generalising the situation.

Hereby, Dalit writers pay close attention to their surroundings and the lives of people around them to reflect and portray a realist image of the society they live in. One of the recently developing paradigm of Dalit literature is in Tamil language, which often incorporates a close look into the modern problems of Dalit communities living in Tamil Nadu.

Dalit literature in Tamil language started late as compared to its other counterparts like Marathi or Kannada. The novels of *Poomani* in the early 1980s is often hailed as the beginning of Dalit writings in Tamil. Later, during the 1990s writers like Bama, Imayam and Sivakami helped in the further development of Tamil Dalit literature to its present state. Bama in her autobiographical novel *Karukku* (1992), describes her life growing up as a girl in an outcaste family and later discusses several impedances and insults she has to face while getting educated in school and later in college. She describes her struggle as a Dalit which gets further intensified by her gender. Later, her work *Karukku* got translated into English and became a sensation, eventually winning the prestigious Crossword Book Award. Other modern Dalit writers in Tamil include Sivakami an IAS officer, who explores contemporary Dalit issues in her writings. She incorporates ideas from feminism to uplift the severely suppressed Dalit women.

Her novel *Anantayi* published in 1992 portrays the hardship and exploitation of peasant women in villages. *The Grip of Change* became her first novel to be translated into English, which is a semi-autobiographical work which points out how the serious issues of Dalit are being trivialised in the

modern scenario. Also, the book presents the voice of Youths, who are full of resolve to bring change in the society. Such writing in Tamil Nadu has not only changed the situations of Dalit but has also encouraged other oppressed communities and people to come forward and revolt against the prevailing social inequality.

Similarly, Dalit literature in Maharashtra is among the earliest literature available against the practice of caste system in India. In Maharashtra, dalit literature can be traced back to the Nineteenth century in the works of Jyotibah Phule and Narayan Guru. Later, their influences inspired the works of Dalit writers such as Baburao Bagula and the venerated dalit leader Dr. B. R. Ambedkar.

Arjun Dangle in his essay, "Dalit Literature Past, Present and Future" calls Dr. Ambedkar as the "Father of Dalit Literature" and writes, "Dr. Ambedkar shaped the tradition of revolutionary thinking of almost a generation of Dalits, who can today hold their heads high thanks to him. The literary manifestation of this social awareness in Dalit Literature" (Dangle xxiv). The essay recounts the rise of Dalit movement and the development of Dalit literature in Maharashtra. He looks into the role and need of dalit literature as well as its development as literature of resistance. According to Dangle, one of the chief reasons for the formation of a Dalit literary movement was the "indifference of Progressive writers", who kept themselves "...restricted only to the capitalist-labour conflict..." (xxvii) in their writings. Hence, the social problems related to caste did not surface in the writings of these writers because they were highly influenced by the hegemony of mainstream tradition.

The center of Marathi-dalit literary movement was the Milind College in Aurangabad established by Dr. Ambedkar in 1950. The college had students from rural areas and the majority of the staff were Dalits. The college had Dr. M.N. Wankhade as the principal, who analysed the Hindu myths and popular Marathi literature in order to establish an academic Dalit discourse. As Dangle writes in the essay: "like Blacks, Dalit writers should revolt and produce their own literatures" (xxxiii). Such works and insight led to the formation of the literary forum, Milind Sahitya Parishad which also launched the quarterly, *Asmita*. The quarterly inspired young Dalits to indulge in creative writing and gave way to a new generation of Dalit writers. The first Dalit literary conference was held in Maharashtra in 1958. Although, the conference was small and lacked support, many resolutions were passed to make the Dalit literary enterprise a successful one. Many more similar conferences culminated into the 1967 literary meet in Bombay organised by the Maharashtra Bauddha Sahitya Sabha. The conference remains important as it gave the platform for publishing the first Dalit anthology, *Akar*. The anthology had poems by Baburao Bagul, Arjun Dangle, Chokha Kamble, Daya Pawar, Hira Bansode, Bandhumadhav and many other prominent Dalit writers. Later, through such regular conferences the writers and critics of Dalit literature started defining the role and most importantly the aesthetics of Dalit Literature. Arjun Dangle, finely encapsulates this change and revolt in the minds of Dalit writers while discussing the Dalit articles published in the *Marathwada* magazine. He writes:

The effective and sharp standpoint of Dalit literature is seen in a discussion in Diwali 1969 issue of the *Marathwada*. In their article, Dr. Wankhade, Professor Chitnis, Daya Pawar

and Baburao Bagul rejected the mainstream literary tradition and revolted so strongly that even thinkers and reviewers who were proud of their tradition were shocked. (Dangle xxxv-xxxvi)

The prevailing consciousness among Dalits in the post-Ambedkar phase, helped the writers to confront the mainstream literary enterprise of the Savarnas. Among them was Namdeo Dhasal who started as a revolutionary young Dalit poet. His collection of poems *Golpitha*, took the mainstream Marathi literature with shock and awe. His poems were an aggressive attack on the ideas of aesthetics and language endorsed by mainstream Marathi literature. Dhasal's poems were unlike the mainstream poems as the diction was bold and rustic laying bare the pain and exploitation of Dalits. Hence, one of his poems titled "Cruelty" reads:

I am a venereal sore in the private part of language.
The living spirit looking out of hundreds of thousands of
sad, pitiful eyes
Has shaken me.
I am broken by the revolt exploding inside me. (Dhasal 1-5)

In the above lines he delineates the life of a dalit through the narrator of the poem. The "venerable sore" is the smothered voices of Dalits which remains unheard by the people in power. Dhasal through the image of a sore bursting and exploding in revolt indicates towards the revolution of Dalits against the caste system. Vijay Tendulkar, rightly states that Namdeo Dhasal's poetry "is a world where the night is reversed into a day, where the stomachs are empty or half empty, of depression, against death or the next day anxieties, of bodies left over being consumed by shame and sensibility..." (qtd. in *The Daily Write*). Dhasal's poetry also draws inspiration from the poignant memories of his past which is further intensified with his use of the local language of Mahars. Along with poetry, Autobiographical writings became one of the most celebrated genres in Marathi dalit literature. Works like *Baluta* by Daya Pawar ; *Upa* by Laxman Mane; *Joothan* by Om Prakash Valmiki and many more are still read by a large number of readers.

In the contemporary times, Dalit literature is an established political discourse for dalit assertion and it has also secured itself a space to articulate its vision and purpose of eradicating caste and other inequalities from the society. There are emerging, number of new dalit writers who are continuously experimenting with their style and has been transcending the traditional autobiographical style of Dalit writing. Looking at the recent development in Dalit Literature, Gajarwala says, "it is one of the things that dalit literary movement will have to wrestle with, if it wants to maintain its relevance.... But I think we have to be sympathetic to the insistence on origin in so far as it is trying to challenge the monopoly of upper-caste people over cultural spaces." (Kaushik)

Therefore, in recent years, young Dalit writers are engaging themselves with modern aesthetics for expressing fresh ideas within the Dalit discourse. Yogesh Maitreya's short story collection *Flowers on the Grave of Caste* can be seen in this light. He is a writer, poet, translator and Ph.D. scholar at Tata Institute of Social Science Mumbai. The stories in the anthology centre around Dalit youths in the urban world and their struggle to achieve their goals and

dreams. Maitreya's stories like any other Dalit text does foreground caste and its exploitation but it is also peculiar for its use of several literary devices which are not so common in the tradition of Dalit literature. One can discover the use of literary devices such as Magic Realism, Allegory, Objective Correlative and many more in most of his stories. In the story *Re-evolutions*, the reference of *Bara Balutedar* trees can be seen as a use of magic realism by the writer. The twelve trees in the village of Beed had stop blossoming after twelve dalits were hanged to it by an uppercaste Patil. Although, it again starts to bloom when Patil is killed by Baliraja and justice is served. Hence, the narration goes: "When the bus stopped, I watched those trees that were now in full blossom with snow falling about them. Never in the history of India had I seen snow fall on this side of soil which was hot harsh, and hateful" (15). Throughout the story there are references of many surreal incidents like that of Sidhartha's unconscious boarding of train to an unknown destination and then somehow rather dramatically landing in the city of Buddhist shrines, Aurangabad.

Maitreya, also briefly introduces the readers with the life style and the survival skills of criminal tribes along with their poignant situation in the hands of police and the uppercaste landlords. The Story also reveals that the writer is ecologically conscious as he successfully portrays and captures the ecosophies of the criminal tribes through Baliraja. Hence, Baliraja says "Mother Earth has given birth to water, trees, birds, mountains, and fire long before it has given birth to human beings. Humans kill each other, and yet she never takes her revenge. Because it is not unjust. Nature is wild, robust, but essentially beautiful. It is us human beings, who made it ugly" (12). Maitreya uses the symbolic representation of Nature in blossoming trees and in the screams of eagles to make us understand that discrimination and injustice is unnatural and in words of Baliraja, "Nature stands on the principle of justice" (12).

The short story, "Flowers on the Grave of Caste" can be read as a political allegory of resistance against the caste system by Dalits. The 200 years old gravedigger in the story symbolizes the two centuries of revolt by dalits against the prevailing caste system in India. The gravedigger when asked about his age, he answers that he was a child when the British arrived in India. which points toward the nascent stage of the Dalit movement in the early colonial period. In the story, the gravedigger narrates an anecdote of a Dalit being buried on the the boundary of Muslim and Christian graveyard. The anecdote calls for a retrospective glance on Dalit exploitation and as well as their ambivalent situation during and after colonial rule when getting converted into Christians and Muslims. Later, the gravedigger narrates about Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar conversion into Buddhism. According to him, the flowers on the grave of caste are the new generation of dalits who are busy spreading the Babasaheb's idea to "educate organise and agitate". Maitreya, astutely uses allegory as a literary device to historicize the dalit movement while encapsulating its essence in the form of a short story.

In another short story titled "Educate, Organise, Agitate", Maitreya makes use of T.S Eliot's popularised literary device, Objective Correlative to portray and express the feelings of Gautam, on hearing the news of Sakaram and Rama's death. The anger and storm building up inside him is manifested through the darkening of clouds, lightning, storm and thick rain happening outside in Nature. The

description of rain as powerful, destructive and merciless gives way to a series of emotion such as sadness, pain, despair and even hope when the writers imagine the merciless rain destroying “the jail’s thick compound walls, which were the symbol of punishment” (Maitreya 67)

Along with the creative use of literary devices, Maitriya also thinks and perceive idea of institutions such as university in different terms. Through Gautam’s dairy entry, Maitreya interrogates the idea of education in universities which is pestilence stricken due to caste prejudices. Therefore, Gautam writes in his dairy about the idea of university that, “Here everyone tries to be something else, or someone who is distinct and superior to the common people. Here everyone is made to think that only they are capable of bringing changes to the society...” (69). Yogesh Maitrya, through his stories exposes the pervasive caste discrimination among the established institutions of Indian society which otherwise goes unnoticed in our day today lives. The journey of Dalit literature has always been subject to change according to the position of Dalits in the society. Unlike Savarna writers, Dalit writers do not adhere to the boundaries of traditions. Dalit literature relentlessly ventures to seek new paradigms for the emancipation of humanity. As Arjun Dangle rightly remarks that Dalit literature is not “separatist” but “inclusive”. Hence, one should perceive Dalit literature as an agent of change and development in society.

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