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Textualizing Lived Lives: A Dalit Aesthetic And Philosophical Negotiation

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Abstract : Next to poetry and short story, the genre of autobiography is an effective means in the literary and philosophical representation of traumatic lived life and humiliating experiences of the marginalized sections in the caste-ridden societies. Vernacular is an equally effective tool for expression by the writers belonging to the marginalized communities. Most of the dalit writers have chosen their regional languages with their local dialects for their creative writing and philosophical expression against the established canonical writings. Personal narratives also represent the social and communal issues embedded with philosophic underpinnings and ideological leanings inherited from the social reformers like Jyothiba Phule and Dr. B.R Ambedkar in the formation of alternative secular, egalitarian and modern identity for dalits and other social margins. This article focuses on the evaluation of dalit aesthetic and philosophy that reflect in literature produced by various dalit writers. It discusses how the philosophy of Ambedkar serves as a base for dalit literature. It also argues in favour of deconstructing traditional literary canon.



Key Words: Religion, Social Revolution, Morality, Buddha Damma. Karma, Dalit Aesthetic.

Religious and Philosophical Evaluation

Caste system is an unwanted phenomenon in any civilized society, which is connected with the ancestral occupations of the so called untouchables whom we call dalits today. They still carry with them the invisible legacy of occupations of their ancestors. Though their present profession is entirely different, their caste legacy still dominates it. The deployment of untouchability is justified on the grounds of purity and pollution. Hindu orthodox elements linked pollution to occupation taken up by the lower castes and then to their birth. It infers that all low castes are branded as untouchables based on their birth. Goutama Buddha's humanistic gestures and his compassion for the poor and low castes, and his antagonism against caste system prompted orthodox Brahminical forces to negate Buddhist teachings and their philosophy. Dr.B.R. Ambedkar is drawn into this discussion for his philosophic thinking over the issues of dalits. In his attempt to explore rationality beyond religious terrain, he looked for a possibility in the Buddhist teachings which were handy to fulfill his expectations in addressing the issue of caste system. Buddhism being indigenous religion, no doubt to say, serves contrary to other religions in its basic tenets and approach towards the society. He straightaway accepted Buddhism not as a religion but as a way of life known as Buddha Dhamma.



Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's views were radical. He wanted to follow Buddhism without 'karma which Hinduism linked it to rebirth. The concept of the karma /rebirth is a metaphysical assumption with no scientific evidence. The karma theory is perfectly used by the Hindu believers to make others accept their social misery in the direction of caste system which is contradicted by the constitutional architect. He reinterprets karma referring to it as 'biological genetic inheritance but transmission of karmic causality is social and moral, not individual' (6).

Dalit social reformers are not the believers of the karma theory. In their alternative thinking and pursuance, they have replaced it with the concept of Dhamma which is profusely replete with morality and it has nothing to do with the concept of religion and God. In fact, morality and religion are different from each other. This point is already debated at length by the scholars. "Every religion preaches morality but morality is not the root of religion. It is casual and effective (Ahir 106). Sensing the religious repercussions, Hindu concept of karma, social reformers valued Dhamma not karma.

Buddhist philosophy served as a basis for Dr. B.R Ambedkar to launch his social movements against caste system. He preferred Buddhism for his social mission against caste system because Buddhism attracted Ambedkar much because of its being an indigenous religion and also of its egalitarian approach. "Buddhism was equalitarian, universalist and nationalist, many of its existing expressions made him very uncomfortable" (Omvedt 3). He also started magazine called *Muknayak* for the voiceless



when non-dalit publishers refused to publish dalit issues. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar used his philosophy to measure one's conduct towards the oppressed. He rejected the Hindu philosophy.

Negatively, I reject the Hindu social philosophy pronounced in the *Bhagavad Geeta* based as it is on the Triguna of the sankhya philosophy which is in my judgments a cruel perversion of the philosophy of Kapila, and which had made the caste system and system of graded inequality the law of Hindu social life (Keer 458-459).

He exposed caste system as being associated with Hindu religion and verna pattern. The Hindu scriptures are regarded as sacred and they are said to be ordained by the divinity, which are unquestionable by any individual. Buddhism with its ideals, which is different from Brahmanism in its socio-political aspects in terms of the relation between the society and the state. With regard to this significant dimension, B.R. Ambedkar points out that "while there have not been social revolutions in India is a question which has incessantly troubled me. There is only one answer which I can give and it is that the lower classes of Hindus have been completely disabled for direct action on account of this wretched system of chaturvarna (Omvedt 135).

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar further explored the viable means acceptable and convenient for the people to use religion as a revolution in the annihilation of caste. In contrary to Marxist view of religions as fostering contentment with exploitative social order, as the opium of the people, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar felt that Hinduism was the greatest barrier to the



progress of the dalits. He says, property is not only the source of power, religion and social status would generate power. He attributes religion as an essential generating factor for social revolution in any social history. He gives an account of historical reality in the past to sustain his argument over religious significance in the attainment of political power.

The political revolution led by Chandragupta was preceded by the religious and social revolution of Buddha. The political revolution led by Shivaji was preceded by the religious and social reform brought about the saints of Maharashtra. The political revolution of the Sikhs was preceded by the religious and social revolution led by Gurunanak. (Omvedt 251)

The historical facts of religion convinces the Indian intellectuals that religious reformation would bring a social revolution and then to political change. His thinking is qualified and sustained by the Buddhist philosophic teachings. Dr.B.R. Ambedkar built strong anti- caste movements as being the democratic means of expression in Indian society with their revolutionary message against caste discrimination and caste-based exploitation.

Jotiba Phule's non-Brahmin movements inspired Dr. B. R. Ambedkar to fight the caste syndrome. My point is that in the context of religion, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar turned to Buddhism for emancipation of his people. His revolutionary ideology with its Hindu scriptural rejection evolved as anti-caste theory for dalit writers. It has its strong



reflections not only in the dalit militant organizations like dalit Panthers in Maharashtra. His protest ideology is reflected in Marathi dalit literature. Despite a split in the dalit Panthers Movement, Ambedkarism continued to inspire dalit writers to produce protest literature in all genres. Arjun Dangle's edited volume titled *Poisoned Bread* (2009, Modern Marathi Dalit Literature) was produced from the Marathi dalit culture. It is a voice of the voiceless and the oppressed. The revolutionary ideology of Dr. B .R. Ambedkar is paralleled by a strong wave of Marathi dalit writing that exploded in several genres in one volume.

Evaluation of Dalit Aesthetic

In the beginning, dalit literature does not emerge just as a prosaic writing. Behind it are the marathon social reformist movements who launched anti-caste movements. Dalit literature, characterized by fury, resistance and rebellion was written in the genre of poetry. If we look into the history of dalit literature, the first poem in Telugu titled *Malavandra Paata* (1909) written by Kusuma Dharmanna Kavi who expressed dissent against caste system. Another dalit poet, Gurrām Jashua, produced timeless poetry that continued to inspire the younger generation to this day. In Maharashtra too, Namdev Dhasal produced a vibrant revolutionary poetry against not only caste misery but also poverty and oppressed life of the marginalized. Dhasal's first collection of poems in '*Golpitha*' took Marathi literary circles by storm and broke all the rules of traditional Marathi literature. The use of language was shocking to the traditionalists (Manoja 2).



Dalit poets of the second and third generation took rather a militant stand in their poetic expression. This phenomenon started in 1980s in Telugu Dalit poetry.

Dalit autobiographical writing is poised to subvert the philosophy of the hegemonic literature and reconstruct the cultural and social struggles in favour of liberty, equality, justice and identity. Autobiography has become a favourite genre chosen by dalits in 1980s onwards, whose lived experiences play a crucial role in shaping the text. Ambedkar's revolutionary ideas and social philosophy laid a base for literary production. His philosophy is directed against social discrimination and inequality. Sharankumar Limbale's dalit aesthetics counters the Hindu concept of beauty and reformulates an alternative discourse. He talks about the impact of Ambedkar's ideology in his own writing. Other dalit writers irrespective of the region and language too used Ambedkar's philosophy in their literary writings.

"I am an activist writer. I am committed to movement that was started by Dr. B.R.Ambedkar to emancipate India's dalits. This movement is an integral part of my being. Without the movement I can't write. The movement is an ink for me. My literature is the literature of protest because of my commitment and the inspiration of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's thoughts" (Limbale 2). Limbale's words substantiate the fact that by and large Ambedkar's philosophy inspired and impacted the dalit writing.

Discussion of the literary and cultural representations of the marginalized and disposed people, such as members of India's untouchable and aboriginal communities



has been based on the writings of upper caste writers, such as Mulk Raj Anand, Mahasweta Devi and Prem Chand (Mukherjee vi).

For Dalit writers, many of the privileged caste narratives which speak about the marginalized people are part of a 'discourse of pity'. They delineate dalit experience out of imagination.

There is a major debate on the aesthetic evaluation of dalit literature that Sharan kumar Limbale proposes that dalit aesthetics is meant for reading and evaluating dalit literature. His critical text, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit literature* questions the Hindu triadic concept of satyam (the True), shivam (the sacred), and sundaram (the beautiful). He evolved a separate yardstick for literary evaluation of dalit literature while Savarna critics like P.S. Rege and Balakrishna Kawthekar oppose the demand for separate criterion for aesthetic evaluation of dalit literature as they feel that "universal values cannot be refuted and if the universal aesthetic principles are not being adhered to, then dalit literature will lose a proper frame work of evaluation" (Limbale 1). But dalit writers find this criterion obsolete and believe that "the traditional aesthetics based on Sanskrit or English literary theories cannot do justice to dalit literature" (Limbale 106). Fixed standards are hardly effective given the fact that 'literature changes with changing culture' and a change in criticism too.

Generally, tastes of persons keep changing with the time. On the idea of beauty which tends to revolve around the feeling of pleasure by viewing the object. There is another



thought-provoking debate on literary aesthetic value which claims that “every genre of literature is different from the other hence a mechanistic critical tradition cannot be applied to literature across the world” (Limbale 1).

The debate advocates the pluralistic nature of literature produced with the changing times and cultures across the globe. It is further emphasized in the context of dalit literature, given its uniqueness in its assertion for identity and social upliftment and also realistic portrayal of dalit experiences of suffering and anguish, as opposed to priority of beauty and pleasure being aesthetic values in mainstream literature, different artistic standards must be developed in the evaluation of dalit literature which calls for social liberation.

Dalit literature negates the pleasure giving sensation but prioritizes social consciousness and the suffering of the victim. Lived experience is another essential dimension in the portrayal of dalit life. Savarna’s claim for imagined experience to create dalit literature cannot fit into the lived experience of a dalit.

The experience of victimhood provides a negative vocabulary that tends to define the philosophical background condition for the emancipatory movement of those who have been the recipients of this experience (Guru 117).

Negative vocabulary used by dalit writers shows the world of their lived life with the Hindu society, which becomes a philosophical base for their social movements and



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literary aesthetics. Dalit writers have shaped their autobiographies from the lived lives of their humiliating past. Apart from poetry and short story, autobiographies have been produced immensely by the dalit writers from Maharashtra in 1970s onwards. Caste discrimination is a common problem, but writers lived experiences as individuals and their engagement with the mainstream society appear to be pluralistic given their linguistic, cultural and territorial differences. N.S. Suryavanshi's *Things I Never Mind* (1975), Daya Pawar's *Baluta* (1978), Narendra Jadav's *Out Caste: A Memoir* (2003), Sharankumar Limbale's *Akharmashi* (2003), Baby Kamble's *Prisons We Broke* (2008), the first woman dalit autobiography in Marathi, Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2008), from Maharashtra, Bama's *Karukku* (1992), Guna Sekhar's *The Scar* from Tamil Nadu, Siddha Lingaiah's *Oorukeri*, Aravind Malagatti's *The Government Brahmana* (1994- the first dalit autobiography in Kannada) from Karnataka and Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* in Hindi, Y.B. Satyanarayana's *My Father Balaiah* (2004) from Telangana, are some of the powerful dalit autobiographies treasured with variety of thematic concerns of lived lives of the authors. The above dalit autobiographies evolved out dalit consciousness, an important seed for dalit writing that reflects revolutionary mentality of the dalits connected with struggle. Dalit literature is demarcated as unique because of this conscious (Limbale 32).



Conclusion

Textualization of the lived experiences of dalits is based on Ambedkar's philosophical thoughts which are associated with Buddhist teachings and religion. Philosophy of Ambedkar laid foundation for dalit movements against cast system in India. Dalit literature is produced in different genres among which autobiography is chosen by dalit writers as a potential means for natural literary expression of their lived lives. This social documentation serves as their history and movement.

Sharankumar Limbale, a Marathi writer, introduced dalit aesthetics as a separate genre for literary production with dalit consciousness which is unique from the mainstream writing. "Dalit literature creates a conflict between the author and the reader for it appears rude in its language and expression"(Limbale np).The standard of dalit writing subverts the Hindu (aesthetic) concept of satyam, shivam sundaram being selfish mechanism of the privileged caste Hindu society and reconstructs it as equality, liberty, justice and fraternity. For dalit literary writing, philosophy gives the base while (dalit) aesthetics serves as an art of expression.

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