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## Dalit Literature: A Cognitive Journey

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*Abstract:* Dalit literature, a literary genre born out of the struggles of India's marginalized Dalit community, presents a unique cognitive journey that explores the collective consciousness, identity formation, and cognitive experiences of its authors. This paper analyzes Dalit literature from its evolution to the impact it brought upon society. The paper explores the various themes which Dalit literature incorporates such as trauma, resistance, identity crisis and caste oppression. The paper also examines the transformative journey which Dalit writing undertook and changing perceptions of society. The emergence of various Dalit writers and their accompanied efforts to bring Dalit literature on the forefront is a remarkable achievement. Ultimately, this paper aims to illuminate the profound significance of Dalit literature in challenging existing prejudices, empowering marginalized voices, and fostering a deeper understanding of social inequality.

*Keywords:* Dalit literature, identity crisis, caste oppression, trauma, resistance.

### INTRODUCTION

The term 'Dalit' refers to a particular group or community in India, which have been ostracized, exploited and humiliated due caste structure and social order ardently followed in India. The etymology of the word 'Dalit' can be traced to the root word *dal* in Sanskrit and *dalan* in Hindi meaning 'broken down' or 'broken to pieces.' It is believed that Jotibarao Phule (1826-90) first used the term to describe condition of outcastes and untouchables in India. Later, B.R. Ambedkar popularized the term as he used it profusely in his speeches and writings in Marathi. The term gained new meaning in 1970s, a period of literary and cultural boom that witnessed the birth of Dalit literature and in the present, the term refers to belated recognition of the Dalit's militant claims upon a history of humiliation and suffering (Rao, 11). Dalit literature emerged as a new term for literature of the marginalized. For centuries it remained speechless but later became vocalized through Poems, Dramas, Short narratives, Novels, Critical Essays, Biographies, Autobiographies and Historical writings. These expressions were not fictitious but rather their own realities. The major issue, which led to the emergence of Dalit literature is identity crisis. The term 'Dalit' became synonymous with Negroes/Black in Afro-America, the Aborigines in Australia and the Maoris in New Zealand. Prominent Dalit literary figures includes authors like Baburao Bagul, Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar, Sharankumar Limbale and many others. Their works delve into the theme of caste oppression, untouchability, social disparity, cultural cruelty and economic injustice. These writings provide a unique perspective on the realities of caste-based discrimination and the quest for equality and dignity. As Baburao Bagul wrote,

*"Dalit Sahitya 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 an historic necessity... Anguish, waiting, pronouncements of sorrow alone do not define Dalit Sahitya. We need literature heroically full of life to create a new society."*

At its core, Dalit literature is not just a literary movement; it is a cognitive journey that challenges prevailing norms, confronts deep-rooted prejudices, and dismantles oppressive structures. Through their writings, Dalit authors aim to dismantle the prevailing narratives that have historically silenced their voices and redefine their identity on their own terms. This cognitive journey takes readers on an emotional and intellectual exploration of the Dalit experience, exposing the harsh realities of caste-based discrimination, poverty, and social ostracization. Themes of intergenerational trauma, resilience, and hope weave through the narratives, offering a profound understanding of the struggles faced by the community and its unyielding spirit to overcome adversity.

## I. EVOLUTION OF DALIT LITERATURE:

### 1.1 EARLY VOICES OF DISSENT

The evolution of Dalit literature is a journey of resilience, resistance, and assertion of identity by the marginalized communities in India. It emerged as a response to centuries of social and economic oppression faced by Dalits. The seeds of Dalit literature were sown in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century during social reform movements led by visionary figures like Jyotirao Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. They were among the first to challenge the oppressive caste system and advocate for the rights and dignity of Dalits. Phule's Marathi work "Gulamgiri" and Ambedkar's writings on social justice laid the foundation for the subsequent evolution of dalit literature.

### 1.2 LITERARY RENAISSANCE AND BEYOND

The post-independence era witnessed the emergence of a new generation of Dalit writers who sought to document the Dalit experience and challenge the dominating caste narratives. Dalit writers during this period emphasized the importance of asserting Dalit identity. Writers like Baburao Bagul (Marathi) and Premchand (Hindi) gained prominence for their powerful portrayals of Dalit lives and struggles. The autobiographical narratives and testimonies recounted the experiences of discrimination and oppression. The narratives such as "Joothan" by Omprakash Valmiki (Hindi) and "My Father Balliah" by Y. B. Satyanarayana (Telugu), shed light on the harsh realities faced by Dalits, providing a human face to the issues of social exclusion and untouchability. "Joothan" encapsulates the pain of poverty, humiliation, and the atrocities on Dalits. Arun P Mukherjee, Professor of English, York University, Toronto, translated *Joothan* into English during 1997-2002. Jootha means "polluted" food that associated with animals. It portrays the struggle between Chuhra (Dalits) and upper caste Tagas of Barla. Mukherjee says, "It was speaking of my corner of India, in my first language, Hindi, in a way that no other text had ever spoken to me." Influential poets like Namdeo Dhasal (Marathi), Gogu Shyamala (Telugu) and Meena Kandaswamy (Tamil) used powerful imagery and emotionally laden verses to articulate the pain, resistance and aspirations of Dalit communities. Writers like Sivakami (Tamil) Kalyani Thakur Charal (Hindi) and Bama (Tamil) gained international acclaim for their novels, which brought Dalit women's experience to the forefront. Gail Omvedt (1987), in her article "Dalit literature in Maharashtra: Literature of Social and Protest and Revolt in Western India," claimed that, "though Dalit literature as 'movement' began only in the late 1960s and early 1970s, one of the most important Dalit writers and a major forerunner of the movement was Annabhau Sathe (1920-1968). He was a writer of diverse forms. His novels

*and short stories remain avidly read even today, and in fact up to the present no equivalent Dalit novelist has emerged."*

## II. REPRESENTATION OF TRAUMA AND RESISTANCE:

Trauma is the prevalent theme of Dalit literature as it reflects the lived experiences of Dalit individuals who have endured discrimination, caste-based violence, and social exclusion. Many Dalit writers draw on their personal experiences and the experiences of their community members to portray the trauma they have undergone. These narratives are often raw, intense, and unapologetic, giving readers a glimpse into the harsh realities faced by Dalit people. "Joothan: A Dalit's Life" by Omprakash Valmiki is an autobiographical work which chronicles the life of Omprakash Valmiki, a Dalit poet and writer, and his experiences growing up in a Dalit community. The book portrays the trauma faced by Valmiki and other Dalits due to the discriminatory treatment, poverty, and humiliation they endured in their daily lives. He was beaten, humiliated, and denied access to education. In the novel *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand, the protagonist, Bakha, is subjected to physical and verbal abuse from members of the upper castes. He is also forced to do manual labor that is physically demanding and degrading. In the novel *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, the character of Velutha is a Dalit man who is in love with a woman from an upper-caste family. Their relationship is forbidden, and Velutha is eventually killed by members of the upper caste.

In addition to portraying trauma, Dalit literature also celebrates resistance and resilience. It showcases the strength and determination of the Dalit community to assert their identity, reclaim their history, and challenge the oppressive caste system. Dalit literature emphasizes the importance of asserting Dalit identity with pride and challenging the notion of untouchability that has been used to marginalize them. Education plays a significant role in Dalit literature as writers highlight how education has become a tool for empowering Dalits and enabling them to fight against discrimination. In "The Prisons We Broke" by Baby Kamble a Dalit writer and social activist, recounts her journey of resistance against caste-based oppression. It highlights her efforts to break free from the chains of discrimination and the discrimination faced by the Dalit community as a whole. "Annihilation of Caste" by B.R. Ambedkar is a powerful text in which Dr. B.R. Ambedkar fiercely advocates for the annihilation of the caste system. He calls for the Dalit community to resist the centuries-old social hierarchy and advocates for the establishment of an egalitarian society based on principles of equality and justice. Diverse range of Dalit literature that reflects the spirit of resistance among Dalits and their efforts to reclaim their agency, dignity, and voice in society. Through their literary expressions, Dalit writers challenge the status quo and contribute to the larger struggle for social justice and equality.

## III. LANGUAGE AND EXPRESSION:

Language and literary expression provides a powerful and unique tool reflecting the experience, struggles and aspirations of Dalit community. Dalit literature often employs vernacular languages, regional dialects, and colloquial expressions rather than the dominant literary languages. This choice of language is intentional, as it allows writers to connect more intimately with their readers and express their experiences in a way that is authentic and relatable. Dalit literature frequently draws on personal narratives and experiences, which provides an insight into the lived realities of Dalit lives and trauma faced by Dalits. The use of regional languages represents a conscious act of resistance against the dominance of mainstream languages, which have historically perpetuated hegemonic narratives. Writing in regional languages offers an alternative space to challenge and subvert the hegemonic discourse. Using vernacular language helps in articulation of stories, experiences and perspectives in their own words, which provides a sense of pride and self-affirmation. Dalit literature in regional

language carries a more nuanced and authentic expression of lived realities, capturing the essence of local cultures and dialects. This essence is lost or diluted in translation in mainstream language.

Bill Ashcroft aptly writes,

*"Marginality becomes an unprecedented source of creative energy". The literature by the Burakumin of Japan, Backjeong of Korea, Midgan of Somalia, Dalits of India are living instances of this phenomenon. They explore the underbelly of the society in a diction that subverts the middle-class concepts of linguistic etiquette and standard". (Ashcroft 1998)*

Through the emergence of Dalit literature, there was a new writing or language which was direct, accusatory, analytical and which dared to challenge the century old myths, traditions and practices. Namdeo Dhasal's iconic poem in Dilip Chitre's translation: Cruelty

*"I am a venereal sore in the private part of the 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. There's no moon light anywhere; There's no water anywhere. A rabid fox is tearing off my flesh with its teeth; And a terrible venom-like cruelty" (Chitre 2007)*

Dalit writing is accused of foul language having venomous sarcasm. The ideology of Dalit writing is sacrilegious. The muse is loud, verbose, and onerous. The diction is unfigurative, coarse and even vulgar as it expresses their feeling of being beleaguered. The language and expression in Dalit literature become transformative tools in advocating social change and building a more inclusive and just society.

#### IV. TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF DALIT LITERATURE:

##### 4.1 GIVING VOICE TO THE MARGINALIZED

Dalit literature provides a platform for the marginalized to voice their experiences and perspective, which have been suppressed or ignored. By sharing their stories, Dalit writers and poets empower their communities, break the silence surrounding caste-based discrimination and challenges the dominant narratives that perpetuates social inequality. It is apparent that various themes of creative literature stem from society; so, when political leaders, social reformers, and religious preachers set out to address the problems of Dalits, those who were well read and literate immediately took them in. Many of them attempted to express the problems of untouchability and caste discrimination through their works. As a result, Dalit works in general were embraced because literature became a channel for expressing grief and, more importantly, a means of overcoming historical injustice. Arjun Dangle writes,

*"The creation of Dalit literature is inevitable until the structure of the society changes as long as exploitation exists" (Dangle 1992)*

##### 4.2 CHALLENGING OPPRESSIVE SOCIAL NORMS

Dalit literature fearlessly confronts questions and subverts the deep rooted caste-based hierarchies, untouchability and systematic oppression. It subverts the dominant narratives that perpetuate caste-based stereotypes and prejudices. Dalit writers offer alternative perspectives and presents multi-dimensional characters through which they challenge the misrepresentation perpetuated by dominant castes. Dr. C. B. Bharati writes:

*"The aim of Dalit Literature is to protest against the established system which is based on injustice and to expose the evil and hypocrisy of the higher castes. There is an urgent need to create a separate aesthetics for Dalit literature, an aesthetics based on the real experiences of life."*

Through the portrayal of social injustices and disparities, Dalit literature lays bare the inequalities that persist in society. The literature acts as a mirror, reflecting the harsh realities. Dalit literature serves as a catalyst for change. It sparks critical conversations, collective action towards building a society free from caste-based oppression and discrimination.

## 4.3 INTERSECTIONALITY OF STEREOTYPICAL IDENTITIES

The intersectionality of stereotypical identities refers to the overlapping of multiple marginalized identities. This concept recognizes that people experience discrimination and oppression not just based on a single characteristic, but rather due to the combination of various aspects of their identity, such as race, gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, disability etc. Dalit women experience a unique form of discrimination that results from the intersection of both caste and gender. Intersectionality sheds light on how these intersecting identities create unique and complex experiences faced by dalit women. Dalit women suffer violence from all sides and corners including their own family. Violence inflicted on Dalit women highlights the "incongruence between Dalit women's reality and the universal right of women to freedom from any gender-based violence that results in physical, sexual or psychological harm" (Irudayam , 2014) In actuality, Dalit women are oppressed by upper-caste men, upper-caste women and Dalit men. Dalit women writers use their personal narratives to portray and protest against this existing oppressive network of relationships.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Dalit literature stands as a testament to the resilience and determination of the marginalized Dalit community in India. It represents a profound cognitive journey undertaken by its authors, who utilize the power of words to challenge systemic discrimination, reclaim their identities, and assert their rightful place in society. The cognitive journey of Dalit literature is deeply intertwined with the process of identity formation and self-representation. This literature becomes a means of empowerment, allowing Dalit individuals and communities to forge a stronger sense of self and embrace their unique cultural heritage. Moreover, Dalit literature serves as a compelling medium of resistance, voicing dissent against age-old caste-based oppression. The narratives of struggle, resilience, and emancipation found in these literary works not only empower the Dalit community but also enlighten readers from all backgrounds, fostering a greater understanding of the enduring legacy of discrimination and the urgency of combating it. However, while Dalit literature continues to gain recognition and acclaim, it still faces challenges in gaining widespread acceptance in mainstream literary circles. The need for continued support, recognition, and inclusion of Dalit voices remains imperative to ensure that their cognitive journey resonates across all echelons of society.

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