



POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION OF DALITS IN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Literature is the powerful tool for propagating the ideology. It has been perpetually used to persuade or dissuade the masses from one ideology to other. Literary hegemony had been overtly and covertly in action to institutionalise oppression since ages. Being a country of varied cultures, India has been facing the problem of inequality and atrocities. Dalit is the political term voicing the atrocities on marginalised masses in India. Since the time immemorial, literary texts in India have deliberately neglected Dalits. They were either given no representation or portrayed as useless untouchables in master narratives of Indian social order. With the arrival of British the condition began to change culminating in humanitarian attempts by some writers under the influence of Gandhian ideology. Post-independence era witnessed a great change with the advent of Dalit writers on Indian literary scenario. The present paper intends to explore the texts from ancient religious tradition, texts of Bhakti movement, texts of Pre-independence era and texts of Post-independence era to find out the extent of representation given to Dalits in literature and thereby bring out the politics of representation in literature.

Key Words: Politics of representation, Dalits, Hegemony, Master narratives of social order.

INTRODUCTION

Literature facilitates discussion about the politics of the victors as well as about that of the vanquished. It is a powerful tool to represent the marginalised groups. It has been the most effective instrument for destabilising politically powerful and ideologically dominant hegemonic forces. Untold experiences of marginalised sections are offered visibility through literature. "Literature according to Sartre "is a tool, with dual action: first, it mirrors the oppressor and second, it guides and inspires the oppressed".

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1P a g e



Among many extant binaries in the universe, the constant struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed is rightly identified and analysed by the modern intellectual world. The oppressed would seek the relief from dictatorial clasp of the oppressors, who, in turn would use their power and intellect for the sustenance of their authority. “When you are the oppressor you see the tears of blood.” (Cheran: 71) The oppressors, people with power and the oppressed, people sans power are archetypal representatives of human psyche, irrespective of time and place.

Oppressed groups are socially, linguistically, culturally and politically outside the hegemonic power structure of the contemporary society. India, being the country of varied cultures and diverse religions, had been constantly witnessing the struggle between the oppressors and the oppressed. The hegemonic power structure institutionalised a hierarchy of social structure turning Indian psyche into pervert system of inequality and atrocities. The perversity culminated in the form of legalised social system that had thrown oppressed groups outside society reducing them to a low status which was no better than that of animals. These groups were outside Varna system which formed ancient Indian society. Having deprived of social status and human rights, these groups became powerless and branded untouchables during the course of time.

Dalits are the most oppressed, depressed, tortured, butchered, and deliberately unheeded masses struggling for existence since ancient times in India. They were denied existence and reduced merely to the state of slaves. The Hegemony of *Vedas* did allow anybody to question the social order. *Dharmasastras* were powerful enough to justify their miserable state with all illogical conceptions like ‘past sins’ and ‘God’s will’.

Dalit is a political term denoting socially, economically and culturally oppressed people who were reduced to the miserable state under a well-planned political agenda. This agenda was propagated through ancient Vedic literature, well supported by later texts like *Puranas*, *Brahmanas*, *Tantras*, *Sanhitas*, *Smritis* and *epics*. Literature in modern times gave voice to the plight of Dalits and forced the cruel society to accept them as the humans. Modern theorists point out the politics rooted in the literature. History points to the politics of power for miserable state of particular groups. Majumdar, Roy, Chaudhri and Kalingar Datta observe, “White hued Aryan invaders were marked out from their dark skinned opponents, who were called *dasa*, *dasyu* or *sudra*”. (26) The Aryans settled in India giving rise to the Vedic literature. The Vedas were entitled to be *Apaurusheya* (divine). Hence, they could not be questioned. Their authority was unique. This was the politics of establishing supremacy of a one group over others. What was believed to be absolute truth is misleading according many scholars.



The whole character of these compositions and the circumstances under which, from internal evidence, they appear to have arisen, are in harmony with the supposition that they were nothing more than the natural expression of the personal hopes and feelings of those ancient bards of whom they were first recited. In these songs the Aryan sages celebrated the praises of their ancestral gods (while at the same time they sought to conciliate their goodwill by a variety of oblations supposed to be acceptable to them), and besought of them all the blessings which men in general desired—health, wealth, long life, cattle, offspring, victory over their enemies, forgiveness of sin, and in some cases also celestial felicity. (Muir 49)

The earliest known atheists, Charvak in *Sarv Darshan Sangraha* argues “agnihotra, etc., are only useful as means of livelihood: for the Veda is tainted by three faults of untruth, self-contradiction, and tautology” (Ambedker: 50) Texts that followed Vedas helped to propagate what Vedas originally intended. Ambedler writes, “The ritual of the *Tantras* of the ‘Daksinacharins’, however, is said to be pure and in harmony with the Vedas, while that of the ‘Vamacharins’ is intended only for Shudras” (80).

Upanishads are the philosophical texts of greater value. They also speak of ‘Sudras’ in derogatory terms. In *Chandagya Upanishad* Chandala is compared to a dog. *The Ramayana* speaks of Rama as the Maryada Purushottama. He is presented as the best man who acts righteously in all circumstances. The text refers to multiple groups of Rakshas whom Rama slays. Rakshas were independent tribal groups residing in the ‘Aranyas’ (forests). They are deliberately portrayed as the monsters. Ramayana does not refer to any Rakshasa entering the land of Ram to trouble them. In fact, Ram keeps on moving from one place to another meeting and slaying these tribal people. *The Ramayana* also speaks of a Sudra called Shabuka. He was the man who sought devotion of almighty. A Brahmin after his son’s death argues that his son died because a Sudra is indulged praying almighty, a highly condemnable act according to him. Maryada Purushottama, Rama after learning this ruthlessly beheads Shambuka.

Mahabharata is the most celebrated and most popular text. It is one of the master narratives of Indian social order. It speaks of the story of Parashurama, the legendary wrathful sage. When his father asks him to kill his mother, he obediently beheads her. Later, she is brought back to life by placing the head of a ‘Matangini’ (low caste woman) on her body. This dramatic incident narrates the story of a father, his obedient son and the poetic justice at the end but it does not speak anything about the Matangini who was killed to save Parshurama’s mother.

Dharma according to Geeta is “*Tasmat Shastram Karyakarya vyawasthito*” (That works according to Sastras). Literature of the Bhakti tradition that emerged in Maharashtra during



medieval times could not speak about the plight of the Dalits. “Saints could not dare to show the spirit of speaking against Hindu religious traditions i.e. against the theocracy of Purohit Brahmins”. (Meshram: 56)

The saint movement begins with the advent of **Dnyaneshwara** (1271-1296), the author of most celebrated text *Bhawart Deepika*, the commentary on *Geetha*. Geeta, Hindu sacred text is the source of inspiration for his philosophy. Dnyaneshwara writes,

Sastrachi ek praman tuj (Sastra is the only proof)

Karyakarya viweki/ sastrechi karawi parahki//

(Good or bad action should be judged according to Sastras)

Sandhai shudragrahi aaghavi/jarhi pakwanne atithi karavi

Tiye dwije kewi sewawi/ Dubla jarhe// (3-216)

(Though there is delicious food cooked at the house of Sudras, others should not consume it).

Nana chadal stri mandarasi/ aaleya sanyasyapasi

Maj laj jaisi Uttama teya (16-175)

(It is extremely shameful to see a Chandala women coming to Sanyasi).

Aata tamasache ling/ aumkhal chang/

Dawleya matang/ sadane jaisa (18-548)

(One should avoid the house of Matang though it is good)

Pai dwijesi parauti dhawane nahi Sudrate/

evm chaturvarnyachi uchite dawili karme (18-880)

(Sudra should serve others, that is his only duty shown by Chaturvarnas)

Chokhamela (1265-1368) is another poet of Bhakti movement. He is the maiden Dalit representative commonly referred to as Chokha Mahar. His writings initially show some resentment but later he becomes the part of the traditional social psyche under the influence of earlier religious scriptures. He writes,

Heen yati mazi deva / kaise ghede tuzi seva //

Maj door door ho mhanati / tuz bhetu kawnya riti //

(Oh God my caste is low / how can I serve thee?

They ask me to go away / what is the way to meet thee?)

Khatnat yawe shudh houni jawe/ dawandi piti gawe Chokhamela//

(Anybody may come to return purified, loudly says Chokhamela)

Lihale sanchiti te na chuke kalpanti / waagi ka bhranti dharu jiwi//

(Fate cannot be escaped, why I should be speculating.)

Ekknath (1533-1599) was a caste borne saint popularly known for his affection for the oppressed. His writings too do not show any concern to change the atrocious social order. He writes,

Jaisi stithi ahe taishapari rahe / kautuk tu pahe sanchitache //

(One should live in the state one is borne, behold the gift of past actions)

Jaya je je dharm taya te te karm / na karita adharm sahaj lage//

(Your assigned work is your Dharma, if you deny it you are the sinner)

Raya rakshawe go brahman / karawe dushtanche nirdalan / paripalan sadhunche //

(Mighty people should protect cows and Brahmins, destroy the sinners and nourish the Sadhus)

Aapapula dharm naacharati lok /Apik dharati pik na hoye.

(If the people do not act according to their Dharma, the land will become barren and would not yield any crop)

Tukaram (1592-1650) belongs to the later tradition of Bhakti Sampradaya (community). His language is derogatory but philosophy is that of the earlier texts. He says,

Abhakt to brahman jalo tyache tond / kaya tyachi rand prasawali //

(Let non-devoted Brahmin's face burn. Why was he borne?)

Jari Brahman zala karmbhrasht / Tuka mhane shreshth tinhi loki //

(Though corrupt, Brahmin is great in three worlds)

Thewile anante taisechi rahawe / Chiiti asu dyave samadhan //

(One should live in the state one is borne and be happy)

Ramdas (1657-1700) is believed to the contemporary of Chatrapati Shivaji, the Maratha king. He seems to support and enliven the Veda tradition. He writes,

Antyaj shabddnyata barawa / pari to neuni kaya karawa

Brahamana saniddh pujawa / he to na ghade ki //

(Though a low caste is intelligent, he cannot be respected like a Brahmin).

Gurutwa aale neech yati / kahi ek wadhali mahati

Shudra achar budwiti Brahmanancha //

(Though a low caste borne becomes teacher, it doesn't add to glory: Sudras destroy righteousness of Brahmins).

Guru to sakalanshi brahman / jari to zala kriyaheen

Tari tayashi sharan / ananya gawe asawe/

(Brahmin is the universal teacher / all should yield to him though is non-active)



Ambedkar observes,

“No saint attacked caste system. In fact, they believed in the caste discrimination. They took birth and died in the same caste. They never propagated equality”. (Compilation of Dalit Literature)

Caste politics is predominant in the saint movement. The very titles by which saints are addressed indicate the political agenda of the upper caste ideology. All the low caste born saints are popularly known by their castes, as- Chokha-Mahar, Gora-Kumbhar, Sawata-Mali, Rohidas-Chambhar, Nama-Shimpi while those who are caste born are known by their salutation as- Dnaneshwar –Mauli / Maharaj, Eknath-Swami, Ramdas Swami.

“Pallu literature” is identified as Dalit literature in Tamil Nadu. Right from the ancient days, the Pallars are associated with agriculture. They were peasants. They had the habit of singing songs while working. This relieved them of the fatigue. A similar tradition can be seen Maharashtra. It is referred to as Bhallari, probably identical with Pallars. Bhallarais are not philosophical compositions. They are thematically occasional songs describing day today life of the peasants.

There is also a group of Non-Dalit writers who contributed to Dalit literature. Prominent among them are Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry, Vikas Swarup and Aravind Adiga. *Potheri Kunhambu*, a novel by Saraswati Vijayam, originally written in Malayalam and later translated into English by Dilip Menon, speaks about the plight and suffering of Dalits and criticises the caste system. Mulk Raj Anand could publish his first novel, “Untouchable” (1935) only after being rejected by more than a dozen publishers. He went on to write *Coolie* (1936), *Two Leaves and a Bud* (1937), *The Old Woman and the Cow* (1960), and *The Road* (1961) after the success of *Untouchable*. Anand seems to have realized the pains, frustrations and aspirations of Dalits. He further seems to be working under the influence of Gandhi who undoubtedly worked for the welfare of Dalits. *Untouchable* exposes the evil effects of untouchability and social, moral, psychological, philosophical aspects of it. E.M. Forster observes,

The sweeper is worse off than a slave, for the slave may change his master and his duties and may even become free, but the sweeper is bound to his master and forever born into a state, from which he cannot escape and where he is excluded from social inter course and the consolation of his religion. Unclean himself, he pollutes others when he touches them. (E. M. Forster iv)

Shanta Rameswar Rao’s *Children of God* (1976) puts Dalits at the centre and presents a down-to-earth picture of caste oppression. Dalits had never protested against their ill-treatment for many centuries, until powerful leaders rose up from among their ranks to



inspire them to fight. Dangle points out, “Dalit literature is marked by revolt and negativism, since it closely associated with the hopes for freedom by a group of people who as untouchables, are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality”. (qtd. Mukherjee: 1)

Today, Dalit literature is a powerful form of literary expression. It has acquired a position of prestige. Dalit characters and Dalit experiences are the major concerns of Dalit writers. Modern Dalit literature under the influence of Ambedkar’s charismatic leadership and post-modern literary theories questions the upper class ideologies and focuses the neglected areas. Dalit literature is essentially against exploitation, and made use of writing as a method of propaganda for the movement. They are rebellious, both thematically and stylistically.

Tamil Dalit writing begins with the publication of Bama’s Karukku (1992) in which Bama narrates her trajectory in the caste-ridden society. Bama says,

We must be strong. We must show by our own resolute lives that we believe ardently in our independence. I told myself that we must never allow our minds to be worn out, damaged, and broken in the belief that this is our fate. Just as we work hard so long as there is strength in our bodies, so too, must we strengthen our hearts and minds in order to survive. (59)

Others who contribute to Dalit literature with a view of improving Dalit life in Tamil are Poonami, Prathiba Jeyachandran, Mathivannan, Indran, P. Mathialagan, N.D.Rajkumar, Ravikumar, Kabilan, A.Vincent Raj, Thai. Kandasamy, S. Sukirtharani, Ku. Umadevi, S. Thenmozhi, Yazhan Aathi, Bharathi Nivethan, Imayam. Azhakiya Periyavan, J.B. Sanakya, Abirami, Cho. Dharuman, M. Jeeva, Veerammal, Anbu Ponnoviam, Raj Gautaman, Ra. Athiyaman, P. Sivakami, Stalin Rajangam.

The man who brought glory to the literary world of Maharashtra was Annabhau Sathe (1920-1969). He was a born low caste. He went to school for a day and half. Being an untouchable, he was asked to sit outside the class. Enraged, he left the school never to see it again. This man went on to write 35 novels, 15 collections of short stories, a play, 12 screenplays, and 10 ballads. He was a communist political activist. He asserted in the great rebellious spirit that “The earth does not rest on the hood of ‘Shesha’ (the snake) but on the palms of the labourers”. In one of his poems he says, “*Jag badal ghaluni ghav, maj sangun gele Bhimrao*”. (Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar told me change the world by hitting hard).

Fakira is his most celebrated novel named after its protagonist, a low caste (Mang) who fights against the British as well as against selfish hypocritical caste people who support them. It was a successful attempt to make Mangas proud of their caste. Maharashtrian Mang otherwise called Matang are running a social movement under the title “Fakira Brigade”. *Waranecha Wagh* is another celebrated novel by Sathe. Most of his novels depict rural life.



He writes in his own unique style. Some of his works have been translated into English, others are being translated.

Marginalised groups are generally given no representation in literary texts. They are not thought worthy to be mentioned as humans. Wherever they are depicted, they are depicted with contempt in the books written by caste people. Texts of pre-British era do not give much representation to Dalit people. They are mentioned to compare worse things in the society. Pre-independence era however, seems to be kindled with the feeling of sympathy for Dalits. Their writings were influenced by Gandhian ideology. One of the remarkable characteristic features of these writings is that they were all caste people writing for and about Dalits. True representation of Dalits can be seen in the Dalit texts by Dalit writers, who write with revolutionary force. This literature is labelled as the protest literature.

Dalit autobiographies are the most popular trend developed in Maharashtra which brought a great deal of change in the literary world. The hallmark of these texts is that they are realistic portrayal of the experiences of the narrator. These seem to have served multiple purposes. On the one hand, it gave vent to the sufferings of the writers and on the other hand it could force people to understand the plight of the oppressed communities. The characters in these texts are neither heroic nor villainous. They are real humans affecting or shaping the lives and thought processes of the writers.

Daya pawar, (Mahar) wrote his autobiography under the title *Baluta*, translated in Hindi, German and Italian. He speaks of his life in Mumbai and in village. He further speaks of his experiences in a revolutionary way. However, this is the fact of life. It has to be accepted. In addition, the established caste people are responsible for all the sinful thoughts and actions portrayed in the book. The society will not allow them to lead a normal life. The complications of life are so great that mere imagination more painful than the death. The aim of this book is definitely to propagate anti-hegemonic ideology. "The book would open our eyes to new truths of life and lead us closer to humanity. What else is the purpose of literature?" (P L Deshpande).

Laxman Gaikwad's (Pathrut) wrote his autobiography entitled *Uchalya*, translated into English as *The Branded*. The language of narration in this text is exactly as the language of the people of 'Pathrut' community. The humiliation and the atrocities these people have to undergo are beyond imagination of a common man. 'Uchalya' literally means, 'one who picks'. This is a community of the people whose business is to pick pockets. They are branded thieves. They are tortured by caste people on one side and by police on the other side.

Dhondamai knew nothing about the theft. Police repeated asked Dhondamai grasping her hair and breast,



“Where are the stolen things? Police took my brother away and asked for two hundred rupees. Dhondamai sold all the goats and gave money to police and brought my brother back”. (12)

Laxman Mane, (Kaikadi) wrote his autobiography known as *Upara* translated into English as *The outsider*. ‘Upara’ literally means one who is not the native. Kaikadis are the people who keep on moving from one place to another to earn their livelihood and to graze their donkeys. Realism is common feature of all Dalit autobiographies. The language used by the people in these communities is the language Mane used in the text. Enraged father shouts at his son “Lakshya tuzya mayala gadhav lagu de (let the donkey fuck your mother). Author seems to be careless of moral code of conduct in the society. In fact, every time there is an attempt to show that he does not care for traditional idea of morality.

Sharankumar Limbale (mixed caste) wrote *Akkarmashi* translated into English as *The Outcaste*. It is the story of a boy born of a ‘Mahar’ woman and ‘Lingayat’ man. Thus, he becomes an outcaste. He has to undergo tremendous humiliations first as a ‘Mahar’ and then as an ‘Akkarmashi’. As a single parent child of an untouchable he had to live in extreme poverty which reduced him to think of nothing else but the next meal. The book raises the ultimate question in social ethics, namely, What is morality?

Kishor Kale (Kolhati) penned his autobiography as *Kolhatyach por* translated into English as *Against all Odds*. It is the story of a boy borne to a ‘kolhati’ girl. As he did not know the name of his father, he uses his mother’s name. His brother uses his grandfather’s name. It is a heart-melting story that takes us into a strange world where men enjoy life on the income of women. He further points out to certain cruel realities which make us cold as stone. He points to the hypocrite caste people who go to prostitutes as the enjoyment and their sons to their daughters born to these prostitutes.

Thus, the modern Dalit writers show their undaunted spirit to inquire into the established norms of morality, ethics and institutionalised hegemony of the caste people exposing them as the hypocrites of the first water. This makes Dalit literature protest literature. They protest against every atrocious institutionalised structure and principles. Unlike the authors of Gandhian times, they do not appeal to the reasoning of the caste people, but they stand in rebellion against them for their fights. They talk about the neglected aspects of life. Their literature is experience based rather than speculative. Authenticity and liveliness becomes the hallmark of their writings. Their writings become political in nature because it threatens the Brahminic hegemony, persuade Dalit masses for protest, and force Dalit intellectuals to think.



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