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# The Journey Of “Dalits” From Dalit Writing To Visual Art: An Illustration

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**ABSTRACT:** The paper deals with the exploration of Dalit writing to the aesthetics of film culture. It is a study on the journey from the Dalit literary genre to the cinematic creation of the Dalit exponent. Dalit literature of today tends to be more realistic as it is the expression of first hand experiences, which the Dalit had been confronting in their life. This paper aims to throw light on the presence of Dalit realities which is not only restraint to movement but also to literature and visual arts. But it is believed that the upper caste Brahmanical society has been dealing with the Dalits inferiorly, and their representation of Dalits in the art and culture is misinterpreted. Because of their preconceived notion about Dalits, the upper castes writers and directors from the big cities often portrays Dalit issues in a biased way for which the actual display of Dalit injustice remains always blur. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to showcase the vulnerability of the representation of Dalits in the society through art and literature.

**Keywords:** Dalits, untouchable, film, Dalit literature.

## INTRODUCTION

The term ‘Dalit’ literally means ‘oppressed’ and is considered to be a class subjected to untouchables, downtrodden and discriminated from the mainstream society of India. Etymologically, the word ‘dalit’ comes from the Sanskrit which means ‘crushed’ or ‘broken of pieces’. In society, Dalits have been designated to a certain class of work which is inferior to the others, such as manual laborers, butcher, animal carcasses and waste and sewers, by the upper class Hindu society. There are many different names proposed for defining this group of people like ‘Ashprosh’ (Untouchable), ‘Harijans’ (Children of God) ‘Dalits, (Broken People) etc.

The origin of caste system is in India. The caste system divides Hindus into four groups based on their karma which means works and dharma. These four main categories are –Brahmins (teachers and intellectuals), Kshatriyas(rulers and fighters), Vaishyas(traders), Shudras(low graded workers).Beside these four categories there is one more category which is known as

Untouchables or Dalits. They are actually moved out from this caste system. In India the people who are related with polluting, unclean, dirty and shameful occupations are seen as polluting people and therefore known as untouchables. Untouchables had no right in the society. People of India were believed that the people born as untouchables as their punishment for the misbehavior of previous life. An untouchable cannot lift to a higher caste within that lifetime.

The social revolutionary struggle became the origin of Dalit literature. In the twentieth century after the colonialism, a democratic movement arose that wanted a fair society where human would be on the same ground irrespective of their caste, color and nations. The revolution was a challenged to the caste system which is the main factor behind the social oppression and the injustice to the Dalit people for ages. Social reformers like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule raised their voice against the oppression and discrimination faced by this section of society. Literature became the prominent medium to explore and address the issues and difficulties of the Dalits.

## **EMERGENCE OF DALIT LITERATURE**

The term 'Dalit literature' first came into its usage in 1958, at the very first ever Dalit conference in Bombay. However, the term 'Dalit' made its recognition in 1972 referring to the identity of a particular community, when a group of young Marathi writers-activists founded an organization called Dalit panthers. Maharashtra was the breeding ground for Dalit literature because of the collaboration as well as the rise of movements like Black Panther in the US and the Indian Naxalite movements. At that time, periodicals became a platform for the Dalit writers to create a genre of literary movement in order to represent the Dalit reality. Dalit literature is a new phenomenon in the modern era of literature which represents Dalit's plight, their issues and grievances across the globe in multiple regional languages. The origin of the Dalit writers mainly belongs to the vernacular regions, in this regard; translation plays a significant role to act as a carrier to make the world aware of their Dalit situation in living a life with the common mass.

Primarily, Marathi Language was the torchbearer for Dalit literature, later several other dialects became prominent after 1960s. During the 1980s, Gujarati language turned to be a solid genre after the anti reservation movement in Gujarat. Major Dalit writers who have explored this genre of literature to the world are namely, Baburao Bagul, Namdeo Dhasal, Sharan Kumar Limbale, Yashwant Manohar, Arjun Dangle, Daya Pawar and Shankarrao Karat. These writers were both revolutionary and literary and became a major encouragement to Indian Dalit authors and became the "voice of the voiceless". Mulk Raj Anand was the first to cover Dalit literature through his novels like "Untouchable", "Coolie" in English. It mainly focuses on creating awareness of Dalits about their social situation in

the society, to all conscious readers. Dalit writing has a wide variety of literary genres like Dalit poetry, Dalit folk poetry, Dalit short stories and Dalit auto narratives. Narayan survey was one of the prominent poets in the early Dalit literature whose famous poem was "Vidhyapith". There are other poets like Keshav Meshram's "Utkhanan" (Excavation), Daya Pawar's "Kondwada" (suffocating Enclosure), Nandedo Dhasal's "Golpitha" (The Red Light zone), Triyambak Sapkal's "Surung" (dynamite) and so on. In the contemporary period the new generation of Dalit poetry emerged as a revolt against the oppressive traditional restraints. Unlike the tremendous Dalit poetry as a powerful mean of Dalit expressions, folk poetry too practiced for promoting Dalit sensibility. The folk poetry includes Ballads which captivated the common people of Dalit community. Dalit writers mostly interpreted their own experiences about social injustice in their own autobiographies which is called Dalit Auto-narrative. The short stories like Anna Bhau sathe's "Fakira", Shankarrao kharat's "Davandi", Baburao Bagul's "Jevah Mi Jaat Chorli Hoti" (When I robbed a caste) 1963 "Maran Swast Hot Aahe" 1969 (Death is becoming cheap), N. G. Shende's "Red stone" are the best examples of Dalit short stories by Dalit writers.

By depicting the exploitive, helpless, and engrossed with grief, suppressed and enslaved and a subaltern state Dalit literature makes the entire world aware about their status in society. Dalit author questioned religion and Identity throughout their literature. Today Dalit writers have their literary foundation with ideology and publish numerous journals. Dalit literature is a new phenomenon today and with great amaze, people fascinate towards this new dimension in literature.

In the creation of Dalit literature, B.R. Ambedkar is the sole inspiration for Dalit authors. In the contemporary time there are numbers of Dalit writers composing their works centering the ideas of Ambedkar. His Annihilation of Caste (1936), The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables (1948) became a de facto manifesto of the anti-caste struggle, which is, not just a Dalit struggle but a struggle across castes. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar having sound knowledge about marginalized people of India has fought for the liberation of Dalits from the clutches of casteist philosophy. His books help them to make others listen to their scream which was not heard before, and educating them to express their pain with the help of pen.

Through the experiences of the people pushed to the fringes of our society, Baburao Bagul in his When I Hid My Caste: Stories, translated by Jerry Pinto portrays the rage and horror that define the Dalit community. Arjun Dangle's Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature is an anthology consists of essays, short stories, speeches, poetry, and autobiographical extracts. Love after Babel and Other Poems by Chandramohan S sheds light on caste-based oppression and how it causes deep-seated impacts that can't be undone

overnight. Dalit women's participation as central actors in the Dalit movement for the reclamation of the self has often been acknowledged. *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement* by Meenakshi Moon and Urmila Pawar (1989) first published in Marathi in 1989, is one of the most widely read and circulated books about Dalit women. It highlights those whose life stories are available but not yet recorded, and has been commended for its piercing analysis of how some of the prominent leaders within the Dalit community were women, yet they did not receive recognition for these roles. *Dalit Panthers: An Authoritative History* by JV Pawar (2017) about the history of Dalit resistance during and after the Emergency. It chronicles how post-Ambedkarite Dalits who were able to tap into internationalist politics and create a global vision, despite local obstacles. Pawar's laborious work explores his personal archives and certifies his stature as a leading social historian of post-Independence India.

Dalit autobiographies are sociological representations that report historical and political situations in local scenarios, alongside first-hand impressions of the authors. Bama's autobiographical book, named *Karukku* published privately in 1992 that breaks traditional boundaries and is a classic example of subaltern writing. Revolving around caste-related oppression within the Catholic Church, her book is an excellent representation of the conflicts between the individual and the community. It is a spiritual journey and reads like the ruminations of a traveler reflecting on spirituality, gender and protest, as well as her Dalit identity. *Joothan* by Om Prakesh Valmiki (1992) is one of the most powerful and widely read Dalit autobiographies. In the book, he talks about how his Valmiki community, most of whom were doing manual-scavenging work, strove to fight against the caste system.

## **SUFFERINGS AND STRUGGLE OF DALIT LITERATURE AND WRITERS**

Dalit writers are gaining prominence in modern literature. They had to endure social stigma and isolation from society, especially from the upper caste Hindus. The way how their living was so harsh, their position as a writer stood even more difficulties. The dalit writers were discriminated against from the beginning. They were not allowed to attend the writers' forum where writers from upper caste took part in. Even at the time of Jyotiba Phule and Ambedkar, the Brahmins did not allow reading and writing of Dalits. Their works were published mainly due to the Britishers who had allowed them to printing of their works. Their works are often compared to Africo – American literature which depicted sufferings of blacks and their racial discrimination as seen in "slave narrative" exposing injustice.

But the present scenario is much better than the social injustice that the Dalit writers had to face in the early time. Modern day Dalit writers are so vocal and are coming forward to explain the harm caused to them by the Hindu caste system. Even the Non-Dalit writers are exposing the exploitative nature of the Brahmanical system. As compared to male dalit

writers, Dalit women writers had to face more oppression and struggle twice as hard to find the space to write and be heard. Since Dalit women writers are discriminated against on the grounds of both their caste and gender. Dalit women have been marginalized by India's mainstream feminism; they see themselves at the margin of the Dalit political and literary movement. It is observed that in the field of literary translation and the subsequent study of Dalit literature in translation, writings of women appear to be privileged, as such the study of Bama's work dominating the field. Dalit women writers have come a long way over the last four decades. From Baby Kamble, the first Dalit women to write her autobiography, to the new generation women writers like Pradnya Pawar, Chaya Koregaonkar, Shilpa Kamble, one can see a clear progression in the way they have interpreted and re-constructed the realities of their gendered existence. This change can be perceived in the way they have defined their identities, perceived their agency and interpreted social reality.

### **FROM LITERARY WORKS TO VISUAL ARTS: DALIT CONDITION AND RIGHTS**

Cinema is an important visual art when it comes to forming, shaping, reinforcing public opinion and perception. Technically, it is a medium of displaying the variants of art as a motion picture. In Indian cinema, the issue of caste was rarely made an important subject with most film-makers and is rarely dealt with the seriousness and urgency it deserves. The marginalization that is a reality in the social space extends to the film world as well. In India, cinema and media has been used until now to perpetuate Brahmanical culture, values and it has thus led to the perpetuation of the caste-system. The struggle of Dalit existence is not only limited to literature, but it thrive to experience the dominance of Brahminism which has defined the rules for Indian cinema in its portrayal of the Dalit experience, such that victimhood has been made the essence of Dalit life.

The representation of Dalits in Dalit cinema is not transparent till now, because it is largely in the hands of upper caste with a traditional background of continuous education across generations. That has naturally led to Indian cinema being 'casteist' at its worst and 'caste blind' at the least. An overwhelming number of Indian films, at their core, portray urban upper caste sensibilities which then lead to the glorification of Brahmanical culture and values through the medium of films. The upper caste Indian filmmakers have been unsuccessful to expand their cinematic imagination beyond their own privileged social realities. The injustice to the Dalit characters happens when the Savarna characters in the films cannot find a "Dalit-looking" actor to play a Dalit character. However, a Dalit actor they do find is "too beautiful to be cast as Dalit." Therefore, they cast someone from among themselves as a Dalit, and darken their face to render a "Dalit look." This darkening of the face to portray a Dalit character has echoes of the West's use of the racist blackface.

Though Indian film industry mostly runs by the upper caste Hindu Savarnas from the big cities but today there are certain films and filmmakers who not only portray Dalit character prominently in the films, but also portray Dalit concerns through the Phule-Ambedkarite ideological perspective. Nagraj Manjule of Marathi Film industry, Pa. Ranjith of Tamil film industry and Neeraj Ghaywan of Hindi Film industry are three prominent film makers who almost single-handedly created a space for the articulation of Dalit concerns in India's elite film industry.

'Achut Kanya' (1936) was made at a time when caste discrimination was widely prevalent. It depicts a story of a young brahmin boy falls in love with an untouchable girl, this movie was one of the first that spoke about the caste system and the lives of dalit. The 'dark-skinned' and 'untouchability' stereotype presence in the movie has scriptural sanctity and even dalits accept this in the film. Though filled with stereotypes this was one of the early attempts in Bollywood to throw a light on the lives of the dalits.

A film like 'Sadgati' (1981) by Satyajit Ray reminds one of the harsh cruelties of the caste system which is a reality that the society is not ready to face, much less counter. The main character in this movie is an embodiment of the caste segregation which labels people as untouchables who can be mistreated and be made to live as second rate citizens. Though meant for television, Sadgati paints a picture of the harsh reality of a dalit life without sugarcoating any experiences.

Director Nagraj Manjule's earlier Marathi film, 'Fandry' (2013), tells the story of a teenage dalit boy who falls in love with an upper-caste girl. The movie was widely appreciated for the unbiased depiction of reality and the choice of cast members. It won the Indira Gandhi National Award for best debut film of a director.

Dalit filmmaker Neeraj Ghaywan's 'Masaan'(2015) was a sign of the new wave in Hindi cinema that has brought a new understanding of Indian society to cine-goers. A sensitive, passionate tale about love across the class-caste divide in some of the more obscure parts of the country, it caught the attention of critics and audiences alike.

As Bollywood proceeded to understand and educate their audiences through the medium of their films, regional cinema had also begun to imbibe such ideas from their larger counterpart. Malayalam cinema had cast the first Dalit woman as the lead and the movie 'Neelakkuyil' dealt with the conditions of the lower castes. Films such as 'Kammattippadam' and 'Kismath' illustrated the dilemmas faced by the Pulaya community and inter-religion marriage respectively, the latter of which outlined the problems faced by a Muslim boy and his love for a Dalit woman.

As such more films should be made and approach to Dalit actors for the representation of their reality without serving injustice to the Dalit community. And then we can certainly hope that Indian cinema would be unbiased and real and can reflect the concerns, ideas, and aspirations and lived realities of a much wider audience of Indian society which will cater to greater appreciation and recognition from those who set the benchmarks of global cinema.

## **CONCLUSION**

The importance of Dalit studies is to offer new perspectives for the study of India. Dalit Literature is essentially against exploitation, and made use of writing as a method of propaganda for the movement. This area needs more exploration and recognition in the world. Dalit realities should be represented with a vision and cause. Though writing of Dalits and their representation in art and culture is recent phenomena, still there is a lack of actual issues and social injustice that they have to endure in day to day life. The savarnas, who presents themselves to be Dalit sympathizer but when it comes to actual representation and upliftment in public fields they back off. Movies about Dalits must have Dalit actors and crew members so that there is true presentation of lives of Dalits in cinemas, instead of upper caste savarnas pretending to be Dalits. More research needs to be implied on the part of pure and realistic ideals of the Dalit communities.

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