

AESTHETICS OF DALIT LITERATURE: A RESPONSE TO THE AESTHETICS OF MAINSTREAM LITERATURE

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Abstract

This paper attempts to study how Dalit aesthetics formulated against mainstream Indian aesthetics in respective Indian languages or English. Dalit literature is a movement for Dalit writers. For them, writing a poem or producing a work of art is not just concerned about creativity or talent. It is seen as a vehicle to convey their experiences of sorrow, pain, anger and to ask questions. It has questions posed to prevailing knowledge system and hegemonic structures that relegated untouchables to inhuman status. The classical rules of literature laid out in Bharatamuni's Natyasastra, a Sanskrit text on dramaturgy, and other books in Sanskrit written by Brahmin scholars have dealt only with the life of Savarna people. Most of the literary works produced by the Savarna writers were on the lines of rules set by such ancient texts embedded with the ideologies of Brahminical knowledge. The Varna system which divided people as Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra is based on the maxim of Purusasukta of Rig-Veda. According to this division, Brahmans are born from the mouth of primal being and Kshatriya's from arms, Vaishyas from thighs and Shudras from feet. Untouchables are not positioned under any Varna because they are thought as born as a result of violation of varna system. The position of Shudras and untouchables in the society was of servitude to the people belonging to upper castes. In this way Brahmins institutionalised their superiority and anybody who did not fit in to their rules were castrated.

Many theories have been formulated since the birth of literature and such theories gave rise to several rules and perceptions which can be called as literary aesthetics. In the ancient times it was opined that literature and art fulfil important ethical roles. They provide models for correct behaviour and provoked tender emotions. It was believed that the moral feelings stirred by the literary works make people to plunge in to good action. However, Corollyn Burdet opines that the supporters of aestheticism disagreed with this and they claimed that art was about elevation of taste and pursuit of beauty and taste and beauty were considered as guiding principles for life by the aesthetes. Form was given importance in aestheticism. In this backdrop, Indian mainstream critics and litterateurs have denied considering Dalit literature as literature saying that Dalit writings lack the qualities of literature. Some have even gone so far as to ask whether Dalit writing is literature. Several allegations were raised such as there are no aesthetic elements and poetic qualities in Dalit writings

Key words: Dalit literature, Mainstream, Aesthetics, Indian literature

Introduction

“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 live.” (The Aesthetics of Dalit literature) Then in response to the question „What is Dalit aesthetics?“ Sharankumar Limbale says“ “The aesthetics of Dalit literature rest on three things: first, the artist’s social commitment; second, the life-affirming values present in the artistic creation; and third, the ability to raise the readers’ consciousness of fundamental values of life like equality, freedom, justice, and fraternity.” (Towards An Aesthetics of Dalit Literature) There are two very broad classifications of literature: It should either be for life’s sake or for art’s sake. Art for life’s sake is followed by most of the Indian writers but ironically the life of a Dalit does not come in this category. A just representation of pain and suffering of the Dalits has never been the subject matter of Upper Caste Hindus. They have presented the mythical stories of various kings and queens, love stories of various princes and princesses, dilemma of the separation of a lover and beloved, the wrath of various deities and totally ignored the pathetic lives of Dalits, and in this way they have achieved what is left by the religion; the total negation of Dalits from the literature. They have made the rules for Satyam, Shivam and Sundram of literature which interpellated their own ideology and made the Dalits slave.

Indian English writing started in the 19th century in India. Indian aesthetics got popularity among all regional literatures, although its traditional source can be found in Sanskrit literature. Indian poetics have emerged broadly into eight schools—Rasa, Alamkara, Riti, Guna/Dosa, Vakrokti, Svabhavokti, Aucitya and Dhvani, corresponding roughly to the western theory of Pleasure, Rhetoric/Figures of speech, theory of Form, Merit/Demerit Oblique poetry, Statement poetry, Propriety and Suggestion. In this context, the paper argues that Dalit aesthetics did not have any close correspondence with other aesthetics. Non-Dalit writers have been writing Dalit literature from 1930’s onwards in India. Jyothi Rao Phule and Ambedkar gave inspiration to Dalit writers in Maharashtra. Dalit literature got popularity among all regional literatures from the mid 20th century onwards in India. Marathi writers write Dalit literature first in Marathi language and soon after, it spread into other regional literatures. Sharan Kumar Limbale is a pioneering writer on Dalit aesthetics in Marathi literature. Dalit aesthetics as manifest in Dalit literature is not researched so far to the extent it deserves. Dalit aesthetics is a new concept, recently emerging through the joint efforts of Dalit writers, critics and intellectuals on Dalit literature. Dalit aesthetics is a new approach to understand and write Dalit writings in India. Dalit aesthetics are usually compared with an Afro-American writers’ ideology of black aesthetics.

Objective:

This paper intends to explore and analyze the formulations of Dalit literature and its aesthetics as against mainstream literature. Also the influencing factors religion, culture, literature and all aspects of social life were on the lines of the discourses of Brahminical superiority and inferiority notions.

The Etymology of the Word Dalit:

In Dalit Literature and Criticism, the etymology of the word 'Dalit' has been defined as derived from the Sanskrit word 'Dal'. The meaning of the word 'Dal' is crack, split, broken, or torn asunder, trodden down, scattered, crushed, and destroyed. The word also means the broken, the torn, and downtrodden, crushed, scattered, and exploited people (3). Aastha Gulati, in the article "Dalit: the word, the sentiment, and a 200-year-old history" outlines that an activist by name Pankaj Meshram had filed a public interest litigation in the Bombay High Court seeking to use the constitutional term 'Scheduled Caste' instead of 'Dalit'. In this article, Anand Teltumbde has been mentioned as telling to The Quint that Jyotirao Phule first used the word Dalit. The word Harijan was used by Gandhiji but it was rejected by Dalit thinkers and revolutionaries. The Quint quotes Ramachandra Guha saying: "In truth, Gandhi's own earlier coinage, 'suppressed classes' explicitly targeted social discrimination, whereas 'Harijan' euphemized it". The Quint quotes the description of Dr. Eleanor Zelliot, in her paper understanding Dr B.R. Ambedkar: "Dalit became a self-chosen term in 1972 when a group of Bombay youths organized the 'Dalit panthers', in an effort to encourage the militancy of the American 'black panthers'. Like the word 'black' in the USA, it was used proudly

The discourses of Dharma (religion) and Moksha (salvation) formed a major part of Indian Mainstream literature. Pointing out this, Raj Kumar in his Dalit Literature and Criticism observes that Dalit writers have called the existing canon of literature as 'Hindu Literature' (67). A large space of mainstream writing was meant for the stories related to kings, queens, princes, princesses and the priests. According to the Hindu Holy Scriptures, Sudras were not entitled to indulge in religious practices and seek salvation. They were represented as demonic and exotic inferior beings. In reply to the opinion of Kusumavati Deshpande in Pasang that it is difficult to find an articulate voice and be technically skilled for Dalits as they are deprived of all samskara (3) and to the opinion of N.S. Phadke in Pratibha Vilas that "the kinds of contexts and contexts and events that are needed to add colour to a novel are not found in Dalits lives" (quoted in Towards an aesthetics of Dalit Literature-109), Limbale points out that it is their middle class mentality that Deshpande cannot find culture and Phadke could not see impressive contexts and events in Dalit Literature. Limbale observes how Dalit literature is criticized as the outpourings of pain and anger and as manifested in 'artlessness' (108). Taking the role of spokespersons for Dalit writers he remarked in defence of Dalit literature that "Dalit writers believe that their literature should be analysed from a sociological perspective focused on social values [rather] than on beauty.

Dalit Aesthetics versus Mainstream Indian Aesthetics

An exclusively aesthetic consideration of Dalit literature will disregard the Dalit writers' fundamental role, and hence is not acceptable to Dalit writers" (19). Jootan by Valmiki is an autobiography and it can be said that it is a favourite genre for many Dalit writers. P. Revathi and M.R. Bindu refer to the quote made by Valmiki thus: "Das's defence of the genre, that Dalit writers should write autobiographies so that not only our history will stay alive, but also our true portrayals of wrongdoers" (1). In "Low Born-Hybrid castes and their Origin and Development" C. L. Solankar observes "During performing Shraddha deed, on the Brahmin, the eyes of a Chandala, village pig, cock, dog etc., should not be cast. In the four Varnas and Antyavasayins (untouchables), a

person of the low caste if condemns a person of a high class, then he must pay extra much fine and if a person of high class condemns a person of a low class, he must pay less fine” (863). These factors raise a question that when a Shudra is not entitled to the rights and rituals practiced by the mainstream people, how then he can be told to follow the mainstream literary tradition? Hence, it can be noticed that the Dalit writers reject the rule making literary tradition of mainstream writers in favour of the humanitarian causes that comprise the interests of Dalit people. Instead of glorifying the stories of some kings, queens, beauty and sublimity, Dalit writers focus on the experiences of marginalised people and untouchables. Afro-American movements have given impetus to Dalit literary movement. Raising voice for the humanitarian causes can be taken as the motto of Dalit literature. In this research article, Kandasamy’s poems have been read focusing on the questions of aesthetics, identity and uniqueness. If it is asked as to why a separate consideration called Dalit aesthetics is needed then it can be noted that the literature which was produced until the emergence of subaltern literature portrayed the social, political and religious life of only few privileged sections of society as literature used to be written by only upper caste people. According to Nagaraj, contemporary Dalit literature is a literature of decultured Dalits which articulates rights and entitlements in liberal polity. Rejecting claims of a separate aesthetics for Dalit literature, he locates Dalit literary contributions in the broad sphere of Indian culture and argues for a new aesthetics for Indian culture. His aim is to recover from the Indian tradition the civilizational contribution of Dalit writers, such as folk and oral cultural forms. This framework undermines the theoretical innovation and aesthetic significance of contemporary Dalit literature. Proposing Dalit literature as a form of contemporary politics in the sphere of modern Indian literary culture, Marathi Dalit critic and writer Baburao Bagul presents Dalit literature as a modern, written, and Ambedkarite tradition that reconfigured modernity, invented new modes of writing, and imagined Dalit as a generic identity, lived experience, and perspective in modern Indian literary history. Dalit literature is human and democratic, Bagul argues, as it draws on the humanist legacy of Buddha, Christ, Phule, Ambedkar, and also the Western Enlightenment. A reading of some Dalit texts, following the discussion of Bagul, illustrates the limitations of Nagaraj’s approach.

Rage and protest: the aesthetic elements

Kandasamy one of the Dalit writers who attempted to spread light on such aspect of Dalit life which found no representation in the mainstream literature. Untouchables in her poetry are represented neither as sympathetic beings nor as inferior human beings. Her approach is on locating the factors which lead to the inferior status of Dalit people. She has published two collections of poetry titled Touch and Ms Militancy. Her book Gypsy Goddess is about a caste atrocity occurred in Kilvenmani. When I Hit You is her auto-fiction that tells the story of a woman which is relatable to many women in the Indian society. Her poems speak about the ways in which Brahminical supremacy was established and discuss the strategies used by the Brahmins in establishing the caste system and patriarchal ideologies. One such poem by her is “Becoming a Brahmin” from Touch discusses how caste system was constructed. She presents an “Algorithm for converting a Shudra into a Brahmin” (1). Step 1: Take a beautiful Shudra Girl. / Step 2: Make her Marry a Brahmin. / Step 3: Let her give birth to his female child. / Step 4: Let this child Marry a Brahmin. / Step 5: Repeat steps 3-4 six times. / Step 6: Display the end

product. It is a Brahmin. (3-8) In the poem she ridicules the caste system by treating it lightly. Here, one can refer to the observation made by C. L. Sonkar in his “Low Born-High Castes and Their Origin and Development” on caste promotion and caste demotion. He mentions that in the Dharmashastras, there is a mention of the ways in which caste promotion and caste demotion can happen. According to this, if a Brahmin accepts to do a business of a Shudra and if his son continues that business and if this continues for five generations, then, his caste will be demoted to that of Shudra on the basis of business. The above quoted poem from Kandasamy seems to be ridiculing such arrangement made in the Dharmashastras. The poem criticizes how women is used as an object in the patriarchal society for safeguarding its own interests. Women are used as key to the door of caste as portrayed in this poem as marriage plays a dominant role in preserving or dismantling caste. Endogamy forms a great part in the caste system. Inter-marriages within the noble families, within a financial oligarchy, within the ancestral families and within the social, religious, racial or geographical groups is a commonly seen phenomenon throughout the world. It’s not just seen among upper castes but also visible as practicing among lower caste people. Paul Rosas in his “Caste and Class in India” observes “groups tend to develop social customs which distinguish it from others. Finally, the breaking of the fundamental principles of all these groups leads to punishment and ostracism which makes the victim an “outcaste.” All this has been general since primitive tribal times” (143). According to Paul, caste has remained by practicing endogamy where “common caste customs and ceremonies, as well as caste inter-dining, indicate a common ancestry” (144). Dr. Ambedkar in his “Rise and Fall of Hindu Women” outlines succinctly about the relationship between the caste and structures of gender stating that women are the gateways to caste system (48). If Ambedkar’s model is emphasized, it appears that the top-down hierarchy of caste system operates among Dalits also and woman are not allowed to make decisions on their sexuality.

Changing Perspectives on Aesthetics

In the 1970s the ‘Dalit Panthers’ revived the term and expanded its reference to include scheduled tribes, poor peasants, women and all those being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion. Therefore, Dalit is not a caste. It is a symbol of protest and revolution. The Primary objective of Dalit literature is the liberation of Dalits. Dalit struggle against casteism has a long history. For example, in Kannada, it goes back to the first Vachana poet of the 11th century, Chennaiah, the cobbler. The 12th-century Dalit saint Kalavve challenged the upper castes in the following words: Those who eat goats, fowl and tiny fish: Such, they call caste people. Those who eat the Sacred Cow That showers frothing milk for Shiva: Such, they call outcastes (Kishore 1). Dalit writers are writing in regional literatures about Dalits with the inspiration of Marathi Dalit writers in India. Marathi Dalit writers followed the path of Ambedkar and African writers. Dalits do not have much education background at the beginning in their life.

Dalit writers have written Dalit literature in regional literatures from mid 20th century onwards in India. The regional literatures have been translated into English by various Indian and foreign translators. There are many adaptable texts in Dalit literature in some regional literatures, which can be translate into English in India. There is more scope to read them for a number of foreigners in the world, if Dalit literatures is translated into English.

Sharan Kumar Limbale comments that the traditional values of Satyam, Shivam and Sundaram, are not applicable in the context of Dalit aesthetics as they are fabrications used to exploit common people. Aesthetic trinity only benefits the upper caste and has been formulated to suppress the lower ones. Dalit aesthetics does not deliver aesthetics based on pleasure giving beauty. When it comes to Dalit literature the idea of beauty needs to be re-examined and re-analyzed. Commonly the idea of beauty is associated with spiritualism, but Dalit aesthetics are derived out of a sense of artistic reality. Dalit aesthetics are built upon three major components—the artist, the artistic creation and the reader. The artistic creation binds the artist and the reader. When it comes to Dalit aesthetics, one cannot rely on pleasure giving beauty and taste. Dalit aesthetics tends more towards materialist rather than spiritualist. Dalit writers have been raising Dalit consciousness among the readers with Dalit aesthetic elements. The idea of beauty in Dalit literature can be evaluated with the intensity of consciousness among the writers. At present there is considerable work going on about Dalit aesthetics. Sharan Kumar Limbale wrote *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies, and Considerations in Marathi*, in 1994. Alope Mukherjee translated it into English in 2004. Milind Eknath Awad wrote one Ph.D. thesis on this field title called *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalits*. He did his Ph.D. from JNU in 2009. The thesis not published so far. There are many articles published on Dalit aesthetics in recent times in various national and international journals. For example:- *Dalit Aesthetic Theory*, research article by Ret. Prof. S. R. Jalote from Dept. of English at BHU in Varanasi. Dalit aesthetics is not traditional aesthetics in general. It has a different purpose in the literary world. That is in the words of R. G. Jadhav: I think that from the point of view of Dalit aesthetics, the important thing is to achieve aesthetic distance by liberating oneself from extreme involvement in social awareness. It means that the Dalit writers have to realize their total sensibility towards life from the level of art (Jadhav 3-4).

Dalit writers got a new identity in the mainstream Indian English writing for their literature. Dalit writers' modest attempts lead to put in a new framework for Dalit literature. "The central idea of mainstream literature is the Hindu trinity of 'Satyam Shivam Sundaram', for Dalit it is the Western trinity 'liberty, equality and fraternity'. This central idea makes both the literature mutually exclusive and parallel" (Kumar 3). Dalits are struggling for freedom in society from upper caste people. The dominant mindset of people from society has to change by Dalit writers' writing.

"Mainstream literature largely follows the principle of 'art for art's sake' while Dalit literature is 'art for life's sake'. This principle makes the literature and its interpretation different" (Kumar 4). Dalit narrative style shows different from general narration. The mainstream literature tries to take one in different world the imaginary world forgetting this world. Dalit literature is representing the real world with Dalits everyday experience in life. "The source of inspiration of mainstream literature is the Hindu mythological texts such as the Vedas, Purana, Upanishads, Geeta, Manusmriti, Ramayana, Mahabharata etc." (Kumar 4). These texts are the recurrent themes in the work of mainstream literature. These are revered time and again and considered as the ultimate fountain of ultimate knowledge and truth.

Dalit literature has a different form and purpose, it cannot include in the mainstream India literature. The mainstream Indian literary criticism and the theory cannot fit for Dalit criticism. Mainstream Indian English literature has been portrayed of Dalits representation in the ugly symbols in their literature. Dalit literature has potential to develop independently along with mainstream literature. Indian literary critics are criticizing Dalit literature with traditional tools so far. This will have to change in the future because the Dalit aesthetic tool can fulfill the gap in between traditional and Dalit aesthetics. Dalit writers have to focus on the various types of Dalit aesthetic elements in their literature. Therefore, the other readers can understand the Dalit literature in a clear way while they are reading a Dalit text. So far, Dalit writers have written all forms of literary genres in Dalit literature. These have to bring change in the lives of Dalits and the ideology of upper caste people. Dalit writers have been struggling for sociological change among Indian communities in terms of their behavior towards Dalits

Conclusion

Dalit literature is revolutionary and literature is a weapon through which they have tried to bring social awareness. Questioning, subversion, interpretation etc., are the main features of Dalit writings. The ideas and ideals of classical Brahmanical literature and the conventional theories of aesthetics are rejected in their works. Language and metaphor used by Dalit writers are very different and sometimes shocking. The reason of Dalit literature being harsh and unconventional; as it is born out of anger, anguish and rebellion against the system. It is the literary depiction of injustices, grief, pain, oppression and suffering. It is the articulation of the voice so long been silenced or ignored. Mainstream literature is the serving the purpose of maintaining the hegemony of one caste on another. Indian aesthetics and Dalit aesthetics have compared two different theories to evaluate both literatures. Dalit aesthetics and mainstream Indian aesthetics have been studying necessarily by readers for the present understanding of Dalit literature. The Dalits write in order to convey their meaning through their texts with traditional tools earlier. Now there are some new Dalit literary tools coming up with new force. The new critical theories could help in order to understand Dalit literature.

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