

Portrayal of Dalit experiences in the select short stories in India: A social perspective analysis*

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Abstract:

This paper offers an analysis of Dalit short stories written in Telugu with brief overview of Dalit Literature in India and Telangana state had made at examining the discursive formations of Dalit narrative with reference to Telugu Dalit short stories.

Portrayal of Dalit experiences in the select short stories had helped in understanding the life style and cultural values and developmental aspects the Dalits in the state of Telangana. The study had conducted in the state of Telangana by assessing Dalit policies in the State of Telangana. The study found that Dalit women empowerment will happen through development initiated by the State of Telangana.

Dalits, considered to be the lowest in the hierarchical Indian caste system and subjected to systemic oppression, are a subaltern community who experience the trauma of persecution in ways that are unique due to the complex social, cultural, political, and economic environment prevailing in India. Dalit literature in various native Indian languages offers a window of insight into their lives. They are narratives of anger and helplessness, violence and fortitude, pain and sorrow, humour and pathos, despair and hope. An extensive reading of Dalit writing leads one to believe that they can be approached from the perspective of 'trauma literature' for a more nuanced and universal perspective.

It gained momentum around 1920 under the leadership of Dr.B.R.Ambedkar with the burning of the 'Manusmriti', agitation for the right to use ponds and wells reserved for caste Hindus, etc. Although Dalit literature, a literature of militant protest against the upper caste literature upholding the Brahminical values, is a post-independence phenomenon- to be precise it made its impact in the sixties- its ancestry can be traced in the earlier decades.

Introduction:

Literary historians agree that untouchables were never involved in the literary processes as they were kept outside the realm of literary activities. In general the literary engagement was restricted to the upper castes of the society. It is evident from literary history that most of the literature produced by the upper caste Hindus reaffirmed and justified the caste system and social discrimination. These discourses, like palukurki Somanath's Basava Puranam, talk vaguely about the presence of nomadic and aboriginal tribes that were allowed to perform religious activities in particular temples on particular days which otherwise are inaccessible to these untouchables. But today Dalit movement is constantly attempting an alliance of socially and economically exploited groups as an

alternative political front to the congress and the BJP which are seen as platforms of Capitalism and Brahmanism. Contemporary Dalit literature is an offshoot of this movement.

To substantiate why I believe Dalit autobiographies should be considered as trauma literature, in this thesis, I have chosen the autobiographies of four eminent Dalit writers: Baby Kamble, Bama Faustina Soosairaj (known simply as Bama), Omprakash Valmiki, and Sharankumar Limbale. The reason I have chosen these autobiographies is that they are all accepted English translations from languages with a strong background of Dalit literature: Bama's *Karukku* was originally written in Tamil and translated to English by Lakshmi Holström, Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* was originally written in Hindi and translated to English by Arun Prabha Mukherjee, Baby Kamble's *The Prisons We Broke* was originally written in Marathi as *Jina Amucha* and translated to English by Maya Pandit, and Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste: Akkarmashi* was originally written in Marathi too, and translated to English by Santosh Bhoomkar.

Need for the Study:

To study numerous essays and articles on Dalit literature, with a focus on Dalit autobiographies, and on trauma literature to substantiate my proposal that Dalit autobiographies should be included in the canon of best literature.

Study Objective:

This study offers insights into the dynamic nature of caste and its vitality in constructing localized form/s of civil society in India. A common running theme in the thesis is Dalit politics of resistance and their struggle to access justice through the state despite the continued denial of justice to Dalits through fragmented institutions of the state. The study, thus, observes how the participation of Dalit movements in claiming democratic citizenship through party politics occurs alongside the marginalization of Dalit assertion in electoral politics.

Looking beyond the state, the thesis charts the relationships between Dalits and the external relational fields within which they operate: it details the vernacular modes of communication in the civic sphere where protests and violence are important modes; the innovative uses of caste and cultural repertoires by Dalit movements in challenging caste hierarchy and forming collective identities of protest; and finally, the context of global associational revolution and engagement of NGOs and INGOs as new associations in Dalit politics of resistance. This thesis contributes to the larger debates on the makings of caste and civil society in India and argues that caste and Dalit movements have a key role in constructing localised forms of civility and civil society that challenge the dynamic hierarchies and exclusions of caste.

Brief origin of Dalit literature and its evolution:

The Telugu literary discourses canonized Gurajada as the first modernist writer and Sri Sri as the trend setter of progressive literature (both *Abhyudaya* and *Viplava kavita*) by declaring that this is the era of Sri Sri. These canonical constructions are contested by dalit intellectuals in the wake of contemporary dalit movement as their struggles against caste hegemony and brahminism. They even pitted Gurram Jashua against these two as a

canonical figure. Dalit literature has not only been contesting the dominant canons of Telugu literature but also making a canon of its own. In defining, evaluating and production of the literature, canon plays a crucial role. Canon sets the standards of literature. Canon acts as an official specification of texts, authors and genres. Canons play a decisive role either in inclusion or exclusion of the author, text or genre. The old canons are being replaced by the new with the rise of social movements. Canon has been shaped by social, political and ideological forces. Making canons is a way of defining who has the power to speak and who does not.

Dalit literature has been effectively mediating the oral and written cultures than any other literary canon. It has changed the style, content and language of literature remarkably and touched the concrete life experiences of oppressed masses. In making its own literary genre by contesting the other, dalit literature too has undergone remarkable transformation over a period of time. The questions such as, 'Who is dalit?', 'What is dalit literature?' have generated continuous debates among dalit circles. Simultaneously, the political category of dalit has got new articulation with further concrete identity (sub caste) such as Madiga/Mala/Dekkali. This has been reflecting in literature too. In other words, the emerged canon of dalit literature has been contesting from within. My paper explores the ideology of the dalit literature in the back drop of ongoing dalit movements by mapping prominent discourses of dalit writings.

Adapa Satyanarayana in his paper Dalit Protest literature in Telugu: A Historical Perspective discussed the historical context of the emergence of a literary genre which reflected the growing identity, awareness and consciousness of the dalits during the colonial period. Although there was no literary genre distinctively known as 'dalit literature' during the pre-independence period in Andhra, an examination of the literary works, i.e., poems, novels, plays, etc, of certain dalit intellectuals indicates that the oppression, agony and anger of the dalit masses is reflected in their writings. These writers, who found an inexhaustible raw material in the society and community in which they and the masses were born, shaped it into a realistic literary representation. The main characteristic feature of dalit literature was its contemporaneity and realistic presentation. He further argued that dalit writers internalized the philosophical and ideological tradition of Bhakti saint poets and liberation ideology and philosophy of Phule and Ambedkar, but it is not the case with savarna writer engaged in writing about dalits. Satyanarayana concludes that dalit intellectuals of the pre-independence period were the forerunners to the contemporary dalit literary and cultural movements in the state.ⁱ One has to debate why the dalit writings of colonial period had gone unnoticed and the conditions that were not recognized as a genre of dalit literature. However, from the late eighties dalit literature has emerged as a distinctive literary genre in telugu. The recognition of this as distinctive literature in public discourse has to be read with a changing historical and socio-political context. The following questions may provide insights in making of a dalit literary genre. What kinds of writings are marked as dalit literature? How are they different from others in terms of style, language and content? What is the response of the upper caste writers to whom the dalit writers are often contesting?

Dalit panthers movement in brief , impact on marathi literature:

Civil society has come to dominate the discourses of development and social change for the last few decades. This thesis is a critical engagement with the liberal ideas of civil society; it specifically explores the politics that surfaces in the civic sphere in the context of caste inequalities through the study of Dalit socio-political organisations that occupy the margins of civil society in India.

This ethnography of Dalit politics interrogates the intersections of caste and civil society in current globalised times and spaces through exploration into post-Panther phase of Dalit politics in rural Maharashtra. The focus is on two socio-political movements; one is Manavi Hakk Abhiyan (MHA), a grassroots Dalit organization with international networks and the other is Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) a national Dalit political party.

Different genres i.e. novels, short stories , poetry:

The study explains of different genres i.e. novels, short stories, poetry, and autobiographies of dalit literature with special emphasis on the genre of Dalit short story.

Literature is standardized with writing. With written culture, the differences in social status have even extended to the production of knowledge systems. The literature of upper castes becomes hegemonic.ⁱⁱ Narayanarao further explains the transformation of telugu literary genre from ancient to modern times. Nannaya is popularly known as Adikavi (first poet), who is the first writer in written literary tradition. The writing of Nannaya is puranic and influenced by Sanskrit literary tradition. The puranic poet is Brahmin but the writing is intended for ordinary people.

The short story in Telugu began with Gurajada Apparao and Achanta Venkata Sharma who began experimenting with his new form around 1910. It is used extensively by several writers to portray the social problems and caste related issues. Chinta Deekshitulu is known for his portrayals of rural life and satire against Telugu women aping western mannerism. Sripada Subramanyam Sastry wrote about domestic and social problems. Sarat Chandra, Adavi Bapiraju, Viswantha Satyanarayana, Karuna Kumara, Kanaparti Varalakshmana, Chalam, Tripuraneni Gopichand, Kodavaganti Kutumbarao all of them made their mark through their experimental and progressive literary styles. Some of the Dalit stories written by these writers are also included for analysis in this paper.

The poetic narration is different from oral tradition of lower castes. The puranic tradition is followed by prabandha literary genre from 16th century. The prabandha poet is a continuation of brahminic poet. The poet gave more importance to narration than a story line. The poet was dependent on the Royal court and his writings are full of srīngara rasa. The writing has a great influence of aesthetics of Sanskrit. Prabandha poet often plays with words and lost the social importance. In the age of prabandha too, some poets of lower castes belonging to sudra and artisan communities resisted this kind of literature and side with people. The poets such as Yogi Vemana and subaltern philosopher saint Potuluri Veerabrahmendra swamy are prominent among them. The dominant literary tradition fails to see them as significant writers. But their literature is popular among masses through social memory even today.

Modern telugu literature emerged with the influence of liberal English education. The ideas of social reformism of Hinduism articulated through 'modern' literature. Gurujada Apparao was considered Navya Kavitha Yuga Kartha (the first modernist writer in telugu). As Velchuri argues Gurajada's borrows from to aasu tradition (oral tradition) and his poetry is modern. It seems Gurajada had no relation to the aasu tradition of lower castes. But the language and chandassu from the aasu tradition of upper castes which is mostly available in keerthana's and womens' songs.ⁱⁱⁱ Philosophically Gurujada's modernity could not be equated with 'contemporarity'. He is critical of tradition from realistic perspective that internalized the social consciousness consisting of progressive values. He carried on his writing with novelty (navya kavita reeti). It is interesting to note that the targeted readers of Gurujada is educated middle class. As Velchuri felt that the potential of Gurujada was not fully realized by the educated class who are carried by the tradition of written literary culture.

Romantic literature (bhava kavittvam) which is other modern literary movement of 1920-40 is also a protest against tradition. This poetry is self centered and imaginary rather than realistic. The poet is in search of freedom and going back to nature. It is a declaration of one's own self experience through poetry. Philosophically, the romantic poetry created a ground for an independent identity for a man from a traditional identity such as caste, occupation, and kinship roles in feudal society. It is realized later that 'freedom' had no meaning in running away from the real world. The conditions are forced to consider the material conditions in realizing a freedom.

Abhyudaya sahityam is a revolt against the classical and romantic literature. It had changed the canons of telugu literature by adopting the principles of Marxism in persuasion of classless society. The writers of this literary genre are compelled to take side of laborers, the productive class against the feudal lords and capitalists, the exploiting class. This literature claims to be realistic and the literary criticism is focused on the content. As Velchuri observed ideologically this modern literature differentiates itself from the classical literature, but in terms of language, it was not a complete break from classical literature. The modern romantic poetry adopted the puranic symbols to the secular subjects without changing its meaning and the abhyudaya poetry adopted puranic symbols with a secular meanings.^{iv}

The free verse (vachana kavittvam) had a privilege over other forms of literature. By its very nature, the readers for abhyudaya sahityam has to be the masses. But from Sri Sri to Kundurthi, the readers are of special class belonging to educated class who are made as readers under the impact of printing press. These writers were confined to only this kind of readers but failed to establish a literary tradition to reach out masses.^v This has followed by digambara and viplava (revolutionary) literatures. The telugu literature from puranic to digambara age, it was produced by educated elite classes. The readers too were drawn from the same class. This may even extended to the revolutionary literature.

The literary standards set by the abhyudaya writers continued for revolutionary literature. Interestingly, Sri Sri was the iconic figure for both these literary trends. The writers were organized as Arasam and Virasam respectively and dictated the terms for telugu literature. But there is a literary stream within this progressive literature of Praja Natya Mandali and Jana Natya Mandali (JNM) which was really reached the masses was marginalized by the mainstream literature. The poet performers such as Nazar and Gaddar and their literature

could not get the literary honour. This literary tradition was very much rooted in oral tradition. Surprisingly, these writers belonging to a lower caste as their literary tradition. In the later days, the writers like Sivasagar set the agenda for revolutionary literature by adopting the idiom of the people through his songs. His poetry is an orature in a written form.

Let us now, focus on the short story **Pullamraju**. The basic premise of the story is that one cannot do away with varna system. The story dates back to the colonial period, where native feudal lords existed along side the british colonizes. It was the time when Indian Reform movement was taking a concrete shape, where several meetings were held to abolish untouchability and bring about equality among the masses. Ironically, these meetings had little effect in the metropolitan and urban areas, while the deep-rooted untouchability persisted in the rural and country life of India.

From the above discussion, we may conclude that dominant telugu literature from classical to modern, from Nannaya to Sri Sri, from padyam to free verse predominantly belongs to elite upper caste groups. But at every stage, this elite literature was contested by the artists/performers/singers/poets of lower castes in different forms. But their literature was not considered seriously because the standards of the literature were set by the elite upper caste literary critics. One thing is clear that the upper caste writers of the written tradition got prominence those who were attempted to the literary tradition of lower castes such as aasu sampradayam and the language of lower castes. Though these writers were celebrated as great writers and trend setters of telugu literature, they couldn't overcome their brahminical past. With a self imposition of Marxist ideology, these writers artificially rejected the tradition and cultural past in their writings.

The contemporary dalit literature has not only revolutionized the telugu literature further but also refined the very idea of literature. Apart from reinventing the past, dalit literature has been creating its own literary genre in telugu literature. The content, language, style, medium of this literature are different other dominant literary traditions. Dalit literature in telugu has its significance in many ways. It has been revisiting the telugu literature through its own literary standards. In re-reading telugu literature, dalit literature has invented Jashua as a great modern writer in written tradition than Gurajada and Sri Sri. This was not because of Jashua's social affinity to a dalit community but due to his focus on the problem of caste as an issue, the Indian social reality was ignored by other classical and progressive modern writers. Though his writing was in classical literary form, the subject he touched was a revolutionary..

Emergence of Contemporary Dalit Literature:

The contemporary dalit literature evolved as a literary genre from late eighties onwards. Dalit struggles around them influenced and made dalits conscious of their subjective positions and in assessing the world around them objectively. Historically, the social groups, which had acquired political and economic dominance, enjoyed the privilege over cultural production and others got silenced. Western-influenced middle class, those who later played a major role in molding the nationalist struggles, involved in the production of literary writings. It is obviously, the upper caste group's ideals and aspirations and their worldview reflected in literature too.

In the post- independent India, modern State was unable to uphold the promised ideals of good life and better society to the vast number of the oppressed of this country. In the political writings of literature of this time, there

emerged an upper caste middle-class man as a protagonist sympathetic to the lower classes and he articulates their needs and is seen to be mobilizing the oppressed masses. There are very few writings which talk about dalits and their life. Those that exist come out as the sympathy of the upper caste writers towards labourers as a part of the class struggles. The protagonists in the literary writing are always from the upper caste groups. They are portrayed as shouldering the responsibility to reform/educated dalits. This completely lacks knowledge about the authentic dalit life and their experiences. These upper caste writers have constraints to perceive the lives of other communities. These socially sensitive upper caste writers could not mobilize the support of their communities to their imagined ideals and many of them moved towards spiritualism. Most of the writers came from Brahmin middle class families. In latter days, the intensified struggles aspiring for the communist ideals too failed to capture the dalit imagination and the question of caste remained immune to their discourses. Till the 1980s, the entire literary discourse centered on the concept of the abstract human being, erosive of all cultural markers like caste, color, religion, region and gender.

Civil society has come to dominate discourses of development and social change over the last three decades. Although there is a lack of consensus on what constitutes civil society, the idea of civil society has become increasingly celebrated across academic, activist as well as national and international bureaucratic circles. The liberal notion that a free and vibrant civil society forms the heart of successful democratic regimes (Gellner 1994), is increasingly held as commonsense now. This thesis is a critical engagement with the idea and practice of civil society as manifested at the micro socio-political level in the state of Maharashtra in India. It specifically explores the politics that surface in the civic sphere in the context of caste inequalities, through the study of Dalit movements that occupy the margins of civil society in India.
