



### Dalit Rediscoveries

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Dalit Studies is a form of Race Studies which is part of Cultural Studies. Cultural Studies, as Cornel West states, is the cultural politics of difference wherein cultural identity is viewed as constituted by a matrix of cultural constructs like race, gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, nationality, language and so on. In this perspective, cultural identity is an overlapping space of several cultural constructs: one's cultural identity as one's difference from others in terms of these cultural constructs.

Race studies can be applied to (re)discover the identities, both personal and collective, of cultural communities like Dalits, Blacks, Tribals, Natives, Aborigines, Sex workers and so on who are subjected to multiple oppression. The people who belong to these categories are victims of an interlocking system of oppression: oppressive factors like race, gender and class not only reinforce the intensity of suffering and misery but also close down possible avenues of escape and liberation.

Dalits in India is a cultural category whose quest for identity is an unending saga of struggle to subvert the labyrinthine space of the intersecting oppressions of race, gender and class. Caste, a derivative of race/class, is a cultural construct specific to Indian history. Division on the basis of caste is endemic in Indian culture and it was even given religious sanctity. The *Savarna* oppressors relate the *Chaturvarnya* to a statement attributed to Lord Krishna in *Bhagavat Gita* : "Chaturvarnyam mama srishtam. ...." This made the Dalits to historically internalized their caste and consequent oppression as a destiny. The upper caste Hindu hegemony perpetuated in the name of Caste was resisted by Buddhism which could also be interpreted as a Kshatriya movement against the Brahmanical abuse of Hinduism and the misinterpretation of Vedic scriptures. Caste is a form of internal colonization which was defined as a result of action and reward on the basis of the theory of cause and effect.

There are different perspectives to the question of caste. Mahatma Gandhi, who believed in the infallibility of the *Bhagavat Gita*, viewed Caste as a moral problem. So he tried for the amelioration of the Dalits, whom he called the Harijans, within the structural hierarchy of Hinduism. But Ambedkar, influenced by his Marxist thinking, considered Caste a purely economic issue. Statistics based on education, employment, income, social positions and data provided by government agencies in terms of malnutrition, infant mortality rate, maternal mortality rate, school drop outs, and so on supported Ambedkar's view. But many educated and employed Dalits with high social position and good income



find that their social mobility is restricted. This supports the Gandhian view that Caste is an ethical issue. In this regard, it is better to consider caste as at once moral and economic.

Dalit writing is defined as the literary expression of Dalit consciousness. It is a terrain of discourses of oppression and resistance. Dalit literature is a spontaneous form of articulation which is an inevitable consequence of struggle. Articulation is always an assertion of identity. It is essential to remind the public that the Dalit community does exist and its predicament of oppression needs be attended. In this perspective Dalit writing is a form of survival literature. It is a form of "literature of necessity" (Redding, 3). Dalit literature is elusive to literary theories. It often evades and even subverts the application of theories which is the attempt of the mainstream academic to showcase the Dalit psyche. In this scene Dalit literature is a form of polemic literature which may also be defined as a construct of oppression.

Any literary text is an expression of the self. The self can be manifested in different forms, especially in terms of concrete images. Land is conventionally connected to the occupation and livelihood of the Dalits. They virtually depend on land for their survival. In their case land is emblematic of their self/ identity. So Dalit writing is an attempt at landscaping the self. Dalit identity is often a self-referencing landscape: the psychography of the protagonist character is reflection of the topography of the place. In Dalit literature the narrative voice often assumes a collective identity. Many writers are a narrator "we" instead of the conventional narrator "I." This means that the narrator's personal identity often merges with the collective Dalit identity. Sometimes the narrative "we" and the singular writer "I." It also suggests that in Dalit literature the decision between the communal and the individual is diffused and blurred.

In contemporary sense, Dalit literature is the appropriation of Buddhist thought. In the conventional sense, Budha is the enlightened one. But in the modern scene, the enlightenment is not a matter of self-realization. It is the understanding that oppression is unnatural and irrational. So the Buddhists strive for an oppressionless world. In this perspective, Budha is the one who rebels against oppression: the one who struggles for equity and justice in society. Any writing that appropriates the Buddhist thought comes under Dalit writing, irrespective of the caste of the author.

There are four major approaches to Dalit studies, based on the historical development of Dalit writing. They are:

1. Orientalist Type
2. Pan- Indian Romantic Type
3. Social Reformist Type



#### 4. Socio- Politically Active Type.

Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia* and Ling Yu Tan's *Wisdom of India* and Rabindranath Tagore's *Chandalika* and *Nadirpuja* are examples of the second type. KumaranAsan's *Chandalabhikshuki* and *Sreebudhacharitam* and SahodharanK. Ayyappan's *Budhatanrapradeepika* exemplify the third type. Ambedkar's *Budha and his Dharma* and *Budha or Karl Marx* are examples of the fourth type. But these approaches never distinguish between the insider's experience and the outsider's view of the experience in Dalit writings. This means that these approaches fail to account for the mediation involved in the Dalit experience and the non-Dalit representation of that experience.

The articulation of Dalit experience by the Dalit's is qualitatively different from the non-Dalit's representation of the Dalit experience. It is, therefore, necessary to differentiate between the writings by Dalits and writings on Dalit experience by non-Dalits. The first category is called Dalit writings while the second is called Dalitist writings. The former is an insider's perspective of the Dalit experience vis-à-vis their culture, history or language. This kind of writing is mediated, kaleidoscopic and politically loaded, sometimes coloured by the ideology of the outsider. In the examples given above only Ambedkar's writings come under Dalit writings and all others come under Dalitist writings.

Autobiography is the earliest genre of Dalit writings. The writing of autobiography is politically important. It is an attempt to politically construct the self. Writing is an essentially political act wherein the articulating self is a paradigm of Dalit ideology. It is an attempt to give expression to the history of Dalit experiences. The major Dalit autobiographies include Laxman Mane's *Upara*, D.P. Das's *The Untouchable Story*, LaxmanGaikwad's *The Branded*, OmprakashValmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit Life*, Viramma's *Viramma: Life Story of an Untouchable* and Bama's *Karukku*. They vividly portray the Dalit Struggle to survive hegemony and oppression and to find a space in the history, culture and politics of the nation.

There is a considerable volume of Dalit writings in regional languages like Marathi, Telugu, Kannada and Tamil. *Poisoned Bread* edited by Arjun Dangle is a representative volume of Dalit writings. There are several memorable specimens of Dalit poetry like Saphale's "Anguleeman", DayaPawar's "Budha" and "Sidhardha Nagar", WarnenKartak's "Budha and Ambedkar", BhagavanSawai's "Thathagatha: Two Poems" and HiraBansode's "Yesodhara." But in Malayalam there is a greater volume of Dalitist literature. KumaranAsan's poem *Duravastha*, K.Saraswati Amma's drama *Smarakasilakal*, LalithambikaAntharjanam's story "Manikkan", Changampuzha's poem *Vazhakkula*, Edassery's poem "BudhanumNariyumJnanum", O.N.V's poem "Palayanam", G.SankaraKurup's poem "Yasodhara", and AyyappaPanikker's poem "Kurushetram." These are literary texts written on a borrowed or acquired consciousness and hence they are mediated



representations of Dalit experiences. The intensity of the suffering and strength of protest get diluted in such representations.

The textual politics of Dalit writings is explicitly difference from that of Dalitist writings. Every literary text is synthesis of politics and aesthetics. The politics of a writer is manifest not merely in the context he/she chooses but also in the form that he/she adopts to represent that context. Textual politics is a matter of representing the ideologically right content in the politically appropriate form (Moi, 7). It involves a process of choosing and combining the politically correct content and form to produce a literary text. Dalit writers select the multiple oppression and hegemony as the content of their writings. But, they dissociate themselves from the mainstream aesthetic which endorses Dalit oppression as a natural choice. Alienation from the oppressive mainstream aesthetic itself is a political act of liberation, a quest for an autonomous self. Dalit's rejection of the mainstream aesthetic leads to the evolution of a distinctively Dalit aesthetic. But Dalitist writings are after the representation of Dalit oppression and marginalization in the mainstream aesthetic form which Dalitist writers follow and endorse as part of their ideology. So the aesthetic and the politics that Dalitist writings reflect hardly represent the Dalit's consciousness. It is a mediated experience represented in the mainstream aesthetic which is inimical to Dalit ideology.

Dalit rewriting is an attempt to find a space for the Dalits in the history and culture of the nation. It is an endeavour to retrieve the Dalit identity submerged in the hierarchical politics of the nation and to rehabilitate the Dalit leaders and writers in the history, both political and literary, of the nation. Empirical history is often the mainstream history written from the perspectives of the rulers. In the case of the Dalits, the empirical history is written from the perspective of the Savarna Oppressors. Oppression and hegemony alienate the Dalits from history, culture and language. Dalit historians adopt a Dalit genealogy, a history narrated from the perspective of the Dalits. Genealogy differs from the empirical history in its emplotment and selection of tropes. In genealogical narratives, conventionally marginalized are centralised and made prominent. In the Dalit genealogy of India's national struggle, for example, Chowri Chowra massacre and Peasant Riot at Barzar become prominent tropes. Genealogical narratives also incorporate folk, indigenous and oral narratives.

In genealogies, myths are memories are often appropriated as forms of histories; they exist in two textual versions: phonocentric and graphocentric. Myth is at once a linguistic and a cultural construct: it is a form of history and a form of metalanguage. Myths form a mainstream discourse inhospitable to the identity of the marginalized communities including the Dalits. Dalits, therefore, attempt a revision of myths to rectify the perspective on Dalit/marginalized characters in myths and epics. Saphale's "Anguleeman" or Dinakar's "Mud-made Drona" is an example. For Dalit's writing



is a form of resistance. It is as Gramsci states, a form of horizontal resistance: a silent form of resistance which forms the last of the weapons of the weak. Revision of history/myth is an attempt to (re)discover the Dalit identity on the one hand and to rectify the Cultural Stereotyping of the Dalits as the other. Revision is a political act which erases the negative images of the Dalits as the Cultural Other of the Savarna. Revision is also an attempt to invent a new metalanguage for self-definition. Thus Dalit rediscovery is a polyvocal and multi-perspective process. The politics of (re)inventing the Dalit identity pervades the history, culture and language(s) of the nation.

**References:**

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