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Resilience of Dalit Literature: A Critical Assessment of Telugu Dalit Literature

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Abstract

When only a few caste Hindus can speak and write or have voice and oppress many by setting agenda, to break this conspiracy the voiceless should speak, write and carve out an alternative literary expression. Dalit literature does not grow out of literary discussion or praxis of writers. It is social movement invested in the battle against injustice and driven by the hope of freedom, and not simply a literary trend or a formal development. This literature encompasses diverse form of intellectual and creative activities by the writers who as untouchables, have been victims of economic, social, cultural and political inequality. The orality, authenticity, literary expression, cultural rootedness, ethics of politics, shared experiences and struggle for liberation of Dalit Literature are resisting the canon of literature in both English and Indian vernaculars. This paper outlines the major cultural shifts, contribution and

critical articulation about resilience of Dalit Literature in Telugu speaking lands.

Keywords

Dalit Literature; Telugu Dalit Writings; Resilience.



Introduction

“Friends, the day of irresponsible writers is over” – Wankhade MN

What is Dalit writing and how do we approach it? Is it simply a new literary trend? If so, we would regard it as body of writing that expands the field of literature by bringing a new social reality into literary discussion. Historically, Mukti (liberation) movement gave rise to many thoughts to Dalits as well as many critical literary writers. The Mukti movement produced an alternative literature which celebrates self-respect, diversity and democratic nature through a bottom to top participation. It also challenged Hindu homogeneous literary production by adopting ‘Dalit literature¹’ which demonstrates and represents a new critical thinking and a new point of view. It poses the Dalit question, it portrays Dalit-men and Dalit-women as protagonists, and Dalit themes and thoughts as critical public issues.

However, the major contribution in Dalit literature significantly came from Maharashtra (Marathi language). Mahatma Jyothi Rao Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar were the champions, who could be credited the most for their attempts to uphold human dignity, self-respect, livelihood and women’s emancipation through a critical literature apparatus. When it comes to modern Dalit literature, it is essentially driven by critical ideology. Marathi modern literature has influential aspects on Dalit literature in the pan-Indian community. *The Poisoned Bread* by Arjun Dangle, *To be or Not to be Born* by LS Rokade, are some of the acclaimed social life narratives of Dalit assertions.

¹ *Dalit Panthers Manifesto*, (Bombay, 1973)

In fact, Dalit literature presents descriptions of slavery and oppression, as well as open and hidden forms of caste discrimination in the contemporary world, unlike anything that had been written before. Their claims to freedom, dignity, self-respect and equality gave new meaning to these primary concepts of democratic life. Several collections of poems, short stories, autobiographical extracts, essays and speeches have been published in the last thirty years.

Dalit literature does not grow out of literary discussion or the practice of writers. It is a social movement invested in the battle against injustice and driven by the hope of freedom, and not simply a literary trend or a formal development. This literature encompasses diverse forms of intellectual and creative work by writers who, as untouchables, have been victims of economic, social, cultural and political inequality. Indian or Hindu literature as Baburao Bagul asserts is 'the established literature of Indian literature...Hindu literature' and the oppressed castes are deliberately ignored and excluded in Indian literature.

The Dalit writers' critical engagement enables them to show that Indian literature is elite and caste Hindu in nature. The canonical writers of Indian literatures generally did not discuss 'caste', class, gender and other graded inequalities in a radical way. The Dalit perspective on colonialism and Dr. Amdekar's critique of Gandhian nationalism are two such questions as Dr. Satyanarayana and Susie Tharu argue. In the academic sphere, neither the syllabus nor the teaching materials reflect in any way that Dalits are regarded as a significant part of Indian society. These are debilitating experiences that almost all Dalits have to go through rejection by civil society in general. There are many instances where even in the highest offices Dalits have to face humiliation in personal lives.

Moreover, short stories and autobiographies, in the history of Dalit literature, written by Dalit writers and poets played a crucial role in articulating the problems of Dalits. To put it here, Baburao Bagul's (1963)

collection of short stories '*Javha Mi Jaat Chorli Holi*' (When I Concealed My Caste) was hailed as 'the epic of Dalit'. These brilliant stories gave Dalits the strength to face the most painful and humiliating experiences of their lives. Dalit Panthers' Manifesto (1973), Gandhi - Dr. Ambedkar debate and so on brought in a new point of view, a new thinking and a language that left Marathi literature shaken and transformed. They began to describe the reality of Dalit life with an insight that came from those who belonged to the community and had firsthand experience of Dalit life as Satyanarayana and Susie critically assert:

Dalit autobiography as a social and cultural epiphany presents a wide range of social and cultural realities which can be significantly distinguished from mainstream celebrated literature. The beginnings of Dalit literature could be traced back to Dr. Ambedkar's struggle for emancipation in the early 20th century. Dr. Ambedkar pioneers what we think of today as Dalit writing. Historians trace the history of the term 'Dalit literature' to the first Dalit literary conference in 1958. The literature which is written by Dalits and that written by others about the Dalits in Marathi can be accepted as a separate entity known as 'Dalit literature'.
(Satyanarayana and Susie)

By realizing its cultural importance, universities and literary organizations should give its proper place.

Dalit literature in the Telugu world

I'm not a victim,

I'm an immortal,

I'm the fluttering flag of defiance – Kalekuri Prasad (A revolutionary

Dalit activist and poet)

In India, from the early nineties onwards, Dalit literature emerged as a new literary genre by contesting western literary frameworks and local

vernacular literatures of both Brahmins and Marxists. The orality, authenticity, lived experiences, cultural rootedness, ethics of politics, shared experiences and struggles of liberation of Dalit literature are resisting the canons of literature of both English and vernacular languages. Dalit literature has epistemologically, ethically and politically provided a new ground for literature. It demands not for inclusion of this literature in English studies but compels to see what constitutes literature.

²The beginning of Telugu Dalit literature broadly has three phases, national movements, Sanskritization and rational movement periods. It has followed the communist, religious and rationalist influences of thoughts. In 1910, the anti-caste movement influenced, and left a mark on Dalit literature. But mainstream literature has always ignored and subjected Dalit literature to degradation by even so-called progressive and revolutionary writers like Sri Sri and Viswanatha Styanarayana. It has witnessed that even the democratic upsurge of 'feminist movement' in 1960s and its writings could not create any space for Dalits and managed to ignore it by and large.

Even in Telangana, many anti-caste movements have been misrepresented and marked as class struggles despite the communists' giving an 'acclaimed status' to, for instance, Chakali Ilemma, Bhandagi and Komarambheem and so on. These activists were credited as communists and the literature produced several form of arts like, song, slogan, rhymes and lyrics hijacked by communist writers.

Therefore, it is historically said that Dalit literature has marked significant and unique characteristic articulations. It embraced agony, humiliation, suppression thus reflecting reality from below. The prominent figures among them are Joshua, Boi Bheemanna, Sivasagar, Master Ji, Kalekuri Prasad, Gaddar, Gorati Venkanna, Belli Lalitha, Madoori Nagesh,

² Thummapudi Bharath; *A History of Telugu Dalit Literature*, Gyan Publishing House, 2008

Cherabanda, Erra Upali, Vemula Yellanna, Subhadra Jupaka, Krupakar Madiga, Gogu Shyamala and so on. Dalit literature which is very radical in many ways finds its 'cultural expression' in the mainstream literature. Dandora, Chandala Satimpu, Gumpu and Madiga Sahitya Vedika are instrumental in cultural expression of Dalit literature in more radical and vibrant ways.

In the history of Telugu Dalit literature, Joshua's legacy is marked by distinguished literary criticism. Chalam's 'Mala Pilla' had become popular and brought about the structural social inequalities in modern India. It also questioned free India for its denial of social equality within society. Every writer has a specific way to express, share and taste something unique in Dalit literature. Gogu Shyamala's *Nalla Poddu (The Black Dawn)*, *Nalupu (The Black)*, Vemula Yellaiah's critiques like *Kakka* and *Siddhi* and *Mulki*, YV Satyanarayana's *My Father Balaiah*, and the English Dalit biography and so on constitute Dalit Writing. These are an outcome of constant struggle against the practice of exploitation and oppression. Therefore, each writer represents a wide range of experience and shares agonies which are distinguished from each other. Teena Anil maps out the paradoxes of Indian literature, analyses as to how it enlarges or restricts the mobility and agency of women in general and women manual scavengers in particular. It provides insights into the ways in which the trio of caste system, patriarchy and capitalism operate together and continue to marginalize women in the urban sphere. It explores the pattern of social mobility among womenfolk of scavenging caste in the context of growing urbanization in India. In the third world countries in general and India in particular, with the ongoing process of urbanization, women irrespective of caste and class form a sizeable proportion of those who migrate from rural to urban areas in the hope of better livelihood options and life opportunities. But very soon these women especially those belonging to the scheduled caste find out that urban living/working conditions are inhuman, debasing and hostile

and often permeated with the three axis of marginalization namely- patriarchy, caste discrimination and capitalist culture. They bear the brunt of the ongoing transformation of traditional structures of the society as well as an overall encompassing consumerist culture on the pretext of urbanization forcing women to be part of the unorganized sector resulting in a regime of insecure tenure and forced eviction.

Karuna Kamble presents the pathetic condition of Dalit women in India. The upper caste women are suppressed by only their men in the society but Dalit women are suppressed by the men of upper caste, the women of upper caste and the men of their own community. If a women of high caste is raped or humiliated this becomes news and debates take place but every hour a Dalit woman is raped but no one talks about it. She is punished if an upper caste boy loves her. There are many such instances of suffering of the Indian Dalit women.

The satellite communities within scheduled castes are significant in carrying Dalit literature forward as one of founding discourses of literature in Telugu language. Dalit literature carries all productive tools as objectives that have been denied literary presence for decades. The Dalit arts and cultural symposium is vibrant. Chindu Yellamma was the first ever producer of Dalit art in India through songs and dance. 'Chindu Bhagotham' is a very prominent cultural art form in the Telugu world which is performed by 'Chindu', a satellite caste within the Madiga community.

Jambua Puranam, 'Pallam Raju' (1923), and Prabhuddha Bharat, were ancestral writings spirited with cultural expression. The artisan communities and their professions are highly regarded in Dalit literature and expressed in a radical way. Human relations, cultural assertions from below, funeral processions and so on were material for Dalit literature. It has its own indigenous form of cultural instruments to inspire and express the voice of Dalits which needs to be heard.

The Dawn of Dalit literature

The *Nalupu (The Black)*, *Edureetha (Offshoot)*, *Eenati Ekalavya (Today's Ekalavya)*, *Kulanirmoolana (Annihilation of Caste)* and *Nalla Poddu (The Black Dawn)* and *Kakka* are masterpieces of Dalit literature in Telugu. The very significant role played by Dalit literature is 'to stand against the caste and its exploitation, and the main objective is to uproot Hinduism with graded inequality sanctioned by Hindu religion. Neither progressive literature nor revolutionary literatures have questioned caste Hindu dominance ever. It is only the Dalit literature which challenged caste Hindu exploitation in the social, cultural, economic and political spheres. Therefore, Dalit literature is more scientific and liberal when it comes to articulating expression of the most disadvantaged communities in India.

The milestones in Dalit literature

These are some of the Telugu stories which acquired 'critical acclaim' for their outstanding performance in Dalit literature. Gogu Shyamala is a senior fellow at the Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies, Hyderabad. She has documented and edited Dalit women's writings in Telugu. Gogu Shyamala's *Nalla Poddu (The Black Dawn)* is a novel which represents caste Hindu exploitation, agony, humiliation, and caste discrimination in the society. Shyamala's critical investigation and her critical engagement is enormously radically rooted in experiential language. Gogu Shyamala's stories dissolve borders as they work their magic on orthodox forms of realism, psychic allegory and political fable. Whether she is describing the setting sun or the way people are gather at a village council like 'thickly strewn grain on the threshing floor', the varied rhythms of a Dalit drum or a young woman astride her favorite buffalo, Shyamala walks us through a world that is at once particular and small, and simultaneously universal.

Set in the Madiga quarter of a Telangana village, the stories spotlight different settings, events and experiences, and offer new propositions on how to

see, think and be touched by life in that world. There is a laugh lurking around every other corner as the narrative picks an adroit step past the grandiose authority of earlier versions of such places and their people romantic, Gandhian, administrative and the idiom in which they spoke. These stories overturn the usual agendas of exit from the village, from Madiga culture, from these little communities to hold this life up as one of promise for everyone. With her intensely beautiful and sharply political writing, Shyamala makes a clean break with the tales of oppression and misery, decreed the true subject of Dalit writing. Shyamala's recent volume "Father May Be an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But..." also got critical acclaim.

Vemula Yellaiah's *Kakka* and *Siddhi* present a unique feature of a critical Dalit life in Telangana state. The novel presents the three generations Dalit life, each generation expressing a distinguished phenomenon which varies from each other. In this novel, *Kakka*, a child bonded labour from the Madiga community, reveals the cruel nature of bonded labor and social discrimination. The entire novel moves from different experiences and adventures to trace out solutions for their emancipation as a whole. Yellanna articulates very passionately the Dalit life in the rural village in a radical way. *Siddhi* is a novel which depicts woman as a centric element and portrays the life of a Dalit woman who faces social humiliation, physical harassment etc. Yellaiah is regarded as one of the modern critical Dalit writers and his *Kakka* has got critical acclaim and is selected for critical readings in Telugu literature.

YB Satyanarayana's *My Father Balaiah* is the first English Dalit biography, which discloses the social reality of Dalits in the graded and unequal society. This biography traces out almost three generations since the colonial rule. This also presents Nizam's regime policies and Telangana democratic struggle with respect to anti-caste and anti-feudal societies. It also presents the early days and first generation of Dalit community educators and social reality after independence. The *Untouchable Spring* written by Kalyan

Rao presents unique features in a caste society and it represents almost five generations' Dalit stories and ends with emancipator mechanism found in radical communists.

Conclusion

Dalit literature plays a vital role in awakening the disadvantaged people who face many forms of oppression and harassment. It has become a mouthpiece to fight atrocities unleashed against them. Dalit literature plays a multi-faceted role in articulating the injustice and inequality meted with the Dalits in the rural and urban spheres. It has brought out the courage of Dalit women and introduced them to a new world where they found new ways to articulate their problems.

Therefore, it is said that Dalit literature in the Telugu world has covered all walks of life but is yet to come from the bottom of the pyramid within Dalit communities namely its satellite communities. The Madiga community as a whole contributed enormous literature and has shaped Dalit literature to a great extent but is yet to come out with literary expression from its satellite caste. Dalit literature has created a democratic space but Dalit women are yet to claim major positions with respect to literary expression. Dalit literature from Telugu world should also be made visible in the academia and there is a lot of scope to conduct research to trace out and bring about change in the marginalized sections.

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