

Dalit Literature: An Abrogation of Normative Aesthetics

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Abstract –

“You can’t dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tool.”

Dalit literature is a post-colonial upsurge against the hegemony of oppression. It depicts the bitter truth of the caste based social fabric of Independent India and the unconquerable challenges faced by the dalits. Its main objective is to raise the voice of protest and make the oppressors heard the new voice of justice and equality. But when the oppressed tried to give vent to their long muted anguish and pain through literature, it was not paid heed to. Their articulation was not considered worthy to be read as literature because it doesn’t fit to their normative aesthetics. Audre Lorde rightly said “you can’t dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tool.” Dalit writers argue that literary standards change with change of culture. Also counter the theory that someone’s writing will be called literature only when ‘our’ literary standards approve, it is a sign of literary dictatorship. Further, dalit critics propose to include and recognize ‘revolt’ as tenth, ‘cry’ should be accepted as the eleventh ‘rasa’, to complete the ‘rasa’ theory. Because, Dalit literature is not about beauty or pleasure, it is about the sufferings and revolts of the Dalits. So, its aesthetics can’t be based on the principles of a normative aesthetics of literature where privileged derive pleasure from beauty. So, it is imperative to develop the separate aesthetic to assess the dalit literature. This paper is an attempt to throw light on why abrogation of normative aesthetics is necessary and why there is a dire need to have alternate narrative to appraise dalit literature.

Keywords: Dalit Literature, Aesthetics, Abrogation, Caste, Oppression.

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Dalit literature being post- independence literature has a new form & purpose. Dalit literature is the literature of exploited people and is principally focused on the expression of their pathetic life experiences and their search for freedom and equality. As Limbale defined Dalit Literature in his *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, “By Dalit literature, I mean writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness.”(19) Here ‘Dalit consciousness’ is very important as it is “the revolutionary mentality connected with struggle.”(32) It is based on the Ambedkarite ideology which makes the dalits conscious against oppression.

Dalit is not a caste, but a realization and is related to experiences, joy and sorrows and struggles of the suppressed in the society. Dalit literature is based on experience, thus the life depicted in Dalit literature is not unreal or illusionary but real and authentic. It reflects Dalit consciousness and sensibility, attempts to define and assert Dalit identity primarily from a Dalit point of view. In this process, it also abrogates the traditional standard of evaluating literature i.e.

literary aesthetics, as the mere purpose of traditional literary aesthetics is to provide aesthetic pleasure or beauty. Though the traditional aesthetics is, as mentioned by Sharan Kumar Limabale, based on the principles of Satya, Shivam, Sundaram which is “used to divide and exploit ordinary people.”(21) This aesthetic concept of Satya, Shivam, Sundaram is the selfish mechanism or ‘master’s tool’ of upper caste Hindu society. Having being conscious, Caliban, a slave, in Aime Cesaire's *A Tempest* rejects the normative concepts:

“Prospero, you are the master of illusion. Lying is your trademark. And you have lied so much to me (Lied about the world, lied about me). That you have ended by imposing on me an image of myself. Underdeveloped, you brand me, inferior, that’s the way you have forced me to see myself I detest that image! What’s more, it’s a lie! But now I know you, you old cancer, And I know myself as well.”

He further says to Prospero, "You didn't teach me a thing: Except a jabber in your own language so that I could understand your orders.... And as far your learning, did you ever impart any of that to me? No, you took care not to. All your science you keep for yourself alone, shut up in those big books.... Without you? I'd be the king." (Scene-II, 11-13) Caliban questions the learning and teaching and mourns that nothing fruitful was shared among the subalterns by the oppressors. Same as in India, as M. Dasan said, "the Brahminic discursive system ... tried to universalize the particular Brahminic thought, its anxieties and concerns. Dalits critics and theorists expose the danger in such generalizations and universalization and project the often repressed "other" experience." (26) Audre Lorde rightly said "you can't dismantle the master's house with the master's tool." Dalit literature is not about beauty or pleasure, it is about the sufferings and revolts of the Dalits. So, its aesthetics can't be based on the principles of a normative aesthetics of literature where privileged derive pleasure from beauty. So, it is imperative to deconstruct and develop the separate aesthetic to assess the dalit literature.

Savarna critics assert that Dalit literature should be treated or critiqued as any literary work and not from a reverential or sympathetic perspective simply because it has been created by Dalits. Dalit literature is not only a literature to give vent to the suppressed feelings and emotions but a movement. It's a vehicle for the pain, sorrows, questions and problems of the subaltern class. Limbale puts forward his objective in an interview:

I want to write about my pain and pangs. So, I cannot give importance to my personal life. I am writing for social cause... My autobiography speaks about this in detail. My autobiography is a statement of my war against injustice. (The Criterion)

He further adds, "...This is the story of my life...and an autobiography of a community." (*Akkarmashi* xxiv). Thus, how it can be evaluated with the tools of existing aesthetics literature? So, Dalit writers argue that literary standards change with change of culture. Also counter the theory that someone's writing will be called literature only when 'our' literary standards approve it. It is sign of literary dictatorship. So, Dr C. B. Bharti rightly puts:

"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 life."

With changing times, literature changes and there remains the possibility of change in its criticism too. But it didn't happen, so, Dalit writers find literary criteria obsolete. They believe that traditional literary aesthetics, which is based primarily on Sanskrit or

English literary theories can't do justice to Dalit literature. Whereas, Savarna critic G.M. Kulkarni regrets that there has been no criticism of rural literature though it had existed before Dalit literature. However, V.L.Kulkarni stands in favour of the Dalits and says, 'if giving "extraordinary pleasure" be considered an artistic value, why can't be giving 'extraordinary pain' too be recognized as an artistic value?'

If pleasure can be considered the basis of aesthetics of Savarna literature, then why, pain and suffering can't be the basis of the aesthetics of Dalit literature. Dalit literature is not that kind of literature that takes you to idyllic state rather it makes you restless and angry. Then, how can the aestheticism of beauty be accommodated with 'Dalit Consciousness' in Dalit literature? This 'Dalit Consciousness' is a revolutionary consciousness based on ideas of equality, liberty and justice rather than pleasure. Therefore, it is necessary to change the paradigm of aesthetic beauty because it is not possible to investigate the creation of Dalit literature and its commitment to revolt and rejection within the existing framework of conventional aesthetics. Further, dalit critics propose as suggested by Limbale to include and recognize 'revolt' as tenth, 'cry' should be accepted as the eleventh 'rasa', to complete the 'rasa' theory.(115) Because, Dalit literature is not about beauty or pleasure, it is about the sufferings and revolts of the Dalits. So, its aesthetics can't be based on the principles of a normative aesthetics of literature where privileged derive pleasure from beauty.

All Dalit writers are inspired by revolutionary Ambedkarite thought and articulate life-affirming values in all their literary creations. However, the standard of a work of literature depends on how much and in what way an artist's ideas, embedded in the work, affect the reader. Thus, Dalit literature can't be fully appraised without knowledge of the Dalit writer's experience, their anger, rejection and rebellion vis-à-vis traditional values, as well as the social context. As, Dalit writers prioritize the issues of the society and their solution, rather than entertaining the readers. They represent their feelings through their literature. They don't produce literature keeping the urbane readers in their mind. Their effort is to take the aesthete-reader, away from the traditional aesthetic values, which are aesthete-reader centered, to the world of reality. Daya Pawar, said, "Critics neither understand the description of social context in Dalit literature, nor fully grasp the meaning of language". Critics don't seem to realize that we live in a different cultural island. They pay no attention to the destination between a literature written from imagination and one that is based on lived ideas.

When pleasure-giving literature can give sense of joy and beauty to people, revolutionary literature awakens consciousness of self-respect. The

literature of the exploited is mainly connected with the struggle for freedom and its expression. The spirit of freedom finds its expression through Dalit literature not only as its life essence, but also as its beauty. The core values of life are equality, freedom, solidarity -- be reckoned as the essence of beauty in Dalit literature. The Dalit consciousness motivated by Ambedkarite thought occupies a central place in the aesthetics of Dalit literature. This Dalit consciousness is a consciousness against slavery. The cultural and social revolutionary movements were led by Phule and Dr Ambedkar in 19th and 20th century respectively and showed the alternative way of living and thinking and rescued Indian society from the clutches of Brahminism. The baton of the same is further being carried on by conscious writer through dalit literature.

Thus, Dalit Limbale say, "Our path is different. Our direction is different. Therefore, we should spend our energies in travelling our own path and seeking our own direction". (21) Thereby they have rejected the traditional artistic standards and aesthetics and have attempted to develop a separate aesthetics of their own, as it way different from other literatures or works of art. Kancha Ilaiah makes plea and warns the class of oppressors, "For about three thousand years you people learnt only how to teach and what to teach others – the Dalitbahujans. Now ... you must learn and to read what we have to say."(xii)

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