

**Lapis Lazuli**  
**An International Literary Journal**



**WWW.PINTERSOCIETY.COM**  
**VOL.5 / NO.2/ AUTUMN 2015**

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**Dalit Consciousness And The Writing of The Other**

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**Abstract:**

Dalit literature, or literature about the Dalits, an oppressed Indian class under the Indian caste system, forms an important and distinct part of Indian literature. Dalit literature emerged into the forefront and as a prominent voice after 1960, starting with the Marathi language, and soon appeared in languages like Hindi, Kannada, Telugu and Tamil languages, Dalit literature in its initial stages (and in a broader sense, even today) was identified as specific protests directed against everyday humiliations that individual dalits and Dalits as a community face. In this context, contradictions between Marxism and progressive literary movements with Dalit literature have to be taken into serious consideration. Most of the debates around/about Dalit literature have failed to adequately acknowledge the new vocabulary of imagination and aesthetical sensibility produced by these literatures. Dalit literature cannot be reduced to an

engagement with victimhood. Dalit literature has spawned new literary cannons by disturbing the usual language available in the pre-existing canonical literary circles. Dalit literature today has established itself as a new mode of literary/aesthetic imagination and writing.

**Key words:** Dalit, Castes, Oppressed, Autobiographies.

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In ancient India according to character, quality and nature the whole human race was classified into four Varnas:

- The Brahmins: priests, teachers and preachers.
- The Kshatriyas: kings, governors, warriors and soldiers.
- The Vaishyas: cattle herders, agriculturists, artisans and merchants.
- The Shudras: labourers and service providers.

This quadruple division or an ancient stratification of society is not to be confused with the much more nuanced jati or "caste" system of today. Earlier where as this division was based on action, today it is entirely by birth; earlier it was the need of social structure but now it has become a major political tool to gain the power. The word Dalit was chosen by the members of the Dalit Panthers; and Dalit Literature 1970 just as Americans chose the word Black. For ages, Dalits have had their tales told by upper-caste writers. Premchand wrote of Dukhi, Mulk Raj Anand of Bakha, Arundhati Roy of Velutha and Mahasweta Devi of Doulati. But what if Dukhi, Bakha, Velutha and Doulati take up the pen and decide to tell their own tales? Over the past few decades, a Dalit literary movement has been giving readers a first-hand experience of how the community lives. In doing so, these writers are also re-scripting the conceptions of Indian society

and history while challenging prevailing literary conventions. And here lies the seeds of the beginning of Dalit literature.

Dalit literature can be categorized into two sections:

1. Writers of any caste and creed writing about the miserable plight of dalits and suggesting the ways of their emancipation.
2. Adalit writer himself taking up the responsibility to go deep down into the affair with his own invented tools to highlight the problems faced by dalits and invoking them to take mightier pen as the sword of their liberation. Very much like feminists as they claim the responsibility of this patriarchal society in the evil and arch-type portrayal of women, the dalits too claim the role of upper castes for creating a very self-pleasing caricature of them indifferent of reality. So, now it was the responsibility of the dalits to write as a dalit and for the dalit with their own norms of writing and social justice. It is often compared with African-American literature especially in its depiction of issues of racial segregation and injustice, as seen in slave narratives.

The first kind of literature was there in India right from the Buddhist period. Dalit Bhakti poets like Gora, Raidas, Chokha Mela and Karmamela; and the Tamil Siddhas, or Chittars, many of whom must have been Dalits going by hagiographical accounts like Periyapuram (12th cent.). These were the writers whose major concern was peace and harmony amongst all; no discrimination with anyone on the grounds of birth, colour and poverty. The acceptance of these dalit thinkers by the society is in itself an evidence that the birth and class was not a bar to excellence and social system was very much action oriented. It was in the medieval India where many evils crept into the society to corrupt the ongoing balanced practices. This was the time

when consciousness in dalits about the inequality in the society took place. They started looking at everything with a suspicion and doubt (including hindu scripture); they started feeling the need a savior (maseeha) for themselves. Even Gandhi and his Harijan was not sufficient for them. In their search for alternatives, Dalit writers have rediscovered the low caste saint poets of the Bhakti movement. Even they found relevance in Buddhism. Referring to folk lore, they make an assertion that Dalits were members of an ancient primitive society and were uprooted by the alien Brahminical civilization. These writers make a fervent plea for a complete overhaul of society. And here was the an apposite time for those who were looking forward for it through ages.

It was after the democratic and egalitarian thinkers such as Sree Narayana Guru, Jyotiba Phule, B.R. Ambedkar, Iyothee Thass, Sahodaran Ayyappan, Ayyankali, Poykayil Appachan and others cogently articulated the sources and modes of caste oppression that modern Dalit writing as a distinct genre began to emerge in Indian languages. According to Satyanarayana and Tharu, "although it is possible to identify a few Dalit writers from earlier times, the real originality and force of Dalit writing, which today comprises a substantial and growing body of work, can be traced to the decades following the late 1960s. Those are the years when the Dalit Panthers revisits and embraces the ideas of Babasaheb Ambedkar, and elaborates his disagreements with the essentially Gandhian mode of Indian nationalism, to begin a new social movement. In the following decades, Dalit writing becomes an all-India phenomenon. This writing reformulates the caste question and reassesses the significance of colonialism and of missionary activity. It resists the reduction of caste to class or to non-Brahminism and vividly describes and analyzes the contemporary workings of caste power." [1]

The contributions of Dalit writers have been emerging everyday to enrich Dalit literature as well as Indian literature in recent years. Critics and reviewers have showed interest in this literature at national and international level. John C.B. Webster, Josiane Racine, Jean-Luc Racine, Dr. Gail Omvedt, Eleanor Zelliot, Christophe Jaffrelot and many Indian researchers have been making significant contributions on Dalit lives in their recent writings. The significances of Dalit identity in the caste hegemonic society are brought out in the Dalit literature. Besides, Dalits realized their identity by reading the works of Rabinthranath Tagore, Jyotibqa Fule, M.K. Gandhi, Dr. Ambedkar, Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand, Vijay Tendulkar in religion and education.

Thus the contribution of Dalit literature can be summed up as:

1. First and foremost, it effectively threatened the Brahmanic hegemony from literature
2. Second, is conscentized Dalit masses for assertion, protest and mobilization.
3. Third is stirred up thinking in Dalit intellectuals and catalyzed creation of organic intellectuals of Dalits.
4. Fourth, given that the level of literacy been particularly low among Dalits, the emergence of Dalit literature where both the writers and readers are mostly Dalits, is itself an evidence of a profound change taking place in Indian society.

However, in the context of the increasing significance of Dalit literature there is a great need to address major theoretical issues connected with it. The important questions which has ben addressed in this paper are the following:

1. How much and how far the Dalit writings have successful in achieving it's aim of portraying the cruelties and humiliation they had suffered into literacy expression and experience ?
2. Is the base of Dalit literature on which the superstructure is erected in many languages same or different?
3. What is the contribution of Dalit literature to main stream literature in terms of content and style?
4. Where do the present trends in Dalit literature lead to ?
5. As alleged by many writers of mainstream literature, "Are Dalit writings falling into a stereotype?"

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Asserting the importance of Dalit literature Arundhati Roy has observed: "I do believe that in India we practice a form of apartheid that goes unnoticed by the rest of the world. And it is as important for Dalits to tell their stories as it has been for colonized peoples to write their own histories. When Dalit literature has blossomed and is in full stride, then contemporary (upper caste?) Indian literature's amazing ability to ignore the true brutality and ugliness of the society in which we live, will be seen for what it is: bad literature. It will become irrelevant." [2]

Modern Dalit literature originally started in Maharashtra in Marathi language and later translated into many other languages. But soon it strengthened its roots in Hindi, Kannada, Telugu and Tamil languages, through narratives such as poems, short stories, and, most , autobiographies, which stood out due to their stark portrayal of reality and the Dalit political scene. Using

autobiography as a literary genre, writers could share personal experiences of caste discrimination, making its existence undeniable for the middle classes. Even genres like fiction, poetry and drama became largely autobiographical in the hands of Dalit writers. Caste was seen as the definitive aspect of Indian society and raising political consciousness (Dalit chetna) turned into a literary goal.

The highest purpose of Dalit writing is not beauty of craft, but authenticity of experience. Most significant attribute is that the Dalit literature displays Dalit consciousness. It is a belief in rebellion against the caste system, recognizing the human being as its focus. Ambedkarite thought is the inspiration for this consciousness. Sometimes Dalit literature has been criticized as being propagandist. It has been alleged that this literature lacks artistic finesse. It has been charged further, that their writing expresses the frenzy of a movement and does not possess neutrality and objectivity. Today Dalit Literature includes not only the writings about Indian suppressed people but also other groups throughout the world that are relegated to a secondary position by the privileged classes.

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