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## Dalit Consciousness in Literature

Purusharth Chawla

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### Abstract:

Dalit literature brings out the voices of rebellion and is a registering of protest by Dalits. While this protest is against the upper caste in case of Dalit males, it extends its boundaries to not only upper castes but also Dalit males in case of Female Dalit authors. Dalit literature helps the community to create a space for themselves, locate themselves in the existing areas and claim their identity, which was otherwise being oppressed. It helps them reclaim not only their dignity but also self-esteem, writing about their culture, documenting and preserving their rich culture of oral traditions and re-writing history from the margin.

### Key Words:

Dalit Literature, Dalit Consciousness, Rebellion, Oppression, Oral Traditions, Dalit Aesthetics, Re-writing History, Dalit Culture.

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Bhuvan: Kachra, pass the ball.

(Kachra stares at Bhuvan with fear)

Bhuvan: What are you gaping at? Throw the ball here.

(Kachra throws the ball towards Bhuvan with his crippled right hand; the ball spins)

Bhuvan (to Kachra): What did you do?

Kachra: I did not do anything. You asked me to throw it.

(Bhuvan calls Kachra to the field, gathers everyone around)

Kachra: I did not do anything. You asked me to throw it.

Bhuvan: Throw the ball again, Kachra.

Kachra (to villagers): I did not do anything wrong. Bhuvan *bhaiya* asked me to throw the ball.

Bhuvan: Kachra, throw the ball.

(Kachra obeys)

Not with your left hand, with your right one.

Bhuvan (to villagers): Did you see how it spins?

Bhuvan: We have found our eleventh player. Come on, Kachra.

(Bhuvan arranges the field; others standing in amazement, not moving)

Bhuvan: What happened? What are you people staring at?

Man 1: No, no. We will not play.

Bhuvan: Why? What happened?

Man 1: You want us to play with this untouchable? No way! He cannot play with us.

Man 2: That is right. We won't share the field with an untouchable.

Man 3: This is not possible. Just think about it.

Man 4: I am not playing.

Man 5: We too won't play, Bhuvan.

Village Head: Bhuvan, what are you doing? It's wrong. You are polluting the entire village. We are ready to fight the British but not by mingling with an untouchable. It's impossible.

(People begin to leave.)

(2:07:00, *Lagaan*)

This scene from the 2002 blockbuster *Lagaan* set in the British rule in India points to the existence of untouchability and caste divide in the country. The condition imposed on the villagers is either to win a match of cricket against the British and get freedom from heavy tax or pay double of the existing tax. Bhuvan, played by Aamir Khan in the film, asks a Dalit man, Kachra, to play for the team when while passing the ball it spins. Other villagers refuse to play with Kachra considering that it would “pollute the entire village”, ruining the whole system. The villagers, with poor harvest due to deficient monsoon, are ready to bear the burden of an increased tax by not playing the match but are not willing to mingle with an untouchable. Such is the extent of the caste system which divides the society in such a manner that associates with a lower caste are considered unthinkable, and paying hefty taxes and ignoring their own welfare, a preferable option. A two-minute-long monologue asking people not to discriminate by the protagonist, Bhuvan, makes everyone change their minds and mentality, their idiosyncratic views and communitarian beliefs. While one of the characters extends gratitude to Bhuvan for “making us realise our mistake”, the monologue makes the village head announce “Kachra will play with us.” Thus, Kachra is not an ‘untouchable’ anymore with the protagonist's hand on his shoulder and the village accepting him, realising their mistake, after the five minutes long scene because the movie found it futile to waste time on an issue like untouchability and caste system. Bhuvan takes the burden of being a social reformer while Kachra being a victim of the caste system, at the bay in the scene (shown sitting in one corner of the field, outside the main area), is speechless and left teary-eyed when the ‘messiah’ Bhuvan makes him a part of the society. One does not encounter any other lower caste person or an “untouchable” in the entire movie. Bhuvan’s invocation of Rama and his act of eating fore-bitten fruit of a Dalit character Shabari makes Rama a figure not believing in caste and helps Bhuvan lift-up an “untouchable” using his example. The story, like other myriad mainstream retellings, chooses to ignore, the presence of Shambhuka, a Dalit character who was beheaded by Rama, in his Utopian Rama Rajya, for not following his orders of not reciting the Vedas. Sriyavan Aanand in his essay, “Eating with Our Fingers, Watching Hindi Cinema and Consuming Cricket”, asserts “*Lagaan* is the Purana of the new millennium, accretion to the quintessentially Brahmanic myth-making tradition.” After this five-minute-long scene, Kachra is a part of the team, whether-or-not he wishes to be a part of it is not paid heed to by anyone. While Kachra sits outside the field, on the other side of the field are female characters, wives and daughters of these peasants, with only a British woman, Elizabeth, standing with men in the playing area. Other female characters have no dialogue but expressions on their face with every word uttered by the males. One notices the complete absence of Dalit females from the seventh-longest film of the Indian cinema which touches on the caste system and untouchability briefly.

The oppression of Dalits and the existence of a caste-based society traces its origin to centuries ago as one can figure out from Shambhuka’s example. Dalit females are caught in the continuous cycle of double marginalisation at the hands of Savarna males and females and Dalit males. For them, it is the intersectionality of caste and gender that become a tool of their oppression. The absence of Dalit female characters in *Lagaan* is one kind of treatment that they receive at the hands of the authors. This essay will focus on the treatment of Dalit Women in various short stories and other texts by Caste-Hindu males, *Savarna* females, Dalit males and Dalit females. It will further look for authenticity in these texts along with an introduction to Dalit consciousness which provides authenticity to any text of the Dalit literature.

Let us first try to explore what are the elements/ characteristics that help us categorise a text as a part of the Dalit literature. Sharatchandra Muktibodh, in his essay “What is Dalit Literature?” points out:

Dalit Literature is the literature produced by the Dalit consciousness. Human freedom is the inspiration behind it. That is its fundamental value. The nature of this literature consists of a

rebellion against the suppression and humiliation suffered by the Dalits - in the past and even at present – in the framework of the varna system. (Muktibodh 01)

Dalit literature is the literature of lived experiences, stories of Dalit lives from Dalit viewpoints and a Dalit insight, intending to be free from oppression that carries anger against the oppressors. Sharankumar Limbale in *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature* classifies Dalit literature as “writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness.” (Limbale 19). One can see the lack of this Dalit consciousness that the critics talk about in Premchand’s works. Premchand, in his story *Dudh ka Daam (Price of Milk)* presents a Dalit boy, Mangal, whose mother works as a wet nurse in the house of a zamindar, an upper-caste household. Mangal used to get the leftover food from this household to feed himself. Mangal stays in the constant companionship of Tomy, a dog. Once after the wife of the Thakur scolds him, Mangal leaves vowing not to eat the leftover food until he is called. At dawn, he returns, hiding in the shade of a tree. As he sees the servant going to throw the leftover food, he appears in front of him and asks for the food with deep gratitude in his eyes. As he eats the food sitting under a tree with Tomy, he is reminded that the leftover he is consuming is the price of milk that Thakur is paying to Mangal’s mother for breastfeeding his child. Ajay Navaria, a Dalit critic and writer, rewrites the story *Dudh ka Daam* by Premchand. The short story is a part of a work by Navaria which includes some of the most well-known Dalit characters framed by Premchand. It is a Premchand look-alike that helps Navaria embark on this journey to rewrite Premchand at the beginning of his work *Unclaimed Terrain, Hello Premchand*. The character quotes Thakur from Premchand’s story, *Dudh ka Daam*, who says, “Whatever else may change in this world, Bhangis will always remain *Bhangis*. It is tough to make them human.” It is this comment that motivates Navaria to recreate Premchand and show “these *Bhangis* can change.” Navaria is writing these stories with Dalit consciousness, not only sympathising with these characters but also providing them with an opportunity to speak for themselves, to create a new identity and change their destinies. In Navaria’s revisioning of the story, Mangal with the help of his teachers, relatives and members of the community, gains education and vows “to work only where he finds a respectable job”. He qualifies for a government job and returns to his village where his mother used to work. Laura Breuck in Introduction to *Writing Resistance* argues, “Dalit characters consigned to death or a hopeless situation in Premchand’s stories are resurrected, educated and politicised here [Navaria’s rendition].” (Breuck, 14) One can notice that in Premchand these characters are framed in such a manner that they can only be sympathised with, with no change possible in their life unless a Kachra finds a Bhuvan and these characters can only submit to their circumstances, an attempt to represent them as reasons for their situation. Bama, in her essay “Dalit Literature”, argues in the context of Tamil literature:

In traditional Tamil literature, there was no place for the labour-class Dalits. If at all Dalits were given a place, they were depicted by the upper caste writers as sick people. The responsibility for the infliction of social evils like ignorance, perennial poverty, drunkenness, unhealthy habitation, non-hygienic habits and occupation etc., on the Dalit people was delineated by the non-Dalit writers from their points of view. One could get the impression from their writings that the Dalits themselves were responsible for their wretchedness. The literature of the dominating castes can never voice the demand for the liberation of the Dalits. (Bama 02)

Bama’s views hold universality as one can see the similar situation of Dalit characters in not only Tamil literature but Premchand’s stories as well. While in Navaria lies a protest, a rebellion which makes a Mangal vow “to work only where he finds a respectable job”, a desire and a zeal to change his life, not submitting to his circumstances,. Premchand’s courage to bring out Dalit characters, make them the centre of his stories and talk about their oppression can be appreciated through how

he has imagined Dalit lives around these existing problems. However, the problem with Premchand lies in not providing these characters agency, weakening his characters and stories, making them “responsible for their wretchedness.” It is this non-Dalit consciousness which only offers a sympathetic tone for these Dalit lives, providing them with no agency to change their circumstances that differentiates Premchand from Navaria and other Dalit authors like Omprakash Valmiki.

Bama in her essay “Dalit Literature” puts forth some more characteristics of Dalit literature, writing,

There are traces of the agony and the ecstasy of the Dalits, the direct natural and emotional outbursts, the collective identity, the culture, the mockery and caricature of the immediate oppressors, the supernatural powers of oracle and the mythical heroism: these are the several elements for the construction of conscious Dalit literature. (Bama 02)

Dalit literature brings out the voices of rebellion and is a registering of protest by Dalits. While this protest is against the upper caste in case of Dalit males, it extends its boundaries to not only upper castes but also Dalit males in case of Female Dalit authors. Dalit literature helps the community to create a space for themselves, locate themselves in the existing areas and claim their identity, which was otherwise being oppressed. It helps them reclaim not only their dignity but also self-esteem, writing about their culture, documenting and preserving their rich culture of oral traditions and re-writing history from the margin. In *Untouchable Springs*, G Kalyan Rao brings out Dalit culture in the form of songs, drama, emphasising on the richness of the oral tradition of this culture. After Yellena leaves home, he becomes a traveller, singing songs about farming and everyday lives of people. Narigadu, too, emerges as a significant contributor in preserving the culture of his community in the form of plays. Bama again in *Karukku* and *Sangati* focus on the culture of the community and points to ceremonies like weddings where gifts are made by the groom to the bride, widows are not discriminated against, and women are at the centre of this cultural celebration.

Another point to focus on in Dalit writings is the portrayal of female characters by the authors. One can notice the difference in the description of female characters by Caste Hindu males, Dalit males and Dalit women. Premchand in his short story, *Kafan*, creates a pregnant female Dalit character, Budhiya, who the readers hear only screaming in labour pain. The males of the family Ghisu and Madhav are sitting outside their hut roasting potatoes to eat, finding excuses not to go inside. They have been described as heartless and idle characters, dehumanised at the hands of the author. At the same time, Budhiya remains inside the hut throughout screaming and eventually dies when she receives no help. She has not been provided with any voice or agency and is left to die in pain. Premchand’s attempt to portray Dalit characters as heartless, idle, lethargic and unhuman along with providing no identity to the female character shows not only a lack of Dalit consciousness but also his view of a female Dalit as a weak human. Anita Bharti on Dalit male authors claim, “Dalit women are defamed by Dalit male writers in public discourse in a similar way as these two Chamar characters by Premchand, and yet no one considers this to be hypocritical.” (Breuck 170). Dharamveer, in his book *Premchand: Samant ka Munshi* analyses the works of Premchand. He reinterprets and gives a new reading of *Kafan*, which reduces Dalit women to a symbol of victimhood, justifying the actions of Dalit men to ignore the condition of Budhiya in the story. Dharamveer writes,

The whole story would become newly clear if Premchand would have written in the final line of the story, this reality of Dalit life that Budhiya was pregnant with zamindar’s child that he raped Budhiya in the field. Then, those words would shed light on the story like a lamp, and we would understand everything.

He further questions the reader, “What would have been better- allowing Budhiya and her child to die, or raising another’s child while calling it your own.” While Dharamveer believes that sexual violence is an integral part for portraying any female Dalit character to bring forth the “reality” in these stories, Dalit feminist argues that the point of Dalit literature is to act as a medium whereby the dignity of these women is restored, providing them agency, freedom and a voice to rebel and act. Charu Gupta, in her essay “Dalit Viranganas”, argues:

Dalit male literature are often replete with images of the loyal wife and an ideal mother. It may thus be argued from a Dalit feminist perspective that the emergence of popular Dalit male literature has not altered much the images of Dalit women. Though vastly different in their scope, area and portrayals, these presentations codify Dalit women in certain ways and fail to offer a more meaningful portrayal of them. The representations often remain simplistic, rarely revealing the complexity, and dimensionality that makes up Dalit women's life. They offer incomplete projections to which not many Dalit women can fully relate to. A true liberatory potential may only be realised when Dalit women themselves can create and represent their histories and images through a collage of identities and sing their songs.  
(Gupta 06)

Mohandas Naimishray in his short story *Apna Gam* presents a Dalit woman Chamiya who is paraded naked at the beginning of the story on account of the inability of her husband, who works in the city, to pay a debt of rupees five hundred. She works in the house of the local Thakur whose son, one day, while she is collecting firewood, beats her up, strips her and parades her in the village. Her husband returns from the city and a group of eleven men go to the police station to file a complaint. When they are not given justice at the hands of the corrupted policemen, they decide to go away from this village and set up their own village where they will not be oppressed by the upper-caste people. Though the community shows strength at the end of the story by complaining against Thakur's son and subsequently deciding to leave the village, they do not act while she is being paraded naked. One of the most problematic views from a feminist standpoint is the muteness of Chamiya throughout the story. She doesn't speak while she is being subjected to violence, paraded naked, it is men who go on her behalf to file a complaint, trying to give her justice. Similarly, as Laura Breuck in her essay “Re-scripting Rape” critiques another short story *Subcontinent* by Ajay Navaria, from a feminist viewpoint, looking for the voice of the female. The story begins with a young adult settled in Delhi haunted by a faint childhood memory of rape of a woman after which the family moves out of the village. While Naimishray's Chamiya is mute throughout the narrative, this woman in Navaria's story is reduced to only a memory of a young Dalit male, who then takes revenge by returning to the village. However, *Izzat*, another short story by Navaria gives an insight into the mind of the Dalit woman, beaten and gang-raped by some upper caste men. The character shows strength by continuously pitching against the desire of the upper-caste doctor for her body and displays immense courage by running with a bottle to harm her rapists to take revenge, trying to bring justice to herself. This story becomes one of the exceptions by a male Dalit author that presents a woman as a strong character who is not dependent on the males of her family or community for justice. While Dalit women characters are shown without agency by *savarna* and Dalit males, the complexity, intersectionality, strengths and weaknesses of a character, voice of rebel, angst and power are portrayed by Dalit women writers. Kusum Meghwal provides agency to her female characters in “woman-centred rape-revenge fantasy”. In her story *Mangali* which is also the name of her protagonist, Meghwal creates a widow who works at a construction site. She has been portrayed as an innocent woman, unable to understand the cruel realities of life and motives of people. When she is offered a place by the contractor to live, she agrees. One day, he attempts to sexually assault her, *Mangali* pushes him aside and hits him with thick firewood lying by the stove. She runs to a police station thereafter. Here in this story, a female character exercises her power,

displays a strength of character and instead of submitting to desires of the contractor, she fights back. Such a portrayal is seen missing from the stories by male writers. Dalit women authors not only use the “rape-revenge fantasy” as a technique to exercise their will and show the strength of character but they also bring out the everyday lives of these women that attempts to capture their struggles, hardships and complexities which is beyond sexual violence which is mostly a way of portrayal by male authors as seen in examples. Bama in her introduction to *Sangati* writes about these women:

My mind is crowded with many anecdotes: stories not only about sorrows and tears of Dalit women but also their lively and rebellious culture; their eagerness not to let life crush or shatter them, but rather swim vigorously against the tide; about the self-confidence and self-respect that enables them to leap over their adversities by laughing at and ridiculing them; about their passion to live life with vitality, truth and enjoyment; about their hard labour. I wanted to shout out these stories. (Bama viv)

Bama brings out Dalit culture explaining wedding ceremonies, a group wedding at church, women working together, preparing for and celebrating festivals. She talks about the menarche and menstrual cycle, hygiene and sanitation during this period while discussing “coming of age” of one of the cousins of the narrator. One can also notice the presence of the grandmother as a matriarch of the family, known and trusted by the entire village as against common patriarchal figures in various other texts. *Sangati* puts forth the relationship of an adolescent with her body, her realisation of changes in the body during puberty and an ‘excitement’ and ‘nervousness’ to cover her breasts with a different breast cloth as other grown-up women along with listing the experiences of a female who goes out of her house to a city to work and things she learns there in the era of industrialisation. *Sangati* celebrates the oral traditions of the community especially women who sing a song when a girl comes of age, someone gets married and other ordinary situations of everyday lives. Through *Sangati*, Bama presents the idea of sisterhood in situations when they work together, going to each other for advice, eating and swimming together, teaching and learning from each other, in this way she makes these women centre of her work and builds a positive space in which her characters are able to live addressing issues like wage gap and inequality in stories when these women are paid for collecting firewood as against the men who get paid more for the same work. Though she includes stories of violence, which too is a part of the everyday lives of these women. Bama writes when she [the narrator] thinks about the males beating their wives,

Even though they are male, because they are Dalits, they have to be like dogs with their tails rolled up when they are in the fields, and dealing with their landlords. There is no way they can show their strength in those circumstances. So they show it at home to their wives and children. But then, is it the fate of our women to be tormented both outside their houses and within. (Bama 65)

Bama further categorically brings forth a double marginalisation that Dalit women go through when they have to work in the fields, then work for their families, not receiving what they deserve for their work, neither money nor respect not only at work but also in homes. She writes using the context of peys as a myth,

As I listened to more of these stories [about peys] and thought about it all, I was convinced that it was all false. But all the same, I thought about the fact that only women- and Dalit women in particular- become possessed. And when I examined the lives of our women, I understood the reason. From the moment they wake up, they set out to work both in their homes and in their fields. At home they are pestered by their husbands and children; in the

fields, there is back-breaking work besides the harassment of the landlord. When they come home in the evening, there is no time to even draw breath. And once they have collected water and firewood, cooked a kanji and fed their hungry husband and children, even then they can't go to bed in peace and sleep until dawn. Night after night, they must give in to their husbands' pleasure. Even if a woman's body is wracked with pain, the husband is bothered only with his satisfaction. Women are overwhelmed and crushed by their disgust, boredom, and exhaustion, because of all this. The ones who don't have the mental strength are oppressed; they succumb to mental ill-health and act as if they are possessed by peys. (Bama 58)

*Sangati* rises above stories of just violence and sexual assault as is the case with other Dalit texts by male authors as argued by Laura Breuck. Dalit women authors are able to provide a just portrayal of their characters with not only a Dalit consciousness but gendered oppression too, bringing out the intersectionality of caste and gender, narrating tales of everyday lives, struggles, hardships and courage.

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### BIO-NOTE

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Purusharth is an English Major from Delhi College of Arts & Commerce, the University of Delhi. His areas of interest are Dalit Literature and LGBTQIA+ issues. He has previously published articles on the struggles of LGBTQIA+ community on various online platforms. He wishes to see Ambedkar's dream of a casteless society, where nobody is relegated to the margin, and everybody has a right to choose for themselves.

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