

Situating Dalit Literature in Indian Writing in English

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Abstract

Etymologically speaking, the term *dalit* has originated from Sanskrit, *dalita* meaning 'oppressed'. It seems to have been borrowed from Hindi recently. It means (in the traditional Indian Caste System) a member of the caste that is considered the lowest and has the fewest advantages. The origin of Dalits as a clan may be traced back to the Rigveda, the oldest Veda of Hindus. Four Varnas are identified in ancient classics and religious literature of the Hindus. The four varnas or castes are subdivided into many subcastes and there is a final stratum of this ethnic division known as the untouchables, the lowliest of all, so impure and despicable that they stood outside the caste and social structure of the Indian people altogether. This final stratum is known as 'Dalits' in modern linguistic terminology.

There is a general traditional assumption among the caste Hindus/upper caste Hindus that the Dalits did not have their own cultural institutions, arts and fine arts, etc. This paper focuses on the presentation of information which proves that the Dalits did and do have their own culture and have had their own traditions, music, rites of passage, worship of gods, and knowledge of many kinds of fine arts, handicrafts and so on. Many stories or books on them by well-meaning authors did not mention this cultural side of their miserable lives, and focussed on only the oppression and abuse perpetrated upon them by the upper caste Hindus, and so we had not heard of their cultural traditions. The paper presents the arguments and facts using information available from various sources such as Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and describes the current state of Dalit literature with particular reference to Tamil literature.

Keywords: Dalit, Varnas, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, Shudras, Rig Veda, subaltern literature, Indian Writing in English, Modern Dalit literature

Introduction – Dalit Community

Etymologically speaking, the term *dalit* has originated from Sanskrit, *dalita* meaning ‘oppressed’. It seems to have been borrowed from Hindi recently. It means (in the traditional Indian Caste System) a member of the caste that is considered the lowest and has the fewest advantages. The origin of Dalits as a clan may be traced back to the Rigveda, the oldest Veda of Aryan supremacy. The celebration of “Purusa-Sukta” myth dictates the origin of the Indian Caste system. Purusa is described in the Rigveda as, “the man... with thousand heads, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet... the ruler of immortality” (30), and it is said and believed by millions that all creatures are part of him; the human beings also are descended from his monstrous body. The Rigveda further enunciates, “His mouth became the Brahmin; his arms were made into the warrior, his thighs the business people and from his feet the servants were born”. (30) This forms the four Varnas: Brahmins (the learned men who become priests and religious leaders), the Kshatriyas (the strongmen who would be the warriors) the Vaisyas (the men of business acumen who ensure prosperity through commercial transaction), the shudras (the humble toilers who lacked the governing graces of the other three varnas). The four castes are subdivided into multitudinous subcastes and there is a final stratum of this ethnic division known as the untouchables, the lowliest of all, so impure and despicable that they stood outside the caste and social structure of the Indian people altogether. This final stratum is known as ‘Dalits’ in modern linguistic terminology.

Post-Colonial Literary Texts

Post-colonial literary texts eventually represent the culture of a particular land in which the text is produced, which is crushed, deteriorated as time passes and people turn to new fashions, industrial revolution, and science. So the literary texts, regardless of the genre are considered as a typical representation of the culture of the writer’s class. The colonial texts have an urge to represent or conceptualize colonialism and its effects and to re-establish the culture of the natives. It is viewed as a Cultural determinism. These texts seem to reject the master narratives that are produced under the impact of western influences. M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham say, “the major element of post colonial agenda is to disestablish Eurocentric norms of literary and artistic values, and to expand the literary canon to include colonial and post colonial writers”. (Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham 307)

The early stage postcolonial texts have foregrounded the differences in perception between the colonizer and the colonized and set up a plane of duality such as ruler/the ruled:

“Foregrounding differences and diversity, celebrating hybridity, plurality and ‘otherness’ as potential sources of vitality and change and rejecting notions like standardisation, conformity, universalisation that are seen as sources of power, hegemony and colonialism—these notions are gaining ground. . .”

(Krishnaswamy, Varghese and Mishra 93).

The Subaltern Literature

This stratum is followed by the national or nationalized literature with the national culture as its subject. In this perspective the literature of a country like India, with multiple diversities in cultural and traditional values represents the hybridization and the hybrid identities have given a unique flavour to the literature as “Subalternism”. “The subaltern has become a standard way to designate the colonial subject that has been constructed by European discourse.....” (Abrams and Harpham, 307). It aims at an understanding of the linkage between the structures of knowledge and forms of oppression. The writers tried to portray the differences between the oppressed and the oppressor in their works and to re-establish or regain their identity through their literary texts.

Cheran in a very succinct poem which talks about the futility of war proclaims:

when you are oppressed,
you see the blood of tears.
when you are the oppressor
you see the tears of blood. (Cheran 71)

These lines typically represent the two terms discussed in subaltern studies, *oppressed* and *oppressor*. The oppressed want to relieve themselves from the tyrannical clutches of the oppressor, against which the oppressed protest to establish themselves. So, the literature of the subaltern group is usually portrayed as protest literature, in which the oppressed try to release themselves from the clutches of the oppressor.

On Defining *Subaltern*

Subaltern is a group, that is socially, linguistically, culturally politically and geographically outside the hegemonic power structure of the contemporary society; 'subaltern' as the term indicates, speaking linguistically, through the etymological roots that the word originated from the Latin term 'subalternus' meaning next (sub), every other (alternus), imbibed into British English during the late 16th century, originally meaning, "any officer in the British army who is lower in rank than a captain", Oxford Dictionary explains. And when transferred to cultural studies, it has assumed the present meaning. It is derived from the cultural hegemony work of Antonio Gramsci, the author of *Prison Notebooks* (1926) The term has entered into the field of cultural studies through the works of Subaltern Studies Group, a collection of South Asian historians who explored the political-actor role of the men and women who are the mass population, rather than the political roles of the social and economic elites in the history of South Asia.

Colonizers and Settlers

In Indian history, a very significant distinction is to be made between colonizers and settlers. In this subcontinent, the Aryans have come and settled down, the Moghuls also, and they established their rule over the area for a long time and settled down. During the process of settlements the Aryans have waged a battle against the aboriginals and have subdued them. In this connection Majumdar in *The Advanced History of India* observes, ". . . the white hued Aryan invaders were marked out from their dark skinned opponents, who were called *dasa*, *dasyu* or *sudra*." (Majumdar, Roy Chaudhri and Kalingar Datta 26). From this line one can clearly perceive two things: that the Aryans were invaders, and there has been already a race existing in these places in which Aryans began to settle and the process is known as "Arya Varta" (Nehru 13). The natives had been thrown out of power and they had become a subaltern group and the power had been transferred to the Aryans, and those people, considering the description of the historians, "dark skinned, flat nosed race who spoke a tongue unintelligible to the Aryans," and "they possess many properties like forts and herds of cattle" (Majumdar. Roy Chaudhri and Kalingar Datta 26), and this is the first instance of the evolution of subalternity in the history of India: "the race who has been in power hitherto has been overthrown and has become powerless and subordinated. They are the dalits, and to add this point the group which has been called as, 'dasyus' by the Aryan has worshipped god 'Indra', who according to the Hindu mythology is the god of rain and he

is otherwise known as 'Varuna'. Dalits are the people who worked in the fertile lands and their profession was agriculture. They worship god 'Indra' believing that the worship may please god to bring rain which may be useful to their profession.

The British Rule

The British have colonised the people and have subjugated them. They have empowered everybody irrespective of the social class that have been created by the Aryan: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra. The Literature, produced during that period has portrayed this subaltern status of the Indian race. Mulk Raj Anand's *Two Leaves and A Bud* seems to be one of the best examples of this kind of writing. Basavaraj Naikar observes on Mulk Raj Anand's *Two Leaves and A Bud*, "The novel is an attack on the evil effects of imperialism, capitalist economy and exploitation of helpless labourers" (Naikar 33-34). "The coolies suffer not only this low level of wages, but frequently from indebtedness to their employers in outlandish districts where he is dependent upon shops provided by employers for his food stuff, fuel, etc.," (Anand, *Two Leaves and A Bud* 126).

But when you look at the history of pre-colonial India, all the different rulers, kings and queens, emperors all did the same thing to their subjects. The lower castes suffered untold oppression and humiliation at the hands of the upper castes and one cannot just keep on blaming the British for the suffering of the Dalits. Anand's other novel; 'The Untouchable' proves that. Actually the colonial rule brought to the common man education that had been denied him for centuries of Aryan rule and it also paved the way for the education of girls and the rise of many men and women reformers in India.

Early Indian Religious Texts and Suppression

The early Indian religious texts confirm the view that the subjugated Dravidians have been reduced by their oppressive conquerors to a sub-human state. Chandagya Upanishad compares the Chandala (outcaste) to a dog or a pig. The Ramayana speaks of a dalit youth, who has presumptuously learned penance and meditation. When the valiant and much celebrated Lord Rama comes to know of this incident, he slays him for his blasphemy. One can understand the status of Dalits through such episodes. The *Mahabharatha* further exemplifies the much degraded status. There is a Character as Ekalavya, a Dravidian indigenous boy (Dravidian race is considered as low caste by the Aryans), has learned the art

of archery and has dared to challenge the valiant Arjuna in archery. As a punishment, he has the thumb of his right hand cut off. Such was the status of the Dalits in the society, they were not allowed to learn anything, not allowed to enter the religious place; and even their touch was decried as the polluting force by the upper caste people.

Different Names for Dalits

Dalits were called by different names in different parts of India, invented by caste people and all entailing insult and contempt. Such names include words like *dasa*, *dasya*, *raksasa*, *asura*, *avarana*, *nisoda*, *panchama*, *chandala* and so on. The British had called them as “Depressed classes” and the term “Scheduled Caste”, after Indian became a Republic, has come to denote the entire Dalit communities officially. It is very sad to say that untouchability is prevalent even in modern Indian society, where educational opportunities are decentralized and the practice of untouchability is banned through Article 17 of the Constitution of India.

Dalit Art Forms

Poetry, music, dance, drama, painting and sculpture reveal the aesthetic richness of the Dalit tradition. Dalit culture expressed itself through these art forms. All the forms of fine art are prevalent in Dalit culture. Aesthetic study of indigenous literary forms of Dalits seems to be challenging and enriching. “Pallu literature” is identified as the earliest known Dalit literature in Tamil. Right from the ancient days the Pallars (they hail from Tamil Nadu), are identified mainly with agriculture. They tilled the land and reared crops for rich landlords when they did not own land; at each stage of their farming, they used to sing some songs to relieve themselves from fatigue. This collection of songs exhibits the richness of Dalit culture; they exploit many literary devices. Each song has its own purpose too, like love, negritude, worshipping God for rain and farming and so on. The Pallu literature is believed to be the earliest documented source for a new genre “Dalit Literature” that has later sprouted with a new critical and creative vigour.

Not Merely a Protest Literature

Looking at surface level, Dalit Literature is termed as protest literature, but it also shows the cultural values of Dalits. It talks about the art forms and their oppression also, thereby it helps the reader to understand the Dalits’ way of life. In this connection

Lalmingthani observes, “we can see from reading Dalit literature that spans several decades, that the suffering of the untouchables is a never ending chain” (Lalmingthani 11).

Religious Conversion and Dalit Recognition

Non-Dalit writers also contributed to Dalit literature. Significant among them is the novel *Saraswati Vijayam* written by Potheri Kunhambu originally in Malayalam and was later translated into English by Dilip Menon. The novel explores the plight and suffering of Dalits. The novel addresses the suffering of Dalits and also criticises the Brahmins and the Hindu caste system. It is a novel which celebrates colonial modernity. The untouchables who entail a subordinating, secondary position in the Hindu patriarchy are directly influenced and swayed by Christianity. The novel highly glorifies Christianity and speaks about how conversion helped to bring about modernity. It states that conversion to Christianity provided food, shelter and education by the Christian missionaries. The foreigners did not practice untouchability and provided equal opportunity; keeping this in view, more and more Indians especially, the dalits who had been ostracized by the main stream Hindu Culture, willingly converted to Christianity, as they believed that there was no emancipation for the lower caste within the Hindu tradition. The novel picturously portrays the existential dilemma of the Dalit Community in the Hindu Society and Culture and shows how they at last found deliverance through conversion.

A Significant Novel in Indian Writing in English *Untouchable*

Another significant novel, produced by a non-Dalit conformist, which portrays a day's events in the life of a sweeper boy, Bakha is Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*. This novel, indeed is an eloquent testimony of Dalit life. The novel was the result of several inchoate and wild urges that pressed the mind of Anand, and in “The Story of My Experiments with a white lie”, he comments:

“The Vanity of youth wanting recognition the departure from the abstract psychological theories towards the search of philosophic insights based on the lives of human beings, whom one knows in flesh and blood, the urge to express oneself at all cost in an absolutist manner, so as to expose the ugliness of death in life by deliberately dramatizing even through distortion the non human realities which impinged on one from all sides.”(Anand 6)

Untouchable is an impassioned plea for social justice, and equality. It exposes the evil effects of Untouchability and analyses its various aspects social, moral, psychological, philosophical, historical and so on. Through incidents which provide structural unity to the novel, not only the novel narrates the pathetic conditions of the untouchables, but also the psychological conditions, whereby the mind of the protagonist is studied very intensively and hard realities are portrayed. E.M. Forster in this connection observes:

The sweeper is worse off than a slave, for the slave may change his master and his duties and may even become free, but the sweeper is bound to his master and forever born into a state, from which he cannot escape and where he is excluded from social inter course and the consolation of his religion. Unclean himself, he pollutes others when he touches them. (E. M. Forster iv)

This novel also talks about conversion to Christianity. In a moment of anger against the devilish social structure of those days, which wreaked misery and injustice upon Dalits through untouchability, the protagonist Bakha thinks, “Yessuh Missih must be good” (Anand, *Untouchable* 130). Premila Paul rightly observes, “the novel is a Kaleidoscopic projection of the protagonist’s miseries”. (p. 20)

Pain and Agony Portrayed But Lack in the Portrayal of the Dalit Culture

Both novels present the existential predicament, psychological dilemma, pain and agony of Dalits in a caste-ridden Hindu Community. Both present the conversion to Christianity, which thematically considers everybody as children of God. They vividly and vivaciously juxtapose the events to create pathos; the suffering of the lower caste people presented in the novel, arouse pity and there the readers find a psychological purgation of their mind. It seems that the authors in these novels focus on the individual feeling of despair associated with such a degraded life. By creating such an atmosphere in those novels the authors give the readers a psychological theoretical perspective on the atrocities of caste discrimination. Anyway in both the novels there is no representation of the Dalit Culture. For example Anand portrays the life of a sweeper as bereft of any niceties of life.

Post-modern Dalit Writers

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The perspectives of the non-dalit writers differ from those of the modern day Dalit writers. Post-modern Dalit writers portray the Culture, existential crisis and protest for liberation and empowerment of Dalits. Dalits had never protested against their ill-treatment for many centuries, till powerful leaders rose up from among their ranks to inspire them to fight. Dangle points out, “Dalit literature is marked by revolt and negativism, since it closely associated with the hopes for freedom by a group of people who as untouchables, are victims of social, economic and cultural inequality”. (qted. Mukherjee 1)

Literature through Regional Languages

Dalit literature is usually presented in the concerned regional languages and then they are translated into English and other international languages. They are usually translated into other regional languages of India when they are available through English. To cite an example Thakazhi Sivankarnpillai’s *Thottianmahan* was translated into Tamil recently. Tamil

Tamil Dalit writing has been heralded with the publication of Bama’s *Karukku* in 1992, in which Bama details her trajectory in the caste-ridden society. The Tamil Dalit literary space includes a handful of works in various genres: novels, poetry, autobiography, short stories, critical essays and plays. Dalit Tamil aesthetics focuses also on folk songs, which are considered as the perennial celebration of their folk arts and are being circulated in CD form; it conveys their pervasive impact on the cultural domain that stands embedded in the political, literary and ideological matrix of contemporary society.

Bama observes, “Reading and writing are Political Practice for dalits” (Bama 193). Dalit writing relates to dissemination of Dalit writing and enabling continuity of Dalit discourse. In the perspective of Indian English Literature or Indian Literature in English Translation, almost all the literary historians kept silent over the genre “Dalit Literature”. They celebrate Gandhi’s or Nehru’s writing whereas they have neglected Ambedkar’s writing, to discuss as literary pieces. The Mainstream culture, the Hindu culture, almost always overlaps in India. It is imperative to unravel the polemic patronage. Neglect and marginalization has extended to early dalit discourse.

Modern Beginnings of Dalit Literature in Tamil

Though Bama is considered as the forerunner of this typically new genre in Tamil, this genre has gotten its origin from another era. Roughly 50 years before, Karukku Rettai Malai Seenivasan had published *Jeeviya Charitra Churukkam* (“Brief Biography or Brief Life History”). Seenivasan was a close associate of Ambedkar in the thirties and forties and belonged to *parayar* caste. He had also worked for Dalit emancipation and empowerment. His *Jeeviya Churukkam* is an early articulation of Dalit assertion of self and the community. This work had been inaccessible and could only be accessed through secondary sources, by way of brief quotations and cursory references till 1999, by which time the work had been republished. It coincides with Ambedkar’s notes, related to his life incidents. Seenivasan tirelessly struggled for educational opportunities for Dalits and scholarships to the Dalits who had converted to Christianity, or to other religions. It is a political strategy to consider the converts to Christianity as backward caste and not as scheduled caste, and this has become a heated political issue today that the Dalit converts register their voice in the national forum demanding the government to recognize them as Dalits. His pioneering work, both creative and agitationist, significantly indicates a subversive, interventionist phenomenon that it can be considered as a lead to the present day Dalit writings.

Another important leader and thinker of Dalit philosophy who was subverted and subordinated by the mainstream culture of India is Panditar Ayotidasar. Very recently, some of his writings have been edited by Raj Gautaman, a Dalit critic. Pandit Ayotidasar had adopted his teacher’s name against his original name Kathavarayan to point out the significance of education to Dalits. He was the first person who bravely announced that Dalits are not Hindus, and had called them as *Aadhi Tamilar*. He embarked upon a rationalist critique on Hinduism, but he is not widely known to the historians as E. V. R. Periyar.

Ayotidasar founded *Dravida Pantiyan* in 1881 to write his critique on Hinduism, brahmanical order, hegemony of priest and related issues. He also founded a weekly journal, *Oru Paisa Tamizhan* that was very popular in Chennai. In meetings, organized by him, Ayotidasar demanded opening up of the wells to the untouchables. His major contribution to the upliftment of Dalits was his inculcating a social awakening amongst the community through his writings. He used his journals to disseminate the Buddhist ideology to the people. He was a pioneer Dalit thinker, a philosopher, writer and social interventionist, who emphasized equal educational opportunities and legislative reforms for the benefit of Dalits.

Ayotidasar's and Seenivasan's writings, perhaps because of their focus was mainly on the Dalit community, were not as much read and their lives were not historiographed like those of others like E.V.R. Periyar, Annadurai and others.

Present Day Dalit Literature in Tamil

Some present day writers have also faced such hardships that their works were not accepted initially, especially if they wrote on controversial subjects like the oppression of the untouchable by caste Hindus. Though the novel *Untouchable* had been written by Caste-Hindu Mulk Raj Anand, many publishers had rejected it. Cowasjee writes in this connection, "By September 1934, the book had been rejected by as many as nineteen publishers and the author contemplated suicide, but was saved by the timely intervention of a young English poet..." (Cowasjee 27).

Bama and Gunsekaran have also met such things and Bama details her experience relating to the publication of *karukku* ". . . it had unexpected results . . . many praised it, many scorned it" and "They decided finally that it was a new genre in Tamil literature". (Bama ix) Dalit writers work for providing the Dalits with an identity in the society. Lakshmi Holmström says, ". . . in this writing, a very powerful sense of the self of the self and the community as dalit, which rejects outright the notion of varna and which, on the other hand, refuses to 'sanskritize' to evaluate dalit lifestyle according to mainstream Hindu Values".(xix)

Poomani's Novels

There are many other writers who portray the Dalit life that has remained unexplored and unrepresented in the mainstream literature. One among them is the writer, Poomani. In his novels, he portrays Dalits as hard and honest workers. His novels *Piragu* (1979) and *Vekkai* (1982) show that Poomani has preferred to work within the well-trodden Marxist paradigm and that he has refused to recognize the shackles of the caste system. Poomani's *Piragu* represents the life of *chakkiliyar* (cobbler) community realistically and with a sense of humour. The protagonist does not protest against the social structure but the upper caste characters are shown as liberal humanists. The good hearted but powerless upper caste people show sympathy to the protagonist. The novel moves towards humanism. His second novel *Vekkai*, depicts a young Dalit protagonist's counter violence against power structure in rural

society. Dalits are primarily represented as agricultural workers, or as those who uphold traditional attachment to agrarian land rather than view it as a potential source of income.

Other Writers of Dalit Literature in Tamil

Now there are an array of writers who contribute to the broad spectrum of Dalit literature like Prathiba Jeyachandran, Mathivannan, Indran, P. Mathialagan, N.D.Rajkumar, Ravikumar, Kabilan, A.Vincent Raj, Thai. Kandasamy, S. Sukirtharani, Ku. Umadevi, S. Thenmozhi, Yazhan Aathi, Bharathi Nivethan, Imayam. Azhakiya Periyavan, J.B. Sanakya, Abirami, Cho. Dharuman, M. Jeeva, Veerammal, Anbu Ponnoviam, Raj Gautaman, Ra. Athiyaman, P. Sivakami, Stalin Rajangam and others; they do a lot to improve Dalit life, contributing their writings to a sharp focus on the life and culture of Dalits.

To Conclude

The process of developing Dalit literature into a powerful tool that contests the claims of the upper caste Hindu society is in progress. Historicization of Dalit writing alerts one to the process of self-actualization and self-articulation. It is also considered a reassertion of this process in contemporary literary space.

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