Dalit Poetry; An Excruciating Cry of the Unheard

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Abstract

Dalit poetry is a burgeoning genre in literature that mirrors the excruciating cry of the downtrodden community, Dalit. The objective of this literature is to show the contemporary world of the tormenting experience of long silenced discrimination, poverty and the craving for social equality and human dignity. In order to explicitly express the reality of their narrative Dalit poets wrote poems, short stories, and mostly autobiographies. Dalit poetry altogether gives a message about the community and portrays their exploitative and helpless situation in the society. Poets express the wanting of dignified and peaceful life for the marginalized.

Keywords: Dalit, Poetry, Literature, Marginalized, Downtrodden and Oppressed

Dalit poetry is a burgeoning genre in literature that mirrors the excruciating cry of the downtrodden community, Dalit. It manifests the traumatic suffering, pain, torture, oppression, distress, and anguish Dalit encounter with the upper caste in India. Being in the shoes of a Dalit themselves, Dalit poets use Their poems to nurse the wounds of caste prejudice and caste Discrimination by questioning the injustice and inhumane act of inequality, a form of apartheid that is rampant in the veins of the Indian Society. The core objective of Dalit poetry is to showcase the unnoticed world in response of an ancient scared practice of caste hierarchy and everyday oppression that brutalizes and vandalizes the basic human rights of Dalits, whose agony is worse than the colonial rule in India as their peaceful livelihood was invaded for centuries in the Name of caste. This paper would be an attempt to picture the excruciating cry of those marginalized, downtrodden folks through Dalit poetry. The paper also reflects on the immoral and evil treatments given to them as the ostracized and socially inferior.

The etymology of the term Dalit finds its origin from the sanskrit word dalita meaning broken or scattered. It literally means oppressed and is employed as a synonym to refer untouchables in the society. There are multiple terms and labels employed to describe the noun Dalit like ash prash meaning untouchable,downtrodden, marginalized, pollutants, suppressed, broken people, and crushed people. The term Harijan meaning children of God was popularly used by Mahatma Gandhi to identify Dalits.
The Constitution of India refers them as Scheduled Castes. These sects of people are also known as the outcasts who are identified having no social rank in the Hindu caste hierarchy. However, this system of social rank comes from the Hindu holy scripture of ‘Manu smriti’ that postulates the ‘Varna system’ of society based on occupation. It is a four-fold Varna system; Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. This mythological social order emphasized on Shudra as slave are destined to serve the rest of society. These Shudras are therefore ordained to do inferior works that are considered to be polluting and highly contagious such as butchering, manual scavenging, cleaning streets, sewers, and latrines. They are literally employed as laborers to serve the upper caste and are prohibited to mobilize publicly. Hence, they live in the outskirts of rural areas and are not subjected to active social participation as they are socially isolated. 

The late 19th century and early 20th century holds a prime significance in the history of Indian literature. It was a period that witnessed the rise of a new phenomenon called Dalit literature. The Marathi word Dalit came to prominence when it was sensibly used by an Indian social reformer named Jyotirao Phule. However, it was Dr. Ambedkar a revolutionary father of Dalit liberation, from the clutches of caste hegemony who contributed for the germination of early Dalit literature.

The objective of this literature is to show the contemporary world of the tormenting experience of long silenced discrimination, poverty and the craving for social equality and human dignity. In order to explicitly express the reality of their narrative Dalit poets wrote poems, short stories, and mostly autobiographies. On observing the importance of Dalit literature, a noted Indian author UR Anathamurthy says: “For the depressed class and people those destined to live in the lower rungs of social hierarchy literature had always been a means to achieve self-respect He also added when “Dalits themselves write about their situation, it imparts to the literature a new strength and idiom”.

Dalit poetry is a literary composition that expresses the unpleasant experience of the Dalit poet and the community. The traumatic suffering, pain, torture, distress and anguish faced by them are depicted via Dalit poetry. It is a work of art that helps to modify the character of Dalit exploiters and caste discriminators by denouncing their evil acts. It contributes to the well-being of state by demonstrating the inequality prevalent in the society that hinders social harmony of the state. Narayan survey, Dayapawar, Keshav Meshram, Tryambak Sapkal, Namdeo Laxman Dhasal were the acclaimed writers of early Dalit poetry. Another form of poetry called Dalit folk poetry is a genre in Dalit poetry that used ballads to create awareness and propagating common people about their movements and reforms. Bhimrao Kardak, Vaman Dada Kardak, Vaman Dada were eminent poets of the kind.

Namdev Laxaman Dhasal was a prominent Marathi poet and fiction writer of repute. His poetry waged war against all grounds of exploitation and humiliation Dalits faced. His writings embraced Dalits as he was one among those who were discarded useless by the society. He used his poem as a weapon to question the hypocrisy and brutality of the caste discriminating society. He was a free verse writer, who employed aggressive language to translate the anguish Dalits routinely faced. Dhasal never hesitated to portray the beleaguered environment of the community as he unveiled the harsh reality of the community through his poetry.

He believed that his poetry not only created his identity as a Dalit poet rather it also revealed the unheard cry of the people. His songs are powerful manifestation of a revolutionary change in the society. In his poem Stone masons, my father, and me, Dhasal highlights the oppression and misery of Dalit people who work as stone masons. He says:

Stone Masons give stones dreams too dream;
I set a match to fireworks.
they say one mustn’t step into
Once father’s life; I do;
I scratch his elbows, his armpits”

The poem lines depict the livelihood of vadari an untouchable caste who originally speak Telugu bordering east of Maharashtra. The poet himself is one among them and the poem is a memory between him and his father as it reflects the experience of the poet. The above lines in the poem mirrors the reality of Dalit life and the practice of hereditary occupation. The untouchables are ordained to break stones for their survival so as their family in generation to come. They are denied of other opportunities in the society. The poet further elaborates;

The bodies of our women bent like bows.
I see my fathers bloodied rump.
Stonemasons mixblood with stones;
I carry a load of stones.
Stonemasons built a stone house
I break heads with stones

The poet expresses the anguish faced by the untouchables particularly women. They work all their life, but die of starvation. The poet glorifies their craftsmanship but their miserable condition is traumatic. They shed their blood to the stones and all they get in turn is suffering. Their misery is unbearable, and that’s the reason poet says; “stonemason build a stone house; I break heads with stones’. Dhasal gives the readers a clear picture through his poetry about their suffering and pain.

Dalit poetry altogether gives a message about the community and portrays their exploitive and helpless situation in the society. Poets express the wanting of dignified and peaceful life for the marginalized. Dalit poetry is not only revealing pain and agony but also provide readers with traumatic experience of anguish faced by Dalits. Dalit poems are medium for expression of rebellion with the broad vision of liberty, equality and fraternity in the society.

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