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PROTEST AGAINST UNTOUCHABILITY IN DALIT POETRY

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ABSTRACT

Dalit literature emerged in the Indian literature as an outburst of exploitation and protest against the discrimination that dalit were subjected to since ages. Dalit writers were inspired by Buddha, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and Dr. B.R.Ambedkar to fight against the oppressive caste system which was instrumental in segregating dalits from the Hindu society. The term Dalit literature dates back to the First Dalit literature in 1958 in the state of Maharashtra in India. The word 'Dalit' came into manipulation after Independence, which means down-trodden, subjugated or broken, it was used in the 1930s as a Hindi and Marathi translation of 'depressed classes'. The word classically used was "Untouchable" or "Shudra". Dalit, we can say, is not a caste but a symbol of change that can bring revolution in the so called 'Society'. It includes schedule tribes, poor peasants, women (who are considered lower than men), and all those who are being exploited politically, economically in the name of religion. They live dangerously insecure existence, avoided by much of society because of their ranks as "untouchables" or "Dalits"

The present paper explores the theme of exploitation and protest in the selected Marathi Dalit poems rendered into English. Though dalit literature is more dominant and forceful in autobiographies, it is no less important in articulating their cry against injustice in poetry.

**Key words:** Dalit, untouchable, exploitation, protest, discrimination, subjugation, anti-caste etc.

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Dalit literature is a post – independence phenomenon. It emerged as the protest of marginalised group against the atrocities caused by the pernicious caste system. Dr. Ambedkar was instrumental in arising in dalits the revolutionary spirit necessary to uproot this suppressing system. More or less, dalit literature can be considered as the expression of Dr. Ambedkar's philosophy and ideology. Every dalit writer one way or the other is indebted to him for the contribution that Dr. Ambedkar has made in almost every human field. It was he who made dalits aware of their slavery and instigated them to fight against this evil system. Historically,

dalits were outside the hierarchical Hindu system, more specifically they were an 'outcaste'. Thus they were excluded from the participation in the social, economical, cultural, intellectual and political life. This caused the dalits to live in utter poverty, life full of superstition and at the mercy of the upper caste. They did not have their own identity nor do they possess any self-esteem.

They were denied education and kept away from the process of development in all walks of life. Dr. Ambedkar, inspired by Mahatma Phule had awakened the dalits from the deep slumber and instigated them to wage against the pernicious and exploitative Hindu caste system. Initially, we find the exploration of the exploitation in the dalit poetry. The main stream Marathi literary tradition had never given due recognition to the dalits. Even in the field of literature, dalits were invisible. So the tremendous task of creating a place for themselves motivated dalit writers to express their pangs and feelings in creative way through poetry.

It is noted that "the distinctiveness of dalit literature lies in its authentic unity of language and content. In it the disillusionment and disgust of young dalits, often accompanied by a desire of revenge, come alive. It revives the memory of the pain and suffering of past generations.

It confronts centuries of hypocrisy, deceit and violence sustained in the name of tradition". 'The writings of dalit scholars also contain powerful denunciations of and fierce attacks on the caste system and on brahmanical Hinduism. It has been pointed out that the dalit Sahitya is considered to be a unique genre of modern Indian literature. For now untouchables themselves using the traditionally-denied weapon of literacy, are exposing the conditions under which they have lived as well as directly rebelling 'vidroha' against the Hindu institution which has assured their perpetual subordination to the Vain order.'

Dalit literature represents a powerful, emerging trend in the Indian literary scene. Given its overarching preoccupations with the location of Dalits in the caste-based Hindu society, and their struggles for dignity, justice and equality, this literature is by nature oppositional. With the growing translation of works by Dalit writers from various regional languages into English, Dalit literature is poised to acquire a national and an international presence as well as to pose a major challenge to the established notions of what constitutes literature and how we read it. It has indeed created its own alternative aesthetic. Sharankumar Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature : History, Controversies and Considerations*, is the first critical work by an eminent Dalit writer to appear in English, is a provocative and thoughtful account of the debates among Dalit writers on how Dalit literature should be read. It is considered as most resourceful book on Dalit criticism. 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.

Mrs. Bansode complains against the rigid Hindu orthodox society, "This complaint of mine is against the orthodox culture...

*We are rejecting this  
Unclean, poisonous life  
And to escape from these cruel curses  
Will you give me  
A bright and auspicious moon?  
My countrymen, to your court  
I have brought a complaint  
Will you give me justice?"*

Feminist movements as well as dalit feminist movement in India are mainly based on the experience of oppression and discrimination. Brutal patriarchy, gender disparity and sexual violence are the important causes for these movements and they also find place authentically in the writings of dalit women as they emerged to the forefront in giving expression to their experiences from women's point of view around 1980s. Feminism continues to be a strong inspiration for the contemporary dalit women writers. Individual identity is central to almost all dalit feminist writing. They challenge the traditional values and call upon all dalit women to recognize their inherent powers and lead an authentic life. They even raise query regarding social organizations, dalit male writers and activists who discard dalit women in every field and complain that dalit

men activists talk about humanity but are not humane towards their wives. Dalit feminists struggle to change the base of the society by publishing their radical thoughts. As dalit feminism is a new phenomenon, no strong voice is raised against social injustice so far. Dalit feminism has deep concern for and commitment towards humanity; and it raises its voice against any kind of narrowness, violence, vengeance on any dalit women and liberation of entire community.

Anguish against Hindu religion, culture, divine laws reflects constantly in dalit feminist writings. Joti Lanjewar, a Marathi dalit woman writer, expresses with roaring voice,

*"Begging won't get anything here  
Not sympathy, not love,  
A suit in court wins injustice,  
Tears are of no value,  
Getting water is a struggle,  
Wrapping yourself in smoke from a dead fire won't work,  
You have to plant the cinder of revolt in your own body". 3*

Dalit feminist literature anticipates that, all women should be respected and treated as human beings irrespective of their caste. Rebellion, revolt, anguishes and agonies are commonly found in dalit feminist literature that craves for equality and justice, rejecting Jamindari system, illiteracy, atrocities, suppression and sexual exploitation. They revolt against existing conditions and express hurdles of their life in their writings. In the poem of J.V Pawar titled 'Birds in Prison' the persona of the poem opens up his heart that is filled with anger and frustration against the age old system of oppression and conventional beliefs of caste system.

*Shouting slogans to condemn or uphold  
a blaze of fire marches forth  
And forest fires take birth  
in oceans that seek to oppose.  
What obstacle shall now withhold  
Our turning volcanic vein by vein  
digging trenches  
every inch of the terrain?*

It is seen that through the use of imagery 'blaze of fire' the poet tries to assert that as the exploitation of Dalits have reached its heights, the time has come when the Dalits will set fire in the society that has tortured them. The fire will spread like a wild forest fire reducing into ashes all the forces that obstruct their paths.

The Dalits are treated worse than animals. Their presence is usually banned from upper-class localities. Even then they are bound to hang clay pots from their necks so that they may not pollute the streets of the privileged by their spittle. They carry brooms tied to their bodies so that while passing through such 'upper lanes' they can wipe away their footprints.

Arjun Dangle gives a harrowing picture of their wretchedness in a poem entitled 'Chhavni Hilti Ha', ('The Cantonment Has Begun to Shake').

*We fought with crows,  
Never even giving them the snot from our noses.  
As we dragged out the Upper Lane's dead cattle,  
Skinned it neatly  
And shared the meat among ourselves,  
They used to love us then.  
We warred with jackals--dogs--vultures--kites  
Because we ate their share.*

The theoretical variety of revolutionaries cannot even imagine the predicament these wretched people live in. Namdeo Dhasal cries out:

*This world's socialism,*

*This world's communism  
And all those things of theirs,  
We have put them to the test  
And the implication is this--  
Only our shadows can cover our own feet.*

Their suffering is not just the suffering of the individual, and there is nothing romantic about it. Their problem is neither ideological nor philosophical. They do not seek poetic beauty. Similes, metaphors and symbols are not important. The reality of their life is too hideously shocking, beyond the capacity of fantasy or imagination. Their tragedy is universal, trampling them down and disfiguring their humanity. Thus analysis of Dalit poetry mirrors the pathetic life of the ostracized in name of caste. It is observed that poets and authors of Dalit literature have used the power of language to express their feeling of being beleaguered. Dalit poetry thus became an academic stance of the poets that aim to change the fate of the suppressed through their writing. Anna Bhau Sathe gave a clarion call to all dalits to change their fate in the following words:

*Take a Hammer to change the world  
So saying went Bhimrao!*

He visualised the picture of the society devoid of exploitation and their protest would lead to:

*Sitting on the chariot of unity  
Let us go forward  
To break the chains of class and caste  
Hold to the name of Bhim!*

To conclude, the dalit literature is designed to reveal the experiences of untouchability and dalits protest against this pernicious system. Unrelieved suffering is the reality of the dalit experience. Dalit poetry is a weapon for the dalit poets against untouchability. Though the Indian Constitution has abolished slavery through law but its presence can be seen in almost every walks of Indian life and psyche. Dalit poets will write about these feelings and experiences unless and until it will get vanished from the Indian mentality.

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