

# Re-scripting the Clichés: Subversion of Stereotypes in Indian Dalit Literature

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## Abstract

Indian literature, undoubtedly occupies a remarkable niche in the realm of World literature. With the advent and upsurge of globalization, the whole world has come to be categorized under one family- *VasudhaivKutumbakam*. This concept of the world being one family has an immense impact on the popularization of the literatures of the colonized countries, the most notable one being that of Indian literature. The pace with which Indian literature has branched out in the past few decades is commendable. The diversity of genres, canons, perspectives and a lot more have enriched this body of writing and it is this diversity which has amassed such an amiable welcome for it from the global audience. Since the reach and development of Indian literature is unbound, the researcher intends to focus on Dalit literature, which is nowadays considered as the soul of modern Indian literature, and its role in subverting conventional westernized notions regarding Indian literature. There had been representations of Dalit experiences in literature earlier too but such representations were from the viewpoints of upper caste litterateurs as is seen in the portrayal of Dukhi by Premchand and Bakha by Mulk Raj Anand. But over the past few decades these narratives of endured pain are being told from the perspective of Dalit writers themselves which is indeed a bold step from the erstwhile crushed down sect of people. Dalit literature has succeeded in becoming an established literary canon that almost every university in India has Dalit texts in its curriculum. The literary and even academic interest of it has gathered global recognition with the texts finding their acclaimed position in the intelligentsia of US, UK, Canada and France. There have been projects organized by foreign universities to conduct conferences for scholars, writers and translators with the aim of bringing Dalit literature to new audiences. The canon of Dalit literature encompasses discussions on gender, sexuality, colonial aspects and even translations from regional Indian languages. This research work intends to explore the global reception of Indian Dalit literature, emphasizing Indian and Canadian perspectives on the same.

*Key Words: Conventional, Crushed Down, Dalit Literature, Globalization, Indian Literature, Perspectives, Projects*

## Introduction

Literature is an artistic expression which has multi-dimensional significance and relevance. It holds the power to bring forth transitions in the thought processes of individuals and at a macrocosmic level, of society as well for the betterment of human existence. With the advent and upsurge of globalization, the whole world has come to be categorized under one family- *VasudhaivKutumbakam*. This concept of the world being one family has an immense impact at the popularization of the literature of the colonized countries, the most notable one being that of Indian literature. The pace with which Indian literature has branched out in the past few decades is commendable.

The diversity of genres, canons, perspectives and a lot more have enriched this body of writing and it is this diversity which has amassed such an amiable welcome for it from the global audience. Of late, we perceive experimental, self-conscious and optimistic literary output in the realm of Indian literature. Such a novelty has been assimilated and has even become a dynamic element of the culture. The themes of hybridity and multi-rootedness have become increasingly prevalent in literary texts. This is particularly evident in the emergence of Dalit literature, which is nowadays considered as the soul of modern Indian literature.

## Dalit Literature: Its Origin and Nature

Dalit literature or the literature of the erstwhile untouchable community in India has come to occupy a relevant niche in the realm of Indian literature. This body of writing has its origin in the persecution imposed on Dalits by societies plagued by the rigid

caste system. It has endeavored to delineate the atrocities posed by caste hierarchy and dared to raise the voice of the erstwhile silenced in order to come ahead in life. There is an inexplicable magic in the way it has approached various literary genres with out-of-the-box thematic concerns, profound revolutionary zeal and narrative styles extraordinaire. This literature encompasses diverse forms of intellectual and creative work by those who, as untouchables, are victims of economic, social and cultural inequality. Dalits bring points of view, interests, insights, and directions that grow out of their experiences and their aspirations. Over the past few decades, this has transformed the understanding of untouchability, caste and the nature of Indian society and politics.

The term “Dalit literature” came into use in 1958, with the first conference of Maharashtra Dalit Sahitya Sangha (Maharashtra Dalit Literature Society). S.P. Punalekar claims that Dalit is an intellectual construct, which is “an expression of the powerless and voiceless” (Das, 2014). Scholars like Ashish Nandy treat the category Dalit as a social construction of the middle-class which defines it in purely ascriptive terms. Dalit hood is a pathetic life condition which characterizes the exploitation and marginalization of Dalits by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper-caste Brahminical order. Traditionally Dalits were considered as ‘panchama’ or the fifth group beyond the four-fold division of Hindu caste system. They were not allowed to let their shadows fall upon a non-Dalit caste member. Dalits were forbidden to worship in temples or draw water from the same wells as caste Hindus and they usually lived in a segregated neighborhood outside of the main village. Certain upper-caste literary figures empathized with their pathetic conditions and penned about their drastic life conditions in their literary works. Dalit literature, in its early stages, were those works which depicted Dalit lives from the points of view of upper-caste literary figures, later on by Dalit male writers and subsequently by Dalit women as well. Dalit literature is an important stream of Indian writing in English and other languages of India. It is the literature about the oppressed classes and caste of India. A tradition of Dalit writing can be traced to eleventh century writer Cekkilar who is famous for his work *Periya Puranam*; Madara Chennaiah, a cobbler-saint who is often referred to as the “father of Vachana poetry”; Narayana Guru, a social activist from Kerala; Jyotirao Phule, a strong Dalit activist and literary figure hailing from Maharashtra. Modern Dalit writings are founded on the works and ideological insights of Ambedkar, the chief architect of the constitution of India. A full-fledged Dalit representation emerged initially in Marathi literature. *When I had Concealed My Caste* published by Baburao Bagul in 1963 was

among the first modern Dalit literary works from the twentieth century. Namdeo Laxman Dhasal was another major Marathi Dalit litterateur. A lot of Dalit women writers like Bama, Urmila Pawar, C.K. Januete too have produced gems of works in the realm of literature.

In an important essay on Dalit literature, the Marathi Dalit critic and writer Baburao Bagul argues that, “the established literature of India is Hindu literature” (Oza, 2014) and that the lower castes are excluded in Indian literature because of its Hindu character. Bagul and other Dalit critics also analyze the reasons for the exclusion and biased representation of Dalits and lower castes in Indian literature. These critics and thinkers re-read Indian nationalist history and literature. They also reinterpret colonial rule and revisit the Gandhi-Ambedkar dialogue. Dalit literature, they demonstrate, represents new thinking and new points of view. It poses the question of the representation of Dalit and lower caste life as a critical public issue. In the words of Aravind Malgatti, “Dalit literature has acted as the sorcerer’s stone of Indian writing. Whenever it has come into contact with the main body of literature in any language, it has turned it into gold” (Desai, 2011). According to Toral Gajarawala, the circulation of Dalit literature in Indian and foreign countries is really significant to bring into light the established notion that “India is non-violent, Hinduism is mythological, anti-orthodoxy and benevolent, and both are peace-loving” (Kaushik, 2015). Gajarawala further asserts that the knowledge of India that circulates in the West is caste-free and Dalit studies offer a corrective to this idea of India in a reformatory way. There had been representations of Dalit experiences in literature earlier too but such representations were from the viewpoints of upper caste litterateurs as is seen in the portrayal of *Dukhi* by Premchand and *Bakha* by Mulk Raj Anand. Bhairappa’s *Ullanghan*, Giriraj Kishore’s *Parishista*, or Mulk Raj Anand’s *Coolie* are also portrayals on Dalit lives by upper caste litterateurs. But these works rarely approach the raw power of Daya Pawar’s *Baluta* or the early Namdev Dhasal poetry. It seems that the voice of the troubled outsider cannot meet that of the enraged victim, a point made brilliantly by the late D.R. Nagaraj in his collection of essays, *The Flaming Feet*. Several Dalit activists argue that only a person belonging to the Dalit community could realistically portray Dalit lives in its whole essence. Nika Gupta has stated that “Only ash knows the experience of burning” (Duhan, 2018). Over the past few decades, these narratives of pain are being told from the perspectives of Dalit writers themselves which is indeed a bold step from the erstwhile crushed down sect of people.

This is a brief sum up of Dalit literature produced in India. It has grown as an extensive body of writing

over the years and has amassed wide readership both in India as well as in a global context. To speak in particular about the reception of Dalit literature in India, a special mention has to be made to applaud the initiatives of the academia to incorporate Dalit texts into their curriculum. In 2013, there was a two-day national seminar conducted at Palanpur on the topic “Dalit Literature: Social and Literary Perspectives” to stress upon the need to incorporate Dalit texts in the syllabi of Indian universities. In this particular seminar, SatyaNarayana, an Associate Professor of English at EFLU, Hyderabad addressed, “An institution can do a lot to accelerate the cause of Dalits... There is a need to spread Dalit literature in order to inform its eminence in changing social setup” (“Include Dalit Literature”). But in the span of five years, we have discerned a significant development in the inclusion of Dalit literary texts in the academic scenario of Indian educational system—whether it be in schools or in the higher education system. Dalit and non- Dalit students are provided an opportunity to understand the status quo of the unequal and unjust conditions prevalent in a country like India which claims to be ‘sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic’. A lot of universities in India, including State, Central, Private and Deemed, offer a notable volume of Dalit literary texts as a reformatory step to bring forth social transitions. Dalit Studies help to generate new viewpoints for the study of India. Dalit Studies, in India and abroad, provide a corrective to this notion and help acquaint a wider audience to the drastic living conditions of Dalits, which could in the immediate future or in the long run help in the betterment of the same. Dalithood might be a problem prevalent in the Indian community. But, by addressing this issue and bringing it into a global context, we could help improve the living conditions of millions of marginalized and silenced communities like sex workers, aboriginals, migrants, refugees etc, who confront multifarious forms of oppression on a daily basis. By doing so we could endeavor to create a more humane world.

### **Crossing the Borders: Plight of Dalits in Canada**

Marginalization and oppression are undoubtedly a global phenomenon. Just like the status quo of Dalits in India, there are Dalits living in Canada too in deprived conditions. It is not only restricted to India but has branched out to all nations across the globe where Indian community has settled down. Dalits living in Canada share almost the same pitiable conditions confronted by Dalits in India. Dalits have a significant presence in certain areas of Canada and have their own Sikh temples, while many others follow Christianity and Buddhism. There are numerous instances of caste-based atrocities meted upon Dalits

in the culturally diverse Greater Vancouver area. Dalit activists have been trying hard to push this issue through the Canadian parliament but the major drawback lies in the constitution of the Parliament—most Indo-Canadian representatives hail from upper-caste groups and have shown indifference to take up the cause of the suffering Dalits. Even in Canadian Indian communities, deep assimilated disdainful attitude towards the erstwhile untouchable sect of individuals remains constant. KamleshAhir, a well-educated immigrant settled in Canada, is just like any other Canadian of South Asian heritage except for her Indian community who denigrates her for being a Dalit, “They think we are bulls–t. We are zero. We are a dog, less than a dog,” says Ms.Ahir, who was born into the Chamar caste, whose members traditionally worked as tanners. “They think we are nothing. It doesn’t matter if we are a doctor, teacher, because we belong to the lower castes. I’m in Canada ... But the bulls–t castes are still here. We live it every day” (“We are Zero”).

Canada is a ‘land of immigrants’ and migrants from all over the world have chosen to come here to start their new lives. Indian immigrants in Canada constitute a large population and there is a thriving diasporic literature in Canada in which immigrants create identities for themselves in diverse ways. The first novel from Indian diasporic community in Canada came from Sadhu Singh Dhami who penned down *Malukawhich* depicts the story of a Punjabi protagonist settled in Toronto. Historically it is the Punjabis who initially started migrating to Canada and settling there for gaining better prospects in life. A very notable literary figure is that of RohintonMistry, who is a South-Asian Canadian writer who has focused on his literary creations the depiction of the marginalized and the oppressed. In *A Fine Balance* published in 1995, Mistry portrays the traumas and disparity suffered by the former untouchables, the individuals belonging to the Chamar community, in rural India. Mistry has skilfully woven the darker and prevailing side of India in which the subaltern sections like Dalits strive hard to survive in the midst of several sorts of discriminations. Despite the wide reception of the socially relevant novels of Diasporic writers like Mistry, Canadian intelligentsia is nowadays seen to cordially welcome the Dalit literature (produced by both the Dalits and non- Dalits) in their literary, cultural and intellectual spheres. The striking proof to this is their participation in various seminars and conferences organized for the spread of Indian Dalit literature.

### **Conclusions**

As a welcome step to bring Dalit literature to a wider audience, Dalit Literature Festival has been organized. The first edition of the Festival was hosted by Delhi

in December 2016. A press release issued by Dalit Literature Planning Board said of it as, “An annual not-for-profit literary initiative, Dalit Literature Festival is envisioned as a unique festival built to promote Dalit literature” (“India’s First”). The main objectives of the fest which is conducted on an annual basis since 2016, is to create an independent and active literary platform for Dalit literature, to bring Dalit literature to the mainstream literary sphere, to bring Dalit literature to new audiences by enhancing its circulation and to create more opportunities to showcase the innate talents of Dalit creative writers and artists.

Since the past few years, a number of national and International conferences are being held to discuss the emerging trends in Dalit literature. In the academia of most universities related to South Asian literary studies, Dalit Studies occupy a significant stature. The rise of Dalit Studies has provided the platform for extensive and in-depth inquiries in the state of affairs of the subaltern population living across the world. Its emergence has also helped in the increased awareness of the identification of miserable conditions an individual gets exposed to due to impertinent prejudices are borne of conventions. If the existing interest the intellectuals and humanitarians manifest towards the promotion of Dalit literature, and through it other marginalized literatures persist, we could endeavor to create a more humane world imbued with egalitarian mindsets and dispositions.

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