

Dalit Literature and Aesthetics

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In conversation with Alessandra Consolaro, Dr. Ajay Navaria, who was in Torino as Visiting Researcher during October and November 2015, discusses Dalit literature and its aesthetics.

Dr. Ajay Navaria, could you clarify the definition of the word ‘dalit’ and its different meanings?

It’s not clear when and who and where the word ‘dalit’ was used for the first time. Late Gandhi ji called this community ‘Harijans’ – meaning People of God – but Doctor Ambedkar was against this word. He asked Gandhi ji “what else are the caste Hindus, if they themselves, like all of us, aren’t people of God”. Dr Ambedkar in his writings always used “depressed classes”, the word for this class of people or untouchables or depressed classes.

In 1970, the word ‘dalit’ emerged in the Indian State of Maharashtra, simultaneously with the movement of the Dalit panthers – a movement modeled to the US Black panther movement; Baburao Bagul, Nam Dev Dasal, Raja Dhale were the pioneers of this movement. This form of Dalit activism triggered/motivated the dalit literary moment we know today, as well its literature in Marathi language. So we can say that the word ‘dalit’ was used initially in Maharashtra. And from there it gradually migrated to the Hindi-belt of North-India in 1990.

The word ‘dalit’ in Sanskrit means ‘broken’ or ‘scattered’. In Hindi dictionaries, the word ‘dalit’ means crushed, exploited, tortured and broken.

As I said, the beginning of the Dalit movement has been considered from Dr Ambedkar. We can also state that ideologically, the start of Dalit literature occurred *en par* with Dr Ambedkar’s philosophy, his thought and inspiration. Said differently; its Dr Ambedkar’s thinking that fuelled literature in Hindi that we can now aptly term ‘Dalit Literature’.

Therefore it would be justified that we should know how the important Marathi literary personalities that ignited the movement, thought about the word ‘dalit’. According to Dr M.N. Wankhede – in his definition of the noun ‘dalit’, not only Buddhist or backward peoples are included but also exploited workers. All these different identities are clubbed together in the word ‘dalit’ (Guptā 1998, 15). Undoubtedly this is a profoundly humanistic definition but it is not focussed on the specificity of the issues of castes. This is a too broad of a definition and exactly this, is its deficit and default. This definition neither clarifies for the cruelties and contradictions that are inherent to the caste-based reality of Indian society. In India, where respect and disrespect depends upon caste-identity, this definition is inappropriate.

The Manusmriti, the so-called Holy Scripture of caste-Hindus, sanctifies the disparities between different castes. According to the Manusmriti – “any Brahmin, even though he has murdered someone from the ‘three-world’, if he recite three times Rig-Veda, Yajurveda, Saamveda and Upanishad he will be pardoned from all his sins” (Āmbedkar 1994, 155). One should not think that it is a religious provision only and it’s not actually practiced anymore in society. Dr. Ambedkar has given many true examples in his book “Annihilation of Caste” (Ambedkar and Balley 1993, 27-29). Even today, after sixty year of Indian independence and implementation of the constitution, the rural area members of dalit communities are facing cruelty from so-called upper caste Hindus on a daily basis.

Actually, in urban area some changes in caste behaviour are occurring- but in the average Indian mind the distance between castes is still very much there.



Dr Ajay Navaria during a seminar in Torino

According to Naranyan Surve – ‘there are many mixed definitions of the word ‘dalit’. This doesn’t mean only Buddhist or backward castes but also whoever suffers in society due to his identity or is being submitted to structural torture’ (Guptā 1998, 3). Naranyan Surve’s definition the influences of Marxism are clearly visible. The vision and philosophy of Dr. Ambedkar however, isn’t at all included in Surve’s notion of the word Dalit. Surve’s view can only be considered right, if we ignore the vicious circles of the caste-system in India. An important consequent of Surve’s ideas would be that a caste-Hindu would be ready accept himself possibly being an untouchable, something that is highly improbably if not unthinkable. Could anyone from the so-called higher caste be tortured and exploited on the basis of his caste origin? We should keep in mind that India is not a class- but caste-based society. There are thousands of castes, which are divided, in higher-caste Hindus, backward castes, Dalits and even tribal communities with scheduled tribe status.

Dr. Ambedkar has written in his editorial that the Indian caste system is like a skyscraper lacking stairs connecting the various levels and floors. Once born on a particular floor, you’ll live and die on the same floor. There is no mobility between the different levels.

Defining the word ‘dalit’ Keshav Meshram wrote – ‘the people who have been tortured for thousands of years, these we have been calling untouchables, only they are Dalits’ (Guptā 1998, 5). This definition is appropriate but as in the definition of Surve and M.N. Wankhede, we find a wider inclusiveness than Meshram’s; but in Meshram’s definition, we find a narrow exclusiveness.

To further elaborate the term ‘dalit’ ,the Indian constitution can help us. The India legal system the category of scheduled castes and the latter includes the Dalit community but is wider; it’s

inclusive of all castes that face or could face caste-based violence. The reason of the violence is their caste-identity only.

Some Hindi literary critics like for instance Kanwal Bharti who belongs to the Dalit community as well, also includes nomadic as well as tribal groups with in the term 'dalit' but again, this doesn't seem to be justified (Bhārtī 2002, 12-13). Caste-based discrimination and atrocities are not related to the realities of tribal communities, as these groups aren't included at all in the Hindu cosmology. We could consider them outcastes rather than lower castes and definitely not untouchables; the whole issue of untouchability isn't significant for tribal communities. It is a characteristic issue of the Dalit community only. The reason of the atrocities on tribal community is their economical conditions. They are poor and living in remote hills and jungles. The rate of literacy is also very low .

Now that we have clarified who can be included in the term "dalit", we can proceed to the next important question: what is Dalit literature and how can we define it?

Under the category of 'Dalit literature' we can include work that can be both written by a Dalit or a non-Dalit author, who writes sympathetically about the suffering of the Dalit community.

We can observe two categories here – first relates to the body of work written by authors expressing their own thoughts and feeling and second are the works that are written sympathetically or empathically. The latter was written before the emergence of Dalit writing. Consequently these authors aren't Dalits but caste Hindus. None of the events that appeared in their writing contained experiences that the writers underwent themselves, but were constructed out of their sensitivity and sympathy for the harsh realities of the Dalit community.

Twenty years before the emergence of Dalit discourse in the Hindi belt of Northern India, the movement already had started in the Marathi language. Because Hindi as a literary language has a wider audience, Dalit discourse also received a larger perspective and territorial area, once it reached into Hindi linguistic practice. The politics of Northern India also gave Dalit discourse greater weight and a deeper acceptance, although we have to acknowledge that the movements itself was ignited in the 1970's and not in Hindi but in Marathi, were it was part of the aggressive activism of the Dalit Panthers.

When we try to find out why not much was written about the lives and experiences of the Dalit community before the emergence of Dalit literature, whether in the Marathi or Hindi language, the answers don't seem to be neither straight forward nor satisfactory.

In Hindi literature before Independence, only Premchand has written about the Dalit community. Premchand, who has written stories about Dalits in *Doodh ka daam*, *Sadgati*, *Ghaaswalli* and *Thakur ka kuan*, has depicted eloquently and sympathetically the sorrowful lives of rural Dalits and the many atrocities that had and still have to undergo. Besides this, Premchand made the hero 'Surdaas', a dalit, in his novel *Rangbhoomi*, which was truly revolutionary. In the literary field, where only high caste Hindus could be heroes, Premchand was courageous to replace the position of the protagonist to that of Dalits, so-called backward castes and women, providing them with agency and willpower. From his first novel *Sewasadan* to the last novel *Godan* we can clearly observe this shift. Premchand's work of fiction can be said to be a map of the society of Eastern part of North India with

its different socio-political and economic changes, activities of different castes, religions and even tribes.

Although Premchand is the first to have placed Dalit characters in the front of his work, still the number of Dalits playing significant roles in his fiction writings are very few. His importance for the Dalit community is that at least he has made the caste system and its effects visible. Premchand's contemporaries were either romantics or writing from a Freudian perspective, ignoring the experience of Dalits all together.

Yashpal, a Marxist writer, was the only exception to include class characters. Even after independence, men-women relationship, loneliness, unemployment and foreign backgrounds, although they were not corresponding with the reality of Indian societies, were the main topics of Hindi fiction.

In this context, two questions arise, first: what was the ideological perspective of those writers who started writing on the problems of the Dalit community? The second is related to what was the social reality of Indian society.

Let's first try to understand the ideological perspective. So-called main stream writers' work was steeped in Gandhian philosophy. To some extent Gandhi's ideas were of course concerned with the issues prevailing in Indian society but sadly Marxism excluded the caste-based realities that governed and still do, day-to-day life in South Asia. We can therefore rightly claim that Gandhian philosophy was to some extent related with caste problems but, Marxism was too euro-centric to pay justice to and account for the effects of the caste system in India.

Moreover, Gandhi ji actually defended and even advocated the varna system of castes as a divine and ideal system for India, although he, of course, was against the practice of caste-based hatred and untouchability. More revolutionary was the thinking of Dr Ambedkar because he advocated the altogether annihilation of the caste system.

Our second question relates to the structure of Indian society. The answer here is that Indian society is divided in castes and sub-castes. We could rightfully claim that castes are different nations on the same territory, all with their own caste nationalities where it is utterly impossible to cross-migrate. Members of one caste don't intermarry and not even share food together. My assertion is that this is the strictest apartheid system ever conceived within the context of human history and, in contrast with South Africa, it is maintained until today. Only very recently this system, under the influence of the combination of meritocracy and the cleverness of certain individuals to conceal their caste identity, is slowly transforming. The existence of this highly elaborated caste-system clearly shows that Indian society isn't a class-based society and as such, western ideologies, like Freudian philosophy and Marxism, aren't applicable to the day to day life in India. In fact, it is safe to assert that the multiplicity of castes, sub-castes and tribes makes the formation of a class-based society a dream 'never-to-become-real'.

Interestingly, Hindi writers who before the advent of Dalit discourse wrote sympathetically about Dalit characters were deeply impressed by Gandhiji. Premchand's "Surdaas", hero of his novel *Rangbhoomi* published in 1925, also employed Gandhian and western ideologies that completely ignored the essentially caste-based reality of India in this novel. Sadly, the depiction of a Marxist and Gandhian philosophy inspired reality based on class through a Dalit character resisting urbanisation and industrialization in Premchand's novel, isn't only wrongful but again sad because it once again

perpetuates an eurocentric class flavour that renders the most essential ingredient of Indian society – the caste system – invisible. Although the main-character of Surdaas is in fact a Dalit, we can observe that the spirit of the story is anti-Ambedkarian. Why? Because Dr. Ambedkar stated that the villages of India, that Gandhi defended so much, were in fact ghetto's for the communities of untouchables. In these, the Dalit community was and still is subjected to torture and other cruelties, like for instance the recent rape and lynching of two teenage Dalit girls in 2014 in Badaun, that became world news (Teltumbde 2014). In Indian newspapers we read everyday how members of the Dalit community are being stripped, raped and made to parade naked in villages.

Moreover, Dr Ambedkar, unlike Premchand who believed that the duty of all women was to serve their husband, prepared an Hindu code bill fighting for the rights of all people, including women. This bill got rejected the high-caste hindus who were against divorce and property rights for females.

Having observed all these facts, we of course cannot claim that Gandhi was against Dalits. He was a liberal reformist believing that the caste problem could only be solved by changing the mind-set of the high-caste hindus. Dr. Ambedkar believed that not change of minds but only fear of punishments, could change the structure of Indian society. Because nobody will reject their personal interests and privileges without struggle.

Reflecting upon both philosophies we can perhaps conclude that both thinkers were right in their own terms. Because today, despite the law that prohibits caste-discrimination, the Dalit community is still subjected to cruel practices including public rape, and other atrocities besides perpetual day-to-day discrimination and foreclosure of equal opportunities. But in cities, change of mind-set and fear of punishment bringing closer the different castes to each other. The face of violence upon Dalit by Non-Dalit is very obvious and barbaric in rural area of India. They go to inhuman level of tortures with Dalits. The literacy rate is very poor in rural part of India and most of Dalits are very poor and mostly agricultural labourers. It has been observed that sometimes even police and local administration help the non-Dalit exploiter instead of the sufferer Dalits. Because most of the officers and employees belong to the same caste category.

In the light of these social circumstances, we can consider the literature written sympathetically by Non- Dalit as 'Literature of sympathy for dalit' but we can't categorise it as 'Dalit literature'.

Why I say so?

In the context of modern Indian literature, we can see these two philosophies as

(1) either the aesthetisation and idealization of rural life by non-dalit writers who sometimes do write sympathetically about dalits or

(2) the rejection of rural life in favour of urban life by Dalit authors that see clearly the emancipatory and liberating effects of the city on the dalit community.

Another important difference between Dalit and non-Dalit authors is that the former will always support the reservation system to uplift the backward communities of India. Non-Dalit writers, rarely – if ever – defend this system.

Interestingly, Dalit authors also defend the right the convert to another religion as a means to escape the caste system, inherent to Hinduism. Sympathetic non-dalit writer rarely support this route out of the caste system.

In conclusion we can also claim that Dalit Hindi authors are more content-based than based on form. This has led to sharp criticism from non-Dalit writers who assert that dalit authorship lacks artistry and sophistication but instead is filled with primitive and raw language, including swear words and insults.

First, and now senior writers that started the dalit movement in fiction are: Omprakash Valmiki, Mohandas Nemisharay, Jaiprakash Kardam, Kanwal Bharti, Manoj Sonkar and Surajpal Chauhan.

Besides these forefathers, the following writers belong to the contemporary generation of Dalit authors: Hemlata Mahishwar, Kailash chand chauhan, Kaushal Panwar, Kailash Wankhede, Sushila Takbhore and Roopnarayan Sonkar.

This exposition by now shows clearly that Dalit-literature is writing by Dalits, taking fully into account the issues of the community of untouchables and is profoundly Ambedkarite in spirit.



Dr. Ajay Navaria with some Hindi students

[Can you elaborate about the issue of the aesthetics of Dalit literature?](#)

Literature comes first and only after that we can talk about the structure of its aesthetics, as a secondary phenomenon. Even hundred years after its initial launch, we can say that Hindi literature hasn't developed independently its aesthetics. The main bulk of Hindi authors use literary devices derived from Sanskrit, such as rasa, dhawani, symbolism and imagery besides following a mainly western aesthetic and there is a persuasive bias in favour of works of fiction that use intensely poetic language. The poetic dimensions of fiction have become the standard of what currently is being perceived as good fiction. Dalit authors strongly reject this development. Content-based authors such as the Dalit movement in Hindi fiction, stand no change in front of critics that use euro-centric and other exogenous frames of reference to evaluate fiction produced by the community of Dalits. We can say again that what is considered good Hindi fiction, strongly resembles Euro-American writing, albeit topped with a deshi sauce of sloppily Sanskrit-derived and other wishy-washy literary circus tricks that obfuscate the hard-core realities of Indian society but instead ruminate Euro-American phantasies of India, presented in a way that obscure the essence of Indian culture, society and civilization.

Omprakash Valmiki reflects on this issue of beauty that there is a clash of value-systems between the main-stream and Dalit authors and one aesthetic can't and shouldn't be evaluated within the context of the other. The dominance however of Euro-centric Hindi writers, who have internalized colonial images and perceptions of India to pursue main-stream success, has generated a literary reality where even in the sphere of fiction, the notions of what supposed to be fiction of high-caste Hindus and their allies they clearly have inherited from the British and other Anglophone writers, form the lens that is generally used to gaze upon the works of Dalit authors. Quite predictably, the outcome of this gaze devaluates or renders them the status of merely outsider's art, kindred to the artworks produced by the West.

In conclusion, I'd like to emphasize that the infantilisation and belittling of the works of Dalit authors is a reproduction of colonial attitudes, where the previously ruling class privileged European art as superior to native forms of creative expression and literary scholarship and exploration. It is sad but true that in contemporary India, although the British have physically left the country, their eurocentric state of mind has been adopted by high-caste Hindus and their allies who have not only replaced the colonial government but also have taken lieu of their actual minds. The Dalit community is the subaltern's subaltern.

Value system and ethics are not beyond the concept of time and space. These are influenced by them and influenced the society as well as literature too. Literature is also influenced by the realities of societies and the concept of time and space and transcends these realities too and try to change it slowly and gradually. During this process, the new aesthetics of literature is developed and emerged. Aesthetics is not a static term but it continuously alter itself.

Maybe it would be too early to speak about the aesthetics of Dalit literature but it is my firm belief that the aesthetics of Dalit Literature would be structured or emerged from the vision of Beghumpura of Kabir and Raidas: " I dream a state, where everyone get food./Raidas would be happy there, where everyone is equal." (Ravidās,161), or as Kabir states in his poem: " O friend, our state is without sorrows. I am calling King, Poor, Faqeer and Sultan equally. If you want Highest rank, come to our state" (Dvivedī 2003, 219).

This is the utopia of Kabir and Ravidas where everyone is equal. This Parampada or Beghumpura was transformed into the constitution written by Babasaheb Dr. B.R. Ambedkar after independence of India. The future Dalit aesthetics would be formed from the term 'individual dignity and equal opportunities' as stated by Dr. Ambedkar in the preamble of Indian constitution. This would be the real aesthetics of Indian literature not only the aesthetics of the Dalit literature.

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