

VOICES OF REBELLION: AN ANALYSIS OF DALIT POETRY

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Abstract

It is said that literature is the reflection of life and the society that surrounds human life. It intensely presents the social, cultural and economic issues that exist in the society. Literature not only highlights the human society but also possess the power to bring about revolutionary changes in the society that society needs. Dalit literature is one such genre that has presented issues like exploitation, marginalization and retaliation of Dalits in Indian society. Through the powerful expressions it has tried to bring revolutionary changes in the way Dalit identity exists in the caste dominated society of Indian. Through the Dalit literature, Dalit writers have tried hard to fights for their rights and more particularly fight against the oppression they suffer in name of lower caste. It is observed that Dalit poetry is very powerful in giving voice to the Dalits' emotions and expressions. Thus the present paper attempts to explore the poetic stance of the Dalit poets and their endeavors in giving a voice to their bitter experiences in a society that is dominated by the caste system.

As the paper focuses on Dalit poetry it is important to understand the Dalits' position in Indian society. To know how the Dalit society emerged it is important to understand the caste system (varnayavastha). The caste system, which has dominated Indian society for over 3,000 years, was developed by the Brahmins (Hindu priests) to maintain their superiority over the less educated and less skilled. Over time, the caste system was formalized into four distinct classes (varnas). At the top of the hierarchy are the Brahmins, who are considered arbiters in matters of learning, teaching, and religion. Next in line are the Kshatriyas, who are warriors and administrators. The third category is Vaisyas, who belong to the artisan and commercial class. Finally, the Sudras (Backward Caste) are farmers and peasants. These four castes are socially and religiously important because they are said to have divine origins—they came from different parts of the Hindu god Brahma, the creator. The Brahmins came from the mouth of Brahma, the Kshatriyas from his arms, the Vaisyas from his thighs, and Sudras from his feet. Because of this caste system Dalits had to suffer a lot in the hands of upper caste Hindu society and for centuries have undergone tremendous pain, suffering, anguish, torture and exploitation. The word Dalit was popularized by the Dalit Panther Movement- a radical militant movement, at the time when

Dalits adopted the term as an act of confident assertion, rejecting Mahatma Gandhi's nomenclature of Harijan, children of God. In 1972, the Dalit Panthers defined the word Dalit as:

"A member of Scheduled Castes and Tribes, neo-Buddhist, the working-people, the land-less and poor peasants, women, and all those who are being exploited politically, economically, and in the name of religion."

Renowned Laureate Gangadhar Pantawar in his writing asserted that Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution against the injustice it has suffered since the ages. He even rejects the existence of caste, religion and several writing that teaches to discriminate and oppress the people in name of 'untouchables'. Here, the word Dalit symbolizes the mood of this explosive commodity and connotes and denotes their protest.

The Dalit community has revolted against the injustice done to them by raising their voice that takes a form of writing. Focusing on Dalit poetry it is observed that there are several issues that the poets raise through their poetry. Exploitation of the Dalits, the loss of identity, retaliation against the oppression etc are some issues that majority of the Dalit poets talk about.

The themes of Dalit poetry mirror the harsh realities of their existence of the Dalits as untouchables or the outcaste. Through Dalit poetry, the poets have used the power of language to express the agony of being oppressed under the caste system. The famous Gujarati poet Dalpat Chauhan vividly expresses the grief of being an outcaste in his poems. The heart breaking experience of being marginalized is reflected in the poem 'Untouchable' where the poet expresses the agony of the entire community through a boy who enters the school for first time.

*The first day in school,
 The doom's day
 With trembling hand I did not write
 One, two, three...
 I wrote
 On the fire land of burning desert,
 My Chest,
 My caste
 Since then
 I am Untouchable, Untouchable, you cannot touch me.*

The miserable life of a child born to Dalit parent is portrayed in the poem. Not only society but also education which is the considered to be sacrosanct is also biased towards the Dalit child in the Indian society. The child instead of carrying the name as an identity carries the name of 'untouchable'. A child of a Dalit family pathetically carries with him a bleak future where right from the first stage of learning, he comes across the situation that makes him accept the harsh reality of the caste system in India. The word 'untouchable' follows the child, youth or an old aged like a shadow that never leaves the identity of a person born as a Dalit. They are always stigmatized in the name of untouchables.

Like Dalpat Chauhan, the heartrending expression of Kannada Dalit poet Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy intensely exposes the doomed existence of a Dalit child.

*Among the broken glass there,
 the plastic bottles,
 the torn rubber condoms,
 the old papers he lifts*

*where some housewife has wrapped a sickening red tampon -
below all that, something brings a smile:
a torn and patched two-rupee note.*

A child born to the parents of upper class like Brahmins and Kshatriyas enjoys the life of happiness, leisure and comfort but unfortunately the Dalit child struggles right from the childhood just to satisfy his hunger. A child instead of going to school and enjoying the company of his parents toils hard in the heaps of rubbish among broken glasses and stinging plastic and paper to get few pennies to satiate his hunger.

The age old caste system of oppression and inequality has found a strong resistance through Dalit poetry. Earlier the voice of the Dalits was suppressed and Dalits were threatened if they tried to retaliate or give an outlet to their experience of exploitation. But through Dalit writings the Dalits have staunchly asserted their identity and have reacted to the forces that had controlled them earlier.

The anger among the Dalits and the sense of revolt is observed in the poem ‘Brainwash’ by Pravin Gadhwani.

*“Give me a Tata detergent cake
I want to wash each and every cell of his brain.
I want to scrub and scrub to remove the rust on his
thinking since centuries.”*

Here the persona of the poem openly revolts against the authority of Brahmins who according to him are responsible for their exploitation. He believes that it is because of caste system Brahmins are considered to be superior and Sudras as the inferior of all. Because of the Varna system the Brahmins are worshipped and reverend. The dalits consider the Brahmins as the root cause of their suffering. The persona in the poem is so much frustrated against the dominating caste that he desires to wash off the age old conventions prevailing in the mind of people belonging to upper caste.

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.

‘It would have been better if I was an illiterate’ by Neerav Patel is yet another poem of discord and hatred against the despots belonging to upper class.

*Watching the water pot at the outskirt of the village
The first thought that I had
Was to raise one leg like a dog and piss in it.*

The Dalits as they are considered to be untouchables they are marginalized from the society and have to live in the outskirts of the village. They are not allowed to fetch water from the place where other upper caste people fetch water from and therefore a separate well or a pitcher is kept from the untouchables. This pitcher or water pot is in itself bears the stigma of being it for untouchable. The persona of the poem has angst filled in within him for the custom that makes them realize that they are untouchables again and again and therefore he feels to piss on the water pot kept for them.

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. They are like character of Caliban (Postcolonial) who had mastered the language of the masters and afterwards revolted using the same language. Dalit poetry thus became an academic stance of the poets that aim to change the fate of the suppressed through their writing.

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