



A Small Voice: Aesthetics of Dalit Life Narratives

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Abstract:

This paper is concerned with tracing the Dalit aesthetics that has been articulated by Dalit activists and looks at the practice of Dalit life narratives which reinvent new ways of looking at reality and create a new aesthetics for itself. The form of autobiography, which is now better known as life narrative, is used to depict the life of the untouchables, who are now known as Dalits. These writers show how there exists within the country, a whole system of domination and colonization of the untouchables, whose labor and hard work is the reason for the prosperity of the upper class, but who are accorded sheer contempt and are denigrated on account of their caste. This entire system of domination is justified by the upper caste by creation of discourse of the inferiority of the untouchables by taking recourse to myth and religion. This is quite similar to the discourse created by the colonizers about the inferiority of the colonies and their natives in order to justify their occupation and exploitation of the colonies and domination of the natives.

The paper will first briefly define Dalit writing and show how it is a product of Dalit movement, which fought for the rights of the untouchables to the advantages of the national developmental process, of which the upper castes seemed to be the natural heirs. Besides mapping the coordinates of the Dalit movement, the paper will also briefly look at the history of the untouchables as given by Dr. Ambedkar. It will show how the representation of both Dalits and Dalit leaders like Dr. Ambedkar was marginalized, nearly erased, in mainstream Indian literature. It will also show how Dalit literature is severely critiqued by the mainstream discourse on Indian literature. It is denigrated as it is perceived to lack in aesthetic values which are valorized in mainstream Indian Literature.

Dalit life narratives record the life of an untouchable, so that it serves as a memory bank for the future generations of Dalits and informs them about the atrocities committed against the community. These narratives attempt to build the collective Self of the entire community. They serve to correct the negative image of the Dalit community by the upper caste mainstream society and bring to the forefront the

suffering of the community. They make a bold attempt to cross the margins and challenge the hegemonic rhetoric of national identity which excludes and obfuscates the discordant voices of the Dalits. They give a graphical account of the communities to which they belong and bring it alive through thick description and also critique the socio-cultural domination of their community by the upper caste, and Dalit patriarchy from within. These narratives make a vigorous attempt to assert Dalit identity and deconstruct received notions of narrative in canonical literature. In the process, they insert their *small voice* in the grand narrative of the nation.

Keywords: Dalit Literature, Life narratives, Caste hegemony, Marginalization

This paper is concerned with tracing the aesthetics of Dalit life narratives that has been articulated by Dalit writers and activists. The paper will first briefly define dalit writing and show how it is a product of Dalit movement, which fought for the rights of the untouchables to the advantages of the national developmental process, of which the upper castes seemed to be the natural heirs. Besides mapping the co-ordinates of the Dalit movement, the paper will show how the representation of both Dalits and Dalit leaders like Dr. Ambedkar was marginalized, almost erased, in mainstream Indian literature. It will also show how Dalit literature is severely critiqued by the mainstream discourse in Indian literature and is denigrated as it lacks in aesthetic values which are valorized in mainstream Indian Literature. It will then study the aesthetics of Dalit life-narratives.

Dalit literature arose out of the Dalit movement, which struggled to bring dignity, self-respect, and equality to the lives of the untouchables. Arjun Dangle defines Dalit Literature in *Poisoned Bread*, an anthology of Dalit writing edited by him. He says that,

Dalit Literature is one which acquaints people with the caste system and untouchability in India, its appalling nature, its system of exploitation. In other words, Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to experiences, joys and sorrows, and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of the society. (lii Dangle, *Poisoned Bread*)

Though untouchability is a social evil practiced throughout the country, the Dalit movement originated in Maharashtra under the leadership of Dr. Bhimrao Babasaheb Ambedkar, who emerged as the foremost leader of the untouchables in the pre-independent India.

Ambedkar was operating in an environment made ripe for the revolution by the groundwork prepared by Jyotiba Phule and Sahu Maharaj. Anupama Rao (39 -80, *The Caste Question*) has shown how in Maharashtra, there was a struggle for supremacy between the Brahmins, the ruling elite and the Marathas, who were the emerging

leaders and needed Brahminic sanction and recognition as Kshatriyas. The Brahmins did not recognize them as rulers and did not give them recognition by refusing to perform Vedic ceremonies for their coronation and other rituals to validate their rule. They, also created myths about the Marathas being low caste people and hence undeserving of the power they had usurped. In turn, the Marathas cast aspersions on the origins of the Brahmins and floated their own stories about the Brahminic pretensions of belonging to high caste and thus questioned their supremacy. Sahu Maharaj, the descendent of Shivaji Maharaj, was one of the key persons in the anti-brahmin movement. He along with another Maratha ruler, Sayajirao Gaekwad of Baroda, was responsible for sponsoring Ambedkar's education abroad. Sahu Maharaj was also responsible for starting schools for the untouchables and the low caste people. Thus, both the Marathas and the Brahmins attempted to maintain their supremacy by inventing a history for themselves. Another important person in this movement against untouchability was Jyotiba Phule, a low caste gardener. He is known for founding the Satyashodhak Samaj which endeavored to bring justice to the untouchables and the poor. He opened schools for the untouchables and through his writing, tried to create a respectable for the untouchables.

The Dalit movement and Dalit Literature as its outcome can be said to be a result of efforts of Dr. Ambedkar. A number of writers and activists were inspired by him to join the struggle for the upliftment of the Dalits. But inspite of best efforts, the struggle remained an uphill task, and it became difficult for Dalit activists to get their ideas accepted within the society as well as for Dalit writers to get accepted within the mainstream/Brahminical literary culture. To begin with, in the mainstream literature, there was a complete erasure of the presence of the Dalits. As Alok Mukherjee puts it, "the space they occupied outside the village in real life was erased in the world of literature." (4 Mukherjee). It has been pointed out by Gauri Viswanathan that Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, inspite of being a prominent national figure, finds no mention in literature about the independence era. She discusses two novels, Mulk Raj Anand's *The Untouchable* (1935) and Shanta Rameshwar Rao's *The Children of God* (1976), and shows how both occlude the figure of Dr. Ambedkar. (211-239, Viswanathan)

When some of the Dalit writers could not be ignored, as in the case of Kabir, their work was co-opted into the mainstream literature. Eventually mainstream literature could not afford to ignore the reality of the Dalit presence. As Mukherjee puts it, as the *Other* could not be imagined out of existence, it had to be contained and confined within a discourse marked by 'sympathy' and 'compassion' (Mukherjee 4-5). And from the position of containment, Dalit literature has come into its own – it now speaks with its own distinct voice and has a style of its own. Just as a new literary text changes the tradition that precedes it, Dalit Literature, has entered the literary arena with its own distinct identity. As Mukherjee puts it, "the Dalit subaltern has now appeared in literature as a speaking subject, but this subaltern's speech is not interpellated by the dominant group's voice, language, tone, style or tradition."

In the Dalit life narrative, the writers show how there exists within the country, a whole system of domination and colonization of the untouchables, whose labour and hard work is the reason for the prosperity of the upper class, but who are accorded sheer contempt and are denigrated on account of their caste. This entire system of domination is justified by the upper caste by creation of discourse of the inferiority of the untouchables by taking recourse to myth and religion. This is quite similar to the discourse created by the colonizers about the inferiority of the colonies and their natives in order to justify their occupation and exploitation of the colonies and domination of the natives. So, in these life narratives, the Dalits are writing back to the dominant upper class.

E.V. Ramkrishnan has shown how Dalit life narratives are different from the western modernist autobiographies, which focus on creation and development to the individual self, which influenced the writing of mainstream autobiographies in India. Ramkrishnan says that there is no precedent for the experiences narrated in Dalit autobiography. It “problematizes the relation between the society and the individual as well as the private and the public by conceiving of the self not in mere private or personal terms.”(Ramkrishnan 66). The world view presented in these narratives

“takes as its starting point the contingency of everyday life involved in the struggle for survival. It also highlights the centrality of the caste body in the Dalit narrative. Hunger as an everyday experience, refers to the irreducible fact of the primacy of the body. Caste system spatially organizes society, severely limiting the mobility of the lower castes and confining them to the ghettos. The narrative of Dalit autobiography puts the body at the centre, problematizing the relationship between the individual and the society. While the self is an elusive entity which can be conceived of in transcendental terms, the finitude of the body cannot be reduced to anything other than itself and in this sense, forms an absolute condition that cannot be transcended. Dalit autobiographies can contest prevalent historical discourses because they are engaged in recovering the discourses of history centered around physical abuse and oppression. They do not conceive the self in transcendental terms. (Ramkrishnan 67)

In the introduction to Sharankumar Limbale’s *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, Mukherjee has shown that Dalit literature is concerned more with community rather than the individual. This concern differentiates it from bourgeois literature. He gives the example of Sharankumar Limbale’s work, *Akkarmashi*, which in which the hero is a composite character and the experiences of this character are drawn from the lives of people in the narrator’s community. Bama too, bases her writing on the experiences of the people in her community. Dalit life narratives record the life of an untouchable, so that it serves as a memory bank for the future generations of dalits and informs them about the atrocities committed against the

community. These narratives attempt to build the collective Self of the entire community.

Commenting on the subject matter of Dalit Literature, Limbale comments on the appropriateness of the subject matter to the particular time. He says that for the current times, “the life lived in huts and cottages situated outside the boundary of the village has become the subject of literature. It has become necessary to transform the imaginary of beauty because it is not possible to investigate the creation of Dalit literature and its commitment to revolt and rejection within the framework of traditional aesthetics.” (Limbale 115). As Parmod Kumar, the editor of *Sanghursh* puts it, “The highest purpose of Dalit writing is not beauty of craft, but authenticity of experience.”(Sanghursh vii). The language used in life narratives to describe the daily events in the life of Dalits is very simple, down to earth, even crude at times. But this use of simple language is also a strategy by the dalit writer to distinguish and differentiate his writing from the mainstream writing. Through such a representation of Dalit writing, Mukherjee argues, “the untouchable Other finds voice to speak across the caste-line and destroy the vaunted purity of the savarna space. The Dalit no longer remains invisible. This representation populates and contaminates the previously unpolluted sites of the savarna Hindu . . .” (Mukherjee14-15)

Dalit life narratives serve to correct the negative image of the Dalit community by the upper caste mainstream society and bring to the forefront the suffering of the community. In *Joothan* Omprakash Valmiki describes the public flogging of people from his basti who had dared to ask for wages for farm labor. Describing the flogging with irony, Valmiki writes, “*This festival of valor was being celebrated openly.*” (45, *Joothan*). This incident has made a deep impact on Valmiki’s mind and he is reminded of lines from a canonical poet Sumitranandan Pant who has eulogized village life in his poems. Valmiki says that he realized that this poem was a complete lie. He says how this experience has shaped his poetic sensibility. He further questions the nationalistic discourse which glorifies the benefits of democracy. He says that it is the upper caste people in power, who misuse the government machinery to oppress the poor and exclude them from the polity and equitable distribution of resources, as if they are not citizens of the country. By inscribing this episode in graphic detail, which is presented in the quote below, Valmiki has attempted to write the history of his people and register their presence in the story of the nation. He shows how this incident impacted the dalits in the village and resulted in an exodus towards the city, where opportunities and freedom from atrocities beckoned these people.

This farce went on for an hour. All ten men who had been beaten were groaning with pain. Their screams had made the birds in the trees take off, but paralysis had struck the villagers, who could not express their empathy. My mind was filled with a deep revulsion. I was then an adolescent, and a scratch appeared on my mind like a line scratched on glass. It remains there still. *The*

poem by Sumitranandan Pant that we had been taught at school, “Ah, how wonderful is this village life”—each word of the poem had proved to be artificial and a lie. What happened that day caused a storm inside me. Perhaps the seeds of Dalit poetry were germinating inside, preparing to sprout at the right time. (Joothan 45-46, emphasis added)

Thus, we see that these life narratives make a bold attempt to cross the margins and challenge the hegemonic rhetoric of national identity which excludes and obfuscates the discordant voices of the dalits.

At times these narratives give a graphical account of the communities to which they belong and bring it alive through thick description and also critique the socio-cultural domination of their community by the upper caste. In her life narrative *The Prisons We Broke*, Baby Kamble shows how the higher castes drew upon the labour of the Mahars and paid them nothing but leftover food in return, that too as a favour. The prosperity, cleanliness and the purity of the higher castes was maintained by the duties that the Mahars performed for the higher castes. Whenever there were deaths in any upper caste household the Mahar had to perform the sad duty of bearing bad news to the relatives, while his family would have to gather wood for the cremation of the dead person. In return they would get the white cloth that covered the dead body which would be cast off when the body was placed on the funeral pyre. They also had a right to the bamboo bier on which the corpse had been carried to the ghat. Kamble shows how the yeskar family made use of these things. The bamboo would be used for the house and the cloth would be washed a number of times and then used as cloth for making clothes. In a very fine example of mimicry, Kamble shows how the white cloth, which has been cast off by the higher castes is used by the Mahars. The humour in such playacting belies the irony of the Mahar’s aspirations to belong to the higher castes and, at the same time, it subverts the domination of the higher castes.

The yeskar’s family could have clothes only from such cloth. A lengthy piece would be given to the young daughter who would be elated to get it. She would drape it around herself in various styles and perform a kind of fashion show. One moment she would drape it around her shoulder like a Brahmin *kaki* and imitate her accent, ‘Hey you, Mahar women, shoo, shoo, stand at a distance. Don’t touch anything. You will pollute us and our gods and religion.’ The next moment she would be Gujar woman, draping the pallav in the Gujarati style, and finally, a Mahar daughter-in-law, pulling the pallav to her head down to her nose. (*The Prisons We Broke*, 80)

The plight of the Mahars is never described with self-pity. It is always a matter of fact description of the happenings in their life.

Thus, we see that these life narratives make a vigorous attempt to assert Dalit identity and deconstruct received notions of narrative in canonical literature. In the process, they insert their *small voice* in the grand narrative of the nation.

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