



## PRIDE AND PREJUDICE: PORTRAYAL OF DALIT CHARACTERS BY NON-DALIT WRITERS

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**Abstract:** *A scrutiny of the history of Indian Literature particularly Indian Writing in English foregrounds that education was monopolised by a certain section of the society, therefore, they portrayed their lives with great pride and vigour, whereas, the Dalits who were deprived of the right to education were either not allotted any space in literature or if given any space on the margins, they were shown as childish, lifeless, caricature etc. This attitude has caused a degree of vacuum and emptiness in Indian Writing in English as far as Dalit identities and voices are concerned. This paper is an attempt to discuss the importance of Dalit autobiographies through which Dalit writers have made efforts to reconstruct, redefine their self/identity and they have challenged the hegemony of dominant official mainstream writers. Dalit autobiography is a special act for Dalit Writers who use this genre to achieve a sense of identity and mobilized resistance against different forms of oppression.*

**Keywords:** *Margin, oppression, assertion, self/identity, reconstruct, different, mainstream.*

A Glance into the history of India reveals that acquiring and imparting education was the exclusive privilege of some in the country whereas for some even entering into the educational premises was an acute sin. No doubt, this monopoly was validated on the basis of scriptural sanctions, ideology, caste classification etc. Therefore, those who were in centre and had power they acquired knowledge and narrated their life stories but they hardly take into account the life stories of illiterates (marginalized). In their biased writings, people who have been oppressed, crushed, ground on the basis of their caste did not get due space, as a result of which, they became invisible in the history, literature etc. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar aptly puts it, "History is theirs who have power and means to write it." The marginalized and subjugated have always been kept away from the central stage. Where everybody is shown speaking and taking action Dalits have been made mute and incapable of doing anything. The official dominant mainstream literary writers as well as critics do not find it as a problem. It cannot be a coincidence that there is no representation of such people in mainstream activities. Jean Paul Sartre in his seminal work *What is Literature?* says, "Writing is

not simply writing, it is an act, and is man's continual fight against evil. Writing must be deliberately used as a weapon. It is necessary that he understands it."

A close scrutiny of the above scenario foregrounds that there is a degree of vacuum and emptiness in Indian Writing in English as far as Dalit identities and voices are concerned. There is a kind of duplication of one theme, replication of one kind of images, metaphors in the Indian Writing in English. Literature is supposed to reflect life in true spirit, if any literature does not give enough space to the sentiments, cries, struggle of marginalized that can hardly be considered as literature.

Limbale aptly puts it that there was no place for Dalits in the content of mainstream literature. The space Dalits occupied outside the village in real life is erased in the world of literature. Thus, if society ensured its purity by relegating the untouchable to a luminal space, literature went a step further. It ensured that the untouchable would not pollute its world even by touching the space.

Very few non-Dalit writers who have, of course under the influence of Gandhi, written on and about the life of Dalits and most of them depicted untouchable world out of sympathy and pity. But it is

a fact that mere sympathy does not produce revolutionary literature. In the hands of non-Dalit writers, the images of the Dalit and interpretation of their lives have been distorted. It is needless to say the leading writers have projected a Dalit image of weakness and folly in their works.

Therefore, in order to reconstruct, redefine their self/identity and represent their authentic experiences Dalit writers, through the act of writing, challenged the hegemony of dominant official mainstream writers. Among various literary genres of Dalit literature, autobiography is a special act for the members of this group who use this genre to achieve a sense of identity and mobilize resistance against different forms of oppression subjected to Dalits. Autobiographies enable the Dalit writers to reclaim narrative authority for the construction of the Dalit 'self'. Dalit autobiographies re-write selfhood by describing their life and the life of their community. Thus, they assert that Dalit society is not inferior, as claimed by the dominant classes, but is 'different' or 'oppressed'. Dalit literature that today occupying an important place in Indian Literature has been born out of the heinous system of untouchability, discrimination, oppression on the basis of caste that has been practiced in India from the ancient times. Antonio Gramsci and Berreman described oppression in terms of hegemony. Gramsci says that hegemony is power achieved through a combination of coercion and consent. Power can be achieved through force and fraud. He argued that the ruling classes achieve domination not by force or coercion alone, but also by creating subject who willingly submit to being ruled. Ideology is crucial in creating consent, it is the medium through which certain ideas are transmitted and more important, held to be true.

For Dalit writers, the 'writing' itself has become a liberating process through which they could give vent to their suppressed voices. Bhagwan Das aptly puts that Dalit writers should write autobiography so that not only our history will stay alive, but also our true portrayal of wrongdoers. Dalit autobiographies will provide inspiration to our future generation. Kanchallaiah says, "Narrative of personal

experience brings out reality in striking way... I would argue that this is the only possible and indeed the most authentic way in which the deconstruction and reconstruction of history can take place." Dalit autobiography, then, is not just remembering of things past, but a process of shaping and structuring them in such a way as to help understand one's life and the social order that shaped it, on the one hand, and to arouse passion for change in the Dalit reader, on the other. As Rene Wellek says, "A writer is not only influenced by society; he or she influences it. Art does not merely reproduce life but also shapes it. Dalapat Chauhan a famous Gujrati Dalit poet in one of his poems demonstrates his self-experience:

Who is wounded,  
That is I,  
To whom since the centuries,  
You refuse to know...  
You are talking about the wound,  
I am living with the wound.

For a long time, the discussion of the literary and cultural representation of marginalized and dispossessed people has for the most part been based on the writings of non-Dalit writers, such as Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Prem Chand etc. Dalit critics have been troubled by the treatment of Dalit characters in the writing of these prominent non-Dalit writers. In their views these representations do not show Dalit as they are, but as helpless and childlike people who cannot make their own decision or take action.

In *Kanthapura* (Raja Rao, 1938), Moorthy, the representation of M.K. Gandhi in his village hesitates to accept a glass of milk from a Pariah woman. Somewhere Mulk Raj Anand propagates that a writer should be fiery voice of the people, and be able to give a new vision of life realizing the pains, frustration and aspiration of others, and cultivating his incipient power of expression, transmutes in art all feelings, thoughts and experiences. But in his novel, the problem of untouchable seems have not been properly addressed. Undoubtedly, in *Untouchable* Mulk Raj Anand has enunciated the

maltreatment of an exploited class with concern but Mulk Raj Anand was writing *Bakha* without having any contextual knowledge. *Bakha* is socially, politically situated in 1920s Punjab. At that time Punjab was confronting Adi-Dharma movement, anti-Hindu movement but in story there is no reflection of that movement. In place of that movement Anand has shown Gandhi. Even Gandhi says that *Bakha* is not what *Bakha* should look like. Mulk Raj Anand was a part of Bloomsbury group in London and he was unaware of, like a totally Indian, real Indian perspective.

Moreover, Anand seems to address a specific question in *Untouchable* through the dramatization of *Bakha*. For *Bakha* the satisfaction is that flush-system will relieve them from dirty work. But can this be an answer to the age-long social problem? Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) attempts to gain sympathy of the caste Hindus towards the outcastes. His main character *Bakha* is made so fatalistic that even for centuries he would not be able to raise voice against such an existing exploitative system. In addition to this, it is not *Bakha* who sought the solution of the vicious untouchability rather it is sought by the author. Even if "Flush" latrine came to India, it would only make him unemployed and might not liberate him from his worst situation.

Likewise, while dealing with the character of *Velutha* in her debut novel *The God of Small Things* Arundhati Roy, does not faithfully present the Dalit world. Same sympathy and pity of Gandhian era are seen in the portrayal of Dalit *Velutha*. His character in the novel represents Gandhian ideology of pity and sympathy. Thus, in the hands of mainstream writers the Dalit characters are nothing but tragic masses that have no identity. In his critical work, Sharad Rajimwale has noted Nila Shah's criticism on the sympathetic mentality of the non-Dalit writer, "Velutha is a skilled paravan embodies the state of untouchable in free India. His plight is not much different from that of Anand's *Bakha*. In spite of his inborn noble qualities and physique he is not empowered to strike back. . . Velutha, in *God of*

*Small Things* 'left no foot prints in sand, no ripples in water (Rajimwale 60)."

Similarly, renowned Hindi novelist and story writer Premchand could not do justice with his characters in his famous story *Kafan*. He made *Chamars* look as if all of them were work shirkers. The very opening line of the story is in a derogatory fashion. He has created an unrealistic world by his biased imagination wherein landlords are kind and benevolent, on the other hand Madhav and Ghishu who represent Dalits are work shirkers, who can fall down to such an extent that they would not bother about dying member of their family just for the sake of some pieces of roasted potatoes and in the end of the story they drink and sing songs with the money they had collected from the landlords for the funeral of their lady. Can a writer who is worshipped like anything in Hindi literature be such insensitive and casteiest in his approach? Premchand comes out as a prejudiced upper caste man in this story. Clear enough, Premchand was either unaware of the strength of Dalit movement and various other reform movements during the independence struggle or he deliberately ignored them. His Dalit characters are totally at the mercy of the 'kind' hearted upper caste.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak poses a relevant question 'Can the subaltern speak?' It is a fact that the marginalized cannot be silenced for a long time. They will have to break the silence and give vent to their frustration and anger and mark their presence in the literary world. For instance, Dalit autobiographies such as *Joothan* by Omprakash Valmiki, *The Branded* by Laxman Gaikwad etc. are the narratives of the Dalit writers' metamorphosis into a speaking subject. They do not bear the exploitation silently rather have courage to speak back. Be it Valmiki's parents or Gaikwad's parents all, through their bold actions and decisions, have proved that Dalit characters are not like what have been presented by the non-Dalit writers. The confrontation of Valmiki's mother with Sukhdev Tyagi and his father's with headmaster Kaliram sows the seeds of rebellion in child Valmiki.

He dedicated *Joothan* to his parents who have proved themselves to be heroic figures.

In case of Laxman Gaikwad who belongs to a de-notified tribe, his father gives him a slate and pencil instead of *bharat blade*, thus he challenges the hierarchies of cast/class and of knowledge. Moreover, Gaikwad realizes that the police, merchant, money lenders, political bigwigs, mill authority are the internal branders who have replaced the external colonizers and he very audaciously confronts all of them. In order to fight back injustice, he holds demonstration, marches of various unions.

Further, Dalit literature in general and Dalit autobiographies in particular as means of assertion challenge the hegemony of dominant classes in order to redefine Dalit self/identity. Considering Dalit literature as essentially human literature, Baburao Bagul lamented the denial of representation to Shudras and Atishudras in the mainstream literature which committed itself to 'the ideology of aestheticism or art for art's sake'. For him Dalit literature disown the past tradition and makes the common man its hero and advocates socialism. Writing back to mainstream literature (where Dalits hardly ever find themselves in true spirit), Dalit writing serves as a means of assertion and resistance. For them, 'Writing' itself has become a liberating

process through which they could give vent to their suppressed voices. In the words of Sharankumar Limbale "Rejection and revolt in Dalit literature have been birthed from the womb of Dalits' pain.

To conclude with Dangle's views that Dalit literature must be written from Dalit point of view and with Dalit vision. The 'Dalit viewpoint' expects a writer to internalize the sorrow and suffering of the Dalits. Dangle further elucidates that any writer with some Dalit sensibility may have Dalit viewpoint but not necessarily 'Dalit vision'. The difference between Dalit viewpoint and Dalit vision can be noticed in the desired outcome. A person with Dalit viewpoint asks for limited transformation while a person with Dalit vision demands a total revolution or transformation. Dangle's remark enables us to understand the level of difference in writers writing with Dalit viewpoint and a writer's living Dalit vision. Without this vision, he ends in artificiality and incapable of doing justice to Dalit characters. Non-Dalit writers seem to be materialist. It is because they are not concerned with the spirit but with the body and thus fall notably wide of the mark. They miss the flickering of that innermost flame which flashes its message through brain, courage, action etc.

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