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## Dalit Literature: The Literature of Counterculture

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### **Abstract**

*The Dalit literature that was born in the form of counterculture in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, is still associated with the same mode of protest. The culture associated with the so called Hindu religion is known as one of the reasons for the degraded and pitiful condition of Dalits. So when they became aware of their social position, they started protesting the Hindu culture. Mahtma Jyotiba Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's movement against social, cultural, political and economic exploitation; and provisions of equality embedded in the Indian Constitution, enable the Untouchables to register their protest against their inhuman condition, pains and sufferings which are the bitter consequences of centuries old social humiliation. This paper discusses the origin, characteristics and objective of Dalit literature. It also throws light on how the Dalit literature is still associated with the mode of counterculture.*

**Key words:** Dalit, Dalit literature, Counterculture, Social movement.

### **Introduction**

The 'Postcolonial Theory' became the interest of reading in the post-Independent India. The Postcolonial theory provided a voice to the suppressed classes. The postcolonial literature deals with the problems and issues related to cultural differences, marginalization and exclusion. Hence, the concepts of Subaltern, Feminism and Dalit literature look very similar to the postcolonial literature or it can also be said that the post colonial theory is the foundation stone of Dalit literature. During the last few decades, Dalit politics, Dalit awareness, and Dalit movement became the centre of attraction for thinkers, social activists and writers. The concern about this issue affected the discourses and literature. The Dalit literature is basically borne from the concepts of Dalit consciousness and Dalit movement. Today, the Dalit literature is a well identified and well established genre of literature. The present status of Dalit literature is a result of great struggle of the Dalits. The Dalit literature is also a result of a great dedication from the Dalit writers. (Manusya Ke Aayine Me Dalit Sahitya Ka Samajshastra 38)

### **Concept of Dalit Literature:**

The term 'Dalit Literature' stands for a particular type of literature that is about the Dalits and written by the Dalits. It means Dalit Literature includes the assertion, identity crisis and cultural differences. Because of the unavailability of education to the Dalits and they remained unable to express their own problems by themselves, their problems and issues were depicted in literature by the writers belonging to other communities. Dr. Manejar Pandey, in an article published in the magazine entitled 'Dalit Chetana Sahitya', aptly writes, "Being illiterate, the Dalits were unable to write their own literature; therefore, most of the literature that is available, is written by the non-Dalit writers" (Dalit Sahitya 4). A section of non-Dalit writers advocates that the literature written about the Dalit issues can be placed and named as the Dalit literature without concerning about the writer whether he/she is a Dalit or non-Dalit. But the most of the Dalit thinkers and critiques are not agree with this argument; they do not consider the literature written by non-Dalits, as Dalit literature. According to Dr. Tulsiram, "The literature, written by the non-Dalits, is just like making the sound of a lion by an actor but the Dalit writer is himself a

lion with original voice.” (Dalit Sahitya Ki Avdharna 61). Here, it is an inherent characteristic of the Dalit literature that it must consist of problems and issues of the Dalits expressed and written by the Dalits themselves. Sharankumar Limbale writes:

By Dalit literature, I mean writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness. The form of Dalit literature is inherent in its Dalitness, and its purpose is obvious: to inform Dalit society of its slavery, and narrate its pain and suffering to upper caste Hindus (Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature 19).

Sharankumar Limbale accepts that only Dalit writers have narrated the sufferings of the Dalits realistically. He writes, “Only Dalit writers have narrated the pain of Dalits- this is as true as the fact that rural writers have not depicted the life of Dalits.” Limbale clarifies that even the rural writers are unable to express the pains of Dalits, even when the Dalit’s condition in rural areas is still pitiable. The literature written by the non-Dalit writers cannot be included in Dalit literature, as they did not face and experience the problems of the Dalits; they are unable to feel the real pain. To prove that only a Dalit can write about the Dalits, Roopa Singh quoted a statement of Dr. Vivek Kumar, published in a magazine ‘Vasudha’, “Only a Dalit can write the Dalit literature with its objectivity; means non-Dalit cannot write the Dalit literature.” (Dalit Atmakatha Ke Sarokar 23)

### **Origin of Dalit Literature: The Initiation of Counterculture**

The origin of Dalit literature is believed to be started in the 11<sup>th</sup> century with the Kannada poet Chennaih who was a cobbler by caste and he composed some couplets. Another Kannada Dalit saint Kalavve of 12<sup>th</sup> century, followed the tradition of countering the contemporary culture. (Kannada Dalit Literature: A Brief Survey 59). Though Chennaih wrote some couplets and was from Dalit community, it is not evident whether he wrote on Dalit problems, as it is the basic feature of Dalit literature, hence it cannot be said clearly that he was the pioneer of Dalit literature. The 12<sup>th</sup> century poet and Dalit saint Kalavve may be the initiator of counterculture but Chokhamela, the 13<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> century Mahar saint, who is believed to be a true devotee of lord Krishna can be regarded as the pioneer of the Dalit literature. A thesis chapter, available on Sodhaganga in the form of web page, describes the origin of Dalit literature:

Chokhamela, a 13<sup>th</sup> century Marathi Mahar saint poet and Kabir, a Mediaeval saint poet, who wrote in Hindi may be considered the pioneers of Dalit literary Tradition as they were the first to reflect their concern for the untouchable Shudras. While Chokhamela protested against untouchability, Kabir gave vent to his protest against caste through the medium of devotional verse. (A Socio-Political History of Dalit Writings in India, Sodhaganga)

Elinor Zelliott also writes about Chokhamela as, “His songs, ‘On the Threshold’, translated from Marathi by Rohini Mokashi-Punekar, are about the breaking of old traditions to attain spirituality.” (From Untouchable to Dalit 3). It means that Chokhamela was a Dalit and it was his own notion to register his own voice in the form of counterculture and protest against untouchability and the age old Hindu traditions about the preachings of God. His songs, based on counterculture, can be termed as a piece of Dalit literature. Thus, saint Chokhamela seems to be regarded as the pioneer of Dalit literature. Dalit critiques also claim Ravidas, Kabir and Jyotiba Phule as the pioneer of Dalit literature, but none of them belongs to the period of Dalit literature. The medieval period of Indian history is known for counterculture by the saints. The Bhakti movement, (15<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> century) that brought almost the entire India under its influence, was unorthodox. However, its impact had a little concern for equality in Hindu social order. But it

became stronger with radical stance because it was opposing the traditional rituals of Hinduism. The medieval saints like Ravidas, Kabir, Malukdas, and Navaladas protested slavery, untouchability, exploitation, caste system, blind faiths, idolatry and prohibition of entry of Dalits to the public places. (Manusya Ke Aayine Me Dalit Sahitya Ka Samajshastra 38). Some of the critiques consider Mahatma Jyotiba Phule as the pioneer of Dalit literature but it seems unfair, as the Dalit literature owes its origin to a revolutionary protest and struggle for social, cultural, political and economic change. Dr. Ambedkar's writings owe their purpose for a revolutionary protest and struggle for social, cultural, political and economic change. Hence Dr. Ambedkar is hailed as the father of Dalit literature. (Dalit Sahitya Andolan 29).

#### **Characteristics of Dalit Literature:**

The Dalit literature is a literature that is written by Dalits to express their anger against an age old social, cultural, economic, political and religious exploitation. The Dalit critiques reflect the characteristics of Dalit literature when they portray that the Dalit literature deals with the voices of revolt against social slavery which still persists in Hindu society, especially in rural and slum areas. Limbale broadly discussed about what is reflected and presented through Dalit literature. According to Limbale, portrayal of Self-experience (Swanubhuti), self-sufferings and rejection of untouchable and cultural identity are the main characteristics of Dalit literature. He further includes Dalit consciousness, social responsibility, uncouth- impolite language and cultural resistance in it. (Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature 30-34).

#### **Cultural Resistance in Dalit Literature:**

The postcolonial theory led the foundation for protest literature; Subaltern, Feminist, Black and Dalit literature are the forms of protest literature that describe the identity crisis. The Dalit literature, that is a result of postcolonial theory, has been transformed into a power to register a rebellious force against unfavourable and humiliating social conditions. The postcolonial theory is based on resistance expressed by the socially, economically and politically deprived section of the society against the forces that compelled them in these conditions since ages. David Jefferess describes how postcolonial theory provides the idea of resistance for liberation from the existing conditions:

The idea of 'resistance' provides a primary framework for the critical project of postcolonialism. Resistance is a continual referent and at least implicit locus of much postcolonial criticism and theory, particularly in terms of the analysis of the failure, or deferral, of liberation in Africa, South Asia, and the Caribbean. (Postcolonial Resistance: Culture, Liberation, and Transformation 57)

Dalit literature is the expression of self-suffering due to Brahminical hegemony in the Hindu social order which is strictly hieratical. The Dalit writers wrote about their past experiences that they had to go through just because their being Untouchable. The Dalits were placed at the last rung of Hindu social strata. They were forced to follow inhumane traditions and culture. Because of the lack of literacy and social awareness, the Dalits were unable to counter the cultural practices those were responsible for their pitiable condition in the Hindu society. When they started writing their own experiences in the form of literature, they registered their disagreement with existing social system. To understand their resistance against the Brahmin dominating culture, it is necessary to discuss the terms 'Culture', and 'Cultural Resistance' or 'Counterculture'.

Culture is a social heritage of a certain group or community. It is a well-developed pattern of responses discovered, developed or invented during the entire period of civilisation of a community or a group. Culture is known to be developed through encounters with problems

and their solutions gaining experiences about the way of life. The term 'Culture' is derived from a Latin word 'colere' which means to tend to the earth and grow, or cultivation and nurture. It means, Culture is a result of continuous habits which have been nurtured with common acceptance. Kim Ann Zimmermann quoted Cristina De Rossi, an anthropologist at Barnet and Southgate College in London, to define culture:

Culture encompasses religion, food, what we wear, how we wear it, our language, marriage, music, what we believe is right or wrong, how we sit at the table, how we greet visitors, how we behave with loved ones, and a million other things,"  
(What Is Culture? Kim)

A chapter in the thesis entitled 'The Politics of Cultural Resistance', available on Sodhaganga, quoted Stuart Hall's statement to define the term 'Culture' as, "the actual grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages and customs of any specific society." (The Politics of Cultural Resistance 139)

The culture of Dalit community is a composite consequence of an age old caste system and untouchability. After the enforcement of the provisions made in Manusmriti, the condition of the Shudras or Untouchables became disgraceful and degraded. They had to or still have to follow inhuman culture and exclusion from the main stream; these laws or provisions are responsible for the social injustice and atrocities against them. The culture of any community is to be developed gradually, not to be enforced by others or inherit from other cultures. Helen Spencer writes, "Culture is learned, not inherited nor gifted. It derives from one's social environment, not from one's genes." (What Is Culture: A Compilation of Quotations 6). Now it has become notable that the culture that Dalits have been bearing since the time they started degrading in the Hindu society, cannot be considered their own culture because it did not develop gradually on its own in the prevailing circumstances but was forcefully enforced upon them. This is the main reason why Dalits have started rejecting, countering or resisting the culture.

Cultural Resistance is generally referred as Counterculture, as both the terms stand for a way of life and set of attitudes opposed to or at variance with the prevailing social norms. It means, counterculture or cultural resistance is an act of opposing the unfavourable traditions of existing society which have become an inseparable part of the existing culture. An article, available for free access on 'New Tactics' explains the cultural resistance as:

Cultural resistance is an accessible mode of artistic expression that voices -- in a wide range of mediums -- opposition to or criticism of certain political, economic, social, or other concerning circumstances in a community. Cultural resistance focuses on raising awareness of an issue and calls for justice; it does not exist for the sake of pity or sympathy.(Cultural Resistance: The Arts of Protest, New Tactics)

The latter part of this statement is very helpful in understanding the Cultural Resistance by the Dalit Community, as it is based on the objective of creating awareness against social injustice. The Dalit community has been the victim of social injustices since the time untouchability was introduced to or enforced upon them. The oppression, they have faced, is still persisting in the Hindu social system, however the Indian Constitution does not allow such caste based discrimination. So when the Dalits started writing about their self-sufferings, they started revolting against Brahminical hegemony. A thesis chapter 'Making Sense of Poetics of Resistance' presents some ideas on protest or resistance in Dalit literature:

Dalit literature is a literature of protest and rejection. It voices the dissent of the Dalits – scheduled castes, and tribes, neo-Buddhists, landless and poor peasants, the working classes and others – and even aims at a change in perception of both the oppressed and the dominant to reform the oppressive order. (Making Sense of the Poetics of Resistance 19)

Dalit literature is an expression of resistance and emancipation that can be considered as a powerful amplifier to the prevailing awareness in the form of an audible buzz of writing by Dalits who had been the worst victims of the mindless caste discrimination. It is a result of Marginal, Subaltern and Post-colonial literature. Though its boundaries are limited to Untouchables, so called Shudras or Ati-shudras, it is capable of being a prominent form of literature, as it is not only making the Dalits aware but it also registers a humble protest against the unjust social status of the whole community. Soumitra Chakraborty writes about resistance in Dalit literature:

Writing as Resistance is a commendable effort to present a meaningful collage of the various regional currents of Dalit Literature spontaneously emerging in revolt of localized expressions of the pan-Indian caste-based atrocities on the “outcastes.” (Margin Speaks: Indian Dalit Literature 256)

The beginning of counterculture is believed to be started in the form of counterculture in 11<sup>th</sup> century by Kannada poet Chennai who was a cobbler by caste and he composed some couplets. Another Kannada Dalit saint Kalavve of 12<sup>th</sup> century, followed the tradition of countering the contemporary culture, as he challenged the upper castes in the following lines:

Those who eat goats, fowl and tiny fish:

Such, they call caste people.

Those who eat the Sacred Cow

That showers frothing milk for Shiva:

Such, they call out-caste. (Kannada Dalit Literature: A Brief Survey 59).

The following couplet of Ravidas, belongs to the Bhakti movement, on varna system is in the form of protest:

Raidas ek boond saun, tabhi machau vichar.

Moorakh hain jo karat hain, baran-abaran vichar.

(Ravidas says that it is foolish to know about the caste of a person, as human being is a small unit created by the God. He compares him with a small drop.)

(Manusya Ke Aayine Me Dalit Sahitya Ka Samajshastra 38)

Saint Kabir also protested the caste system by saying:

Ka karo jati, ka karo paati..

Ram ka bhajan karo dinrati.

(Kabir says it is not important to consider a person with his caste but to devote ourselves towards the God, is an ultimate purpose of human life.) (Manusya Ke Aayine Me Dalit Sahitya Ka Samajshastra 38).

The Dalit literature, we have today, is also in the form of counterculture. The poets, dramatists, novelists and autobiographers are just countering the Hindu culture to register their disagreement and protest against the age old cultural slavery that is still prevailed in the form of untouchability and caste based discrimination. The counterculture or cultural resistance in Dalit literature reveals that they [Dalits] had, and still have, to cope up with a culture that was/is not their own, it was forced upon them with the help of some particular conspiracy. They had a

prosperous culture until the laws of Manu were enforced upon them. Niranjana Kumar writes about the cultural status of Dalits:

The culture, they lived with, is responsible for their pitiable and inhuman condition. They were to be considered impure and untouchable, as they were, even today are, associated with some polluted works. They were enforced to live outside the villages; they could not have property; they could not have proper food and shelter. (Manusya Ke Aayine Me Dalit Sahitya Ka Samajshastra 36)

### Conclusion:

Thus it can be concluded that the Dalit literature is the literature of socially and culturally marginalised people. This form of literature was begun in the form of cultural resistance against the social, cultural, economic and political injustice in the form of caste based discrimination. Later it became to be known as Dalit literature after a strong social rebellion and protest of Hindu caste system by Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and the towering figure, Dr. Ambedkar. The tradition of counterculture is now flourishing in the every section of the Indian society. The Constitution of India that ensures political equality and envisions to establish social equality as well, has given a new pace to this literature. And today the Dalit literature has become one of the strong vehicles to create social awareness and a new canon for the untouchable people.

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