Diksha Kant

Professor Raj Kumar

MA English (Second Semester)

April 8, 2016

Dalit Literature: Construction of an Identity

The Indian caste system is deeply rooted in the minds of people, and the concept of untouchability prevails even after Independence. Dalits and Shudras are the worst sufferers. Their life was full of humiliation, discrimination, and suppression by the upper caste. This paper attempts to highlight the emergence of Dalit literature in resurgent India. It starts off with the etymology of ‘Dalit’ and further proceeds by highlighting the ideologies of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Jotibha Phule on education and the adverse conditions of Dalit which leads to the emergence of Dalit Literature. The paper concludes by describing the ‘Dalit Literature’ as an expression of protest and a weapon to fight for their cause. The paper draws extensively from secondary sources and narration of stories by Omprakash Valmiki, the renowned figure of the Dalit movement in India.

Introduction

Etymologically the term ‘Dalit’ is derived from the Sanskrit root ‘dal’ which means to grind (grain), to split (pulse) open, to crush. According to Valmiki, this word has been taken metaphorically and applied to a person who has been broken down into pieces and oppressed, crushed, deprived, exploited and trampled upon to obtain the lowest rung in the social hierarchy labelling the person as an untouchable. Manusmriti, a religious scripture, describes Varna System, which distinguishes the society based on occupation. According to this system, four kinds of people were born out of Lord Vishnu, Brahmin from the head, Kshatriya out of arms, Vaishya out of abdomen and Shudra out of feet laying emphasis on Shudras as a slave whose occupation was to serve the rest of the society as they were born out of an inferior part.

Historically speaking, Dalits have been known to work as manual labourers cleaning streets, sewers, latrines, cleaning away dead animals and similar kinds work including butchering, collecting garbage, etc. They were disallowed entering to temples and were entirely cut off from any social and cultural gatherings. As a result, they were recognised as an outcast banned from all non-Dalit participation and Hindu social life. They were denied basic rights of education and were bereft of any development. As a consequence, their life was full of poverty and superstition, and they didn’t possess any identity of their own. The extent of deprivation from human rights and extreme oppression made Dalits conscious of their condition and led to the rise of various Dalit Movements across India. One of the earliest known movements was started by Lord Gautam Buddha condemned the act of untouchability and preached to abolish it. The state of Maharashtra was the key to the transformation of Dalits and the concept of untouchability. Significant figures like Mahatma Jotibha Phule, Rajashri Shahu Maharaj, V.R. Shinde and Dr. Babasaheb R. Ambedkar were prominent reformers. Dr. Ambedkar single-handedly turned thousands of untouchables to Buddhism. These reforms played a critical role in the upliftment of Dalits across the country, and the course of reformation is still in progress by various creative social reformers.

“Education was not merely alphabetical learning but a means of igniting the minds of the oppressed for desirable socio-cultural transformation” (Phule,70). Mahatma Phule was fully aware of the importance of education. he knew that education can act as a powerful tool of the social revolution. In order to scrape away the injustice and inequality education is a must. Mahatma Phule emphasised on the notion of – ‘Education to all’. According to Phule education should be based upon equality because only such education has the capability to bind the society together. Jotibha Phule said that – “the quantitative growth in primary school is important but it should not be at the cost of the qualitative growth” (Bala, *Mahatma Jotibha* *Phule- An Educational Philosopher*).

In the light of human rights as the prevailing issue, the literary description in the context of marginalised groups has become the bone of contention. Independence brought a light of hope that every issue will now be resolved, but instead they increased, to an extent that resulted in various revolts and mass movements seeking justice. The idea of education and democracy reached the masses leading to the awakening of not only Dalits but also Adivasi and Nomadic tribes. Dr. Ambedkar said “Mahatma Phule the greatest shudra of modern India who made the lower classes of Hindus conscious of their slavery to the higher class who preached the gospel that for India social democracy was more vital than independence from foreign rule” (Sirswal, *Mahatma Jotibha Phule: A Modern Indian Philosopher*). The concept of equality and equal worth through democracy become widespread, but hardly any change was reflected in the social structure. As a result, the sentiments of pain and revolt kindled, and the literature post-independence expressed these sentiments.

Post- independence many Dalits gained education coupled with pressure of Dalit Movement helped them express their anger against established unequal social system in writing, what came to be known as ‘Dalit Literature.' Dalit literature emphasised the expressions of suffering, rejection, and revolt, experiences, consciousness of the Dalit masses. For thousands of years, Dalits have suffered exploitations because of the Hindu religious order. Dalits reckoned this act of slavery by the thoughts of Babasaheb Ambedkar. The vast masses collectively expressed their sufferings in the form of Dalit Literature, and it is because of this reason as to why it assumed a social character. Rejection and revolt were another forms which came out as an integral part of Dalit Literature. Born out of unrestrained anguish, the rejection was aimed at the unequal societal order and the revolt to demand equality, liberty, fraternity and justice. Dalit writers wrote out of social responsibility. Their writing expressed the intensity of impatience and the emotion of commitment as an activist. However, it is important for them to ensure that this responsibility should not have any deteriorating effect on their creation.

Dalit writers are criticised for being the propagandist and lacking objectivity. This is certainly because they present the anguish and sufferings of the masses, and the questions that they pose in front of the society are not individual but a collective thought. Intense lived and felt experiences cannot be regarded as a propagandist. Writers are accused of being monotonous and univocal. This requires understanding the Dalits share common experiences and thus shared ideology, and because of which the literature sounds univocal. The literature is accused of being resentful to the extent of breast-beating. This is due to the fact that these people suffered from thousands of years, and this has come out in the form of suppressed irritation. The anger expressed in Dalit literature is natural, and one can’t expect this pain to be expressed in limited and artistic form. Apart from the charges Dalit literature demands a separate form of appraisal or criticism. Since the literature represents the plight of Dalit community and is written from a socialist perspective the yardstick for appraisal or criticism are expected to be different. It must be kept in mind that any aesthetic consideration of Dalit literature should be based on Ambedkar’s line of thought as this literature’s literary value is embedded in its social value.

Buddhism considered people from all religions as equal and was free from casteism. This inspired many to reject Hindu gods and goddesses and embed in themselves the Buddhist ideology. Consequently, this upheaval resulted in a different identity and new consciousness awakened in Dalit society. Dalit literature found a new dimension in the form of Buddhism and attempts were made to analyse the literature in Buddhist and Ambedkarite perspectives. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a champion of Dalit rights has beautifully summed up the essence of Dalit literature: “My final words of advice to you is educate, agitate and organize, have faith in yourself. With justice on your side, I don’t see how we can lose our battle. For ours, the battle is not for wealth or power. It is a battle for freedom. It is a battle for the reclamation of human personality” (Sinha,103-104).

Ambedkar brought up a concept of ending the caste system. This modern idea became what is known as Ambedkarism. Ambedkar fought against the manifestations of the caste system revolving around marriage restrictions, heredity of caste, profession belonging to one’s caste, dietary rules, and hierarchy in the social structure. Indeed, humanism went synonyms with Ambedkarism since all it meant was fighting for human values. Dr. Ambedkar had a deep connection with education. For Ambedkar education is the priority in order to bring growth among individuals as well as in society. According to Ambedkar, education can bring radical changes in an oppressed society and create boulevard for a change which are equal for all.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar influenced Omprakash Valmiki and the other Dalit writers to build up the Dalit consciousness and consequently the awakening of the masses. Dalit consciousness became a significant need for Dalits because the non-Dalits somehow or the other ignored the voice of Dalits.

Omprakash Valmiki’s short stories capture nature’s every image and the various aspects of human emotions. Valmiki through his work presented himself not as an individual but as a member of Dalit community. Omprakash Valmiki made the unheard voices of the suppressed echo in the world of literature. “Keeping in mind the importance of Dalit discourse in the contemporary post-millennium literature, the publication of the stories by Om Prakash Valmiki is timely and will bring the issue of Dalit consciousness before the English-speaking world. It is also an emphatic answer to the question asked by Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak,” Can the subaltern speak?" Amma and Other Stories affirms that the subaltern can speak and speak in the most authentic mode” (Singh, *Being Dalit-*213). In Amma & Other stories written by Omprakash Valmiki had made an attempt to voice the anger and the pain of the lowest caste. In these stories, Omprakash Valmiki talks about the oppression by the upper class as well about the women of all classes among Dalits in the context of who sufferings from the hands of their male relatives. Omprakash Valmiki knew the significance of education and is clearly reflected in his short stories enforcing a moral, which would help these Dalits to get rid of the torturous life.

In the short story “Amma”, the Amma is the woman representing all Dalit women. She was assigned the dirtiest job of cleaning lavatories. However, repellent the job seemed, she had to do it for her survival of her family. Although she was quite old, she didn’t quit the job as she wasn’t convinced with the idea of passing her job to her off springs. She wanted them to be well educated so as not to get the same life she had lived. In her own words, “Get a bit of education so that you may be a peon in an office if not a clerk. You will, at least, be free from this dirty work which does not get you two square meals a day properly nor any respect” (Valmiki, p-189). She does not want her children to carry the stigma of a sweeper’s broom. This clearly reflected the state of mind of Dalits as to what they had expected out of their children in the best possible circumstances given the conditions prevailed during that period. This marks a depiction of construct that Dalit women also hold an identity and they are not an object for sexual exploitation. The misery of the working Dalit women so also the importance of education in order to gain an identity of their own is clearly portrayed in the story.

“Shavyatra”, is the most moving tale in which the depiction of oppression within an oppression is very well portrayed. It is a story about a CHAMAR-dominated village where on the margin lived a Balhar family, who were the lowliest of the lowliest. Everyone wants to have an upper hand. Surja also had a son who ran away from home and got himself educated and somehow managed to get a job in railways. The very act of running away from the house is breaking the shackles which were bounding him to live within the limits of the lowliest of the lowliest caste. The utter need to get educated in order to raise their condition and status. He hardly comes to the village but whenever he come "the Chamars of the village eyed him strangely. They were not able to digest the fact that Kallu had become Kallan. In their eyes, he was still a Balhar, lowest in the caste hierarchy, an untouchable even among the untouchable"(Valmiki p-213).

The second instance which shows the harsh realities of the discrimination. When Kallan's daughter Saloni was suffering from fever and Kallan went to get a doctor for her, as the doctor saw Kallan he declined to come. Even about knowing about the seriousness of the condition he denied to come. The doctor forgot his duty under the so-called prevailing caste system and replied to Kallan that "Don't bring the patient here. Or else my shop will get shut down tomorrow. Don't forget you are a Balhar; the doctor warned him plainly"(Valmiki, pp-218-219). This resulted in the death of that ten years old girl. She was the worst sufferer. But this pain doesn't end here. The Chamar of the village were still unmoved they did not even help Surja and his family. Moreover, they did not permit to burn the dead body in the cremation ground. "The Chamars had refused permission point blank"(Valmiki, p-222). They had to cremate her three- four kilometres further away. No one helps them in the funeral possession. This is the untouchability going on among the untouchables. The lowliest of the low among the Dalits have encountered the painful experience of cremating the body of thedead without the help of any Chamar from that village and acted as the mute spectators. It vividly potrays the loneliness and distressful sufferings of Surja. The Chamars were so engraved into domination that they do not show any concern and sympathy.

Conclusion

Hence through education they realise their position of being subjection to a hegemonic force which supress the community they are in as well as the culture they follow. This realization act as a propeller to resist and fight for a change. This intellectual assertion has the capability to break the rigidity of the pre-defined societal norms. Dalit literature helps in the building consciousness and finally awakening of the Dalit Masses. They rose their voice for liberation, protest, and rebellion against the then prevailing social order. The caste system in India is the harsh reality of Indian society that made a number of people the victim of suppression, humiliation, and torture. Dalit literature conveyed a message of collective progress and not the individual. Writers of Dalit literature used the power of language in order to expresser their anguish. It aims at eradicating social discrimination and promoting equality. Dr. Ambedkar’s struggled for the equality, identity, freedom and unity for the Dalit as well as women. This influenced many Dalit writers to express their existence of life and culture. They gave the first-hand experience of Dalit to highlight the circumstances of Dalit world which were ignored in the mainstream society. Through Dalit literature, Dalit culture gained voice which was silenced since centuries.

Work Cited

Amar Nath Prasad, M.G. *Dalit Literature: A Critical Exploration*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons Bala, Rani. *Mahatma Jotibha Phule: An Educational Philosopher*. 2011.Web.

<http://sikhinstitute.org/oct-2011/13-rajni_marwaha.html>

Lakshman, C. *Lives in Shadows*. 2009. Web. 31 March 2016.

<http://www.thebookreviewindia.org/articles/archive-1569/2009/april/4/lives-in-shadows.html>

Limbale, Sharankumar. *Towards an Aesthetic of the Dalit Literature: History, Controversies and Considerations.* New Delhi. Orient Longman Private Limited. 2004. Print.

Singh, N.P. *Being Dalit*. Indian Literature. Vol.54. No.2. Sahitya Akademi.April 2010.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/23342066>

Sinha, Sunita. From Erasure to Assertion: The Other and the Unempowered in Mulk Raj Anand. *Dalit Literature: A Critical Exploration*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons Publishers and Distributers.2008. Print.

Sirswal, Desh Raj. Mahatma Jyotibha Phule: A Modern Indian Philosopher. October.2013.

<http://msesaim.wordpress.com/2013/10/14/mahatma-jyotiba-phule-a-modern-indian-philosopher-by-dr-desh-raj-sirswal/>

Valmiki, Omprakash. *Amma and the Other Stories*. Trans. and Introduction, Naresh K. Jain. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors. 2008. Print.

\_\_\_\_ Valmiki, Omprakash. “Amma” in *Amma and the Other Stories*. Trans. and Introduction, Naresh K. Jain. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors. 2008. Print.

\_\_\_\_ Valmiki, Omprakash. “Umbrella” in *Amma and the Other Stories*. Trans. and Introduction, Naresh K. Jain. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors. 2008. Print.

\_\_\_\_ Valmiki, Omprakash. “Shavyatra” in *Amma and the Other Stories*. Trans. and Introduction, Naresh K. Jain. New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors. 2008. Print.