

# RELIGIOUS AND COMMUNITY DISCRIMINATION: LITERATURE AS PROTEST IN DALIT WRITINGS IN INDIA AND BLACK AMERICAN LITERATURE IN THE WEST

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*Abstract: As N.M Aston puts it, "the causes and circumstances leading to the age-old existence of oppression and despair of the lives of the marginalized class of nations' vast majority of people can be enumerated thus: 1) The self-down-gradation of these people since ages, suppressing even the slightest protest against injustice that sought to find a voice; 2) The conditions of abject poverty, unhealthy and unsanitary conditions in which these people had been sheltered, but they held a belief that they were accursed to live such lives; 3) Even the minimum rights as human beings denied to them, rendering them incapable of seeing the light of freedom and comfortable living, thanks to the age-old ideology taught to them by the upper castes in India and the white race in other countries, that they were fated to be hewers of wood and drawers of water-mere slaves!" (Aston, 2001, 9); and 4) Dalit is a category of self-definition of Untouchables in post-Independence India. It signifies a state of radical consciousness and seeks to interrogate and challenge the previous stereotypes that Hindu caste society had employed to describe untouchable and near untouchable castes and communities.*

Many different names are proposed for defining Dalits in India, like "asprushya - untouchable," "Harijan- children of God," "Dalit – broken people," etc.; the word "Dalit" comes from the Sanskrit. It means "downtrodden," "suppressed," "crushed," or "broken to pieces." Maharashtrian social worker Jyotiba Phule was the first to use it in the nineteenth century. It was in the context of the oppression faced by the untouchables by upper-caste Hindus.

## I. Mythological Context

The religious scripture "Manu Smriti" described the "varna system" of the society based upon occupation. It is a four-layered 'Varna' system comprising four kinds of people of the society borne out of the body of Lord Vishnu. According to this myth, Brahmin was born out of head, Kshatriya was born out of arms, vaishya was born out of the abdomen, and Shudra was born out of feet. It emphasized Shudra as an enslaved person or servant because he was born out of feet and destined to serve the rest of society. Dalit (shudra), thus was recognized as an inferior part of the society. They were assigned inferior activities like leatherwork, butchering, cleaning the streets, and removing animal carcasses and waste. The civilized Hindu society has allotted works like manual labor, cleaning streets, latrines, and sewers. As they consider these activities polluting, the Dalits engaged in these activities are commonly

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segregated and banned from full participation in Hindu social life. They were banned from entering the temple and not allowed to take water from the public well of the village.

## II. Gandhi-Marxists-Dalits

Dalit as a concept and as an issue has been treated differently throughout history. Some major isms which tried to attach themselves are Marxism and Gandhianism. Indian Marxism has always seen Dalit's problem in terms of land and agrarian relationships. It defines *Dalit* as a landless laborer. However, land and economic reasoning are not enough to arrive at a holistic understanding of the Dalit problem.

The second approach, the Gandhian approach, looks at the Dalit problem as a problem of value structure. The roots of this approach are in the Bhakti movement. This approach has been the most powerful and relevant to understand in recent times.

The word "Dalit" took an interesting turn when the British in the Government of India Act 1935 used its English translation as "Depressed classes" to mean downtrodden people of India who were hitherto referred to as 'Harijan' by Mahatma Gandhi. However, Ambedkar sensed the multiple nuances of the word and gave it a more respectable identity by calling them "Dalit." In the post-Ambedkar era, it became a part of political activism. It got a newfound awareness that stressed the extreme inclusiveness of all those depressed people who are the historical victims of class and caste exploitation.

## III. Dalit Literature

The roots of the term 'Dalit' can be traced back to the Purusukta of Rig Veda, where we find the first reference to the caste system. The hymn describes:

Brahmnoasaya mukamasti  
 Bahu rajanayah kruta  
 Uru tadasay yadvaishya  
 Padabhayam Sudro ajayat  
 (X 90-12)

According to this hymn, Brahmanas were born from the mouth of Brahma, the Kshatriyas from his shoulders, the Vaisyas from his thighs, and Sudras from his feet. Hence Brahmanas are the most superior, and Sudras are the most inferior in the hierarchy. The Brahmins have established the theories that the caste system is God-made and not Man-made. In the subsequent ages, Manu, an ardent supporter of the caste system, made it code in his "Manu-Smriti." The division based on class is a universal phenomenon, but the characteristic of the Hindu caste system is that it is based on birth and not on aptitude. Because of the rigidity of the caste system, Sudras

are considered outcasts, down-trodden, polluted, marginals, and exploited by the higher castes for centuries.

The text writers like “Manusmriti” themselves belonged to the ruling class and dictated terms that would maintain the status quo. The division of society into varnas was initially based on karma or vocation. It was not linked with birth. However, the ruling classes had designed it to make mobility between vocations very difficult. As A. S. Chandalia observes, “...The postmodernist philosophers like Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Derrida were not there but the determiners of the norms and writers of Samhitas knew the power of knowledge. Education, i.e., knowledge is the most powerful means of social mobility. Access to knowledge was refused to all except the Brahmins.” (Chandalia, 2009, 34)

The Hindu religious order has considered the Dalit’s shadow, touch, and speech impure. It has regarded them as untouchable and guilty from birth Dalits should not accumulate property or wear gold ornaments; they should live outside the village and own only donkeys and dogs. They should partake of food only in clay utensils, use only shrouds for clothing, and take inauspicious and crude names. Dalits have been kept deprived of power, property, and position for thousands of years. It was pronounced that “God created this hierarchy” so Dalits may not rebel against this social order. Thousands of generations of Dalits have continued to endure this injustice.

Dalit society came to understand its slavery following the thoughts of Babasaheb Ambedkar. This mute society found its hero in Babasaheb and its anguish voice through him, and this anguish of Dalits is the progenitor of Dalit literature. It is not the pain of any one person, nor is it just one day- it is the anguish of many thousands of people experienced over thousands of years. Therefore, it is expressed collectively. It is the anguish of an entire outcast society. It is the reason to make it a social character and not just any writing.

There are multiple meanings and definitions of the word “Dalit”. Marathi dictionary defines *Dalit* as (i) Ground and (ii) Broken or reduced to piece. As Gangadhar Pantwane, a professor of Marathi and founder editor of *Asmitadarsh*, “To me, Dalit is not a caste. He is a man exploited by the Social and economic traditions of this country. He does not believe in God, rebirth, Soul, Holy book teaching, separatism, fate, and heaven because they have enslaved him. He does believe in humanism. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution.”<sup>1</sup>

The Marxists would define “Dalit” in class, generally including women, tribal workers, and agricultural laborers. Leading Dalit writers like Annabhau Sathé and Namdeo Dhasal clearly influence the Marxist concept in their writings. The word “Dalit” is found in several Indian languages, and a Marathi word is found in Molesworth’s Marathi-English dictionary of 1975, a reprint of the 1813 edition. It

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<sup>1</sup> “Dalit: New Cultural Context of an Old Marathi Word”, *Contribution to Asian Studies*, XI, 1977-78.

gives the meaning as “ground,” broken or reduced to pieces generally. (Zilliot, 1992, 267)

It is derived from a Sanskrit word meaning “crushed” and is understood in all the Indian languages that are derived from Sanskrit. Thus the “Dalits” are people who are broken, crushed, and torn apart so much so that they are unable to rise and better themselves. As Sharan Kumar Limbale puts it:

Harijans and Neo-Buddhists are not the only Dalits, the term describes all the untouchable communities living outside the boundary of the village, as well as Adivasis, land-less farm laborers, workers, the suffering masses, and nomadic and criminal tribes. In explaining the word, it will not do to refer only to the untouchable castes. People who are lagging economically will also need to be included. (Limbale, 2004, 30)

The definition of untouchables or Dalits in the census report 1911 is exciting. The census report laid down ten tests to mark off the untouchables from those who were touchable. Under these tests, a separate enumeration of castes and tribes who are:

1. Denied the supremacy of the Brahmins
2. Did not receive the mantras from Brahmana
3. Denied the authority of Vedas
4. Did not worship the great Hindu gods
5. Were not served by Good Brahmins
6. Have no Brahmin priest at all
7. Have no access to the ordinary Hindu temple
8. Cause pollution
9. Bury their dead
10. Eat beef and do not reverence the law. (Ghosh, 1997, pp.1-2)

“Dalit” is now widely used in place of the word “untouchable.” Over the years, there have been several terms used to describe the people of the erstwhile untouchable community, such as “Anti-Sudra,” “Scheduled Castes,” “exterior castes,” “outcasts,” “depressed classes,” “ex-untouchables,” and so on. The Dalits feel that these terms coined by the upper caste Hindus, officials, and social reformers were abusive and synonymous with derogation, domination, and paternalism. It is why the people in this category prefer to describe themselves as Dalits, including all aspects of oppression. In this context, Elenor Zilliot observes:

In early 1970, two Maharashtrian movements achieved enough prominence to be noticed by the English Press, The Dalit Panthers, and Dalit Literature. By substituting the word ‘Black’ for ‘Dalit’ the reader can immediately understand that a phenomenon comparable to the American Black Panthers and Black Literature has surfaced among the lower caste in social and literary affairs in Western India. Like the American movements, the Dalit Panthers and the Dalit school of literature represent a new level of pride, militancy, and sophisticated creativity. The Marathi

word 'Dalit', like the word 'Black' was chosen by the group itself...Dalit [refers to] those who have been broken, ground down by those above them deliberately and actively. There is in the word itself an inherent denial of pollution, Karma, and justified class hierarchy. (Zilliot, 1992, 267)

Over the ages, the connotation and the interpretation of the term "Dalit" have changed. For example, Namdeo Dhasal, the noted Marathi poet and one of the Dalit Panther's Movement leaders, infused the term with a leftist vision to include the Scheduled castes and the Scheduled castes. The economically oppressed classes comprised the Scheduled tribes, Neo-Buddhists, landless laborers, and others. He defines Dalit in class, generally including women, tribal, workers in industries, and agricultural workers.

As Gangadhar Pntawane, another Dalit activist from Maharashtra who is also the founder-editor of "Asmitadarsh (Mirror of Identity), the chief organ of Dalit literature, the term 'Dalit' does not refer to caste but is a symbol of change and revolution: 'the Dalit believes in Humanism. He rejects the existence of God, rebirth, soul, sacred books that teach discrimination, fate, and heaven because these have made him a slave. He represents the exploited men...'" (Joshi, 1986, 79)

Dalit literature artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule, and poverty endured by Dalits. This literature is but a lofty image of grief. Every human being must find liberty, honor, security, and freedom from intimidation by the powerful elements of society. These values are now being articulated in Dalit literature. Recognizing the centrality of human beings, this literature is thoroughly saturated with humanity's joys and sorrows. It regards human beings as supreme and leads them toward total revolution.

Dalit literature has arisen from cultural conflict. Since the "downtrodden" (Dalits) have no place in the Canonical Literature of India, Dalit writers call it "'Hindu Literature' and challenge its hegemony. In the words of Baburao Bagul, the established literature of India is Hindu Literature. However, Dalit literature has the revolutionary power to accept new science and technology and bring about a total transformation. "Dalit is the name of a total revolution; it is revolution incarnate."

Education and the idea of democracy reached many sections of the society after Independence, awakening the masses all over the country and Dalits, Adivasis, Nomadic, and other tribes living in and outside villages. The democratization of education enabled its spread among farmers, women, and workers. The idea of the equal worth of all people was widely expressed, but social conditions did not change. There were revolutionary transformations in the nation's lives, society, and individuals due to the consciousness of such humanistic values as equality, liberty, fraternity, and justice. Yet, at the same time, sentiments of pain and revolt were also kindled because of dissatisfaction with an inequitable system. The literature of the post-independence period expressed these sentiments. The new writers emerged from various sections of society. They presented in their writings their language, environment, condition, and issues. Dalit literature attracted considerable discussion

because its form and objective differed from other post-independence literature. Its presence was noted in India and abroad.

In this process, Dalit literature has effectively threatened the Brahminic hegemony from literature. It also concertized Dalit masses for the assertion, protest, and mobilization. It stirred up thinking in Dalit intellectuals and catalyzed the creation of the organic intellectuals of Dalits. The emergence of Dalit literature, where writers are mostly Dalits, proves a profound change in Indian society.

The Dalit was rising in the 1920s: The mobilization of the oppressed and exploited sections of the society- the peasants, Dalits, women, and low caste occurred on a large scale in the 1920s and 1930s, under varying leaderships with varying ideologies.

Dalit writing is a post-Independence literary phenomenon. The emergence of Dalit literature has great historical significance. The causes and effects leading to the age-old existence of oppression and despair in the lives of a marginalized class of the nation's vast population are also observed in many other parts of the world. Dalit literature represents a powerful emerging trend in the Indian literary scene. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, a champion of Dalit's rights, has beautifully summed up the essence of Dalit Literature: "My words of advice to you are to educate, agitate and organize; have faith in yourself. With justice on our side, I do not see how we can lose our battle. For ours is a battle not for wealth or power It is a battle of freedom. It is a battle for the reclamation of human personality."

Dalit literature represents a powerful emerging trend in the Indian literary scene. In the unashamed description of the traumas of being an "Untouchable" target of upper caste ideology, its texts question the institutions that have placed them at the margins.

Arjun Dangle has defined Dalit literature as "Dalit literature is one which acquaints people with the caste system and untouchability in India... It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion, and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary."

Most marginalized groups worldwide have a similar system of oppression, but the titles are different as per the class and class divide. In India, it was under the pretext of the Caste, and in the Western World, it was under the name of the Race. Inequality was the main source of this marginality, leading to insecurity, injustice, and exploitation. Marginalized sections were always on the periphery and distanced from the power centers. In this research work, the main objective is to draw similarities between the politics of Caste and Race in Indian Dalits and the American Blacks.

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western India. Like the American Movement, the Dalit Panthers and the Dalit school of literature represent a new level of pride, militancy, and sophisticated creativity. The Marathi word Dalit like the word Black was chosen by the group itself and is used proudly; and even in the English press, the unfamiliar Marathi word has to be used...untouchables, scheduled castes, depressed classes, Gandhi's euphemism, Harijan...are the same connotation. Dalit implies those who have been broken, ground down by those above them deliberately and actively. (Eleanor, 2010)

Dalits were always on the marginalized "other" side of Indian society. So, when they started voicing after centuries of silence about themselves, we have the literature depicting assertion of human rights, self-pride, revolt against social injustice, chronicles of personal and collective suffering, and hopes and aspirations for a new society devoid of discrimination. Dalit Literature is literature about Dalits that are about Dalits. Dalit (Oppressed or broken) is not a new word.

It was used in the 1930s as a Hindi and Marathi translation of "depressed classes," a term the British used for what is now called the Scheduled Castes. In the 1970s, the Dalit Panthers exploited politically, economically, and in the name of religion. So, Dalit is not a caste. It is a symbol of change and revolution. The Primary motive of Dalit literature is the liberation of Dalits; the struggle against casteist tradition has a long history. Some of the essential writers whose writings will find a place are Mahasweta Devi, Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Sachi Rautray, Rabi Singh, Basudev Sunni, Bama, Abhimani, Poomani, Imayam, Marku, Mangal Rathod, Neerave Patel, Perumal Murugan, Palamalai, Sudhakar, D. Gopi, and others.

Sharankumar Limbale has stated, "Dalit literature is precisely that literature which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule, and poverty endured by Dalits. This literature is but a lofty image of grief." This trend started in 1873 when Jyotirao Phule, a Marathi Dalit (then known as an Untouchable), published his book *Gulamgiri* (Slavery) and dedicated the treatise to the then "Negroes" in America as a "token of admiration for their sublime disinterestedness and self-sacrificing devotion in the cause of "Negro" Slavery."

In 1992, Indian Literature virtually started a new chapter with Arjun Dangle's *Poisoned Bread* publication, the first-ever attempt to anthologize Dalit writings in English. He involved all the genres available in Marathi Dalit literature-poetry, short stories, essays, autobiographical excerpts, and public speeches. As a result, today, we have several Dalit writings coming out in both Indian languages and English. Following are some of the most widely read writers of Dalit literature that are available in English translation- Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati*, Dr. Narendra Jadhav's *Untouchables: My Family's Triumphant Journey Out of the Caste System in Modern India*, Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outside*: Akkarmashi, Joseph Macwan's *The Stepchild*, Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit's Life*, Baby Kamble's *Our Existence* and Imayam's *Beats of Burden*, Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*.

Some prominent Dalit writers are Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Baburao Bagul, Rabi Singh, Namdeo Dhasal, Dutta Bhagat, Lakshman Mane, Neerave Patel, Palamalai, Sudhakar. Several other writers are writing Dalit Literature but do not share the Dalit writers' category as the latter are not Dalit by birth as the other Dalit writers. Mahasweta Devi, Sara Joseph, Kumaran Asan, Mulkraj Anand, and Premchand are well-known names written in diverse Indian languages.

Unlike its precedents, Dalit literature wouldn't lay down any precepts to be confirmed by the coming posterity, rather it would portray dreadful and humiliating events of the Dalit world by exposing inequality, sorrow, and misery of their class. Dalit literature would tell us about the cultural conflict of the socially, economically, and culturally deprived and disadvantaged groups of people. So, this literature would be revolutionary, didactic, and doctrinaire. But above all, unlike its antecedents, Dalit literature wouldn't play the role of a separatist but an integrationist. (kumar, 2009, 65)

A study of Dalit literature is promising as it has bright prospects for making our society largely integrated. It promotes cooperation and love, which are major forces of a good society. In this way, it has begun to change, enabling nondalits to deconstruct a traditional mindset that makes them perceive Dalits as lower than themselves; and instead see Dalits as equals rather than pitiful victims. It also fills Dalits themselves with confidence and pride. Their ultimate goal is to bring them into the equation with others and provide confidence and pride in themselves. So typical Dalit literature fights against the system and not against man.

#### IV. Black American Writings

The racial problem is only one of the many problems that America and many parts of the Western world face. It is one of the problems that seem endemic to the Twenty-first-century societies of the West, particularly the societies that have been industrialized for a considerable time. This problem of "Racial discrimination" also has its relation to the whole complex of many more significant problems, and it cannot be fully understood in isolation.

Racism and classicism signify the traumatic conditions under African-Americans who lived in White America. It started when white masters of the land brought the first Africans in chains and used their labor to enrich their coffers. As a result, black people soon ceased to exist as human beings in the white world. Racism is a system of societal and psychological restrictions that has critically affected the lives of blacks. Right from the days of slavery, the blacks have realized the cruel reality of racism: Judgment of the white man's standards of life and beauty, the black man's life became unbearable. As John Arthur suggests:

Racism is usually a form of prejudice in just that sense: it is an attitude that is grounded in the beliefs formed on insufficient evidence or beliefs that are held too



firmly without adequate regard for other information that may call these beliefs into question. (John, 2007, 35)

The oppressive story of racism in America brought pain, sorrow, bloodshed, death, and above all, the negation of an entire race. The African-American race was ghettoized, persecuted, and viciously outlawed from all avenues of decency, hope, progress, and livelihood. The primary myth of racism is that white skin brings cultural superiority- that whiteness is more intelligent and more virtuous than the black by being white. On the psychological level, whiteness is automatically equated with beauty, culture, and blackness with ugliness and slavery.

When the enslaved African was torn from his homeland and brought to the New World, he was quickly denied his native culture. Tribal organizations, languages, family structure, religion - all were systematically extirpated. He was compelled to appropriate his materials from a new culture in rebuilding his sheltered life. However, his master permitted him access to western culture on a minimal basis. The Whites deliberately obstructed the process of assimilation. The other side of this coin is an unconscious self-hatred likewise appropriated from the dominant culture. Hated by Whites and being an organic part of the culture that hated him, the Black man grew to hate himself what others hated him. An unconscious desire to be White coupled with revulsion towards the "Negro" masses may produce an assimilationist pattern of behavior at a purely personal level.

He is condemned because he is Black. Nature is responsible for that. What did it mean to be a black man in this world dominated by the white race? The black American writer defines his racial condition, which is responsible, by and large, for his socio-cultural condition in the conspiring world of the white people. Suffering is indeed his lot. He has not sinned. Nobody has talked about Black Adam's fall. Nor has anybody applied the Indian doctrine of Karma to his socio-racial conditions to explain his perpetual suffering, torture, and trauma for being Black. The Karma doctrine can be applied to only individuals, men or women, but not to the whole race- black, brown or white.

Slavery was imposed upon the blacks in America for more than three centuries. The land of liberty locked them in this dark dungeon of slavery. Their racial problem resulted in social, economic, and cultural problems. The inhuman exploitation of American Blacks has no parallel in the history of humankind. Slavery was institutionalized in social behavior. The white people gave bad treatment to the "Negroes" as per the code that originated in the minds of both the white and the black people. The black race was marginalized in all respects. The shackles of slavery fell only after the Civil War. However, they were not shattered completely. The Jim Crow Laws were passed to put them in bondage. The highest court of America upheld the notorious "separate-but-equal" principle. The "Negro" was disenfranchised without any benefit of legal power and property.

However, Africa, the land of its ancestors, cannot altogether disappear from their memories. Africa occupies a special place in their hearts and souls. Their conscious

minds are filled with America, but Africa is stuck forever in their psyche. That is the reason why they call themselves Afro-Americans. Their identities have traveled from colored to “Negro,” from “Negro” to Black, from Black to Afro-American, and now from Afro-American to African American. They are full-blooded African Americans. The long dark shadows fall across two continents – America and Africa. Their history is a long passage of time, telling a tale of two continents. They were thrown out of their history, faith, and culture. African history has given them a whole page about American history has given them a small and narrow margin on its page. Their history is a story of an endless hallucination of agony. Nevertheless, this agony has given rise to a vast and rich heritage like their spirituals, Jazz, Blues, Poems, plays, short stories, and novels. Marginal is their existence. Ralph Ellison’s “Invisible Man” to Richard Wright’s “Native Son” to Alex Haley’s “Roots,”-the Black American literature deals with the essence of black identity caught in perpetual crisis.

The “Negro literature” has passed through such subsequent phases as black literature, Afro-American literature, and African-American literature. Here, the term “African” suggests and signifies the primacy and priority of the blacks from Africa in the context of literary activities. As R. Bhongle explains:

African-American literature today opposes several things in the literature of white Americans. “Negro” now is no longer a marginal character but a protagonist who asserts his racial identity. He opposes even the earlier image of himself as portrayed by the Harlem writers- a docile, self-conscious, submissive black man knocking at the door of God who has always been unkind. Jesus Christ is described as the white devil with blue eyes... If at all there is the God benevolent to the Negro, he must be an incarnation of his image and personality. (Bhongle, 2001, 33-34)

As African Americans' place in American society has changed over the centuries, so have the foci of African American literature. Before the American Civil War, African American literature primarily focused on slavery, as indicated by the subgenre of slave narratives. At the turn of the 20th century, books by authors such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington debated whether to confront or appease racist attitudes in the United States. During the American Civil Rights movement, authors such as Richard Wright and Gwendolyn Brooks wrote about issues of racial segregation and black nationalism. Today, African American literature has been accepted as an integral part of American literature, with books such as *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* by Alex Haley, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison achieving both best-selling and award-winning status.

William Faulkner remains one of the key figures in American fiction. Before Faulkner’s arrival on the literary scene, American fiction was mainly confined to social and political issues, most of the non-controversial type. The arrival of Faulkner brought about a revolutionary change in the literary scenario. He was mustering more courage than his predecessors, who felt afraid to deal with controversial and shameful realities like racism, miscegenation, etc. Faulkner brought literary treatment of the

social and psychological aspects of racism to the forefront. Through his acclaimed novels like *"Sartoris," "The Sound and The Fury," "Absalom, Absalom!"*, *"The Unvanquished"* and *"The Intruder in the Dust,"* Faulkner jolted his white readers, making them aware of the harsh realities of racial segregation and racial exploitation in their so-called progressive society, which was thought to be a model society for the entire world.

It requires extraordinary courage for a white novelist like Faulkner to expose the racial misdeeds of his white brethren. Despite some initial opposition from racist critics and readers who believed in the doctrine of white supremacy, Faulkner succeeded in his noble task of drawing sympathy from his readers towards the sorry plight of the blacks in the predominantly white American society.

#### V. Historical Context: Dalit Writings

In India, the beginning of Dalit literature can also be traced back to medieval "Bhakti" literature. As it is observed, most of the poets of "Bhakti" writings were low-caste local preachers. They also collectively attacked the then Hindu canonical practices. Many Bhakti poets like Namdev and Kabir were highly against Brahminical orthodoxy. As per the definition of Dalit literature, these poets can also be considered among the first Dalit writers as they belonged to the lower castes. They wrote primarily against the high-caste discrimination against their community and humanity in general. However, the upper-class Hindus appropriated many of these writings over time. Some of the major ones who significantly impacted the history of Dalit writings are Ravidas, Namdev, Tukaram, Eknath, Chokhamela, Kabir, and others. Their writings collectively may be described as protodalit.

These Bhakti poets questioned the orthodox and repressive brahminical understanding of Hinduism and made it possible for the lower castes and women to give a form to their religious aspirations. They also collectively emphasized devotion and love and not knowledge as a means of salvation. As Zelliott and Monash put it:

Another is acceptance of all castes and women into the fold of the saints; in some areas, the songs of Muslim saints are also included in the stories and the canon and the vernacular as the medium used by the 'bhaktas', in Hindi and Marathi, the songs are among the first vernacular literature of the area. (Zelliott and Punekar, 2005, 14)

There are two ways of capturing the origin of a movement or phenomenon: the historical way of locating the specific point of birth in a single moment or a cluster of such moments. Second, focusing on the moment of metaphorical birth, where the motifs and images went into making a moving surface dramatically. However, in most cases, the factual data received by the historical facts are not enough to substantiate the origin. As the origin of any river, the Dalit movement's origin is also

not very praiseworthy, but it turned out to be a full-blown social phenomenon in due course.

Three specific phases can be identified in the present century; first, proto-Dalit activism (1900-1930); second, the emergence and consolidation of Ambedkarite paradigms (1930-1972); third, the birth of the Dalit movement, which began with the birth of the Dalit panther's movement of Maharashtra in 1972, the movement which in the same decade spread to other parts of the country.

Initially, it was a 'social movement'- a manifestation of the political will of a community. Here the community in the question itself is partly newly invented and mobilized to influence the shape and course of the historical change. This process also involved the cultural politics of renaming several untouchable castes, which mobilized themselves by bonding over a common memory of their real and existential experiences.

Maharashtra-an Aryan cum Dravidian land- was the first to witness an anti-caste movement of Jyotiba Phule, and then came the Dalit movement of Ambedkar. However, after Ambedkar converted to Buddhism as a possible escape from oppression, it lost its steam to some extent. Days passed, and an end to caste oppression was not in sight. Dalit struggles had to break out into new forms, but they had to take a more militant form. Nevertheless, in the pre-Ambedkarite period, Jyotiba Phule was the first Hindu to run a school for the untouchables as early as 1851 in Poona, the center of the orthodoxy of Brahminism. Poona was the capital of the Peshwa Rule of Maharashtrian Brahmins after Chhatrapati Shivaji. Phule was established in Poona Satya Shodhak Samaj (truth-finding society) in 1873 to liberate the non-Brahmins from the stranglehold of the Brahmin priests and the rich. Inspired by Phule, Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj, the ruler of Kolhapur, started many reformist activities in 1912. He was the first ruler in the history of India, as early as 1902, to reserve 50 % of Government jobs for socially and economically backward sections of the society irrespective of caste, creed, and religion.

#### VI. Contribution of Dr. Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar

Dalit literature in pre-Ambedkar times and after the rise of Dr. Ambedkar marks a clear-cut two different identities. As N. D. Nalawade observes:

In the first place, even if there is an urge to free Dalits from the Hindu slavery and ask Dalits to give up the traditional way of life and in the second place to inspire the Dalits to acquire the art of writing. (Nalawade, 2001, 48)

*Dr. Ambedkar* is a phenomenon that has happened to the Dalits in India. The rise and lifetime of Dr. Ambedkar was the real foundation period of Dalits' all-around rise and growth in India. It has multi-marvelous facets that adorn the careers of present Dalit writers who are more fortunate because Dr. Ambedkar has to his credit a very rich and unprecedented golden heritage of writings on varied subjects and, more

particularly, on the ancient and Sanatan Hindu scriptures. He has brought drawbacks and contradictions to the Hindu scriptures and literature to the forefront. Simultaneously he has evolved his theories to establish a new philosophy and create an atmosphere for counter-attacks. (Ambedkar, 1987, 416-37)

Dr. Ambedkar's famous books "The Buddha and His Dhamma," "Who Were the Shudras," "Annihilation of caste," "The Problem of Rupee in British India," "Thoughts on Pakistan," and others make him not only the Dalit crusader but an all-round intellectual who happens to be the God-father of Dalit reforms in India. Dr. Ambedkar is the apostle of the Dalits. Historically, he is the first to break Sanatan Hindu traditions of the ban on learning for the untouchables. His achievements in learning are a source of pride, prestige, and inspiration to the Dalits. Because, first, Dalits were supposed to be ineligible to learn due to wanting blessings from the Goddess of learning. Secondly, no man among the Dalits had risen previously to the height of Dr. Ambedkar at the caste level and at the national level. Thus, none else but Dr. Ambedkar stands as an ideal for the people of the downtrodden castes. As D. R. Nagaraj notes:

The Dalit Movement, I suggest, is a product of the mental state that believed in the firm rejection of the Gandhian model of tackling the problems of Untouchables, and that has shaped the contours of its themes and patterns. (Nagaraja, 2010, 21-22)

Namdeo Dhasal very well explains Dr. Ambedkar's contribution to the entire existence of Dalits in India:

Your reputation wasn't false  
 You grabbed the banyan tree by the roots  
 Weapons  
 You didn't take them out just to fill your belly  
 You unleashed them against injustice  
 You did a post-mortem on the gods  
 Satvi, that fate-reckoning goddess,  
 You cut her nose, snubbed it  
 You threw the barren tales of heaven and fell  
 Into the gutter  
 You fucked the 33 crores of cocksuckers without caring  
 You set the water on fire  
 The sky came storming down  
 At your command (Dhasal, 1992, 7)

The themes chosen by Dalit writers are the natural outcome of their expressions. In short stories, poems, ballads, novels, biographies, autobiographies, dramas, historical writings, and other literary forms. The Dalit writers follow the message of Dr. Ambedkar, and their literature has man as its center. And as Dr. M. N. Wankhede states:

The pens of the Dalit writers are ready as the lever, to lift the people's democracy out of the mud of anarchy. (Dangle, 1992, 319)

Dr. Ambedkar's revolt was not of the sword and guns. It was a purely ideological revolt. A similar goal at the heart of Dalit literature is to awaken an ideological revolution in the Dalit community. It is a saga of the anguish and injustice experienced by Dalits. Dr. Ambedkar was the primary source of the novel's progressive and radical thoughts. When he served in Baroda, he was thrown out of his inn and humiliated because of his lower caste. After this incident, he had vowed a fierce struggle and metamorphosed his life into a continuous struggle for justice. He has vowed:

If I fail to do away with the abominable thralldom and inhuman injustice under which the class in which I was born has been groaning, I will put an end to my life with a bullet.

The Dalit writer believes that Dalit writings in themselves are a form of social change. Poetry, in particular, often rises in response to atrocities as if making the violence real through the written word might change the future. In a poem called 'Words,' Waman Nimbalkar expresses this:

Words it is that set aflame  
House, homes, countries,  
Men as well.  
Words extinguish even the fire  
In men set aflame by words  
Where it not for words, the sparks of fire,  
Would not have fallen from the eyes  
Great floods of tears would not have flowed  
No one would have come near  
Nor have gone far away-  
Were it not for words?

Another factor contributing to this awareness of Dalit writings is culture, which is counter to the Indian Brahminical culture. The use of marginal figures of "The Ramayana" and "The Mahabharata" and other religious mythology is observed in their writings to assert their connection to this old scripture. Examples include Shambuk, who was a shudra and was killed by Rama for learning the Vedas, Karna, the stepchild of Pandu and rejected by his mother Kunti, Bali- whose kingdom was taken away by Lord Vishnu in his dwarf avatar, and especially Eklavya- the greatest disciple of Guru Drona but who was a tribal or a low caste boy and as he was proving himself superior to Prince Arjuna. Drona asked him to cut his thumb and stop learning archery from him. K. M. Sheriff writes:

A remarkable achievement of Gujarati Dalit literature is a creation of subaltern mythology to counter classical Hindu mythology with its casteist hegemonistic trappings. Ravana and Eklavya are the epic heroes...(*Indian Literature*: 159, 1994. Issue -10)

## VII. Historical Context: Black American Writings

After President Lincoln's assassination, Andrew Jackson, Vice-president, vetoed most of the bills helpful to the "Negroes". He made it easy for states to come back to the union without guaranteeing equal rights to blacks. During his presidency, Southern States enacted "black codes," which forced freed slaves to be serfs. Some laws made it illegal for Blacks to rent or lease farmlands. They were imprisoned if they broke labor contracts; almost all were done under extreme duress. Courts were free to assign black children under eighteen to forced labor.

However, Blacks also began immediately asserting their independence from Whites. They formed their churches. They were becoming politically active, strengthening their family ties, and trying to educate their children. The Whites whipped up a barrage of propaganda against Blacks, slandering their so-called inborn character, inept, corrupt, and ruinous to Governments in the South. However, despite all this resistance, Blacks were elected to Southern states in that election. They started writing their experiences systematically and with a single aim to let it reach as many people as possible – both Blacks and Whites.

*African American literature* can be defined as writings of people living in America having African descent. It is a twofold saga of the condition of African Americans in America and what it means to be a true American. As Princeton University professor Albert J. Raboteau has said, all African-American study, "speaks to the deeper meaning of the African-American presence in this nation. This presence has always been a test case of the nation's claims to freedom, democracy, equality, the inclusiveness of all." (Coon, 1998, 32)

The literary expressions of "Negroes" themselves have had continuous development in America since the 18th century. For Blacks in America, apart from the memory of slavery, there came the living experience of segregation, lynching, and humiliation everywhere in their daily life for generations after generations. The literary output of the American "Negro" has been both large and credible but ignored mainly by White America and therefore not much known. However, several great names whose works could be rated first-class did emerge despite the lack of freedom, racial persecution, and later hard economic life, too bitter to allow education and leisure to take to literary labor. The Black poetess Phyllis Wheatby was the pioneer, and her first poems were published in 1773. Richard Allen followed her; the first Bishop of African Methodist Church, whose autobiography was published in 1793, was hailed as a great narrative. Booker T. Washington's "Up from Slavery" was one of the best in its genre.

These were followed by many acclaimed “Negro” writers in the nineteenth century. “The Life of Gustavus Vassa” in 1837, “Henry Highland Carnet” and “J.W.S.C. Pennington” in 1840, R.B. Lewis’s “Negro History,” “White Field Poems” in 1846, all these made a mark and earned respect and recognition. William Wells Brown wrote several works starting from “Narrative of a Fugitive Slave” in 1847, “Sketches from Abroad” in 1855, “The Black man” in 1863, “The Negro in the American Rebellion” in 1867, and “The Rising Son” in 1874.

All these works were rated as outstanding accomplishments in literature. In the 20th century, Bishop Loguen’s Life History and ‘Douglass’ Autobiography ran endless editions till 1893. In 1841, the first “Negro” magazine edited by George Hogarth and published by African Methodist Episcopal Church appeared. In the 1850s emerged a new woman poet of applauded ability, Frances E. W. Harper, and poet James Whitefield. Negro historians Martin L. Delancy and William Cospier Nell and Catto, whose history of the “Negro” Church made valuable contributions. So also, the impressive biographies of Josiah Henson, Samuel C. Ward, and Samuel Northrop added fame to the growing prestige of “Negro” literature.

On the whole, the literary output of the American “Negro” has been both enormous and creditable, although comparatively little in the kingdom of the whites. Paul Lawrence Dunbar, the undoubted laureate of the “Negro” race, occupies a unique place in the American literary world. He raised a dialect and the theme from the minstrel stage to literature and became a national figure. In the 1920s emerged, what was known as the “Harlem Renaissance” with daring calls. A poem by Claude McKay recorded in Congressional Record as an example of dangerous currents among young blacks:

If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot  
Like men, we will face murderous cowardly pack  
Pressed to the wall dying, but fighting back (Zinn, 2015)

Another famous poem by the black poet Lawrence Dunbar, “We Wear the Mask”:

We wear the mask that grins and lies  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes  
We sing but oh the clay is white  
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;  
But let the world dream otherwise,  
We wear the mask.

By the 1930s, the mask was off for many black poets. Langston Huges wrote in “I too”:

I too sing America  
I am the darker brother



They send me to eat in the kitchen  
 When company comes  
 But I laugh  
 And eat well  
 And grew strong  
 Tomorrow  
 I will be at the table  
 When company comes" (Ibid)

But as W. E. B. Du Bois observes:

To appraise rightly this body of art, one must remember that it represents mainly the work of those artists whom accident set free; if the artist had a white face, his Negro blood did not militate against him in the fight for recognition; if this Negro blood was visible, the ability was united to indomitable will. But the shrinking modest, black artist without special encouragement had little or no chance in a world determined to make him a menial. (Bois, 2005, 14)

In this perspective of the racial problem, a "close" reading of texts may be beneficial if we are concerned with what the writer in question is saying in his fiction, especially in the works of writers like William Faulkner. Because of its very urgency, topicality, and the emotional charge that it carries for a great many Americans of the present time, the reader may very well attribute to these writers' texts meanings that are not there.

Similarly, in the 1990s, English translations of Dalit autobiographies began to appear in quantity in India. The translations helped these sagas reach out to a larger mass in many regions and many classes in Maharashtra. With diverse themes, some tell stories of triumph over adversities. For example, Narendra Jadhav's "Outcaste: A Memoir," a best-seller in the Marathi language as "Our father and Us." (Jadhav, 2003)

Another bestseller Joothan' (Leftover Food), details the harsh conditions of Untouchables in a north Indian village. Like Joseph Macwan's bleak description of Gujarat's weaver community life, this novel is also the first autobiography published in English.

Dalit literature serves the purpose of social intervention and carries solid radical connotations. These connotations vary depending upon the writer's personality, motives, and inspiration to write the changing socio-cultural contexts. To appreciate it, one has to understand the historical, social, and cultural settings they belong to. The context, perspectives, and characteristics of the historical trend collectively set the quality of the concept of Dalit literature and the genre's Western counterpart. The exercise provides the understanding of the Subject, an individual among many who share the same types of cultural ostracism, physical repression, and social stigma. He is kept out of the legitimate boundaries of human society.

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