
Dalit Literature and Black American Literature: The Voices of the Marginalized

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Abstract

Today's Dalit Literature and Black Literature are the two sides of the same coin called 'inhumanity'. These two forms of literature are actually born out of the atrocious system of caste and racial discrimination in India and the United States of America respectively. Like Black Literature, Dalit writing was marked by humiliation, atrocities on men, women and children at the hands of the so-called upper castes/classes. Therefore, it is interesting as well as revealing to juxtapose these two forms of literature, which may be proved as an eye-opener for the students of comparative literature. It is a protest literature against all forms of exploitation based on class, race, caste or occupation. The literature of two marginalized groups of people, namely, the Indian Dalits and the American Blacks is worth comparison. The present article is an attempt to bring out the common striking points of similarities of these two great tributaries, which meet the universal ocean of literature.

Key Words: atrocious, racial, discrimination, atrocities, juxtapose, eye-opener, marginalized

Introduction

Dalit literature and Black American Literature are worth comparable for several reasons because some of their basic features are similar as they are reflected in the writings of Dalit and Black American writers. Some features are social injustice, insecurity, treatment of inferiority meted out to both these groups at the hands of the dominant social groups in both America and India, lack of education, bad habits as a result of ignorance, backward economic conditions, a mindset of inferiority, poverty etc. In short, the life of both the Blacks and the Dalits, to a great extent, fits into Mahatma Phule's diagnosis of the social backwardness of the Dalits.

Mahatma Phule's thoughts about the Dalits are largely applicable to the Black Americans also. He was quite aware of the

existence and the problem of the Black Americans who were called Negroes in Mahatma Phule's times. Mahatma Phule devoted his book to the Negroes, which reveals that he hinted a comparison between these two social groups. It could also be said that Mahatma Phule was probably the first advocate to make a comparison of the problems of the Dalits in India and the Blacks in America.

Some of the prominent scholars on Dalit and Black literatures have tried to point out similarities between these two literatures. Prof. B. Rangrao, a prominent scholar, on both these literatures, states (1989:19):

.the nature of suffering of Indian Untouchables and Black Americans is the same because of the social situations in their respective countries. Therefore, their social

consciousness, individual suffering and condemnation of the traditional social systems in their respective countries that oppressed them are also quite similar. The wounds of exploitation, torture of both the present day African American and Dalit youth are still intact. Both, the Dalits and the African Americans share common features in their lives like violence, fear, and obscenity

(Translated by the writers)

Protest or revolt against the established order in the lives and literatures of both the Indian Dalits and the African Americans, is one of the points of similarity. They resort to protest or revolt because of exploitation and oppression to which both the Dalits and the African Americans were subjected to. Dr. Janardhan Waghmare, a very prominent and pioneering critic of Dalit and African American literatures states (1992:308):

In the history of the world there is nothing to compare with the physical torture inflicted on the Blacks. The Whites try to destroy their race. They were bought and sold. During the period of slavery the Black man did not even have the courage to assert his right over the Black woman and so his family system was devastated; even today he has not been able to rehabilitate his family life. . They became aggressive and today's Black has started saying confidently, 'Black is beautiful'. The story of the untouchables in India is more or less the same They were subjected to a good deal of mental torture. They were not allowed to be educated they have turned aggressive and rebellious and for the last twenty-five years have been braving it out in the rural

areas. Between 1966 and 1970, 1,100 untouchables have been killed. But today's Dalit youth has turned revolutionary. He has been imbued with new concepts; he is trying to discover his identity and is struggling to present it through the medium of literature.

Mrinalini Sebastian, commenting upon the theme of oppression in both these literatures, states (1988:29):

both the groups are oppressed by a large section of society and that they are oppressed on the basis of their race/caste; that both the groups are slaves/bonded labourers till very recently. . . . there are still bonded labourers in India. . . and that both the oppressed communities are still trying to break the invisible shackles which bind them to their oppressors in a servant-owner relationship. It is this struggle against a system, which has tried to suppress them and has denied their rights to live as human beings that makes the conditions of these sections of society similar and makes their attempts worth comparing.

One of the characteristics of Black American literature is that it expresses anger, irritation, and a feeling of condemnation against those who exploited them. Many a times, all these are directed at themselves. Hence in the writings of the Blacks we find self-hatred or self-detraction. Talking about this feature of Dalit writing, Dr. Janardhan Waghmare affirms (1992:307):

There is no difference whatsoever between the position of the Blacks in America and that of the untouchables in India. And hence for a long period of time both were caught in

the whirlpool of self-denigration and self-hatred.

At the level of consciousness; both the Dalits and the African Americans are quite similar since the basic foundations on which their existence was based before their emancipation has been almost the same. Recording this view Prof. B. Rangrao says (1989:25):

The nature of social consciousness expressed in Marathi Dalit writings and American Negro writing is the same.

(Translated by the writers)

After the emancipation, both the Dalits and African Americans realized that their neglect by the dominant group in their society is the part of the framework of the so-called social values in both the countries. Naturally this awareness now generates a terrible anger in the minds and the hearts of the neglected. This notion of irritation with the exploiters is one of the noted characteristics of both these writings. Prof. B. Rangrao rightly states (1989:22):

The literature of both these types is of communities that have been neglected in their countries. Naturally there is terrible imitation against those so-called social values, which are established and thought to be prestigious and have been instrumental in the neglect and oppression of neglected communities. Both the type of literature is literature of revolt and in this commitment to community and social consciousness is more than commitment to expression of individual consciousness Both these literatures have denied a traditional literary criterion of judging the quality of literature.

(Translated by the writers)

Social status of African Americans and the Dalits

There is a very close connection between the social status of African Americans and the Dalits and this can be clearly seen from the various social processes that both the communities went through. Although minor details like geography, colour, environment etc. differ in the cases of Dalits and African Americans, the core of their life was full of characteristics like misery, pain, exploitation etc. The ways and means of their subjugation may look outwardly different, but at the heart of all, there were a number of similarities. Commenting on this, Dr. Janardhan Waghmare writes (1992:305):

He fell into the deep pit of inequality and was roasted alive. White society ostracized him. He was always made to do dirty jobs. He couldn't live in the White locality. Though in a different sense from that of the Dalit situation, he had to live outside the city limits of the Whites. American culture allotted to him the bottom place in society and he could not raise himself from this place in spite of his desire to do so, nor could he change it. Black slavery has been characterized as a popular institution.

Talking elaborately about the life of the Dalits and their situation in India, Dr. Waghmare further states (1992:306):

For centuries he could not get an equal share in the development and progress of his culture, religion and social life. Despite being an heir of this country he had not acquired legacy rights. Unlike the Black the question of leaving his country never

confronted him. He is of this country but this country could never be his. So Ambedkar said, 'Gandhiji, I have no homeland.' He felt he took birth in this country for nothing.

Summing up the points of similarities Dr. Waghmare says that we can compare the Dalit literature and African American literature on the basis of five major points which he records as follows (1992:313):

1. Both Black and Dalit writers are in search of their respective identities.
2. Experience in both literatures has surfaces from social life based on inequality.
3. The literature of both is life-oriented. Both Black and Dalit writers write from the awareness of social commitment.
4. The literary language of both is the language of cultural revolt.
5. In both literatures the aim is to find new cultural values.

V. H. Baskaran who compares Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man with Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchable opines that (1990:133):

The condition of the untouchable in India is almost the same as that of the Negro in America and therefore an interesting comparison can be made between Untouchable and Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man or James Baldwin's Negro novels

which emphasize the deprivation and the evil effects of discrimination of cherishable values of a civilized society.

It should be noted that the present day Dalits were the erstwhile untouchables or outcastes. Therefore, when Baskaran talks about outcastes or untouchables, he is talking about the Dalits. The hint that African American and Dalit literatures can be compared has been given by the greatest stalwart of Dalit the cause, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Dr. M. N. Wankhede suggests that Dalit writers should create a revolutionary literature like the Black writers. Those who accepted and propagated this view include writers and critics like Shankarrao Kharat, Prof. B. Rangrao, Dr. Yashwant Manohar and Dr. Janardhan Waghmare. Such opinion is expressed by Sharankumar Limbale in his book 'Dalit Sahityache Saundaryashastra' (Marathi) 'Aesthetics of Dalit Literature.'

As far as the attitude of both the Dalits and African Americans is concerned, the writers from both these communities feel that they were made to live the most horrible life. As a result of this notion they express their displeasure, miseries, pains etc. through literature. It is this characteristic that in a way, inspires them to write.

One of the features of theirs is that they were kept in bondage for many centuries. What they basically lacked was not bread, but freedom. Achievement of freedom attracted them more than any other thing and they worked very hard in order to achieve this goal. As they were denied freedom for centuries, they were naturally hungrier for it than any other community in the world. This

feature of their life, consequently, gets reflected in their literature. Therefore, when we analyse these two literatures we find that they are, in a way, a movement towards human liberty. They also advocate awareness, revolution, struggle, and change for the better and social commitment. Both these literatures can be termed as literatures with commitment and literatures that intend to bring about a social revolution. Therefore, both these literatures advocate the right status of man and his identity in the world. Addison Gayle Jr. rightly sums up a central drive of the Blacks who are thirsty for freedom and identity. He states (1996:96):

Our basic need is to reclaim our history and our identity from what must be called cultural terrorism, from the degradation of self-justifying white guilt. We shall have to struggle for the right to create our own terms through which to define ourselves and our relationship to the society and to have these terms recognized. This is the first necessity of a free people and the first right that any oppressor must suspend.

These thoughts about the African Americans are also applicable to the life and objectives of the Dalits. In this regard Dr. Yashwant Manohar, talking about the objectives of Dalit literature states (1978:39):

The aim and objective of Dalit literature is to establish democratic socialism and to establish the artistic values in the framework of democracy.

(Translated by the writers)

Namdeo Dhasal, a prominent Dalit writer also talks of bringing about a total revolution when he says (1973:78):

The struggle for emancipation of the Dalits demands a total revolution. Piecemeal change is impossible and we do not want it also. We want total revolution only.

(Translated by the writers)

Dalit literature like Dalit struggle for liberty, advocates the liberty of all the oppressed and exploited. Commenting upon this, Baburao Bagul writes (1981:259):

Literature which advocates human liberty, treats man as the only great thing in the world and opposes the superiority of race, colour and caste can be called Dalit Literature.

(Translated by the writers)

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, it can be seen that by and large the objectives of both African American and the Dalit literatures are quite identical and therefore comparable. Namdeo Dhasal moans:

*This world's socialism,
This world's communism
And all those things of theirs,
We have put them to the test
And the implication is this--
Only our shadows can cover our own
feet.*

That is why authenticity and liveliness have become hallmarks of Dalit literature and Black American Literature.

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