



## Contemporaneity of Language and Literature in the Robotized Millennium

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### Dalit Discourse: A Pragmatic Approach to Redefine the Margins

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*Society, friendship and love*

*Divinity bestowed upon man*

William Cowper, the poetic genius of the Transitional Age, penned this verse to sensitize man about the heavenly endowments duly vouchsafed on him which like a fair breeze befriend the vessel of life and bring it ashore while guarding it against every tempest. Out of the three adornments rightfully chosen by the versifier, society is the greatest contributing factor in the holistic growth and progress of the entire human race and his surroundings. This concern for the humanity resulted in social stratification. The main objective behind creating these divisions was to contribute to the systematic and smooth functioning of the human society which was evolving at an accelerated pace. With rapid changes in the socio-economic condition, man's attitude and approach towards life changed tremendously making him self-centred. Bacon rightly says, "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." This greed for power can be attributed as one of the causes because of which the system that was formed for better working of the human society gradually suffered a decline. With the passage of time the vulnerable groups were strategically pushed towards the fringes; margins. Hence, terms like high and low, victim and victimizer, subaltern and mainstream, black and white began to surface. In the Indian context, this misfortune befell the Shudras who after wielding the cudgels against the hegemonic power earned for themselves the status of 'humans', rightful citizens of the nation and an identity of being a Dalit.

The identity of Dalits remained under thick covers of ignorance for centuries at a stretch because their lives were never documented by the literary giants. The 'absenteeism' culture shrouded their existence till Chokhamela weaved his pain of being an untouchable in verses and made the earliest attempt to shake the entire cult of Brahmanism and its allies. Despite receiving backlash from society Chokhamela continued to sing about his suffering and assert his identity. In the later stages, Kabirdas, Raidas and the ilk gave voice to the concerns of the historically marginalized section of the society that undoubtedly weakened the roots of oppressive caste system and gradually made a case for a mute section of society. The Dalit Panther Movement, which after ages altogether became a prominent voice of the untouchables who have now earned an identity for themselves legally, gave rise to a corpus of Dalit literature. The sporadic voices of Daya Pawar, Namdeo Dhasal, Raja Dhale, Arjun Dangle and others in the form of poetry, fiction, prose etc challenged the canonical literature and kindled the thought process of Dalits in every nook and corner of the country. The young Dalit brigade proved that education is a great leveller. Their commitment to Ambedkar's ideals that echoed loud and clear in their writings not only celebrated the Dalit sensibility but also sent shockwaves in the dominant literary arena of the contemporary times. These facts firmly established that Dalits got visibility in the social quarters through the medium of literature. Empowered with education, they began to chronicle their personal and collective suffering. Poetry and autobiography became powerful tools in their hands through which they presented the plurality of Dalit voices. One might know of characters like Bakha, Maghai Dome and Arun Athavale whose voice resonate Dalit concerns but the authenticity and conviction with which Baby Kamble, Daya Pawar, Urmila Pawar, Omprakash Valmiki, Bama and the like speak give their writings an edge over the text of other non-Dalit writers.

It is unfortunate to note that despite putting the best foot forward women are last in the line to receive recognition for their endeavours. The story is no different in the case of Dalit women who are at the lowest rung of the social ladder even after about 80 years of Independence. The multiple 'waves' of feminism could not wash away the dirt of suffering, agony, pain, violence and anonymity off their feet. Despite the fact that Dalit women were always at the forefront in every Ambedkarite movement and India's struggle for independence, history barely registers their endearing efforts. It was much later in 1989 when Urmila Pawar along with Meenakshi Moon gave Dalit women their due credit by documenting their contribution in the aforesaid movements in the book entitled *We Also Made History*. Just like their male counterparts Dalit women too endured to acquire education resisting vitriolic attack poured on them not only from upper caste society but also from their own community which was still recuperating from centuries old wound. Gradually voices of the Dalit women began to be heard and the first colossal figure to break the silence was Baby Kamble who through her autobiography *The Prisons We Broke* painted every facet of a Dalit woman who chooses to break free from the clutches of society.

In the wake of the 20th century when Dalit Feminist Movement started gaining grounds, life narratives of Kaushalya Baisantri, Bama, P. Sivakami, Urmila Pawar and others began to surface as a result of which Dalit women succeeded in

breaking the stereotypical mould while unveiling the multi-layered life of Dalit women which hitherto remained absent in the popular literature. This observation drives home the point that Dalit men and women have been able to carve a niche for themselves by exploring varied forms of literature. It is through their literary writings alone that Dalits proved their mettle and gave a befitting answer to their opponents. For the readers also in order to understand the ground reality of Dalit lives texts produced by Dalits themselves prove to be more helpful as they hold testimony to the first hand experience of this wretched community. Dalit literary texts have a greater purpose to serve than merely existing as poetic or prosaic pieces. These texts chronicle the life history of a section of society silenced and ousted even in the present times. They also add considerably in understanding the diversified culture of the country. Baby Kamble in her autobiography describes at length how Mahars celebrate the month of Ashadh. She enthusiastically paints a vivid picture of the celebration stating, “The entire maharwada looked upon the four of Ashadh as one of those rare occasions of festivity and joy. The entire village flocked to the temple with varied dishes as offering to the goddess. They also offered beautiful pieces of khun and bangles to the goddess” (Pandit, 29). The writer is trying to suggest through her words that the community of Dalits viewed as obnoxious and uncivilised actually has a rich culture. In addition to function as cultural and historical document, Dalit literary texts also offer a deep insight into the psyche of Dalits who have suffered a number of disabilities that are buttressed by religion and domineering societal norms. With the growing awareness, literature has become a modern force for Dalits in combating segregation and oppression. Dalit writers, in this way, offer contrapuntal evaluation of their life and experience. Their writings, therefore, may be equated with the works of Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Chinua Achebe, Mahasweta Devi and the like who through their texts have successfully debunked the image of the Orient as painted by the Occident. Dalits are, thus, trying to present their perspective to a large heterogeneous group of readers who till very late viewed this weaker section of the society from the lens of the writers having biased ideological stance.

Ezra Pound rightly says, “Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree.” In case of Dalit litterateurs this holds true because the message that they wish to convey is of utmost importance to them, therefore, they decided to keep their words away from the enticing garb of words. Limbale, for that matter, on behalf of the entire Dalit community of writers has point blank refused to accept the very basis of the aesthetics on which the canonical literature rests i.e. *Satyam Shivam Sundaram*. All the writers practice this norm because the language of the high caste doesn’t ‘suit’ their writing. Dalit writers have made their stance clear that even if there detractors continue to point out that the language employed in Dalit writings is of ‘low standard’, they will not cease to use words from their regional language, colloquial expressions, community specific jargons etc because it is primarily through raw use of language that Dalit writers attempt to reach out to their readers. Omprakash Valmiki, for instance, gave consent for his autobiography to be translated into English on the condition that the title of the translated version will remain *Jhootan* and it will not be translated into any other English equivalent. This step has sent a clear message to the stalwarts of mainstream literature that Dalits are in no mood to play second fiddle to anybody. People will have to listen to the language they speak which is not camouflaged like the ‘refined language’ used by the upper caste writers. Self-expression in the form of writing has been the trademark of human civilization. Literature in every age has proved to be the most potent medium for man to give vent to his pent up emotions. Vandana Datta aptly appoints out, “Literature is above all isms, above all classifications and it is this that should be aimed at, irrespective of caste, class and gender” (Datta, vii) and this is exactly what Dalits are aiming at. In due course of time Dalits empowered themselves with education and familiarised themselves with the nuances of language that justify the revolutionary streak in their literature. Dalit writers emerged victorious despite the fact they bore the brunt of the vicious mindset of the high caste society and also struggled in finding publishers due to the condescending attitude of the mainstream publication sector. Having said that, powerful Dalit discourse is yet to be seen. In the present times, there is a dire need to establish egalitarian pattern of society which is already falling prey to the mechanical way of living and Dalits have to understand this. The challenge is not to move towards the centre, the challenge is to strengthen the periphery. The existent power structure must be dismantled in order to redefine the margin.

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