

A STUDY OF SIMILARITIES BETWEEN DALIT LITERATURE AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Dalit literature is the literature which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by Dalits. Dalit literature has a great historical significance. Its form and objective were different from those of the other post-independence literatures. 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 and with varying ideologies. Its presence was noted in India and abroad. On the other hand African American writing primarily focused on the issue of slavery, as indicated by the subgenre of slave narratives. The movement of the African Americans led by Martin Luther King and the activities of black panthers as also the “Little Magazine” movement as the voice of the marginalized proved to be a background trigger for resistance literature of Dalits in India. In this research paper the main objective is to draw similarities between the politics of Caste and Race in Indian Dalit literature and the Black American writing with reference to Bama’s Karukku and Alice Walker’s The Color Purple.

Keywords: *Dalit Literature, African American writings, marginalized, Slave narratives, Black panthers, Untouchable, Exploitation*

INTRODUCTION

In the words of Arjun Dangle,

“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”

There are many different names proposed for defining dalits in India like Asprushya-untouchable, Harijan- children of God, Dalit – broken people, etc. The word Dalit comes from the Sanskrit which means downtrodden, suppressed, crushed or broken to pieces. Dalit (shudra), was recognized as an inferior part of the society. They were assigned inferior activities like leather work, butchering, cleaning the streets, removing animal carcasses and waste. The civilized Hindu society has allotted works like manual labor, cleaning streets, latrines and sewers. They were banned from entering the temple, not allowed to fetch water from the public well of the village. Dalit can be traced back to the Purusukta of Rig Veda where we find the first reference of the caste system. The hymn describes;

Brahmnoasaya mukamasti

Bahu rajanayah kruta

Uru tadasay yadvaishya

Padabhayam Sudro ajayat

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. In the subsequent ages Manu, an ardent supporter of the caste system made it a code in his Manu-Smriti respectable identity by calling them Dalit.

The definition of untouchables or Dalits given in the census report 1911 is very painful

1. Denied the supremacy of the Brahmins
2. Did not receive the mantras from Brahma
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 law

This social hierarchy is also seen in mythological figures as follows Shambuk who was a shudra killed by Rama for learning the Vedas, Karan, the step child of Pandu and rejected by his own 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.

In his famous work *Castes in India-Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development*

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar has lighted up the psychopath of upper class society.

“The Hindus wanted the Vedas and they sent for Vyasa who was not a caste Hindu. The Hindus wanted an Epic and they sent for Valmiki who was an Untouchable. The Hindus wanted a Constitution, and they sent for me.”

Dalit literature in pre-Ambedkar times and after the rise of Dr. Ambedkar marks two different identities. 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’s revolt was not of the sword and guns. It was a purely ideological revolt. This is the similar aim at the heart of the Dalit literature to awaken an ideological revolution in the Dalit community.

Today the Dalit writer asks: What is India to me? An enigmatic land, a dream, or a nightmare? Or a puzzling riddle? He is in search of answers to these questions. What it means to be an Untouchable or a pariah? He knows very well that his forefathers sprang out from the same womb as Brahmins. Why then was he rejected by the Mother? Why and How? Who is responsible for this inhuman act? His questions are many. They issue forth from what, who, why, and how. The questions he asks seems to be simple but the answers are amazingly complex

Dalit literature represents a powerful emerging trend in the Indian literary scene. Following are some of the most widely read writers of Dalit literature - Bama's *Karukku* and *Sangati*, Dr.Narendra Jadhav's *Untouchables: My Family's Triumphant Journey Out of the CasteSystem in Modern India*, Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outside: Akkarmashi*, JosephMacwan's *The Stepchild*, Om Prakash Valmiki's *Joothan: A Dalit-s Life*, Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life*. Some of the prominent Dalit writers are Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Baburao Bagul, Rabi Singh, Namdeo Dhasal, Dutta Bhagat, Lakshman Mane, Neerave Patel, Palamalai, Sudhakar.

There were many exchanges in the early twentieth century between African American and Indian leaders. Nico Slate, in his article *Race, Caste, and Nation: Indian nationalists and the American Negro (1893-1947)* examines similar exchanges between Indian leaders and African American leaders. Most of the marginalized groups all over the world 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 Cast and inequality but in exploitation the western World it was under the name of the Race. The racial problem is only one of the many problems that not only America but many parts of the Western world face at the present time. On psychological level, whiteness is automatically equated with beauty and culture and blackness with ugliness and slavery. When the African slave was torn from his homeland and brought to the New



World, they were prohibited to follow their native culture. Tribal organizations, languages, family structure, religion all were systematically extirpated. The slavery was imposed upon the blacks in America for more than three centuries. Their racial problem resulted into social, economic and cultural problems. Their identities have travelled from colored to Negro, from Negro to Black, from Black to Afro-American and now from Afro-American to African American. Their history is a story of an endless hallucination of agony. But this agony has given rise to a vast and rich heritage like their spirituals, Jazz, Blues, Poems, plays, short stories and novels like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Richard Wright's *Native Son* to Alex Haley's *Roots*.

The American Black writer faces the same dilemma as Dalit literature. What is America to me? They were brought to America in chains and auctioned on the shores of Atlanta. The Black Americans have irrigated the fertile land of liberty with their blood, tears and sweat. 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. The arrival of Faulkner brought about a revolutionary change in the literary scenario. Faulkner brought literary treatment of the social and psychological aspect of the 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*. He made them aware of the harsh realities of racial segregation and racial exploitation.

Dalit is the protagonist of India's boycotted society, the African American is the protagonist of Black America. One is robbed and degraded by the White society and the other by Savarna society. One is brought and sold from their home land and the other was called untouchable by birth. These marginalized people who suffer from many disabilities such as Blacks suffering from slavery, apartheid, racism, colonialism; dalit suffering from untouchability, humiliation, oppression, casteism. Dalits in India have several times been compared to the condition of colonized African slaves. However, the Dalits have led life under a far more sinister culture, they mostly oppressed by upper classes of India. Racism originated as an ideological support for slavery. Slavery was not born of racism: rather racism was the consequence of slavery. In both these cases of Dalits and Blacks, God did not ordain the slavery. Human beings created it. There was a direct influence of Blacks on dalits and Dalits on Blacks. It got reversed in the late 1960s and 1970s when the militant Black Panthers and their claims of Black Power motivated a group of young dalit poets and activists to compose outrageous art in order to shatter the complacency of Brahminical ideologies. They proudly called themselves Dalit Panthers. In 1972 a group of young Marathi Dalit artists in India called themselves the Dalit Panthers and embraced violent politics and aesthetics to resist caste supremacy.



Through literature there are two special voices shouting in the wilderness for liberation on Dalit women in India and the Black women in America who are under the triple subjugation of caste or race, gender and class. There is double colonization for women as they are subjected both to general discrimination as colonial subject and specific discrimination as women. An important quest theme in the works of both Dalit women writers and Black women writers have been that of a character's personal search for a meaningful isolation, meaninglessness and moral decay. The journey made by Dalit women writers and many contemporary Black women writers – the journey into freedom has provided a means for defining the self. Such a self-defining journey is visible in Bama's autobiography *Karukku* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*.

Bama, a leading Tamil Dalit woman writer, has been using her pen like “*Karukku*” – a sharp edged weapon to cut the weeds of untouchability and patriarchy which have thickly grown over the centuries in this ancient land. Bama's novels focus on caste and gender discrimination. They portray caste-discrimination practiced in Christianity and Hinduism. However Bama's works are embodied with Dalit feminism and the inner strength of the subaltern woman. *Karukku* traced a Dalit woman's journey toward Roman Catholics and her eventual estrangement from a convent. It records the trials and tribulations of Bama as an individual, as a woman and as a writer. Some of the incidents in *Karukku* depict the condition of dalit woman. When the protagonist joins the college, she was alienated by the fellow people due to her clothes. She felt deeply humiliated by her classmates where she went around in the same skirt, jacket and daavani for a whole week. She endured all the shame and humiliation and stayed on. Then she decided to become a nun and enter a convent and in that she work hard for other children who struggle as she had done. The nuns from the convent matched their attitude and behavior to the power and prestige of those families. The convent does not know the meaning of poverty. The more she watched this more frustrated she felt. Her mind was disturbed and her conscience was bothered and bruised. And it was this conviction that made her leave the convent. In her second work *Sangati* also Bama depicts the downtrodden and oppression of woman by their own men and by the upper class men and women.

Similarly the oppression of women is seen in Alice Walker's *The Color purple*. The colored women in Africa or America have to endure all the violence and racist behavior of both white men and women; on the other hand she has to suffer from the hands of black men. *The Color Purple* is the story of Celie, a poor, barely literate Southern black woman who struggles to escape the brutality and degradation of her treatment by men. Although it is not easy to get rid of the patriarchal society, the protagonist manages to overcome these conditions. Black community; itself have lots of obstacles that prevent black women from realizing their identity. Among these handicaps, there are rape and incest and color. Walker's novel *The Color Purple* begins with the scene of rape. When the protagonist of the novel, Celie is

fourteen, her stepfather, whom she believes (because nobody talks about the lynched) is her father, begins to rape her. She cannot tell this trauma anybody. The rape scene of the novel is based on Walker's great-great-grandmother, who was raped and impregnated at age 11 by her master Walker's great-great-grandfather. As seen, this abuse is related to a real event and it is written by the writer to demonstrate what a black female live. This event reveals the portrayal of black family. The writer suggests that child-rape; incest is an undeniable fact of most blacks' lives. The reason of significance of the Celie's rape scene is that there is not a race issue. Celie is black and her stepfather is black, as well. This incident displays that being a member of a black family is dangerous for a female. These facts are the representatives of a black female's life. Celie is oppressed even in black community, the degree of blackness shapes the behaviors of people.

Both Indian Dalits and African Americans are two distinctive groups that occupy a similar bottom position in their respective societies. Indian dalits as well as American Blacks were the sons and daughters of darkness journeying through untold sorrows and sufferings. Both the literature aimed at promoting ideas of social equality, justice and resistance to suffering, discrimination and economic exploitation. To conclude that societies and literature of African American and dalits are very much alike. The reason for this resemblance is that the emotional commitment of women of the two societies are similar. There are commonalities in their pain, their rebellion, their hopes and desires. Though their languages are different, the state of mind and the emotions expressed through these literatures are parallel.

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