



## A HISTORY OF TELUGU DALIT LITERATURE : A SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE

**Y. KISHORE**

Research Scholar

Dept of English

Vikrama Simhapuri University

Nellore, (AP) INDIA

### ABSTRACT

*This paper offers an analysis of Dalit short stories written in Telugu. While a brief overview of Dalit Literature in India will be given at the outset an attempt is made at examining the discursive formations of Dalit narrative with reference to Telugu Dalit short stories.*

### INTRODUCTION

Literary historians agree that untouchables were never involved in the literary processes as they were kept outside the realm of literary activities. In general the literary engagement was restricted to the upper castes of the society. It is evident from literary history that most of the literature produced by the upper caste Hindus reaffirmed and justified the caste system and social discrimination. These discourses, like palukurki Somanath's Basava Puranam, talk vaguely about the presence of nomadic and aboriginal tribes that were allowed to perform religious activities in particular temples on particular days which otherwise are inaccessible to these untouchables. But today Dalit movement is constantly attempting an alliance of socially and economically exploited groups as an alternative political front to the congress and the BJP which are seen as platforms of Capitalism and Brahmanism. Contemporary Dalit literature is an offshoot of this movement.

The short story in Telugu began with Gurajada Apparao and Achanta Venkata Sharma who began experimenting with his new form around 1910. It is used extensively by several writers to portray the social problems and caste related issues. Chinta Deekshitulu is known for his portrayals of rural life and satire against Telugu women aping western mannerism. Sripada Subramanyam Sastry wrote about domestic and social problems. Sarat Chandra, Adavi Bapiraju, Viswantha Satyanarayana, Karuna Kumara, Kanaparti Varalakshmana, Chalam,

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Tripuraneni Gopichand, Kodavaganti Kutumbarao all of them made their mark through their experimental and progressive literary styles. Some of the Dalit stories written by these writers are also included for analysis in this paper.

The word Dalit means 'the down trodden' and the socially underprivileged who assert themselves as a significant socio-political category called themselves by this name. It is a movement different from the Ezhava's initiated by Narayana Guru or even Gandhian movement for the upliftment of Harijan, in its robustness and unstinted criticism of the Brahmanical orthodoxies. It gained momentum around 1920 under the leadership of Dr.B.R.Ambedkar with the burning of the 'Manusmriti', agitation for the right to use ponds and wells reserved for caste Hindus, etc. Although Dalit literature, a literature of militant protest against the upper caste literature upholding the Brahminical values, is a post-independence phenomenon- to be precise it made its impact in the sixties- its ancestry can be traced in the earlier decades. Javakar's Desaca Dushman(1926) an essay attacking Chipulankar and Tilak, for which the author was prosecuted by Brahmans can be taken as the beginning of Dalit literature. According to some ,S.M.Mate's-Mate belonged to higher caste- upekshtance Antaranga(1942)is the first specimen of Dalit life in Mrathi. Dalit literature as it is come to be known found its powerful expression in the short stories of Annabhav Sathe and Shankar Rao Karat. Not only did they introduce a new world experience in literature, but also widened the range of expression and exploited the potentiality of the language of the downtrodden.

158 Telugu Dalit short stories written during 1910 to 1998 that appeared in various journals and published in a book form in 1998 are considered for the purpose of analysis. The stories are classified into five major themes namely, 1.Caste Discrimination Stories, 2. Economic and political stories, 3. Untouchable Stories, 4. Dalit stories and 5. Dalit women stories. These stories are reclassified thematically into social Emancipation stories; Caste Feuds & Caste Politics stories with sub themes as Sub-caste Conflicts, Inter caste conflicts, Gandhian stories, Marxist stories, Revolutionary stories, etc. Religious stories; stories of Exploitation with sub-themes as Religious stories, stories on Education; Economic stories, Political stories; and Gender stories, though not in the same order given above.

Colonial legacy has given Indians a notorious instrument of authority in the name of divide and rule. As the ancient proverb goes: Unity strength; segregation only results in weakness. This theme is dominantly portrayed in several Telugu Dalit stories. The following is a discussion of few such stories where the upper caste Hindus divided the Dalits on caste lines and fuelled frequent internal caste wars so that their vested interests of exploitation and bonded slavery were best restored.



Slavery began on the violent and permanent overpowering of one person by another. Distinctive in its character and dialectics, it originated as a substitute for certain death and was maintained by brutality. Depending upon the number of slaves involved and the kind of society in which the slave holder lived, a variety of means of appropriation, acquisition and enslavement were utilized by the slave holders and their associates in recruiting persons to be parasitized. The slave was natively alienated and condemned socially as a dead person; his existence having no legitimacy what so ever. This alienation and isolation made him or her the ideal human tool, perfectly flexible, unattached and branded. To all members of the community the slave to a existed only through his caste and profession. The slave losing in the process all claims to autonomous power was degraded and reduced to a state of liminality. He often was projected at an inter –subjective level as slave to a particular master thus erasing away his personal identity. The Dalit slave was camouflaged by his or her landlord or master by various ideological strategies. The landlords defined the Dalits as dependents. This is consistent with the distinctively human tradition of camouflaging a relation by defining it as the opposite of what it really is. The landlords used concepts from Hindu mythology and vedic puranas to support their views. This exploitation led to the awakening and reconfiguration of Dalit consciousness.

Let us now, focus on the short story *Pullamraju*. The basic premise of the story is that one cannot do away with varna system. The story dates back to the colonial period, where native feudal lords existed along side the british colonizes. It was the time when Indian Reform movement was taking a concrete shape, where several meetings were held to abolish untouchability and bring about equality among the masses. Ironically, these meetings had little effect in the metropolitan and urban areas, while the deep-rooted untouchability persisted in the rural and country life of India. The story shuttles between Bombay presidency and Doppalapudi, a lesser- known fiefdom in Andhra Pradesh. As was the tradition, the elite and advisors to the king of Dopplapudi, Pullamraju were Brahmins. The news that several seminars at Bombay have given a fervent call for the abolition of caste system and untouchability reached Doppalapudi. This created awareness in the masses of the region and they started to question the practice of untouchability in the region. Pullamaraju was irritated by the mass movement in his fiefdom and sought the help of his advisor Ramachandraiah. Both of them felt that the mass upraise against traditionally sanctioned practices should be brought to an end. Ramachandraiah with his disciples charted out a plan of action. He toyed with the idea of manipulating the internal caste system of untouchables. It is worth nothing here to specify that among untouchables, based on their profession there is an internal heirachy. For example, the most glaring of such a hierarchy in the Telugu community is the one between Mala and Madiga castes with Mala as an upper order untouchable and Madiga as their inferior, which exists even to this day. Ramchandraiah and his disciples met the headmen of both these communities separately. He explained to them the meaning of equality

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in an intriguing way with the example of community well. He reminded them that community wells were accessible only to upper caste people till that and that the untouchable's pitchers were filled by drinking water at a distance from the well by the upper castes. If the concept of equality is to be applied, then both Mala and Madiga communities get free access to the well, which might not be a problem to the upper castes. On the contrary, the inferior untouchables and the superior untouchables would draw water from the same well and that their personal sentiments would be affected. This idea was enough to fuel the internal caste feuds of the untouchables. Ignoring the broader agenda of social equality, both the communities were up in arms against each other to prevent the other from making use of the community well. As advised, the king Pullamaraju made an announcement stating that until the internal strife is put down among the untouchables, they would not be allowed equality on par with the other upper castes of the community. The strife ended and the untouchables never acquired social equality. The story ends with Ramachandraiah being commended for nipping the rebellion in its bud by pullamaraju.

Another parallel story *Horns* that depicts the internal caste-feuds among the dalits are fuelled by the upper castes on religious grounds. It is common to the traditional Varna system imposed by the Brahmanical order that untouchables have no entry to the Hindu temples. Neither they can visit the temple to offer their prayers nor could they hear religious gospels of the temple. If at all they are to pray, they could from a distance without entering this sanctorum of the temple. On the other hand, the Untouchables are the popular masses worship several local deities like Gangamma, Nukamma, etc. Who, according to them protect their kit and kin from epidemic diseases, famine and natural catastrophes. Their way of worship is distinctly different from Hindu rituals. The priest of the common man is one among them but not the the vedic Brahmin. They sacrifice the animal to please the deity by performing a ritual called Jathara, where they take out a procession of the local deity and gather at the village outskirts under a sacred tree, usually Neem or Peepal, to cook the offerings and distribute the food among the families based on the members of the family. The story, in a first person narrative talks about Gangamma jathara which is jointly celebrated by both Malas and Madigas of Andhra Pradesh, which turns up into violent blood bath splitting of the dalit communities on strong internal caste hierarchy. *Horns* begins with Jathara. The deity Gangamma was taken in a procession around seven neighboring villages for four days. All the offerings were collected and procession came to a halt at the village outskirts. Rice that was gathered along with the meat of goats, chicken and sheep that were sacrificed to the deity. The preparations were spread out on a long cloth that were spread on the ground. Each family placed in a respective lamps around the food. this process was accompanied by music played on traditional instruments. As the finale offering, A buffalo decorated in multicolored ropes was sacrificed. As soon as the offering was made the tantrums of the drums came to a complete halt and a peculiar noise took the place of the rhythmic drum beats. It was nothing

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but animated altercation between two castes-Mala and Madiga. No one had any idea as to what ignited the quarrel. All of a sudden two were killed another half a dozen wounded. Slowly, the gathering understood the fight was about the distribution of the slaughtered buffalo. Lurking in the gathering was KondaReddy the hench man of the upper caste, who was waiting for an appropriate occasion to fuel the flames of hatred. All of a sudden he came to the forefront and yelled at the top of his voice. Imitating the hysterical streaks of a possessed soul, He laid down the seeds of Venom in the gathering. He went on to say that the strife was deity Gangamma's own creation, as she could not tolerate the coexistence of superior untouchable –Mal and the inferiors –Madiga. Enacting the sequence an oracle possessed by a god/goddess, He lectured elaborately on the dangers to follow in the future, which might wipe out entire untouchable community. He concluded his rhetoric with a strong warning against the unity of the two community. Puzzle ridden the gathering bifurcated into two groups strictly on their cast basis and left the place. Narrator on curiosity approached only to learn that it was Konda Reddy who initiated and fuel the factional clash.

Two stories written by P.Kesava Reddy and Iyyepalli.Ramalakshmi, *The Road and Dhanyajeevulu (liberated lives)* present us with the classic example of failure of Gandhian ideology in solving Dalit problems. These stories written at a time when first five year plans were made and development of rural India was on the agenda on every political formation. People's unity across caste barriers was one of the major factors in achieving Indian independence. Several freedom fighters and leaders visited rural india in the pre-independence era and lectured about equality, unity, education and social responsibilities of a true nationalist/patriot. After independence, the rural India was totally neglected by the same intelligentsia on the grounds of nation building, political consolidation and shaping of the future. With the creation of a separate Muslim state, Indian right wing nationalist too neglected Dalit politics as they did not visualize any communal, threat for about 10 to 15 years, the main stream intellectuals, allowing the traditional forces to consolidate, regroup and reorganize the society, while ignoring the rural India. Many of the young liberals found promising administrative jobs with government and migrated to the cities .The remaining few tried to implement Gandhian concepts to the society and failed miserably.

In the story *Jeevanaadulu (Pulse of Life)*, Santhi Narayan narrates a similar plot through different events and characters. In this story, continues of exploitation Dalits to their individual demands of life prompt the Dalit to take up against upper caste. Though many communist with revolutionary ideologies were branded as violent and banned during 1930s and 1950s, in the light of Gandhi's Non violence, Marxism as revolutionary movement was being propagated in a secret way in india. the Dalit community formed the real testing ground for various ideologies. This story begins with the issue of Dalit marriage.(we have seen the implications of a Dalit marriage on the society in *Pullam Raju*).This story depicting the

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success of a rare Dalit also demonstrates the general attitude of the society towards a successful Dalit. Due to extreme poverty most of the Dalit prefer physical to education, as menial work would help them in some way or other to the family. Even if a Dalit is sent to school, (S)he is humiliated and hunted by the caste stigma. By the time one reaches the high school stage, we hardly find my Dalits at all in the schools. Under these circumstances, Santha Nrayan introduces a Dalit son in law, Kulla Ayyappa who works as a clerk in the district courts of Ananthapur. The bride's father works at the village land lord's house as a chief slave or head slave(The concept being, if there is more than one laborer working at any time, then among them is choosen as the head of the group who interacts on behalf of the group with the employes). Recognition as head slave is regarded as prestigious by the Dalits and usually such a Dalit is also regard as a representative of his sub caste. This story also describes the misuses of public property by the influential upper caste in the villages. For example it is useful for the upper caste to borrow chairs, benches and other furnitures from the school for their personal purposes like marriage, meetings, death, etc as hiring furniture would involve some finance expedture, while artisian community like black smith, corpentors and weavers are also expected to extend their help. Gangandu, the Dalit brides father, approaches the school teacher to borrow the furniture on the occasion of his dauther's marriage. He is made to run from pillar to post, from one house to the other for two days and ultimate is denied of any help on the group of customary practice. The upper cast emphasized that it is not customary for a Dalit to avail oneself of this fecility, while it is the custom to do so in respect of upper castes. Infuriated, he returns home. To mock at the village non cooperation, he hires decent furniture. this upsets the village pulse. All the upper caste treat this as an act of insolence that calls in for corporeal punishment. while appropriate groups for punishments are explored, Gangadu makes the task easier by announcing that he requires a two day leave to perform his daughter's marriage. His lanlord refuges to give him leave. Some how the ordial of marriage is completed. The upper cast not only prevent the married couple from taking out a procession (Barat) but also insult and humilitate them. The educated employed Dalit bridegroom (who works in district court as a clerk) publicly condemns the mockery for the first time in that village denounce inequality. Gangadu ponders aloud: "Isn't this what our comrades have been urging us to do for quite some time?-to come openly and denounce the inhuman treatment and if necessary to take up arms against this evil." The Dalit realizes that tolerance and submissiveness are regarded as inability by the upper castes. Immediately a militant vengeance overcomes the Dalit community and the story ends with the chief slave leading a rebellion against the land lords and upper caste armed with sticks and sickles.

*Okka Pidikili chalu* (One punch would Do) by Rajgopal too portrays Dalit suffering and pain similar to other Dalit stories but ends on a different theme. This story captures the transformation in Dalit consciousness through Guravayya. He was forced to work there by his

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parents as a part of debt- relief settlement with the landlord. Guravayya takes up the task but is sensitive to the inhuman treatment meted out unlike the other dalits. He even goes to the extent of not marrying as he is afraid that the same future would haunt his off springs too. One day while Guravayya and his parents were busy with their work, the landlord approaches his mother and fondles with her breasts. Guravayya's mother resists this and the landlord goes away threatening her that he would not be deterred by any protests and that he is giving her time to yield voluntarily to his desires. Young Guravaya observes this and he finds it delicate to talk about this to his father thinking that it would result in a big clash. On the contrary he learns that his father has observed sexual harassment of his mother by the landlord results in his parents committing suicide in a very violent way. They both die violently in front of Guravayya, by stabbing each other a crow bar used for digging the earth. This disturbs the young boy and he waits for a chance to take his revenge. After few years, the landlord comes home scowling and hurling abuses at Dalit youth were teasing upper caste girls on their way to the college. Guravayya thinks that this is the right opportunity and he soon grabs the crow bar that tasted the blood of his parents and kills the landlord. But the landlord gets a fatal grip on Guravayya's neck which he maintains till he dies killing Guravayya in the process. The news of landlords death spreads like wild fire and soon Guravayya becomes a Dalit hero. Many Dalits praise him for what he has done and say that his death would be remembered for he showed them the way to freedom, the path to liberation from chains.

Dalit literature focuses on the parameters of the negative. Caste and patriarchal boundaries which traditionally define untouchables and dares to step outside of them so as to understand their own individuality, Worth and ability. There is no wonder them that the unremitting trauma of the Dalits demands an unending supply of stories about the victims of untouchability.

Dalit stories repeatedly inscribe the negative effects of caste system on Dalit characters. While majority of the stories describe the various modes of exploitation by the upper cast, few other stories suggest overcoming this exploitation. These suggestions varied with the progressions of time and the change in the ideological formations of the time. As the analysis of the stories is restricted to those written during the period from 1910 to 1998, the researcher elaborated the ideological movements of Indian during that period namely pre Gandhian, Gandhian, Marxist/Communist, Ambedkarite and post Ambedkarite.

The ideological effect of Ambedkar of Dalit contributed to the idea of Dalit conscious and heralded movement of alternative political awareness in India. A self empowering, vibrant, reconstructionist world view emphasized the potential role of Dalit initiative and responsibility in articulating the power of the powerless. The post Ambedkarite Dalit

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movement of the 1960s and 1970s was one of the most significant developments in India, not only because of the self confident protest and rebellion that it unleashed but also because of the question it posed about the nature of oppositional politics in India and its relation to the nature of Hindu society.

The stories written during the pre Gandhian period presented detailed description of atrocities committed by the upper castes on Dalit, with the Dalit resigning he/she had no other choice. Centuries of exclusionary practice lead to what might be described as the inferiorization of Dalits: Dalits are portrayed as innately inferior, accustomed to dehumanised living, sexually promiscuous, intellectually limited, and prone to violence. As Dalits were black in complexion they are also associated with evil, demise, corruption, cause and filth.

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