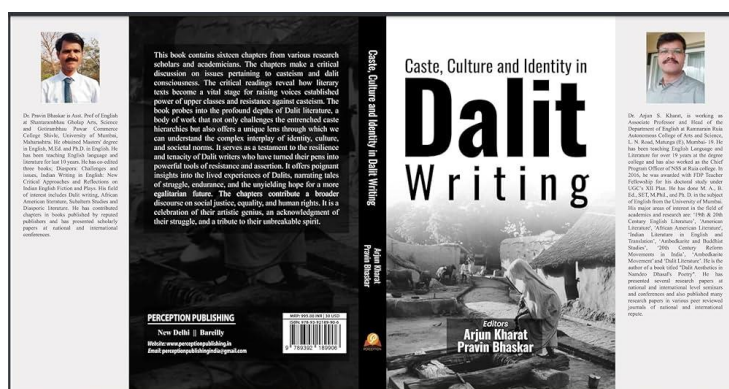


A BOOK REVIEW OF *CASTE, CULTURE AND IDENTITY IN DALIT WRITING* BY ARJUN KHARAT AND PRAVIN BHASKAR



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*A social movement that only moves people is merely a revolt.
A movement that changes both people and institutions is a revolution.*
—Martin Luther King Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (1964)

The term, Dalit is referred to identify the broken men who subsequently came to be treated as untouchables. The vicious caste structure of Indian society has suppressed the identity of Dalits as the marginalised communities under the hegemonic culture of the upper castes. However, Dalits, being socially marginalised and culturally unidentified in Indian society, have launched a revolt against the dominant ideology of privileged castes. Having become visible and resilient in the mainstream society, they have started social movements to change the people and institutions in the society. The editors of the book in “Preface” rightly observe the rising of Dalits as, “The experiences of humiliation, segregation, separate settlements, separate cremation grounds and wells forced them to wake up from their long slumber and rebel against the vicious traditions and practices of the upper castes” (11). Dalit literature is one of the movements started by the enlightened minds who have been suffering from the caste prejudices due to which their identity as the human beings have been buried under the ground for ages.

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The book titled, *Caste, Culture and Identity in Dalit Writing*, edited by Arjun Kharat and Pravin Bhaskar is one of the scholarly add-ons in Dalit literature that critically examines the literary productions by Dalits and deliberate on caste issues, Dalit culture, and Dalit identity. This is an edited book consisting sixteen research chapters on a wide range of matters revolving around Dalit lives and experiences. The book delves into the marginalisation of Dalits, their quests, questions, and claims for identity, resistance, struggle against the agencies of casteism, anxiety of Dalit-ness, Dalit women, and communist rebellion. The book opens up with the chapter that unearths the history of Dalit oppression from the beginning of untouchability which consequently results in their marginalization and the historical crisis of their identity such as Avarna, Outcastes, Broken Men, Chandala, Untouchable, Harijan, Depressed Class, Dalit, and Scheduled Castes. It deliberates on how the marginalization of Dalits deprives them from the basic human rights that impact all domains of their life. It deals with the characteristics of Dalit literature such as rejection and resistance to the hierarchical caste structure, authenticity of experience, and fight for human identity and dignity. The communities that are marginalised by the caste system in India are at the core of Dalit literature.

Identity conflict is the most pertinent issue in Dalit literature. The book dedicates two chapters to Yashica Dutt, a young woman, who is troubled by the existence of her identity as a Dalit. In the prologue to her memoir, *Coming Out as Dalit*, she asserts her dual identity which hides the real one and lives the other as “Hiding one aspect of your identity is like leading a double life. You don’t feel like you belong anywhere. You create masks to wear in each of your lives, and switch artfully between the two. Eventually, the two blur together and you no longer remember who you were” (33). The two narratives, Sujatha Gidla’s *Ants amid Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India* and Yashica Dutt’s *Coming Out as Dalit*, talk about the mothers who are fighting against the stereotypical gendered roles characterized by their identity as Dalit and woman. As doubly oppressed by caste and gender discrimination, Dalit women are the most common victims in the society. The book reprimands Dalit patriarchy that excludes Dalit women from the advantages of privileged caste, richness, and superior gender.

The Chapter on Suneeta Borde’s *Findri: Mulichya Nakushipanachi Goshta*, autobiographical novel, explores on how the socio-religious institutions oppress lower caste women in Maharashtra before conversion to Buddhism, from birth to adulthood and how these women overcome the difficulties in their lives. It uncovers the lives of women from four generations that characterize cultural transition of Dalit community from traditionalism to modernity. The following chapter focuses on the agricultural folksongs in Central Kerala. The folksongs of landless labourers, the lower caste people from the *Pulayar* and *Parayar* castes, verbalize their experience of struggle and hard work.



Meena Kandasamy has been dealt with in two subsequent chapters: the one looks at the narrativization of caste, identity, and culture in her novel, *When I Hit You: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife*; the other underscores the plight of Dalit workers who are killed by tyrannical upper-caste landowners in *The Gypsy Goddess*. These two chapters on Kandasamy are the representative explorations of the age-old exploitation of Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular on the basis of cruel caste structure and patriarchal social order and their struggle against such brutalities and injustice done to them.

The chapter titled, “Bacteria of Caste and Anxiety of Dalitness in Dalit Literature” offers an innovative perspective on bacteria of caste that enable the caste to be biodegradable because “In the social organization, the caste practices decompose, merge into a natural ambience, become a non-thing and are regenerated with time” (95). The subsequent chapter throws light on the politics of representative culture in Dalit literature. The next chapter centring on Anna Bhau Sathe’s *Fakira* explores the unheard voice of the untouchable. *Fakira* designates the encounter of lower caste people for dignity and freedom against the dominant caste people in rural social structure and British forces. *Fakira*, a rebellious protagonist in the novel, epitomises the core of human values.

Baburao Bagul, a pioneer Dalit writer in Maharashtra, shuddered the mainstream Marathi literature by presenting harsh reality of caste ridden society. The chapter on Bagul’s *Bohada* captures the painful experiences of atrocities being inflicted on Dalits by upper castes. Another chapter particularizes the reflection of caste, identity, and culture in the writings of Baburao Bagul. It details about the identity of Dalits that has been extended to the poor, agricultural and industrial workers, women and other marginalized sections of Indian society in addition to untouchables and elaborated on how these different identities have been reflected in the writing of Bagul.

The book contains a chapter on literature of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar that critically examines his *Writings and Speeches*. The inclusion of this chapter in the book is very significant because it introduces his revolutionary thoughts for the reformation of Indian society and these radical ideas have been the source of Dalit literature. Life writing is a significant genre of Dalit literature. The chapter titled, *Culinary References in Select Autobiographies of Dalit Women Authors* explores the issues of food and hunger which are integral to Dalit lives in general and Dalit women’s lives in particular. This chapter examines these issues

Social exclusion and marginalized identity of Dalits have been very pertinent issues in Dalit literature. These issues have been dealt in two chapters of the book. The chapter titled, *The Politics of Marginalization and Protest in Bama’s Vanmam*, delves into the issue of community marginalization of Dalits and how this marginalized community attempts to regain self-respect and right place at the mainstream. Another chapter focuses on the same



issue of Dalit marginalization particularly emphasizing on U. R. Ananthamurthy's *Samskara* and Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*.

Thus, the book offers glimpses of historical conditions of Dalits that produced a huge variety of writing ranging from the life writing, poetry, plays, and novels. All those who are interested in the studying Dalit literature must read this book, because it will enable them understand the literature of all the marginalised sections of society from across the world.

REFERENCE

Arjun Kharat and Pravin Bhaskar, Editors. *Caste, Culture and Identity in Dalit Writing*. New Delhi, Bareilly: Perception Publishing, 2023, pp. 197, HB, MRP: 995.00 INR/10 USD, ISBN: 978-93-92189-90-6.