

**READING, WRITING AND REWRITING:
DALIT LITERATURE AND DISCURSIVE PRACTICES**

ABSTRACT



**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH**

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2002

This question, What is literature? must be a central one for any body committed to literary studies. The same question has been asked repeatedly since Plato and Aristotle within the Western tradition of philosophy. To define something is to limit its scope and functionality. Literature in this sense cannot be defined, for it is the most articulated expression of human experience that encompasses the whole domain of our existence. Young says, "Literature: a licentious and vagrant category, unsusceptible of limitations, and impatient of restraint: a mélange of poetry, novels, plays, sermons, political tracts, diaries, letters, books of philosophy and science once thought to be true but now read as fiction"¹. I can't but agree with Young's notion of literature for it is hard to defend literature as a stable category: its sameness is made up entirely of difference. What is wrong with it is also what is apparently right with it: literature is flagrantly hybrid. Literature takes the reader beyond itself: discussion of books about the world quickly turns into deliberations about the world, which the reader represents. Critics perpetually find themselves looking through and beyond their windows of understanding of this world. We need not be surprised as Jacques Derrida finds this question from Derek Attridge haunting him². As a product of a given place and time, literature as a body of knowledge entails the conflicts, patterns of convention, codes and modes of thinking. It thus makes sense when Terry Eagleton³ says, that it is more useful to see literature as a name which people give from time to time for different reasons for certain kinds of writing within a whole field of what Michel Foucault called "discursive practices" and that if anything is to be an object of study, it is this whole field of practices rather than just those sometimes obscurely labeled as "literature". By invoking the ontological

significance of literature, Eagleton has proposed a reading strategy that would study the whole field of discursive practices where a literary text does not stand independently, but acquires significance only in relation to socio-cultural practices.

In the act of reading, a reader can assume different positions including the author determined position. Thus, the reader leaves the passive state of silence and enters into a kind of dialogue with the text. In the entry into discourse, the reader is entering society, for he or she breaks the monologic authorial voice and collaborates with the text to produce meaning. Such communal creations become analogous to the creation of any linguistic artifact, if we subscribe to the notion that the linguistic artifact is made up of some kind of original discourse resultant from the multifarious play of many fragmented discourses. And it is here, in the language, which is central to the civilization and society that men and women exist. The idea is that a personal self is created in the articulation or reading of a text, its phenomenological existence. This self is rather a surface with no depth; it is that which is constituted in a language.

The argument I offer here is that any knowledge formation need to look at seriously the nature of the text, the conditions in which it is produced and in what manner it should be read or evaluated. We need to consider the rewriting of certain texts, for they may not be in exacting sense but carrying out traces of an earlier text. The practice of literary knowledge, therefore, needs to be conscious of the complexity of the social conditions and relations under which it is produced and read admitting conflicts/plurality of interpretations. As resistance literature, 'Dalit Literature' in India certainly invokes for

reconsidering our understanding of reading, writing and rewriting. These three concepts need to be placed in the larger context of discourse formations.

In the context of modernity, there is the suggestion that individuals have within themselves an authentic capacity for self-definition and the subjective organization of meanings. In each person there is the struggle to negotiate the opportunities and dangers of modernity in terms of ongoing, enduring sense of self: to respond to the continuities and discontinuities of contemporary social processes in terms of one's own distinctive subjectivity, for example, Dalit identity and articulation where the excess of overloading of cultural meanings impacts upon the psychic space of the subject as disorientation, discontinuity and fragmentation. The dalit life is increasingly bound up with dislocation and dispersal of postmodern social space. We can appropriate Jameson's concept of mapping of social space between self and other to the dalit subject which "has lost its capacity actively to extend its pretensions and re-tensions across the temporal manifold and to organize its past and future into coherent experience. It becomes difficult enough to see how the cultural production of such a subject could result in anything but 'heaps of fragments' and in practice of the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary and the aleatory."⁴

'Castism' that is peculiar to India has allowed for consolidation several marginalized heterogeneous individuals to forge a homogenous alliance in search of their identity. The marginalization here is an ideology of social, political and economic domination based on beliefs that a(some) designated caste(s) is(are) either biologically,

culturally, intellectually, professionally, etc. inferior. And this belief is used almost in all aspects of everyday life to justify, rationalize or prescribe the marginalized caste(s) in the society as well as to explain its social position and accomplishment. Here one is tempted to compare or liken castism in India to racism in most of the Western world. They are not one and the same, but there is a striking similarity. Both caste and race are natal concepts—one is born into a caste just as someone is born into a race. The relation between the two also exists as that of a macrocosm to a microcosm. That is to say castism is a macro sphere which includes racism as one of the several essential micro spheres. Castism also encloses within it concepts of class, once again, not as the West views it, but with unique Indian-ness attributed to it. It may be presumed that cast had its origins prior to the time when class might have originated. In short, we can amuse that castism in India is like English language which has borrowed and continues to borrow extensively various concepts to grow into a mighty language without disturbing the basic syntax typical to the language.

For a Dalit deprived of linguistic expression—the written word—what is problematic is the question of the writing self. That is to say, how does a Dalit represent the interchange of expansion and contraction, externalization and internalization of dalit experience? How precisely does the written word discharge the tensions of the subject? Schelling's hypothesis⁵ might help us to understand this problematic. The self remains muted till it finds the required strategy – writing – to be able to express. Deprived of the written word, it waits for its formation; once it is formed, it expresses through the dialectical process that consciousness executes on itself. That is, in his/her search for an

Why and how is writing alone in the required strategy for self expression?

alternative identity, the dalit writer makes effective use of what Foucault calls history of counter-memories, as a necessary opposition to traditional history.

a. J. Singh

Most of the earlier Dalit Writings came to the public through Journals like *Bharati, Raaga Maalika, Satihita Bodhini, Andhra Jyoti*, etc. The majority of the writers associated with these journals either knew English or were exposed to the English language, and this conditioned their world-view and literary style to a great extent. Most of them did not write with literary pretensions; but all of them consciously or unconsciously took part in an experiment, which brought about a real break through in Indian literature. The awareness of the social problems, a rational view of existence as opposed to a theocentric world-view structured in privileging caste hierarchies are explored mostly in prose narratives. The developmental phase of Dalit literature conveys immediate sorrow, shock and anger through autobiographical narratives written mostly from the victim's perspective. The next phase of Dalit literature achieves a different perspective relying on multilayered narrative and a multi plot structure in order to create a response not of the visceral engagement encouraged by the earlier works, but of interrogation, treating the readers not as passive or empathetic consumers but as active, questioning participants making them regard the Dalit writings with critical eyes. Readers of these narratives are made to realize that history is a collection of subjective experiences that can be rewritten and reinterpreted from a distant spatio-temporal dimensions; from the contexts of other kinds of narrative, such as folkloric archetypes; or from many different subjective sites. Through out this sequence of changing perspectives, several kinds of thematic continuity are evident. Apart from the obvious

theme of caste discrimination and exploitation (commenting on death, destruction, terror, loss, etc.), in particular, Dalit literature manifests a skepticism and distrust of authority. Collective memory of a torturous past is narrated through retrospectively in linear, direct and limited ways. Most of the Dalit writers did not resort to special literary devices to convey the intensity of the suffering or the grotesque condition of Dalits and their ruined selves. Instead the direct portrayal of the Dalit subject in the narratives may result in emotionally shaking the reader.

To reproduce in challenging discourse the fetishizing of the dominant language which actually takes place in society, the Dalit writer, in the initial stages, should borrow the writing instruments from the already established discourse. The acquired language is thus constituted as the absolute norm of all linguistic practices, which then can only be conceived in terms of the logic of deprivation. The combined effect of low cultural capital and the associated low propensity to increase it through educational investment condemns the least favoured castes like the Dalits to the negative sanctions of the scholastic market. That is, the Dalits are subjected to exclusion or early self-exclusion induced by lack of success and competence in the educational market. The general assumption was that upper castes needed the Dalits for their survival while the Dalit is denied of his immediate survival by these upper castes. The same sentiment is echoed on the religious domain too. This bred parallel contempt towards Hinduism, the main proponent of caste system. Ambedkar who openly denounced the Hindu religion by burning a copy of *Manusmriti* and embracing Buddhism vehemently propagated this idea. The newly found religious identity helped the Dalits to break away from the dominant

religion but paved the way for new frames of confrontation triggered on religious grounds.

Applying Gramsci to Indian Nationalist Movement, Partha Chatterjee identifies three phases of development – ‘moments of departure’, ‘moments of manoeuvre’, and ‘moments of arrival’⁶. We can extend these concepts to include Dalit situation. The moment of departure here could be treated as the awareness of the essential differences between the Dalits and the upper castes. The second phase of Chatterjee’s analysis is the ‘moment of manoeuvre’ which is war on two fronts – ‘war of movement’ and ‘war of position.’⁷ Applying this to the Dalit situation, we might observe that moment of departure’s ‘surrender yourself’ attitude was soon replaced by confrontation. The third phase according to Chatterjee is the ‘moment of arrival.’⁸ It was this stage at which the Dalit movement attained a complete profile as we see it. Several fragmented ideas were amalgamated and a unified Dalit discourse was constructed

The concept of freedom and facility of constitutional security made it possible for Dalits to actively participate in political democratic processes. Dalit literature describes the political formation of Dalit subject in a very comprehensive way. It portrays the unassuming Dalit subject to be appropriated by the political will of the dominant castes during the early years of independent India. Recognition of political exploitation of the Dalits made it possible for them to learn the intricacies of growing democratic political process. This results in the fight for fundamental rights of the Dalits on the political front. Lack of congenial atmosphere to put up these fights from the existing political

formations, the Dalit groups formed their own political parties or joined the political parties that are organized exclusively for Dalit purposes.

In the formation, reformation and deformation of Dalit identity as an articulated position in Dalit writing, one notices that in spite of the historical disruptions, some stability has been accomplished. The 'mute' Dalit has finally been 'voiced'. This voice is no more mimetic, it is self-reflexive that actualizes the selfhood at various levels of socio-political matrix. The Dalit writing of today asserts a position in which the Dalit is no more an object – (s)he is a fully developed subject. The subject continues to confront but the voice will never die. This voice will continue to reinforce the process of reading, writing and rewriting.

Endnotes

- ¹ Young, Robert J. C. 1996. *Torn Halves: Political conflict in literary and cultural theory*. Manchester UP: Manchester & New York; pg. 10.
- ² Attridge Derek. 1992. Ed. *Jacques Derrida: Acts of Literature*. Routledge: New York & London; pp. 1-75.
- ³ Eagleton, Terry. 1983. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Basil Blackwell: Oxford; pg. 203.
- ⁴ Fredric Jameson. 1991. *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, p.25. He argues that the social and economic world in which the postmodern subject is constituted is the world of late, multinational capitalism. The immense communicational potentialities of late capitalism, with its plurality of surplus-generating forms, derail the symbolic

framing of reality, the grasping of psychic experience, the mapping of social space between self and other. In this view, post modernity is defined entirely by absences, the dissolution of inner experience and received social meanings. It is possible to make sense out of this apparent disorientation, however, provided that we grasp the irreducibility of the plurality of human worlds.

5 Quoted in "Selfhood as such is spirit: F. W. J. Schelling on the origins of evil" by Slavoj Žežek in *Radical Evil*, edited by Joan Copjec; London: Verso; 1996, p. 3.

6 Partha Chatterjee. 1986. *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*. Delhi: OUP.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

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