

## **DALIT CONSCIOUSNESS: REDEFINING THE NOTIONS IN LITERATURE**

\* Taniamol Chacko

### ***Abstract***

It is said that that India is at the threshold of a Dalit Revolution, dalits being the most marginalized people in India. The term Dalit means 'oppressed', 'broken' or 'crushed' to the extent of losing original identity. However, this name has been adopted by the people otherwise referred to as Harijans, untouchables, and has come to symbolize for them a movement for change and for the eradication of the centuries-old oppression under the caste system. In legal and constitutional terms, Dalits are known in India as scheduled castes. The roots of Dalit oppression go back to the origins of the caste system in Hindu religion. The philosophy of caste is contained in the Manusmriti, a sacred Hindu text dating from the second century BCE. 'Untouchable' outcast communities were forbidden to join in the religious and social life of the community and were confined to menial polluting tasks such as animal slaughter and leather-working. The introduction of Islam to India from about the thirteenth century AD led to widespread conversions by many low-caste and 'untouchable' groups, and by the mid-nineteenth century about one quarter of the population was Muslim.

**Keywords:** AmbedkarDalit, Dalit Literature, ManusmritiParaya, Untouchables

---

\* Guest Lecturer, Department of English, St. Stephen's College, Uzhavoor  
E-mail: taniamolchacko@gmail.com

## DEFINING DALIT AND DALIT CONSCIOUSNESS

Exploitation is the caste of Dalit. Dalit means those who are affected through social, economic and cultural darkness of exploitation. (DalitSahitya: SidhantaniSwarup3)

Contemporary society adjoins the ideals of liberty, equality and justice but the socially and culturally ostracized community "Dalits" have always remained on the periphery. Though silenced for a long time their fight for social justice brought positive transformation in collective socio-cultural consciousness. Dalit writing attempts to deconstruct the dominant, casteist constructions of Hindu Varna system and it constructs a distinct dalit community. It has been said that the root word Dal means "broken, ground -down, downtrodden or oppressed." Those previously known as Untouchables, Depressed Classes and Harijans are increasingly adopting the term "Dalit" as a name for themselves. Dalits are outcastes falling outside the traditional four-fold varna system. "Lost rights are never regained by appeals to the conscience of the usurpers, but relentless struggles...Goats are used for sacrificial offerings and not lions" (Dr B.R Ambedkar). Dalit is not a caste. It is the state of being, an Achilles' heel to the society. It is a condition - by taking away their land, by rejecting them language, by contravening their sense of self and denying them a place in history, a history of their own. Thus caste puts a limit on the pleasures of the community. It does not allow a person to surpass the caste limits for his enjoyment. Dalits do not have their own history; they are marginalized as objects in their own country rather than being treated as its subjects. Modern writers like Bama are tracing the history of Dalits and the dalit consciousness of the whole society. Dalit writing can be seen as a protest against written history that excluded them. Dalit literature not only hoists heart wrenching questions but also authenticates the capability of the people in the margins to fight injustice.

In the essay What is Dalit Literature Sharad Chandra Guha vehemently laid down the fact that Dalit is a state of revelation of exploitation and humiliation. It is not a literature of the caste but of a consciousness. He states that:

The nature of Dalit Consciousness is obviously not subjective. It is true that pains and pleasure are lived and experienced by individuals alone but the sufferings of Dalit are common reasons. Hence the content is essentially social. (267)

Dalit Consciousness can be defined as the reformative thought of Dalit's life. It is the consciousness that rise among certain sections of the dalit population. It is essentially against exploitation. It is the power, which gives them a freedom of speaking, writing and living. It is the condition to be conditioned. It is the feeling of Dalits. The Dalit author Sharan Kumar Limbale calls it "the burning cry of untouchables against the injustices of thousands of years". There raises a question in minds of Dalit "When

have I really lift my life as myself". Is it possible to make boundaries by naming them?

I speak up bluntly  
But now if anyone ask me  
I speak up bluntly,  
I am Paraichi". (Sukirtharani)

In the essay "Dalit Women Writing in Telugu,"ChallapalliSwarooparani says that Alphabet is now a weapon to attack the oppressions perpetuated by Brahmanism for centuries. "Even a short...gives a long content of Dalit life."The article also attempts to explore how Dalit Consciousness is articulated through Dalit writings by analysing Bama'sKarukku. Karukku is the first Dalit Tamil autobiography, vociferously condemns all forms of oppression: be it caste, class or gender. It traces the dalit consciousness and how dalits are treated in the society. Many thought that conversion to Christianity may free themselves from the dark clutches of the caste system. It stands as a means of strength of the multitudes whose identities have been destroyed and denied. Bama's rewriting of self is the rewriting of dalit history. She expresses her grief over the pathetic conditions of Dalit: "They never received a payment that was appropriate to their labour" (Karukku47). She demolishes that no religion can build an identity their own.

"In this society, if you are born into a lower caste you are forced to live a life of humiliation and degradation until your death. Even after deathcaste-difference does not disappear" (Karukku26). Masses from the'Paraya' community converted to Christianity either to escape from caste oppression or for reservation benefit. But for Bama, the response of the old priest for expelling her from school was "After all, you are from Cheri. You might have done it. You musthave done it" (Karukku19). At each and every stage she experienced oppression: as a child, a student, a nun and as a woman. She uses colloquial language to strengthen dalit consciousness. "What do we lack?"becomes a questioned question in Karukku. Each Paraya family is attached to a Naicker family as a bonded labour. Everyone seemed Harijan contemptible, but they didn't hesitate to use them for menial works. It was Bama's Annan, who inspired her to educate herself to fight against discrimination. He once told her "Because we are born into the ParayaJati, we are never given honour or dignity...but if we study and make progress we can throw away these dignities (Karukku17). Bama's Annan reflects the subversive Dalit consciousness.Karukku, written by a wounded self has not been dissolved in the stream of time. On the contrary, it has been a means of relieving the pain of others who were wounded.

In a nutshell, Karukku subverts the Dalit consciousness that accepts lower caste people as untouchables, contemptible, polluted and inferior. "Karukku have enabled many suppressed voices to raise their voices and proclaim, 'my language, my culture, my

life is praiseworthy, it is excellent "(Ten Year Later). Thus in Karukku, it is the "Subaltern who speaks". According to P.B Shelley's view in his To a Skylark, "Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought". Sweetest songs for long had been struggling to find a voice of its own till Bama came out with her Karukku. Epic in the scale of its hurt and hope, Karukku tells the largely untold story of masses suffering silently in a society of segregation and lynching to start more fulfilling lives.

## References

1. Ambedkar, B.R. Ambedkar: Autobiographical Notes. Introduction by Ravikumar. 1938. Pondicheri: Navayana, 2003.
2. Bama.Karukku.Trans. LaksmiHolmstrom. Chennai: Macmillan India, 2005. Print.
3. "Dalit." Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 22 July 2017. Web. 17 Feb 2018. Web.
4. Manohar, Yeshwant. DalitSahitya: SidhantaniSwarup, Nagpur: PrabodhanPrakashan, 1978
5. Muktibodh, Sharatchndra. Muktibodh, Sharadchandra, What is Literature Trans. by Milind
6. Malse in Poison Bread ed. Arjun Dangle, Bombay: Orient Lingmen Ltd, 1994:267
7. Rani, Challappalli Swaroopa. "Dalit Women's Writing in Telugu." Economic and Political Weekly, vol. 33, no. 17, 1 May 1988.
8. Shelley, Percy Bysshe. To a Skylark. London: Phoenix, 1996. Print.
9. Shmoop Editorial Team."Dalit and Silencing." Shmoop.Shmoop University, Inc., 11 Nov. 2008. Web. 14 Dec. 2017.