



Literature of Bias: Intercultural and Cross-Border Comparisons between Dalit Literature and Black American Writings.

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Abstract

Dalit and Black American communities have had similar experiences of historical marginalization which gave rise to their cumulative shame as well as anger. The contribution of Dalit literature has been immense: (i) First and foremost, it effectively threatened the Brahmanic hegemony from literature (ii) Second, is concentrated Dalit masses for assertion, protest and mobilization. (iii) Third is stirred up thinking in Dalit intellectuals and catalyzed creation of organic intellectuals of Dalits. (iv) Fourth, given that the level of literacy been particularly low among Dalits, the emergence of Dalit literature where both the writers and readers are mostly Dalits, is itself an evidence of a profound change taking place in Indian society.

Similarly, the ever changing nature of American life and the vigorous versatility and all encompassing spread of a written record are the marks of American literature. It is an accepted fact that social forces do make a distinct imprint on literature, especially in America where the democratic processes bring the people into immediate familiarity with cultural forces and American literature has responded admirably to such pressures. Literature can become a bridge that connects the past with the present emphasizing the diachronic value of certain texts. It also help the nation , community and individual to reconsider their priorities. It can reaffirm the belief in the unity of mankind all across the globe.

Key-words: Marginalization, Dalit literature, Black American writings.

Introduction

Any literature is a mirror of the society and society is viewed always in the light of the condition of people in a cross section. But unfortunately for many centuries the other side of this mirror never came to light and literature primarily remained an elite concept: Literature of the elite, for the elite and by the elite. This paper focuses on the marginalized 'other' side. Here the idea of literature is more about assertion of human rights, self-pride, revolt against social injustice, chronicles of personal and collective suffering, and hopes and aspirations for a new society devoid of discrimination. It definitely is a weapon for the struggle for selfhood. This newly found objective categorically discusses two different diaspora but one universal idea of humanity, in Black Americans' and Dalit Indians' lives. This paper is an attempt to discuss the similarities between the Black American life portrayed in Black American novels and the "Dalit" awakenings of the similar issues in Indian literature, especially in Gujarati Dalit writings.

..."Comparative literature can be studied profitably in the Indian context under the following heads: sources, themes, myths, forms, movements and trends...."

For the objective of comparing two different literatures, here the 'Theme' is used as a major comparison. This statement is substantiated by the fact that while Indian writers create an independent linguistic space for their characters, they locate their female characters in the psycho-emotional spaces traditionally assigned to women in mainstream novels. Similar examples are found in Toni Morrison's women characters.

Inequality is the main source of marginality, as it gives insecurity, injustice and exploitation. Marginalized sections of society are generally beyond the pale of dominant culture. Their existence is by and large peripheral. All cultures and societies, advanced or disadvantaged, have power centers in their corpus. The marginalized groups of sections are consciously or unconsciously distanced from the power centers. They are scattered here and there and lack cohesiveness and strength. Deprived of economic, political or religious power, they grope in the dark for survival. They live in physical or psychological ghettos. The social organization in which they are imprisoned by custom and tradition builds walls of segregation around them. However, they struggle for emancipation.

Dalit writing is a post-Independence literary phenomenon. The emergence of Dalit literature has a great historical significance. The causes and effects leading to the age-old existence of oppression and despair of the lives of marginalized class of a nation's vast population are also observed in many other parts of the world. As the 'Literature of Slaves' is as old as the human civilization, the Caste system, the root cause of the emergence of Dalits in society, is also as old as Hindu Civilization, having its roots in the 'Manu Smriti'.

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 Caste and in the Western World it was under the name of the Race. Inequality was the main source of this marginality which led to insecurity, injustice and exploitation. Marginalized sections were always on the periphery and distanced from the power centers. In this paper my main objective is to draw similarities between the politics of Caste and Race in the Indian Dalits and American Blacks. Here are some grounds to compare and contrast. Both are marginalized literatures - one arising out of the 'literature of Slaves' and the other from the 'literature of Untouchables'. Concepts like 'race' and 'caste' are as old as the history of civilization. But they also provide a constant platform of 'myth' in the society around which many realities are interwoven. Many writers have interwoven this fact in their fiction. Morrison had a theory - a vision of slavery and black/white relations in America. That was in some ways old-fashioned, but still inflammatory and unresolved. The task was to remake the old story in a compelling way so as not to lose the relevance today. She thinks that one characteristic of black writers is "a quality of hunger and disturbance that never ends." Her novels "bear witness" to the experience of the Black community and Blacks in that community. Her work "suggests who the outlaws were, who survived under what circumstances and why, what was legal in the community as opposed to what was legal outside it."

The mass movement from south to north led African Americans to examine their lives: Who were they? What were their rights as Americans? The artistic expression of this collective examination became known as the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance represented a re-birth of Blacks as an effective part of American life. Similar portrayal we can find in Dorothy West's works, the last representative writer of "Harlem Renaissance". In much of West's writing, "White racism finds echoes in Black society's obsession of gradations of skin color and the possibility of 'passing.'" Her 1948 semi-autobiographical novel, *The Living Is Easy*, explores

racism and class-consciousness among the African-American bourgeoisie in Boston. She incorporates an element of social commentary in the book through her criticism of the values and ethics of the African-American middle class. Her second novel *The Wedding* examines issues of race and class among upper-middle class African Americans, this time in Martha's Vineyard community, Oak Bluffs.

In Morrison's '*Beloved*' every character lives simultaneously in his/her present and in the history - the chapters of the novel alternate between the two stories: that of the growing contest between Sethe and Beloved; and that of Sethe's life on the plantation, her escape, and the traumatic events that followed her crossing of the Ohio River and her appearance at the home of her mother-in-law.

Morrison presents the white view of blacks as the Other and the blacks' experience of themselves as Other. She concentrates mainly on two sides of this phenomenon.

(1) She wants her prose to recreate Black speech, "to restore the language that black people spoke to its original power"; for this she uses magic, folktales and the supernatural in her novels because, "...that's the way the world was for me and for the black people I know. In addition to the very shrewd, down-to-earth efficient way in which they did things and survived things, there was this other knowledge or perception, always discredited but nevertheless there..."

(2) According to Morrison, another characteristic of Black Writing is a distinctive irony. It is not humor, not a laughing away of troubles. It is this: "taking that which is peripheral, or violent or doomed or something that nobody else can see any value in and making value out of it or having a psychological attitude about duress is part of what made us stay alive and fairly coherent, and irony is part of that--being able to see the underside of something, as well."

Like in *The Bluest Eye*, characters in the Black Community accept their status as the Other, which has been imposed upon them by the White community. In turn, Blacks assign the status of Other to individuals like Pecola within the Black community.

The subjugation of Dalits in India and Blacks in America is the result of slavery imposed on them in the name of casteism in India and racism in America. Writers from these marginalized groups express their revolt against slavery through words.

In Indian context, the caste system, with a history of more than 3000 years, is a shameful system of social segregation, which works on the principle of purity and impurity. Purity is rich and white or whitish, impurity is poor and dark. Hidden powers of wealth can be easily traced in every feudal Brahmanical concept of the ideal. Material milieu of purity, beauty, prominence, command and comforts come with wealth. Economic division is reflected in the social classifications. But it should not be registered that caste is racial or economic. The Dalit movement is an anti-caste movement fighting for the construction of a modern secular and democratic Indian identity.

The term Dalit literature can be traced to the first Dalit literary Conference in 1958 in Maharashtra State in India. These writings were not limited to just one language or a particular region as many great writers like Mahashweta Devi, Namdeo Dhasal, D. Gopi, Joseph Macwan, Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle have contributed and put the Dalit literature into the mainstream literary theories. When Joseph Macwan says, " ...mainstream literature is based on aesthetics, whereas Dalit literature is expressive of such intense pain that it renders all definitions of aesthetics ineffective", he in turn shoves away all the eliteness of beauty and aesthetic from his writings. Thus, like the Black literature and women's' writings, Dalit literature is engaged in a search for self- identity. Pain, anger and consciousness of injustice converge to give birth to the Dalit literature.

Dalit literature works on two dimensions just like Black American Writing does : one, to familiarize Dalits with their past, to explain to them that they are enslaved, to show them that they are human beings and to fight for their rights are their duty and the second is to work on the heart and minds of savarnas (non-dalit) in order to persuade them of the rights and entitlements of Dalits.

In Gujarati Dalit novels, realism is a pre dominant mode. It natural considering the fact that it is universally accepted as the most effective mode for depicting lives and times vividly and comprehensively. Joseph Macwan, the first Gujarati dalit writer to receive a Sahitya Akademy award is a realist par excellence. Fiction and real life over-lap in his works. Many of his stories read much like his life sketches. Macwan's style and treatment are simple, but sensitive and evocative. Macwan, the author of 'Angliyat' (the Step Child'), one of the three most acclaimed novels in the history of Gujarati Literature passed away in 2010. With him departed an era of

dalit literature, for he defined, and dominated its idiom for many years. One of the most arresting story tellers of our times, Joseph's work was dramatic, weaving tales through memory and music, breaking into elegiac songs (Marashiya), or bringing gentle flirtation through wedding songs. Like his character in the novel, Bhavan Bhagat, Joseph Macwan was a community archive, storing in his narratives the life and times of Vankar (weaver) community he belonged to. Painting with words of aspirations and tragic losses of the untouchables in his novels, he created a vivid ethnography of a region, people, and caste.

Joseph Macwan was born and brought up in a small village in district Kheda in Gujarat and being a Dalit converted in Christianity, he had first hand experiences of all the atrocities toward untouchables in the area. His novels have all the characters who shaped his life in one or the other form. These wide encompassing characterization provide a cross-section view in different strata of the Dalit community who finally had one collective grief and suffering- being Dalit. Some of these major characters in his real life are Jeevikaaki, pataka kaka, Panna Bhabhi, bhavaan Bhagat- inhabited his literary landscape and became through 'Vyatha na Vitak' and 'Angaliyat' part of Gujarat's collective memory. This is also an interesting example of the oral tradition and literature which is becoming extinct. His works are a solid combination of fictional reality or reality in fiction.

As Rita Kothari puts it in the first preface to the English translation of his 'Angaliyat (step child)';

"A ray of hope, a beacon for the nascent body of within, the community of writers, readers and critics had looked forward to Josephbhai giving direction and bringing in a freshness to Dalit writing in Gujarati, in a way that only he could have. However, some of his contemporaries believe that Josephbhai did not go beyond the personal universe to justify his claim that he was *the* representative voice of Gujarati dalit writing. The matter remains contestable. Meanwhile, Josephbhai carried the burden of representation and became a symbol of both Dalit aspirations and disappointments." 'Angaliyat' marked a turning point for both mainstream and Dalit Gujarati alike although their perspectives are far from similar. The literary elites hailed it as an authentic voice from rural Gujarat, heard a good forty years after Pannalal Patel's 'Manavi ni Bhavai' (original 1947, 'Endurance: A Droll saga', Sahitya Akademy, 1995).

Patel's novel had depicted the human predicament of rural peasants during the worst famine (popularly remembered as 'chhappaniyo') around 1899-1900.

The novel 'Angaliyat' works at four levels. It is a gripping tale of love, heroism, humiliation, revenge and death. It is a vividly coloured picture of the lives of two neighbouring villages in the Charotar district of central Gujarat. It is a document of the politics of the pre- and post-Independence years, as seen from the perspective of the downtrodden. It is also an account of the struggle of one Dalit community against its Upper-caste oppressors, spurred on by two opposing ideologies, the Gandhian and the Ambedkarite. Whatever the odds and however hard the struggle, Teeha knows the vital importance of fighting on. When Methi's brother Moti remarks, "One can't live in water and risk enmity with the crocodile", Teeha snaps back, "To hell with water and crocodiles... .people like us either become extinct or we suck up all their water itself... .the British sun is still warm. Once Independence arrives, our days will be numbered."

Dalpat Chauhan's works pave a different way into Gujarati Dalit novels. His novel *Malak* (The country) is about forcible migration of Dalits. The whole Dalit community is at the center of it. It represents the relationship of Dalits with other castes. Due to tyranny of the upper caste, the Dalits had to leave their houses but they do not lose hope. *Bhalbhankhalu* (The Dawn) by Dalpat Chauhan is a novel dealing with an attempt of a dalit father to enroll his daughter in a primary school in pre-independence era. *Gidh* (Vulture) by Dalpat Chauhan is a novel that again deals with atrocities on Dalits, its theme is a Dalit man's attraction to a non-Dalit woman. Dalit dependence on non-Dalits, their village customs, pain, and bonded labor in unclean occupation are depicted powerfully. The author himself notes that "This is history of our dark, unknown aspect. It is only a small corner of darkness in which we were forcibly pushed."

Marginalized Dalit literature is now a multi colored art. Another Gujarati novel, *Shosh* (thirst) which was awarded Sister Nivedita First Prize by Gujarati Sahitya Parishad in 2004 is a first Dalit novel written by a Dalit Woman, Daxa Damodara. Here the heroine Madhvi is an upper caste woman and the father is a reputed Chartered Accountant. She is the second female child in the family and this is a reason enough for the father to hate her. In the second half of the novel, she gets attracted towards Rajendra Makwana, a Dalit boy who is an average student but good at heart. She is not allowed to study further, to write poems or to paint. She gradually starts

becoming abnormal in the process of understanding this injustice. Her love for Art and for Rajendra were considered equally wrong and out of place. In her quest for love, she starts painting 'thirst' and gets attracted towards Kutch, the desert zone, known for its calamities. In a bid to normalize her, the father marries her to Purander, a sportsman.

In this novel, Dalit is treated differently but the divide is very real which finally the becomes reason enough to make Madhvi a paranoid. Here the issue of Dalit v/s Non-Dalit takes place mostly in the sub-conscious self of Madhvi. She is not able to detach it from other social issues like domestic violence or the gender politics. Her protest is not only feminist but also humanist. Here the author tries to put the Dalit discrimination on a larger platform and tries to address it not only on a social but on a more humane ground.

Black American writings surpass traditional barriers of story or plot. African-American oral culture is rich in poetry, including spirituals, gospel music, blues and rap. This oral poetry also appears in the African-American tradition of Christian sermons, which make use of deliberate repetition, cadence and alliteration. Morrison, as myth-maker/grit/folklorist, is the perfect novelist to cross this barrier . She considers herself first and foremost a story teller whose poetic sensibility helps readers experience the world in new ways. Like Faulkner, Morrison is in love with lyrical and mesmerizing language that conveys love of a community and offers hope in a chaotic world, a world drenched not only with the evil of race thinking, but also the evil of sexism. Morrison's fictive world is mythic, legendary -- full of complicated stories about ordinary people who have survived and prospered in an extraordinary and almost miraculous way inside the maelstrom of American racism and sexism.

Similarly, Dalit life has found its highest expression in folk songs and other mass performances of arts like street/stage plays. Most of their literature is in oral tradition. However, only in post independence period a considerable number of dalits got access to education. This paved the way to enter into the literary modes of dominant social groups. It took almost a hundred years for Dalits to enter into the literary genre of novel writing. In *Angaliyat* (Step Child), Mecwan also uses the folklore very aptly. The character of Bhavan kaka is a kind of Sutradhar to provide a link between the two worlds - Dalits and the Others. He also uses many myths and stories which provide a ground to understand Dalit characters' psyche.

Toni Morrison has become the name around which the debates of considerable significance on American literature, culture and ideology have amassed. These include debates about multicultural curricula; about the relation of slavery to freedom; about the possibility of creating literature that is both aesthetically beautiful and politically engaged. In her *Sula*, the place called the 'Bottom' is a mostly black community in Ohio, situated in the hills above the mostly white wealthier community of Meddalion. The Bottom first became a community when a master gave it to his former slave. This 'gift' was in fact a trick: The master gave the former slave a poor stretch of hilly land, convincing the slave that the land was worthwhile by saying that because it was hilly, it was closer to heaven. But the trick led to the growth of a vibrant community. Now the community faces a new threat: wealthy whites have taken a liking to the land, and would like to own much of the town in order to build a golf course.

In the *Bluest Eye* and *Paradise* she has created two communities which are crippled by racism. The *Bluest Eye* is the dualistic tale of the oppressor and the oppressed. The racism, oppression and marginalization have crushed the characters' self-esteem and sense of self-worth. Most of the Black Americans portrayed in the book condemned their blackness.

During the times of slavery, the order of importance in American society was clearly mapped out. First were the White males, next White women, then Black males, and finally Black women. Both White and Black women faced discrimination. However, nothing can compare to the treatment African American women faced from not only White males, but Black males as well. They were ranked on the bottom step of social ladder, and often lived extremely hard lives. They would suffer the same harsh and unbearable treatment from Black men, as they would from the White. Physical abuse, emotional abuse, and sexual assault were all a part of the everyday lives of African American women during the age of slavery.

There are two phases of marginalized (Dalit or Black American) literature. In the first phase, there exists a co-relation between the prevalence of hegemonic relations and retaliations by those considered fallen. The writers channelized their anger against orthodox prejudices and savage discriminations. There are several ethnic groups in the plural societies like those of India and the US, which were looked upon as 'marginal' but today, they pose a serious threat and challenge to the mainstream or rather they have already become main stream. Today words like 'deconstruction', 'subversion', 'dismantling', 'mapping', 'remapping', 'decanonizing',

'decoding' etc. have become the buzz words of any literature. In recent years, these dialogues all over the world are being reframed. Terms like 'Literary Theory' and 'Literary Criticism' are replaced by new terms like 'Ideology' and 'Discourse'. The 'Context' today is more important than the 'Text'. The use of 'dialects' and 'vernaculars' is preferred. Inclusion of slang and obscene words are better accepted and appreciated.

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