



Research Paper

Dalit Literature and African American Literature: Similarities and Differences

Renuka P. Chauhan

Ph. D. Research Scholar
Department of English
School of Languages, Gujarat University
Ahmedabad (Gujarat)

Abstract

Dalit literature is a new and distinct stream of Indian literature. This literature is written by both Dalit and non Dalit writers. It presents exploitation of Dalits on the name of castism, their sorrow, slavery, degradation, poverty, tribulations and their revolt for freedom and equality. It has presented to Indian literature fresh experiences of Dalits, a new sensitivity and vocabulary, a different protagonist, an alternate vision and a new chemistry of suffering and revolt. African American literature is a literature written in the United States by the writers of African descent. It presents African American culture, slavery, racism and their fight for freedom and equality.

Key words

Dalits, Blacks, Black Americans, Afro Americans, Slavery, Racism, Exploitation, Negro, Touchable, Untouchable, Savarnas, Whites

Received 25 Apr, 2022; Revised 05 May, 2022; Accepted 07 May, 2022 © The author(s) 2022.

Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

I. Introduction

Dalit literature is a new emerging branch of Indian literature. It is precisely that Indian literature which artistically portrays the sorrows, tribulations, slavery, degradation, ridicule and poverty endured by Dalit community. This literature is written by both Dalit and non Dalit writers. It presents a lofty image of grief. Human beings are the creation by the same God who never mentioned anywhere that one is superior and the others are inferior. So every human being expects liberty, equality, honour, security and freedom from society. But it is not found in Indian society. The Indian society is divided in different religions and castes especially Hindus. The caste system which exists already for more than 3000 years seems to have been developed by the Brahmins in order to maintain their superiority. Eventually, the caste system became formalized into four distinct varnas. At the top there are the Brahmins, the priests and arbiters of what is right and wrong in matters of religion and society. Next are the Kshatriyas, who are soldiers and administrators. The Vaisyas are the third, who are the artisans and commercial class. And finally the Shudras, who are farmers and peasant class. These four castes are said to have come from Brahma's body parts e.g. Brahmins from Brahma's mouth, Kshatriyas from Brahma's arms, Vaisyas from Brahma's thighs and Shudras from Brahma's feet. Beneath the four main castes is a fifth group, the scheduled Castes. They literally have no caste. They are untouchables, the Dalits, which means oppressed, downtrodden and exploited social group. The Dalits are the collection of all communities of India who were denied a status in the traditional caste system of India. They were considered even lower than the lowest caste, namely Shudras. They were exploited, ridiculed and remained deprived of education for thousands of years. But it is said that every dog has its day. Now they are fighting for their rights, equality and freedom. And these values are now articulated in a particular kind of literature- its name being Dalit literature. Though Dalit literature primarily began in Maharastra with the efforts of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, gradually it emerged in other states of India also. Today it manifestes itself in different regional languages such as Marathi, Kannad, Hindi, Gujarati, Bengali, Tamil, Malayalam and English also.

African-American Literature is a type of American Literature which is written in the United States by the writers of African descent who directly presents the experiences and viewpoints of African-American people. It began during the 18th and 19th centuries with the writers like Phillis Wheatley and orator Fredrick Douglass. It reached an early high point of view with the Harlem renaissance, and continues today with the writers like Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou and Walter Mosley who are recognized as the most significant and popular authors in the U.S.A. This literature presents the issues of culture, racism, religion, slavery, freedom and equality of Blacks. The African American literature is very rich and varied. Before the American civil war, African American literature was primarily written on the issues of slavery in the form of slave narratives. But later in the 20th century writers like Richard Wright and Gwendolyn Brooks wrote about issues of social segregation and Black Nationalism. Today African American literature is considered as an integral part of American literature.

Dalits and Blacks

The term Dalits is referred to all Indian untouchable communities who live outside the boundary of the village as well as Adivasis, landless farm labourers, workers, the suffering masses and criminal tribes of India. For centuries they remained as untouchable and an outcaste. The Hindu Varna system made them slave. They have been tortured for a very long time. They had neither village nor homes. They had to do crime, to beg or to work as a labourers or sweepers to earn their livelihood. The tribal people lived in forests, outside the village or caves. According to Arjun Dangle:

“Dalit’ is not a caste but a realization and is related to experiences, joys, sorrows, and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of society. It matures with a sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolutionary”.

The term African Americans referred to the people of America whose motherland was Africa, but were captured and brought to America and sold as a slave since 1619. African Americans are also known as Black Americans or Afro Americans. The term ‘Negro’ is also used for them. The white settlers of America bought Africans for their farming purposes. In order to capture slaves’ violent armed raids were carried out against African settlements. Those captured were gathered like animals. Some Africans also helped the white raiders. In order to teach the captured black people a lesson, the white raiders subjected them to torture. The captives were beaten to death and sometimes buried alive. They were nails on the wall or their ears were cut off and fed to them. The whites assigned extremely difficult task to pregnant black women which causes their abortion. Black children while still in their mothers’ wombs were distributed as reward. Creditors became owners of unborn children upon nonpayment of debts.

Slaves were always sold off by their masters for fears that they could rebel if their number increased. Children were always separated from their mothers, wives from their husbands. So their families were destroyed by the whites. Sometimes slaves ran away out of fear of being sold by the whites.

God didn’t create Dalits and African Americans as slaves. But they were human beings who made them slaves on the name of caste. The Savarna societies and the whites imposed slavery on Dalits and Blacks. They forced Dalits and Savarna societies to do work as a labour for them. This is the past and future of African Americans while Dalits always rested in the hands of their owners, their condition became extremely serious.

Dalits were kept outside the village, separate arrangements were made for them such as separate river banks, separate wells, separate cremation grounds etc. Dalits were denied any right to education by the Hindu caste system, the question of separate educational institution didn’t arise. But later during the British rule Dalits began to take education. But discrimination was done to them in education also such as they had to sit in the last row of the class or outside the classroom in the lobby. Separate rules were made for taking mid day meal and drinking water. Children didn’t play with them. On the other side whites assigned separate educational institutions, separating eating places, separate spaces in trains and buses, separate residential areas to African Americans.

Similarity and Difference between Dalits and Blacks

Mahatma Gandhi coined the term ‘Harijans’ means ‘children of God’ for Dalits, but they did not like this term. They were liked to call themselves as Dalits rather than Harijans. In this way Dalits have abandoned the auspicious and uncivilized names thrust upon them by the Hindus. Not only that they were converted in other religions other than Hindu religion. On the other side the term ‘Negro’ was used for the African American people since Garvey’s generation. Like Dalits they also did not like this term and named themselves as ‘Blacks’. They underwent religious conversion with a view to end slavery.

Dalits were exploited, oppressed, degraded by Savarna society while the African Americans were robbed and degraded by white society. The Blacks were bought and sold by the Whites. Blacks could get

freedom from slavery by paying to their Masters. But Dalits could not get freedom from Savarnas, as it is imposed from their very birth. Though Dalits were technically not slaves, they could not even pay to rent a house. It was White Masters' responsibility to look after the slaves, while Dalits were not slaves; the Savarnas had no concern for Dalits. The African American slaves perform labour but their labour is not considered undignified, while Dalits do the lowest types of work such as cleaning dry latrines of hospitals, houses, offices, to sweep roads and clean the open drains, have to pick out the excreta along with any garbage from the drains. In some states women have to walk through the villages to manually clean human excrement from dry toilets which they will collect in their baskets and carry to the outskirts of the village for disposal, to skin dead cows or other animals and to throw them outside the village etc. but their work is considered undignified. The African Americans cannot hide their Black colour, while Dalits can hide their caste. The African American slaves were brought from Africa to America while Dalits belongs to India.

Dalit literature and African American literature

Sharan Kumar Limbale in his essay "Dalit Literary Movement" defines:

Dalit literature is form of agitation. It centers the common man who has been oppressed for thousands of years. The Hindu caste system has divided Indian society into castes. There are not only divisions of castes, but also the watertight compartments of Indian people and cultural. One who takes birth in one's caste should live in one's caste, drink and eat in his caste, marry within his caste and die within his caste. This is the case of tyranny. Dalit literature wants to destroy this inhuman caste system, which enslaved not only Dalits but also our democratic country. Our nation is politically free but socially it is still in slavery. Dalit literature is a struggle for total revolution, and it is a declaration of human rights."

(Quoted by Ajir Kuttly, "Dalit Literature: The emerging scene" *The World plus* Vol. III No.3 Nan-March 2005, p.36)

Dalit literature is a writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a Dalit consciousness. The form of Dalit literature is inherent in its Dalitness, and its purpose is obvious: to inform Dalit society of its slavery, and narrate its pain and suffering by the so called upper caste Hindus. African American Literature is writing about African Americans or Blacks by African American writers. The purpose of African American literature is to present African American culture, slavery, racism.

Both African Americans and Dalits experienced inhuman degradation; their struggle is against it. Despite differences of country, region, conditions, society and language, the similarity in the life experience of the two communities derives from the fact that both were targets of excess injustice and slavery. There are similarities in the feelings of ownership, entitlement and superiority demonstrated by white and savarna societies, on the one hand and of revolt against slavery by African American s and Dalits, on the other. Because of these similarities, Dalit writers see the pain of African American writers as their own. African American writers express their sorrow and pain in blues, ballads, stories, novels, dances and songs. Dalit writers also express their suffering and misery in poems, short stories, novels, autobiographies.

Both African American literature and Dalit literature are written in spiritual form in the earlier stage. The spiritual creations of African Americans were born out of their prayers for mercy. Such a desire for mercy is also present in the abhang, of Dalit saints. Bothe the literature express pain and suffering arouses feeling of pity in the readers' mind.

In the initial phase African American writers wrote folk literature. Many biblical subjects appeared in it. They wrote their works in their own dialects. The folk poems are playful, entertaining, and popular. Dalit literature is also replete with poetry, folk theatre and folk art. Dalit folk theatre is meant for popular entertainment. It is due to the Ambedkar movement, the face of folk theatre changed, and it was transformed into Ambedkar jalsas.

Black literature focuses on the African American experience and reveals race relations in certain times and places. Many slave narratives sere written in Black literature. 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' is a novel by Harriet Beecher Stowe, a white woman who threw heart rending light on the life of African Americans. This novel was so popular that 3, 00,000 copies were sold in the first year alone. It was translated into many languages and it was dramatized by many organizations.

'Up from Slavery' by T Washington made him popular as the spokesperson for the Black community. D E B Dubois' 'The Souls of Black Folk' adopted a rebellious stance towards white society.

Black writers wrote about their lives with courage, without any hesitation and fear and openly. They did not concern about whites. Longston Hughes' 'The Weary Blues' and Jean Toomer's 'Cane' are the best examples of these type of literature.

After 1930, Richard Wright, Margaret walker and Ralph Elision inspired many African American writers. 'Native Son' by Wright is permeated with this ideology. In the 20th century African American novelists were very enthusiastic to represents their feelings and views. They were not ashamed of their race or colour. In

the 1970s many Black writers achieved best selling and award winning status. E.g. Maya Angelou read a poem on Bill Clinton's inaugurations. Rita Dove won a Pulitzer Prize and remained poet Laureate of United States from 1993 to 1995. August Wilson received two Pulitzer Prizes for his plays. In 2004 P Jones was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for his fiction.

Dalit literature represents plights of Dalits community and their old age exploitation by savarnas. It is believed that Dalit literature began in the 11th century. Madara Chennaiah, a cobbler saint is considered as the first Dalit writer of Dalit literature. Like 'Uncle Tom's Cabin', a novel written by a white woman Harriet Beecher Stowe, SM Mate, a savarna published 'Upkshitanche Antrang' a book on Dalit life. The heartfelt sorrow of Dalit life was narrated by Shankar Rao Kharat in stories like, 'Ramamahr', 'Saaangawa', 'Daundi', 'Aaba', 'Ramoshi' and 'Bhat'. Mahatma Phule, the founder of the 'Satya Shodhak Samaj' dedicated his book 'Gulamgiri' to Black people.

Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, the messiah of Dalits wrote many works for the upliftment of Dalit Community. His 'Who Were Shudras', 'The Untouchables: Who were They and Why They Became Untouchables' are very famous books by him. Besides these works there are writers like Bama, who wrote 'Karukku' to represent the double marginalization of Dalit Women. Sharankumar Libale wrote 'Akkarmashi' and 'Towards an aesthetic of Dalit literature' to represent Dalit life. His 'Towards Aesthetic of Dalit literature' was translated into English and Hindi both. Joseph Macwan wrote 'The Step Child', Omprakash Valmiki wrote 'Joothan: A Dalit's Life'.

II. Conclusion

African American and Dalit writers write for self identity and for their rights of equality in the society. Both African American and Dalit societies and their literatures are very much alike. Though their languages are different, the state of mind and the emotions expressed in literatures are parallel.

Works Cited

- [1]. Agarwal, Anju Bala. "Dalit Literature: An Echo of Black Literature". Dalit Literature: A critical Exploration Ed. Amaranth Prasad and M.B.Gaijan. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2007
- [2]. J. Kavi Kalpana and K. Saranya. "A study of Similarities Between Dalit Literature and African American Literature" Vol. 2 Issue 5. Pune Research Journal: 2016
- [3]. Limbale, Sharankumar. Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature: History, Controversies, and Considerations. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2004.
- [4]. Sadangi, Himansu Charan. "Dalit the Downtrodden of India". New Delhi: Isha Books, 2008.
- [5]. Waghmare. "Literature of Marginality" Dalit Literature and African American Literature. Ed N.M.Aston. New Delhi: Prestige, 2001.