

INEQUAL AND EXCLUSIONISTIC MAINSTREAM LITERATURE AND THE MARGINALISATION OF DALIT LITERATURE – A STUDY

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Abstract: In the United States of America, which meted out the most inhuman treatment to the Black Americans, Harlem Renaissance is considered an important movement of literature and is celebrated as a powerful literary attack against racial discrimination. American nation gracefully accepted Renaissance as a great literary and cultural event and recognised it as a part of nation’s consciousness. Why is it that the Indian nation has not given similar treatment to Dalit Literature and deprived its contributions the place it deserves is an important question without a convincing answer. Do great literary works by Dalit writers languish for want of translations is another question that needed to be answered. Whatever be the reasons the fact that mainstream literature dominated the scene and marginalised Dalit literature cannot be hidden. No concerted effort to translate the voluminous writings of Dalit literature into English and other languages was taken up by the literary academies stands testimony to it. As the great works of Dalit literature inspire generations it is time for the celebration of protest in its true spirit of pain and agony in being a Dalit. There is no more appropriate time than now for the cause of Dalit literature as the Tamil Writer, Perumal Murugan is under attack by the caste outfits for penning a thought provoking novel, “Madhorubagan”. It is in this backdrop the present Paper attempts to bring into light how Dalit literature has been marginalised over the years since its origin. The Research Paper also focuses on how Dalit writings in different regional languages and Dalit literature suffered at the hands of mainstream literature.

Keywords: Inhuman treatment, consciousness, languish, voluminous, marginalised

Introduction: In the United States of America, which meted out the most inhuman treatment to the Black Americans, Harlem Renaissance is considered an important movement of literature and is celebrated as a powerful literary attack against racial discrimination. American nation gracefully accepted Renaissance as a great literary and cultural event and recognised it as a part of nation’s consciousness. Why is it that the Indian nation has not given similar treatment to Dalit Literature and deprived its contributions the place it deserves is an important question without a convincing answer. Do great literary works by Dalit writers languish for want of translations is another question that needed to be answered. Whatever be the reasons the fact that mainstream literature dominated the scene and marginalised Dalit literature cannot be hidden. No concerted effort to translate the voluminous writings of Dalit literature into English and other languages was taken up by the literary academies stands testimony to it. As the great works of Dalit literature inspire generations it is time for the celebration of protest in its true spirit of pain and agony in being a Dalit. There is no more appropriate time than now for the cause of Dalit literature as the Tamil Writer, Perumal Murugan is under attack by the caste outfits for penning a thought provoking novel, “Madhorubagan”. It is in this backdrop the present Paper attempts to bring into light how Dalit literature has been marginalised over the years since its origin. The Research Paper also focuses on how Dalit writings in different regional languages and Dalit

literature suffered at the hands of mainstream literature.

In an era of Human Rights and widespread awareness of it literary depictions of the experiences of marginalised groups of people have special significance. The recent growth of Dalit literature in India is an attempt to bring to the forefront the experiences of discrimination, violence and poverty of the Dalit. Often, with religious and social sanctions, these experiences have long been silenced and marginalised as unliterary and Perumal Murugan is the latest victim of it. Dalit literature having begun in Maharashtra and Gujarat has taken substantial shape today and has left its mark in a variety of Indian languages such as Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Malayalam, Hindi etc. This spurt in Dalit writing is a part of the growing need of the Dalits themselves to articulate their experiences. These works which have been for centuries relegated to the margins suffering social inequality and exclusion from the mainstream literature contained descriptions of the traumas of being an untouchable and the targets of upper-caste ideologies and machinations. These works questioned the ideologies and the institutions that placed them at the margins.

The Hegemony of Mainstream Literature: The Dalits have not only been exploited socially, politically and economically, but they have also been deprived of the right to education for long. Centuries of caste stigma and segregation have benumbed the intellectual life of the Dalits. Their views and perceptions have been reduced to merely struggling

for survival and not looking beyond for growth and development despite the richness and variety of their socio-cultural resources. Worst still, they are made to think that their culture is low and mean. It cannot be denied that the ruling class historians and writers have given little attention to the history of life and culture of Dalits. Historical evidences related to Dalits are either destroyed or simply neglected for lack of interest. Dalits were simply marked under slavery and serfdom in India. The Dalits have been presented as people who do not have a history of their own. They had to accept what their opponents wrote about them. However, the truth cannot be suppressed for long. Educated and conscious Dalits have now started to ventilate their views breaking the ring of the ruling class that had misrepresented their history and culture.

The Mainstream literature has treated Dalits as subhuman. It ill-treated and misrepresented the dalits in the literature. It has failed to recognize the rich culture and values of the Dalits. The absence of the social evils such the Sati system and dowry system in Dalit culture has not received any mention in the mainstream literature. The "sustainable development" and "co-existence", which now social scientists and environmentalists are talking about is part of Dalit culture, which is never accredited to them. These unique values of the Dalit communities have never drawn the attention of the upper caste writers. Many of the artistic forms were in fact taken from the Dalit communities. This ingenious quality of the Dalits is never appreciated; rather it is appropriated by the upper caste Hindu writers. The opinions of these so-called writers have been considered as the only truth. Their ideas were considered as the universals. The perennial evils of caste system in India can also be well explained as the manipulation of these intellectual few. Even the name of religion was used to formulate a system of ascribed hierarchy.

Beyond Inequality and Exclusion: Dalit literature confronting the challenges of the so called mainstream literature in the form of its exclusive norms, principles and standards has not only emerged as the radical literature but also rejected its aesthetics and literary theory. Dalit literature aims at dismantling the existing structures of exploitation and restructuring the society and is not just the literature of protest or negation as it made to be perceived. Though Dalit literature first started in Marathi during the seventies, it is now being written in several Indian languages. These literatures, barring languages, do share the egalitarian ideology and expose the exploitative mechanisms latent in the Indian society. More than four decades have passed since dalit literature embarked. Though dalit literature set new standards hitherto unknown and

unpractised in world literature in general and Indian literature in particular, it had to suffer negligence and severe criticism at the hands of the mainstream. For long, dalit literature was not translated into English. Despite many hurdles in its path Indian Dalit Literature went beyond confines of the mainstream literature.

The Growth of Dalit Literature: In the present Indian literary scenario, Indian Writing in English has seen vast growth and wider reach. Apart from this the Indian Literature in vernacular languages has also grown in its output but the reach of it has been restricted to respective regions. The heartening fact that literature produced in vernacular languages is being translated into English. Though the number of translated works is not very high, the emergence of translation as a vividly potential area on the Indian literary scene is a positive sign.

It is solely because of the efforts of great writers such as Mulk Raj Anand and Eleanor Zelliot who translated Marathi dalit poems as An Anthology of Dalit Literature. This was the first attempt of this kind. In the same year, Arjun Dangale, one of the founding members of Dalit Panther in Maharashtra, edited Poisoned Bread. It was a collection of prose, autobiography, poetry, etc. S Anand has attempted to provide causal relationship between the emergence of dalit literature in translation and many factors including the market. After a long of 7 years Lakshmi Holmstrom translated in 2000 the Tamil novel, Karukku, written by Bama in 1992. This autobiographical novel in Tamil won worldwide acclaim only after it was translated into English. This was followed by the publication of Laxman Mane's Upara as The Outsider in 1997 and Laxman Gaikwad's Uchalya as The Branded in 1998 by Sahitya Academy.

The Pivotal Role of English: English as a language has been an instrument of ventilating the thoughts, ideas and expressions to many a colonized and oppressed community all over the globe like the natives of Australia, New Zealand, North America etc. The seminal role played by the English language in bringing out the tribulations and humiliations suffered by the Dalit community, through the process of translations cannot be undermined. Though, many literary attempts have been made by this marginalized community in their vernacular languages beginning from 1970s, the emergence of their English translation is hardly two decades old, starting from 1992. In India, English language has widened the scope for realizing the injustice and inequalities existing in the social system and for making inroads into the creation of a new egalitarian society.

With the global status acquired by English, it can play a pivotal role in transnationalizing the

vernacular literary works from their restricted reach to the global domain. In this context Dalit Literature which has been produced since 1970s in different vernacular languages needs greater fillip and exposure through translation into English. Thus English translation of Dalit Literature can be an eye-opener for the Indian society in particular as it has been petrified with social bias and prejudice since long. At the same time English can also be a conduit to take the translated Dalit Literature closer to mainstream literature. The role of English in unsealing the boundaries of Dalit Literature through translation needs to be duly recognised and is worthy of appreciation.

Present State of Dalit Literature: Dalit literature, has acquired a prominent position in Indian English literature today having carved an important niche for itself as the most powerful form of literary expression. It focuses on writing that includes Dalit characters, descriptions of their living conditions and experiences. Influenced by post-modern literary movements, it questions mainstream literary theories and upper caste ideologies and explores the unrecorded, hidden facts of neglected issues. Exploitation and discrimination of Dalits are the two core areas of protest in much of the Dalit writing which is transforming into a movement.

In fact, the first systematic exploration of anti-caste ideas were traced in Buddhist works. Later the Bhakti movement poetry of the fourteenth century attempted mention of the castes and the outcastes. Dalit literature, in the modern era, received its first impetus with the advent of leaders like Mahatma Phule and Ambedkar, who powerfully projected the issues of Dalits through their works and writings. It gave a fillip and a new trend in Dalit writing began with many Dalit and non-Dalit writers with their works in Marathi, Hindi, Punjabi, Tamil, Telugu and English. By the 1960s, Dalit literature saw a fresh crop of new writers such as Mahasweta Devi, Namdeo Dhasal, Daya Pawar, Arjun Dangle, Sachi Rautray, Rabi Singh, Basudev Sunani, Bama, Abhimani, Poomani, Iyamam, Marku, Mangal Rathod, Neerave Patel, Perumal Murugan, Palamalai, Sudhakar, D. Gopi and others.

Beyond the Confines: Dalit writings are mounting a rebellion against upper-caste presumptions towards the Dalits with a hidden motive to enjoy privileges in the society. They are breaking their silence of ages and trying to sensitize the society through their literary attempts. Education and exposure to literature have helped them to move forward from the ill-conceived ideas of exploitation and contamination forced upon them by the upper castes. Identification of their situation with that of the Blacks in America could not have been possible without exposure to education and literature.

Though Dalit literature covers a wide range of literary genres, in content, however, similarities could be traced between authors and their works. The medium is different but the overall message in the works is as much about community not individuality, revolt not passivity, progress not backwardness. The shared political position of these authors is against the hegemony of upper and forward-class Hindu beliefs and for the power of the human being against oppressive social rules. Because of this, cultural concepts such as religion and identity are called into question. The language of these texts is very faithful to local, spoken dialects, as high-flown language is not seen to have adequate political power and effect.

The common ground of Dalit literary movement is the social oppression and suppression by the practitioners of Hindu caste system. This movement puts more stress on the lived experiences of the writers while depicting the prevailing circumstances. Only those who have undergone the trials of being socially ostracized can be said to write Dalit literature of any political or moral relevance. Dalit writers form a spectrum that comprises different historical, social, and political background spreading over the length and breadth of India from Punjab, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and to Andhra Pradesh. It could be said that Dalit literature laid a firm foundation in the mid-20th century, but its framework was established in the early 19th century. Today, Dalit writers have their own literary foundations and publish numerous journals. They also have a number of political organizations.

Widening the Perspectives: The first and foremost impact of literature in translation is that it widens the network of readers. Greater reach of translated works help break down the linguistic barriers and disintegrate cultural borders. In the case of translations of Dalit Literature the issues of dalits in India get national and international focus and exposure. The remarks of Ganguli are particularly apt to be quoted here as she says: "Another instance of rapid trans-nationalization of dalit issues is the widespread commissioning of translation of dalit literary and political writing by some of the major publishing houses, such as Oxford University Press, Penguin India, Orient Longman and Macmillan." Another writer-translator, Mukherjee, A.P., expresses similar views in the Note to his translated work, "Joothan", "I wanted to translate it the moment I finished reading it. I wanted to share this text with a wider readership in the hope that they too, will feel its transformative power. Here in Joothan readers of English language texts will find another answer to Gayatri Spivak's famous question: 'Can the subaltern speak?' ... Very little of Dalit literature is available in translation. High class and in a global language, many world communities become aware of the

injustice and inhuman practices, which would provide opportunities for fair and open discussion of the subject. Also it may provide new opportunities to introduce new academic study courses on 'Dalit upper class Indian voices, whether in India or in the Diaspora, continue to stand in for the Indian voice. It is time that this hegemony be ruptured and other voices heard. It is time now that they be read in other parts of the world besides India. I hope that the English translation of Joothan will enlarge Valmiki's readership manifold." Thus the dalit writings of different vernaculars upon translation into English besides enhancing readership may also bring in a social transformation in the caste-conscious society. Further as the centuries-long oppression has been given expression Literature Studies', 'Subaltern Studies' etc., as is already introduced in some western universities worldwide. Eventually, these may expedite the process of liberation and formation of alternative hegemonies.

The exploitation of the marginalized by the hierarchical upper-castes and the resultant sorrows and struggles, their culture and beliefs which had been hitherto unrevealed in the mainstream literature were exposed to the upper class 'others through translation of Dalit literary works in English. Dalit literature in English translation came out as an eye-opener for the society which had been fossilized with social discrimination and injustice. The stark realities reflected in such writings impacted the consciousness of the people in the upper rungs of the social ladder leading towards a changed perception though in a belated and slow manner. As regards the gap between Dalit literature and its readers, Sharankumar Limbale points out, "Since most Dalit writing and discussion of this writing have been in the various regional languages of India, very little of either is accessible in English. This is a major gap given that much of the theorizing in India and abroad about Indian literatures, culture and society, whether from Marxist, Postcolonial or subaltern perspectives, has been in English. Only some of the theorists have drawn on materials from the regional languages, and even they have taken virtually no note of interventions by Dalits." It is only with the translation of dalit literature in this global language did emerge the widespread awakening among the oppressed and the oppressive communities. Not only the voices of the voiceless started to be heard by the world but also the dalits of various regions and states were able to communicate and share their miseries only through this interlinking language. "English is the only tool that can connect the Dalits of India and being the language of modernity, it can connect people around the globe to the Dalit experience," attests Journalist Chandra Bhan Prasad. (qtd. Das)

Dalit literature in vernacular languages has not received serious thought or attention for a long time and has been disregarded in the literary circles. Nevertheless the situation changed after the publication of English translations from modern Marathi Dalit literature entitled "Poisoned Bread" edited by Arjun Dangle there began serious discussions in the literary circles. The momentum gained as a result of the works of such academics as Arun Prabha Mukherjee who translated Omprakash Valmiki's "Joothan" into English in 2003 with an introduction to it, the preliminary inclination to allow new literary genres by the dominant literary discourses, has, over the time, given way to wider acceptance and circulation of Dalit literature in and outside India. The arduous journey of Dalit literature in general and its vernacular version in particular remained on the periphery for long until the fag end of twentieth century when it acquired a recognizable identity with growing number of writings from different parts of the country. Its movement now to the centre-stage can largely be attributed to the laudable service rendered by English language in bringing out original works in it and through translations of Dalit literary works from regional languages. A brief review of English translations of works produced in the recent past by writers from different vernacular languages will endorse the vital role of translations in general and the seminal contribution of English language in particular in unsealing and widening the boundaries of Dalit literature.

Conclusion: Literature is a window that provides for the voices that have been silenced or remained silent for a long time to ventilate their views. Among several reasons for not being heard or less heard, language is one of the main factors for such a situation. It may be national or international languages compared to regional languages. When there is a need to voice and convey literature to more number of readers, translation, seems to be one of the useful instruments. As Gopal Guru (2008) explicates: "What is the role of translation? Translations help in bridging the gap between two minds existing in two different spaces and times, viz. the sociological space in terms of the caste location, and the intellectual space it allows the dalit concerns to occupy. It also connects two minds existing in two different spatial contexts. The story of the self, translated in a communicative language also reveals the foreignness of other's mind. First order translation seeks to communicate the life experience at the horizontal terrain of language transition.... Second order translation makes the dalit experience available to a larger public through its reproduction in connecting it to a language like English, then possibly to several vernacular languages.... Translation plays an

important role in terms of creating a moral impact upon the recalcitrant self, usually from the upper caste. It can open the ethical/moral corridor within the hardened self."

Many works of Dalit Literature are available in regional languages restricting them to respective regions, and translation is the means to widen the network. At present English is the only access to Dalit Literature in different languages through translation. Translation of Dalit texts into English is not only an empowerment of Dalit writers but it is also enrichment of literature in English. It opens a world of actual knowledge of the oppressed, their trials and tribulations. The translations fill up major gaps in Indian writing in English which has not been able to reflect the voices of the socially and economically marginalized sections.

Dalit literature as a subject has already been introduced in many foreign universities whereas a very few Indian universities have Dalit literature as a subject or a full fledged paper. It is high time that the

academia understood that by not introducing Dalit Literature as a subject in the higher education, it would be perpetuation of suppressing the voices of the oppressed. On the other hand Dalits, studying in universities have been forced to study the literature which is not their own. No text books ever present Dalit culture as an integral part of Indian culture. There is no dearth of Dalit literature and a good number of Dalit novels, poems, autobiographies and short stories exist in many regional languages and many of them have already been translated into English. These writings represent the true culture and identity of the Dalit communities. Therefore, they should be introduced and taught in true spirit. Now Dalits must speak about themselves and others must listen to their voices. Others must recognize that the Dalits also have a story about themselves and they are not without their own history and culture. However, the aim of introducing Dalit literature should not be to create another island of literature like mainstream literature which has never been inclusive.

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