

Dalit Perspectives in Mainstream Indian Writings

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Abstract

The academic interest in Dalit Studies is a continuation of the debate on marginality within Postcolonial Studies. The technological developments and globalisation have also helped the growth of Dalit Studies at the global level. Despite this rousing reception, India had to witness the bloody Khairlanji massacre in 2006 and the suicide of the Dalit student, Rohith Vemula in 2016. This demands an understanding of the reception of Dalit Studies on Indian civil society. It is with this perspective that this Paper attempts to find the Dalit perspectives in mainstream Indian novels. This impact can be found on various cultural spheres of Indian creative works.

Keywords: *Dalit, Indian Novels, Mainstream, Marginality, Postcolonial Studies*

Introduction

The idea of perception with its thrust on the role of the reader has broadened the scope of Comparative Literature. It serves two purposes: firstly, it moves away from the dominance of the influencing agent and turns towards the reader as an active receiver; secondly, the focus on differences in perception of texts in different contexts accommodates diverse aspects of culture. Studies on 'influence' are limited to the influence of literature, theoretical concepts and literary movements. In the context of the rise of Dalit Literature and politics, Dalit characters are included in the mainstream creative works. This paper argues that the inclusion of Dalit characters in contemporary literary and media representations shows not just the reception of Dalit politics but is a response to the Dalit uprising that took place in the 1990s, and its global visibility in 2001 following the World Conference against Racism (WCAR) in Durban. This also helps us understand the reception of Marginal Writings and the political identity movements on the larger cultural sphere. In the last twenty years, Dalits have been registering their footprints in all the fields, even though the violence on Dalits continues. In a sense, the reception of the Dalit question is partly due to the development of technology and globalization. This is the case of the marginal communities across the world.

Just as the ‘nationality’ debate in the early 20th century had to accommodate the caste question, the debates on contemporary India within this new world order, especially after 1990s, have to incorporate the Dalit question. All these factors – political, representational, cultural and educational issues – have influenced the producers of contemporary works of literature, cinema, art, etc. Due to the visibility of the Dalit question, writers turn towards the issues of marginal people. This demands us to study the inclusion of Dalit characters and its function in various representations. From this perspective, this paper tries to raise questions on the nature of the perception of Dalit uprising in the following representations: Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* (Indian English novel), Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (Indian English novel) and Perumalmurugan’s *Pookkuzhi* (Tamil novel by a non-Dalit writer). Through an analysis of these representations, this paper highlights the difference between the method of studying Dalits and the method of studying caste.

The impact of Dalit Studies is visible in all the spheres of contemporary culture in the Indian context. Here, the term ‘Dalit Studies’ refers to the literature, activities of Dalit movements, formation of Dalit parties, rise of Dalit criticism, recovery of Dalit history, documentaries on Dalit issues and also the formation of a Dalit canon in the academic sphere. An overview of the activities that has taken place in different socio-cultural and political spheres in connection with the rise of the Dalit question in India may help us understand the nature and ambience of this reception. It may also help us pose the question regarding the ethics and politics of the reception of Dalit Studies in the mainstream literary and cultural representations.

Review of Literature

Paik (2014) portrays that the Dalit Women’s Education in Modern India is a social and cultural history that challenges the triumphant narrative of modern secular education to analyse the constellation of social, economic, political and historical circumstances that both opened and closed opportunities to many Dalits. Banerjee (2016) describes that the time and again referring to our experience of how dalit studies have come about in India, and with gender studies somewhere in the background, the essay argues that in order to carve out a field of adivasi studies, we must revisit histories of political and literary representation, political and cultural autonomy, vernacular languages and indeed religion and conversion. Kshirsagar, R. K. (1994) elaborated in his book about dalit studies: Sagajananda is a Dalit spiritual leader, who set up Nandanar Educational Trust in Chidambaram for providing education to children from the depressed classes, particularly girls, in 1916. B. Sunder formed ‘Bhim Sena’, a voluntary corps force for self-defence at Gulbarga in Karnataka. Its branches were opened in many places in Andhra, Karnataka and Maharashtra. He insisted that Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Muslims, Christians, Anglo-Indians, Sikhs and Parsies are minorities in India; as such they should forge a united front and protect their fundamental rights. Kakkan and Ram were a few other significant leaders in this congress controlled Dalit history. Narayanan is another

significant leader in this tradition who served as the tenth President of India and first Dalit President in the Independent India.

Dalit Movement and Activism

Dalit movement and activism in several parts of the country are inseparable from the intellectual history. It sometimes offers the possibility for leaders to enter into the political domain and later get into the mainstream electoral politics. Dalit movements were started in the pre-independence context with the hope to alleviate the problem of untouchability through colonial administration and through the missionary activities. Distinct political, ideological movements emerged in the colonial period to represent the issue at the regional level in different regions. Hence, there was no pan-Indian movement or party in principle or action. However, these movements have common goals of opposing untouchability, discrimination and claiming social equality.

Dalit consciousness through Dalit Literature

Literature with Dalit consciousness is being produced since 1990. As Ambedkar's ideology was deeply rooted in Maharashtra, Marathi Dalit writings were translated into English as well as into other Indian languages. The term 'Dalit' got pan-Indian recognition. Taking Ambedkar's wider perspectives on the Dalit question, comparisons were made between Afro-American Literature and Dalit Literature. It emerged as part of the interest on the rise of indigenous cultures across the world. It then gave way to the emergence of Fourth World Literature or Indigenous Studies as an academic discipline.

Dalit Literature of the Northern and Central India

The sixties saw many new things happening in Marathi literature. For the first time a poet, Narayan Sureve, wrote about the problems of workers. The Little Magazine movement also took root and flourished in this decade. Indian literature made its acquaintance with the Angry Young Men. In Marathi Dalit literature, Anna Bhau Sathe and Shankarrao Kharat were popular during 1960s. Baburao Bagul's short story collection *Jevha Mee Jaat Chorli Hoti* (When I had concealed my caste) made vibrant waves in the Marathi literary world. Some of the admirers said that it was an epic of Dalits while others compared it to the jazz music of the Blacks. Bagul's stories taught Dalit writers to give creative shape to their experiences and feelings. In the seventies, Dalit critics began to theorise on Dalit literature and its role.

The Media and the Dalit Question

The print media and publishing houses accommodated Dalit issues due to the social and intellectual pressure created during the 1990s. Dalit autobiographies and literature were translated into English and other European languages.

Emergence of Dalit Political Parties

The emergence of Dalit political parties took place in the 1980s. The constitution of India provides reservation for Dalits to contest in the reserved (SC) constituencies. The elected Dalit representatives from mainstream political parties did not raise the Dalit issues in the Parliament and Legislative Assemblies. Elected Dalit youth gaining the inspiration from Dalit movement thought of their political aspirations and started Dalit political parties. Dalit parties gained empowerment through mobilization in civil society and strong social movements. Dalits have formed political parties in Hindi heartland, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu.

Dalit Perspectives in Indian Writing

Dalit Studies, Dalit Politics and Dalit Literature became so significant during the post-Durban context that the mainstream literature in India – both Indian writing in English and Indian regional literature – started accommodating Dalit characters and themes related to Dalit subjugation. These attempts cannot simply be regarded as appropriation of Dalit politics but remain an engagement with the debates in Dalit literature/experience. These works significantly differ in content and perspective from the early nationalist/modernist writings of Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao and so on. While the nationalist writers who accommodated the caste question did not face the issue of authenticity, the writers of late 1990s and the early 2000s were quite conscious of the questions of authenticity that came along with the debates on Dalit politics /literature. Hence these works and their nature of engagement with Dalit/caste question demands a close attention. It is from this perspective that this chapter chooses to analyze Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008), Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) and Perumalmurugan's *Pookkuzhi* (2013) to highlight the nature of reception of Dalit studies in Indian English Writings and Tamil Regional Writings.

Form becomes significant in all these writings. Adiga has experimented through the second person narrative - a letter-writing mode. The story develops as an autobiography of a down trodden, Balram Halwai. This form gains significance in the context of theorising reception of Dalit autobiographical writings. But the Dalit protagonist is portrayed as a beneficiary, who has achieved economic empowerment, in contrast to the victimhood and exploitation found in Dalit autobiographies. The character mocks at the customs and practices of democracy, and religious beliefs. He sarcastically describes the corrupt political system and bureaucracy. On the other hand, Arundhati Roy vividly combines the issues regarding subjugation of Dalits and women, suggesting that the Indian social practice of caste is inseparable from women's oppression. Ammu, differing in opinions with her husband, moves

back to her home town –Ayemenem– with her kids, where she develops a relationship with a Dalit labourer, Velutha. The narrative of *Pookkuzhi* seems to be a strategy for highlighting the strategic operations of caste at the local level. The work is a conscious effort of Perumalmurugan to expose caste-practices in rural Tamil Nadu. An Indian reader may identify this novel with the literary genre of ‘Realism’ as caste is a practice of the everyday in India. But the central character’s constant fear that anything may happen at any time takes the narrative beyond the realistic mode. The author vividly describes the urban Dalit character Saroja’s shock over the rural customs and rituals. The activities of the village refer to the real incidents - the inter-caste marriages of Illavarasan-Divya in Dharmapuri and Kannagi-Murugesan in Cuddalore, and the resultant conflicts.

Significant events like the brutal killing of Dalits in Khairlanji and other places, the Durban Conference, K.R. Narayanan’s ascent to the Rashtrapathi Bhavan, the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party, Chandrabhan Prasad’s views in the English media, growth of Dalit literature, violence on Dalits, their retaliation and the counter violence in many regions, and reports on Human Rights Commission created an atmosphere from which *The White Tiger*, *The God of small Things* and *Pookkuzhi* emerged. Since the reception of Dalit politics affected the entire culture, it got reflected in all socio-political and cultural spheres. It could be seen both in Indian English Writings and in the Regional Writings of non-Dalits. A close reading of Arvind Adiga, Arundhati Roy and Perumalmurugan shows the broad reception of Dalit politics in the cultural sphere.

Conclusion

The reception of Dalit issues in these works is different from the representation of the ‘untouchables’ in the works of Mulk Raj Anand and Thakali Sivashankara Pillai who followed a Gandhian perspective. But these works – *The White Tiger*, *The God of Small Things* and *Pookkuzhi* – reflect the impact of Ambedkar and Dalit activism in the literary public sphere. a brief summary of these works and will discuss the socio- economic and political factors that influenced these works, the characters and the form of these narratives. If *The White Tiger* strives to represent economic deprivation and the protagonist’s efforts to counter this economical deprivation, *The God of Small Things* focuses on the religious nature of the communists and Christians in Kerala, and *Pookkuzhi* exposes the cultural influence that gets religious sanction at the local level in a Tamil society. With this insight, it can be concluded that the Dalit perspectives in mainstream Indian novels incorporated.

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