

A Critical Discourse on Aesthetics in Contemporary Indian Dalit Literature

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Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to study Aesthetics in contemporary Indian Dalit literature. Dalit literature is prominently a literature of social reform and awareness. In the second half of the 20th century, Dalit literature has emerged as a new literary current to address the prevalent regional issues of modern India especially the caste system. With the rise of Dalit literature, Dalit critics have demanded a separate aesthetic yardstick to interpret and evaluate Dalit literature. Since ages, canons of literary aesthetics have been shaped by the mainstream literature. However, Modern and Postmodern movement has brought a paradigm shift in the very nature of Aesthetics. Across the world, literature from the marginalized and subaltern class is gaining instant recognition. Unlike mainstream literature, Dalit literature not only attacks the established caste-based social stratification but also rejects established literary canons. Taking impetus from the thoughts of Dr. Ambedkar and Jyotirao Phule, Dalit literature has surfaced with a new zeal and confidence to assert liberty, equality and fraternity in society. Dalit writers' resentment and revolt is clearly reflected in subverting the classical notions of Aesthetics. The beauty (Aesthetics) of Dalit literature lies in its aspiration for the inalienable human rights – life, liberty, equality, justice and dignity. With the emergence of Dalit consciousness, Dalit writers have developed their own literary style, form and tradition that is challenging, revolting and rebellious in nature. This subversive and aberrant literary approach is reshaping the very concept of Aesthetics in Dalit literature.

Keywords: *Aesthetics, Dalit and Dalit literature, Postmodern Literature, Dalit Aesthetics*

Art, one of the most distinctive and universal aspects of the humans, embodies human's innate desire to imitate reality. In Aristotle's words "art is representational". However, it is not mere imitation that determines art but it is the artistic skills that recreate and redesign reality. From the Classical antiquity to modernity, art practices have developed various theories to appreciate different forms of art. Today, these theories have developed a separate branch of philosophy known as Aesthetics. It is widely acknowledged that we appreciate art because it gives us pleasure and appeals to our emotions. Since the classical age, there has been a ceaseless debate over whether beauty is subjective; lies 'in the eyes of beholder' or objective; an inherent part of an artwork itself. In the classical age, beauty was thought to be objective i.e. eternally governed by some immutable high laws. On the contrary, in the Age of Reason beauty was regarded 'no other than subjective'. Later in Postmodern age, this subjective notion became a catalyst to bring a radical transformation in the very concept of beauty. In the Postmodern age, beauty does not 'lies in the eyes of beholder' but lies in the culturally conditioned mind of the beholder. In other words the concept of Aesthetic is not transcendental, absolute, arbitrary

and eternal. It changes over the passing of time and more importantly it is subject to conditioning. What was once considered low, rough, repugnant, inelegant, bizarre, offending is now creative, meaningful and artistic. Ellen Dissanayake, in her famous work *Homo Aestheticus* (2010), writes:

What seemed at the time a shocking (or amusing)..., can now be recognized as a crack in the dike of high art that in the past two or three decades has released an ever increasing flood of antiestablishment theory and realization-of-theory (i.e., works of art). (Dissanayake 200)

In the light of Aesthetics, Indian Dalit literature finds beauty in human emancipation. It is the literature of those people who were socially and culturally exploited for thousands of years. For dalit writers literature is a tool to create consciousness among people about their exploitation. The function of Dalit aesthetics is to stir the reader's emotions about the gruesome treatment they receive from the very society they live in. The root of Dalit literature actually lies in social inequality which has been prevalent in India since ancient times. Due to the age-old caste system, people are divided into different castes and sub-castes. This stratification is strictly hierarchical in which people, who form the hegemonic class, control all kinds of power and resources whereas people at the bottom of the hierarchy have a very limited excess to power and resources. After the independence, the Constitution of India outlawed the caste system but in practice it still exists in various forms.

Unlike mainstream literature in India, Dalit literature not only attacks the established social norms mainly caste system but also rejects established literary norms. With the emergence of Dalit consciousness, Dalit writers have developed their own literary style, form and tradition that is challenging, revolting and rebellious in nature. Nevertheless, the mainstream literary critics such as P. S. Rege and Balkrishnana Kawthekar are of the opinion that Indian literary tradition is rich enough to appreciate and evaluate Dalit literature. It does not need any separate and distinct yardstick to evaluate its artistic expression. If Dalit literature is great, it will withstand any test and any time. Artistic values cannot be destroyed only because they have been rejected by Dalit writers. In P.S. Rege's words:

When measuring the significance of any artistic creation, only artistic values should be employed, all others are irrelevant- they are meaningless. If they were to have a place, it would be minor. (Rege 29)

On the other hand, Dalit critics present their arguments to defend Dalit literature and its separate identity. Sharankumar Limbale, a renowned Marathi Dalit writer and critic, argues that Dalit literature is novel form in the area of literature and it puts an emphasis on fresh experiences, a new sensitivity with new words, and a new way of expressing Dalit's suffering and revolt. Sharankumar Limbale presents a systematic understanding and analysis of Dalit aesthetics in his book *Dalit Sahityache Saundaryashastra* (2004) which was later translated into English by Alok Kumar Mukherjee as *Towards An Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*. This work is considered to be the first critical work that investigates aesthetics in Dalit literature. It has been assumed that Dalits, being a low-caste and uncivilized, cannot produce a sense of beauty in their works. According to Limbale, this claim is shallow and narrow. One should look at Dalit writings from a broader perspective. In the following words Sharankumar Limbale clearly draws a demarcating line between Dalit aesthetics and traditional aesthetics.

Ambedkarite thought is the aesthetics of Dalit literature....this literature cannot be evaluated on the basis of either Sanskrit aesthetics or western aesthetics. The aesthetics of this (Dalit) literature can only be based on the thinking of Ambedkar and Phule. (Limbale 147-48)

This disengagement has also raised a significant question on the aesthetic aspect of Dalit literature. How can a literature generate aesthetic taste for its readers which is full of anger, resentment, abusing and offending words, abhorrent and repugnant images? For instance in the following lines from *Under Dadar Bridge*, a dalit poet Prakash Jadhav narrates the mental state of a protagonist who is a son of a prostitute and he is in search of his identity.

‘Hey, Ma, tell me my religion. Who am I?
What am I?’
‘You are not a Hindu or a Muslim!
You are an abandoned spark of the
World’s lusty fires.
Religion? This is where I stuff religion!
Whores have only one religion...
‘Who was he? Who’s my father?’
Scraping and scratching at the VD sores...
She would answer: ‘He was some swine or other!’
‘Whore! Tell me the truth, or else...’
‘Why? Was there only one who mounted
And then abandoned my body?
How many names shall I mention?
Many came and many went.’(Dangle 65-66)

Since ages, conventional aesthetic standards have been employed to evaluate and appreciate mainstream literature. Dalit critics argue that these standards are basically designed to suit and justify the socio-economic output of the hegemonic class. Since Dalit literature is the result of the very different socio-economic condition of the marginalized people, it obviously needs different aesthetic consideration to suit and justify its literary works. Sharankumar Limbale aptly says:

To assert that someone’s writing will be called literature only when ‘our’ literary standards can be imposed on. It is a sign of cultural dictatorship. The yardsticks of literature do not remain standstill for all time. With changing times, literature changes, and there remains the possibility of change in its criticism too. New literary trends cannot be evaluated with traditional literary yardsticks. (Limbale 07)

In linguistic aspect, Dalit literature is originally found in regional, dialectal and clumsy languages. Visual images and symbols used in the poems are rough, asymmetrical, comfortless and disturbing. Such literary behavior of Dalit literature poses an important question on the aesthetics of Dalit literature: Can Dalit literature be beautiful? The style and nature of Dalit literature is aberrant and subversive. It deconstructs the prevailing linguistic conventions for literature which is set by the hegemonic class. Today, this against-the-stream attitude is a conspicuous characteristic of the postmodern literature. Dalit writers use crude language and disturbing graphical descriptions because the language used by dalit people in their community gives more authentic impression while narrating their social conditions. In the following words from a short story titled *The Cull*, Dalit writer Amitabh presents a lifelike graphical description of a moment when a dead animal is being skinned and people are waiting to get their share of meat.

On the scrub under the gum trees were gathered all the Mahars from shanty town. Each carried a knife and some kind of container. Some made do with a broken piece of a mud pot or a rag. Some didn’t have even that, so they would have to carry the meat in the folds of the dhoti or sari they were wearing. He (Pandya) and

his son Somya started skinning the carcass with their knives... As soon as Pandya and Somya were out, others, like sanguine Rajput warriors, pounced upon the prey, raising a full-throated battle cry...Tens of knives were sawing at the chest at once. Whatever piece, small or big, they could manage, they cut and put into their containers. The knives slashed and sliced, chunks and chunks of meat were piled into the hampers and basket. It was a free-for-all. (Dangle 221-222)

The beauty of the Dalit literature lies in its appeal through disturbing words. For example, in *Jasumati, My Black Jasmine*, Neerav Patel, a renowned Gujarati poet and critic, narrates how a dalit woman is molested in public. In the title of the poem, the poet has deliberately used 'black' adjective for Jasmine. This is very suggestive because for dalit people 'black' is close to their reality. In the following words the poet gives a horrific picture of how a young dalit girl's chastity is violated in public.

Instantly you become feast for the zooming vultures.

A nasty joke,
A quick and sudden hug
A slap upon your heavy buttocks.
You are cornered like an easy prey.
They enjoy the delicious
Most touchable flesh of an untouchable girl.
You moan and become mother-
Mother of a bastard.
They button up the trousers
And take a plunge in the ganges
They defile you, dear Jasumati
Like a crow defiles with his dirty bill. (Patel 113)

For the Dalit writers, real beauty of literature lies in its action. If literature is unable to bring change in the world, in such literature lies a real ugliness. Neerav Patel, in the following words, nicely explains the pragmatic approach of aesthetics in Dalit literature.

The sword that is strong enough to strike and sharp enough to cut the target into two is beautiful and not the one that has a blunt blade but has a well-carved, gilded handle. And that helped develop his aesthetic sense. He (Dalit poet) sharpened his poetic talent so that he can strike, and strike at the very root of the evil. (Patel 116)

The major literary genres used by Dalit writers are autobiography, poem, short story and essay. These genres are mainly employed to depict the painful and inhuman treatment to the people of dalit community which is firmly rooted in almost all the regional communities. In Dalit shorts stories, poems and autobiographies, story does not move as per Aristotelian rule i.e. beginning-climax-end but story ends where it starts i.e. no change in the life of character. Characters are born with pains, they suffer and they are left by the writer with eternal torment.

Since ancient time, Indian literature is highly influenced by aesthetics and literary theories which were developed by Sanskrit scholars. In the medieval period, the renowned Sanskrit poets and literary critics enriched this tradition. However, modern Indian literature has adapted the western literary theories and European knowledge and methodology of reading and writing. Eventually, this resulted in a new hybrid literary culture in India in which the contemporary Dalit literature bears a significant contribution to the development of new aesthetic theory. However, the mainstream critics argue that "Dalit literature must be assessed on the basis of traditional critical theories. There are universal

values embedded in literature, which never change” (Limbale 106). To answer this Sharankumar Limbale argues that:

The act of imagination called art is impermanent and ever-changing. Literature changes with changing culture. Unless the yardsticks change, the relationship between literature and criticism will be fractured. Like literature, criticism, too, is apt to change. Just as the course of literature has changed from one period to another, so has the mode of criticism. (Limbale 107)

Instead of following the age-old notions developed by the hegemonic class, the marginalized literature, especially the Black literature in the West, has adapted postmodern norms of literature. Sharankumar Limbale says that in the earlier literature the chief focus was on the life of kings and noblemen. There was no space for the slaves, peasants, serfs, downtrodden people and oppressed classes in literature. Back then, the society could not accept a hero from the oppressed class but today marginalized literature is chiefly about those who are voiceless and this is the reason why Dalit literature is accepted and well acclaimed across the world.

In Dalit literature, behind the anger and resentment there lies an aesthetic that is life-affirming and realistic. It harshly revolts and attacks to eradicate the evil and inhuman practices prevalent in different forms in society especially the caste system. Dalit literature does not believe in romanticizing the day-to-day life incidents. It holds mirror up to society so that people can see their own evil reflection. Thus, aesthetics in Dalit literature lies in its vision of social reform, freedom, justice, equality, brotherhood and above all humanism. Since Dalit literature is deeply inspired by the revolutionary Ambedkarite thoughts, its major concern is to protect and promote the inherent dignity, self respect and inalienable rights of humans. This is aptly seen in the following poem by Anna Bahu Sathe, a renowned dalit poet from Maharashtra.

The rich have exploited us without end,
The priests have tortured us,
As if stones had eaten jewels
And thieves had become great.
Sitting on the chariot of unity
Let us go forward
To break the chains of class and caste
Hold to the name of Bhim! (Dangle 05)

This humanistic approach and emphasis on human values are the real aesthetic standards of Dalit literature. Therefore, the real beauty of Dalit literature lies in its vision of social reform, emancipation, freedom, justice, equality, brotherhood and above all humanism. The classical notions of aesthetics judge literature based on the concept of ‘Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram’. Dalit literature rejects this spiritualistic and abstract approach of aesthetics which often makes literature vague and unrealistic. This kind of literature cannot function as didactic literature to bring change in society. As a critic, Sharankumar Limbale presents the following aesthetic standards to judge Dalit literature:

- Artists must be motivated by their experience.
- Artists must socialize their experiences.
- Artists’ experiences must have the strength to cross provincial boundaries.
- Artists’ experiences must seem relevant to all time. (Limbale 120)

The pragmatic approach of Dalit aesthetics bears some limitations. In order to raise the social and cultural issues, dalit writers have reduced aesthetics to focus on a specific group of people. This intense reductionist approach has lost its universal appeal. Literature always transcends time, place and culture. Moreover, Dalit literature does not accept non-dalit writer's work who writes on the socio-economic conditions of the dalit people. "By Dalit literature," Limbale defines "I mean writing about Dalits by Dalit writers with a dalit consciousness" (Limbale 19). If the aim of Dalit literature is to produce "an aesthetic that is life-affirming and realistic" (19) then the exclusion of non-dalit writers makes no sense. Non-dalits writers such as Premchand and Mulk Raj Anand have envisioned the sufferings of the dalits through literary expression which serve aesthetic that is life-affirming and realistic. Dalit aesthetics which rests on humanitarian grounds should have an appeal to all the people of marginal classes who has been persecuted and oppressed. The demand of separate aesthetic standards to evaluate Dalit literature is apt. However, for the proper assessment of the many dimensions of a work of art, it would be inappropriate to employ fixed aesthetic yardsticks.

Dalit literature, which has begun its journey as a protest literature and whose chief function is to portray the true picture of Dalit's life, has now occupied a significant place in the contemporary Indian literature. With the development of Dalit consciousness in the post-independence era, Dalit literature has succeeded to earn a significant identity which is epitomized in the capitalized 'D' in Dalit literature. Subverting the traditional notions of aesthetics, Dalit literature has introduced a new yardstick to judge the artistic taste of literature, which has firmly secured a space in the literary tradition of Aesthetics.

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