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THE SUBALTERN LITERATURE IN INDIA - A JOURNEY TO A BETTER TOMORROW

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Abstract

This paper 'The Subaltern Literature in India- A journey to a better Tomorrow', defines the term 'subaltern', discusses about whom would come under the category and states the relevance of the word in today's Indian context. Originally used as a term for subordinates in military hierarchies, subaltern is now used to refer to groups who are outside the established structure of political representation, any person or group of inferior rank and station, whether because of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion. In our contemporary Indian society the scheduled castes, Tribal communities and oppressed women fall into the category of the subaltern. Proving wrong the popular theories that the subaltern cannot speak, writings of the oppressed and the subaltern classes have carved a niche for itself and have proved that the subaltern can speak. Of late, Indian tribal writings, dalit literature and women's writings, drenched in firsthand pain, bring out the vehemently forceful voice of the voiceless to the world with a determination to be heard. To know is the first step in visualizing social change. To understand and empathise is the path to a more equal and humane society. This paper endeavours to emphasise that it is important to acknowledge the subaltern contribution to literature as an efficient tool that can bring about social change and move their position from subaltern to the centre.

1. Introduction

"Men are mortal. So are ideas. An idea needs propagation as much as a plant needs watering. Otherwise both will wither and die."- These are the words of the champion of the subaltern in India, Dr. B.R Ambedkar. But one has to

acknowledge that the basic right to express one's ideas is denied to many classes of the society. These silenced, muted, oppressed and voiceless groups of people, finally after many years of struggle and hardships, have managed to find their own small voice and this voice of the voiceless is termed as subaltern literature.

'Subaltern' originally is a term used for subordinates in military hierarchies. Subaltern was first used in a nonmilitary sense by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci to refer to groups who are outside the established structure of political representation, any person or group of inferior rank and station, whether because of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion. In the contemporary Indian society the scheduled castes, Tribal communities and oppressed women fall into the category of the subaltern.

According to theorist and philosopher, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'subaltern' is not just a classy word for any oppressed but the people who are completely denied both mimetic and political forms of representation. She even presents a very critical question if the subaltern can really speak. She makes us understand it better by stating the example of Sati. The only historical record of the social practice, Sati was written by either British colonial historians or the religious heads of the Indian nation. The colonial writers thought of it as a barbaric practice of an under developed country while the native religious leaders portrayed it as a height of martyrdom and chastity but there is not a single record of the practice of Sati as narrated by a woman of that time and what she had to say about it. That is because she was either too oppressed to express her emotions or she was dead already, a victim to Sati. So the general conclusion was that the subaltern cannot speak. But now writings of the oppressed and the subaltern classes have carved a niche for itself and have proved that the subaltern can speak.

Authentic subaltern literature is written by those who have suffered the marginalisation. It can be studied by all but created only by the subaltern class itself. If one looks at Mulk Raj Anand's novel 'Coolie' or Arunthathi Roy's 'God of Small Things' for instance, it is about the suffering of the Dalit and the downtrodden, penned by the upper caste writer. That's why it sometimes lacks

insight and authenticity. One is used only to hear the voices of the oppressed in the language of the oppressor which is a charitable attitude towards the suffering of the oppressed class, instead of deep pain and anger, which one finds in regional Dalit literature. This marginalised culture, which is uncorrupt by the globalization, flourishes away from the mainstream talks about the struggle between castes, seen from the point of view of the lower caste, the have-nots, the minority, the marginal, the subaltern. It describes the world differently from the perspective of the subaltern.

2. Tribal Literature

Tribal communities have more than one problem in recording their life of deprivation and poverty and expressing their feelings, thoughts, pain of oppression and anguish. Its not just oppression and isolation that have kept them silent so far, it is also the fact that many Indian tribal dialects do not have their own written script. So the Tribal literature in India has always been delivered orally. However, things have taken a fresh turn in the recent years with many written versions coming into vogue; tribals of India have indeed taken to writing nowadays. Many tribal languages now possess their own scripts or have taken recourse to state scripts. Approximately 4 decades ago, when Dalit literature started pulling the nation's attention tribal writers also came into the limelight. Marathi writer Atmaram Rathod and Laxman Mane are a few popular writers from nomadic tribal communities. Kochereti from Kerela and Alma Kabutri are other prominent names in tribal literature. They have not sufficed with writing their folk songs and folktales but have also contributed to complex literary genres like novel and drama. Literary conferences regularly provide a platform for tribal writers. At present there exists a successful understanding among the tribal activists all over the county that tribal uniqueness and culture can not be upheld and unless tribal literary expressions are made. That promises a bright future for tribal literature.

Similarly, tribal literature has also chipped in to lend a new subaltern perspective to literature. Even though their work is yet to be translated into English, they still prove to be radically new voice in literature.

3. Dalit Literature

Like the angst-driven African-American literature in the US, Dalit writing is characterised by a new level of subaltern pride, militancy, creativity and above all, the use of the pen as a weapon. Dalit literature, which looks at history and current events from a Dalit point of view, has come to occupy its own place in the body of Indian literary expression. Dalit literature emerged into prominence and as a collective voice after 1960. Starting with Marathi and soon appeared in Hindi, Kannada, Telugu and Tamil languages. The writers expressed themselves through self narratives in the form of short stories, poems and most importantly autobiographies known for their realism. In 1992 Ambedkari Sahitya Parishad was formed with the goal to connect people with common ideals and aspirations to provide a platform to those who wanted to express their anguish through their literature against oppression and bigotry and to make their presence felt in the world. Period between 1972 to 1978 saw the proliferation of the Dalit literature especially through poems.

Babu Rao Bagel is the pioneer of Dalit writing in Marathi. His first collection of stories '*When I concealed my caste*' created a stir in Marathi literature with a passionate depiction of a crude society. It is even made into a film by Vinay Apte. Gradually other writers started contributing to their growing literature. Arun kamble, Shathabai Kamble, Lakshman Bapu Mane in Marathi, Profs. Krishnappa and Govindaiah in Kannada, Gurram Jashuva in Telugu are some prominent Dalit writers in regional tongues. In Tamil Nadu Dalit literature gains prominence in 1990s. The critical writing and comment has gone side by side with new writing by self styled Dalit writers like Idayavendan, Abhimani, Unjairajan, Vidivelli, Marku, Sivakami, Bama etc. At a time when Subaltern Literature is gaining momentum in terms of its knowledge production and dissemination, regional writers translated into English have obtained wider readership.

Even the mainstream critics have begun to acknowledge this writing as radically new and different. Just like the theme and emotions expressed in the works, the style of writing is different and daring too. It is essentially subversive

in character, bringing both content and form which challenge established literary norms. So far there has been no models for Dalit writing, sequence, chronology, perception of time, form and language must all be reconstructed as they evolve. In speaking their own stories these authors try to regain their lost and marginalized identity and establish their sense of individual self.

4. Dalit Women Writing

History or His-story has always been biased towards women as it has always been written from a patriarchal point of view. Women are the most oppressed and tortured part of the subaltern. If one is poor, Dalit and a woman, she gets it in three ways. Oppressed, ruled and still being ruled by patriarchy, government, caste and religion, Dalit women are forced to break all the strictures of society to live. Dalit feminist writers like Sivakami and Bama are efficiently using literature to tell the story of pathos of the doubly oppressed Dalit women to the world.

Bama, one of the pioneers of Dalit feminist literature has also become a significant regional voice among the subcontinent women. Her text *Sangathi* serves to draw aesthetics of not only Dalit fiction but also a Dalit feminist polemic that is inclusive of a clarion call for action and transformation. Belonging to the oppressed group herself, Bama has personally experienced the marginalizing condition. Her autobiography, *Karukku*, is well known. Her second book, *Sangathi* moves from the story of individual struggle to perception of a community. In this sense, it can be considered as the autobiography of the whole community. *Sangathi*, which has as its theme the growth, decline, culture, and liveliness of Dalit women talks about their resilience and determination to bounce back and not curl up and collapse with every blow.

The text as such deals with the variegated experiences and stories of the Dalit women strung together, thus breaking the normative literary narrative of a single plot or story. The author deftly traces her reactions to her growing knowledge about her caste, community and the fact that they come under the lowest rung of the hierarchy of patriarchal power structure. Women are mostly the wage earners of hard labour sweating it out in the fields, construction sites,

and also match box factories. This unequal division of labour, a product of the first world elite that has been imposed upon the lower caste women who are paid much less than their men. At the very outset of *Sangati* we learn that the oppressed class too has its own gender discrimination wherein Dalit men who are on the margins of the structured society in turn marginalize their women on the basis of fixed gender roles.

The anguish and confusion in Bama as a child as she starts to understand the hierarchy of the society and the severe gender bias and double standards is clearly brought out in the novel. Women like Mariamma in the novel, not only has to face the wrath of their fathers at home but also the danger of being molested by men outside the family, mostly upper-caste men. The men of their own community do not have the power to question the landowners for fear of losing their favors and finally accepted as truth the mudalali's words in condemning the innocent girl. In talking about the particular, Bama cleverly ropes in the prevailing subordinate condition of women through the ages thereby touching upon the history of gender issue that is universal. Bama registers the fact that church, home, marriage, workplace, all of these proved claustrophobic to the women folk and to add to this the poor health facilities that available to these women of lower caste proved hazardous to their life and they are victims to incessant domestic violence too. Playing the spokesperson for the women of her community, Bama states that it is on her to speak out the truth. A change in attitude is the need of the hour, and with this she is optimistic of inequalities coming to an end. Therefore in speaking about the unrepresented in literary discourses so far, Bama has linked together the caste as well the gender oppression, in the process redefining woman from the socio/cultural perspective. The author as well as her books serves a fine example for the profound and powerful impact the oppressed can create through their literature.

5. Conclusion

The chief achievements of subaltern literature is that it has begun to bring about a change; to enable the world to deconstruct the traditional mindset which make them perceive the subaltern as lower than themselves and instead

see them as equals rather than pitiful victims. Secondly, it has put forth a new and subversive ethic that not only awakens the conscience of the oppressors but fills the subaltern themselves with confidence and pride. If we consider the achievements of subaltern literature it can be listed as

- *Will to narrate one's social history
- *Painfully rooting out the purulence
- *Faith in education as the key to progress
- *Quest of identity
- * Writing as a way of self-assertion
- *Nomadic communities seeking status of human being
- *Gender potentialities in women's everyday practices
- *Community uplift, welfare, social and political activities.

However, despite all this progress in subaltern literature, it still continues to face challenges from different quarters. It sometimes outrages and even repels the guardians of caste and class. It may provoke them into asking if this is indeed literature. Sometimes the stark naked truth of reality stares into the reader's face as one reads subaltern literature and it makes one uneasy. The anger and resentment resulting from ages of oppression and pent up hard feelings expressed in subaltern literature may sometimes shock the reader or make one want to conveniently put it away and stick to mainstream literature. The aim of this type of literature is not to give a feast to our senses or transport us into to a state of poetic ecstasy but to make their voices heard and their point of view and perspective acknowledged by the world too. The society should learn to give ear to the voices of the oppressed and be open to their literary expression as it is a very constructive means they have chosen to voice out their pains and sufferings in opposed to some who resort to vandalism or terrorism to vent out their anger, despair, pessimism and rebellion.

To know is the first step in visualizing social change. To understand and empathise is the path to a more equal and humane society. Hence it is importance to acknowledge of subaltern contribution to literature as an efficient tool that can bring about social change and move their position from subaltern to the centre.

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