
Representing Dalit Emotions and Aspirations within the Framework of Indian Society

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Abstract: Dalit literature is a significant development in the modern era of literary expression, where the painful and tormenting experiences of Dalit and formerly “untouchable” writers are articulated to reflect the contemporary social and psychological conditions of both Dalit and non-Dalit communities. This body of writing engages deeply with global theoretical discourses on trauma, violence, otherness, and the body, allowing the incorporation of texts that emerge from Dalit and tribal experiences as well as from Indian historical contexts such as Partition and the Emergency. Literature that represents these experiences is not only a mode of artistic expression but also carries the transformative aim of empowerment and the social advancement of oppressed communities in India.

Keywords: “Torment, oppression, social injustice, economic exploitation, ethnic distinctiveness, and humanitarian concerns.”

The word “**Dalit**” literally means *oppressed* and is often used as a synonym for *untouchable*. It also refers to casteless sections of Indian society and is sometimes used interchangeably with *outcaste*. Dalits are not a single community but a heterogeneous population comprising various caste groups. They are spread not only across India and South Asia but also in different parts of the world. Several terms have historically been used to describe this group, such as *Ashprashya* (meaning “untouchables”), *Harijan* (meaning “children of God”), and *Dalit* (meaning “the broken people”).

The provenance of the term “Dalit” lies in the Sanskrit word *dalita*, which means *suppressed* or *crushed*. The usage of the term gained prominence in the 19th century through **Jyotirao Phule**, a social reformer and champion of backward and

oppressed classes in Maharashtra. Later, in the context of untouchability and caste-based oppression, **Mahatma Gandhi** used the word *Harijan* literally *children of Hari (Vishnu)*—to emphasize their dignity and humanity.

In Indian literature, **Dalit writing** reflects the emotions, struggles, and aspirations of marginalized communities. It has emerged as a unique and powerful form of expression in genres such as poetry, short stories, novels, plays, and autobiographies. Dalit autobiographies, in particular, are remarkable for their sincerity, frankness, and courage. Whether widely recognized or not, they serve as assertions of identity in both literature and society.

Dalit writing is, at its core, an expression of **anguish, resistance, and revolution** against social injustice, inequality, cruelty, and economic exploitation rooted in caste hierarchies. Poetry has often been the dominant medium of Dalit expression, symbolizing humanitarian concerns and the yearning for equality. Importantly, Dalit literature does not exclude or defy writers from other communities but instead expands the space of literary discourse.

The legacy of Dalit literature draws inspiration from humanitarians like **Jyotirao Phule (1827–1890)** and **Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956)**, who vehemently condemned the rigid caste system (*Chaturvarna*: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra). Their reformist zeal continues to inspire Dalit writers in their pursuit of dignity, equality, and social justice. Through this body of literature, historical marginalization has been articulated with clarity, revealing cultural distinctiveness, contemporary identity politics, and struggles against violence and discrimination. At the same time, Dalit writing interrogates the dynamics of **power and powerlessness**, offering critical insights into social realities.

In the **post-globalization era**, human rights discourse has gained significant traction among scholars, intellectuals, philosophers, and policymakers. Within this framework, Dalit literature has acquired increased importance as it foregrounds the lived experiences of marginalized and oppressed communities. The persistent themes of discrimination, violence, and poverty depicted in Dalit works highlight centuries of silenced suffering—often legitimized by religious or social sanction and dismissed as “non-literary” or “unfit for reading.” However, contemporary Dalit literature, through poetry, fiction, short stories, and autobiographies, challenges these dismissals and asserts the cultural and intellectual worth of Dalit experience.

Thus, Dalit literature is not merely a literary category but a **movement of voices** reclaiming space, identity, and humanity. It confronts exploitation, emphasizes

dignity, and champions a humanitarian vision of equality that transcends caste and class barriers. Several movements by Dalit leaders, both in India and abroad, drew inspiration from global struggles for equality. In the United States, **Martin Luther King Jr.** fought against racial segregation, while in South Africa, **Nelson Mandela** resisted apartheid. Their sacrifices and contributions remain a major source of inspiration for oppressed communities worldwide. In Maharashtra, prominent social reformers such as **Mahatma Jyotirao Phule**, **Rajashri Shahu Maharaj**, **V. R. Shinde**, and **B. R. Ambedkar** spearheaded powerful social reforms that challenged entrenched caste hierarchies. In West Bengal, **Chaitanya Prabhu** initiated the *Namo India Movement*, which significantly helped change people's attitudes toward Dalits, fostering kindness and respect.

In America, the **Black Panthers**, a radical social and political organization that fought for African American rights, inspired Dalits in Maharashtra to form the **Dalit Panthers** in the 1970s. Other organizations such as the **Republican Party of India**, **Indian Panthers Party**, the **All India Scheduled Caste Federation**, **Mala Mahanadu**, and **Madiga Reservation Porata Samithi** soon followed, each championing the cause of Dalit empowerment. The works and speeches of Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Jyotirao Phule, and B. R. Ambedkar continue to motivate Dalits in the modern world.

Over time, the meaning of the word **Dalit** has expanded. While it once referred specifically to oppressed castes in India, today it broadly signifies anyone subjected to **exploitation, poverty, nastiness, and discrimination** in society. In Dalit literature, however, the term retains a collective meaning. It conveys the voice of the community rather than individuality, a revolt rather than passivity, progress rather than regression. Through it, Dalits present their **social, political, economic, and educational struggles** to the world. This message is conveyed by highlighting the grief, humiliation, and oppression that continue to suppress and enslave Dalits. In comparative terms, a Dalit in India may be likened to an oppressed African under colonialism or an African American under racial segregation. Dalit writers consistently **question religion and identity** in their works. While Dalit literature achieved firm recognition in the mid-20th century, its foundations were laid in the 19th century. Contemporary Dalit writers have strengthened these foundations through their own ideological frameworks, publishing works in national and international journals (Chintha & B., 2015).

In recent decades, Dalit literature has been recognized as a distinct genre, depicting the **torment, resistance, and lived experiences** of Dalits in contemporary society. **Mulk Raj Anand** was among the first Indian writers in English to address caste oppression in novels like *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936), both later translated into several languages. In Maharashtra, **Dalit poetry** emerged as a powerful vehicle to raise awareness about Dalit realities. These poems vividly express the violent and painful experiences of Dalit life (Kizhavana & Anjali, 2015). Among the earliest influential poets was **Narayan Surve** (Nazareth, 2015). Abandoned as a baby and raised by a mill worker in Mumbai, Surve worked as a child labourer, joined the Left movement, and participated in the freedom struggle. A revolutionary poet, his works are known for their simplicity, humour, and affirmation of marginal lives. His acclaimed Marathi collection *Maze Vidyapeeth (My University)* captures the struggles of Dalit laborers:

Raising brick on brick
They build houses for others,
Dig holes, Haul the muck from the deep manholes.
They live on the margins of the city, yet they are no citizens.
They stay for months together
Untouched, neglected...
But, for the progress of the city, their shacks are demolished first.

Other poets such as **Keshav Meshram** (*Utkhasian*, “Excavation”), **Daya Pawar** (*Kondwade*, “Enclosure”), **Namdeo Dhasal** (*Golpitha*, “Red Light”), and **Triyambak Sapkal** (*Surang*, “Dynamite”) contributed significantly to the growth of Dalit poetry (Chintha & B., 2015). Folk poets like **Bheemrao Kardak** and **Vittol Uma** also played an important role, using ballads to propagate Dalit sensibility and inspire the masses.

Dalit sensibilities also found expression in **short stories and novels**. Works such as *Fakira*, *Anna Bahu Sathi*, *Davindi*, and *Jerah Mi Jaat Charli Hoti* (“When I Robbed a Caste”) depicted caste oppression with sharp realism (Chintha & B., 2015). Although less popular, Dalit drama too contributed to this body of literature. Perhaps the most significant English contributions came from **Mulk Raj Anand**. His novel *Untouchable* portrays the experiences of *Bakha*, an 18-year-old latrine cleaner, over a single day in the fictional town of Bulandshahr. Through Bakha’s story, Anand exposes the cruelty of untouchability while also depicting the solace of nature:

“The hand of nature was stretching itself out towards him... He had been startled into an awareness of the mystery of vegetable moods. He was just swamped by the merest fringe of the magnificent fields that spread before him.” (*Untouchable*)

In *Coolie*, Anand tells the story of **Munoo**, a village boy who struggles for survival as a servant, factory worker, and rickshaw puller. The novel highlights themes of exploitation, labour struggles, and class oppression. Both *Untouchable* and *Coolie* place Anand among the twentieth century's greatest Indian novelists in English.

Another milestone in Dalit literature is **Bama Faustina's autobiography Karukku (1992)**, the first autobiography by a Dalit woman writer. It broke barriers of both caste and gender, addressing caste oppression within the Catholic Church and exploring the struggles of Dalit women in Tamil Nadu. Bama reflects:

“Today I am like a mongrel-dog, wandering about without a permanent job, nor a regular means to find clothes, food and a safe place to live. I share the same difficulties and struggles that all Dalit poor experience...” (Bama, *Karukku* 67–68).

Dalit literature thus represents **an expression of anguish, resistance, and assertion of dignity**. It is revolutionary in spirit, opposing social injustice, inequality, cruelty, and economic exploitation based on caste and class. Poetry remains its dominant form, though short stories, novels, autobiographies, and plays all contribute to its richness. Writers such as **Omprakash Valmiki (Joothan, 1997)** further developed the genre, exposing the hypocrisy of upper-caste society and its history of oppression. This literary legacy draws from the humanitarian vision of **Jyotirao Phule and B. R. Ambedkar**, who condemned the Hindu caste system and fought for dignity and self-respect. Ambedkar's call for “**education, agitation, and organization**” remains central to Dalit empowerment. Later, the **Dalit Panthers** of 1972 carried forward this legacy, using literature as a weapon against caste atrocities. Many Dalits also embraced **Buddhism or Christianity** as a protest against caste oppression, seeking liberation from hierarchical Hindu rituals.

A significant emergence of women writers in Dalit literature has been witnessed in recent decades. Their works are often rooted in **firsthand experiences** of being members of the Dalit community and reflect what it means to live within the framework of Indian caste culture. One of the most prominent voices is **Bama**, remembered for her Tamil autobiographical novel *Karukku* (1992). The text explores

the intersection between individual life-writing and collective biography. Bama positions herself as a **witness to her community's suffering**, urging readers to undertake "rhetorical listening" as secondary witnesses. Through her vivid narratives, she portrays the trauma, poverty, and systemic oppression faced by Dalits, while also exposing the entrenched power and mindset of the upper castes. She recalls:

"When I was studying in the third class, I hadn't yet heard people speak openly of untouchability. But I had already seen, felt, experienced and been humiliated by what it is." (*Karukku* 11)

Another major figure is **Hira Bansode**, a Dalit poet writing in Marathi. Her collections such as *Pournima*, *Phiyad* (1984), and *Phoenix* (2001) represent the struggles of the first and second generations of Dalit-educated women. In her poem *Sanskriti*, she rebels against the glorified notion of India's "great culture," comparing her homeland to a **stepmother** who treats Dalits as inferior:

"But today the schoolbook's lies infuriate me. We are ashamed to call you mother. You may be a mother to some, but to us you are an evil stepmother."
(Twice Dalit: The Poetry of Hira Bansode)

Bansode consistently champions Dalit women, as in her poem *Bosom Friend*, which critiques the hypocrisy of upper-caste friends who outwardly show equality but secretly harbor prejudice. Similarly, **Sumitra Bhave's** *Pan on Fire* (1988) presents the life stories of eight Dalit women in Marathi, foregrounding their collective struggles. **Sandhya Rangari**, another bold Dalit voice, critiques the fragmentation within Dalit politics after Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's death. She exposes how caste-based divisions weakened the Dalit Panthers movement, mockingly likening it to a jungle panther surviving on grass. Her poem *Amhi Suryachya Leki* questions whether Dalit leadership has digested Ambedkar's philosophy, which she claims remains "too hard for ordinary wisdom."

Dalit Autobiography and Narrative

Dalit personal narratives and autobiographies are marked by **sincerity, boldness, and frankness**. They function not merely as individual life stories but as collective assertions of Dalit identity within literature and society.

Hazari's *Untouchable: The Autobiography of an Indian Outcaste* is one of the earliest such works in English, noted for its unconventional realism.

Writers like **D.P. Das, Balwant Singh, D.R. Jatava, and Shyamlal** have also contributed in English, while **Laxman Mane, Sharan Kumar Limbale, Narendra Jatav, and Vasant Moon** produced seminal works in Marathi, later translated into English.

Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* (A Dalit's Life in English translation) reveals the deep scars of caste oppression:

"I feel amazed when I look back on those days and the things that I learned to tolerate. How much my ability to tolerate hurts flung at me has taken out of me!" (Joothan)

Dalit literature, which began as a grassroots movement in Maharashtra during the 1960s, has grown into one of the **most significant literary movements in post-independence India**. Originally grounded in the experiences of the oppressed and the so-called "untouchables," it has gained international recognition through translations into English.

As **Arjun Dangle**, leader of the Dalit Panther movement explains:

"Dalit is not a caste but a realization and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows and struggles of those in the lowest strata 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 writings of **Jyotirao Phule and B.R. Ambedkar** laid the intellectual foundation of Dalit literature, while **Mulk Raj Anand** was among the first mainstream writers to bring Dalit experiences into Indian English fiction. Today, Dalit literature is viewed as both **a collective revolt against caste oppression and a humanitarian cause**, covering diverse genres such as poetry, novels, short stories, and autobiographies. It challenges religious orthodoxy, caste hierarchy, and systemic inequality, while offering new frameworks for empowerment and justice.

The incorporation of Dalit texts into **English Studies** in India has been transformative. As Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest* shows, English literature was once a colonial tool of governance. However, in post-independence India, Dalit and minority writings in English have redefined the discipline as a site of empowerment and social critique.

English, as a language of education, law, and administration, has become a medium for Dalits to **assert their identity and demand justice**. Courses in Indian

universities now increasingly include Dalit texts, reflecting their growing academic and cultural importance.

The growing interest in politically charged writings has accompanied the protest movement of the Dalit Panthers, creating a serious readership for Dalit autobiographies, poetry, and fiction that articulate the Dalit experience. Autobiographical works such as *Karukku* by Bama and Manoranjan Byapari's *Ittibritte Chandal Jeebon*, alongside autobiographies by Baby Kamble (*Jina Amucha*) and Daya Pawar (*Baluta*), as well as the powerful poetry of Namdeo Dhasal, are now available in English translation, ensuring wider dissemination and critical recognition of Dalit literature.

The emergence of Dalit consciousness is a pan-Indian phenomenon. Its powerful discourse of otherness has facilitated the discovery of similar literary traditions in regions once thought to be devoid of Dalit voices. Today, Dalit literature forms an integral part of English curricula, owing to its original writings in English as well as the availability of translations. The role of institutions such as **Katha** and the **Sahitya Akademi** in supporting translations, along with the rise of new publishers and local presses, has been crucial. Major publishers—including **Macmillan India**, **Orient Longman/OBS**, **Oxford University Press India**, **Zubaan**, **Navayana**, **Adivaani**, **Speaking Tiger**, and **Penguin Random House**—have significantly contributed to the global circulation of Dalit literature.

This research has shown that Dalit literature effectively articulates **historical marginalization, cultural and ethnic distinctiveness, contemporary politics of identity, and the accompanying insurgencies and violence**. At the same time, the conditions that produced this literature provide profound insights into questions of **power and powerlessness**, making Dalit writing both a record of resistance and a tool of critical social transformation.

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