

THEMES IN MODERN DALIT LITERATURE

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The word Dalit does not at all imply someone who is fallen, degraded, or weak. This word emerged from the social structure of this country. The varna-ashrama system declared a large section of people as untouchable for various traditional reasons. It made even a simple human life impossible for them. They were excluded from knowledge, dignity, power, wealth, culture—everything. They were completely reduced to insignificance by stamping them with the identity of Dalit.

While the multifaceted experiences of life are often expressed through the creativity of talented individuals in society. The plight and emotional reality of the Dalit community's everyday life were never truly captured in Indian literature. The religion-based tradition, which blinded thought and reason, was firmly rejected by Dalit literature. It strongly opposed this blindness and, while rising again with new hope as human beings, reconnected deeply and broadly with human tradition. It began to take shape as a cry of liberation from intellectual and mental slavery. Dalits started moving towards reclaiming their cultural heritage.

The central theme of Dalit literature revolves around the experiences, pain, struggles, and injustices faced by the Dalit community. It encompasses social, cultural, and political issues. Dalit literature reflects the Dalit community's sense of identity, demand for social justice, and their fight for equality.

Key Themes in Dalit Literature :

Awareness of Caste Discrimination :

Dalit literature portrays the discrimination and social inequality caused by the caste system. Dalit writers harbor deep resentment towards the caste system and the social discrimination it brings. This intense anguish is expressed in the form of rebellion in every literary work. This rebellion is not against any specific individual or community but is a quest for self-identity. It is a protest against regressive tendencies and outdated life values. The revolt expressed in Dalit literature is against the varna (caste) system. It is a protest against the religion that upholds this system and the society that denies basic human rights. It is a rebellion against the injustices and atrocities inflicted upon the Dalit community.

In Baburao Bagul's novel *Sood (Revenge)*, this intense anger and frustration against the caste system are powerfully depicted. The novel conveys that the caste system is a stigma on humanity, and this stain must be erased while still living within society. Every person should be able to live as a human being, and all avenues for their development must be open. The *Rebellion* a novel by Anna Bhau Sathe is pathetic story of social discrimination where low caste struggles to get a small piece of land back captured by a high cast landlord. The poem 'This Country is Broken' by Bapurao Jagtap advocates that if social discrimination based on caste, religion and people exists for long in this country, it will remain broken and destroyed



forever. 'A Corpse in the Well' by Shankarrao Kharat and 'Son Eat Your Fill' by Daya Pawar are the stories of social discrimination where Dalits are exploited, beaten and denied social justice by high caste.

Pain in Dalit Life :

Dalit writers have expressed the sorrow, suffering, and pain experienced in their lives. Dalit literature serves as a mirror reflecting the grief of the Dalit community. The characters in Dalit literature live lives filled with suffering. These hardships are inflicted by the societal system. Factors such as poverty, lack of education, meaningless customs and traditions, oppression by upper castes, and denial of basic facilities contribute to their suffering. These causes are strongly reflected in Dalit literature.

The collective consciousness of the oppressed found a powerful expression through the figure of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. His multifaceted leadership left a deep impact on all sections of society, even beyond the Dalit community. He emphasized in his speeches that:

"Writing should speak our joys and sorrows in our own language."

He believed that, "The language of books should be alive and as sweet as coconut water. Reading such books should awaken people and stimulate their thinking."

This philosophy can be seen as the source of origin for Dalit literature.

'The Poisoned Bread' by Bandhumadhav is a tragedy of Grandpa Yetalya. He goes in search for job of winnowing and treading out the corn at the threshing floor. Bapu Patil owner gives him the bread stuck with cow dung instead. Grandpa Yetalya eats that bread and dies. Baban Chahande's poem Labour Pains deliver the painful condition of a labour woman who has to suffer much even for the piece of bread. 'Hunger' a poem by Namdeo Dhasal is painful story of people who are denied their rights even to eat healthy food.

Demand for Social Justice :

Dalit literature is a powerful voice for social justice and equality. It is based on the pain, suffering, struggles, and fight for existence of Dalit people. Dalit writers have given expression to their experiences, pain, and the social inequalities they face. Dalit literature demands social justice. One of its main objectives is to raise awareness of the injustices inflicted on Dalits due to caste discrimination and to fight for their rights. A poem of Keshav Meshram titled 'In Our Colony' is a cry for social justice. He expects demolition of caste system in civilized colony. But unfortunately low casts are deliberately marginalized.

Dalit literature is expressed through various literary forms such as poetry, short stories, novels, and autobiographies. These works depict the pain, struggles, hopes, and aspirations of the Dalit community. Dalit literature is not only important from a literary perspective, but it is also a powerful medium for social change. It raises a strong voice for Dalit rights and equality while criticizing the caste-based discrimination in society. It inspires people to fight for social justice and encourages positive societal transformation.

Dalit writers are deeply committed to social causes. Through their writings, they

comment on the inequality and atrocities prevalent in society. Dalit literature presents a realistic picture of society, including the pain, suffering, and struggles of Dalit lives.

Self-awareness and Identity :

Dalit literature attempts to awaken the sense of self-respect and identity among the Dalit community. It centers around their lived experiences, pain, struggles, and their rights. Through this, Dalit literature creates awareness among people about their rights, dignity, and identity. It realistically portrays the daily hardships, injustice, and social inequality that Dalits face. It instills in them a sense of self-respect and inspires them to fight for their rights. Dalit literature celebrates the cultural and social identity of Dalits and encourages them to preserve it. It also motivates people to bring about positive changes in society.

By nurturing self-confidence among the Dalit people, Dalit literature inspires them to fight for their rights and strive for transformation in their lives. Shankar Kharat's 'A Corpse in the Well', 'We are Kings' Daya Pawar, Naja Goes to School – And Doesn't of Shantabai Kamble, 'The stragglers' by Dadasaheb More these all autobiographical work can be called literature of self-identity.

Political and Social Change :

Dalit literature inspires political and social transformation. It is not just a literary genre but a powerful tool for societal and political change. It ignites resistance against injustice and oppression, and it creates awareness about the exploitation and discrimination rooted in the caste system.

Issues of Dalit Women :

Dalit literature also highlights the special issues faced by Dalit women, including their exploitation and oppression. These women experience dual oppression—both within their homes and from society at large. Dalit women undergo discrimination on both caste and gender levels. Being Dalits, they are subjected to inequality and exploitation both within the household and in society. They often face sexual violence, which is largely ignored. They are socially and culturally marginalized. Dalit literature provides space to narrate the unique experiences, struggles, and injustices faced by Dalit women, which are different from those of Dalit men or upper-caste women. The woman in Avinash Dolas' 'Refugee' is representative of all destitute Dalit women who has to sacrifice her son for living. She has sell her body to grocer Tulya for the sake of five rupees for her child. Baburao Bagul's short story 'Mother' is a story of all Dalit mothers.

Rebellion Against Exploitation :

Dalit literature inspires resistance against exploitation and injustice. It is not only for Dalits but conveys a universal message of justice, equality, and humanity. Dalit literature is a strong rebellion against exploitation and inequality. It challenges traditional, oppressive ideologies. It awakens self-confidence in Dalits and motivates them to fight for their rights. Dalit literature is a source of inspiration for social change.

There is now a need to critically examine the varna system, the religious bondage that

supports it, and the idea of God that renders humans powerless—from a scientific, natural, and humanist perspective. Dalit literature, with the capacity to influence emerging minds, has started gaining strength. It aligns literature with life, and with the subtle emotional vibrations and value-based thoughts that emerge from it.

Dalit literature rejected the traditional standards tied to the established systems. Concepts like scriptural authority, God, ritual purity, casteism, and physical punishment are signs of a destroyed intellect—as pointed out by Buddhist philosopher Dharmakirti. Recognizing this, Dalit literature began to be written with greater clarity and sensitivity. Keshav Meshram's story 'Barriers' is a story of rebellion of Narayan who wants subvert barriers in education caused by caste system. The autobiography 'The Bastard' by Sharankumar Limbale, short story 'Promotion' by Arjun Dangle all is the literature of revolt.

The early writings upheld the principle that "Humanity is not dignified by the coating of devotion alone." Among the early contributors, the name Kisan Fagu Bansode deserves special mention. Other prominent writers who firmly established these ideas include Hariharrao Sonule, Na. Ra. Shende, Shankarrao Suradkar, Cha. Bh. Khairmode, Namdeo Whatkar, Da. Ta. Rupwate, Ghanshyam Talwatkar, and many more.

Post-1960: The Era of Powerful Dalit Literature

The period after 1960 marked a surge in realistic portrayals of Dalit life. A tension emerged in the available literature between weakly drawn narratives wrapped in flowery language and intense, deeply personal expressions shaped by lived experience.

Prominent writers of this period include :

Shankarrao Kharat, Haribhau Pagare, Bandhumadhav, Baburao Bagul, Sukhram Hivrale, Keshav Meshram, Vaman Hoval, Namdeo Dhasal, J. V. Pawar, Raja Dhale, Chokha Kamble, Hira Bansode, Bhimrao Shirwale, Surekha Bhagat, Yogiraj Waghmare, Tryambak Sapkal, Daya Pawar, Datta Bhagat, Vaman Nimbalkar, Pralhad Chendwankar, Narendra Shelar, Madhav Kondvilkar, Umakant Randhir, Arun Kamble, Arjun Dangle — all of whom made notable contributions to Dalit literature in this era.

This period witnessed the emergence of both theoretical and creative works across various literary genres. The Marathi literary critics could no longer ignore this growing body of work and had to evaluate it seriously. Scholars like M. B. Chitnis, M. Na. Wankhade, D. T. Mane, Tarachandra Khandekar, Gangadhar Pantawane, and Raja Dhale enriched Dalit literature by offering valuable critical perspectives.

Key Literary Contributions :

Shankarrao Kharat's literature is especially notable. He powerfully depicts the suffering, humanity, endurance, and rebellion of marginalized individuals and communities.

Annabhau Sathe, with his dreams of happiness, prosperity, civility, and equality, began writing with the hope that Maharashtra would become a utopia. He once described the fierce power of folk balladeers, saying, "Their poetry was like a sword sharpened on a whetstone." This metaphor also applies to his own writing. His novel Fakira (1959) is considered his finest

work. He wrote extensively—Barbadya Kanjari (1960), Abi (1961), Makadicha Maal (1963), Waranecha Wagh (1968)—but over time, his work became more quantitative than qualitative. The fact that his name was excluded from major reviews of the Marathi novel tradition highlights the bias of mainstream literary thought.

Baburao Bagul's writing erupts like lava, with a rebellious tone and powerful, thought-provoking language. His books such as When I Hid My Caste (1962), Death Is Getting Cheaper (1969), and Revenge (1970) reveal a deep introspection and continuous social consciousness.

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